The Romance of Solidarity:
A Long History of Sentimentalism, 1861-2009

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A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2014

Reading Committee:
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Program authorized to offer degree:
English

University of Washington

Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee: Alys Weinbaum

This dissertation traces a long history of the sentimental literary genre in popular US novels. Beginning with 19th century abolitionist texts, it examines a lineage of books that are written by privileged white authors in order to speak with, or on behalf of, the racialized "other." This genre of text aims to "change the world" via projects of empathic identification, interracial collaboration, and coalition based on gender identity, and is marked by an ethos of solidarity and desire for intimacy with the subaltern. This dissertation argues that the sentimental impulse to "feel right" marks a form of white conservatism, and rather than becoming less popular since the 19th century, the bind between appearing as an "activist" writer and the use of sentimental generics has become more deeply entwined. Across four distinct – but all politically and racially tumultuous – moments in US history, this dissertation asks what is at stake in the continuing popularity and utility of sentiment to express a politics of solidarity.

Chapter One grounds the dissertation in the 19th century, with an analysis of abolitionist writing by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, and Lydia Marie Child, and considers how the texts that come out of the antebellum and Reconstruction years offer a framework to think through interracial and collaborative narrative possibilities. Chapter Two moves ahead to the Civil Rights era, and traces the friendship of William Styron and James Baldwin in relation with their novels. Chapter Three assesses Dave Eggers' *What is the What* in the context of post-9/11,

and argues that the generic collapse of "autobiography/novel" mirrors a sentimental desire for empathic identification. Chapter Four considers Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* as a revision of the 19th century slave narrative, one that rewrites the radical challenges of the form into a tale of white women's progress. Across these historical locations, this project assesses the limits of a sentimental impetus to "feel right" and its profound connections with the histories of slavery and abolitionism. This dissertation works at the intersection of American Studies, English, and Gender Studies, and proposes new ways to think about the politics of solidarity, gender, and racial formation in the US.

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Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments are "sentimental" in and of themselves: perched from this perspective of the present, they build the story of the past, neat and orderly, all adding up the inevitable triumph of publication. And, while I might take issue with generic norms in general, in this case I am happy to fall back on them. I am profoundly grateful for the community, experiences, and individuals who have nurtured and supported me and this project for the past seven years. And indeed, writing my thank-yous gives me the chance to appreciate how deeply connected time and space can be. I notice traces of this project as far back as experiences I had in elementary school, and am happy to publicly acknowledge and express gratitude for those of you who have traveled alongside ever since. What is so deeply humbling, of course, is noticing how the concerns of this project – justice, narrative, and the politics of solidarity – have also been the questions and projects of so many mentors, activists, teachers, and writers before me. I sincerely hope that this work contributes to this lineage.

The seeds for this dissertation were planted at Macalester College, in courses with James Dawes that had serious one word titles like "Justice." Jim's commitment to questions of representation, justice, and radical pedagogy deeply influenced how I see the world – and the work of the humanities scholar in it – and his example inspired me to take a gamble and apply to graduate school. While the first versions of my graduate work might have owed a little too much to his influence, I hope that this project usefully extends those original discussions and ideas.

My mentors and teachers in the English Department at the University of Washington are without equal. In particular, I wish to thank Alys Weinbaum for seven sustained years of mentorship, intellectual rigor, and the best close reading a student could ask for. From the first-

year course I took with her, right through the PhD process, Alys' dedication to questions of equity, gender, race, and literature have been inspirational and have continually challenged me to rethink and reconsider. Eva Cherniavsky I thank for true intellectual generosity and close reading of my work; from the first "early American lit" course I took with her, I knew I had found an intellectual mentor. Gillian Harkins I thank for rigorous theoretical feedback and always being able to reflect the stakes of the work back to me. Thank you also to Chandan Reddy for stimulating seminars early in the process, and rambling, philosophical conversations later on. From the History Department, I wish to thank Stephanie Smallwood for her help with the prospectus, and ongoing support and guidance throughout the dissertation process.

Working as an Assistant Director in the Expository Writing Program helped me to understand the pedagogical stakes of working with language and literature. Director Anis Bawarshi modeled how to effectively work in programming and administration from a place of intellectual commitment and interpersonal care and development. My co-Directors, including Lindsey Rose Russell, Ashley Bashaw, Gianna Craig, Elizabeth Brown, Chelsea Jennings, Suzanne Schmidt, and Kirin Wachter-Grene, made the EWP not only a stimulating and exciting place to come to work every day, but also a lot more fun. The Critical Classrooms cohort became an almost sacred space for discussions of race, gender, and power in the classroom, as we worked toward developing antiracist teaching practices. Finally, thank you to Diana Borrow for keeping us all on track, and with a smile and a good story to boot.

The Simpson Center at the University of Washington became my intellectual home away from home. In particular, I fondly remember the American Studies Prospectus Workshop, with Alys Weinbaum and Stephanie Smallwood, as a workshop filled with days of dynamic conversation, interdisciplinary discovery, and stimulating collaboration. Additionally, The

Certificate in Public Scholarship, led by Miriam Bartha and Bruce Burgett, became a welcome intellectual and practical space in which to play with and apply the theories of justice and action that I was theorizing within the English Department. I am profoundly grateful, in particular, for Miriam's support as Portfolio Adviser. My understanding of what academic work can be, look like, and do in the world has been greatly expanded by the Certificate program in general and her mentorship in particular. Additionally, Candice Rai served as an invaluable adviser to my Capstone project; Candice's deep knowledge of teaching, community work, and engaged scholarship provided the backbone for the Capstone. Although my writing for the Certificate is not included in this dissertation per se, the conversations, readings, and exercises in collaborative and justice-oriented work from that program inform every word.

I have spent the last two years as a Project in Interdisciplinary Pedagogy Fellow at the University of Washington, Bothell, where I have had the great pleasure of engaging in conversations on best practices and radical innovations for teaching with like-minded pedagogues. In particular, thank you to Camille Walsh, Dan Berger, and the rest of the American & Ethnic Studies faculty for creating a truly collegial environment for sharing ideas and feedback. Finally, I would like to thank all of my students at the University of Washington, Bothell, and in particular those who took "Legacies of Slave Narratives" in Winter 2013 or 2014. Those small, intense classroom discussions were all the proof I needed that teaching is the best job in the world, and you will see the traces of our conversations in this dissertation. Your dedication to hard conversations and making real connections between the text and the world continue to inspire me every day.

Not a page of this project, or indeed graduate school at all, would have been possible without the friendship, love, and energy of a wide network of friends. Maya Smorodinsky,

Ashley Bashaw, and Nicole Burgund were my "first-year friends" who somehow, miraculously, became life-long friends. Jessie Kindig and I connected at the Prospectus Workshop, only to realize that we've lived parallel Seattle lives. I thank her for being a close friend and for her generous feedback on this project. Chelsea Jennings I thank for collaborative writing projects, co-teaching, good humor, a serious commitment to writing dates, and the added bonus of realizing that your colleague is a very true friend. Thank you to Anne Phyfe Palmer, Jenny Hayo, and Douglas Ridings for creating space for self-study, community, and joyful expression. Finally, to Hannah Brooks-Motl, Team Tucket, the Plumb-Swords, and sangha: you're the best.

Lastly, there is no part of this project that would have been possible without the long-time support of my family. Thank you to my father, Gray Pedersen, for being the first person I know to (co)teach a class called "Equity and Justice," and to my mother, Anabel Cole, who tells me stories about what it was like, as a woman, to pursue a PhD in the 1970s. You are both my first and most tremendous inspirations and role models. Thank you to my brother Ben, for making the world a more sonically beautiful place. To my brother Henry, who has also found his place in an institution, I send thanks for all of the long ideological battles and the constant, recursive act of coming back and trying the conversation again. You have taught me how to speak my mind and also, always, to keep it open and to hear the other side. Finally, to my lover, friend, and partner Robert Anderson: thank-you for your love, compassion, joy, and showing-up. I dedicate this dissertation to you.

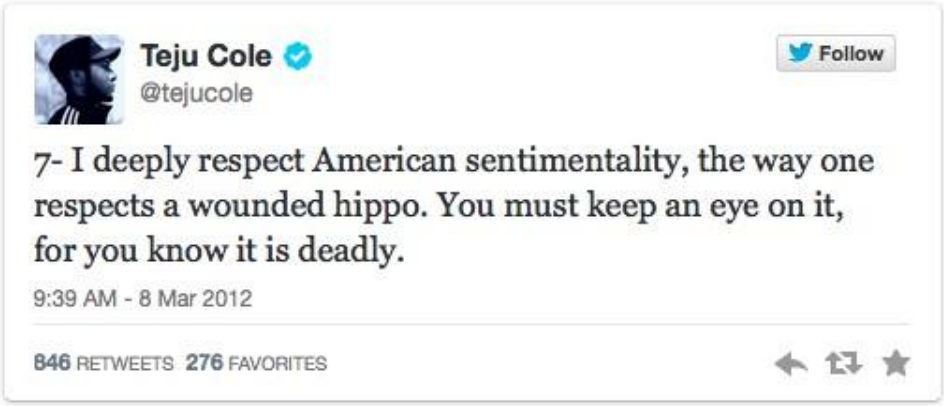
It is my fear that these acknowledgements have become overly sentimental, to the point that I find myself choking up even as I write them. However, in the spirit of the following work, I hope that we take sentiment seriously, without rejecting its emotional character out of hand as being too feminine or apolitical, but instead recognizing the importance of its potential role as a

starting place for the emergence of a new kind of politics: one that can recognize the capacities and strengths of communities, histories, and the stories we tell. Much love to you all.

The Sentimental Legacy


Teju Cole
@tejucole
Follow
4- This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.
9:36 AM - 8 Mar 2012
617 RETWEETS 228 FAVORITES


Teju Cole
@tejucole
Follow
5- The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
9:37 AM - 8 Mar 2012
1,269 RETWEETS 466 FAVORITES


Teju Cole
@tejucole
Follow
7- I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.
9:39 AM - 8 Mar 2012
846 RETWEETS 276 FAVORITES


Teju Cole
@tejucole
Follow
6- Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.
9:38 AM - 8 Mar 2012
1,055 RETWEETS 291 FAVORITES

In a series of seven tweets on March 8, 2012, author Teju Cole[1] called out Nicholas Kristof, Oprah, and the non-profit Invisible Children, among others, for investing in something called the "white savior-industrial complex," which runs on a potent blend of "sentimentality" and "privilege" ("Savior-Industrial Complex" 1). The tweets – and his mediations on contemporary political life – were written in response to *Kony2012*, a short video documentary made by Invisible Children. Invisible Children aims to call attention to the Ugandan "war lord" Joseph Kony, who seized control of a militarized faction in 2006 and, ever since, has wreaked havoc on the area and committed gruesome violations of human rights against, in particular, the children of Uganda. Invisible Children's aim is to shed light on the situation and to have Kony tried (Invisible Children). In the video, a blonde man and his blonde child feel deeply about the situation, and are compelled to act. Their video became the site for Cole's musings.

Cole's tweets take aim at the banal "complex" of economic, political, and social interests that have come together to make such racist and decontextualized videos appear not just progressive, but activist. Charting the hypocrisy of a citizenry that can normalize "close to 1.5 million Iraqis [dead] from an American war of choice" and, at the same time, stage the white liberal as an interventionist saving-force against human rights violations and for democracy around the globe, Cole reminds us that "privilege" is more than possessing a certain skin color or a given passport; it is being able to stage the world for one's own "big emotional experience." Cole closes his tweets with the tightly ironic: "I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly" (1).

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[1] Teju Cole was born in the US to Nigerian parents, raised in Nigeria, and currently lives New York. His first novel, *Open City* (2011), won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York City Book Award for Fiction, the Rosenthal Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Internationaler Literaturpreis, and was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the New York Public Library Young Lions Award, and the Ondaatje Prize of the Royal Society of Literature (tejucole.com, 1).

This project amplifies and historicizes the arguments condensed in Cole's seven tweets. Though there is something satisfying in the brevity and lyricism of a 140-character aphorism, Cole's claims deserve more attention. These tweets call attention to a social and cultural relay between emotional experience and political positionality. Cole tells us that the "activism" of the Invisible Children video is not only dehistoricized, but works to secure the *feelings* of the videowatchers in the US rather than contextualize or understand violence in Uganda. This, he tells us, is "sentimentality": an affect, an emotional experience, or a feeling that the consumer of sentiment can interpret as political and, thus, feel themselves in the right, though they remain in some fundamental way ignorant. This project takes Cole's tweets and extends his inquiry backward through the history of sentimentality. There is a rich – and often vilified – archive of sentimental novels and texts stretching from the 18th century into the present. Sentimentality is a genre that everyone knows when they see it, but no one will claim: today, often associated with "chick lit," "sentiment" has a waft of the womanly, a touch of the tear-jerker, that more serious, realist, representational (masculine?) writers avoid. How do Cole's vitriolic tweets build from and extend the existing critiques of sentimentalism? How has sentiment been understood across different historical periods? What kind of political work has it been understood to do at different points in the past? And, despite the continuing critiques and criticisms of its generic qualities and lack of political imagination, how can we situate and understand its continued and continuing popularity?

This dissertation traces a "long history" of the sentimental legacy. Following Raymond Williams, I am interested in the way that a literary "genre" can resurface at different moments in history, and what the continuities and discontinuities might tell us about those historical moments. I have chosen to focus on sentiment because of its claim to represent the "feminine"

realms of the home, domesticity, and women's concerns, while also staking the claim that these spaces and concerns are always already political. The debates that follow the genre, in particular in the 1970s and 1980s, surface these tensions and show us how the bind between "sentiment" and the "political" still has teeth in the present moment. My central concern, therefore, is tracing how sentiment provides a space to explore and express a political agency that is gendered. The texts that I examine in this dissertation write gender in widely disparate ways; from white women seeking political agency in the 19th century to a Sudanese war refugee scripted into a western and feminized subjectivity in the 21st, gender functions as a category for political agency that is carefully limned and limited by the generics of the sentimental genre.

Sentiment, as a literary genre, dates to the 18th century, when European writers such as Rousseau and Richardson gave us heroines like Julie and Clarissa. These beautiful and virtuous young women had hard lots in life; battling against forms of patriarchy and economic instability, they used what they could – namely, their beauty and virtue – to fend off inappropriate advances and to seek the safety of marriage. These tales ended in two ways: death or marriage, the young woman either punished for her transgressions or rewarded for toeing the line. In either case, readers were meant to identify with the young woman, to create an empathic bond with her, and to cry tears of misery and/or joy along with her. Sentiment, or what Cole calls a "big emotional experience," is where empathy creates the conditions for crossing identitarian boundaries. For it was not just working- and middle-class white women who read Rousseau and Richardson's books; significantly, these texts were also enjoyed by men, working-class people and elites alike. Historian Lynn Hunt has argued that the empathic experience of "feeling with" the other created

the conditions for the emergence of a discourse of human rights in enlightenment Europe; tears materialized the conditions wherein all people could be understood as mutually "human." [2] Hunt's analysis ignores the narrow delineation of this "human" in its historical moment: she might be a woman, and she's poor, but she is still white, European, Christian, and written by an elite male mind. What, say we, of the colonial subjects, the slaves, or the women themselves? Therein, of course, lies Cole's objection to sentiment: these representations actually serve to provide sentimental readers a mirror of themselves. While a reader (or, these days, a YouTube watcher) might believe that they have learned about "the other," they have often only validated and confirmed their own subjectivity, status, and privilege.

Sentimentalism maintained a vibrant and productive life through the 19th century; tales of put-upon young women and the men who loved to seduce them remained popular through the Civil War. This project begins with an analysis of the use of sentiment in 19th century US abolitionist literature; white women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Marie Child borrowed heavily from European plotlines to tell their stories of slavery. Like the European narratives, these texts also challenged their readers to empathize across lines of class, gender, and now, additionally, race. Their sleight of hand was significant: whereas the heroine of the European novel was almost certainly a working-class domestic maid, the heroine of the abolitionist novel was a young slave woman who labored on the plantation and in the household. Abolitionist writers asked their readers to transfer their knowledge of the servant girl and her

[2] Lynn Hunt argues that sentimental narratives were enjoyed across class and gender lines, thereby creating the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a pan-humanism: "New kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)" (33-34). Building from Benedict Anderson's famous theory of "imagined communities," Hunt tells us that "imagined empathy" built bridges across subjects, via the reading experience, in 17th and 18th century Europe. This new experience of "empathy" for the unknown subject actually changed the brain chemistry of the European subject, and Europeans acceded to the capacity to "imagine" the "other" as "just like them" – which is to say, the universalized subject of rights.

travails to the slave girl, and to understand that, due to her youth, beauty, and virtue, she too is in a sexually precarious and unprotected position. Able to build from readers' narrative expectations, readers were now called upon to recognize her humanity as "the same" and encouraged to "feel with" the slave girl, just as they had previously felt with European servants. By "crying with" the slave girl, white readers were asked to overlook, or even ignore, her blackness, and instead perceive her within a nationalist discourse of universal humanity. "Race" therefore emerged as one more category of discursive identification, rather than a *de facto*-obstruction to becoming a literary heroine. It is also significant that this iteration of sentimentalism was written by white women rather than men. By claiming the pen and thereby a position within the public sphere, white women writers staked a claim for their own abstract personhood and, concomitantly, their citizenship within the nation. In historical retrospect, it is clear how the sentimental genre was always-already political: for it is through the discursive illustration of sameness, equality, and intellect that 19th century white women began to articulate their political selves through identification with the political situations of black men and women, and began to write the first strains of an ethos of colorblind equality.

Sentiment relies, therefore, on emergent structures of post-racial and feminist humanism. Even within the highly-racialized atmosphere and context of the abolitionist movement, these texts would not have had traction within an implicit discourse of colorblindness and universal "sameness." If women could write and slave girls could be heroines, then there could be no barriers to universal equality and egalitarianism.[3] That this "sameness" is staged via empathic identification with a sentimentalized construction of the subject is what requires exploration. As the sentimental abolitionist texts demonstrate quite aptly, political and literary possibilities for

[3] See Karen Sánchez-Eppler's work in *Touching liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993), wherein she traces the productive alliance between the "abolitionist" political position and the emergent "feminist" stance, which included political pressure for gains such as enfranchisement and property ownership.

representation are carefully circumscribed by the gender, racial, and social norms of the moment, and "sameness" emerges in the balance as a reflection of and assimilation to the dominant norm. For example, and repeating the structural inequities of their European predecessors, many of the sentimental abolitionist texts highlight the conflicted and limited ways in which representations of blackness were constructed and circulated in the antebellum era. Black subjects, written by a white pen, were still carefully coded within a hierarchy of skin color, Christian morality, and capacity for assimilation to white culture. Carolyn Karcher has called this a ""[concession] to racial prejudice" ("Rape, Murder and Revenge" 63); implicitly playing to their white audience's racial expectations, the texts were able to petition against the institution of slavery on the basis of universal humanity, but do little to challenge racial prejudice and its concomitant production of racial knowledge. The result is a politicized rally cry for universal rights and egalitarianism, but one that reiterates the social and political structures that produce inequity.

It is within this historical and literary context that the authors of the slave narratives entered their appeals to the public sphere. Similarly concerned with boosting anti-slavery sentiment, ex-slaves wrote narratives that detailed their lives in slavery, their processes of escape and emancipation, and descriptions of life in the North as free-people. These authors had to contend with their social positions as black authors, and thereby had the added burden of having to demonstrate *their own* "humanity" via their texts – not just the humanity of their subjects. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes that the act of writing itself was, therefore, an act of claiming the self, for there could be no narrative without the central figure of the hero: "If the matter of shaping the self came only after the slave is free, in a context of an autobiographical novel where the slave first posits that full self, then slavery indeed dehumanizes and must in no uncertain terms be abolished" (85). Gates ascribes a logical tautology to the slave narratives' political

practice: without a hero, there is no narrative. But here is a narrative and a hero, and therefore slavery is, at base, wrong. Gates' argument anticipates Hunt's, for it is through the articulation of humanity that readers are able to recognize the literary possibilities of the subject and to imagine them as "the same."[4] Here, I am interested in how the authors of the slave narratives drew on sentimental expectations, and how their texts are in conversation with the generic norms of sentiment. For example, the authorship of Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was contested through much of the 20th century because of its coherence with sentimental norms and tropes; it wasn't believed that an ex-slave woman could write a narrative that cohered so tightly with sentimental norms or drew so freely from other texts.[5] It wasn't until the early 1980s, with Jean Fagan Yellin's scrupulous archival work, that Jacobs' text was finally authenticated and proven to be "written by herself" (Yellin 479). Just as European readers were compelled to "feel with" the servant girl, Jacobs too constructed her narrative as a seduction plot, and asked readers to consider the institutionalized obstructions to her emancipation-through-marriage plot as part and parcel of a depraved system. By taking up the first-person position, Jacobs claimed a voice within a public sphere that was controlled by white discourse. As Franny Nudelman writes:

> What is innovative about Jacobs's narrative is … that she, a black woman and ex-slave, uses techniques typically employed by white abolitionists to tell her own story. What makes this text remarkable is that it combines the conventions of abolitionist sentimentality with the utterly unconventional use of these structures by a black female narrator. Jacobs steps into an abolitionist tradition that takes the revelation of slave

[4] Gates Jr. argues that slave narratives stand in opposition with sentimentalized novels of the antebellum south (what he calls "the plantation novel"), including those that aim to abolish slavery but, in their representations of the plantation, romanticize slave-owners and present slaves as "beast-like" (82).

[5] The author of *Incidents* cites Scripture easily and freely, includes verses from popular songs and poems, and draws from sentimental plot-lines such as the pursued house servant.

> suffering as the means to politicizing a white audience and mobilizing them to abolish slavery. Her first person narration, however, radically alters the structure of a discourse that typically constructs the suffering slave as a mute object whose experience must be translated by an empathic white observer. Employing the conventions of abolitionist sentimentality, Jacobs reveals the logic and the limits of that discourse, and the need for alternative forms of address. Rather than valorizing this text as an ambitious rejection of dominant discourse, I … consider the way sentimental conventions and values generate and determine Jacobs's critique. (491-492)

As Nudelman points out, Jacobs inverts the reader/ read relationship that both Hunt and Gates have ascribed to literature. Rather than ask a reader to "recognize her humanity" based on her text, she redeploys certain tropes and norms of sentiment in order to call attention to the highly limited and contingent parameters of humanist discourse.

In this project, I approach the slave narratives as a central cluster of texts in the production of knowledge surrounding race, humanism, and freedom in the US. How do narrative norms and constraints – the received genres – determine the story of the human that can be told? And, in spite of these restraints, how do authors and texts play with those forms in order to tell a different kind of story? I therefore locate two lineages within the sentimental tradition. The first is in the tradition of Rousseau, Stowe, and other authors who come from a privileged position, writing *about* the other in a way that reflects their own social concerns back to them. Within this tradition, I am mostly interested in what I will call "empathic identification": the ideal of a collapse of subjects (writer, reader, and subject) into universal "sameness" through an emotional reading experience. The other tradition I identify as coming out of Harriet Jacobs and other ex-slave writers who appropriate the dominant forms in order to say something different to and

about their dominant audience. The first has the potential to be violently regressive; the second has the potential to be radically challenging. Rather than approach these two threads of sentiment as opposed and separate, however, I argue that both come from a place of necessary coalition and are necessarily generically bound. Stowe and her cohort wrote about slaves and slave women as a way to contest slavery, patriarchy, and to think through their own political positionalities. Jacobs' and fellow ex-slaves' texts were always edited and validated by white writers. An ethos of coalition and collaboration haunts both lineages, suggesting to writers and readers that there is no political action without the other. The books are also always in conversation; from Stowe's *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Frederick Douglass' inclusion of Garrison's Preface in his *Narrative of the Life*, both sentimental and slave narratives were constantly using, riffing on, and invoking the other.

In this dissertation, I primarily track the iterations and stakes of those texts that follow what I'll short-hand as "the Stowe lineage." I trace sentimentalized representations of black subjects by white writers across the 20th and 21st centuries, and notice how white writers situate themselves in relation to their black subjects. This "writing about" is often qualified by a deep longing for activist kinship and collaboration, and, at the same time, by a sense of superiority and its own necessity: for, just like the white writers who "enveloped" the original slave narratives, sentimental white texts continue to see themselves as validating and confirming the legitimacy and authenticity of the black subject.[6] This dissertation tracks how sentiment, as a gendered expression of political agency, has been deployed by white writers in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, in order to express and explore both longing for activist coalition and, at the same time, a regressive consolidation of structures of race, gender, and capitalism.

[6] John Sekora's "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative" (1987) discusses how the white editor of the antebellum slave narratives introduced and verified the black text, thereby "enveloping" the message with a sheen of white authority.

To explore these concepts, I have assembled a cluster of novels that draw from the generics and politics of 19th century sentimentalism and slave narratives. Written by elite white writers and aiming to change the world, these texts represent the racialized other in modes that draw from sentimentalism and rely on the generics of the slave narrative. That these novels span three different centuries – from 1867 to 2009 – allows me to consider the ways in which sentiment has continuously informed (and been informed by) the dominant US political imagination, and how the slave narrative form provides a template for writing interracial collaboration that remains forceful and productive for white writers into the present. Moreover, I have chosen texts that were published during three moments in US history wherein the meanings of whiteness and blackness were being actively contested and debated. Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, the post-9/11 moment, and the Obama presidency all present critical junctures in the meaning and significance of black life and citizenship in the US. My curiosity is how, in these moments, white writers return to the norms of sentiment, and, along with its plea for political and social change, also reproduce many its racism and misogyny. Far from being chastised, the novels I examine have been extremely successful and popular.

My main point of concern is not necessarily the ways that white authors articulate their whiteness and their privilege in relation to their racialized subjects. There is a deep and rich body of academic work on the ethics and aesthetics of representing "the other"; while my work draws on this, I do not need to repeat it.[7] Instead, I build from it by adding an analysis of how 20th and 21st century articulations of whiteness and privilege are generically indebted to and in conversation with 19th century sentimentalism and slave narratives. All of the authors I examine

[7] Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) are two particularly famous and influential theories of how discursive representations of "the other" serve to bolster the subjectivity of the white colonizer, writer, and/or subject, and reify whiteness as a social norm in white, western, imperialist societies.

rewrite slave narratives – sometimes inadvertently – in order to articulate their contemporary politics with narrative form. Thus, the slave narratives provide a template for writing racialized subjectivity that is so powerful that it continues to shape the production of knowledge regarding race, gender, and political solidarities into the present. I trace the ways in which the very specific literary form of the slave narrative, which was deployed to tell a personal story of suffering and liberation in order to sway a reading public's opinion on the institution of slavery, has congealed into a literary genre. This genre now provides a narrative template for the exposition of suffering, violence, and white supremacy, based on a belief in empathic identification and interracial collaboration.

To explore these questions, I build on Raymond Williams' conceptions of "genres" and "forms." In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams tells us that a genre is not an "ideal type" nor a "traditional order" nor a "set of technical rules," but instead a combination of "social material process" with emergent literary forms (185). In particular historical moments, genres emerge as part and parcel of the social material landscape. Williams warns us away from imagining an eternal and generic sameness of something called (for example) "the tragedy" – instead, he urges us to understand the particular social conditions under and through which the tragedy emerged. In this dissertation, I watch how the genre of "sentiment," aided and abetted by a reliance on the form and the politics of the "slave narrative," continues past its hegemonic moment. Both US sentiment and the slave narrative emerged out of particular relationships between social processes and literary forms in the 19th century; what is at stake in the continued life of a genre after the passing of its concomitant historical moment? Williams writes: "In genre theory, everything depends on the character and process of such continuities" (183). In this project, I trace sentimentalism as a genre, one that emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries,

achieved hegemonic status as the available vocabulary to articulate anti-slavery sentiment in the 19th century, and has remained coherent – if residual – through the 20th and 21st centuries.[8] Following Williams, I ask what the character of this continuity reveals about US social processes. How does the sentimental genre express a politics of feeling, one that is so productive that it continues to persist even after the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment?

Reading Right

It seems that every examination of US sentiment begins with Harriet Beecher Stowe.[9] Her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) still stands as a paragon for how books can change the world; famously, Abraham Lincoln was said to have greeted Stowe at a party celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation with the words "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" That this myth of origins has since been debunked doesn't sway Stowe's proponents,[10] who argue that the emotional power of Stowe's work is a model for political activation.[11] Sentiment is often derided for its belief in the transparency of emotions and the

[8] Williams' language of emergence, hegemony, and residue allow an analysis of the ways in which cultural forms emerge as part of an economic and social landscape, and can become dominant. "Residual" cultural forms are those which are no longer so hegemonic as to appear common-sensical, but still exert cultural force. Sentiment, and indeed the sentimental legacy, can be read as a very long residue of a genre that was hegemonic in the 18th and 19th centuries.

[9] And so will this one. Although I do not examine *Uncle Tom's Cabin* closely in this project – it has been done elsewhere, and well – I use both the text itself and its surrounding debate as exemplary for the genre and the questions that haunt it.

[10] Daniel R. Vallaro has carefully combed records of conversations, comments, and parties, and doesn't think that Lincoln ever said this. Instead, he notices that the first time that the phrase was printed was in 1896, the year of Stowe's death. He argues that this cultural myth is good for Stowe's reputation and estate, and was circulated by her family members to bolster her posthumous reputation (Vallero 18).

[11] For example, on the event of Stowe's 200th birthday (June 14, 2011), the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, CT held a 24-hour read-aloud of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and attendees were encouraged to liken her "social justice" stance to issues in their own time. Non-profits, in particular those run by and for women, presented on their outreach and justice efforts. As part of the festivities, the Center gave a $10,000 literary award to Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn for their book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*

legibility of good and evil in the bodies of its characters, but in fact these very qualities are what have proven so enduring.

In the Epilogue to *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe calls upon her readers to "feel right" (317): the relationship between tears and political change, she tells them, is both direct and causal. Narration slips out of the third-person and into the first, and Stowe addresses her readers in an act both emotionally laden and politically active: she begs them to "act" in response to the fiction they've just read – a fiction that features a light-skinned woman who resists slavery, cries with other women, and eventually experiences her virtue as rewarded. She scolds her readers:

> There is one thing that every individual can *do,*—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! (317, emphases mine).

The conflation of the action verb "to do" with the verb of emotion "to feel" is forceful. Coming at the end of the novel, having "cried with" the heroes and heroines of the anti-slavery text, Stowe asks her readership to recognize these feelings as moral and political. It is not a politics of the legislature; emphatically, Stowe does not ask her readers to contact their Senators. Instead, she encourages them to cultivate an "atmosphere of sentimental influence" – a para-political sphere, one created out of tears, feeling, and sympathy rather than organizing or action. It is a gendered sphere, to be sure; like Mrs. Byrd, the Senator's wife in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe trusts that her female readers will create the correct conditions at home, so that their agential

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("Happy 200th Birthday…"). The ideological underpinning of this celebration, of course, is the belief that women can and will "change the world," for one another, because they understand each other sympathetically. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center arranges a lineage of literary righteous action, one that stretches from the abolitionist text to Kristof and WuDunn's journalism.

husbands can go out and legislate the change that is needed in the world. But the significance of the private (atmo)sphere must not be underestimated. Just as Mrs. Byrd changed first her husband's heart and then his mind – convincing him eventually to vote against the Fugitive Slave Act – so too the women of the north can exert political power through the practice of feeling correctly.[12]

Stowe's direct address, at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, reinforces the idea that the text in hand is more than fiction. She rallies readers to feel deeply about characters because of the implication that there is something *real* embedded in the text. Even though the plot twists of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* test one's ability to suspend disbelief, readers are to understand that *things like this do happen*. Abolitionist texts claim to transcend the fictional, even as they stage elaborate and unbelievable romances of resistance. To "believe" in the racialized heroine is not just an imaginative act, but is meant to stand as a transferable experience to the very real cause of abolition. Having cried, the reader enters a new realm of political positionality; she can understand herself as an "abolitionist," whether or not she contributes to the cause. Integral to this emergence of the reader as self-consciously aware of her emergent political feelings is the question of the parameters of this education.

My analysis of "sentimentalism" hinges on an assumption that it is a pedagogical form. By teaching her readers to "read right," Stowe also teaches them to "feel" and to "act" right as well. As I discuss in Chapter One, readers needed only learn how to correctly read the signs of

[12] The politics of Stowe's text has been extensively explored and debated. From Ann Douglas' argument that the text complacently makes room for capitalism and imperialism (1977), to Jane Tompkin's counter-argument that Stowe reimagines US polity from the viewpoint of matriarchal Christian humanism (1985); to more recent entries in the debate, such as Timothy Powell's analysis of how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* articulates a vision of the US that is monoculturally "white" (2000) and Aaron Ritzenberg's argument that the classically sentimental trope of "touch" in the text figures an idealization of utopian, embodied politics (2013), the connection between feeling and politics has been made again and again. Although they disagree on the terms of the politics, scholars regularly return to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to chart an emergent discourse of women's political agency, as well as a structure of feeling that co-locates feeling with politics in the domestic space of the bourgeois home.

the text in order to be allowed into this new political space. I argue that from Stowe to Invisible Children, the "signs" are often patriarchal representations of race, gender, class, and political life that normalize a white supremacist and capitalist world order.[13] For example, from "Little Eva" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the documentarian's son in *Kony2012*, small blonde children have continued to signify innocence, purity, and a source of moral fortitude. The signs are always this clear: in the sentimental universe, people's morals are legible in their bodies and their fates determined by skin color. Readers, schooled in the meanings of bodies and skin colors, reiterate these dominant reading practices as they move from book to book, from life situation to life situation. Sentiment therefore provides a training ground for a particular subjectivity, one that is privileged and righteous in its emotional purview. Believing that it is "changing" the world – one heart at a time – it is also in fact carefully delimiting the parameters of that "change." "Change" emerges as an idealization of emotional sameness *while using racial knowledge as the basis for emotional experience.* It is a colorblind stance, one that pretends that it doesn't "see" color while also according signification and value to race and bodies.

The arguments that I make about sentimentalism build from Louis Althusser's famous theory of interpellation. Following Althusser, we could say that these texts interpellate their readers into subjectivity. What the subject (the reader) gains is tremendous: in the case of Stowe and her white female readers, accession to a political platform and the emergence of a "feminist" sensibility. In the case of Invisible Children and other 21st-century iterations, a healthy non-profit development budget and the social status of being an "activist" in a cruel world. Sentiment, therefore, is a genre that interpellates its readers into empathic identification, in order that they might learn a new politics via their "feeling with" the text. As with the theory of interpellation,

[13] Ann Douglas' seminal *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) was the first to make the argument that Stowe's politics do little more than make the world safe for capitalism.

what is lost is any "way out" of these practices of reading or being. The text is the all-mighty Subject that both performs the "hail" and delineates the range of reading experiences and knowledge production. The reader becomes the subject demanded by the text; interpellated into reading practices that allow her own subjectivity at the cost of reading bodies and race in a particular way, she reiterates dominant culture's constructions of race and gender, ensuring that the dominant economic and social order will remain vibrant in spite of – and indeed, because of – her accession to it.

Judith Butler's addition to the theory of interpellation is helpful here. Butler theorizes that there must be a different temporality functioning in Althusser's model of interpellation than simply "before" (nothing) and "after" (subjectivation). Something psychic must exist before the "turn," which would make turning a compelling or valuable option. Butler posits that this "desire" to be named and subjectivated complicates Althusser's theory insofar as it makes the subject "complicit" in her subjectivation. If we map this theory to consumers of sentimental literature, it becomes clear that the interpellative "hail" performed by these texts is one that cues emotions of guilt and desire that were always-already present. The texts do not create them; rather, they cue, legitimate, and give them an available vocabulary. In particular, I think that the sentimental text cues and names a structure of white liberal guilt. These texts both make the reader aware of her whiteness and position of readerly privilege, and also ask her to bemoan it. Recognized in her whiteness, she is both confirmed in the position of racial privilege *and* granted the particularly pleasing position of naming it and bemoaning it.

These iterations of interpellation also leave out something integral to my analysis of sentimentalism as a genre: the ways in which narrative form is neither entirely bounded nor coherent. The above descriptions of the form seem to take it at face value, forgetting that that

which appears to bring conclusion and resolution to a narrative is also the place at which new possibilities, or "genres," or political formulations, might appear. The limits of any genre, Jacques Derrida reminds us, highlight the ways in which the genre might actually exceed itself – or even, that there is no such thing as genre. In "Law of Genre" (1980), Derrida argues that there is no pure law as such, but that texts contribute to a taxonomy of genre through engagement and reproduction of formal norms. The text itself, therefore, belongs to a genre by participating in it, but it also remains open through iterative re-reading practices. "Genre" implies a presence – the limit, the boundary – but that presence is in fact the absence of generic law, and the openness of art, interpretation, and the multiplicitious practices of distinct discursive communities. Derrida's theory allows us a bit of breathing space within the relatively airtight picture painted above of "sentimentalism." For, if we follow Derrida, then we must be able to read these texts for something beyond the universally interpellative or the entirely subjugating. One question of this project, therefore, is what else do sentimental texts make space for? How do they hail their readers, *and also* blur the edges of empathic identification and a belief in the transparency of the signifier? What are other political or empathic possibilities within the suffocatingly smug world of sentiment?

From Stowe to Stockett

To address these questions, I turn first towards the novels themselves. After grounding my research in the 19th century with an analysis of how Jacobs and Child self-consciously deployed sentiment, I move into the Civil Rights era and analyze two novels by William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), a "neo-slave narrative" (Rushdy), and *Sophie's Choice*

(1976), a fictionalized narrative of the Holocaust. The third chapter jumps to the post-9/11 moment, and takes up *What is the What,* an "autobiography/novel" written by Dave Eggers in 2006 in the voice of a Sudanese war refugee. The fourth chapter closes the project with a meditation on the limits of interracial solidarity as imagined in Kathryn Stockett's 2009 novel *The Help,* and puts both the novel and the 2011 movie version in conversation with the politics of Barack Obama's presidency. I engage these novels in terms of their generic norms, their will towards narrative resolution, and the terms in which they "represent" their characters and their life worlds. All four authors rewrote slave narratives in crafting their own narratives of the present. The political question – what does the continued life of sentiment mean for an expression of political solidarity? – is therefore also a generic concern: what do slave narratives offer contemporary writers that is so powerful? How does the slave narrative provide space to explore contemporary iterations of race and justice? How do writers re-write narratives in order to re-arrange the past and thereby justify the present? I close-read these novels in order to explore the ways in which they cleave to – and from – sentimental narrative expectations. How do they conjure legible characters, readable bodies, and narrative closure and resolution? And how do they disrupt and challenge narrative norms and expected outcomes? At stake in these close readings is an excavation of the relationship between sentiment in contemporary literature and the 19th century slave narrative. Sentiment offered ex-slave authors a cultural vocabulary through which to articulate their political positions and their relationship with(in) the US nation-form. By revisiting that form at different moments in US history, I investigate what cultural work the form has been asked to do. How do writers instrumentalize sentiment within their own moment, and how are its norms part of and also in conflict with the form of the slave narrative?

I am particularly interested in tracing the tropes of "listening," "violence," "writing," and

"silence" within these texts. This, I will argue, is the sentimental legacy: by *listening to* an "other's" tale of *violence*, and then *writing* it down, to be disseminated to a wide audience, a "good deed" has been done. The victim is relieved of her burden, and the listener of her guilt: the story, set free into the public sphere, can now do its work to change the hearts and minds of its audience. *Silence*, therefore, enters as the last and most significant trope. Where these texts *do not* tell their story – where the narrative form breaks down, gives way, cannot hold the plot – is where we find space to explore alternative possibilities and politics. I encounter *silence* within the sentimental legacy hopefully, and mark the "boundaries" of the genre as places where new forms of reading, collaborating, and listening might emerge.

Taken together, this concern with the process of listening, writing, and disseminating stories cues my final and most vexed theme: "collaboration." All of the texts I examine, whether written by one or two authors, write interracial collaboration into their plots. These relationships take a cue from the slave narratives, and often try to explain themselves via an ethic of privilege and access: the white writer has both, and now can bring a new voice into the public sphere, or so the argument goes. I trace this ethos of collaboration to see where and how it is deployed to explain political solidarities and legitimize the white writer's occupation of the black voice. A belief in the process of co-writing, editing, and sharing stories informs and lights up the pages of these novels. I'm curious about this use of the material in order to explicate or legitimize the discursive. At times, the practice appears as a form of discursive enslavement: the black body put to work once again, this time at the service of the white writer, to legitimate his position and his project.[14] At others, an attention to material conditions and an attempt to represent *the process and labor of collaboration itself* reveals the particular and difficult ways in which attempts to

[14] Hortense Spillers writes that the distribution, consumption, and valuation of narratives of black suffering looks remarkably like the slave market for black labor (179-180).

write with, write about, and write for justice are always historically conditioned and highly contingent.

My second concern with these texts is the way in which they constantly rewrite and reassess the past, in order to put it to work for the present. The four historical periods that I examine – Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, the post-9/11 moment, and the Obama presidency – are moments during which the meanings and definitions of black humanity and citizenship are contested and shifting. In each, I look at how a white writer rewrote a previous historical juncture, in order to better explain the present. Sometimes the results of this grasping at the past are violent, as in the case of Styron; sometimes the results are interestingly complicated and recursive, as in the case of Eggers. No matter the "outcome," however, this use of the past creates a version of history akin to what Michel Foucault would call "monotonous finality" (76), in which the events of the past are conjured into an orderly set that leads to the inevitable present. By close-reading these texts to examine the places in which history is set to work – in service of the present – I disrupt this progressive version of history. Instead, I examine how certain narratives of the past get used, or are called up, in particular moments, to create particular narratives of the present.

This project builds from a long and sustained academic interest in representations of social justice. Along with many materialist and poststructuralist scholars, I ask how discursive renderings of the body and justice shape lived experience, and vice versa. In particular, Feminist scholarship, Trauma Studies, and recent scholarship on "Human Rights Literature" are all formations in the last 40 years that have asked, among other things, what is at stake in representing the human body in literature. My project grows out of and is in conversation with

these formations. In particular, I am interested in those moments where scholars examine the relationship between literary representation and political representation.

I situate the foundations of this project alongside feminist scholarship that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, which turned back to female writers of the 19th century. These scholars challenged the dominance of a narrative of American letters which was constituted by white men; in particular, by adding writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Marie Child, and Harriet Jacobs to the American canon, they showed how 19th century American writing had wider concerns than individualism and rugged masculinity. This group of feminist scholars was also concerned with showing how women's writing has always already been political; far from being "just" domestic fiction, novels like Stowe's and Jacobs' overtly aim to intervene in national life. While these scholars argued over the politics that the texts advance,[15] they commonly agreed that the texts *do something*, not the least of which is advancing women's agency and political autonomy.[16] By claiming that the "domestic" and sentimental texts of the 1800s were "actually" political, these scholars were able to make clear the connection between the "personal" realm of the home and the "political" realm of enfranchisement and authorial agency. I revisit this moment in literary scholarship, both to learn from the work, as well as to contextualize it within its own particular historical moment of production. For I am fascinated not only by the challenges to the "canon" that these scholars mounted, but also by how their acts of

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[15] Jane Tompkins, for example, famously took umbrage with Ann Douglas' argument that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is ultimately complicit with the dominant economic order. She argues, instead, that the book radically reimagines US society as matriarchal: "the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view ... Expressive of and responsible for the values of its time, [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] also belongs to a genre, the sentimental novel, whose chief characteristic is that it is written by, for, and about women" (124-125).

[16] Karen Sánchez-Eppler makes the important argument that this "first wave" of women radicals was in no way egalitarian across the color line; she illustrates how white women used the cause of abolition as a way to articulate their own political autonomy. This was done at the expense of the black body; by using the cause of abolition as a platform, the particularities of slavery and racial oppression was submerged within a general argument contra disenfranchisement of all people (1988, 28).

"resuscitation" validated and confirmed their own political moment. As feminist scholars within a male-dominated academy, the choice to focus on a "first-wave" of politicized and active women writers must have been authorizing. Like the novelists I consider in this project, they too drew from writers in the 19th century in order to bring coherence and continuity to their own political writing projects in the present. These scholars co-locate the representation of gendered and racialized bodies in sentimental novels with the emergence of a radical political positioning for women, a position that they inherit and from which they build.

The work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and other poststructuralist thinkers is also foundational to this inquiry. As discussed above, Derrida's formulations on "genre" allow me to consider how the process of taxonomizing a literary text inhibits readings as much as it allows them. Derrida's work allows this kind of double-seeing: a capacity to understand how language creates, limits, and defines meaning relationally undergirds this project. Additionally, Foucault's work on the process of narrating history is integral to this analysis. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault explores the ways in which the narratives that we construct are not only informed by our own present concerns, but are also limned by the "present concerns" of generations before us, from how information was originally recorded, to how it has been used, to how it has been reformulated. Foucault's seemingly simple observation that we cannot read historical texts without an awareness of how they have been bartered, rewritten, and put to work leads to the significant insight that, as scholars, we are also always participating in a process of rewriting and re-transcribing the past. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces how the transcription of the body into knowable discourses in the 19th century created the conditions for the emergence of biopolitical regimes in the next century and beyond. While Foucault's emphasis is perhaps distinct from my own – the medical transcription of the body as opposed to

the aesthetic – the stakes are the same: how does the rendering of the body into a knowable and known quantity impact its position within a political regime?

Trauma Studies, a scholarly formation that emerged in the 1990s, responds to the worry that poststructuralist criticism might leave scholars and readers in a space of nihilism, one in which progressive action might be precluded by worry over the politics of (mis)representation. As Cathy Caruth wrote in her 1996 *Unclaimed Experience*:

> Recent literary criticism has shown an increasing concern that the epistemological problems raised by poststructuralist criticism necessarily lead to political and ethical paralysis. The possibility that reference is indirect, and that consequently we may not have access to others', or even to our own, histories, seems to imply the impossibility of access to other cultures and hence of any means of making political or ethical judgments. (10)

To combat this "paralysis", Caruth offers us a new way of encountering "history", one in which we "listen" to the stories of "another" (10), and rather than expect to "bear witness" to a transparent narrative of truth (which would be rather sentimental, after all), listeners are instead repositioned to better understand their own relationship to violence, the "another," and a constellated history of stories.[17] Although I appreciate the urge to listen well, I am also interested in how this particular body of scholarly work reflects the central question of the dissertation: how does a belief in the capacity to listen, share, and heal together draw from 19th century sentimental ideals? In other words, what historically determined ideas of identity and boundaries do theorists such as Caruth pre-suppose? How does the act of witnessing or testifying reify the sentimental expectation that a will to narrative, a trust in truth, will redeem both the past and the present?

[17] Caruth's choice to use the phrase "another," as compared with "other," is fascinating. The elision of the self/other dialectic – so foundational to theorists of race and gender – is perhaps meant to signal another horizon of listening, past the categorization of identity politics.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a turn towards an analysis of the relays between human rights discourse and literary form. This scholarly formation analyzes international law and hegemonic global relations relationally with literary texts. Significantly, this group seems to be the most formalist of all; for example, as discussed above, Lynn Hunt argues that the sentimental novel established the requisite affective space in which a pan-humanism could flourish (33). Likewise, Joseph Slaughter argues that the subject of the *Bildungsroman* and the human rights document are one and the same; narrative form provides the structure through which to imagine and articulate the limits of the human, and human rights documents exemplify the cultural construction of who "the human" is (3). Slaughter uses and builds from Lisa Lowe's argument that the *Bildungsroman* legitimates certain bodies and subjectivities and concomitantly subjugates others[18] by pointing out how, if all testimonies or "human rights narratives" have to cohere with a preconceived idealization of both the human and his narration, then many bodies, experiences, and forms of violence are erased.

Undergirding this line of inquiry is a materialist analysis regarding the relationship between the "individual" and civil society. The danger, as we learn from Marx, is that a discourse of "man" that emerges from legal norms folds into narratives of formal equality, in which all "men" are the same in their legal representation (before the structures of the political state). These discourses of the human forget the profound ways in which particularities are enacted in civil society, the marketplace, and, I would argue, on the page. Following Lowe and Slaughter, I am wary of universalizing discourses of the human as much on the fictional page as in society. What Slaughter's analysis opens for us, however, is the way in which these narratives of the human are "mutually enabling" (Slaughter 4): the human refracted between the page of the

[18] See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (1996).

human rights narrative and the human rights testimony cohere and reify a vision of the human that is, as Marx would put it, "Man as a member of civil society - non-political man - necessarily appears as the natural man" (46). This "natural man" acts by and for himself, in accordance with the laws of the market.[19] By noticing the ways in which these visions of the human are "mutually enabling," we can also begin to deconstruct them. By using both materialist and poststructuralist tools to ask how the human, represented both on the page and in civil society, has been historically constructed, we can also ask what has been left out. As I move through the distinct historical moments of this project, I trace the shifting ways in which the figure of the human in sentimental literature both is and is not reflected and refracted in the political structures of the US state in that particular moment.

The first chapter of this project, "A Chapter of Wrongs and Sufferings: The Tangled Skeins of Sentiment in Harriet Jacobs and Lydia Marie Child," takes up Harriet Jacobs' 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative published on the eve of the Civil War. Jacobs' text, while using and replicating many of the generic norms of sentiment, also carefully codes the limits of the genre, and writes its boundaries as part of the plot. I highlight Jacobs' descriptions of her white female collaborators as a way to trace the politics of sentiment: where and how "womanly sympathy" gets translated into political action (and what kind), and where and how this sympathy is shown to be a guise for white women's own subject-consolidation. Jacobs' narrative was edited and introduced by Lydia Marie Child, a northern white woman who was active in the abolition and the suffrage communities. Child's 1867 novel, *A Romance of the Republic*, is indebted to *Incidents* in more ways than one; from the light-skinned protagonist to

[19] Etienne Balibar expands this argument in "'Rights of Man' and 'Rights of the Citizen': The Modern Dialectic of Equality and Freedom" (1994), in which he argues that the figure of the "man" is actually the same as the "citizen," insofar as he is determined by his capacity to own property (46). Balibar's contribution makes Marx's construction even more focused on the relationship between the naturalized "man" of society and the state.

the "romantic" plot, Child draws from Jacobs to revisit the antebellum years. I consider the ways in which the slave narrative provided space in the immediate post-Civil War years for Child to reconsider and reimagine the racial and social future of the US. I read Child's text as a "requiem" for the sentimental form; by conjuring tropes such as the "tragic quadroon" and the "lascivious Southerner," she calls upon her readers' narrative expectations. While the novel does reproduce a "romance" of slavery, it also interestingly subverts its tropes by challenging her readers to notice what sentiment *can't tell*, along with all that it can. Finally, I consider how the actual collaboration between the two women has been absented from both of their novels. Given that both women are so strenuously interested in the possibilities of interracial female alliance, what does it mean that both women *don't write* their last instance of collaboration?

The second chapter, "Our Common History: William Styron, James Baldwin, and the Boldest Thing a Writer Can Do," jumps ahead to the 1960s. Though there are many examples of sentimental literature and interracial writing collaborations between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, I focus on the 1960s as a particularly volatile moment in the history of black life and citizenship in the US. By the late 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had already achieved significant juridical successes, such as the ending of the Jim Crow laws and the passage of the Civil Rights Bill. However, socially, the meaning and significance of black life in the US was in no way settled. From Black Nationalist calls for secession from the US to white supremacist backlash against Civil Rights actors, the US was seized by a very public and often violent reckoning of what and how it meant to be both black and a citizen in the US. Against this historical context, I trace the archive of William Styron and James Baldwin's friendship in relation to their novels. Baldwin lived with Styron for several months in 1961, while Styron was commencing work on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), a first-person rewriting of the 1831

slave narrative. According to Styron's memories, he was inspired and encouraged by Baldwin's 1956 *Giovanni's Room*, in which the African-American Baldwin writes from the first-person vantage point of a white American man. Styron's *Confessions*, when published, first attracted vociferous support from the literary establishment – indeed, he won the Pulitzer in 1968 – and, almost as quickly, an enormous and sustained backlash from black intellectuals and historians of slavery. Styron invoked Baldwin's name, and the fact that they lived together, again and again in order to legitimate his project. Here, I read Styron's novel alongside his invocation of his and Baldwin's friendship. Styron turns to the slave narrative in order to comment pointedly and aggressively on contemporaneous Black Freedom movements. Unable to defend himself verbally against his detractors, Styron included an exculpatory sub-text in his next novel, *Sophie's Choice* (1976), a novel that remembers the Holocaust through the memories of a young Polish woman. I take this wide-ranging group of texts – from the original *Confessions of Nat Turner*, to Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, to both of Styron's novels – to explore the deployment of narratives of white guilt and redemption in mid-20th century American writing. I read the extremely limited archive of letters that exist between Baldwin and Styron – the ephemera of their friendship – in relation to the voluminous amount that Styron produced *about* their friendship. Taken together, I consider how Styron deployed sentiment in order to consolidate and shore up his own positionality as a privileged white male in a time of shifting racial power. By invoking the sentimental ideals of collaborative writing and interracial friendship, Styron was able to produce himself as a progressive white author, in spite of his frighteningly violent and misogynistic novels. This chapter also includes an analysis of Styron's use of the Holocaust as the particular discursive site at which he "explains" himself and the racialized sins of his past, and therefore considers the politics of Black Freedom movements relationally with the aftermath of the

Holocaust. The tension between the master narrative of global "freedom" with real US struggles for civil rights (not to mention other forms of freedom) manifests in Styron's texts as a reluctance to portray himself as anything less than a benevolent liberator and his subjects as anything more than the downtrodden.

The third chapter, "Subjectively Told: Dave Eggers, Valentino Achak Deng, and Silent Stories in *What is the What*" jumps forward again, this time into the post- 9/11 period. Dave Eggers, a popular writer with his own independent press, worked with Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee, to craft his life story into the novel form. Eggers calls the book, *What is the What* (2006), an "autobiography/ novel," signaling the complicated confluence of Deng's non-fictional life narrative and Eggers' writerly crafting of that narrative. The novel itself is constructed through the trope of "silent stories," which the character of Deng tells in his head to the people he meets as he goes about his American day. The "silent stories" cleave to the slave narrative form, narrating Deng's life chronologically from birth in the village of Marial Bai, through the Civil War, his long, tortuous escape to east African refugee camps, and eventually his relocation to Atlanta, Georgia. The life trajectory from birth to escape to freedom is familiar, but Eggers also subverts the romantic form by paralleling Deng's contemporary US life with his life in Africa. This temporal layering creates a schism through which a critique of narratives of freedom and redemption can be built; in many ways, Deng's US life is no better than his life in Africa, and Eggers presses his readers to assess structures of racism and classism in the US that disallow an idealized form of "freedom" to emerge. However, I argue that in the last moment Eggers backs away from this critique and instead relies on a sentimentalized ideal of union and transparency between the reader and the read. "Silent stories" emerge as a trope for access and listening, even when Deng has been effectively silenced within and by the text. This

sentimentalized relationship between Deng and his reader is materialized in the form of the book and its generic collapse (autobiography/novel).

The final chapter, "Crying in the Kitchen: Kathryn Stockett, *The Help,* and a Long History of Sentimental Narratives," considers the long life of the sentimental form from the vantage point of the present. I position Kathryn Stockett's 2009 novel *The Help* as the latest iteration of this sentimental literary impulse. Its tale of a young white southern woman who "listens" to the black "help," and then writes their stories for publication, in hope that the stories might "change" things, has proven wildly successful. The book lingered on the New York Times Bestseller List for over 100 weeks, and the Disney movie based on the book was also high-grossing. Its immense popularity tells us that this form of sentimental pleasure – docile black bodies and white saviors – is alive and well in our so-called post-racial, Barack Obama moment. However, *The Help* is also famously maligned by progressive audiences and scholars for its racist representations of black life and its willful erasure of actual organizing efforts by black domestic workers in the 1960s. Scholars have traced how the book trades in white supremacist representations of black bodies, and the Association of Black Women Historians released a statement condemning the book's portrait of the Civil Rights Movement. My contribution to this conversation is a reading of the book as part of a much longer history; I argue that Stockett doesn't only revise the Civil Rights Movement, but also revisits Stowe's, Jacobs', and Child's abolitionist texts in order to comment on interracial female collaboration. *The Help* reiterates many of the tropes, archetypes, and politics found in sentimental abolitionist literature. However, whereas Jacobs and Child offered one potentially radical possibility within the genre, based on an immanent critique of the genre itself, Stockett returns instead to a closed and easy version of sentiment, one that I read as inherently conservative. Stockett's book, therefore, reiterates a

sentimentalized view of coalition that has little to do with actual historical truth, and much more to do with the redemption of white female agency.

At stake in this analysis is the confluence of "feeling right" with an activist positionality. From Stowe to Stockett, I trace the ways in which a "political" subjectivity is available to privileged, most often white, readers via the empathic identification they forge with literary characters. The cathartic pay-off of sentimental texts (spoiler alert: they all end with tears and redemption) is what's at stake. For readers are able, having felt that they worked through something difficult, to imagine themselves as part of a community of the oppressed, as one activist or witness among a community of the like-minded. This structure of witnessing replicates the same politics of racial nationalism and capitalist exploitation as the original sentimental texts. There is a collapse, therefore, but it's not between the reader and the read; it is instead the coalition of the activist identity with structures of knowing that are white supremacist and patriarchal from their very foundation.

A Chapter of Wrongs and Sufferings:

The Tangled Skeins of Sentiment in Harriet Jacobs and Lydia Marie Child

In 1853, Harriet Beecher Stowe snubbed Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs, an escaped and now free ex-slave, was interested in writing the narrative of her life and her freedom. On the advice of her friend, the abolitionist Amy Post, Jacobs reached out to Stowe to help her craft the story. Stowe never responded, but instead told her other friend that Jacobs' material might be helpful for her own next book, a follow-up to the bestselling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Jacobs, insulted, was now more than ever committed to writing her book herself. The result, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), is a famously graceful evocation of the particularities of being both a woman and a slave. However, given its sexual content and its black author, Jacobs still needed to find a white woman to edit it, legitimate it, and write its introduction, before it could be considered for publication. This time Jacobs reached out to a different friend of Post's: Lydia Marie Child. Child had published, at the very height of her career as a women's domestic writer, the antiracist *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833 (*First Woman* 14). That treatise lost her her library privileges, several weekly magazine columns, and her status as an upstanding white woman. Child, it turns out, was the right choice. Child took the project, and the two women entered into an epistolary relationship, with Child sending feedback to Jacobs through the mail. By Child's own admission, she changed little in the manuscript, but "such changes as I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement. I have not added anything to the incidents, or changed the import of her very pertinent remarks" (Jacobs 27).

In this chapter, I read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* alongside Child's post-bellum

Romance of the Republic (1867) for representations of interracial collaboration and solidarity during the Abolitionist movement and its aftermath. Many scholars have written extensively on Jacobs' text, and my additions to this body of work are meager. However, by juxtaposing *Incidents* with Child's text, I explore the ways in which the critiques, hopes, and promises of antebellum, proto-feminist, multi-racial organizing were born out in the years immediately after the Civil War. In other words, I read Child's novel as a response to and an extension of Jacobs' narrative. Child attempts to map a future of interracial female collaboration. Her text, rife with complications and silences, can be read as a template for the future of multi-racial feminist projects of solidarity.

In *Incidents,* Jacobs has to choose a last name for her daughter. She can't use "Sands," the father's name, because they're not married and the father's identity is supposed to be secret. The baby is christened, instead, with two last names: that of a former mistress, and Jacobs. Sighing unhappily, Jacobs remarks: "What *tangled skeins* are the genealogies of slavery! I loved my father; but it mortified me to be obliged to bestow his name on my children" (103, emphasis mine). Like many sentimental writers before her, Jacobs relied on heteronormative values in order to enter her protest. Some eight years later, in her novel, Child writes of two slave sisters who were never emancipated by their otherwise doting father, and are subsequently kid-napped and raped by a man pretending to be their husband. Mrs. Delano, an abolitionist, wants to help, but her male friend believes nothing can be done: "'It is a *tangled skein* to unravel,' rejoined Mr. Percival. 'I do not see how anything can be done for the sisters under present circumstances'" (159, emphasis mine). This chapter is interested in these tangled skeins: patriarchies, subversions, and the ways in which Jacobs and Child's texts reflect, refract, build upon, and attempt the very radical work of "building bridges" across difference. That they attempt this

project within the confines of the sentimental form is what's at stake: where and how are these writers able to express something other than the enormous constraints of a racist polity and patriarchal system? Where and how can they not? I examine "silence" as a trope for and a politicized response to the violences of race and patriarchy. Jacobs' "slave narrative" forcefully reminds the white reader that she cannot hear, understand, or "feel" everything "the same" as the black slave woman. Child, rewriting Jacobs' narrative in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, questions the very impetus to "hear" stories and its concomitant interpellating hail into a nexus of white supremacy. In this chapter, I read Jacobs' and Child's texts as part of the tradition of sentiment and also pressing at its boundaries: by writing within the form, where and how do these writers gesture, together, towards a different horizon of possibility?

19th century sentiment

19th century American "sentimentalism," as a literary genre, has an interesting and varied social history. While many of the texts were immensely popular on publication (Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, for example, was the best-selling book in US history when published in 1850), popular literary opinion has not always treated them as kindly. Often consigned to the realm of "women's lit," these texts are commonly understood to offer little in the way of character nuance, development, or the craft of writing as compared to such masters of interiority and form as Herman Melville or a Henry James. The insult is that sentiment deals in practices of legibility: too concerned with the surfaces of things, the morals of a sentimental text are "readable" the bodies of its heroines and its tilt towards narrative resolution. Furthermore, the topics a sentimental text treats – women's issues; motherhood; familial problems and resolution – are considered warily, if at all; this is not the literature of a national identity, these are not real

and important matters of concern.[1] One of the major interventions of feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s was to stake the argument that these texts are political, *precisely* because they focus on the personal. Extending the 1970s rallying cry backwards over 100 years, scholars such as Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, Harryette Mullen, and many more located a "first wave" of feminist writers in the nineteenth century who attempted to surface the reality that national politics has always been scripted from (and for) the space of the home. This group of feminist scholars collectively produce the abolitionists and suffragists, in particular, as a group of politicized women, who use their domestic location as an emergent platform from which to speak. For example, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Mrs. Byrd's capacity to influence her husband, the Senator's, heart, and therefore his mind, and therefore his *vote,* is read alternately as a powerful enunciation of women's domestic power *or* as a powerful seizing and molding of contemporary events to build her own political subjectivity,[2] but no matter what it is read as political intervention. The work of these scholars has had powerful ramifications: not only did their challenges to the "canon" significantly refigure what is often taught in the undergraduate classroom as "American Literature," but their work also opened space to consider the ways in which politics looks like more than just legislative power.

Lauren Berlant's work on the history of sentimentalism is masterful in tracing how the work of sentiment in US culture has been to create a "juxtapolitical" public sphere in which the norms and forms of sentiment create an "intimate public" (*Female Complaint* 5). In *The Female Complaint*, she locates the "intimate public" as an imagined community of women readers and consumers, and one that must be understood as resolutely political. Life within national being, as

[1] Lauren Berlant's 2009 *The Female Complaint* traces the long history of "women's" sentimental writing and the way in which it has always-already existed in a "juxtapolitical" relationship with national identity and politics.
[2] Jane Tompkins and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, respectively.

consumers, and in community with others is all also in conversation with the fact of "being" a woman, and the "kinds" of stories that women tell (and hear):

> "Women's culture" was the first such mass-marketed intimate public in the United States on a significant scale. As a market domain where a set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly, women's culture solicits belonging via modes of sentimental realism that span fantasy and experience and claim a certain emotional generality among women, even though the stories that circulate demonstrate diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race. (5)

Berlant's contribution is especially useful to my inquiry because she nods towards the ways in which "a certain emotional generality" claims legibility across "diverse historical locations … of class and race." The implicit argument here is that *women*, across time and difference, are able to build bridges, across time and difference, by the sharing of stories. The stories that women tell, therefore, may or may not impact legislature, but they certainly cull a community called "women."[3]

This chapter aims to examine and to extend this body of feminist scholarship. I begin by questioning the assumption that the politics of the texts can be clearly read. Whether it's Douglas arguing against the political complicity of the text, Samuels' argument that the sentimental reader becomes the sentimental (and political) subject, or Berlant showing us how sentimental texts

[3] Miranda Joseph provides interesting interlocution here. She reminds us how the term "community" is often invoked to signal an organic "outside" or force of resistance to capitalism. In fact, "The discursive opposition of community and society provides a crucial clue to the former's pervasiveness in contemporary discourse; community is a creature of modernity and capitalism … Community is performatively constituted in capitalism, in the processes of production and consumption, through discourses of pluralism, multiculturalism, and diversity, through niche marketing, niche production, and divisions of labor by race, gender, and nation" (2007: 58-59). The construction of a community called "women," who all consume the same stories of difference and sameness, is precisely who I believe Berlant is writing about.

continue to net an inchoate-yet-bonded audience, these assessments all assume that the text is a privileged site of empathic identification and therefore political subjectivation. In short, they grant that the text is political in general, sentiment is political in particular, and it is political because it tells stories and changes hearts and minds. I put pressure on the assumption of a transparent capacity for identification and thereby a manifest politics. By calling attention to the way in which sentimentalism defends its own reading practices even while launching an attack upon slavery, I explore how the sentimental inheritance is one in which feeling-as-politicalaction precludes other forms of alliances and allegiances, which are not necessarily dependent upon sentimentalized and hierarchical forms of empathic identification. However, I am also interested in how these texts reveal a space for different strategies of reading and knowing, ones that contest hierarchies of identity and gestures towards another form – or politics – of storytelling.

Transparency and Empathic Identification

Arguments that "sentimentalism" provides a transparent site for identification and politics often begin with the texts themselves. Black authors were introduced by famous white authors, who would vouch for the authenticity of the text in order to "prove" to northern audiences the veracity of the works. White authors were also criticized for embroidering or exaggerating the truth; Stowe's *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1853 (only one year after the novel, and the text she considered Jacobs to be apt material for), is an example of the strenuous documentation of sources and events in order to prove the veracity of the novel. This promise to truthfulness sits at an interesting crossroads with the generic norms of sentimentalism. Sentiment often included elements of the "romantic," which in the 19th century was the term used to distinguish texts from the "real" – a romantic text, for example, might include supernatural

elements or plot twists that require a large suspension of disbelief (Eliza's leap across the Ohio River comes to mind as an apt example). In her *Key,* Stowe makes the argument that romance is actually the only way to represent the atrocities of slavery; the leap between the horrific realities of slavery and the capacities of literary representation is too great. She writes that slavery is actually excessive to representation: "slavery, and some of its workings, is too dreadful for the purposes of art. A work which should represent it directly as it is, would be a work which could not be read" (*Key* 5). Stowe goes on to tell us of the "pain" she experienced in the writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; to save her readers from this same experience of "dreadful" and visceral pain, she turns towards the softening effects of romance (*Key* 4). Romance can mute reality into "art," and thereby offers the closest thing to reality that is still within the realm of representation and is physically readable.

This argument about the limits of representation has its own limits. Stowe, while forcefully articulating that her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is based purely in "facts," must also make the book enticing for her readers. To cast it as a romance is therefore doubly effective: not only can romance gesture towards the unrepresentable, but it can also make reading a pleasurable experience. By putting the archetypes, plotlines, and moral valences of sentiment to work for reality, Stowe (and other writers) engage readers' incoming literary expectations and produce texts that are enjoyable to read. Furthermore, "all works which mean to give pleasure must draw a veil somewhere, or they cannot succeed" (*Key* 5). To limit the telling, then, is to leave something to the imagination, to stop short of full revelation. The process of reading, empathizing, and "feeling with," creates (for the privileged writer or reader) a process likened to a dance of veils: with each new revelation, the reader comes closer to the "truth," here embodied as a woman. Christian readers that they were, Stowe's audience would have recognized this

process as illicit and wrapped within an outlawed, titillating, sexuality. The pleasure, therefore, emerges from the twinned realizations that readers are now in possession of an illegal knowledge, and that this knowledge can be communicated as political. Stowe's hedging away from the pain of "reality," therefore, in the end congeals the world she presents with a "romance." Rather than limit what she writes (based on what she knows, or what she considers to be "representable"), the pages of romance are filled with erotic and suggestive scenes in which readers are seduced into believing they understand the truth.

It is no mistake, then, that much content of abolitionist romances are tales of virtue (un)rewarded, scenes of sexual violation, and portraits of the sexual depravities of men. While these scenes were deployed to shock readers, they were also understood to "arouse" (Jacobs 26) them. Karen Sánchez-Eppler has examined the ways in which white women writers used the bodies of slaves and the tropes of slavery in order to theorize their own political journey towards enfranchisement, and to write themselves into a place of sexual subjectivity. This joining of the "abolitionist-feminist" causes, as written by the white women of the north, proved an effective alliance for its writers:

> 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. ("Bodily Bonds" 33)

By obscuring the specificities of slavery and conflating slavery with the experience of bourgeois marriage, white women writers used the bodies of slaves as representative for their own

emergent political subjectivity. Hence, while the overt message might have been that "we are against oppression of all women, no matter her race" this alliance of women's issues with abolition put the bodies of slaves to work in order to make their own point (and, indeed, to explore more) about themselves. "Learning the signs" in order to "read right" was a lesson in feeling right as a political act; however, we can begin to see how the politics of those feelings might be more complicated than an easy and transparent empathic exchange between white women and women (ex-)slaves. "Feeling right" discursively created a network between "women" everywhere that was premised on a white, Christian, liberal humanism, the dominant language and mode through which antislavery knowledge was produced. An emergent ethos of coalitional politics, therefore, was reliant on the effacement of antiracism in favor of panwomanism. As Stowe so aptly put it, for white women this feeling of "pain" in the process opened into an experience of "pleasure" in speaking of the unspeakable, of recognizing the self as one contingent body among many.[4]

The sentimental novel therefore has the capacity to reveal a body of knowledge about the racialized other for its white reader, which produces a heightened sense of the reader's own particular positionality and embodiment in relation to that character. With this new knowledge of "the other" comes the experience of consolidation of one's own readerly subjectivity. Feelings of empathy, discomfort, and righteousness with the text assures – or comforts – the privileged reader that she is in the political right. To make this point, I am indebted to Franny Nudelman's discussion of the relationship between the "sufferer" (the read-about) and the "reader" (about-

[4] In a lecture on October 23, 2013 entitled "Ancient Roman Slavery and American History," Sandra Joshel called this the experience of "thinking with slaves." To invoke "slavery" as a synonym for one's own position in society is to claim a rhetoric of equality – *we are the same* – but, as Joshel reminds us, the actual import of this invocation was to bemoan one's own place in society rather than the slave's. To "think with the slaves" is to imagine oneself as a slave – signifying "the worst" position in society – and to use that discursive positioning to protest *one's own position*, not necessarily the slaves'.

suffering) in sentimental fiction. Nudelman writes:

> Sentimental communications … are always prompted by inequality. *Suffering is the experience of a victim, and not that of a reader, whose sympathy depends on her actual privilege.* The suffering that invites the reader's identification also distinguishes between reader and sufferer. (956, emphasis mine)

That the experience of "suffering" so often falls across lines of race in sentimental texts contributes to the experience of "becoming white" for the reader. Not only is she able to recognize herself as an empathetic and politicized subject, but she is also asked to recognize her relationship to racialization. Her "privilege," as Nudelman puts it, is an economic and racial fact. "Feeling right" about the sufferer was the experience of taking the correct political stance in regards to race relations. It is Stowe's experience of pain and pleasure, now specified to the construction of race. The "pain" of reading racialized suffering allows the pleasure – and economic safety – of consolidating one's own (necessarily supremacist) racial identity. Nudelman's analysis is particularly useful because she writes that, structurally, being the reader places one above the sufferer – it creates a hierarchy of the reader and the read. The reader of sentimental fiction, in other words, assures herself that she "feels right" and is therefore a political being, even while maintaining a safe distance from the actual violence of rape, racialization, or slavery. To read one's politics, in this scenario, is to enact the precise chasm that it pretends to decry.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) addresses this nexus of sentimental desire, ownership, and solidarity. Like Stowe, Jacobs appeals to "the women of the

North" in order to rally them towards the cause of abolition. However, Jacobs stood in a tense dialectical relationship with the genre and the feminist-abolitionist politics of the era. As Franny Nudelman so forcefully argues, Jacobs turned the logics of sentimentalism on their head by taking up her pen herself (Nudelman 941). Rather than allow her experience to be inhabited by the likes of Stowe (or Child, or Amy Post) and have her story told by a so-called "abler pen" (Jacobs 7), she assumes the position of the author and details her own experiences. She uses the values, tropes, and narrative arcs of the sentimental genre, and yet also always bends the genre to challenge what readers expect. Furthermore, she puts a distinct limit on what her readers are able to empathize with or to understand. She calls attention to the pleasurable aspects of knowledge- and self-production, and shows us that there are more difficult – and ultimately more liberatory – forms of communication and knowledge production than full sentimental disclosure.

Jacobs' work is infamous both for its sexual content and its unwillingness to describe that content in detail. Her discussions of sex – be they romantic, violent, or something "akin" (79) to either – is described euphemistically, often so obscurely that readers are left to wonder at the "true" meaning of her words. Some critics have interpreted Jacobs' silence as indicative of shame or unwillingness to shock "delicate" readers with details regarding that "chapter" of her life (Jacobs 163). I read it as a self-aware reproach to the culture of sentiment itself. Sentimentalized discourse and coded silences reveal much, but I will argue here that Jacobs' precise use of silence not only calls attention to the sentimental impetus to *read right*, but also neatly refuses its logics.

Harriet Jacobs famously writes with the generic norms of sentiment. Like Stowe before her, she vacates sexual specificity, and alludes to rape and sexual violence in "veiled" language. However, unlike Stowe, Jacobs denies her reader titillating or sexualized reading experience in

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Her summary of her master, Dr. Flint's, pursuit of her as a young woman is cloaked in the discourse of popular sentimentalisms, and yet her invocations of the form eviscerate their romantic subtexts.[5] Critics have read Jacobs' representation of Flint's pursuit as heavily reliant on popular seduction plots; like *Pamela* or *Clarissa*, the virtuous young woman is pursued by the corrupted and sexually avaricious older man. Jacobs plays with this inherited plotline, revealing how the life of the "slave girl" differs from that of the English servant; her "virtue rewarded" is not in the shape of a marriage plot, Flint is a violent and depraved monster instead of a romantically redeemable hero, and the book ends with Brent continuing to look hopefully forward towards the day when she has her own home with her children. Dana Nelson, in particular, has read Jacobs' text as a deconstruction of traditional sentimental tropes; for example, instead of assuring white readers that they are just like her (in an act of potential "erasure" of the particularities of her experience), Jacobs points out how white readers have no access to her inner life or emotional experiences. Nelson argues that "sympathy assumes a sameness in a way that can prevent an understanding of the very real, very material differences that structure human experience in a society based upon unequal distribution of power" (142), and when Jacobs spells out that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 81), she is reminding us that, given the "vertical" power differentials, she can't be held to white bourgeois "horizontal" social mores. I would argue, however, that Jacobs does more than just point out social difference. In Nelson's reading, we might understand Jacobs' claim for moral relativity to encompass the argument that "if we *were*

[5] I do not intend to conflate Harriet Jacobs the author with Linda Brent, her protagonist. Although extensive historical research has been done to establish the veracity of Jacobs' text and her experiences, it's important maintain the epistemological space between these two figures. Jacobs, as the author, made deliberate writerly choices that impacted how her story was told, what was revealed, and what was elided. Therefore, I understand Linda Brent as a literary heroine. To maintain this distinction between the historical person and the literary figure, I will refer to "Jacobs" when speaking of the author, and "Linda" when discussing the plotted character.

the same, and if I was not a slave, then I could be as virtuous as you." Instead, I think that Jacobs does something much more radical: by opposing the language of sentiment, she denies its very logics.

Jacobs' first move is to focus on the language of seduction as the problem. Flint's sexual violence is sometimes expressed physically; a few times he hits her to the ground. However, most of his advances are discursive. He "began to whisper foul words in my ear ... He peopled my mind with unclean images … He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things" (52). We find out that "What he could not find opportunity to say in words he manifested in signs" (55), and that after she learns how to read, he uses this to his advantage and "notes were often slipped into my hand" (56). Although the "signs" were made clear to Linda, Jacobs' reader is left to wonder at their import. Surely sexual, surely violent. And yet, one is left in a space of silence, to wonder whether the violence is primarily ontological (the assertion that she is his property, for example, strikes Jacobs as one of Flint's – and indeed all of society's – foundational violences) or whether Flint's discursive pursuit is meant to signify something else. There is no answer in the text; Jacobs asks us to take her at her word that his aggressions were enough to send her not only into a sexual relationship with another man, but eventually into seven years of confinement.

Readers of Jacobs, therefore, are left with the choice to "believe" Jacobs – that Flint's violence was primarily verbal – or to wonder at her choice to absent physical, sexual violence from the text. Both of these choices reify a reading practice in which the reader comes into "knowledge" of "reality," and thereby their own experience of subjectivity via a practice of perceived solidarity. And indeed, Jacobs leaves neither option as wholly satisfying. Instead, her text demands that we accept silence as the only possible truth. The signs are not sure, and this is

in fact the point. Flint's language was brutal – rather than re-enact that violence, Jacobs leaves the reader in a space of instability. This is a way of challenging the telos of subjection and subjectivity. Without *knowledge* of what "really" happened, without the opportunity to comfortably situate oneself relationally to Jacobs by *sympathetically hearing her story*, the reader must accept Jacobs' own limits and choices as a storyteller, and find whatever cold comfort she can in the loophole of ambiguity.

Jacobs reminds us of the instability of signs once more in the text. Much later in her life, when she is living in New York and is near to her daughter, who works as a servant for a white family, she learns that the white head of that household "had poured vile language into the ears of [my daughter]" (191). That her words here so precisely match the way in which she described her own experiences leads the reader to wonder, once again, what this phrase obscures. Perhaps it is a sentimental cloaking of physical violence, repeated on the next generation; or perhaps it is a way to encapsulate the nexus of race, gender, and sex violence that defines both of their experiences in the south and the north.

Jacobs' second challenge to the culture of sentiment lies in her representations of coalition with white women. Jacobs candidly addresses her readership in her Preface: "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (26). Her appeal fits perfectly with the sentimental hail: by "arousing" these women, her book participates in a hail to bring these women into new bodily and political subjectivities. However, Jacobs also offers several illustrations of the ramifications of this "arousal," and the problematics therein.

Linda's family is tightly knit into the multiracial town of Edenton, North Carolina, and Jacobs offers several examples of multi- and cross-racial collaboration between women. In particular, she notes how her grandmother Martha cultivated friendships with white women, and how these friendships proved helpful in the family's survival. Among others, there is the sister of Martha's deceased mistress, who buys Martha at the auction block and manumits her; there is grandmother's friend Miss Fanny, who brings Linda news of the town when Linda is sent to Flint's son's plantation. These women stand as complicated examples of how a cross-racial friendship and collaboration can work. In the case of her grandmother's purchase, at the time Linda seems happy and thankful: she recalls that the white woman "had a big heart overflowing with human kindness" (37). However, the longer that Linda meditates on the meaning of slavery, the more she is repulsed by the idea of a friendly purchase. I will examine this idea in further depth below. In the case of her grandmother's friend Miss Fanny, it seems that Martha carefully (and perhaps calculatedly) cultivated the woman's friendship:

> My grandmother loved this old lady … She often came to take tea with us. On such occasions the table was spread with a snow-white cloth, and the china cups and silver spoons were taken from the old-fashioned buffet. There were hot muffins, tea rusks, and delicious sweetmeats. My grandmother kept two cows, and the fresh cream was Miss Fanny's delight … The old ladies had cosey times together. They would work and chat, and sometimes, while talking over old times, their spectacles would get dim with tears, and would have to be taken off and wiped. When Miss Fanny bade us good by, her bag was filled with grandmother's best cakes, and she was urged to come again. (111)

This illustration of sentimental connection is exemplary: in the home space, ideally made up, the women share stories and cry together. They talk and cry for "old times"; there is a common bond

that is based on domestic pleasures and the production of feminine sensibility. The women don't discuss power and its reaches, or plot for escape or retribution. Furthermore, Jacobs stresses the economic exchange: Miss Fanny is seduced by the comforts of the home into pleasure and tears, and for her time with the slave family she leaves with arms full of Martha's "best cakes" – cakes that would otherwise be sold (at a premium) on Edenton's market. For this, she can be called upon as a white protectress and advocate for the family. It is fitting, therefore, that when Miss Fanny comes to visit Linda on the plantation, Linda remarks that she is "rejoiced" to see her; however, the comfort Linda derives is limited:

> She said her principal object in coming was to see how I was treated, and whether anything could be done for me … She condoled me in her own peculiar way; saying she wished that I and all my grandmother's family were at rest in our graves, for not until then should she feel any peace for us. (112)

This bizarre mode of comfort relies entirely on sentimental narration. If Linda were to be "in her grave," she could be properly (sentimentally) mourned and cried for.[6] As it is, Linda continues to live on a plantation, sexually molested by her master, and in fear for her children's futures, and there is not much that Miss Fanny can do about it besides be sympathetic. These relationships with white women are, at their best, extremely contingent and limited. At their worst, they reveal the selfishness and the self-making of the white women: for it is Miss Fanny's own emotional health, after all, that Miss Fanny is most concerned about.

[6] A good example of sentimental hypocrisy is when Linda's Aunt Nancy dies, and Mrs. Flint takes up the role of bereaved mistress: "Mrs. Flint had rendered her poor foster-sister childless, apparently without any compunction; and with cruel selfishness had ruined her heath by years of incessant, unrequited toil, and broken rest. But now she became very sentimental. I suppose she thought it would be beautiful illustration of the attachment existing between slaveholder and slave, if the body of her old worn-out servant was buried at her feet" (162). In other words, the death scene allows an elaboration of sentimental feelings, which Jacobs reveals here as hollow and entirely self-serving.

Linda's complicated relationship with white women reaches its zenith with the Bruce family. Having escaped to the north, she is unable to find work without references, but eventually the kind Mrs. Bruce hires her to care for her baby, Mary. Jacobs describes the relationship as mutually beneficial – Linda enjoys caring for babies again – and she stays. Mrs. Bruce eventually dies, and after some time Linda becomes the nanny for the second Mrs. Bruce, whom Jacobs describes in the same glowing and compassionate terms as the first Mrs. Bruce. This woman listens to her when she explains her situation and history (something always difficult for Linda to do), and takes action to help Linda. In particular, there is a moment when slave hunters have come to New England to search for Linda, and Mrs. Bruce sends her away with her own child; she tells Linda: "'It is better for you to have baby with you, Linda; for if they get in your track, they will be obliged to bring the baby to me; and then, if there is a possibility of saving you, you shall be saved'" (205). Mother-love, that classic element of sentimental and womanly feeling, here becomes the very tool of resistance. Mrs. Bruce is a sentimental heroine. Why, then, does Jacobs recall with so much ambivalence the moment when Mrs. Bruce purchases Linda's free papers? Jacobs knows that she is now free – the chapter is entitled "Free At Last" – and yet Linda's reaction to the news of her (legal) freedom is qualified:

> The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph. I wrote to Mrs. Bruce, thanking her, but saying that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that *such a great obligation could not easily be cancelled*, and that *I preferred to go to my brother in California*. (211, emphases mine)

Mrs. Bruce goes ahead with the purchase anyway. And Linda is right: the obligation is not easily cancelled. This obligation, however, is not articulated through legal papers or the threat of violence. Instead, it is sentimental and articulated with domestic and emotional labor. Jacobs concludes her book:

> The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own. But so God orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend, Mrs. Bruce. *Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side.* It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children. (213, emphasis mine)

Jacobs reveals the sentimental attachment as one that is "binding": her servitude results both from "circumstances" and also those vaunted ideals of "love, duty, and gratitude." *Feelings* keep her from a hearthstone with her children, or from California with her brother. Mrs. Bruce heard Linda's story, but rather than support Linda's wishes, she acted precisely against them. Mrs. Bruce's actions also secure Mrs. Bruce's own position as privileged; she maintains the labor of her valued servant. Mrs. Bruce likely imagines herself as someone who truly "feels right," and because of this assumes that she acted right. The sentimental nexus of feeling right as equivalent to political action as productive of the economically stable, racialized white woman is exemplified in Mrs. Bruce's "generous" purchase of the already-free Linda Brent. This crushing conclusion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* reminds us that sentimental feeling – an empathic identification – with the sufferer is never the same thing as being the sufferer. Here, Mrs. Bruce reifies that hierarchy, maintains a safe distance from Linda and her liberation, and Linda remains caught in the nexus of so-called "solidarity," woven out of sentimental politics. It

is a tricky conclusion: emancipated but not liberated, "bound" by "love" and "duty," Linda Brent's labor is now directed towards the production of northern images of interracial relationships. Her irony is fierce, and cutting: "It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people" (213). "Pity," that hallmark of empathic identification, makes Jacobs' conclusion all the more clear: this is not collaborative resistance; this is Mrs. Bruce's self-production (via mother-love, via purchase) and Linda's unwitting role as accessory.

Taken together, Jacobs' refusal to "tell all" and her questioning of the sentimental relationship between sufferer and reader challenge the reader of *Incidents* to resituate her own knowledge about herself. Not only is the reader's knowledge (about self and other) revealed as highly constricted and precarious, but her desire to "feel right" is also shown to be, quite simply, the desire to act in her own self-interest. Rather than listen poorly and act rashly, Jacobs slyly recalls to the reader that she must not assume that she has heard and knows all. The sentimental relationship between white women and black women is not only insufficient, but actually preventive of a radical coalitional politics. Implicit in this argument is the suggestion that, in order to create something akin to interracial coalition politics, one must seek a place outside of the sentimental form or impulse.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a book made out of small spaces. Brent's world is constricted: from grandmother's house to Flint's house, from the neighborhood to the plantation, the spaces of slavery and autonomy are carefully mapped and known. Escape, therefore, can only happen through minute movement and tiny motions. Linda first stays in the house of an unnamed friend; when this becomes untenable, the unexpected happens: a wealthy, white, slave-holding woman in town offers to conceal Linda for a short time. Linda is overwhelmed with gratitude, and spends several instrumental weeks in a small garret overlooking the street. This small space

of escape is entirely orchestrated by women: from the first conversation between grandmother and the white woman, in which the white woman "listened attentively to the details of [Linda's] story and sat thinking for a while" (121), to the woman's slave Betty, who manages Linda's concealment and keeps her fed and safely hidden, it is an elision of Flint's power through tactical use of domestic space. Linda lies on a pile of "feather beds" (122) and watches the street below: from there, she can plot her children's sale to their father, and plan her next move. These weeks in the garret are, actually, an exemplary moment of radical interracial solidarity. What is so suggestive about the white woman's action is that her action reveals the complexity of her own subject-position. She is unwilling to fully compromise her position – her family, her husband, her community must not, cannot find out – and yet, having heard the story of Martha's grandchild, she is moved to offer material comfort and economic support. She uses the privilege of her own position to aid a friend's grandchild; Jacobs returns the favor by maintaining her anonymity and writing about her without cutting irony. It is not, in the end, a sentimental relationship: the woman was not bought with cakes, or moved by tears. Instead, she was compelled to help a friend in the limited and contingent ways that she could. When the hiding space become compromised, Linda must move on. This is emphatically not an episode of the white woman's self-making or her experience of sentiment and tears; instead, the woman is described as thoughtful, rational, and calculating. Jacobs repays the risk by not revealing her name or romantically illustrating her efforts; it is a compliment by exclusion.

Jacobs' most famous small space is, of course, her "loophole of retreat" (134), an attic crawlspace above her grandmother's house. For seven years, Jacobs lies in wait for the right opportunity to escape north. She spies on the comings and goings of the street; she feels the weather through the roof; she watches her children grow older. For seven years, the family waits

for the right moment to move Linda on, but it doesn't arrive. And so instead, Jacobs does what she can: she reads, she knits, and she talks to her grandmother when given the chance. Lest her readers disbelieve her determination and fortitude, she writes: "I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (135), reflecting on the fact that constricted autonomy is better than sexual violation. For there is something radical in this small space; like the garret before it, this is a female-constructed space that is also politicized. From here, Linda can exercise her "cunning" over Flint and run him back and forth to New York (145); she can hear the news of her brother's freedom (151); she can follow the sojourns of her children as they grow and eventually leave Edenton. It is, in other words, a space of limited, contingent, and highly precarious freedom. In conversations with her grandmother, plans are hatched, stories told, and new forms of knowledge and resistance emerge. This too is a counter-argument to the culture of sentiment: for few of these conversations or stories are recorded. Instead, they take place off of the page: seven years of resistance, and as the reader we can barely imagine, let alone viscerally experience, the experience. Readers do not get the voyeuristic experience of "pain" that Stowe trumpeted; instead, we have to take Jacobs' word for it that seven years of secrets, plans, and plots moved from attic to kitchen to street.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a sentimental text that offers a profound critique of the culture of sentiment. It calls attention to the ways in which sentimentalized relationships are akin to a different form of slavery, and that a culture of "crying with" does little to improve the condition of the slave, and a lot to make the white woman more wealthy and secure. Jacobs also offers an alternative, routed through the small spaces that women share. While the small spaces – the garret, the attic, the hold of the ship, the kitchen – might seem the most domestic and the most feminine, she also lets us know that this is where the most radical collaborations can

happen. That she does not reveal the names, the specifics of the conversations, or the ways in which women negotiated their subjectivities in these spaces is what's at stake. How, therefore, is it possible to develop a theory of interracial feminist coalition if the process is never represented? If it can only be expressed through elision, small spaces, and the absence of irony? What does it mean if the opposite of sentimental formula is silence?

A Romance of the Republic

I read *A Romance of the Republic* as a requiem for sentimentalism. It's all there: the tragic quadroon, the lascivious slave owners, the plot twists and turns that leave a reader smirking in disbelief. Not only that, but it's set in the antebellum years, and seems to have as its main goal the abolishment of slavery. And yet, it also obliquely mourns the genre, in a way that shows both distance and critical space. Published in 1867, I read *A Romance* as Child's attempt to understand the afterlife of slavery and the ongoing question of woman's position in society. That Child grasps at the most antebellum of forms – a romance of a slave narrative – is important. Why, two years after the end of the Civil War, would she write and publish such a book?[7]

Literary historians believe that the book was less successful with or interesting to the general reading public than Child's other novels precisely because of its timing. Readers wanted

[7] Contemporary black authors, such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, also drew from sentimental narrative norms in order to write about miscegenation, passing, and race violence in the post-Civil War years. However, while both *Iola Leroy* (1893) and *Contending Forces* (1900), respectively, start their plots in or reference the antebellum years, the majority of the plots take place during Reconstruction and use sentimental tropes (such as the body of the "mulatta") to comment on social practices and social realities in that historical moment. I situate Child's book as slightly different because of its temporal immediacy with the war and the abolitionist organizing moment, and the fact that most of the book takes place pre- and during the War.

to "move on" from abolitionist literature and the ravages of the war.[8] Additionally, the unpopularity of the book could have been due to its provocatively antiracist themes, which were even less socially acceptable in 1867 than before the war. In the text, Child pictures the United States as multiracial, one in which families are built upon mutual love and respect, rather than racial homogeneity. Most radically, she portrays several interracial relationships that are loving and successful, and celebrates the babies born of these alliances. Sentimentalism, therefore, is used as a platform to express a very different politics than a reader might expect. That the form cannot contain these politics, and the book ultimately capitulates to the demands of the genre, are what make this text an interesting site to explore post-Civil War imaginations of the US's racial future.

A Romance of the Republic begins in the first half of the 19th century, in the home of Alfred Royal. Royal has two daughters, Rosa and Flora, who are renowned for their beauty and accomplishments. The astute reader of sentimental literature will notice how the daughters' beauty is described as "superlative and peculiar," and how Rosa's "complexion was like a glowing reflection upon ivory from gold in the sunshine" (3), and not have to speculate too hard to realize that Rosa and Flora are the daughters of a slave. Their mother, long-since passed, was the slave of her father. When he fell upon pecuniary difficulties, Royal stepped in to buy his beloved. We are assured that theirs was a love match; however, Royal always failed to emancipate both his wife and his daughters. When he dies unexpectedly, the daughters realize their situation and are cast into a romance of adventure, deceit, international voyages, and eventual reunion. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Romance* features fanciful plot twists and unbelievable turns of luck. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the injustices of slavery are articulated

[8] In her biography of Lydia Maria Child, Carolyn Karcher charts the varied reception of *A Romance*; by and large, white readers avoided the book. Some black newspapers and journalists lauded the book for identifying racism as a root problem in US society (*First Lady* 531).

through the body of the light-skinned black woman, who is able to evince the moral fortitude and strength of character to overcome both slavery and the despots it creates. However, unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin, A Romance* raises questions about the limits of the "tragic quadroon" figure, the desire she evokes in the text and also for the reader, and how that desire figures in relation to the text itself.

As with many sentimental texts, masculinist sexual desire is portrayed as an evil. Mr. Fitzgerald is most clearly figured as the corrupted and lascivious Southerner. After Royal's death, Fitzgerald faux-heroically absconds with both of the daughters to Nassau. He marries Rosa in a sham wedding to quell her doubts, but proceeds to treat both women as though they constitute his own little "harem" (12). Fitzgerald, like so many other sentimental villains, is despicable because he wields control over helpless young women, and rather than act with virtue, he is directed by his desire for control over their bodies. The conflation of *wife* with *slave* is nowhere more obvious than in how Fitzgerald treats Rosa; when discussing their plans to elope to Nassau, Rosa bemoans her status as slave:

> "But if your plan should not succeed, how ashamed you would feel to have us seized!" said she.
>
> "It *will* succeed, dearest. But even if it did not, you should never be the property of any man but myself."
>
> "*Property!*" she exclaimed in a proud Gonsalez tone, striving to withdraw herself from his embrace.
>
> He hastened to say: "Forgive me, Rosabella. I am so intoxicated with happiness that I cannot be careful of my words. I merely meant to express the joyful feeling that you would be surely mine, wholly mine." (61, emphases in original)

The slippage between the status of "slave" and "wife" is revealing. As noted by Sánchez-Eppler, abolitionist-feminist writers strove to show how *wife* was just a tongue's slip away from *slave*: by drawing parallels between being married and being owned, this literature hoped to call attention to both women's rights and slave emancipation. Additionally, Fitzgerald's slip reveals the desire latent in this conflation. His "joyful feeling" that she will be "[his], wholly [his]" tells us that there is something sexual about ownership. The delight is in the property, is in having and owning the female, racialized body. This is both the mark of the villain and the text's critique of women's place in society. By pointing out the ease of the slip from one position to the other, Child bemoans woman's place in society while also crying out injustice on slavery.

There is also another way to interpret this slippage. The assumption that Child meant to call out various injustices in the relatively straight-forward equation that "women are slaves too" would imply that this is another instance of white self-making out of the black slave experience. However, slavery was over. What was at stake in Child's use of slavery if slavery no longer held the same rhetorical powers? I read Child's collapse of the two categories *not* as a hail to and for white women, but rather as a way to *highlight* how slavery is always-already a domestic phenomenon. Rather than returning a (white) woman to her rights, this passage returns slavery to the realm of the home: it reminds us how the staging ground of "romance" has always been the femininized space of the bourgeois home. *The incorporation of slavery into the "genre" of sentiment was, perhaps, too-easy; or perhaps it always already lived there.* The desire expressed in Fitzgerald's slip is the desire for property ownership, which is also the desire for conjugal bliss and familial home. As scholars of history have noted, the emergence of bourgeois wealth and culture is an effect of slavery; the immense wealth created in the "New World" through a system

of racial slavery allowed the emergence and rise of the middle-class in Europe and the US.[9] Fitzgerald desires all of this: the body of the slave will not only produce his wealth, but also create his pretty home. Much like the writers of sentiment explored their own political and bodily concerns through the text, so too here the form does double work: it recalls us to the fact that the institution of slavery was intimately wedded to the domestic and cultural desires of the dominant class.

Fitzgerald is perhaps the most banal expression of this desire in the text; his desire is actually sexualized, and therefore carefully coded as evil. As the sexual villain, his desire for intimacy with the slave or to become family with the owned is always a corruption. However, other more upstanding characters express the same desires as Fitzgerald; when not sexualized, their desires become the everyday experience of and longing for a domestic home-life. Intimacy with the slave body, a possession through knowledge and closeness, and a making of the self through that ownership, therefore emerge as the structuring and motivating desires of the text. This is the critique implicit in Child's text: one cannot take up sentimentalism without desiring the slave. To write a "romance of the republic" is to be lulled back into the racist and patriarchal spaces of sentimentalism.

The quotidian nature of this desire for intimacy is first signaled by the interesting closeness between Fitzgerald and other, more heroic, male characters in the book. Desire for Rosa and her sister Flora's bodies and their "peculiar" beauty is primarily figured as a triangulated desire between men. I use the term "desire" in the way proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "in a way analogous to the psychoanalytic use of 'libido' – not for the particular affective state or emotion, but for *the affective or social force*, the glue, even when its

[9] This argument is well articulated in *Soul by Soul* by Walter Johnson (4).

manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, *that shapes an important relationship.* How far this force is properly sexual (what, historically, it means for something to be 'sexual') will be an active question" (2, emphases added). If desire is essentially a social experience and relationship, then *desire for the other* is as much a desire for a particular kind of social relationship, knowledge, or standing, as something we might deem "properly sexual."

The first instance of this social desire is, significantly, presented in the domestic space. Royal has invited Fitzgerald and Alfred King (who, no surprise given his name, turns out to be the hero of the romance – a nice example of "reading the signs" in order to discern the order of things) to his home, and when his daughter Flora begins to dance the three men are captivated by her performance: "The floating fairy vision had given such exquisite pleasure, that all had been absorbed in watching its variations. Now they looked at each other and smiled" (9). As Sedgwick notes, building from Rene Girard's theory of triangulation, the relationship between the men is as powerful as any sexual desire evinced for the "floating fairy." This first portrayal of desire, therefore, is "sexual" insofar as it figures a desire for the body, but it also exceeds the limits of the "properly sexual" by positing the relationship among men, the sharing of the desirous relationship, as as-important as the original "exquisite pleasure" of watching Flora's body. Desire is figured both as "sexual" and also as the making of a white masculine subjectivity for the three men, as they watch Flora together.

Royal's home is as much the scene of incarceration as it is of beauty. Because the girls are both slaves and of mixed race, Royal keeps them locked in the house, and entirely controls who they are able to see (and who is able to see, or look at, them). Their domestic life, we're assured, is one of dignity and love; however, juxtaposed with the elegance of their bourgeois

home and its domestic pleasures is the pleasure Fitzgerald anticipates at the auction block. Just as the three men constructed themselves through the act of looking at the women in the home space, so too Fitzgerald falls asleep to imaginations of watching Rosa's body in a public space:

> He remembered with a shudder what Madame Guirlande had said about the auctionstand. He was familiar with such scenes, for he had seen women offered for sale, and had himself bid for them in competition with rude, indecent crowds. It was revolting to his soul to associate the image of Rosa with such base surroundings; but it seemed as if some field persisted in holding the painful picture before him. He seemed to see her graceful figure gazed at by a brutal crowd, while the auctioneer assured them that she was warranted to be an entirely new and perfectly sound article, --a moss rosebud from a private royal garden, --a diamond fit for a king's crown. And men, whose upturned faces were like greedy satyrs, were calling upon her to open her ruby lips and show her pearls. He turned restlessly on his pillow and muttered an oath. Then he smiled as he thought to himself that, by saving her from such degradation, he had acquired complete control of her destiny. (66-67)

Fitzgerald's nighttime reveries repeat the homosocial experience of looking at women. Here, however, his desire is refracted off of and increased by other slave-buying men. These are men of whom he is one – he "had himself bid for [women] in competition with rude, indecent crowds" – and whom he considers his competitors in ownership. Rosa's imagined value, as articulated through the gazes of other potential buyers, excite Fitzgerald and make the possibility of ownership even more arousing. Furthermore, it is the imagination of Rosa's violation, the opening of her body at the hands of other men, that calls an "oath" from his mouth and increases his desire. Fitzgerald's fantasy is predicated as much on watching other men violate Rosa as it is

on Rosa's famous beauty or "purity." Alfred King, Fitzgerald's competitor for Rosa's affections, also lurks in this scene. By describing Rosa as "a diamond fit for a king's crown," Fitzgerald's thoughts remain, at least partly, with his masculine nemesis. The other men in this scene, therefore, produce Rosa as the valued object. To control the racialized and gendered body, to have intimacy with that body, and ultimately to have ownership over it, is what's for sale. Fitzgerald imagines himself as the hero in this romance; by rescuing Rosa from other men's "brutality" – and delivering her into his own possession – he will be able to create his own home scene. Significantly, the intimacy of the domestic space will also be the place where he "gets to know," or read the signs, of Rosa's body.

Walter Johnson has written extensively on the history of the Southern auction block, and how complicated matrices of identity and economy emerged in the negotiations that took place there. The decision to buy a slave at auction was often the mark of a man's emergence into propertied personhood. Johnson explores how slave-buying men considered their options, and saw their choice of what slave to purchase as a reflection of their logic, economic rationality, and masculinity (86). In particular, the choice of a young female slave signaled the decision to expand one's property, based on her reproductive capacities (82). It goes without saying that these women often became the concubines of their buyers, and that these men's property was therefore amplified with their own offspring. We can only imagine, therefore, that Fitzgerald's reveries reflect some of these same ideals and questions of self-making. Economically, Fitzgerald bolstered his estate with the acquisition of a healthy woman of reproductive age: she will be a boon to his property for years to come. And in terms of his consolidation of identity as a landed, rational, and masculine man – the ideal of sentimental manhood, as it were – Rosa does all of this, and more. Her beauty, grace, and culture create his ideal bourgeois home.

The text understands all of this as reprehensible. Although elsewhere the text affirms certain ideals of masculinity and domesticity, here the reader is reminded of the ways in which slavery pre-empts the heterosexual and bourgeois home. It is Fitzgerald's mistaking of the auction block for the genesis of the home, the sentimental text tells us, that marks him as a villain. That Rosa and Flora are so wonderfully prepared for domestic life, and yet it is stolen from them because of the mistake of birth, is what's at stake. Child's text decries the connection of the home with the slave block. However, by positing the spectacle of the female body in Royal's home as the precursor for the spectacle of the female body for sale, the text reveals the home and the auction block as complementary. As both Sedgwick and Johnson point out, masculine identity and the completion of the domestic space are forged through the experience of jockeying with other men over the meaning and value of women's bodies.[10]

So far, these discussions of "desire" have all circulated through a dominant and heteronormative matrix of "desire." However, if we take the idea of desire as a "social force" seriously, then it is also clear that a compelling network of desire among female characters is also at play in this text. While masculine self-making is carefully coded as sexual, the desires that circulate between the female characters are more ambivalent. Like the male characters, a desire to get to know, have intimacy with, and create bonds of domesticity lasso the female characters together. Unlike the male characters, these desires seem to exceed the realm of the properly political, and ultimately urge the reader to assess her own subject-location in terms of both race and privilege.

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[10] Rubin's seminal "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" argues that men establish kinship ties and consolidate masculinist economic relationships by "trading" (eg, transferring through marriage) women. Interestingly for this paper, she also argues that women also only become gendered "women" through this trade. In this analysis, Rosa would emerge at her feminine heights on the auction block – by rescuing her and thereby guaranteeing his own masculine inheritance, Fitzgerald consolidates them both in a normative male/female matrix.

Rosa and Flora are both light-skinned enough to "pass" as white, but both choose abolitionist politics and promote cross-racial alliances throughout their lives. There are several ways to understand Rosa and Flora's antiracist activisms. The first would be an elaboration of "women are slaves too" – realizing their commonality with slaves (both as slaves themselves, and as women), Rosa and Flora dedicate their lives to battling oppression. In this reading, Child's use of slavery in 1867 would be as metaphor: *having eradicated the one evil, now let's eradicate the second.*

But it's not quite so easy. While Rosa and Flora's antislavery consciousnesses are forged in the fire of their own experiences as women of color, their identification with a multiracial coalition of women remains fraught. I read *a desire for solidarity with a multiracial coalition of women* as the social desire, or affective glue, that gives logical structure to the text. However, transparent empathic identification among women is never revealed as easy or even necessarily possible. As they fight their way through the sentimental form, Rosa and Flora experience both its triumphs and its vicissitudes; even as an idealized sentimental empathy emerges as the means to and of political action, that empathy is shown to be conditioned by its social realities and highly conversant with systems of oppression. Like Linda Brent, the protagonists of *A Romance* remain "bound" by the form even as they desire something else.

When Fitzgerald facilitates Rosa and Flora's "escape" to Nassau, the sisters don't know that he has actually just bought them, and are under the impression that Rosa is married to Fitzgerald. The first hints of female solidarity emerge with Tulee, the sisters' slave. Tulee, who plays the part of the "faithful servant," has come with them to Nassau. However, she rejects a narrative of reciprocal love and devotion, and tells Flora that she would rather be free: "'To be sure, I would,' said Tulee. 'Ye like it yourself, don't ye, little missy?'" (78). Tulee

makes it very clear that she respects the sisters, and yet she is also there with them because of bondage, not love. Tulee's desire to be free anticipates the sisters', and Tulee's capacities to plan against and to resist Fitzgerald greatly exceed that of the sisters. In particular, because of a network of information that runs between the slaves at the small cottage (where Fitzgerald keeps the sisters) and the slave at his large plantation house (where he eventually brings a white wife), Tulee is able to interpret many signs and events that the sisters cannot. For example, Tulee suggests to Flora that the island is like a "prison"; moments later, imitating her new teacher, Flora reflects that the cottage is "prison-like" (78). As the sisters come to realize their predicament, Tulee's insights, skills, and planning become all the more important. As sympathy grows between the three women, Tulee emerges as a guide for interpretation and knowledge of their situation. Tulee schools them in a reading practice that runs parallel to the one of patriarchal love and devotion in which they were raised.

Chloe is introduced as a slave from the plantation who, besides knowledge in herbs and Christian healing, has "a little wild gleam of poetry in her fervid eyes" (174). Interestingly, the poetry in Chloe's eyes is never interpreted for the reader. I read this character as a comment on and revision of Aunt Chloe from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – like that Chloe, this woman is married to a gentle/gentile Tom, and her typified dress, speech, and mannerisms rely on and reify racist imagery. However, rather than follow Stowe down the rabbit-hole of sentimental empathy and the experience of "pain" (which is actually "pleasure"), Child chooses to leave this Chloe enigmatically unreadable, insurmountably powerful, and devoted to planning and executing an escape to the north *with her husband*.[11] Straddling the line between a flat set-piece and an

[11] Child's rewriting of Tom's fate in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is biting. This Chloe and Tom are written as strong, pragmatic, and organized individuals who hatch plots and save one another. Instead of dying (or leaving the country), they become part of a multiracial community in the north.

illegible character, the poetry of whom we might never understand, Chloe births Rosa into a new consciousness of feminist positionality and politics.

Chloe is called to the cottage first because of friendship with Tulee, and then she stays when Rosa finds out about Fitzgerald's white wife and falls into a deep illness. For several months, Chloe tends to Rosa, singing Methodist hymns and "negro melodies" (174). She keeps her gaze on Rosa's "eyes," and eventually Rosa returns the pressure to her handhold and awakes to meet Chloe's gaze. Chloe and Tulee are positioned as the mothers, or midwives, who bring Rosa into her new position and knowledge of the world, and "never did a mother welcome the first gleam of intelligence in her babe with more thrilling joy, than the first faint, quivering smile on Rosa's lips" (175). For Rosa's new knowledge, of course, is of her positionality: having assumed that Fitzgerald had respected her and treated her like a white woman (by having marrying her), she had assumed herself of a different status than Tulee or Chloe. Now, understanding what her parentage and geographical position signify, she enters into alliance with women she formerly thought of as "hers."

Chloe and Tulee continue to nurse their "infant" (177) to health, mainly with attention and story-telling: "Chloe sung to [Rosa], and told her stories, which were generally concerning her own remarkable experiences; for she was a great seer of visions. Perhaps she owed them to gifts of the imagination, of which culture would have made her a poet; but to her they seemed an objective reality" (177). Chloe's experiences once again remain remarkably opaque. Child writes Chloe both as a stereotypical "mammy" character, one with colorful stories and protective instincts for the more refined (and whiter) Rosa, and as a woman whose experiences and capacity to craft her narratives place her outside of the calculus of sentimental trope. That her stories

"would have" made her poet – if what? The implication is that Rosa and Tulee understand the stories that Chloe tells, and that these stories create a network of love and solidarity between the women. This is a traditional configuration of empathic identification; Chloe (the dark-skinned woman), reveals herself to the light-skinned woman, and they develop a mutual and enriching relationship. However, Child does not reveal these stories, or the poetry of Chloe, to the reader. Unlike Rosa, the reader is not given the opportunity to form empathic identification or sentimental attachment with Chloe. Just as Jacobs wrote *about* conversations with the unnamed slave-owning women who hid her for months, here too the reader *reads about* the discussions without being granted the text, the nuance, or the explicit information of Chloe's subject. Instead, Chloe emerges as an ambivalent character who is also endowed with a strong political agency. She is ambivalent insofar as readers don't "know" her; she is agential insofar as she writes her own poetry and rewrites Stowe's: by telling her story to Rosa and then the abolitionist Mrs. Delano – off of the page – Chloe is able to create networks of resistance and plot her (and Tom's) trajectory out of slavery.

Child remarks candidly that society wouldn't know what to make of Chloe's stories anyway, even if she had included them in this novel. Although Chloe's relationship with Rosa seems to fall into sentimental trope, in reality it represents a new horizon of possibility for allyship. Rosa does not hear Chloe's story, feel deeply, and then save Chloe; instead, both Rosa and Chloe share their stories and then use that mutually enriching power to plot their own lives and escapes. Rosa is born into a network of women of color who protect and nurse one another with their stories as much as their herbs. That this network is outside of the realm of sentimentalized representations of empathy is what is at stake.

Somewhat later in the text, Chloe escapes to the north with her children, and her husband

Tom is close behind. Their escape plan is developed with the abolitionists, and they are able to save their family from dispersal based upon a decision to risk and to act. White abolitionists are shown as instrumental in this process, and in helping Chloe's family to become established once they reach the north. I find this attention to the *action* of abolition (plotting, escaping, surviving) in the absence of the *feeling* of abolition (storytelling, empathetic identification) telling: Child demonstrates that an whole network of political organizing and allyship is at work, and yet the reader remains unsentimentally attached. The reader doesn't "empathize" with Chloe; we might say that that "the veil" remains on her body. She is unsignified, unintelligible, and yet she is also a significant character whose actions direct the plot. What does it mean when one of the main actions of the book both revises Stowe's story of Chloe and Tom, and also disallows the reader to feel deeply?

Child's continual questioning of the sentimental impetus to transparently show and reveal truth and reality operates at on levels of both content and form. Throughout *A Romance of the Republic* runs a deep questioning of the veracity of the text itself and its own narrative. Its constructed status is consistently referenced; from an anti-slavery lawyer who reflects that "[this story] seems stranger than fiction" (157) to a northern farmer who decides that "somebody should write a story about [the sisters]" (337), the idea that this story *is fiction*, and yet fiction that *aims to be grounded in, and perhaps even influence reality*, is under constant scrutiny. The self-referential comments come fast and furious as the novel draws towards its conclusion; we hear that "A dozen novels might be made out of [these] adventures" (369) and that this story "might sell for something of a writer of sensationalistic novels" (391). The sisters' story is broadcast as something forceful in its veracity, a true yet "romantic [story]…[that has] grown out

of the institution of slavery" (157), and yet even the text can't quite believe its own narrative. The continual assessment of its status, the continual revelation of its own fictionality, and the fact that everyone in the text can't believe that it's true, recalls to us how an easy, transparent empathy is always fraught. Even when being compelled to read right, and to empathize fully, we are also instructed to hang back. The text reminds us of this, again and again: identify with this, and you might get taken for a ride. The stories, we are told, are too "sensational," too "romantic," for anyone to believe. Child, again, gestures towards the limits of a sentimental attachment: how are these stories being told? Under what conditions? And what might be at stake in believing in them? The *pleasure* that the reader might experience in the narrative, therefore, is also limited by Child's continual undercutting of the narrative. Rather than suspend our own agential identity and "become" the characters in the text (a "painful" experience, if we believe Stowe), we are instead asked to constantly assess the limits of this storytelling and reading experience. This selfreflexivity flips the pedagogical project of sentimentalism on its head: rather than being taught that the signs are stable and being schooled in how to read them, we are instead instructed to doubt what we think we know. If the signs are not stable, then blackness, whiteness, goodness, and badness might not read as expected. This lesson is aptly demonstrated in the bodies of Fitzgerald's two sons – one by Rosa, one by his white wife – who are so identical that Rosa is able to switch them at birth (to secure a life of freedom for her son). The revelation of the "white" son's (ex)slave status, at the end of the novel, upsets the white patriarchy and influences both hearts and minds. In short: you can't read the signs.

The use of the mulatto/a body, in abolitionist literature, was regularly used to comment on the instability of racial hierarchy and, concomitantly, the instability of racial signs. In this way, Child's invocation of the swapped babies narrative is just that: another intertextual moment,

a reference point recognizable to readers and calling on their expectations. However, by setting this moment of "misreading" within a novel about misreading, I think she also pushes the trope farther. It's not just that mixed-race babies can grow up to be "just like" white men, it's that white men can also misread themselves. This point is aptly demonstrated in the reading experience of Joe Bright. Joe, a white man, finds an ad for a runaway in the local newspaper that comes a little too close for comfort: "'Runaway from the subscriber a stout mulatto slave, named Joe; has light sandy hair, blue eyes, and ruddy complexion …''By George!' said [Joe], 'that's a description of me. *I didn't know that I was mulatto before*'" (322). Joe's education is the same that Child presses for all of her readers: it's not just that slaves might be "the same" as white people, but that white people might also find themselves mixed. Trusting the body as a transparent site for racial knowledge collapses no matter which way you look at it.

Child's use of the names Chloe and Tom is, therefore, so much more than just intertextual play. By destabilizing the signs and the reading practices that readers thought they knew, readers are thrown into a space of not-knowing. Is the text fact; is the text fiction. Is Chloe a racist archetype; is Chloe a politicized figure of resistance. The evacuation of the details of Chloe and Tom's escapes, therefore, leaves the reader in this space of non-knowledge. Forced to revise what they thought they knew about these stock characters of slavery, Child does not provide an alternate set. There is not a super-sentimental moment wherein the "truth" of Chloe emerges: instead she remains the poet, outside of the bounds of the intelligible, but frankly free and decidedly part of a network of multiracial women.

The limits of truth-telling are again made clear when it comes time to tell Tulee's story. Towards the end of the novel, in a classic crescendo of familial reunion, the sisters find out that Tulee lives next door to them in upstate New York. While both Rosa and Flora's stories are

revealed, prodded, and examined, Tulee's remains a secret, told in snippets and only to the sisters. Indeed, Tulee has a difficult time getting away from her owners, and weeks go by before she can slip away, and into the sisters' kitchen, to tell her story:

> In the course of those private conversations, it came out that she had suffered, as all women must suffer, who have the feelings of human beings, and the treatment of animals. But her own humble little episode of love and separation, of sorrow and shame, was whispered only to Miss Rosy and Missy Flory. (379)

Another limit, then. Whereas the "adventures" of the lighter-skinned women become the stuff of novels, Tulee's own "little episode" is absented from the text, referred to only in the most sideways of glances. It is clear that Tulee is a "woman," and what that signifies here (we are led to believe) are the same brutalities and violences, likely sexual, as are suffered by the sisters. But the suffering of the dark-skinned black woman is kept "veiled," is only whispered in private conversation. I read this both as a capitulation to form, and also a gesture towards a new horizon of political possibility: one in which stories do not limn politics, and the choice to *not hear*, to *resist representation*, is as powerful as the choice to listen.

Tulee is not the "tragic" figure, the figure of romance: "[concessions] to racial prejudice" ("Rape, Murder, and Revenge" 63) have already guaranteed that.[12] Her story, therefore, is neatly written out of the plot. However, the text is self-conscious about this absence. Like Chloe's unreadable poetry, the reader of this romance does not have the interpretive tools or the political positionality to be able to "hear" Tulee's experiences. Unable to sit in the kitchen, unable to see past Tulee's dark skin and what that signifies, the reader is left in an excluded space. Tulee emerges, therefore, as a character who has perhaps experienced something like "reality," and yet

[12] Karcher writes that the figure of the "tragic quadroon" was racist insofar as it was easier for white audiences to identify with lighter-skinned heroines than darker-skinned ones. Child's use of Rosa and Flora is both very traditional in this sense, but she also importantly departs from that configuration.

of whom the least can be said – at least, *to the reader*. Again, Rosa gets the story when the reader of *A Romance* does not.

This blank space, this small space, in the text stands as a resounding refusal to the desire for sentimental identification and allegiance. Rosa was "birthed" into knowledge of racial oppression through Chloe and Tulee's nursing, and cemented her political alliance with these women through shared stories, whispered outside of the pages of the text. For the reader, this experience remains impossible. The book cleaves to its sentimental narrative for the reader: light-skinned and upper-class Rosa and Flora remain the sentimental heroines of the text, dark-skinned and working-class Chloe and Tulee remain illegible and silent for the consumer of sentimental fiction. The sentimental genre cannot write the silence. The text stands, therefore, as so many sentimental texts do: relying on the "tragic quadroon" to embody and pronounce (in that order) the problematics of slavery *for the reader*. And yet, Child gestures wildly to so much more. The desire to have a society in which Chloe "would be" a poet, the desire to hear Tulee's story, and the pressure to excavate that space between "romance" and "reality" evince a keen desire for knowledge, intimacy, and closeness with other bodies, realities, stories, and political possibilities for women of all racial and class identifications.

Taken together – the solidarity that emerges among women, and the concomitant refusal to make some of those women the heroines of the narrative – *A Romance of the Republic* reveals a deep and ambivalent desire for knowledge and intimacy as structuring desires of the text. Rosa's solidarities with Chloe and Tulee, inscribed as they are within a discourse of care and multiracial female alliance, emerge as paradigmatic examples of what successful solidarity can look like. However, as shown by Chloe's poetry and Tulee's story, this solidarity is included in

the novel only to reveal its extreme limits. Child positions extra-textual, opaque conversations at the heart of a novel dealing in the most superficial of reading practices. As Derrida argued, the "limit" of any genre serves as the boundary that appears to bring it towards closure. The limit, and thereby the agenda, of the sentimental form appears to be a desire for knowledge of, and thereby intimacy and solidarity with, the racialized other. There are (at least) two ways to interpret this limit, and they reflect differing feminist readings of the text. The first reading would be in the vein of a pedagogical reading practice, in line with the manifest politics of the text: that the position of the women is as a slave too, and to realize this solidarity is to awaken to new forms of story-telling. Chloe's untranscribed hymns and Tulee's unwritten story would nod towards the next horizon of sentimental knowledge production, and in many ways I see this as the inheritance of sentimentalism: read more, read more widely, read more about others, in order to understand them and support them better. The good reader must simply learn how to *read more*, like Rosa, in order to be birthed into this new positionality of feminist politics.

But Child, whatever her desires for this allegiance and this widening of story-telling, doesn't write these stories for the reader. Instead, she binds the reader ever-deeper into the conservative and domestic politics of the sentimental novel, and concludes the text with a tableau of America that seems to legitimate any criticism leveled against sentimentalism by 20th century scholars. The mélange of multiracial families, reunited in Boston and celebrating the end of the war and the triumph of the Union, sing the songs of the "Republic" and arrange themselves in a patriotic stance, with the darker-skinned characters posed in supplicatory positions, their lighter and whiter friends arranged to educate and guide them towards enlightenment. Dana Nelson, in particular, has taken issue with this conclusion of the text; she writes:

> *A Romance of the Republic* works to eliminate the categories of *racial* difference – to show that "blacks" can be like "whites." But what it fails to allow – a positive evaluation of *cultural* or *social* configurations different from those of the white middle class – effectively prevents the novel from establishing any tolerance or understanding of difference at *any* level … the novel is not able to countenance the cultural differences produced by the intersection of African cultural heritages and slave quarter life. Consequently its contributions to cross-racial understanding at the epistemic level are qualified because it fails to imagine cross-*cultural* relationships that would complement the cross-*racial* ones. (88, emphases in original)

While I agree with Nelson's assessment that the book ultimately lacks a vision of life beyond a white, middle-class cultural existence, I read this as primarily a capitulation to genre, and therefore concomitantly as a statement on the cultural future of the U.S. This leads us to the second reading of the "limit" of genre: unable to narrate anything except its own identity politics and own unsatisfied desire to express alliance, the sentimental novel reveals itself instead as a project of attempted (and always failing) solidarity. The stories that it can tell rely on racialized, gendered, and other oppressive tactics of reading that reify a world in which the signified equals the signifier. Child, playing with this legacy, gestures towards the possibility that the domestic space, wherein women are nursed and songs are sung, might be the *only* space in which knowledge and intimacy might be imparted; a different form of communication might happen here. Rather than teaching us to "read right," Child asks us to imagine this project of solidarity as happening in the women's rooms, in the stolen moments between domestic labor. If it is *A Romance of the Republic*, as the concluding tableau seems to suggest, then we are doomed from

the start. If, however, we enter the small rooms and quiet minutes of women's time together, we might be able to tell a different story.

Conclusion

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, published in 1861, relies on silences in order to ironize and challenge the sentimental status quo. *A Romance of the Republic*, published just six years later but after the eruption, violence, and conclusion of the Civil War, tries to make good on *Incidents*' suggestions. Both of the novels take up the sentimental genre quite overtly, but also challenge the genre's will to knowledge about the other and its desire for sentimental intimacy with that other. When Child and Jacob take up the genre, they do so with a critical difference: they use its tropes and feelings, and in particular focus on the persecuted body of the young slave woman, but they also show us how that story reproduces hierarchies that only allow for certain ways of knowing. Jacobs denies a titillating reading experience for the reader, and instead explores the relationship between herself and Mrs. Bruce to remark on how sentimental attachment can be remarkably similar to the experience of slavery. Child uses the example of Fitzgerald to show how a desire to possess the slave is intimately linked with the construction of bourgeois wealth and culture. However, both writers also hold out space for a different form of knowledge production. In Child's text, the silenced stories, told among women, stand as a possibility for a different form of allyship. It's a sentimental ideal, but *the difference is, it's not being written.* These extra-textual moments are the moments of actual compassion and collaboration. And, in Jacobs' text, we have a material example of the relationship that Child craves: absented from Jacobs' narrative are her whispered conversations with Amy Post, her friend and collaborator, who eventually encouraged her to stop feeling ashamed and to write her

story. Post introduced Jacobs to Child, and Jacobs chose to trust Child based on Post's recommendation.[13] Silenced from Jacobs' pages, therefore, are memories of the conversations between an interracial group of women that led to the production of the text itself. Like Child's novel, Jacobs' text relegates to the extra-textual memories or representations of a more radical form of storytelling. This is not to imply that Jacobs' relationships with Post and Child were easy or unproblematic, but to point out that Jacobs does not choose to represent her collaborations with them in writing. Why not? Why would the example of a collaboration that leads to her production of self in writing, her actual "self-authorization," as it were, be assigned to the silent?

Feminist scholars, as I have discussed in this chapter, have strenuously tracked and charted the ways in which sentimentalism is *political* because of how it opens space for empathic identification and political feeling between the reader (in her assumed privilege) and the written subject (in her state of abjection). I do not disagree, but in this chapter I have explored the ways in which two authors draw from sentimental generics in order to deny a transparent, easily empathic reading experience. In this limit, we find a host of exciting possibilities: resistance, collaboration, plots, and joy. What is at stake is that these possibilities continue to be caged within, or in opposition with, a sentimental impetus to know and to act. Child's text shows us, quite eloquently, how to "desire" the slave is as much a social experience as it is sexual; it is, actually, part and parcel of the experience of living in a slave society. There is no "activist" subject-position besides listening to and saving the slave; knowing her is the condition of possibility for social change. And yet knowing her is also the condition of entrenching difference, hierarchy, and a form of identity politics that has more to do with privilege than coalition. What Jacobs' and Child's texts suggest, therefore, is the option to *not know.* Like the

[13] See *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* by Jean Fagan Yellin for a detailed analysis of the relationships between this group of abolitionist women.

unnamed "benefactress" in Jacobs' text, Jacobs and Child ask readers to open their homes (and their hearts) to injustice, to risk everything in order to change things, and also to step back. For to tell the story – Ellen's story, Chloe's story, Tulee's story – would be to reiterate a sentimental narrative of difference, privilege, and to promise the (assumed) privileged reader of her necessity. But she is not necessary; in fact, her subject-position is emblematic of the structure. Jacobs and Child offer a different way to tell stories, and it is to get comfortable with silence.

Both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *A Romance of the Republic* therefore gesture towards a different horizon of possibility, at least when it comes to multiracial coalition among women, and it is silence. These "extra-textual solidarities," as we might call them, cannot be written in the sentimental form. They challenge the status quo, and threaten the white reader with the undoing of her own identity, and in so doing offer a sideways glance towards an anti-sentimentalized form of coalition.

The Ordeal of his Guilt:

William Styron, James Baldwin, and Our Common History

This chapter begins in 1831, in the jail cell of a convicted slave, and ends in 1979, with the publication of a book that imagines the Jewish Holocaust through the eyes of a young Polish woman. The first book, Nat Turner's testimony to the lawyer Thomas Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* is a variation on the antebellum slave narrative form; the second, William Styron's 1976 *Sophie's Choice,* writes a "narrative of neo-slavery" that relies on and draws from the form.[1] This jump to the mid-20th century is not meant to imply that in between 1867-1961 there was no sentiment; indeed, both sentimentalism and the slave narrative form enjoyed reprisals and reworkings throughout the late 1800s and the first half of the 1900s.[2] However, I move into the 1960s and 1970s in order to examine another moment in which the legal standing and cultural valuation of black life was actively contested and reworked at the legislative and also the popular and cultural levels. The Civil Rights Movement forced a conversation about the meaning and place of black life within the nation-form,[3] and we are able to see how the abolishment of Jim Crow in 1954 (with the *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling) and the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1963 changed the structural face of racial relations in the US. Of

[1] "Narrative of neo-slavery" is a phrase coined by Dennis Child, and refers to novels that use the slave narrative form in order to comment on slavery in the present. Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is not self-consciously such a book, but in this chapter I will argue that the ways in which he draws from the antebellum form creates a continuity between US chattel slavery and the Holocaust.

[2] Both sentiment and the slave narrative form remain active throughout this time period. Sentiment was deployed by black authors such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, who used the figure of the mixed heroine to comment on the arbitrariness of racial designation and hierarchy. Additionally, in the 1930s, writers employed by the WPA were sent into the South to interview surviving ex-slaves. The collection of interviews, now housed in the Library of Congress, numbers over 2,000 and represents the largest archive of first-person narratives by people who lived under US chattel slavery.

[3] I use Etienne Balibar's phrase to direct attention to how the "nation-form" is always-already imagined through a structure of kinship. The "fictive ethnicity" of the US nation-form has been, until this point, reliant upon active policing of racial boundaries and the definition of a white American-ness. I argue that, in this historical moment, activists and writers challenged the fictive ethnicity of "America" with the reminder that America has never been white, and indeed, white emerges only in its paradoxical and dependent relationship with blackness.

course, the momentum for these legislative successes came out of sustained political organizing and activism, and many of those activists also identified cultural and political possibilities beyond the legislative. The emergence of Black Power in the 1960s, alongside trenchant critiques of war, poverty, and imperialism from diverse organizing bases, locate the 1960s as one particularly volatile moment in which to examine the deployment of a conservative sentimentalism and the stakes of rewriting a slave narrative.[4]

The 1960s are also the historical moment in which the "form" of the "neo-slave narrative" emerged. In his 1999 *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Cultural Form*, Ashraf Rushdy explores how the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967 was central to a national and cultural debate about the historiography of slavery and the significance of reimagining slavery in the context of the present. Rushdy argues that Styron's book, as a "master text," reifies racist discourses such as Stanley Elkins' "personality types and stereotypes" (aka the "Sambo theory"), and sent the inflammatory message that contemporary black freedom movements were out of pace with society, and would end only with violence and travesty. Rushdy locates a significant cluster of novels by black authors, from Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as reclaiming the form (from Styron as well as from history itself) to not only imagine slavery from the perspective of the slave, but also to comment on life, politics, and the viability of culture as a site for change in their present, late-20th century, moment. Rushdy's analysis of the historical moment is foundational to my project, and I agree with him that Styron's use of the slave narrative form was both aggressive and regressive. I disagree, however, that "neo-slave narratives" by black authors emerged necessarily in response to Styron's text; instead, I am interested in how Styron's

[4] My analysis and historiography of the 1960s is indebted to Nikhil Pal Singh's tracing of the "long Civil Rights era" in *Black is a Country* (2004).

text was one of many that reprised the slave narrative in this particular historical moment. That Styron's text was violently anti-black is now common knowledge; however, in its moment of emergence, it was read by white audiences as both progressive and enlightening.[5] My questions, therefore, are: what cultural work does Styron's *Confessions* do in 1967? How does its invocation of the slave narrative form challenge and reify racial knowledge production in this historical moment? How does it also draw from generic sentimental norms in order to tell its story of the present? After exploring these questions, I turn to *Sophie's Choice* as another literary site where Styron is similarly preoccupied with rewriting the history of slavery. Both texts present a narrative of history in which the white liberal conscience is not only the one that survives to tell the tale, but is also redeemed of its violent past and, concomitantly, its guilt.

Our Common History

On August 21, 1831, Nat Turner led what is remembered as the largest slave rebellion in US history. Although the rebellion was overtaken and controlled by whites in the next two days, what happened on that night in Virginia remains of deep interest and social, political, and emotional significance. Nat Turner, as a figure for change, rebellion, resistance, and power, has shown up in texts as varied and wide-ranging as Harriet Jacobs'1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to a 2008 graphic novel by Kyle Baker, simply entitled *Nat Turner*. Who has the "right" to write, or to represent, Turner is a subject of as much debate as the heroism of his actions, and adding to the layers of historical ambiguity is the fact that the only trace that remains of the historic Nat Turner is the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner*, an oral testimony recorded by

[5] In his contribution to *Ten Black Writers Respond*, Ernest Kaiser traces the reception history of the novel, including everything from *Newsweek*'s announcement of the book as "an act of revelation to a whole society" to *The New York Times*' trumpet that "the book [is] a triumph, a rare book that shows us our American past, our present, ourselves, compelling, convincing, a rich and powerful novel" (59).

the white lawyer Thomas Gray while Turner was in jail. It is a short document – roughly thirty pages – and offers a profound opportunity to read for discursive tensions between the slave-owning class and the slaves themselves. It is a text rife with silence, and as such Turner emerges as a figure of endless possibilities. To engage the question of why he started the rebellion, and the methods of his planning and plotting, is to chart one's own political inclinations onto what remains a deeply ambiguous and ambivalent text.

In his 1976 novel *Sophie's Choice*, the author William Styron writes a protagonist that is almost entirely autobiographical. Stingo is twenty-two and trying to make it in New York as a writer, much as Styron was in 1947. Like Styron, Stingo is, in equal parts, enthralled with and despondent about his childhood in Virginia and his personal connections with slavery. In a stroke, he realizes how he will repay his debts: he will write the story of Nat Turner. Stingo decides to craft a character who "emerged out of the mists of history" to perform a "cataclysmic act" (*Sophie* 460); the result, of course, was Styron's highly contentious 1967 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which he expands the original document into a 500-page novel, told in the first-person. James Baldwin, Styron's friend and one-time housemate, famously endorsed this vexed project against charges of racism and minstrelsy that were leveled by black intellectuals and activists in the late 1960s.

In this chapter, I bring together a broad nexus of texts in order to explore how the trope of "collaboration" – if not friendship – can be deployed in order to allow for humanist, masculinist theories of history and the human. I read William Styron's 1967 *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in tandem with his friend James Baldwin's 1956 *Giovanni's Room*, wherein the black Baldwin writes as the white character David. I trace the archive of their friendship, and how

Baldwin's name was continually invoked to legitimate Styron's project. This leads into an analysis of the reception of Styron's *Confessions,* and how black intellectuals and radicals took offense at Styron's re-writing of the historical Nat Turner's story. I include a short reading of the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner,* which was itself also a product of interracial collaboration. Finally, I turn towards *Sophie's Choice* in order to explore how other historical violences – World War Two and the Holocaust – are brought into mid-twentieth century narratives of history, violence, and redemption. At stake in this analysis is the question of intimacy and its relationship to historical violence. Styron's friendship with Baldwin reflects, in many ways, his relationship with the subject of his *Confessions*: in both cases, he locates a black man as "exceptional," and writes to redeem him as white, universal, and a subject of history. Styron's project is unabashedly masculinist; in both of his texts, the telling of history and the redemption of man is contingent upon the sexual violation of women. Women – of all races – are shown to be always-willing and desirous of virile men. History, therefore, is the story of the expansion of white male subjectivity at the expense of both black particularity and women's sexual and gender expression.

In the fall of 1960, James Baldwin moved into the "little house" on William Styron's Connecticut property. They were set up by a mutual friend, who knew that Baldwin was low on funds and that Styron liked to host literary folks; and, as both men were hard at work on novels treating race in the United States, it was presumed that there was much to talk about. Baldwin stayed until early summer of 1961, when he left the United States for Turkey. In December of 1961 he finished *Another Country*, and it was published the following year. Styron's novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, would not be completed until 1967. As Styron's memories have it, the men spent those months in close camaraderie, most nights filled with drinking and talking.

They listened to Nina Simone, drank whiskey, smoked Marlboros, and discussed their work. In his 1987 eulogy for Baldwin, published in *The New York Times Book Review*, Styron writes that "he revealed to me the core of his soul's savage distress and thus helped me shape and define my own work and its moral contours. This would be the most appropriate gift imaginable to the grandson of a slave owner from a slave's grandson" ("Jimmy" 87). That they both shared an intimate connection with slavery bound them together, at least in Styron's reminiscences; by talking through their childhoods, and their debts to racialism in the United States, they were creating a new space and a new way to write and think race.

This origin story of Styron's *Confessions* is part of its lore, and indeed almost universally offered as an exculpatory explanation for the contentious novel. The subtext is not so much sub, as just text: Baldwin, black intellectual, condoned white Styron's re-writing of the black "insurrectionist's" story and, as such, Styron's controversial project can be deemed part of an ongoing and progressive conversation about race. To materialize this legitimation, Baldwin's words of support have been conjured in nearly every discussion of the text: "He has begun the common history – ours." Museum exhibits, newspaper articles, and even Styron's daughter's memoir all repeat this aphorism verbatim whenever discussing Styron's *Confessions*.[6] Styron's daughter claims that the phrase was printed on the cover of the Random House first edition; a consultation with archivists at Columbia University, however, proves this untrue. The phrase, so cited as to become truism, seems to actually come from nowhere – neither the archives of Random House, nor the archives of Styron's letters at Duke University, have any record of Baldwin's utterance.[7] In spite of its material absence, however, the phrase exerts and maintains

[6] "The 1968 Exhibit" at the Historical Society of Minnesota, "Freedom Train" by Navasky, and *Memories of My Father* by Alexandra Styron are just three examples of the – uncited – repetition of Baldwin's phrase.

[7] My gratitude to librarians at the Random House archive, housed at the Columbia University Library in New York, NY, and the Duke University Library in Durham, NC, where all of Styron's letters are collected. In particular, Karla

tremendous discursive power. Defenders of Styron's novel use the phase to imply that whatever missteps occurred in the writing of that novel are more than made up for by the sheer fact of Styron's trying, his *desire* to write a new racial history of the US, and Baldwin's support of the project. A "common history," named by a black man and written by a white man, gets held out as a great progressive hope for a post-racial future, built from the common past.

The invocation of Baldwin's name, and his so-called quotation, are held up as counterargument against responses to Styron's text such as those in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), in which those ten writers respond with vehemence and anger that Styron not only "stole" the powerful figure of a black revolutionary, but also reconfigured historical data to tell a very different, and much more racist, story of slavery and black masculinity. Set against the race riots of 1967 and 1968, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, the revolutionary discourses of Black Power, and anti-war and anti-capitalist protests, these accusations took on the gravity of the contemporary political moment. Styron didn't only misrepresent history and the historical Nat Turner; he manipulated both in order to say something pointed about current "insurrectionists" in the US. A ferocious debate ensued, between scholars of slavery such as Eugene Genovese (who defended Styron's work) on the one side and Herbert Aptheker (who deplored it) on the other, regarding who had the license to tell history and occupy the black voice.

Remarkably absent in this very public debate was James Baldwin himself. Consistently cagey whenever asked about his relationship with Styron, Baldwin's official position regarding the 1967 *Confessions* had much less to do with race, and more to do with Styron's rights as a writer. When pressed by *The Paris Review* years later, Baldwin succinctly replied:

Nielson at Columbia and Will Hansen at Duke were very generous with their time and patient with my search for this quotation.

> My position … is that I will not tell another writer what to write. If you don't like their alternative, write yours. I admired [Styron] for confronting [Nat Turner], and the result. It brought in the whole enormity of the issue of history versus fiction, fiction versus history, and which is which . . . He writes out of reasons similar to mine: about something which hurt him and frightened him. (Elgraby 1)

Baldwin's reply is in line with his other comments regarding his relationship with Styron, but oddly out of pace with Styron's remembrances of their months together. For Styron, it appears, a capacity to discuss, argue, and learn from one another – in spite, or perhaps because of, their difference in race – was the key to their relationship, as underscored by his nod to their historical antecedents. For Baldwin, Styron was simply "a friend of mine who happens to be a writer," and what's more, "We never spoke about our work, or very rarely. It was a wonderful time in my life, but not at all literary. We sang songs, drank a little too much, and on occasion chatted with the people who were dropping in to see us. We had a certain common inheritance in terms of the music" (Elgraby 1). These comments of Baldwin's, given in 1984 (just three years before Baldwin's death, and Styron's eulogy), rearrange Styron's genealogy. Rather than an encounter between a grandson of slave and a grandson of slave owner in which the inheritances of slavery are reviewed, rewritten, and thereby divested of their power, Baldwin tells us that they shared music – this was their "common inheritance" – and maybe drank too much. He does not offer an apologia for Styron's novel, nor shed any light on what he meant by "our common history," nor even comment on whether or not he said the famous phrase in the first place. What is common, history, who "we" are, and what we have inherited, remain unremarked.

Against this opacity, Styron emerges as anxious and eager. Styron was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1924, and almost all of his writing, fictional and non, treats his Southern

upbringing. In *A Tidewater Morning*, a collection of essays about his childhood, Styron discusses most directly what it was like to grow up white in the Jim Crow south, with liberal-leaning parents. When he finally leaves the south for New York, after college and a tour of Korea, he self-consciously chooses to leave behind the racial thinking of the south as well. That it is a lifetime's work to become aware of one's own bigotry is not lost on him; in his eulogy for Baldwin, he writes:

> Struggling still to loosen myself from the prejudices and suspicions that a southern upbringing engenders, I still possessed a residual skepticism: could a Negro *really* own a mind as subtle, as richly informed, as broadly inquiring and embracing as that of a white man? My God, what appalling arrogance and vanity! Night after night Jimmy and I talked, drinking whiskey through the hours until the chill dawn, and I understood that I was in the company of as marvelous an intelligence as I was likely to ever encounter. ("Jimmy" 97-98)

In this remembrance, Baldwin becomes the site at which Styron can exorcise his theories of racial supremacy. Some fifteen years after leaving the south, Styron is able to find proof of racial equality in his intimate exchanges with a black man in the north. In this process, Baldwin must become representative of "Negroes" everywhere; not only does he prove himself to be a "marvelous intelligence," but he also reveals to Styron that it is possible for all "Negroes" to possess such a thing. He is, in other words, a template for black humanity for the white intellectual: Styron is delighted to learn that "Jimmy" can think, discuss, and argue just as well as he can. Emboldened by his realization that black people share a "common" humanity, Styron turned to the writing of *Confessions.* While it might be too much to say that Baldwin becomes the model for black subjectivity in *Confessions*, it does seem clear that Baldwin played a key role

in the text's emergence. Styron tells us that Baldwin helped him to develop the "moral contours" of his writing; suggested in this phrase is that Baldwin helped Styron to overcome his own racism and to write from (and for) a place of (perceived) racial justice. For Styron, the writing of *Confessions* is tied with an understanding of history in which racism has always masked the marvelous intelligence of black people.

In the Prologue to his 1967 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron explains how it is a timely project:

> The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was simultaneously a long time ago and only yesterday. Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try and re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history. (xi)

By positioning 1831 as "a long time ago and only yesterday," Styron allows himself the breadth to play with subjectivities, histories, and ways in which things do and do not change. The text is positioned as a racially progressive intervention, grown out of a desire to know the hidden subjects of history and to write against orders of racial supremacy. The remarkably ambiguous phrase "meditation on history" recalls to us that Styron sees this as his life's work: as the grandson of a slave owner, he must come to terms with both his personal and his political inheritances. To do this, he rewrote an actual historical text, expanding the original *The Confessions of Nat Turner* – an oral testimony, spanning about thirty pages – into a 500-page novel. The novel traces "Nat's"[8] life, from birth to death, from his first-person perspective. The

[8] When I refer to the historical person Nat Turner, either in research or in the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner*, I will refer to him as "Turner." To differentiate from this person, I will call the fictional character in Styron's novel "Nat." Likewise, I will refer to the 1831 text as *Nat Turner*, and the 1967 text as *Confessions*. This is, in part, a nod towards Lerone Bennett Jr., who astutely noted that Styron's book "is the confession of William Styron" (4).

novel attempts to explain the gaps and silences that occur in the original text, from the mysticism of Turner's deep religiosity to the fact that Turner himself killed only one person the night of the revolt. The audacity of this project was lauded by the literary establishment, and Styron was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1968.

The original *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), the oral transcript by Thomas Gray, was used as evidence against Turner in his trial, where Turner was condemned to death in spite of his "not guilty" plea. The short testimony begins as many slave narratives do – "I was born" – and tells the story of Turner's childhood, his emergence as a prophet, his multiple decisions to stay on the plantation and plan resistance, rather than to run north; and finally, the planning and execution of the "insurrection, as you call it" (44). The text concludes with Turner's descriptions of hiding out for six weeks before being apprehended, a few editorializing remarks of Gray's, and a court document that lists the names of the slaves tried, and their sentences. The text, while mostly in the first-person, is interrupted a number of times by the voice of Gray. Because of this, the 1831 *Nat Turner* also offers lessons in authorship and authority; for example, phrases such as "we found no more victims to satisfy our thirst for blood" (52) is a sensational and unlikely way for a slave revolt leader to describe his actions, and more likely a construction of Gray's, reflecting sentimental prose of the time (Bennett Jr., 4). The text calls for careful and close reading, paying attention to the places in which Gray's editorializing might have led to a manipulation of Turner's words and the presentation of his subject. However, there are also fascinating moments in which Gray is unclear how to read and label Turner; for example, Gray abruptly announces: "He is a complete fanatic, *or plays his part most admirably*" (54, emphasis added). That Gray is unsure whether Turner is insane or just acting allows us, the reader, to wonder how Turner is also manipulating language, stories, and bodily performance in order to be

recorded in a certain way. Gray's uncertainty introduces an element of confusion and political ambiguity into the text; if Turner is a "fanatic," then this event can be shelved away in the annals of history, an example of one mentally ill man who went too far. If, on the other hand, Turner is "playing the part" of a fanatic, then Gray and his readers are faced with a calculated, nuanced, and ongoing performance.[9] In its ambiguity, the figure of Turner continues to suggest radical rebellion and a politics of resistance. In his contribution to *Ten Black Writers Respond*, Lerone Bennett, Jr. writes: "for all its limitations, the Gray *Confessions* remains the primary document. And it contains lines which are obviously genuine, particularly in which Nat described his visions. Thomas Gray was hardly up to inventions of that order" (5). The original *Nat Turner* is a dialogic text, staging the competing voices and discourses of the slave-owning class and the slaves themselves. As such, it offers contemporary readers an extraordinary site to read the ways in which the slave owning class attempted to discursively limit and control black subjects, and also how language and discursive transcription meet a limit in the legibility of Turner's body and the significance of the slave rebellion.

When he rewrote this text in the 1960s, Styron omitted this ambiguity. For all of its claims to racial progressivism, Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* reiterates remarkably racist tropes and erases the productive tension between Gray's generic, dominant mode of discourse and Turner's subversive modes of address. Instead, the story is focalized entirely through Nat, and the reader is lulled into accepting that they are reading "the true" voice of the man. Gray appears only as a hapless, poor white man, a pawn in Nat's game. There is, in other

[9] I originally used the word "resistance" here, in place of "performance." However, following Saidiya Hartman's arguments in "Venus in Two Acts," I too am choosing to be wary of writing a "romance" (8); it is inappropriate to map my own ideologies of power and resistance onto such an historical event. Instead, letting the archive stand in its ambiguity is a stronger way to learn about the recording of slavery and the ways in which slavery and slave subjectivities have become inherited forms of knowledge. "Performance," while still problematically bound to my own historical and academic moment, at least offers a theorization of the ways in which bodies, circumscribed in space and time, can play out roles in any number of contradictory ways. See Diana Taylor, *The Archiveand the Repertoire*.

words, little attention to the ways in which the historical record was actually limned by Gray or countered by Turner.

To explain this move into the first-person, Styron once again uses memories of "Jimmy" to explain himself; in 2002, Styron was interviewed for the documentary *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*, and stated: "It was [James Baldwin] who encouraged me, more than anyone else, to seize the idea of the first-person and the plunge into that kind of narrative mode. Because he himself had already begun to deal with the idea of writing about white people from an intimate view, and he said, 'But what you should do, as a white writer, is to be bold, and take on the persona of a black man, Nat Turner.'" The argument is that the most challenging thing that Styron could do, as a white writer, is to write the psyche of a black subject; implied in this memory is that it is also the most socially progressive. The complicated line that both Baldwin and Styron walk, of course, is that Turner was an actual historical person, about whom there is already much historiography, art, and myth,[10] whereas Baldwin's ventriloquized white characters are fictional. The stakes are much higher for Styron: by occupying Nat's voice, Styron not only "challenges" himself as a writer but is also inserting himself into a pre-existing conversation about the memory and representation of a black leader. The fact that Styron also titles his novel exactly the same as the original – *The Confessions of Nat Turner* – only furthers the confusion. Readers are compelled to enter into the 1967 "confession" as though it is the true – at last! -- narration of the historical man.[11]

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[10] *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2002) offers an examination of the varied ways in which Nat Turner has been (re)represented since 1831. The director of the documentary concludes with the comment: "It's all just interpretation of interpretation of interpretation."

[11] Not only were they compelled, but they were convinced. Ashraf Rushdy's meticulous tracing of the 1968 debate includes a discussion of how Styron's text came to define the popular imagination of Nat Turner so strongly that academics and critics alike were forced to constantly distinguish which one they were referring to. Eugene Genovese went so far as to rename the original text as *Testimony*, demonstrating how fully Styron's text displaced the original in contemporary discourse (86).

Ventriloquizing Nat has generic stakes. Whereas all of the antebellum slave narratives included Prefaces and Introductions by well-known white writers to legitimate the black writer's "authority" – what John Sekora calls the "white envelope" that contains and undergirds the black text (503) – the relationship between Turner and his "envelope" is more ambivalent. Gray doesn't just legitimate Turner's narrative; he is the condition of its production. Because Turner's "narrative" is also a "confession," it stands in generic tension with other legal testimonies and human rights claims. It is not written to an abolitionist audience to inspire the cause, such as (for example) Frederick Douglass' first narrative; nor is it the sagacious reflections of an elder man, like his last.[12] It is, instead, a legal document, and one that is meant to work against Turner in a court of law. When Styron displaces Gray as the means through which the testimony is received, he attempts to relocate Turner's narrative to the realm of the properly "slave narrative." This displacement has significant generic consequences. By reinscribing Turner's narrative as a first-person slave narrative rather than a court testimony, he also invokes all of the anti-slavery radicalism and organizing that imbued those other antebellum narratives. Styron's Nat takes his place among Douglass, Jacobs, and other ex-slave narrators whose writing bravely and radically challenged a national public to imagine black subjects as part of national and civic life. When he writes radicalism out of Nat's story – when the narrative becomes a story of white benevolence and the depravity of black people rather than one of organizing or black resistance – he rewrites literary history. Styron's occupation of Nat's voice attempts to rewrite the significance of slave narratives from anti-slavery, humanist, political tracts to highly personal tales of sexual coming-of-age. In this way, his rewriting of Turner's story can only be called sentimental. He draws from an available literary vocabulary – black male sexuality; black female depravity; white female

[12] *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892), respectively.

desirability – one that, though it has shifted tenor and become much more graphic, reflects the same concerns regarding black humanity and miscegenation as can be charted in some sentimental texts. Styron thereby invokes the most conservative generics of sentimentalism in order to rewrite the significance of slave narratives.

In his *Confessions*, Styron ignores basic plot points presented in the 1831 text as well as historical research done since, and recreates a Virginia Tidewater scene that is more pastoral than patriarchal, more genteel than gruesome. In other words, his "meditation on history" maintains a nostalgic, white supremacist discourse about slavery in general and black subjectivity in particular. Obvious examples of this revisionism include the erasure of Turner's slave community: in the 1967 text, Styron ignores Gray's and Turner's comments regarding how Turner learned to read, and instead tells us that Nat's "master," Sam Turner, taught him, in a move of liberal sentiment and scientific inquiry. Additionally, Styron erases the historical Turner's (also enslaved) wife, who lived on a neighboring plantation, and wrote Nat as not only single, but also sexually averse to black women and obsessed with white women.[13] These twin erasures – the relocation of "literacy" from something mystical to something masculinist and knowledge-production from slave communities to the owners, as well as the displacement of a radical politics onto a sex drive for white women – doubly reveal how "history" and the historical subject are understood and constructed by Styron.

A striking element of Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is the way in which he constructs Nat as angrily, egotistically averse to other black slaves. The historical Nat Turner

[13] Whether or not Turner was "really married" became an object of great debate in the months following the publication of Styron's novel. Eugene Genovese defended Styron's right to write her out of the plot, saying that he took a writer's liberties with a suspect historical record. See *New York Review of Books*, "An Exchange on Nat Turner," November 7, 1968, for more on this debate.

was a field slave, and had little (if any) communication or interaction with his white masters; Turner's confession makes clear that he was deeply connected with and lived and worked within a network of enslaved people. The Nat of Styron's text, on the other hand, is raised as a special "pet" (167) of his master, Samuel Turner, and has little time with or patience for other slaves. Nat's liberal education is what makes him aware of his peculiar station in life, and it is this awareness breeds his discontent (156). It is a double-edged discontent; for not only does Nat desire more out of life (seeing what white people have, he desires it as well), but he's also disgusted with how other slaves don't wish more for themselves. He sees black slaves as uneducated, subservient, and dull; for example, in church he observes those sitting in the upstairs pews, his language a litany of racist tropes: "I can see around me a score of faces popeyed with black nigger credulity, jaws agape, delicious shudders of fright coursing through their bodies as they murmur soft *Amens*, nervously cracking their knuckles and making silent vows of eternal obedience" (97). Nat sees other slaves as docile and accepting of their lot in life; his reiteration of the derogatory "nigger" reinforces his distance from them and his belief that he is different and destined for more. The text poses this rejection of other slaves as unproblematic; the first-person narrative compels the reader to align them self with Nat's interpretations. This closeness with Nat, and intimacy with his life, reinforces the message that Nat really is exceptional and "different" than other slaves. Nat's difference is two-pronged: his education at the hands of his master, and his mental superiority to all other slaves. The text does not make clear whether the latter is a result of the former, or just kismet; however, what is clear is that Nat possesses an awesome brain, and that this brain has been nurtured by white liberal education. Literate, aware of history and his place in it, Nat has no choice but to loathe all of the other slaves. His ultimate decision to take up arms against white people emerges paradoxically not as an assault on white

supremacy but rather as anger that he is not more fully part of it. Nat doesn't want to be a slave; but it isn't entirely clear whether or not he cares about slave society in general. As shown above, in many places it is entirely clear that Nat thinks other black people are unable to do much more than to obey and to labor.

In the original *Nat Turner*, there are two accounts of how Turner became literate. Gray tells us, in biographical explanation, that "[Turner] certainly never had the advantages of education; but he can read and write (it was taught him by his parents)" (10). Gray does not explain how Turner's parents knew how to read; it was, of course, illegal for a slave to know how to read or write, but Gray does not elaborate. Turner, in contrast, displaces the question of literacy into the realm of the metaphysical:

> The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much that I have no recollection whatsoever of learning the alphabet, but, to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shown me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the name of different objects – this was a source of wonder to all the neighborhood. (3)

Turner's move, here, reminds us of the power of literacy – it "had great influence over my own mind" – but also marks a realm outside of language through which power can move. His pre-knowledge of the alphabet is deciphered as a sign from God of his predestined abilities, and it is something that he shares with his "neighborhood," to their astonishment. His literacy (in both written language and interpretation of religious signs) sets him apart, as a prophet in his community. These competing accounts of Turner's literacy remind us, again, of how the text is a site of discursive struggle. Gray wants to know how Turner learned to read; Turner marks a place

outside of epistemic certainty in which the mystic meets the communal. To these competing theories of literacy, Styron brings a third: literacy as masculinist certainty.

The scene of Nat's enlightenment begins with the rape of his mother at the hands of the plantation overseer. Focalized through the eyes of the young Nat, the reader is meant to understand that Nat doesn't understand what's happening at first: "Again my mother says something, insistent, still touched with fear, but her voice is blotted out by man's grumble, louder now, almost a roar" (147). Nat watches a violent scene unfold: the overseer pins his mother against the pantry, and positions a dagger at her neck to keep her still. In the next moment, however, "a kind of shudder passes through my mother's body, and the moan is a different moan, tinged with urgency, and I do not know now whether the sound I hear is a merest whisper of a giggle ("Uh-huh, aw-*right*," she seems to murmur)" (147). This is one of the only moments in the text where his mother is mentioned at all. That she fulfills a white supremacist, misogynistic view of black women is startlingly obvious; the conceit that his mother goes from fearful to pleasured by the rape at the emergence of the "dagger" relies on the "Jezebel" trope of black female sexuality – that black women are "lewdly sensuous," hyper-sexualized characters, readily available for white sexual fantasies and the increase of a planation's population (Mitchell 25). So much for women's subjectivities, then; Styron waves them away with a dagger. Instead, he focuses on how the observation of the "primal scene" impacts the formation of young Nat. Nat watches the scene to its completion – McBride, the overseer, promises his mother a gift of earrings for her compliance, and he "lurches" away (149). Saidiya Hartman's theory of "seduction" is useful to understand this scene. Hartman analyzes how female slaves, without legal standing as humans, were not only coded as "Jezebels" or "mammys" (Mitchell 25), but

also implicitly understood to be "always willing" – for without legal will, there was no recourse to stop or seek redress from rape (Hartman 81). However, a carefully coded discourse of "seduction" cloaked sexual violence, which "[relied] on the power of feelings or the mutual affection between master and slave and the strength of weakness or the ability of the dominated to influence, if not control, the dominant" (80). Nat's mother, in her struggle against McBride, submission, and eventual acceptance of a reward, fulfills all of these expectations. She is not a legal human or woman, and is thereby unrapeable; however, the network of affection that runs between her and McBride create conditions through which she is both pleasured and monetarily rewarded. Nat's observations suggest that she got exactly what she wanted out of the assault; not only was she *not violated*, but she actually manipulated the situation to get exactly what she wanted. This disgusts and upsets the young Nat; like supremacist discourses that code what occurred as "seduction," Nat sees his mother's actions as both dirty and her fault.[14]

McBride, on the other hand, appears to Nat "prodigious and all-powerful," and next to this power Nat "[feels] a sense of my weakness, my smallness, my defenselessness, my *niggerness*" (150). Rather than run to his mother (or anyone else) to comfort her (or himself), a psychological wall goes up. Nat, from this moment, bends himself to becoming a man, "powerful" as the white McBride, and separate from all other slaves. He immediately turns to a book he previously pilfered from the master's house and has been trying to learn how to read. At once, he is found out by the subservient house slave, and turned into Master Samuel. However, rather than punishment, the beneficent and liberal Samuel decides to educate Nat; to see if

[14] Ashraf Rushdy reads Nat's mother's rape "the very lynchpin" of the novel because of the way that it confuses violence and sex. The subsuming of the violence of rape into an experience of pleasure is metaphorical for how the book understands violence in general: "Styron used troubling, vicious stereotypes from the ideological fabric of American society to produce a hypersexualized Nat Turner whose ideas about violence took on sexual forms, and an equally hypersexualized [mother] who feels acts of violence against her body as sexual expression" (72).

"slaves [are] capable of intellectual enlightenment and enrichment of the spirit" (155). And so begins Nat's education: as a move away from black women, black community, and towards the masculine and violent powers of white men. In a classically Freudian move, the experience of witnessing his mother in a sexual relationship inspires in him both fear and titillation. To wit, he spends the rest of the book trying to become as white and as powerful as white men in an attempt to eventually do them harm. And black women, more than even Turner himself, are evacuated from Styron's narrative; indeed, they can't even be evacuated, as they only existed as symbols for masculine coming-of-age in the first place.

The eventual "insurrection" is, therefore, just a natural culmination of this trajectory. Repulsed by the compliance of male slaves, the sexuality of female slaves, and his own slave status, Nat turns his mind towards upsetting the whole system. It is a version of history in which one "great" man emerges and acts, compelled by his own individualized and psychological wounds, and changes the course of history forever. Styron systematically denudes Turner of his community, his practices, and his history, and instead recreates him as a somewhat fanatical, moderately brilliant, and entirely misdirected man. For, in addition to Nat's misguided motivations, the text also strongly suggests that slavery is not that bad. Samuel, after all, believes in black literacy and the eventual end of slavery (221). White women are appalled at the brutality practiced on black bodies (366), and everywhere an anti-slavery sentiment is rising. This view of slave society is so self-serving as to be laughable (Styron is writing of his own ancestors, after all), except that it is also a comment on the forces of history and violence. Nat got it wrong, Styron tells us, because he didn't wait. *Things were getting better – white people were going to end slavery – and Nat just made it worse for everyone*. One misdirected action, therefore, and the progressive tilt of history got set back by another 30 years.

The parallelism with contemporaneous 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power movements is clear. That Styron's book reads as a warning to black freedom movements to not "go against history" or "set history back" is one of the central reasons that it was rejected by black intellectuals and activists. Styron's suggestion, instead, is that benevolent white intellectuals (and political leaders) are already moving things in the right direction, and the oppressed need only wait for legislation to catch up with popular sentiment. *William Styron's Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), published only a few months after the novel, locates Styron's revisionism as politicized warning:

> The contributors to this book collectively maintain that the distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate. The motivation for this distortion could be William Styron's reaction to the racial climate that has prevailed in the United States in the last fifteen years. Nat Turner, a nineteenth century figure, seems to have been used to make a comment on a twentieth century situation. Why did the character of Nat Turner in Styron's novel vacillate between being a rebel and an uncle tom [sic]? Why in spite of his noble calling was he unable to conquer his lust for a white woman? Is there a difference between William Styron's stereotyped portrayal of Nat Turner and the current racial bigots' opinion of civil rights leaders? (Clarke viii)

The final question, posed rhetorically, is answered with a resounding "no" in the ten essays that follow Clarke's Introduction. Written by a host of cultural leaders, from professors to authors to journalists, the essays chart the ways in which Styron appropriated Turner's voice and subject in a gross, violent, and politically aggressive manner. As Charles V. Hamilton puts it: "Styron joins the school of thought which believes that the kinder you treat the subjects, the more likely they are to rebel. This is related to the current notion of growing black militancy resulting from rising

expectations" (76). These essays document a close intellectual connection with Black Power and Civil Rights interests. While all of the essayists reject Styron's efforts to write Turner as racist, they also all imbue the historical Turner with a political will that is another revision of the original document. In their claiming of Turner, they conjure a black radical tradition that imbues the present with historical antecedent and gravity. As John Oliver Killens writes:

> I'm saying that the great Nat Turner must be seen in [a] revolutionary context, to be properly understood, and to properly understand what is happening in the northern urban areas. I'm saying that just as "kindly masters" could not save the day during the good old genteel days of slavery, Great White Fathers will not be able to stem the tide of revolution today by joining (even leading) in the singing of "We Shall Overcome." The "natives" are in a restive mood again, and nothing short of total liberation will quench their thirst for freedom. *There are thousands of Nat Turners in the city streets today*, and the ranks of freedom-fighters are increasing every moment. (43, emphasis added)

Styron's Nat, in his regressive and racist representation, is positioned as a warning against the emergence and ascendance of a black radical class, one that situates itself as the cultural and political inheritors of Turner's legacy. To absent black community is to forget what is happening in "the city streets today": radical, community-based, anti-government activism. Unlike Turner's rebellion, Clarke et al warn, this revolution will not be repressed. Nor will it "set history back"; these revolutions mark a new turning of society, created not by gradual liberal progressivism but rather an immediate reckoning with race, poverty, and imperialism.

In contradistinction, in *Confessions* Styron's Nat become ever-more isolated from black community. His willful ignorance of black women might have begun with his mother, but as he grows older it continues, and eventually becomes a motivating force for his actions. Out of his

abhorrence for black people, and especially women, comes a reliance on the sympathy of white women in order to reflect his own humanity – and, concomitantly, sexuality – to him. In one telling scene, Nat is contemplating the existence of Arnold, an older black man who had been "set free through the grace and piety of his late mistress," but squandered his inheritance on brandy and now and "[exists] mainly as a ragpicker." Nat philosophizes: "For what could freedom mean to Arnold? Unschooled, unskilled, clumsy by nature, childlike and credulous, his spirit numbed by the forty years or more he had spent as a chattel" (261). A northern white woman passes Arnold by, and tries to ask him a question. His speech is so "unschooled" that she can't understand him, and she bursts into tears. It is in this moment that Nat is sexually awakened:

> I was seized by a hot convulsive emotion that I had never known so powerfully before … For I had seen on this white woman's face was pity – pity wrenched from the very depths of her soul – and the sight of that pity, the vision of that tender self so reduced to this helpless state of sobs and bloodless clenched knuckles and scalding tears, caused me an irresistible, flooding moment of desire… It was as if, divesting herself of all composure and breaking down in this fashion – exposing a naked feeling in a way I had never seen a white woman do before – she had invited me to glimpse herself naked in the flesh, and I felt myself burning for her. Burning! (263)

The white woman's sympathy, akin to nakedness, inspires both a death and a sex drive in Nat. Knowing on the "margin of consciousness" (263) that he desires her, and that this is essentially a death wish, he nevertheless plunges into the full bodily experience of his desire. With the revelation of her humanity and sympathy, the full-throttled barrage of his burning desire is upon

him. Arnold is a warning sign of what becomes to those who are set free too soon, or without proper preparation, or who don't have it in their "nature." That his failed freedom prefigures Nat's sexual desire is significant: set free by his white mistress, Arnold becomes a liability to society. The mistress was too lenient, too sympathetic, and should not have freed such a man. Nat, on the other hand, wants to control and subject white women in a display of his own potency and masculinity. In their sympathy he reads a possibility of subjection, theirs to his, and a power akin to his mother's rapist.[15]

Margaret Whitehead, a neighboring belle, becomes the fulcrum of Nat's fantasies. Whitehead sees that Nat is "different," and she reveals her heart and her stories to him. She understands him sympathetically as a "friend," and in return he fantasizes about her rape: "I could stop now and here, right by the road in this meadow, do with her anything I wished … I could throw her down and spread her white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration" (367). Unlike Arnold or the northern woman, Whitehead is an historical figure from the 1831 *Nat Turner.* She is the only person that Turner kills himself the night of the revolt, a fact that Styron imbues with significance. Turner tells Gray tersely: "Miss Margaret, when I had discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner … on my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her with a blow on the head, with a fence rail" (50). Turner, in fact, had trouble with his weapons all night; because of his dull sword, Whitehead is the only person he directly kills. Styron reads this as a sign for the "insurrection's" real goal: the desecration of Margaret

[15] I read this as a snide comment on northern white women's abolitionist activisms of the 19th century. The text tells us that the coalition of white women's suffrage with slave abolition hinged on a sexual tension between white women and black men. It rewrites a radical coalitional politics into a struggle for sexual power. It also writes black women out of abolition completely.

Whitehead, as symbolic of white women, in an act of sexual desperation that, unable to be expressed, becomes a masculine form of rebellion instead. Without outlet for his sexual urges (his dull sword, after all), Nat becomes more and more estranged from reality, and channels his energies into violence.[16] His motivation for the insurrection is therefore actually out of step with history – great man or not – for, in the final analysis, he was just another black man, sexually traumatized by the observation of his mother's rape, displacing this fear of "nothingness" onto the violation of society's greatest inviolate, the white woman. This is not politics or revolution; it is miscegenation, and *Confessions* roundly condemns it, in the rhetorical equivalent of lynching. Styron's *Confessions* thereby erases the most fundamental fact of slavery from its telling: that it was built upon logics of race and racial hierarchy. By placing Turner's motivation so completely onto sexual desire for white women, the 1967 text ignores the realities of race violence. It reiterates a white supremacist fantasy of the black rapist,[17] but attempts to "humanize" that fantasy by imbuing it with Freudian significance. For the text cannot imagine a subject of history – Turner – who was not motivated by sex. By constructing a Freudian explanation for Turner, Styron ultimately weaves a rationalization that is satisfying to the mid20th century liberal white intellectual. It is an assuaging, if not comforting, explanation for one of the largest slave rebellions in US history: it wasn't about race; it wasn't about slavery; it was about sex. This explanation coheres with mid-century ideals of racial liberalism, because *sex is a universal and human explanation for violence*. This justification of Nat appears almost conciliatory: coming

[16] Lerone Bennett, Jr., in *Ten Black Writers Respond*, has a different interpretation of these facts: "'General Nat,' as he was sometimes called, was the *leader* of the Southampton revolt, and leaders seldom kill. It was Nat's duty to organize, command, and to lead. If Styron finds this incomprehensible, the explanation is to be sought not in Nat Turner's inability to kill but in William Styron's in ability to understand a black man leading" (14).

[17] Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* (1892) was one of the first documents to trace the ways in which sexual violence against white women was often invoked to excuse disciplinary violence against black men; Styron's easy use of the trope some 70 years later attests to its power as a disciplinary mechanism.

from the masculinist rhetorics and structures of the 1960s, Turner gets passed an olive branch. *We understand that you had psychological hang-ups*, the argument goes; *just like us, you were undone by (white) women.* Styron's text nooses Turner from his particular and opaque positionality – black, slave, field slave, married (not legally) – and hangs him in the model of white subjectivity, a "human" recognizable to white mid-century readers: male, Freudian, and fucked-up. Styron, the "friend who happens to also be a writer," is the one who rescues Turner from history: he alone can explain why this "great man" – in spite of his brilliant mind – got it wrong.

This explanation of violence and sex relies on a conception of the human in which constructions of race and gender are entirely erased. The text does not take histories of racial capitalism, lynching, poverty, or sexual violence into account. The text does not even consider women as humans; its dismissal of women as either "always willing" or as objects upon which men discover their subjectivity consigns women to the realm of the non-human. The text's central mistake, therefore, is to write Nat as a typical antihero of the mid-century novel. Styron, in an avoidance of the racial logics of slavery and indeed his own historical moment's real connectedness with slavery, cannot write the black field slave, and so instead he writes another version of Sal Paradise, Holden Caulfield, or Humbert Humbert[18] – those modern white men who can't figure out how to fit into society, grow up, or love women quite right. Styron's assignation of Nat to a modern white subjectivity is the same move that Styron makes when he assigns Baldwin's "marvelous mind" to one just like his. It's a blandishment of equality, a celebration of a believed equity, where in fact all that happened was a myopic generalization of middle-class white male culture. Indeed, it is even more than this: it is a modern rehearsal of the long-held,

[18] The antihero protagonists of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), respectively.

deeply-felt fear of miscegenation, the loss of the white nation at the hands of virile black men and women's undisciplined desires. The "common history" to which Baldwin speaks (or not) might refer, therefore, to discourses of sexual control and violence, and the circumscription of forms of humanity by and for the white subject.

The use of Whitehead as a romantic figure, and the root cause for the insurrection, significantly draws from conservative sentimental concerns. Though sentimental writers often deployed the trope of the light-skinned black woman to signify a long history of interracial sexual encounters, there was little envisioning of a liberated, equitable, and multiracial future for the US. Recall how in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* all of the black characters either died or went on a colonizing mission to Liberia; though Stowe called for an America without slavery, it was also an America without black people. Timothy Powell calls this the "monocultural" (107) impulse in sentimentalism – though the texts petition for formal equality, there is also a determined reticence to imagining multiracial society. Styron repeats these concerns in his slave narrative revision. In conjuring Whitehead as a romantic figure, Styron also conjures the racist fears of a white nation-form that can't, or won't, imagine interracial love or marriage. Instead, he casts black male sexual desire as typically virulent and aggressive; white women as typically in need of protection; and black women as typically depraved and deserving of what they get. That these characters are legible in body, desire, and constitution is what's at stake; Styron imports the most conservative and violent generics of sentiment without any of the genre's radical possibilities.

Styron's endless reiterations that Baldwin condoned, inspired, and supported the project – in spite of startling lack of evidence to support this position[19] -- rely on a comparison with both

[19] There are only four letters from Baldwin in all of Styron's collected papers ("Letters" 1968); none mention any of their literary endeavors. Indeed, all of the letters discuss a mutual friend who is currently imprisoned in Europe.

Giovanni's Room (1956) and *Another Country* (1962), in which Baldwin writes from the perspective of white men and women. In particular, in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin writes in the first-person and tells the story entirely from the perspective of a young, white, American man. Styron understands his own project as parallel with Baldwin's; it is, after all, the "bold" move to make as a writer, and indicative of an emergent discourse of colorblindness in which it is the persona, not the color of their skin, that matters.

The antihero of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, David, lives in Paris and spends his days wandering the streets and his nights drinking and falling in and out of love, while his American girlfriend, Hella, travels alone in Spain. He meets the Italian Giovanni at a bar one night, and two men begin a love affair marked by their beauty, youth, Giovanni's dedication to David, and David's cold use of Giovanni. When Hella returns to Paris, David leaves Giovanni and attempts to throw himself back into the heterosexual relationship. Hella leaves David when she finds him with another man at a bar; at the same time, Giovanni reaches financial desperation and has killed his former boss, Jacques, who also used Giovanni sexually. The book both opens and concludes with a meditation on Giovanni's impending execution. The book has been long classified as an example of an emergent "gay" literature, and was indeed shocking to many when first published because of the frank way that it treats sexuality without moralization.[20] Almost as shocking, for some, was Baldwin's departure from the "race novel." Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1953), discusses his childhood and early life as a black man in Harlem, and examines the roles of both Christianity and racism in the US. It was, in other words, a text that both the white, bourgeois reading public as well as many black readers expected of a black

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Baldwin begs Styron to use his reputation to help free the friend. The tone of the letters is much more business-like than intimate. These letters are archived with Styron's other manuscripts and correspondence at Duke University.

[20] Baldwin's press, Knopf, famously wouldn't publish the book because of its homosexual content; Dial Press eventually picked up the book. Upon publication the book – and Baldwin – were greeted with accusations of "indecency" and "pornography" (Abur-Rahman 478).

writer.[21] With *Giovanni's Room*, he leaves the explicit questions of both religion and race aside, and focuses on how sexual experiences are formative to identity construction and coming-of-age. This choice was deliberate. In a letter to his editor, written from France in January 1954, Baldwin describes his new project:

> It's a great departure for me, and it makes me rather nervous. It's not about Negroes, first of all. Its locale is the American colony in Paris. What is really delicate about it is that *since I want to convey something about the kinds of American loneliness I must use the most ordinary type of American I can find: the good, white, Protestant is the image I want to use*. This is precisely the kind of American about whose setting I know the least. Whether this will be enough to create a real human being only time will tell. It's a love story: short and, wouldn't you know it, tragic. Our American boy goes to Europe, finds something, loses it, and in his acceptance of his loss becomes, in my mind, heroic. (Thorsen, emphases mine)

Baldwin's logic is clear: in an effort to craft a truly "American" character, one who's "loneliness" can be examination of the whole milieu's, he must develop a white character. That he "knows the least" (from a personal perspective) about this character is actually beside the point; because of the way in which the "good, white, Protestant" male has always already been the universal subject (of books, letters, history), Baldwin does not need significant personal experience in order to craft the archetype. That the character is specifically American is also significant: Baldwin draws on a literary tradition that has been obsessed with the young, naïve,

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[21] Eldridge Cleaver's response to *Giovanni's Room* is infamously anti-gay. Cleaver writes of how, when he read *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, he felt as though he had found spiritual kinship; Cleaver found himself "changed and *liberated*" after reading Baldwin's early work, because Baldwin writes as a "Negro … combining the alphabet with the volatile elements of his soul" (103, emphasis in original). Apparently Cleaver felt betrayed by *Giovanni's Room*, through which he describes Baldwin's homosexuality as a "death wish" (102) and a rejection of black "masculinity" (103).

white American man and his lonesome travels. David is Huck Finn all over again, but here the frontier is one of sexuality and Europe rather than race and the western territories. In fulfilling this archetypical American character, David also accesses that particular white privilege of being able to *just be David* and not also represent a larger analysis of America and race. It is a classic paradox: it is because of his universality that David can become an individual. Because he does not "represent" his race – his whiteness makes his racialization invisible; in the minds of the contemporaneous public, this book "does not have race in it" because they are all white American or European characters[22] – David can emerge in his lonely, frightening individuality. If David was written as black the book would suddenly be "about" race and exile; instead, David provides a blank slate for the exploration of a universal *loneliness.*

It is interesting that, in order to explore sexuality, Baldwin chose the most universal of subjects. This opposes Styron's move, wherein he attempted to use sexuality in order to attempt to universalize the *least* universal of subjects. There is much at stake in this difference. Baldwin's David is, ultimately, a safe character. Recognizably related to Paradise, Caulfield, and Humbert, an examination of his sexuality and psyche is on par with much contemporaneous literature. The white male psyche, and the ways in which it is both sexually traumatized and sexually adrift, was not startlingly new territory. David is Baldwin's contribution to this milieu – in this iteration, the subject is both nationally and sexually adrift, and in that very adrift-ness is able to become all the more "American" and representative of the eternal struggle for

[22] This is not my argument. I think that *Giovanni's Room* does contain a considerable and thoughtful argument about race and poverty in Europe; Giovanni is, after all, the passionate Italian in comparison with the more staid and calculating French. Giovanni's poverty – he came from the countryside to find work in the big city – puts him in a place of subjugation that is both racialized and gendered. However, this argument about race, nationality, and gender is subtle, and not the main emphasis of the novel. Additionally, while playing on stereotypes of both Italians and French, an American reading public would have normalized both European national identities as "white"; neither "Italian" nor "French" has ever appeared on the US census as a racial designation. Instead, individuals can name these nationalities as "ancestry" and mark "white" as their race.

independence, romance, frontier, and new forms of freedom. David is an interesting character because we already know him and what he wants.

A rich academic discussion surrounds the significance of David's sexuality and Baldwin's choice to write David as white. In 1992, Yasmin DeGout argued that Baldwin stages homosexuality as an experience of pure innocence for characters like David, and at the same a site of depravity and exploitation for characters such as Giovanni's boss Jacques. Arguing contra DeGout in 2007, Aliyyah Abur-Rahman shows us how the "depravity" of Giovanni's exploiters (from his boss to David) is the historical linkage of Western masculinity with whiteness. In their use and then disposal of Giovanni's body, both Jacques and David cast Giovanni as both "black" and also "gay," and in the process purify themselves as straight, white, and coherent with the white nation-form (be it France or the US). My argument builds from Abur-Rahman's, in that I am interested in how the signification of "whiteness" allows for an invocation of universality in this text. Even as Baldwin smuggles critiques of racialization, homophobia, and capitalism into the text, he also uses David's whiteness as a site for a certain literary freedom. David can have sex with men and women, can fall in love with men and women, can identify as an expat and as French, all because of his whiteness. The abjection and disposal of racialized and sexualized bodies in the novel – in particular Giovanni's – makes space for the white universality of David's pursuits, experiences, and his loneliness. This is Baldwin's critique of racial formation, sexual policing, and capitalist exploitation. Baldwin's "most ordinary type of American," who learns something about himself via the disposal of the racialized and sexualized other, also gets to be a "hero" who learns something about himself and, eventually, returns home to the US, ready to be reintegrated into the status quo. Its generic coherence with the classical *Bildungsroman* is obvious, which situates *Giovanni's Room* as, among other things, contributing to a taxonomy of

the individual who can be integrated into the nation-form.[23] Ultimately, David's sexual deviancy is acceptable and able to be integrated, one part of his hero's tale rather than the sum of its parts.

On the other hand, Styron's attempt to map this same personage – sexually deviant, nationally unmoored – onto the historical body of Nat Turner reveals the limitations of this form of national integration. By trying to explicate Nat through his sexual predilections – and, in the process, make Nat more like David – Styron forgets the thing that makes Nat different: his blackness. Like Giovanni, Nat's presence in the novel affirms the structures of whiteness that surround him. Nat doesn't become universal through his sexual desire: he becomes more black. Indeed, the particularities of Nat's sexual predilections – his myopic focus on blonde girls – cast him even further into the discursive trope of the black rapist. Rather than liberate Nat into an universal subjectivity, one in which he would be "free" to explore his own particular brand of national loneliness and sex, Styron's representation highlights the terms of Nat's blackness and the inconceivability of his ever being integrated. By attempting to will Nat into an universal subjectivity, one that is contingent on masculine desire and sexual experimentation, Styron only succeeds in reifying whiteness as universal and casting Nat into the realm of the abject.

This line of thinking echoes an emergent discourse of colorblindness, in which US citizens were encouraged to "forget" race as antithetical to modernity and post-war society. Jodi Melamed explains how this discourse, which she locates as part of "racial liberalism," was on the rise in the middle of the 20th century; an official state policy of racial liberalism allowed the US state to see itself as antiracist and progressive.[24] Racism was coded as wayward, premodern, and

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[23] Lisa Lowe writes of the *Bildungsroman*: "The novel of formation … elicits the reader's identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual's relinquishing of particularity and difference through an identification with an idealized 'national' form of subjectivity" (98). The individual becomes himself, which is to say a member of the nation-form, through this type of quest.

[24] The stakes of this self-image, writes Melamed, have global repercussions: by seeing themselves as the "racially progressive" nation, The US positioned itself as morally superior to the USSR (9).

at odds with ideals of freedom, rather than constitutive of it (Melamed 9). Implied in this discourse is that, to be a progressive and modern nation, citizens of the nation must "forget" the racial past and move forward. Not only does this discourse, in tandem with Styron's novel, affirm to white readers that they have done nothing wrong in the past (if the rebellion was about sex, then whiteness is not culpable), but also that they do nothing wrong in the present (if white and black are "the same," then there's no need for additional justice or equity-oriented actions). By denying that Turner's rebellion had anything to do with the physical and ontological violences of slavery, Styron erases the entire history of racial slavery and processes of subjection. The result is ponderous and upsettlingly racist; it is the ignorance of the history of racism and slavery in favor of a blandishment of equality and liberalism.

Yet how could I *ever* get rid of slavery?

That William Styron's text demonstrates a certain white liberal racism of the 1960s is not new news. In his memoirs, Styron describes the ferocious response to his *Confessions of Nat Turner* as both stimulating and confusing. He writes that although he was "gratified that [his] work could inspire such fear," he found many of the claims of racism and white supremacy "mindless." Styron clung to his stated desire for a collaborative meeting of minds, white and black, in discussion of "common" history. Instead, he found rage, disbelief, and an organized front of black activists and intellectuals who worked to make sure the legacy of the text went down as "racist" rather than as Pulitzer-worthy. After what Styron calls several "ill-considered public appearances" ("Nat Turner Revisited" 450) during 1968 to try and defend his position, he retreated back to his Connecticut home and into his writer's den. He began work on his next novel, and let the debate continue without him.

Or so his telling of it goes. According to his memories, Styron turned his mind to his next novel, and left the race debates to roil without him in those last days of the 1960s. However, it is clear that the need to explain himself was not so easily abandoned. For, within *Sophie's Choice* (1976), which is itself an exploration of the Holocaust through the eyes of a female survivor of Auschwitz, there is also a carefully coded exculpatory subtext explaining Styron's rationale for writing the *Confessions*. *Sophie's Choice,* like *Confessions*, was widely embraced and celebrated upon its publication; unlike *Confessions*, its reputation remains largely uncontested and Styron's "right to write" the Polish Sophie's voice almost wholly unquestioned. This could be due, in part, to the fact that Styron chose not to frame the whole of *Sophie's Choice* in the first-person. Instead, the novel is narrated in the first-person by Stingo, a thinly (and sometimes not at all) veiled Styron, a 22-year-old southerner who has just moved to New York to make it as a writer. The year is 1947, and he meets Sophie (and her Jewish lover, Nathan) in his Brooklyn boarding house, and listens to her stories over the course of one long hot summer. Stingo is careful to tell the reader that he is recreating her stories and retelling them from memory; there is, therefore, a safe distancing between himself and his subject through which questions of authenticity might be muted. This distancing also makes the argument that, through their intimacy, Stingo gained important knowledge. Through talks, food, and music – those cornerstones of friendship – Stingo earns the right to write Sophie's story.

Many of Stingo's misadventures come directly from Styron's own journals from his youthful post-war years – and in Stingo we see enacted all of the discomforts and ambivalences with race that Styron loaded into *Confessions*. Like Styron, Stingo is the grandson of a slave owner. In Styron's autobiographical writing, there is frequent mention of "Drusilla and Lucinda," two slaves who were "given" to his grandmother as play-mates. His grandmother was twelve

when the war ended, and Drusilla and Lucinda disappeared – this in spite of the fact of his grandmother's "love for these children" ("Nat Turner Revisited" 437) and the bereavement she felt at their leaving ("Jimmy" 96).[25] These two slave girls loom large as figures for the emotional and domestic connections that slavery wove between whites and blacks, without ironic awareness of the fact that Drusilla and Lucinda actually left after the end of the war, or a questioning of the discourse of "love" within the structure of people as property. Instead, the romance of Drusilla, Lucinda, and grandma is allowed to survive as a narrative of the vexed ways in which white and black people cared for one another pre-emancipation.

This story resurfaces, almost verbatim, in *Sophie's Choice*. Stingo describes the existence of (now fictionalized?) Drusilla and Lucinda:

> I have often found it a little difficult to believe that I have been linked so closely in time to the Old South … but there it is: born in 1848, my *own* grandmother at the age of thirteen possessed two small Negro handmaidens only a little younger than herself, regarding them as beloved chattel all through the years of the Civil War … I say "beloved" with no irony because I'm certain that she did very much love them, and when she recollected Drusilla and Lucinda … her ancient trembling voice cracked with emotion. (*Sophie's Choice* 29)

So far, so autobiographical. However, in the next moment Stingo introduces a new element: the before-unknown existence of an older brother, Artiste, who was sold south to the plantations of

[25] Drusilla and Lucinda are conjured in Styron's 1987 eulogy for Baldwin, to express the complicated ways in which blacks and whites loved one another under slavery; again the 1992 "new Afterword" for a reprint of *Confessions;* and again in his daughter Alexandra Styron's 2011 memoir, to explain her own connections with slavery. The repetition of the story of Lucinda and Drusilla is striking not only for how it appears verbatim in *Sophie's Choice,* but also – like Styron's stories of Baldwin – how it is so often invoked to metonymically stand in for race relations writ large.

Georgia when he was sixteen. This sale, it emerges, was due to something "indelicate"; in a letter from his father, Stingo reads of Artiste's offense: "Apparently Artiste, who was in the first lusty flush of adolescence, made what your great-grandfather calls an 'improper advance' toward one of the young belles in the town … your great-grandfather did what anyone of that time would have considered the proper course … He sold Artiste … for $800." The discourse of "love" between whites and blacks, so celebrated between grandma and her chaste "handmaidens," of course falls apart with the threat of black sexuality. If the story were to stop here, we might read Artiste as the banished body of Nat Turner, sold down river because of his sins against the white woman. But instead, the letter continues:

> It develops that Artiste had made no such 'advance' toward the young white girl. The lass was a hysteric who soon accused another negro boy of the same offense … You may imagine your great-grandfather's anguish. In this letter he describes *the ordeal of his guilt*. Not only had he committed one of the truly unpardonable acts of a slave-owner – broken up a family – but had sold an innocent boy of 16 into the grinding hell of the Georgia turpentine forests. (33, emphasis added)

The ordeal of his guilt, and the sin that cannot be rectified. Great-grandfather searched and searched, but Artiste cannot be found. The white woman's story was a false one (a narrative too easy to believe, a trope too easily relied upon), black bodies took the blame, and the white patriarch stands in the shambles, wondering what he has done. He is, in spite of his guilt, $800 richer.

The letter in *Sophie's Choice*, written from his father in Virginia, announces the inconceivable fact that they have found the money from Artiste's sale; it had been buried, to protect it from Union troops, but now it has been unearthed. The value of the coins has risen to

$5,500 – "a 700 per cent return on the sale of poor Artiste" (33) – and it is to be divided between dear grandma's progeny. Stingo finds himself with a $485 bequest – just enough to cover one summer of dedicated writing. Like his great-grandfather, he feels himself guilty, but quickly brushes this emotion away: "if I had tithed a good part of my proceeds of Artiste's sale to the N.A.A.C.P. instead of keeping it, I might have shriven myself of my own guilt, besides being able to offer evidence that even as a young man I had enough concern for the plight of the Negro as to make a sacrifice. But in the end I'm rather glad I kept it … in 1947 I needed $485 as badly as any black man" (34). Much of *Sophie's Choice* is written with this nostalgic, reminiscent tone; the writer as sagacious, reflecting on his early days, telling a story with the gift of hindsight. It adds to the suggestion that Styron is also reflecting on the Nat Turner debates; his missed opportunity to donate to the NAACP, for example, might have been a convenient way to head off some of the later accusations of his racism. As to whether the Artiste narrative is a "true" one or not remains ambiguous. In her memoir, *Reading my Father* (2011), Alexandra Styron tells us that her father struggled monetarily in New York post-war, but "would soon receive a felicitously timed bequest of a thousand dollars from his maternal grandmother's estate" (80). No more is said about the provenance of that money. Whether or not Styron's bequest came from an actual slave sale is beside the point; what is interesting is that, in this otherwise precisely autobiographical passage, he chose to highlight the sale of Artiste (and the guilt that ensued) as central to his emergence as a writer. Without the money, he might have toiled in the publishing houses forever; with the revelation of the money, he can quit his job, take a cheap room in Brooklyn, meet the beautiful, haunted Sophie and her brilliant, masculine boyfriend Nathan, commence work on his first novel, and spend the summer growing into himself. The sale of

Artiste is the condition of possibility for Stingo's *Bildungsroman*. The young white southern writer is allowed the possibility for self-narration and self-possession through the body of the slave.

Sophie's Choice is not "about" slavery, but in a different way than how *Confessions* is not "about" race. Manifestly, *Sophie's Choice* is a Holocaust novel, which flashes back and forth between Stingo's (mis)adventures in the city and Sophie's memories of her life in Poland and Auschwitz. Sophie is not Jewish herself; she was sent to the camp for smuggling a ham across Krakow. Her fair looks, fluency in German, and cultural knowledge land her a spot in Commandant Höss' house as a maid, and from there she (unsuccessfully) plots his seduction and the freedom of her surviving child, Jan. For her titular "choice" is which of her children to send to the gas chambers when they first disembark the train at the camp. Sophie, cracking when they begin to take both children, pushes away her daughter, Eva:

> "Mama!" She heard Eva's thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her … "Take the baby!" she called out. "Take my little girl!" At this point the aide … tugged at Eva's hand and led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. [Sophie] would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back, beseechingly. But because she was now almost completely blinded by salty, thick, copious tears she was spared whatever expression Eva wore, and she was always grateful for that. For in the bleakest honesty of her heart she knew that she would never have been able to tolerate it, driven nearly mad as she was by her last glimpse of that vanishing small form. (529-530)

This story of maternal loss – the dispersal of the family, as a demonstration of the complete power of a racist institutionality – closely echoes the story of Artiste and his sisters. Or, indeed,

almost all stories of slavery: central to almost all of the nineteenth century slave narratives and particularly important to nineteenth abolitionist texts is the scene of the destruction of the nuclear family. Abolitionists used the destruction (if not pre-emption) of the heterosexual family unit and, in particular, the bereavement of the mother as the ultimate argument against slavery; as Stingo's father remarked, when great-grandfather sold Artiste, he committed "one of the truly unpardonable acts of slavery" by breaking up a family. By recreating this oft-recited tale of US slavery at the gates of Auschwitz, the narrative constructs a rhetorical equivalency between the two historical spaces. It is another claim to universalism, this time routed through the nineteenth century ideal of motherhood: the destruction of the family and the violence of the child forcibly removed from her mother is a universal sin. As readers, we can understand Sophie's predicament because we have read it before: in slave narratives. Indeed, baby Eva recalls to us another fragile blonde girl-child: Uncle Tom's cherubic and ill-fated friend in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In that text, Little Eva's early death signifies a soul and a compassion for humanity that was literally too good for this world; such goodness could not survive in the moral wreckage of the antebellum south, and she takes mysteriously ill and dies. In *Sophie's Choice*, Eva remains an undeveloped character, but the text urges us to imbue her death with the same significance as Little Eva's: tragic, and therefore a comment on society: the youngest, the most vulnerable, the pure, the beautiful are the first ones sacrificed for the sins of society. The Holocaust and its morality become visible through its parallelism with US plantation slavery and the experience of maternal grief. The abject body of the woman – in tears, unable to see or to speak – stands in both instances as the marker for the limit of a society that has lost its way. Slavery therefore creates both the economic *and* the cultural conditions of possibility for Stingo's writing of the Holocaust. The sale of Artiste literally funds his writing; his compassion and understanding for

Sophie's story emerges through its parallel with slave narratives and abolitionist tracts.

Sophie's Choice consistently makes the argument that US racial slavery and the Nazi genocide are the same morally and logically. This argument emerges overtly in some places; for example, Nathan's rage is sometimes directed at Stingo, in an unwillingness to believe that Stingo isn't "actually" racist or personally responsible for the legacies of slavery. Nathan, a Jewish-American character, observes both Stingo and Sophie with skepticism; Stingo because he is southern, Sophie because she is Christian. In one conversation, Nathan pushes Stingo to realize that he can't just disavow himself of his upbringing or heritage, and is indeed intimately connected with southern history. This point in enacted when they learn of the recent lynching of a young black man, Bobby Weed, in Georgia. Nathan pushes Stingo:

> "Aren't you able to perceive the simple truth? … And that is that your refusal to admit responsibility in the death of Bobby Weed is the same as that of those Germans who disavowed the Nazi party even as they watched bladly and unprotestingly as the thugs vandalized the synagogues and perpetrated the *Kristallnacht*. Can't you see the truth about yourself? About the South? After all, it wasn't the citizens of New York who destroyed Bobby Weed." (76)

Both Nathan and Stingo wish for a version of history in which linear and progressive time prevails. Nathan's comment that "it wasn't the citizens of New York who destroyed Bobby Weed" misses the point regarding histories of global capital and the construction of the US; if he wants to claim that Stingo is personally responsible, then he needs to be prepared to take a look at all of settler colonialism, including the history of New York. Instead of a nuanced understanding of complicity, he claims that "The South today has abdicated any right to connection with the human race" (76). Likewise, Stingo is so anxious to clean himself of his

southern legacy that he attempts to banish the south to a different order of time: he calls Weed's murderers "*troglodytes*" (75) and "subhumans" (77). These impulses come from different places; Nathan's anger over the Jewish Holocaust inflicts all of his views, and he identifies with the oppressed without reference to history or privilege. Stingo, on the other hand, performs the role of the naïve white American who cannot understand the depth or complexity of racial history in the US. However, the impulses are in fact the same: a desire to fix racial oppression in the past, and to believe in a fair and equitable future. Instances of racial violence therefore get coded as acts of "subhumanity," performed by "troglodytes," without connection to the real "human race." The suggestion is that these acts are unique, and that most of "human" society is moving "forward" and into a more enlightened era. That references to the "subhuman" so closely mirror the language of racial science, and its project of mapping the human from ape to *homo erectus*, only affirm what Nathan and Stingo would like to wish away: that they are still deeply in the midst of this history, and even language fails in an attempt to declare themselves out of it.

It is worth mentioning, once again, that Weed's supposed crime was "so classic as to take on the outlines of a grotesque cliché: he had ogled, or molested, or otherwise interfered (actual offense never made clear, though falling short of rape) the simpleton daughter, named Lula – another cliché!" (77). The repetition of violated white femininity – though always suspect, always fabricated, always just an excuse for racial terror – at the hands of a black man is so constant in Styron's work as to become a trope. Or perhaps the trope is the crying white woman, who stirs up interest in herself through the accusation of unwanted sexual advances; after all, Lula's "woebegone and rabbit face had sulked from the pages of six metropolitan newspapers" (77), including a few in New York. Like the "hysteric" who blamed Artiste, white women's claims of violation are always suspect and seen as self-serving. This echoes the scene in

Confessions in which Nat watches his mother's rape turn from something violent into something pleasurable; the implication is that women (of all races) actually always want to be sexually violated, and when they don't get it, they make it up. Importantly, Stingo is most impacted by these (hi)stories of female violation when they have finally been "righted." The revelation of Artiste's innocence allows great-grandfather to feel "guilty," and as such he remains a humanized, sympathetic character for his progeny. Rather than sullying the pages with the possibility that a slave was sold as part of everyday commerce, the story exists as a tale of white women's deviance. Likewise, Lula's "rabbit face" is a cause of disgust; if it weren't for her wayward claims and outsider sexuality (the comment on her poor looks suggest that white men like Stingo have already rejected her; she turns, therefore, towards telling tales), then this never would have happened and Weed would be alive (a ridiculous claim to make about 1940s racial terror, of course, but it's Stingo's gist). Stingo's displacement of his multi-generational white man's guilt onto the bodies of women is another erasure of actual histories and experiences of violence. It implies that women – and the tales they tell – have entirely too much power and control over the (dis)course of history. History, therefore, is a mammoth narrative, a tale told by hysterics and racists, from which the sad and innocent subjects of history must try and redeem themselves.

But of course Stingo, Nathan, and Sophie cannot talk or reason themselves out of history; instead, a logic of interconnectedness binds them ever-closer together. Styron crafts a narrative in which one white American's desire to run away (out of) southern history is coterminous with an Auschwitz survivor's desire to run away from her actions under the Third Reich. This theory of history is congruent with Enzo Traverso's definition of the "long nineteenth century," in which Nazi German is repositioned to be not an aberration of enlightenment history, but rather a

culmination of Western colonial practices and concomitant cultural self-making. The eugenics and technologization of death that define the Holocaust are, in particular, the outcome of a particular history of imperialism and Europe's emergence as world-leader: "The massacres of the imperialist conquests and the Final Solution are linked by more than 'phenomenological affinities' and distant analogies. Between them runs a historical continuity that makes… Auschwitz an authentic product of Western civilization" (153). In *Sophie's Choice*, racial slavery is positioned as the precondition of the Holocaust economically, culturally, and now also scientifically. Stingo and Nathan reveal this connection with racial science in their use of the language of "human progress."

This is not to say that Styron does not also exceptionalize the Holocaust; Weed's lynching, for example, when juxtaposed with the efficiency of the German camps, supports Stingo's idea that the south is "medieval." However, overall, the three characters all are stuck in history. Nathan is tormented by the Jewish Holocaust and suffers a form of survivor's guilt; Stingo is terrified of his connections with the south, and the idea that he might be indebted to racial oppression; and Sophie cannot laugh, "fuck," or eat her way out of the fact that she gave up her daughter and failed to help the Resistance.

Nathan and Sophie, in the tragic conclusion, commit a double-suicide and remove themselves from history. Nathan's pathological illness and violence are rendered untenable; he is too destructive to live. Sophie, on the other hand, is too sad to live. In her good-bye note to Stingo, she writes:

> My dearest Stingo … when I woke I was feeling so terrible and in Despair about Nathan, bei that I mean so filled with Gilt and thoughts of Death it was like Eis Ice flowing in my

> Blut … I may not see you again but do believe me how much knowing you have meaned to me … I feel so bad, I must go now. Forgive my poor englisch. I love Nathan but now feel this Hate of Life and God. FUCK God and all his Hände Werk. And Life too. And even what remain of Love. Sophie (545)

By the time that Stingo locates Sophie, she and Nathan have ingested sodium cyanide and died entwined on their bed. Stingo arranges their double funeral, reads Emily Dickinson at the gravesite, and wanders Brooklyn till morning. There is nothing left to do except mourn "the beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth," from Artiste to Weed to Eva to Sophie and Nathan. When he awakens, he notices Venus in the sky and realizes: "This was not judgment day – only morning. Morning: excellent and fair" (562). Stingo alone is left to contemplate morning and the ideal of new beginnings. And it is in this final moment of grief that clarity strikes: it is just morning after all, just another morning. As the sun rises, Stingo realizes that the world does in fact go on. History continues.

This concluding moment of lightness recalls a moment only slightly earlier in the novel, when Stingo realizes what his next writing project needs to be: an exegesis of Nat Turner. Stingo has been robbed of his cash – the money from Artiste's sale – and, in spite of financial worries, now feels considerably lighter. Perhaps, he hopes, his debt to slavery has been paid:

> *Yet how could I ever get rid of slavery?* …There was a dwelling somewhere in the inward part of my mind a compulsion to write about slavery, to make slavery give up its most deeply buried and tormented secrets … And were not all of us, white and Negro, still enslaved? I knew … I would be shackled by slavery as long as I remained a writer. Then suddenly … suddenly I thought of Nat Turner, and was riven by a pain of nostalgia so intense it was like being impaled upon a spear. (459)

His nostalgia, so visceral as to be painful, is an apt symbol for how connected and indebted he is to the past. Stingo is right; he will never be able to "get rid of slavery." The next best thing to making it disappear, however, is to fix it in history: to make it known, to know it well, to make it "give it up." It is significant that this desire to know and to write is an embodied experience; to make slavery "give up its ... secrets" is a sexual and violent fantasy, with the masculine writer positioned as the one who shall reveal the unknown. Slavery, like the women that populate Styron's novels, will be penetrated, known, and ultimately rendered as stepping stones to the emergence of the male subject. Stingo sees the opportunity to write about Nat Turner as a chance to redeem the black man from history. No longer will the story be told by "hysterical" white women; instead, Stingo's masculine hand will reintegrate black masculinity into history, and in the process he will absolve himself of any lingering guilt. Significantly, a third counter-narrative of *Sophie's Choice* (along with Sophie's story and Stingo's connections with slavery) is Stingo's quest to lose his virginity; comedic episodes of fumbling and awkward sexuality interpolate Sophie's stories of Europe. In the final pages of the book, Stingo finally has sex with Sophie, something he's intensely desired throughout all the story-telling; the book is therefore also a coming-of-age tale, in which Stingo's manhood is secured both by the loss of his virginity and his concomitant capacity to write the stories of the oppressed. To tell Nat's story, in other words, refracts Stingo's own masculinity and rescues Nat from a wayward historiography.

> In turn, Stingo begins to tell Nathan about his new writing project, but:
>
> I realized there was very little I could say about this man; he had appeared out of the mists of history to commit his gigantic deed in one blinding cataclysmic explosion, then faded as enigmatically as he had come, leaving no explanation for himself, no identity, no after-image, nothing but his name. He had to be discovered anew, and that afternoon

> … I realized for the first time that *I would have to write about him and make him mine*, and re-create him for the world. (460, emphases mine)

Who knows if this is the actual genesis of Styron's *Confessions*; at least in this version of the story, Baldwin is left out of it. However, the short explanation offers both an apologia and an explanation for the 1967 novel. Stingo saw absence: he saw no historiography, no art, no myth surrounding the historical Nat Turner. He saw a man who "appeared out of the mists of history" without explanation of any sort (the 1831 *Nat Turner* is entirely ignored in Stingo's telling). And, to do penance – perhaps for Artiste, perhaps for his own whiteness, or perhaps for a version of history in which things progress – Stingo decides to tell the story of Nat. He will conjure Nat into history, make a man out of him, and explain the "cataclysmic explosion" in a way that modern readers will all understand. What Stingo understands implicitly, of course, is that through this process he will "make" Nat "his." Through the process of transcription, Stingo puts Nat to work once again. It's an updated version of slavery, wherein the body of the black man does the discursive heavy-lifting for the white writer. Stingo sees this as his chance to free himself; his freedom comes at the expense of the further "shackling" of the black body.[26]

Nat's isn't the only story that Stingo writes, of course. The funny collapse of Styron-the-writer with Stingo-the-character is complete in some places (such as memories of Lucinda and Drusilla) and ambivalent in others. In any case, the novel is called just that, "a novel," so we must not conflate the two personages. The text we hold in our hands – *Sophie's Choice* – is Styron's work. Styron, writing about a character named Sophie, redeeming her from, or perhaps bringing her into, history. For in fact, this is what Sophie wanted. During one picnic in Prospect Park, Sophie tells Stingo:

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[26] Hortense Spillers has written of the phenomenon of white writers writing slavery as "discursive slavery"; especially in the antebellum slave narrative, white traders fixed the black subject on the page, and then distributed and sold copies like so many bodies (180).

> I want to write about Auschwitz … I want to write about my experiences there. I suppose I could write in Polish or German or maybe French, but I'd so much rather be able to write in English … There are so many terrible things I could tell. *But maybe I could write it as a novel, you see, if I learned to write English good*. (496)

Like Stingo's imagined Nat, there are unknown, unspoken, cataclysmic things in the past *that can only be explained through the novel*. The novel is the form through which historical figures might explain themselves and find their places in history. Significantly, Sophie feels she must do this in English: her future, after all, is mapped in America. To become thoroughly American, she must embrace the language and the discourse of the nation, and become a heroine with proper psychological explanation and contextualization. Of course, as we know from her suicide note, Sophie dies with her "poor englisch" (545). She never writes her novel; instead, Styron does. The result is the text we hold in our hands.

Stingo awakens on the Coney Island beach the morning after Sophie and Nathan's funeral and realizes that that is all it is: "This was not judgment day – only morning. Morning: excellent and fair" (562). His life will continue, after all; he will write *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and, later, *Sophie's Choice*. The dream of progress begins in this moment, this morning that is not judgment but actually quite "excellent and fair." It is a nod towards Stingo's dream of writing his way out of history; with Sophie and Nathan gone, and Nat unexplained, the future opens itself up like a vast and empty canvas for the elaboration of Stingo's theories of history and subjectivity. It is worth backtracking at this moment to revisit Styron's *Confessions*. For that novel concludes, as well, with a meditation on morning. In this book, Nat awakes on the morning of his execution and looks towards the "morning star" (424). Margaret Whitehead is on his mind, and he masturbates to her memory. His ejaculation, unlike the deed of his rebellion, is an

epiphanic event, the culmination of all his desires: "And now beyond my fear, beyond my dread and emptiness, I feel the warmth flow into my loins and my legs tingle with desire … with tender stroking motion I pour out my love within her … and the twain – black and white – are one" (428). In his orgasm, Nat finally achieves what he desired through the whole text: collapse into and subsuming with white subjectivity. Like Stingo's "beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth," Nat frees himself of particularity and imagines all as "one." Now, Nat looks forward to his death with the same interest as sexual experience; he hears the bells calling the town to the square for his hanging, and thinks: "Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Oh how bright and fair the morning star" (428). Like Stingo, Nat sees in the morning the possibility of a clean state, a new start. His death is not the violent reaction of a stunned white supremacy, but rather the final step in a personal epic; significantly, that "final step" is sexual union with a white woman. "Oneness" – sexual union – has been achieved, and it matters not that violence against black bodies, slavery, and white retaliation continue, for it is the morning: excellent and fair.

The theory of history that is at work in both Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice* is not far removed from the ideal of "progress" that Walter Benjamin explores in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and which Benedict Anderson takes up in *Imagined Communities*. Benjamin reminds us that "empty-time" is the condition of possibility for a narrative of progress. This empty future, excellent and fair, is imagined like the next bead on a rosary, rather than in dialectic tension with the past and its struggles (Benjamin 263). This conception of an empty future allows the historiographer – or, perhaps, the writer of historical fiction – to craft a narrative in which characters move through time but are constantly emerging into a new and open possibility. Stingo realizes that he cannot "get rid of slavery," and yet the

desire remains, and motivates: by writing Nat, Stingo will once and for all explain the past, situate the actors, mourn the violated, and be able to move on. It is, in many ways, a model of literary healing: a belief in the capacity of language and story-making to bear witness to the past, and so be able to chart a new(er) and more open future. Benedict Anderson has connected this ideal of "empty time" with the novel form itself, arguing that the modern novel relies upon a model of time in which the characters are marching ever-forward into the empty, homogenous future (Anderson 24). In the case of Styron's novels, Turner and Sophie are brought out of the "medieval" (*Sophie's Choice* 77) and "different orders of time" (*Sophie's Choice* 235) to become "humanized," explicated, and understood modern characters.

What is at stake in this configuration is the loss of what Benjamin calls "the tradition of the oppressed" (259): a mode of knowing, or knowledge-production, in which the past remains present, and continues to act on and with current actors and actions. The figures of Nat and Sophie represent a host of frightening historical scenes and subjectivities – slavery, racial science and oppression, the Holocaust, maternal grief, violence against women and families – and the novel's empty-time impulse is to contain the enormous concomitant emotions and experiences of rage, guilt, grief, loss, and bereavement. A sentimental desire to *hear more*, therefore, waxes through the pages of Styron's novels: if Stingo (or the reader) can just hear more, then the very act of bearing witness to the past will absolve the subject of his own sins. This desire to *hear more* draws from and amplifies the logic of sentiment, which tells us that *the act of having read* is akin to political action. In Styron/ Stingo's case, *listening well* to Nat and Sophie is all the excuse that Styron needs to elaborate his remarkably racist and misogynistic views of history and justice. Styron enters his Nat and his Sophie into literary history as "redeemed" and also as a

chance for readers to redeem themselves: for, having learned more about the brutalities of past, they are supposedly positioned to better understand their present.

That this act of "listening" is premised upon the silencing of those very subjects is what matters. Both of Styron's texts, gruesomely graphic in their portrayals of violence, rape, and human wretchedness, create a spell of realism which compels the reader to "believe" in what they have read. Unlike Stowe, Styron feels no need to throw the mantle of supernatural "romance" over his depictions; instead, by entering into the spaces of historical violence and grief with discursive yet fictional precision, both books limn two political possibilities for the reader: either enter into alliance with the subject, listen to and be a friend to the sufferers of history; or turn your back on these stories, and stand with the oppressor. This invocation to allyship is modeled by Styron/Stingo: by listening, by learning, by writing, he has become the champion for history. It is a history in which women's bodies are the site for violence and masculine self-making; women's stories are whims and fancies that intervene tragically into the lives of men; and black men rape and kill their way into social dominance and control. Having successfully slayed these dragons, Styron – the good white liberal – gets to survive. Not only that, but tell these stories and set the record straight. Political allyship, here, echoes and repeats the same mistakes as some nineteenth century allyship. It is the shoring up of white supremacy, the consolidation of the white subject, via empathic identification with the black/abject body. Having properly instrumentalized that body and set it right in history, the white writer sits alone, on the beach, surviving.

This cluster of texts – from 1831 to 1976 – highlight some of the complicated and conflicting ways in which literary listening makes space for political feeling, and the stakes therein. Gray's text, while always included in the master lists of "antebellum slave narratives,"

tells us as much about the vexed nature of testimony and truth as it does about Turner's life and rationales. Styron's *Confessions*, and the backlash against it, offer a literary site at which to explore how the deployment of slave figures incites political feeling and critique over 100 years post-emancipation. And *Sophie's Choice* reveals how a European experience of racial violence and genocide creates the space to think chattel slavery in the late twentieth century. Sophie, in her long talks with Stingo, represents a desire to know and absolve history through the practice of talking and listening. Stingo, a young white American in post-World War II America, steps into a subjective space of being both benevolent listener and liberator; was it not men just like him, after all, whose tanks rolled into the camps and liberated the prisoners in Europe? By linking the Holocaust with chattel slavery, and knowing his position of righteousness in relation to the one, he extends this logic backwards to the other. Once again absenting the historical economic and political systems and particularities that converged to create racial slavery and the Holocaust, he creates one master narrative of history, constituted mainly by the oppressed who died and the liberators who speak for them. "Hearing" something – anything – that deviates from this narrative of social progress and equality is lost.

Styron's constant reiterations that Baldwin condoned, encouraged, and supported his project remains unsupported by the historical record. Instead, what resonates more loudly is silence. Rather than read Baldwin's reticence to comment as a lack, I read this silence as a commitment to the processes of collaboration that cannot be transcribed. It was a "bold" thing for Styron to write the book, and a kind one for Baldwin to never publicly disavow him; as Baldwin states, by bringing "the whole enormity of the issue of history versus fiction, fiction versus history, and which is which" (Elgrably 1) to the fore, Styron did force a very public consideration of how slavery is remembered and told. The ambivalence of their relationship, and

the ways in which it has been repackaged and retold over the years, is not unlike the original text of *Nat Turner*. That too was a text of silences, and in its silence the text becomes a site of endless and iterative possibility. While I am once again loathe to ascribe political rationality, I do read something pressing in Baldwin and Styron's relationship. Perhaps this nexus of texts – *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and *Sophie's Choice* (1976) – is an odd selection for an analysis of solidarity. The only text that was actually "written collaboratively" is (arguably) the original *Nat Turner*. And yet, Styron's texts manifest a powerful desire to be able to express a politics of intimacy and solidarity, both with the racialized other and with history itself. This sentimental impulse to know and reveal is an inheritance from the nineteenth century; political alliance, via literary feeling, is the way that readers become activists. The stakes have of course changed since the nineteenth century; here, we see none of the radical spaces and leanings offered in Child or Jacobs' texts. Instead, in an act much more violent and racist than the abolitionist or Reconstruction sentimental texts, we see black and female subjects consigned to silence, the future of solidarity and collaboration contingent on their disappearance into the white text.

Subjectively Told:

Dave Eggers, Valentino Achak Deng, and Silent Stories in *What is the What*

Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories … because to do anything else would be something less than human. I speak to these people, and I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us … I will tell stories to people who will listen and people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist.

– Dave Eggers

Dave Eggers' 2006 novel *What is the What* closes with this demand for his readers' recognition. It is a novel made of "these stories," silent stories told to uninterested characters, as well as to its imagined reader. The first-person narrator, Valentino Achak Deng, is a Sudanese Lost Boy,[1] and the book recounts his displacement from his home village, his journey across East Africa, the thirteen years of life he spent in different refugee camps, and his eventual relocation to Atlanta by the United Nations. The text, which tells a fictionalized account of the real Deng's life, leans heavily into the ethics and aesthetics of witnessing. In this closing appeal, Eggers

[1] "The Lost Boys of Sudan" is the title given to the roughly 27,000 Sudanese refugees who were resettled in the United States as a result of the Sudanese Civil War. The war began in the early 1980s and was resolved with a peace treaty in 2005, though the subsequent genocide in Darfur was also politically linked with the Civil War. The war was waged primarily between northern Sudan, where the Islamic government holds power, and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, a coalition of southern Sudanese (mostly Christian) people who wanted to secede. Northern Sudan methodically destroyed the villages of the south, hoping to eliminate and all revolutionary forces. In the process, hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and thousands more fled the country. The Lost Boys are famous, in part, for having walked across Sudan in order to reach refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. Although they are now men, and there are a few hundred women in their numbers, they are still referred to as "boys" because the people who crossed Sudan by foot and lived to be relocated were mostly males between the ages of 6-18 (VAD Foundation).

demands that the reader acknowledge the existence of Deng,[2] which has (arguably) just been materialized for the reader through the text of the novel. To make this small jump of faith, Eggers tells us, is no more ridiculous than to believe in ourselves: the only way that we can know ourselves is through the listening and the telling of stories. To recognize Deng's life as human is, in turn, to recognize our own humanity. The one subject stands as a mirror for the other, and neither can be known without this tight weaving of stories and mutual recognition. This collapse of subjects is signaled in the full title of the book, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel*. The book, penned by Eggers, is spoken in the first-person voice of Achak. It is not an autobiography, but it is also not a novel. It is a collapse of one into the other, the loss of both the cost of producing something new.

This chapter jumps ahead in time again, this time to a novel that, though published in 2006, reflects on international human rights conditions, experiences, and law since the mid-1980s. *What is the What* begins in the early 2000s, in the Atlanta apartment of Deng, and, through flashbacks, narrates Deng's experiences as a child during the Civil War in Sudan and his adolescence in refugee camps in east Africa. That these memories are triggered by events in his present-day Atlanta life creates a parallelism that is both formal and sentimental: urged to understand that his life in Atlanta is just as contingent as his life in Africa, and indeed all US residents' lives are as such, readers situate themselves alongside Deng in a novel that is as much about the US as it is about Sudan. The final plea of the book, "I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us … I will tell stories to people who will listen and people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that

[2] A word on names: when I am referring to the real-life Valentino Achak Deng, who collaborated on the book with Eggers, I will call him "Deng." When I refer to the first-person protagonist of the novel, the one crafted by Eggers, I will call him "Achak."

you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (535), invokes a sentimental will towards empathic identification. Once again, hearing the story, identifying with the protagonist, and extending those laurels of "sameness" conjure the black body into liberal western subjectivity. In this twenty-first century moment, however, the warrant to occupy the black voice has shifted. Since William Styron's illfated *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968), only a very few white writers published books featuring a black protagonist.[3] Stanley Crouch has attributed this absence to "the public flogging that William Styron took from Negroes" (20); since Styron, Crouch tells us, writers have retreated into their identitarian particularities and only "write what they know" in the most narrow sense of the phrase.[4] Popular and critical consensus throughout the second half of the twentieth century seemed to maintain that white writers do not have the right, the reach, or the rhythm to write the black voice or black experience. Eggers' novel, then, is curious in its runaway popularity. The popular press never questioned his right to write; critics in general focus more on Eggers' turn towards a new form of non-fiction fiction in order to tell a post-human story. In this chapter, I contextualize Eggers' novel within the post-9/11 moment, and consider the ways in which *What is the What,* a life narrative that spans experiences of slavery and freedom, draws from sentimental norms. How does its use of the "white envelope" change or challenge nineteenth-century constructions? What is at stake, in this particular moment, in the

[3] Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Richard Price's *Clockers* (1992), and George Pelecanos' detective novels, 1994-2011, are texts by white writers that include African-American protagonists and narrators. The reticence, on the part of write writers, to write novels about or spoken by black protagonists has been attributed to Styron's spectacular failure in 1968 and the ferocious backlash that ensured (Crouch 22).

[4] Crouch's argument is couched within a dismissive appraisal of the "so-called black revolutionaries" of the late 1960s and the rise of ethnic and women's studies in academia in the 1970s and 1980s. Crouch bemoans what he perceives as a proprietary approach to writing about race in the second half of the 20th century, which he argues was spurred on by a sense of "cultural possession" that emerged because of the Black Power movement and was consolidated through the emergence of ethnic studies departments. I do not agree with Crouch's historicization or his analysis of the effects of institutionalizing ethnic studies. However, I invoke Crouch as an example of how the story of this silence exists and circulates: the silence of white writers, the lack of white writers writing in the black voice, and the great freeze as a result of Styron's missteps.

conjuring of sentimental ideals of unity and sameness? How has the warrant to occupy the black voice changed since 1968, and what is at stake in this new historical moment?

Deng emigrated to the US in 2001, and began his collaboration with Eggers in 2003. They were introduced by a benefactor of Deng's in Atlanta, Deng told his stories orally to the author over the course of three years, and Eggers then crafted the stories into the novel. Eggers was already a successful and affluent author, whose own memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, was published in 2000 to much acclaim. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers develops the warm-yet-ironic voice that allows him to discuss his parents' deaths (both by cancer, within a matter of months of one another) with a blend of detachment and tenderness; this tone and style has become the Eggers hallmark. Eggers used the money from *A Heartbreaking Work* to found a non-profit writing center for youth[5] and to expand his publishing house, McSweeney's, which eventually published *What is the What*. To tell stories, and to put them forth into the public sphere, is understood as a pedagogical project. The calling forth of more stories – from the kids who drop-in for creative writing workshops, to the Sudanese man who reaches out for help with the crafting of his life narrative – is the action of cultivating the "collapsible space between us." Stories give us one another, and they also give us ourselves. In this "strength" we are able to stand in resistant and thoughtful humanity.

Eggers' other literary work also bridges this fiction/ non-fiction divide. Extremely prolific, he's published six novels, two collections of short stories, edited essay collections, and founded a series of books that collect oral histories of "human rights crises" around the world.[6]

[5] The original writing center, 826 Valencia, was established in San Francisco in 2002. Since then, centers have also been opened in New York, Chicago, Ann Arbor, Seattle, Los Angeles, Boston, and Washington, D.C. For more information: 826national.org

[6] See Eggers' bio on the McSweeney's site for more information ("About Dave Eggers").

Arguably, all of his work is recognizable by two traits: firstly, a whimsical, almost childish infatuation with language and words; and secondly, a concern with the politics of modern life. The collision of these two sensibilities can be unsettling; Lee Siegel, for example, writes in *The New Republic* that Eggers debases all of his subjects with his mirthful writing style: "Eggers's style can read like *Peanuts* for adults who are reluctant to grow up … His world is populated by young, childlike people mostly in their twenties, for whom the more mature world – as in *Peanuts* – resembles the shadows flickering on the wall of Plato's infamous cave" (50). When Eggers brings this signature style to topics such as genocide in east Africa, Siegel writes, it is not only disrespectful but also ontologically violent. In spite of this minority dissenting voice, in general the Eggers-brand of whimsy has worked as a platform for a western audience's reading attention better than not. The US prison system, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and public housing in Chicago have all had their moment of consciousness-raising, in the youthful style of the Eggers brand.[7]

Eggers is highly aware of his strange position vis-à-vis these stories. One of his first novels, *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* (2002), tells the story of two young, white, American men who come into a large amount of money. Plagued by feelings of guilt and ennui, they decide to travel around the world and give their cash away to people who seem to need it. Aware of the structurally uneasy position this puts them in, Will (the first-person narrator) rants:

> There is disparity and our instinct is to create parity, immediately. Our instinct is to split the bank account with the person who has nothing ... If it feels good it *is* good, and today, at the ocean, we met a man living in a half-finished hut, and he was tall and had a radio

[7] The "Voice of Witness" project is its own non-profit, run as an imprint of McSweeney's Press. So far, the series includes nine oral history texts, covering topics ranging from women's prisons in the US to Columbians displaced by violence, and one pedagogical text, aimed at teachers and educators who want to incorporate oral history projects into their curricula. Though Eggers doesn't write the histories himself, I argue that its location within the McSweeney's brand gives it its sheen of youthful, optimistic social engagement. See voiceofwitness.org.

> and we gave him about $700 and it was good. It can't be taken from us, and you cannot soil it with words like *condescending* and *subjective*, fey and privileged words, and you cannot pretend that you know a better way. You try it! You do it! We gave and received love! How can you deprive us of that? I'm not asking them for thanks - we're not even sticking around long enough to allow them it, and we don't speak their goddamn language, anyway. We're just wanting to see them, to touch their hands, to brush up against their arm or something. That is allowed! (124)

Will might as well be a mouthpiece for Eggers' career trajectory; ever-willing to take a blind leap of faith, into the limited promises of human connection, in spite of all the critical and institutionalized obstructions therein, in order to try and create some sense of "parity" where only "disparity" existed before. *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* concludes, thankfully, not with a typical road-buddy-novel denouement of coming-into-selfhood, but with the two main characters parting ways, now significantly less well-off, though still young, white, American, and male. Will's major realization is that he left the US in act more selfish than selfless:

> But every country now seemed to offer a little of every other country, and *every given landscape, I finally realized, existed somewhere in the U.S.* Which took some of the fun out of it. It made little sense to leave one's country if all you're looking for is scenery and poor people ... Hell. What were we doing here? ... To travel is selfish - that money could be used for hungry stomachs and you're using it for your hungry eyes, and the needs of the former must trump the latter, right? How much disbelief, collectively, must be suspended, to allow for tourism? (254, emphasis added)

By reading Will as a thinly veiled Eggers – Eggers had himself recently come into money as well, and used that money to open the non-profit writing center – we can trace the emergence of

his global consciousness and the consolidation of his activist ethos. There is poverty and hunger everywhere, including the US; Will realizes that he didn't need to leave the US, much less Chicago, to give away his money. The trip was instead a new form of tourism, a way of satiating his own desires more than anyone else's; the trip was designed to make him feel good. However, his guilty consciousness reminds him that "hungry stomachs" are more important than his own voyeuristic desires, and he still desires a way to fill those stomachs. Eggers, the writer, reaches for the best way he knows how, which is the novel form. He will help Deng tell his story, found a Foundation, and rebuild Deng's home country.

As motivated by current events and "disparity" as *What is the What* is, it also remains remarkably quiet about the US's contemporaneous wars with Afghanistan and Iraq. Eggers' work, in general, is highly concerned with the individual experiences of individuals, and ignores the social, economic, and political structures that convene to construct those experiences. Much like nineteenth century sentimentalism, justice is presented as a truth told between friends; through the relay of a story, hearts will change minds, which in turn will (maybe) change legislature. However, in spite of its willful ignorance of the US wars, *What is the What* a post9/11 story. Deng is selected for relocation to the US on September 8, 2001, and is supposed to fly out on the 11th. He and his peers watch the explosion of the twin towers on television in Nairobi; their immigration is delayed. When Deng finally does make it to the States, he finds a public attitude that is more suspicious than welcoming. Deng invokes his Christianity often in order to differentiate himself from other brown-skinned immigrants. But the historical positioning of this novel is more than plot: it also exists as part of the book's *raison d'etre*. I claim that this book was – and remains – so popular because it addresses an emergent white liberal guilt, the same guilt that was first articulated in *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* Unlike the

white guilt that Styron addressed (the guilt of the grandchildren of slave-owners), it has not yet become hegemonic. Instead, it exists as liberal uncertainty: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the deployment of "democracy" and "freedom" as double-speak to legitimate global violence, coupled with the very real experience and fear of a violent attack on the territorial US, leaves the "good liberal" in a space of unknowing. This book provides a certain amount of security. Recalling sentimental norms of the nineteenth century, it tells readers that if they just *learn* about the other, then the political work will be done. As Will claims: "We gave and received love! … We're just wanting to see them, to touch their hands, to brush up against their arm or something" (124). "Love," here, comes to stand in for a nexus of relationships and feelings much more complicated and layered than the individual would like to, or can, encounter. Instead, by blanketing these feelings of inadequacy, concern, and guilt in a belief *in the power of two people to connect*, "parity" will be achieved.[8] The calling up of sentimental ideals of connection in this moment of political change and racial unease is significant: what work does the genre do, now? How has it changed? And what other logics and knowledges does it bring with it?

The claim that *What is the What* creates connections between people and, as a result, promotes the ethical good was echoed in the popular press. In her *The New York Times* review of *What is the What*, author Francine Prose claims that, like Mark Twain's 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book forces American readers to situate themselves and their country's politics in a global framework, reach beyond their immediate situation in order to learn something bigger and newer, and finally to "experience the subject from the inside." Prose

[8] Aaron Ritzenberg's *The Sentimental Touch* (2013) traces the trope of human touch – in particular the hand-hold – from nineteenth century sentimentalism through twentieth century modernism. He claims that the use of "touch" symbolizes, in otherwise machinated and profit-driven universes, a space of common humanity and connection, and that this highly-sentimental trope is reiterated through the twentieth century unquestioned. Eggers draws from this literary storehouse as well, when he claims that "brushing up against their arms or something" will achieve a form of togetherness that is unassailable by critics or, we imagine, modern life. Coincidentally, the side-kick character in *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* is named "Hand."

claims that this new-knowing, of something that was not-known before, will change the political field:

> After having read *What Is the What,* you . . . know precisely who the [Lost] [B]oys were because you have experienced their mass migration and the mass murder that occasioned it through the eyes, and in the compelling voice, of Valentino Achak Deng. By the time the members of Eggers's large and youthful fan base have repeatedly consulted the book's map of East Africa, tracing the Lost Boys' wanderings, they will be able to visualize the geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing their possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class. (1)

This use of the text as a pedagogical tool is congruent with contemporary scholarship. In the years post-9/11, a number of monographs were published by scholars in the humanities on the relays between human rights and literary form. Lynn Hunt, Joseph Slaughter, Elizabeth Goldman, and James Dawes,[9] among others, use the language of international human rights in order to explore the cultural work and possibilities of literary texts. While their findings and stakes were divergent – Slaughter, for example, critiques the universalistic approach of human rights narrative, while Dawes, on the other hand, spends more time exploring how these stories shape policy and experience – it is a significant entry into the vocabulary and purview of the humanities scholar. I see this shift as an optimistic rejoinder to work done in the 1980s and 1990s under the rubrics of Subaltern and Trauma Studies. Whereas much of that scholarship highlights the limited and contingent ways in which the scholar can "know" the other, hear her story, or

[9] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*; Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*; Elizabeth Goldman, *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights;* and James Dawes, *That The World May Know.* All four of these monographs were published in 2007.

understand her pain, this work on "human rights" forcibly relocates a politics of redress and justice to center stage. Its belief in the power of narrative, while not naïve, does make the claim that the "human rights story" must be told, and heard, and disseminated. However, this work is limited insofar as it invokes the phrase "human rights" to focus specifically on "human rights atrocities" occurring *outside of the US.* The literary texts under review by these scholars are, by and large, about crises in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe. This displacement of "atrocity" from the US nation-form, six years into the US's two "wars of choice" (Cole "White Savior"), to the African other has consequences for how their work is received and circulated. In a nervous, budget-stricken institutional environment, the choice to look at "atrocities" abroad – and the ways that *we can hear them* – might appear as a safe choice for the humanities academic.

The historical context of *What is the What*'s publication is one, therefore, of a cautious optimism, that the white, privileged subject might actually be able to "hear the subject" and thereby be able to act right. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argued in 2004 that "over the past twenty years, life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims" (1). *What is the What* enters into this milieu, wearing its formal ambiguity on its sleeve and its good intentions in its Prologue. It isn't surprising, then, that much of the critical reception of the novel also lauded its project and execution. Brian Yost writes that "The testimony, as a cosmopolitan artifact, bridges gaps of received culture and lived experience in order to form active connections between otherwise distant and disconnected people. The empathetic bonds formed through communication across transnational spaces require readers to respond with a reorganization of beliefs and actions" (165). Eggers and Deng's project is fundamentally different than other, more exploitative testimony projects – Yost tells us –

because, in this case, the money from the project stays in the hands of the subaltern.[10] Yost calls the novel (and, by extension, collaborative projects like *What is the What*) an act of "cosmopolitan activism" (150) because not only does it refigure discursive and empathic lines of knowledge, but it also puts the considerable resources of the West to work in order to rebuild a destroyed region of Africa. Yost puts much weight on the fact that Eggers' work transcends the "national": rather than consolidate an Andersonian imagined national community, this text is able to span territorial boundaries and aid the emergence of a cosmopolitan, decentered, and radicalized reading public.

This argument that material change (the advancement of human rights claims) is an effect of discursive representation (life narratives) relies on the assumption that these texts are primarily pedagogical, and that (privileged) students will heed their lessons, if not use their privilege to enact political change. It is telling that Francine Prose locates the lessons of *What is the What* in the high school classroom; the implicit argument is that, once given this "experience [of] the subject from the inside" (Prose), good readers will have been *taught something*. It is the collapse of the subject, just as requested in the final lines of the text itself. This time, we are reminded of the power at stake in this formulation. For Deng (and his story, or the knowledge produced around him) becomes an object of knowledge for consumption and use by the liberal reader, to "experience" and then "know" something new, that was not-known before.

And here we encounter the central problematic, the one that an accusation of "Orientalism" (Siegel 53) takes aim at: the book is not written by Deng, nor is it written for a

[10] All of the considerable proceeds from *What is the What* go to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which is working to rebuild villages and establish schools in southern Sudan, and to aid the Sudanese community in the U.S. The Foundation website reads: "All proceeds from the book are donated—and will continue to be donated, as it's published in paperback and overseas—directly to Valentino's cause" (VAD Foundation).

Sudanese (or even African) audience. Quite simply, the book is penned by Eggers, in Eggers' signature style, and aims (explicitly) to change the hearts and minds of privileged Western readers (Prose got it right, as it were; the readers of *What is the What* have two options for this lesson: the novel or the classroom). However, unlike the nineteenth century abolitionist texts, in which the proving of veracity was paramount, here we see an argument contra authenticity. In the Prologue to the 2006 edition, Deng tells us that this text introduces a new kind of collaboration, and readers must enter into it with disbelief suspended:

> This book was born out of the desire on the part of myself and the author to reach out to others to help them understand the atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed before and during the civil war. To that end, over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my own voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation. *Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel.* It should not be taken as a definitive history of the civil war in Sudan, nor of the Sudanese people, nor even of my brethren, those known as the Lost Boys. *This is simply one man's story, subjectively told* (5, emphases added).

In this Prologue, Deng inverts the editor/writer structure of the antebellum slave narrative, and assumes his own authenticity in order to pronounce Eggers' right to write the book. Whereas in those 19th-century texts the authenticity of the black writer was suspect, here the active reader is assumed to be suspicious of Eggers' right to write. Deng, whose assumption of self is also the *a priori* condition of the book, introduces Eggers to head off those accusations of "Orientalism." However, unlike the slave narratives, in this Prologue Deng carefully warns us that his life is not

meant to be representative of the cause. The book is as much artistic endeavor as political intervention; Deng tells us that he is *not meant* to be symbolic of the Lost Boys, or of the war in Sudan, or of genocide in Africa. He is just one man, and this is just his story, "subjectively told." This introduction gives artistic license to Eggers, and also gives purchase to readers' capacity to "enter into" the novel as such. Freed by concerns for fact-telling, readers are able to instead intuit larger truths and lessons.[11]

For the 2007 reprint of the book by Vintage, Deng rewrote the Prologue. It continued to include a discussion of method – "It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What is the What* a novel" (xiv) – but gone are the reminders of Deng's unique positionality. Rather than recall the fact that this is a fictionalized story, crafted by another, instead he includes more of a history lesson:

> My desire to have this book written was born out of my faith and beliefs in humanity; I wanted to reach out to others and to help them understand Sudan's place in our global community. I am relieved that Dave and I have accomplished this task through *illumination of my life as an example* of the atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed against its own people. Although the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement gave southern Sudan the opportunity to rebuild itself – and the chance to secede in 2011 via popular referendum – gross human rights violations still continue today in the Darfur region of the country. (xiv, emphasis added)

[11] Elizabeth Twitchell has an excellent analysis of the tension between "the moral obligation to empathize with distant and dissimilar persons, and a skepticism about the morality of empathic identification itself" (624) in her "Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Era of Misery Lit" (2011). In this article, she locates *What is the What* as bartering in the aesthetics of the 1990s "misery lit" moment, and yet also always working to show that a pure empathic connection and knowledge is politically and ideologically fraught.

Perhaps encouraged by reviews such as Prose's and the financial success of the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, the second edition of the book claims itself as an act of history-telling and as a representative life. This act of (auto)biography becomes a model for the process of knowing history: know me, Deng implies, and you will know Sudan. What's more, the process of collaboration is deescalated from an artistic process ("over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author") to a necessary tool ("I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What is the What* a novel"). Taken together, the revelation of the book-as-history and the collaboration-as-politics tell us that this project is much more than just "one man's story, subjectively told." Indeed, Deng seems eager to enter into that space demanded by Prose; he positions himself as the object of knowledge, the body onto which the explorations and the experiences of the privileged Western student are mapped. We must therefore return to the question of Orientalism – or more precisely, "Africanism" – to explore what kind(s) of history the text produces, and what kind(s) of politics this collaboration makes possible.

In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), a short treatise by Toni Morrison on US literary studies, Morrison traces the figure of the black body in US literature by white authors. She notes how an "Africanist" figure is almost uniformly present in US literature, and as often goes unremarked by critics and scholars. She argues that this racialized figure stands as a naturalized metaphor for ideally "American" themes – the black body plays the foil to white explorations of freedom, innocence, and individuality. The black body (and all that it symbolizes) throws the white body (and all that it symbolizes) into relief. The black body doesn't speak, is silenced, and instead provides the background against which the white author can articulate the white values of the white nation.

We might say that *What is the What* offers a new iteration of Africanism for the 21st century. Rather than use the character of Achak as a foil against which to layer white characters, Eggers positions himself as the white intellectual against Deng's unknown/unknowable blackness. Even as the reader thinks that they are "getting to know" (or "experience") the Sudanese subject, they are actually being interpellated ever-deeper into a nexus of white, Western, intellectual production. Eggers, in fact, produces the self, himself: by taking Deng's name as his legitimation and Achak as the character he enlivens with his own voice, he inhabits the other. He speaks the subaltern, he erases the actual Deng from literary history, and, in doing so, consolidates networks of power and knowledge *rather than* problematizing them with a narrative by a black man. The silence that reverberates is actually cacophonous: for while Deng has disappeared into a vacuum, Eggers and his admirers grow louder in their self-congratulatory rhetoric.

Contemporary with Morrison's work in the 1990s and Eggers' early novels was the emergent field of Trauma Studies. Scholars such as Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth turned to psychoanalytic theory, stemming from Freud, to explore the ways in which stories are shaped, told, heard, and passed on, both in the immediate moment and also over generations. Caruth's theorization of "history" offers us another way to read *What is the What*. Drawing from poststructuralist insights, Caruth argues that we must understand that trauma is never referential, and that "immediate understanding" of pain will never arise. Instead, what might emerge is a possibility for "history" (11). "History," we are to understand, is where the "crisis of life" and the "crisis of death" meet: where the survivor tells, and where the "another" meets the survivor to hear. In this formulation, as Deng "speaks," Eggers is able to listen. In his listening, Eggers doesn't emerge into "truth" or an embodied knowledge of Deng's experiences. Instead, he

recognizes the "another" (Deng) in himself, and the connectedness of their stories, and is from that place able to write the "history" that is both life and death, knowing and unknowing, Deng and Eggers.

How do we navigate these two exegeses of the novel? In the first, Eggers' project is an updated example of Africanism, an act of racial cross-dressing in which Western audiences are able to smugly reflect on themselves to themselves. In the second, the experience of listening (though never complete) seems to be politically tantamount to activism; to listen is also an experience of becoming the victim. As I turn to the text of *What is the What*, I aim to explore the ways in which the novel reflects and refracts both of these formations of literature and politics. I situate *What is the What*'s desire for unity and knowledge as part and parcel of the sentimental inheritance, and yet also importantly delineated by the specificities of this historical moment. In this moment, an impetus to question the limits of story-telling, undergirded by a deep ambivalence regarding the efficacy of stories to "change the world," becomes the warrant which allows Eggers to perform this remarkable act of erasure.

Dave Eggers is aware of the difficulty of the terrain. The project is vexed, and he knows it: to be a wealthy, white, American man writing in the voice of the impoverished African emigrant is a politically dangerous project. Although Eggers has been praised for the smooth manner in which he produces Achak's voice, I will argue that Eggers remains uneasy with the idea of a facile or complete identification between himself and Deng, or between the Western intellectual and the racialized subaltern. Hearing, he tells us, is more difficult than we might think. And although "stories" are supposed to be that which bring us together, in most of the book they are in fact what separate Achak from the rest of the world.

All of the reviews and most of the scholarly work that treat *What is the What* focus on the *Bildungsroman*-like arc of the narrative, which follows Achak from his childhood in Sudan to adulthood in the US. Furthermore, most of them also treat the events in Sudan as the central drama of the narrative. Achak's experiences in Sudan, in this type of analysis, are thereby "brought forth" into the Western public sphere in order to alert a privileged reading audience to the "atrocities" that occurred, and continued to occur at the time of publication, in a particular region of Sudan. However, what these analyses of the novel ignore is the emphatic way in which Achak's experiences in the US. open and close the novel, and parallel the events in Sudan. Achak's "life narrative," told in flashback, is always in conversation with his present American reality – a reality that is very different, but actually no less difficult than his experiences in east Africa. To focus exclusively on Achak's experiences in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya is to miss one of the major insights of the novel: that the structures of race, class, religion, power, and politics that produced the genocide in Sudan are the same structures that delineate his experiences in the US. This novel rejects the *Bildungsroman*'s desire for closure, pointing instead to the ways in which Achak's life remains unresolved and deeply complicated. This uneasiness with narrative structure and tidy endings is demonstrated, again and again, in the ways that stories fail Achak.

The novel begins in Atlanta, in the present tense, as Achak answers his apartment door. It is a robbery, and within moments Achak is bound and gagged on the floor while two AfricanAmerican characters (he calls them Tanya and Powder) clean out his apartment. Eggers quickly dismisses the possibility of pan-Africanism, or Third Worldist solidarity; when Powder asks if Achak is "from Africa" and Achak nods, Powder tells him:

> "All right then. That means we're brothers." I
>
> am unwilling to agree.
>
> "And because we're brothers and all, I'll teach you a lesson. Don't you know you
>
> shouldn't open your door to strangers?" (5)[12]

The irony of supposed racial or ethnic belonging is enormous. Achak is dislocated from national or regional specificity, and becomes the embodiment of "Africa." However, this means little; Achak is "unwilling" to agree that they are brothers based purely upon a racialized subjectivity. Likewise, Powder's ironic deployment of "brotherhood" only heightens the ultimate lesson: that they are strangers. No facile means of identitarian politics are going to change the histories of colonialism, slavery, or neoliberal economics that have positioned both men in such vulnerable locations. Powder later kicks him repeatedly, yelling "'Fucking Nigerian! So stupid!' … 'No wonder you motherfuckers are in the Stone Age!'" (9). Tonya and Powder leave, Achak is left wounded on the floor, and the ghost of racial solidarity exits with Achak's VCR.

Hearing stories, therefore, is not about racial identity. Eggers sleight of hand here – to position Deng's last tormentors as black Americans – tells the reader that being of a so-called "race" does not equate with a capacity to "hear" better. To be sure, he also doesn't imply that white people are any better at listening; just that we must not dismiss him (Eggers) outright because he's not black. Eggers continues to drive this point home as the book unfolds. The narrative is constituted out of "silent stories": interior monologues, told in Achak's head, to characters whom he meets in Atlanta during one 24-hour period. The narrative oscillates between Achak's "present" in the United States and the telling of his "past" in east Africa. The characters

[12] Here and henceforth, page references to *What is the What* are from the 2007 Vintage edition.

to whom he "speaks" – silently – are all black, save the last two. Furthermore, they all represent different failures of the US system.

Achak's dubs his first "listener" "TV Boy." He's a young man, left to guard Achak in the apartment after Tonya and Powder have left. Achak tries to rally the boy's support, but the boy responds with fear and eventually violence. Achak responds sympathetically to the boy: "he could be in the same sort of trouble I am" (25), and begins the first of his silent stories, describing his childhood in the village of Marial Bai. "It was not so long ago that I was like you" (48) he tells TV Boy, and then pauses to reflect: "Perhaps you, too, are a child of war" (57). Eggers' suggestion is that the reader must continually assess not the differences between Achak and his listeners, but rather their similarities. TV Boy, if a child of war, suggests that the system of racial exploitation and poverty that continues to undergird the US system abuses black youth – differently, but not less violently – than a civil war. TV Boy's positionality – young, black, male, now criminal – is as much a production of the dominant power regime as Achak's childhood experiences were. If this were a moment of Caruthian healing, TV Boy might peer down their doubled narrative, and understand how race and economic structures have produced both of their "wars." But TV Boy does not listen; instead, scared by Achak's verbosity, he drops a phone book on Achak's head and Achak passes out. Literally knocked out by a list of names and locations, reminding the reader of how Achak remains a "stranger" to structures of belonging in the US, Achak's story and the might-have-been of testimonial redemption is precluded.

Achak's second listener is the nurse on duty at the hospital where he eventually seeks help for his injuries. Julian works the overnight shift, and is unable to offer Achak immediate help; instead, Achak waits in the waiting room for hours, silently telling Julian of his years in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps. Although Julian at first appears a kind rescuer – "He must

be able to pull whatever strings necessary. He will personally make sure it is done quickly and done well" (241) – the failures of public health become apparent as Achak continues to wait to be treated. The failures of the American health system are juxtaposed with the indeterminacy of continuing violence in Sudan, and the inability of stories to change the course of events. As he sits in the waiting room, Achak comes across a magazine with an image of a Darfurian woman on the cover:

> A Darfurian woman, with cracked lips and yellow eyes, looks into the camera, at once despairing and defiant. Do you know what she wants, Julian? She is a woman who had a camera pushed into her face and she stared into the lens. I have no doubt that she wanted to tell her story, or some version of it. But now that it has been told, now that the countless murders and rapes have been documented, or extrapolated from those few reported, the world can wonder how to approach Sudan's violence against Darfur. (249250).

It's an ambivalent meditation on representation. The Darfurian woman looks like "despair" and, one would assume, is meant to alert Westerners to the continuing genocide in Sudan; however, images of malnourished Africans have been common in the US since the 1983 Ethiopian famine, which is famous not only for bringing images of starvation and death to the US but also the massive celebrity response, including but not limited to Michael Jackson's "We Are the World" single.[13] One might wonder at the exploitative issues that surround the image; as Achak wonders, did this woman get a chance to tell her "story"? Eggers implies that the highly-constructed, largely referential image will instead only cue appropriate Western reactions of sadness, bafflement, or even repulsion. Left "wondering" how to act in the literal face of such "atrocity,"

[13] See usaforafrica.org for more information on the Jackson effort.

the implication is that the Western reader will hide the magazine away, the woman's "real" story will go untold, and Darfur will be left free to pursue genocidal practices. Given the context of the waiting room, with Julian sitting just out of reach in the next room, Achak's meditation on the woman signifies an even larger nexus of not-knowing, willful ignorance, and powerlessness. Julian can't offer help to Achak: he does not hold the institutional position to rush Achak in to see a doctor. Julian, therefore, is like so many Western subjects whose hands are tied by the structural positions in which they find themselves. Knowing Achak's story, like "knowing" the woman's, actually does very little: given the reality of public health, of the hospital hierarchy, of international trade and politics, there is little than one can do except "wonder." As Achak ruefully remarks: "Julian, you know nothing yet" (255).

The next of Achak's "listeners" is Dorsetta, "one of the few African-American women who [works] out" at the health club where Achak checks in classes. Achak uses Dorsetta's position in U.S. society as a space to reflect on his own. She graciously tells him to "hang in there," but Achak reflects that "The truth is I do not like hanging in there. I was born, I believe, to do more. Or perhaps it's that I survived to do more. Dorsetta is married, a mother of three, and manages a restaurant; she does more than hang in there" (504). Achak understands that Dorsetta works incredibly hard, balances family and work, and exercises in a fancy health club: she is, by all appearances, doing more than surviving in the US system. Achak, feeling bereft at his current position and lack of opportunity and community, appeals to her: "Dorsetta, I pretend that I know who I am now but I simply don't. I'm not American and it seems difficult now to call myself Sudanese" (505). But Dorsetta, of course, does not hear: she has already disappeared into the locker room, her busy American day off to its regular start. Isolated in the front desk, confused at

who he is and what he is meant to be doing in and with his life, he tells Dorsetta the story of leaving the refugee camps. But of course she does not hear.

It is telling that Achak's first female listener is also the one with whom he explores his desire to build a family. We have already learned of the violent way in which Achak's Sudanese girlfriend died in Seattle, the victim of domestic violence; now, we hear Achak question if he wants an arranged marriage with a woman in the Kenyan refugee camp. These conversations revolve around the omnipresent specter of gender oppression across different spaces and in different contexts. Dorsetta, a black woman, becomes the space in which he can explore the desire to begin a new romance, and to start a family. Haunted by Tabitha (his deceased girlfriend) and by the women in the Kenyan refugee camp who are waiting for him to bring them to the US, he desires something as stable and seemingly proper as Dorsetta's busy life, her more-than-hanging-in-there. Notably, Achak does not consider the ways in which Dorsetta's every day is also structured by gender, race, and class histories. Achak's use of the female listener reifies her gender position, even as he sits with confusion and anguish over gender violence and inequality.

Achak's penultimate listener is Sidra:

She is white, very large, exceedingly graceful …

> "I'm Sidra," she says, and extends her hand. "I'm new … I'm, you know, making some changes." She looks down at her girth shyly, and I immediately feel that I should say something. I want to make her feel better. I want her to feel blessed. I want her to know that she has been blessed. To be here now, to be alive as she is, to have lived always in this country, Sidra, you are blessed.

> She gives me her card and I swipe it. Her picture appears, her smile sad and tilted, and she enters the gym. (460)

Sidra, trapped by the gender and class expectations of U.S. culture, can't hear what Achak wants to tell her: that she is beautiful, that she is blessed. Her wound is a bourgeois white woman's; compared with Achak's wounds, it seems laughably insignificant. And yet, Eggers pushes us to recognize the ways in which these wounds are bound together. Achak does: he wants her to know that to have always lived in the society that produced the wound of size, "this country," is a blessing.

Sidra and her white woman's pain are an interesting contrast to TV Boy, Julian, and Dorsetta. Unlike the first three, her wound is bourgeois, perhaps the mark of class and race privileges rather than subjugation to them. And yet the implication is the same as the others: trapped within a prison of institutional identity, of identifying structures that delimit how they see themselves and the world (and consequently themselves in the world), the characters are all unable to hear one another. The dream, therefore, is quintessentially Caruthian: to reach beyond these identities and to listen to one another, and to hear stories, will be to begin the long process of circling (if not healing from) the wounds.

But they never do. Achak's stories remain silent, and every single character disappears into their Atlanta lives, never the wiser for Achak's long interior monologues. The final image of the text is Achak leaving work, setting off across the city, an untethered boy again, ultimately unsure who he will call or what he will say to them. Ceaseless movement, solitary reflection, and emotional disconnect characterize the conclusion of the novel. A sadness, therefore, lingers around the edges of this text. Despite its deep belief in the power of the story, Eggers suggests that structures of race, class, and gender do keep us separated from one another. Even within the

community of Sudanese immigrants, Achak has a hard time finding companionship; the book is rife with stories of Sudanese living in the US who steal, fight, and hurt one another. The implication is that we cannot talk (or hear) our ways out of these wounds. They are too deep, and discourse too always-already implicated.

But not entirely. Achak's ultimate listener is, of course, the reader him/herself. As he crosses the city, Achak conjures up the reader as the privileged subject who has heard his stories, and is now empowered to change this system of failure. Movement and sadness, therefore, are in the last moment replaced with a politics of hope. For the reader, this sudden shift to the second person can be discomfiting: by being aligned with TV Boy, Julian, Dorsetta, and Sidra, the reader must confront their own positionality and capacity to "hear" or to not-hear. Furthermore, the "you" addressed in the last moment of the text is a privileged subject. Achak's final argument, to the person holding the text, is actually slyly mocking: "All the while I will know that you are there. *How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exis*t" (535, emphasis mine). The suggestion is that most readers do pretend that Achak (and by extension, Deng, and by extension, all of the Sudanese people that Deng is meant to represent) does not exist; that is he, in fact, a fictional character and therefore dismissible. This is the myopia of Western privilege: to hide magazine images away, to read books about African subjects and then forget about them. I argue, therefore, that Deng's last listener, the "you" of the reader, is located as the ultimate white liberal subject. Achak appeals to this reader's desire for knowledge (to "experience from the inside," to "collapse" the space between), but then ironically calls attention to the ways in which this privileged reader *does not* "do" anything with their new knowledge. In "forgetting" the intimacy between themselves and

Deng, they too reject Achak's stories and the chance to develop a "history" that is both personal and political.

This split subject (Achak/ reader) is the result of the Westerner's desire to "know" and their incapacity to know. Achak wants to "collapse" the space, and yet he cannot; readers desire intimacy with the subaltern, and yet they continually forget the ways in which their own subjectivities are as intimately linked with structures of power as is Achak's. Like Achak's other listeners, readers are also incapable of "hearing," wounded by their own experiences and positions within the US. However, there is one certain difference. Unlike the other characters in the text, the reader *has* just read ("heard") Achak's stories (all of them). The final charge, therefore, is to *do something different* than (for example) feel a sense of estrangement and "wonder" (as with the image of the Darfurian woman). Instead, readers are directed to recognize the ways in which the telling of the stories *has actually* tested the ontological categories of identity, and the ways in which the reader can choose to transcend those categories and become "human" – all too human – by aligning one's own stories with those of Achak (535).

It's an ambivalent conclusion. There is a deep sadness, occasioned not by Achak's experiences as a child and adolescent in east African but rather by the ways in which the US political and social system continues to fail him – as well, it seems, as everyone he meets (and by extension, the reader). However, there is also a small slice of hope. That hope is embedded in stories, and in the capacity to heed these warnings. To walk on unawares, as Dorsetta and Sidra do, is as violent as TV Boy's telephone book or Julian's negligence; Achak urges us to stay, to "fill the air with our words," and to recognize ourselves in each other. For the reader, this final charge is both stunning and extremely difficult. Readers like Prose, who take Achak at his word, will be convinced that they now "know the subject" and have begun the complicated work of

healing. Readers who identify with the textual listeners, however, will realize that it is quite a bit more complicated than that. The reader left in an ineffective space in which they don't know what they have just "heard": the desire to identify seems redemptive, and yet the problematic of listening (and how that would even happen) remains unresolved.[14]

There are several moments in the text where a system of representation fails. Like the image of the Darfurian woman cited above, discursive representations of the human are shown to be suspect. These moments can be read as self-referential; as Eggers warning the reader not to trust the given representation, or at least not to take it at face value. This is nowhere more clear than when Achak is living in the Kakuma refugee camp, in Ethiopia, and must write his life narrative in order to be considered for relocation to the US. Achak's first draft is a few paragraphs long, but he revises and expands it when a friend tell him the story should be juicier:

> The first step in leaving Kakuma was the writing of our autobiographies. The UNHCR and the United States wanted to know where we had come from, what we had endured. We were to write our stories in English, or if we could not write adequately in English we were to have someone write it for us. We were asked to write about the civil war, about losing our families, about our lives in the camps. Why do you want to leave Kakuma? they asked. Are you afraid to return to Sudan, even if there is peace? … we knew that our stories had to be well told, that we needed to remember all that we had seen and done; no deprivation was insignificant … When I finished, it was nine pages long. When I turned it in, the UN took a passport picture of me to attach to my file … I stared at this photo for

[14] Michelle Peek calls this the position of the "ineffective listener," and argues that the experience of locating oneself as Achak's final "ineffective listener" is to recognize the limitations of human rights discourses and humanitarian modes of knowing. She argues that the final, second-person appeal asks readers "to question the ethics of the promises (even promises delivered with the best of intentions) that structure humanitarian witnessing" (127).

> hours … debating with myself whether or not this picture, these words, were truly me. (485-486)

Achak's self-production, in print and image, is coherent with poststructuralist critiques of the self. Achak's displacement into dominant language and discourse creates him in the image of the dominant regime; having reported the correct answers in regards to his activities during the war, his (dis)connections with family, and his ability to write in English, he is able to claim a subjectivity that is appropriate for UN attention. His resulting discomfiture suggests not only that this official representation isn't "really" him, but asks whether a "true" self could exist in text and image. His textual "self" is inscribed within narrative discourse; the trajectory of Achak's narrative begins at the beginning, and is meant to tell the story of Achak through difficult experiences and into an eventual resolved place of safety and security.

Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.* explores the connection between human rights legislation and narrative form. Slaughter argues that human rights and the *Bildungsroman* are "mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development" (4). The *Bildungsroman* is a "novel of formation … it narrates the protagonist's development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of 'youth' to the definition, mobility, and potency of 'maturity'" (Lowe 45); in other words, the *Bildungsroman* accords a narrative arc to the human life, and in so doing suggests that a normative narrative of enlightenment defines the subject. Slaughter's key insight is how human rights discourse requires the same teleology of the human. Achak knows that his tale must be "well told" in order that he be considered for relocation; the implicit assumption is that the story will be literary, insofar as it will include dramas of despair, hardship, trauma, and

conclude with a desire for relocation. This desire for relocation is significant. Not only does it defer the conclusion of the *Bildungsroman*, but it positions the US at the only possible way in which Achak can become "reintegrated" into society and emerge into maturity. With the US as the conclusion of the life narrative, other possibilities (returning to his home village or the possibility that difficulties continue in the US) are written out of the plot. Lisa Lowe tells us: "The novel of formation … elicits the reader's identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual's relinquishing of particularity and difference through an identification with an idealized 'national' form of subjectivity" (98). Emergence into "national" identity can only happen with immigration to the US; Achak's UN narrative exists, therefore, as a sort of cliff-hanger, meant to appeal to UN administrators who will read it and understand that the only logical conclusion is immigration and assimilation into the United States. Finally, this narrative thereby positions Achak's life and experiences in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya as the "not-yet": the pre-story that leads up to the emergence of the (national) self in (Western) history.[15] This historiography of the subject is both racist and nationalist, though easily reiterated and understood as a straight-forward story of immigration and development.

Eggers is critical of this construction; he reminds us, again, that Achak "isn't sure" whether his life narrative is "actually" his story or an accurate representation of his self, and

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[15] This emergence of the "self" is importantly linked with the telling of history. Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis of historiography is helpful here. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty tells us that modernity is articulated with a linear model of time, in which various nations emerge at various moments out of the darkness of "pre-modernity" and into the light of globalizing capital. Those nations that have not yet "developed" are positioned in the "waiting room of history" or the "not-yet" of modernity (8). By using the European novel form of the *Bildungsroman*, Achak positions his African past as the "not-yet" of his story. The future, as it were, is the chance to become "developed" and part of US society.

[16] Although not a statist organization per se, the UN's emergence at the end of World War II as an arbiter of relations between states has always secured it as a force that acts like, and for, the interests of the capitalist, Western forces that won the war and limned the "break-down" of the globe post-war. Indeed, even the name "United Nations" suggests that there could be no such organization without a conception of the world as national.

indeed Eggers coyly reminds us that their own (his and Deng's) collaboration mirrors the UN process: "if we could not write adequately in English we were to have someone write it for us" (485) – which is exactly why Deng sought out Eggers for help with his memoir project. The UN narrative coheres a nationalist novel of formation; Eggers' narrative coheres a subject for consumption for Western audiences. Both are acts of conjuring, of auto-production of the dominant regime. As Lowe notes, the tension here is between the particularities of the individual and the demand to "relinquish" them in order to become the "national," or universal, citizen.

Wendy Brown has argued that this (re)production of particularity secures the stability of the state, for to be injured is to be needy of state protection: "Thus, the effort to 'outlaw' social injury powerfully legitimizes law and the state as appropriate protectors against injury and creates injured individuals as needing such protection by such protectors" (27). This is precisely what Achak does in the UN camp: he produces himself as particularly injured in order to claim the protections of the UN.[16] That the violences of the Sudanese Civil War are "against the law" – the UN law – requires that the UN step in as arbiter and securer of justice. That this actually *secures* the position of the UN is not questioned.

What is the What can be read as a powerful example of the tensions between universalism and particularity. For example, when Achak is called upon to write his narrative for the United Nations, Achak produces himself as "particular" (Dinka; Christian; injured). By securing his identity as such, he is then able to enter a "universal" identity – the "human" of "rights" – and immigrate to the United States. That this schema secures the power, vision, and economics of the UN and the US is exactly the point: by distributing equity and rights, the legal and economic institution of the West is positioned as the universal. The performance of Achak's injury shores up the power and position of Western geopolitical forces. Emphatically, it is not that the UN is

not also a particular formation, but that it happens to occupy the privileged position from which to articulate the universal. As Stuart Hall remarked, "what we call 'the global' is always composed of varieties of articulated particularities. I think the global is the self-presentation of the dominant particular" (67). The *dominant particular*, in this example the UN, has the "voice" (as it were) to delineate the interests of the universal, which are the interests of itself. Alys Weinbaum and Brent Edwards take this analysis one step farther: "the US is so often the unavowed ground for articulating the idea of the 'globe' … *any enunciation of the universal is always better understood as the articulation of what Hall has termed the 'dominant particular*'" (260, emphasis mine). If "*any* enunciation" of the "the universal" is actually a demonstration of the "dominant particular's" self-interest, then we come to a difficult place. Achak's testimony would be little more than a performance of injury (to shore up the dominant particular) and a demonstration of assimilability (to the dominant particular).

Perhaps, then, this is what actually gives him pause. Not only does Eggers' self-reflexive moment – "I stared at this photo for hours … debating with myself whether or not this picture, these words, were truly me" (486) – recall to the reader the constructedness of the text they hold in their hands, but also that Achak must produce himself in order to be allowed entry to the U.S. at all. This is a high-stakes way to re-think Althusser's theory of interpellation. For in Achak's case, as the man hailed on the street by the police, he actually does have time to decide whether or not to answer. Althusser perhaps did not imagine a place or situation in which bodies were not always-already interpellated into the "universal" construct of the Western subject;[16] but Achak,

[16] Of course, Achak was always-already interpellated into "global" systems of commerce and capital. The war in Sudan is itself a symptom of this, as it has roots in the interventions of oil companies as well as the colonial past. As a political and economic subject, therefore, Achak is "always-already." However, I am arguing something slightly different: how Achak understands himself within the "global" structure. As a boy in Sudan, he had no knowledge of Sudan's colonial history or even the existence of white people. Achak's narrative, therefore, traces his coming-of-age as a coming-into-knowledge. Knowledge, here, is both empowering and subjectivating.

pre-narrative, is quite obviously not. As long as he lives in the refugee camps, a number to be counted for rations but otherwise ignored by "the dominant particular," Achak stands outside of a totalizing structure of capital and ideology. It is not until he expresses interest in entering into that structure that he must become interpellated. The hail, therefore, is the practice of writing the life story. Achak is blunt: "The first step in leaving Kakuma was the writing of our autobiographies. The UNHCR and the United States wanted to know where we had come from, what we had endured" (485). At stake in this construction is the interpellation of new subjects. To be a subject is to be a human is to be universal is to be able to claim rights. To tell one's story is the first step.

Art is instrumental in this process of the new "hailing." And, while the official life narrative of the UN purchases Achak's entry to the US, it is his explorations of art and culture that convince the reader of Achak's universality. As a youth leader for the UN's Youth and Culture program, Achak writes and produces plays, organizes sports, and leads extracurricular activities for the minors in Kakuma. Achak particularly takes to writing, producing, and acting in plays, and most of the youth group's productions are invested in social change:

> So we wrote and performed plays about AIDS and how to prevent it. We wrote a play about anger management and conflict resolution. One play concerned castes and social discrimination in the camp, another covered the effects of war on children. We performed a one-act proposing gender equality – that the boys and girls of Sudan, like those in Kenya, should be treated the same – and to our continual amazement, the plays were appreciated and we received very little resistance, at least overtly, to our message. (371)

The messages (modern health care, egalitarianism, gender equality) his group presents are challenging to the Sudanese social order, and instead replicate the (stated, if not enacted) values of the West. In other words, Achak has been hailed by the dominant system, and now reproduces their values, in turn interpellating more youth and Sudanese. These plays are in fact seen as a form of "practice" for the new global order, and how the youths' lives are imagined to be once they move to the US. For the reader of *What is the What*, however, the plays (and their messages) have a different effect: unlike the highly-constructed narrative of the U.N., these plays seem to reflect something more personal and authentic, and thereby convince the Western reader that Achak is who we think he is. By demonstrating to his Western reader that he believes in and can promote Western values, Achak proves to the reader that "he really is just like us." Once again, this "universal sameness" has enormous political repercussions – Achak finds himself deemed worthy of U.S. subjectivity – but even deeper epistemological implications. For if Achak is universal, a universal that transcends the particular of ethnicity or nationality, then it means that we have no problem with stories or story-telling. If we are all the same, then all we have to do is listen.

Although the text strenuously reminds the reader of the discursive distance between themselves and Achak, it also succumbs to this desire to excavate the "soul" (Marcuse 94).[17] In Achak's explorations of art and a realization of his "self" through leadership and culture activities in the camps, Achak matures into a universally recognizable Western character.

[17] Herbert Marcuse's famous theory of "affirmative culture" is helpful here. Marcuse tells us that "Bourgeois culture has liberated individuals, but as persons who are to keep themselves in check" (115). We keep ourselves "in check" because we believe in the freedom, and therefore sanctity, of our private lives. In the realm of art, culture, and the soul, we all have a privileged space outside of the vicissitudes of capitalism. In this space – which, according to dominant culture, is apart from our work – we appreciate "relations to God, to beauty, to goodness" (94) – in other words, we indulge our "soul." It is the "soul" that keeps us happy, that verifies to us that there are limits to our suffering, and that we are not being (overly) exploited by the capitalist system. Marcuse takes this to task, and explains how "culture" is affirmative insofar as it keeps society going – rather than being its outside, it allows capitalism to flourish.

Because Achak carves out the space of interiority – of artistic exploration – for himself, and expresses a "self" that is legible to Western audiences, readers of *What is the What* "recognize" Achak as "just like me," and therefore the injustices of his life story become all the more compelling. This is exactly the process that Judith Butler describes in *Frames of War*, when she writes that what is recognizable as "personhood" is always-already articulated with how "we" have been taught to "see":

> How then is recognizability to be understood? …If we claim that recognizability is a universal potential and that it belongs to all persons as persons, then, in a way, the problem before us is already solved … Thus, we install a normative ideal as a preexisting condition of our analysis … There is no challenge that recognition poses to the form of the human that has traditionally served as the norm of recognizability, since personhood is that very norm. *The point, however, will be to ask how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as "recognizable" persons and to make others decidedly more difficult.* (6, emphasis mine).

Achak becomes "recognizable" to the reader of the text because of the revelation of his "soul." His blackness and African-ness are surmounted by the appeal of the personal, the sentimental. Just like his UN narrative demonstrated coherence with a nationalist strategy for containment and self-consolidation, here the personal appeal of the soul consolidates both Achak-as-person and also the reader as sympathetic being. By recognizing him as a person, both the reader and Achak are brought into subjectivity.

There is, therefore, a strange temporal layering to the text. Not only is Achak's present juxtaposed with his past (reminding us that injustices do not end once he gets on the plane to the US), but also the manner in which Deng, the real person, is conjured into being through the

demonstration of Achak's soul. As noted above, Deng wrote the Prologue for the book, and assuages any worries that Eggers is not the legitimate author of the book. But why would the reader trust Deng? It is because of the careful illustration of Achak's universality, his ultimate sameness with the reader of the text. This is a sameness that can be extended to Eggers (legitimizing his authorship), and ultimately to the form of the text itself. It is from this appeal to the "soul" that the strange subtitle of the book makes sense: *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel*. Granted access to his most interior of spaces – and then assured that, within those spaces, he believes in the same values and desires the same things as the Western subject – Achak is hailed and the reader accepts Deng as human. And, now hailed and named, the reader has to pay attention: the subject of the book is just like them.

Butler reminds us that this "recognition" of the subject that "we" already know comes laden with norms and universalist expectations. It is, in fact, hard to "see" or "hear" anything beyond that which "we" already know. And yet, Eggers continues to remind us that, in spite of these structural obstacles, the ethical reader must *try to hear*. For although TV Boy and Achak's other non-listeners are left in a void of silence, Achak regards them with sympathy: they are doing what they can, given the sharply-delineated circumstances. The text emerges as the paradoxical object that reminds readers that they are unable to hear the stories and also tells the stories. It performs double work: firstly telling readers that they must listen, because that is what humanity is (and therefore, the reader is human for having read), and secondly telling readers that they will never "get it" because they are also trapped by war, race, gender, violence and the particularities of their own situations. This is, furthermore, the paradox of the text: to become human is to be particularized, to be situated racially and nationally (at the very least), and to be cast into a hierarchy of knowledge production. The desire to transcend those categories – and

become something "human," more than human – is always a failed project, *and yet one that the text ardently desires.* This desire matches the desire of the liberal reader: to be able to believe in the text and in the capacity to share stories, and thereby become (or make, or make possible) a new form of coalitional politics and knowledge production. This is not the same as believing in an ideal of textual transparency or a system of truth-telling; however, the text suggests to the reader that to try and listen is more ethical than not, for those characters who don't even try to listen – who absent themselves, out of apathy or institutional mores – are shown to be the cruelest characters of all.

After TV Boy is picked up by Powder and Tanya, Achak remains bound and gagged in his apartment for a number of hours waiting for his roommate, Achor Achor, to return. He realizes that it could be days, so "I must make myself heard, I must alert a neighbor, bring someone to my door" (138). He knows that his neighbors downstairs are Christians, as they have proselytized at his door before. They have also stopped Achak to discuss the matter of human trafficking and contemporary slavery: "An earnest-looking man with the face of an overfed infant, he had read something about the persistence of slavery in Sudan; his church was sending money to an evangelical group that was planning to travel to Sudan to buy back slaves. 'A few dozen,' he said" (139). Achak thinks that, surely, these neighbors will hear him if he makes noise. The desire and action are both literal and figurative: Achak throws his body against the wall to make a commotion, to raise their interest. There is no response. Achak goes on to "tell" these neighbors, in his head, about the slave trade in Sudan, "because it interests you" (140). But Achak remains bound, not a few feet away from them; the suggestion is that Achak is inassimilable to their immediate world because of his blackness, his foreignness, his poverty, and in spite of his own devout Christianity. Their "help," as it were, is only able to make the

empathic connection with those who need "saving" in an exotic, over-there-in-Africa kind of way; their sympathy does not extend to struggling, working-class African immigrants in their own neighborhood. Eggers crafts this into a morality lesson for his readers: "Hear me, Atlanta! I am grinning and tears are rolling down my temples because I know that soon someone, perhaps the Christian neighbors … will come to this door and say Who is there? What is the matter? *They will feel the guilt in knowing they could have done something sooner had they only been listening*" (162, emphasis added). Listen, readers, Eggers tells us. The threat is explicit: the guilt you will feel is enormous.

A second example of the failure of listening is when the police arrive. By this point, Achor Achor has come home, released Achak, and together they called 911. Achak has a fleeting moment of juridical fantasy, in which his words and stories hold tremendous power and he has an audience: "I briefly imagine testifying against Tonya and Powder, pointing at them across an outraged courtroom" (233). Achak's dream of juridical justice is a dream both of *speaking* and of being *heard*; the courtroom is "outraged," the people have feel this crime deeply. For once, structures of race and nationality and class will not impact his capacity to tell a story and to be heard, well. Achak's "sense of defeat," therefore, "is complete" (239) when the police eventually arrive – after almost an hour – and do little more than give him a complaint number. The police officer implies that the crime is Achak's fault ("'You sure you didn't know these people? … But then why did you open the door?'" (237)), and then is more interested in hearing about the contemporary violence in Darfur than discussing the crime at hand. When she leaves, Achak "cannot bring [himself] to care" (239). There is no institutional hearing, no juridical space in which he might claim story-telling and justice.

This tension between missive to hear and a paradoxical awareness of one's inability to hear stands as a powerful demonstration of the tensions between Trauma Studies and recent human rights scholarship. Trauma Studies urges us to try create a different form of "history" in spite of the unknowability of trauma; human rights work hopes that these narratives might also be able to secure a safer and more just world for all. *What is the What* offers a critique of both methods. Because of entrenched and violent ontological and epistemological histories and stances, the "real" Deng will always remain absented from this text, and the reader is forced to recognize this *in spite of their desire to believe otherwise*. But it is this desire that Eggers understands as redemptive: for to try, in spite of the deep and divisive and historically powerful differences between subjects, is to conjure something akin to humanity.

Mitchum Huehls takes up this line of inquiry in his analysis of *What is the What* as a "human rights novel." Huehls argues that the figure of "the human" has been vacated, due both to the historical violences of particularity and also the process of erasure that occurs in representation. However, Eggers' innovative "non non-fiction" (11) calls attention to the ways in which "the human" is an empty space, always-already written over, and the stories that appear in the interstices are therefore all we can hope for: "In telling his stories to an array of deaf audiences … Deng realizes what is, in effect, the representational logic of the novel itself: his humanity will not be returned to him when others understand the content of his travails" (12).[18] To narrate, therefore, is both the site of inscription and liberation. To believe in the transparency of stories or the representation of the self is to fall into a struggle in which there is no way out; instead, Huehls urges us to realize that ways in which, liberated from the need to "really

[18] Huehls' decisions for how to name the various personae are different than mine; here, "Deng" signifies the character Achak.

represent" the subject, Eggers and Deng are able to write something new. The great insight if not gift) of this new-humanism, Huehls tells us, is the capacity to continually re-write the self:

> His humanity, in effect, becomes a blank slate for inscribing, erasing, and reinscribing himself in perpetual, catachrestic self-production … either [humanity's eternal] absence remains entirely and perpetually empty, in which case the human is groundless and utterly erased, or it can be provisionally filled, in which case the human is in a state of constant production. (14)

This self-in-process, or non-self, provides a new site for representational politics. Forced to recognize the disconnect between Eggers and Deng, which mirrors the disconnect between Achak and his listeners, a new space for knowing emerges. It is not the "double-telling" (Caruth 8) of two stories, held together in dialectic tension, but rather a negation of knowledge and a willingness to admit the limits of the text.

Huehls' argument is liberating in its sweep, and compelling in its political stakes, but I'm not sure that it's entirely borne out by the text. For, in spite of the book's nervous self-reflexivity and warnings about authenticity, I do see the ethical compass signaled in the title and the conclusion. The examples of characters' *failures* to listen (cited above) demonstrate the text's ultimate argument vis-à-vis the ethical position of the reader. The recipients of Achak's "silent stories" are left in the dark regarding his life, but that is because he didn't speak those stories. For those of us who do receive them – neighbors, police, readers – our duty is to act. The formal collapse between "autobiography" and "novel," therefore, refracts this argument. A subsuming of one into the other – the incapacity to differentiate between genres, or between subjects – is this book's hail for its readers. I see the relationship between Eggers and Deng as modeling the "ideal" relationship between victim and listener (according to the logic of the book itself) –

unable to tell whom is speaking, whose words we are reading, we are to believe in the capacity of their artistic process and their trust in one another. If, as readers, we also take this step of "becoming Deng," then we too will be redeemed. We are reminded of this in the last moment, Eggers invokes an innocent ideal of transparency and universal sameness. "I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us" (535) Achak pleads, reminding us that we are the same and we all have stories and we must tell them, tell them, tell them. The representational politics of the text, therefore, so carefully limned and constructed through the whole text, fail in the last moment. Why?

One cynical answer is that it is because Eggers cannot write any subjectivity except his own. In style and content, this final paragraph is an evocation of his own memoir, where – in the final paragraph – he invokes his unseen audience as a remedy for the tragedy and trauma of the past: "Don't you know that I am connected to you? Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you" (*Heartbreaking Work* 436). Perhaps we have reached the limits of Eggers' capacities as a writer. He could not fathom the ambiguity of the "non nonhuman" (to play on Huehls' phrase), and so rather constructed Achak in his own image: viscera, ears eyes and blood, open and collapsed. A more nuanced interpretation would have less to do with Eggers' talent and more with the social and formal pressures of the novel. I ultimately agree with Huehls that Eggers does something radical and innovative in how he positions the subject – always-already a subject, and yet also struggling to reveal the limits of that representation. However, the fact is that the novel claims to "collapse the space" between subjects. And this is how the book gets taught: on "human rights" syllabi across the country, as "common books" for incoming freshmen, as "world literature" in high school classrooms. The liberal reader remains more common that Huehls' displaced humanity.

The double work of this text is complicated. On the one hand, there is the deep mistrust of reader's capacities to "hear" anything beyond the complications of their own political and social situation. We are all "ineffective listeners" (Peek 127), and the stories that we tell are never sufficient. Limned by social and political identities and structures of power, what we can "hear" is only a refraction of ourselves. And alongside this, there is a powerful argument for the recognizability of the subject by another subject, via art: that in text and performance we can catch a glimpse of the other and have a self-reflexive moment of understanding universality. This tension – between the known and not-known, the intellectual and the subaltern – is stretched to its limits when Achak considers the individuals who remain in Sudan. Eggers seems to understand that they are the true subaltern of the text; Achak's positionality (as a leader in the camp, as one chosen for resettlement, and as someone who reached out to a US writer) already separate him from the vast numbers of people who continue to live in Sudanese villages and in the refugee camps. They remain unwritten, uninterpellated, without a soul for the reader. Achak, however, wants the reader to understand that there is something beyond discursive representations of humanity:

> TV Boy, there was life in these villages! There *is* life! [My home village] was a settlement of about fifteen thousand souls, though it wouldn't look like it to you. If you saw pictures of this village, pictures taken from a plane passing overhead, you would gasp at the seeming dearth of movement, of human settlements. Much of the land is scorched, but southern Sudan is no limitless desert. There is a land of forests and jungles, of rivers and swamps, of hundreds of tribes, thousands of clans, millions of people. (47)

It is significant that Achak addresses this memory to TV Boy (so-called because he continues to watch television as Achak lies bound on the floor). Achak implies that TV Boy would not be

able to understand "life" in southern Sudan because it does not represent like "life" in the West, or on TV; in fact, Achak does not even have an available vocabulary through which to articulate what this "life" is like to TV Boy, and instead relies on the vantage point of an airplane, detached and above, to communicate what exists. And when this fails, he relies on numbers, conjuring "millions" out of what looks like (to the airplane, to the Westerner) nothing. "Life," here, comes to signify something much closer to Giorgio Agamben's theory of "bare life" than a universalist discourse of the human. Without state, without name, and without hail, the people who exist in the embattled villages and in the refugee camps are counted and tallied, but remain unknown to the Western reader.[19] Achak's first entreaty to TV Boy – "there is life in those villages!" – is also a reflection that TV Boy will never understand that life without the vantage of the airplane, the frame of the camera, or the logics of numbers. This fascination with the *number* of people (rather than their sacred interiorities) continues when Achak describes the creation of the first refugee camp: "Within days there were thousands of boys, and soon after the boys arrives, there were adults and families and babies and the land was crowded with Sudanese. A city of refugees rose up within weeks. It is something to see, people simply sitting, surrounded by rebels and Ethiopian soldiers, waiting to be fed. This became the Pinyudo refugee camp" (257). Existence first, and biological need, such as hunger, second, demarcates the group more than an awareness of "soul" or a universal humanity. Western readers might try to imagine the "silent stories" that the refugees tell in their heads, but the book does nothing to excavate them. Instead, the existence of "bare life" is meant to signify something larger and, perhaps, more compelling: the discursive limits of universality, or empathy.

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[19] The connection with Agamben's theory of "bare life" is significant. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), Agamben argues that "bare life" exists as the *raison d'etre* of the state; rather than exist outside of and against the state, the management of life validates and secures the workings of the state. This is certainly the case in terms of the refugee camps that are erected in response to the Sudanese civil war; a whole system of humanitarian aid workers, doctors, and UN structure emerged in response to, and to manage, the humanitarian "crisis."

Although Achak frets that TV Boy doesn't "know" about the refugee camps, he also isn't terribly compelled to explain that life to him. Instead, Achak is content to tell his own story. The refugees remain without a discursive "soul," and yet this is not signaled as a bad thing. Indeed, Achak feverishly misses the camps and their unknowability: "And yet in this moment, and I am strewn across the couch and my hand is wet with blood, I find myself missing all of Africa. I miss Sudan, I miss the howling grey desert of northwest Kenya. I miss the yellow nothing of Ethiopia" (7). "Nothing," here, signifies not only the desert expanse where the camps are located (at another point in the text, Achak wryly questions why UN camps are always in desolate and barren deserts), but also the experience of being "bare life." To be unknown, un-souled, and uninterpellated into Western subjectivity was to be free of certain US misadventure. More than this, however, is the negation of Western structures of sympathy and knowledge. The failure of Achak's robbery is the failure of his Christian neighbors is the failure of the health system: there was a promise of sympathy and help there, but in reality it was always-already vacated. Achak answered the hail, produced himself as a subject, and said "yes" to culture: and in return, is beaten and robbed and left to suffer alone. The suggestion is delicate, but it is there: better to remain unknown. Better to remain in the camps, untouched by this imperious form of help. Because the response to "bare life" is to secure the self and the state, the forms of knowledge that emerge from this "help" continue to validate and cohere Western identities and politics. Achak intuits this, and misses, desperately, being in a position where he was free both from sympathy and its attendant (dominant particular) self-making.

This precarious relationship with knowledge-production and violence is epitomized in the book's treatment of women and gender violence. Women, when they enter this book, are positioned as the true subaltern, and remain largely unknown. They are always focalized through

Achak's memory, and when he speaks for them, he usually does not know what to say. In the case of Tabitha, his girlfriend who is killed by a former boyfriend after relocation to the US, Achak spends days gazing at photographs of her after she dies. This double-displacement, first in language, and secondly in image, recalls to the reader that we will never know "the real story" of what happened to Tabitha in the US. And this is a character with whom Achak was intimate. More disturbing are the female characters with whom Achak has no dialogue. In one stunningly confusing passage, Achak walks through the Pinyudo refugee camp with a priest from his home village, Father Matong. Matong tells Achak of the provenance of his Catholic name, Valentino, and suggests that Achak will also grow to be a great leader of men. Achak is probably nine or ten years old at this point, and so some of his ignorance is excusable, and yet the insertion of rape into a scene about faith is unsettling:

> As we had been walking, we hadn't realized that we were so close to the barracks of the Ethiopian troops. We heard voices, and were soon upon a group of soldiers crowded together, watching a struggle on the ground before them. It seemed like some sort of wrestling, though only one of the participants was in uniform, and only one seemed to be moving. One of the wrestlers wore a garment of Anyuak color, and let out a womanly cry. Again we altered our course. (286)

The moment is never mentioned again. The scene stands, therefore, as sign for silence. It could be Eggers' way of acknowledging his limits; perhaps he wanted to discuss the practices of sexual violence that (must have?) occurred in the camps, but did not know how to weave them into Achak's guileless narrative of formation. In any case, the misinterpretation of events by Achak ("some sort of wrestling") reminds the reader that Achak is not female, is not illiterate, and furthermore, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, "the subaltern as woman cannot be heard or read"

(Spivak 104). Gender violence remains unarticulated, unremarked and unknown to Achak; the good Father not only literally walks away from it, but also guides the conversation towards discussion of Achak's immortal soul. The soul, once again, distracts us from noticing difference: the observed scene is so ambiguous that many readers, like Achak, might entirely miss what is going on and instead stay enthralled to discussion of Achak's favorable future: "I think you will have the power to make people see, he said" (287). Recognizable Achak, after all, walks away from the "womanly cry."

The text's silence regarding women and gender violence is, in this final moment, the book's capitulation to the project of knowledge-production. Unable to write the woman's subjection into its narrative of *Bildung*, her experience is folded out of the story; like the inhabitants of Mariel Bai, she is eyeballed from afar, and left unknown. This process stands as a powerful metaphor for the work of the text itself. For, written out of the novel is the story of the actual story-telling that actually happened: *the process between Eggers and Deng itself.* They tell us that they met for three years; recorded hours of testimony; visited Sudan; conducted interviews … and rather than represent this collaborative process of story-making, Eggers rewrites Deng's narration as one of stifling, oppressive silence. Screaming in his apartment, begging in the hospital, and auto-narrating to the UN all offer short, provisional reprieves to this silence. But Eggers, in this final analysis, feminizes Achak in the same way as the woman in the camp. Screaming, crying, and ultimately silenced.

The trope of "silent stories," therefore, is much more than a clever plot device. I argue in Chapter One that Harriet Jacobs and Lydia Marie Child absent conversations of sexual violence from their novels in an act both coherent with sentimentalism (there was not an available social vocabulary) and also defiant of it: they challenge their readers to accept silence as an

antisentimental project of not-knowing. In that not-knowing, privileged readers are denied the titillating and self-making experiences of reading "right." In the absence of this righteousness, Jacobs and Child make space for a different form of coalition, one both precarious and unscripted. The use of "silence" in *What is the What* is diametrically opposed from that proposed in Jacobs' and Child's texts. "Silence," throughout *What is the What*, is what keeps individuals apart. Silence is indicative of failures of the system. Achak wants to "fill the air with our words" (535), and it is this hyper-production of discourse that is understood to be redeeming. The conclusion, therefore is hyper-sentimental. It invokes transparency, ideals of empathic identification, and the production of words as that which will redeem us; indeed, doing anything else would be "less than human" (535).

What is the What, therefore, is a profoundly vexed project. On the one hand, this text understands many of own its short-comings, and begs its readers to understand the provisionality of what they're reading, and to attempt to locate themselves within the same networks of oppression as Deng. It begs its readers to try and hear more, even though "hearing" is conditioned upon location. Then, in a swift sleight of hand, it reminds the reader that they *can't* hear anything except that which is written by the dominant. Deng's stories remain "silent," even when written by Eggers. Achak emerges as an ultimately Eggers character in the last moment, an "open" and vulnerable soul who is just seeking an experience of "love." Thus feminized, he is silenced, consigned to being a "representative" subject for the anti-genocide cause. He reflects the western reader to themselves, assuring them that they have "read right" and now can identify with the African subject. The warrant for a white writer to occupy the black voice has thus shifted and also maintained continuity since 1968. Although the "guilt" that Eggers' readers feel in 2007 is particular to the post-9/11 moment, the reliance on an Africanist subject to explore and

surface current constitutions of whiteness echoes Styron's project, not to mention the sentimental abolitionist texts.

Crying in the Kitchen:

Kathryn Stockett, *The Help,* and a Long History of Sentimental Narratives

So far in this dissertation, I have examined what I call a "sentimental legacy" of novels written by privileged white writers, often writing in a first-person black voice, to comment on structures of race and power. I began with Harriet Beecher Stowe's infamous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and traced ways in which Lydia Marie Child and Harriet Jacobs responded to and revised her politics of sentimentalism. However, even with the radical suggestions of coalition implied in both Child and Jacobs' texts, the legacy that I have limned in this project remains a history of white subjectivity. From Styron to Eggers, the ways in which the liberal white writer has constructed the black voice and the politics of "acting right" remain bound within a network of white supremacy, patriarchy, and US empire. Here, I suggest that, rather than attune our sensibilities to the silences and possibilities of the post-Civil War years, sentimentalism actually became more noisy and domineering over time in its perceived self-worth and the value of its politics. In other words, even as sentimentalism became less popular aesthetically, its politics became dominant. The emergence of the white writer as "activist" – even when his politics are explicitly racist and misogynist – is what's at stake. In this final chapter, I examine the consolidation of "activist writer" with "white supremacist," and ask what is lost when becoming a popular and "political" white writer requires the production of sentimental narratives.

What is so telling about both Styron's and Eggers' novels is the popular reception that greeted them. Styron is primarily remembered as the great writer of *Sophie's Choice,* rather than for his racist and reviled *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and Eggers' text remains a mainstay on high school and college syllabi across the US. Both writers are seen as activist, in their way: to have been "bold," to have taken the chance, to have reached across the breach of race or

nationality and given voice to the other, is considered a major feat of writerly imagination as well as the politically conscionable move to make. In this final chapter I consider this coalition of identities: the sentimentalized union of white writer as voice-piece for the racialized and oppressed and their resulting, immense, popularity. I have selected Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, published in 2009, as a final text because (among other things) it returns us to the scene of the home and demonstrates the continuing utility of the slave narrative form in telling narratives of the present. Stockett's novel "gives voice" to black domestic workers in 1960s Mississippi. That her book spent a year at number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list (S. Jones 1) and the Disney movie version grossed $216 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo) demonstrates the continuing popularity of the supremacist/activist collapse.[1] To conclude this project, I turn toward her novel in order to ask: how does the sentimental legacy continue to shape what popular audiences consider "activist" and "political" in our contemporary moment? How does the literary form of the slave narrative resurface, once again, and how it is rewritten for 2009? What is at stake in this relentless drawing from and revising of the past in order to create a novel of "change" in the present moment? How has the warrant changed, from 1867 to 1968 to 2006 and now finally 2009, for white writers to occupy the black voice?

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* is akin to what Brian Norman calls a "neo-segregation narrative." It takes a look at the late Jim Crow years from a relatively secure vantage point, in order to explore and comment on the meanings of those years and the subjectivities and politics that were forged in the fires of the Civil Rights Movement. However, unlike the books that

[1] The differences between the novel and film versions of *The Help* are numerous and telling. The movie version provides a streamlined, annotated version of the novel, and omits many of the more ambiguous scenes and tensions of the novel. In this chapter, I primarily treat the novel, except in places where the differences in plot are so significant as to be note-worthy.

Norman examines,[2] *The Help* does not use its location to comment on contemporary segregation (in its *de facto* rather than *de jure* status) or consider the ways that racial hierarchy continues to structure the national imagination. Instead, Stockett crafts a narrative of resolution, one in which hearts change minds; good, colorblind whites triumph over bad, petty, and racist whites; and the personal is emphatically political. It is, in other words, a narrative of 2009. Published just one year after Barack Obama's historic election and eight years after 9/11, Stockett's book once again encourages white readers to *feel right* in the dominant mode of the times. "Righteousness" emerges as an interracial coalition between women, one broached in the kitchens and carried out on the written page. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe before her, Stockett scolds her white readers into an empathic identification with black characters. Encouraged to feel with Skeeter, the white female character who takes a chance on "changing" the world via empathic connections with black women, readers enter a world in which one white woman's will to write the stories of her black "help" catalyzes a Civil Rights Movement, the liberation of black women from their oppressive jobs and husbands, and kicks off a coalitional feminist politics. Contextualized within the Obama moment, we can read this narrative as one of a flailing liberal whiteness: encouraged by a narrative of colorblindness, assured that the social problems attendant to race are now assigned to the "pre" of our now-post era, the white woman is unsure how to orchestrate her sympathy. By returning to the Civil Rights moment and inserting herself forcefully and strategically into the labor struggles of black women, Stockett assures her white female readers that they too had a place in history; not only that, but it is a familiarly affective place. All they have to do, then and now, is to *feel right* and then *to act*. This consolidation of a master narrative

[2] Norman's book focuses on "neo-segregation narratives" by black authors, such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Getting Mama's Body*. Norman argues that "Post-Civil rights writers draw on Jim Crow to tell us as much about our present as our past" (2) and puts pressure on how these authors use "a tale of Jim Crow degradation *then* [to] create a narrative of pride *now*" (3).

of the meanings and gains of the Civil Rights Movement along the lines of a sentimental tale creates coherence and sense of continuity for white women in the present. *The Help* relocates the Civil Rights Movement's power and significance from black organizing to white women's empathy.

I have chosen to conclude this project with an analysis of *The Help* because it so artlessly exemplifies the pattern of white liberal guilt and writerly affect that I have traced since 1867. Like Stowe and other white abolitionist writers, Stockett relocates the seat of political power away from Congress and into the home; the politics of how women feel relationally and that which binds them together – babies, house-making, and dealing with their men – is shown to be more powerful and important than the structures of race and labor that keep them apart. In short, *The Help,* and its immense popularity, demonstrates the way in which literary sentimentalism is alive and well, and its conceit of radical politics via the acts of listening and writing remain compelling tropes for a white reading audience.[3] Here, I hope to point out a few of the ways in which *The Help* picks up on this legacy and reiterates it for a contemporary audience. I am also concerned with the ways in which, while instrumentalizing readers' romantic and sentimental expectations, it also occludes and then rewrites the more radical possibilities of interracial solidarities that texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *A Romance of the Republic* tried to offer. Significantly, *The Help* borrows the set-pieces of antebellum sentimentalism but vacates them of their political potentials. In telling a long history of interracial feminist solidarity that riffs on slave narratives, seats itself in the Civil Rights Movement, and then expiates the

[3] Readers' reactions are not unilaterally determined by race. Suzanne W. Jones' "The Divided Reception of *The Help*" explores the ways in which some black readers have connected with the text, and some white readers have rejected it. When I invoke a "white reading audience," therefore, I am speaking of those readers who identify with and employ reading strategies of a master narrative of racial thinking and reading. For more on this concept, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*

guilt and ghosts of the neoliberal present, Stockett's book reveals how powerful a rewriting of the past for the present can be.

Context

Stockett was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, and was raised by her family's black servant, Demetrie. Stockett includes remembrances of the now-passed Demetrie at the end of *The Help* as a self-explanatory coda; she writes of how close she felt to Demetrie as a child; the complicated feelings of pride, love, racism, and guilt that flowed between them; and her sincere wish that she could "thank" Demetrie now. Stockett's suggestion is that the book we hold in our hands is her expression of thanks to Demetrie, and an earnest attempt to grapple with and reconcile the complicated experiences of her youth (530). Just as Styron invoked Baldwin's name again and again to legitimize his project, so too Stockett holds onto this origin narrative to justify her novel. The fact that Demetrie is actually dead doesn't figure into Stockett's narration: instead, it is just imagining Demetrie's comforting presence that made this story spring forth. As journalist Wyatt Williams writes: "[Stockett] launches into the same spiel she's told to a thousand other journalists, about being homesick for Mississippi while living in Manhattan in the days after 9/11 and writing in the voice of Demetrie, the African-American domestic worker who raised her in lieu of her oft-absent parents, as a way of comforting herself" (1). This explication of Stockett's "right to write" the black voice relies on an idealization of her childhood as authentically southern; as readers, we are meant to understand that Stockett's use of the black voice was – to borrow from Styron – "bold," but also personal. This argument that the personal is political – that our politics spring from our childhoods, our homes, and our domestic encounters – is also the overarching argument of the book. Stockett's positionality, therefore, is unarguable:

to dethrone her as authentic voice would be to negate the reality and vividness of personal domestic politics. It is also, importantly, a highly racialized explanation. As a white southern expatriate in New York in the post-9/11 moment, Stockett conjured that which would make her "feel right" about her place in the world: her black maid. Although she knows little about Demetrie's real life or experiences, Demetrie provides a fantasy template for black femininity. That this black femininity comforts and protects against the perceived threat of terrorism is what's telling: Demetrie, as both maternal figure and also silenced domestic worker, emerges in the balance as the perfect mammy. Like Scarlett O'Hara's "Mammy" before her, Demetrie protects Stockett from the ravages of war and the truth that she — as a white woman – is implicated in and instrumental to the violence of the state. In this case, it's imperial violence abroad in the name of "democracy" and "freedom" rather than a defense of states' rights, but the gist remains the same. By "telling" stories inspired by Demetrie, Stockett relieves herself of the guilt of being white, privileged, and a constitutive part of US empire and capital.

The Help's message of empathic identification, "change" as something that is plotted between women, and the virtue of white women has been immensely popular. Domestically, the Huffington Post trumpets ideals of literary realism when it gushes "*The Help* is about … something real. Something that matters" (Kornbluth). NPR.org told readers "This could be one of the most important pieces of fiction since *To Kill a Mockingbird* … If you read only one book this summer, let this be it" (Bates). Internationally, the books did just as well: translated into over 40 languages, and often taken as a real representation of the south during the 1960s, the book became an emblem of just how far "we've" come since the 1960s. For example, a journalist from the English newspaper *The Sun* writes jovially of his experience visiting Jackson, Mississippi on a *Help*-themed tour; he sips a cocktail called the "Aibilene" at a hotel that was once owned by

the Ku Klux Klan but now has Jewish proprietors, and he writes of visiting locales ranging from the Vicksburg battlefield to the Capitol building "where the character Skeeter reads the notorious Jim Crow laws which enforced segregation" (Hudd). What binds all of these reviews together is a sense that *The Help* transcends the fictional, and offers readers insight into the real experience of being black, female, and part of the Civil Rights Movement. Reviews such as these suggest that the emotional righteousness of having "read right," the ideal of transparency between text and reality, and the unproblematic conflation of historic events with fictional characters are alive and well today.

Not all of *The Help*'s reception history has been so cheery. Stockett was sued by Abilene Cooper, her brother's former maid, for using her name and much autobiographical information in her crafting of Aibiline. Cooper is quoted as saying: "When I started to read the book, I said, 'This is the closest thing to my life I ever seen. It's gotta be me'" (Churcher). Cooper initially sued for $75,000, but her case was thrown out due to a statute of limitations. Additionally, the novel has been torn apart by critical and black respondents. The Association of Black Women Historians published "An Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*" that enumerates the ways in which "We are … concerned about the representations of black life and the lack of attention given to sexual harassment and Civil Rights activism" (I. Jones) in the book. The ABWH carefully notes that they do not mean to denigrate the performances that black actresses give in the film, but rather contest the myopic and white supremacist ways in which both the book and the film portray this period in history, and the disregard that the novel pays to the actual labor and organizing of the Black Freedom movements. Early online responses were also critical of Stockett's text. Websites such as thefeministwire.com and feministing.com were particularly critical of the text; black feminist scholars such as Duchess Harris and Hortense Spillers ignited a

critical discussion on the text that took issue with the book's reliance on a central white figure to examine Civil Rights activism (Harris). In 2014, the Cultural Studies journal *Southern Cultures* dedicated its 20th anniversary issue to *The Help*, and included papers ranging from an examination of the text's reliance on the figure of the "mammy" (Wallace-Sanders) to its place as a "postmodern" coming-of-age novel (McHaney), most of which came out of a 2011 conference on the same theme (Watson). This scholarly response, while not as immediate nor as vitriolic as the response to Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, does contain an echo of that earlier backlash. The critical conversation engages many of the same questions, including: who has the right to write the black voice? How and where did Stockett "get it wrong"? What is at stake in this representation of the past for our historical moment? However, there is much less consensus here than in 1968. Instead, this conversation charts a middle path, with some scholars delighted, some angry, but all willing to reasonably assess how *The Help* fits into a pantheon of novels about interracial relationships in the second half of the twentieth century.[4] Pearl McHaney is the most generous of the scholars, when she writes that "*The Help* is a flawed, but courageous, first novel, and, I contend, the novel is controversial because it presents stories that are either known and heretofore packed away out of our everyday use or stories that were never told to today's readers for political, racial, class, economic, educational, social, or generational reasons and, in being heard now, are rightly shocking and hurtful" (86-87). That McHaney's comments echo the explanations of and enthusiasms for literary sentimentalism[5] is what's so interesting to me: once again, it is the *hearing of secret stories*, and in a particularly gendered mode, that

[4] Most of the reviews and critiques compare *The Help* (favorably or not) to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Anne Moody's memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), all books that situate the emergence of a young woman's sense of self as a result of interracial encounter and violence.
[5] Particularly as voiced by the 1970s and 1980s feminist scholars who turned their attention to sentiment in order to make a case for its political positionality; I am thinking in particular of Jane Tompkins, Shirley Samuel, and Harryette Mullens.

makes this text not only acceptable but also perhaps "courageous" – which is to say, political. There is something significant about gender, and the ways in which *The Help* articulates its politics, that saves it from the vitriol of, for example, the "ten black writers" who responded to Styron. Significantly, the response to *The Help* has been spear-headed by black women; unlike the ten black *men* who responded to Styron regarding his misuse of their revolutionary hero, Stockett's female respondents focus on her use of the social landscape and her misrepresentation of domestic labor. In this final chapter, I both elucidate the ways in which Stockett's novel draws from and reifies sentimental norms, and also to consider the ways in which the response to the text has also been overwhelmingly gendered. Finally, I consider the connections between gender and political agency within the sentimental tradition.

The text is structured by the first-person views of three women who live in Jackson, Mississippi. Two of the women are African-American and one is white. They switch off chapters, narrating events chronologically between the fall of 1962 and the fall of 1964. Events from the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, from the Rosa Parks bus boycott to JFK's assassination, pepper the plot, sign-posting the passage of time. While most of the book's action revolves around the quotidian chores, headaches, and heartaches of being a woman, this labor takes place within the rapidly shifting terrain of the south during the Civil Rights Movement and is imbued with significance because of power negotiations between white and black women and women and men. The early 1960s, therefore, is situated as a historical landscape in which things were "changing" (Stockett 12). What they "were" before this (and why the need "changing") is never actively articulated; Stockett depicts a racist landscape mainly via the pathological intensity of one white woman, a character named Hilly Holbrook, who comes to stand in for an entire structure of white supremacy. While other white characters revolve around

Hilly and are beholden to her socially, they are on the whole shown to be good, caring, not-racist, and ultimately "changeable" individuals. "Changing" the racism of the south, therefore, is a social matter of destabilizing the mean girls of Jackson. Following this logic, the book offers models of white women's subjectivity as ways to instigate "change." To be very clear: antiracist activism does not come from the black community, nor is it primarily organized for in black churches or cultural centers. Instead, the book offers us two different archetypes of white women, embodied as "Skeeter" and "Celia Rae Foote," as exemplars for how to change the hearts, minds, and eventually legislation of the south.

This revision of the Civil Rights Movement is an act of both erasure and replacement. It occludes a long history of Civil Rights, one that begins as far back as the 1930s with Depression-era labor and union organizing, and replaces it with a master narrative of national progress. The Civil Rights Movement is no longer about racial justice or economic justice, but about the affective relationships and experiences of "all people," but most centrally white people. Jacqueline Hall Dowd writes how the Civil Rights Movement is often revised, and crafted into one chapter of a seamless progress narrative of "America," and the 1960s made into a containable decade with observable outcomes that are coherent with dominant political and discursive aims:

> By confining the civil rights struggle to the south, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement. It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its *gravitas.* It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time. (1234)

As Hall points out, "the challenges of our time" are still intimately linked with the structures against which Civil Rights organizers and activists campaigned. By reducing this history to a bland narrative of injustice overcome – or "changed" – we lose the lessons and insights of those moments and the realization of how things haven't "changed," or have actually changed in a way distinct from that master narrative of progress.

The Help tells us that it is a story of women's organizing and resistance against the racist social structures of Jackson, Mississippi. It focuses on the experiences of two domestic workers, Aibilene and Minny; while both are full-time domestic servants, Aibilene specializes in childcare and Minny as a cook. The intimate proximity of black women with white families in the south has been a source of political and academic interest for a long time. White abolitionist women writers, for example, not only likened marriage to slavery, but also suggested that white wives and black domestic servants were in the same position relationally with the white patriarch. Jacobs' illustrations of Mrs. Flint in *Incidents* does much to disabuse this idea, and contemporary scholarly work has further contested the idea that there is a natural affinity between white mistresses and their black maids just because of their sex and colocation in the house. Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage* (2008) forcefully makes the argument that not only was there no shared political identity or alliance in that relationship, but that disciplining their slaves in the house was actually one space where white women could, and did, exercise power and establish themselves as patriarchal figures in their own right. Glymph tells us that the relationship between black domestic servant and white mistress was often more intimate, and also more violent, than those servants' relationships with the male patriarch (3). Glymph relies on the WPA ex-slave narratives, an archive of oral histories recorded – primarily by white writers – in the 1930s. These narratives present a picture of violence and fear in the white

slaveholding home. Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s there was a short upsurge in interest in recording the oral testimonies of black women in the south and, in particular, asking after their relationships with the whites.[6] These texts, in the same spirit as the WPA narratives, primarily aimed to record a voice that dominant historiography ignored. As Susan Tucker, the woman who gathered the oral histories of some 200 black women "domestics" in the 1980s and published them as *Telling Memories Among Southern Women* (1989),[7] writes:

> Oral history … seemed quite suited to a study of domestic workers. They had vivid memories, and seemed to be quite vividly remembered by the whites, and yet they were not present in history books. Moreover, there seemed to exist significant silences within their own memories and the memories about them. The memories, for example, often showed me that in the past, white and black women did not speak to each other about race and class, and yet both of these were key factors involved within their lives and their interactions with each other. (2-3)[8]

Stockett actually contacted Tucker to ask for help with her fictionalized version of Tucker's project; and, while Tucker did provide some mentorship to Stockett, their projects are widely divergent. Tucker's project is an oral history project, and articulates a theoretical framework that positions herself and her interviewees within the highly racialized structures of the south. From that position, she asks what might be possible. The interviews face the racism, sexism, and

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[6] In 1989, in particular, three such oral histories were published: Susan Tucker's *Telling Memories Among Southern Women in the South: Domestic Workers and their Employers in the Segregated South*; Katherine Clark's *Motherwit: An Alabama Midwife's Story*, and Louise Westling's *He Included Me: The Autobiography of Sarah Rice.*

[7] Susan Tucker was aided by Mary Yelling, a black woman who conducted roughly one-third of the interviews. Tucker writes: "without [Mary Yelling], many of the stories concerning tensions between black and white women would not have been told. As a black woman talking to black women, she was able to establish a rapport more quickly than I was, and one of a somewhat different kind" (ix).

[8] Tucker's project anticipates Stockett's, and the similarities are striking: both are middle-class white women, and both turn to this subject because of sentimental and nostalgic memories for their own black nannies. In an interview, Tucker tells us that, although she received no academic credit or attention for her book, she was often called to talk with community groups and "Every single year from 1988 to … just last month" (Tucker 2014, 100) someone has contacted her asking for insight and help with their own projects.

violence of domestic labor head-on. In comparison, Stockett's fictional treatment reifies a social landscape in which women just have to realize their similarities, and from there the trappings of race will disappear.

I'll now turn to *The Help* to notice the particular ways in which it obscures and rewrites the Civil Rights Movement, and also to better understand the sanitized version that it does present. I am particularly interested in how Skeeter and Celia, two white women, are written as two different possibilities for white women's subjectivity and telegraph models for gendered political agency.

The Help

That Stockett's project draws from and revises the slave narrative is clear from the first sentence: "Mae Mobley was born on an early Sunday morning in August, 1960" (1). The typical slave narrative begins with birth – "I was born" mark the openings of Frederick Douglass', Harriet Jacobs', and many others' narratives – and from this moment of emergence into the world, the narrator tracks their own coming-of-age in the first person. In *The Help*, by contrast, the black maid Aibilene recalls her young white charge, Mae Mobley's, birth. The scene is set from the first sentence: this is a book about white women, and their *Bildungsromans*. Even when spoken through the voice of Aibilene, the focus remains on the white girl and her trials.

The Help is a novel constructed out of three interpolated first-person narratives.[9] The three speakers are Eugenia Phelan, aka Skeeter, a wealthy white woman; Aibileen Clark, who is black and works as Skeeter's friend's maid; and Minny Jackson, Aibileen's good friend and also a black domestic worker. Skeeter has recently graduated from Ole Miss and returned home too

[9] There is also one stand-alone third-person narrative, which describes the disastrous events of the Junior League Benefit Ball. Its tone is both comedic and journalistic. It is the only scene in the novel where all of the characters are present and interacting.

educated, too tall, and too ugly to wed. She is proto-feminist: she wants to be a writer, and she wants to change the world. She lives on her parents' cotton plantation, attends Junior League events with her shorter, married friends, and gets her first job as a house-keeping writer for the local newspapers. Aibileen is 54, has worked as a domestic servant since she was fourteen. Minny is younger than Aibileen, fat, and excessive in almost every way possible: her body spills through her clothes; she sweats through layers of cotton pads (52); her "sass" mouth has gotten her fired eighteen times; she has six children and one on the way.

As a "neo-segregation narrative" (Norman), *The Help* attempts to "ask" black servants "what it was like to be black in Mississippi" and to work for white families (Stockett 530). Skeeter's ambition to write something "that matters" leads her to the idea of taking ethnographies of black women; inspired by James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she decides to situate herself as the white hand that will be able to record and craft the black narrative. A good portion of the book describes her racial innocence and naiveté, as she tries to get black maids signed on to her project and is met with blank stares and disbelief. However, as the Civil Rights Movement gathers force around them, more and more maids decide to sign onto the project. In the end, with Aibileen and Minny's help, Skeeter records thirteen oral testimonies, the book, simply titled *Help*, is published – anonymously – by Harper & Row, and the white women of Jackson, Mississippi are forced to take a long and hard look at how they treat their help. Repercussions abound: Skeeter loses her friends and a suitor because of her integrationist views; Minny's husband is so enraged that she is finally forced to leave him; and Aibileen loses her job. However, we are encouraged to understand these losses as social progress. Skeeter becomes an independent woman; Minny

leaves an abusive husband; Aibileen finally leaves domestic work. The novel ends on an uptick, then, and the reader is reassured that these women really did accomplish what they set out to do: "change things" (12). The post-feminist, post-racial world of 2009 is on the horizon; these three women, turned out alone into the world and stronger for it, are proof of the gaining momentum of equality. In the final analysis, "change" figures as a personal emancipation from an oppressive situation, and not as organized or coherent action with a community or against oppressive practices. *The Help* anticipates neoliberal ideals of individual actors who watch out for themselves, while trumpeting a sentimental ideal of *feeling* as that which provide care and safety for those individuals.

The Help is structured as a whodunit: readers are presented with the mystery of Skeeter's maid Constantine's disappearance early in the plot, and desire for narrative resolution keeps the reader turning the pages till the very end, even as Medgar Evers is killed and Ole Miss integrated. *The Help*, therefore, takes a cue from the 1980s feminists, when it reminds us that the personal is political – often more political than what is happening in society. Indeed, Aibilieen and Minny often appear as apolitical, uninterested in the Civil Rights Movement until Skeeter persuades them to help her with the book project.[10] The real action of the book, instead, is Skeeter's developing sense of self and her concomitant development of friendships with black women. Her sense of self has been arrested because of complicated relationships with two maternal figures: her white mother, and the black woman who raised her. To grow into herself, Skeeter must be welcomed and redeemed by black women, and from this strength then rise to meet and overcome her mother.

[10] It is only when Aibilene considers how racism will impact Mae Mobley that decides to join Skeeter's project. Aibilene realizes that Mae Mobley will eventually "[turn] out like her mama" (33) – which is to say, racist. This sentimental desire to "change" things, via Mae Mobley's young white subjectivity, is what finally convinces Aibilene to join Skeeter's project.

Skeeter's mother is a former beauty queen and is constantly appalled with Skeeter's wayward appearance. Now that Skeeter, still single, has graduated from college, her mother is on a tear to make Skeeter more marriageable. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that her mother is also dying of cancer; although this is not revealed until the final third of the book, the mother's continuing deterioration mirrors her determination to get Skeeter married. The failure of the white matriarch, and with her the dying values of southern white beauty and femininity, catch Skeeter in an uncomfortable bind. Skeeter wants to attend to her mother (and fulfill her mother's, as representative of southern patriarchy's, desires), and also to run away as quickly as she can (and achieve her own proto-feminist desires). Skeeter's other "mother" is the family maid, Constantine. Constantine raised Skeeter; told her she was beautiful when she was young; played games with her and taught her life lessons; and shared the first twenty-two years of Skeeter's life with her. However, when Skeeter returns from college, she learns that Constantine is gone. Without explanation, without good-bye or even a letter, the woman who nurtured and loved Skeeter has disappeared. Skeeter feels betrayed and lost without Constantine as her ally.

The story of Constantine's disappearance, and Skeeter's determination to find out what really happened to her, structures Skeeter's relationships with the other maids. Although all of the maids know the truth, no one feels comfortable telling Skeeter what happened – it has something horrible to do with Skeeter's own mother. As readers, we anxiously turn the pages, trying to piece together the true story of Constantine. Clues come from the practice of "reading right" and reading the signs of skin color; just as with sentimental literature, it appears that we can discern the truth through the shades of someone's skin. During one of Skeeter's memories, we learn of Constantine's light skin, which Skeeter aestheticizes into an opera of difference: "I'd never seen light brown eyes on a colored person. In fact, the shades of brown on Constantine

were endless. Her elbows were absolutely black, with a dry white dust on them in the winter. The skin on her arms and neck and face was a dark ebony. The palms of her hands were orangey-tan and that made me wonder if the soles of her feet were too, but I never saw her barefoot" (76). Stockett does not include this kind of rhapsodic rehearsal of the colors of whiteness. White characters, in contrast, are painted as "skinny," their legs "spindly," hair "lanky" (2) – all straight lines, in comparison with Constantine's flowing, gentle, and ultimately unknowable color. This rehearsal of black women's bodies as both gentle mammies as well as mysterious sources of productivity and plethora coheres with racialized thinking about blackness and whiteness; Stockett reifies whiteness as an invisibled norm and the reader is interpellated into understanding Constantine's "chocolate" (78) as a sign of her difference, exoticism, and ultimately her capacity to stand in as the maternal figure in Skeeter's life. We are also meant to read Constantine's body as the site of an interracial sexual history; her multitudes of blackness are rendered legible in the next scene, when Constantine tells Skeeter that her (Constantine's) father was a white man. Part of Skeeter's loss of racial innocence is therefore learning that such things happen at all; significantly, these sexual possibilities are narrowly presented as entirely *positive* and consenting relationships. The possibility that Constantine's skin might represent (or obscure) *generations* of interracial sexual relationships, both consenting and forced, is foreclosed.

Just as Stockett turns her back on a long history of interracial sexual liaisons, she also strenuously backpedals away from the specter of rape in the present. Constantine's father, we learn, was a *good man*. Constantine tells the young Skeeter:

> "Oh, my daddy looooved me. Always said I was his favorite … He used to come over to the house every Saturday afternoon, he give me a set a ten ribbons, ten different colors. Brought em over from Paris, made out a Japanese silk. I sat in his lap from the minute he

> got there until he had to leave and Mama'd play Bessie Smith on the Victrola he'd brung her and he and me'd sing …. One time I was boo-hooing over hard feelings, I reckon I had a list of things to be upset about, being poor, cold baths, rotten tooth, I don't know. But he held me by the head, hugged me to him for the longest time. When I looked up, he was crying too and he … Press his thumb in my hand and he say … he sorry." (78)

Constantine's father emerges as complex and ultimately humane character. Far removed from the villainous white southern men of abolitionist literature, his love affair with Constantine's mother and his doting on his illegitimate daughter is presented as sugared as his weekly visit. The social and economic inequalities of their positions – Constantine's "rotten tooth" versus her father's trips to Europe – are not the focus or the critique. Instead, his memory is beloved because he gave what he could. What's more, he *felt right*: his hugs, his tears, and his apologies stand in for economic or racial justice, and readers are to understand that he *is doing what he can*, and, like Constantine, we must not ask for more.

Significantly, Constantine's father is not the only white man to be treated with such dignity and kindness by Stockett. In fact, all of the white male characters in *The Help* appear as baffled, benevolent, and ultimately kind-hearted creatures. As Tikenya Foster-Singletary writes in "Dirty South: *The Help* and the Problem of Black Bodies": "the white men in the novel emerge as real, human beings" (99). The white men who populate this novel – who circulate through the home spaces, just home from work or back out on their way – are treated with generous humanity. Foster-Singletary points out how Skeeter's boyfriend Stuart Whitworth is crafted as a three-dimensional, deeply hurt person who is struggling to figure out who he is and what he believes in the rapidly shifting terrain of the 1950s south. Born into privilege – the son of a senator – Whitworth reiterates the racist views of southern government. However, even with

all of this race, gender, and class privilege, Whitworth emerges as a "good man" (449): he listens to Skeeter, is honest and open with her, and ultimately keeps her big secret (the collection of testimonies), even though he won't marry her because of it.[11] In his leaving, Skeeter feels sadness but also recognizes opportunity: she is no longer bound to the south, no longer beholden to uphold a certain role of white femininity. In his racism and sexism, therefore, Whitworth makes space for Skeeter's emergence. His views go unpunished and unexamined, and – like Constantine's father – we are to understand him as "good" because, given the tight constrictions of society, he is doing what he can. The list of benevolent white men goes on: Cecilia's husband, Elizabeth's husband, and Skeeter's father are also all painted as interestingly complex characters. All of these men are also vacated of traces of racial and gender violence: although the black maids mention in their stories the violence done by white men in general, none of the white male characters in the novel are violent themselves. They are granted the gift of individualism: far from the stock villains of sentimentalism, they are shown as complex and ultimately humanized characters.

This is significant in two ways. Firstly, this is a gift that Stockett does not grant to her black male characters. Black men show up in this book as either dead or gruesomely violent. Aibilene's son, Treelore, was killed on a work site, and the story of his body being taken to the hospital – too little, too late – echoes the ways in which black male bodies were lynched and made into spectacles of racial discipline in the first half of the 20th century. Here, however, it was

[11] In the film version Stuart is reduced to a more one-dimensional character. In that version, he rages at her confession, and storms off the porch, shouting: "You're a selfish woman, Skeeter. You're better off on your own." This is one example of how the film version flattens Stockett's characters into recognizable and archetypical characters; here, Stuart is revealed as a "bad racist," and it is therefore more easy for the viewer to let him go – we do not mourn Skeeter's break-up, because he is a bad man. In the novel, at the very least, Stuart's complexity allows the reader to consider the various ways in which people are interestingly bound and located.

Treelore's own fault – a mistake on the job – and though his injury wasn't attended to immediately, the accident was not an act of racial violence. Treelore's friend, Robert, is another young black man who is injured young. This time, it is an act of terror: Robert is lynched for his accidental use of a "whites only" bathroom. Even this lynching is denuded of its historical context. Rather than contextualized as part of a long history of terror, the lynching is meant to demonstrate a mounting retaliation against the Civil Rights Movement, and serves to heighten the atmosphere of danger in which Skeeter's project takes place. It is therefore located as exceptional rather than the norm; rather than part and parcel of a long history of racial terror, it is positioned as a horrific response by an endangered whiteness. Additionally, Robert's crime – his use of the wrong bathroom – was not only an actual mistake on his part, but also entirely desexualized. Rather than incorporate lynching as a violence that claims to protect white women, Stockett's lynching is a soft version in which it never would have happened, if only Robert had acted right. Not only does this protect the white male characters once again (the punishment does not match the crime, *but at least there is a crime*), but it also disarticulates Skeeter's relationship as white woman from the act of lynching. Skeeter's status as heir to "twenty-five thousand cotton dollars" (67) is protected and unexamined; as readers, we are not encouraged to connect her privileged position with the violence wrought against Robert's body and person.[12]

The third and final black male character in *The Help* is the culmination of this (il)logic of black male culpability. Leroy, Minny's husband, is the only black male who is older than about twenty and also alive. He is bitter and violent, alcoholic and abusive to his wife and children. The only interactions we see between Minny and Leroy are either violent or economic; they fight, and

[12] Crystal Feimster's *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* does masterful work reconstructing the ideological connections between sexual violence and lynching. Feimster reminds us that lynching was commonly used to discipline black men that had been accused of sexual violence against white women, and that white and black women were able to articulate their own political subjectivities in relation to the rape/lynching bind.

they discuss the family's finances. Minny has six children, and a seventh on the way by the end of the book, because Leroy won't beat her when she's pregnant. Their relationship upholds racist stereotypes of black sexuality and depravity; excessive in her fertility, Minny uses sex as cunning; uncontrollable in his urges, Leroy falls into stupor, sex, and violence to sate himself. Minny's decision to leave Leroy at the end of the book is read as a feminist triumph; she gathers her six children to her pregnant body, goes to stay with her sister, and contemplates life as a single woman. Leroy, therefore, is not granted the complexity or compassion of (for example) Stuart Whitworth. He is simply black, violent, and left behind. Like Syron's *Confessions*, this novel casts the black male subject into the realm of the hyper-sexualized and embodied. Unlike in Styron's *Confessions,* these black male characters are not shown to grapple with questions of cunning or planning. They simply do not plan, or work, or make decisions: instead, they are ruled by desire, they make bad decisions, and they die. Against their rational and cunning wives and mothers, black men are illustrated as unfit for the coming progressive era. Readers are therefore asked to locate black men as unfit for the coming neoliberal moment of self-reliance and economic independence. Or rather, we read their absence as such: for, with the exception of Leroy, there are no black men in this universe.

Stockett's decision to represent white men as morally complex and relatable characters, and black men as their opposite, has deep ramifications for the mystery of Constantine and the treatment of sexual violence within the book. When Constantine comes to work for the Phelans, she is unattached romantically but soon becomes involved with another employee on the Phelan plantation, Connor. Aibileen, finally telling Skeeter about it, remembers: "'We was all surprised Constantine would go and … get herself in the family way. Some folks at church wasn't so kind about it, especially when the baby come out white. Even though the father was black as me'"

(422). Readers of abolitionist literature will pause here, put the book down, and begin to connect the dots by "reading the signs." Just as Styron borrowed Little Eva from Stowe to make a point about the Holocaust, here too (we believe) Stockett to be leading us towards a critique of a history of violence against black women by white men. The baby, we predict, wasn't actually the child of Connor at all, but rather Skeeter's father. This is the narrative we have been told by Jacobs, by Stowe, by Child: that to be a black woman in the domestic space is to be vulnerable to the violent appetites and whims of the white patriarch. Skeeter's solidarity with the black help would have to be radical, then: she would have to take a stand against her own father. As readers, we look forward to the revelation that Skeeter's father is the patriarch at the heart of the mystery, and we believe that this is the reason that Constantine was sent from the house with such a perfunctory dismissal.

The book cannot face this story. Again Stockett backs hastily away from this ledge of gender and race violence, and places the culpability squarely on the shoulders of the black characters. The "real story," as it is revealed, is based on a rejection of Lulabelle (Constantine's daughter) by both Constantine and the black Jackson community. Not only is Lulabelle "too white" (she'll never fit in, never be accepted), but the moral burden is on Constantine for having had a child out of wedlock. It is Constantine's own depravity, her own mistake. And she pays: rather than give up her job and community in Jackson, Constantine sends Lulabelle to an orphanage in Chicago. Aibileen's memories of Constantine's actions significantly revise abolitionist scenes of separation between children and their mothers: "'Lulabelle was screaming. That's what Constantine told somebody at our church. Said Lula was screaming and thrashing, trying to get her mama to come back to her. But Constantine, even with that sound in her ears … she left her there'" (423). Stockett's scene of the destruction of the nuclear family draws from

abolitionist literature but vacates the violence done by white people. Instead, a mother hates her daughter because she's the wrong color and because she represents her own sexual mistakes, and chooses her white employers over her kin. Connor disappears, and is never mentioned again: his role in the "mistake," whether romantic or erotic or something else entirely, is dropped as one more example of a black man who can't (or won't) stay and fulfill the duties of a real man.

Stockett's rewriting of abolitionist critique and solidarity doesn't stop here. Like Jacobs, Constantine is shown to have conflicting feelings over her sexual and maternal choices. She misses her daughter, and when Lulabelle contacts her – now aged twenty-two, while Skeeter is away at college – Constantine excitedly invites Lulabelle back to Jackson. The revelation of the mother's sexual choices to the daughter recalls Jacobs' conversation with her daughter Ellen over her relationship with her white lover Mr. Sands; again Aibilene recalls: "'[Constantine] told us prayer meeting, *What if she hate me? She's gone ask me why I give her away and if I tell her the truth … she'll hate me for what I done*'" (423, emphases in original). This appeal to sentimental womanhood and the ideal of purity is strangely at odds with the rest of *The Help*. Whereas the rest of the book bends towards feminist liberation and racial integration, here it reiterates the same limited tropes of purity and femininity that Jacobs had to deploy in *Incidents*. Like Ellen, Lulabelle ultimately seems unbothered by the revelation: she returns to the south, and the havoc she wreaks on the Phelan social order is what ends up getting Constantine fired.

Essentially, Lulabelle "passes": she enters the Phelan house through the front door, and applies to be a member of Mrs. Phelan's Daughters of the American Revolution chapter. The embarrassment is too much; Mrs. Phelan fires Constantine; Constantine and Lulabelle move back to Chicago; and Constantine dies within weeks. Skeeter imagines her lonely and cold in that northern land.

Skeeter's reaction to this final truth is mixed. On the one hand, she blames her mother for firing Constantine, and is deeply pained at the news of Constantine's death. On the other hand, she can't bring herself to write the full story. While crafting a short reminiscence of her relationship with Constantine, which will open and frame the collection of black narratives, Skeeter decides to leave her own mother's actions out of the plot. She explains this to Aibileen:

> "I can't put it in the book," I tell her. "About Mother and Constantine. I'll end it when I go to college. I just …"
>
> "Miss Skeeter—"
>
> "I know I should. I know I should be sacrificing as much as you and Minny and all of you. But I can't do that to my mother."
>
> "No one expects you to, Miss Skeeter. Truth it, I wouldn't think real high of you if you did." (425)

Skeeter, unwilling to "risk" the same as her black ethnographic subjects, lets her family off the hook. Just as Stockett backs away from white violence and culpability and rewrites sexual violence into a tale of sexual morality, Skeeter cannot tell tales on her family. Whiteness remains unsullied, her father remains gentle, her mother remains idealized. Skeeter, in the end, cannot undo herself. This final choice, to risk violence against black women but not her mother's feelings, reveals the politics of the book. Friendship with black women – *feeling* with black women – is important insofar as it helps the young white woman to establish herself and get to know herself. However, this must never be done at the risk of destabilizing her own positionality. Skeeter loses her Jackson life but she gains the world; suggested in this construction is that the

Junior Leaguers and backwards-thinkers of the south will, like Skeeter's mom, go gently into that dark night.[13]

Except that Skeeter's mother refuses to die. Although she is incredibly weak and the doctor tells her that she has but weeks, Mrs. Phelan tells Skeeter that "I have decided not to die" (451) – and Skeeter reflects: "Of course Mother will be as obstinate about her death as she has been about every detail of her life" (452).[14] In the final act of the novel, therefore, Skeeter leaves the south, but the south is left intact. The values and knowledges represented by her mother live on, ultimately unchallenged by Skeeter's book. Instead of a violent reckoning with the economics of their "plantation" or a protest against her mother's deep misogyny, Skeeter just leaves. The implication is that the backwardness of Skeeter's mother is akin to the "real racists" of town: they will die out on their own. A slow biological progressivism, in place of an upsetting political reckoning, will change the hearts and the minds of the citizens of Jackson.

I read the story of Constantine as a revision of the slave narrative. The novel cues audience expectations of sexual violence and "miscegenation," but cannot follow through with a

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[13] The story of Constantine's disappearance takes on a very different plot and meaning in the movie version. In the film, Constantine's daughter – renamed "Rachel" – is dark-skinned, and appears to have been in touch with her mother and the Phelans her whole life (if she ever left at all); as Skeeter says to her mother: "You love Rachel. I know you do." The story of Constantine's racial heritage and her rejection of her daughter are entirely omitted; instead, when Rachel bursts into the DAR meeting, she is just a dark-skinned black woman who doesn't know her place. The DAR President pressures Mrs. Phelan to fire Constantine in that moment, and Constantine and Rachel disappear. The texts' very ambivalent and difficult relationship with ante and post-bellum narratives of white fathers, light-skinned daughters, passing, and the destruction of the nuclear family because of structures of racial economics is erased. Instead, something akin to a gross – and personal – "racism" is ascribed to the DAR President, who is clearly a woman who is backwards and will not progress with the rest of society.

[14] Allison Graham reads this decision to stay alive as a result of the fact of "the revived valor of her bloodline" (58) due to her daughter's "bravery." Graham's invocation of "blood" as that which carries health and familial pride opens the door to a critique of biopolitical thinking here; not only is her mom still alive, but so is the racial structure that organizes social, political, and economic life in Jackson. The film version takes this point even one step further. While in the novel Mrs. Phelan remains ignorant of Skeeter's book, in the film she not only reads the book, but also realizes that her daughter is the author/editor. Mrs. Phelan is ultimately redeemed for her racist sins (firing Constantine under social pressure) because she "is proud" of her daughter: "Courage sometimes skips a generation. Thank-you for bringing it back to our family." This complete disregard for the history of the Phelan wealth – they are cotton farmers on a plantation – and Mrs. Phelan's deep connections with societies such as the DAR points towards the contemporary urge to rewrite the history of slavery and the south as a story of "bad racists" corrupting an otherwise "good" society. The revival of the Phelan "bloodline" is the effect of the young belle's bravery.

critique of sexual and racial power. The mystery at the heart of the book is therefore left intact: what did happen with Constantine? I read "Constantine's baby" as the product of sexual violence, not romantic liaison. The racial representations and politics of the rest of the book are too didactic and regressive to imagine a white baby born of two black parents, and the book has disciplined its readers to "read" the truth of people in their bodies throughout. However, Stockett has now created two conflicting structures of knowing: the first is the kindness and goodness of white men. The second is the legibility of people's "race" in their skin. When confronted with Lulabelle, who is either the product of white men's sexual violence or the site of racial indeterminacy, Stockett cannot maintain narrative control and the book spirals out of her control; from this collision emerges the strange excuse of "Connor" and "the family way." This upset of readerly expectation is the opposite of what Raymond Williams calls "the materializing of *recognition*" (191, emphasis in original); instead, it denies recognition. In its elision of the classic slave narrative critique, readers are momentarily baffled, their suspicions raised. In this space of unsettling there can be great possibility; there is a chance for the reader to notice the way in which Stockett actively occludes Skeeter's father's violence, and strives to maintain Skeeter's innocence. However, given the rest of the text's restless drive towards narrative coherence and conclusion, the story of Constantine is instead swallowed into the narrative arc, one in which Skeeter makes friends, changes lives, and leaves the south. What this does is secure the fact that Skeeter will never have to think critically about her father or question his justness in relation to Constantine or other black employees,[15] or question her own positionality vis-à-vis the stories she hears. Instead, she can imagine herself as the perfect listener, able to hear all.

[15] Indeed, Skeeter repeatedly tells us how kind he is to his black employees, and in fact goes out of his way to tip Constantine for her extra labor: "'Don't tell your mama I gave Constantine a little extra, now.' 'Okay, Daddy,' I'd say. That's about the only secret my daddy and I have ever shared" (73). When read within the context of a revision of the slave narrative, this act of tipping takes on sexual undertones.

Therefore, the book upholds a sentimental ideal of stories told between women, about sexual transgressions and interracial relationships; however, and like Jacobs and Child, the book also gestures towards other horizons of knowledge, intimacies, and violences, ones that cannot be spoken within the given narrative form. Readers, like Skeeter, are encouraged to believe that they have indeed "heard the whole story." We learn of Constantine's transgression, her terrible choice, and the bad consequences. The result of this "knowing" is a demonstration of the problem of hearing: all that readers, like Skeeter, can hear is a story that protects white men and southern economic and social structures. Readers might believe that there is another story being told somewhere – off the page, maybe in the kitchens of the black characters – but, like Skeeter, readers do not get to hear it. Instead, the text reiterates a sentimental story of female purity and redemption that occludes the white patriarch's role and protects the white matriarch.

Stockett, unable to depict a white man as violent, shows us how Skeeter's "emergence" into selfhood comes at the cost of also leaving white southern patriarchal institutions intact. Feminism, here, is predicated on a consolidation of white power and sexual control. Skeeter "can't know" the truth of Constantine's baby, even though the text relies on sentimental reading practices to suggest what is really going on. It appears that the maids, in the last moment, protect Skeeter again: rather than "tell" a story of sexual violence, they fall back onto sentimentalized norms of feminine purity and disgrace. The condition of possibility for Skeeter's emergence into a feminist positionality and her coalition with the black maids is premised upon the effacement and concealment of a long history of sexual violence against black women. The confusion in the text manifested around "the story of Constantine" is, I believe, indicative of the text's confusion regarding what coalition is or should be. It borrows the scenes of feminine telling and sharing stories from the antebellum naratives, but rewrites them to preserve the racial and social

structures of white patriarchy. In this way, the text eviscerates any political possibilities offered in those quiet moments of sharing, and replaces them with a master narrative of good white people who save the day.[16]

The Help thereby uses the slave narrative form to tell the story of white women. From Mae Mobley's birth on the first page to Skeeter's "escape" to New York at the end, this is a narrative of emancipation from white patriarchy *for white women.* However, Skeeter is not the only model. The text also gives its readers a second archetype for a progressive white woman's subjectivity. Celia Rae Foote is a white woman who hires Minny, and their sub-plot runs through the book, offering comic relief in the form of kitchen shenanigans and Celia's "inability" to fully act like a white woman.[17] Critics have read Celia as another site of racial indeterminacy (Foster-Singletary) and the relationship between Celia and Minny as one of "mentorship," wherein Minny is positioned as a "mammy" against Celia's child-like innocence (Wallace-Sanders 72). I agree with both of these readings, and I also think that the character of Celia does more. Celia offers another model for interracial coalition: for Celia, like Skeeter, takes on the mean girls of Jackson. Unlike Skeeter, she stays in Jackson to deal with the repercussions, and ultimately remains bound with Minny in a relationship that is both sentimental and economic. In short, she offers white women readers another model for their emergent feminist identities.

Celia Rae Foote is, in many ways, not actually white. She has married into high Jackson society, and now lives on a "plantation" outside of town, but she hails from "Sugar Ditch" and

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[16] The story of Constantine is significantly downplayed in the movie version of *The Help* and, as noted above, the structure of the whole story is rewritten. I believe this has much to do with the story's undigested and problematic presence in the novel. Rather than broach a long history of sexual abuse or interracial sexual relationships at all, the movie chooses to make the story about one headstrong black woman and the white racists who couldn't abide her. The movie digests the problem, in other words, and turns it back into a master narrative of "good" and "bad" characters.

[17] Minny's skills and attitudes in the kitchen owe much to Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She is domineering, controlling, "sassy," and an excellent cook. Minny's character, therefore, borrows and builds from a long history of racialized, gendered representations of black women. Of the three main characters, she is the least individualized.

speaks with a country accent. She is, in short, "white trash" (Stockett 365). However, this racialization is precarious. For Celia's body slides across boundaries; as Foster-Singletary writes, Celia is "blackened" in certain, embodied ways:

> Celia's body itself is tainted with signs of pathological blackness. She is surrounded by dirt … she is impure and dirty, which pushes her out of the hard confines of white womanhood. Minny notices that "she's almost as big as me except she's skinny in all those places I ain't" (31). Celia, then, is a ripe landscape, and she easily lines up with the way blackness is drawn in the novel. She wears too much make-up, her hair is overbleached, and her clothes are always too tight. Like the black bodies with which she is grouped, Celia is ostracized. (Foster-Singletary 103)

Minny ends up working for Celia, and in their initial interview Celia is so delighted that Minny will work for her that "the crazy woman goes to hug [Minny], but I step back a little, let her know that's not the kind of thing I do" (42). In fact, the proceeding months are a repetition of the negotiation of this line, and what Minny "will do" in relation to Celia's inappropriate boundary-crossings. As Foster-Singletary notes, the act of hiring black help to clean her husband's ancestral mansion and Confederate artifacts is her chance to become white (103). As mistress of the plantation, reasonable in her household economy, and aware of the social barriers between the mistress and the help, Celia could eventually enter the Jackson middle class and her children, certainly, could become part of society.

But Celia can't achieve any of this. She's terrible at household economy (she doesn't even collect grocery shopping receipts), but her most ostentatious wrong is the way in which she looks to Minny as both a friend and a confidante.[18] She keeps Minny a secret from her husband,

[18] Celia is also unable to have children. Minny nurses Celia through one especially difficult miscarriage, and helps her to heal emotionally from the knowledge that she should not get pregnant again. Celia's buxom yet infertile body

and expects Minny to help her in this collusion (43). When they first meet, she offers Minny a drink, and Minny remarks, "that's my clue: something funny's going on here" (38). What's "funny" is that Celia, in her countrified, low-class, kind of way, is approaching a discourse and ethos of colorblindness. Like a sentimental ideal of feminist coalition, Celia is able to see that which binds her and Minny together as more important that than which holds them apart. This is nowhere more obvious than when Minny arrives to work with a cut on her eyebrow. Minny feels ashamed – "Leroy screamed at me all night, threw the sugar bowl upside my head" (359) – but won't admit anything to Celia beside "I banged [my head] on the bathtub" (358). Celia doesn't believe it, and wants to talk; she tells Minny to sit down, and fixes her coffee. She then confesses: "You know … you can talk to me about anything … I've seen some things, back when I was in Sugar Ditch. In fact …" (360), and her voice trails off. This whispered tale, in the space of the kitchen, approaches the sentimental scenes of interracial telling and collusion that bind women together in the antebellum narratives. Celia, in spite of her newfound wealth and status, understands Minny because she, too, has experienced gender violence. The odd twist to this scene of empathic identification, of course, is that Celia's experiences of violence are relegated to her impoverished past. Her implication is that, having once been poor, she knows what poor men can do. This connection provides a foothold to begin an empathic identification; while racialized differently, they have similar experiences of class and gender.

In the next moment, Celia looks out the window and gasps. Minny follows her gaze, and sees "A man – a *naked* man – is out by the azaleas … He's tall, mealy-looking, and white … Even from the back I can tell he's touching himself" (360). A poor man, then, underfed and pale, has crossed the boundary onto the plantation and is threatening both of them with sexual

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again signifies her as "outside" of a traditional white power structure. This can be read as a reluctance to portray anything resembling miscegenation; even when married to white, upper-class "Mister Johnny," Celia's body is still located as a space of ambivalent racial (re)production

violence. It's like a ghost from Celia's recent past; however, now that she has "help," she is not expected to take care of it. Instead, Minny tells Celia to lock the doors behind her, and she steps outside to confront the intruder. Minny is no match for him; almost immediately, he has Minny on the ground, and is threatening her with rape. Minny looks up, and sees Celia wielding a fire poker behind him: "*Crack!* The man's jaw goes sideways and blood bursts out of his mouth. He wobbles around, turns, and Miss Celia whacks the other side of his face too … in the back of my head there's this voice asking me, real calm, like we're just having tea out here, *Is this really happening?* Is a white woman really beating up a white man to save me?" (363). The start of their empathic identification, tentatively broached in the safe space of the kitchen, comes alive in the yard. Celia steps in, "strong," to protect her friend. She draws from her strength and experiences as a poor woman in Sugar Ditch in order to incapacitate the man, rescue her maid, and call the police. Minny is shocked. She realizes: "I ought to thank her, but truly, I've got no words to draw from. This is a brand-new invention we've come up with" (365).

The "new invention" startles and scares Minny. That afternoon, as she discusses the experience with Aibilene, the two women remark that "the lines" that separate poor from rich, men from women, and white from black might not actually "exist" (367): it's more likely that "Some folks just made those up, long time ago" (368). Celia's kindness in the kitchen and fortitude in the yard are that which awaken a dormant sense of equality in the black maids. Inspired by her lead, Minny begins to re-see the world not in terms of "lines," but in terms of people. What this version of social equity erases, of course, are the ways in which "the checkerboard" (268) of social positionality doesn't allow for the easy transgression of lines. Celia is punished socially for her misbehaviors; likewise, Aibilene and Minny know that they will be punished economically, if not physically, for challenging racial structures. Nevertheless,

the *acknowledgment* of that fact that "lines" are "made up" is what is understood as revelatory. The emergent friendship – between the "white trash" girl who doesn't fit in and her black help – is the closest that *The Help* gets to a radical critique of race, class, and gender. Significantly, it is Celia's capacity to cross boundaries that opens the possibility in the first place. Celia's ambiguous racialization, her inability to fully leave "Sugar Ditch" behind or enter into Jackson society,[19] and her coalition with her maid with and against male characters, trace the contours of an emergent and radicalized subjectivity. Where the narrative fails, once again, is in its insistence that "change" begins always in the home, always between individuals, and always inspired by the white(r) woman.

Celia therefore embodies the text's second model for an activist white female subjectivity. The first, Skeeter and her writing, was the kind of project that could only emerge from a highly privileged position. Skeeter uses her education and her class connections to reach maids, connect with a publisher, and get the book out. Celia, on the other hand, draws from her experiences of poverty to save her maid and bring a male perpetrator to justice. Minny's newfound devotion to her employer stems from this recognition of what they have in common. When Mister Johnny, Celia's husband, tells Minny that "You'll always have a job here with us, Minny. For the rest of your life, if you want," Minny is given the emotional and economic strength to finally leave her husband. With relief, she begins to cry, and her employers do too: "He's crying. She's crying. We are three fools in the dining room crying" (476). It's the emotional pinnacle for the Celia sub-plot, and that fact that it ends with tears, a reconsolidation of Minny's domestic labor, and in the domestic space of the plantation, is significant. This highly

[19] Celia is rejected again and again by the social elite of Jackson, as led by Hilly Holbrook. Her desire to be accepted by these women leads her into social embarrassment after embarrassment; finally, she accepts her social outsider status and resigns herself to life without the Junior League. What society she will keep in their absence is never discussed; at the end of the book, Celia's closest friend is Minny, her paid employee.

sentimentalized version of coalition relies on an ethos of colorblindness, the generosity of the white patriarch, and the economic strength of the white family in order to save the black maid. The economic and racial structures of the south, on the other hand, are left intact. The message is very clear: hearts can change faster than legislation; colorblindness begins at home; and black women make devoted, lifelong servants.

When Skeeter leaves Jackson, therefore, she does not heartlessly leave Aibiline and Minny to fend for themselves. Minny is a beloved member of the Foote household, and Aibiline plans to take over Skeeter's house-keeping column for the local newspaper. The newspaper position is perfect for Aibiline, for not only has she supplied Skeeter with the information since the start, but it's also a position in which her race will remain unknown: "[My editor] said yes, as long as you don't tell anybody and you write the answers like Miss Myrna did" (512). The newspaper column, like the book *Help*, offers Aibiline another anonymous way to enter the public sphere. In the book, she was anonymized to protect her safety. With the newspaper, she is anonymized in order to appeal to white audiences. In both cases, there is an argument for the power of the public sphere: able to finally abstract herself in language, Aibiline locates a stronger sense of self and feels more powerful and happy than she has in years. What the novel ignores, of course, is the way in which her "colorblind" new job is actually extremely color-aware: no one will know who the new Miss Myrna is, and her abstracted self in the public sphere is as a white woman, writing for other white women. Once again, "change" comes as a white woman. Readers, however, are asked to see this as progressive. Like Skeeter's acquisition of a publishing job in New York, the opportunity to enter into the workforce and the public sphere is constructed as a feminist triumph. Unquestioned, of course, are the highly regulatory ways in which these jobs reproduce racial, gender, and class norms.

The Help resolves into a tidy package that lauds the power of empathic identification, the emergence of feminism, and the potential of interracial writing collaborations. The actual social order of the south is not upset, but the seeds are sown: as readers, we are to believe that the emergence of friendship between Minny and Celia, just like the bonds of coalition that emerged between Skeeter and Aibilene, will allow a new way forward for the south. All three women's stories conclude with the promise of a new start. Minny has left Leroy, and gone to live with her sister; Skeeter boards a plane for Chicago, to go pay her respects to Constantine, before heading to New York, and Aibilene leaves her employer's house, fired, and walks out into the road: "The sun is bright but my eyes is wide open … Maybe I ain't too old to start over, I think, and I laugh and cry at the same time at this" (522). A rhetoric of redemption, of new starts, of fresh promises awaits all of these women.

Situating *The Help*

The Help provides an apt space to pause and consider the legacy of literary sentimentalism. It boldly picks up where the abolitionists left off; by decrying the racial hierarchies of the south and the racist, economically unjust relationships between white women and their black servants, it urges readers to take a stand against racism and to feel with the servant. It also repeats many of the same mistakes as 19th century sentimentalism: depictions of blackness are often equated with disease and excessiveness, and, in the end, the white woman is the one who is both economically and socially secure in the exchange of stories. Like Mrs. Bruce in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, both Skeeter and Celia benefit economically from their engagements with black women, and Skeeter is also able to assure herself of her own righteousness. Discourses of love flourish in order to protect the white woman; for example,

members of Aibileen's black church community all sign a copy of the book to give to Skeeter, sending it with the message that "she a part of our family" (513). Skeeter leaves Mississippi for New York, where her Jewish editor has offered her a job at Harper & Row. Boldly setting off into the land of multicultural America, single and published and wearing a mini-dress, she leaves Aibileen and Minny to deal with the (likely violent) repercussions of the book in Jackson. As readers, we are not to mind this uneasy ending; armed with the "love" of the black church and urged by Minny, who tells her "You got nothing left here … So don't just walk your white butt to New York, *run* it" (499), Skeeter is fulfilling the promise of her life. Emerging into a 20thcentury, liberated, white woman's subjectivity, Skeeter is positioned to plot the future from the safety of New York.

This violence that this book does to the actual histories of women's organizing during the Civil Rights Movement is significant. When Stockett revises the Civil Rights Movement to be about affective relationships between women, and led by white women, she ignores and dismisses a long history of black women's activism. This is a repetition of much of the dominant historiography of the Civil Rights Movement itself; told through the lens of Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X, and later Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton, it is a master narrative of strong individual men who stood up for what they believed in. The one exception to this all-male historiography, Rosa Parks, does get her dues in Stockett's book. Aibilene gets onto the bus and remarks: "we sit anywhere we want to now thanks to Miss Parks" (15). "Miss Parks," like other Civil Rights leaders, is denuded of the political committee, community, and the attendant highly-organized boycott that accompanied her action. Aibilene's reflection on Parks is telling: her tone sweet, sympathetic, and as though Parks just acted that way *out of the goodness of her heart*.

This occlusion of actual organizing with sentiment belies the historical record; as sociologist Jenny Irons tells us, black women's experiences in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement was one of "overparticipation." Black women's concurrent duties as mothers, wives, and workers meant that, by adding political organizing to their day, they labored just as much, if not more, than their male partners did, but that the "triple constraints of race, class, and gender did not permit adequate recognition of their efforts" (Irons 693). In spite of the lack of historiography, Irons draws the conclusion that women's participation in the Civil Rights Movement was "high-risk," sustained, and yet also always defined by gender. Irons concludes that black women were engaged with every level of the moment, and additionally contributed something else: "activist mothering," which Irons defines as acts of "maternalism, nurturance, and domesticity" (699) that benefit and support the whole community.

Likewise, white women's activism during the 1960s was much more high-risk than the book suggests. Duchess Harris writes: "[Skeeter] is not a true white civil rights activist like the historical figure, Viola Liuzzo (April 11, 1925 – March 25, 1965), a mother of five from Michigan murdered by Ku Klux Klan members after the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march in Alabama." In its evisceration of the actual organizing, marches, meetings, and violence of the Civil Rights Movement, *The Help* turns "civil rights" into an affective and intimate experience, largely unrelated to the public sphere and its violence and violent reckonings for activists. In this way, the text is super-sentimental: it relies on tropes of intimacy, domesticity, and femininity *so much* that it forgets the actual radicalism of those emotions. In short, rather than give interracial organizing and activism its due, it rewrites it as a gentle and easy matter of seeing "lines" and then just crossing them.

Similarly, bell hooks, in a 2013 discussion with Melissa Harris-Perry, asks why, in this post-Obama historical moment, there has been such an explosion of "sentimental representations of blackness." She lists *The Help* among other films, such as *The Butler* (2013) and *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), that reify a figure of "the good Negro." Harris-Perry responds that, in the contemporary economic moment of the Great Recession, these "good Negros" are illustrated as "sacrificing themselves for the American project." Given the precariousness of white American economic supremacy in 2013, a nostalgia for doting mammies and devoted black men has returned to the big screen: these are women and men who will courageously and happily take the blows for the health of the white nation (hooks 2013). Extending this argument, we can see how the sacrifices made by the black female characters in *The Help* are another iteration of this desire: Skeeter's ability to leave Jackson and become modern is at the cost of her new black friends staying behind to face the consequences of their book. It is also at the cost of absenting the devoted (or otherwise) black man. To become a feminist, in this book, is to leave all men behind. However, for Skeeter, newly confident in her mini-skirt, there might very well be a progressive boyfriend on the horizon; white men, after all, are shown to have a complexity and a northern man might be willing to meet her in her feminism. However, for Aibileen, Minny, and the other black women of the south, there are no progressive black men.[20] The feminism they embody, therefore, is a black womanist solidarity, though not of their own choosing. There are just no other options.

Stockett's representation of the south shares much with Styron's. Styron used words like "medieval" to describe its "backwardness" when compared with modern New York. Likewise, in

[20] Aibilene tells us that she "closed the door" on romantic and sexual relationships after her partner left her for a "no count hussy" (22), and she's been single for over twenty years. The ease with which Stockett paints Aibilene as the asexual mammy is alarming.

The Help Skeeter's process of becoming "modern" is contingent upon her leaving of the south for New York. Her departure is made possible by the fact that Aibileen and Minny stay in Jackson to oversee the book, and that her mother remains alive. The emergence of the colorblind, feminist, and liberal subject is therefore contingent on the existence and continuance of the structures of race, patriarchy, and labor that the subject claims to supersede. Quite literally, "Mother's" love supports Skeeter's departure, and the labor of Aibilene and Minny keep the whole system running. Perhaps *The Help* was so appealing to so many readers and viewers for just this reason: rather than ask liberal readers to connect their precarious positionalities with oppressive and violent structures of power, it paints a universe in which "change" is always *intimate*, politics always happens in the home, and to "feel right" is all that anyone need do. In hooks' language, the "good Negro" will save the day, and the white subject is allowed to continue her blithe and innocent forward trajectory. This all happens in a void of historical context and social organizing.

Coda

The Help provides an apt place to conclude this project because it embodies the white liberal *desire* for empathic identification via writing and reading so completely. Stockett's coda tells us as much: wishing that she "could have" asked Demetrie these questions, she imagines their conversations instead. The book's genesis as well as its attention to the collaborative and radical possibilities of writing make it an exemplary site to examine the ways in which the trope of "collaboration" can, as often as not, get used to further work that is actually quite individualistic, if not actively racist. Stockett's book is as telling for the ways in which it *picks up* the sentimental legacy as the ways it *drops it*. For all of its progressivism, Stockett does not

allow for the emergence of silence, solidarity, or radical collaboration in the ways that Jacobs and Child offered. Instead, when the plot turns towards the questions of sex, she – like Eggers – writes it out of the plot. Racialized and sexual trauma is, therefore, the point at which the book's logic of collaboration collapses. Constantine's multi-racial past is treated as her individual sin and mistake; Minny's husband is a flat reiteration of "the scary black man"; and collaboration between women – while made possible by their capacity to share across "lines" – consolidates a white racial economy in which white people get to save their black servants and also maintain their domestic "help." Like Styron's Stingo, Stockett's Skeeter sets off into the great unknown of the new (york) day, bolstered by her intimate knowledge of the other. Writing emerges in the balance as that which will change hearts and minds, but only insofar as it reflects the hearts and minds of those white writers.

This dissertation has examined a cluster of novels, written by white writers, that attempt to "feel right" by feeling with black subjects. With the exception of Child, all of the other authors use the first-person, and they were sometimes lauded, sometimes punished for this "bold" move. What is at stake, of course, is not the choice to write from a racialized point of view. Instead, it is the loss of perspective regarding structures of race and economics. These novels vacate the actual and difficult questions of positionality, privilege, and knowledge-production, and instead emphasize the act of listening as redemptive and political struggle. Styron's reassignation of Nat from one among a community of slaves anticipates Stockett's stripping of actual Black Freedom organizing from the plot of *The Help*: in neither case is the work of actual coalition-building, organizing, and black political action the point.

That this is all signified under the rubric of "sentiment" is fascinating. Rather than own up to their acts of literary construction, Styron, Eggers, and Stockett all claim the act of

"listening." Taking a cue from the sentimental value of crying together, they claim their own legitimacy and political valence *because the white writer says that they listened well*. Styron listened to Baldwin and then Sophie; Eggers listened to Deng; and Stockett, when she couldn't listen to Demetrie, recreated her voice as she thinks it might have been. The white writer, therefore, positions her political action – that of *having listened* – as as-important as the original violences of race, class, gender, and knowledge-production into which they claim to intervene. It is a stunning rearticulation of white supremacy and middle-class culture, done through the calculus of empathic identification. And what is so profoundly difficult about this confluence of "political" writing with the white writing subject is the evacuation of actual historical activisms and violences. The emergence of the white activist writer – who is right because she writes – is all that is guaranteed.

Across the 1968 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the 2006 *What is the What*, and the 2009 *The Help* we see the emotional and empathic experience of the white subject as the paramount concern. These three texts turn the oppressive, genocidal, and violent activities of racist and imperial powers into spaces for big emotional experiences and self-validation. And, while empathy is not a negative thing per se, this form of empathy is premised upon an evacuation of the violences the texts pretend to protest. Far from serving as texts that "[meditate] on history" (*Confessions* xi), "to reach out to others to help them understand the atrocities" (*What* 5), or "change things" (Stockett 12), these texts all route a consolidation of white supremacy and patriarchy via the sentimental literary mode.

Sentimentalism promises an affective cathartic pay-off for its readers. That this catharsis so often has to do with the feminized realm of the home and domesticity has long marked it as a

"women's" genre. In this dissertation, I have examined the ways in which both male and female authors write about both male and female subjects in a sentimentalized mode. While the outcomes of these texts remain startlingly similar – an interpellation of the subject and the violence into dominant norms – what emerges in the balance is a question regarding the connection between gender and political agency. Styron depicted Turner as a hyper-sexualized being. That his sexual inclinations were for white women and other black men is what offended his ten black respondents; they demanded that Turner be "restored" to being represented and known as a man's man, a true revolutionary. In contrast, Eggers effectively silences Deng through the illustration of his life via "silent stories." Like the violated woman in the refugee camp, Deng's utterances ultimately go unwritten and unknown. Deng, in essence, is positioned as a female character, one written by the "abler pen" (Jacobs 7) and then accessible for the emotional experiences and knowledge production of readers. Finally, Stockett rewrites the Civil Rights Movement to be about the coming-of-age experiences of white women, and wholly obscures the work, organizing, and violence of the 1960s south. In these three situations, gender is the foundational analytic through which readers can understand the political agencies of the characters. Nat was a deviant because of his deviant sexuality; Deng is accessible and lovable because of his feminine capacity to porously accept all comers; and the black women of the south are fixed in the kitchens of their white employers, yet now generously "known" thanks to the generosity of their white friends. And white people, in all cases, remain the heroes, the saviors, the writers who have listened, taken notes, heard well, and finally written the stories that we all need to hear.

It is worth examining, in this final moment, the difference in intellectual response between Styron's rewriting of Nat Turner and Stockett's rewriting of Civil Rights. The response to *Confessions* was immediate, ferocious, and intellectually cohesive. The book response, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, locate this issue as an issue of color and history. Ten black writers – all men – write back to Styron and let him know how he, as a white man, got it wrong. In comparison, the response to Stockett's *The Help* simmered. The book's initial popularity edged out the critical response; online discussions debated both the merits and demerits of the book. The first multi-author, published, intellectual response came in the form of a Special Issue of *Southern Cultures* in 2014, some six years after the book's publication and three years after the movie. In that Issue, eight women scholars respond to Stockett's book.[21] As noted above, their responses range from angry to speculative to impressed. The difference in these texts – from *Ten Black Writers* to the Special Issue – tells us something significant about how political agency is gendered. The ten black writers, as representative of the Black Freedom movement and emergent modes of intellectual inquiry such as Ethnic Studies, concisely and precisely reclaim Nat Turner as a masculine revolutionary hero. In comparison, there is little "reclamation" done in the Special Issue; no one makes a claim for the maids themselves, or tells Stockett to "give us back our labor." Additionally, respondents carefully make space for the political acts that *The Help* does claim – which is to say, the practices of listening and empathizing. These are, of course, gendered activities, just as domestic labor is gendered. The problem, therefore, is that both of these critiques repeat the same structures of gendered affect and political agency that the novels themselves perform. Men are hyper-rational, political beings; the question is, what are the particulars of that political rationality and what are

[21] There is one piece written by a male in the Issue – the Introduction (Watson).

the qualities of that humanity. In contrast, women – and those gendered female – are affective creatures, sites available for empathic exchange and the discovery of kinship and "sameness." I believe that the tepid response to *The Help* reiterates and consolidates this relationship between gender and political agency in this historical moment.

Like sentiment of the 19th century, maybe books like *The Help* are at first seen as too female and too domestic to have any "real" import or impact, and the critical assessments of their politics will come later. However, by situating texts like *The Help* and *What is the What* within a sentimental legacy, one that reaches back to at least the 19th century, we are able to see how the same analyses, critiques, shortcomings, and possibilities that haunted the genre in the 19th century are still present and relevant today. In which case, we must take texts such as *What is the What* and *The Help* just as seriously as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in that they too are ideological rewritings of some of the most radical texts in US history. To revise the slave narrative into a narrative of whiteness is to re-perform the act of inscription that is one of the most foundational violences of the US: slavery, the occlusion of black life and experiences, and the consolidation of whiteness at the expense/creation of blackness.

I will close with a return to Jacobs and Child, collaborators who – despite geographic distance, race, and economic differences – tried to articulate an ethic of coalition that superseded the impoverishing politics of sentiment. Both women identified sentiment as a tool that could be used to tell certain stories and not others. In the elision of those othered stories – the stories that women can share when the white writer is, in fact, not listening – there remains a space of extradiscursive possibility. Perhaps it is simply the location of writers and their subjects within wider coalitions: neither Jacobs nor Child, for example, ever lost sight of the wider network of abolitionist-suffragists for a moment. Whatever the case, the subtle and delicate suggestions of

coalition and a located, active engagement, which Jacobs and Child suggested in the last days of slavery and in the first years of emancipation, exist in the rhetorical deployment of sentiment and the refusal to write a story that un-self-consciously reaches narrative resolution via the subjectivity of the white characters. This dissertation has examined novels that did not follow Jacobs' or Child's lead; instead, these texts exist as the children of Stowe, hugely popular and influential texts that tell a white America exactly what it wants to hear about itself. A companion project to this one would examine that other lineage, books born of collaboration and silence and justice, and their varying successes. In this dissertation, however, we have listened to the noisy and the noisome in order to trace the relays between slave narratives, white literary agency, gender, and political feeling.

I will conclude this dissertation with a call – to writers, readers, activists all – to consider the sentimental legacy as one in which social pain is rendered into reading pleasure. Rather than accept the more obvious cathartic seductions of sentiment, and believe that we have "learned" something about the past and/or a racialized subject, I urge us as readers to be curious about those textual moments which refuse a sentimental allegiance, and those that exist outside of the realm of righteousness and catharsis. I have limned a tradition of using the past in order to shore up the present; to shore up whiteness; and to create a bond between the white writer's identity and an ideal of activism. Following Jacobs and Child, we might ask what possibilities exist – for knowledge, for justice, and for activism – in the choice to refuse empathic identification, to remain unnamed, and to step into a place of not-knowing rather than smug, sentimental, attachment.

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