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Bodily Bonds:
The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition

As Lydia Maria Child tells it in 1836, the story of the woman and the story of the slave are the same story:

I have been told of a young physician who went into the far Southern states to settle, and there became in love with a very handsome and modest girl who lived in service. He married her; and about a year after the event a gentleman called at the house and announced himself as Mr. J. of Mobile. He said to Dr. W., “Sir, I have a trifling affair of business to settle with you. You have married a slave of mine.” The young physician resented the language; for he had not entertained the slightest suspicion that the girl had had any other than white ancestors since the flood. But Mr. J. furnished proofs of his claim.¹

Convinced, and under the threat of having his wife sold at public auction, the doctor bought her for eight hundred dollars. When he informed her of the purchase, “The poor woman burst into tears and said, ‘That as Mr. J. was her own father, she had hoped that when he heard she had found an honorable protector he would have left her in peace.’” The horror of the story lies in the perversion of an almost fairytale courtship—complete with a suitor who has traveled far, a modest girl, and love—into an economic transaction, and the perversion of the bonds of paternity into the profits of bondage. It is the collapse of the assumed difference between family and slavery that makes this anecdote so disturbing; in this story the institutions of marriage and of slavery are not merely analogous, they are coextensive and indistinguishable. The passage of the woman from father to husband and of the slave from one master to another form a single event. Not only are the new husband and the new master one man, but he needs only one name, for bourgeois idealizations of marriage and Southern apologies for slavery both consider him an honorable protector.

This merger of slavery and marriage redefines love and protection as terms of ownership, thereby identifying the modest girl, object of this love and honorable protection, as an object of transaction. Significantly, Child places the anecdote within a section of her Anti-Slavery Catechism that asserts the difficulty of distinguishing the bodies of slaves from the bodies of free people. Indeed the story concludes a catalogue of bodily features (“nose prominent,” “tibia of the leg straight”) that do not protect one from enslavement.² In this story the composite
of bodily traits that identify a girl as marriageable proves misleading, putting into question the presumption that the body can provide reliable information about the institutional and racial status of the whole person. What matters about the girl for Child’s purposes is that a doctor intimately acquainted with her flesh perceives no hint of blackness. If the body is an inescapable sign of identity, it is also an insecure and often illegible sign.

In Child’s story the conflation of the figures of woman and slave, and of the institutions of marriage and bondage, results from difficulties in interpreting the human body. I wish to suggest that the problems of having, representing, or interpreting a body structure both feminist and abolitionist discourses, since the rhetorics of the two reforms meet upon the recognition that for both women and blacks it is their physical difference from the cultural norms of white masculinity that obstructs their claim to personhood. Thus the social and political goals of both feminism and abolition depend upon an act of representation, the inscription of black and female bodies into the discourses of personhood. Despite this similarity of aims, I find that the alliance attempted by feminist-abolitionist texts is never particularly easy or equitable. Indeed, I will argue that although the identifications of woman and slave, marriage and slavery, that characterize these texts may occasionally prove mutually empowering, they generally tend toward asymmetry and exploitation. This essay thus interrogates the intersection of feminist and abolitionist discourses through an analysis of the attitudes toward black and female bodies revealed there. The composite term that names this intersection, feminist-abolitionist, has come into currency with the writings of twentieth-century historians. Women involved in both the abolitionist and women’s rights movements also tended to advocate temperance, oppose prostitution, and reform schools, prisons, and diets; they referred to themselves as “universal reformers.” My use of the term feminist-abolitionist is thus an anachronistic convenience, the hyphen neatly articulating the very connections and distinctions that I intend to explore. I will therefore focus on those writings in which the rhetorical crossings of women and slaves predominate: the political speeches and pamphlets that equate the figure of the woman and the figure of the slave; the sentimental novels and giftbook stories in which antislavery women attempt to represent the slave and more obliquely depict their own fears and desires, so that the racial and the sexual come to displace one another; and the more conservative Sunday-school primers that, in trying to domesticate slavery, recast its oppressions in familial terms, demonstrating the complicity of the two institutions and hence the degree to which domestic and sentimental antislavery writings are implicated in the very oppressions they seek to reform.

Feminists and abolitionists were acutely aware of the dependence of personhood on the condition of the human body since the political and legal subordi-
nation of both women and slaves was predicated upon biology. Medical treatises of the period consistently assert that a woman’s psyche and intellect are determined by her reproductive organs. Indeed, to the political satirist the leaders of the woman’s rights movement are nothing but wombs in constant danger of parturition:

How funny it would sound in the newspapers, that Lucy Stone, pleading a cause, took suddenly ill in the pains of parturition, and perhaps gave birth to a fine bouncing boy in court; or that Rev. Antonia Brown was arrested in the middle of her sermon in the pulpit from the same cause, and presented a “pledge” to her husband and the congregation . . . A similar event might happen on the floor of Congress, in a storm at sea, or in the raging tempest of battle, and then what is to become of the woman legislator?

In this lampoon the reproductive function interrupts and replaces women’s attempts to speak; their public delivery of arguments, sermons, and service is superseded by delivery of children. The joke betrays male fear of female fertility while fashioning the woman’s womb and its relentless fecundity into a silencing gag.

The body of the black was similarly thought to define his role as servant and laborer. Subservience, one Southern doctor explained, was built into the very structure of his bones. The black was made “submissive knee-bender” by the decree of the Almighty, for “in the anatomical conformation of his knees, we see ‘genu flexit’ written in his physical structure, being more flexed or bent than any other kind of man.” As God writes “subservience” upon the body of the black, in Latin of course, the doctor reads it; or, more crudely, as the master inscribes his name with hot irons (“He is branded on the forehead with the letters A. M. and on each cheek with the letters J. G.”), or the fact of slavery with scars (“His back shows lasting impressions of the whip, and leaves no doubt of his being a slave”), the body of the slave attains the status of a text. Thus the bodies of women and slaves were read against them, so that for both the human body was seen to function as the foundation not only of a general subjection but also of a specific exclusion from political discourse. For women and slaves the ability to speak was predicated upon the reinterpretation of their flesh. Feminists and abolitionists share a strategy: to invert patriarchal readings and so reclaim the body. Transformed from a silent site of oppression into a symbol of that oppression, the body becomes within both feminist and abolitionist discourses a means of gaining rhetorical force.

Though the female body, and particularly female sexual desires, as I hope to demonstrate, are at least covertly inscribed within feminist-abolitionist texts, the paradigmatic body reclaimed in these writings is that of the slave. The slave, so explicitly an object to be sold, provides feminism as well as abolition with its most graphic example of the extent to which the human body may designate identity. “The denial of our duty to act [against slavery] is a denial of our right to act.”
rote Angelina Grimké in 1837, “and if we have no right to act then may we well be termed the ‘white slaves of the North’ for like our brethren in bonds, we must seal our lips in silence and despair.” As I have already suggested, the alliance between black bodies and female bodies achieved by the rhetorical crossing of feminist-abolitionist texts was not necessarily equitable. By identifying with the slave, and by insisting on the muteness of the slave, Grimké asserts her right to act and speak, thus differentiating herself from her brethren in bonds. The bound and silent figure of the slave metaphorically represents the woman’s oppression and so grants the white woman an access to political discourse denied the slave, exemplifying the way in which slave labor produces—both literally and metaphorically—even the most basic of freedom’s privileges.10

In feminist writings the metaphoric linking of women and slaves proves ubiquitous: marriage and property laws, the conventional adoption of a husband’s name, or even the length of fashionable skirts are explained and decried by reference to women’s “slavery.”11 This strategy serves to emphasize the restrictions of woman’s sphere, and, despite luxuries and social civilities, to class the bourgeois woman among the oppressed. Sarah Grimké, beginning her survey of the condition of women with ancient history, notes that “the cupidity of man soon led him to regard woman as property, and hence we find them sold to those who wished to marry them,” while within marriage, as defined by nineteenth-century laws of coverture, “the very being of a woman, like that of a slave, is absorbed in her master.”12 “A woman,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton explains to the Woman’s Rights Convention of 1856, “has no name! She is Mrs. John or James, Peter or Paul, just as she changes masters; like the Southern slave, she takes the name of her owner.”13 The image of the slave evoked not simply the loss of “liberty” but the loss of all claims to self-possession. At stake in the feminists’ likening of women to slaves is the recognition that personhood can be annihilated and a person owned, absorbed, and un-named. The irony inherent in such comparisons is that the enlightening and empowering motions of identification that connect feminism and abolition come inextricably bound to a process of absorption not unlike the one that they expose. Though the metaphoric linking of women and slaves uses their shared position as bodies to be bought, owned, and designated as grounds of resistance, it nevertheless obliterates the particularity of black and female experience, making their distinct exploitations appear as one. The difficulty of preventing moments of identification from becoming acts of appropriation constitutes the essential dilemma of feminist-abolitionist rhetoric.

The body of the woman and the body of the slave need not, of course, only merge through metaphor, and it is hardly surprising that the figure of the female slave features prominently in both discourses. Yet even in the case of the literally enslaved woman, the combining of feminist and abolitionist concerns supports both reciprocal and appropriative strategies. The difference between the stereo-
typic cultural conceptions of black and female bodies was such that in the crossing of feminist and abolitionist rhetoric the status of the slave and the status of the woman could both be improved by an alliance with the body of the other. Their two sorts of bodies were prisons in different ways, and for each the prison of the other was liberating. So for the female slave, the frail body of the bourgeois lady promised not weakness but the modesty and virtue of a delicacy at once supposed physical and moral. Concern for the roughness and impropriety with which slave women were treated redefined their suffering as feminine, and hence endowed with all the moral value generally attributed to nineteenth-century American womanhood. Conversely, for the nineteenth-century woman there were certain assets to be claimed from the body of the slave. "Those who think the physical circumstances of women would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable," Margaret Fuller argues, "are by no means those who think it impossible for Negresses to endure field work even during pregnancy." The strength to plant, and hoe, and pick, and endure is available to the urban middle-class woman insofar as she can be equated with the laboring slave woman, and that equation suggests the possibility of reshaping physical circumstances. Fuller's words provide a perfect example of the chiasmic alignment of abolition and woman's rights, for though embedded within a discussion devoted to feminist concerns this passage achieves a double efficacy, simultaneously declaring the physical strength of the woman and implying the need to protect the exploited slave.

Just as the figure of the female slave served feminist rhetorical purposes, she also proved useful in abolitionist campaigns and was frequently employed to attract women to abolitionist work. William Lloyd Garrison, for example, headed the "Ladies Department" of the Liberator with the picture of a black woman on her knees and in chains; beneath it ran the plea, "Am I not a woman and a sister?" Such tactics did not attempt to identify woman's status with that of the slave but rather relied upon the ties of sisterly sympathy, presuming that one woman would be particularly sensitive to the sufferings of another. Indeed such a strategy emphasized the difference between the free woman's condition and the bondage of the slave, since it was this difference that enabled the free woman to work for her sister's emancipation.

The particular horror and appeal of the slave woman lay in the magnitude of her sexual vulnerability, and the Ladies Department admonished its female readers to work for the immediate emancipation of their one million enslaved sisters "exposed to all the violence of lust and passion—and treated with more indelicacy and cruelty than cattle." The sexual exploitation of female slaves served abolitionists as a proof that slave owners laid claim not merely to the slave's time, labor, and obedience—assets purchased, after all, with the wages paid by the Northern industrialist—but to their flesh. The abolitionist comparison of slave and cattle, like the feminist analogy between woman and slave, marks the
slip from person to chattel. More startling than the comparison of the slave to a cow, however, is the Ladies Department’s equation of “indelicacy” with “cruelty,” for set beside the menace of brandings, whippings, beatings, and starvation, rudeness seems an insignificant care. This concern with indelicacy becomes explicable, however, in terms of the overlap of feminist and abolitionist discourses. To the male abolitionist the application of those notions of modesty and purity that governed the world of nineteenth-century ladies to the extremely different situation of the slave must have seemed a useful strategy for gaining female support on an economic, political, and hence unfeminine issue. Viewed from this perspective the language of feminine modesty simply reinforces traditional female roles. Even here, however, the emphasis on sexual exploitation suggests that the abolitionist’s easy differentiation between the free woman and the enslaved one may conceal grounds of identification. For in stressing the aspect of slavery that would seem most familiar to a female readership, the abolitionist press implicitly suggests that the Ladies Department’s readers may be bound like the slaves they are urged to free.

As the examples of the Grimkés and Stanton demonstrate, feminist-abolitionists emphasize the similarities in the condition of women and slaves; nevertheless, their treatment of the figure of the sexually exploited female slave betrays an opposing desire to deny any share in this vulnerability. The same metaphoric structure that enables the identification of women and slaves also proves capable of serving the antithetical purpose of precluding such identification. Thus in the writings of antislavery women the frequent emphasis on the specifically feminine trial of sexual abuse serves to project the white woman’s sexual anxieties onto the sexualized body of the female slave. Concern over the slave woman’s sexual victimization displaces the free woman’s fear of confronting the sexual elements of her own bodily experience, either as a positive force or as a mechanism of oppression. The prevalence of such fear is illustrated by the caution with which even the most radical feminist thinkers avoid public discussion of “woman’s rights in marriage”; it is only in their private correspondence that the leaders of the women’s rights movement allude to sexual rights. “It seems to me that we are not ready” to bring this issue before the 1856 convention, Lucy Stone writes to Susan B. Anthony:

No two of us think alike about it, and yet it is clear to me that question underlies the whole movement, and all our little skirmishing for better laws and the right to vote, will yet be swallowed up in the real question viz.: Has woman a right to herself? It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, etc., if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right. Not one wife in a thousand can do that now.19

The figure of the slave woman, whose inability to keep her body and its uses under her own control is widely and openly recognized, becomes a perfect conduit for the unarticulated and unacknowledged failure of the free woman to own
her own body in marriage. In one sense, then, it is the very indelicacy of the slave woman’s position that makes her a useful proxy in such indelicate matters.

Garrison’s Ladies Department attests to the importance of women to the anti-slavery movement. In 1832 the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was founded as an “auxiliary” to the all male New England Anti-Slavery Society. By 1838 there were forty-one female auxiliary societies in Massachusetts alone.20 The function of these auxiliaries was to provide support—mostly in the form of fundraising—for the work of the male organizations. Thus the auxiliaries behaved much like other female philanthropic or benevolence societies, and most of the women who worked in them gave no public speeches, wrote no political pamphlets, and did not see their antislavery activities as challenging the traditions of male authority and female domesticity. Nevertheless, in their work against slavery these female societies transformed conventional womanly activities into tools of political persuasion, “presenting,” as Angelina Grimké explains, the slave’s “kneeling image constantly before the public eye.” Toward this end they stitched the pathetic figure of the manacled slave onto bags, pincushions, and pen wipers (“Even the children of the north are inscribing on their handiwork, ‘May the points of our needles prick the slaveholders’ conscience’”), and wrote virtually all of the sentimental tales that describe the slaves’ sufferings.21

In many ways, then, the antislavery stories that abolitionist women wrote for Sunday-school primers, juvenile miscellanies, antislavery newspapers, and giftbooks need to be assessed as a variety of female handiwork, refashioned for political, didactic, and pecuniary purposes. The genre is fundamentally feminine: not only were these stories—like virtually all the domestic and sentimental fiction of the period—primarily penned by women, but, beyond this, women largely controlled their production, editing the giftbooks and miscellanies that contained them, and publishing many of these volumes under the auspices of female antislavery societies.22 The most substantial and longest-lived abolitionist publishing endeavor of this type, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society’s annual giftbook the Liberty Bell, provides the most obvious illustration of these practices, and one that subsequent antislavery collections sought to imitate.23 In their efforts to raise funds the Boston auxiliary organized an Anti-Slavery Fair, and it was for the sixth fair, as a further educational and fundraising gesture, that the Liberty Bell was published. Under Maria Weston Chapman’s skillful editorial hands it appeared at virtually every fair from 1839 to 1858, to be sold alongside the quilts and jams.24 The minutes of the committee for the tenth Anti-Slavery Fair claimed that the Liberty Bell “always doubles the money invested in it.” Since the cost of producing the volume was three to four hundred dollars (covered by donations drawn largely from among the contributors), the committee’s claim would assess the Liberty Bell at slightly less than a fifth of the fair’s average proceeds of four thou-
sand dollars a year.25 One important feature of the tales published in the Liberty Bell, then, was that they were considered saleable. The depiction of the slave was thought to have its own market value. The reasons the volumes sold, moreover, appear paradoxically at odds both with each other and with abolitionist beliefs. On the one hand the horrific events narrated in these tales attract precisely to the extent that the buyers of these representations of slavery are fascinated by the abuses they ostensibly oppose. For despite their clear abolitionist stance such stories are fueled by the allure of bondage, an appeal which suggests that the valuation of depictions of slavery may rest upon the same psychic ground as slaveholding itself. On the other hand, the acceptability of these tales depends upon their adherence to a feminine and domestic demeanor that softens the cruelty they describe and makes their political goals more palatable to a less politicized readership. Chapman, explaining the success of the Liberty Bell, admits as much, suggestively presenting her giftbook as a mother who treats the public “like children, to whom a medicine is made as pleasant as its nature permits. A childish mind receives a small measure of truth in gilt edges where it would reject it in ‘whity-brown.”26 Though plain by giftbook standards, the embossed leather and gilded edges of the Liberty Bell permitted it to fit without apparent incongruity into any household library. Despite their subject matter, the antislavery stories it contained attempt a similar and uneasy compliance with the conventions that governed nineteenth-century domestic fiction. The contradictory nature of antislavery fiction’s appeal thus raises more general questions about what it means to depict slavery, and hence about the politics and power of representation.

Critics have frequently argued that sentimental fiction provides an inappropriate vehicle for the project of educating the public to slavery’s real terrors.27 This criticism, however, simply echoes the authors’ own anxieties about the realism of the stories they tell. Almost every antislavery story begins by citing its source: a meeting with the hero or heroine, an account of the events in the newspaper, or most often and simply just having been told.28 “The truth of incidents” claimed in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s preface to Uncle Tom’s Cabin is documented by her subsequently published Key to the novel—the genre’s most sustained and impressive attempt to demonstrate its veracity. But her very effort to prove that her novel is “a collection and arrangement of real incidents . . . a mosaic of facts” propounds the difference between her narrative and her key to it, since “slavery, in some of its workings, is too dreadful for the purposes of art. A work which should represent it strictly as it is, would be a work which could not be read.”29 The reading of these stories, and therefore both their marketability and their political efficacy, depends upon their success in rearranging the real. The decision to rearrange it into sentimental tales, I will argue, is highly appropriate, not only because of the dominance of the form during the period, nor simply because of its popular appeal and consequent market value, but also because sentimental fiction constitutes an intensely bodily genre. The concern with the human body

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as site and symbol of the self that links the struggles of feminists and abolitionists also informs the genre in which nineteenth-century women wrote their anti-slavery stories.

The tears of the reader are pledged in these sentimental stories as a means of rescuing the bodies of slaves. Emblematic of this process, Child's story of "Mary French and Susan Easton" relates how the white Mary, kidnapped, stained black, and sold into slavery, is quite literally freed by weeping; her true identity revealed because "where the tears had run down her cheeks, there was a streak whiter than the rest of her face."30 Her weeping obliterates the differential of color and makes Mary white, thereby asserting the power of sentiment to change the condition of the human body or at least, read symbolically, to alter how that condition is perceived. The ability of sentimental fiction to liberate the bodies of slaves is, moreover, intimately connected to the bodily nature of the genre itself. Sentiment and feeling refer at once to emotion and to physical sensation, and in sentimental fiction these two versions of *sentire* blend as the eyes of readers take in the printed word and blur it with tears. Reading sentimental fiction is thus a bodily act, and the success of a story is gauged, in part, by its ability to translate words into pulse beats and sobs. This physicality of the reading experience radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader. In particular, tears designate a border realm between the story and its reading, since the tears shed by characters initiate an answering moistness in the reader's eye.31 The assurance in this fiction that emotion can be attested and measured by physical response makes this conflation possible; the palpability of the character's emotional experience is precisely what allows it to be shared. In sentimental fiction bodily signs are adamantly and repeatedly presented as the preferred and most potent mechanisms both for communicating meaning and for marking the fact of its transmission.32

Sentimental narrative functions through stereotypes, so that upon first encountering a character there is no difficulty in ascertaining his or her moral worth. In sentimental writing the self is externally displayed, and the body provides a reliable sign of who one is. Nina Gordon, the heroine of *Dred* (Stowe's other antislavery novel), develops an instinctive goodness more potent than her lover Edward Clayton's principled virtue. In her instantaneous and unproblematic discrimination of good from evil, Nina provides a paradigm for reading the novel that contains her.

Looking back almost fiercely, a moment, she turned and said to Clayton:

"I hate that man!"

"Who is it?" said Clayton.

"I don't know!" said Nina. "I never saw him before. But I hate him! He is a bad man! I'd as soon have a serpent come near me as that man!"

"Well, the poor fellow's face isn't prepossessing," said Clayton. "But I should not be
prepared for such an anathema. . . . How can you be so positive about a person you’ve only seen once!” . . .

“Oh,” said Nina, resuming her usual gay tones, “don’t you know that girls and dogs, and other inferior creatures, have the gift of seeing what’s in people? It doesn’t belong to highly cultivated folks like you, but to us poor creatures, who have to trust to our instincts. So, beware!”

Skill in reading the body of the stranger belongs not to the highly cultivated man who talks of what is prepossessing and what an anathema but to girls who hate and will call a man bad. To Nina Mr. Jekyll’s face is “very repulsive,” and in feeling herself repelled, pushed away by his visage, she weighs the evidence of his character in the reaction of her body to his body. Jokingly shared with dogs, the girl’s capacity to read signs by instinct is as physical as the traits it correctly interprets. The succeeding chapters prove the adequacy of Nina’s reaction to Mr. Jekyll, and so endorse her and the sentimental novel’s mechanisms of assessment.

Nina Gordon is the ideal reader of all sentimental fiction, not simply of anti-slavery tales, but her ability to read bodies correctly is more important for anti-slavery fiction, where the physical vocabulary has been suddenly enlarged to include very different looking bodies, making the interpretative task more difficult. The problem, for the antislavery writer, lies in depicting a black body that can be instantly recognized not only as a loyal or a rebellious servant but as a hero or a heroine. Stowe introduces Dred:

He was a tall black man, of magnificent stature and proportions. His skin was intensely black, and polished like marble. A loose shirt of red flannel, which opened very wide at the breast, gave a display of a neck and chest of herculean strength. The sleeves of the shirt, rolled up nearly to the shoulders, showed the muscles of a gladiator. The head, which rose with an imperial air from the broad shoulders, was large and massive, and developed with equal force both in the reflective and perceptive department. The perceptive organs jutted like dark ridges over the eyes, while that part of the head which phrenologists attribute to moral and intellectual sentiments rose like an ample dome above them.

A magnificent, herculean, and imperial gladiator—with these words Stowe arrays Dred in the vocabulary of classical heroism. That gladiators were also slaves only strengthens the claims Stowe desires to make for this slave. The density of such terms, however, equally evinces her sense of the difficulty of granting and sustaining Dred’s heroic status. She therefore supplements her attempt to fashion Dred into a polished black marble icon of classical heroism with the pseudoscientific language of phrenology. The phrenologist, like the reader of sentimental fiction, reads internal characteristics from the external signs offered by the body. By enlisting the phrenologist in her descriptive task, Stowe garners the authority of study for what she has previously presented as instinctual knowledge. Her need for these multiple buttresses attests to the frailty of this structure. The precariousness of Dred’s heroic stature is all the more telling because in Stowe’s description the heroic and the phrenological have combined to present him less
as a man than as a monument. A structure of magnificent proportions crowned
by an ample dome, this massive figure of polished marble achieves a truly archi-
tectural splendor. In this description Stowe has not so much described Dred as
built his body.

Stowe's difficulty in creating a slave hero is best demonstrated, however, not
by the body she constructs him in but by the features she silently omits. For
though Stowe describes Dred as having eyes of that "unfathomable blackness and
darkness which is often a striking characteristic of the African eye," she avoids
detailing the rest of his visage. In "The Slave-Wife," Frances Green, less sensitive
to the racism that underlies this dilemma, gives her hero, Laco Ray, a face that
exemplifies Stowe's problem:

Tall, muscular, and every way well-proportioned, he had the large expansion of chest and
shoulders that are seen in the best representations of Hercules. He was quite black, the
skin soft and glossy; but the features had none of the revolting characteristics which are
supposed by some to be inseparable from the African visage. On the contrary they were
remarkably fine—the nose aquiline—the mouth even handsome—the forehead singularly
high and broad.36

Green's Laco Ray inhabits in 1845 virtually the same body Stowe gives to Dred in
1856, confirming the genre's reliance on stereotypes: every hero, even a black
one, is simply another in a familiar series of "best representations of Hercules."
In making her black Hercules, however, Green registers her need to reject "the
revolting characteristics" of nose, mouth, and brow that she criticizes others for
supposing "inseparable from the African visage." Her desire to separate them is,
obviously, as suspect as the assumption of their inseparability. Her own insecurity
about attaining such a separation betrays itself in adverbs as she constantly modi-
ifies her description to emphasize its unexpectedness: remarkably fine, even hand-
some, singularly high and broad; what she finds most exceptional about Laco Ray's
features is that they belong to him. Making a black hero involves not only dyeing
the traditional figure of the hero to a darker hue but also separating blackness
from the configuration of traits that in the bodily grammar of sentimental fiction
signals revulsion. In replacing or omitting revolting features, both Green and
Stowe remake the black body in order to mold the slave into a hero. These fea-
tures revolt, moreover, not only because they fail to conform to white criteria for
beauty but, more interestingly, because they threaten to overturn sentimental fic-
tion's stable matrix of bodily signs.

The project of depicting the body of the sympathetic black thus becomes a
project of racial amalgamation. Child's story of Mary French's transition from
white to black and back to white again begins with an idyllic scene in which Mary
and her free-black playmate Susan frolic with a white-and-black spotted rabbit.
In his alternating patches of color the rabbit presents an ideal of amalgamation
that would not blur racial distinctions into mulatto indifferenciation but rather preserve the clarity of difference without the hierarchies of valuation imposed by prejudice. The problem in Child's story, as in Stowe's and Green's, is that this sort of equality-in-difference becomes impossible to maintain. Susan, kidnapped with Mary, cannot prove her right to freedom by bodily traits; her father (afraid of being kidnapped himself) cannot search for her; and Mary's father does nothing to pursue this search once he has redeemed his own daughter. The racial prejudice implicit in her only half happy ending is obviously one of Child's points. Nevertheless her concluding remarks instance such racial hierarchization. "The only difference between Mary French and Susan Easton is," she explains, "that the black color could be rubbed off from Mary's skin, while from Susan's it could not." Despite her clear desire for a different answer, the only solution to racial prejudice Child's story can offer is rubbing off blackness, and though she does not say this, it is impossible to imagine what one could produce by such a purging except whiteness. If Mary's liberating tears offer, as I have argued, a perfect emblem for sentimental fiction's power to emancipate, that emblem includes the recognition that the freedom it offers depends upon the black being washed white. The problem of antislavery fiction is that the very effort to depict goodness in black involves the obliteration of blackness.

Child's story challenges the prevalent bodily vocabulary that interprets dark skin as an unvarying sign of slavery: for Susan, being black and being a slave are not the same thing. Yet whatever Susan's "right to be free," even under antebellum law, the blackness of her body is itself described as a form of enslavement, and one that no act of emancipation can rub off. The painful longing for such an emancipation from one's own skin is explored in Eliza Lee Follen's story "A Melancholy Boy." Throughout most of this story Follen relates a series of anecdotes about the good but inexplicably unhappy Harry, without in any way describing his physical appearance, though the publication of this piece in the Liberty Bell would prompt readers to expect that some abolitionist issue is at stake. In the last paragraph of her tale Follen "discover[s] the cause of Harry's melancholy."

I was returning from a walk, and saw him at a little brook that ran behind my house, washing his face and hands vehemently, and rubbing them very hard. I then remembered that I had often seen him there doing the same thing. "It seems to me, Harry," I said, "that your face and hands are clean now; and why do you rub your face so violently?" "I am trying," he said, "to wash away this color; I can never be happy till I get rid of this color."

Harry does not name his color, though he does distinguish himself from the other boys: "They are all white." Follen too refrains from naming "this color," so that the story centers upon the absence of the word black. Both Harry and Follen attempt to escape his blackness, not only by violent scrubbings but also by suppressing the word that names it. In Harry's hopeless efforts to attain personhood
through the denial of his body, antislavery fiction locates the problems of representation established by the encounter between sentimental narration and abolitionist ideals within the psyche of the very entity it wishes to represent.

With its reliance on the body as the privileged structure for communicating meaning, sentimental fiction thus constantly reinscribes the troubling relation between personhood and corporeality that underlies the projects of both abolition and feminism. The issues I have been exploring are not peripheral to feminist concerns, for by responding to the representational problems posed by the black body with a rhetoric of racial amalgamation, the women who wrote these antislavery stories encode the racial problematic within a sexual one. The "rubbing off" of blackness that characterizes antislavery fiction imitates the whitening produced by miscegenation. Moreover, miscegenation provides an essential motif of virtually all antislavery fiction, for even in those stories in which escape, slave rebellion, or the separation of families dominate the plot, its multiple challenges suffuse the text. My identification of the human body as the site at which feminist and abolitionist discourses intersect can be further particularized in the images of the black woman's rape by the white man; or their unsanctioned, unprotected, and unequal love; or the always suppressed possibility of the white woman's desire for the black man; or the black man's never sufficiently castrated attraction to the white woman; or, most of all, in the ubiquitous light-skinned slave whose body attests to the sexual mingling of black and white. Though it marks the intersection of abolitionist and feminist discourses, the body of the light-skinned slave means differently for each of them: the less easily race can be read from his or her flesh, the more clearly the white man's repeated penetrations of the black body are imprinted there. The quadroon's one-fourth blackness represents two generations of miscegenating intercourse, the octoroon's three—their numerical names attesting to society's desire to keep track of an ever less visible black ancestry even at the cost of counting the generations of institutionalized sexual exploitation.

Critical discussions of the mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons who figure in these texts have dealt almost exclusively with the obvious racist allegiances that make a light-skinned hero or heroine more attractive to a white audience, and that presume that the feelings of identification so essential for sentimental fiction cannot cross race lines. I am not interested in attempting to defend either authors or audiences from this charge. My discussion of the rhetoric of amalgamation already has suggested that the light-skinned body is valued in this fiction precisely because of its ability to mask the alien African blackness that the fictional mulatto is nevertheless purported to represent. I would contend, however, that an acknowledgment of this racism ought to inaugurate, not foreclose, discussion of antislavery fiction's fascination with miscegenation. For at stake in the obsession with the fictionalized figure of the mulatto is the essential dilemma of both fem-
ist and abolitionist projects: that the recognition of ownership of one’s own body as essential to claiming personhood is matched by the fear of being imprisoned, silenced, deprived of personhood by that same body. The fictional mulatto combines this problematics of corporeality and identity for both discourses because miscegenation and the children it produces stand as a bodily challenge to the conventions of reading the body, thus simultaneously insisting that the body is a sign of identity and undermining the assurance with which that sign can be read.

Moreover, stories of miscegenation inevitably link the racial and the sexual, demonstrating the asymmetry of abolitionist and feminist concerns—and the by now familiar ways in which, by identifying with her enslaved sister, the free woman comes to betray her.

The form miscegenation usually took in the American South was, of course, the rape and concubinage of slave women by their white masters. Caroline Healey Dall’s “Amy,” published in the Liberty Bell of 1849, tells this story, and records in its telling the interlocking structure of patriarchy’s dual systems of racial oppression and sexual exploitation. The story begins with a marriage: “In Southern fashion, Edith was not quite sixteen when she was wooed and won, and borne, a willing captive, to a patriarchal dwelling.” Edith’s ambiguous role as a willing captive within the patriarchal systems of marriage and slaveholding becomes more sinisterly evident as the story progresses and she eventually proves willing to prostitute her slave and half sister Amy. As Dall explains, “The offspring of a lawless and unrequited affection,” Amy “had, nevertheless, unconsciously dedicated her whole being to vestal chastity. But nothing availed.” The problem of Amy’s ancestry is not, despite prevailing cultural expectations, that as the child of lawless sexuality she has inherited lascivious desires but rather that as the child of sexual exploitation she has inherited the role of being exploited. Her body displays not only a history of past miscegenation but also a promise of future mixings. A friend of Edith’s new husband sees Amy, reads both her desirability and her vulnerability on her “graceful form,” and reenacts a parodic version (or is it?) of the wooing and winning with which the story begins. The woman Charles Hartley must woo in order to win Amy is, however, not Amy but her mistress, Edith. In this transaction Amy is prostituted as much by the white woman’s reluctance to discuss sex as by the white man’s desire to indulge in it. For as Charles keeps pressing Edith to procure Amy for him, she comes to see her slave’s sexual modesty as a threat to her own delicacy:

Not only did the whole subject distress her, but to be so besought on such a subject, by one until lately a stranger, was a perpetual wound to her delicacy. She felt herself losing ground in her own self-respect. Her husband regarded it as a desecration, and repeatedly asked whether her own life was to be worn out in defense of Amy.

In the end, concurring with her husband’s insistence on the sanctity of her delicacy, Edith signs the “deed of transfer.”
In Dall's story the pairing of feminist and abolitionist concerns proves double edged: for if Edith's inability to prevent male desire, or refute male conceptions of feminine purity, allies her to her powerless slaves and names her a captive of patriarchy, she nevertheless remains fully complicitous in Amy's sexual victimization. The role of feminine delicacy that she accepts is paid for not just by her own loss of efficacy but by Amy's destruction. Dall's critique of female delicacy identifies it as an essential prop both for the subordination and demoralization of women and for the exploitation of slaves. The narrative voice in which Dall tells this story, however, conforms to the requirements of the delicacy it condemns. In describing Amy as "dedicated . . . to a vestal chastity," it is the narrator, not Edith's husband, who first equates female purity with the sacred; while in calling the lust that fathered Amy "affection," Dall mitigates the very evil her story was intended to expose. The problem is that traditional notions of female purity attach both to the body—in its vulnerability to rape or enforced concubinage—and to language. The conventions of chastity count speech as a sexual assault; hence Edith can describe Charles's propositions as a "perpetual wound." Dall fears that to name explicitly the obscene events that comprise her plot would be experienced by her readers as the infliction of wounds. The cultural critique voiced by Dall is leveled at her own prose, for in respecting the sensibilities of her readers she adheres to the dictates of a linguistic delicacy that she has demonstrated simultaneously protects against and inflicts physical indecencies.45

The sacrifice of Amy's chastity serves not only to defend Edith's delicacy but also, paradoxically, to provide her with a variety of safely mediated sexual experience. After all, it is to Edith that Charles brings his suit for sexual favors, and—after the requisite protestations of lost self-respect—it is Edith who yields. That she can yield Amy's body rather than her own demonstrates the usefulness of the slave woman as a surrogate for the white woman's sexuality, and particularly the usefulness of the mulatta, who in being part white and part black (and in Amy's case, being more explicitly half sibling and half not) simultaneously embodies self and other. Thus through the prostitution of Amy Edith can be perceived as gaining a degree of sexual license normally forbidden the proper bourgeois woman. Edith's husband and her husband's friend, however, fill virtually interchangeable roles in this narrative, both equally involved in demanding Edith's compliance. Her husband's anger over her desecration is directed at her initial defense of Amy's chastity, not at Charles's presumption in bringing the matter up. Consequently, even Edith's passive and unconscious circumvention of sexual prohibitions ultimately functions as a demonstration that the white woman, like her slave, remains a sexual possession of the white man. In these terms fictional depictions of the slave woman's sexual vulnerability may themselves constitute an act of betrayal not unlike Edith's own, for in such stories antislavery rhetoric disguises, and so permits, the white woman's unacknowledgable feelings of sexual victimization and desire. The insights and emotions granted to the white woman
by such confusions of the racial and the sexual remain divorced from her body. If, as Lucy Stone insisted, the ability to control the "uses" of one's own body constitutes the most basic condition of freedom, then for the white woman the strongest proof that she is not owned by the white man lies in the inadmissible possibility of using her body elsewhere—a possibility only granted her, within anti-slavery fiction, through a vicarious reading of the body of the slave.\textsuperscript{44}

In anti-slavery fiction the story of the white woman's desire for the black man is not told, and his desire for her is constantly reduced to the safer dimensions of a loyal slave's nominally asexual adoration of his good and kind mistress.\textsuperscript{45} Child comes closest to giving voice to these desires not in her fiction but in her first abolitionist tract, \textit{An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans}. While this book established her as an abolitionist leader, it cost her both her popular readership (so many subscriptions to the \textit{Juvenile Miscellany} were canceled by horrified parents that the series was forced to fold), and, with her expulsion from the Athenaeum, her position in Boston literary society. Perhaps chief among the \textit{Appeal}'s many challenges to societal norms was Child's call for the repeal of antimiscegenation laws.\textsuperscript{46} Although her attack on these discriminatory statutes explicitly distinguishes between society's refusal to sanction interracial marriage and its willingness to condone such liaisons out of wedlock, she implies that what is at stake in these contradictory attitudes is not miscegenation per se but rather the patriarchal melding of sexual and racial oppression that assures the supremacy of the white man, granting only to him the freedom to choose his sexual partners.

An unjust law exists in this Commonwealth, by which marriages between persons of different color is pronounced illegal. I am perfectly aware of the gross ridicule to which I may subject myself by alluding to this particular; but I have lived too long, and observed too much, to be disturbed by the world's mockery. . . . Under existing circumstances, none but those whose condition in life is too low to be much affected by public opinion, will form such alliances; and they, when they choose to do so, will make such marriages in spite of the law. I know two or three instances where women of the laboring class have been united to reputable, industrious colored men. These husbands regularly bring home their wages, and are kind to their families. If by some odd chances, which not unfrequently occur in the world, their wives should become heirs to any property, the children may be wronged out of it, because the law pronounces them illegitimate. And while this injustice exists with regard to honest, industrious individuals, who are merely guilty of differing from us in a matter of taste, neither the legislation nor customs of slaveholding States exert their influence against immoral connexions.

In the next paragraph she discusses the "temporary connexions" made by "White gentlemen of the first-rank" and New Orleans quadroons.\textsuperscript{47} Her examples of illegal miscegenating marriages pointedly make the woman white and the man black, while the case of the quadroon concubine pairs race and sex differently. Child's care in this passage to discriminate her own desires from those she discusses indicates the strength of the taboo against which she writes. For even as she disclaims any concern for the "world's mockery," Child admits the impossi-