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“OUT OF THE DARK CONFINEMENT!”: PHYSICAL CONTAINMENT IN MID-
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

by

Allison Lane Tharp

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of English
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

“OUT OF THE DARK CONFINEMENT!”: PHYSICAL CONTAINMENT IN MID- NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN PROTEST LITERATURE

by Allison Lane Tharp

May 2016

Most scholarship on American protest literature tends to focus on the protest literature of specific, politically marginalized groups, such as black protest, women’s protest, or working class protest. My project redefines how we read nineteenth-century American protest literature by investigating the connections between the protest texts of these three marginalized groups. In particular, I argue that mid-nineteenth-century protest authors incorporate images of physical confinement and entrapment within their texts to expose to privileged readers the physical and ideological containment and control marginalized subjects encounter in their daily lives. Drawing from rhetorical theories of argumentation and audience engagement, and incorporating historical and cultural contexts, I analyze three protest texts that respond to the contentious debates of the 1850s—a decade marked by increasing tensions over issues of race, class, and gender: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” (1861), and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

Along with analyzing these authors’ use of images of physical confinement, I also study the use of direct address and reader engagement in protest texts in order to show how authors foster an empathetic connection between privileged readers and marginalized characters. I show how protest literature further uses these formal modes to critique and advocate for change within the status quo. By drawing attention to the

rhetorical techniques of Wilson, Davis, and Jacobs, I advance beyond the current scholarly interests in genre to investigate how these authors forge connections among such movements as women's rights, workers' rights, and abolition.

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Extra thanks to my dissertation chair, Dr. Ellen Weinauer, who has been my professional rock for the last six years and without whom this project would not exist. Your future students are lucky to have you.

DEDICATION

To Colleen, for her support in all of its varieties.

To Hank and Fatty, for reminding me that there is life outside of books.

To Nick, for everything.

My unconditional love and thanks to you all.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

“All literature is protest.”

-Richard Wright

In “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949), James Baldwin condemns the genre of protest literature, claiming that it is merely “an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene” (14). “So far from being disturbing,” Baldwin asserts, “the protest novel only ramif[ies] that framework we believe to be so necessary,” reflecting a society that is obsessed with categorization, of “life neatly fitted into pegs” (14). According to Baldwin, instead of exposing social inequality and thereby arguing against it, protest novels ultimately reify the categorization of individuals: bad versus good; oppressor versus oppressed. As he claims, protest novels, reflecting society more generally, “[have] the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned” (15). In this sense, Baldwin argues that protest literature makes promises it cannot keep: in promising that “the oppressed and the oppressor will change places” (16), protest literature hides the fact that the oppressed individual has “his doom . . . written on his forehead, it is carried in his heart” (16).

Using Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as examples, Baldwin denounces protest novels for assuaging an individual’s sense of outrage and purpose. Readers can give in to their sense of emotion without having to make a difference in the world: “[Protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of American dreams. They are fantasies, connecting nowhere with reality, sentimental” (14).

The sentimental nature of protest novels, for Baldwin, takes them out of the realm of reality and honesty, rendering characters and arguments one dimensional while “the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart” (10). For Baldwin, novels that take as their aim social protest ultimately fail because of their “rejection of life” and “the denial [of the human being’s] beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (17).

Baldwin’s denunciation of the sentimental aspect of protest writing is not surprising given the critical history of American literature. Critics such as F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and R. W. B. Lewis denounced the sentimental novel in the 1940s and 1950s—an issue that Jane Tompkins wrestles with in her text *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. In her defense of the sentimental tradition, Tompkins observes that “twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority” (82). Baldwin’s notions of sentimentalism’s “violent inhumanity” and “mask of cruelty” echo the thoughts of twentieth-century critics that Tompkins describes in her text. But unlike Baldwin and these critics, Tompkins maintains that sentimental and women’s writing from the nineteenth century is politically powerful—it works to change readers’ minds on social issues. Drawing from Tompkins’s critique of the critical disavowal of women’s writing, and in contrast to Baldwin, in this project I argue that nineteenth century American protest literature *exposes*, rather than perpetuates, the inequality that accompanies social categorization, and that it does so in

order to argue that all individuals have a right to a life of freedom and equality. The protest texts I analyze in this project ask their readers to understand a new reality—a reality of oppression for those nineteenth-century individuals who are not afforded the benefits of citizenship. I do not maintain that these authors actually attempt to create a new world, as Baldwin suggests; rather, in depicting their characters’ “beauty, dread, [and] power” (Baldwin 17), these authors attempt to create new readers. Specifically, through providing social instruction within their texts, these authors attempt to create readers more inclined to recognize, and thereby denounce, inequality in their daily lives.

Despite the fact that American protest literature—fictional or not—can be traced back to the nation’s birth,¹ criticism on this genre of writing is still in its inception: critics have not reached conclusions about what constitutes protest writing, or the proper ways through which to study the genre. Indeed, over the past twenty years, criticism on protest literature reveals that this genre exists as a fluid category of art, largely unfixed in a critical or scholarly view. Some critics, for example, have approached protest literature through historical and cultural contextualization. Paul Lauter recently suggested that protest literature is distinctly connected to its time and place of creation, and that analyzing protest texts “in relation to concrete events and social movements” allows us “to understand how [texts] *work* as social protest” (8, emphasis in original). For Lauter,

¹ We can view The Declaration of Independence as one of the earliest manifestations of protest literature. Importantly, Jefferson incorporates images of physicality into The Declaration of Independence, much like the authors under consideration in this study do: “But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government” (n. pag.). That Jefferson characterizes rebellion in spatial and physical terms (“pursuing,” “Object,” “reduce,” “under,” “throw off”) demonstrates the use of images of confinement at the nation’s inception—the colonies are defined as physically subjugated and confined by monarchs. For protest literature before The Declaration of Independence, see especially Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776).

the “distinctiveness of discourse” emerges when we view a work within its larger cultural context, such as examining images of mobs in abolitionist literature (11). However, once we take these works out of their historical contexts—as we might consider Baldwin doing when he claims that protest texts “[have] nothing to do with anyone” (14)—“we are converting them to fossils” (Lauter 10). To Lauter, knowing their historical context allows for the most effective way of understanding protest texts.²

Whereas Lauter views protest literature as inherently tied to context, other critics attempt to theorize the thematic and aesthetic connections among protest arts more generally. As an example of this second way of thinking about protest literature, Kimberly Drake concludes that “protest art constitutes the development of a uniquely American literary aesthetic, one in which narrative power is shared with readers, whose reactions determine not only the success of a protest, but its form” (157). Drake’s defining characteristic of protest literature—what she terms the “artist-audience dialectic” (150)—becomes more striking when we consider that the texts she analyzes range from abolitionist fiction to late twentieth century punk rock.³ Her analysis expands the idea of the protest literature genre, continuously pushing the definition of what a “protest text” can be.

Joseph Entin aptly sums up these two distinct critical interventions when he claims that “recognizing the complexities and contradictions of protest art should not diminish our sense of its power; rather, such complexities testify to . . . the need for careful and rigorous critique” (6). I agree with Entin because the difficulties in the categorization,

² For a similar view, see Michael True’s “The Tradition of Protest in American Literature.”

³ Zoe Trodd agrees with this point of view in her introduction to *American Protest Literature*.

criticism, and analysis that arise when we consider protest literature prompt us to continuously question the genre, as Lauter does when he presents an important set of questions about protest literature generally conceived: “in what ways do different *kinds* of works—poems, stories, manifestos, declarations, laws, movies, speeches—function as social protest literature? Is there any functional core, a set of tropes, a particular discourse, which obtains across genres?” (8, emphasis in original). Keeping the “complexities and contradictions” of protest literature in mind (Entin 6) and the questions that emerge from these complexities, I position this project between these two modes of critical inquiry. Like Lauter, I contend that protest literature is inseparable from its cultural context, but like Drake, I aim to diminish the boundaries between social movements to locate what Lauter terms “a functional core” of protest literature as a genre (10).

In order to locate this “functional core”—to demonstrate how nineteenth century protest literature exposes an unequal society’s aim to control those that who threaten the status quo—I analyze three texts from a very compressed time period: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” (1861), and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The genre of protest literature is so big as to almost seem invisible—after all, as Richard Wright reportedly told James Baldwin, “*all* literature is protest” (157, emphasis in original).⁴ Therefore, concentrating my focus to this compressed time period and analyzing texts written by women who draw from the sentimental genre, I contend with the idea encapsulated in Baldwin’s essay that

⁴ In his collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), James Baldwin reports that Richard Wright told him this in response to Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”

sentimental fiction and women's writing serves no political or social function. Moreover, I continue the conversation about the political power of women's writing so aptly analyzed by Tompkins, as I discussed earlier. Finally, this concentrated focus allows me to test a critical insight: that images of physical confinement, paired with other specific literary elements, become part of an argumentative technique within American protest literature.

American protest writing is unique in that it has a singular theme: it aims to correct perceived social inequality in the United States. As John Stauffer suggests, protest literature can be defined as "the uses of language to transform the self and change society. . . . Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society's ills" (xii). In this dissertation, I identify a new lens that allows us insight into nineteenth-century protest literature. The protest texts I analyze aim to correct social inequality through deploying three rhetorical elements: direct address, specific scenes and characters of social instruction, and images of confinement. These elements resemble literary elements in a multitude of other genres—such as political writing, sentimental fiction, realist writing, and the slave narrative—but these rhetorical techniques and literary characteristics are unique in that they work to convince readers to establish social and political equality in the public sphere. Indeed, these elements are so common among protest texts that we might even view the works that utilize them as a sub-genre of protest literature as a whole. Ultimately, the confluence of these three literary techniques within a protest text works to persuade readers to *act* in their worlds, inciting those readers to push for social and political equality.

Like sentimental fiction, and like the political novel, the narrative voice within protest texts ask for empathy from the reader, using a variety of specific rhetorical techniques. For example, direct address—when the narrator speaks directly to the audience—works within these texts to convince readers to participate in the story, make meaning from the text, and feel empathy for oppressed characters. But unlike sentimental fiction, protest writing does not make empathy its final goal. Rather, empathy is the first step to move readers to political action in the public sphere. Direct address becomes a rhetorical strategy for protest authors to convince their readers to join in the larger effort to enact political change and correct the problem of social and political inequality.

Unlike the sentimental or political novel, but very much like realist fiction, this sub-genre of protest literature teaches readers *how* to read the story as a story concerning the need for equality by incorporating scenes of social instruction. Typically, this sort of protest writing employs a character or characters whose example instructs readers about how to react appropriately to the story of injustice. More often than not—as is the case with the mill visitors in Davis’s text, Amelia Matilda Murray in *Incidents*, or Wilson’s Bellmont men—these characters represent damaging “social reading” for the readers of these texts. By this I mean that protest authors depict instances of characters responding to inequality and injustice in a negative way, and through these scenes, authors teach readers how *not* to react in a social situation. These instructive scenes, paired with the narrator’s direct address to the readers, aim to establish empathy between readers and characters. By creating empathy through such scenes, this sort of protest writing instructs its readers about the politics of social equality, which the writer hopes to see realized in a public sphere.

Finally, this sub-genre of protest literature makes use of a unique set of metaphors and imagery in order to further establish the bond of empathy between readers, characters, and writer: images of physical confinement. Images of physical confinement and entrapment become part of an argumentative technique used by protest authors to expose a far reaching and sometimes invisible form of social containment. Those individuals who challenge the status quo—in the case of these authors, this includes women, blacks, and the working class—are ideologically contained and socially controlled in mid-century America. The authors I analyze expertly expose this unwritten social policy and audaciously denounce the practice. By confining readers to a particularly unjust, unequal situation, this sub-genre of protest writing aims to make readers realize the containment and control certain oppressed groups face in their day-to-day lives and seeks to establish a desire in the reader to seek genuine political relief in the public sphere. Ultimately, these three literary techniques—direct address, scenes of social instruction, and images of physical confinement—work together to transform the reader from a passive recipient to someone who fights actively for social justice and equality.

To fully investigate this sub-genre of protest literature, I begin this project by exposing the ways in which both physical structures and the written word worked to segregate women, blacks, and the working class from other American citizens. I agree with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg's assertion that "role definitions exist on a level of prescription beyond their embodiment in the individuality and behavior of particular historical persons. They exist rather as a formally agreed upon set of characteristics understood by and accepted by a significant proportion of the population" (333). Considering this assertion, we can see that a large portion of the population in the

nineteenth century viewed white women, blacks, and the working class as inferior, and these subject positions were thereby segregated within their day-to-day lives. This segregation happened so insidiously as to be almost invisible, but slavery supporters, certain sectors of the upper and middle class, and those who believed women should refrain from entering the political realm used the written word to perpetuate the segregation found in nineteenth-century society. As I will describe throughout the project, we see this separation maintained through popular speeches and writings of the time period: periodicals aimed at women, like *Godey's Lady's Book*, public speeches by societies that argued for the colonization of free blacks, like the American Colonization Society, and popular publications, like Charles Dickens's travel writings or editorials in *The Atlantic Monthly*, that implicitly argued for the benefit of class separation, to name just a few. This confinement and separation, I suggest, has ideological implications for mid-nineteenth-century America: in confining and separating individuals who challenge the notion of citizenship—challenging it because they are denied the privileges of citizenship and thus give lie to the promise of equality for all—Americans can ideologically contain, and thereby control, those individuals. Through this containment and control, marginalized Americans are kept in their inferior status. Alongside my in-depth analysis of the protest texts under study here, I also identify public thought and writing that attempted to fight against the ideological containment of subjugated sectors of society. I weave these counter-texts into my analysis: abolitionist publications, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, publications that attempted to expose the stratification of social classes, like Alexis de Tocqueville's writings and Jacobs Riis's photography, and writings that fought for women's equality.

Due to the volume of cultural contexts I include within this study, the word choice I use throughout attempts to encapsulate the complexities between *representations* of inequality and the physical *reality* of inequality in mid-century America. For example, when I discuss the differing living conditions between working class individuals and middle/upper class individuals, I categorize the separation of working class citizens into tenement districts an act of “confinement.” When I then discuss the implications of this separation—such as the discursive racialization of these working class individuals—I refer to it as social “containment.” I draw a distinction, then, between the terms “confinement” and “containment.” When I analyze physical or narrative instances of this segregation, I refer to them with many descriptors: confinement, entrapment, isolation, separation. However, throughout the project, I attempt to reserve the term “containment” for those moments when I am discussing the ideological ramifications that come with the physical and narrative confinement these subjects face. And the ideological ramifications are vast: as protest writers like Rebecca Harding Davis, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson depict, contained oppressed subjects in mid-century America are consistently excluded from the promises of freedom and equality set forth in the Declaration of Independence nearly a century earlier. In using images of confinement within their texts, these protest authors, I argue, expose this nearly ubiquitous social containment. Significantly, by compelling their readers to recognize this policy of perpetuating inequality, these authors foster a pathway for empathetic engagement between their privileged readers and their oppressed characters.

While primarily an analysis of literature, this project exists at the nexus of literary studies, cultural studies, and rhetorical criticism. Due to this multivalent nature of my

project, and because I view these texts as works of art, as persuasive arguments, and as cultural artifacts, I approach my analysis from a dual perspective: I attend to the historical and cultural contexts of the nineteenth century, paying particular attention to the intersections between the three social movements I am examining, while also situating my analysis in rhetorical theories of audience and argumentation. For the purposes of this project, I attempt to recreate as fully as possible the cultural contexts of the ten years leading up to the publication of these three texts, and in doing so, I attempt to demonstrate what Lloyd Bitzer would call the authors' rhetorical situation. According to Bitzer, in order for rhetorical discourse to take place, three elements must be present: an exigence, or a problem that calls for argumentation or persuasion to solve said problem; an audience, but in particular an audience that is capable of making change; and finally, constraints that come to bear on the rhetor and the audience and that thus determine the type and focus of discourse (5-6).⁵ In analyzing the contextual surroundings of these texts, I attempt to expose the rhetorical situation(s) each author finds herself facing as she aims to persuade her audience to agree with her arguments. To do so, I rely on cultural productions like popular magazines and publications of the time period to determine the ideologies within and often against which these three writers were producing their work. Magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, along with abolitionist fiction, pro-slavery tracts, anti-Tom novels,

⁵ For alternate views of the rhetorical situation, see Richard Vatz's "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation" (1973). In his essay, Vatz disagrees with Bitzer's understanding of the rhetorical situation and instead emphasizes that exigences or events do not exist as factual reality outside of the rhetor's form of communication. As he claims, ". . . meaning is not intrinsic in events, facts, people, or 'situations' . . . we learn of facts and events through someone's communicating them to us" (156). "Therefore," Vatz writes, "meaning is not discovered in situations, but *created* by rhetors" (157, emphasis in original). See also Barbara A. Biesecker's "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Différance*" (1989), in which she takes a deconstructive approach to the rhetorical situation.

transcendental thought, publications on manifest destiny, reports on working class living conditions, and treatises on architecture are all instrumental in my analysis. Through this cultural examination, I reveal the ways that texts can reflect, perpetuate, and denounce cultural and social norms prevalent during the time period.

Further, as my use of Bitzer suggests, I supplement my cultural and literary analysis within this project by incorporating rhetorical theories of audience and argumentation. Doing so allows me to focus my study on specific literary strategies and techniques that protest artists have found advantageous in persuading or compelling their audiences to conviction and/or action. Rhetorical criticism is a natural and appropriate lens through which to approach protest literature: if protest literature aims to make a difference in society, as I suggest it does, it is important to view these texts as more than aesthetic literature or literature for pleasure. Instead, we should view these texts as arguments. I ultimately argue that images of confinement—used to represent and expose a social policy of ideological containment and control in the nineteenth century—function as more than literary techniques or images. In depicting an oppressed subject as physically confined, these authors are able to mimic the feeling of claustrophobia and inescapability for the reader, more effectively prompting that reader to engage emotionally with the oppressed character. But these images go further than producing a literary effect; instead, the images of confinement I analyze in this project produce an *argument* that readers encounter. This imagistic strategy that protest authors deploy, then, leads the reader from a feeling, prompted by an aesthetic decision, to conviction. In short, images of physical confinement build a bridge between feeling and action.

Analyzing these instances as argumentative allows me to view the confinement and entrapment in these texts as something beyond striking imagery. Instead, the images these protest artists deploy work to make their readers *think*. As Devon Jensen notes, “language can function to create reality” (n. pag.). Jensen’s claim recalls Kenneth Burke’s notion of “terministic screens,” an idea that our place and time in history determine the way we understand the world. More specifically, Burke explains that an object takes on different meanings depending on which lens we use to view that object—a photograph will look different, and it will “mean” something different, if it is in color or in black and white. As he explains, “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45, emphasis in original). What Burke implies is that language has meaning-making functions; instead of simply conveying or reflecting reality, language can create it. This is not to say, of course, that literature creates *the* reality, but instead that it creates *a* reality. This is an important distinction, as we will see in subsequent chapters when I analyze my primary texts alongside popular thought and publications of the time period. But at the heart of Burke’s notion of terministic screens is the idea that we can come to understand our worlds only through our own perceptions, and those perceptions are influenced by our cultural surroundings. In keeping with this insight, I focus on the ways in which my chosen authors work to alter their audience’s terministic screens. They want their readers to witness a new reality they may never have noticed before: the reality of social oppression for the working class, women, and blacks in mid-century America.

As Howard Zinn claims, “there are . . . situations where we *believe* we know something, but don’t *really* know it in a visceral way; we don’t know it emotionally to the point where it moves us to action” (515, emphasis in original). Zinn’s comments here reflect James Baldwin’s frustration with protest literature as a genre. For Baldwin, protest literature ultimately fails in its attempt to reverse the positions of oppressor and oppressed in the aim of creating a new society, and one of the ways in which the genre fails is in its inability to make the reader feel anything other than “spurious emotion” (10). Through the inability of protest literature to make readers actually *feel* something real, Baldwin argues, these novels fail to humanize their subjects, and in “overlooking, denying, evading [a character’s] complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexities of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (Baldwin 11). As I hope my project will demonstrate, however, human complexity, ambiguity, and paradox prevail within the texts I analyze in this study; the worlds depicted by Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson are filled with “hunger, danger, [and] darkness” (Baldwin 11). As these protest texts show, discourse can make us more clearly understand a specific reality, and the ways in which the discourse is framed, or “screened,” can determine the ways in which we come to understand this reality—preventing readers from a mere “parad[e] of excessive and spurious emotion” and instead exposing to readers the “beauty, dread, [and] power” inherent in even the most oppressed of subjects (Baldwin 10, 17). In the case of the protest artists I analyze, their language functions to recreate a specific reality for their readers—a reality of ideological containment imposed upon oppressed subjects in mid-

nineteenth-century America. This in turn prompts those readers to revise their views of oppressive social structures through a combination of an immediate visceral reaction and a subsequent thought process. The reader's realization of ideological containment and what it represents for the oppressed subject propels this thought process, and I argue that this realization paves the way for empathetic engagement between privileged individuals and oppressed individuals. These three texts, then, constantly push readers to revise their own, often flawed, understanding of the world around them.

Harriet Wilson (a free working class black woman in New Hampshire), Rebecca Harding Davis (a middle class white woman from Virginia), and Harriet Jacobs (a slave from North Carolina) all penned texts that protested the ideological containment working class, black citizens, and women faced in mid-century America. A striking similarity exists in all of these texts: each author uses images of physical confinement as a rhetorical device to protest against actual separation—and its attendant ideological containment and control—in the material world, and to do so, each author appeals directly to her readers. The audience of these texts would have largely been middle to upper class white citizens, as I document in the following chapters, and so each author had to strategically appeal to this set of readers and prompt them to change their ideological paradigms so that they would go on to make change in the material world. Most importantly, though, these three authors, even when not making explicit arguments about women, engage in a public, political act of writing and argumentation that in itself speaks volumes against the separation of women to a specific physical, rhetorical, and linguistic sphere in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead of writing themselves into

existence, these women authors instead write themselves out of confinement—forcefully and unapologetically.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson use images of physical confinement within their texts to pointedly challenge notions of freedom and equality and attempt to expose readers to the actual reality oppressed subjects suffered in their day-to-day lives. Ultimately, through appealing to and engaging their readers and by prompting those readers to “experience” life as a subjugated individual experiences it, these three authors lay the groundwork for an empathetic engagement between a privileged reader and a marginalized character, something absolutely integral to social change.

In Chapter Two, “In the midst of universal movement: Physical and Narrative Containment in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” I analyze the disconnection between a promise and a reality in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Through an analysis of cultural discourse on manifest destiny, domesticity, and the values this discourse entailed, I detail how popular thought and publications in the middle decades of the nineteenth century promised freedom, equality, and movement for all American citizens. However, this promise is complicated by the physical reality of separation and confinement for white women, the working class, slaves, and free blacks. Through a look at various speeches, popular publications, and cultural texts of the time period, I expose the far-reaching physical and narrative control to which these oppressed groups were subjected, and I suggest that the very existence of this control gives lie to the promise of equality and freedom for all. This cultural exploration lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters where I analyze how Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson paradoxically utilize

images of physical confinement to lead their readers to recognize and denounce the physical and ideological containment oppressed individuals faced in the nineteenth century.

In Chapter Three, ““There is a secret down here . . .’: Physical Containment and Social Instruction in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron Mills,’” I argue that Davis uses three specific narrative techniques to move her privileged readers to a willingness for action in the material world. First, Davis uses direct address between her narrator and readers to command those readers to change their points of view about industrial laborers in mid-century. Second, through a setting of physical entrapment and stagnation, Davis manipulates readers into entering a world they would likely never enter: the dirty, confined world of the Virginia iron mills. And, third, Davis reintroduces readers to characters with whom readers would likely feel comfortable, but she forces them to disaffiliate with these characters, leaving readers only her working class protagonists with whom to affiliate. Through this, Davis provides a model of “social reading” for her readers to emulate. I provide an in-depth analysis of Davis’s contemporary, relatively privileged audience—readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*—and argue that Davis’s greatest challenge in her protest text is to move these individuals to conviction, and hopefully action, regarding the degrading living conditions for mid-century industrial laborers. Through these three specific narrative techniques, Davis attempts to create a collectivity of individuals who not only have the means to help those less fortunate than themselves but a willingness to do so as well.

Chapter Four, ““That little dismal hole . . . : Harriet Jacobs’s Physical Containment and Shifting Direct Address in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” takes

as its central focus Jacobs's seven-year stay in the garret above her grandmother's storeroom while attempting to escape slavery. Critics have exhaustively analyzed this section of Jacobs's text, largely coming to the conclusion that Jacobs uses this confining space to her own advantage: she utilizes the spaces of slavery against the system itself in order to escape. My reading of the text, however, complicates this conclusion. Through an in-depth analysis of Jacobs's use of direct address, I conclude that the garret chapters work primarily as a way for Jacobs to alter her readers' views on freedom, motherhood, and slavery. In the garret section, Jacobs refrains from including her characteristic direct address, and I argue that Jacobs strategically keeps silent so that her readers, too, feel and experience the same confinement—which represents ideological and social containment—Jacobs herself feels. Without direct address, readers are trapped in the text, unable to leave. In short, Jacobs uses this section to make her readers “experience” slavery, something she claims as an aim in her preface. Through these narrative techniques—a refusal to directly engage the reader and an extended image of physical entrapment—I argue that Jacobs's text works to alter her reader's response to slavery and motherhood in mid-century, ultimately forcing that reader into an empathetic engagement with slave women and thereby priming that reader for action in the material world.

In Chapter Five, “‘The pent up fires burst forth’: Harriet Wilson's Unsympathetic Audience,” I analyze what happens when a protest text does not have a sympathetic audience. Though Wilson published her novel three years before both Davis and Jacobs, analyzing her novel last allows me to focus on the importance of audience engagement, a point of success in Davis and Jacobs but much more complicated in Wilson's text. Though Wilson incorporates images of physical confinement within her text, like both

Jacobs and Davis do, she also faces a more unsympathetic audience than the other two authors. In the chapter, I argue that Wilson seemingly has an easier task in compelling her readers to enter the text. After all, she only needs those readers to enter the domestic home, something I argue her readers would feel comfortable doing due to the popular paradigm of domesticity during the time period. Once readers have entered the text, however, Wilson's task becomes much more complex: she must defamiliarize the domestic home for her readers, and she must demonstrate that the home—in contrast to what domestic ideology purports—works to ideologically contain and control those individuals like Frado who do not fit into the mold of American citizenship. After analyzing how Wilson dismantles domestic ideology for her readers, I discuss the main reason why her readers may still remain unsympathetic to Wilson's arguments: unlike both Davis and Jacobs, Wilson does not provide any corrective models within the text. This leaves readers bereft of an ideology to hold, and without a guiding sense of how they *should* act, readers are left only with models they should not embody. Ultimately, though Wilson is likely unable to change her readers' actions immediately, I end this chapter by arguing that she likely does succeed in changing her readers' dispositions, and this is the first step necessary to moving readers toward a change in conviction and a subsequent change in behavior.

I use the Coda to my dissertation, "Physical Containment, Continued," to test out a critical insight that images of confinement prove to be a useful argumentative device for protest authors writing in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Using Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a case study, I demonstrate the ways that she uses images of confinement in much the same way that Davis, Jacobs, and

Wilson do: to expose to readers the ways in which society ideologically contains and controls those citizens who challenge the status quo—in Gilman’s case, middle class white women suffering emotional disorders. From here, I provide a brief overview of how protest authors continue to deploy images of physical containment well into the twentieth century. Through this brief discussion, my final chapter posits that images of physical confinement provide protest authors a narrative strategy in which to make real the degraded conditions of oppressed subjects, no matter the cause for protest. This final chapter begins to crystallize a rubric of emblematic protest literature, regardless of genre or sociopolitical focus: the machinery I identify within these texts points to a prime way that protest authors can reshape the empathy of their readers, thereby moving readers to conviction and hopefully action in the name of oppressed American subjects. I end with a discussion of the implications of my study for the criticism of American protest literature: in analyzing a “functional core” of protest texts (Lauter 10), I suggest that we can more fully see the connections between protest movements, leading toward a more nuanced understanding of connections between history, the written word, and ideology.

Ultimately, this project argues that protest texts act as a corrective to a false American promise, a promise that claims Americans, regardless of their subject positions, have access to movement through spaces, to freedom, and to equality. Protest authors’ images of physical confinement, isolation, entrapment, and separation are finally effective because they expose the contrast between this ingrained American promise of freedom and a strikingly different reality of ideological containment, stasis, and control of oppressed subjects. The exposure of this contrast in protest texts, from the middle of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, works to create a collectivity of

readers more informed about the reality of American life, and thus more willing to fight for those less fortunate than themselves.

CHAPTER II : “IN THE MIDST OF UNIVERSAL MOVEMENT”: PHYSICAL AND NARRATIVE CONTAINMENT IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA.

From this hour, freedom!

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,

Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute . . .

-Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

The title of this project—“Out of the dark confinement!”—appears in Walt Whitman’s 1867 poem “Song of the Open Road.” In the poem, Whitman’s speaker celebrates the freedom that comes with exploration, travel, and movement. As the speaker tells us, “I think heroic deeds were all conceiv’d in the open air, and / all free poems also, / I think I could stop here myself and do miracles” (lines 72-74). In this “open air,” the speaker finds “the secret of the making of the best persons”: “it is to grow in the open air and eat and sleep with the / earth” (lines 104-106). Whitman depicts an ideal in this poem, one that would likely appeal to his contemporary readers’ sense of a specific American promise. Namely, the poem promises that movement, growth, and expansion are possibilities for all Americans. The poem advances a truly democratic world where individuals reign supreme and societal structures fall to the wayside “for the progress of souls” (line 292). “All religion, all solid things, arts, governments—all that was/ or is apparent upon this globe or any globe,” the poet tells us, “falls into niches and corners before the pro-/cession of souls along the grand roads of the/ universe” (lines 287-291).

While Whitman presents a utopic American democracy—one in which controlling structures like religion and government no longer have the power to define

the individual—his poem is not free from one of the most prevalent nineteenth century concerns: social inequality. While the “thousand perfect men” are truly free to roam the “grand roads” (line 99; line 290), other subject positions are rendered differently in the poem: the poem describes the “black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas’d, the illiterate person” (lines 23-24), and “a thousand beautiful forms of women” (line 102). Here, only the “thousand perfect men” are truly free; the “black” is forever tied to his “woolly head” (line 23) and the women are tied to their “beautiful forms” (line 102). “The felon” and “the diseas’d” are marked by a legal or bodily status (lines 23), and the “illiterate person” is marked by a mental deficiency (line 24). Whitman’s poem implicitly raises issues about the notions of equality in mid-nineteenth-century America, revealing a tension between freedom for some, and the “drag of the body” (17), to use Sidonie Smith’s term, for others.⁶

Whitman’s images serve as a point of departure for this project, and I aim to elucidate the tension apparent in Whitman’s poem: in a society marked by its promises of freedom, movement, openness, and expansiveness, certain members of society find themselves excluded from those promises. In what follows, I provide a cultural and historical overview for my subsequent chapters by analyzing the disconnection between ideals and reality in the 1850s and 1860s. In particular, I examine the divide between nineteenth century America’s ideology of manifest destiny and outward movement—

⁶ In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, Smith analyzes women’s autobiographies and speaks to the embodiment women faced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embodiment that often disqualified them from identifying with a “universal subject” (5). As Smith claims, “if the topography of the universal subject locates man’s selfhood somewhere between the ears, it locates woman’s selfhood between her thighs” (12), rendering a woman “an encumbered self” (12). I will attend to the idea of embodiment more in a later chapter, but for criticism on citizenship, the body, and social inequality, see especially Karen Sanchez Eppler and Russ Castronovo.

along with the ways in which ideas of domesticity are enlisted in the valuation and justification of westward expansion—and the very lived experience of separation, confinement, and claustrophobia for those subjugated sectors of society not allowed access to the promise of freedom inherent in that ideology.

To pave the way for an understanding of how nineteenth century protest authors use images of physical confinement and entrapment in their texts, it is necessary to understand how physical containment was an ideological and societal reality in the time period. This chapter thus documents the various ways that individuals and ideas that challenged the status quo were contained either physically or, more insidiously, through the written word. I begin with an analysis of how white, middle class women, the working class, and blacks were segregated to the home, tenement housing, and slave quarters respectively. In addition, I analyze various types of publications that reflect, perpetuate, or critique this separation of a disempowered group from a more privileged group. These discursive renderings of separation and confinement represent what I term narrative containment—by which I mean the written word deployed to perpetuate and necessitate the separation of certain individuals from other American citizens. The analysis I offer in this chapter paves the way for subsequent chapters, where we will see that the physical and ideological reality of containment offered, paradoxically, a space from which protest authors could combat nineteenth-century inequality: protest authors appropriate the physical containment their subjects encounter in the real world in order to expose the fault lines in American promises of freedom and equality.

The Rhetoric of Manifest Destiny

In 1845, John O’Sullivan published an article entitled “Annexation” in *The United*

States Democratic Review in which he described America's "manifest destiny to overspread the continent" (5). Largely assumed to be the first proclamation of the ideal of manifest destiny, O'Sullivan's article describes the providential design of America's westward expansion. In fact, for O'Sullivan, America's manifest destiny was just that: already manifest. It was fact and reality, "inevitable and irrevocable" (5). In light of this inevitability, it is not surprising that, although Texas was not officially admitted into the Union until December of 1845, O'Sullivan's August 1845 article presents Texas as already part of America: "Texas is now ours . . . her star and her stripe may already be said to have taken their place in the glorious blazon of our common nationality" (5). According to O'Sullivan's logic, California, too, is already manifestly part of America: "The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders. Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses" (9). Without the aid of government, California will become part of America simply by the "irresistible" pull of westward expansion. In this section of the text, O'Sullivan demonstrates that as Americans move westward, they bring with them their valued social structures: with the plough and the rifle, Americans can work California's land and protect her residents; schools and colleges will ensure the education of America's new citizens; courts and representative halls will allow California to be governed as the rest of America; and mills and meeting-houses clarify that commerce will reach America's western shore as American citizens continuously plow westward. This will all happen, O'Sullivan is quick to assure his

readers, as part and parcel of the “natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles” (9).

For O’Sullivan, then, westward expansion is inevitable because the American principles of freedom and movement organically expand into uncharted territories. We can see these sentiments echoed in an unsigned editorial entitled “Rapid Growth of America” in an 1850 issue of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*.⁷ The editorial’s anonymous author explains that England’s growth into outside colonies surpasses the rapid growth of ancient civilizations like Greece and Rome. “We are sending out every year,” the article claims, “literally, hundreds of thousands of civilized men” (238), the majority of whom are civilizing North America. The article invokes the lasting influence this spread of civilization will have on America: “we can see no limit to the spread of our laws, literature, and language” (238). “Greek and Roman greatness,” our author proposes, “are really, in comparison, nothing to this” (238). As O’Sullivan and this anonymous author would have us believe, the movement outward to claim more territory is, at the heart, an act of civilization and demonstrates the nation’s manifest destiny.

Scholars and critics have located the rhetoric of manifest destiny in many cultural venues. Roger Cushing Aikin has demonstrated, for example, that American landscape painters in the early republic often created compositions that moved from the right to the left, or from east to west, signifying America’s westward movement. Amy S. Greenberg has analyzed the rhetoric of expansion found during public meetings in the years leading up to the Civil War. As she claims, these public meetings “helped justify and promote

⁷ This editorial was reprinted in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* from London’s *Fraser’s Magazine*.

violence abroad by expressing a very particular vision of aggressive manhood at home” (636). Providing another form of narrative analysis of manifest destiny, Mary E. Stuckey discusses the ideology in relation to the Donner Party.⁸ As these examples make clear, the rhetoric of manifest destiny proliferated through many areas of cultural discourse in the nineteenth century. As Robert Miller suggests, “the import of the phrase ‘Manifest Destiny’ was that it gave . . . a justification to . . . continental ambition and it came to have its own mystical meaning and resonance in American History and the American psyche” (120).

Interestingly, the rhetoric of manifest destiny often worked to obliterate the boundaries between the public, political realm and the private realm of the home, rendering westward expansion a domestic issue. As Jenine Dallal has suggested, “at its height in the nineteenth century, expansionism was represented as an abstract, tautological, and domestic process, not a corporeal encounter with rivals over land” (50). O’Sullivan engages in this domestic representation when he suggests that Americans “let [Texas’s] reception into ‘the family’ be frank, kindly, and cheerful” (5). By representing the nation and its borders as a “family,” O’Sullivan makes expansion an issue for all Americans, and he makes it clear that if American citizens do *not* welcome Texas into the national family, those citizens are taking “delight to file [*sic*] their own nest” (5). In short, if an American disagrees with Texas’s annexation, he or she must relinquish the values of the national family. Through this comparison of manifest destiny with the national family, O’Sullivan transforms the values of expansion and territorial acquisition from

⁸ Stuckey argues that “the Donner Party can be understood as a single case study that illuminates the rhetorical processes undergirding the development and expansion of the American nation during this critical period” (231).

political values applicable to a few into quintessential American values applicable to all American citizens, and for which all citizens are responsible.

In the above examples, O’Sullivan enlists the ideals of domesticity—popular and nearly ubiquitous during this time period—to give justification to westward expansion. O’Sullivan’s emphasis on manifest destiny’s centrality to the national “family” yokes the ideas of acquisition of space and domestic ideals in mid-century, ideals that were central to the nation’s claim of equality, especially espoused in sentimental writing. In popular writing of the time period, prominent thinkers discursively connected home ownership with the possibilities of equality for all Americans. Andrew Jackson Downing’s 1850 *The Architecture of Country Houses*, for example, perhaps the most popular pattern book of the era, provided readers with architectural plans for cottages and also advanced Downing’s philosophy that home ownership was more than simply material reality; instead, home ownership at the time reflected American values of freedom and equality—values also inherent in the ideology of westward expansion and manifest destiny.

Downing’s text is interspersed with his reflections on the nature of the American home, and in one key passage, he exemplifies the ways in which the American home is unique in that it reflects the egalitarian nature of American society. The true American home, for Downing, is “the home of that family of equal rights . . . the republican home, built by no robbery of the property of another class, maintained by no infringement of a brother’s rights” (269). Downing continues, moving away from the structure of a home and instead reflecting on the truly American homeowner:

The just pride of a true American is not in a great hereditary home, but in greater hereditary institutions. It is more to him that all his children will be born under wise, and just, and equal laws, that one of them should come into the world with a great family estate. It is better, in his eyes, that it should be possible for the humblest laborer to look forward to the possession of a future country house and home like his own, than to feel that a wide and impassable gulf of misery separates him, the lord of the soil, from a large class of his fellow-being born beneath him. (270)

In this passage, Downing advances a generalized philosophy in which he connects the home and the homeowner to an American society marked by its desire to eradicate class distinctions. That “the humblest laborer” can look forward to homeownership in the same way that “the lord of the soil” can do assumes an American society that maintains “equal laws” (270). Much like O’Sullivan advocates westward expansion as an expansion of American values, leading to a growth of American equality and freedom for all within the path of westward expansion, Downing here emphasizes that the built environment and the domestic home—and the values these areas entail—can allow any citizen to achieve equality in mid-century America. When O’Sullivan advocates a “kindly and cheerful” acquisition of Texas and California into the American “family,” he engages with the qualities of domesticity a thinker like Downing advances in his writings. Through enlisting these domestic qualities into his justification of manifest destiny, O’Sullivan attempts to draw a parallel between the valuation of a domestic home—foremost on the minds of many Americans during this time period—and the innate value of territorial expansion and acquisition. The freedom, equality, and “greater hereditary institutions”

represented by a domestic home (Downing 270), O'Sullivan implies, can become manifest on a national scale as well—leading to an expansion outward of these very American values.

Engaging in the discourse of what Amy Kaplan has termed “Manifest Domesticity,” O'Sullivan and other proponents of annexation use the values of manifest destiny to at once gain national space—through the annexation of Texas and California—and also to solidify America's borders against “foreignness.” As Kaplan argues, rather than further demarcate the boundaries between men and women in nineteenth-century America, the rhetoric of manifest destiny worked to conjoin a man's and a woman's sphere in opposition to the foreign. When we view the domestic in opposition to the foreign, Kaplan argues, we see the domestic home yoked to the nation; the home and the nation stand together “in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home” (582). For Kaplan, manifest destiny represents the spread of the national “home,” and men and women are allied against “racial demarcations of otherness” (582). But this view is further complicated: if manifest destiny entails expansion of the national borders, expansion necessitates an interaction with the “foreign” or the “other.” In Kaplan's view, herein lies the power of the domestic home, for while it at once demarcates boundaries between “America” and “the foreign,” it can also perform “the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien” (582), something we see in sentimental literature of the time period. As Kaplan's study and O'Sullivan's rhetoric make clear, manifest destiny is about more than the acquisition of space; instead, it becomes a way for America to

further define itself as a nation while expanding its principles to assimilate and transform those who might threaten the cohesion of the “national family.”

On the surface, the view that manifest destiny—and the values that accompany it—can work to transform the nation into a larger and equal “national home” enacts a promise for all American citizens: as America moves outward, those who fall within its path are able to join, seemingly seamlessly, a national family whose values emphasize freedom, movement, domesticity, and equality. But as we will see, this promise of freedom and movement was a promise only applicable to certain sectors of society. Those sectors of society deemed unworthy of citizenship, like blacks, women, and the working class, found themselves instead separated from the promise of freedom applicable to all citizens.

As critics and scholars have demonstrated, citizenship and the freedom that accompanies it became an often unrealized hope because the very language that defined humanity and citizenship was a language steeped in abstractness and bodilessness, and as such, relegated “marked” bodies—marked by race, gender, and socioeconomic status—somewhere outside the realm of this humanity. Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues that American foundational documents, like The Declaration of Independence, define “American identity” in abstract terms. As she asserts, “the relation of the social and political structures of the ‘body politic’ to the fleshy specificity of embodied identities has generally been masked behind the constitutional language of abstracted and implicitly bodiless ‘persons’” (1). Nineteenth century abolitionists and feminists, Sanchez-Eppler points out, implicitly and explicitly attacked this “constitutional rhetoric,” and recognized the inherent segregation of this abstract and bodiless citizenry: “All the ‘men’ who,

Thomas Jefferson declared, ‘are created equal’ shed their gender and their race; in obtaining the right to freedom and equality they discard bodily specificity” (3). Similarly, Russ Castronovo argues that the very definition of “freedom” in nineteenth century America relies on non-specific terms that are devoid of historicity or contextualization. “Clogged with connotations of the past,” Castronovo explains, “a semantic subject is made unwieldy by the weight of memory, antecedence, and context. But once ensconced in a language of syntax, as opposed to a language of semantics, freedom has no earthly awkwardness and flits about effortlessly as both premise and promise” (117). More precisely, “freedom seems most complete when most disembodied” (Castronovo 121).

What Sanchez-Eppler and Castronovo intimate here is that citizenry—and the freedom and humanity that accompanies it—is reserved for those who can cast aside their bodies, a feat impossible for black, female, or poor bodies that bear the mark of history, culture, and legal status. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn asserts, “rhetorically, the ‘citizen’ was defined and therefore gained meaning through its contrast with the oppositional concept of the ‘noncitizen’ (the alien, the slave, the woman) who lacked standing because he or she did not have the qualities needed to exercise citizenship” (20). To classify these bodies as “noncitizen” and as non-human with “airy abstractions” leads to “practices that exclude and oppress women, enslave and colonize nonwhites, and dispose and exterminate indigenous peoples” (Castronovo 118). Castronovo’s choice of verbs in this excerpt attests to the ways in which these classifications of citizenship determine the difference between freedom and confinement for these marked subjects in nineteenth century America, leading Castronovo to term this desire for abstract freedom “political

necrophilia,” defined by the desire to “put to rest” the “historical, material, legal, and institutional circumstances” that “restrict access to the pleasures of abstract identity” (137).

What happens, we might ask, to these “marked bodies” when confronted with the equalizing ideals of domesticity and territorial expansion? Facing an impasse, these individuals are at once ensconced within a social arena that *claims* equality for all but that does not afford the privileges of citizenship to these marked subjects. As American values of equality seep outward from the domestic home to the western coast, individuals who are defined by their bodies find themselves contained within a physical and discursive rhetoric of equality. Rather than partaking in this equality, however, these “foreign” individuals are tamed and molded through the “process of domestication” (582), to use Kaplan’s phrase. More often than not, as we will see, this process of domestication—where individuals marked by their bodies (“the wild, the natural, the alien” [Kaplan 582]) are conquered and tamed—solidified the differences between sectors of society in the nineteenth century, which led to entrapment within, rather than participation in, the national family. Through this entrapment, these “foreign” citizens were able to be demarcated and controlled within the domain of American freedom, movement, and equality but unable to truly share and experience these oft-touted American values.⁹

⁹ Of course, the idea of territorial expansion was a hotly debated issue of the time period. In an 1845 issue of *The Voice of Industry*, edited by W.F. Young, an editorial announcement claims, “The papers are full of ‘War with Mexico.’ The *Slave* republic of the United States, going to war with the *anti-slavery* republic of Mexico, and calling it a contest for *liberty!* Our government had better take care of what territory she already possesses instead of fighting for more” (3, emphasis in original). For more on the debate over territorial expansion in the nineteenth century, see Reginald Horsman’s *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (1981), Robert Johannsen et al.’s *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansionism* (1997), Robert E. May’s *Manifest Destiny’s*

The Physical Reality of Containment

Despite the valuation of manifest destiny and the ideals it entails—freedom, movement, openness, expansiveness, boundary crossing, acquisition of space—nineteenth century America is marked by the presence of physical separation, most primarily for the subjugated sectors of society under study here: women, the working class, and African Americans. The dichotomy of openness (as represented by westward expansion) and containment (as represented by social structures like the home, the mill town and tenements, the slave cabin) represents an important tension in nineteenth century American society, which critical distance allows us to see as a contestation over spaces. Indeed, as Laura Dassow Walls explains in a recent review, “this approach to space as an active construction rather than a passive backdrop foregrounds America as a remarkably spatial problem” (861). As has been well documented, the middle decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological development.¹⁰ America witnessed increasing discord over women’s rights, staggering numbers of newly-arrived immigrants and, thus, growth in the working class population, and intensifying sectionalism over the spread and perpetuation of slavery. Here, I am interested in the ways that this increasing divisiveness exposed itself in architectural structures and geographical layouts of the nineteenth century, most

Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America (2002), Robert J. Miller’s *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (2002), and Christopher Childers’s *The Failure of Popular Sovereignty: Slavery, Manifest Destiny, and the Radicalization of Southern Politics* (2012).

¹⁰ For more on industrialization and technological advances and their attendant societal changes, see Peter G. Goheen’s “Industrialization and the Growth of Cities in Nineteenth-Century America” (1973), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg’s “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America” (1973), David Montgomery’s “Wage Labor, Bondage, and Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America” (1995), and Mason Stokes’s “Someone’s in the Garden with Eve: Race, Religion, and the American Fall” (1998).

specifically in the traditional domestic home, tenement housing, and slave quarters. These structures worked to clearly demarcate and police the boundaries between subject positions in the nineteenth century, rendering white women, the working class, and blacks distinctly separated from propertied, white males. This physical separation was mirrored and bolstered by the written word; thus, I will also analyze what I term instances of narrative containment—moments when narrative (oftentimes fictional, but also nonfictional as well) works to perpetuate the separation of, and thus the control over, women, the working class, and blacks in mid-century America. When we analyze physical structures and popular rhetoric, it becomes apparent that separation and confinement—as a way to contain and control certain subject positions—were enacted on both a physical and a metaphorical level in the nineteenth century, even when expansion and openness were touted as inalienable American values.

A Woman's Separate Sphere

Whether white or black, upper, middle, or working class, women in the nineteenth century were affected by the ideology of separate spheres, which critics have comprehensively documented over the past century. In 1841, Catharine Beecher published *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* in which she argued that

. . . the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man . . . the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of the country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. (37)

Implicit in this statement is an emphasis on the value of domesticity for the American

woman, one of the four cardinal virtues of a True Woman, as defined by Barbara Welter in 1966.¹¹ As Welter explains, “the true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside—as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother. Therefore, domesticity was among the virtues most prized by the [nineteenth century] women's magazines” (162). Welter’s study analyzes women’s magazines between the years 1820 and 1860, and as she explains, “in a society where values changed frequently . . . one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found . . . It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth-century American woman had—to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand” (151-152).¹²

We can see these ideas about the proper place for a woman in an 1851 article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* by Professor J. H. Agnew of the University of Michigan. Agnew opens his editorial by discussing our “age of stirring life . . . of notions and novelties, of invention and enterprise, of steam-motives and telegraph wires” (654). The success of “this world of galvanic motion” (654) depends largely on women, Agnew asserts: women and their influence will determine if the rapidly changing world will be

¹¹ Despite having been written 50 years ago, Welter’s formulations remain relevant and effective for analyzing nineteenth-century women’s lives and writings. As we will see in detail below, critics have responded to her study by elucidating the ways in which women of color and working class women cannot as easily be subsumed under the ideology of “true womanhood.” But Welter herself makes this implicitly clear by referring to the “true woman’s” “frail *white* hand” (152, emphasis mine).

¹² Scholars of the 1960s and 1970s reconceptualized the ideology of gendered spheres as a positive way for women to develop a specifically feminine culture, one marked by strong female interaction and friendship. In 1975, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg published a groundbreaking article on same-sex relationships between middle class women in the nineteenth century. Analyzing letters, diaries, and other primary documents, Smith-Rosenberg argues that the gendered divisions in American society paved the way for a sphere in which women could form intimate relationships. As she claims, living in a society “characterized in large part by rigid gender-role differentiation within the family and within society as a whole. . . a specifically female world did indeed develop, a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks” (9). For Smith-Rosenberg, the gender divide represented in architectural structures—like the home and the church—provided a scene where in women could form “female closeness and support networks” (10).

filled with “rude, unshapen masses” or “polished gems” fit for both “the pillars of this republican edifice” and “for its adornment also” (654). In this statement, Agnew implicitly argues that a domestic woman has the power to shape the nation. Agnew then lists and describes the “offices and influence” of women for the aim of turning “unshapen masses” into “polished gems,” the first of which is “*to make a happy home*” (654, emphasis in original). Speaking directly to his women readers, Agnew commands them to “point your [sons and sires] away from the earth’s sordid gold to the brighter gems of literature. Direct their energies to the intellectual and moral advancements of their age” (655). There is one office, in particular, that woman cannot fulfill: “she has no right to be a *man*” (656, emphasis in original). For Agnew, a woman has no place in politics or in legislation; instead, a woman belongs in “the quiet retirement of the home” (656), and from the confines of this home, American women have the power to reform society: “*it is what she bids it to be*” (656, emphasis in original). As Agnew exclaims, “What a potency! Let her wield [her power] for her country’s welfare. Then shall it be a beacon light to other lands now in darkness and degradation” (656). American middle class, white women, for Agnew, function much in the same way that America’s ideal of manifest destiny functions for a thinker like O’Sullivan: in acting as a “beacon of light” for places yet in darkness, “true women” could advance America’s principles and values—but, Agnew is quick to assert, this power should only come from the domain of the home.

Perhaps these womanly duties were a “fearful obligation” (Welter 151); after all, as Agnew intimates, a woman’s duty to her children and husband has implications for the future of the nation. Further, as Amy Kaplan’s study makes clear, white women’s

“solemn promise,” to use Welter’s term, to uphold and perpetuate national values renders domesticity “more mobile and less stabilizing; it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign” (583). Kaplan’s critical notion and Agnew’s editorial testify to the fact that white women faced a separation and confinement that was not as strict as earlier conceptions of the “separate sphere” ideology would have us believe. White women did indeed have ideological power in the nineteenth century, and even if that power could not be asserted at the voting booths, it could very well be asserted within the walls of her domestic domain.

If upper and middle class white women were relegated to the domestic, private, and moral duties of the home, working class, free black, and slave women were unable to achieve the status of “true woman” in the nineteenth century, primarily because they were often not allowed access to the “home”—whether domestic or national.¹³ Revising the notion of separate spheres, critics have discussed how women’s status was complicated by class and race positions in the nineteenth century. There was a large gap, for example, between a subjugated white, middle class woman and a subjugated white, working class woman, rendering “woman” a complex subject position. As such, over the past several decades, feminist critics have exposed the nuances and intricacies in writing about nineteenth century women: the separate spheres ideology, these critics imply, is not a one-size-fits-all model for analyzing women’s lives in the nineteenth century. As early as

¹³ As critics have demonstrated, women also increasingly found employment within schools, in effect expanding their sphere of influence. For more on the increasing employment of women in schools, see Jessica Enoch’s article “A Woman’s Place Is in the School: Rhetorics of Gendered Space in Nineteenth-Century” (2008).

1969, Gerda Lerner argued that “for almost a hundred years sympathetic historians have told the story of women in America from the feminist viewpoint. Their tendency has been to reason from the position of middle class women to a generalization concerning all American women” (13). This tendency leads to a distorted understanding of women and their contribution to society primarily because middle class women only represent a portion of America’s female populace, and Lerner advocates that “any valid generalization concerning American women after the 1830s should reflect a recognition of class stratification” (13). The working woman in America was doubly contained: when working in the public sphere, she was often relegated to “female” tasks; when finished with a day’s work, she often returned home to domestic duties. As Linda K. Kerber puts it, this was “an ugly reality in which working women labored in the public sector by day and returned to domestic chores by night” (29). For working class women, then, the virtues of a true woman, with domesticity at the pinnacle, were subordinated to the economic realities of an increasingly industrial, capitalist society in which they had to contribute to the financial security of the household.

The disconnection between middle or upper class women and working class women becomes apparent when we read an 1845 article published in *The American Phrenological Journal*. Entitled “Men and Gentlemen—Women and Ladies,” the anonymous author claims that “*Woman* is the last, the most perfect work of God; ladies are the productions of silkworms, milliners, and dressing-maids” (24, emphasis in original). Though not speaking about the rights of working class women, this excerpt nonetheless exposes the discrepancy between a middle or upper class American woman and a working class American woman: the working class woman creates the economic

realities and privileges for middle and upper class women in mid-century America, and in so doing, she *produces* the American “lady.”

These issues were taken up two years later in the *Voice of Industry*, a working-class magazine that concerned itself with the rising Industrial Revolution in mid-century America. In an article entitled “Female Labor,” the anonymous author argues for equal wages for working men and women. As the author claims, “there are, it is well known, hundreds of families in our cities supported solely by females, who are obliged to labor with the needle twelve and fourteen hours out of the twenty-four, to gain hardly a comfortable subsistence for themselves and those dependent upon them, so trifling is the compensation they receive” (4). Here, the author makes an argument dependent upon the values of domesticity: if a working woman works the majority of the day, it is to provide a “comfortable subsistence” for her family, something integral to the health of the family and the nation, as Catharine Beecher intimates. But perhaps more insulting to the author than the unequal pay between men and women is the unequal treatment of the working woman at the hands of more wealthy citizens: “Why is it that so many of the wealthy, whose whole lives are filled to overflowing with luxuries and plenty,” the author asks, “use every possible endeavor to crush down to the lowest imaginable point, the seamstress, milliner and manteau-maker?” (4). “And even though this mean and selfish spirit is so universally practised,” the author continues, “they are very apt to think the recipients thereof owe them an everlasting debt of gratitude for such manifestation of their unbounded charity and benevolence!” (4). The author’s sarcasm in this excerpt points to a growing problem in American society: the working woman works to support her family and instill in her family the values necessary to a productive life, just as the

middle or upper class woman does within her domestic domain, but the working woman's labors produce the means by which the middle and upper class woman can thrive within her home. Seamstresses, milliners, and manteau-makers—our author's choice of working women's occupations—produce the very objects necessary for a middle or upper class woman to clothe herself and her family. But instead of viewing herself as *dependent upon* working women, our author argues, domestic American "ladies" view the working class woman as a charity case, judging her life to be substandard to the lives of middle class and upper class women.

The issues of equality between women in the nineteenth century becomes even more complicated when we consider a third form of oppression: race. Following Lerner's trend in expanding our understanding of women's subject positions in nineteenth century America, in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw developed what has come to be called "intersectional criticism" to discuss black women's specific realities. Crenshaw argues that the "single-axis framework" of discrimination—one in which black women are thought to be discriminated against *either* because of their race or their gender, but never simultaneously by both—is unable to "sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (58). Crenshaw argues that sex discrimination solely focuses on the experiences of white women, while racial discrimination solely focuses on privileged blacks, leaving black women no category with which to identify. Though Crenshaw is writing about legal discourse, she argues that we can see this same single-axis framework in feminist and antiracist theory, resulting in "Black women [who] are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women's experiences" (69). As we will see in the chapters on Harriet Wilson

and Harriet Jacobs below, the ideology of true womanhood could rarely be a reality for black women in the nineteenth century, whether slave or free. With little to no control over their own bodies and a legal system that viewed them as noncitizens, the womanly ideal of “purity” could not be guaranteed for black women.¹⁴ Likewise, the domestic ideal of “a home of one’s own” was an unlikely reality for slave women in the nineteenth century. With marriage between slaves rendered legally null and void, the hope for a home was too often only a hope. While a narrative like Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*—which I discuss in more detail below—ends with a traditionally sentimental marriage and acquisition of a home, other narratives, like Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents* and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, end with a striking lack of homeownership for the female protagonists, whether slave or free.

Considering this now-established notion of intersectionality, it is imperative to view nineteenth century women as often triply marginalized—through their gender, their race, and their class status. Analyzing the shifting criticism on the “separate sphere” ideology, Kerber argues that understanding the ideology is both more simple and more complex: “it is simpler because the separate women's sphere can be understood to denote the physical space in which women lived, but more complex because even that apparently simple physical space was complexly structured by an ideology of gender, as well as by class and race” (37). Inherent in Kerber’s simple/complex definition is that the physical spaces to which women were relegated in the nineteenth century reflected *and* maintained

¹⁴ For discussion on this non-control, see Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). Through analyzing legal cases, Hartman observes that “in nineteenth-century common law, rape was defined as the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will and without her consent. Yet the actual or attempted rape of an enslaved woman was an offense neither recognized nor punished by law” (79).

ideologies of gender, race, and class; but despite this maintenance of the social order, women often moved out of the private sector and entered into very public discourse that aimed to shape a material public reality controlled largely by white, propertied males.¹⁵ This movement outward from the confines of the domestic home complicates the notion of “separate spheres.” While, ultimately, women were confined to the private space of the domestic home, that private space often held political and national power. But this power, more often than not, was reserved for the middle class white woman who could and would perpetuate American values that claimed equality, even when those ideological values only granted equality to a select few.

The Separation of Working Class Citizens

Perhaps one of the earliest realizations of America’s separation between social classes can be found in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. In his second volume, published in 1840, de Tocqueville discusses the very different lived realities between laborers and free citizens in America:

When a working man has spent a considerable portion of existence in this manner, his thoughts are forever set upon the object of his daily toil: his body has contracted certain fixed habits, which it can never shake off: in a word, he no longer belongs to himself, but to the calling to which he has

¹⁵ These ideas extend into the postbellum period as well. In her influential study of postbellum rhetoric and gender dynamics, Nan Johnson argues that middle class white women after the Civil War were implicitly, and oftentimes explicitly, instructed to exist in a rhetorical sphere relegated to their roles as traditional women. As Johnson explains, “although a few publicly acclaimed nineteenth-century women may have gained access to the powerful public rhetorical space of the podium and the pulpit,” as a whole, middle class white women “were being encouraged to see their rhetorical identities as a reflection of their roles as wives and mothers” (14). But as criticism has shown, and as those “publicly acclaimed nineteenth-century women” argued repeatedly, women had been coerced into a private rhetorical space—one outside (or deep inside) of the public, political realm—long before the start of the Civil War.

chosen . . . a theory of manufactures more powerful than manners and laws binds him to a craft, and frequently to a spot, which he cannot leave: it assigns to him a certain place in society, beyond which he cannot go: in the midst of universal movement, it has rendered him stationary. (86)

In this excerpt, de Tocqueville makes clear that a “working man” is wedded to his labor in such a way that his body and his movements are restricted. That “he no longer belongs to himself” attests to the ways in which members of the working class were denied independence and freedom, ideals that had been promised to all American citizens some 60 years earlier. Members of the working class, de Tocqueville suggests, no longer own their own bodies and can no longer move on their own volition. Their very livelihoods negate the promises of freedom and movement that should accompany American citizenship. De Tocqueville’s observations elucidate the gap between American ideals of movement and expansion and the reality of stasis and containment for working class Americans.

With increasing immigration in the mid-nineteenth century and rising numbers of working class citizens, de Tocqueville’s impressions call attention to a society that adhered to strictly demarcated class positions, despite the popular conception of the “self-made man,” an ideology that touted the possibility for economic and social growth. Perhaps the most looming example of such demarcations of the working class in the nineteenth century is tenement housing, which largely began in the 1830s when “the division of one-family homes into dwellings designed to house several families and the construction of large tenement apartment buildings were both considered reasonable methods of offering affordable housing to poor and working-class urban migrants”

(Leviatin 17). In his influential study on the arrangement of industrialized cities in the mid-to late nineteenth century, David Ward describes how newly arrived immigrants to America's cities were more often than not relegated to central tenement districts near the city's factories and mills. As he claims, "The central tenement districts provided by far the largest supply of cheap living quarters, but because most tenements were overcrowded, badly designed, and poorly—if at all—endowed with sanitary facilities, even low rents were exorbitant" (345). As David Leviatin points out, with increasing industrialization and therefore increasing numbers of immigrants entering America as the century drew on, tenement housing, paired with the "greed of landlords and builders," "turned what once appeared to be the logical solutions to an increased demand for cheap housing into the causes of crisis" (17).

Although published in the late nineteenth century, Jacob Riis's 1890 text *How the Other Half Lives* clearly captured the reality of tenement housing for New York's working class. He makes it clear in his first chapter, "Genesis of the Tenement," that the isolation of working class Americans from middle- and upper class Americans through housing structures had a decades-old history. As he claims, in the thirty-five years following the War of 1812, New York's population more than quadrupled and "the dark bedroom, prolific of untold depravities, came into the world" (63). Riis then quotes a report to the Legislature of 1857 which describes the conditions within the tenements: ". . . the entire premises reached the level of tenant-house dilapidation, containing, but sheltering not, the miserable hordes that crowded beneath mouldering, water-rotted roofs or burrowed among the rats of clammy cellars" (63, see figure 1). In this excerpt, the authors of the report make clear that tenement housing did not work to shelter American

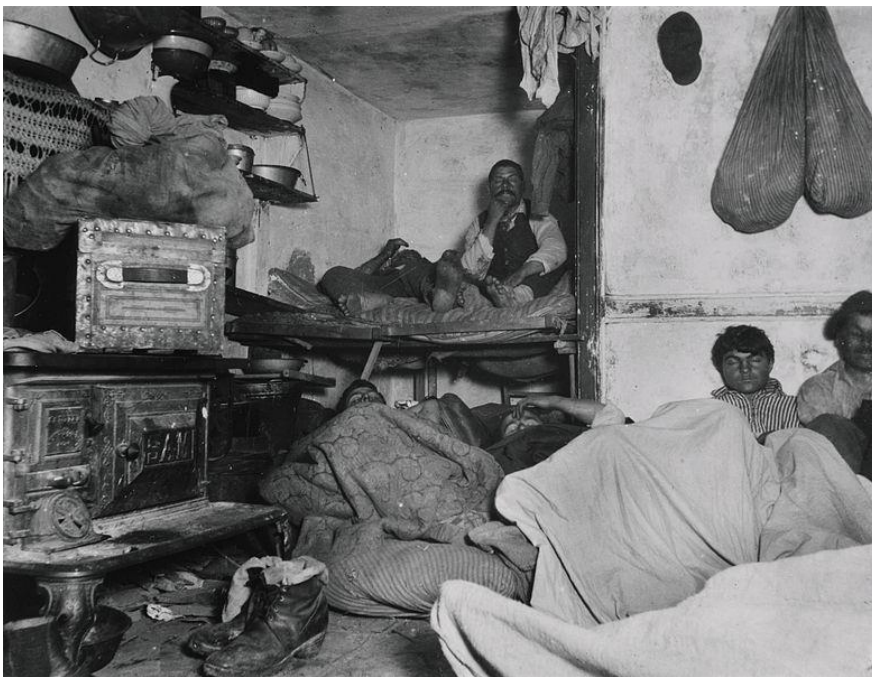
working class citizens from the elements; instead, it worked to separate them from more respectable parts of American cities. Of course, the American city's cramped living conditions directly oppose those American values of openness and expansion inherent in the rhetoric of manifest destiny. As city developers "looked up to the sky," to use David William Fleming's phrase, millions of working class citizens were pushed into tenements, slums, and ghettos that Riis aptly captures in his text.



Figure 1. Jacob Riis's "Tenement of 1863, for Twelve Families on Each Flat"¹⁶

¹⁶ Riis includes a footnote for this image in which he explains that the Council of Hygiene described this tenement as such: "Here are twelve living-rooms and twenty-one bedrooms, and only six of the latter have any provision or possibility for the admission of light and air, excepting through a family sitting- and living-room; being utterly dark, close, and unventilated" (66). With no "admission of light and air," this description of the tenement housing is strikingly similar to Harriet Jacobs's description of her grandmother's garret, which she lived in for seven years, and it is reminiscent of Harriet Wilson's description of her protagonist's living quarters within the Bellmont home, both of which I will discuss in much more detail in subsequent chapters. This image from Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* is from David Phillips's hypertext of Riis's text. As Phillips claims, "Unrestricted, not-for-profit use of the

Within the pages of Riis's text, the reader is confronted with photographs depicting the inhabitable living spaces of New York City's working class population in the 1880s. Riis's photographs depict dirty, claustrophobic surroundings; small, narrow alleyways; dimly lit living spaces filled with people. In a particular photograph, "Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement—'Five Cents a Spot'" (105, see figure 2), viewers are confronted with a grim portrait of six individuals resting in a stifling, filled room. On the left side of the composition, viewers see luggage, pots and pans, and shoes stacked from the floor to the ceiling. Two men are lying on a mattress on the floor, under what appears to be a makeshift loft bed holding two more men.



*Figure 2. Jacob Riis's "Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement—"Five Cents a Spot"*¹⁷

hypertext edition of *How the Other Half Lives* is hereby granted. All text and images are in the public domain" (n. pag.).

¹⁷ This image and the next (figures 2 and 3) are from Wikimedia Commons and are in the public domain.

In the front right hand corner lays another bed in which another two men sit cramped. The floor is dirty, uncarpeted, and unfinished; the men's faces are in shadow, rendering the scene dark and almost ghastly.

In another image, "Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters" (192, see figure 3), viewers encounter three children resting in a pile in an alleyway between buildings. That Riis titles the image "Sleeping Quarters" leads the viewer to believe that this is where these children take shelter after a day of work.



Figure 3. Jacob Riis's "Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters"

The children sit barefoot in front of a grate in the ground, surrounded by a wrought iron fence and a cobblestone half-wall. The children's exposed legs are dirty, and a pipe from the building looms over their heads. In just these two images, marked by the

characteristic darkness through which Riis leaves his subjects in shadows, readers must face the reality of a life in New York's tenements.

While tenement housing worked to separate the working class from other American citizens, as Riis's text so aptly captures, it also often left inhabitants exposed to the elements. In his *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), Charles Dickens describes one New York working class home and compels his readers to join in his exploration: "mount up these other stairs with no less caution (there are traps and pitfalls here, for those who are not so well escorted as ourselves) into the housetop; where the bare beams and rafters meet overhead, and calm night looks down through the crevices in the roof" (214). In these few pages of Dickens's chapter on New York, he demonstrates that working class citizens are relegated to "a squalid street," in a "square of leprous houses," but these structures do not produce adequate shelter for their inhabitants: the ceilings are open to the elements, and the "miserable" rooms are "destitute of all comfort" (213).

This chapter in Dickens's *American Notes* echoes de Tocqueville's observations about working class citizens, but Dickens also reports specifically on the black workers he encounters in the tenements. After leading his readers through a "wolfish den," Dickens directs the reader to "open the door of one of these cramped hutches full of sleeping negroes" (215). After an interjection of disgust—"Pah!"—Dickens describes a room full of inhabitants: "From every corner, as you glance about you in these dark retreats, some figure crawls half-awakened, as if the judgment-hour were near at hand, and every obscene grave were giving up its dead. Where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men, and boys slink off to sleep, forcing the dislodged rats to move away in quest of

better lodgings” (215). In this grotesque description, in which Dickens likens the tenement’s black inhabitants to corpses risen from the dead, the reader receives a clear image of crowdedness, claustrophobia, and confinement: like rats, these inhabitants are depicted as vermin who “crawl” and “slink” in a home not fit for dogs or even the rats to which the inhabitants are compared. But Dickens’s quick dismissal of the scene, as my chapter on Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” will show, demonstrates what many saw as a typical response of middle and upper class white individuals. Once escaping the tenements, Dickens explains that the air “is fresh after the stifling atmosphere of the houses; and now, as we emerge into a broader street, it blows upon us with a purer breath, and the stars look bright again” (218). Though the tenement dwellers must stay behind “where neither ray of light nor breath of air, appears to come” (213-214), Dickens and the reader are allowed to emerge into the fresh air of New York’s nicer streets. Even if the tenements are walking distance away from the rest of the city, Dickens’s depiction represents a separation of working class citizens from the rest of the city’s population, and Dickens’s quick dismissal of the scene (from one paragraph to another) demonstrates that once the tenement and its inhabitants are out of sight, so too are they out of mind.

It should come as no surprise that Dickens focuses so specifically on black tenement dwellers in this chapter. As scholars have demonstrated, race and class status in the nineteenth century were intertwined in the public view, often leading to the phenomenon of characterizing working class individuals in racialized language.¹⁸ In a

¹⁸ For more on the intersection between blacks and the working class, see Amy Schrager Lang’s “Class and the Strategies of Sympathy” (1992), Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the*

recent study on the intersection between race and class in what he identifies as America's first Gilded Age (1865-1925), Charles E. Orser Jr. describes how wealthy Americans used "poverty lines in a manner wholly analogous to the color line: as a method of social differentiation" (153). In discussing how poverty and race were "dialectically entwined" in nineteenth-century America (151), Orser uncovers the ways in which wealthy Americans created distinct separations between themselves and those they identified as "others," resulting in a hierarchical, capitalist social structure that deemed failure "wholly personal" while success was consistently determined by ancestry (152). In this dominant paradigm, then, individuals of Anglo-Saxon ancestry could rest assured in their class positions, while those racialized individuals were deemed wholly responsible for their own success or failure. As Orser puts it, "the watchword for esteem for the 19th-century American was 'success'—economic and, thus, social and political—and all those men who could not obtain it were considered failures" (154). Though tenement inhabitants ranged drastically in nationality and race—working class white and black Americans, Germans, Irish, Italians, and so on—the logic of racialization allowed wealthy, white Americans to enact a "generalized homogenization," to use Orser's term, against these working class individuals, rendering them defined not by their nationalities or their personal characteristics but instead by their racialized status as a working class group. As Orser claims, "they were racialized into an essentialized category labeled 'the poor'" (161). Through this process, an "us/them" dichotomy emerges as the dominant view, and through this dichotomy, separation of the "them" by the "us" unfolds seamlessly,

American Working Class (1995), and David R. Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1999).

relegating those racialized as “working class” to a section of the city separate from the wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon descendants.¹⁹ Orser uncovers a rhetorical connection between race and poverty in the nineteenth century that has substantive physical effects: while the sublimation of working class individuals into a homogenized racial category happened discursively, this rhetorical technique was also represented in the very lived realities of working class individuals.

For laborers and the working class in nineteenth century America, living conditions and wages were continuously degraded as the gap between the rich and the poor—the owners of the means of production and the workers—grew exponentially. As Rodger Streitmatter explains, “only by pooling the earnings of husband, wife, and children could a family eke out even a bare subsistence—people who fell into debt would, like serfs from medieval times, be thrown into prison” (3). As more citizens became working class laborers and fewer individuals controlled the means of production, the recently born ideal of American democracy became only a dream for the working class.

The Separation of Slaves and Free Blacks

The increasing divide between the middle and the working classes could be seen most readily in the North’s large, industrial cities, especially in the middle decades of the century as America moved toward secession and the Civil War. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, wage labor entered the political arena with a striking force, and

¹⁹ Despite the racialization of working class citizens, blacks in New York toward the end of the century still suffered more economic hardship than their “whiter” counterparts. As Riis explains in his text, the rent prices for the same tenement living space were more expensive for black tenants. As Riis explains, “the negroes proved cleaner, better, and steadier tenants. Instead, however, of having their rents reduced in consequence, the comparison stood as follows” (158): where white tenants would pay a total of \$127.00 a year in rent, black tenants would pay \$144.00 a year for the same dwelling.

prominent thinkers of the time period, both pro- and antislavery, utilized the existence of wage labor for their arguments about slavery. As Shearer Bowman has recently demonstrated, Abraham Lincoln consistently used the rhetoric of the “self-made man” in his speeches and advocated the North’s free labor market for its ability to allow working class citizens to climb the social ladder, moving from working for an employer to eventually becoming self-employed. Bowman contrasts Lincoln’s rhetoric with that of George Fitzhugh, a proslavery southern writer who argued vehemently that American slavery was better than what he termed “wage slavery,” most specifically because employers do not have to care for the well-being of their employees, whereas a master makes sure to take care of his slaves’ well-being. In these opposing rhetorics, wage labor becomes the central component of an argument either for or against slavery. These rhetorics demonstrate, in short, that slavery and wage labor are intimately connected: discursively and rhetorically, wage labor and slavery are each used as a counterargument to the other; moreover, there are actual similarities between wage labor and slavery in regard to the legal, physical, and political separation working class individuals and slaves experienced on a daily basis.²⁰

Paving the way for the “separate but equal” physical reality that would come during Reconstruction, and echoing Thomas Jefferson’s 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the

²⁰ As we will see in more detail in the chapter on Harriet Wilson, invoking ideas of wage labor was risky business for a free black author. Because Wilson published the text anonymously, and because she vilifies wage labor and indentured servitude in the North, contemporary readers could have thought that a proslavery advocate authored the text, implying that slavery would prevent the misfortunes that befall Frado. But as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, Wilson’s text in fact “dramatizes how the gradations between slave labor and wage labor, far from delineating a black-and-white division (‘slave’ vs. ‘free’) instead reveal that dehumanizing exploitation can emerge in many different permutations, complicated, as she insists throughout the text, by anti-black racism” (xxxix). For more on this topic, see David Dowling’s “‘Other and More Terrible Evils’: Anticapitalist Rhetoric in Harriet Wilson’s ‘Our Nig’ and Proslavery Propaganda” (2009).

African Colonization Society (ACS), founded in 1816, advanced the argument that slavery, and a free black population, posed a spatial problem to the American ideal of freedom.²¹ As the ACS would repeatedly argue, if blacks were not separated from whites, their “inferiority” would mar a perfect American society. In an 1827 speech seeking financial support for the society, Henry Clay appealed to his audience’s fears of amalgamation to argue for an African colony of America’s free black population. Clay makes sure to assuage fears that the ACS aims to send all black Americans, slave and free, to Africa; instead, the society’s goal is to send only the free black population away, which would “accomplish the desirable objects of domestic tranquility, and render us one homogenous people” (364). For Clay and the ACS, deporting free blacks to Africa would ensure that America will remain a primarily white country. As he claims, “if . . . the capital of the African stock could be kept down, or stationary, while that of the European origin should be left to an unobstructed increase, the result . . . would be most propitious” (364). The ACS’s plan to colonize Africa with America’s free blacks demonstrates that, for slave holders and those members of society determined to have a “homogeneous” America, the acquisition and manipulation of space became a vital tool in the separation of blacks and whites. In short, the only way to ensure the survival of the white race in America, the ACS implicitly argues, is to contain African Americans by separating them spatially.²²

²¹ In a famous summation in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson claims, “I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (341). Due to his “suspicion only,” Jefferson suggests that when emancipated, blacks should be removed from whites so as to not “[stain] the blood of his master” through “miscegenation” (342).

²² As Amy Kaplan has noted, colonization, like that supported by the ACS, can be seen as another form of “manifest domesticity” because it is America’s way to send its values, along with a free black population, to Africa. Through this colonization, America is able to send its values abroad, much like

The supposed racial inferiority present in the ACS's writings and speeches was also mirrored in the built environment, specifically on slave plantations, and as the century continued, it would further be perpetuated and contested through the written word. The plantation space was used to control slaves, leading to a sense that space in and of itself could demarcate boundaries and police subject positions in nineteenth-century society. These spaces, created and controlled by white slave owners, served an ideological as well as physical function. Indeed, as Stephanie M. H. Camp argues, "at the heart of the process of enslavement was a geographical impulse to locate bondpeople in plantation space" (88), and in so locating slaves within geographical space, white slave owners could control them as well.²³ In both pro- and antislavery texts, readers are continuously confronted with architectural structures that work to represent and police race: the southern plantation, the slave cabin, the auction block, the prison, the church, among others. In his book *Sites Unseen*, William A. Gleason calls structures like these "buildingscape[s] of bondage" for both slaves and free people of color. As Gleason explains, these architectural structures worked to spatially orient blacks and whites in American society. Gleason studies pattern books of the mid century—which gained popularity in the 1850s not simply for builders but also for more general readers—and argues that these types of publications advanced a specifically American architectural style, popularizing the cottage as a viable living space. But within these texts, as Gleason

westward expansion allowed American values to overtake the continent. For more, see Kaplan's reading of Sarah Hale's *Liberia* in "Manifest Domesticity."

²³ In her article, which focuses on slave women's bodily pleasure, Camp argues that slave women and men transgressed the spatial and temporal boundaries of their slaveholders and the plantation by attending nighttime gatherings and parties. This allowed them, especially women slaves, to reclaim ownership of their own bodies and to use those bodies as sites of pleasure and resistance to the system of slavery.

points out, readers encounter a sub-narrative about race: architecture in mid-century both reflected racial divisions and created them, whether in a free state or a slave state.

The democratic architectural rhetoric that Gleason identifies in pattern books and that I discussed earlier in relation to Andrew Jackson Downing insists that spaces in mid-century are in fact representative of American equality. This ideal was also reinforced by the written word and repeated in texts written by slavery supporters when slaveholders maintained that their slaves lived in humane conditions and that slavery was a paternalistic system in which a master became the moral compass and provider of physical comfort for his slaves. Through this discursive rendering of happy slaves in happy homes, proslavery authors used narrative to perpetuate the separation and confinement implicit in the system of slavery. After Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, proslavery authors published responses to the novel in which they denounced Stowe's representation of slavery as an evil system. Known as "anti-Tom literature" or "plantation literature," these novels unanimously argued for the beneficial nature of slavery, and they often presented slaves as contented with their masters and their status. One of the primary ways "anti-Tom" authors could present a slave's contentment was through a treatment of slave spaces, which were often rendered more "home-like" than they were in reality.

We can see these arguments about contented slaves in Reverend Baynard R. Hall's 1852 *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, which tells the story of a slave named Frank convinced by northern abolitionists to escape slavery. True to the conventions of anti-Tom literature, Frank's escape to the North makes him realize his mistake: life as a slave in the South was undoubtedly preferable to the wage labor he faces in the North. In his

opening chapter, “Returning Home,” Hall commences to describe the architectural reality for masters and slaves. Describing “our southern coast,” Hall depicts “immense gardens” and “lordly mansions,” which are marked by their “spacious lawns in front and comfortable ‘quarters’ at convenient distances—a negro village of neat cabins, usually white-washed, and always each surrounded with its own domain of truck-patch, and boasting of its hen-house, pig-pen, and other offices” (12). Before describing any characters, Hall assures his readers that slaves in the south live comfortably—their cabins are neat and white-washed, and the slave quarters appear self-sufficient with the access to the “offices” of farm life. In short, Hall’s depiction of the slave quarters directly counters the arguments and descriptions found in Stowe’s novel: instead of Simon Legree’s slave quarters, with their “forlorn, brutal, forsaken air,” “mere rude shells, destitute of any species of furniture, except a heap of straw, foul with dirt, spread confusedly over the floor, which was merely the bare ground, trodden hard by the tramping of innumerable feet,” Hall presents exactly what Stowe’s Tom wishes for: “a cottage, rude, indeed, but one which he might make neat and quiet, and where he might have a shelf for his Bible, and a place to be alone out of his laboring hours” (332).

Of course, Tom has this at the Shelby Plantation, early in Stowe’s novel: though a “small log building,” Tom’s cabin has a “neat gardenpatch [*sic*]” filled with fruits in the summer, a “large scarlet begonia,” “a native multiflora rose,” and “various brilliant annuals” (95). Inside the cabin, Tom and Chloe have a drawing room with a “bed, covered neatly with a snowy spread” (96); another bed, “designed for *use*” (96, emphasis in original), can be seen in the other corner of the cabin, and the wall over the fireplace is “adorned with some very brilliant scriptural prints, and a portrait of General Washington”

(96). But even when the slave has a home, no matter how “rude,” s/he does not *own* the home, thereby making the home insecure. When Tom learns that Mr. Shelby decided to sell him to Haley, “he leaned over the back of the chair and covered his face with his large hands. Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through fingers on the floor” (109). In this moment, Tom realizes that a single decision can obliterate his home.

Other texts, like Stowe’s, complicate the rhetoric of contentedness found in proslavery texts. Following in the footsteps of Stowe and her emphasis on the architecture surrounding slavery, Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* demonstrates that slave quarters and their comfort or lack thereof were completely dependent upon the ideological mindset and economic stability of the white plantation owner.²⁴ Hannah, a slave on the run from her master, finds refuge with the Henrys, a kind couple who, though they own slaves, harbor abolitionist impulses and plan to free their slaves. When Hannah finds refuge at the Henry cottage, Crafts describes the slave quarters as comfortable and humane, and after describing in detail the Henry estate, she moves on to describe the slave quarters as equally magnanimous: “There was a garden for flowers, another for vegetables, and a third for fruit. There was a spring in one place, a well in another, and a fountain in a third. I could never sufficiently admire the order and harmony of the arrangements, which blent {blended} so many parts into a perfect whole. (123).

²⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. rediscovered and published Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* in 2002, and it is thought to have been originally written between 1853 and 1861.

Crafts's description of the slave quarters at "Forget me not," though reminiscent of pro-slavery techniques that render the slaves happy when their masters are good, contrasts starkly with her description of the slave quarters at the Wheeler plantation. When Hannah first arrives at the Wheeler plantation, she describes the bountiful gardens first: the lime trees "were like green arcades" (198); the orange trees were "dropping with fruit" (199); the peach trees are "laden" and the grapes "hung tempting" (199); there are melons in "the greatest profusion," "rich vegetable treasure," herbs, roses, a cotton field, and a rice field (199). This description of a bountiful estate quickly gives way to a description of the slave quarters, which were "built with far less reference to neatness and convenience than those in Virginia" (199):

. . . they all lived promiscuously anyhow and every how; at least they did not die, which was a wonder . . . by night they contained a swarm of misery, that crowds of foul existence crawled in out of gaps in walls and boards, or coiled themselves to sleep on ~~nauseous~~ nauseous [*sic*] heaps of straw fetid with human perspiration and where the rain drips in, ~~and the midnight dew imparts some~~ and then the damp airs of midnight fatch {fetch} and carry malignant fevers. (199)²⁵

Crafts's description of the Wheeler plantation, with its life bearing garden, contrasts with her description of the death dealing slave quarters: whereas one is marked by profusion of health, color, light, and nourishment, the other is marked by profusion of decay and disease. Her emphasis on the physicality of the slaves who live in the slave quarters mimics Dickens's description of the black tenement dwellers in his *American Notes*.

²⁵ Strikethroughs are consistent with Crafts's original manuscript.

Here, as in Dickens's chapter, the field slaves on the Wheeler plantation are marked by their vermin-like characteristics: the slaves crawl in the quarters, and like snakes, they coil.²⁶ But whereas Dickens's description of the rat-like tenement dwellers works to disgust the reader, as the dwellers themselves disgust Dickens, Crafts makes sure to follow up her description with socio-political observations about how the system of slavery causes inhumane living conditions, which in turn dehumanize their inhabitants: "this is all the result of that false system which bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration only due a man . . . it bans poor but honest people with the appellation of 'vulgar'" (200). "The Constitution," Crafts continues, "that asserts the rights of freedom and equality to all mankind is a sealed book to them, and so is the Bible, that tells how Christ died for all; the bond as well as the free" (201).

Crafts characterizes the slaves on both the Henry and the Wheeler plantations based on their living conditions and their treatment by their masters, leading her readers to the conclusion that a slave's physical environment is a direct reflection on their well-being. The order and harmoniousness of the slave quarters at the Henry plantation are due largely to the fact that the Henrys are kind masters: ". . . the slaves were industrious and obedient, not through fear of punishment, but because they ~~felt it to be their duty~~ loved and respected a master and a mistress so amiable and good" (123). Whereas the Henry slaves are industrious, the Wheeler slaves are "vile, foul, filthy" (205). In this comparison between the slaves on the Henry plantation and the slaves on the Wheeler plantation,

²⁶ It should not surprise us that Crafts's descriptions here mirror Dickens's; after all, as critics have documented, huge swatches of her novel *The Bondwoman's Narrative* are taken from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. For more, see Hollis Robbins's "Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*" (2003) and Daniel Hack's "Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of *Bleak House*" (2008).

Crafts connects the system of slavery with architectural representations of slavery—the bountiful plantation versus the degraded slave quarters. Of course, Crafts’s novel is ideologically complex: by providing readers with the “magnanimous” Henrys, and insisting that some slave quarters are not as “degraded” as the Wheeler slave quarters, Crafts seems to allow for “good” in slavery. But in her depiction of the Wheeler plantation and the “vile” and “filthy” slave quarters, Crafts successfully complicates the view advanced in pattern books like Downing’s that America’s architecture reflects a society marked by its equality. Whereas Downing celebrates America’s “hereditary institutions” (270), Crafts points out that it is these very institutions that perpetuate the unequal status endemic to slavery: “The greatest curse of slavery is it’s [*sic*] hereditary character. The father leaves to his son an inheritance of toil and misery, and his place on the fetid straw in the miserable corner, with no hope or possibility of anything better” (200). Crafts’s architectural concern within the novel works to complicate popular mid-century depictions of architecture as marked by equality, and her emphasis on the connection between architecture and inhabitants emphasizes the idea that architectural spaces could be useful tools in perpetuating the ideological underpinnings for a system like slavery.²⁷

In the 1850s, these narrative musings on slavery and the containment slaves faced within the system found their way into the political arena as well. With the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, part of the Compromise of 1850, slavery itself seeped past

²⁷ For more on the relationship between architecture and slavery, see John Michael Vlach’s “The Architecture of Urban Slavery in the Antebellum South” (1997), Milette Shamir’s *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (2006), and Louis P. Nelson’s “The Architectures of Black Identity: Buildings, Slavery, and Freedom in the Caribbean and the American South” (2011).

its southern boundaries. Though slavery had already entered the north through economics, the law created an unprecedented seepage of slavery's effects into the north; further, the Fugitive Slave Law in effect extended the legal arm of slavery into the northern states, requiring everyone, regardless of their stance on slavery, to return fugitive slaves to their masters. Anti-slavery texts, including many slave narratives, often alluded to the Fugitive Slave Law. In *Our Nig*, for example, Harriet Wilson alludes to the law when she claims that Frado was “watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who did n't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North” (129). Frado must watch closely for “traps slyly laid by the vicious to ensnare her” (129). Here, Wilson refers to the incapacity of the law to protect free blacks from capture. Harriet Jacobs also condemns the law in a late chapter in *Incidents*, noting that after the passing of the law, “every where, in those humble homes” of northern free blacks or escaped slaves, “there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislators of the ‘dominant race’ for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts?” (148). The political maneuvers of the 1850s crystallize the notion that the problem of slavery had spatial dimensions. While slaves and free blacks were physically confined, the ideological containment implicit in the system of slavery often expanded past its southern borders—rendering separation and the manipulation of “space” (with slavery's ideological control making its way to the north through legislation) a viable way to manage the “difference” between whites and blacks in mid-century America.

A Place from which to Protest

The built environment in nineteenth-century America raises questions about the

utility and accessibility of American values, such as equality, movement, access to space, and freedom. As Americans' surroundings constantly depicted, the reality of these values was possible only for a select few, while large numbers of American citizens were relegated to enclosed and clearly demarcated structures. While these structures worked to both perpetuate and police the boundaries between subject positions (man/woman; black/white; working class/upper class), the boundaries were also solidified discursively. The physical containment imposed upon certain groups was reinforced by narrative containment, when the written word was used to implicitly support and perpetuate the subjugation of certain groups of people, thereby increasing the stronghold of divisiveness in nineteenth-century America.²⁸ But counter to this very real physical and narrative containment, protest authors used the written word to expose acts of containment and to denounce them. In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how protest authors, whether writing about class, race, or gender, use images of physical confinement and separation as

²⁸ Narrative containment came in many forms, not just the fictional ones I analyze here. We can see narrative containment in the white-authored prefaces to slave narratives. In Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, for example, William Lloyd Garrison's testimonial implicitly strengthens the cultural view of the time period that Douglass, like all blacks, is inferior to whites. "Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being," Garrison attests, Douglass needs "nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race" (4). Garrison's rhetoric in the above line implies that Douglass needs to be molded in order to fit into American society. Further, Garrison views Douglass as an "ornament"—or a symbol of the escaped slave, a testament to slavery's evils—rather than a functioning human able to make a difference. In short, through his preface, Garrison gives Douglass a face but assumes he has no voice, in effect containing his narrative within this paradigm of inferiority. We can also see narrative containment in a document like "The Confessions of Nat Turner." After Turner's bloody 1830 slave rebellion, Thomas Gray published Turner's confessions with his own introduction and conclusion attached. Gray's textual intervention (in the form of his introduction, conclusion, and interjections) into Turner's confession ultimately works to regulate the public's response to Turner's revolt, alleviating white fear of future slave revolts by simultaneously separating Turner from whites and from other slaves; further, and perhaps most importantly, Gray's intervention diminishes the effect of Turner's revolt by discursively containing it, committing the violence of the revolt to the pages of history rather than to the material realities of 1830s Virginia.

a shorthand argument to prompt their readers to recognize the ideological containment of certain citizens and to push their readers toward material action in the world.

From Thomas Jefferson's "all men are created equal" to Whitman's commendation of a free and open road that accepts all, nineteenth century America abounds with promises of freedom and equality. As Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" attests, any American, regardless of subject position, has access to these American promises: "The black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate person, are not/ denied . . . the laughing party of mechanics, / the escaped youth, the rich person's carriage, the fop, the eloping couple . . . they pass—I also pass—anything passes—none can be interdicted" (lines 23-33). Whitman's poem presents an ideal of American equality—that anyone has access to the "open road . . . the long brown path before [them], leading wherever [they] choose" (lines 1-3). But the authors I analyze in this project tell a different story, namely that only a select few Americans actually have access to the "grand roads of the universe" (Whitman 290-291). While Whitman's speaker can "[divest himself] of the holds that would hold [him]" (lines 83-84), and while he can "inhale great draughts of space" and claim that, "the east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine" (lines 85-87), Rebecca Harding Davis's Welsh workers, Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent, and Harriet Wilson's Frado cannot claim this freedom and equality for themselves. But through their use of specific literary techniques—direct address, scenes of social instruction, and images of confinement—these three authors expose the inequality their subjects face and they aim to move their readers to an empathetic engagement that will lead to direct political action in the public sphere.

CHAPTER III – “THERE IS A SECRET DOWN HERE”: PHYSICAL
CONTAINMENT AND SOCIAL INSTRUCTION IN REBECCA HARDING DAVIS’S
“LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS”²⁹

Published in in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, Rebecca Harding Davis’s novella “Life in the Iron Mills” responds to the contentious decade leading up to the Civil War, a decade marked by heated sociopolitical debates over the role of women in public life, the problem of slavery, and most pressing for Davis’s novella, the deplorable conditions of working class life in America.³⁰ In the novella, Davis’s unnamed narrator recalls a pivotal moment in the lives of Hugh and Deb Wolfe, Welsh immigrants who worked in the iron mills in a Virginia factory town thirty years earlier.³¹ The novella is, at the core, a protest text. In telling the story of Hugh and Deb, Davis makes often implicit and sometimes explicit arguments about mid-century-American working class conditions and the complicity of middle- and upper-class citizens in perpetuating those conditions. But, in order for protest authors to move their audiences to persuasion and action, they need an audience that is amenable to change and can respond favorably to the problem represented.³² The audience’s reception of the novella’s arguments presents the biggest

²⁹ A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication at the *Journal of Narrative Theory*.

³⁰ For more on the contentiousness of the 1850s, see Eric H. Walther’s *The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s* (2004), the collection *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, edited by Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon (2012), and John Ashworth’s *The Republic in Crisis, 1848-1861* (2012). Ashworth’s interpretation of the time period leading up to the Civil War emphasizes “relatively disadvantaged groups,” “economic changes” taking place, and the “ideology. . . comprised of ideas which are relatively consistent with one another” along with “many tensions, sometimes even outright contradictions within these belief systems” (3).

³¹ Though the town is unnamed, critics tend to agree that it is based largely upon Wheeling, West Virginia, (then Virginia) where Davis spent her childhood and early adulthood.

³² For more on the audience’s reception of a “text,” see Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” (1968). As I briefly discussed in my Introduction, Bitzer claims that a rhetorical situation needs three elements: an exigence (or problem), an audience able to make change, and constraints on both the author and the audience that determine how they respond to rhetorical discourse. I view protest literature as inherently rhetorical because it aims to change a reader’s mindset, attitudes, and/or behaviors.

problem for Davis's aims. As we will see in more detail below, Davis views her audience—the readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*—as readers who tend to view the world and its societal problems with a generalized mindset that does not prove amenable to material change. Davis's success in protesting working class conditions and calling for material change depends largely on her ability to alter her audience's response to oppression so that they can understand the lack of freedom in the same way that an oppressed working class immigrant understands it. Only after this change in outlook can that audience aim for specific material change in the world.

Critics of Davis's novella have lauded the radical and revisionary nature of her text, calling it “a startling new experiment in literature and a pioneering document in American literature's transition from romanticism to realism” (Harris 4). In recent years, scholars have devoted significant attention and focus on readers' engagement with the text and the arguments Davis presents. Such critics as Andrew Silver and Jill Gatlin have been particularly influential in advancing the argument about Davis's efforts to manipulate her audience and move that audience to a change in perspective about working class laborers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.³³ In this chapter, I seek to advance the conversation begun by Silver and Gatlin by examining how, through the form of her novella, Davis produces the grounds of empathy for her readers, readers who would likely not seek this empathetic engagement with the immigrant working class in mid-century America through their own volition. The novella attempts to foster this

³³ In particular, Silver analyzes Davis's text as a revision of the travel narrative genre, and he argues that Davis promotes a new form of travel narrative, one that is more understanding of “foreign” characters. Gatlin analyzes Davis's images of environmental pollution and argues that these images push readers to reframe their response to both pollution and working class individuals.

empathetic engagement in three specific ways. First, the narrator engages readers with direct address and, in so doing, commands readers to change their point of view on working class living conditions. Second, through a setting marked by physical confinement for both characters and readers, Davis makes readers “experience” the life of her working class protagonists—a life marked by ideological containment and control. Finally, Davis reintroduces characters into the text with whom readers would likely feel comfortable, but she forces her readers to disaffiliate with these men, leaving only her working class protagonists with whom to affiliate. Through these three narrative techniques, Davis makes the act of reading an active one—both the text and the readers are pushed out of passivity and forced, in some way, into action. As the narrator tells readers early in the novella, “There is a secret down here. . . . I want to make it a real thing to you” (41). Through her narrative strategies, Davis attempts to transform readers into social actors who can then make the secret they have learned a “real thing” in their own nineteenth century society—something the open ending of the novella begs readers to do.

The Atlantic Monthly and Davis’s Readers

Davis’s novella was originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1861 when the magazine was just four years old, and it is important to understand the magazine’s history and cultural standing in order to see how Davis’s novella fits within the publication. According to Ellery Sedgwick in his study of *The Atlantic’s* first five decades, the magazine “often carried greater intellectual prestige [than other “quality magazines” of the time period] and represented an influential, relatively highbrow portion of that

culture” (2-3).³⁴ Sedgwick details how the founders and first editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* at once fought for social equality, most notably abolition and racial equality in mid-century, and simultaneously favored a portion of their culture that disavowed “majority rule in intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical issues” (7). Sedgwick claims that this seeming inconsistency between what the magazine’s editors valued and what they promoted in culture—equality versus a “hierarchical idea of culture”—“created tensions between the cultural elite and the developing industrial mass culture” (7), something that continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

Echoing Sedgwick’s observations about *The Atlantic*’s societal values, Susan Goodman demonstrates that the prestigious magazine was committed to the ideals of American democracy, especially in its early years: “With roots firmly grounded in the antislavery movement, its founders made a pledge to the American people to work for the nation’s greater good, or what they endorsed as ‘the American idea,’ which amounted to a national conscience” (ix).³⁵ If we consider *The Atlantic*’s founding members, the image of the magazine’s ideal reader begins to take its shape: as Goodman details, in 1857, Moses Phillips, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Lothrop Motley, James Russell Lowell, James Elliot Cabot, and Francis

³⁴ Sedgwick is the grandson of the same-named Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* beginning in 1908.

³⁵ For historical studies on *The Atlantic Monthly* and its cultural influence, see Portia Baker’s “Walt Whitman and *The Atlantic Monthly*” (1934). In analyzing the magazine’s “cool and reluctant” but “courteous” relationship with Walt Whitman (298), Baker explains that the magazine had “an avowed aim as a conserving and ethical force in literature” (301). See also Louis J. Budd’s essay “Howells, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and Republicanism” (1952) in which he argues that the magazine was “a well-balanced magazine which responded to major ideas and current problems and which actively participated in national politics” (139). In the preface to M. A. De Wolfe Howe’s *The Atlantic Monthly and Its Makers* (1919), he claims that “*The Atlantic* has long been a venerable institution. The writers who gave it first its high position stand in the public mind as the ‘venerable men’ of American letters” (n. pag.).

Underwood met for dinner and founded the magazine (3). “When Francis Underwood, a staunch abolitionist and former state senator, determined to found the magazine,” Goodman explains, “he approached people thought to be ‘friends of freedom’” due to their antislavery positions (5). And in *The Atlantic*’s first issue, the founders announced that the magazine speaks for “that body of men which is in favor of Freedom, National Progress, and Honor, whether public or private” (qtd. in Goodman 6). As this opening announcement makes clear, the magazine represented the values deemed important by a relatively privileged group in the nineteenth century—a group of stable individuals who aimed to shape the “national conscience” (Goodman ix) and viewed themselves as the “creators and communicants of social, ethical, religious, and aesthetic ideas” (Sedgwick 5).

Rebecca Harding Davis was aware—and critical—of this limited privileged vantage point early on. In her autobiography, Davis refers to the disconnect between the *Atlantic*’s biggest names, such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, and others, and the nineteenth century’s “real” world, the day to day lives of the very people for and about whom these giants claimed to be speaking. Remembering her first meeting with these “memorable ghosts” in her autobiography, Davis bluntly explains that “while they thought they were guiding the real world, they stood quite outside of it, and never would see it as it was” (*Bits* 32-33). Men like Emerson, Alcott, and “their disciples,” according to Davis, lack “some back-bone of fact” (Davis, *Bits* 36). As Davis reveals, “their theories were like beautiful bubbles blown from a child’s pipe, floating overhead, with queer reflections on them of sky and earth and human beings, all in a glow of fairy color and all a little distorted” (*Bits* 36). Davis also comments on individuals: Bronson Alcott,

according to Davis, was “absolutely ignorant of the world, but with an obstinate faith in himself which would have befitted a pagan god” (*Bits* 37-38). Emerson, Davis tells us, appeared interested in her as he would have been interested to meet Thomas Edison or a newly freed slave: “If Edison had been there [Emerson] would have been just as eager to wrench out of him the secret of electricity, or if it had been a freed slave, he would have compelled him to show the scars on his back and lay bare his rejoicing, ignorant, half-animal soul” (*Bits* 43). But, Davis continues, “an hour later he would have forgotten that Edison or the negro or I were in the world—having taken from each what he wanted” (*Bits* 43). Davis’s fascinating insights about many of the very men who would become permanent canonical figures shed light on *The Atlantic Monthly*, its readership, and its values.³⁶ The “‘Atlantic’ coterie,” to use Davis’s phrase, represents a readership of “disciples” whose values tend to fall into abstract generalities, and as Davis makes clear, these “Areopagites” search for Truth and advocate Freedom while largely ignoring the mundane lack of truth and freedom for those less fortunate than themselves (*Bits* 32).³⁷ They were, at the core, “always apart from humanity” (Davis, *Bits* 32).

³⁶ Scholars and critics have documented that *The Atlantic Monthly* and its founding members helped to create a canon of American literature, one that favors white, male writers. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D.H. Lawrence writes strictly about male writers, ranging from Benjamin Franklin to Walt Whitman. Less than two decades later, F.O. Matthiessen crystallized this male-centric view of the American Renaissance by analyzing five male writers: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. In this widely influential publication, Matthiessen mentions Harriet Beecher Stowe, one of the most popular writers of the time period, only three times, twice in footnotes. A little over a decade later, R.W.B. Lewis reiterated the view of the “American Artist” as male in his *The American Adam*. Publications like these shaped the field of American literary studies for decades and established the American literary canon as a white, male domain. But despite the canonical influence these authors had, from the 1970s onward, scholars voiced their trouble with these representational aspects of the American canon. Jane Tompkins articulates her frustration with the “small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion for the last thirty years” (xi). Toni Morrison, in a similar fashion, argues that an understanding of black presence “should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5).

³⁷ According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the Areopagus was the highest judicial court in Athens, thereby making an Areopagite a member of this “important tribunal” (1).

These generalized notions of freedom can be seen in narrative form when we look to Ralph Waldo Emerson's emphasis on a disembodied citizenry in "The American Scholar." In this oration, Emerson declares that ". . . there is One Man . . . this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes . . . that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters . . . but never a man" (n. pag). Man as the "original unit," in Emerson's formation, "is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier" (n. pag.). This "One Man" appears in Emerson's text as a disembodied, abstract notion, simultaneously comprised of all subject identities but transcending any identifying marks of his own.³⁸ J.F. Buckley asserts that Davis does not fully share these transcendental views: "she does not, it seems, share the blind faith of Emerson's disciples and is troubled by the absolute and unqualified adherence to transcendentalism evinced by many of her countrymen. As she sees it, they do not fully comprehend what it is they espouse" (67). Davis, in contrast to transcendentalist thinkers, *does* fully comprehend the story she tells, and her novella has a completely different aim than what we see in Emerson's oration: the negotiation of the specific body within society. The crux of the novella takes place when three wealthy men, touring the iron mills and discussing the nature of art and poverty in front of Hugh and Deb, find that they

³⁸ For more on the notion of a disembodied citizenry, see my discussion of Karen Sanchez-Eppler's *Touching Liberty* (1993) and Russ Castronovo's "Political Necrophilia" (2000) in Chapter Two. Echoing these critics' ideas of embodiment and citizenry, most particularly in the economic realm, Jared Hickman recently claimed that, "persons of African descent would thus seem to have been completely downgraded to bodies—or, rather, a body: a single, racialized mean—and that body to mere mechanical matter quantifiable in terms of dollars and inches" (323).

have been robbed and accuse Hugh of the crime. After being convicted of theft, Hugh and Deb are both incarcerated, Hugh commits suicide in jail, and Deb is rescued by a Quaker woman and spends her remaining years living in a Quaker settlement, awaiting the day she can reunite with Hugh. Through these experiences, Davis's characters have no hope of transcending the body. In fact, their only hope—and often an unrealized one—is setting the body itself free from its physical and social separation and confinement.

The article that appears directly before Davis's novella in the same 1861 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* sheds light on the generalized notions of freedom that contributors to the magazine upheld. Entitled "Cities and Parks: With Special Reference to the New York Central Park," Henry Whitney Bellows spends 16 pages justifying the construction of Central Park. Chief among Bellows's arguments is that the park will set America apart from its Old World counterparts. Whereas the "Old-World cities" had to meet the "necessities of their cribbed, cabined, and confined condition" by "[tearing] down sacred landmarks, [sacrificing] invaluable possessions, and [trampling] on prescriptive rights, to provide breathing-room for their gasping population" (416), Americans demand beauty, space, and leisure. As Bellows explains, "that the American people appreciate and are ready to support what is most elegant, refined, and beautiful in the greatest capitals of Europe,—that they value and intend to provide the largest and most costly opportunities for the enjoyment of their own leisure, artistic tastes, and rural instincts, is emphatically declared in the history, progress, and manifest destiny of the Central Park" (421-422). Here we see the generalized ideals Davis identifies in the rhetoric of *The Atlantic Monthly's* founders: foremost on Americans' minds in the mid-nineteenth century,

Bellows would have us believe, is a beautiful space in which leisure is a given, refined tastes are celebrated, and the values of “rural instincts” (422) are lived out within a metropolis. These desires, the article suggests, are evident in the “history, progress, and manifest destiny” (422) of Central Park’s construction. Here, Central Park becomes a microcosm of an idealized version of America—the young nation has diverted ways from the “cribbed, cabined, and confined” Old World (416), and it is in her history to forge into new frontiers in order to establish the sensibilities of a refined sovereign people who “have been dreaming princely dreams and thinking royal thoughts” (421). This idea of royalty is repeated on the next page: “[The Central Park] is a royal work, undertaken and achieved by the Democracy . . . developing, both in its creation and its growth, new and almost incredible tastes, aptitudes, capacities, and powers in the people themselves” (422). The creation of Central Park, then, like the creation of America herself, has a symbiotic relationship with the people: while they create it, the Park works to recreate in them a sensibility of refinement.

The majority of Bellows’s article is spent countering protests to the construction of this large, publicly-accessible place in the heart of New York City, not the least of which deals with the debasing influences of the lower class on the sensibilities of New York’s wealthier and more privileged citizens. Bellows counters concerns about public drunkenness, rough play, speeding carriages, and foul language with statistics of arrest records (these occurrences, the author claims, are few and far between), but perhaps most revealing is the notion that Central Park’s beauty will help to dull the negative instincts in America’s working class citizens. Bellows claims that “it has been observed that rude, noisy fellows, after entering the more advanced or finished parts of the Park, become

hushed, moderate, and careful” (428). Further, and more explicitly related to the lower classes of New York’s society, the author explains that “. . . the park evidently does induce many a poor family, and many a poor seamstress and journeyman, to take a day or a half-day from the working-time of the week, to the end of retaining their youth and their youthful relations with purer Nature, and to their gain in strength, good-humor, safe citizenship . . . ” (428). “What would they have done,” Bellows implores, “where would they have been, to what sort of recreation would they have turned, *if to any*, had there been no park?” (429, emphasis in original). From Bellows’s point of view, the things that make Central Park uniquely American—its beauty, refinement, adoration of nature, and expansiveness—are the very things the working class needs to become contributing members the body politic.³⁹

“Life in the Iron Mills” follows directly from Bellows’s defense of Central Park in *The Atlantic*, and upon first reading, it appears as if Davis would agree with Bellows that the working classes pose a direct threat to the middle and upper classes, especially upon their sensibilities. Early in the novella, the narrator describes the mill workers returning home after a day of work. As the narrator explains,

³⁹ In Terry Gifford’s *Pastoral* (1999), he explains three forms of the pastoral, the second of which applies to Bellows’s article on Central Park. According to Gifford, the pastoral can refer to “an area of content,” and “refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban. . . here a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude towards what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be” (2). Gifford continues, identifying a trend in the English pastoral that is also evident in Bellows’s treatment of Central Park and the working class inhabitants of the city: “There is a sense,” Gifford explains, “in which the English pastoral has always been able to make criticisms of the establishment, whilst at the same time warning against a radical disturbance of the social order” (52). In similar ways, we see Bellows here critiquing European society (and Americans who may desire that society) and at the same time attempting to prevent a “disturbance of the social order” in suggesting ways to control the working class inhabitants of New York City. For more on the pastoral, see Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1967) and Raymond Williams’s “Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral” (1967).

You may pick the Welsh emigrants [*sic*], Cornish miners, out of the throng passing the windows, any day. They are a trifle more filthy; their muscles are not so brawny; they stoop more. When they are drunk, they neither yell, nor shout, nor stagger, but skulk like beaten hounds. A pure, unmixed blood, I fancy: shows itself in the slight angular bodies and sharply-cut facial lines. (42)

Here, Davis's narrator places the immigrant working class in a category separate from native born citizens or middle and upper class citizens; these workers, the narrator implies, are identifiable simply by looking at them. The narrator continues, claiming that "as many a political reformer will tell you,—and many a private reformer too, who has gone among them with a heart tender with Christ's charity, and come out outraged, hardened" (42). The working class immigrants who populate the world of the iron mills—marked physically and categorically—have a direct negative effect on those "reformers" who would attempt to help. It seems Davis and her narrator would also agree with Bellows's generalized sensibilities that beauty and nature can help to cure the ills of the working class. After all, Hugh himself claims that all he wants and needs is ". . . to escape,—only to escape,—out of the wet, the pain, the ashes, somewhere, anywhere,—only for one moment of free air on a hill-side . . ." (59). The claustrophobic and confined nature of Hugh's and Deb's lives in the iron mills is an image in direct opposition to the images of Central Park the article describes. But in the novella, Davis combats the egalitarian notion that public places are accessible to all social classes. As she explains, Hugh cannot escape the confines of the iron mills for the "hill-side" he desires (59). More importantly, though, Davis demonstrates that artistry, beauty, refinement, and nature—

ideals that Bellows proposes will help the working classes to rise above their base status—are not enough in the material world. As Davis makes clear, Hugh has a keen sense of beauty and artistry: upon witnessing the sunset, “[Hugh’s] artist-eye grew drunk with color. The gates of that other world! Fading, flashing before him now! What, in the world of Beauty, Content, and Right, were the petty laws, the mine and thine, of mill-owners and mill-hands?” (63). But despite this knowledge and appreciation of beauty, Hugh is still entrapped and confined in all areas of his life. In short, a recognition of beauty is not what Hugh needs; instead, he needs the economic and social means to escape his confinement. The inability to see this reality, Davis seems to argue, results in *The Atlantic Monthly’s* “beautiful bubbles” of idealism, so “distorted” that they can make no meaningful change in society (*Bits* 32-33).

The Persuasion of Physical Containment

If *The Atlantic Monthly* is high-minded but lacking in “humanity,” Davis’s intervention adds a “back-bone of fact” to the publication (Davis, *Bits* 32, 36); but she also needs to persuade her readers to adhere to the facts she presents. To this end, Davis opens her novella with a frame story that lasts four pages before the narrator moves to the story—Hugh’s and Deb’s lives in the mills. Davis uses this short space to establish a tableau of separation, claustrophobia, and immobility that will last throughout the rest of the novella. Instantaneously, Davis’s privileged readers encounter a social setting that is likely outside their realm of experience. Whereas her readers are encouraged to value freedom and openness, as is evidenced by Bellows’s essay on Central Park and my discussion on manifest destiny in Chapter Two, here they are confronted with immobility and entrapment. And though *The Atlantic’s* founding members “stood quite outside” of

the “real world” (*Bits* 32), as Davis observed in her autobiography, her readers are instantly drawn *into* the world of the iron mills through the novella’s opening pages.

Most important for Davis’s aim is to create a collectivity of readers who exist between those “high-minded” but always separate individuals, like Emerson, and individuals who lack all agency to better their own lives and who face a social policy of ideological containment, like Hugh and Deb. In short, Davis must push readers to become individuals who can make change but also have the willingness to do so. In order to persuade her relatively elite readers to sympathize with the immigrant working class living in abject poverty, Davis must find a way to merge these two very divergent identities. The most obvious way in which Davis succeeds in bridging these two worlds is by employing an ungendered, unraced, and largely unclassed narrator who remains with the reader from page one until the end of the novella, leading that reader downward into the narrative and then back up again at the end. Davis’s narrator has no identifying marks, such as gender or race, which renders the narrator a blank slate upon which readers can project their own ideas of what kind of person should be telling this story and, more importantly, what kind of person readers *want* to tell the story. This thereby paves the way for more active engagement on the reader’s part. In short, Davis gives her readers agency in deciding the very identity of the narrator. This sense of textual and narrative control—endowing the reader with the freedom to decide the narrator’s identity—is Davis’s first step in bringing readers into her fictional depiction of working class reality. As I have discussed, Davis’s novella was originally published anonymously in *The Atlantic Monthly*, thereby leaving the narrator even more of an empty canvas onto which readers can assert their own imaginings: not only is this narrator free from race and

gender, but the narrator is also tied to an anonymous (and therefore unraced and engendered) author. Of course, considering the narrator as an extension of the anonymous author likely gives that narrator a defined and marked social class in reader's minds; but instead of alienating readers from the narrator, the readers' idea that the narrator may be of a similar social class as them likely fosters more engagement: both author, narrator, and reader have in common an affiliation with *The Atlantic Monthly*, and thus, as Sedgwick and Goodman have shown, likely consider themselves a part of the cultural elite. Eventually, this readerly control will dissipate, but Davis's decision to let readers shape the narrator's identity likely prompts readers to imagine someone like themselves, rendering those readers more likely to follow the narrator down into the world of the iron mills.

From the start, the narrator engages the reader in direct discourse and demands the reader's participation in the story: "A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of iron-works?" (39). In this moment of what Louis Althusser terms *interpellation*, or calling the audience to participate in the rhetorical situation at hand, the narrator instantly "recruit[s]" readers into the text (Althusser 174). Further, because interpellation is "ongoing, not restricted to one hailing, but usually part of a rhetoric of socialization" (Charland 138), the narrator works to "transform" readers as they continue to read (Althusser 174). For those readers who decide to continue reading, Davis's direct question about the meaning of a cloudy day in the world of the iron mills necessitates a response: the readers must either admit to themselves that they *do* know what "a cloudy day" means for a town of this sort, or, more likely, readers must admit that they *do not* know and must continue reading to understand. Importantly, through this simple

question, Davis has invited her erudite audience to make meaning or to strive for understanding. In her clever opening, then, Davis urges her readers to engage with the text through a subtle command to expand their knowledge—something they would presumably relish. By opening with a question, Davis flatters her readers and compels them to assume they can, and will, understand the significance of this setting, and that they can make meaning with the knowledge they will accrue. Opening the text in such a way is an important rhetorical move for Davis to make because it transforms the audience into what Thomas Farrell terms a “co-participant” in meaning making (327). As Charland claims, “an interpellated subject participates in the discourse that addresses him” (Charland 138). Through her act of interpellation, then, we see Davis inviting her readers to actively participate in the novella’s plot, rendering the reader an agent who can make meaning out of the information he is given. This act of interpellation is ultimately effective because, while Davis recruits her audience based on a shared notion of meaning making and knowledge acquisition, she manipulates that audience to come to an understanding of a world to which they would likely never enter. Instead of refusing to see this impoverished world “as it was,” Davis’s readers are instantly primed to witness the reality of the iron mills (*Bits* 33).⁴⁰

The significance of the clouds in the opening sentence of “Life in the Iron Mills” soon becomes apparent when readers sense that the clouds represent the uppermost level

⁴⁰ Davis’s opening question here should direct our attention to her 1863 short story “The Promise of Dawn,” also published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. She begins this story in nearly the same way she opens “Life in the Iron Mills”: “A winter’s evening. Do you know how that comes here among the edges of the mountains that fence in the great Mississippi valley?” (10). This act of repetition points toward a developing rhetorical style: the active engagement necessitated by opening with a question that demands participation becomes a technique Davis can rely upon to draw her readers into her narratives.

in a series of containing elements. The world Davis compels her readers to enter is filled with layers of confinement. While the day is cloudy, the sky is “muddy, flat, immovable,” the air “thick, clammy,” and humans are “crowded” (39). “It stifles me,” the narrator bluntly admits (39). In this opening paragraph, readers encounter four mentions of confinement—the clouds, the sky, the air, and the breath of humans—and finally find themselves, alongside the narrator, “stifled” (39). Before the story proper even begins, then, Davis orients readers spatially within her fictional world, and though the narrator can “open the window” (39) to attempt an escape from the stifling air, s/he and the reader exist below four levels of suffocating forces.⁴¹

Once readers have descended into the narrative frame story, the narrator further emphasizes the frequency of entrapment in this fictional world. In a scene that includes what Eric Schocket calls Davis’s “‘subdued’ racial content” (47), the narrator demonstrates how the containment and claustrophobia in this town permanently affect its working class inhabitants. The narrator introduces readers to a “negro-like river,” “dull and tawny colored” that “drags itself sluggishly along,” “slavishly bearing its burden day after day” (40). Schocket argues that through this inclusion, “Davis means to jar readers through an initial moment of misapprehension: instead of discovering black slaves, they find industrial laborers whose bodies mimic the physical determinism of chattel servitude by bearing similar marks of bondage and oppression” (47). While Schocket’s reading reveals Davis’s nineteenth century social surroundings, the river’s presence also calls

⁴¹ Because we are given no identifying markers as to the narrator’s sex, I follow in the lead of other critics who refer to the narrator with a gender-neutral pronoun. When possible, I will refer to the narrator as “s/he.”

attention to the town's stagnancy; the river's sluggish mobility insinuates its bondage to "boats and coal-barges" in the pursuit of commerce (40).⁴² Davis's intersecting criticism between working class individuals and African Americans in the nineteenth century is worth noting. Entrenched in a social milieu with slavery at its center, Davis's allusion to blackness while omitting any real black bodies allows her to engage her readers' sense of outrage toward the institution of slavery and redirect that emotion toward the institution of wage slavery. In short, in the absence of African American slaves from the novella, readers' pity must turn to those bodies who wear physical markers indicative of but different from chattel slavery: bodies marked by the black ash and grime of the iron factories. Critic Jill Gatlin argues that the pollution constantly marking characters in scenes like this one work to alter the reader's response to industrial labor and working class conditions. But more importantly, these images of blackness, soot, and grime demonstrate that the natural environment, in this case, gets defined in terms of slavery and servitude early in the novel, emphasizing clearly that the "natural" order of things in this "town of iron-works" is industry and labor (39). Davis's narrator then quickly compares the slow, never-ending burden the river carries to the lives of the "masses of men" who "[creep] past, night and morning, to the great mills" (40). Like the "sluggish" river, "tired of the heavy weight" of commerce, the masses of workers also "sluggishly" make their way in the "slow stream of human life" (40).

But the comparison quickly begins to fall apart. Unlike the river, which has a "look of weary, dumb appeal," the narrator describes the mass of workers with violent imagery:

⁴² For more on this subject, see Caroline S. Miles's "Representing and Self-Mutilating the Laboring Male Body: Re-examining Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*."

their “dull, besotted faces” are “bent . . . sharpened here and there by pain and cunning. . . begrimed with smoke and ashes” (40). Their bodies are “stooping all night,” “laired all day,” and constantly surrounded by “boiling cauldrons of metal,” “drunkenness and infamy,” “air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” (40). The narrator realizes here that the initial comparison between the “negro-like river” and the “masses of men” fails. As s/he claims, “my fancy about the river was an idle one: what if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight . . .” (40). The “Welsh puddler,” passing in the street below, will have a less pleasant future than the river. While the river can anticipate “quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains,” the mill workers can only look forward to being “stowed away . . . in a hole in the muddy graveyard, and after that,—*not* air, nor green fields, nor curious roses” (40, emphasis in original). Inherent in the narrator’s failed comparison is a reflection on the particular spatial dimensions of the workers’ oppression. Ultimately, the river *moves*: in its ability to escape its claustrophobic environment of servitude, the river stands out in sharp relief against the working class individuals who can never escape the confinement they face on a daily basis, even in death where they do not ascend upward to a heaven but instead travel even further downward into a “hole in the muddy graveyard” (40).

After describing the “town of iron works,” whose “idiosyncrasy” is smoke, filled with “nightmare fog,” and peopled by “thousands of . . . massed, vile, slimy lives” who can never hope to escape their claustrophobic and confined lives, the narrator’s intention becomes clear on the third page of the novella: “I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the

fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here . . . I want to make it a real thing to you” (40-41).⁴³ In this straightforward communication between narrator and reader, the narrator officially defines the story in spatial terms. S/he asks readers to go downward and to physically enter a new world so that an alternate reality can be made a “real thing” (41). The commands to “hide . . . disgust” and to ignore the filth in the iron mills also indicate a physical entering: readers will get dirty; their bodies will presumably get marked like working class bodies are marked. Davis’s decision to begin the novella with a frame story that forces the reader’s participation becomes even more effective when her spatial rendering of immigrant poverty continues. The novella proceeds to plumb deeper, and readers continue to travel downward, eventually rendering them just as contained in a world of “fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” as Davis’s protagonists (40).

Of course, any reader of any text has the choice to close the book and not return. But Davis’s use of a direct question to open the novella and the narrator’s direct address to readers throughout the opening pages is just the beginning of her ability to implicitly convince her privileged readers to continue reading about industrial labor and immigrant poverty and to continue traveling downward into the narrative to experience life like Hugh and Deb experience it. To reemphasize, by opening with a question, Davis has done more than simply begin a story; instead, she has worked to draw her readers into the

⁴³ Just as her opening question should draw our attention to her short story “The Promise of Dawn,” this direct address between narrator and readers should direct our attention to Davis’s story “A Story of the Day,” also published anonymously in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October of 1861. In this story, Davis’s narrator explains to readers that “I want you to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it. Sometimes I think it has a new and awful significance that we do not see” (472). Here, too, like in “Life in the Iron Mills” and “The Promise of Dawn,” we see Davis’s rhetorical use of direct address to coerce her privileged readers into entering a world they may not enter by their own volition.

text with the promise of expanded meaning. This act of interpellation is important because it begins Davis's act of constituting a collectivity of like-minded thinkers from her group of readers, and by recognizing themselves in the text, readers can begin identifying with the text. This recognition is absolutely essential to Davis's pragmatic aims because, according to Kenneth Burke, identification and persuasion go hand-in-hand to "induce action in another" (46). Since identification and persuasion are intimately connected, if identification is "logically prior to persuasion," as Maurice Charland argues (133), a reader will not feel compelled to act on his communicative directives if he has formed no personal connection with a text, an individual, or an idea.

Davis's skillful use of emotive appeal and direct address necessitates the reader's identification with the working class inhabitants of the novella's underground world, prompting those readers to strengthen the collectivity between themselves, the narrator, the characters, and the text itself. As readers begin to more fully identify with Hugh and Deb, they begin to realize that Hugh and Deb's values resemble their own values. It is important to explain here that by "identification" I certainly do not mean "sameness." As Davis is quick to insinuate throughout the novella, readers are not and never will be the *same* as Hugh and Deb. Maurice Charland's discussion of the independence movement in Quebec, Canada, is helpful here because Charland makes clear that a collective identity is a rhetorical formation. In his analysis of Quebec's quest for independence, he explains that a collective identity can hide the discrepancies between individuals and make way for a community that "masks or negates tensions and differences between members of any society" (140). Important for Davis, though, is that the collective identity formed between readers and Hugh and Deb does *not* mask these differences but instead sharply

exposes them—and through this revelation of differences, readers are able to emotionally connect with Davis’s protagonists when they enter the world of the iron mills.

Through giving a specific definition to words like “freedom” when readers have likely viewed the term through abstract ideas, Davis forges a stronger connection between readers and her protagonists.⁴⁴ Thus, when Hugh wonders, “was it not his right to live as they,—a pure life, a good, true-hearted life, full of beauty and kind words?” (62), readers can identify with Hugh because they, too, feel entitled to certain rights promised to them as American citizens. And when the narrator instructs readers to “be just,” the readers’ identification with Hugh allows them to cast judgment in Hugh’s favor. While readers *can* quit reading, if they do so, they must naturally abandon the ideals created by the text. Charland calls this technique “the illusion of freedom,” an effective strategy an author can use to constitute his or her audience and manipulate that audience to continue their identification and thus produce a collectivity. As Charland suggests, “freedom is illusory because the narrative is already spoken or written. Furthermore, because the narrative is a structure of understanding that produces totalizing interpretations, the subject is constrained to *follow through*, to act so as to maintain the narrative’s consistency” (141, emphasis in original). In other words, Davis has created a new world with its own rules and language, and through directly addressing the reader, Davis transforms him into an actor, a part of this new world. If a reader denies Davis’s

⁴⁴ For more on this idea of words and their abstract or specific meanings, see Michael Calvin McGee’s essay “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” in which he defines the ideograph as “the basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology” (7). As McGee explains, words or phrases like “liberty,” “equality,” “freedom of speech,” and “religion” can be seen as ideographs when they function symbolically and ideologically in a society; ideographs “not only make sense of the world but bond a people together” (C. Smith 308).

world (puts the book down), he must necessarily abandon the ideology that Davis has created. Readers would be forced, in short, to shirk their newfound understanding of “freedom” and instead revert back to their own generalized connotations of freedom, despite the fact that they are now more likely to see the social errors in their own understanding of values.⁴⁵

Keeping the illusion of freedom in mind, the narrator’s early addresses to the reader function as a form of conditioning: the narrator simultaneously reveals to readers the logic of the iron mills and factory workers, and s/he also positions the reader as part of the novella’s world. Early in the novella, after describing “masses of men” making their way to the iron mills, the narrator poses a question: “What do you make of a case like that, amateur psychologist? You call it an altogether serious thing to be alive: to these men it is a drunken jest, a joke. . . . There is a curious point for you to settle, my friend, who study psychology in a lazy, *dilettante* way” (40-41, emphasis in original). It seems as though the narrator insults the reader with accusations of laziness and dilettantism, but the narrator, too, “idly [taps] the window-pane” and refers to the reader as “my friend” (40-41). Readers, then, are compared to the narrator, and when the narrator challenges readers—“but if your eyes are as free as mine are to look deeper. . .” (41)—readers may be more likely to oblige the narrator by continuing to read, plumb deeper, and witness the “massed, vile, slimy lives” of the novella (41).

⁴⁵ McGee’s idea of the ideograph is again helpful here. As he explains, “each member of the community is socialized, conditioned, to the vocabulary of ideographs as a prerequisite of ‘belonging’ to the society...the society will inflict penalties on those who use ideographs in heretical ways and on those who refuse to respond appropriately to claims on their behavior warranted through the agency of ideographs” (15-16).

When, through direct address, the narrator challenges his/her audience to look more closely at the lives in the iron mills, it becomes clear that readers and the narrator are “free,” whereas Hugh and Deb are not. Thus, while readers may identify with the protagonists while they visit the world of the iron mills, they will eventually leave that world and the mill workers behind indefinitely; but in constituting a collective identity, the text creates readers who will likely carry the *memory* of the workers and the lessons they have learned away from the text. Indeed, when the narrator challenges readers to look deeper to see that “. . . no perfume-tinted dawn will be so fair with promise of the day that shall surely come” (41), the narrator foreshadows an ideal hope that the audience will change their views, and thus their actions, regarding the immigrant working class in nineteenth century America. When readers finally emerge from the “foul effluvia” of Davis’s novella, they must make a decision to breathe freely for themselves or to help those still stuck in Davis’s underground world to breathe freely as well.

Davis’s Guide to Social Reading

After luring readers into her fictional world with direct address and images of confinement, claustrophobia, and entrapment, Davis—with her narrator’s help—aims to reteach her readers how to “read” their social world and their own subject positions within that world. More specifically, Davis reveals to readers that their typical ways of “reading” signify the destructive power of social categorization—and then she elucidates to readers ways to revise these reading practices to become more socially constructive. Davis enacts this teaching in two specific ways, both near the middle of the novella. First, the narrator demonstrates a way of reading that reveals faulty stereotypical habits but then revises these habits: viewing Deb as a “type” and then focusing on her individuality

to demonstrate that our assumptions about someone's identity, or the ways we "read" someone's identity in social situations, are often insufficient. Second, Davis uses a trio of mill visitors to exemplify faulty social reading practices, and in doing so, convinces readers to revise their own social reading techniques. As we will see, the mill visitors represent to Davis's ideal audience the ways in which "reading" as a social action can be misguided and dangerous to those not favored in a specific social reading of a situation.

In Davis's first scene of instruction, she depicts the narrator's initial misreading and subsequent revision of Deb's character. When the narrator introduces Deb, s/he describes her in physical terms: "she wore a faded cotton gown and a slouching bonnet. When she walked, one could see that she was deformed, almost a hunchback" (43). Though the narrator never explains how Deb became deformed, it takes no stretch of the imagination to infer that the weight of her environment could only have added to her deformed nature; indeed, only after "considerable stumbling" does Deb enter the "low" cellar where she lives with Hugh, Hugh's father, and Janey (43). After returning home, and before she even finishes a bite of her dinner, Deb emerges from the cellar and walks over a mile out of town to deliver Hugh his dinner, despite the fact that she herself has been "standing twelve hours at the spools" (45). Having arrived at the mill and given Hugh his meal, Deb rests on "a heap of ash," "the refuse of burnt iron," until Hugh's shift at the mill ends. At this point, once Deb has traveled from one confined space to another, the narrator urges the reader to look more closely at Deb's body. "Miserable enough she looked," the narrator explains, "lying there on the ashes like a limp, dirty rag,—yet not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime: more fitting, if one looked deeper into the heart of things,—at her thwarted woman's form, her colorless life,

her waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger,—even more fit to be a type of her class” (46). Deb’s “thwarted” body, her “pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out looking face” lead the narrator to commence a reading of Deb’s character; but, as we are told, the narrator reads Deb only as a “type of her class” rather than as an individual (46). The very act of reading and embodying Deb, then, results in the narrator’s ability to easily categorize her and then forget her as an individual as well. Just as, according to Davis, Emerson would take what he wanted to know from Thomas Edison, Davis herself, or a newly freed slave, here the narrator takes what s/he needs to obtain a cursory understanding of Deb’s character, remaining always on the surface.

The narrator’s initial reading of Deb as a “type” reflects popular publications of the time period that often worked to redefine the causes of working class suffering from a social problem to an individual one. In 1863, for example, William A. Pabor published “An Allegory” in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, one of the most popular periodicals of the day. This short tale tells the story of the King of Cloudland, who decides to send the Shadow and the Sunshine down into the world in order to discover the root of all evil and suffering. Upon entrance into the world, the Sunshine and the Shadow discover “Intemperance” and watch as alcohol wreaks its havoc upon all human kind, the “young and old, the wise and the simple, the good and the bad, the weak and the strong” (47). Pabor details how the Shadow and the Sunshine went to “the habitations of the poor and the homes of the lowly, and saw there the full effects of the fearful vice. They were witnesses to the prosperity of those who grew rich by dealing out destruction to their fellow men” (47). In this section, it appears as if Pabor will discuss the social aspect of poverty, and that the Shadow and the Sunshine will discover that if the poor are driven to

drink, it is largely due to “those who grew rich” through the labor of the working man; but this is not the case. The Shadow watches as a family disintegrates under the influence of alcohol, and he soon reports his findings back to the Sunshine. In a particularly grim portrait, the Shadow describes a working class husband and wife who have both fallen victim to alcoholism. Their home, covered with “signs of neglect in its outward aspect” and “even worse” inside, has “no fire on the hearthstone, no carpet on the floor, and no bread in the cupboard” (47). In this heatless and food-less home, the mother and the father are drunk, and their infant child lies dead in a corner. The scene gets even darker: the woman awakens from her drunken stupor, and when she attempts to take the bottle of gin from her husband, he beats her and knocks over a candle, which burns the house to the ground. Those inside, still drunk, “awoke at the bar of their God and their Judge” (47). The Sunshine, after listening to the Shadow’s story, tells of this couple’s early life and marriage. During a toast at their wedding, the man’s “moral courage . . . forsook him, and he raised the *fatal first glass* to his lips” (47, emphasis in original). The Sunshine details how this first sip of alcohol sent the man on a “downward road” of alcohol abuse, and “as *his* self-respect was lost, *hers* vanished also; and here, with the years of life scarce half told, behold the end!” (47). In agreement, the Shadow and the Sunshine decide that intemperance was “the greatest” of the “sources from whence flows evil wrought by human hands” (47).

Pabor’s advocacy of temperance is not surprising, given that temperance was one of the most popular reform movements of the nineteenth century. The way Pabor makes his point about temperance, however, delimits the realities of working class suffering, most primarily because his conclusions work to separate the social classes. When the Sunshine

explains that the man's "moral courage" failed him (47), many contemporary readers would have immediately decided that the man's alcoholism was his own fault. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Charles E. Orser Jr. explores this idea of individual success and failure in his study of America's first Gilded Age, which he dates as starting in 1865. As he explains, "failure in capitalism is deemed wholly personal because the social contract created by capitalist practice assigns primary responsibility for success to individuals" (152). Like Davis's narrator, then, Pabor is able to condemn intemperance in his tale without having to concede that there may be socially created reasons why this working class husband and wife turned to alcohol to cope with their day-to-day troubles. Viewing the working class as a "type," as Pabor and Davis's narrator do, allows socially privileged individuals, like *The Atlantic Monthly's* readership, to deny responsibility for working class living conditions.

But Davis does not allow her narrator to rest in his/her easy categorization of Deb. After the narrator has described Deb's "thwarted form" laying on the ashes, s/he begs the reader to look deeper into Deb's character and read the "story of a soul filled with groping, passionate love, heroic unselfishness, and fierce jealousy" (46). Desperately in love with Hugh, Deb can never consummate her feelings because, though he was "kind" to her, it is a kindness similar to that which he offers to "the very rats that swarmed in the cellar" (46). Indeed, Deb knows that Hugh's "soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest" (46-47). If "there was that in her face and form which made [Hugh] loathe the sight of her," Deb will never be able to make Hugh love her (47). When Deb gives Hugh some money she has stolen, she emphasizes her awareness that nothing could make Hugh suddenly love her: "If I were t' witch dwarf, if I had t' money,

wud hur thank me? Wud hur take me out o' this place wid hur and Janey? I wud not come into the gran' house hur would build, to vex hur wid t' hunch,—only at night, when t' shadows were dark, stand far off to see hur'" (61, emphasis in original).⁴⁶ Even if Deb could provide for Hugh the freedom from his confined life, she would still be relegated to the "shadows" and "dark" where she could hide her body. This description of Deb is a far cry from the Deb readers encountered just paragraphs earlier. No longer "a type of her class" (46), Deb is passionate, deeply individualized, and in tune with the emotions and ideas of those around her.

In this short tableau, the narrator has demonstrated to readers how to "read" in a more socially tolerant way, refusing to place an individual in a "class" and instead probing deeper in order to read that person's individuality. Shortly after this, readers encounter a trio of wealthy mill visitors. Primed through the tableau about Deb and her character, those readers are challenged to shun the reading practices of the wealthier mill visitors—despite the fact that these are the only individuals within the novella with whom the typical *Atlantic Monthly* reader could presumably identify, primarily due to the visitor's desire for aesthetic beauty and their disavowal for ethical responsibility toward the immigrant working class. Toward the middle of the novella, a group of men take a tour of the iron mills at night and come to a stopping point in the very area in which Hugh is plodding away at the furnace and Deb is lying in the heap of ashes. The group is comprised of men in differing professions: Kirby, the son of the mill owner; Clark, the overseer; Dr. May, a physician in the town; an unnamed reporter; and Mitchell, a "stranger in the city" visiting to observe "the institutions of the South" (51). Despite their

⁴⁶ All instances of dialect are in the original.

differing professions, however, Hugh views them all as part of a “mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being” (49). Given the visitors’ education, cultural and religious references, and views of freedom and oppression, it is likely that Davis’s *Atlantic* readers would identify with them. Hugh describes the visitors as existing above him, mysterious and glamorous, much like Davis argues that *The Atlantic Monthly* founders are “always apart from humanity” (32). During the visitors’ short, uncensored visit (for “Greek would not have been more unintelligible to the furnace-tenders” [52]), readers learn that the mill owner manipulates his workers into voting for candidates who will further the mill’s interest, and that the visitors are here “merely for amusement” (50). More importantly, though, readers witness the visitors’ faulty ideas of philanthropy, or lack thereof. Kirby claims, “I wash my hands of all social problems,—slavery, caste, white or black . . . if they cut korl, or cut each other’s throats . . . I am not responsible” (55). Echoing Kirby’s denial of responsibility, Mitchell claims that he “is not one of them . . . reform is born of need, not pity” (57). Dr. May agrees with Mitchell’s sentiment, for when “he prayed that power might be given these degraded souls to rise, he glowed at heart, recognizing an accomplished duty” (58).

The visitors’ shirking of responsibility was likely a familiar refrain to readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Calling attention to this “liberal individualism,” Monika Elbert explains that Emerson and other transcendentalist thinkers in the nineteenth century had a “mean spirited” view toward philanthropy, relegating their charitable giving to a small sector of needy individuals who were known as “the legitimate poor,” those who could not help their poverty due to physical debilitation (n. pag.). On the other end of the spectrum were “the paupers,” a larger group of needy individuals “who were morally

deficient and deserved neither charity nor sympathy” (Elbert n. pag.). Davis seems to agree with Elbert’s notion that this disavowing of “civic responsibility” leads to the “aestheticization of poverty” (n. pag.), a romanticized view that can only be espoused by those who poverty does not reach. Readers can see this same type of aestheticization in “A Trip to Cuba,” an essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly* two years before Davis’s novella. In the essay, Julia Ward Howe chronicles her voyage to Cuba, and though she explains that she views American slavery as morally wrong, she ultimately turns American slaves into aesthetic objects, removing the question of their plight from the narrative. Upon first viewing the “negro among negroes” in the Nassau port, Howe deviates from her narrative to compare the blacks in Nassau with blacks in America. Whereas the “negro among negroes is a course [*sic*], grinning, flat-footed, thick-skulled creature, ugly as Caliban, lazy as the laziest of brutes, chiefly ambitious to be of no use to any in the world,” the American “negro of the North is an ideal negro; it is the negro refined by white culture, elevated by white blood, instructed even by white iniquity” (604). In both descriptions, Howe turns black individuals into aesthetic objects: by describing the Nassau blacks as “ugly as Caliban,” the author removes the reader from an intimate connection with these individuals and instead compares them to a Shakespearean character, essentially fictionalizing their existence. They become a form of entertainment rather than a reality. Further, in describing American blacks as “ideal,” “refined,” “elevated,” and “instructed,” Howe removes the physical reality of slavery from the image she portrays, implicitly arguing for the positive influence of slavery in America. In each instance, readers are removed from any form of realistic representation of the day-

to-day lives of either Nassau or American blacks; instead, the images Howe portrays turn these individuals into objects for the reader to consume.

We see a similar “aestheticization of poverty” (Elbert n. pag.) in the mill visit scene, most especially when Mitchell observes that the walk in the iron mills is ““worth the trouble”” since the ““works look like Dante’s Inferno”” (50). ““I like this view of the works better than where the glare was the fiercest,”” Mitchell explains, because the ““heavy shadows and the amphitheatre [sic] of smothered fires are ghostly, unreal. One could fancy these red smouldering lights to be the half-shut eyes of wild beasts, and the spectral figures their victims in the den”” (52). Just as Howe separates her readers from the Nassau blacks by comparing them to Shakespeare’s Caliban, here Mitchell likewise removes himself from the men and women who labor unceasingly in the mill by comparing his surroundings to Dante’s inferno. In analyzing this scene, critic Andrew Silver notes that Mitchell essentially removes himself from the scene by turning the iron mill into an aesthetic object, in effect “removing [working class individuals] from their cultural context and recasting their experience as fantasy” (108).⁴⁷ While Mitchell can admire the unrealness of the mills due to his class status, Hugh and Deb cannot afford to attain this viewpoint. In fact, when Deb walks into the iron mills to bring Hugh his dinner, she sees the “crowds of half-clad men, looking like revengeful ghosts in the red light, hurried, throwing masses of glittering fire. It was like a street in Hell” (45). ““T looks like t’ Devil’s place!”” Deb exclaims. For Mitchell, the iron mills are a reminder of

⁴⁷ See Silver for more on Davis’s interaction with the travel narrative genre. See also Wanlin Li’s “Towards a Sentimental Rhetoric: A Rhetorical Reading of Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron Mills’” (2013).

Dante's Inferno, a place for his imaginings to run wild, but for Deb, the mills are an actual depiction of Hell.

Mitchell's glorification of the iron mills elucidates Hugh's thought that "between them there was a great gulf never to be passed. Never!" (52).⁴⁸ Due to their varying statuses in life, Mitchell and Hugh forever exist in separate worlds. Mitchell's picturesque rendering of the mills and the impoverished men who work within them, and the visitors' three faulty ideas of philanthropy—that charity is not an individual's responsibility, that kindness can become an antidote to reality, and that change can only happen from within an oppressed group—alienate a reader who has formed an emotional bond with the protagonists. As Dana Seitler argues, Davis presents the mill visitors' "artistic enterprise" as "as an exploitative activity—a picturesque aestheticization of suffering that would reduce the lives of the working poor to occasions for aesthetic pleasure" (535). Readers, though, who have earlier been instructed to "hide your disgust" (41), and who have followed the narrator downward into the dirtiness of the iron mills, are prompted to view the mill visitors' exploitation of Hugh as an uninformed understanding of the reality of Hugh's life—the visitors can aestheticize the world they see because the world will not touch them. In a word, the "great gulf" that separates Hugh

⁴⁸ Hugh's idea of a "great gulf never to be passed" between him and Mitchell should direct our attention to Luke 16: 19-31, "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus." In the parable, the rich man had refused to help a poor, sore-covered Lazarus, and upon his and Lazarus's death, Lazarus goes to Heaven to sit by Abraham's side, and the rich man goes to hell. The rich man begs Abraham for a cool sip of water, and in response, Abraham tells the rich man, "there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over from us to there" (Luke 16: 26). For more on this, see William Shurr's "Life in the Iron Mills: A Nineteenth-Century Conversion Narrative" (1991) and Sheila Hassell Hughes's "Between Bodies of Knowledge There is a Great Gulf Fixed: A Liberationist Reading of Class and Gender in 'Life in the Iron Mills'" (1997). We will see a version of this phrase repeated again in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and as I discussed in Chapter Two, architect Andrew Jackson Downing uses a version of this phrase to emphasize American equality in his *The Architecture of Country Houses*.

from the visitors allows the visitors a safe space from which to pass judgments; readers, by contrast, have been instructed to transverse this gulf.

Davis encapsulates the mill visitors' ineffectual *misreading* in their response to Hugh's korl statue. The statue—which Hugh sculpted out of leftover waste from the iron in the mills—plays an integral role in the novella. The statue simultaneously represents Hugh's "groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure" and personifies "the spirit of the dead korl-cutter" and his "unfinished work" as it is the only remaining vestige of Hugh and Deb at the novella's end (47, 74). For the purpose of this analysis, the korl statue most importantly serves as a way for Davis to expose faulty knowledge and understanding in nineteenth century society. Lurking in the corner of the iron mill, the statue frightens the visitors as they begin to depart, and its presence spurs a conversation concerning art and its meaning. The realness of the statue strikes the visitors, and the narrator explains that "there was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman's form, muscular, grown coarse [*sic*] with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's" (53). The men examine the statue: "Kirby and Doctor May walked around it, critical, curious. Mitchell stood aloof, silent. The figure touched him strangely" (53). Doctor May sums up the image: the statue has "the peculiar action of a man dying of thirst' . . . 'A working-woman—the very type of her class'" (53). Instantly, readers may recall the narrator's earlier misreading of Deb as a type of her class but also remember the narrator's revision—that Deb is an individual, not just a type. Thus, Davis uses Dr. May's reading of the statue as "the very type of her class" as representative of a damaging misunderstanding and an ineffectual misreading.

When Mitchell intuitively identifies the statue's sculptor and directs Dr. May to Hugh, the doctor asks him about the sculpture's meaning. "“She be hungry,”” Hugh replies, leading Dr. May into a dialogue about anatomy: "“Oh-h! But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow! You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong—terribly strong. It has the mad, half-despairing gesture of drowning”” (53). But Hugh persists, explaining the symbolic meaning of his art rather than the literal meaning: the korl woman is “not hungry for meat,” Hugh explains, but instead for “summat [sic] to make her live, I think,—like you” (54). Here, Hugh provides a corrective for Dr. May's literal reading of the statue, insinuating that for the statue—and, readers can assume, for Hugh himself—starvation is more than a physical trait for the working class; it instead reaches to the soul.

Mitchell alone seems to understand Hugh's intentions. As he exclaims, ““Good God, how hungry it is!”” (54). In analyzing this scene, William Shurr deduces that Mitchell has been effectively converted, made to identify with Hugh and thus the working class. But we cannot deny the fact that Mitchell does not help Hugh and leaves the mill with only a touch of his hat and “a quiet look of thorough recognition” (58). Further, “[Mitchell] looked at the furnace-tender as he had looked at a rare mosaic in the morning; only the man was the more amusing study of the two” (55). Like the iron mill, the korl statue, and the Nassau “negro among negroes” in Howe's “A Trip to Cuba” (604), Hugh is relegated finally as an object—a type—for men like Mitchell to study. Like Emerson and Alcott in Davis's memoir, removed from the very humans for whom they supposedly advocated, Mitchell remains apart from Hugh and, in effect, from the reader.

Indeed, once Mitchell and the other men leave the mills, the readers remain behind with Hugh and Deb, and the narrator reverts back to a direct address, motivating readers to reflect on the scene they just witnessed:

Do you remember rare moments when a sudden light flashed over yourself, your world, God? when you stood on a mountain-peak, seeing your life as it might have been, as it is? one quick instant, when custom lost its force and every-day usage? when your friend, wife, brother, stood in a new light? your soul was bared, and the grave—a fore-taste of the nakedness of the Judgment-Day? (58)

We can imagine that Davis hopes readers experienced this “rare moment” in the mills with Mitchell, May, Kirby, Hugh, and Deb. During this mill visit, the readers do not participate—instead, with their omniscient viewpoint, readers indeed exist on a “mountain-peak” between the two parties, seeing their lives as they are now—represented by the mill visitors—and as they could have been—represented by Hugh and Deb. With the visitors’ privilege exposed through their conversations, *The Atlantic Monthly’s* readers likely recognize a social connection between themselves and these men; but with Davis’s emphasis on Hugh’s appreciation of beauty and art and her point of view that Hugh exists in this environment because of social factors, readers can simultaneously see how society *creates* their own privileged positions. The “sudden light,” a flash coming at a “quick instant,” reveals to readers that though they have social privileges that Hugh and Deb do not, they can identify with the protagonists anyway. Since the mill visitors express their own judgmental summations about Hugh, Deb, and the world of the iron mills, readers categorize them as the undesirable party with which to identify. Through

these techniques, Davis alienates her readers from the mill visitors in a socially constructive way: readers' antithesis toward the mill visitors prompts them to reexamine their own roles in society and recognize their own faulty reading practices.⁴⁹ And through their reexamination and recognition, readers find themselves in a position to revise their actions in the material world. In this moment of narrator intrusion, readers occupy a liminal position between fiction and reality in which they can simultaneously reflect upon the (fictional) scene they just witnessed but can also apply that scene to their own realities. Importantly, in the narrator's direct speech to the reader, s/he does not specify that readers have observed the specific mill visit scene from the "mountain-peak"; instead, the narrator disconnects this direct address from the scene itself and prompts readers to imagine this "sudden light" flashing in their own lives (58). At this moment, readers have entered the realm Davis hoped they would: that of individuals with both the ability and willingness to enact change.

Avenue for Action

As the novella comes to a close, readers learn that the narrator has kept Hugh's korl statue and has it hidden behind a curtain—it is, after all, a "rough, ungainly thing" (74). But sometimes, the narrator admits, the curtain is "accidentally drawn back" to reveal the statue; s/he sees "a bare arm stretched out imploringly in the darkness, and an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woful [*sic*] face, through which the spirit of the dead

⁴⁹ For more on the role of antithesis in literature, see Charles Goehring and George N. Dionisopoulos's "Identification by Antithesis: *The Turner Diaries* as Constitutive Rhetoric" (2013) in which the authors analyze the ways in which William Pierce's white supremacist novel constitutes its audience based on the premise of antithesis. Goehring and Dionisopoulos reveal the way in which a fictional novel can conjure societal destruction—through compelling readers to adhere to physical violence in the name of white supremacy, with destruction as Pierce's ultimate goal, antithesis becomes an apt strategy to employ because it allows a collective group to identify an "enemy."

korl cutter looks out, with its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work” (74).⁵⁰ The statue, like Hugh before it, is hungrily awaiting something, desperately wanting to finish what it started. It seems fitting that the novella ends with this creature that “seems to belong to and end with the night” (74) and not with Hugh’s suicide in prison or with Deb’s transportation to the countryside by a Quaker woman. Instead, as it begins, the text ends with questions: the statue’s “pale, vague lips seem to tremble with a terrible question. ‘Is this the End? they say,—‘nothing beyond?—no more?’” (74). Readers should find themselves instantly transported back to the opening of the novella when they first encountered the “terrible question which men here have gone mad and died trying to answer” (41). And still, the narrator “dare[s] not put this secret into words” (41).

The narrator poses one final question before the close of the novella: “Has the power of [the korl statue’s] desperate need commanded the darkness away? While the room is yet steeped in heavy shadow, a cool, gray light suddenly touches its head like a blessing, and its groping arm points through the broken cloud to the far East, where, in the flickering, nebulous crimson, God has set the promise of dawn” (74). The narrator’s closing tableau depicts a moment in time but refuses to answer the question s/he poses. If readers were searching for a clean ending, for narrative cohesion, they will not find it here. Instead, in order to fully leave the narrative and its containing forces, readers realize that *they* must answer this question; they must continue to make meaning out of the text in order to experience a satisfying conclusion. Like the opening question, this ending

⁵⁰ Of course, it should be no surprise that the narrator continuously describes the statue as wolfish; this directly connects the statue to Hugh whose last name is Wolfe.

question demands engagement, and the only way to end the novella is for readers to reflect upon their experiences and to answer the question through action.

The narrator promised hope. As s/he told readers early in the novella, “if your eyes are as free as mine are to look deeper, no perfume-tinted dawn will be so fair with promise of the day that shall surely come” (41). And the reader’s eyes are free to look deeper now. Through the specific persuasive techniques Davis incorporates in the novella—direct address, images of confinement, and depictions of faulty reading practices—she teaches readers how to respond to the story’s ending. Readers have ultimately been conditioned to respond to poverty and oppression in a more direct way, and leaving the world of the text, they can take their newfound understanding of social identity and make justice a reality in the material world that they inhabit. The “secret” of the iron mills, existing nebulously in the “nightmare fog,” has become a “real thing” to the reader (Davis, *Life* 41), and now it is the reader’s job to answer the narrator’s questions and reveal the answers through action.

CHAPTER IV – “THAT LITTLE DISMAL HOLE”: HARRIET JACOBS’S SHIFTING
DIRECT ADDRESS AND PHYSICAL CONTAINMENT IN *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE*
OF A SLAVE GIRL

“Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage. They
have no conception of the depth of degradation involved in that word, slavery.”

-A Woman of North Carolina

“Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto
my speech.”

-Isaiah xxxii, 9.⁵¹

In her 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Harriet Jacobs details the abuse, escape from slavery, and eventual freedom of Linda Brent, her pseudonymous narrator.⁵² Whereas Rebecca Harding Davis depicts the containment and control working class individuals face in mid-century America, Jacobs—who published her narrative in the same year as Davis’s novella—depicts the containment slave women suffer in their day-to-day lives. In contrast to the working class, who were ideologically contained and controlled so that their lives would not seep into the realities of middle and upper class citizens—something that Davis takes as her subject matter—Jacobs demonstrates that slave women were ideologically and physically contained so that their bodies and sexuality could be controlled.

⁵¹ These epigraphs are partial versions of the epigraphs Jacobs uses on her title page to open her narrative.

⁵² To avoid any confusion, in this chapter, I will refer to the author, narrator, and character as Jacobs, only using the name(s) Linda, Brent, or Linda Brent when they appear in a quotation from the narrative.

This control of the slave woman's body would ensure the perpetuation of the system of slavery. In 1662, Virginia adopted the provision *partus sequitur ventrem*—which Thomas D. Morris paraphrases as “the status of the child derives from its mother” (43). “The normal common law rule on status,” Morris continues, “was that it derived from the father. There is no doubt that the rule *partus sequitur ventrem* was of importance in the legal history of slavery” (43). Interestingly, as Jennifer M. Spear explains in “Race Matters in the Colonial South,” *partus sequitur ventrem* was part of English inheritance law and dictated that children followed their mother's condition if they were born *outside of marriage*. Colonial slaveholders, Spear explains, were still able to use this law because “they assumed that all children born of enslaved women would be born outside lawful marriage, an assumption they made a reality by denying the legal validity of slave marriages” (584). For Jacobs, this common law was of dire importance: her children would immediately adopt an enslaved status, simply because their mother was a slave. Jacobs demonstrates the containment and control Dr. Flint imposes upon her, a control largely regarding her sexuality and her children. In preventing Jacobs's escape by controlling her bodily, Flint would be able to ensure the continued enslavement of her children as well. Further, like Davis, Jacobs expertly exposes this ideological containment through her inclusion of potent images of physical confinement.

Because she uses her narrative to argue for the humanity of slave women, Jacobs addresses the narrative to northern women. In the preface to the narrative, Jacobs reveals her purpose for penning the text: she explains that she wants to “arouse” Northern women “to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South. . .” (5). More generally, Jacobs desires to “convince the people of the Free States what slavery

really is” (5). Before her narrative even starts, her general audience, readers who live in the north, and her specific audience, free, privileged, white women, are clearly labeled. Lydia Maria Child echoes the intended audience when, in her introduction, she claims that she agreed to edit Jacobs's narrative “with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions” (6). In the preface to the narrative, Jacobs and Child both argue that it is through changing feelings that material change will happen. In true sentimental fashion, free women are the harbingers of change because they create and perpetuate the morality of a nation. But Jacobs’s short preface does more than identify an ideal audience. However subtly, Jacobs explains the process by which she plans to engage northern women's morality: “Only by experience can one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations [slavery]” (5). Jacobs’s word choice here reveals her narrative intentions: she wants northern women to reach “a realizing sense” of slavery and its impact on slave women, but this realization can only come by “experience” (5). To succeed, then, Jacobs must make free, northern women experience slavery, and the only way she can do this is discursively: she must use words to make northern white women experience the realities of slavery for black women.

Over the years since Jean Fagan Yellin authenticated Jacobs’s text in 1981, critics have devoted significant attention to the narrative, often addressing the genre and audience engagement of the text. Critics such as Hazel Carby and P. Gabrielle Foreman have been influential in addressing Jacobs’s ability to manipulate generic conventions and engage a set of readers in order to advance her arguments about slavery, motherhood,

and freedom on the eve of the Civil War.⁵³ Carby, for example, claims that “Jacobs used the material circumstances of her life to critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of black women” (47). She continues, explaining that “Jacobs, as author, confronted an ideology that denied her very existence as a black woman and as a mother, and, therefore, she had to formulate a set of meanings that implicitly and fundamentally questioned the basis of true womanhood” (49). Echoing Carby’s assertions, Foreman discusses the ways in which Harriet Jacobs “negotiate[s] the assertion of [her] voice,” leading to a narrative voice that “blur[s] the parameters of the genres [she has] chosen” (313). For Foreman, this blurring of genre leads to the subversion and inversion of the “authority of audience” (313), forcing Jacobs’s readers to submit to the authors’ own meaning of their lives and homes. For both Carby and Foreman, Jacobs succeeds in melding the genres available to her in mid-nineteenth-century America—most notably the slave narrative and the sentimental novel—using the conventions she needed and discarding those she did not. This manipulation of generic conventions led to Jacobs’s ability to engage her white, female readers and redirect their understanding of life for a black woman in mid-century America.

In this chapter, I seek not only to continue this conversation begun by critics but also to suggest new ways of understanding Jacobs’s narrative strategies, specifically her use of direct address. In particular, I argue that Jacobs uses three specific narrative strategies to move her audience to an empathetic engagement with slave women,

⁵³ For more prominent criticism on Jacobs’s use of generic conventions and her audience engagement, see especially Teresa Goddu, Valerie Smith, Franny Nudelman, Robyn Warhol, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, and Miranda Green-Barteet.

strategies similar to her contemporary Davis. First, Jacobs uses direct address in the early part of the narrative to compel her readers to enter a slave woman's world. This direct address endows readers with a sense of narrative power: as I will demonstrate, Jacobs's addresses allow the reader an active position of meaning-making within the text. Second, in the chapters where Jacobs details her physical confinement while hiding in her grandmother's garret for seven years, she ceases to directly address the reader. In these chapters, Jacobs forces the reader to abandon her active status, rendering her a passive witness to slavery's cruelties. It is here, through her abandonment of direct address and extended image of physical confinement, that Jacobs most successfully makes her reader "experience" slavery, something she claims as her narrative aim in the preface. Finally, Jacobs uses the last part of her narrative to introduce her arguments about proper "social reading," in ways similar to Davis. Through introducing characters who respond to a female slave's situation with no sympathy, and countering these characters with characters who approach the slave's situation with sympathy and delicacy, Jacobs instructs her readers on how to "respond" to the text: readers' "experience" of slavery, Jacobs suggests, should prompt them to empathetically engage with Jacobs and thus with slave women more generally. Through these three formal techniques—direct address, images of confinement, and depictions of positive and negative "social reading"—Jacobs works to create a body of readers who will leave the text siding emotionally and politically with those female slaves who find themselves unceasingly victimized by the system of slavery, that "pit of abominations" (Jacobs 5).

The Early Chapters: Direct Address and the Reader's Power

In the early chapters of her narrative, Jacobs addresses her readers directly, compelling those readers to engage in ideological critique of the system of slavery. These instances of direct address seem to endow the reader with narrative power. In particular, through addressing them, Jacobs allows her readers to come to their own conclusions about their current state of society, a state marked by the ever-increasing presence of slavery and discussions over the role of women in public life. In her engaging 1995 study on Jacobs's narrative, Robyn Warhol discusses how Jacobs's narrative interventions work to simultaneously pull the reader in and distance her, resulting in the reader becoming "conscious of her own activity in reading, and to consider whether she can take action in the extratextual world to redress the wrongs she has been reading about" (66). In other words, Jacobs's narrative interventions, according to Warhol, "[bring] into the text an awareness of the two bodies that are necessary to any literary transaction: in this case, the white body whose hands hold the book and the black body whose hand guided the pen" (66). While I agree with Warhol's conclusion, I suggest that these direct addresses also remove the reader from Jacobs and the narrative at hand and allow the reader to, in a way, escape the narrative. In short, the direct address that Jacobs employs forces readers to apply the general ideological critiques Jacobs advances to their own lives, but to do so, readers must leave the text, even if just temporarily. Through her diversions from the plot, Jacobs is able to transform "incidents" from her own life into representational moments of slavery and servitude as a whole, but she succeeds in doing so only by asking her readers to escape the text and imagine or revisit moments in their own lives.

One of the most striking instances of this diversionary technique appears early in the narrative. After explaining that January first is hiring day for slaveholders, Jacobs interrupts the chapter to speak directly to her readers. “O, you happy free women,” Jacobs begins, “contrast your New Year’s day with that of the poor bond-woman!” (17). Here, Jacobs gives her readers a direct command to leave the text—readers must think back to their last New Year’s celebration, and this requires that readers for a moment disengage from the narrative. As Jacobs continues, she describes a celebration she assumes her readers have experienced: “With you it is a pleasant season, and the light of day is blessed. Friendly wishes meet you every where, and gifts are showered upon you. Even hearts that have been estranged from you soften at this season, and lips that have been silent echo back, ‘I wish you a happy New Year’” (17). In Jacobs’s imagining, New Year’s day for the free woman signifies a moment of things being brought closer to them—wishes, gifts, and hearts come toward the her, rendering her day one of engagement with others. At this point, readers must decide if their memories of their own New Year’s celebrations—memories the text prompted them to revisit—match Jacobs’s imagination of what that celebration might have entailed. In this moment, then, readers’ lives have merged with the narrative, and when Jacobs describes New Year’s day for the slave woman, readers can more fully see how the two celebrations—that for the free woman and that for the slave woman—are diametrically opposed. For the slave mother, Jacobs explains, “New Year’s day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning” (17). Whereas New Year’s day for the free woman is a time of celebration, for the slave woman, New Year’s day is a day where things may be torn from her possession—most

primarily her children. Regardless of whether or not an individual reader's memories of her New Year's day match Jacobs's imagining of a New Year's day for a free woman, the reader can unequivocally say that her celebration is different from that of a slave woman. The free woman knows that her children are unlikely to be taken from her, and if they are, she has the option of legal recourse that a slave mother does not have.⁵⁴

Jacobs takes this dichotomy of possession and dispossession further by explicitly claiming that free women have claim to their own children: "they are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you" (17). The slave woman, in contrast, desires this hand of death: "often does she wish that she and [her children] might die before the day dawns" (17). Whereas death is negative for the free woman, representing the only agent that can steal her loved ones away from her, death is the only hope for the slave woman: in death alone can she keep the things she loves. Despite the opposition in these images, though, this instance of direct address ends with an ideological statement wherein Jacobs raises the issue of the nineteenth century's unequal legal system: the slave woman "may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies" (17). In this ending, Jacobs exposes the opposing pillars of being a slave and a

⁵⁴ This idea of children being taken away should, of course, draw our attention to the idea of divorce in the mid-nineteenth-century. Elizabeth B. Clark, who analyzes the changing views on divorce in the nineteenth century by focusing specifically on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's activism, claims that "even progressive minds feared the path to easy divorce, disagreeing about its significance, its desirability, and its consequences" (27). Clark explains that before the Civil War, the prominent view regarding divorce "invoked duties rather than rights as justification. . . particularly the mother's duty to children" (28). Liberal feminists like Stanton argued that it was a mother's obligation to remove her children from a violent or drunk father. After the Civil War, Clark explains, proponents of divorce turned their rhetoric to a powerful comparison of wives and slaves, arguing for the individual liberty and economic freedom for women in bad marriages. For more on divorce in nineteenth-century America, see Julian Barr's "To Love and to Cherish: Marital Violence and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century America" (2012).

mother. A slave mother cannot celebrate her motherhood in any legally recognizable way, but she *can* feel her motherhood in the same way that a free woman can, rendering the two subject positions yet again diametrically opposed despite their emotional similarities. Importantly, though, in this moment of direct address, Jacobs does not expose the contrast between *herself* and her readers; instead, Jacobs is absent as an individual here, and she replaces her individual subject position with that of “the slave mother” generally conceived. In allowing her reader an escape from the text and a prompting to remember pleasant times, Jacobs’s comparison between readers and an entire class of disenfranchised women more fully elucidates to her readers the ideological and legal workings of the system of slavery. In forcing her readers to reflect on their lives in comparison to the life of a slave mother, Jacobs essentially requires that her readers experience the narrative as political commentary rather than simply a narrative of one woman.

In the above instance of direct address, Jacobs compels her readers to engage in comparison: what is it, she implicitly asks, that makes black women different from white women? Indeed, this comparison informs virtually all of Jacobs’s narrative addresses to the reader. Readers again see this strategy of comparison early in the text when Jacobs describes her grandmother’s agony after a slave trader buys her son Benjamin: “Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrists; could you have heard her heart-rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, *Slavery is damnable!*” (23, emphasis in original). In analyzing scenes like this one, Warhol claims that Jacobs calls attention to

the difference between herself and her readers. As Warhol explains, these types of scenes emphasize that “what is real for the narratee is only speculative for the protagonist; what is real for the protagonist is unthinkable for the narratee” (65). While at first this address to the reader seems to emphasize the difference between readers and Jacobs (the phrase “could you have” in the direct address implying “you did not”), I suggest that Jacobs dismantles this difference, essentially showing the scene to readers as she saw it. By emphasizing the physicality of her grandmother’s suffering, Jacobs is able to clearly construct an image for readers to understand: readers *can* picture a mother (possibly themselves) clinging desperately to her son in handcuffs; readers *can* hear the “heart-rending groans” of a mother whose son is being taken from her hands; readers *can* see the wild eyes “pleading for mercy.” In each of these descriptors, Jacobs emphasizes motherhood, not race—this is not a slave woman’s body, or a slave woman’s groans, or a slave woman’s eyes; these are qualities any mother would have in a similar situation. In short, not only can readers see the scene vividly, but through the description, readers can also imagine themselves in the scene. Though she may be emphasizing difference (after all, readers will *not* experience this because they are not slaves), readers can in fact “witness” the scene through Jacobs’s retelling of the scene. The power of this address lies in its logical ending. If readers *could* see the scene, they would denounce slavery; because readers *can* witness the scene, the ending (“you would . . .”) becomes imperative: readers *should* claim that “*slavery is damnable!*” (23).

Ironically, readerly agency is most potent when Jacobs uses imperative commands to communicate directly with her readers, primarily because a command requires participation in the text or communication with the ideas Jacobs reveals. It is no

surprise, then, that readers encounter a command when Jacobs details a pivotal moment in the text: her “plunge into the abyss” that necessitates her preparations for escape from slavery (46). In a moment of honest admittance, Jacobs details how she chooses to conceive a child with a white man out of wedlock. Here, it becomes obvious to readers that typical strictures of domestic ideology cannot apply to a slave woman; instead, Jacobs’s only domestic choices are in fact perversions of domestic ideology.⁵⁵ In her first option of domestic bliss, her master Dr. Flint offers her a home of her own in exchange for her sexual loyalty. This home would come at a cost, in an ironic turn of events, of Jacobs’s very womanhood as defined by nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity. She would have to sacrifice her virtue and purity for the possession (though not legally recognized) of a home.

Flint’s perversion of domesticity propels Jacobs to take matters into her own hands, but the only way she can avoid Flint’s perversion is to commit a perversion of her own. As such, she knowingly and willingly sacrifices her own purity in order to avoid Flint’s demands. Though there was an “impassable gulf between” them (47), Jacobs decides to embark on a sexual relationship with the white Mr. Sands with the design of escaping Flint’s tyranny.⁵⁶ Jacobs gives nod to the ideals of domestic purity in this

⁵⁵ For more on Jacobs’s use of sexuality and domesticity in her narrative, see Margaret Washington’s “‘From Motives of Delicacy’: Sexuality and Morality in the Narratives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs” (2007), in which she analyzes the inclusion or omission of sexuality in Truth’s and Jacobs’s narratives. See also Stephanie Li’s “Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2006), in which she explores the idea that “Jacobs presents motherhood as a force that resists slavery and its supporters” (15). Finally, see Franny Nudelman’s “Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering” (1992) and Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1989).

⁵⁶ The language Jacobs uses here—“impassable gulf” (47)—should direct our attention back to Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills” when she describes Hugh’s thought that “between [he and Mitchell] there was a great gulf never to be passed. Never!” (52). It is striking that both Davis and Jacobs use the same physical and spatial language to describe the relationship between a socially inferior and socially superior character.

section, most primarily in her apologies to readers for her transgression, but ultimately, Jacobs uses this section of her text to argue that the system of slavery forced her into her domestic perversion so that she could maintain some slight control over her own body and being. In “offering” her a home, Dr. Flint tries to use the prospect of domesticity and domestic bliss to contain and control Jacobs’s body, ensuring that she will not escape slavery. In her retaliation—having children with Mr. Sands—Jacobs strategically fights against the containment and control Dr. Flint aims to impose upon her. Her children become an extension of her own body, but they are not under Flint’s control, resulting in Jacobs’s renewed authority over her own body. Jacobs forces readers, in short, to face head on what P. Gabrielle Foreman has termed “the nineteenth-century unutterable” (313)—the sexuality surrounding slavery, or, “the ‘unspeakable’ subject of the abuse women suffered under slavery” (316).

Much like Davis does with the mill visit scene near the middle of “Life in the Iron Mills,” Jacobs uses her “plunge” with Mr. Sands and the direct address that accompanies it to teach her readers how to “read” a social situation in a more empathetic and inclusive way. Instead of coming to rash conclusions about Jacobs’s sexual encounter, readers are instructed to not judge the action without thought. In a moment of interruption from the story about her sexual encounter with Sands and the result of her decision, Jacobs addresses her readers directly and extensively:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law and custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares and

eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (47-48)

Much like her direct address about her grandmother's agony over Benjamin's sale, here Jacobs calls attention to the difference between her life and her reader's life. But, again, Jacobs creates a vivid image for readers, emphasizing the physicality of the situation. Readers are asked to imagine what it might feel like to be "unprotected," "reduce[d]," and "subject" to the will of another; they must imagine "avoiding," "eluding," and "trembling" when facing a tyrant. In each of these instances, Jacobs pushes the reader to more fully imagine what slavery and domestic strictures feel like *bodily* for the slave woman, and in doing so, she creates a moment of understanding for her readers: though they may have never experienced it, Jacobs uses her discursive rendering of this scene to approximate the experience for readers. In short, Jacobs provides readers with the power to understand her own situation more fully.

Jacobs makes an interesting rhetorical decision in this moment of direct address. The first sentence directly defines American slavery, something northern white women have definitely never experienced, by explicitly naming slavery: "You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law and custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another" (47-48). But the second sentence provides an analogy for readers, something they likely *have* encountered through their consumption of popular literature: a gothic tyrant. Jacobs claims, "You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice" (48). To reiterate and to make real the abuse of slavery for her readers, Jacobs

must turn the slaveholder into a “hated tyrant” whose power and snares must be “eluded” by the innocent victim. This tyrant’s fear-inducing footsteps and voice become stand-ins for Jacobs’s very real fear when Dr. Flint approaches. In this moment, readers are implicitly asked to take their cultural knowledge and apply it to Jacobs’s very real situation, and through this redefinition of slavery as an instance of gothic possession, readers’ sympathies are directed toward the victim: the slave woman. But Jacobs does more than use the gothic genre to her own purposes of engaging a reader who may be familiar with that genre; instead, she ensures that her reader cannot simply conclude that her story is a sensational gothic plot. In emphasizing what Teresa Goddu calls “the institutionalized threats of power” (149), Jacobs does not let the reality of her situation become subsumed by the gothic genre. “Her history,” Goddu claims, “must not be subsumed by the fictional conventions she uses to represent it” (144). In effect, then, Jacobs uses the gothic genre to draw her readers into the text and provide them with an image they likely understand, but she does not allow readers to dismiss her story as fictional. Instead, readers see the “gothic event as actual,” which ultimately “curtails her readers’ ability to read her history as a romantic tale” (Goddu 146-147).⁵⁷

After this moment of direct address, Jacobs sums up her encounter and provides instruction for how readers should respond to her situation: “in looking back, calmly, on the events in my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same

⁵⁷ For more on Jacobs’s use of gothic tropes, see Jennifer Rae Greeson’s “The ‘Mysteries and Miseries’ of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (2001) and Sandra Kaye Liggins’s dissertation “Authoring the Gothic: The Gothic Tradition of African-American Literature” (2002). See also Eric J. Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993) in which he addresses the use of gothic tropes in slave narratives, anti-slavery discourse, and pro-slavery writings.

standards as others” (48). Jacobs’s placement of the adverb “calmly” in this sentence adds emphasis to the word, and I suggest that it calls attention to the manner in which readers should respond to her situation. Instead of claiming that she “calmly looked back” on her life’s events, Jacobs seems to pause in order to more clearly modify *how* to reminisce—I looked back, but I did so calmly. As a conclusion to the direct address that preceded it, Jacobs’s emphasis on calmness here seems to be an instructional moment. Jacobs is asking her reader, too, to approach the situation with Sands calmly and resist the urge to judge through an immediate emotion she may feel. To approach the situation “calmly” is especially instructive in light of the gothic tropes Jacobs uses in this section to get her reader to identify with the slave woman’s plight: while these gothic images might prompt a reader to identify with a protagonist in duress, Jacobs does not want her reader to approach the situation as they might approach a typically alarming and exciting gothic tale. Instead of responding to the gothic elements of Jacobs’s description with terror or fascination, as readers might approach a fictional story, this small descriptor in the text—“calmly”—guides readers toward a more rational response to Jacobs’s situation. She wants them, finally, to understand that her “plunge” is not simply the effect of a gothic tyrant’s abuse; instead, Jacobs demonstrates that it is a calculated, rational decision made in the face of Dr. Flint’s containment and control of her own body.

The direct address in these early chapters endows the reader with some form of agency, though it is an agency controlled by Jacobs’s discursive depiction of slavery and motherhood in mid-century. Through engaging readers in her ideological critiques, Jacobs asks readers to imagine life for a slave woman. But to imagine this life, Jacobs asks readers to contrast their own lives of freedom with a life of bondage—bondage to

masters, bondage to men, and bondage to a system. Jacobs attempts to bridge the divide between herself and her free readers by forcing them to understand—through comparison—life for a slave woman. She succeeds in doing this through her emphasis on the physicality of slavery, her descriptions of bodily pain that are not tied to a black body, and her implicit arguments for the similarities between slave mothers and free mothers—a similarity that is not legally recognized but that readers can understand based on Jacobs's narrative descriptions that rely on the concept of motherhood in her moments of direct address. Ultimately, Jacobs's moments of engagement with her privileged readers through direct address make the reader active: readers are required to in some way respond to these moments of communication, and through this response, Jacobs walks readers through to a conclusion that is more empathetically and inclusively minded. Readers' status as active in the early chapters of the narrative will change in the middle of the narrative: once the direct address ceases, particularly in the garret chapters, readers find themselves no longer allowed to leave the text and come to conclusions about Jacobs's ideological critiques; instead, readers become passive witnesses of slavery's abuses, right alongside the confined and entrapped Jacobs.

Physical and Narrative Containment: The Garret Chapters

The early chapters, filled with the kinds of direct address examined above, give way to the middle chapters of her text where Jacobs's direct address disappears. It seems surprising that Jacobs does not address her readers directly in the garret chapters. Because little action happens within these chapters—after all, Jacobs is confined to a space that allows very little movement, and detection would be the end of her strivings for freedom—it seems, logically, to be the prime section in which Jacobs would directly

engage the reader in ideological discourse. Yet she does not do so. P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that Jacobs exercises control over her narrative through her moments of silence: writing of Jacobs's relation to Child, her white editor, Foreman argues that Jacobs regains control over her own narrative by "creating gaps and silences on her own terms" (317). Speaking primarily of the incidents in her life that Jacobs chooses to *not* reveal to readers, Foreman argues that Jacobs veils herself even in the moments that she publicly shares certain events.⁵⁸ I would argue, though, that these "gaps and silences" become most effective when Jacobs is silent toward her readers in the garret chapters. In short, Jacobs gains power not only when she decides *what* to reveal to readers but also when she decides *how* to reveal these events, moving from direct engagement that involves readerly response to a lack of engagement that forces readers to witness the physical containment a slave woman must endure to escape her ghastly fate. This movement from active to passive further cements the hardships slavery enforces upon a slave woman, and the act of witnessing but being unable to participate or change the outcome of the narrative forces readers to "experience" the slave woman's lack of agency in her day-to-day life.

Because her stay in the garret is such an integral part of the narrative—a space from which she can negotiate her position between slave and free woman—much has been written about Jacobs's use of spaces in her narrative. Recently, Miranda Green-Barteet has analyzed the narrative as a series of literal and metaphorical "interstitial

⁵⁸ See also Chiou-rung Deng's "Resisting Sympathy, Reclaiming Authority: The Politics of Representation in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (2011), where she claims that "Jacobs's narrative, defying the calling to speak, makes silence even louder than spoken words, for fear that the representation of her experience, for the purpose of facilitating sympathy, might become another form of subjection, rendering her the object of the reader's voyeuristic, though sympathetic, gaze" (131).

spaces.” As she explains, Jacobs negotiates the realms “between and betwixt other more clearly defined spaces” in order to find less visible but more useful “sites of resistance and empowerment” (53, 68). Green-Barteet’s formulation finds its source in earlier Jacobs criticism. In speaking of the garret, Valerie Smith argues that “the plot of Jacobs’s narrative, her journey from slavery to freedom, is punctuated by a series of similar structures of confinement, both literal and figurative” (29). Further, Smith suggests that “each moment of apparent enclosure actually empowers Jacobs to redirect her own and her children’s destiny” (30).⁵⁹ Like both Smith before her and Green-Barteet after, Michelle Burnham emphasizes the importance of Jacobs’s stay in the garret, defining it as “the hinge which balances twenty chapters on either side” (278). “It is almost as though,” Burnham explains, “this chapter is hidden in plain sight, much like the body of Harriet Jacobs herself, who finally discovers the safest hiding place to be the most obvious one imaginable” (278). As these critics make clear, Jacobs’s garret serves as both a literal and metaphorical middle point: it marks the exact center of her narrative while simultaneously representing her transition between slavery and freedom.

Surprisingly, despite the nuanced insights on this central part of Jacobs’s narrative, most critics who write about Jacobs’s seven-year-long confinement refer to the garret itself as her “loophole of retreat,” the name of the chapter in which the garret is introduced. Jasmine Syedullah claims that “the loophole of retreat was both a material and metaphorical space that provided much-needed physical and critical distance from standard notions of freedom” (30). Though Syedullah, among other critics, raise

⁵⁹ See also Smith’s chapter, “‘Loopholes of Retreat’: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in Henry Louis Gates’s *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (1990).

important points about Jacobs's garret, the notion that the garret itself is Jacobs's "loophole of retreat," while useful, sidesteps the imprisoning nature of the garret and limits our understanding of Jacobs's stay within it.⁶⁰ A close analysis of the chapter and the subsequent discussion of her seven-year imprisonment make clear that Jacobs's garret is far from a "retreat." Instead, the garret is a "hole" (92), a "small den" (92), a "place of concealment" (94), a "wretched hiding-place" (97, 109), a "little cell" (98), a "dungeon" (101), a "dark hole" (104), a "prison" (105), and a "living grave" (116). In fact, the only time that Jacobs explicitly refers to the garret as a "retreat" is when Dr. Flint is within close proximity. When her grandmother becomes ill and Mrs. Flint induces her husband to examine and treat the illness, Jacobs explains that "as secure as I was in my retreat, I should have been terrified if I had known [Flint] was so near me" (98). Her garret may be the lesser of two evils—Dr. Flint's licentious power repelling her more than the vermin, ants, and extreme weather that plague her in her "den"—but her metaphoric descriptions of the garret point overwhelmingly to a state of negative entrapment: Jacobs is in a dark, dismal, wretched, prison-like hole for seven years, a far cry from a "retreat."

Jacobs is not without comfort, though; she does have a "loophole of retreat" that exists within her prison: the peep hole she created with a stray gimlet her uncle Philip left behind during his construction of the trap door. With this gimlet, Jacobs is able to drill a hole in her den, "one hole about an inch long and an inch broad" (93), through which she

⁶⁰ Though Daneen Wardrop argues that "the only palpable comfort upon first occupying the loophole comes in the form of having the good luck to find a gimlet, a sharp tool with which she can pierce the wall facing toward the direction of her children's voices," we still see Wardrop referring to the garret itself as the "loophole of retreat" (209). This reading is so common that I have yet to find a critic who explicitly calls attention to what the term "loophole" exactly refers to in the narrative. For more of these examples, see Doherty (89), Nudelman (958), Whitsitt (83), and Green-Barteet (63).

can see and hear, though not verbally communicate with, her children. Jacobs makes exceedingly clear that her peeping hole is the “loophole” to which the title refers: “I was thankful when there came a day sufficiently mild for me to wrap myself up and sit at the loophole to watch the passers by” (94). Jacobs explains that this “aperture” (93) is her “loophole of retreat,” the only thing that makes her stay in the garret bearable.

Certainly, most critics who define the garret as Jacobs’s loophole do, in fact, call attention to the negative physical and emotional effects of her imprisonment; still, by returning a focus to these effects, we are able to see the garret and Jacobs’s role within it anew. If her “peeping-hole” is the “loophole of retreat” to which the chapter title refers, and the peeping hole makes life in the garret bearable, then the garret can be seen as an extension of slavery: indeed, the description of the garret as a “den” mimics Jacobs’s rhetoric when she describes “the wild beast of slavery” and northerners hunting the fugitive slave “back into his den” (32). In other words, the only thing that makes her confinement bearable, for Jacobs, is the ability to see. Moreover, not only can Jacobs see (her children, the community, local slave owners, etc.), but her hiding-place conceals her body from her master. In this sense, Jacobs gains power through containment. Indeed, as Syedullah claims, “. . . what we inherit from Jacobs is proof that all structural impositions have loopholes and it is in the loopholes that we may work toward ‘something akin to freedom’” (10). But it is not simply power or freedom for herself that Jacobs seeks throughout the pages of the narrative; instead, as we have seen, Jacobs’s primary aim is to push her readers toward a real understanding of slavery and womanhood, an understanding that would prompt those readers to change their behaviors in the material

world. It is in the garret chapters, I argue, that Jacobs is most effectively able to succeed in this goal.

I view the garret as the rhetorical center of the text for a variety of reasons: first, though the narrative is filled with instances of bodily confinement, Jacobs's stay in the garret is the most extended image of such confinement within the text, and Jacobs's emphasis on her bodily pain while in hiding magnifies the physicality of these seven years in her life for readers. But most importantly, Jacobs uses this center of the text to fully make the reader "experience" slavery, not simply because of her vivid images of physical entrapment, but because she ceases to directly address the reader in this section. As such, the reader's earlier agency to imagine herself into and outside of the text is replaced by Jacobs's ability to trap the reader in the text, mirroring Jacobs's trapped condition within the garret. The idea that a lack of direct address entraps the reader is a complex contradiction; it would seem that direct address is more "trapping" than a lack of readerly engagement. Indeed, the early direct address does in a way function as a technique for Jacobs to coerce her readers into a world they would likely never enter. Much like Davis does in interpellating her privileged readers to enter the dirty and oppressive world of the iron mills, Jacobs uses her direct address in the early chapters of her narrative to similarly interpellate her readers into the world of a female slave desperately attempting escape. But as we have seen, Jacobs's strategic direct addresses simultaneously pull the reader into Jacobs's world and allow the reader imaginative freedom to exit the text and revisit scenes in her own life. Conditioned in this way through the direct address, readers face a very different reality in the garret chapters. Instead of imaginative freedom and the ability to leave the narrative, they are stuck in the

garret alongside Jacobs, seeing what she sees and only what she sees. Ultimately, the garret chapters are integral to Jacobs's aim in making her readers "experience" slavery, which leads them to an empathetic engagement with Jacobs herself and an entire class of women still victims to the system of slavery.

The images that proliferate of Jacobs's pained body while trapped in the garret should not surprise contemporary readers of slave narratives. In abolitionist discourse, the broken, pained, and scarred body of the slave often became a metonymic image for the evils of slavery; viewers, through observing the slave's body in pain, could understand the damaging effects of slavery. But as writers have shown, this bodily representation of slavery's evils often worked to dehumanize the (former) slave, rendering him an object and a spectacle. We can see this phenomenon in Frederick Douglass's oft-cited critique of abolitionists in his narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass is given the duty to procure subscribers for Garrison's "The Liberator," and he explains that he was "generally introduced as a '*chattel*'—a '*thing*'—a piece of southern '*property*'—the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak" (265, emphasis in original). And when Douglass is invited to join the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, he details that John A. Collins would often introduce him as a "graduate from the peculiar institution. . . *with my diploma written on my back!*" (264, emphasis in original). In his political critique of this treatment, Douglass reveals that being reduced to a thing with the proof of slavery on his body was insufficient for his humanity: "it did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them" (266, emphasis in original). In short, instead of

simply telling his story with his body, Douglass desired to use his story as a public argument against slavery.⁶¹

Upon first reading, Jacobs's emphasis on her bodily pain within the garret chapters may strike us as a traditional inclusion in the slave narrative: like the whipped bodies that circulate throughout such narratives, and like Douglass's body on the lecture circuit, Jacobs's body in the garret becomes striking evidence for the damaging effects of the slave system.⁶² Indeed, her images of bodily pain certainly do work to move readers to a more sympathetic engagement with slaves and a disengagement with slavery as a system. Jacobs details the "stifling" air and the "total" darkness of her cell (92); her lack of protection from the "intense" and "scorching summer's sun" (93); the "tormenting" pain from "hundreds of little red insects. . . that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning" (93); the penetrating cold of winter leading to her cramped limbs "benumbed by inaction" and a "painful sensation of coldness in my head" (97); the feeling of losing speech due to the stiffening of her face and tongue (97); the fear of becoming a "cripple for life" (101). These perpetual feelings of pain, suffered

⁶¹ For more on Douglass's response to slavery and abolitionists of the north, see Jeannine DeLombard's "'Eyewitness to the Cruelty': Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*" (2001). DeLombard explains that the differing representations between Douglass's own view of his body and life in slavery and the views of those on the abolitionist circuit ultimately "does not diminish the significance of the quest itself, for it is precisely Douglass's effort to transcend the body—and the role to which that body cosigned him in the antislavery movement—that constitutes an important critique of antebellum abolitionism" (247). See also T. Gregory Garvey's "Frederick Douglass's Change of Opinion in the U.S. Constitution: Abolitionism and the 'Elements of Moral Power'" (1995).

⁶² Critics and historians have comprehensively detailed the physical abuse slaves suffered in nineteenth century America and their resistance to this abuse. See, for example, William L. Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (1988), William Dusinberre's *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia* (2009), Larry Reynolds's *Righteous Violence: Revolution, Slavery, and the American Renaissance* (2011), and Ely Aaronson's *From Slave Abuse to Hate Crime: The Criminalization of Racial Violence in American History* (2014).

unceasingly for seven years, lead Jacobs to explain that “my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul” (116). But unlike Douglass, forced to emphasize his physical memories of slavery on the abolitionist lecture circuit, Jacobs is able to control her representation of bodily pain within the pages of her narrative, and through this control, she can guide the reader toward a more personal and nuanced understanding of slavery’s damaging effects: as Jacobs repeatedly tells her reader, she would choose this nearly unbearable physical pain to be near her children. In short, Jacobs uses images of her contained body in pain to comment on slavery’s damaging effects to motherhood specifically. As she claims, “I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had paid for the redemption of my children” (98). And later, when Jacobs describes her intense desire to breathe free air, she claims, “I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on” (101). Jacobs’s confinement in the garret, then, becomes less of a chance for readers to observe the spectacle of the slave body in pain and more of a chance to understand the sacrificial nature of Jacobs’s descent into the cell: she sacrifices her bodily health for the redemption of her children. In a word, she sacrifices her body so that she does not have to sacrifice her motherhood. This reversal of expectations—from expecting the spectacle of the body in pain and instead viewing a reasoning and selfless human mind—moves readers, who may also be mothers, to side with Jacobs’s plight. In emphasizing the sacrificial nature of motherhood, then, Jacobs uses images of her suffering body to demonstrate to readers that she should be defined by her status as a mother, *not* by her status as a slave.

While Jacobs's body in pain induces sympathy in the reader because of how Jacobs represents this pain as a self-sacrificial decision, her body also becomes the conduit through which readers are allowed to view slavery in this section of the narrative. Whereas in the earlier parts of the text Jacobs granted readers their own interpretive agency through her direct addresses, here she ceases to directly address the reader, thereby preventing that reader from leaving the text, even for a moment. As Sally Gomaa suggests, Jacobs displays agency in this part of the text because she does not present herself as simply a spectacle; instead, she challenges the "presumed social distance" between herself and her reader "by being simultaneously the sufferer and the spectator" (380). While Jacobs's earlier direct addresses to the reader grant that reader the role of "spectator" and allow that reader to constantly imagine herself into existence—whether it be imagining herself as a slave, or as a woman placed under insurmountable ideological barriers, or as a powerful fighter for social justice—the lack of direct address in the garret chapters halts the reader's ability to reimagine her own identity. Instead of leaving the text and entering into an imaginative world in which they can apply Jacobs's observations to their own lives, readers are relegated to seeing the world through Jacobs's eyes. Here, they have moved from active meaning-makers to passive recipients.

Jacobs's strategic decision to cease her direct address ultimately works so well because readers find themselves even more entrapped than Jacobs. In the garret chapters, Jacobs's body is confined and isolated, but she has the ability to see and not be seen by those around her; the reader, however, is completely reliant on the entrapped Jacobs during this section—readers have even less power, rendered blind to everything except what Jacobs chooses to show them. The first thing Jacobs sees after using the gimlet to

construct her peephole is Dr. Flint, which leads Jacobs to a “shuddering, superstitious feeling that it was a bad omen” (93). Again inserting familiar tropes from gothic fiction (superstitions, omens) into her narrative, Jacobs’s first sight once in the garret is the tyrant from whom she is escaping, leading readers to feel Jacobs’s foreboding about the situation. And though Jacobs shortly after sees the “two sweet little faces” of her children playing in the street below (93), she continues to expose readers to grim, foreboding scenes throughout the garret chapters. Jacobs relates scenes of horror to the readers, such as a slave mother thrown out of her master’s house and sold to a “Georgia trader” (97). In another glimpse outside of her garret, Jacobs describes a slave woman “rush wildly by, pursued by two men” (97). “For some trifling offence,” Jacobs relates, “her mistress ordered her to be stripped and whipped. To escape the degradation and the torture, she rushed to the river, jumped in, and ended her wrongs in death” (97). Later, Jacobs sees her son Benny covered in blood after being attacked by a dog; even later, Jacobs watches as Mr. Sands and his new wife fawn over Benny, and Mr. Sands’s sister decides she wants to take Jacobs’s daughter Ellen in as a servant. Finally, Jacobs must endure the slow and agonizing death of her Aunt Nancy, her grandmother’s only remaining child, while she is unable to attend the funeral with the rest of her grieving family. Of course, none of these scenes are necessarily *new* to readers. Families being torn apart, abuse and violence, and ubiquitous death mark the early parts of the narrative as well; but here, readers are forced to witness these scenes rather than escape the text to ruminate on how the scenes they encounter in the text might relate to their own lives. In this section, Jacobs refuses to allow her reader even one moment of freedom from these experiences of slavery.

Whereas before readers were forced to act, judge, and imagine—in short, free to leave the confines of the text—during the garret chapters, Jacobs takes away this ability, rendering readers stuck within the sentences on the page, no matter how hard the scenes may be to witness. The effect produced by Jacobs’s writing in this section forces her readers to wade through myriad images, information, and scenes, and this entrapment becomes most effective when she pairs her content with her form, specifically when she uses repetition in these chapters. While Jacobs uses various literary and rhetorical techniques—such as her direct address, her use of pathos, and her use of *enargia*, or vivid description⁶³—her use of repetition is strikingly effective. Jacobs uses *anaphora*—a rhetorical technique of repetition—to further confine readers to the text and to approximate slavery’s invasive nature. We see this *anaphora* early in the garret chapters:

I was never cruelly over-worked; I was never lacerated with the whip from head to foot; I was never so beaten and bruised that I could not turn from one side to the other; I never had my heel-strings cut to prevent my running away; I was never chained to a log and forced to drag it about, while I toiled in the fields from morning till night; I was never branded with hot iron, or torn by bloodhounds. (92, emphasis mine)

After emphasizing what she *never* felt, Jacobs returns to the narrative present and claims that, “though my life in slavery was comparatively devoid of hardships, God pity the woman who is compelled to live such a life!” (92). Of course, *anaphora* has many uses, among them emphasis and emotional engagement, but in this moment, Jacobs uses

⁶³ For more on Jacobs’s literary and rhetorical techniques, see Thomas Doherty’s “Harriet Jacobs’s Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (1986).

anaphora to force the reader to slow down and vicariously experience what happens with regularity to other slaves. The reader has to wait for Jacobs's conclusion, mirroring Jacobs's own waiting within the garret. As Goddu has explained, Jacobs's repetition of these horrific scenes, produced by the system of slavery, renders the reader unable to turn away: Jacobs "refuses her reader any escape from history's horrors" (Goddu 146). Jacobs is strategic in naming these general scenes of suffering primarily because she aligns readers with Jacobs herself: in this moment, both Jacobs and readers become witnesses only of slavery's particular abuses, and when Jacobs concludes that God should pity the *woman* who lives this life of abuse, Jacobs and her northern women readers are yet again aligned: Jacobs makes an implicit argument that because she and God pity these slave women, her women readers should as well. Through her content as well as her form, Jacobs prompts readers to "experience" slavery, something Jacobs revealed as her intention in the preface. Only through this experience, Jacobs argues, can free individuals empathize with a slave woman.

Of course, empathy is a complicated emotion that is difficult to gauge, and I do not attempt here to prove that Jacobs's contemporary readers actually felt empathy or actually felt like they were "experiencing" slavery. Instead, I want to emphasize that Jacobs's narrative strategies attempt to foster empathy. Lauren Berlant has argued that empathy is ultimately a "civic-minded but passive ideal" (641), and she claims that sentimental fiction works to create "normative terms of feeling" (644) when, logically, these feelings are not possible. Ultimately, this passive empathy and universalizing of feelings allows readers to privatize their emotions and thus precludes readers from acting in the material world, an idea James Baldwin would likely agree with as my discussion in

the Introduction indicates. But to empathize, to experience what someone else experiences, even for a moment, seems a necessary step toward action, *even if* the empathy does not result in action. Though writing about more contemporary works, Ann Jurecic's assertion that "it is the reader's choice" to act on her experience through reading is useful here (24). "Literature matters," Jurecic claims, "not because it changes our brains, hearts, souls, or political convictions, but because the practice of reading literature slows thought down" (24). In this slowing down of thought—through her *anaphora* and her lack of address to readers—Jacobs asks readers to make assertions, come to convictions, and form some conclusions about the subject matter. While this certainly does not necessitate empathy, this slowing down of our thoughts can help us to suspend judgment and therefore think more carefully through a social situation. Following Jurecic's lead, then, I suggest that Jacobs's techniques to enforce empathy in readers occur in the realm of thought rather than in the realm of feeling. Like Jacobs herself, "calmly" looking back on the events of her life (48), readers are prompted into a rational and calm form of empathy—a form of empathy to which readers can come through the slow, methodical unfolding of their thoughts.⁶⁴

In the last of the garret chapters, when Jacobs is preparing for her escape, she reintroduces the reader into the text. She opens the chapter entitled "Preparations for Escape" with a challenge to her readers: "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that dismal little hole, almost deprived of light and air, and

⁶⁴ For more on the relationship between empathy and literature, Rajini Srikanth's *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law* (2011), Theresa Kulbaga's "Pleasurable Pedagogies: 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' and the Rhetoric of Empathy" (2008), Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), and Kathleen Lundeen's "Who Has the Right to Feel? The Ethics of Literary Empathy" (1998).

with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years” (116). This reintroduction of readers into the text functions dually: readers are forced to come to conclusions about whether or not they believe the stifling containment the system of slavery can enforce upon its victims while Jacobs reclaims her own authority. Both entities, Jacobs and her audience, escape their confinement and are reintroduced as active agents into the text. But any conclusions readers can come to from this point on will likely be informed by the “experience” of slavery they encountered within the confining garret chapters. These chapters, then, in the middle of the text, function as a rhetorical stasis—a stopping point in the narrative—which works to suggest to readers the various ways that slavery affects its victims. Finally, empathy becomes a decision: readers must decide for themselves where to direct their feelings, resulting in the reader’s reanimation as an agent in the narrative and, therefore, because the narrative takes a stake in political social arguments, an agent in the nation.

The Reemergence of Direct Address and Social Instruction

In the last chapters of the narrative, much as Davis does in her novella, Jacobs presents various types of “readers” (all of whom, not surprisingly, are women) to her own readers, suggesting to her audience ways to reach conclusions about social situations that are socially constructive, on the one hand, and socially destructive on the other. Through her readerly avatars in the last chapters of the narrative, Jacobs moves her readers to affiliate with those real-life “readers” who can respond to a social situation with sympathy. In her first years of freedom in the north, Jacobs encounters women who respond to her situation in a favorable way. Mrs. Durham, in whose house Jacobs finds refuge once she reaches the north, responds to Jacobs’s plight and experiences with the

“delicate silence of womanly sympathy” (128). When Jacobs finally reveals to Mrs. Bruce, her employer, that she is a fugitive slave, Mrs. Bruce “listened with true womanly sympathy” (140). These two sympathetic responses are in direct opposition to Mrs. Hobbs, Mr. Sands’s cousin who took Ellen to the north. When Jacobs visits the Hobbs family, Mrs. Hobbs makes it a point to tell Jacobs that Mr. Sands has given Ellen to the Hobbs’s eldest daughter. Jacobs wonders to herself, “How *could* she, who knew by experience the strength of a mother’s love, and who was perfectly aware of the relation Mr. Sands bore to my children,—how *could* she look me in the face, while she thrust such a dagger into my heart?” (131, emphasis in original). Unlike Mrs. Durham and Mrs. Bruce, Mrs. Hobbs responds to Jacobs’s situation unfavorably, though she has the “experience” to teach her how to respond otherwise. In these interactions, Jacobs displays two ways of reading a social situation: the first, as represented by the womanly sympathy of Mrs. Durham and Mrs. Bruce, comprises a stance of non-judgment; the second, embodied by Mrs. Hobbs, is defined by a refusal to learn from experience, thereby leading to a *misreading* of a social situation.

The damaging misreading of a social situation is encapsulated in a later chapter. When visiting England with the late Mrs. Bruce’s daughter and husband, Jacobs spends a large portion of a chapter discussing the working poor in England, and she argues that their lot in life is better than an American slave’s. As she explains, though these working poor had to “[labor] hard,” they never had to fear “insolent patrols” entering their homes in the middle of the night to “flog them at their pleasure” (143). “The father, when he closed his cottage door,” Jacobs describes, “felt safe with his family around him. No master or overseer could come and take from him his wife, or his daughter” (143). “I

repeat,” Jacobs asserts, “that the most ignorant and the most destitute of these peasants was a thousand fold better off than the most pampered American slave” (143).

After coming to this conclusion and stating it definitively for her readers, Jacobs makes a strategic decision to explain *how* she came to this conclusion. Through this display, Jacobs implies that others are unable to read the situation of the American slave properly, leading to a faulty reading of the system of slavery. Referring explicitly to Amelia Matilda Murray’s travel writings about slavery, Jacobs sets her reading of the working poor in England in direct opposition to Murray’s reading of slaves in America. As Jacobs audaciously claims, “I do not deny that the poor are oppressed in Europe. I am not disposed to paint their condition so rose-colored as the Hon. Miss Murray paints the condition of the slaves in the United States” (143). Murray, a British botanist, visited the United States and wrote a book comprised of letters defending the system of slavery in 1856. Entitled *Letters from the United States, Cuba and Canada*, Murray’s book argues clearly that slavery is a societal good. “Is there any part of Africa, the West Indies, or South America,” Murray asks, “where three millions of negroes are to be found as comfortable, intelligent, and religious, or as happy, as in the Southern States?” (16). Murray advances a common argument of the time that slavery is a social good primarily because the slaves in the southern states have close contact with their white masters, thereby rendering the slaves more evolved than blacks not blessed by the system of slavery. In this defense of slavery as a paternalistic system, Murray echoes social

scientists and sociologists such as George Fitzhugh, who argue that slavery can only increase the humanity of a barbarous race.⁶⁵

Jacobs does not detail Murray's arguments within her chapter, supposedly assuming her audience would be familiar with the text. But she does respond directly to Murray's unacceptable ways of gathering evidence to support her conclusions for the social good of slavery. As Jacobs claims, "a small portion of *my* experience would enable [Murray] to read her own pages with anointed eyes."⁶⁶ If she were to lay aside her title, and, instead of visiting among the fashionable, become domesticated, as a poor governess, on some plantation in Louisiana or Alabama, she would see and hear things that would make her tell quite a different story" (143, emphasis in original). In this quick deviation from her plot, Jacobs elucidates to readers the error in only examining one side of a situation. Had Murray fully immersed herself into the system of slavery, had she fully examined and analyzed her object of study—indeed, had she *experienced* slavery—her summation of the situation and the conclusions she would draw from her analysis would produce "quite a different story" (143).

⁶⁵ In his *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (1854), George Fitzhugh advances the idea that slavery in the south is a greater good than wage labor of the north. In a famous summation, Fitzhugh claims that "nature compels master and slave to be friends; nature makes employers and free laborers enemies" (248).

⁶⁶ Jacobs's use of the word "anointed" is telling here. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be anointed is to be part of a sacred rite, to be consecrated, or to be a consecrated one—like Christ, the Lord's anointed one (2 & 3). Jacobs implies here that Murray's own reading of American slavery is *not* sacred, consecrated, or done in the name of Christ. As Wardrop argues, ". . . if Murray were to know firsthand, as does the slave, the actual experience of slavery, then she would have her eyes anointed—both blessed with vision, but also wetted with tears. . . genuine tears, and compassion" (225). Jacobs may also refer to Revelations 3:17-18, Christ's blistering speech to the "lukewarm" members of the church of Laodicaea: "You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see."

The truth of Jacobs's observation about Murray's unsubstantiated conclusions can be seen when we examine Murray's February 9th letter from Darien, Georgia. On the way from Savannah to Palatka, the boat Murray is traveling on encounters a problem and must be docked for the night. Murray and her companion, by a stroke of luck, find accommodations with a Mr. Cooper at his "English-like house (as respects the interior)" in Darien (14). In this "first resident introduction to plantation life," Murray observes a "happy attached negro population" surrounding the plantation (14). Murray claims that she "never saw servants in any old English family more comfortable, or more devoted" (14). "It is quite a relief," she explains in the letter, "to see anything so patriarchal, after the apparently uncomfortable relations of masters and servants in the Northern States. I should much prefer being a 'slave' here, to a grumbling saucy 'help' there" (14). Watching the women using the threshing-machine, Murray suggests that "they were more comfortably dressed than our peasantry, and looked happier; otherwise (except the complexions) the scene was much the same kind as that at a threshing-barn in England" (15). Reflecting the "anti-Tom" publications I analyzed in Chapter Two, Murray uses her quick observations about the slaves at Cooper's plantation to come to conclusions based solely on visual observations. She claims explicitly that she "never *saw*" English servants so happy; she feels relief to "*see* anything so patriarchal"; Mr. Cooper took her to "*see* the threshing-machine" (14, emphasis mine). Importantly, Murray does not claim to speak to any slaves or even to discuss their condition with Mr. Cooper. This becomes a problem of evidence when Murray then shifts subject matter in her letter and uses these scenes of apparent domestic bliss as evidence for her conclusions on the system of slavery as a whole. After witnessing these scenes, Murray claims that "it is vain to intend

keeping silence upon the one thought that must be uppermost in a mind accustomed from childhood to erroneous views upon the Slavery question; and I may as well write on” (15). Murray concludes, “I now *see* the great error we have committed is in assuming that the African race is equal in capacity with the European; and that under similar circumstances it is capable of equal moral and intellectual character” (15, emphasis mine). In simply “seeing” scenes of slave life at Cooper’s plantation, Murray then can *see* that slavery is a beneficial institution that helps a degraded race incapable of social advancement. Murray’s jump to this conclusion seems to be what Jacobs condemns when she brings up Murray’s book: without exploring the evidence fully, the conclusions pro-slavery advocates come to are uninformed and, more importantly, socially destructive.⁶⁷

In her chapter about English life, then, and through using Murray as an example, Jacobs implicitly instructs her readers on what they should do with the knowledge they have gained through reading the narrative. In “experiencing” Jacobs’s entrapment in the garret, a side of slavery they likely had never been exposed to, readers, Jacobs suggests, are primed to tell a true story, one that is not painted “rose-colored” (143). In short, Jacobs gives her readers two models for social reading in this section: the first is represented by Murray, someone who comes to conclusions on a system she never experienced; the second, and more favorable, is Jacobs herself, someone who can

⁶⁷ In 1949, the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* published one of Murray’s previously unpublished letters to counter the *Dictionary of National Biography*’s claim that Murray’s views on slavery had changed and once returning to England, she became “a zealous advocate for the abolition of slavery” (qtd. In Hawes 315). In the letter, originally written in 1855, Murray explains that after returning home, she only feels “more strongly how necessary it is that some individual should make an effort to counteract the injustice & mischief which Mrs. Beecher Stowe’s book [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] fostered & encouraged” (qtd. In Hawes 317).

experience and then read the conditions of the working poor in England, ultimately coming to a strong and informed conviction about their lives.

In the very next chapter, Jacobs continues her implicit arguments for proper social reading and provides the ultimate image of responsible, sympathetic, nonjudgmental, and informed reading: her daughter Ellen. The night before Ellen is to leave her mother for two years of boarding school, Jacobs wrestles with the decision to reveal to Ellen the truth about Mr. Sands being her father. As she claims, “now that she was going from me, I thought if I should die before she returned, she might hear my story from some one who did not understand the palliating circumstances; and that if she were entirely ignorant of the subject, her sensitive nature might receive a rude shock” (146). Here, Jacobs emphasizes the importance of understanding a situation fully. If Ellen were to hear about her mother’s relationship with Mr. Sands from someone else, Jacobs implicitly argues, she may not be able to understand *why* Jacobs made the decision she did, which would result in Ellen’s inability to come to proper conclusions about the situation. But it is Jacobs herself who receives a shock when Ellen stops her from telling her story and reveals that she already knows Mr. Sands is her father. Having learned it from a nurse in the Sands’s household, Ellen spent her five months in Washington desperately waiting for her father’s love but never receiving it, instead watching as Sands would hold, kiss, and smile at his daughter Fanny. ““I thought if he was my own father,”” Ellen admits to her mother, ““he ought to love me. I was a little girl then, and I didn’t know any better. But now I never think any thing about my father. All my love is for you”” (146). In this moment, readers and Jacobs herself realize that Ellen has known about her mother’s “plunge into the abyss” with Sands for years, but importantly, she never let this

knowledge taint the way she viewed her mother. Instead, Ellen processed this information in a way that Jacobs seems to argue is the way her northern women readers should process the information they have also received: delicately. As Jacobs explains, “I loved the dear girl better for the delicacy she had manifested toward her unfortunate mother” (146). In these depictions of “reading” women, then, Jacobs creates a set of guidelines for her own readers to follow when responding to the narrative, specifically, and the system of slavery generally: a response should be sympathetic, delicate, and socially informed through experience. With these requirements laid out, readers likely find themselves in a position to “read” Jacobs’s experiences through slavery with these guidelines, thereby prompting them to side with Jacobs, and by proxy, slave women more generally.

Jacobs’s most famous piece of direct address comes in the last chapter of her narrative, and it encapsulates the reading techniques she has presented to readers in the last half of her narrative. “Reader,” Jacobs claims, “my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! . . . 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” (156). In beginning this direct address with a description of how her story does *not* end, Jacobs elucidates to readers that the reading techniques they have learned throughout the narrative should replace the reading techniques they held before. Unlike the heroines of the sentimental and gothic tales readers may be comfortable reading about, here, the ending of Jacobs’s narrative cannot end for her the way it does for traditional white heroines. Reading a slave woman’s situation in the way they would read any woman’s situation is dangerous, Jacobs seems to argue, because it can lead to a misunderstanding of the typical ways that a slave

woman's story can and should end. In her presentation of both good and bad representatives of social reading in these ending chapters, Jacobs has primed her reader to "read" the conclusion to Jacobs's own story with the "anointed eyes" she claims Amelia Matilda Murray failed to use in writing her travel narrative (143). Further, she has trained readers, "who know by experience the strength of a mother's love" (131), to refuse to "look [Jacobs] in the face . . . while [thrusting] such a dagger into [her] heart," as Mrs. Hobbs does in an earlier chapter (131). Instead, readers who have truly *experienced* Jacobs's narrative now have the proper evidence to understand and accept that her story could not have ended in any sentimentally typical way.

Reframing Reading and Social Justice

To end, I would like to return to the very beginning of Jacobs's narrative. Two epigraphs on the title page of Jacobs's narrative, which I have taken in part as my own epigraphs as well, immediately announce the theme of confinement, entrapment, and claustrophobia in the narrative. In the first, a "Woman from North Carolina" claims that Northerners cannot understand slavery because they only see it as "perpetual bondage" (n. pag.). "They have no conception," the speaker claims, "of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, slavery" (n. pag., emphasis in original). The second epigraph, taken from the book of Isaiah, exclaims, "rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech" (n.pag.). These two quotations encapsulate two of Jacobs's primary concerns within the narrative: slavery and womanhood. Further, both quotations utilize language of containment and physicality to convey their messages. But from here they diverge: the first quotation notes the

containing force of slavery on black women while the second condemns the spoiled, rich women of Judah.

Readers are primed to picture two very different individuals when reading these two epigraphs. In the first, the speaker contrasts perpetual bondage with degradation, a difference subtle enough to be easily missed by those who are not slaves. But the difference is vast: whereas perpetual bondage denotes an unchanging state, degradation denotes a constant state of sinking. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines degradation as “a lowering or reducing in strength, amount, etc.” (5) and as “a lowering of character or quality” (3). These two definitions refer to the active minimization of both physical and emotional qualities, and the use of the word within the quotation reveals that slavery is not simply a static state but is instead a state of constant descent. Moreover, the North Carolinian woman continues: if northerners fully understood slavery, “they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown” (n. pag.). Here, the speaker makes clear that the system of slavery, like a tyrant, enacts the degradation of millions, and the system must be overthrown for equality to be realized.

The second quotation, from Isaiah 32:9, condemns “careless” women. The New Living Translation of the *Holy Bible* translates the verse with even more condemnation: “Listen, you women who lie around in ease. Listen to me, you who are so smug” (Isaiah 32:9). After this command, the prophet tells these “smug” women of Judah what will befall them if they do not “listen”: “In a short time—just a little more than a year—you careless one will suddenly begin to care. For your fruit crops will fail, and the harvest will never take place. Tremble, you women of ease; throw off your complacency. Strip off your pretty clothes, and put on burlap to show your grief” (Isaiah 32:10-11). In these

verses, the prophet condemns the women of Judah for their carelessness and ease—much like Jacobs implicitly condemns the comfortable northern women she is addressing—and the prophet further galvanizes these women to abandon their careless status and to act. In the first epigraph to the narrative, then, slaves are consistently descending, while in the second epigraph, women who are at ease and careless are condemned. Ultimately, through the use of these two epigraphs, Jacobs has presented a problem: northern women are “careless” and “at ease” in the face of the degradation of slavery; thus, she uses her narrative to galvanize these northern women to action.

The dichotomy of woman versus slave is a problem for Jacobs in both her life and in writing her narrative, for while the two categories—slave and woman—are seen as separate, Jacobs is both (until her freedom is purchased in 1852). More importantly, even when Jacobs achieves her freedom, there are still millions of slave women in America. Throughout her narrative, though, Jacobs dismantles this dichotomy, demonstrating clearly that she is both slave and woman, and through this demonstration, Jacobs prompts her readers, as well, to realize that womanhood is not a barring factor for slavery, and likewise, slavery (and blackness) is not a barring factor for womanhood. Instead, through Jacobs’s formal techniques, readers likely come to realize that they share many of the same characteristics with slave women: a lack of voice in the political and social realms, an attachment to and love for their children (if they are mothers), and a desire for a home of their own, a “hearthstone” where they can convene with their families (156). In this recognition of similarities and the “experience” of slavery through the garret chapters, readers likely find themselves closer to a “realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage” (Jacobs 5) and condemn their own careless and

at ease status. In the end, readers must leave the narrative and come to socially constructive conclusions in the political and material world, but they can only do so sufficiently with their more fully formed skills of “reading” the plight of the female slave and their knowledge that they need clear and well-formed evidence to back up their convictions—something Jacobs’s narrative has consistently pushed them to do.

CHAPTER V –“THE PENT UP FIRES BURST FORTH”: HARRIET WILSON’S UNSYMPATHETIC AUDIENCE IN *OUR NIG*

In the preceding chapters, I have presented the striking similarities between Rebecca Harding Davis’s novella “Life in the Iron Mills” and Harriet Jacobs’s narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In both texts, the authors face a readership that is likely more privileged than the oppressed characters, and as a result, both authors must convince their readers to enter the world of the text. Once successfully doing so, each author incorporates images of physical confinement into her text in order to expose and denounce the ideological containment and control that marginalized characters encounter in their daily lives. Finally, both authors attempt to change their readers’ convictions and behaviors by presenting socially destructive “readers” and replacing them with representations of socially constructive “readers.” Through these three narrative techniques, I suggest that both Davis and Jacobs represent the reality of nineteenth-century society to their readers, and they attempt to galvanize those readers to make changes in their material worlds. In this chapter, I move backward in time to analyze Harriet Wilson’s novel *Our Nig* (1859) in order to investigate what happens to a protest author and her text when she encounters an unsympathetic audience.

In 1982, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered and republished perhaps the first novel written by an African American woman: Harriet Wilson’s 1859 *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There*.⁶⁸ Wilson’s semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of

⁶⁸ As I discussed in Chapter Two, Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, also rediscovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is supposed to have been written between 1853 and 1861, presenting the possibility that it, instead of *Our Nig*, is in fact the first novel written by an African American woman.

Frado, a northern, biracial child who is abandoned by her parents and indentured to a middle class white family in the north on the eve of the Civil War. The novel meticulously details the abuse Frado endures at the hands of the Belmont family, and in particular, Wilson focuses on Mrs. Belmont's sadistic abuse toward Frado. Though published two years earlier than both Rebecca Harding Davis's and Harriet Jacobs's protest texts, analyzing *Our Nig* within the context of my readings of Davis and Jacobs reveals the ways that a protest text's possibility of effecting change is wholly upon its audience's reception. Toward the end of the novel, Wilson herself calls attention to the importance of her audience. As she claims, "still an invalid, [Frado] asks for your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her history is unknown save by the Omniscient God. Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid" (130). But *Our Nig* fell into obscurity after its self-publication, which suggests that Wilson was unable to do enough with her novel to secure the sympathy and aid of her audience. Wilson's immediate aims (monetary support) and extended aims (a reconfiguration of northern race relations) could not be met through her rhetorical discourse. Her preface makes clear that supporting herself and her son was one of Wilson's main reasons for penning and publishing the novel, but her son died just months after the publication of *Our Nig*. The novel itself, along with Wilson's pointed arguments, disappeared from the literary record until over a century later. But many of Wilson's rhetorical literary techniques—persuasive images of physical confinement and separation and her subversion of traditional ideologies of the middle class home—would be repeated by protest authors throughout the rest of the century, including but not limited to both Davis and Jacobs only two years later. Wilson's insurmountable problem, as I suggest in

this chapter, is an unsympathetic audience—an audience that likely demands more of Wilson than Wilson demands of them.

In the 33 years since Gates's discovery and republication of *Our Nig*, critics have responded widely to the surprisingly complex novel, focusing on the novel's publication history, disappearance from the literary scene, the triple generic underpinnings of slave narrative, sentimental novel, and autobiography, and the novel's intended audience.⁶⁹ In this chapter, I am interested in continuing the discussion about Wilson's audience.⁷⁰ I aim to suggest a new way of understanding why the novel fell into obscurity and thus failed to draw attention to the northern racism, sexism, and classism that Wilson so passionately writes against. Considering that Wilson incorporates the very techniques that I have been arguing work to move an audience to action, including persuasive images of physical confinement and audience engagement, it is surprising that Wilson's novel did not expose northern racism in the way that authors like Davis and Jacobs exposed working class oppression and the degrading system of slavery, respectively. But Lloyd Bitzer's notion of a "rhetorical situation" is helpful in discovering the difficulty Wilson encountered with

⁶⁹ For more on the novel's history, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and R.J. Ellis's introduction to the 2011 edition of *Our Nig*, Eric Gardner's "'This Attempt of Their Sister': Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* from Printer to Readers" (1993), and Barbara White's "'Our Nig' and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the 'Bellmont' Family" (1993). For more on the novel's generic underpinning, see Elizabeth Breau's "Identifying Satire in *Our Nig*" (1993), Julia Stern's "Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*" (1995), Elizabeth J. West's "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*" (1999), and Barbara Krah's "Tracking Frado: The Challenge of Harriet E. Wilson's 'Our Nig' to Nineteenth-Century Conventions of Writing Womanhood" (2004). Finally, for more on the novel's disappearance from literary history, see Ellen Prato Fiorito's "'To Demand Your Sympathy and Aid': *Our Nig* and the Problem of No Audience" (2001).

⁷⁰ More recently, critics have taken varying approaches to reading *Our Nig* that depart from the traditional approaches I outlined above. For example, with the rise of Disability Studies, critics have approached Wilson's novel from this point of view, analyzing Frado's physical disabilities due to overwork and abuse and her social disabilities due to class and race status. For more, see Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu's "Editors' Introduction: Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions" (2006).

her novel. According to Bitzer, and as I discussed in the Introduction to this project, a rhetorical situation requires three elements: first, there must be an exigence—a problem that invites rhetorical discourse in order to fix or alter it; second, there must be an audience, but in particular one that is capable of making change; and third, there must be constraints on the rhetor that come to bear upon the audience, which can take the form of “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like” (Bitzer 8). When these three elements converge, Bitzer argues, a rhetorical situation has been formed, which can lead to “the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (4).⁷¹

To take Rebecca Harding Davis and Harriet Jacobs as examples, we can see a fully formed rhetorical situation: both authors are responding to a particular, though complex, problem amidst the myriad exigencies of the decade leading up to the Civil War, exigencies that involve the oppression of individuals based on race, class, and gender and these individuals’ lack of freedom in their material worlds. Both authors write to a clearly defined audience, but as we have seen, both authors must strategically appeal to their audience—middle- to upper-class individuals—in order to persuade that audience to work toward changing the exigencies that exist in mid-nineteenth century America. And finally, both authors face constraints of the time period that determine how they communicate—both authors are women addressing an audience that exists in a time period where women are viewed as non-political actors; Jacobs finds herself doubly constrained as a black woman appealing largely to northern, white women surrounded by American racism, sexism, and classism in their day-to-day societies.

⁷¹ For more on Bitzer’s rhetorical situation, see my discussion in the Introduction to this project.

While both Davis and Jacobs had to contend with issues that made their rhetorical situations complex, Wilson's rhetorical situation was fraught from the beginning: her publication constraints render her audience elusive. This chapter begins with a discussion of *Our Nig*'s publication history, her intended audience, and the contentious relationship Wilson sets up between herself and her readers. I suggest that these elements of Wilson's rhetorical situation informed her lack of presence in the literary scene. Next, I analyze Wilson's dismantling of certain ideologies of the time period, including the domestic ideology of mid-nineteenth century America, and I suggest that this dismantling further compounds her fraught rhetorical situation. Her aim to present a different version of the domestic home for readers entrenched in a view of the domestic home as the moral center of the nation becomes the most extended aim of the novel. Facing a powerful paradigm of domesticity, Wilson must make her audience recognize the destructive qualities of the domestic home—it does not aim to create moral, productive citizens out of children; instead, in the case of Frado, it debilitates her. While Wilson successfully demonstrates these destructive qualities, she does not provide a corrective for her readers, as we saw both Davis and Jacobs do, and without providing a model of a positive domesticity to replace the images of negative domesticity, I argue, Wilson leaves her unsympathetic audience with no model to follow as they leave the world of the text and reenter their political, material realities. In the end, though, it is important to understand the extended aims and possible deferred success of Wilson's novel, for at the core of her argumentative project is the desire to change readers' very ideological understandings of mid-century America. While readers' actions may not change, I ultimately suggest,

Wilson's novel may have been able to alter her readers' dispositions, thereby helping to pave the way for eventual social change.

Our Nig's Publication and Intended Audience

The context within which a text is published can strongly influence both *who* the audience will be and *how* the audience will respond to the text. Comparing *Our Nig's* publication history to both Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* elucidates how Wilson's rhetorical aims were fraught from the beginning. Wilson encountered issues with publishing her novel that neither Davis nor Jacobs had to contend with. Davis's publication of "Life in the Iron Mills" in *The Atlantic Monthly* catapulted her onto the literary scene. When editor James T. Fields accepted the novella, he sent Davis fifty dollars for the text and solicited another manuscript. In the end, Davis's novella was published anonymously in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, the magazine had a large number of readers in the early 1860s, ensuring that Davis would reach the audience necessary to make pointed political arguments. As Cecilia Tichi claims in the introduction to the 1998 Bedford Cultural Edition of the novella, "Miss Harding was a self-styled backwoods author audaciously bidding for publication in the nation's center of literary prestige, and yet her decision was sensible because of the *Atlantic's* reputation for publishing fiction by women and its recent trend toward the new mode of fictional realism" (3). The road to publication for Jacobs's *Incidents* was more frustrating than that of Davis. Originally planning to dictate her narrative to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jacobs amended this plan when Stowe only offered to include Jacobs's story in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs decided, at this point, to write the narrative herself, but she could only do so at night after finishing

her daytime duties as a nursemaid to the Willis family, specifically because Jacobs feared Nathaniel Parker Willis's proslavery sentiments (Dorani 201). The eventual publication, however, came with an endorsement from Lydia Maria Child, a well-known antislavery author of the time period, and announcements of the narrative's publication appeared in such periodicals as *The Liberator*, *The Anti-Slavery Bugle*, and the *Christian Recorder*.⁷² Both Davis and Jacobs had, in varying degrees, the context necessary for their published texts to reach an audience in the early 1860s.

Wilson, in contrast, already marginalized by her sex, class, and racial status, is further marginalized because she has a limited audience to persuade: her goal in *Our Nig*, according to the title page, is to demonstrate that "slavery's shadows fall even [in the north]" (n.pag.). But as Ellen Prato Fiorito has clearly demonstrated, Wilson's subject matter—northern racism—prevented her from reaching the wide audience necessary to enact change. As Prato Fiorito explains, antebellum black writers found success when they wrote about the evils of slavery and thus created a dichotomy between the slaveholding south and the free north, leading to "limits on how and what racial matters could be commercially entertained" (32). Wilson's condemnation of northern racism, Prato Fiorito argues, prevented her from reaching an audience as wide as that reached by a writer like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs; instead, *Our Nig* "[denies] this simplified configuration of American racial issues and as a result, found [itself] in a nearly

⁷² Of course, Child's editing of Jacobs's manuscript has raised questions in the contemporary and current criticism of Jacobs's text. Due to the pseudonymous publication of the narrative, many of Jacobs's contemporary readers may have believed that Child was the actual author of the narrative (Taves 212). Today, scholars question the validity of the assumption that Child only cursorily changed any aspects of Jacobs's text before its publication. For more, see Alice A. Deck's "Whose Book is This?: Authorial Versus Editorial Control of Harriet Brent Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*" (1987) and Albert H. Tricomi's "Harriet Jacobs's Autobiography and the Voice of Lydia Maria Child" (2007).

untenanted place in America” (Pratofiorito 34). Wilson, in short, refused to contain racism in the south, and as a result, she had trouble finding a sympathetic audience. Further compounding the situation is the lack of authenticating materials in the text. Wilson has no introduction from a white, or well-known, or respected individual, and at the end of her text, one of her appended letters is written by someone only known as “Allida,” another letter is written by Margaretta Thorn, who has “known the writer of this book for a number of years” (138), and the last brief letter is written by someone known only as C.D.S. Unlike Jacobs, who had an introduction by Child and a letter from the Quaker Amy Post appended to her narrative, Wilson does not have this aura of authenticity and approval in her text.

Our Nig’s road to publication was difficult from the beginning. As both Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Eric Gardner have noted, Wilson attempted to publish her novel in the heart of Boston’s abolitionist community. George C. Rand and Avery, a Boston publishing company firmly rooted in the antislavery movement, printed Wilson’s text anonymously in 1859, and as Gardner has detailed, the firm was located near abolitionist reform groups, most notably the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery society, located only two blocks away from Rand, Avery. Even more striking than its location, Rand, Avery had previously printed Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which should lead us to believe that the printing company was sympathetic toward abolition and race relations in mid-century America. Importantly, as Gardner has uncovered, of the seventeen extant copies of *Our Nig*’s original publication, one copy belonged to William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., an abolitionist in the vein of his father. Despite the Garrison family’s ownership of a copy, Rand, Avery’s close proximity to

abolitionist groups, and the company's previous printing of perhaps the most important abolitionist novel of the time period, *Our Nig* never entered the abolitionist circuit. Rand printed *Our Nig*, but selling it was left up to Wilson herself; Gardner concludes that "Rand did have avenues that he could have pursued to publicize *Our Nig*, and there is no definite proof that he used any of them" (233). Instead, the original owners of *Our Nig* were largely young, white residents of Milford, New Hampshire, and surrounding counties. Gardner has discovered that many of the original owners were under twenty years old, probably having received the novel as a gift "geared toward the moral improvement of young readers" (Gardner 228). These readers—largely middle-class, white, and young—are a far cry from the readers Wilson would need to respond materially to her text. After all, as Bitzer argues, "the rhetorical audience must be capable of serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce" (8). Wilson did not have this audience. Most of the readers who did encounter Wilson's novel would have been at an age that rendered them impotent in change making, like Flora M. Lovejoy, an owner who was only two years old when *Our Nig* was printed (Gardner 235).

Though Harriet Wilson encountered issues in finding an audience willing and able to act politically in favor of her arguments, she still implied an audience while writing—an audience that *could* conceivably enact change in their worlds. In her preface to *Our Nig*, Wilson names her audience as her "colored brethren" (n. pag.), but her prose and her direct addresses, especially in the early chapters of the novel, reveal that her audience is instead comprised of the very people her text works to condemn: white northerners. As Edwin Black has explained, critics must often infer the implied audience of a text by

identifying and analyzing “stylistic tokens” (112). Wilson’s “stylistic tokens” make it apparent that she is speaking to an unsympathetic audience, not her “brethren.” In the preface, Wilson includes an apologetic sentence typically found in slave narratives: “In offering to the public the following pages, the writer confesses her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens” (n. pag.). Writing to “the refined and cultivated” indicates that Wilson’s audience would have been educated, which was not a guarantee for slaves and free blacks on the eve of the Civil War. In fact, educating a slave was illegal in many states. In 1830, for example, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill that would punish those individuals who educated a slave. Because educating slaves, primarily in reading and writing, “has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion to the manifest injury of the citizens of this state” (“A Bill” n. pag.), the bill decrees that any white man or woman caught educating a slave will be fined between \$100 and \$200. If a free black man or woman is caught educating a slave, he or she will be whipped, “not exceeding thirty nine lashes nor less than twenty lashes” (“A Bill” n. pag.).

The attempt to deter the education of slaves is a repeated theme in slave narratives. In his *Narrative* and his *My Bondage and My Freedom*, for example, Frederick Douglass demonstrates the consequences that attend education. When Douglass’s mistress, Mrs. Auld, decides to teach him to read, his master Hugh Auld dissuades his wife with a series of reasons why slaves should not be educated. As Auld claims, “‘learning would spoil the best nigger in the world;’ ‘if you teach the nigger. . . how to read the bible, there will be no keeping him;’ ‘it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave’” (108). And as Wilson herself will detail in the middle chapters of the

novel, Frado is only allowed to attend school for three months out of the year for three years before Mrs. Bellmont decides that she should no longer attend and further her education, because “Mrs. Bellmont was in doubt about the utility of attempting to educate people of color, who were incapable of elevation” (30). In mid century, then, some whites considered educating both slaves and free blacks as pointless at best, and damaging to race relations in America at worst. Considering these examples, it is likely that when Wilson writes about the “refined and cultivated,” she is not thinking about her mostly unlettered “colored brethren” (n. pag.).

This suspicion that Wilson’s intended audience is in fact not her “colored brethren” is further confirmed in the opening chapter of the novel. In the first chapter, entitled “Mag Smith, My Mother,” Wilson tells the unfortunate story of Frado’s mother and stepfather, Mag and Jim. Mag, a white woman, is seduced by a man and impregnated, leading to her exclusion from her community. Unable to secure consistent work, Mag “descended another step down the ladder of infamy” and marries Jim, a free northern black man (Wilson 13). At this point, Mag is fully ostracized by her community for two wrongs: childbirth out of wedlock and marriage to a black man. At the end of chapter one, Wilson engages her readers in a moment of direct address that clues us in to her intended audience. As she claims, “you can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation” (13). Considering the culture in which she was writing, a culture that produced proslavery arguments about the nation-damaging qualities of intermarriage between whites and blacks, we can safely assume here that the “gentle reader” Wilson speaks to is white.

As we saw in Chapter Two, the fear of “amalgamation”—or racial mixture—is exemplified in the rhetoric of the American Colonization Society (ACS) who argued for the colonization of ex-slaves in Liberia. In an 1849 editorial in *The Southern Dial*, Henry Clay, president of the ACS, details his meticulous plan for emancipation in Kentucky. According to the editorial, Clay proposes that all slaves born after a certain date (he suggests 1855 or 1860) should be emancipated after serving 25 years as a slave. Any slave born before this date, according to the plan, will be a slave for life. For those slaves born into Clay’s emancipatory system, after 25 years of slavery, they should then be apprenticed out for no more than three years to pay for their own passage to Africa where they will then live in a colony. This point of colonization is integral to Clay’s plan; “without [colonization],” Clay explains, he would be “utterly opposed to any scheme of emancipation” (23). “As nowhere in the United States are amalgamation and equality between the two races possible,” Clay explains, “it is better that there should be a separation, and that African descendants should be returned to the native land of their fathers” (23). In this editorial, and in most of the ACS’s public discourse, a separation of the races is couched within an argument about emancipation and the denigration of slavery as a system. As Clay explains, if the white race “[possesses] the intellectual superiority, profoundly grateful [*sic*] and thankful to HIM who has bestowed it, we ought to fulfill all the obligations and duties which it imposes; and these would require us not to subjugate or deal unjustly by our fellow men who are less blessed than we are but to instruct, to improve and enlighten them” (21, emphasis in original). Yet, later in the editorial, Clay focuses on the greatest benefit of his system of emancipation: “We shall remove from among us the contaminating influence of a servile and degraded race of a

different color” (28). While Clay maintains that slavery is a degrading system, he exposes the popular conception of the time period that the emancipation of slaves is primarily a benefit to white Americans: without the “degraded race” in their presence (28), Americans can ensure the purity of the nation.

This representation of the evils of amalgamation made their way into fictional discourse as well, especially in anti-Tom literature—proslavery novels published in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In 1860, at the tail end of this genre’s popularity, Virginia Georgia Cowdin published *Ellen; or, the Fanatic’s Daughter*, an anti-abolitionist novel that details the evils of northern capitalism. Toward the end of the novel, Cowdin discusses abolition and amalgamation, claiming that

the amalgamation of the white and African races would be an outrage upon the laws of nature. In mental, moral, or physical organization, the African, whether by original stamp or as a curse, ranks in the lowest scale of human existence, and those who would dare, in defiance of the strict line of demarkation [*sic*] placed by the Creator, to foredoom the unborn generations of a superior race to degradation, are guilty of heinous wickedness. It were better for them had they never been born. (118)

Cowdin’s word choice—“outrage,” “curse,” “defiance,” “foredoom,” “degradation,” “wickedness”—exposes the intensity of mid-century views on amalgamation and the perceived threat that a mixture of the races would foretell. Though Clay’s tone is largely logical and detached, his word choice in his editorial is equally indicative of his thoughts on emancipation and colonization: for Clay, and those who support colonization, the removal of blacks from America would be a removal of a “contaminating influence,” a

“servile and degraded race” (28). For both Cowdin in her fictional discourse and Clay in his political discourse, amalgamation would amount to a lessening of white purity, and it would “foredoom the unborn generations” to a breach in the “strict line of demarkation [*sic*]” between the races (Cowdin 118). Ultimately, colonizing free blacks or emancipated slaves in Africa does not result in black freedom but instead, to use critic Amy Kaplan’s words, “emancipate[s] white America from their presence” (594).

Wilson’s discussion of amalgamation in her opening chapter points to her actual ideal audience—those white citizens who would support a separation of the races and who are therefore in need of Wilson’s arguments to change their views of race in America—and her word choice in the early chapters of the novel resounds with the same intensity as Cowdin’s and Clay’s. Wilson manipulates this language, however, and instead of applying her intense descriptors toward those who may be in support of abolition and emancipation, as both Clay and Cowdin do, she uses intense language to condemn the very readers who would agree with Clay and Cowdin. Wilson starts her novel by telling the story of Mag’s “[descent]. . . down the ladder of infamy” (13), but instead of condemning Mag for her choices, Wilson condemns those who judge Mag. After Mag gives birth to a child out of wedlock, Wilson explains that her “new home was now *contaminated* by the publicity of her fall; she had a feeling of *degradation* oppressing her” (7, emphasis mine). Wilson continues to explain that the shame others show Mag forces her to abandon her home and to live in a “hovel. . . which she knew to be untenanted” (8), but in this explanation of the public’s reaction to Mag’s giving birth out of wedlock, Wilson uses the language of contamination and degradation to describe the judgmental and unfounded reactions the general public has toward Mag, *not* to

describe Mag's negative influence on the general public, as Cowdin and Clay do when discussing amalgamation. Instead, Wilson reverses this discourse, demonstrating how the public's reaction works to contaminate and degrade Mag.

Wilson's opening attempts to both engage and criticize her audience, a risky decision to make: Wilson could easily alienate her readers, compelling them to stop reading the novel. But, like Rebecca Harding Davis's narrator in "Life in the Iron Mills," Wilson strategically includes herself in the very group of people she works to condemn. After describing Mag's situation, Wilson takes a step back and addresses a larger issue, and though she does not use direct address here, it is clear that she is speaking to her readers more generally: she pauses the plot to comment on how "we" work to perpetuate the contaminating influence of public reaction. As Wilson claims, "alas, how fearful we are to be the first in extending a helping hand to those who stagger in the mires of infamy; to speak the first words of hope and warning to those emerging into the sunlight of morality!" (7). This form of direct address is a strategic move for Wilson to make. Instead of using "you," or "reader," Wilson implicates herself in this condemnation of people who judge instead of help, rendering this direct address to the reader less of a criticism against readers themselves and more of a censure of society in general, Wilson herself included. This strategic move is necessary for Wilson's aims, because without compelling her audience to identify with the narrator at all, the audience will likely be left too unsympathetic to Frado's plight to continue reading. In implicating herself in the issues she works to condemn, Wilson ultimately invites her audience—however limited that audience is—to identify with her narrator, making them more likely to follow that narrator further into the text.

Defamiliarizing the Domestic: Wilson's Rhetorical Aim

Wilson's inability to secure a wide readership for her text is only one reason why the text may have gone missing from the records of literary history. Perhaps more challenging than securing a readership for Wilson was changing the minds of those readers she did manage to reach in regard to racism, classism, and sexism in the north. We might suppose that Wilson's task of engaging her readers would have been more successful than either Davis's or Jacobs's. As I have detailed, both Davis and Jacobs had to coerce a likely unwilling audience to enter a world they would resist: the dirty, confined world of the iron mills for Davis, and the abusive, claustrophobic world of slavery for Jacobs. Wilson, in contrast, needs only to coerce her audience to enter the domestic home—a place with which her readers were undoubtedly comfortable. But, Wilson's task then becomes much more challenging than Davis's or Jacobs's, for while her readers enter the text willingly, Wilson then attempts to defamiliarize the domestic home and make her readers recognize the confinement and abuse certain subjects face within that sacred sphere.⁷³ Lois Leveen provides a helpful reading of the title page that defines Wilson's text as an inversion of domestic ideology from the very first page. As she claims, "of particular interest . . . is the contrast that occurs in the yoking of 'free black' to 'white house.' By extending the antonymic relationship between the 'black' and 'white,' the phrases suggest an associative opposition between 'free' and 'house' as well, implicating the domestic space in which the free black is rendered a 'nig'" (562). The

⁷³ For more on Wilson's attempt to dismantle prominent ideologies of the time period, in regard to race and gender, see P. Gabrielle Foreman's "The Spoken and The Silenced in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*" (1990) and Barbara Krah's "Tracking Frado: The Challenge of Harriet E. Wilson's 'Our Nig' to Nineteenth-Century Conventions of Writing Womanhood" (2004).

title page of the novel, then, presents the contrast Wilson sees between ideology and reality: for Frado, the home is not a place of growth; instead, it is a place of bondage.

Her aim to defamiliarize the domestic home is ultimately so challenging for Wilson because in nineteenth century thought, and especially in popular publications of the time period, the American home is consistently represented as the moral center of the nation as a whole, a place where children can learn to be future productive citizens of the nation. In “Homes of America Hope of the Republic,” for example, published in *The Democratic Review* in 1865, an author identified only as S.W.C. claims that “the Homes of America are the nurseries of her greatness, the sanctuaries of her faith in freedom, her hope in man. Their influence is the true conservative element of the republic, their power deep, quiet, all-pervading. They are the foundations upon which all the institutions of our moral and political existence repose” (292-293). In this article, S.W.C. echoes a prominent theme found in mid-century advice literature: the “home” is the moral foundation of the nation, and the women who maintain the home have specific moral duties to their children, their husbands, and the nation at large.

Almost two decades earlier than S.W.C.’s editorial, in her *The Young Lady’s Home* (1848), Louisa C. Tuthill engages in the same sentiments as S.W.C. and condemns women who “[step] forth upon the arena of life,” while condoning the woman who “[makes] her home and her fireside a quiet, sweet sanctuary for less favored ones, who must mingle amid the jarring and conflicting elements of the world,—whose hearts would otherwise be hardened and seared by constant intercourse with such a world” (99). For Tuthill, the woman who remains in the house is a salve for those individuals who must make their way in the outside world, but most importantly, it is in the realm of

emotion that woman is most beneficial to others: the outside world hardens the heart, but the “angel of the hearth” can soften that heart. For both Tuthill and S.W.C., then, the woman in the home can be, if properly trained, a positive influence on her husband who is consistently degraded by the world outside of the home.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of domesticity in the nineteenth century can be found in the writings of Catharine Beecher. In 1841, Beecher published the widely popular *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* in which she argued that, “. . . the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man . . . the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of the country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same” (37). Here, Beecher creates a logical argument: if the woman is virtuous, she will influence those around her to be equally as virtuous, which in turn will affect the moral fabric of the nation. In this formulation, which countless advice writers would echo, Beecher enunciates the popular mindset that a “virtuous and intelligent” woman is the moral center of the nation: good starts in the home. Beecher, along with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, would repeat these thoughts in 1869’s *American Woman’s Home*. Beecher and Stowe inscribe the text to “the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the Republic, as moulded [*sic*] by the early training and preserved amid the mature influences of home” (n. pag.). Here, Beecher and Stowe yet again maintain that the home is a place where the “Republic” can thrive. Domestic advice authors, writing widely popular texts, helped to maintain the paradigm that the American home is

the true center of the nation, where morals and right thinking are inculcated at the hands of woman and maintained through her influence within her domestic sphere.

At first, with Wilson's emphasis on Mag's degradation, it seems as if *Our Nig* is rooted in this domestic ideology; in contrast, though, Wilson's novel aims to dismantle the ideology of domesticity, demonstrating that it is damaging for citizens marked by race, gender, and class, like Frado. For Frado, the domestic Bellmont home does not represent a place of safety and moral growth, and Mrs. Bellmont is not the "virtuous and intelligent" mother of Beecher's domestic writings. Instead, the domestic home contains Frado. Rather than receiving the "formation of [her] moral and intellectual character" (Beecher 37), Frado is controlled by Mrs. Bellmont, who wields the domestic home and its containing abilities against Frado's growth. Within the walls of the Bellmont home, and at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont herself, Frado's status as an outsider is maintained.

The first and most apparent way in which Wilson reverses the ideology of the home is in reversing the gender roles of the Bellmont family. Mrs. Bellmont is the head of the household, but not because she is a domestic fixture; instead, Mrs. Bellmont is economically minded, incapable of housekeeping, and sadistically abusive in her physical punishment of Frado and her verbal punishment of the other family members. As Mr. Bellmont explains, "Women rule the earth, and all in it" (44). As this rumination of Mr. Bellmont's might hint, his character is ultimately weak and incapable of taking a stand against Mrs. Bellmont. Although he pities and sympathizes with Frado, he does so only verbally, choosing to leave the house when Frado most needs a helping hand. Similarly, the Bellmont sons, Jack and James, though verbally supportive of Frado, are incapable of combatting their mother. Jack buys Frado a dog as her companion, and James attempts to

convert her to Christianity, caring more for her soul later than her physical comfort now. One by one, these verbally sympathetic characters leave, Jack for marriage and James becoming an invalid, “confined wholly to his room, mostly to his bed” (76). And though James attempts to shield Frado from Mrs. Bellmont’s wrath until his death, his most important goal with Frado is “every day [imparting] religious instruction” (76). Mr. Bellmont and his sons, then, take on the role of the moral mother, attempting to instruct Frado in religion and acceptance rather than protecting her from the physical abuse she suffers daily. As Jennifer Larson has argued, the Bellmont men’s “power is checked by their cowardly fear of the mistress’ wrath, their own perceived bondage to the social customs that privilege mistress over servant, or their conflicted allegiance to the maternal in their domestic space” (546). The remaining three members of the family all fall under the purview of Mrs. Bellmont. Her youngest daughter, Mary, is as tyrannical and sadistic as her mother; Jane, another daughter, is an invalid, incapable of protecting Frado; and finally, Aunt Abby, Mr. Bellmont’s sister who lives on the premises, largely attempts, like James, to convert Frado to Christianity and thus save her soul from damnation, but Mrs. Bellmont consistently attempts to bar Aunt Abby from any meaningful relationship with Frado. Each of these family members, then, either take on the opposite gender role or find themselves equally controlled by Mrs. Bellmont, and thus unable to protect Frado from Mrs. Bellmont’s abuse.

Just as Wilson reverses the very gender roles within the mid-century-American home, she also subverts the popular thought of the time period that the home is the moral center of the nation. The title page’s reference to a “two-story white house, North” engages the ideology of the time period that the home is integral to the nation, but in

Wilson's rendering, the home represents various levels of American prejudice. At its most literal level, the house refers to the Bellmont's home, the place Frado spends her developmental years as a working class laborer to a middle class family. In this sense, the house refers to the economic disparity between a homeowner or a family member—someone granted access to the “home”—and someone who enters the home under the purview of work—granted only access to the “house.” In other senses, though, the “two-story white house, North” calls attention to the national, racial, and domestic prejudice befalling Frado within the walls of the Bellmont home: the “white house” of the title page can simultaneously refer to the nation's White House, the southern plantation, and finally, the domestic home—the moral center of the nation. In the novel, Frado exists somewhere outside of the American sphere of nativity and domesticity, relegated and confined to the margins of the Bellmont home and also to the margins of a community when her indenture ends. Frado, then, is consistently separated and isolated from a model of community and citizenship that she attempts to join but cannot enter. Wilson demonstrates these ideas of separation from the domestic sphere in an early scene. Sent to get wood for the fire, Frado is unable to please Mrs. Bellmont with a piece of wood small enough for the fire, and after facing physical punishment, Frado escapes the home and hides in an outbuilding. Aunt Abby, Mrs. Bellmont's sister-in-law, attempts to lure Frado back into the house, but Frado explains that “‘I've got to stay out here and die. I ha'n't got no mother, no home. I wish I was dead’” (46). In this confession, Frado focuses not on her physical punishment, nor on her inability to please Mrs. Bellmont, nor on her lack of a father; instead, for Frado, having no home and no mother is akin to death.

When Frado is abandoned by her mother and stepfather at the Bellmont home, it becomes quickly apparent to both Frado and the readers that her status in the home is marginal and that she exists as an object to be used; moreover, it becomes apparent to readers that the physical confinement Frado suffers is a direct result of Mrs. Bellmont's belief that Frado and those like her—black, poor, orphaned—must be contained, and thus controlled, somewhere deep inside the family structure. In the first Bellmont conversation about Frado, which readers witness as bystanders, Mrs. Bellmont explains her intentions to train Frado. As she claims, “I don't mind the nigger in the child. I should like a dozen better than one . . . if I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have so much trouble with girls I hire, I am almost persuaded if I have one to train up in my way from a child, I shall be able to keep them awhile” (26). Here, it becomes clear that Mrs. Bellmont's aim is to mold Frado, but while the ideal domestic woman aims to mold her children into productive citizens of the nation, Mrs. Bellmont trains Frado to do only one thing: work. Instantly, Frado is dehumanized, allowed no participation in the conversation over her fate. This dehumanization continues when readers soon learn where Frado is to sleep. When Jack, one of the Bellmont sons, claims that Frado will be afraid to “go through that dark passage” on the way to her living quarters, and that she will be unable to “climb the ladder safely” (26), Wilson demonstrates that Frado's existence in the home is not one of familial relation; instead, she becomes an item to be stowed away in the dark when not in use. On the way to her living space, Frado is amazed by the “nicely furnished rooms,” typical in a middle class home, but Frado is relegated to the margins of the nice home and contained somewhere out of sight: in “an unfinished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to the floor, so that the bed

could stand only in the middle of the room” (27). The only source of light and air is from a “small half window” (27).⁷⁴ Here, Frado is physically confined and separated from the Bellmont family, further marking her as an outsider to the domestic family and as a subject that in some ways needs to be contained and controlled. As Leveen suggests, “confining Frado to the kitchen and attic quarters above it, Mrs. Bellmont asserts spatial distinctions between (white) master and (black) servant” (566). When Jack notes that Frado will soon “outgrow these quarters,” Mrs. Bellmont retorts that “when she *does*, she’ll outgrow the house” (28, emphasis in original), insinuating that Frado’s only habitable space is somewhere outside of the domestic family structure. Mrs. Bellmont’s spatial remarks about Frado insinuates that Frado’s role is only to serve; once this role has been depleted, Frado has no space within the domestic sphere. Here, Mrs. Bellmont uses physical and spatial language to discursively emphasize Frado’s role. She only has access to a house, not to a home, and this access is tenuous. Frado can only claim access to the Bellmont house as long as she abides by the domestic mother’s spatial and physical rules. In short, Wilson uses Mrs. Bellmont’s remarks to emphasize the connection between Frado’s *body* and her *role* as a worker.

⁷⁴ Frado’s living space is similar to Harriet Jacobs’s garret, “a small shed added” to her grandmother’s house, “only nine feet long and seven wide . . . and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor” (91-91). Just as Frado lacks air and light, Jacobs’s garret had “no admission for either light or air” (92). It is worth noting the similar thematics of space and containment with which both Jacobs and Wilson engage. For more on the relation between Wilson’s and Jacobs’s texts, see P. Gabrielle Foreman’s “The Spoken and the Silenced in *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*” (1990), Beth M. Doriani’s “Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women’s Autobiographies” (1991), John Ernest’s *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature: Brown, Wilson, Jacobs, Delaney, Douglass, and Harper* (1995), Thomas B. Lovell’s “By Dint of Labor and Economy: Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and the Salutory View of Wage Labor” (1996), Katja Kanzler’s “‘To Tell the Kitchen Version’: Architectural Figurations of Race and Gender in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*” (2006), and Sally Gomaa’s “Writing to ‘Virtuous’ and ‘Gentle’ Readers: The Problem of Pain in Harriet Jacobs’s ‘Incidents’ and Harriet Wilson’s ‘Sketches’” (2009).

Wilson's emphasis on Frado's living quarters testifies to the spatial separation within the Belmont home, but it also reflects the ways in which mid-century thought and publications worked to separate those individuals deemed unworthy of citizenship from those who fulfill the requisites for citizenship. As we saw in Chapter Two, the very physical structures that populated American cities worked to organize society by means of categorization. For influential architect Andrew Jackson Downing, "the home of that family of equal rights . . . the republican home, built by no robbery of the property of another class, maintained by no infringement of a brother's rights" is touted as a democratic and equalizing ideal (269). But, Downing's claim notwithstanding, the reality of inequality in mid-century America is reflected in the built environment and in texts condemning this inequality, like Wilson's. Finding herself up against a rhetoric that praises America's equality, Wilson's emphasis on Frado's containment within the Belmont home complicates Downing's idea of an equalizing architectural style and the favorable reaction critics had toward Downing's text. In an 1851 review of Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses* published in *The New Englander and Yale Review*, the authors laud America's burgeoning architectural sensibilities and claim, "no man, we think, could live just the life in a well proportioned and truly beautiful dwelling that he would in a mud shanty or a rude log cabin" (61). "Certain elevating influences," the reviewers continue, would steal into him unawares, and from a hundred different sources, that would lift his life above its otherwise lower level" (61). Here, the reviewers begin to connect material reality with spiritual and moral reality, arguing that our architectural and domestic structures can influence our very personhoods. The reviewers continue with this comparison, maintaining that *good* domestic structures make for *good* moral citizens:

Every good house, therefore, every house which is what a house should be, is a public good. It is the embodiment and expression of ideas which the mass of men need to have set before them, and ideas which have a direct bearing upon human welfare. The tendencies in our depraved condition are so strong toward mere animalism of feeling and habit, that every influence which tends to lift us above such feelings and habits deserves to be welcomed, and while therefore we would not set forth architecture as a “means of grace,” in the ordinary acceptance of that term, we do nevertheless believe it to be of no unimportant auxiliary to those peculiarly gracious influences which God has provide for human redemption. (62)

In this excerpt, the reviewers maintain that the home is the moral center of the nation. Just as domestic advice authors such as Catharine Beecher claim, the review asserts that this moral instruction stems from the actual building—hinting to the problematic argument that a “home,” well-maintained and constructed, is necessary to cultivating a moral stance that can actually bring American citizens closer to godliness. This review hints to the equality that Downing’s *Country Houses* does: architectural structures, like the ones Downing advocates, are a “public good,” advance “public welfare,” and can provide “human redemption.” Yet, the reviewers never attend to the economic welfare necessary to provide for a “good house,” leaving those who are not economically stable in a category that cannot revel in the “human redemption” a well-made house can bring. This glaring omission calls to attention Rebecca Harding Davis’s protagonists the Wolfes, who live in a dark, claustrophobic cellar. Davis’s depiction of the Wolfe’s

“house” demonstrates that “good” citizens can, in fact, live in poorly made “homes,” and Wilson’s depiction of the Bellmonts clearly shows that immoral citizens can exist in “good” houses.

Wilson’s depiction of the Bellmont home and the Bellmont family members stands in contrast to both the review of Downing’s text and the domestic advice literature of the time period because she demonstrates that a home cannot alone provide for the moral upbringing of a citizen; instead, Wilson focuses on the damaging effect of a homeowner *despite* living in a well-made home. For Wilson, material structures do not improve or damage a person’s morality—and Mrs. Bellmont is a case in point. It is inside the home, at the hands of the “mother,” that Frado suffers her most damaging abuse. When Mary decides to push Frado into a stream as punishment, Mary loses her footing and falls into the stream instead. Mary returns home, exclaiming, “‘Nig pushed me into the stream!’” (34), an accusation which Frado denies. This leads Mrs. Bellmont into a rage, and the second Mr. Bellmont leaves the house (“as he usually did when a tempest threatened to envelop him” [34]), “Mrs. B and Mary commenced beating [Frado] inhumanely; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room without any supper” (34-35). As if a sadistic beating is not enough, Mrs. Bellmont’s form of punishment is to confine Frado further and to render her linguistically silent, unable to ask for help, to explain her innocence, or to condemn Mrs. Bellmont’s inhumane actions. In another scene, Mrs. Bellmont repeats this form of punishment: “Angry that [Frado] should venture a reply to her command, [Mrs. Bellmont] suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, [Mrs. Bellmont] seemed left to unrestrained malice;

and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly” (82). In these scenes, Frado is left unable to defend herself physically or through language, and Wilson makes it clear that Mrs. Bellmont delights in Frado’s suffering and derives pleasure from these acts of abuse, a quality more befitting a perverse slave master than a middle class mother.⁷⁵ Importantly, these scenes of abuse detail the physical pain Frado faces at the hand of the white domestic woman, but, as becomes all too clear, even if Frado’s “cries for help” could be heard, they are never answered.⁷⁶

Frado’s only form of recourse from this physical punishment is escape. In key scenes throughout the novel, readers see Frado escaping the home for the outdoors, and through these scenes, Wilson demonstrates that the domestic home is not a place of safety for Frado; instead, her only safety is in the public sphere outside of the home. In one such scene, after being expelled from the house, Frado retreats to the roof of the barn. “Availing herself of the ladder,” Wilson describes, “she was mounted in high glee on the topmost board” (53). Frado’s expulsion from the home leads to her sense of escape and freedom. While Mr. Bellmont is fearful for her safety, and Mrs. Bellmont and Mary “did not care if she ‘broke her neck’” (53), Jack and the hired men laugh and delight in the scene. The narrator then takes a step back to comment on the scene as a whole: “Strange,

⁷⁵ For more on Mrs. Bellmont’s parallel to a sexually perverse slave master, see Barbara Krah’s “Tracking Frado: The Challenge of Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* to Nineteenth-Century Conventions of Writing Womanhood” and H. Jordan Landry’s “Bringing Down the House: The Trickster’s Signifying on Victimization in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*.” As Landry argues, “Mary and Mrs. Bellmont are perverse in their treatment of the black woman Frado and in the form their sexual desire takes. But, with a twist, these characters behave sadistically toward Frado and harbor incestuous desire for each other” (441).

⁷⁶ Cynthia Davis argues that Frado’s pain renders her a sympathetic subject to readers. Davis maintains that Wilson substitutes the overly sexualized black female body with a body in pain. This “pain filled body . . . with its potentially universal sympathetic appeal,” Davis argues, “provides a sort of insurance that cries for help on its behalf have a better chance of being heard, being answered” (398). I would argue, in contrast to Davis, that Frado’s chance of being heard and answered never comes to fruition.

one spark of playfulness could remain amid such constant toil; but her natural temperament was in a high degree mirthful, and the encouragement she received from Jack and the hired men, constantly nurtured the inclination” (53). In this scene, in which Frado can give in to the childlike playfulness she should feel daily, Frado reaches the apex of her freedom. Importantly, in this moment Frado raises herself above the Bellmonts, ascending to the highest point available to her, and in so doing, escapes the confinement and abuse she encounters within the home and at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont.

Perhaps the most striking moment of Frado’s self-assertion within the novel also takes place outside of the home. Yet again sent to retrieve wood for the fire, Frado encounters Mrs. Bellmont following her to perform some kind of punishment for not returning promptly enough. But Frado finally stands up for herself: “‘Stop!’ shouted Frado, ‘strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you;’ and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts” (105). In this moment, Frado regains her voice, brutally snatched from her during previous punishments, and in so gaining this voice, she gains thoughts of freedom and independence. After this show of self-defense, Mrs. Bellmont surprisingly does not react. Instead, as Wilson explains, she “dropped her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement. Frado walked towards the house, her mistress following with the wood she herself was sent after. [Frado] did not know, before, that she had a power to ward off assaults. Her triumph in seeing [Mrs. Bellmont] enter the door with *her* burden, repaid her for much of her former suffering” (105, emphasis in original). Through Frado’s act of courage in the outdoors, she can reenter the house *before* her mistress, satisfied that she

successfully avoided yet another punishment. Interestingly, in this one scene, Frado's and Mrs. Bellmont's roles are reversed: Frado gains a voice while Mrs. Bellmont can only stare in "amazement"; Frado enters the house first, with Mrs. Bellmont following—carrying the wood she had sent Frado to procure. Through her act of defiance, then, Frado gains a measure of control over her own surroundings and can then enter the house—the place of her abusive containment—without fear.

In this showdown between Frado and Mrs. Bellmont—the victim and the abuser—Wilson has finally dismantled the ideologies of the home and the domestic mother. In *Our Nig*, the home is not the site of moral upbringing or civilizing but instead a place where Frado finds herself uncomfortable, abused, and rendered silent. According to Lois Leveen, "the narrative of *Our Nig* might therefore seem to confirm that a free black body cannot be at home in nineteenth-century America, a view Frado herself voices at several points in the narrative" (574-575). While Wilson's depiction of the domestic home is unrecognizable in the domestic discourse of the time period, her portrayal of the domestic mother, as well, dismantles the very ideologies to which readers likely adhere. Readers get a glimpse of the ineffectual domestic mother in Mag, the first mother of the novel. Despite the fact that she is forced into destitution by her surrounding white community, Mag makes no attempt to mother Frado. In fact, she views Frado as an economic burden, not as a child. In the rest of the text, Mrs. Bellmont will become the representative figure for Wilson to demonstrate the damaging qualities of domestic ideology: instead of a moral, guiding compass for Frado, Mrs. Bellmont is a "villainous mother surrogate" (440), to use Julia Stern's words, one that, like Mag, views Frado for her economic worth and attempts to mark Frado as unworthy for American citizenship

and freedom. Mrs. Bellmont is not the domestic mother figure who imparts to her children—biological and adopted—the ways in which to become moral, productive citizens in a nation of equality; instead, Mrs. Bellmont is calculated, economical, and abusive.⁷⁷ And finally, it is in the public space of the outdoors—where she can escape the containment and control of the domestic home and the domestic mother—that Frado is able to find her own power and her own voice, able to stand up for herself as a person with rights, despite how much Mrs. Bellmont has trained her to view herself as otherwise.

A New Domesticity: A Lack of Corrective Models

To return for a moment to my analysis of both Davis and Jacobs, we see how both authors populate their narratives with a set of unsympathetic social “readers.” For Davis, we see this happen in the mill visit scene when Mitchell and his group enter the iron mills and fail to see or understand the potent reality of Hugh’s working class situation. For Jacobs, we see her representation of unsympathetic social readers in the last half of her narrative. She presents certain white women—such as Mrs. Hoggs and Amelia Matilda Murray—who are unable to fully understand a slave woman’s situation, thereby misreading her reality. This move is important for both authors to make because it demonstrates to their readers what they should *not* do. But a simple presentation of socially destructive “reading” is not enough to compel readers to change their behaviors; instead, for their audience to fully disaffiliate with these representations of uninformed “reading,” both authors must provide a model of socially constructive respondents to

⁷⁷ We most fully see Mrs. Bellmont’s economical nature when Jane, her invalid daughter, is torn between which suitor to marry. Mrs. Bellmont insists that she marry Henry Reed over George Means. As the narrator explains, “[Mrs. Bellmont] wished [Jane] to encourage [Henry’s] attentions. She had counted the acres which were to be transmitted to an only son; she knew there was silver in the purse; she would not have Jane too sentimental” (56).

replace those they see as socially damaging. As I have argued, Davis's and Jacobs's representations of unsympathetic readers are ultimately instructional moments because both authors are sure to provide a corrective to what they present as antithetical to social progress. Davis demonstrates the correct way to "read" the realities of working class citizens when her narrator refuses to read Deb as a "type of her class" and instead expands his or her view to see Deb as a fully formed human, capable of suffering, to be sure, but also capable of love and desire. Jacobs counters the images of unsympathetic social readers when she presents her own daughter Ellen and Mrs. Bruce as readers, characters who maintain an outlook of sympathy and delicacy when regarding the slave's situation. Ultimately, as I have suggested, Davis's and Jacobs's modeling of constructive and positive social "reading" allows their audiences to disaffiliate with those characters who would read the working class or a slave as a "type" and instead to affiliate with the characters presented as socially constructive models: in short, through the texts, readers learn how to properly re-read a social situation marked by oppression and subjugation.

Like Davis and Jacobs, Wilson presents her readers with a surplus of socially destructive "readers," ranging from the selfish mothering of Mag, the benign but misguided men of the Bellmont home, to Mrs. Bellmont herself, the ultimate representation of unsympathetic social reading in the novel. From the moment Mrs. Bellmont finds Frado on her doorstep, she reads the situation in a way that will benefit herself socially, to the degradation of Frado's health, emotions, and very citizenship. These models of negative, socially destructive domesticity likely work to make readers disaffiliate with these characters, much like Davis's and Jacobs's readers were likely to disaffiliate with those "readers" who would misunderstand the plight of the working class

or slaves. But unlike Davis and Jacobs, Wilson does not replace her images of negative, socially destructive domesticity with any extended models of a positive domesticity. Though I suggest that Wilson demolishes readers' passively received terministic screens regarding free blacks in the working class north, to use rhetorician Kenneth Burke's term, her failure to provide models of proper social reading techniques leaves readers unsure of what actions they should take in the material world. As I briefly discussed in the Introduction to this project, Burke asserts that we view our surroundings and come to conclusions based upon our respective "screens," which he likens to camera lenses, that are formed by the culture within which we are raised and live. I suggest that Wilson successfully exposes to readers that their "terministic screens"—their ways of understanding and responding to black, working class individuals—are faulty forms of social understanding that lead to inequality and a lack of acceptance. But she does not provide to readers a new and more socially accepting terministic screen to adopt, something readers need in order to approach a social situation with a firm grounding in a set of ideals and socially acceptable behaviors.

In key scenes throughout the novel, Wilson has ample opportunity to provide correctives to the abuse Frado suffers, thereby willing her readers to recognize in themselves areas for improvement, but she does not do so with any extended treatment. In fact, readers quickly begin to realize that there are few moments when any positive peripheral character emerges—instead, readers and Frado are constantly trapped within the abusive Bellmont realm. As Leveen claims, "the absence in *Our Nig* of textual descriptions of neighboring homesteads creates an aura of geographical isolation, heightening both Frado's and the reader's sense of entrapment" (Leveen 570). There are a

few peripheral characters, though, that Wilson could provide as models for a more socially accepting form of domesticity. For example, on the first day of school, after being taunted by the other children claiming that they will not play with her, Frado prepares to leave when the teacher appears. Mrs. Marsh, the teacher, “reminded [the students] of their duties to the poor and friendless; their cowardice in attacking a young innocent child; referred them to one who looks not on outward appearances but on the heart” (32). ““I think *I* shall love her,”” asserts Mrs. Marsh, ““so lay aside all prejudice, and vie with each other in shewing good kindness and good-will to one whom seems different from you”” (32, emphasis in original). Here, Mrs. Marsh represents a model in direct opposition to Mrs. Bellmont; whereas Mrs. Bellmont is judgmental and economical, Mrs. Marsh is nonjudgmental and open to difference. In setting up this contrast, Wilson has the opportunity to move her readers toward the model represented by Mrs. Marsh, and she can prompt them to disaffiliate with Mrs. Bellmont. But after this short scene, Mrs. Marsh does not reappear with any frequency in the novel, and soon after this, Mrs. Bellmont takes Frado out of school indefinitely.

Wilson has other avenues as well, within the house, that she could take to project a revised model of domesticity, but readers are confronted again and again with characters who are incompetent in helping Frado. Earlier I discussed Wilson’s reversal of gender roles within the domestic home, rendering the woman the economical, calculated, and abusive head of household while the Bellmont men remain largely unable to stand against Mrs. Bellmont’s tyranny. What Wilson demonstrates as the Bellmont family members’ greatest failure, though, is not their lack of physical protection over Frado but instead their nearly obstinate emphasis on Frado’s adherence to Christianity and Christian

principles. At first, it seems that James and Aunt Abby are indeed sympathetic characters: Frado often retreats to Aunt Abby's room in an attempt to escape Mrs. Bellmont's wrath, and it is James who, at least verbally, stands up to his mother on Frado's account. When James must return to the Bellmont home due to his failing health, he takes it upon himself to make some changes in Frado's treatment, the first being to invite Frado to take her meals at the family table instead of standing in the kitchen to eat. Importantly, while he certainly does not prevent future moments of abuse between Mrs. Bellmont and Frado, here James renegotiates the spatial dynamics of the Bellmont home, attempting to insert Frado into those familial locations—for instance, the dining table—she has been barred from entering. James's actions leave Mrs. Bellmont and Frado on an even playing field: they can exist simultaneously in the same space with no physical violence ensuing. But these moments of seeming equality do not last long, and they prompt Mrs. Bellmont into abusive rages, more perverse each time. After Frado commits an insult against Mrs. Bellmont in which she has her dog Fido lick Mrs. Bellmont's plate clean before she will eat on it, James claims that while he will not "excuse or palliate Nig's impudence," "she should not be whipped or punished at all" (72). Of course, though, this does not work out in Frado's favor, for "the first time [Mrs. Bellmont] was alone with Nig, she gave her a thorough beating, to bring up arrearages; and threatened, if she ever exposed her to James, she would 'cut her tongue out'" (72).⁷⁸ When James finds Frado after this beating, all he can do is "[long] for returning health to take her under his protection" (72). While James protects Frado in a specific moment, ultimately his attempts to help backfire,

⁷⁸ Though obsolete now, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "arrearage" is "the state or condition of being behind, or *in arrear*, with a payment due; indebtedness, debt" (1b). In this sense, then, Wilson intimates that Mrs. Bellmont beats Frado because she believes Frado owes her something.

infuriating the already infuriated Mrs. Bellmont who takes out her anger on the helpless Frado.

James's and Aunt Abby's largest undertaking in regard to Frado is to condition her as a Christian, but readers soon learn that this effort is ineffectual in protecting Frado on earth or securing her place in a heavenly beyond. In effect, when these two characters teach Frado about Christianity, they also implicitly argue, intentionally or not, that Frado must endure her abuse on earth in order to guarantee her place in Heaven. When James is on his death bed, he instructs Frado about the role she must adopt in order to enter Heaven when she dies: "My Heavenly Father is calling me home. Had it been his will to let me live I should take you to live with me; but, as it is, I shall go and leave you. But Frado," James says, "if you will be a good girl, and love and serve God, it will be but a short time before we are in a *heavenly* home together. There will never be any sickness or sorrow there" (95, emphasis in original). Aunt Abby also implores Frado to be obedient with the promise that she will be rewarded by God. When Mary moves to take care of her brother Lewis, Frado reveals her joy to Aunt Abby, claiming that she hopes Mary will never return to the Bellmont home. Aunt Abby admonishes Frado's joy in Mary's departure and reminds Frado of her role as a Christian: "But you forget what our good minister told us last week, about doing good to those that hate us" (80). When Frado asks if her ministering to Mary's wants and needs are not "good," all Aunt Abby says is that Frado should finish her work, "or your mistress will be after you, and remind you severely of Miss Mary, and some others beside" (81).

The line of reasoning James and Aunt Abby put forth, similar to arguments about slavery in the south, implies that if Frado suffers Mrs. Bellmont's wrath silently, she will

be rewarded by an ensured place in Heaven. And Frado does attempt, in earnest, to learn about God and to strive to become a Christian, but in the end, Frado finds herself abandoned by religious doctrine and concludes that a God who would make Mrs. Bellmont is not a God worthy of praise. After Mrs. Bellmont forbids Frado from attending any more religious meetings with Aunt Abby, the narrator explains Frado's decision: "Frado pondered; her mistress was a professor of religion; was *she* going to heaven? then she did not wish to go. If she should be near James, even, she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching her ascending path. She resolved to give over all thought of the future world, and strove daily to put her anxiety far from her" (104, emphasis in original). Here, readers see that despite James's and Aunt Abby's attempts to Christianize Frado, she concludes that Heaven would not be the ensured relief they promise it to be. Indeed, as Elizabeth West has suggested, "while alarmed at the possibility that heaven holds no place for blacks, [Frado] is more disturbed by the vision of a heaven that includes the terrifying whiteness of Mrs. Bellmont" (18). Ultimately, then, Wilson demonstrates that any attempt to convince Frado of the appropriate earthly behavior is inefficient in allowing her any form of earthly peace, and the promise of heaven is not enough.⁷⁹

These attempts to Christianize Frado fail to protect her from the very earthly suffering she faces, rendering these Christian models insufficient in combatting the negativity of domesticity Wilson displays. The abolitionists Frado encounters after her indenture to the Bellmonts officially ends serve as another model of failed ideology in the

⁷⁹ For another view on Wilson's treatment of Christianity, see William L. Andrews's *Three Classic African-American Novels* (1990) wherein he argues that "the role of religious faith" is crucial to Frado's self-assertion within the novel (20).

text, specifically because there are no models of abolitionists with whom readers would want to affiliate.⁸⁰ In the very brief conclusion to the text that encapsulates Frado's life after her indenture to the Bellmonts, readers learn that she marries an escaped fugitive slave named Samuel. However, when Samuel abandons Frado and their young son, Wilson reveals that he was in fact masquerading as a fugitive slave in order to receive monetary compensation. As she claims, "[Samuel] left [Frado] to her fate—embarked at sea, with the disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (127-128). Here, not only is Samuel rendered an unsympathetic character, but Wilson's wording in this sentence—"hungry abolitionists"—demonstrates these abolitionists' consuming nature: they are desirous of "illiterate harangues" as a means to an end. Wilson continues her critique of abolitionists, claiming that Frado was "watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who did n't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh! To lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next to one; awful!" (129). "Kidnappers" likely refers to The Fugitive Slave Law; though Frado is a free black in the North, she could be kidnapped and sold into slavery. But the amount of attention Wilson pays toward "professed abolitionists" renders them equally as dangerous or even more dangerous than those who would kidnap Frado and sell her into slavery. With her interjections of "faugh!" and "awful!" (129), there is no mistaking Wilson's view of

⁸⁰ Wilson's critique on abolitionists was likely specific to Wilson's own life. As Barbara White has shown, the Bellmonts were likely modelled on the New England farming family, the Haywards, who had abolitionist leanings and ties. For more, see "'Our Nig' and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the 'Bellmont' Family."

abolitionists, rendering them as racist as Mrs. Bellmont. Here again, Wilson closes out an entire category with which readers could identify as they come to the end of the novel.

Through her retelling of Frado's life story, Wilson demonstrates the inability of existing paradigms to account for the humanity of a person such as Frado. The system of domesticity claims moral domain over America's future citizens, giving the domestic mother moral control over her children. Wilson demonstrates the failure of this system, however, through the figure of Mrs. Bellmont—a sadistic mother unwilling to impart toward Frado any form of moral upbringing. While domesticity as an ideal is inefficient in administering to Frado's earthly needs, so too are Christianity and abolitionism. Frado cannot adhere to a religion that excuses the abuse she receives in her day-to-day life, as James and Aunt Abby compel her to do. Moreover, the abolitionists Frado encounters after her indenture ends fail to provide a safe haven on earth for a free black in the north. But to return, for a moment, to Wilson's own statement about her audience, we must ask ourselves if Wilson has done enough to change her readers' actions. As Wilson proclaims to her readers at the end of the text, "enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy and aid" (130). Perhaps Wilson appeals to her readers' sympathies, but in providing no model for her readers to follow, it is unlikely they would provide aid, primarily because they likely do not know how. As all available routes of typical aid are closed to readers—domesticity, Christianity, and abolition—I suggest that Wilson's readers would have been unable—and perhaps unwilling—to provide the aid that Wilson herself needed.

Dispositions over Actions: Wilson's Likely Success

If we map the three texts I have been considering—Davis's novella "Life in the Iron Mills," Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Wilson's novel

Our Nig—we see that, at least until their final sections, all three follow a similar pattern: first, narrators must bring readers into the text; next, narrators must coerce readers to continue reading, despite ideological or moral differences readers may feel with the ideas raised in each text; third, each author must make their readers in some way witness or experience the reality of their protagonists’ suffering in their contemporary societies. Each text ends, also, with some form of call-to-action for readers, compelling those readers to take what they have learned through experiencing the text and make that lesson a real thing in their material worlds. Wilson diverges from both Davis and Jacobs, however, before this call-to-action takes place. A central element that makes both “*Life*” and *Incidents* successful as protest texts—a clear, instructive reframing of behaviors for readers to adopt once they put the text down—is absent in Wilson’s text. Instead, before the call-to-action of the ending, Wilson’s readers find themselves entrenched in a textual world where their own guiding ideologies—domesticity, Christianity, and abolition—have been fully dismantled, reversed, and in some cases, demolished to the point of no return. Unlike Davis’s and Jacobs’s readers, in short, Wilson’s readers have no corrective ideology toward which to turn. Left so unmoored, Wilson’s readers likely face an impasse: they may now recognize what they do *not* want to embody—the devilish mother Mrs. Bellmont, the ineffectual and overly emotional Christian sympathizers, and the professed abolitionists who appear briefly at the novel’s end—but Wilson has not presented readers with a model of someone they *do* want to embody. I suggest, then, that at the end of the novel, readers have no character with whom to identify, and therefore no modelled path to follow as they leave the text and re-enter their material realities.

Despite Wilson's lack of modeling more appropriate domestic characters for her readers, I do not maintain that Wilson's rhetorical argumentation failed, as certain critics believe.⁸¹ Wilson might have failed in compelling her audience to immediately change their behaviors and beliefs in regard to northern, working class, black individuals—a failure made apparent in the fact that the novel disappeared from the literary record, and that Wilson herself did not receive the monetary compensation necessary to care for her child. But Wilson may well have succeeded in changing her audience's dispositions. It is useful for the purposes of my analysis to view Wilson's novel in the tradition of epideictic rhetoric. According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, there are three genres of rhetorical argumentation: deliberative rhetoric, in which the rhetor induces action for future events, like voting for a politician; forensic rhetoric, in which the rhetor asks the audience to analyze past actions, as we can see in a court of law; and finally, epideictic rhetoric, in which the rhetor praises or blames a situation or person (I.3 1358b-1359a). As Christopher Tindale has discussed, more contemporary rhetoricians, like Richard Whately and George Kennedy, devalue Aristotle's view of epideictic rhetoric, but as Tindale claims, "praising and blaming reflect the central values to be promoted and discouraged" and "such values are integral to persuasive discourse" (74). In the same vein, in their influential study *The New Rhetoric* (1969), Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca place value on epideictic rhetoric, claiming that it "strengthens the

⁸¹ Barbara Krah, for example, concludes her article by claiming that "... Wilson uses domesticity as a frame of reference without, however, seizing the humanizing power of the dominant culture's sentimentalized concept of home to encourage the Victorian reader to identify with Frado/herself" (470-471). Krah claims that, "Wilson fails to put forward a new model of black identity and to secure an audience for the novel. Her failure demonstrates the difficulty to create an 'own discourse of black womanhood' in opposition to the discourse of white womanhood without the identity-conferring traditions of an alternative community" (481).

disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (50). If we reconsider Wilson’s purposes in writing her novel, moving from the idea that Wilson wrote *Our Nig* simply for monetary support (which would put the text squarely in the realm of deliberative rhetoric because she is inducing future action) to the idea that Wilson aimed to change her audience’s disposition toward the ideology of domesticity, we can view her text as epideictic rhetoric—an argument meant to move her audience to either praise or blame something and thus change their dispositions. Instead of praising the ideology of domesticity, Wilson implicitly argues, readers should see the ideology anew and blame it for the ways in which it oppresses those American citizens like Frado.

Viewing Wilson’s novel as epideictic rhetoric—discourse that either praises or blames something—we can begin to see her act of dismantling ideologies as an end in and of itself. Wilson clearly wanted to change her audience’s action—she says as much in the preface when she claims that she wrote her novel because she was “forced into some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” (n. pag.). Wilson’s immediate exigence is clearly labeled: ill, poor, and alone, Wilson needs monetary help to survive. Above and beyond this immediate exigence, though, Wilson also responds to larger, ideological issues facing free northern blacks a few years before the Civil War. Again in the preface, Wilson claims that “I would not from these motives even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North” (n. pag.). Careful and apologetic here, Wilson nevertheless clearly labels her ideological exigence: slavery is not contained in the south; instead, it has made its way to the north, and Wilson’s goal is to expose this reality to her readers. To complete this exposure, Wilson dismantles the ideologies in which her

readers likely find themselves entrenched, and in so doing, she in effect blames these seemingly ameliorative ideologies for their refusal to attend to individuals like Frado as full-fledged American citizens. And this is her end goal: in blaming the ideologies of domesticity, Christianity, and abolition for creating and perpetuating a figure like Mrs. Bellmont, Wilson aims to change her audience's disposition toward these ideologies. In the end, then, perhaps not "enough has been unrolled to demand [the reader's] sympathy and aid" (130), as Wilson asserts in her last chapter. But I suggest that "enough has been unrolled," and enough has been exposed as negative, to demand the audience to at least rethink their dispositions toward free, northern blacks on the eve of the Civil War.

Harriet Wilson has much to protest: finding herself in failing health, unable to raise and care for her son, abandoned by her husband, and remembering a life of abuse at the hands of middle class white northerners, she is "forced into some experiment which shall aid [her] in maintaining [herself] and child without extinguishing [her] feeble life," as she tells us in the preface (n. pag.). But these personal tragedies are inextricably linked to societal problems, problems Wilson exposes with expertise throughout her novel. Her surrogate, Frado, is rendered unfit for acceptance into a national arena and a domestic homestead simply because of her gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Wilson uses the fictional form of the novel to expose the failings of a nineteenth century society that at once expresses equality and denies access to this equality to those rendered outsiders by popular discourse and ideology. Her ultimate goal—the sympathy (emotion) and aid (action) of readers—requires that those readers in some way change their viewpoints on the very ideologies Wilson dismantles. This is Wilson's ultimate challenge because the readers she addresses are readers likely informed by these very ideologies. While her

images of physical containment and the need for escape expressly capture the social conditions within which Frado finds herself, Wilson's dismantling of prominent ideologies seems at first to only alienate readers because she refuses to provide for her readers any corrective models for ways to respond to those citizens like Frado who are marked by their class, race, and gender. However, this alienation does not have to be long lasting. While Wilson's immediate aims of monetary support were clearly not met, many of her readers could have become the fighting force against black inequality after the Civil War.

CHAPTER VI –CODA: PHYSICAL CONTAINMENT, CONTINUED

I have been looking at a particular period, set of conditions, and contexts, but this shorthand—images of physical confinement—carries forward into other periods, suggesting that it is a device central, albeit shifting, to protest literature. While certainly not all American protest authors deploy this rhetorical technique, such a wide and diverse array of authors do incorporate images of physical confinement into their texts that the technique deserves more extended investigation.

This coda will test my suggestion by examining a protest text published more than three decades after the texts I have been analyzing: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). In this brief examination, I demonstrate that, like Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson, Gilman uses images of confinement, claustrophobia, and entrapment in order to show her audience that individuals who challenge the status quo—in this case, a woman suffering from postpartum depression—often encounter physical containment to separate them from other citizens. These images, as I will suggest at the end of this coda, are not only useful at a particular time or for a particular genre but also exist at the "functional core" of protest literature (Lauter 10). This complex of images and readerly engagement moves out of the time period I have been studying, functioning for a variety of protest authors to demonstrate the inequality of American citizenship well into the twentieth century.

Gilman and Woman's Containment in the Late Nineteenth Century

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been exhaustively examined by critics since the 1970s, and the text is found on high school and college

syllabi so often that it has long been considered canonical.⁸² For the purposes of this study, I view Gilman's short story as a clearly enunciated argument against social containment. In telling the story of the unnamed narrator, Gilman demonstrates with striking acuity the psychological breakdown of a woman segregated from others. Suffering from what he determines is a nervous condition, the unnamed narrator's husband, John, takes his wife to an ancestral home for a summer of rest and recovery; Gilman's story, however, demonstrates that, far from advancing her recovery, John's "cure" for his wife is in fact detrimental to her health. John's prescription for his wife has a direct autobiographical link to Gilman's own life. After suffering from depression for years, in 1887 Gilman underwent Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure" in which she was forced into intellectual inactivity. According to Dale M. Bauer, editor of the 1998 Bedford version of "The Yellow Wallpaper," "after enduring periodic bouts of anxiety as a result of S. Weir Mitchell's treatment, [Gilman] came to distrust the growing popularity of the rest cure that he had pioneered for neurasthenics" (14-15). Gilman's short story can be read, in part, as a condemnation of this medical treatment. In removing her from any form of communication or interaction with others, and confining her to the upstairs nursery with its "repellant, almost revolting" wallpaper (43), John pushes the narrator to a

⁸² In the 1970s, when Gilman's story began to receive much critical attention, feminist scholars analyzed the story in light of a gendered canon formation and autobiography. See, for example, Annette Kolodny's "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" (1980) and Paula A. Treichler's "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1984). For an interesting rereading of the scholarship on Gilman's text, see Julie Bates Dock's "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Shifting Light of Scholarship" (1996) in which she argues that feminist critics of the 1970s "introduced or overlooked evidence" about the story due to "the struggle to gain a foothold for women writers in literary studies and in the academy" (53). See also Susan S. Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" (1989) in which she compellingly argues that feminist critics of Gilman's story (including herself) "may have reduced the text's complexity to what we need most: our own image reflected back to us" (420).

psychological breakdown. Rife with social implications, Gilman's story demonstrates the damage wrought when a patriarchal society confines—and thereby controls—women.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is thus about more than one woman's emotional decline; instead, Gilman wrestles with issues within the story that were, at the time, central to the social conception of "woman" more generally. The Civil War's upheaval helped to reshape women's role in society. For white women, the Civil War presented a pivotal turning point in their social roles. During the war, nursing, organizing, fundraising, and writing propelled women into a political and social arena that had theretofore largely been the domain of white males. As Nina Silber asserts, "with the wartime crisis allowing greater opportunities for women to write, female authors used this occasion to weigh in on matters of national import" (12).⁸³ White women's increased political and social role continued into the post-bellum years. According to Bauer, "Gilman came of age in a time of transition: when New Women frequently had careers of their own and did not depend on their husbands for economic security, as in the age of 'true womanhood'" (5). "[T]he New Woman of the 1880s through the 1920s," Bauer claims, "agitated for social change and greater freedom, seeking independence, careers, suffrage, and often birth control" (5). Reflecting on such changes in women's roles, Mary A. Livermore wrote in 1891 of a society in which "The New Womanhood" thrives: "since the war, women have organized missionary, philanthropic, temperance, educational and political organizations on a scale of great magnitude . . . they are accountants, pharmacists, cashiers, telegraphers,

⁸³ For more on gender and the Civil War, see Alice Fahs's "The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900" (1999), Jane Turner Censer's *Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* (2003), and Frances M. Clarke's "Forgetting the Women: Debates over Female Patriotism in the Aftermath of America's Civil War" (2011).

stenographers, typewriters, dentists, book-keepers, authors, lecturers, journalists, painters, architects and sculptors” (124). As Livermore’s list makes clear, the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by a vast increase in women’s social, political, and professional roles.

Despite these changes in women’s roles during and after the Civil War, women still faced a complex ideology about their prescribed roles in society. Though the United States had experienced a cultural shift away from the ideology of domesticity examined in depth in Chapter Five, in the late nineteenth century, womanly and motherly duties were paramount. Domestic advice manuals, like Prudence B. Saur’s *Maternity: A Book for Every Wife and Mother* (1887), for example, instructed women and wives on the proper ways to maintain their health in order to “be the mother of fine, healthy children” (152). John Harvey Kellogg, a few years earlier, provided the same form of instruction in his *The Ladies’ Guide in Health and Disease* (1882). Among other prescriptions, Kellogg advocates that women should not read fiction, which is “one of the most pernicious habits to which a young lady can become devoted” (160).

Nowhere are these womanly expectations clearer than in Dr. Mitchell’s own writings. In *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked* (1871), Mitchell enunciates the societal damage caused when a woman suffers from an emotional disturbance: more than a personal inconvenience, Mitchell suggests, neurasthenia (nervous depression and maladies) prevents a woman from fulfilling her role as a mother and wife. “If the mothers of a people are sickly and weak,” Mitchell argues, “the sad inheritance falls upon their offspring” (30). This “domestic demon” (32) and “growing evil” (46) turns a woman into “a vampire, sucking slowly the blood of every healthy, helpful creature within reach of

her demands” (32). In this text, Mitchell explains the necessity of containing this womanly “vampire,” and he makes it clear that nervous depression is damaging not just to the woman suffering from it, but also to those who come into contact with her, most importantly her children and husband.

Bauer suggests, “the Gilded Age of the 1880s had challenged conventional ideas about women’s roles, even as it affirmed many traditional nineteenth-century notions about gender identity” (3). This prescription for gender identity is what Gilman combats in her text. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman’s semi-autobiographical narrator suffers from depression after the birth of her son; because she cannot be a proper mother—as she tells us, “. . . I *cannot* be with [the child], it makes me so nervous” (44, emphasis in original)—she is removed from society, and a surrogate mother (her sister-in-law Jennie) takes her place as the baby’s primary caretaker. Under her husband’s medical expertise, the narrator is ordered to rest, avoid the social excitement of outings or visits with friends and family, and above all, she is not to write. The narrator disobeys this last prescription, however, and it is through her clandestine journal entries that readers witness her psychological plummet into madness, caused, the story suggests, by her confinement.

Unlike the sentimental authors treated in this study who clearly and directly address their readers within their texts, Gilman—writing in a period where realism is emerging as the dominant literary form—approaches her readers less directly and with less emotional force. Still, she engages her readers in the text from the beginning, much like Wilson, Davis, and Jacobs do. The format of the story—a series of diary entries—works to draw the reader into the text: readers are lured into the story because the narrator gives them an entryway through the diary. With their inside perspective into the

narrator's feelings and thoughts, readers find that they have more information about the narrator's world than her husband does. At the end of her first diary entry, the narrator writes, "there comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" (44). Because the narrator has "to be so sly [about writing]" (42), as she admits early in the story, Gilman instantly aligns readers and narrator: in revealing to readers what she cannot reveal to her husband, Gilman's narrator plays into her readers' desire for knowledge and secrecy. Creating a surreptitious relationship between narrator and readers, Gilman seeks to prompt readers into the story so that their desire for understanding can be fulfilled. In short, because the narrator's journal entries do not remain private—as one would expect with a diary—readers are lured into the text and find that they have a role to fulfill. Only they can decipher what happens to this woman forced into solitary confinement because only they get the full story; the narrator does not give her husband or anyone else in the home access to her inmost thoughts and secrets.

Within the story, readers quickly begin to decipher what the narrator's husband cannot: the narrator's psychological and emotional stability rapidly wanes as a direct result of her physical surroundings. The narrator at first describes her emotional state as "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" (42), which results in her sensitivity, anger, and fatigue. This state, though, rapidly devolves as the narrator is consistently separated from any form of societal engagement. Shortly after admitting her slight depression, the narrator's interest in the yellow wallpaper that adorns the walls of her nursery grows: "There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness" (46). Further, the narrator begins to see "a

strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (47). Here, readers see the narrator’s burgeoning obsession with the wallpaper, an obsession that becomes clearer in the next entry: “There are things in the paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. . . . it is like a woman stopping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don’t like it a bit” (50). After the narrator identifies the woman in the wallpaper, she begins to align herself with this woman, declaring that she plans to free the woman from her entrapped state. In a few short journal entries, then, the narrator quickly moves from mild anxiety and depression to a crazed obsession with the wallpaper, and Gilman’s readers are given an insider’s perspective to the narrator’s rapid mental decline.

In the famous ending to the story, the narrator has officially disassociated from herself, instead viewing herself as the woman who has been stuck behind the wallpaper this whole time. As John breaks down the locked door to the nursery, the narrator has been confined to, he finds his wife creeping around the room, fitted into the “smooch” in the wall (55). Our narrator “looks at him over [her] shoulder” as she continues creeping and says, “‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’” (58). At this ending point of the story, Gilman demonstrates that the confinement our narrator has suffered over the previous three months has pushed her over the edge and into insanity. The inclusion of the name “Jane,” a name readers have not encountered until this point in the narrative, suggests that the

narrator is in fact referring to herself in the third person.⁸⁴ At this end to the story, Gilman clearly shows that the narrator cannot overcome the detrimental and damaging consequences of her confinement, which has led to a complete mental and emotional breakdown.

Unlike Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson, Gilman does not include a direct call to action on readers' parts at the end of her text.⁸⁵ Instead, the text ends grimly, leaving readers with no hope that the narrator, her husband, or her child will ever completely recover from this attempt to cure the narrator's "nervous depression" (42). While Gilman lacks a specifically identifiable call to action in her text, there is a striking similarity between Gilman's text and the texts published three decades earlier: each author holds up as a warning socially destructive "readers." As I have shown in previous chapters, Davis represents the negative impact when a social "reader" sees a working class individual as a type; Jacobs demonstrates the implications of "reading" a fugitive slave's life without delicacy and sympathy; and Wilson shows the damaging results when traditional ideologies of domesticity are used as a lens to assess and understand the life of a free northern black woman. Gilman, in a similar move, exposes the implications of a

⁸⁴ While the name "Jane" could conceivably be a misprint for the name Jennie, other scholars believe, as I do, that "Jane" could in fact be the narrator herself. John S. Bak has argued in "Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1994) that "'Jane,' here, is arguably [the narrator] herself, estranged now not only from John but from her own identity as well" (n. pag.). See also William Veeder's "Who is Jane?: The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (1988).

⁸⁵ That Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson all incorporate a call-to-action at the end of their texts is not surprising. As Nina Baym explains in the introduction to her second edition of *Woman's Fiction*, a comprehensive study on women's sentimental writing in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, "shaped as novels of education . . . [sentimental novels] aim to forward the development, in young, female readers, of a specific kind of character. The protagonists represent instances of the character that the authors want their readers to become, while the grippingly affective reading experience is meant to initiate or further the resolve of readers to change themselves" (xix). In Baym's formulation, the goal of sentimental authors to in some way alter the development of their readers seems to necessitate an ending that prescribes some form of action.

patriarchal society “misreading” a woman: the figure of the husband, John, becomes Gilman’s representation of unsympathetic social reading. As Wai-Chee Dimock has claimed, “. . . the husband is not just a doctor but an emphatically bad one. This means, of course, that he is a bad reader, who, when confronted with a set of symptoms, repeatedly fails to come up with the right interpretation. As his wife becomes crazier and crazier, he becomes more and more optimistic in his diagnosis” (608). John fails in reading his wife’s symptoms, and as a result, he pushes his wife over the brink of sanity. In the narrator’s first diary entry, she admits that she disagrees with her husband’s decisions for her treatment, but she ends her diary entry by writing, “but what is one to do?” (42). With the narrator’s question, Gilman demonstrates early on that no one within the story, the narrator included, can argue against the damaging prescription for health forced upon her. The narrator is entrapped and powerless, left with no recourse. This becomes further clear to readers later in the story when the narrator finally gains enough courage to tell her husband that she is not getting better and wants to leave their summer home. After calling his wife “little girl” (50), John replies that ““of course if you were in any danger, I could and would [take you home], but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know”” (50). It is almost impossible to take John’s response seriously because he has demonstrated over and over again that he does *not* know the proper way to care for his wife, whether or not he can claim status as a doctor. John wrestles authority from his wife, but she continuously disagrees, though clandestinely, with the conclusions he reaches about her health and recovery.

John is not the only unsympathetic social reader within the text; indeed, there is no one in the realm of Gilman’s story who takes a stand against the isolation the narrator

is facing. I would argue, in fact, that John and Jennie function not as fully formed individuals within the story, but rather as representatives of those American citizens who believe that the best thing to do with a suffering woman is to isolate and confine her to inactivity. In “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” Gilman explains that she wrote her story to save other women from suffering the same fate that she suffered when she underwent Mitchell’s increasingly popular “rest cure.” Instead of being forced to “rest,” Gilman writes, women should “[go] to work again—work, the normal life of every human being” (349). As she claims, her story was “not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (349).⁸⁶ In the story, John and Jennie represent those who would direct a woman to “live as domestic a life as far as possible” and “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as [they] lived” (348), as S. Weir Mitchell had instructed Gilman to do. In exposing their illogical response to a woman’s emotional disturbance, Gilman uses John and Jennie as a surrogate for a sector of society that has failed to understand a woman’s psychological nature, leading to her psychological damage in the face of containment.

John’s inability to “read” his wife’s symptoms and our narrator’s own madness leave the story bereft of what Dimock terms “a figure of authority” (608), or someone with the power to interpret the story’s events in order to come to well-formed conclusions. In analyzing Davis’s and Jacobs’s texts, I uncovered the ways in which both authors provided corrective models for social “reading” and understanding. In “Life in

⁸⁶ As Gilman shares in “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” her story “worked” to save at least one woman from the rest cure: “It has to my knowledge,” Gilman explains, “saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and recovered” (349). More indicative of the story’s success, for Gilman, is that “many years later,” Mitchell himself “admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia after reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*” (349).

the Iron Mills,” the narrator refuses to see Deb as a type, thereby exposing the mill visitors’ damaging responses to Hugh and Dev in the mill visit scene. And Jacobs replaces the models of negative social reading—depicted by Amelia Matilda Murray and Mrs. Hoggs—with characters like her daughter Ellen who maintain their sympathy and delicacy when responding to Jacobs’s complex past. In contrast, Gilman does not depict any character *within* the story who knows how to “read” in a socially constructive way.

Because no character within the text itself has the capacity to understand the narrator’s needs, only the audience is left as Gilman’s corrective social reader. Because they have access to the narrator’s innermost thoughts, Gilman conditions her readers to approach the narrator’s confinement from a more socially inclusive perspective. I agree with Dimock’s assertion that in Gilman’s story, the only figure who can learn from the ineffectual social understanding represented by John is the reader. As Dimock explains, “in the absence of any competent reader inside the story, it is the outside reader . . . who is called upon to occupy the position of interpretive authority, functioning both as the text’s ideal recipient and its necessary coordinate” (609).⁸⁷ Just as in the cases of Davis, Jacobs, and Wilson, Gilman positions her audience as what Dimock calls the “interpretive authority” in the text. In the absence of John *or* the narrator’s ability to “read” the situation fully and correctly, Gilman creates a space for her audience to both

⁸⁷ Dimock’s reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper” that I refer to here is her attempt to read the story through a New Historicist lens. But the aim of Dimock’s essay “Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader” (1991) is to demonstrate the *apparent* difference between New Historical criticism and feminist criticism: in reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” from a New Historicist lens, Dimock comes to the conclusion that the story is about professionalism in the late nineteenth century; using a feminist lens to analyze the story leads us to believe that the implied reader, according to Dimock, is in fact the *woman* reader who has yet to be professionalized in the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, Dimock concludes that the two approaches are not diametrically opposed. Instead, as she claims, “history is crucial as a category of gender studies” *and* “gender is equally crucial as a category of historical analysis” (621).

see and remedy the damaging effects of American society's prescriptions for women's mental and emotional health. Gilman demonstrates, by the story's end, that confinement is not an effective means of recovery for an emotionally unstable woman and mother; instead, confinement is a way to contain and thereby control a woman who challenges the notions of what it means to *be* a woman: as Dr. Mitchell himself suggested, nervous depression prevents a woman from fulfilling her duties as wife and mother, leading to the necessity of containing and isolating that woman to prevent the spread of this "domestic demon" (32). I suggest, then, that this is Gilman's implicit call to action for the reader: she positions her reader to both see and understand the damaging effects of confinement, thereby priming that reader to make this knowledge manifest in the world outside of the text.

Gilman's short story expertly exposes and implicates a patriarchal society that chooses, and enforces, isolation and confinement over recovery for women suffering from emotional instability. Much like Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, and Rebecca Harding Davis over thirty years before her, Gilman incorporates images of her protagonist's confinement within the text in order to expose to readers the very real physical and emotional social containment many women faced during the time period. For Gilman and the other authors I have analyzed in this project, these images are not literary flourishes; instead, in these texts, images of confinement become potent shorthand arguments to push readers to change their conceptions, attitudes, dispositions, and, hopefully, actions when they leave a text and reenter their material worlds.

Protest Literature and Containment in the Twentieth Century

Gilman is not, of course, the only later writer to use images of confinement and entrapment to expose to readers the inequality of American citizenship and the containment to which certain individuals are subject. A very brief survey of a number of texts should suffice to demonstrate that these images are an aspect of protest literature that warrants more exploration and critical examination. We might examine, for example, *The Awakening* (1899), in which Kate Chopin depicts the physical confinement that her protagonist Edna Pontellier faces in her unhappy marriage. Echoes of “Life in the Iron Mills” can be found in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), where the immigrant protagonist Jurgis and his family suffer physical confinement at every turn: their small house, the meat packing factories, and Jurgis’s prison cell. As we move further into the twentieth century, these images of physical confinement proliferate. Typically a symbol of mobility and movement, the car in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—packed with the Joads’s belongings—is filled to capacity and barely functional, demonstrating not hope and possibility but desperation and futility instead. Published the same year, Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got his Gun*, protesting the ravages of war, depicts a man trapped within his own body. After suffering injuries in World War I that deplete all of his senses, the protagonist must live with his memories and thoughts while confined to his ruined body. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) depicts the physical entrapment in all aspects of Bigger Thomas’s life, from his small, one-bedroom tenement apartment which he shares with his family, to the prison cell where the novel ends.⁸⁸ Finally, we can

⁸⁸ Isabel Soto provides an interesting reading of the spaces in Wright’s novel in her brief essay “‘White People to Either Side’: *Native Son* and the Poetics of Space” (2009). As Soto claims, “ultimately, we are talking about the spatialization of power,” and in Wright’s novel, “spatial entrapment is expressive

look to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), in which the image of the bell jar, "with its stifling distortions" (241), renders the person in it as "blank and stopped as a dead baby" (237). This list is by no means exhaustive, nor do I maintain that each of these authors uses images of physical confinement in the same ways; however, the sheer volume of these images, over a century-long time span, points to how depicting a trapped, confined, and isolated individual could prove to be an effective social argument against inequality and ideological containment, no matter the time period.

Certainly, the images of physical confinement I have been analyzing are inextricably linked to the historical and cultural context within which they were produced. But just as important as such context, for the purposes of this study, is the fact that these images of confinement become effective techniques for protest authors no matter their subject. Whether writing about the oppressed conditions of the working class, slaves, free northern blacks, or middle class white women, the authors I have examined in this project find these images of confinement to be more than a formal literary device; instead, these images become argumentative devices for these authors—and others from the nineteenth century through the twentieth—to redirect their readers' understanding of oppression and inequality. Further, as this brief coda has hopefully demonstrated, these argumentative images are present in American protest literature spanning a century's time. Ultimately, if American protest literature takes as its most common subject some form of inequality, images of confinement are a tried and tested method of exposing this inequality to readers.

of the absence of personal and material agency. Bigger endures, even as he fails to control, physical dislocation and confinement" (24).

This critical insight becomes imperative, I will briefly suggest, when we attempt to see the connections between protest movements that have not been critically analyzed in any depth. For decades, critics have theorized and analyzed the connections between women's rights, workers' rights, and black rights, as I have done in this study.⁸⁹ But in identifying a "functional core" to protest literature (10), to use Paul Lauter's term, I suggest that if we look to images of physical confinement within protest texts, we can begin to analytically understand connections between even seemingly disparate movements. This will ultimately lead us to more nuanced critical insights about protest literature as a genre—allowing us to see the connection between history, culture, and the written word more thoroughly and completely.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Zillah Eisenstein's "The Combahee River Collective Statement (1978); Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics (1989); Karen Sanchez-Eppler's *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993); Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000); Leslie McCall's *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class and Race in the New Economy* (2001); and Jennifer C. Nash's "Re-thinking Intersectionality" (2008).

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