Red Letters, White Paper, Black Ink: Race, Writing, Colors, and Characters in 1850s
America

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Abstract

It's well known that both the idea of race and the idea of writing acquired new kinds of importance for Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. Less obvious has been the extent to which the relationship between the two ideas, each charged by antebellum America with an ever-broader range of ideological functions, has itself served for some authors both as an object of inquiry and as a politico-aesthetic vocabulary. "White Paper, Black Ink, Red Letters" concerns this race-writing dialectic, and takes as its point of departure the fact that both writing and race depend on a priori notions of visibility and materiality to which each nonetheless is – or seems to be – irreducible. That is, though any given utterance of racial embodiment or alphabetic inscription becomes intelligible by its materialization as part of a field of necessarily *visible* signifiers (whether shapes of letters or racially encoded features of the body) the power of any such signifier to organize or regulate experience depends on its perceived connection to a separate domain of *in*visible meanings.

For many nineteenth-century Americans race offered an increasingly persuasive narrative of identity at a time when the self-evidence of class, gender, and nationality as modes of affiliation seemed to be waning. At the same time, the country's rapid geographical and industrial expansion (as well as, for some, its newly self-conscious literary nationalism) helped to keep alphabetic inscription the privileged technology of subjective and intersubjective identification; this was a moment when the centrality of face-to-face communication was already clearly waning in the face of industrialization and urbanization, but when neither audio telephony nor sound recording made it possible for the voice to go where the body was not except as writing. In examining the relation between these two interpellative poles my project seeks to shed new light on the structures of feeling and meaning that arise in a republic of letters which regards itself as – like the printed page – dependent for its coherence on strictly regulated relations of black to white, and which also regards the racial body as always already not just a political problem but a textual one.

Given the necessary intersection of the printed book and the literary text, it's a bit remarkable that literary criticism and bibliography have, for most of their respective histories, been carried out as two separate lines of inquiry. There's no reason, though, that the dependence of the literary on the bibliographic shouldn't play some part in every critical endeavor; and inasmuch as bibliographic description draws the abstract aims of verbal artistry into the orbit of such lived, material practices as labor, production, and trade, a vigorous discussion of inscriptive technologies as such would seem not just *compatible with* but *ideally suited to* the demands of literary studies at a moment in the discipline's history when its ongoing inquiry into the intertwining histories of identity and power is both as necessary and as contested as it has been at any other time. I present the relationship

between racial and alphabetic semiotics in the American nineteenth century – the capacity of each, when discussed explicitly, to register ideas about both – as one tool a bibliographic-historicist project might use to generate new and useful interpretations of widely-read, long-familiar works like *The Scarlet Letter*. But while bibliographic and editorial concerns have helped to shape my understanding of what a text *is*, my project's understanding of what it is to *interpret* such a text owes its greatest debt to foundational work in the study of sexuality – that of figures like Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler – all of whom offer tools by which the body's materiality can be discussed as a political utterance. Butler in particular helps us to see how what we think of as the material world must emerge, just as do books, within the context of some representational order, and how this order must in turn be governed by normative canons of grammar which shape intersubjective relations of domination and subordination; that which can be seen and read, whether body or paper, must always communicate content, but also refer back citationally to the code under which that content emerges as intelligible. I deploy these interpretive strategies, however, as a contribution less to queer theory than to American Studies, seeking to build upon and forge connections between, on the one hand, recent work on embodied racialization in the United States (works by Sarah E. Chinn, Walter Johnson, Maurice O. Wallace, Paul Gilmore, M. Giulia Fabi, Eve Allegra Raimon, Michael O'Malley, et al.), and, on the other (suggestively, not exhaustively), histories of printing (Warren Chappell), of literary publishing (Michael Winship), and the alphabet (Jill Lepore, Patricia Crain). My work thus seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions of race and print culture in American Studies while at the same time making a case that the study of the American nineteenth century is particularly well situated right now to unravel certain methodological knots of concern to the discipline of literary

criticism more generally, such as the relationship between text and book, and the relationship between formalist and historicist methodologies.

Both my first and second chapters concern Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* – the first considering the novel's genesis and its unusually elaborate paratext, and the second considering the novel as such. The first chapter discusses the lengths to which Hawthorne went in order to script in advance the novel's encounter with its readership – lengths that include arranging for the title to be printed on the title page in red ink, and even setting the opening of the novel on the same city block where a Boston reader would have purchased the book itself. The color on the title page – which Hawthorne describes in his letters explicitly as a commercial strategy – is, I argue, central to the novel's meaning, since it calls attention to the visual nature of reading words in ways that books normally don't. Color thus functions on the title page both as a way to attract consumer interest and as a defamiliarization of the act of reading. And once this title page has generated this alphabetic gaze, the novel's plot then presents the human body – Hester Prynne's body – as that gaze's paradigmatic object. Indeed, the central conceit of *The Scarlet Letter* is – in spite of the marginal role race has usually been supposed to have in the novel – one that seems scarcely imaginable except as a consequence of racial epistemology: that to look at a person is also to read a text. In this synthesis of alphabet and body the conceit reimagines the semiotics of race (in which Hawthorne assumes the public is interested) so that they resemble those of his literary project as an author (which he fears it will ignore).

The project's third and fourth chapters concern the work of William Wells Brown, which reverse the paradigm I explore in my discussion of Hawthorne, suggesting that a seriously-minded anatomy of racial meaning could best be produced in the antebellum

United States by way of a simultaneous anatomy of printing as a material practice. Brown's writing interrogates the epistemological underpinnings on which racism and slavery depend by placing those underpinnings in three overlapping contexts: the semiotics of the alphabet, those of the physiognomic body, and those of money. Brown's abiding concern with money allows my project to map the relations among the alphabet, the marketplace, and the racial body, which I introduce in my reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, more explicitly as part of an emerging market economy. In presenting the idea of printing as central to the idea of race, Brown produces a startlingly subversive, pragmatic, and thoroughly antisentimental argument against the institution of slavery, one which suggests that if racial embodiment reproduces the logic of textual inscription then the commodification of the slave body reproduces the logic of paper money. Slavery would thus, even were it not a moral outrage, portend a crisis of value that Brown believes every moneyed American will see the wisdom of avoiding, however unmoved by slaves' suffering he or she may be.

A coda to the project concerns Edward Prime-Stevenson's 1906 *Imre: A Memorandum*, and serves as a conclusion. Only now beginning to be read, *Imre* is a defiant celebration of love between men, a book as avowedly anti-commercial and anti-democratic as it is anti-homophobic. Set in Hungary and self-published in a run of just five-hundred copies under the pseudonym Xavier Mayne, the novella is informed in equal measures by, on the one hand, the languages of continental sexology and racial science, and, on the other, by the New Jersey-born Prime-Stevenson's flamboyantly aristocratic pretentions and outspoken, vaguely right-wing Magyarphilia. The coda suggests how the political and inscriptive energies I locate in the 1840s and 1850s changed to accommodate the new discourses of sexual orientation that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century,

discourses which would eventually complicate racial narratives of the self with other

narratives – ones that privileged desiring over being.

      While my project seeks to answer specific questions within American Studies – to

argue, for instance, that *The Scarlet Letter's* preoccupation with the alphabet is a way of

engaging the question of race rather than a way of avoiding it – its broader disciplinary aims

deploy these local interventions so as to argue implicitly against the notion that formalist and

historicist methodologies represent challenges to one another, or that their admixture

threatens to dilute rather than to concentrate their respective explanatory powers. Too often

misdescribed as a debate over the relative importance of aesthetics and history, I argue that

literary studies is best served neither when we ask questions about the nature of literature as

such nor when we ask how the content of history is registered by literary arts, but rather

when we ask questions about the content of history to which the nature of literature offers

the richest and most compelling responses – when we ask historicist questions to which

matters of literary form offer not just *answers*, but the *best* and *most compelling* answers.

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, alas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I, by no means, my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore,
Fainting I follow. I leave off, therefore,
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I, may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about,
 "Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame."

       — Sir Thomas Wyatt

Contents

Acknowledgements

The argument of this dissertation concerns the overlapping importance, to nineteenth-century middle-class Americans, of race and writing, so it's probably fitting that the document's most important debts are to the years I spent as a graduate teaching assistant – that is, as part of a kind of *pedagogical* middle class – in literature surveys for English majors at the University of Virginia.

To lead discussions for groups of undergraduate English majors is to have the chance – indeed, the happy obligation – to free associate at great length on the subject of reading, and to do so for and with a patient and curious gallery of coconspirators. In teaching, I have also learned a great deal from my students, but I imagine that the same could be said by every scholar who is also an educator. For a project like mine, though, in which the actual phenomenology of reading is so central a thematic concern, the value of regular contact with an ever-changing cast of unique, non-professional, and sometimes genuinely strange individual readers is not to be underestimated. The opportunity to talk

with and listen to my charges inspired much of what I'm most proud of in the following

pages, and kept me sane as I wrote those pages with which I'm less pleased.

But the bigger practical influence on my interpretations has come by way of the

courses' lectures. At UVa the survey courses are generally team taught, and offer a chance to

hear the same texts discussed by scholars with sharply divided notions of what literature is

and does, sometimes in the course of a single hour. What these scholars share, though, is a

commitment to getting undergraduates excited about close reading, and this entails not just

soundness of critical judgment but a certain flamboyance of technique. The relationship

between form and content, and that of this form-content dyad to history, is in these lectures

mediated by a sense of pyrotechnic showmanship meant to compete with Facebook and

Twitter. For better or worse, I have been seduced by the light of these pyrotechnics, and

though I know that – in their scholarship – they usually deploy a subtler and less garish

mode of reading, I have Herbert Tucker, Cynthia Wall, Michael Levenson, Stephen

Cushman, Stephen Arata, David Morris, Victor Luftig, Paul Cantor, Gordon Braden, John

Parker, Bruce Holsinger, Alison Booth, and John O'Brien to thank for it.

These lectures taught me how to read texts closely, but – meant for undergraduates –

they could not teach me why the profession of thus reading them constitutes work of

genuine and vital importance to the world in which we now live. The teachers I encountered

as an undergraduate at Vassar College – particularly the director of my senior thesis Peter

Antelyes and my academic adviser H. Daniel Peck – initially inspired me to pursue graduate

study in literature by convincing me that to read well is always to intervene in the emergency

of the present. Those I encountered in my coursework at UVa – Alan Howard, Susan

Fraiman, Rita Felski, and Deborah McDowell among many others – helped me to

understand what the work of our profession actually is and why it matters. In particular, Jonathan Flatley and Eric Lott helped to convince me early on in my graduate education that the rigors of formalism and the aggressive abstractions of high theory need not be adversarial in their relationship to historical specificity or political engagement. The canons of textual description we call "formalism" and "historicism," like our two eyes, not only face the same direction but, in working together (and, indeed, *only* in working together), allow us to see the three-dimensional world as it really is. This is a lesson which I have tried to put into practice on every page of this dissertation. Both Jonathan and Eric would later serve on this project's advising committee, along with Jennifer Wicke, whose exacting and almost preternaturally instructive annotations of my draft material have exerted a profound shaping force on the content and prose even of those sentences she did not, personally, help me to clarify.

This dissertation's argument depends – to an extent I believe is unusual outside bibliographical studies as such – on access to actual books from the nineteenth century, so a special note of gratitude is due to the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, an organization whose staff and librarians, in a just world, would be as famous as the collection of which they're custodians. I can think of few institutions where a project like mine would even be possible, but can think of *none* other than UVa where it would be so enthusiastically nurtured, or nurtured by a staff more welcoming or more professional.

Among the many more personal supporters I've had in the years I've worked on this project – including my colleagues Wendy Korwin and Maura Tarnoff, and friends Patra Wanant, Virginia Fuentes, and Andy Miller – I want to single two groups out for particular

mention. First, my cats Huckleberry and Little Kitty who, in the long hours I spent sitting at the computer actually writing, have been both the *only tolerable* and the *best imaginable* company. There must be writers somewhere who do not own cats, but I cannot imagine what they do to make bearable the social isolation which the work of writing entails. Secondly and lastly I would like thank my immediate family. My brother Isaac who, beyond the ready jokes and emotional support he has always offered, has (in what is, after all, a digital age) helped to pack, transport, and unpack my immodest library of actual books from apartment to apartment on at least three occasions, merits praise both for his conversation and his physical endurance. My mother Jackie Turner has, through these years, shown inexhaustible patience, limitless forgiveness, and a reluctance to judge that ought to make her a candidate for some kind of sainthood. She has been consistently the loudest and most indefatigable cheerleader of a dissertation about whose contents she knows little and cares even less. But my late father, Jack Turner, was more accepting still. When people tell me, as they sometimes do, that my father would be particularly proud to have seen me earn a doctorate, I secretly disagree with them, having been reassured by him on several occasions that the mere number of years for which I had managed to prolong my graduate education constituted in itself an accomplishment liable to dwarf, in his eyes, anything else I might do in the future. My memories of the unconditionality of his support have been a tremendous comfort to me in facing the painful truth that, at the last, he did not live to see this project finished. It is to his memory that this dissertation is dedicated.

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Introduction

When I began this project a decade ago, I felt myself poorly equipped to sustain a series of

close readings for the entirety of a book-length project. Such an undertaking, I reasoned,

assumed in advance and without just cause that I already possessed a clear understanding of

how non-close reading works. I felt at this time that I needed to know more about what

actually happens when a person reads a piece of writing. In these early stages I already knew

that I was interested in how it is that characters in narratives learn things about one another,

and the project I had nebulously in mind was to focus on secrecy in fiction. Even then,

though, I recognized that I was less interested in secrecy as such than in the kinds of

questions that narratives centered on secrecy allowed authors to engage – questions about

what people can know about one another, and the limits of this knowledge, and the

particular means by which it can be ascertained. I was drawn to stories of racial passing, but

also to other stories in which secrets figure prominently, like Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

and "Minister's Black Veil," and I was particularly fascinated with the way that the same

psychological and epistemological questions which appear in stories about racial passing to anchor political arguments also appear in works by canonical (white) American Renaissance authors like Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, but appear to different effect. In works of these authors such questions anchor arguments that seem, at least at first, to have little to do with politics or race.

Having no more certain a sense of my topic than this, I began writing about *The Scarlet Letter*. Very little of the material that these first exercises generated has made its way into the finished dissertation. This early material was characterized by a self-conscious attempt to force the project to be about secrecy. Such force seemed necessary at the time because the project, whenever I worked on it, would otherwise be drawn back into the old questions: *What do we see when we look at a page of writing? What actually happens when we read?*

At least two things happen when we read. Firstly, we decode the visual symbols on the book's pages so as to turn them, in our minds, into verbal content. This content in turn represents things and ideas. Secondly, we interact with a material artifact – usually a book. In decoding the symbols on the page, we tend to forget that the book is a material thing because we are caught up in its verbal powers, in the illusion of an author's presence which it offers. This, indeed, is part of what *literacy* means to us: to know how to read is not just to have the capacity to attach the symbols on the page to abstract sounds and meanings but also to overlook or to *exclude* from consciousness much that *does not* directly contribute to this decoding. Reading a book, we don't notice each time our eyes reach the end of one line and then return to the left of the page to begin reading the one below it. We also often turn pages without realizing we're doing so. The colors of words and letters on the page, furthermore, we tend to notice only when they depart significantly from established norms

or otherwise make our work of decoding less routine than it could be. But we always also have a material and economic relationship to what we read. In going to the store to buy the book, or opening the UPS package in which the book has arrived, or in selling the book, or in deciding how much money we could obtain should we choose to sell it, or in paying to have it moved (or laboring to move it ourselves) to a new residence, our awareness of the book's materiality is returned to us. These experiences, though common to all readers, are usually regarded as of economic rather than literary or interpretive importance. Each is seen as external to the book's meaning. Our experiences of them form part of our relationship to the book, but they are not part of what it means to *read* the book.

This dissertation tells part of a surprising story – the story of how and why, for nineteenth-century Americans, the complicated materiality of written works, a materiality which includes all those things I've just said "reading" usually encourages us to ignore, intersected with seemingly-unrelated ideas about the political status of the human body. The part of the story I will tell consists of two halves. The first half focuses on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* – with one chapter an extended meditation on the novel's title page, and a second chapter on the racial and textual dynamics we encounter in the novel itself. The other half of the dissertation focuses on the work of fugitive slave, novelist, historian, and autobiographer William Wells Brown. The dissertation's third chapter discusses his first book – *The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* – and its fourth discusses his *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, the first novel written by an African American. Though a work of fiction, *Clotel*, like *The Scarlet Letter*, includes a long autobiographical preface, and in this preface Brown restages in surprising ways much of the material he had explored earlier in his *Narrative*.

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Throughout this project, the abstract fissure in which I'm most interested is that between what we experience as the material and what we experience as the immaterial – the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the insensible – and in the various ways that this gap can be bridged in our experience of the world. It has always seemed to me that reading is one such way, and that this is one reason we regard reading as enriching and humanizing. To read is to experience a material artifact, but to reach – by means of that artifact – a verbal and psychological space that we tend to understand as irreducible to mere ink and paper.

But if reading and writing shuttle us between phenomena and noumena in ways that we find restorative and humanizing, the idea of the racial body – because like writing it attaches invisible meanings to visible signs – performs similar work. Unlike reading, race has historically performed this work in ways that we would hesitate to endorse wholesale or without qualification. Both race and writing organize our experience of the world in ways that connect the visual to other zones of sensation – feelings, memories, desires, judgments, anxieties, etc. – but race we regard as, whatever it means or is "in itself," tied to a history of violence, suffering, and oppression, while reading we associate (perhaps naively) with what emboldens hope and enables empathy. This paradox is interesting to me, and this interest, as the argument that this dissertation presents began to make itself clear to me, led me to wonder if the way authors stage the relationship of the reader to the page might have something in common with – might, indeed, shed some light on – the racial gaze. Perhaps the difference between the black letters and the white paper that reading requires us to note might help us to understand the way what is imagined to be the *racial* difference between black and white *people* is organized, experienced, and politicized.

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The meanings of a word on a page do not inhere in that page's paper and ink, and yet those meanings are obviously available *through* the paper and ink. A page of writing possesses and entails a materiality, but it is not, like a rock or a tree, a thing which first and foremost *is* its materiality. You can look inside a rock or a tree by cutting it open, but you cannot look inside the words of a book by cutting them. The words have a kind of materiality, but it is not *that* kind of materiality. Reading, we see, but we also do more than see. We look at the ink on the page, but we also do something else, and this is how reading allows us to discover things that our eyes alone would be otherwise unable to tell us about the world.

Part of reading has usually meant suppressing our awareness of our bodies and senses, even our powers of sight. As I've already observed, when we become fully engaged in a book we turn pages without knowing that we do so. Our thoughts and feelings are set free from the prison of the five senses. Reading moves us, as William Blake insisted it could and should, beyond the merely phenomenological, but as the spectacular colors of Blake's works make clear, gaining this "beyond" we experience also a certain loss which attends the amnesia of reading. Blake stands at the beginning of a Romantic tradition which Hawthorne and Brown shared in, and which we still inhabit today. Part of what Blake's methods say is that, though life should be more than what the senses report, and though reading is a technology that can help us to achieve this "more," reading, at its best, can also return us to the body we inhabit, and remind us that when we read we see, that when we turn a page we move our muscles, that when we reach the end of one line we physically redirect our gaze so that it can connect to the beginning of the next line. We become more than our bodies when

we read, but, in the kind of reading Blake helps us to learn, we can also remain our bodies. We become more than individual subjects, but by learning to read and see at the same time we can also remain individual subjects, and remain conscious of our implication in other orders of meaning than the verbal – we remain economic, political, identitarian creatures, our minds and bodies perfectly aligned and perfectly coextensive.

People reading are still people, even if by reading they become, in a sense, more than merely people. When some particular books help us to experience this dual state, and to experience it as a state of psychological coherence rather than one of alienation and fissure, I can think of no reason not to believe, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that such books are worth celebrating, and talking about, and gushing over. But that shouldn't mean that they are always benign, or that the satisfactions they offer are ever innocent pleasures. A book that allows you to read while, at the same time, remaining consciously inscribed in the relations of economic and political power that structure your daily life is necessarily a book that stages its reader's politics as part of its own subject matter. Such a book will always seek to remind its reader of his or her participation in the commodification of its pages, and will perform its representational tasks while inviting comparisons to other grammars of power. It will ask its reader to notice the ways in which the grammar of labor or money or desire or oppression is like or unlike the grammar of print. For each of the two the writers on whom I focus in this project, the discourse of material power that print came to seem most to resemble was the still-hardening ideology of racial physiognomy. Like print, this physiognomy deploys as a visible code what is in fact a technology of regulation. The norms of print and race, though not always the same as one another, each render in optical terms social relations and power imbalances not in themselves visible.

I'll state the claim as clearly as I can. Some of the books that are great are great because they stage their status as material phenomena in the world as part of the aesthetic experience they offer. These books have an aura of artistic achievement which, though it is rooted in standards of judgment which are at best arbitrary and at worst exploitative, nonetheless works real changes in the lives of readers who have internalized those standards. By allowing us to be thinking, desiring, knowing subjects and phenomenological subjects at the same time – by allowing us to read and see simultaneously – they allow us to experience ourselves as less fragmented and more whole.

Both race and writing are simultaneously objects of and technologies of interpretation. Reading allows us to see beyond the seen, but it also sometimes allows us to recover the friction between what we actually, *literally* see, and the values, desires, and beliefs which we only *imagine* that we see. The racial body and the written word demand that we read them, and in reading them we summon them into being by reinscribing them into a political economy that can't itself be seen – that doesn't have a color or a luster, that can't actually reflect light to which our eyes are sensitive. To the extent that the kinds of books in which this project is interested stage reading as a laboratory of interpretation, I have assumed that the reading of books constitutes a space in which we can monitor ourselves in the act of interpreting the visible world, and watch ourselves produce the ideological tissues that attach meaning and value to what we see and what we seek to understand. Books like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Clotel* allow us to slow our interpretation of the visible world down and to study it so that – to choose an example that connects Hawthorne and Brown to one another – the sleight of hand by which the phrase "black man" could mean "the devil" in one context and

"a male African American" in another can be recognized as the dishonest trick of racist paranoia which it really is.[1]

This project assumes that reading books is self-evidently and genuinely like reading people, but even if it were not, all of the books I discuss in this dissertation regard the two acts as mirrors for one another. For Hawthorne, the idea that, in looking at another person, we might see a text of the same kind which we encounter on the printed page serves as an endless reserve of intellection and narrative curiosity. For Brown the interpretive challenges of reading people are themselves less interesting than the fact that – because slavery 1) commodifies the black body and 2) produces, through the sexual exploitation of black women, ever greater numbers of light-skinned slaves – the practice of reading people has become, in the South, less textual than economic in its nature. Where for Hawthorne what's interesting is that, in a society saturated with race, the body becomes a kind of text, for Brown what is interesting is that, in a society saturated with race that also treats one particular racial group as a commodity, the body becomes not just a text but also a particular kind of text: a currency.

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[1] I have made several small methodological interventions throughout this dissertation, but the one such major intervention which characterizes, I hope, the whole is related to what I've just said. It should be clear that I take the claims of both historicism and formalism seriously, and my hope is that, in plotting a course for the future of literary studies, less ink will be spilled by people choosing sides than by people endeavoring to imagine questions that can respond to the demands of both set of claims. My motto in my argument here has been: Formalist answers to historicist questions. By this I mean that, in my desire to produce intricate close readings of literary works, I have not treated the production of such readings as an end in itself, nor have I sought to offer an account of how literature "too" participates in cultural and ideological conversations whose most important utterances came from elsewhere. My aim has been to locate particular questions about the history of power to which close readings of literary works constitute not just answers but the *best* and most historically *relevant* answers. As literary artists who also made the semiotics of the visual page a central thematic concern in their respective works, Hawthorne and Brown genuinely have more to teach us about how race functioned in nineteenth-century America than any of their contemporaries, novelists or otherwise.

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I have arranged "Red Letters, White Paper, Black Ink" as two "movements" which I have called A and B. This is meant to invoke alphabetic sequence as an organizing principle, of course, but it also seeks to recall the ways that, in the days of vinyl records, pop songs would be marketed as singles with an A side, which was meant for commercial radio play, and a B side, which was a space where even the most business-oriented pop groups would take creative risks. Hovering in the background of my argument, and in this A/B structure, is an assumption that among the ways in which works of art are marked by their historicity is their dependence on technological norms and routines of production and distribution. This is true for records (the logic of the A and B side obeys, above all, a *commercial* grammar of meaning), but it is also true for books. And, indeed, the fact that the vinyl record retains in the logic of an A side and a B side registers its descriptive dependence on the alphabet which I see as telling. Though recorded music is in so many ways unlike the book, and though it helped to usher in the televisual society that – even as I write this – continues to erode, for better or worse, the hegemony of ink and paper, an organizing logic of letters in sequence, which has no necessary relationship to sound recording of the kind that it has to writing, asserts still its capacity to shape the world.

In *The Story of A* Patricia Crain discusses the phenomenon of "alphabetization," by which she means – most importantly – the acquisition of literacy. But alphabetization for Crain also involves internalizing other orders of alphabetical meaning not strictly connected to reading words. We could represent words as letters without having any such thing as "alphabetical order," for instance, and internalizing the logic by which the orthographic symbols we use begin with A and move through a strictly invariable sequence to Z is another

part of Crain's notion of alphabetization, one of consequence not just for records but for academic letter grades and a whole host of other practices not exactly the same as reading or writing. The pop single with an A side and a B side has only limited use for alphabetic letters as such. There is a label on the record which displays song titles and other information, but the music itself could be fully legible to someone who had not read (or could not read) this label. Not so the sequence of A and B. To be unaware of the difference between an A side and a B side, or not to understand that A is the first letter of the alphabet and B the second, would be to fail to interpret the music correctly – to be unaware of the interpretive consensus within which the music was produced and distributed. Even as, in the mid-twentieth century, books began to be displaced by electronic media, the alphabet on which books depend remained central to our understanding of what a text is and how its meanings could be organized.

In a more literal sense, though, part A of this project concerns one particular A: the titular scarlet letter of Hawthorne's first romance. Chapter 1 presents an extended reading of the novel's title page, though in the course of this reading a number of foils emerge for that page, among them other parts of *The Scarlet Letter* itself. I argue that the title page, on which Hawthorne arranged for the title to be printed in red ink, seeks to introvert the work of signification. Usually words are made of ink and paper, but the things which those words represent – whether conceived of as signified or referent – are understood to exist out in the world or in some realm of ideas rather than in the ink and paper themselves. With very few exceptions (like, say, the phrase *these three words*) a written inscription does *not* find its referent inside itself. When the words "Scarlet Letter" are printed in red, though, the referent moves inside the sign. The words refer to something concrete – something we can actually see and

touch – but it is not something out in the world of things but something inside the word itself, something which the word contains thirteen times.

This inward turn is, I argue, a symptom of what many scholars have characterized as Hawthorne's ideological turn away from the political landscape of United States in 1850. Hawthorne was, as many scholars have argued, uncomfortable directly engaging the social climate in which he wrote because he saw that climate as increasingly primed for civil war, and as increasingly preoccupied with slavery and racial identity, neither of which he (consciously) felt drawn to as themes. The title page stages this rejection of the world of 1850, as does the historical setting of the novel in the distant past. But just as, avoiding the theme of a *possible* civil war in the 1850s, Hawthorne set his novel so as to make its action contemporaneous with an *actual* civil war in the 1640s, the inward turn of the novel's title page reflects not his unmixed desire to avoid political engagement but his profound ambivalence toward the political material he had to work with. The a-politics of *The Scarlet Letter* thus begins to undo itself rather quickly. It is no accident that the color of the letter Hester wears is also the color ascribed to *all* of the non-white characters the novel presents, nor is it irrelevant that, as the title page dramatizes, the effect of *red* in the novel depends in part on the ease with which Hawthorne realizes it can serve as a substitution for *black*.

In the second chapter I trace the consequences of this racial ambivalence for the novel itself, looking closely at passages in which racial difference is explicitly addressed, but also looking more broadly at the novel's way of treating the body as an idea. *The Scarlet Letter*, once we open it, has already asked us to be aware of the visibility of words and letters more than we normally would be. In attaching the letter to Hester, it associates this visibility with that of the body and with the epistemological problems of attempting to know a person

physiognomically (problems to which both the scarlet letter [for Hawthorne] and race [for white America] are, in different ways, meant to be solutions). Hawthorne's treatment of actual racial difference in the novel is, as I will show, eminently instructive, and sheds real light on the ideological project which – though he withdraws it even as he offers it – is nonetheless among the pillars on which the novel's peculiar aesthetic power and enduring reputation rests for its support. But even when Hawthorne isn't talking about race, he's talking about race. With rare exceptions his characterizations arrive at narratable knowledge by means of a demonstrably physiognomic way of seeing the body. It's true that Hawthorne often seems not to believe in or advocate that way of seeing, but even when he most distances himself from it he nonethteless finds it difficult to explain what he is doing without reference to it.

I have called this chapter "Bearded Physiognomies," a phrase the novel uses in its first couple of pages, to indicate this ambivalence. On the one hand, a beard frustrates a true physiognomy, since the classical physiognomy formulated by Lavater interprets only those parts of the face which are regarded as permanent and unchanging. A beard is thus a mask. But a beard isn't just any mask, since – as it is imagined to result from a physiological reality – it participates in the same epistemological economy within which the physiognomic body always circulates. A person with a beard is male, and is old enough to beget children; not only is this knowledge arrived at by physiognomic means when we espy a bearded person, it is also – not incidentally – the knowledge that most matters in the novel's opening pages, since to wear a beard, if a beard is taken physiognomically to be a sign of male potency, is thus to be, potentially, a suspected co-conspirator in Hester's adultery – to have been biologically capable of fathering Pearl.

A is for adultery. B is for Brown. There is a sense in which this whole dissertation is about *The Scarlet Letter*. But Hawthorne – white, straight, middle-class, highly educated, subject to real financial pressures but secure enough to live nearly his entire life in the town where he was born – can tell us only so much about where *The Scarlet Letter* comes from. The narrowness of his experience does not allow us to understand his project as fully as we should because it prevents us from discovering how that project could have been different – how, in other hands and by an author with a different history – the interplay of race and letters would have shaped itself into autobiographical narrative like "The Custom-House" or a fiction like *The Scarlet Letter*.

When I suggest that the work of William Wells Brown can help us to overcome these limitations, I do not mean to suggest that I am less than concerned with Brown's work than with Hawthorne's, or that my project's interest in Brown is subordinate to its interest in Hawthorne. The world that made *The Scarlet Letter* is important not just because it made *The Scarlet Letter* but because it also made *Clotel*, *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Our Nig*, *Walden*, and the American Civil War. More broadly considered, it made industrial America, the idea of the American West, it invented sound recording, the telephone, commercial film production, and the light bulb, nationalized the United States's currency, and then created the Federal Reserve System (which makes the money we still use today). The world that made *The Scarlet Letter* also made *us*.

One contention of this project is that *The Scarlet Letter* interweaves and interleaves certain cultural master narratives on which we still depend today – especially race and writing – and does so in ways that shed light on its moment and ours. We normally think a great deal in our daily lives about both race and writing, but we don't normally think of them as

fundamentally linked to one another. *The Scarlet Letter* helps us to see how this link might

work, and since it seems to want to be about letters and colors only, and seems to engage

with race despite its best efforts *not* to do so, I think it also helps to suggest how

fundamental that link might be. Hawthorne wanted to write a book about a woman who was

forced to wear a red letter, but in spite of his reluctance to attach himself to anything that

smacked of current events, he found that he could not write such a book – or could not

imagine other people being interested enough in such a book to read it – unless the letter

this woman was forced to wear was attended at every turn by ideas about, and anxieties over,

racial politics and the physiognomic grammar those politics assumed.

Brown's writing engages eagerly with the same political landscape that Hawthorne's

engages reluctantly, and so Brown tells us things about the origins of our twenty-first-

century America that Hawthorne can't tell us. Among the most important of these is that –

at least as far as Brown is concerned – the relationship between race and writing – in a

country built partly on slavery and by slaves – is never as simply binary in its structure as

Hawthorne seems to want for it to be. For all its complexity, *The Scarlet Letter* is basically

interested in the semiotics of letters, on the one hand, and the semiotics of the body, on the

other. Brown complicates this binarism by suggesting not just that there are important

distinctions *among* different bodies (of which race, Brown and Hawthorne would both agree,

is one) but that there are also important distinctions among different kinds of *textual*

inscription. Brown shows us a South in which enslaved black people are always attended not

just by the fact that they are forced to labor without pay, but also by the fact that they can

themselves be offered as payment. The relationship between the racial body and the printed

book for Brown is always triangulated by circulating currency. This currency, furthermore,

can be either coined metal or printed paper, a difference which turns out to be important both to Brown's literary project and his political one.

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At one point I was hoping to end my fourth chapter with a discussion of the dollar sign, but I could find no place in Brown's writing where I genuinely believed that his use of that sign was pointed enough to be important as a semiotic act. I could find no dollar signs in Brown that I felt sure Brown had put there with a sense that the character was doing something the letters d-o-l-l-a-r wouldn't have done just as well. But I wanted to say something about the dollar sign here in this introduction because I think the sign itself communicates – in its tightly compressed way – a history of vital importance, and it encapsulates much of what both Brown and Hawthorne tell us about the relationship between race and the page, much of what Brown says about this race-page dyad's relationship to money, and much of what I have said in this introduction about the fact that, in 2013, we still inhabit a world built out of the concerns that Hawthorne and Brown together do so much to help us understand.

There are many stories about where, when, and why the dollar sign originated. Scholarly opinion is divided enough on the subject that most such theories have at least a few adherents, and none of which I'm aware is regarded as anything but guesswork. But the theory on which my reading depends was articulated by Gordon Braden in a lecture for a comparative literature class in which I was a teaching assistant in the spring of 2011. What Gordon said was that the dollar sign is believed to have originated with Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, who was (or claimed to be) the man who secured Spain's territorial rights in the New World. As Holy Roman Emperor, Charles was keenly aware of

his position as a latter-day Caesar, and saw his colonization of the Americas as a decisive moment in the history of world empire (as, indeed, it was). Now, Imperial Romans had regarded the Strait of Gibraltar as a kind of limit on their territorial ambitions, and they imagined the strait as marked on its northern and southern shores by the two Pillars of Hercules. These marked the western extreme of the known world, and were sometimes pictured in artistic renderings with a sweeping banner between or across them reading *non plus ultra*: no more beyond.

With both an old and a New Spain to his name, Charles V revived this image, but changed its motto to *plus ultra* – more beyond – and claimed for what might have been the first time in the second millennium to rule an empire which surpassed Rome in its glory. Charles V adopted this revised emblem as his royal seal. It would thus be affixed to official documents but also to his government's currency: gold coins (of which, with the new territories, there was plenty) that the Spanish called *dollars*. The seal depicts the two pillars with an s-shaped banner which bears the motto flowing in front of them. All this, Gordon explained in his lecture.

What is this emblem a picture of? It is a royal seal, but it is not used as such today, and few people regard it that way. What does it represent now that it also represented when it first appeared? What thread of continuity accounts for the fact that it has not yet been replaced by some other symbol? It means money, yes, but that is not what it depicts – not what it actually draws a picture of. In a cartoon, when a character is overcome with avaricious lust, dollar signs appear in his or her eyes. There is no longer a Holy Roman Empire or Spanish monarchy, but there is still the dollar and the dollar sign, and in many countries the dollar and its sign have replaced the older *L* and *d.* that, still used in Britain,

harken back to the Romans. The dollar sign represents what, in the sixteenth century, was a *new* kind of money – a kind of money that depends for its existence not just on the existence of wealth or property in the Old World but on Europe's colonization of the New World, and on the new, early modern imperial logic which, with the Renaissance, began to displace the ancient one that preceded it.

But this new order is not *just* about Europe and the New World. That would be a binary reading – the kind which, William Wells Brown would be quick to remind us – the history of slavery is always there to complicate for us. The banner which connects the two Pillars of Hercules – the one that says *plus ultra* – is depicted on a coin made of *gold* mined in America and sent to Europe, but the *banner* is not depicted connecting Europe to America. It's depicted connecting Europe to *Africa*. The story has little to do with America as a political entity, and nothing at all to do with the people we now regard as Native Americans (who are rendered completely invisible in the story the coin tells). The gold itself represents America, but the sign impressed *onto* that gold tells a story about how, as that which had always been gold, it entered history and became money. This story is geographically triangular – the three points of this triangle represented by the gold itself (America) and each of the two pillars: the people of Europe and the people of Africa.

What the dollar sign depicts, then, is the connection between Europeans and Africans, and its invention foreshadowed the complicated and violent history of comingling economies, bodies, and cultural and inscriptive systems. Dollars are not just money; they're *a particular kind* of money – that kind of money which is produced by Europeans' enslavement of Africans, and their expropriation of that enslaved labor in the Americas, that kind of money which produces the "African American" as a type of identity.

Each time we write out a dollar sign – or for that matter spend a dollar – we reinscribe an ideographic version of this story. But because we have lost the ability to read the ideograph we tend not to realize that what we are participating in is less the machinations of the American economy than the continuing histories of empire and slavery.

If – in attempting to honor the nuances and rise to the challenges of either the intensity of Hawthorne's focus on single characters or the slipperiness of Brown's preoccupation with acts of monetary exchange – I can encourage others to notice such ideographs more relentlessly and read them more aggressively, I'll count the ink well spilt and years well spent.

A

Antechapter: Introductory to the Scarlet Letters

Hawthorne famously begins *The Scarlet Letter* by suggesting that not even the most

meticulously planned society can remake Eden. No matter how perfect its vision, no people

can uneat that fruit whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and with it inevitable

transgression against the law.

> The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they
> might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical
> necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as
> the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the
> forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of
> Cornhill,[1] almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac

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[1] Strictly speaking, *Cornhill* refers to at least two places in colonial Boston: one an actual hill and the other a street; only the latter is near the prison. Caleb Snow's 1825 *History of Boston*, from which Hawthorne drew much of his knowledge of the city's seventeenth-century geography (Kesserling 10), notes that in the 1630s "Corn-hill" was the name for what, apparently not long after, was renamed Fort Hill (Snow 43, 110). The fortification itself seems to have been built in the late 1630s, though it's not clear if the name of the hill changed immediately; this hill was the only place called "Corn-hill" in the 1640s. Snow does not explain how it is that the name "Cornhill" came to attach to a section of what by Hawthorne's time was already the present-day

Johnson's lot,[2] and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King's Chapel.

Hawthorne's mapping of vanished urban spaces is beguilingly specific, but more than a little misleading, since it implies that the vicinity of Cornhill and Isaac Johnson's lot are two different places. Johnson's lot is *itself* in the vicinity of what Hawthorne calls Cornhill. Indeed, in the 1640s the burial ground, the prison, and the Church meeting house were *all* located on Isaac Johnson's lot,[3] and what Hawthorne knew as Cornhill Square called *Church* Square (Snow 116).

Washington Street, but his description of the fire of 1711 reads: "All of the houses on both sides of Cornhill, from School-street to the Dock-square [present site of Faneuil Hall] were laid in ruins" (210). Before the adoption of modern postal numbering on Washington Street (which seems to have happened shortly after the Revolutionary War, and accompanied the renaming of Queen and King Streets Court and State Streets) the four blocks of Washington Street on the Boston peninsula were known by separate names, of which Cornhill was the northernmost block. This area includes the house originally belonging to Ann and William Hutchinson, which until the 1711 fire stood at the corner of present-day School and Washington Streets; in 1712 Thomas Crease built an apothecary shop on the site, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the building had been repurposed as the Old Corner Bookstore. The name Cornhill for this block was fully out of official use by 1820, and the site of the prison doesn't seem actually to have been near anything that was called "Cornhill" in either 1640 or 1850. (The hooked northern end of the former Cornhill, which is not particularly close to the site of the prison, retained its name until it was raised to make way for Government Center in the 1960s.

To the extent that the prison was near what would have been called "Cornhill" when Hawthorne was young, though, it was not *so* near it as was the Old Corner Bookstore, to which the phrase "vicinity of Cornhill" is far more literally applicable. There may be a joke here, as the Corn-hill of 1630 would in 1850 – under the name Fort Hill – have been quite near the site of the Boston Custom House, where Hawthorne had once had a job. The conflation of Custom House employment with incarceration would be by no means far from the novel's thematic orbit.

Snow is fairly specific about the prison's location, and, like Hawthorne, explicitly notes the proximity of the prison to the marketplace (along what is now Court and State Streets). According to Snow "Richard Parker or Brackett… we find on the colony records as prison keeper as early as 1638. He had *'the market stead'* on the east, the prison yard west, and the [church] meeting house on the south… From these data we ascertain the fact that the county prison was originally located about the spot where the jail lately stood [now Court Square], and that the spot now [and still, in 2013] occupied by the Old State-house was the ancient market-place" (Snow 116-117, italics in original).

[2] Johnson died in 1630, the first of the settlers to do so after relocating from the temporary shelters in Charleston to reside permanently in Boston (Snow 34-39). As I mentioned in the previous note, Snow finds no mention of the prison before 1638, so it might have come into existence as much as eight years after the burial ground.

[3] Johnson's lot had been more than just what became King's Chapel Burial Ground (the Chapel itself was not built until the 1750s). The editors of the Norton Critical *Scarlet Letter* place both the prison and the meeting house there (35 n2). This would mean that Johnson had owned the whole block bounded (clockwise from the northeast, and by 2012 nomenclature) by Court, Washington, School, and Tremont Streets, which Snow confirms (37), though the relevant block of Tremont Street was in Snow's time called *Common* Street. Johnson was the wealthiest of the original settlers of Boston (Snow 34-39), so it makes sense for him to have owned a

Bostonians in 1850, even those not especially familiar with their city's history, would have been aware of the location of King's Chapel Burial Ground; the chapel, built in the 1750s as this most Separatist of cities' first Anglican place of worship, is centrally located, and before the skyscrapers by which it is now surrounded would have been even more prominently visible. A short, straight line connects the site of the prison and the site of the burial yard, and in a culture of letters saturated with both scripture and the poetry of John Milton, few readers would have had difficulty making the connection between the failure of utopian schemes – of which, as *The Blithedale Romance* reminds us, mid-nineteenth-century New England had no shortage – and the loss of Eden, of which sin and death were consequences. The landscape Hawthorne describes for his first readers is thus grounded both in everyday experience and in a colonial geography whose ghostly traces – and stark moral severity – could still be seen and touched; it's an uncanny geography in which what is most eerie lurks not just beneath but in and through what is most familiar. For a Bostonian reading the first pages of *The Scarlet Letter* when it was new (and there were many such, the novel had to be printed again within weeks) the picture of Boston in those first pages would have been vividly, spookily specific – a delightfully weird echo, in the present's most concrete features, of the past's most phantasmal. But this picture would also have been strangely incomplete, leaving unmentioned an experience the reader is nonetheless implicitly being called upon to remember, since he or she was almost certainly on Isaac Johnson's lot

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much larger lot than most others and, after his death, for such a lot to be subdivided. This helps to explain why the block, by 1640, included all the town's public buildings (for which land was not originally set aside, the plan having been to build in Cambridge instead), but also several private homes; the town took what it needed, and sold or gave away the rest as multiple lots portioned for settlers of more modest means, like the Hutchinsons.

in the very recent past, and was not there on business connected with the burial ground or the prison. In 1850 Isaac Johnson's lot was where Bostonians bought their books.

Ticknor, Reed, and Fields[4] – the name both of the firm that published *The Scarlet Letter* and, in a clever feat of vertical integration, of the booksellers who handled much of its retail distribution – was located at the corner of Washington and School Streets, in a building informally known as the Old Corner Bookstore. The building served as both a business office and a retail shop. No actual bookmaking took place on site, the printing itself always being contracted out to independent presses.[5] The building still stands (it is no longer a bookshop) and is about the same distance from the burial ground and from the site of the colonial prison as these latter two are from each other. That is, the three lots sit equidistant from one another, the prison in the middle of the block's north boundary, and the burial ground and the bookshop on the southwest and southeast corners, respectively. Hawthorne brings the world of the novel into close, if spectral, proximity with the world of the reader by triangulating the prison and the burial ground with a location he doesn't *need* explicitly to

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[4] Which is the name as it appears on the title page of *The Scarlet Letter*. The firm itself changed its name as partners came and went, and for simplicity's sake I have adopted the strategy of Michael Winship's *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* in using "Ticknor and Fields" to refer generically to a publishing enterprise that between 1832 when it began and 1878 when it was absorbed by Houghton Mifflin, went by at least seven different names (Winship xv). James T. Fields, an accomplished poet and a shrewd business man, worked most directly with Hawthorne during the months *The Scarlet Letter* was written. William D. Ticknor, the senior partner, was officially Fields's superior, and would later become close with Hawthorne himself (when Hawthorne died he was traveling with Ticknor in New Hampshire). Reed, who spent only five years as a partner (1849-1854) does not figure prominently in the genesis of *The Scarlet Letter*.

[5] Binding was possibly a different matter. The list of books for sale in the front matter of a first edition of Longfellow's *Kavanagh* (dated May 1, 1849) ends with the note "Each of the above poems and prose writing, may be had in various styles of handsome binding" suggesting that the firm left some – perhaps most – copies of each work unbound in order to accommodate special requests. An 1860s photograph of the store features a sign advertising a book binder on the third story of the building, facing School Street, so it may be that the flexibility in binding was easy to guarantee, and the binding was done onsite, even if it was not done by Ticknor and Fields itself. (The building featured a number of business signs, some of which appear to be paid advertisements for businesses a few doors down.) The bindings on Ticknor and Fields publications were not generic – they feature a unique (or at least unusual) embossed floral crest on the front and back covers, and "Ticknor & Co." on the spine.

mention, since he already knows the reader has just been there – already knows the reader's own memories link the material history of the novel to the place from which it was purchased.

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The opening of *The Scarlet Letter* – Isaac Johnson, the burial ground, the prison – directs our attention to the Old Corner Bookstore, and through it both to the materiality of the book, and to the implication of that materiality not just in verbal or literary orders of meaning but in economic ones too. The novel's physicality mediates a relationship that is at once one of art and one of commerce, since the narrative provides aesthetic satisfactions by offering, within its diegesis, imaginary objects to which the conflicted affective currents of the uncanny can successfully attach. But to open ourselves to the full force of those currents in the way that Hawthorne seems to have imagined them, we need to allow our attention to the diegetic world Hester inhabits to be mediated not just by the words but by the book, since the book (or – more specifically – our experience of going to the bookstore and buying the book) has been encoded for us in this opening chapter as literally, materially, part of the history of the world described on the page. The novel stages itself as a literary object whose status as an article of trade does not blunt or compromise its aesthetic power; rather, that status enhances and extends this power, since our awareness of our own participation in the book's commodification is a part of the machinery by which the fiction draws us the more deeply into the beauty of its design.

Nor are the mentions of prison and burial ground – which put us on the right city block – the only or the most direct of the novel's efforts to focus our attention thus (even if they are, arguably, the most clever). The botanical token which Hawthorne offers the reader

at the close of the chapter, a rose imaginatively plucked from a bush by the prison door,

performs similar work by connecting the prison to yet another historical figure – the only

one besides Johnson, as it happens, whom the opening chapter mentions by name.

> This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it
> had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the
> gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair
> authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann
> Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,—we shall not take upon us to
> determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now
> about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than
> pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. (48)

The content here is fairly insistent in its repetition of what, by this point in the chapter, has

become a governing motif. As nineteenth-century Bostonians, our connection to our

seventeenth-century forebears is governed by the material persistence of their world in ours,

a presence real enough that even now we can see and touch features of the vanished city in

which they lived.

What completes this circuit of identification, though, is the fact that the *real*

physicality of the book has at least as just a claim on the footsteps of Ann Hutchinson as the

spectral physicality of any imaginary rose. When, shortly after the 1711 fire which destroyed

much of the city, Thomas Crease built the apothecary that would later become the Old

Corner Bookstore he was building a commercial structure on the ashes of a residential one –

the house that William Hutchinson had built for his wife Ann upon their arrival from

England in 1634. The rose is imaginary, as is, indeed, (though Hawthorne may suggest

otherwise in "The Custom-House,") the "narrative." But the book is as real a thing as Ann

Hutchinson ever was a person, and though we are asked by Hawthorne to *imagine* being

given a rose sprung from near the prison threshold she crossed perhaps twice, reading *The*

Scarlet Letter we *actually do* hold in our hands a gift from the author, almost equal in its redness, sprung from a less foreboding threshold which she must have crossed many more times than that. The past's vanished materiality – to which we by definition lack direct phenomenological access – is made over and over again newly and vitally available to us by the novel's dogged staging of the material conditions of book production and distribution: the literary marketplace, and, as we will see, alphabetic inscription. To touch the book becomes to live the past.

These are conditions over which, though they are common to all commercially authored literary works, the act of reading itself usually encourages us not to linger. If this part of the novel's engagement with the past has so far received little sustained scholarly attention in spite of, over the past few decades, so many often brilliant readings of the novel's peculiar fascination with the materiality of the alphabet,[6] this may be in part because to appreciate the cleverness with which Hawthorne engineers the reader's response we must better understand not just how the book stages itself as a literary text but also how it stages itself as a commodity – as part of a particular phenomenology of reading which in 1850, Hawthorne knows, is always already also a phenomenology of shopping.

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The Scarlet Letter was officially published on Saturday, March 16, with only specially selected reviewers (and possibly personal friends of the author and publishers) provided

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[6] The most important voice in this chorus is that of Patricia Crain, whose chapter on Hawthorne in her *The Story of A* – though reluctant to connect the novel's obsession with the material and visible to the politics of the racial – nonetheless serves as a model of the quantity and quality of seriousness with which *The Scarlet Letter's* fascination with the alphabet needs to be treated. At the same time, without connecting the novel to the central position race enjoyed in nineteenth-century America as a discourse of the self, Crain is left without a complete way to explain *why* a novel so preoccupied with alphabetic inscriptions (ones worn on the body, no less) would emerge in 1850 rather than in 1650 or 1950. I argue that we must recognize the peculiar relation the book takes up vis-à-vis the alphabet, but we must understand it as an effect of specific historical pressures rather than capricious authorial whim.

copies in advance. Hawthorne's short preface to the second edition is dated March 30, exactly two Saturdays later. As is now well known, the novel was a great and virtually instant popular success, but one reason that a second edition had to be produced so soon after the first is that it was not expected to find so large an audience so quickly.[7] As I've already suggested, and will show in a moment, Hawthorne was preoccupied to an unusual degree with how his novel would sit in the institutional structures of commercial publishing and bookselling – with the kind of encounter *The Scarlet Letter* would occasion between reader and (to use a term thematically and geographically central to the novel) marketplace. Indeed, when, as Hester exits the jail, the narrator notes that "It was no great distance, in those days, from the prison-door to the market-place," he is referring to a distance of about three-hundred-fifty feet, roughly the same distance that separates the 1640 site of the prison door from the 1850 site of Old Corner Bookstore – which is to say, from that "market-place" on which Hawthorne's own literary and professional ambitions most depended. So, did the novel stage itself as an intervention in that marketplace? What were the first two weeks of its reception history like?

As Hawthorne composed the novel – far from convinced of its commercial viability – he had every reason to think that, after initial publication, it would long languish on Old Corner Bookstore shelves, purchased once in a while by an impulsive browser who strolled in with seventy-five cents burning a hole in his or her pocket. As it happens, the novel's instant success probably meant that most copies of the first edition reached their new

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[7] Hawthorne sometimes seems to doubt that it would find any audience at all. James T. Fields, a master promoter who took it upon himself to make Hawthorne a literary sensation, always claimed to believe in the book, but the fact that it was not set in stereotype until its third printing (in September, 1850) suggests that either his public support hid private reservations about the book's commercial viability, or that Ticknor – not yet the close friend of Hawthorne's he would later become – was less convinced than Fields (See: the editors' "Introduction" to Ohio UP's *Centenary Edition* of *The Scarlet Letter*).

owners over precisely the retail counter he had expected, though their stock was depleted in weeks rather than decades.

So, everyone who read *The Scarlet Letter* in the spring of 1850 had bought it at the Old Corner Bookstore, but many of those first readers must have. Hawthorne was not especially well-known at the beginning of 1850 outside the Boston area. He had never made enough money writing so as to be able to support himself or his family by his pen (a fact which "The Custom-House" suggests is crucial to a sound reading of *The Scarlet Letter*) and though his name was well known in literary circles, he seems to have had almost as many detractors as devotees.[8] It's hard to imagine that, in March, before the book had a reputation, hundreds of people were asking for it from bookshops in cities to which neither the novel nor its author had any strong connection, nor does it seem likely that many other bookshops within Boston would carry a novel on which, because it was American, the author held a legally actionable copyright.[9] Such a book would be difficult to sell alongside cheaper pirated editions of the Waverly novels. If the Old Corner Bookstore began selling the book on March 16, it probably shipped copies to booksellers outside Boston at more or less the same

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[8] See, for instance, the weirdly hostile pair of announcements (one circa March 20 and another beginning April 5) in the Trenton, New Jersey *State Gazette*. The former reads "Nathaniel Hawthorne is about to publish a new romance to be called the 'Scarlet Letter.' Who will not read it?" The latter a list beginning "Cheap Books! Very Cheap Books!!" and including at about its midpoint "The Scarlet Letter, by Hawthorne, author of Thrice Fold Tales." Note here as well that, on Wednesday, March 20 (four days after its official date of issue in Boston and probably New York) *The Scarlet Letter* is still being billed in Trenton as forthcoming, and on Friday, April 5 (nearly a week after Hawthorne in Salem has signed the *second* edition's preface) the book is being for the first time announced as available in that city for sale. Northeastern cities situated directly on postal Route One are thus receiving their first shipments while the second edition is already being prepared for press.

[9] Advertisements in the Boston *Daily Atlas* that ran between March 16 and 22 announce the novel as available both at Ticknor, Reed, and Fields and at Tappan, Whitmore, and Mason. The latter's shop, at 114 Washington Street, was across said street from, and about one hundred fifty feet north of, the Old Corner Bookstore. While not technically on the Johnson lot, Tappan, Whitmore, and Mason was actually about a hundred feet *closer* to the site of the old prison than Ticknor, Reed, and Fields. It's not clear if Hawthorne knew in advance that Boston booksellers besides Ticknor would be selling the novel, but it is clear that those who purchased *The Scarlet Letter* from Tappan would just as fully inhabit Hester's Boston as those who bought the novel from Ticknor. I've found no Boston papers from March, 1850 announcing the book as available at any shop but these two.

time; to do so earlier, even if the novel was ready to ship, might have risked piracy by other printers, who would be harder to detect the further they were from Boston. Piracy was a major concern particularly if a loose copy of the novel should make its way to Britain, and not because the threat came literally from seafaring pirates of the swashbuckling variety. In the absence of international copyright, to bring out an official London edition – which Hawthorne badly wanted to do[10] – Ticknor and Fields had to ensure that the first copy of the novel to reach England went directly into the hands of a printer with whom they had a prior working relationship, so they could ill afford to risk an advance copy falling into the hands of anyone they could not trust to refrain from sending it overseas. This is the kind of thing any publisher of the time would have understood, even if such knowledge was less universal among authors; but Hawthorne would doubtless have had reason to understand it more than most authors, since he had so recently served as the surveyor of customs at an international seaport.

So the novel probably had something like what, in today's book trade at least, is called a "strict-on-sale" date. The advance notices that ran in Evert Duyckinck's *Literary World* in New York explicitly mention March 16 as the day to expect the novel. By March 23, exactly one week later, Boston's *Daily Atlas* could claim that the novel had already "been extensively read both in town and country," though this had happened so quickly that the *Atlas's* editor had not actually had a chance to read the novel himself. (My research has uncovered no similar claim made so early in any publication outside Boston.) The *Atlas* notes only that the novel's "mechanical execution is a credit to the publishers" (a possible reference to the red ink used on the title page if it is not simply a backhanded compliment

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[10] Hawthorne's letters from the months after the novel's publication mention this hope repeatedly.

meant to insult the prose), and includes what appears to be an excerpt from Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* review. (Greeley, who had ties to Duyckinck, was doubtless sent an advanced copy.) Newspapers in major cities had, by March 23, been announcing *The Scarlet Letter* as forthcoming for weeks, so booksellers would already have known it was on its way and have signaled their interest to Ticknor and Fields before March 16 actually arrived.

Of the 1,200 copies Ticknor and Fields originally believed would meet foreseeable future demand, a great number must have been held on the premises in hopes that booksellers in other cities would ask to be resupplied, but newspaper announcements up and down the east coast suggest that cities as well connected as Washington, D.C. were just getting their initial shipments on March 27, a mere three days before the date on Hawthorne's preface to the second edition.[11] Booksellers in Trenton, New Jersey did not announce the novel for sale until April 5, almost a week after said preface.[12] This almost certainly means that plans for a second edition were already well underway before any booksellers outside Boston could be restocked, and that whatever portion of the first edition had been set aside to meet future trade demand must have been depleted by unanticipated retail demand at the Old Corner Bookstore (or other Boston booksellers equally near the setting of the novel's opening events).

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[11] An advertisement that first ran in the Washington *Daily Globe* on March 27 reads "'The Scarlet Letter,' a Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Just received and for sale by Taylor & Maury" (4). More remote locations – cities further south or west and even some isolated New England towns like Brattleboro, Vermont and Middletown, Connecticut, were still announcing the book as newly arrived as late as mid-April. Washington and Trenton I regard as bellwether cities since, though far from Boston, and less likely to warrant special distribution arrangements than New York, they share with each other and with most other major cities at the time placement on Route One.

[12] See note 8, above.

What this means is that both in terms of the plausible authorial intent regarding the retail experience through which Hawthorne *imagined* staging his book as he was in the act of writing it, and in the historico-anthropological terms of the buying frenzy that *actually occurred* in March of 1850, the novel's material existence as a commodity is more anchored to the Old Corner Bookstore and its block than to any other place in the world, including Hawthorne's Mall Street home and even the Salem Custom-House.[13] Hawthorne wrote for a reader walking in Hester's footsteps. The first shopper who bought *The Scarlet Letter*, perhaps skimming its first chapter before leaving the store, did so just *feet* from the place where Hester is said first to have donned *her* scarlet letter, within the walls of the prison. The prison and the bookshop, in the early eighteenth century when the former was an old building and the latter a new one, were almost back to back.

That demand for *The Scarlet Letter* outstripped the expectations not just of Ticknor and Fields but of Cambridge printing house Metcalf and Company is suggested by the fact that neither arranged for the novel to be cast in stereotype plates – something they *had* done for, say, Longfellow's *Kavanagh*, the first edition of which was printed by Metcalf in the summer of 1849. Metcalf workers set *The Scarlet Letter* as movable metal type in twenty-one octavo forms, and in the time between finishing its first run and receiving word that there would be a second they had cannibalized roughly fourteen of them for use in other

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[13] Advertisements in the Boston *Daily Atlas* that ran between March 16 and 22 announce the novel as available both at Ticknor, Reed, and Fields and at Tappan, Whitmore, and Mason. The latter's shop, at 114 Washington Street, was across said street from, and about one hundred fifty feet north of, the Old Corner Bookstore. While not technically on the Johnson lot, Tappan, Whitmore, and Mason was actually about a hundred feet *closer* to the site of the old prison than Ticknor, Reed, and Fields. It's not clear if Hawthorne knew in advance that other Boston booksellers would be carrying the novel, but it is clear that those who purchased *The Scarlet Letter* from Tappan & Co. would just as surely inhabit Hester's Boston as those who bought the novel from Ticknor's.

projects.[14] Two-thirds of the pages in the second edition are thus from type wholly or partially set anew, the cause of, among other things, a few unauthorized variants in the second edition (for which, Hawthorne's newly added preface explicitly states, he has elected to make no changes). This is not labor which a reputable press (and Metcalf branded itself as "Printers to the University," meaning Harvard) would find itself having to perform twice out of mere carelessness or mismanagement. The press had either decided independently, or had received intimation from the publishers, that Hawthorne's largely favorable but modest reputation augured a first run which would meet or exceed demand indefinitely.

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A Brief Note on Secondary Literature

Sacvan Bercovitch notes that "no critical term is more firmly associated with *The Scarlet Letter* than ambiguity." There is little doubt that Bercovitch is right about this, and even less doubt that the fascination with ambiguity around which the critical consensus has formed is something that the novel goes out of its way to court. Our understanding of the novel as fundamentally ambiguous is not itself based on a misreading of the text, but it has nonetheless become an interpretive truism which has helped to enable incomplete, ahistorical readings, since too often the ambiguity in the novel has been understood to be a way of disengaging the fictional world Hawthorne describes from the historical context within which he imagined and described it. Like Bercovitch, I'm interested in making a case

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[14]An apocryphal story relayed decades later by Julian Hawthorne claims that Metcalf and Company workers are also responsible for the disappearance of the novel's the manuscript, which has never been found and was likely destroyed. The younger Hawthorne claimed that his father had bitterly imagined press workers to be lighting their pipes with it. Matthew J. Broccoli disputes Julian's veracity, and contends that, according to Fields's widow years later, Hawthorne claimed to have burned the manuscript himself.

that, while the novel is every bit as self-consciously ambiguous as we've always thought it to

be, this ambiguity needs to be seen not as means by which Hawthorne *distances* himself from

the political questions of his moment but as the medium through which he most profoundly

engages those questions.[15] My argument will differ from Bercorvitch's primarily in its

willingness – in discussing the politics of ambiguity – to accord the visible world and the

materiality of the alphabet the central place the novel seems to insist they deserve in such a

discussion. As Bercovitch suggests, the novel's ambiguity is profoundly implicated in the

ideological and sectional debates of 1850 America, but without locating race at the center of

these debates we can use the novel's context to explain its ambiguity, only without race, the

novel's context can't explain why its ambiguity is so often staged in relation to material,

visible things – especially bodies and letters – rather than, say, ideas, memories, or emotions.

Without race, in other words, we cannot appeal to the novel's context to explain why it is so

focused on the visible world, or on the physiognomic body, or on color. If ambiguity seems

to take the novel out of the orbit of questions as seemingly concrete and specific as those of

racial identity, the fact that this ambiguity is so often attached to bodies and colors rather

than things randomly chosen brings it back into that orbit quickly enough. Those critics who

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[15] As brilliant as Bercovitch's reading is, he remains apparently convinced that the novel is not interested in race, which he seems to regard as an issue too black and white – so to speak – to be approached by way of the kind of ambiguity in which Hawthorne is interested. For Bercovitch, Hawthorne's ambiguity is all about the need to escape stark binarisms like north and south, or free state and slave state, and to maintain national unity and peace by keeping everything in abstract, uncertain terms, so that nobody is certain enough of anything to kill or die for what they believe. There is much wisdom in this interpretation of the novel – and it may be that this is the connection between politics and aesthetics that Hawthorne had most consciously in mind as he wrote. But my argument is that, even while this ambiguity does, admittedly, try to keep things abstract, Hawthorne's preoccupation with the material world, including his unprecedented preoccupation with the materiality of letters as such (letters which are always metonyms in this novel both for writing and for the visible body), draws the novel's politics back into the world of physical bodies, and this engagement with the body, I will show, is manifestly – even if often obliquely – tied to ideologies of racial identity, for it is in terms of racial physiognomy that nineteenth-century Americans would have been most conscious of the visible body as a problem of textual interpretation.

have by not linking race to the novel's ambiguity suggested implicitly that racial embodiment and its attendant politics are somehow too narrow a set of concerns, or too specific to the experience of people who are not white, or too fixed and determinant in their meanings to have much importance in a novel as obsessed with ambiguity as this one, have failed to understand what race is. By reminding ourselves of the various ways in which racial epistemology and racial identity are *themselves* unstable, *themselves* predicated on various kinds of unknowability, *themselves* performative representational acts which interact with and transform the underlying discursive order they appear only to cite, we can use the idea of race to unlock more fully the meanings of *The Scarlet Letter*, can use *The Scarlet Letter* to understand more fully how the notion of race functioned in antebellum America, and can recover Hawthorne (despite his often reactionary politics) as an important forerunner for notions of embodied identity we tend to associate with the poststructuralist turn of thinkers like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Judith Butler.

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Compared to other novels in what's sometimes called the American hyper-canon, *The Scarlet Letter* has been difficult to consider as a political document. This difficulty has not been entirely the fault of critics' reluctance to ask politically or historically minded questions; the novel itself has a way of resisting and derailing interpretations which rely on historical specificity – of descrying them in advance as somehow reductive or petty. Hawthorne's fictions seem expansive precisely in their uncertainty, and to the extent that we consider politics (as, to be fair, many of Hawthorne's contemporaries also considered it) as a set of restrictive questions like *should slavery exist?* or *can a society be both multiracial and egalitarian?* then the "political" does, admittedly, seem to deflate the very qualities of expansiveness that make

Hawthorne worth reading in the first place. I suggest above that those critics who resist

politicizing Hawthorne may have understood Hawthorne quite faithfully, but drastically

underestimated the complexity of "the political," and assumed in advance and to their peril

that the instability of ideological forms like racial identity will necessarily fail to keep pace

with the instability of symbols like the black veil or the scarlet letter. But the critics who

follow this line have not acted alone. Hawthorne, always ambivalent about politics, ever has

among these conflicting valences at least one valence characterized, at the manifest level, by

distaste and impatience. Much of *The Scarlet Letter* seems willfully to resist any explicit

engagement with the kinds of political questions that consciously mattered to Americans in

1850, and this includes, of course, that which even Hawthorne once grudgingly admitted

might be "the great subject of the day"[16] – the question of the enslavement of African

Americans in the South. It is to this resistance – real enough, but only ever half the story –

that Jean Fagan Yellin refers when she notes that

> The studied ambiguity of [Hawthorne's literary] works, usually understood as the
> result of deliberate artistic decisions, must also be considered as a strategy of
> avoidance and denial. Hawthorne, it appears, could not acknowledge the necessary
> engagement of politics and art… Instead he devised an elaborate refusal to connect
> the great moral problem that is his literary subject with what the Garrisonians called
> the "American national sin."

Yellin is not alone in making this argument, but she puts it succinctly enough here

that, as I have developed my reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, I have found it useful to regard this

entire theory of Hawthorne's aesthetic as the "ambiguity as avoidance and denial" position.

The stark distinction Yellin, writing in the 1980s, makes between politics on the one hand

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[16] Hawthorne wrote to Longfellow, May 8, 1851: "This Fugitive Law is the only thing that could have blown me into any respectable degree of warmth on this great subject of the day – if it really be the great subject – a point which another age can determine better than ours" (*Letters* XVI 431, quod. in Yellin 95).

and art on the other may seem to accommodate a New Critical consensus which today is an even more distant memory than it must have been then. But this rigid art/politics dichotomy – which, however anachronistic it seems, lives on in, among other places, the debate over the comparative methodological merits of formalist and historicist approaches to literary works – has continued to structure our response to *The Scarlet Letter*, and to do so more stubbornly and resiliently than it has responses to *Huckleberry Finn*, or *The Great Gatsby*, or even *Moby-Dick*.

This sense – I hesitate to call it a *belief*, because it's one few people would explicitly avow or consciously subscribe – that we must choose between artistic and political relevance in writing about Hawthorne has not usually been an advantage for those trying to understand *The Scarlet Letter*. But *the fact that* this sense has endured so tenaciously can still speak eloquently and usefully of how it is that the novel acts on us. When critics see *The Scarlet Letter* as a work tightly wrapped in artistic insulation from the crassness of *mere* political concerns, they are not guilty of seeing something that isn't really there. Rather, their response registers as critical (mis)reception qualities that belong to the work itself, but which show us only one of its faces. This insulation is something Hawthorne genuinely weaves with one hand (though – like an ambidextrous Penelope – his other hand is as quick to unweave it).[17] Our sense that *The Scarlet Letter* can't be both aesthetically and politically worth

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[17] Nina Baym says that Sophia Peabody, when she received the love letters Hawthorne wrote her while they were courting (letters in which he claimed the women to whom he was related by blood could not understand him) "Sophia's… imagination accepted the lover's hyperbole as literal truth, as Hawthorne expected – for he was aware of, and attracted to, the transparent sensibility which seemed the very opposite of his own… And, as a result of her mistake, she transmitted the legend through the conversations and letters until it became an article of family faith" (5). Unlike these letters, Hawthorne's fiction is meant for a reader sagacious enough to penetrate its various ironies and disguises, devises Hawthorne says are necessary to insure that his real meanings will only be understood by those most predisposed to sympathize with him. The "avoidance and denial" understanding of Hawthorne makes a mistake similar to Sophia's, reading the mere surface of what Hawthorne offers, to the sophisticated reader, as a window on his deepest concerns.

talking about is not just some misreading floated by lazy interpreters still caught up in New Criticism's wake. It is *the* misreading which tells us what the novel is trying to do – the one which the text engineers for us – the manifest interpretive content which we must carefully dismantle if we are to unlock the latent mysteries it hides. To analyze the text we must work through its resistances; and to work through these resistances we must understand them. They are disguises the novel's political valences put on, and understood carefully they can tell us much about what they seek to conceal. Indeed, like Reverend Hooper's veil, they reflect the very fragility of the desire to hide – the fact that the game of hiding is really the complicated performance of a wish to be discovered.

As I have been suggesting, *The Scarlet Letter* is not just more obviously canonical and less obviously political than most other American novels; its canonicity and (what has been taken to be) its lack of politics spring largely from the same source: the "studied ambiguity" which, Yellin is right to hint, has served as a guarantor of the novel's deliberate artistic design and its author's "genius." To write about *The Scarlet Letter* in ways that seek to dismantle as illusory the notion that it has nothing to do with the politics of the nineteenth century has thus, sometimes and for some critics, been to dismantle the ambiguities at its thematic core, as if these ambiguities too must necessarily be illusory.[18] If *The Scarlet Letter* is political, this argument goes, it must not actually be ambiguous. And if its ambiguities have underwritten its reputation as a literary achievement, one is obliged accordingly to argue either that literary merit is *itself* a form of false consciousness, or that *The Scarlet Letter's* reputation as a literary achievement is undeserved. In both cases such arguments cast doubt on an assumption in which, one would think, they must maintain faith if they are to remain

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[18] See Grossman.

internally coherent: that *The Scarlet Letter* is worth discussing in the first place.[19] If the novel is ambiguous then it may be great, but it is not political (Yellin's position, a more dialectical version of which is Arac's[20]). If, on the other hand, the novel is genuinely political, it may be "great" in some post-New Critical, non-literary sense of the word, but its ambiguity has been an illusion – a case of apolitical New Critics and their poststructuralist heirs mistaking for the text's "artistry" what has in fact been no more than their own complexity reflected in the glass through which they read (this is essentially Grossman's claim in 1993). And if *The Scarlet Letter's* value is located now not in its illusory ambiguity or artistry but in the political significance which these illusions too long hid, why, indeed, discuss the novel at all when one could discuss instead Hawthorne's *overtly* political writings – his campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, or the late-career essay "Chiefly About War Matters?"[21] As if Hawthorne's

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[19] Though I'm not offering an exhaustive review of the secondary literature here, the history of the kind of scholarship to which I'm referring can be gleaned by reviewing, in chronological order, the articles in my bibliography by: Arac (1986), Yellin (1989), Madsen (1991), Grossman (1993), Goddu, and Person (both 2001). Each of these essays raises important points, and the picture I draw is a composite of the interpretive shortcomings of each, not an attempt to discredit any one of them in particular. That said, none of them argues that *The Scarlet Letter*'s politics are performed in and through (rather than in spite of) its ambiguities. On the other hand, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Office of The Scarlet Letter* brilliantly argues precisely that point, but in the course of this argument Bercovitch so wildly understates the importance of race to mid-nineteenth-century conceptions of self and society that his results are scarcely recognizable as a description of life in the United States.

[20] Which is included in the collection *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), which Bercovitch co-edited with Myra Jehlen. Arac notes among other things that Hawthorne might seem to offer a politically charged skepticism, but that "while questioning what offers itself as our world, he refuses to commit himself to the authenticity of any other world or way of seeing" (258). While this project's scope prevents me from offering a point-by-point rebuttal of Arac's argument, I should point out here that among the things I seek to show in my project is that Hawthorne's doubt-struck epistemology, which Arac notices here is curiously fixated on *seeing* rather than on the work of any other sense, is not a way of avoiding politics, but a way of encoding as an aesthetic practice – that is, of *performing* – that kind of politics within which racial embodiment functions as the governing trope. The "questioning" that Arac sees as a way for Hawthorne to *beg* the question of race is, I argue, in fact a way of *asking* it.

[21] I do not mean to suggest that Hawthorne's non-fiction is undeserving of attention, but rather that it merits attention *precisely because* Hawthorne also wrote the fiction he did. Furthermore, this is not the case because Hawthorne's literary output possesses some aura of genius which transcends mere history but because these works in particular – and what has been taken to be their literary qualities more generally – have performed crucial functions *within* history as embedded discourses of power *in themselves*. The "power" of a "powerful work of art" is still a kind of power in the political sense after all, and the specificity of "literature" is no more or less worthy of sustained critical engagement than the specificity of "money" or "race" or "the

fiction were *not* the primary reason his non-fiction could garner such attention in the first place! It's no doubt true that this non-fiction warrants more attention than it has ever received, but that attention is warranted mainly because Hawthorne also wrote fiction which not only *met* but *helped to invent* enduring criteria for literary excellence in the United States. His eloquent and occasionally racist essays about the real world indeed have the power to startle, but that power is wasted to the extent that the writing in which it surfaces is discussed by critics in ways that leave our understandings of Hawthorne's *literary* works intact, as if the conservative racial politics of the non-fiction showed us a side of Hawthorne that simply didn't exist (as Yellin implies that it doesn't) when he wrote fiction – a political self which in his fiction he completely and successfully concealed. None of us is going to vote in the presidential election of 1852. The point of Hawthorne's propagandistic writing for us today must be that we don't need to look at them at all to discover his politics.[22]

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body." Indeed, part of the importance of Hawthorne (and especially *The Scarlet Letter*) is that it has served not just as an example of what critical consensus has long held to be literary greatness, but one of the key moments in the production of literary greatness as a modern idea. Engaging the novel on these grounds is thus not, as Jay Grossman implies, to traffic in the illusion of a transcendent aesthetic order unconnected with history of power, but a means by which that illusion can be unmasked for what Grossman apparently assumes it actually is: a grammar of power which cannot be understood outside of other such grammars (e.g. those racial, economic, or imperial power), and which *must* be understood if we hope to make sense of power more broadly. Grossman seems to think of himself as reading *The Scarlet Letter* against the grain in assuming that the power of writing is a mode of ideological domination; it does not occur to him that this is, in fact, what, hiding in plain sight, the novel is actually, literally, saying in its plot: that the power of the alphabet is a mode of ideological domination.

What race and writing share is their status as historically determined discourses of power without which subjectivity itself either would not exist at all or would exist in a form unrecognizable to us. My aim here, if it's not clear, is *not* to defend properly "literary studies" from some external threat posed by "cultural studies," but rather to defend *both* from those who mistakenly regard cultural studies as something originating outside literary studies rather than from within its best practices.

[22] This is, in effect, what Yellen's argument amounts to, and it's an argument that is in different ways rehearsed and recreated still. Yellen (and to a lesser extent Arac) argue that we should be troubled by the fact that *The Scarlet Letter* refuses to engage questions of race or slavery, and that this fact should qualify our praise of the novel's aesthetic merits. They do *not* argue, as I do in this chapter, that *The Scarlet Letter* is among the most thorough, uncompromising, and sophisticated meditations *on* the subject of race produced in the nineteenth century.

So scholars have tended not to discuss *The Scarlet Letter* in ways that readily allow that it might be fiercely political, resolutely ambiguous, and aesthetically satisfying all at the same time, and this is partly because the novel asks implicitly for its literary success to be measured by the success of its flight from the political world of the 1850s. This flight is presented in at least three keys simultaneously: in that of its setting, which is the distant past, in that of its aesthetic project, which is avowedly antiliteral and antipolemical, and finally in that of the (only slightly fictional) autobiographical context in which the novel most explicitly asks to be interpreted. If there was any danger of our failing to see it in the novel proper, "The Custom House" makes sure we know that this book is written as, among other things, an embittered retreat from a cruel and arbitrary political world the author seems neither to understand nor even to want to understand. As T. S. Eliot helps us to see, though, authors who flee in their writing, however real or necessary that flight is to the production of their art, continue to be defined by the monster they keep at their backs; surely this is as true of politics as it is for emotion and personality. However sincere Hawthorne was in his distaste for public life, however much it seemed to him to cheapen what makes us most fully human, no major American writer of the mid-nineteenth century was so active a participant in official politics as he, who read political histories voraciously, who regularly held semi-political appointments, who actively participated in the presidential campaign of 1852, and who would later accept a diplomatic position as reward for his labors.[23]

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[23] Sacvan Bercovitch writes that while "[n]o American writer felt more detached from party politics than Hawthorne did; few were more engaged in the affairs of political office; and none was so deeply learned in American political history" (107).

Jay Grossman's often brilliant "A is for Abolition?" deserves special mention here, in part because some of Grossman's argument explicitly challenges Yellin's.[24] Grossman argues that *The Scarlet Letter* is "profoundly implicated in… antebellum discourses" (14) of race and racism, particularly in the figure of the "black man" (about whom much more later). He continues:

> Yellin is certain… of the canonical status of the work she studies, and it is that very notion of canonicity [as *The Scarlet Letter* possesses such unimpeachable New Critical pedigree, "canonicity" here should be understood to presuppose ambiguity] that makes it impossible for her to see the simple untranslated presence of a black man in Hawthorne's most famous novel. (24)

The problem here is that in order to make the case that "the black man" in *The Scarlet Letter* is a character with racial significance (which, as I will argue later, he undoubtedly is) Grossman must also make the insupportable claim that this black man is a "simple untranslated presence" in the novel. Surely a novel as preoccupied as this one is with the ways in which individual people are always already constructed in and through semiotic orders has no "simple untranslated" characters, even if most of them are "present" in some sense. But even if we concede that most of the novel's characters are simple untranslated presences, or for that matter that *all* of its characters are both simple and untranslated, the Black Man can't be one of the "present" ones, because he *never actually appears* in the novel. Often talked about but never seen, he is most properly thought of as an *absence*, whose

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[24] Grossman also argues against (and names his essay in response to) an article by Deborah Madsen, who says essentially that *The Scarlet Letter* is engaged with questions of race and slavery, and harbors, perhaps without Hawthorne's conscious intent, latent antislavery convictions. I do not share Madsen's view that Hawthorne was a closet abolitionist – he was not one, and those occasions where he bothers to mention non-white people tend to be shot-through with the quality and quantity of racism typical of white Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. That said, he was not particularly friendly to slavery, and Madsen is right to insist that *The Scarlet Letter* borrows some of its thematic tropes (such as the scaffold scene) from antislavery narrative works, apparently because Hawthorne recognized their power to engage readers' most intense emotions. This does not mean, though, that he sought to use this emotional engagement with the reader to argue against slavery.

potential racial meanings are kept in play by the very fact that he never comes so near the reader as to risk having his "blackness" assigned a fixed, knowable meaning, racial or otherwise. There is no simple untranslated black man present in *The Scarlet Letter.* The character called "the Black Man" – who is conventionally glossed as an avatar of the devil – is kept in the vicinity of racial meanings precisely in the work of translating his implied presence out of his unavoidably complex and actual absence.

Thirteen Scarlet Letters

> *Letters in the shape of figures of men, etc. At a distance, the words composed by the letters are alone distinguishable. Close at hand, the figures alone are seen, and not distinguished as letters.*
>
> *To symbolize moral or spiritual disease by diseases of the body; – thus, when a person committed any sin, it might cause a sore to appear on the body; – this to be wrought out.*
>
> <div align="right">From The American Notebooks</div>

I argue in this dissertation's antechapter that to read *The Scarlet Letter* politically without reading it reductively we must recognize that its investment in ambiguity is less a mask behind which its political content is hidden than a formal matrix within which that content is suspended are a medium through which it is communicated.[1] The novel is preoccupied with masks of various sorts, of course, of which the titular emblem is both the most obvious and

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[1] Strictly speaking, I did compare certain aspects of this ambiguity to a mask, but to a particular kind of mask, the resistance of an analysand. The analysand wants to cling to his or her neurosis, but also wants to be cured, thus the resistance is designed both to conceal what is repressed and to articulate it more eloquently and more fully than the conscious mind itself is able.

most enigmatic. At its most literal, as an emblem the letter reveals Hester's secrets, and as cloth it helps to conceal part of her body. But the letter is less literally a mask than its major precedent in Hawthorne's oeuvre: Reverend Hooper's folded crepe in "The Minister's Black Veil." In many respects the scarlet letter takes up, reframes, and extends ideas that Hawthorne had begun considering as the black veil a decade and a half earlier.

The crucial fact about the veil is that, though it conceals Hooper's face, in doing so it reveals more fully who he actually is than his bared face ever could. This, both Hooper and Hawthorne seem to suggest, is the public performance of a shame – a gripping fear of showing one's face in public, of having that face read and judged – which in its hidden, unacknowledged form is common to all people. If Hooper alone has the integrity to perform openly a shame at being seen which is, in reality, universally felt, then in *masking* his face he has revealed something the *un*masked faces of his parishioners conceal; he has shown their faces, and their willingness to have their faces seen, to be more fraudulent disguises than his own, for, unlike him, they pretend to one another not to feel or to understand the fear of being looked at, a fear which Hooper alone openly claims. Thus *not* to hide the face, in "The Minister's Black Veil," is to hide the true self, which for Hawthorne is always that self which harbors the wish to hide for shame or fear of scorn; the mask which hides the eyes is thus the window to the soul.

Much of what is true about the veil is also true about the letter, including – crucially – that it is distinguished from its generic kind by its color. While the title "The Minister's Black Veil" designates the veil not just by its color but by the profession of its owner, both Hooper's last words, which close the penultimate paragraph ("on every visage a black veil!") and the final words of the tale as a whole ("it [Hooper's face] moldered beneath the black

veil"), suggest that the veil's meaning, at least as far as Hooper is concerned, is not determined by the fact that he is the one who owns or is wearing it. In these examples this contest over the veil's meaning – which drives the entire story's philosophical project – is played out in a contest over articles: Hooper says *a*, universalizing the shame the veil signifies, and the narrator-as-community says *the*, minoritizing that shame as an idiosyncrasy of Hooper alone. But the veil's meaning is never so negotiable that it could be some color *other* than black and still mean whatever it means, nor does it ever seem to occur to anyone in "The Minister's Black Veil" that another of the veil's properties such as size, or shape, or opacity might rival color's determinative relation to its overall significance as an object; all these qualities are mentioned at least once in the tale, but none become part of the object's name. No one suggests that the veil's color might *not* be the most important thing about it. On this all parties, including Hawthorne himself, appear to agree.

So in conceiving of the scarlet letter, Hawthorne changes the color of his central symbol, but does not seem to waver in his commitment to color as a bearer and determinant of meaning.[2] To the extent that color's role has been transformed or deepened it is due less to the fact that the color has changed from black to scarlet (though this change, as I'll discuss shortly, does have consequences of its own) than to the fact that the veil has become a letter. This is a crucially metatextual turn, because, unlike the object in "The Minister's Black Veil," that in *The Scarlet Letter* accorded titular importance, whose shifting, contested

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[2] I'm taking a modest liberty in supposing that Hawthorne saw *The Scarlet Letter* as a direct development of material he treated in "The Minister's Black Veil," but the thematic parallels are hard to ignore (both center upon a minister tortured by a secret he never openly reveals, but which probably [and in *The Scarlet Letter* definitely] involves an affair with a young woman of his congregation). I view the choice of "the scarlet letter" for a title to be, among other things, an indication of the novel's close kinship with the tale.

meanings the work tracks, exists within the same semiotic space that the work itself inhabits: the alphabet. *The Scarlet Letter* does what "The Minister's Black Veil" would do had it been a black-crepe art installation rather than a tale.

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Before Hawthorne was even sure he wanted to call his first novel "The Scarlet Letter," he was sure he wanted its title (whatever it was to be) to appear on the title page in red ink. Writing to J. T. Fields on January 20, 1850 – Metcalf and Company already set the first part of the novel in type, though the last three chapters were not yet written – Hawthorne asked,[3]

> If 'The Scarlet Letter' is to be the title, would it not be well to print it on the title-page in red ink? I am not quite sure about the good taste of so doing, but it would certainly be piquant and appropriate – and, I think, attractive to the great gull whom we are endeavoring to circumvent.

This was not the first time Hawthorne had written to his publishers wringing his hands over questions of the book's title or its title page's design. On January 8 he had written to Ticknor, Reed, and Fields (the letter is addressed to the firm as a whole) complaining "I cannot think of a name for the book, and fear it must go to press without one. It has already cost me more perplexity than any fifty pages of the volume." On January 15 Hawthorne wrote again to the three partners – still supposing the narrative he is has now begun calling

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[3] A chronology of the relevant biographical material relevant to the book's composition and publication is beyond the scope of my project. The *bare outline* of such a chronology would look roughly like the following: composition begins in September, 1849. Fields reads an abbreviated version after visiting Hawthorne in Salem in November or December and offers to publish immediately. Hawthorne sends Ticknor the manuscript for "The Custom-House" and most of "The Scarlet Letter" on January 15, noting that three chapters of the novel are still unwritten. Hawthorne writes to Horatio Bridge on February 4 saying that he finished the novel the previous evening, and that typesetting of the first part of the volume is already underway. The novel is listed in the Ticknor, Reed, and Fields pricelist dated March 1, but seems not to have actually been sold at or shipped from Ticknor's Old Corner Bookstore until March 16, which is also the date of the earliest printed reviews. (The material in this note borrows heavily from the editorial introduction to the *Centenary Edition* of *The Scarlet Letter*, and from Hawthorne's correspondence [also published in the *Centenary Edition*] for the dates mentioned.

"The Scarlet Letter" would be the centerpiece of a volume also including not just "The

Custom-House" but collected shorter tales as well – to declare

> I shall call the book Old-Time Legends; together with *sketches, experimental and ideal.* I believe we must consider the book christened as above. Of course, it will be called simply "Old-Time Legends," and the rest of the title will be printed in small capitals. I wish I could have brought the definition of the whole book within the compass of a single phrase, but it is impossible. If you think it essentially a bad title I will make further trials.[4]

The sense in these letters that Hawthorne either was himself hesitant or believed Fields and

his partners were hesitant to commit to the title on which they would eventually settle is

compounded by an undated draft of the letter to Fields of January 20 (the one from which I

quoted first), which suggests that the letter Hawthorne posted that day to Fields, in which he

agrees to call the book "The Scarlet Letter," is not only tentative in what it says, but also the

result of at least one more reversal of real or rhetorically assumed opinion.

> If the Judgment Letter is to be the title – print it on the title page in red ink. I think that the only proper title for the book would be the Scarlet Letter. I am quite sure about the taste of so doing. I think it is attractive and appropriate –

Hawthorne is in the draft passage both firmer in his recommendation that the title be

printed in red ink on the title page and more committed to the title "The Scarlet Letter" than

he is in the letter he actually posted. If he is reluctantly accepting "Scarlet Letter" as a title in

the posted epistle, in its draft he is even more reluctantly accepting another title, as if his

intention in writing to Fields was to communicate not his acceptance of any particular title,

but rather the fact that his acceptance of *any* title would only ever be reluctant. Complicating

these vacillations, and running through the whole month's correspondence with Fields and

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[4] The typographical idiosyncrasies have been preserved as they appear in *The Centenary Edition*.

his two partners, is Hawthorne's concern with the kind of impact the design of the title page

will have on the reader's experience of the book, and on the way the book is talked about.

It's as if the novel's title was worth fifty times the hand-wringing of any one of its pages not

just because of what its words would *mean*, but because of how they would *look*. The

arrangement of the title's letters – considered geometrically as much as verbally – seems to

have been a constant preoccupation for Hawthorne even as he was in the midst of actually

composing.

Indeed, Hawthorne's commitment to the visual flourish of red on the title pages is,

besides his preference for the title "Scarlet Letter," perhaps the only thing that *doesn't* change

between his letter to Fields and its draft. The draft suggests implicitly that the choice of a

title *other* than "The Scarlet Letter" is the justification, in Hawthorne's mind, for the use of

red ink on the title page – as if actual scarlet *ink* was meant primarily to compensate him for

the absence of the *word* "scarlet." In the posted letter, the use of red ink is justified not by

the fact that the book *isn't* to be called "The Scarlet Letter" but precisely by the fact that it *is*.

Hawthorne wants to see the novel's title in red, and he wants the wording of the title to

provide – or at least to appear to Fields to provide – the rationale for having it appear that

way. This willingness to alter content in order to achieve desired form – an elevation of style

over substance which still maintains the pretense of form's subordination to content – is

even manifested in the wording of the two passages. The phrase "I am [not] quite sure about

the [good] taste of so doing" appears in both documents, though the words I've placed in

brackets here appear only in the posted letter and not in the draft, and one of these words –

"not" – actually reverses the polarity of the content's meaning! Whether the result of design

or of carelessness, this omission of "not" suggests a writer more deeply committed to

signifiers than signifieds, one whose most deeply felt attachments are to particular arrangements of words – one wants almost to say *shapes* on the page – rather than to the ideas for the conveyance of which those words are ostensibly mere instruments. It's as if the matters of judgment and conviction discussed in the letter – the actual point of view Hawthorne is claiming to be his own – can be revised, reversed, and restructured on a whim; but the arrangement of words through which these matters are conveyed must yield to as few alterations as the author can arrange. Hawthorne had, one can only assume, just spent much of the past month revising his own prose, and he composes this missive with a sense that words and the will these words seem to obey are equally open to revision – that, if anything, it is *easier* to change what you believe than to change the way your beliefs are verbalized; words are more autonomous – and their wielder's will less free – than rational humanism would ever dare to fear. It is a frame of mind that befits an author about to propose a title (and a title page) in which the relationship between words and things will be performed in newly problematic ways.

For the next several pages I allow myself *considerable* license to ruminate, and in revising the following pages I have preserved in that rumination moments of recursive, nonlinear argumentation and speculative grasping which are normally refined out of finished scholarly prose. I do this not because I seek to try my reader's patience but because part of my argument is that *The Scarlet Letter* asks to be read – and is best understood – in these terms, and they are terms within which size and scope – depth and breadth – are matters not only of degree but of kind. The mode of free association in which I engage, and the duration for which I allow myself to engage in it, is itself meant as evidence for one of my points. Readers inclined to accept my claims outright, or impatient to discover to what conclusions

those claims have led me, might skip from here to the beginning of the next chapter, taking

on faith that the pages between here and there have demonstrated the following:

- Hawthorne chooses a title for his novel which signals to the reader, before "reading"
  proper has even begun, that colors and letters will be among the key rhetorical
  registers in which the book is interested.

- That what the title emphasizes overtly is a sense which I usually call *unity*, but which
  can be understood as suggestive of fullness, completeness, harmony, concord,
  reciprocation, balance, stability, and resolution. This unity is, most importantly,
  concord or resolution between, first, signifier and signified and, second, color and
  letter, but it is not limited to these. Furthermore, these two specific instances of unity
  between opposed (signifier/signified) or distinct (color/letter) registers of meaning
  are but the *manifest* content of the title's unifying gesture; that gesture's *latent* content
  can best be seen in light of textual (that is, *drawn from the novel itself rather than its title or
  title page*) evidence to include a wish to supersede the distance or dissonance between
  the paired terms of, for instance, specific political (north and south) and
  psychosexual (mother and son) binary oppositions.

- That in spite of the overt emphasis on unity described above there is a less-overt but
  ever-present awareness in the novel that this unity is imperfect or elusive, as if the
  title page were meant to suggest the *ideal* of absolute unity without also suggesting
  that this ideal could ever be made *real* (even – perhaps – in the relatively unfettered
  domain of imaginative writing). The novel's vision of *the good* might thus be
  understood as one in which a people's shared dream of absolute unity, and the
  pleasures which attend that dream, enable that people to manage the aggressive and

libidinal impulses which stem from the ineradicable corruptibility and moral imperfection which Hawthorne tells us in the novel's opening chapter frustrates even the best laid utopian plans. The shared *unrealizable* dream of a perfect society is what motivates the achievement of the *realizable* (but more modest) dream of sublimation and forgiveness. This realization is only possible when individuals recognize in one another the shared wish for a perfect world, but each also accepts that this perfection can never be made real, the wish never acted out. Should any of us attempt to make our own utopian castles on the ground rather than in the air, we will quickly realize that our own idea of the perfect society differs irreconcilably from our neighbors. But by accepting the *fact* that the world will always be flawed, we can sustain the necessary *fiction* that we all want the same things and all cherish the same utopian dream.

- That the use of red ink in the letters of the title on the title page (and the two words of the title themselves) underscore all the above points: viz. the importance of both color and character, the desideratum of unity, and the melancholy but democratically necessary certainty that the desire for perfect unity will never find satisfaction. The red ink also – with almost the flamboyance of a William Blake page – claims for the novel domains of visual meaning that extend beyond the limits of the verbal, while at the same time, paradoxically, betraying Hawthorne's anxiety that the vast resources of language may prove inadequate to the task at hand. Introducing this red ink, Hawthorne reveals his fear that words alone are not enough – that without laying claim to visual registers of meaning to which novels to not normally have or want

access, he may find himself unable to communicate to his readers, or indeed to
attract the attention of any readers in the first place.

And finally on the subject of scale (which is to say, the duration of my discussion of
the title page):

- That the multiple binary oppositions mobilized on the title page, which are all
  carefully kept in a state of suspended dialectical tension even as they ache toward
  complete resolution, are meant to offer the reader sweetly baited interpretive snares.
  These are, like Hooper's black veil or Hester's scarlet letter, insoluble aesthetic
  puzzles to which no answer ever quite satisfies. Because they are endlessly
  fascinating, these puzzles prevent us from moving on to engage the less abstract
  questions raised by the presence of bodies in the novel proper. By the time, in the
  novel, the abstract preoccupations with color and character are triangulated so as to
  include a new *third* preoccupation with the materiality of the *body* (this happens
  roughly as soon as Chillingworth is introduced, the novel's first non-white character
  at his side), we as readers have already been coached to regard our relationship with
  the visible world in abstract and safely circular terms. Our coaching encourages us to
  consider the philosophical and inwardly focused questions of the visual, rather than
  the concrete and manifestly *racial* terms the novel begins at this point to deploy. By
  allowing ourselves to be snared in these traps, we can see how they function as
  resistances, and begin to unravel how it is that the novel, in resisting, is also
  providing tools we can use to move past its resistance. In the thirteen red letters on
  the title page we encounter an epistemological motif that, as it continues to be

repeated, will gradually come to serve as the novel's understanding of racial difference.

The dizzying orthographic performance of the title page – which I think can stand as a synechdoche for much of what seems apolitical in Hawthorne, much of the Hawthorne that is "so little of a politician that he scarcely feels entitled to call himself a member of any party"[5] – is like the resistance of an analysand who both does and does not want his resistances overpowered. It cannot be ignored, but nor can it be taken at face value; it must be worked through, and this entails engaging it to some extent on its own terms. We must accept that Hawthorne is making some kind of case on the title page that he is above merely political preoccupations and prefers to them philosophical and aesthetic ones, but in seeking to understanding what his argument means, or why it is being made, or how, ultimately, Hawthorne wants his reader to respond to it, we need not (and I suspect *must* not) believe that what the argument says is literally true. We seek to move past the seeming lack of political valence we encounter in *The Scarlet Letter*, but to do so we must understand how this appearance of lack is meant to forestall our progress as interpreters. We must learn to see, in the traps the resistance lays for us, distorted images of whatever content it half-hopes to hide. The extravagance of the discussion that follows is meant to rise to the challenges Hawthorne poses on the title page and in the title. The traps laid there for us ask that we give ourselves over to a kind of speculative free association while we remain focused on but one object. We are asked to look at the title and wonder about its meaning fearlessly, and in

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[5] Hawthorne's description of himself in *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852), a book whose very existence must deeply complicate the meaning of this, its opening sentence.

the knowledge that certainty may never arrive. Just as the sequence of letters in the title asks to be read simultaneously both in liner (verbal) sequence from left to right and in recursive (visual) circular terms (since, for example, the letters of *letter* meet our eyes as the disordered and incomplete recurrence of the letters of *scarlet*) my discussion will endeavor to allow for free association, circularity, and disorder, while at the same time serving a clear purpose. By accepting the title page's invitations to paranoia, interpretive false starts, and dead ends, we engage in the kind of reading Hawthorne demands, and this will allow us to work through rather than around or against his resistances – his half-hearted protests of political neutrality. This freedom to speculate and wander is, I think, the best way to work through Hawthorne's traps, since it promises to demonstrate how those traps work, how they may be overcome, and how the key to overcoming them is built into the structure of the traps themselves.

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Examining the January 20 letter to Fields next to its draft, we find Hawthorne seeming to change his mind about some things and to remain firm about others. The mere fact that the story changes between the two documents, however, may suggest that *neither* represents Hawthorne's best effort to convey his conscious feelings. While it's possible that Hawthorne is being as direct as he can be with Fields in both passages, it's not probable. Some external event of which no evidence remains – an urgent message from Fields, for instance, saying, perhaps, that though he no longer prefers the title "The Judgment Letter," or ardent encouragement from Sophia that red ink is, in fact, tasteful when used on title pages of romances, and that one need not advance the such a suggestion timidly – would have to have altered circumstances so that the change between draft and letter represents Hawthorne accommodating new information.

The specific opinions being reversed aren't actually that important on their own; the question of if Hawthorne was genuinely changing his mind or simply changing his story can't be answered definitively, and the startling fact that *The Scarlet Letter* was almost called something else doesn't and shouldn't undermine our belief that the title by which we know the novel directs our attentions usefully. Even when we correct for his vacillations, Hawthorne's preference in both the letter and the draft is clearly for the words "Scarlet Letter" to be printed in red ink. It's because he seems to think one or the other of his wishes may prove impossible to fulfill for some reason that he tells Fields his second choice would be for the title "Judgment Letter" to be printed in red rather than for "Scarlet Letter" to be printed in black. More important to my argument, in comparing the letter to the draft, is how *both* suggest that the red ink on the title page is something Hawthorne saw as important to the novel's meaning – and to the terms under which new meanings could be generated within the novel. What the reversal tells us is that the color on the title page is at least as crucial a part of the work's authorial project as the specific words of which the title is composed. We can attribute to Hawthorne as an author,[6] then, not just the use of red ink on the title page and the specific title "Scarlet Letter" but also the representational crises initiated by the simultaneous use of both.

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[6] As opposed, that is, to Fields as a publisher/editor, or anyone else involved in the book's production (typesetters, copyeditors, etc.) My point here is not to reify literary authorship or rely uncritically on the distinction between imaginative labor and unimaginative labor. To whatever extent that distinction continues to structure the ways in which we think about published works, though, it's important to note that the splash of color on the novel's title page is part of its authorial design. The fact that that, as far as I know, not one of the editions of *The Scarlet Letter* which is currently (2013) in print and available for sale presents the title in anything but black (including those few which present the original title page in [monochromatic] facsimile) suggests that most scholars regard the red ink as *not* an authorial decision, therefore an editorial or printerly decision, therefore without textually substantive meaning, and therefore superfluous.

But this representational crisis does not at first seem like a crisis at all. Like much of

what we encounter in Hawthorne's fiction, it initially seems to be a coherent, perhaps even

straightforward, unity of meaning. This unity of meaning invites prolonged rumination,

though, and in this rumination slowly reveals that within it which is paradoxical and

inscrutable. Reverend Hooper's black veil and Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, to pick two

examples I've already discussed, both seem to make intuitive sense, even if the sense they

make is not the kind of literal sense it would be easy to articulate. Reverend Hooper is a

gloomy man, so he dons a piece of cloth whose existing connotations are of gloom,

bereavement, and mourning. Avoiding even *that* level of metaphorical range, Hester Prynne's

scarlet A stands for the word *adultery* with a synecdochal exactitude that barely even counts

as figurative.[7] We know, though, that in Hawthorne's world, the literal must always

eventually contend with other, less systemic, less rigorous interpretive agendas, even if those

agendas assume only the form of doubt, confusion, or unease in the vicinity of what too

easily makes sense.

So both the *words* of the title and the fact that those words are set in red type serve to

foreground the relationship between colors and letters as conceptually separate (but in this

case pragmatically joined) vehicles of meaning, and initially their relationship seems to one of

almost perfect harmony. This melding of color and letter performs as inscription something

like the utopian gesture on which Hawthorne casts such a skeptical glance in *The Scarlet*

Letter's opening. To remove the thirteen letters would be to remove the scarlet, and to

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[7] It really *isn't* figurative in the sense we usually mean when we talk about rhetorical tropes, because the synecdoche here is confined to the signifier (the word and its spelling) rather than having anything even figuratively to do with actual adulterous acts.

remove the scarlet would be to remove the thirteen letters. In material terms, the two are as exactly coextensive as the sea and the water that fills it, and their unity abides as long as we consider the title primarily in terms of the letters of which it is composed and the color of the ink as which those letters sit on the page. What holds true for these letters also holds true for Hester's letter, which is arguably[8] the title's primary referent. The thing and its redness cannot be disarticulated from one another physically without destroying both. The same cannot be said for the words of the title, though, since the separate words name the qualities separately: *scarlet* refers just to color, and *letter* just to alphabetic inscription, and the two words, though neither could be split into its color and its letters, are separated from one another on the page, and, in literal, material terms, could be sent to opposite sides of the globe by anyone with a pair of scissors, two envelopes, and money for overseas postage. The same cannot be said for the letters and their redness; it's not even clear how such a thing could be imagined.

If we allow that black is a color, though, this inseparability of letter and color would obtain virtually wherever there is printed language. The inseparability of these letters and their redness is therefore neither unusual nor particular; what's both unusual and particular is the extent to which Hawthorne tries on the title page to call our attention to an interdependence of color and letter which governs *every* page of the novel, and indeed every

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[8] This is a commonsense reading of the literal meaning of the novel's title, and it's not incorrect. We should recall, though, how important articles (which Hawthorne in his letters to Fields doesn't seem to be categorizing as part of the title in the strictest sense, and which are not inked in red on its title page) are to the last two paragraphs of "The Minister's Black Veil." That our scarlet letter is one that takes the definite article suggests that, strictly speaking, the literal referent of the title is only one of the many scarlet letters in the novel (Hester's, the one reflected on the suit of armor, the one Dimmesdale sees emblazoned in the night sky, and the one on Dimmesdale's chest, bring their number to at least four). When Hawthorne titles the climactic chapter of the novel "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter" and, in that chapter, reveals *Dimmesdale's* letter, he seems to be complicating what he doubtless knows is the most intuitive reading of the title.

page of *most* novels.[9] By shifting from the usual black ink to red ink Hawthorne disrupts the reader's decoding routines, and by closely aligning signifier and signified (the scarlet letters spell out the phrase *scarlet letter*) replaces those routines – in which language is supposed to refer outward into the world, with an introjected way of decoding in which what the words mean is not imagined to be outside their status as words but inside it. The letter to which the title refers (and, importantly, the letter A appears once and only once in the title) is inside rather than outside the sign.

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Hawthorne's fiction, and *The Scarlet Letter* in particular, have played a major part in generating what, for professional and semi-professional readers of literature in the United States, have served as standards of literary excellence and aesthetic pleasure. Herman Melville, Henry James, the New Critics, and to an only somewhat lesser extent those scholars of the past two generations who have inherited the institutional infrastructure the New Critics built during the Cold War, have all regarded this book as in some sense paradigmatic – as setting a recognizable standard for what imaginative works are supposed to accomplish. I want to linger over this point about the inward semiotic trajectory of the title because I think we find in it an early and perhaps inaugural instance of an ideologeme which, though now (rightly) unfashionable, continues to have tremendous power to organize our understanding of what it is to read. The red ink on the title page is "piquant and appropriate" in Hawthorne's estimation. In being *piquant* it heightens our awareness by

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[9] I avoid absolutism here, since there are practical exceptions of which Hawthorne was probably aware, and which (I think tellingly) were being perused fairly seriously in the same decades during which he was writing. A novel can be written in Braille, for instance, and it's likely that the first Braille novels were produced while Hawthorne was developing his craft. I'll return to this question of alphabetic inscription which is non-visual (and in Braille's case tactile) later in the chapter.

providing a sensory experience more than usually intense or pronounced, and this it does by disrupting our readerly routines enough for us to notice things about the words we read that would normally escape our attention. In being *appropriate* it casts signifier, signified, and referent in a relation to one another that Hawthorne believes his readers will, with him, find intuitively coherent and sound. When Pope tells aspiring poets that in their work "the sound must seem an echo to the sense" he is describing much the same ideal of beauty as the one Hawthorne describes when he tries to justify to Fields the extravagant use of color. But Pope's description of an art in which form and content are perfectly mated to one another is ultimately at least partly metaphorical, since it imagines poetic form as an *aural* rather than a *visual* matter, but writes knowingly for a (perhaps relatively new, but still fully formed) culture of print. Pope's "sense" cannot be echoed by "sound," because books are visual not aural records. By the time Pope's *Essay on Criticism* was composed, poems were already things normally experienced with the eyes rather than the ears. By making this desired mimetic bond between form and content a matter of visual rather than auditory experience, Hawthorne transposes the bond into the register where his (and Pope's) readers will most likely actually encounter the work itself: that of shapes on a page rather than vibrations in the air.

When Hawthorne does this by turning the meaning of the sign inward rather than outward into the world of things, bodies, and relations of actual power, though, he intertwines this ideal of aesthetic coherence (form and content in *appropriate* echoing relation to one another) with another idea to which it has no necessary relationship: that of an aesthetic experience which floats free of practical or political concerns. This is not something Pope, or Addison, or Samuel Johnson, all of whom wrote expressly didactic and

reform-minded books, would have understood readily. Even the British Romantics, with whom this particular understanding of aesthetic autonomy is sometimes associated, remained politically engaged, however much they sought in their work to approach political questions in indirect and non-didactic ways.[10] On the title page of *The Scarlet Letter*, the authorial gesture by which form and content are so perfectly mated to one another is the same one by which the words, in their effort to mean, turn away from the world of things and people inward to the world of the page itself. In this sleight of hand we can see a skeleton which will later assume fleshly form as New Critical doctrine (or at least as that doctrine to which, today, New Criticism is usually, if unfairly, reduced): that literary excellence must ever march hand in hand with apolitical, non-didactic meanings.

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Thus, in the thirteen characters[11] on the title page, SCARLET LETTER is both what is meaning and what is meant, and part of what unites the two is that both "what is

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[10] This is a generalization, obviously. There are moments in all six of the major Romantics which, examined out of context, seem to invoke an early version of *l'art pour l'art*, and Keats, at least, seems (as much as Hawthorne) to have been trying at a conscious level to equate what is beautiful with what floats utterly free from the push and pull of actual history. (Like Hawthorne's, of course, Keats's work engages its historical moment in complicated and fascinating ways, in spite of what seems to have been his intent.) But even if we read, say, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as, ultimately, a meditation, on the part of the poem, upon its own status as poetry, we must still read the urn as a metaphor for the poem, and to do so we must imagine that the urn exists elsewhere – in time and space rather than just on the page. The thirteen red letters make no such claim on us, since we can take their referent to be *literally* part of the sign they combine to form.

[11] This is as good a place as any to address why it is that I'm discussing the thirteen letters of "Scarlet Letter" when there are other plausible counts of the letters in the work's title. The title begins with the definite article, adding a T, an H, and an E to our count. Furthermore, there is the descriptive subtitle "a romance," and lastly there is the semicolon which terminates the main title, appearing immediately to the right of the final R in *letter*. Both the *THE* and the subtitle *a romance* are inked in black, in a significantly smaller font than the main title, and on separate lines. The subtitle, furthermore, is not habitually used by Hawthorne or anyone else in referring to the work, and though it is doubtless important as part of Hawthorne's attempt to distance his long narratives from the specific constraints of "the novel" (an attempt which he continues in "The Custom-House" and in the prefaces to his other romances), it is not part of what he seems to have regarded consistently as the book's title. In his letters to Ticknor and Fields while writing, he tends to refer to the story, and later the entire volume, as 'The Scarlet Letter' with the article capitalized and, like the two other words, within inverted commas (*Letters* 305-08). In the all-important, unsent, and undated draft of the letter Hawthorne sent to Fields on January 20, he does not use these inverted commas, nor does he capitalize the article, so that both titles –

meaning" (a thirteen-letter, two-word phrase) and "what is meant" (a thing with two

declared qualities: its *being a letter* and its *being the color scarlet*) are composed of two in-theory

separate parts (again – the two *words* of the phrase and the two *qualities* of the thing the

phrase names, and not by coincidence each of the two words names one of the two

qualities).[12] It's as if each register – color and letter – is willing to share the throne of

meaning with the other since in this case such an arrangement allows them each to rule two

kingdoms simultaneously: that of the signifier and that of the signified. The two words, in

their relation to one another, seem even to marshal their respective phonetic and

orthographic properties in the service of communicating reflection, harmony, and balance.

Each word possesses two syllables; the two inner syllables are spelled identically, and share

virtually the same pronunciation. On the title page itself, the two words of the main title are

set in capital letters of uniform size (**SCARLET LETTER** rather than, say, **Scarlet Letter**

or **SCARLET LETTER**).[13] The two three-character strings on either side of the space

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the Judgment Letter and the Scarlet Letter – are rendered just as I have rendered them here (308, all these have been studied in *The Centenary Edition*, which provides only transcriptions and no facsimiles of these specific letters). In the only holograph manuscript dating from 1850 in which Hawthorne mentions *The Scarlet Letter* that I've been able to examine for this project (to Zacharia Burchmore, June 9, 1850), the title is rendered with the article lowercased, and is not set off in quotes or underlined (Hawthorne Papers, Box 1, Folder 35, UVa Special Collections), nor is it terminated with any punctuation. Though penned in Lenox, the letter to Burchmore is written on the same blue stationary that Hawthorne had been using since his dismissal from the custom house (see: to Charles Wilkins Webber, December 18, 1849 Box 1, Folder 34, a letter written from Hawthorne's study in his Mall Street, Salem home while *The Scarlet Letter* was in progress). This stationary is almost certainly the same as that used not just for the January correspondence with Ticknor and Fields, but for the lost manuscript of the novel itself as well.

[12] That colors are not always in the shape of letter is obvious – that letters are not always dependent on color may not be. Certainly, letters which are inked onto a flat surface like paper or parchment tend to be legible only where a binary system of color difference distinguishes the ink from the surface on which it sits. That said, there are numerous instances – some of which I'll discuss briefly in this chapter – in which alphabetic communication does not depend on such a system. The Braille alphabet developed for use by the blind and the manual alphabet which supplements American Sign Language are two such examples, and writing that is engraved or embossed on a monochromatic surface such as brick represents one of several kinds of writing irreducible (it seems to me) to either chromatic or non-chromatic phenomenology.

[13] To be fair, both of the latter two depart from Ticknor, Reed, and Fields's house style, though so does the use of color.

between the words are visually identical to one another in every respect. The second word, LETTER, consists of six letters the middle four of which are arranged palindromically so that one would need change only one letter of that word – the first to R or the last to L – for it to be a true palindrome. (This is not the case for, say, *retell.[14]*) The sounds L and R represent, both liquid consonants, are enough like one another that – notoriously – some non-native English speakers have great difficulty distinguishing between them in everyday speech. Linguists refer to them as the *lateral* and the *rhotic* phonemes, and in the strictest sense they are the only two liquid phonemes in the English language, though in poetics – unless I'm far less precise in my discussions of verse than I mean to be – any consonant, like s or n, whose sound can be "held" by a speaker till breath runs out, counts as "liquid." The fact that modern linguistics groups this pair of sounds together under a separate phonetic heading, though – like the fact that in many languages the difference between the two sounds simply doesn't exist in a perceptible way – says something about the kinship they share. It says, specifically, that – as a group of two and only two – they are bonded by their sound in a way that we might imagine E and F or U and V paired to one another visually.

In other words, though *letter* is not a palindrome in the strict sense, four of the six characters – each E and each T – duplicate another letter in the word, in all four cases the E or T and its double sit equidistant from the word's orthographic and syllabic midpoint. The difference of the first from the sixth (last) letter frustrates this palindromic gesture, but does not so wholly preempt it that the gesture disappears. The palindrome which *letter* comes

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[14] I exchange one of my Ts for an L here, but the letters are distributed more or less the same way as in *letter*: a doubled vowel, a doubled consonant, and two single consonants. I was unable to find a true anagram for *letter* that was also an English word.

close to being is as something it *almost is*, rather than as something it simply *isn't* – a gesture which it fails to complete rather than one it fails even to initiate. Between the perfect mirroring of the inner letters and the close phonetic proximity of the outer, the word is sufficiently symmetrical for us to notice this symmetry as a governing ideal should we, for some reason, go hunting around words to look for meaningful patterns in the arrangement of the letters that spell them. Usually we have no reason to do so; my suspicion, though, is that Hawthorne arranges to have this title printed in red ink partly to give us such a reason.

The font used[15] is one in which the left and right sides of capital Ts essentially mirror one another (the serifs on the left point in the opposite direction from those on the right), so that were it not for the asymmetry of the letter E (the fact that its left and right halves do not mirror one another the way those of T, I, H, etc. do), the ETTE in the middle of the word would truly mirror itself. But even more improbably, and even less likely to be a product of mere happenstance, the title's second word consists *entirely* of letters which have already appeared in its first, *scarlet*, in which L, E, T, and R each appear exactly once. As is apt for a phrase that cannot fail to direct our attention to the status of individual letters as material things (because, again, it both *means* red letter and *is* red letters), its very spelling gestures

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[15] Font as such enjoys only a small place in my analysis, but the fact that this is so – in spite of the length of my meditation on the title page – deserves a brief explanation. Ticknor and Fields's publications do not vary much in their typographic conventions. *The Scarlet Letter* departs from house style only in its use of color, though it is an assumption of my project that – in choosing to make a special request about the color of ink used – Hawthorne implicitly lent authorial approval to the other elements of the book's design. (Ticknor and Fields published friend and rival Longfellow, so Hawthorne was doubtless familiar with their *mise-en-page* and knew what his lack of intervention in it promised.) That said, he does not seem to have been an expert on typefaces or their nomenclature (nor am I). He may or may not have been conscious of the fact that the serifs on their house style's capital T (unlike those in Monotype Garamond, which I am using now) are symmetrical. The font used for *The Scarlet Letter* is almost certainly some form of Scotch Roman (which was designed by Boston printer Samuel Nelson Dickinson in the 1830s, and was extremely popular in nineteenth-century America) or some adaptation thereof. I've been unable to find a sample of Dickinson's actual font in which the curl at the foot on the upper case R curls so tightly as those in *The Scarlet Letter*, though.

toward a choreography of unity, symmetry, repetition, and reflection. The *letters* on the page

have been materialized entirely as *scarlet* ink, just as the word "letter" is materialized entirely

out of characters already contained in the word "scarlet." Where the word "letter" suggests

repetition (both because two of its letters repeat internally and because all of its letters repeat

letters in we've encountered in the previous word[16]) "scarlet" suggests singularity (each of its

letters is used once). The two words are close enough to anagrams of one another that, as a

pair, they whisper of the same wished for unity that color and character (which are one

another's materialization in this ink) and signifier and signified (which arrange themselves

here as a kind of semiotic Mobius strip) whisper in and as the title as a whole.

　　This is a unity the desirability of which, as I will suggest shortly, can be explained

quite robustly in psychoanalytic terms, and these terms strike me as readily applicable

whether or not we avail ourselves of commonsense humanist notions of authorship. I don't

mean to suggest, however, that psychoanalytic readings definitively or exhaustively answer

the question of why it is that an author like Hawthorne might come to find the sort of

semiotic harmony we encounter on the title page attractive or aesthetically satisfying. We can

and must look simultaneously for other kinds of answers. This is so partly (but *only* partly)

because even those who, like me, see psychoanalysis as the richest means of describing

people's inner worlds must still continue to ask questions about their outer worlds – the

world that lies outside the mind. Color and letter – like signifier and signified – gesture

toward unity, but it is a unity always troubled and never quite complete. The two perform a

dialectical ballet in these two words, and it's a ballet congruent not just with the union of

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[16] Which is to say nothing, at this point, of the fact that what it *means* is a kind of repetition of what it physically *is*.

mother and son at the center of oedipal desire, but the union of states at the center of

federalism. On a national scale, Hawthorne would offer the desirability of this federalist

unity, and the real threat posed the Union by sectional and ideological divisions, as the

central argument of his 1852 *The Life of Franklin Pierce*.[17] The traumatic friction which the title

page's vision of harmony seeks to repress or ward off, whatever else it stands for, stands at

least for both an eviction from the womb and a war between the states.[18] Hawthorne writes

against – writes partly to assuage the anxiety he feels *because of* – militant voices on both sides

of the slavery question. Fraternal twins *in utero*, by their reckless baiting of one another the

North and South risk tearing open the placental Union – an ideological membrane by which

each is nourished and both are protected from external threats; each separately must learn to

trust that this Union has love enough for them both.

We know, of course, in hindsight that the politics of compromise would fail

miserably and catastrophically. Hawthorne, who would die in 1864, lived long enough to see

this failure happen, but in 1849 and 1850 he, like many Americans, must have regarded

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[17] Hawthorne's campaign biography of Pierce, the politics of which (including its relationship to the Compromise of 1850 and the aesthetics of ambiguity) are discussed in Bercovitch's *The Office of* The Scarlet Letter (see especially 86-88).

[18] Though I've tried to discuss the text in ways that validate and interweave biographical, formalist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, and here, finally, historicist approaches, I want to emphasize that I do so in order to show both the power of a genuinely complicated work of literary artistry and, even more so, in order to insist on the methodological argument I'm making implicitly throughout this dissertation. This argument claims the mutual compatibility of these theoretical vocabularies when all are used judiciously. Part of using them judiciously, it should go without saying, is avoiding reductive interpretations, and so it bears repeating that the multidisciplinary approach I take here is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, my hope is that it will help to demonstrate the impossibility any exhaustive interpretation, since one of Hawthorne's lessons for us in *The Scarlet Letter* is that every interpretation is itself subject to – and thus creates new possibilities for – reinterpretation. Ambiguity (which a certain simplified New Critical sensibility might take to be Hawthorne's claims about the specificity of literary representation) needs to be seen as a much more sweeping claim about the natures of epistemology and phenomenology – a claim that what common sense would suggest is the nature of literary interpretation in particular is in fact something more like the nature of phenomenology in general.

sectional compromise as the best way to avoid bloody revolution, permanent disunion of the states, and an international embarrassment that might discredit republican democracy on the world stage for generations to come. If America descended into the Napoleonic despotism or the patchwork nationalism of Europe, democracy itself – the Winthrop vein of American exceptionalism feared – would be dead. If America endured intact and continued to grow and prosper, it would have shown Europe that monarchal power was not a necessary evil but an *un*necessary end. The sense in 1850 must have been that the American Revolution and the Constitution had placed a proud, risky bet on republicanism, a horse little tested and, in the shadow of Ancient Rome and modern France, much suspected. It's as if, for the Revolution itself to have been justified, the United States needed to outlast the monarchical institutions with which it cut ties in the eighteenth century.

The stakes of political stability seemed, looking across the Atlantic, to be as high as they'd ever been, since Europe painted a somewhat apocalyptic picture of what political instability could look like. A new Napoleon had been selected to lead France at the end of 1848, and less poetic sensibilities than Hawthorne's had the uncanny sense that the events of the French Revolution – utopian Romanticism collapsing into an anarchistic bloodbath which only a new Caesar would have the strength to stop – might suddenly and nightmarishly repeat themselves in the present.[19] We must remind ourselves then – as obvious as it seems – that in 1850 people had no reason to expect or even fear the Civil War

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[19] Marx's is, of course, only *mildly* less poetic a sensibility than Hawthorne's, but the fact remains that, at a time when Marx thought he saw the ghosts of the Napoleonic past haunting the neo-Napoleonic present, Hawthorne – whose sensibility was considerably more gothic than Marx's (and who, employed as the customs surveyor of an Atlantic seaport, would have reason to follow the news coming out of Europe) – could well have seen the same ghosts.

as we now know it. It would doubtless be more reasonable to have supposed that either there would be no war at all or that there would be a war that ended with the coronation of a new North American monarch.

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Those who recognize the title *Brain Age* might recall an electronic gaming fad among baby boomers in the mid-2000s which, through a series of various kinds of timed puzzles, was supposed both to entertain the player and help him or her to ward off senility. According to Wikipedia[20] *Brain Age* neither claims nor seeks scientific legitimacy, but it is "inspired by" the work of, and carries some kind of endorsement by, Japanese neuroscientist Ryuta Kawashima. The game begins by assigning the player a base intelligence and cognition score which he or she will then try to improve over time with daily tests and puzzles. Playing the game for the first time, the player must complete a so-called *Stroop Test*, named for American psychologist J. Ridley Stroop, whose pioneering experiments helped to lay the ground work for what we now think of as cognitive science.[21] Stroop was interested in how different mechanisms of cognition, in themselves perfectly functional, could interfere with one another if working to solve distinct problems simultaneously. The test he devised is

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[20] I do something here which I would find displeasing if I encountered it in a paper from one of my students, but since my remarks about *Brain Age* are not the only pillar of evidence on which my claim stands, and since video games in general are new enough that scholarly norms for discussing them haven't yet fully developed, I take the liberty of citing a source more consulted than trusted, and liable to change drastically from minute to minute. As long as I've opened the door to the Wikipedia riffraff, though, I might as also mention that */wiki/Stroop_effect* mentions a recent (2000s?) episode of the PBS show *Nova* on which Stroop tests were used to gauge the intellectual impairment of climbers approaching the summit of Mount Everest. Other Wikipedia pages consulted for this section included */wiki/Brain_Age:_Train_Your_Brain_in_Minutes_a_Day!* and */wiki/Ryuta_Kawashima*.

[21] Stroop's test and its findings were published in his "Studies of Interference in Serial Verbal Reactions," which first appeared in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 18 (1935) 643-662. For my research I consulted an online version held at Christopher D. Green's web resource *Classics in the History of Psychology* (psychclassics.yorku.ca/Stroop/).

ingeniously simple; the subject is shown a card on which the name of one color is printed in

ink of another color (for example **red** or **blue**); the subject must then name, as quickly as

possible, the color of the *ink*.[22] As Stroop's initial article detailing his research explains:

> [I]f the word 'red' is printed in blue ink how will the interference of the ink-color
> 'blue' upon reading the printed word 'red' compare with the interference of the
> printed word 'red' upon calling the name of the ink-color 'blue?' The increase in
> time for reacting to words caused by the presence of conflicting color stimuli is
> taken as the measure of the interference of color stimuli upon reading words. The
> increase in the time for reacting to colors caused by the presence of conflicting
> word stimuli is taken as the measure of the interference of word stimuli upon
> naming colors. (646-47)

The "Stroop effect" is even now the name given to the retarded cognitive response of a

mind solving conflicting problems which in themselves are or should be simple. By checking

the response time of a subject against established norms, various kinds of psychological

impairment – intoxication, oxygen deprivation, head trauma, dementia, etc. – can be

identified and quantified.

Neither the scientific legitimacy nor the ideological and regulatory assumptions of

Stroop's work is particularly important for my argument. The Stroop test probably has little

to do with twenty-first-century laboratory science; and even if modern cognitive

psychologists would see nothing damning in Stroop's humanistic conception of the mind,

their acceptance (or lack thereof) shouldn't be taken an endorsement of that conception on

my part. I'm not saying that "the mind" as Stroop understood it is or is not "real" in a

transhistorical or prediscursive sense. Real or not, this "mind" needs to be understood as (or

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[22] Stroop's article also details the various control tests, in which other groups of subjects were asked to
identify solid blocks of colors, color names written only in black ink, etc. Though I am not a scientist his
investigation certainly seemed to meet the standards of the modern scientific method as I understand it.

as *also*) a discursive, historical construction just like any other object of any era's scientific inquiry. So I regard Stroop's ideas as, in a basic sense, products of the 1930s, and in their eighty-years distance from *The Scarlet Letter*, it might be objected that they possess at best limited relevance to my argument. That said, the fact that Stroop's test is still being used for things in the twenty-first century, and that it has a kind of pop-psychological credibility in both the east and the west, suggests that his work was undergirded by assumptions about the mind not specific to the time and place they were first implemented. They have a history, but their history doesn't begin and end with the America Stroop lived in. The mind that Stroop researched is still the mind as many people understand it today, and there's no reason to suppose it does not closely resemble the mind as it was understood in Hawthorne's America too.

But what matters most for my argument is that Stroop was *not* particularly interested in the relationship between colors and words. In his article's introductory overview of relevant scholarship he cites a broad range of psychological research into the effect of competing stimuli on cognitive function, and only some of this research has anything to do with either reading or color perception. The real object of Stroop's inquiry is what was then called "interference" (his opening paragraph bemoans the absence of any more theoretically specific term of art, and I know not if one has since been introduced), that is, the process by which mental tasks that can ordinarily be performed without needing to be planned or thought about consciously (such as the opening of a door) are disrupted or inhibited by the mind's attempt to solve simultaneously some unrelated problem. The disjunction between color and writing is merely that means by which, Stroop believes he has discovered, this kind of interference can be produced in a laboratory grade of purity. Stroop's ultimate goal is

always the study of an interpreting mind at war with itself; his argument is that the competing tasks with which his test charges the subject give us a picture of such a mind which is as undistorted by the particulars of individual temperament and circumstances as might be wished. Just as a small hammer, when it strikes the knee, can provoke a scientifically viable picture of a patient's reflexes – a picture not of the subject's relationship to hammers but of the relationships of the parts of that subject to one another – the Stroop test produces a picture not of the subject struggling to interpret any particular thing, but of interpretive protocols struggling intra-subjectively with one another. Stroop's test misaligns color and writing to provoke and study the *form* of internal conflict without discoloring that form by supplying it with any more *content* than he must – to produce friction that is not friction between any two particular things. The card he asks his subjects to look at is, like the hammer that strikes the knee, a stimulation as close to neutral as he can provide while still provoking his subjects to respond. Seeing **red** and saying "blue," the mind performs fractured cognition in an elemental state – fractured cognition so completely reduced to its content-free essence that, Stroop suggests, it can at long last be studied under tightly controlled laboratory conditions.

We do not need to know or care if this "Stroop effect" is a function of biology or culture to recognize that Stroop's investigations focus on interpretive protocols quite deeply set within the structure of subjectivity. His discovery is that, like the hammer that strikes the knee, the decoding challenge he presents to his subjects can implicate them in a causal chain but circumvent their powers of conscious intent. It draws them into an interpretive circuit, but the mental powers that complete this circuit are involuntary ones, and what surprises most in his research is probably that the intellectual capacity to connect written words or

fields of color to spoken language resides in a part of the mind to which conscious intent has only limited access. One cannot simply *decide* to ignore the part of the mind that wants to make the mouth say "blue" when it sees the word blue. Indeed, the duration of the Stroop effect – the amount of additional time it takes for the subject to suppress the word "blue" and pronounce the word "red" in such a case – might be regarded less as the duration of writing's "interference" in the power of color recognition than the time it takes the conscious mind to step in and facilitate in the decoding of the visible world – a process with which, for most adults, it rarely needs to trouble itself.

So Stroop studies, and discovers how to produce at will, minds momentarily paralyzed by their having to inhabit two separate interpretive protocols at the same time. The ability to recognize familiar words or color fields, for most people, functions smoothly without the need for conscious problem solving. Reaching into the parts of the mind that perform these two tasks, Stroop discovers that he can reach depths to which the subject's own power of conscious reflection can't sink. Importantly, though, while the Stroop card produces an involuntary response,[23] unlike the reflex arc produced by a doctor's hammer on the knee, this is a response which must make use of learned modes of interpretation; it is not a reflex in the strict sense, since if subjects who only read English were shown colored inscriptions of color names in Arabic or Japanese they would presumably experience no interference.

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[23] To be clear, what is involuntary in the subject shown a card that says **BLUE** is either the mistaken pronunciation of the word "blue" or the hesitation (it is this hesitation that Stroop was most interested in measuring) before pronouncing the word "red." I am not suggesting that the motor response is itself involuntary, since if the subject were asked not to say anything when shown the card, he or she would have no problem keeping silent. What is involuntary is the susceptibility, for the part of the mind that wants to correctly identify the color, to interference by the part of the mind that turns the shapes of the letters into words. Stroop's discovery is that a literate mind cannot will itself illiterate.

Stroop began his research, obviously, in the 1930s, nearly a century after Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. Whatever model of the mind he was studying, it can't be exactly that which Hawthorne understood to be his reader's in 1850. Furthermore, as I've already mentioned, Stroop was studying a phenomenon which is inherently bound to certain learned cultural norms. Even if some version of the Stroop effect could be proven to exist in every culture and every writing system, its existence would still depend on the subject's internalization of *some* culture – his or her participation in some group consensus of agreed upon meanings, since a tabula rasa (in an apt image for my purpose) would lack the verbal capacities by which the test accesses the mind. That said, the fact that Stroop's work is still being used in pop psychology today suggests that, whatever he was looking at when he looked at "the mind" was something like what we call "the mind" eighty years later. Without suggesting that Stroop had hit upon some transhistorical phenomenon *not* produced by his society's overlapping discursive orders, then, I'd like to suggest that the way his 1930s America constructs the mind closely resembles the way some people understand the mind today, and if that mind has changed so little eight decades *since* his initial discoveries, it stands to reason that it hadn't changed much more drastically in the eight decades *before* he made those discoveries. Hawthorne was already long dead when Stroop was born, but if Stroop found a way into a kind of verbal unconscious we need not assume in advance that Hawthorne's time is so distant from Stroop's as to have a different mind altogether – an entirely different social construction of the mind, with entirely different backdoors and vulnerabilities. The image of the mind Stroop mapped endures in the image of whatever mind the makers of *Brain Age* intended to test.

What Hawthorne does differently from Stroop, of course, is make the ink *the same* color as the color represented by the word, and the potential interpellative power of this gesture is much easier to understand once we've seen how in Stroop's hands the same technology can throw the mind involuntarily into a state of civil war. Hawthorne wants not to engineer such a war in order to study it, but precisely to preempt cognitive civil war in the hopes that his work might help to enact its readers as subjects disinclined to *actual* civil war. What Stroop's work tells us is that written language, perhaps particularly in combination with color, opens a more-or-less direct line by way of which the page can access a deeper-than-rational mind. To disrupt color's relationship to writing is to disrupt the relationship between the mind and the visible world, and the relationship among various interpretive protocols housed within the mind with one another, in far more fundamental ways than we'd probably guess. Stroop divides interpretation against itself by means of the same technology Hawthorne uses to reinforce interpretation's unity. By greeting the reader with the word *scarlet* written in scarlet ink, the text seeks to place color and writing in sympathy with one another perfect enough to bypass the intellect and access a more fundamental self, thus training that self's discrete trajectories of mental activity to coexist peacefully with one another. A readership of such minds might refrain enough from judgment to accept or ignore one another's imperfections. A nation of such minds might successfully keep peace with itself.

I have a sense that my discussion of J. Ridley Stroop and his work, isolated as it is from the rest of my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter*, will strike my less generous readers as, perhaps, self-indulgent, and my more generous readers as made up of interesting observations too little developed to count for much. There is some justice in, at least, the

latter judgment, and it's both for that reason and because any reservations about this discussion of Stroop will likely also attend its companion piece – my discussion of the number thirteen, which follows – that I want to stop here to respond to it specifically. The thirteen scarlet letters on the title page together serve as a nexus for two distinct semiotic trajectories, both of which should be distinguished from the usual, rationalist-positivist understanding of normal signification; these two trajectories can be thought of as the coherently inward-facing, unifying, centripedal one (for which Stroop helps to suggest a plausible rationale) and the unstable, refracting, decadent one represented by the number thirteen. Briefly, commonsense notions of language tend to assume that phenomena in the world or in the mind are named and communicated by means of a nomenclature (viz. representationally communicative language) that circulates within both world and mind. This nomenclature is regarded as anything which moves as *parole* among the things and sensations it names, but is also understood to exist as *langue* in a noumenal realm of Forms somehow separate from and irreducible to the phenomenal realm. On the title page of this novel, this relation of noumenon to phenomenon is compromised and possibly inverted, since the words do not refer to something from which they are separate but to that part of which they themselves are the whole. At the same time, of course, the two words also name the letter that Hester wears in the narrative, and serve as the title for the narrative itself. Note that a title like *Moby-Dick* names a whale and a book about that whale; in naming the book, the title names a *whole* of which the whale is a *part*, but *not* a *part* of which the title is the *whole*. The title page that declares that novel's title to be *Moby-Dick* is one among the many hundreds of pages that, together, constitute that novel's materiality. With *The Scarlet Letter*, though, the

title page is part of the book, and the letter itself is part of the story, but each scarlet letter is also one-thirteenth of the title.

My point here is that, though this inward turn shapes our response to the content of *The Scarlet Letter*, and serves to articulate us as reading subjects fit to make sense of that content, the centripetal force generated by the title page's unusual metatextual turn curves (we might say) space in such a way that not every interpretive effort which it demands is one that can ultimately achieve escape velocity from its collapsing core. To do justice to the title page, then, we must be willing to send exploratory missions down to its surface, even knowing that not all of these missions will have power enough, when their work is done, to escape the gravity of the title on which they've lit, and accompany us into the novel as a whole. The title sucks meanings into itself. To have discovered this, and to have measured and described the unusual violence of its pull, is not to have wasted the years.

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The above section on Stroop was originally written in the summer of 2012. While revising it in the current spring of 2013, I saw yet another episode of PBS's *Nova* (yes, I am a shameless addict) which featured the Stroop Test. The episode, "The Mind of a Rampage Killer," partly a response to the December 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School (after which, this spring, mass shootings have been much in the news), provides an overview of recent research in neurological and statistical sciences as it applies to violent psychosis. The implied question of the show, initially broadcast on February 20, 2013 is: to what extent, if any, can our current understanding of the brain help to identify a mass murderer before he (or, in theory, she) actually becomes violent?

In the episode, presenter Miles O'Brien interviews psychologist John Keilp. As O'Brien explains: "Keilp believes one fundamental difference [between the brains of potential killers and others] may show up in a deceptively simple test." Keilp's research involves asking subjects (a severely depressed experimental group and a non-depressed control group) to complete a Stroop test while inside an MRI scanner. The experimental group not only took longer to complete the test compared to the control group, but showed brain activity in far fewer regions than the control while completing it.

> Keilp: What [the images of the depressed subjects' brains are] telling us is that [these subjects, when they take the Stroop test, are] not activating regions that are necessary in order to process the task as efficiently [as the control group].
>
> O'Brien, in voiceover: Keilp has found that depressed, suicidal people are just not as good at the Stroop test. Their brains seem inclined to focus on one thing, in this case the word, not the color, and are less flexible. It may mean their brains are wired in a way that makes them fixate on suicidal thoughts. Research like this may take scientists closer to a means of screening for suicidal tendencies, especially in adolescents, who would never admit to it… But the question remains, why does someone who wants to end his own life decide to take so many others with him?

My point is here is not to evaluate Keilp's research or assumptions; that wouldn't be my point even were I qualified for the task. But, particularly in this spring's political climate, I can scarcely think of any practical question of greater importance to most Americans than how to prevent mass shootings or identify in advance, among the many troubled young men in the world, those who will eventually surrender to their psychoses and start killing people. That Stroop's 1930s work has assumed a central place (I take its appearance on *Nova* to be proof of *some* kind of centrality) in the search for answers to a question of such dire consequence, a question which one must think would demand the best and most trusted science available, indicates to me that the paradigm of the mind within which Stroop worked

is still very much the paradigm of the mind we inhabit today. That the Stroop test it has endured as a scientific instrument so long after Stroop's own death in 1973 suggests that whatever discursive structure this paradigm describes is one that changes slowly, that it is a feature less of 1930s America than western modernity, and probably came into being as a kind of humanist commonsense long before Stroop was born in 1897.

Also crucial here, though, is the de facto recognition that, even in the age of MRI scanners and internet video streaming, the relationship between color and letter continues to be regarded, even by those who devote their professional lives to asking it, as a direct line into the mind's – nay, the very *brain's* – capacity to compromise. Stroop's, at least in the eyes of science circa 2013, remains the best tool we have to access the willingness of the mind to think in several ways at once, and to measure how the capacity to do so differs between and among individuals.

Taking a computer-administered Stroop test (in the grand tradition of TV presenters who must dramatize with their own bodies whatever it is they're discussing) O'Brien remarks "Gosh – this is – this is harder than you'd think!" Even as part of a twenty-first-century America where television slickness (and O'Brien is a skilled and telegenic presenter) is arguably regarded as the highest possible aesthetic achievement, O'Brien stutters a little in the face of the verbal dissonance of the test. Keilp, who is an academic and not a trained media personality, is in this one scene much more precise and fluid in his articulation than O'Brien. The scene continues while O'Brien continues with the test,[24] Keilp sitting beside him:

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[24] In fairness I should point out that in Stroop's original test (and in the *Brain Age* game) the subject must say the name of the color of the letters out loud. In Keilp's version, each color is assigned a number and the

> Keilp: Well, you notice right away how you slow down [vis-à-vis the control test,
> in which the color names are matched to the color of the letters, as RED].
> O'Brien: Ye- oh yeah! I- I'd- I don't know why this is – uhhhh – this shouldn't be
> that hard. Why is that?
> Keilp: Well, that was Stroop's big discovery.

Keilp's own "big discovery" appears to be that individual susceptibility to the Stroop effect

correlates (or what amounts to the same thing for my argument, is expected to correlate)

with a propensity for violence to self and others – a willingness to kill or die for beliefs even

when the beliefs are delusional, and a resistance to compromise about (or inaction upon)

those beliefs even when compromise and hesitation are clearly in everyone's best interest. In

the context of Stroop and Keilp, the relation between color and letter assumes crucial

importance to the relations both between thoughts and actions and relations between those

who hurt and those who suffer. It suggests not just that an author, like Hawthorne, eager to

tap into that part of the brain which manages conflict and accommodates ambiguity would

do well to foreground the relationship between color and letter, but that, for anyone whose

ultimate goal is to tap into that part of the brain, authorship may be the best profession –

that, indeed, literature of the kind Hawthorne imagines in *The Scarlet Letter* may have a claim

on the energies that lead to civil war which is, neurologically speaking, more substantial than

that of any other single cultural practice. Recall that the scarlet letter, even as harshly punitive

as it ultimately seems to Hawthorne, originates as an alternative to execution – it displaces

onto letter and color a set of austere moral judgments which otherwise could be satisfied

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appropriate number is entered into the computer on a key pad. This seems a needless complication of the test, introducing variables of manual dexterity, numeracy, and muscle memory into what should be a test of verbal and visual decoding. But Keilp refers to his test by name as a Stroop test several times, and if in his expert opinion the changes do not alter the data that the test, in its pure form, would yield I'm not one to argue. For my claims to be compromised by the fact that Keilp has made these changes to the test, his research would itself have to be invalidated by his peers it the discipline of psychology.

only with bloodshed. If Keilp supposes that the Stroop test might, for those prone to unforgiving rage, activate those parts of the material self which want to kill, Hawthorne may well suppose that his novel's title page might, in joining the color meaning to the color meant, teach would be John Browns other ways to think.

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In the last two sections I discussed the ways in which Hawthorne's metatextual turn on the title page anticipates later work in experimental psychology by supposing that – when we read words and identify their colors – we flex two sets of interpretive muscle. As J. Ridley Stroop would argue in the 1930s, a mind asked to name the color blue when blue coloration is presented to said mind as the shapes of the letters r, e, and d will succumb to a kind of strained paralysis – an arrangement, within the faculties of interpretation, like the figure of a man who locks his hands tightly together and then with his shoulder muscles tries to pull them apart again. It is with, I think, only modest metaphorical license that I describe a mind in such a state as engaged in a kind of civil war, and to the extent that my metaphor is a sound one we can understand Hawthorne's vision of *The Scarlet Letter's* title page as preempting such a war. This may overstate the power of books, of course. Perhaps no reader relation could prevent a civil war, or even interpellate reading subjects disinclined to civil war. If a book *could* prevent a civil war, one might well suppose that it would have to do so by virtue of the arguments it articulated, and not by virtue of the manner in which it husbanded and deployed its more basic capacity to generate meanings. My point is not that even the cleverest literary gesture necessarily has such power in the real world, or that Hawthorne was under the impression that it could have such power. I argue rather the more modest point that if matters of subtle literary technique and book design *could* have such

power in the real world, *The Scarlet Letter* shows us precisely the form they would have to take in order to be most effective. Hawthorne does not seem to have taken to writing imaginative prose in order to shape his readers' political sentiments, but having elected to write fiction, one sees in his authorial project, not so concrete a thing as the open advocacy of a particular cause, but a dogged eagerness to construct his individual readers as people who will keep a certain kind of politics at arm's length. It is not a particular set of short term political interests that Hawthorne advocates, but a certain aloofness vis-à-vis those interests – not a particular ideology, but a lightness of touch when dealing with any ideology. This is probably how he understood his own project. But in the context of impending civil war, such an a-politics is *itself* a set of short term political interests, since where politics is polarized, and both poles increasingly belligerent, to oppose politics is in effect to oppose militarization. Let's look more closely, then, at this question of civil war.

Hawthorne's belief that sectional compromise could prevent such a war was formidable enough to be fully intact at least as late as his 1852 *Life of Franklin Pierce*. We should remind ourselves that this belief was not, and at the time could not have seemed, as simplistic or naïve as it risks seeming to us; we know how the story plays out. At the same time, it's true that Pierce, who served but one term as President, would be elected with the help of Hawthorne's biography (written, like *The Scarlet Letter*, very much under the shadow of the custom-house affair) in 1852, and would leave office in 1857 with Kansas already long at war with itself, and the very Senate floor disgraced by the nearly fatal caning of Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. To the extent that *The Life of Franklin Pierce* is a continuation of work that began in "The Custom-House," and the Civil War a continuation of work begun in Bleeding Kansas, the respective political circumstances of the novel and the war are less

easy to partition from one another than the nominal dates 1850 and 1861 would suggest. Nobody could have seen the war coming, exactly, but radicals on both sides in 1850 were already calling for something like it, and the possibility seemed real enough to Hawthorne in 1852 for him to suggest that Pierce was better suited to the presidency than any Whig because Pierce was less controversial and thus better able to keep the peace. How, for all his professed pessimism, and in spite of his apparent recognition in 1852 that the threat of civil war was quite real, could Hawthorne not have seen the outbreak of what we know as *the* Civil War as a matter of *when* rather than *if*?

To begin with, the novel itself – though it does in many ways try to contain the divisive energies it sees as imperiling the union – regards the possibility of civil war as real enough. In setting the novel specifically in the 1640s, Hawthorne distances its events from the possible *American* civil war, but makes them exactly contemporaneous with the *English* Civil War. In setting much of the novel on the blocks surrounding the publishing houses of upper Washington Street (the neighborhood not just of the Old Corner Bookstore but also of much antislavery activism, and the offices of William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, which shared an address with the printer of *The Liberator*), Hawthorne sets his novel at the *time* of a past Civil War, and at that *place* which, to him, seemed most to be sowing the seeds of a future one.

The opening of the novel, from which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, does perhaps so good a job of warding off any naïve utopianism that it has helped to create the too-simple image of Hawthorne as an author who has always already given up on the political – if not on society itself – as hopelessly fallen, and irrevocably designed to wage war against itself. There is certainly, I admit, that strain in Hawthorne; he seems sometimes to

have been too often disappointed by humanity's imperfections to go on caring what happens

to it as a whole (though this pessimism is much more consistent and programmatic in

Melville, and in Melville's case it was not an impediment to dealing with subjects like slavery

directly). Hawthorne not only guards, with an air of someone too often hurt to maintain

hope, against any future disappointment in society *en masse*, but seems sometimes to reserve

his most bitter vitriol for those he sees as driven, even as individuals acting upon other

individuals, to overcome those flaws by which human beings know themselves as fallen. The

perfect beauty sought in "The Birth Mark" is not regarded as morally or aesthetically

corrosive in the same way as the perfect knowledge sought by Chillingworth, but in each

case the operations of poetic justice ensure that this hunger for perfection is homicidal at its

core.

     The temporal and spatial alignment of *The Scarlet Letter* suggest that those

dangerously deluded, hypothetical utopians whom the novel introduces before even its

protagonist, are identified not with those who dream of a world without war but those who

dream of a world without their political enemies. The crowd that gathers in the marketplace

to jeer at Hester is at once the crowd gathered at Whitehall to jeer at the doomed Charles I

approaching the block, the crowd of 1850 gathered at the Old State House (which stands,

recall, on the site of the original marketplace) to denounce slaveholding. As I will discuss in

chapter two, they also resemble the crowd gathered to inspect a slave at auction. It is any

crowd insulated by its moral certainty from feeling its shared humanity with the object of its

scorn. There is something almost Spenserian in Hawthorne's belief that literature can help to

produce an intellectually agile public, one made up of people who – precisely because they

are accustomed to paradox and uncertainty – are better equipped to navigate an increasingly

complicated social, economic, and political landscape. He trains readers to know and feel much and yet never to know or feel so fixedly as to watch unmoved the shame or suffering of another person.

This ambiguity is, then, not an attempt to evade concrete political questions but an attempt to engage them without being reductive or overly sentimental. It's an attempt to maintain intellectual nuance while still making not just a plea for common decency and tolerance, but a case that common decency and tolerance constitute our best line of defense against a specific political disaster. This should make intuitive sense to you and me because we are products of the late-twentieth century, but for some reason it often hasn't; people sometimes, after all, mistakenly argue that the high postmodernism of Warhol or Barthelme lacks a political vision for the same reasons they argue that Hawthorne lacked one. It should be easy to see that the uncertainty and detachment, the emptying out of affect we associate with high postmodernism arrives – not by coincidence – at a moment marked, for the first time in history, by the knowledge that rash political extremism might literally destroy the entire world overnight. The stakes Hawthorne faces are not this high, but neither is his relativism so all encompassing; his politics differ from those of the Cold War postmodern primarily, and perhaps only, in their scale. The unprecedented horrors of World War II were, for postmodernism, fresh evidence of something Hawthorne seems in 1850 already to have understood: people paralyzed by self doubt will never feel moved by their own convictions to kill one another. People unable to summon unquestioning, unironic belief in any particular masternarative do not organize state sponsored genocide, or deploy nuclear weapons. One might object here that neither do they agitate for the liberation of a brutally oppressed population to which they do not belong, and that *without* just such agitation by

northern abolitionists – both black and white – we've no way of knowing if or when slavery

in the United States would have been dismantled. Hawthorne offers us no easy way out of

this paradox; and we're rightly uncomfortable with the extent to which his racism blinded

him to it, given that we are people who would like to think of ourselves as enemies both of

fixed political dogmas and of institutional oppression. But the fact, on the one hand, that

Hawthorne's politics were deeply, problematically unwilling to challenge what in his time

was plainly unjust, and, on the other, that those politics anticipate the kind of anti-

foundationalist thinking that seemed a generation ago a necessary response to Thatcherite

neo-fascism and nuclear brinksmanship (and which, for scholars of my generation,

constitutes the intellectual ecosystem within which we were spawned), should not lead us to

suppose that Hawthorne's fiction has *no* politics, or that in spite of his aesthetic and

philosophical nuance his politics are somehow simple or one dimensional. In other words, if

one reason the politics of *The Scarlet Letter* have been difficult to locate is *certainly* that the

book itself does much to obfuscate them, another reason is *possibly* that these politics

threaten to paint an unflattering portrait of an intellectual heritage which we, or at least our

immediate forbears, still take quite seriously. It presents the anti-foundationalist post-isms

that we remember as only recently so fashionable not as challenges to the great evils of the

twentieth century, but as concessions to the great evils of the nineteenth.

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The Scarlet Letter thus does not suggest that compromise of sufficient scope to unify a

divided nation is an easy thing to achieve or maintain, nor even does it suggest that the

comparatively simple compromises which make it possible for an individual to see a page or

read a word are much easier. The coherence of the Union is fragile just as the coherence of

the visible world is superficial, and in both cases Hawthorne suggests that we must strive –

to be one nation and to see one truth – without hope of real or lasting success. This unity

will be a tissue of lies, but even such a tissue may be enough to keep blood from being

spilled, and precisely in *being* such a tissue such a unity will accommodate the differences of

temperament among individuals which frustrate every other utopian design. Indeed, if

among the things we must work to understand in this novel is why so resilient a critical

consensus formed around its greatness so quickly, we could do worse than to focus on the

set of questions provoked by Hawthorne's seeming skepticism toward his own project in *The

Scarlet Letter*, rather than on any of the more usual questions of the novel's literary merit or

historical importance; the set of questions posed by Hawthorne's doubt serve as one reason

the novel remains compelling and enigmatic to those who, following a readerly path cut first

by Melville, fall in love with the book's unanswerable riddles and irresolvable paradoxes:

What does the letter mean? What is it supposed to accomplish – what is its "office?" Does it

eventually do what it is meant to, or communicate what it ought? When we look around us

at the objects of our world, does the world make the vision or the vision the world? These

questions are not normally put to a work's title page on its own, but by asking them of this

particular title page before we ask them of the novel itself we can add another question to

this list: Do the various dialectics that the scarlet letter marshals (signifier/signified,

color/letter, etc.) eventually merge into their respective syntheses and achieve stability, or, on

the other hand, are all attempts to achieve such stability doomed to fail? Might these

dialectics be introduced by Hawthorne merely to dramatize this failure? Are they intended

not to arrive finally at finished meaning but to remind us that meaning is *never* finished, since

its constitutive elements are always locked in too dynamic a mode of warfare? And if the

unity suggested on the title page – its attempt to eliminate every trace of what, following

Stroop, we might call interpretive "interference" – is meant to demonstrate its own

impossibility (that is, to demonstrate that every interpretation ultimately interferes to some

extent with itself), does that then suggest that *compromise* is doomed to fail, or that

compromise is necessary because *utopianism* is doomed to fail? The north must compromise

with the south, and the south with the north, Hawthorne seems to say, else both sides will

fall into the lazy habit of clinging uncritically to their own beliefs. The consequence of such

certainty, he implies, is unavoidably the spilling of blood: the decapitation of the king, the

militarization of the radicals.[25]

What the title page says is that, at least for Hawthorne, such unity is an easy thing to

imagine; but that same "imaginative faculty"[26] which envisions this unity also threatens it. The

integrative energies of the imagination see potential for congruence and synthesis where the

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[25] I am presenting here what I see as an only slightly more nuanced version of Bercovitch's position, which is that, even if what the novel is saying is that meaning is never finished or stable (which Bercovitch, I think a little prematurely, suggests that it definitely is not), we can still make concrete claims about its historical position and political valences, since its refusal of finished meanings happens within a specific cultural climate where the consequences of absolute certainty and absolute belief are not abstract. The book may cling to vagueness, but there is nothing vague about its reasons for doing so. The fear is that, without encouraging readers to look on uncertainty as a positive good, North and South will form separate governments and go to war over the issue of slavery. This would mean social disorder, violence and death for many, certain international embarrassment for those who believed in American republicanism, and possibly the end of the American republic itself. Again, just as 1789 was understood to follow on the heels of 1776, we cannot underestimate the fear in American in 1850 that a North American monarchy would follow on the heels of the 1848 rise of Napoleon III. This fear was real and powerful, and – born on the fourth of July – Hawthorne the gloomy nationalist seems almost to have experienced it as a personal threat.

[26] The phrase appears in "The Custom-House" in Hawthorne's theory the romance genre (Norton 27), but the whole paragraph beginning "If the imaginative faculty refused to act…" is of great interest here. Analysis of it, though, would unfortunately take me too far from my central concerns for too long. The paragraph describes the transformative power of moonlight as it illuminates a room familiar in the day. The objects in the room thus appear both starkly separated from one another in the crisp, cold lunar glow, and tied together by that glow's uniform strangeness. The moonlight simultaneously emphasizes the outlines of the objects (making them seem *more* separate) and unifies them under the sign of a single, eerie shimmer (making them *seem* less separate). To see the object world thus is to see it allegorize the very possibility of federalist unity – of nationalist pluralism.

literal mind sees only irresolvable conflict and antithesis; at the same time, though, these energies see multiple trajectories of meaning where the literal mind sees only one trajectory – one legitimate interpretation. This imaginative faculty, which Hawthorne seems to understand as the special province of the romance as a distinct genre, is ever ready to perform a kind of counter-reification. To the imagination, no two discourses, semiotic registers, modes of production, or economic systems are so incompatible that they cannot be seen as potentially the halves of a single coherent whole.

But just as no *two* things are, for the imagination, so different that they cannot be forged into some new alloy, no *one* thing is, for the imagination, ever merely itself and nothing else. Dimmesdale, who thinks he sees the letter A emblazoned in the night sky, imagines for a moment that his individual sense of guilt and the whole vast order of the cosmos are not distinct things, but that they are rather iterations of one another. But the same imaginative faculty that allows him to suppose that his mind and the heavens are two reflections of one truth also allows him to imagine that he is wrong – allows him to entertain other Bostonians' different interpretations of which, with as much validity, the image in the sky admits. What allows us to imagine the possibility of order and unity (or to imagine the *possibility* of seeing a sign which makes available but one plausible interpretation) is that same capacity which *prevents* those possibilities from ever being realized. The multiple kinds of harmony Hawthorne seeks to establish by titling the novel "The Scarlet Letter," and by having that title printed in red – the perfect reciprocity of signifier and signified, the seamless conjoining of color and letter in the inscription itself, the assonance, the use of just four

distinct characters for the last ten letters of the thirteen-letter phrase[27] – all of this serves to counterbalance internal conflict and dialectical friction which, the novel suggests, inheres in the meanings of all visible thingss.

The aching wish for unity articulates itself first on the novel's title page, and does so as a titular inscription within which semiotic friction might at first seem to have been reduced as much as possible, but from which we should note that it has not been eliminated completely. For as much as Hawthorne is threatened – and feels his country is threatened – by the prospect of division, open conflict, and war, he is also threatened by the totalizing stability of any true or final unity. Though this simultaneous movement towards and away from a final synthesis of all meanings would be easy to take too literally and reductively, we must regard it nonetheless as yet another textual echo suggesting America's national project – its system of checks and balances between branches of government, houses of Congress, federal and state authority. Without too energetically making the personal into a passive mirror of the political, we should note that both Hawthorne's fondness for unstable meanings and his suspicion of centralized truth and power at the rhetorical level resemble arguments on behalf of the Constitution made in, among other places, *The Federalist Papers*.

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[27] Some of my colleagues have suggested that this thing with the reuse of letters seems to be reaching too far. I regard the fact that this particular novel, more than any other, is explicitly concerned with the meanings of individual letters to be evidence enough that the arrangement of those letters in the title *might* well mean something, and to regard the fact that Hawthorne in his correspondence reflects consciously on how the title page will play upon the readerly imagination as a visual artifact as but further proof of the same. Those who claim that any book title is likely to produce similar rates of redundancy can take note of *Moby-Dick* (eight letter as eight characters), *Walden* (six letters as six characters), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (twelve letters as fourteen characters), *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (thirteen letters as nineteen characters), *Leaves of Grass* (nine letters as thirteen characters). Compare these to *Scarlet Letter* (seven letters as thirteen characters) or *The Scarlet Letter* (eight letters as sixteen characters). All of Hawthorne's books' titles are less redundant in their use of letters except *Mosses from an Old Manse* (ten letters as twenty characters) which, because it is a longer title drawing from the same twenty-six letter alphabet, and makes an overt play for alliteration, is something of an anomaly. *Mosses…* was also Hawthorne's most recently published volume when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, suggesting that his concerns in the earlier book may have been an early version of the ones he dealt with more consciously in the later one.

The Scarlet Letter's unwillingness to locate truth in any single point of view could even resemble the United States Constitution's distribution of governing powers in some of the same ways that, according to Michael Moon, Whitman's continual revision of *Leaves of Grass* resembles that Constitution's amenability.[28] For Hawthorne, the dream of order on the one hand, and the intractable multiplicity of speculative and ruminative interpretations on the other, keep things safely in check, just as do the unbreakable ties of each State to the Union. Those who seek to make the utopian dream of an absolute and absolutely stable political union into a reality, whether doing so at the level of the individual by unearthing and publishing the precise content of every secret soul, or doing so at the level of the social whole by refusing to maintain a union that includes both slave states and non-slave states, threaten personal dignity, political stability, and imaginative liberty alike. In its most favorable understanding of itself, the United States had been created to prove that individual liberty and social stability could coexist, a proposition for which the too brief Golden Age of Athens and the discredited Roman Republic offered, lamentably, the closest thing to real historical evidence. In a sense (a reductive but instructive one) the western world's entire understanding of democracy was extrapolated from the failure of the Roman Republic and the comparative glory of the Roman Empire; the example of Rome stood behind every attempt at social engineering and state planning to happen in the west since the Renaissance. The few Cromwells to challenge this commonsense tended to end up with their tails between their legs, clutching – embarrassed – a regal head they desired nothing so much as to reattach to its wonted body. Even the most optimistic of American nationalisms in 1850

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[28] See Moon's *Disseminating Whitman*, especially his introduction of this parallel between revision and amendment on 15-18.

would have had to concede that the failure of the Union would permanently enfeeble the democratization of the west. And Hawthorne's, I need hardly add, was not the most optimistic.

For those of us who have already read the novel, it's easy on the title page already to see the pleasingly close identification of signifier with signified as having always already let a snake into the interpretive garden. At the most concrete level, though, nearly every instance of binary symmetry I have discussed above (color/letter, signifier/signified, first-word/second-word) is from the very beginning marred by some slight imperfection. The consistency of this condition – the fact that such an imperfection exists in every case rather than just a few cases, and the fact that that imperfection is always slight rather than severe – suggests the presence of governing design rather than uncanny coincidence.

Examples abound. The two words of the title are nearly the same length, but at seven and six characters respectively they fail to match exactly; for symmetrical design this is a near miss, but a real and quantifiable miss nonetheless. The phrase in red ink, similarly, is *scarlet letter* but is composed of scarlet letter*s* (plural), which is an imprecision we can ignore only for so long. The proximity is close enough to force the reader to *recognize* the aesthetic satisfactions made available by signifier merged to its own signified, but the misalignment is serious enough that this reader, Tantalus-like, never has those satisfactions actually made available to him or her. Paradoxically, the design so cleverly aligns the signifier and signified that the reader is led into a hyperawareness of even the most subtle failures of this alignment, just as the holder of a lottery ticket that has all but one of the winning numbers feels his poverty doubly. Though Hawthorne had been sharply critical of such hubris in "The Birth-Mark," he is nonetheless aware of how readily a thing's single imperfection,

precisely *because* it is only one rather than several, can provoke a reaction in excess of that provoked by the ordinary flaws people encounter around them every day; ordinary things are so deeply flawed that we are shielded from the wish to perfect them, but what is *nearly* perfect goads by refusing to let us forget our utopian wishes. In proverbial terms, Hawthorne forces us to keep the parade going even while he ever so gently rains on it – and rains with an inconsistent drizzle that at every moment seems as if it could suddenly let up and give way to sunshine.

Furthermore, for a sequence of characters that seems, with all its internal echoes and points of visual, geometric uniformity, to invite us to read it backwards and forwards in a search for moments of palindromic mirroring, the thirteen-letter phrase doesn't seem overly eager to begin and end with the same letter. Such would lend a palindromic flourish even to an otherwise-asymmetrical string of words. I'm not suggesting that it's in any way strange that Hawthorne refrained from choosing a title that was less than perfectly symmetrical. His literary moment was not one that fetishized the scrupulous balance of neoclassicism or the fragmentary wordplay of late modernism, and there's no evidence either that he ever considered any of what I'm calling "imperfections" flaws in his design, or that he ever considered alternatives that would have eliminated them in favor of something more suggestive of orthographic symmetry. That said, it's an impressive coincidence that a single emendation – the addition of a terminal *S* to *LETTER*[29] – would eliminate not just one of

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[29] A century and a half of habit makes it inevitable that "The Scarlet Letters" will fall strangely upon our ear, but we shouldn't let that delude us into thinking that, even if the phrase is somehow a less musical or worse title for the novel, it is a less thematically appropriate one. Those who object that the title must be singular because the narrative concerns only one scarlet letter and not several should recall that there are, in fact, multiple scarlet letters in the novel (including the one in the sky, the one reflected in the suit of armor, the one at the tombstone).

them but *all* of them.[30] "Scarlet Letters" begins and ends with the same letter, is composed

of two seven-letter words, and locks the titular signifier and signified into an alignment that

could scarcely be more total.

So my point here is *not* that Hawthorne seeks to craft a title or title page in which the

semiotic relations among parts, or of those parts to the whole, is completely dominated by

order, coherence, balance and symmetry. The aesthetic attraction to this order might explain

why he did not want to call the book "The Judgment Letter," but not why he did not want

to call it "The Scarlet Letters," or for that matter why he did not choose an entirely different

title which could register this kind of unity even more overtly and emphatically. He could

have called the novel "The A," or "Twenty Scarlet Letters" (particularly effective without the

article, though of dubious thematic relevence), or "The Twenty Eight Scarlet Letters" (which

would only work if the article were also printed in red). If he wanted to balance more

perfectly the relations among the letters of the title, rather than the relation between signifier

and signified, he might have given his protagonist a name which was a true palindrome and

titled the novel after her, as eighteenth-century novels with titular heroines like *Pamela* and

Clarissa seem to authorize.[31] Why not *Anna*? The title and title page, as they exist, rather ask

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[30] Reduced to the binary logic of consonants and vowels, this terminal S would not just suggest but create a true palindrome of the title. We can visualize this by substituting the letters *c* and v for consonants and vowels respectively, so that **scarlet letters** is rendered **ccvccvc cvccvcc**; thus abstracted, the second word is the first word written in reverse, and the title as a whole a kind of latent palindrome, which, unlike most other two-word palindromes, even maintains the break between its words at its mathematical midpoint.

[31] It may be that if the title did not explicitly mention letters and were something more in the vein of "Ethan Brand" or "Young Goodman Brown," nothing on the title page would direct our attention to the performative force of the letters themselves, and any peculiarities of the title's spelling would have as little significance in *The Scarlet Letter* as they do in any other nineteenth century novel (which is to say, the significance I attach to them in this discussion would cease to be merely far-fetched and become methodologically unwarranted). *The Scarlet Letter* is a unique case because both novel and title ask us to think carefully about individual letters more deliberately than we normally do, even and especially when those letters are isolated from their contexts in the words they spell. I would not make so sweeping a suggestions even about something like Poe's "The Purloined Letter," which includes the word *letter* in its title (though used in a

that we recognize the ideal of order and unity towards which they gesture, while we also mark as well their decisive distance from that ideal.

Much of this friction, though, requires that we look deeply at the title. Looking at it casually, it probably won't consciously occur to us even that the two words contain different numbers of characters. To realize even this, we must linger over the words and count the letters. Let's count them now.

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Thirteen is an unlucky number,[32] and though this sense of thirteen as somehow cursed seems to have reached its zenith around the turn of the twentieth century (it was already a feature of the cultural landscape in the mid-nineteenth century), both in terms of the sheer number of avowed triskaidekaphobes living in the English speaking world and in terms of the seriousness with which such people took whatever threat ordinal or cardinal thirteens posed to them. What might surprise many people today is that even widespread knowledge that such a superstition existed doesn't seem to have existed *before* the nineteenth century; the superstition is not at all medieval but thoroughly modern. Only slightly less surprising is the fact that, in its original form, the belief in unlucky thirteen was that bad luck would befall somebody if thirteen people sat together at a single dining table; often the belief was specifically that one of the thirteen diners would die within a year. (The special

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different sense, obviously), and which, like much of Hawthorne's writing, models a kind of hyper-aware, almost paranoid reading of the visible world. The mode of reading I present in this chapter is thus not meant to be admissible to the discussion of every book. My assertion is merely that it is the mode of reading this *particular* book more emphatically foists on us. It's importance is ultimately (and especially) that Hawthorne *doesn't* present this way of seeing as a way to read books, but rather as a way to read the human body.

[32] The information in this section is a digest of that found in *13: The Story of the World's Most Notorious Superstition* by essayist and children's author Nathaniel Lachenmeyer. My research did not turn up any more authoritative book by an academic.

significance of *Friday* the thirteenth doesn't seem to predate the twentieth century, though the belief that the Friday of each week and the thirteenth of each month were separately unlucky was, by 1900, well established.[33]) It's not clear how many people actually believed thirteen at a table was unlucky, but in nineteenth-century America *most people believed* that most people believed this, regardless of how many or how few confirmed triskaidekaphobes truly existed. Most people also seem to have been sure that that superstition both dated from and in some way commemorated the Last Supper of Jesus Christ, though its links to the events described in the Gospel (or, indeed, to *any* events that occurred before the advent of modernity) have proven impossible to establish. The thirteen-at-a-table superstition had only a discontinuous and unrecorded life – if it had any life at all – until Enlightenment rationalism began trying to stamp it out in the late seventeenth century. The belief had somehow become worth stamping out as irrational without also having become worth asserting publically, and – as I already suggested – actual written avowals of triskaidekaphobia do not appear until the very-late eighteenth century. In American publications thirteen-at-a-table is first mentioned in the early nineteenth century, and thereafter mentioned with increasing regularity, by about 1830 assuming its place at the head of the superstition board of fare. By 1841, a Scottish newspaper could remark woefully (and importantly) that the belief in unlucky thirteen-at-a-table had come to redefine the number thirteen *itself* as unlucky, and quantities of thirteen *anything*, including coins in one's pocket,

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[33] Lachenmeyer persuasively argues that the entire Friday the thirteenth phenomenon can be traced to a single, now-forgotten novel of 1907 – *Friday, the Thirteenth* by Bostonian investor Thomas W. Lawson, which is about a stock trader who cleverly strikes it rich on the titular day by remaining coolly rational while taking advantage of other people's (till then separate) superstitions about both Friday and the number thirteen (Lachenmeyer 88-92).

had come to seem inauspicious to the unenlightened (Lachenmeyer 49-50). By the early 1840s, then, thirteen had begun its transformation from unlucky at a table to unlucky everywhere.

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer doesn't mention *The Scarlet Letter* specifically in his book on triskaidekaphobia, but his chronologically ordered list of relevant literary extracts begins in 1850 with an example from Dickens's *A Christmas Tree* (57); left off the chronology, though mentioned elsewhere in the book, is Poe's 1839 tale "The Devil in the Belfry" (166). In both works the subject is a clock which uncannily chimes thirteen times at twelve o'clock – a transitional form unlucky thirteen assumed on its route from thirteen at a table in the early nineteenth century to Friday the thirteenth in the early twentieth. Lachenmeyer infers that Poe was something of a triskaidekaphile, pointing out that he lived in room number thirteen for at least part of the time he studied at the University of Virginia, and married his cousin Virginia Clemm when she was thirteen years of age. (On this basis we must regard Humbert Humbert as among the most ardent fictional triskaidekaphiles in history.)

Lachenmeyer also notes (without specific dates or examples, but the paragraph opens with a reference to P. T. Barnum's 1860 autobiography, and concerns events which he says predate the invention of the skyscraper, which most historians date to the 1880s) that at this time[34] "The 13th day of the month was increasingly considered unlucky. Parents began to make sure the name they chose for their children *did not combine with the surname to make 13*

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[34] Again, the time to which Lechenmeyer's remarks apply is not specified, but he is talking about all or part of the mid-nineteenth century. The paragraph in question (50-51) opens with citations of a French publication from 1858 and P. T. Barnum's 1860 Autobiography. After mentioning that new parents began around this time avoiding naming their children with thirteen letter names, Lachenmeyer observes that architects had not yet begun skipping the thirteenth floor in building design because as yet no buildings were as tall as thirteen stories. Though I've been unable to determine exactly when the first buildings to reach that height were built, the Otis elevator which allowed them to rise above six stories or so was invented in 1852.

letters" (51 emphasis added). For what it's worth, *Julian Hawthorne* has fifteen letters, and *Una Hawthorne* has twelve. *Rose Hawthorne*, though, the name of the Hawthorne's youngest child, not born until 1851, has thirteen letters. If Hawthorne *had* been harboring some orthographic triskaidekaphobia perhaps the wild success of his first novel cured him of it. Composer Arnold Schoenberg, a well-known triskadekaphobe and one-time teacher of Theodor Adorno, is said to have suffered from severe fear of the number thirteen from at least 1908, and to have consciously avoided titling his compositions with thirteen-letter phrases. At any rate, the vague and unfounded associations of thirteen with Judas Iscariot (presumably the unlucky diner at the Last Supper, whose name happens also to contain thirteen letters in the twenty-six-letter alphabet English uses) and black magic give the number resonance peculiarly appropriate for a Hawthornian romance of colonial Massachusetts. He almost certainly knew the Poe tale, which scarcely makes sense if one is unfamiliar with the superstition Poe satirizes in it. Furthermore, though the link between witchcraft and the number thirteen was tenuous in the extreme before the twentieth-century rise of neo-paganism, Hawthorne's uncommon interest in puritanical zealots might have made him one of the few nineteenth-century Americans to know that accused witches were sometimes said by those who prosecuted them to belong to covens of thirteen (apparently twelve female witch apostles and one male warlock master, a self-styled antichrist) – though the rationale for this accusation seems to have been that such a coven would thus blasphemously profane a number which, because of its link to the early church, official Christianity held to be auspicious and holy. (For what it's worth, the earliest version of this chapter was delivered as a paper at the University of Virginia on Friday, February 13, 2004.)

While thirteen is undoubtedly a number possessing emotional and historical resonance for people beyond its mere utility in enumeration, the same could be said of virtually every whole number that is less than thirteen, and even of a few – twenty one, one hundred, six hundred sixty six, etc. – that are greater than it. There's no reason to think that Hawthorne went out of his way to choose a title of thirteen letters, though it is undoubtedly the case that in America in 1850 quantities of thirteen were, more than any other quantity per se, supposed by some to be regarded at least by a superstitious few as uncanny, cursed, tied in supernatural ways to darkness, misfortune, and sorrow. Asked about the number thirteen, nineteenth-century Americans may not have mentioned bad luck, but asked to name an unlucky number, they would almost certainly offer thirteen. Even if the number's tenuous connection to early modern witchcraft was unknown to him, Hawthorne had grown up in a world where the number was already deeply associated with Judas and the Last Supper, associations befitting a tale which turns on betrayal, guilt, secrecy, and religious law. More plausible, though, is the notion that quantities of thirteen suggest disorder and imbalance, something they can do in this title without Hawthorne even consciously realizing it. Whether it is a cause or an effect of the use of Arabic numerals, quantities we represent with single digits 1-9 seem safe and knowable, and quantities that can evenly be divided into a two or three groups of such numbers – ten, twelve, fourteen (maybe), and fifteen – seem to enjoy a kind of honorary single digit status. I'm not sure how eleven has managed to evade suspicion all these years – maybe because, composed of two parallel lines, it suggests balance and order visually despite representing a prime quantity – but something about thirteen really does seem, to me, anyway, to suggest the smallest quantity of anything of which one could legitimately lose count.

If this notion is unscientific and untestable – if I am essentially just talking about how various numbers make *me* feel personally – I am at least not the first to indulge in speculation along these lines, since this notion of thirteen's irregular messiness, or thirteen as a privileged signifier *of* irregularity and messiness, was proposed in the early twentieth century as a possible origin for triskaidekaphobia itself (Lachenmeyer 24-26). Representative of this general trend is Englishman Charles Platt, who in 1925 forwarded a claim (apparently without any factual evidence whatsoever) that for "primitive man" the word meaning thirteen "was not used as a number, but as a vague word meaning anything beyond Twelve… [It was] a number full of vague and unimaginable possibilities, and therefore a number to be avoided by any peace-loving man" (quod. in Lachenmeyer 25). Most of these arguments postulated that all early counting systems were based on the human body, and that body-counting systems usually counted ten fingers and two feet, for a maximum of twelve anything (modern anthropological evidence refutes both of these assumptions). To count to thirteen, then, (the old joke goes), a man would have to pull down his pants.

No matter how wrong these ideas of thirteen are, though – no matter how much they, in effect, constitute a pseudoscientific superstition in themselves – they, like John Ridley Stroop's theories of interference, circulated within a culture of letters and learning not so distant in time from *The Scarlet Letter* as to be irrelevant to it.[35] The asymmetry of thirteen,

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[35] Though it may not be fully clear from my repeated protests, in its early iterations, my reading of *The Scarlet Letter* (which I admit takes certain methodological liberties that the most rigorously historicist criticism does not) was met with resistance which surprised me on the point of the relevance of twentieth-century cultural discourses to a nineteenth-century novel. Why, I was asked, would the beliefs held by people who weren't yet even born when Hawthorne died be of any relevance to *The Scarlet Letter*? What could such people have said that would help us to understand now what Hawthorne was trying to accomplish in 1850? Hawthorne cannot have been influenced by twentieth-century science, and though twentieth-century science might conceivably have been influenced by Hawthorne, this would only be of importance to my argument if the object of my study were it rather than he.

its unwillingness to submit to order, its organic willfulness reminiscent of Pearl, is made only

more manifest in the title of the novel, which comes as close as it might to dividing the

thirteen letters into two words of equal length and yet, inevitably, fails, because such is the

nature of odd quantities. Thirteen, within this mythology, is the oddest quantity of them all.

One certainly supposes that Melville, having at some previous time heard the story of a

white sperm whale called Mocha Dick, either altered or misremembered its name in 1851 as

a way to endow the title of his novel with exactly that symmetry which Hawthorne withholds

from the title of his. Hawthorne would probably not have to count the letters of his title to

notice that its words fell just short of equal character length, and he would not have to be

thinking consciously in these terms even to notice so much as that. (We are, after all, talking

about a man who actually changed the spelling of his last name in such a way that, whatever

he was consciously trying to accomplish, it would from that day forward contain the same

number of letters as his first.) Without the added w, *Hawthorne* would contain one letter

fewer than *Nathaniel*, just as *letter* contains one fewer than *scarlet*.

So, as I argued in the first half of this chapter, the titular signifier on the title page is

in a state of refraction, and this state constitutes its material existence as multiple instances

of its own signified. If we had hoped this multiplicity might suggest abundance or liberation

from fixed or reductive meanings, the fact that there are *thirteen* such instances, as I've just

argued, should give us pause, because if any mere quantity signals trouble ahead, thirteen is

undoubtedly that quantity. As the threat of war between the states came to seem ever more

real in 1850, a person could be forgiven for having had the same misgivings about American

republicanism, with might have seemed doomed in part because it began as a federation of

exactly thirteen independent states. Indeed, Bayard Taylor would make a speech to precisely

this effect in 1863, lamenting in hindsight that South Carolina had been a Judas among the original states (Lachenmeyer 168-69). Though Taylor traveled in circles different from Hawthorne's, the latter did write to the former, in, as it happens, that same year of 1863, to express admiration for his recent novel *Hannah Thurston*, so the social worlds they inhabited overlapped to at least this extent.[36] In Taylor's eyes, the number thirteen was an ill omen, linked both to the Last Supper and to the United States' national heritage – one whose cursed energies could be invoked in the early years of the Civil War precisely as a means for understanding how the divergent futures of north and south could be explained in terms of their shared past as a parts of a single national whole.

Undoubtedly we do not normally attach much significance to the number of letters in a book's title – indeed, we don't usually count those letters at all – but not every book is *about* the status of individual letters the way this one is; not every book is named for an individual letter, certainly, nor does every author bother to add a single letter to the spelling of his name.

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[36] I'm sure I read somewhere that Hawthorne was approached by Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1855 or 1856 as a potential writer/editor for Perry's memoir of his travels to Japan, and, if I'm not mistaken, this happened specifically because Perry asked Bayard Taylor (who was with Perry on these travels) to recommend an author. Taylor seems to have read and admired Horatio Bridge's *The Journal of an African Cruiser* (1845), which Hawthorne edited (and, if its tone is to be trusted, wrote at least some parts of), and to have had it in mind as a model for the memoir Perry wanted to publish. Hawthorne was too busy to take the job, and recommended Melville, who was not yet well known enough to suit Perry, and the Commodore elected to write the memoir himself. I had thought this was in was in Christopher Benfey's *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan*, but having reviewed every indexed reference to Hawthorne in that study I've been unable to find any mention of this sequence of events. If true, it would place Hawthorne and Taylor in one another's orbits at a date much sooner after the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*.

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The heraldic crest whose description concludes the novel serves as a startling

reversal of the title page's flourish – startling not least because its last three words share with

the title's two words the same content.

"ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES."

Rendered in capital letters and centered, the line (SL, 264)[37] breaks typographically with the

visual norms of the prose enough to insist on being looked at rather than just read, and to

align itself not only with the novel's diegesis but with its extradiegetic features – chapter titles

and, especially, the title page.[38] The use of small capitals draws the blazon more fully into the

orbit of the verbal, and disinvests it in the purely visual, by maintaining a distinction between

upper and lower case usage (recall that no such distinction obtained for the letters on the

title page – each line of which is rendered in capital letters of uniform size). One

consequence of the use of small caps here is that the letter *A*, though it functions twice as a

word unto itself, is rendered in two different sizes so that its two appearances are non-

identical, thus asserting the privilege of verbal meaning (which the two *A*s do not share)

over geometric shape (which they do). The difference in size between the two also leaves

underused a potential for visual symmetry (*A* is both the second and the penultimate word

of the blazon, though asymmetry of size discourages us from recognizing this as a pattern)

which, used so forcefully in the thirteen letters on the title page, invites visual, non-verbal

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[37] See also *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850), 322. All questions of typographical style conceivably subject to silent editorial emendation have been checked against copies of the novel's first edition in the preparation of this chapter.

[38] Running headers in the novel are always centered and always set in capital letters of uniform size. Small capitals, except in this concluding blazon, are used only for the first word of chapters (and for chapter names in the table of contents), always set THUS.

engagement by asking us to consider the letters not just from left to right as words but also from right to left and center to edge as shapes.

What's crucial here, though, is that the blazon produces two names for colors, doubling the bare quantity of color names we encounter in the title, while at the same time doubly banishing color itself. The title page gave us red and black ink, though a name for red only. The blazon gives us names for both red and black, but only black ink to look at. The esoteric nature of these names (which, despite being heraldic terms of art, don't refer to any special hues or shades) casts the phrase in a rhetorical register which insulates the verbal from a challenge by color to its semiotic dominance, and demonstrates in words resources colors lack, since a single *instance* of red might attach meaningfully to many wholly distinct *names* – *red*, *scarlet*, and *gules* to name just three. In context, though, what is being described in the blazon is not a coat of arms at all; it's a depiction of a coat of arms engraved in stone.

> [O]ne tombstone served for both [Hester and Dimmesdale]. All around, there were monuments carved with armorial bearings; and on this simple slab of slate… there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald's wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend[.] (*SL*, 264)

The tombstone offers an inscriptive space even less dependent on color than printed writing ordinarily is, since stone can be written upon by means of chiseled imprint; it requires not even a distinction between black ink and a white page, binary nodes which must be kept visually distinct in print; writing carved in stone is mere gray on gray. Colors of arms thus rendered are represented as equally spaced lines (gules is vertical lines only, sable vertical and horizontal intersecting). So the heraldic lexis deployed here helps us to see that names for colors are being used to describe a spectacle even less colorful than the description itself (a description whose page, like all but one of the novel's others, features only black letters on a

white field). It is in this sense that color is doubly banished from the novel's ending, since the blazon is effectively a monochromatic description of a second, *even more* monochromatic description of a tertiary space in which color is, finally, imagined actually to exist and signify. If the title page gave us red letters spelling out "red letter" and referring to a red letter, this conclusion gives us black letters spelling out "red letter" and referring to a letter that is, in fact, not red at all but gray.

In theory this victory of the verbal over the visual could be achieved in ways that do not rely on the rigid and peculiar phrasing of a blazon, or rely for that matter on the notion of heraldry at all. Yet heraldry must be invoked here because this victory, if it is to do what Hawthorne needs it to do, must take place in a language which cannot be invoked except within some discourse of heredity. One reason the language of the blazon is so unforgivingly strict in the first place is presumably that the colors of actual armorial bearings – which to mean anything at all must retain some stability across centuries – are mutable in ways that words are not. Colors will fade, even when letters don't; hues can't be carved in stone, but letters can.

If the sudden eruption of heraldic nomenclature into the novel at what amounts to the last possible opportunity has any intratextual precedent at all it is when Hester and Pearl see the scarlet letter reflected in Governor Bellingham's suit of plate armor, but – for reasons that at that point in the novel do not yet make sense – the narrator assures us that this suit of armor, in spite of its medieval look, is *not* a family heirloom inherited from some Old World progenitor. It is

> a suit of mail, not, like the pictures, an ancestral relic, but of the most modern date; for it had been manufactured by a skilful armourer in London… [It] had been worn by the Governor … at the head of a regiment in the Pequod war.

> Hester looked… and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions. (SL, 105-06)

Here we have another armorial scarlet letter, one that – though a mere reflection – is, unlike the engraved crest on the tombstone, literally armorial and literally scarlet. But it's an artifact of the marketplace, and not one that can connect parents to children, or the living to the honored dead. This is, then, precisely what books might do – what professional authorship can accomplish. Not only will alphabetic inscription hazard less brazenly the risk of a war with (or about) non-white people, but it will also offer a logic of inheritance every bit as persuasive as race's, a model of legacy and posthumous importance every bit as comforting in the face of death or grief. It will do so, furthermore, by courting the energies of the marketplace in ways that, tempered by irony and paradox, might transform these energies' effects on the romantic imagination and neutralize their power to alienate, frustrate, and impoverish. If we have been unable to see how ardently *The Scarlet Letter* courts these energies, and consequently unable to see how profoundly it engages questions of racial embodiment and racial spectacle along the way, it is partly because we have charted the path the novels understanding of race lays without realizing that it actually begins at the point of sale.

●

The title page of *The Scarlet Letter* works partly by merging color and letter into a single titular phrase, which – in spite of some glaring but, in the end, narrowly circumscribed imperfections (like the asymmetry of the two words' character-counts and the grammatically singular "letter") – essentially constitutes its own referent. It is sometimes said that structuralism imagines the sign as like a strip of paper, in that it must have two sides (the

signifier and signified), and these sides are opposites which nonetheless cannot be imagined as existing independently of one another. As I've already suggested, the semiotic performance of the red letters on the title page is both fluid enough and circular enough to frustrate in advance any description so schematic as this sign-as-paper one, but bearing in mind that *all* such descriptions will be imperfect, we can usefully suppose that among the *least* problematic would be one which, taking up the image of the sign as a strip of paper, imagines the title as two Mobius strips, each looped through the other like the two links of a very short chain. Color and letters are the two sides of one of these strips, though because of the way Mobius strips work it is difficult to determine which of the two sides we have our finger on at any given moment. The form, for example, of the initial S in "scarlet" – which of its properties are strictly alphabetic, and which strictly chromatic? It's easy to imagine the letter in some other color, or the color in some non-alphabetic shape like a square, but to do this we must treat the color and the letter as abstract ideas rather than as material facts. We can imagine separating the color from the letter, but not in the same way that we can imagine separating the letters from one another, which is to say with no more than a pair of sharp scissors.

The other strip of paper – the second Mobius strip, looped through the first to form a two-link paper chain – represents signifier and signified in the abstract, and their relation likewise seems to constitute a stable dyad one moment, a shifting aporia the next. Looking at a Mobius strip, the idea of a strip of paper with just one side remains impossible to imagine, but our senses seem nonetheless to report that which our imagination cannot project.

The use of color on the page thus appears to create a closed circuit of meaning, so that – since *what* the title represents is also the *means* by which it represents, and what the

book refers to is not the world outside itself but the alphabetic signifying architecture it contains – the risk of contamination by the outside world (with its dangers of national collapse, political fanaticism, and cruel judgment) is minimized. The title page greets the reader and directs his or her attention towards its own intratextual dynamics – or, at least, seems at first to do so. The book seeks to create, and the title page helps it to succeed in creating, what, to some extent, all novels seek to create: a world of printed words which is as intellectually, psychologically, and phenominologically rich as the reader's reality – as the object world about which the senses report to the conscious mind. Though Hawthorne would encourage us to think of this book not as a *novel* proper but as a *romance*, since what he is writing is more lamp than mirror (or, in his terms, more moon glow than sun light), he does not hold himself to the same standards of probability as the real world, but the book must still belong enough to reality so as to compete with it for attention. The textual dynamics of the page – the fact that the whole novel, like the title page, is asking us open ourselves to a new and more intricately wrought sense of letters as things (the very things, after all, through which the novel reaches us, so this letter business is always partly a way for the text to ask us to fall deeper into its own mysteries) – all this dovetails with the setting of the work in the distant past to draw us out of the material and phenomenological world we normally live in, and into the intellectualized, philosophically abstract, non-specific, non-political world of the novel and its many letters. Like the burglar who throws a fine steak to the guard dog, then, the title page gives us a richly satisfying aesthetic problem to chew on, and while we chew the novel goes about its business. But whatever that business is, and whether or not it is as nefarious as stealing the jewels from the safe, it cannot be the business of avoiding and denying the question of race, or its attendant politics, since once we begin to

look for them, roused from our steak and reminded of our canine duties, we will soon see that race and its politics are everywhere in the novel.

All the while, though, even if the title page *is* meant to keep us busy with (or at least predisposes us to be intellectually and emotionally sated by) the dynamics of a self-contained economy of meaning – whether contained by the page, or by the seventeenth-century past, or by the undecidable and paradoxical – it does so in ways that betray ambivalence. For it also seeks to engage the material world in some clever ways, and in concerning itself with materiality it undermines its own attempts to flee the world of politics, history, power, and bodies. The red ink on the title page, for all its introverted lyricism, is also the initiation of that project, forcing our attention as it does on the physicality of the book itself, on its pages and ink as things not quite reducible to its letters and words. Our focus on the page's materiality is partly the result, as I've already said, of its semiotic circularity – of the fact that rather than referring outwardly to things or ideas not stored on the page, it refers inwardly to itself thirteen times over. But it is also the result of the fact that the red ink simply disrupts an established routine of reading by introducing a color other than the (naturalized, and thus more or less transparent) black of the ink or white of the paper. If the Stroop test disrupts the routines by which we decode the world of visible signs by placing color and writing explicitly at odds with one another (as in **blue**), the stylistic flourish of the red ink raises the question of the extent to which, even when the two are in concord (as in **scarlet**) the performative force of the hybrid sign is one of harmony or cacophony. Warren Chappell, in his *Short History of the Printed Word*, says of eighteenth-century printer Giambattista Bodoni's type designs what he might have said with as much justice of the thirteen letters Hawthorne arranges for us here.

> The type and pages beg to be admired – that is *looked* at – which is well and good, except that *looking* and *reading* are quite different, actually contradictory acts. We are linked to what we read by rhythmic motion. To *look at* things, we either disengage and let them flow by on their own or we stop them in their tracks. To look we hold our breath…. To read we breathe. (173-74)[39]

Ever ambivalent, Hawthorne is doing both these things with the title, asking us to breathe and not breathe at the same time. On the one hand, he wants precisely the kind of disengagement and passivity Chappell describes. He wants this not so much because he thinks it is the best way to read literature as because he thinks it is the best way to experience the world of power, exploitation, and ideological division. By learning to see and read the text simultaneously we are being trained to see and read the world – that is, to regard the world with an intellectual and aesthetic receptivity that is also, not coincidentally, a kind of political demobilization. By suggesting that this is akin to what Chappell describes when he says that Bodoni's designs ask us not to breathe, I am suggesting that the part of Hawthorne's project which seeks to make us look passively at the book rather than read it actively has everything to do with Hawthorne's and his novel's anxieties over what it means to have a material, human body, and what it means for that body to have appetites and drives. Above all, these are anxieties related to a newly articulate sense in the United States that the material body cannot exist except insofar as its existence emerges through materialist and implicitly or explicitly racial description – that the ideology of race constitutes the discursive lens through which the truth of the body is most legitimately brought into focus.

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[39] Italic emphasis has been rendered faithfully from the original, but I have emended some typographical anomalies which plague the whole book (in the edition I'm using) and which, given the subject matter, are genuinely hard to account for. Specifically, em dashes in the original are signaled by white space (as are instances of the ligature *fi*, of which there are none in this passage), so I have supplied them. The ligature *fl* in "flow" is mysteriously rendered " so that in the original *flow* appears as "ow.

This duality – that is, the novel's attempt to make us have and not have bodies, to make us engage with and disengage from the material world – starts on the title page and continues in the novel. It frames "The Custom-House," where Hawthorne's embarrassed flight from the world of political appointments invites onto the pages of an otherwise seventeenth-century-set fiction a battle of words till then played out in the pages of 1849 newspapers, and it frames (and explains), as I've already argued, the uncanny power of the novel's opening chapters.

This materiality draws Hawthorne's narration back into the world of racialized bodies. I will discuss how this is so in the next chapter. If we are truly to take our cues from the title page, though, we must approach the novel's bodies through the two disembodied visual registers the title page offers us as tools, and follow the path these tools cut through the novel, to see if and how they perform Hawthorne's engagement with his historical context. In what kind of context, after all, does the color of a letter come to seem a fit subject for a novel? How do colors and letters behave differently when they are not declaring the novel's title but are part of its diegesis? What do they become when they must be read alongside descriptions of human bodies?

"Bearded Physiognomies"

Part One of Two

Of color and letter, color probably seems intuitively the more closely related to the logic of

race. This is not to say that its relation to race is somehow simple or self-evident, but rather

that the presence of *some* conceptual link between color and race has been more successfully

naturalized in our culture, and appears to most of us more clearly self-evident than any

meaningful relationship between *letters* and race. This is so, I think, even when we take into

account the ways in which writing as a cultural practice has historically been deployed as

both the means and the mark of what many nineteenth-century Europeans would have

perceived as their own racial superiority over people whose culture was primarily oral. Thus,

as a way of balancing my discussion of the title page, which focused mainly on the role of its

letters, and on color insofar as it staged the letters of the title in certain ways not otherwise possible, this initial discussion of race in the novel proper will concentrate first on color. In the alphabetic dance of the red ink on the title page, after all, it is *letter* which must be built out of color – *letter's* l, e, t, and r which must appear as repetitions of the four final shapes in the sequence s, c, a, r, l, e, and t.

It's tempting to begin such a discussion with "the Black Man," even if there are also reasons to resist this temptation. Among the reasons to resist are two principle ones: first, that black is *not* the color in which the novel is most explicitly interested (that color is, obviously, red), and second, that "black," as those skeptical of the Black Man's racial significance sometimes point out, was not the privileged descriptor for Americans of African descent in the 1850s.[1] Indeed, it would be the mid-twentieth century before "Black" would supplant "Negro" as the dominant signifier of racial blackness.[2] We should note, though,

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[1] The complexities of racial taxonomy, and the equally complicated relationship of "race" to other discourses with which it sometimes overlaps (color, descent, ethnicity, "blood," and beginning in the twentieth century genetics) are unfortunately beyond the scope of my project, interesting though they are. Throughout this dissertation I have endeavored to balance my desire to be historically specific and semantically precise with the practical realities of writing prose. While hoping to write something readable, I have also sought not to traffic in, or seem to accede to, figures of speech which historically have been too often taken literally and used as instruments of oppression and violence. Because every document is ultimately finite, though, I will not always be able to do what I do in this note, which is to point out explicitly that my phrase "Americans of African descent," and the phrase "African Americans" with which it is more-or-less denotatively interchangeable, name a group of people who fit certain racial criteria in the present. We should not be too cavalier in overlooking the real fact that belonging in this group is not the same thing as having African ancestry, and involves, like all identitarian designations, some degree of metaphorical license. For one thing, *all* the people who have *ever* existed are descended from distant ancestors who lived on the continent we now call "Africa." More importantly for the political history of the United States, most of the people we call "African Americans" are as much of European as African ancestry; calling such people "African Americans" (though there's no reason to resist the term just because it, like every other, is fails to correspond to its own literal meaning) belies the extent to which what we are talking about is not ancestry so much as how the bodies of people now living are positioned by racial interpretive practices we've internalized in the present.

[2] Phillip Brian Harper's "What's My Name?? – Designation, Identification, and Cultural 'Authenticity,'" in his *Are We Not Men?*, is the most thorough and sophisticated of scholarly accounts with the history of names for black Americans. Harper is mostly concerned with the 1980s and '90s transition from *Black* to *African American* as the preferred self-identificatory term for Americans of what is considered African descent, though his account necessarily includes some discussion of the origin of "Black's" orthodoxy. I am, of course, more interested in what "black" would have meant in 1850, while Harper is interested in the twentieth century only,

that just because "black" was not the preferred adjective for someone of African ancestry in

the nineteenth century, that doesn't mean that the word suddenly acquired *all* of its racial

significance one afternoon in 1965. "Black" people – in contexts where it's clear that the

name of the color is meant to bear the entire burden of communicating a racial designation –

appear frequently enough in mid-nineteenth-century texts, and they often do so in the work

of writers who feel no need to gloss the word, or explain that they're using it in a specialized

sense. Nineteenth-century racism was extremely fond of excessively elaborate categorization

– something it shares, Freud might observe, with paranoia as a specific psychic and affective

order.[3] That is to say, the phrase "black man" in 1850 often meant a person of African

descent, and though I am *not* suggesting that Hawthorne's Black Man is literally African or

African American,[4] I *am* suggesting that racial difference is among the several discourses his

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though the fact that the 1990's move toward various hyphenated continental identities represents a shift in the relationship between race and color is certainly of great interest.

[3] Much could be made, were there but world enough and time, of the relationship between racial taxonomy and paranoid psychosis in Freud's case of "The Psychotic Dr. Schreber" (*Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia [Dementia Paranoides]* [1911]). "If we take a survey of the delusions as a whole we see that the persecutor is divided into [Schreber's physician] Flechsing and God; in just the same way Flechsig himself subsequently splits up into two personalities, the 'upper' and the 'middle' Flechsig, and God into the 'lower' and the 'upper' God. In the later stages of the illness the decomposition of Flechsig goes further still. A process of decomposition of this kind is very characteristic of paranoia. Paranoia… resolves once more into their elements the products of the condensations and identifications which are effected in the unconscious" (149). Schreber, a German judge, first suffered psychotic symptoms in 1884 when he was in his mid-forties. We can note, for what it's worth, that some of Schreber's psychotic distinctions are explicitly racial. God, for Schreber, includes both anterior and posterior realms, and "the posterior realms of God were, and still are, divided in a strange manner into two parts, so that a lower God (Ahriman) was differentiated from an upper God (Ormuzd)" (Schreber, quod. in Freud 120). "As regards the significance of this division Schreber can tell us no more than that the lower God was more especially attached to the peoples of a dark race (the Semites) and the upper God to those of a fair race (the Aryans)" (120). My point is that the elaborate racial nomenclature of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in perceiving a need to manage elaborate and subtle differences and to invent names by which to regulate and fix seemingly subtle distinctions, smacks of structures of representation Freud regards as symptomatic of paranoia generally.

[4] Which is what Jay Grossman seems to suggest in "'A' is for Abolition?" It's not fully clear what Grossman is saying about the Black Man, but it seems to be one of the following two claims: 1) that Hawthorne intended the Black Man to be taken as literally a man of African ancestry, or 2) that though the man's blackness may *not* be literal or racial, we should not let that fact stop us from regarding him as a demonstration of Hawthorne's attitudes toward racial blackness in straightforward, unambiguous ways. Both of these claims are, again, complicated by, among other things, the fact that Hawthorne's Black Man doesn't actually appear in the novel

blackness connotes, and that this connotation helps to inform, for a reader who identifies with white hegemony, the kind of threat he poses to social and moral order. This is another way of saying what I have been saying all along – saying about the novel as a whole: his primary meaning is not a racial one, but whatever that primary meaning is, it can only be understood fully once we have examined the various ways in which it is reflected in and refracted through familiar racial tropes which, though never center stage, are weirdly ever-present at the novel's margins. Indeed, insofar as miscegenation served for many mid-nineteenth-century whites as the objective correlative for more general fears about moral and social chaos, the fact that the threat posed by the Black Man in the novel is staged as the irreducibility of his blackness to racial or non-racial terms itself helps Hawthorne to make the character unsettling, and this in turn helps us to understand those anxieties. We can see in the novel's unwillingness to tell us in exactly what sense the Black Man is "black" traces of the displacement that ushers fears of miscegenation into the novel's affective landscape without their needing to be named explicitly; the porous boundary between *racial* blackness and *non*-racial blackness simply serves as a proxy for the "real" threat of a porous boundary between racial blackness and racial *whiteness*.

In spite of occasional overstatement on both sides – claims either that the Black Man's meaning has *no* connection with race (in the footnotes I'll discuss shortly) or that it is

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at all. He's only ever talked about, and it's not even clear whether the reader is supposed to be sure that he is real rather than imaginary. It's not even clear if the characters themselves regard him as real! I agree with Grossman that the Black Man can tell us something about race in *The Scarlet Letter*, but in order to read him correctly we must recognize both that 1) his blackness can neither be reduced to race nor can it be understood as wholly detached from race, and 2) part of the way Hawthorne preserves this dual valence is by giving us access to multiple interpretations of the Black Man while *denying* us access to the man himself. We must *wonder*, and we *must* wonder, about the extent to which his blackness is racial, precisely because we have been given enough information to be compelled to ask this question, but not enough information to be able to answer it satisfactorily.

determined *entirely* by its connection to race (as Grossman seems to be saying) – the whole debate around the proper way to read, understand, and teach the character can offer us some valuable lessons.[5] The consensus among scholars seems[6] to be that, since the word *black* did not acquire its current racial sense until the mid-twentieth century, *any* racial significance the word might possess for twenty-first-century readers is irrelevant to its meaning in a novel of 1850. To suppose otherwise would be anachronistically to violate common sense, regardless of which of the novel's social worlds – that of the seventeenth century or that of the nineteenth century – we regard as determinative of its verbal norms. Explanatory notes that gloss the Black Man in recent classroom editions of *The Scarlet Letter* are virtually unanimous, and sometimes downright prickly, in their assertion that the Black Man is either the devil proper or an infernal agent thereof.

The novel's first mention of the Black Man appears in direct discourse – suggesting that the phrase enters the diegesis under the sign of its seventeenth-century connotations more than its nineteenth-century ones. Near the close of her first interview with Chillingworth (who has just eased Pearl of some ailment) Hester, shaken by the leach's

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[5] As I've already suggested in the previous note, Jay Grossman's "'A' isFor Abolition" passionately, and in many ways convincingly, argues that Hawthorne's Black Man needs to be understood racially, and that those who lament the absence of racial difference in Hawthorne's romances (e.g. Yellin) somewhat inexplicably overlook "the simple, untranslated presence" of this character's racial otherness.

[6] I'm drawing on anecdotal data here, primarily on private conversations I had with senior members of the UVA faculty as I was preparing for my comprehensive oral exams in the early 2000s. I have found such evidence necessary because – except in cases like Grossman's, where a critic is explicitly making a case that the Black Man *is* part of *The Scarlet Letter's* racial landscape – published works tend not to dwell on the Black Man's meaning, or treat that meaning as a problem or question. As Grossman rightly says, the Black Man is "overlooked." As I explain, though, the character tends to be glossed as a devil or warlock, and this implicitly codes his blackness as unconnected with racial blackness (but, like racial blackness, connected with threats to moral and social coherence). The fact that a consensus exists which regards him as needing to be glossed in the first place, though, I suggest (somewhat speculatively) is a tacit admission that an unacknowledged racial reading of him exists, even if it exists – these editors believe – only as a potential *mis*reading against which the novel is to be guarded.

seemingly occult knowledge of medicine more than she is grateful for his help, and

apparently casting him in her mind as a Faustus who has just made her and her child

unwitting parties in his bargain, asks "Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest

round us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?" A survey

of the five such editions I have readily at hand includes two volumes from the 1960s which

do not gloss the passage at all, including the Harry Levin-edited Riverside Edition, which,

among modern editions (it is no longer in print, but I purchased it new in the 1990s), is the

closest relative of Ticknor, Reed, and Fields's of 1850.[7] The Norton Critical *Scarlet Letter*, of

which mine is the 1998 "third" edition, glosses the passage as "the devil or his emissary" (55

n4), who presides over the black mass, like the mass that – the editors mention – occurs in

"Young Goodman Brown" (the phrase "Black Man" does not appear in that tale, though it

is true that images of darkness are everywhere in it). Thomas E. Connolly's note for the

Penguin Classics edition that I use when I teach the novel offers this:

> *the Black Man*: witchcraft sprang from primitive religions that expressed a belief in
> the incarnation of a god in a human or an animal. This god was always called a
> devil by the Christians [who expressed a belief, Connolly seems counterfactually
> to suggest, in a god who was *not* incarnated in a human] and it appeared disguised
> as an animal or dressed inconspicuously in black; hence the Devil is called the
> black man. (234-35 n55)

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[7] The Riverside Editions are inexpensive trade paperbacks, apparently aimed at undergraduate students (I bought the book for a seminar on the American Renaissance at Vassar College in 1995). They are produced by the Houghton Mifflin Company. Ticknor and Fields merged with Houghton and Mifflin (which had no previous history publishing fiction) in 1880, and the Riverside Edition (I also have one of Emerson which I bought for the same course) seems to have been imagined as heir to Ticknor and Fields prestigious roster of mid-nineteenth-century New England authors. The other 1960s edition is a mass market paperback (New York: Airmont Books, 1962).

(Connolly's notes, which as a whole are among the best researched and most useful in any widely available edition of the novel, date from 1970; the edition itself, in what I take to be an implicit endorsement of the notes it contains, was prepared by Penguin in 2003.)

It's hard to imagine what this note is doing if it is not preempting some wildly irresponsible misreading of the phrase – one too distasteful, it seems, to dignify with explicit acknowledgement. One wants Connolly to append at least something like "not, as might be today, an African American." Neither *black* nor *man* is in any way an obscure term, and one can scarcely believe that a person whose knowledge of English failed to extend so far as an understanding of their meaning would be reading a novel as difficult as *The Scarlet Letter* in the first place, at least in the absence of explanatory materials far in excess of what the Penguin edition provides – say a facing translation into some other language. Many people who know just thirty or forty English words likely know exactly what both "black" and "man" mean.

But if Connolly's note is designed to preempt a racially-inflected reading of the Black Man, it does so with strangely broad scope. For instance, the references – two of them – to animal transformations serve no discernible purpose unless they are meant as a guarantee to the reader that the note is not merely accurate but exhaustive, that what it offers explicitly is really and truly *all* there is to know about the Black Man. It's as if Connolly is so certain, and so eager to demonstrate, that no other *relevant* information exists that he has even included a small helping of *irrelevant* information on the side. For Connolly, the Black Man has so little to do with race that he has more to do even with animal transformation!

If the Penguin Classics edition guards against racially inflected readings with its verbosity, the full-text of the novel as included in *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (I'm

working from the sixth edition, edited by Nina Baym, who has written extensively on

Hawthorne,[8] and who provided the 1983 critical introduction included in the Penguin I have

been discussing) does so with its brevity. The two-word phrase "Black Man" is glossed with

a one-word footnote: "Devil" (1374 n6). However genuine the pressures to use page space

in the *Norton Anthology* economically, one would think its editors would splurge on an article

at least. The note, in what seems to me wanton disregard for conventional usage, refuses to

offer a "The" or even an "A." It's as if the perceived need to contain rather than expand or

explore the Black Man's potential significance manifests itself as the desire to craft an

explanatory footnote even shorter than the phrase it's meant to gloss.[9]

What this survey – unscientific as it is – tells us is that the Black Man probably did

not become "[the] Devil" until the late 1960s – the very years during which the word *Black*

eclipsed the older *Negro* in the United States as the preferred self-description among most (or

at least most younger) African Americans. To be fair, teaching editions of literary works

tended not to have the copious annotation we now take for granted before the late 1960s

either, so earlier editions of *The Scarlet Letter* provide few footnotes at all. To me, though, this

suggests less that these new annotations of the Black Man are an innocent outgrowth of an

equally innocent paradigm shift in academic publishing norms than that the paradigm shift in

those publishing norms in the late 1960s *itself* grew partly out of a perceived need to police

the range of meanings ostensibly "classic" works of literature could sustain in the newly

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[8] In the more recent eighth edition, also edited by Baym, "Devil" (Vol. B 493 n1) is used again, still sans article.

[9] *The Scarlet Letter* covers one hundred forty one pages of the *Norton*; it features one hundred forty explanatory footnotes, (this includes the one Hawthorne himself appended near the end of "The Custom-House," which appears in all editions of the novel) of which just twelve contain one word only.

radicalized context of the university classroom. The quarantining of the Black Man's

blackness's *diabolic* connotations from a perceived contamination by its *racial* ones needs to

be regarded as an effect of those very racial connotations – or rather of a newly articulate

way of addressing those connotations in the context of the 1960s – and not an attempt to

preserve some pre-existing consensus by which everyone was certain the character was the

devil and it never occurred to anyone that the epithet "Black" might resonate with ideas

about or mobilize fears of African Americans. That such a consensus never existed is only

part of my point. What matters more is that the fantasy of its *having* existed can best be

explained as an effect of the very force (the Black Man's mobilization of racial discourses

and racist fears) which these footnotes are designed to contain, repress, and deny.

So, though the Black Man's blackness has never been racial, exactly, this blackness

only became officially *un*-racial in about 1970, at which point an emerging consensus around

the exact meaning of "black" made it necessary, from the perspective of official reading, to

fortify *The Scarlet Letter* explicitly against what was taken to be an anachronistic and presentist

misreading. The New Critical orthodoxy of the moment can easily be imagined trying to

preempt a situation in which the Black Man became in American Lit surveys what Caliban

was becoming in British Lit surveys.[10] To be clear, I'm not saying that, before the Black Man

acquired this deracializing gloss in *The Scarlet Letter's* editorial footnotes, his meaning was

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[10] I'm trying not to be reductive in my treatment of New Criticism here, an interpretive vocabulary to which all modern criticism, including of course my own project, owes a tremendous debt of gratitude. That said, like all orthodoxies, it governed both what was most brilliant in the discipline and what was most short sighted. So, while New Criticism frequently rose above its own clichés, like other institutions it probably clung more closely to the safety of those clichés when it felt its own institutional vulnerability. In other words, it does not strike me as an accident that these de-politicizing and de-historicizing footnotes appear at a moment when New Criticism was still very much the dominant ideology in the study of American literature, but when, at the same time, it must already have begun to see the writing on the wall. (Structuralism arrives in America in 1968, the same year revolution erupts on in the universities of Paris, etc.)

primarily or explicitly racial; I'm saying that before those footnotes appeared the racial

meaning of "black" circulated with all the word's other secondary meanings in a rich

interpretive haze. These footnotes seek to exclude this meaning from play, and do so, it

seems to me, with the genuinely dishonest implication that the idea of racial blackness would

have been the furthest thing from the thoughts of the novel's 1850 reader.[11] The meaning of

the character's blackness – like so much in *The Scarlet Letter* – is deliberately ambiguous, and,

as it usually does, this ambiguity serves to keep concrete political meanings within the novel's

rhetorical vicinity without demanding actual, explicit commitment to those meanings. With

the Black Man, Hawthorne can use the intensity of his readers' racial fears to keep those

readers emotionally engaged with the novel, and can do so without ever having to own his

authorial interest in race, since it is the reader who brings the concreteness of ante-bellum

America's racial politics to the novel, not the author. Hawthorne's manipulation of racist

fears, as clever and subtle as it is, and as much as it helps to account for part of what made

so difficult and joyless a novel so instantly a popular success, is always hidden behind a veil

of plausible deniability.

It may be hard for some readers today to imagine that a white author in 1850s

America would create a non-white character and then refrain from describing that character

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[11] Again, the question in which I'm interested is less "What is 'black' about him and is it his race?" than it is "How does the idea of racial blackness help to constitute his meaning for the novel?" and "How are the scope and substance of that racial import affected by the fact that Hawthorne keeps him off stage, and never gives him body enough to admit of racial classification?" As I've already mentioned, the fact that the character is not racially black in any clear way is actually part of what keeps him in the orbit of racial politics, since by introducing racial blackness not under the sign of knowable, fixed meanings but under the sign of confusion and uncertainty Hawthorne draws aesthetic power from the reader's already existing (and ostensibly "real") racial fears. These fears connect blackness and confusion not in uncertainty over the applicability of racial categorization itself but in authority over the applicability of specific racial designations like black and white: that is, they are fears of miscegenation and of the social chaos many feared would result from no longer being able to determine people's "true" race on sight.

in unambiguously racial terms. There is at least some evidence not only that some of today's readers might feel so, but that even some of today's most sophisticated and historically informed readers might feel so, and perhaps with good reason.[12] It probably *is* hard to imagine that a white author of the mid-nineteenth century would engage his reader's feelings about racial difference without making racial difference itself literally part of the scene/seen. (Hawthorne of course *does* make it part of some scenes in the novel, though always with Native Americans rather than African Americans.) But it should be even *harder* to imagine that a "Black Man" in 1850 – at least one possessing all the qualities with which Hawthorne imbues this particular character (occult pagan knowledge, alluring menace, a secret and evil desire to seduce and "mark" white women, a general antipathy to the stability of "our" way of life) – could be understood in terms wholly and absolutely *separate* from race. Hawthorne's is a complicated literary performance partly just in that the Black Man's blackness is primarily *not* racial; it is primarily another kind of blackness. Its non-racial primary meanings – evil, death, mourning, witchcraft, and forbidden magics – benefit in their intensity and suggestive power from vague associations with racial fears which, in 1850, are prevalent enough that Hawthorne can play upon them without *needing* to name them. So the Black Man's blackness is that of the "black art" in *Doctor Faustus*,[13] but it's also that of *Othello*;[14]

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[12] I'm thinking here of something I heard on the radio: a 2002 interview with Henry Louis Gates on NPR's *Fresh Air* about the then-recently discovered *Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts (probably written in the mid 1850s). Gates tells host Terry Gross that one feature of the manuscript that allows him to authenticate it as being by an African American author is that Crafts tends to introduce non-white characters without explicitly designating them as being any particular race. This, Gates believes, is something that white writers of the period did not do. (*Fresh Air*, April 9, 2002). While I'm not sure how inflexible Gates means to suggest that his rule is, it's certainly true that Hawthorne typically *does* code his nonwhite characters in racial terms. Native Americans, when they appear in *The Scarlet Letter*, are always identified as "Indians" or "red men" or some equivalent.

[13] Emperor Charles V to Faustus at the beginning of Scene 9.

[14] The word appears at least five times in the play and, as one always expects with Shakespeare, is almost unfathomably rich in each case. Suffice it to say that it never refers *just* to race, but always resonates with racial implications.

where the former is clearly diabolic, the latter is awash in associations of every kind. "Black" in *Othello* abounds with a racial suggestiveness to which the word is nonetheless always irreducible.

But one difference between the English Renaissance stage and the American Renaissance novel is that the latter, unlike the former, grew out of a cultural milieu so charged with racial ideas and fears that, like the ionized air before a thunder storm, the same shared social meanings that allowed a self-consciously American literature to develop in these decades provided a medium through which "blackness" could arc from a moral abstraction in the aesthetic ether to a concrete embodiment on the earth, and do so without requiring a character as "literally" black as the Moor of Venice to complete the circuit. For Americans in 1850, especially in cities like Boston where slavery was the political issue the loudest voices tended most to shout about, the mere chatter of people's daily inner lives must have built up a kind of static charge of thoughts about race. People who had no particular interest in or strong feelings about slavery or racial inequality must have been bewildered by the amount of rhetorical and emotional real estate these issues nonetheless demanded for themselves in the psyche. Even people who did not particularly care about racial difference or politics clearly found themselves abundantly ready to identify with the cultural work of, for instance, the mistral show – there's no other way to account for that form's broad popularity. Such forms could conceivably have been *especially* important in the lives of people who felt no strong inclination toward racist or antiracist activism. Such people had no choice but to be thinking about race anyway; it was simply in the air. One imagines that, unconsciously, they must have been looking for opportunities to work out the private thoughts and feelings about racial difference that seemed to arrive unbidden from a

noisy public sphere. Not passionate enough to attend antislavery meetings or callous enough to move south and buy slaves of their own, one imagines that such people were ever ready to seize on objects to which their otherwise-useless feelings about race could attach.

So there is literary precedent going back at least to Shakespeare (and in this it's precedent that antedates both Hawthorne's 1850 and Hester's 1640) imbuing "black" with a range of meanings that include racial ones without entailing them. It is, anyway, indisputable that in mid-nineteenth-century America, the phrase "black man" would have been understood to refer to an African American man in *some* contexts. As I will discuss in chapter four, in *Clotel* William Wells Brown describes a pew in a multiracial (but segregated by race and gender) church which is labeled "B.M." for *black men*, the phrase in this context making so much intuitive sense to the parishioners that – like "adultery" – it doesn't even need to be spelled out to be understood. Whoever wrote that sign seems to have thought "Black Man" was the phrase that most clearly lent itself to representing an African American male adult, and seems also to have assumed that the other's in his town would feel the same way. Had he any notion that "B.M." would require explanation for *anybody* attending the church, he presumably would have included at least *some* of the other letters.[15]

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The relevant question here isn't that of if "black man" in 1850s America meant "male African American person" or "the devil," since clearly the phrase could mean either or both at once (a not-incidental fact to which I'll return later). The extent to which the two words did or didn't mobilize racial meanings for an American in 1850 depends largely on the

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[15] See *Clotel* (175). I discuss the passage at much greater length near the end of chapter four in this dissertation.

context within which they appeared. So the relevant question is this: Does *The Scarlet Letter*

provide one of those contexts within which the phrase's racial meanings are activated?

Depending on how we answer this first question we will have to face one of two sets of

further questions, sets through which we'll finally be able to clarify our understanding of

what Hawthorne seeks to accomplish by deploying "blackness" in so ambiguous a way. If we

decide racial meanings *are* active when Hawthorne uses the phrase, we must still ask if such

meanings can really be *that* important, given that they are always obviously secondary to what

is, in this context, "black's" primary and literal meaning – its Faustian one? If, on the other

hand, we decide that the black man's blackness completely shuts out the possibility of even

the vaguest hints of racial significance, we will need to ask how secure the integrity of this

racial vacuum can be in the context of a mid-nineteenth-century increasingly eager to explain

the entire world in racial terms. Given the range of things that, by the 1870s, even non-

crack-potted people would begin to claim were fundamentally and inextricably tied to race –

fertility, criminality, industriousness, technological progress, moral laxity – it strikes me as

implausible that something like the word "black," which has been central to ideas about

racial difference from the modern beginning of those ideas in the Renaissance, and which

retains its centrality today after half a millennium, might so easily or securely be isolated

from racial connotations by the mere fact that, at the literal level, Hawthorne uses it to

denote something other than race. If the tether of words to their literal denotations, in any

context, were not always frayed by the various things those same words could mean in *other*

contexts, there would be no such thing as literary criticism. Language would always be

transparent enough not to require comentary.[16]

Such an isolation seems to me to be ever less likely to succeed the more we consider

the increasing importance of race in America in 1850, or connect that importance to

Hawthorne's skill as a literary artist. Such skill after all, in an Anglophone literary culture

which regards Shakespeare as its finest produce, would have to have something to do with

that which, to me anyway, most seems to set The Bard's finest achievements on so high an

altar: their incredible sensitivity to the ways in which a word in use possesses a primary,

explicit meaning that nonetheless accrues poetic fullness as it reverberates between and

among *all* of the various things which the same word *could* mean, but in its particular present

case does *not* mean. One could pick virtually any line of Shakespeare to play this game with,

but in the interest of keeping thematically close to the Black Man we might think here of the

images of darkness which attach to the female lover – who is both dark of hair and eye and

morally corrupt – in the last part of the *Sonnets*. The couplet that concludes 147 is particularly

delicious – "For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell,

as dark as night." The reading is obvious enough that I need not elaborate on it much, but

the reason the image works poetically is that a woman who is being called *morally* dark is

being called so in a way that also mobilizes really *every* connotation of darkness, both literal

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[16] The idea is sometimes put to me that the Black Man is so called because he wears black clothes. The Thomas E. Connolly note I discussed earlier seems to suggest as much, and it's true that, according to the *OED* anyway, such usage was exceedingly common in the nineteenth-century (though less so, if their quotations rightly indicate, in America than in England). People would routinely refer, for instance, to "black monks" meaning members of a monastic order whose robes are black in color. It strikes me as unlikely that that usage would be common among Hawthorne's Puritans, though, since he makes a point of telling us later that all of them dress in black too. If the blackness of the black man were merely a matter of his habit, that "blackness" would not serve to distinguish him from the Puritans who talk about him.

and figurative, which we can imagine. When we say such lines "resonate" what I think we mean is that their relation to their literal meaning is enriched by that meaning's harmonic accord with and refraction through all the word's other signifying possibilities; these possibilities, though disavowed at the literal level, remain part of a textual substratum of meaning that the manifest content itself – by a kind of melancholic identification with the potential meanings it has not been allowed to realize – simultaneously renounces and internalizes. The Dark Lady's blackness is not literally racially black here, any more than Hawthorne's Black Man's is, but in both cases the *connotations* of racial blackness cannot be disposed of, since such connotations– by enriching rather than subverting the denotative properties of the words they hover near – constitute a word poetically deployed as something which matters to us in ways that the mere factual reporting of events can't. I would rather not make a case that literary language constitutes a "better" or "fuller" kind of language than the language of ordinary communication in some ahistorical way. But given the way Anglophone criticism has constructed the ideology of literature, and given the kinds of things that have seemed within that ideology to be the agreed-upon criteria of literary excellence, it does seem to me that to deny the importance of race to the meaning of the Black Man is to deny that *The Scarlet Letter* succeeds in literary terms.

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Examples of the phrase "black man" used to refer to an African American without being further qualified abound in abolitionist literature, but for the moment it will suffice to note that William Wells Brown titled his pioneering 1863 history of notable African Americans *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*. The title page of the volume makes clear that the main title is *The Black Man*; and though the full title seems

customarily to have been used in the nineteenth century (that is, for whatever reason, nobody seems to have taken to calling the book simply "The Black Man"), we should note that editors continue to use the full title even today, and surely nobody will suggest that today the phrase "the black man" is devoid of potential racial meaning. That the whole title, including subtitle, is generally used today suggests that whatever ambiguity or opacity attended the short title *The Black Man* in 1863 still attends it now, in spite of the fact that we have been long used to "black's" modern, post-Civil Rights Movement sense. The crucial point, though, is that in 1863 – a year in which Hawthorne was still alive and slavery for the most part still intact in the south (so a context not *entirely* unlike that of 1850) – Brown could publish a book under this title and expect that "Black" would bear the entire burden of signifying race to the reader. Even if we observe the work's full title, though, the only clue we have that the book is about African Americans, or about *any* racially specific designation, is in that one word: *black*. Indeed, nothing else on the whole title page designates Brown as a black author, or as a former slave, or as a writer whose works tend to focus on the experience of African Americans. For readers unacquainted with his previous work, only the word *quadroon* in the last of the authorial credits beneath his name designates him even as somebody who has written about African Americans previously; neither *Clotel* nor *Sketches of People and Places Abroad* (the two other authorial credits the title page mentions) declare in their titles that they are about the politics of race or slavery. One must turn the leaf, to the dedication (which is "to the advocates and friends of Negro freedom") to discover, had the word "black" *not* communicated its meaning, that this book is to have any more to do with the lives of black people than does *The Scarlet Letter*. Works about African Americans or slavery, including Brown's, tended to be marked and marketed as such on their title pages,

and this includes *Clotel* (the title page of the first edition of which identifies the novel as "a narrative of slave life" and its author as "a fugitive slave, author of 'Three Years in Europe'") and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which, should the "lowly" of its title prove difficult to interpret, famously includes an illustration beneath the title itself. So we can say beyond any doubt that this title page of Brown's is one of those contexts within which the word "black" served unambiguously to denote "African American," and it does so in the absence of any other signifier of racial difference – any other cue to alert the reader that race is among the discourses to which the word "black" might belong.

As I will note in the second half of my project, Brown and Hawthorne, though they probably never met, were part of the same broadly considered Boston literary community at some of the same times. A systematic investigation could bring to light earlier, equally unambiguous evidence that "black man" was a phrase readers of *The Scarlet Letter* would have responded to in racial terms. One particularly pointed instance of the word "black," though which Hawthorne may well have encountered, is in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," in which the refrain "I am black, I am black!" functions, as it sometimes does in *Othello*, to represent racial blackness, emotional anguish, and moral guilt all at once. The poem was published in the 1848 number of *The Liberty Bell*, a Boston antislavery annual.

That said, Brown's volume is manifestly part of Hawthorne's literary world. It's said that Pi Alley, the Washington Street entrance into the courtyard behind the Old Corner Bookstore (and all the other buildings on its block) got its name in the mid-nineteenth century from the lunch carts that would operate there around noon. Printers, booksellers, and newspapermen would go to buy pies for lunch – convenient fare if one must eat quickly

on the walk back to the press – and in reaching for the coins in their pockets to pay,

typesetters would also withdraw handfuls of mixed type or "pi" in slang. The sheer

geographical proximity of the presses, bookshops, and antislavery societies to one another,

those who worked and lunched near Washington Street all likely overheard one another's

conversations on the street and at lunch spots. Even the famous Union Oyster House was

only about two thousand feet from the Old Corner Bookstore.

   The Black Man was published by Robert F. Wallcut, who in both 1850 and in 1862

was the General Agent of *The Liberator* – his name is on the masthead in as large a typeface

as, and above, that of its editor William Lloyd Garrison, and the address listed on the title

pages of the books he published is also the address of the American Anti-Slavery Society's

office, from which *The Liberator* was published: 21 Cornhill in 1850. By 1861 both the Anti-

Slavery Society and Wallcut's business office had moved to 221 Washington Street.[17] Both

these addresses are roughly one hundred feet from the Old Corner Bookstore, the former to

the north and the latter to the south. Indeed, though Wallcut seems to have done some

printing on site,[18] he often contracted the same nearby presses favored by Ticknor and

Fields. Brown's *The Black Man* was stereotyped and printed at the Boston Stereotype

Foundry, which, at 4 Spring Lane, was directly across the street from the Old Corner

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[17] Just south of Broomfield Street, and like the Old Corner Bookstore on the west side of the street. The address numbers I'm using are those which were in use until much of Washington Street was burned in 1872; the numbers then adopted for the rebuilt neighborhood are those in use today, except where the demolition that made way for Government Center, begun in 1969, has changed them. A high-resolution digital photograph I downloaded from the website of the Boston Public Library – of a map undated but produced between the 1865 construction of the City Hall on School Street and the 1872 fire, and calling itself *Nanitz' Great Mercantile Map of Boston*, has many of the storefronts numbered.

[18] *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison* (1852) gives Wallcut's address as 21 Cornhill on the title page (again, this is what was called "The Anti-Slavery Office" a space which served primarily as the offices of *The Liberator*), but on the verso imprints "J. B. Yerrinton and Son, Printers, 21 Cornhill." It's possible that Wallcut shared the space, or kept an office on the second story while Yerrinton kept his press on the ground floor.

Bookstore, and was on the block adjacent to Hobart and Robbins's New England Type and

Stereotype Foundry, who had handled the third printing (and every subsequent printing until

after Hawthorne's death) of *The Scarlet Letter*.[19] These two offices were at respective ends of

Spring Lane, a narrow one-block thoroughfare perhaps one hundred feet long, and named

for a natural fresh water spring that, until 1908 (according to a plaque at the site today) was

where the entire neighborhood would get its drinking water. The presses could conceivably

have been printing *The Scarlet Letter* while, a block away, fabricators were casting the plates

for Brown's *Black Man*. Nothing prevents us, for that matter, from supposing that

Hawthorne to have been across the street conversing with Ticknor and Fields at the same

time, while Brown chatted with Wallcut a few doors down. Indeed, the only reason we know

Brown wasn't at *The Liberator's* office on March 16, 1850 is that he had fled to England about

a year earlier – though between September, 1849 when Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet

Letter* and March, 1850 when it was published, *The Liberator* printed no fewer than four

articles written by Brown, and mentioned him by name in nearly every one of its weekly

issues.

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Thus far, my discussion of the Black Man has sought to demonstrate the following.

First, the anxiety over what the character means in *The Scarlet Letter* seems to be a product of

the late-twentieth century, and those who, beginning then, have rushed to gloss him as "the

devil" are, for better or worse, establishing a new interpretive orthodoxy rather than

preserving an old one. Second, the phase itself could refer unambiguously to African

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[19] Located at numbers 62, 64, and 66 Congress Street (on a plot that is now Angell Memorial Square) Hobart and Robbins also printed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

American identity in Boston in the mid-nineteenth century given the right context, and even if Hawthorne was not particularly interested discussions of race, the bookselling and publishing neighborhood of Boston was geographically small, and he was in close enough contact with the abolitionist press to overhear its discussions whether he liked it or not, even if he preferred not to associate with those who worked in it. And third, even if *The Scarlet Letter* does not provide such a context, the early modern – and to some extent specifically Shakespearian – notions of literary achievement to which both Hawthorne and the New Critics were heirs tend to favor a model of signification in which *all* a word's latent meanings, so long as they are not absolutely the products of a later historical moment or a significantly different culture, help in the context of self-consciously artistic verbal endeavors to inform the broader resonance of manifest denotation.

There remains a possible objection here, though, in that – even if we suppose that the phrase "black man" had racial connotations no book of 1850 that used this phrase could refuse to deploy with it, Hawthorne's desire *not* to participate in what he saw as the naïve utopianism of anti-racist activism might have blinded him to the fact that Black Man, whatever else it meant, simply *had* to suggest a racial category. Even if Hawthorne's mistrust of utopian schemes, however ardent, could never hope to extricate his words from connotations he wished to avoid, his decision to devote the novel's *second paragraph* to an explicit disidentification with such schemes, under whose heading he numbered political reform movements of every kind, surely signals an authorial desire to place as much distance as possible between the novel's words and the rhetoric of fashionable reform movements. (In Hawthorne's more racist moments, he seems to have regarded even the acknowledgement that black people *exist* as a posture akin to the – in his view – insincere

and opportunistic reform efforts of whites more liberal than he.) This would mean, perhaps, that the existence of these racial connotations in *The Scarlet Letter* is a real imperfection in the novel's design, but not that such connotations are a legitimate part of this design's successful execution. Certainly – we might say – the book would be better if the Black Man were called something else, such as the "infernal wizard," or some such thing, since such a name would allow Hawthorne to disengage from racial connotation which, such a reading supposes, have no important role to play in his novel. On the other hand, such a reading might suppose that *The Scarlet Letter* would be a better novel if the racial connotations of "black" *had been* harnessed by the book as a part of (rather than as a distraction from) its thematic architecture, but this observation, reminiscent of Jean Fagan Yellin's in "Hawthorne and the American National Sin," does not mean that the novel meditates in any way on racial identity; it only means that we are right to be disappointed by the fact that it does not do so.

So it's not enough to establish that "black man" was in widespread use as a racial designation in 1850, or even to establish that that phrase in that year *always* carried potential racial connotations. The decisive element for us in determining if and how to weigh the potential racial significance of "black" for *The Scarlet Letter's* Black Man ought not only to be whether or not such meanings were available to Hawthorne where and when the book was written, but rather whether or not, and to what extent, readings based on such meanings enrich our understanding of the work as a whole in ways that would make sense in Massachusetts in 1850 (or which meet such pressing needs in the present that, without claiming to do otherwise, we can sacrifice historical accuracy for some greater good). We should be asking not just if people in 1850 might have interpreted the Black Man's blackness as a quality connected directly or indirectly with *racial* blackness, but asking as well if a reader

who saw such meanings in the novel would be able to produce a more satisfying

interpretation of it for having done so.

Hawthorne was profoundly interested in the new scientific discourses of his

moment, even if he usually regarded their more extravagant promises as dangerous and

illusory. As I will discuss at length when I engage individual passages from the novel, he had

an abiding fascination with para-racial sciences like physiognomy and (to a lesser extent)

phrenology. Both sciences play roles in Hawthorne's thinking, though so too does the

distinction between them, and at least one scholar has argued that Hawthorne found

phrenology's claims to quantifiable, measurable scientific validity laughable. But he was

nonetheless deeply and less skeptically fascinated with physiognomy, whose claims more

closely resembled something like a newly systemic vocabulary by which to describe

longstanding commonsense notions of bodily appearance and physical beauty.[20] Phrenology

and physiognomy were both subjects of articles in *The American Magazine of Useful and*

Entertaining Knowledge during his short tenure there, as were a few other topics of repeated

inquiry, most of which are unrelated to one another but all of which are strangely specific for

a magazine which seems to have been conceived as a true miscellany of whatever might be

interesting to people.[21] Marion L. Kesselring, in her exhaustive study of Hawthorne's library

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[20] See Taylor Stoehr's 1974 essay "Physiognomy and Phrenology in Hawthorne." As is something of a refrain in my discussion of secondary sources, Stoehr's essay makes a great deal of sense, but is strangely reluctant to connect Hawthorne's fascination with the new sciences of the body to race, racism, or slavery. But Stoehr's article is full of well observed historical detail, as "Even if we cannot be sure that Hawthorne read phrenology of talked about it with his friends, we do know that in 1825 he registered for Dr. Wells's special series of lectures in anatomy and physiology, open to all seniors in [Bowdion] college upon payment of a $15 fee. That phrenology would go unmentioned in such a course is unlikely, and it is at least possible that Hawthorne was partly attracted to these rather expensive lectures because he could hear phrenology expounded there by a disciple of Gall himself" (359).

[21] Hawthorne served as editor (and, except for occasional contributions from his sister Ebe, sole writer [Wineapple 87-89]) of *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* from March through August of 1836. His numbers are Volume II 7-12. The magazine was a true miscellany, digesting whatever the editor

records, notes that from at least October 20 until November 3, 1828 Hawthorne had

Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* in his possession, and seems also to have read Combe's *On the*

Constitution of Man sometime in the mid-1830s.

The influence of Combe particularly is easy to recognize in Hawthorne's fiction, but

this fact on its own does not link the modes of representation we encounter there to

anything as seemingly specific as race; phrenology and physiognomy do not solve the

problem presented by the Black Man since they do not register the extent to which his

meaning is a racial meaning; rather, they repeat that problem in a different key, continuing to

suggest the interpretive trajectories of race without ever leaving the veil of plausible

deniability by which they can claim to be about something else entirely. Both fields of study

are clearly engaged *somehow* in a cultural conversation about race (in the broadest and vaguest

sense). They constituted a point of fascination and wish fulfilment for the mid-nineteenth

century in ways that simply can't be completely unrelated to the deep cultural investment in

race with which their decades of perceived scientific legitimacy were almost exactly

contemporary. But physiognomy and phrenology are nonetheless reducible to western

culture's conversation about race only imperfectly.

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thought readers might find fascinating, and often betraying his own eccentric points of wonder. A sampling of relevant pieces: in the March issue "The Science of Noses" (268), and "Exercise of the Brain" (302-4, an excerpt from George Combe's *On the Constitution of Man* [1826], a seminal work of phrenological theory), in the April "Phrenology" (337-8), and "Advantages of Moral Science" (349-50, also from Combe's *On the Constitution of Man*), in the June number an article taken from the *Encyclopedia Americana* on "Hair" (415). Under Hawthorne's editorship (of which it seems he tired very quickly) other reoccurring topics include great men of the Revolutionary generation, animals (essays on cats and snakes, for example), racial and national character (mostly drawn, apparently, from recently published travelogues), the puritans, and recent scientific and anthropological discoveries. A woefully amputated section of this chapter once dealt at length with Hawthorne's astonishing piece "The Egyptian Papyrus" from April

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   The crux of the Black Man's meaning is to be found neither in the fact that the name

by which he is called can mean *the devil* (or some agent thereof), which is, as I've already said,

basically what it is supposed to mean in the novel at the literal level, *nor* in any determinative

or fixed idea of race, but rather in the fact that the same phrase can be used to mean either

or both. When racial meanings fail to attach securely to this Black Man, they fail precisely

because the same phrase that can mean *male African American person* can also mean *evil*

incarnate. He is properly read as a signifier neither of racial blackness nor of moral blackness

but of the intersection between the two in what Hawthorne imagines to be his reader's

imagination. "Black Man" thus serves as a switch word connecting the concept of racial

otherness to the concept of moral – or Judeo-Christian – evil, and this connection allows the

character thus named to serve as a trope conflating two concepts of evil in intensely

Christian communities of white people, particularly those for whom Christianity is bound up

in some fairly elaborate way with the machinery of European imperialism and colonial

expansion (Boston in the 1640s and the United States in the 1840s had this in common).

White, missionary imperialists (at least as Hawthorne imagined them) tend to see themselves

arrayed against two evils: a satanic evil which is actively malevolent (but which exists within

Christian cosmology) and a heathen evil of erroneous belief (or non-belief), which may not

maliciously assault God's law out of ill will, but which threatens the sanctity of that law

nonetheless, and does so both philosophically (by suggesting, through its mere existence,

that there is, in fact, a world outside Christianity) and supernaturally (by consisting of

unsaved souls that, if still unsaved when the bodies in which they reside die, will descend to hell and join the Devil's army, willingly or unwillingly).[22]

The banal, predictably racist logic by which a single two-word phrase can serve to signify "African American" and "Devil" with equivalent accuracy is not my primary point here – although seeing Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* make common cause with that kind of racist arithmetic, even if he seems less to be endorsing it than to be using it as a means to achieve aesthetic ends not in themselves deplorable, can and should startle us. Even if we are prepared to accept that Hawthorne is deeply engaged with the idea of race and the structures of power and exploitation to which that history is connected, we probably are not prepared to see him traffic in so coarse a brand of racist sentiment as "black people are morally bad and socially corrosive, like Satan." Hawthorne isn't actually saying this, but he is assuming that it's the kind of sentiment his audience would identify with, and he is utterly untroubled by that fact, happy to have found yet another way to circumvent the great gull. However reactionary and bigoted, Hawthorne's racist sentiments tend at least to be much more subtle than that, and the hostility behind them, at least at a conscious level, is usually directed less at

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[22] The dichotomy I'm sketching here isn't really meant to have doctrinal or theological significance for Christianity as a whole, but rather explanatory value for how the Black Man is supposed to function symbolically in the novel; the "Christianity" I'm discussing is really the religious context which latter-day New Englanders (I include both Hawthorne and myself) imagine must have characterized life for Puritans in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. This context had little use for the elaborate categories still central to religious debates in Europe – which included significant lines of division not just between "us" and "them" but for dozens of subtle gradations of them-ness. In Boston in 1640 there was only one church, but those who lived in Winthrop's Boston occupied (at least) one among (at least) four possible relations to it: church members (white Christians), white people who were not religious, Native Americans who had converted to Christianity (not actually church members), and Native Americans who had not been converted. The latter three among these four seem to have been regarded with little overt hostility; even the unreligious white emigrants were far more tolerated by Winthrop's band than we might suppose. Not so the sometimes fifth group: heterodox Church members like Anne Hutchinson. See the early chapters for Caleb Snow's history.

But one thinks also here of Mary Rowlandson, whose difficulty in interpreting the Native Americans with whom she is forced to travel represent a force that terrifies her because it is in league with Satan, or a force that terrifies her because it points to a world outside of Christianity's symbolic order.

non-white people (about whom Hawthorne's only firm conviction is that any concern devoted to them is wasted) than at reform-minded whites who seek actively to interfere in what such reformers see as the unjust institutional treatment of others. There's a contrarian strain in Hawthorne the existence of which helps, perhaps, to explain why he connected on a personal level with people like Emerson and Thoreau, with whom you'd think he would have little in common, at least politically speaking. This contrarianism might have lead him to make into political enemies people for whom he possessed merely personal animosity. This is something of which we're all probably guilty once in a while: *I don't like you, therefore I disagree with your politics.* Hawthorne's is a contrarianism that seeks to fortify its own intellectual sophistication by sneering at those who are naïve enough to entertain utopian hopes, or who are arrogant enough to suppose themselves able to diagnose or cure society's ills by means of their own intelligence or actions. Its hostility is directed arguably at would-be intellectuals and artists whom Hawthorne believes poach, by adopting fashionable political views, a prestige which rightfully belongs to people like himself – a prestige which he would like to think he has earned legitimately by way of what he regards as his innate talents and hard work. When we discuss Hawthorne's racism – which make no mistake was real and malignant – we must be careful to note that it was not rooted in that hostility toward non-whites which characterized that of, for instance, Thomas Jefferson. It is a political stance he adopts in order to fortify his disidentification with whites whom he regards as stupid, and as having taken a shortcut to cultural relevance which Hawthorne flatters himself he would never take. It's likely that Hawthorne regarded non-white people as universally no smarter than the stupidest of white people, but this bigotry did not manifest itself as hostility directed (consciously) at actual African or Native Americans since (consciously) he did not regard

non-whites as a threat to his sense of who he was. It was only with other would-be

intellectuals and moral authorities that he had to compete for resources or status, since it was

only they, he seems to have assumed, whom others might mistakenly regard as his equals.

The whites who sought to challenge racial exploitation were often regarded as heroic verbal

stylists and influential civic and cultural leaders, designations Hawthorne believed he

deserved more than they. That he also had to worry about African American writers stealing

his spotlight may not have occurred to him, partly, perhaps, because until 1853 no African

American had published a novel.

But if this is the structure of feeling behind Hawthorne's antipathy toward

abolitionist reformers, why would be make common cause with so blunt a racist trope as

"black people are like daemons?" The racism with which Hawthorne self-identifies has

everything to do with, and serves ultimately to buttress, his felt superiority over reductive

schemes of *any* kind, racist or anti-racist, abolitionist or anti-abolitionist? It's against precisely

the coarseness of reformers' moralism that Hawthorne is usually so eager to contrast his (he

thinks) so much subtler and more granular faculties of judgment. And if in using the Black

Man this way Hawthorne betrays his belief that his audience is prone to think in racist

clichés, how can this square with his simultaneous belief that that audience has been seduced

by fashionable antislavery attitudes?

In the discussion of the Old Corner Bookstore with which I began my treatment of

The Scarlet Letter I suggested that Hawthorne's description of a vanished Boston manages to

connect meaningfully both with the reader's sense of the concrete material world and with

that reader's sense of the mysterious, ghostly, and occult by playing off of (without

mentioning or needing to mention) the relatively mundane retail transaction by which the

book has been acquired. I described these effects as *uncanny*, which I think is a fitting term for them because, in a way that recalls (but is ultimately distinct from) vocabularies like the sublime or the cathartic, they seek to deliver aesthetic satisfactions which mix pleasure and displeasure in complicated ways. One might think of the *uncanny*, in the sense I mean it here, as resembling the sublime in the mixture of terror, awe, wonder, and exhilaration it offers, except that where the sublime throws the self into a state of crisis by insisting on each individual person's *insignificance* (the sublime makes us feel small, or vulnerable to mortal harm, or impotent, or forgettable, often in a literal, physical sense, as with the vastness of space, the depth of the ocean, the destruction wrought by a tsunami, etc.) the uncanny stages a similar crisis by insisting on *the permeability of ego's outer membrane*, so that, when in the uncanny's presence, you don't recognize yourself as your self, your world as your world. The familiar is tinged with the strange, the strange with the familiar, the *me* and *not me* suddenly less easy to distinguish from one another.

The uncanny is intrinsic to the gothic, which is clearly among the aesthetic vocabularies Hawthorne most eagerly seeks to annex in elaborating his theory of the romance. The Black Man's particular uncanniness, though, works differently from that of the scarlet letter (I mean here the embroidered piece of cloth) which like him is connected to the distant past, but which unlike him becomes present to the reader by its resemblance to the book's own alphabetic materiality, thus – as the uncanny usually does – simultaneously mobilizing the strange and the familiar, the present and the long-vanished past. In the case of the Black Man the burden of the familiar, concrete, and material (which in the case of the letter is, again, present to us in and as the book) is present to us in the routine paranoia of racial difference and miscegenation that, in mid-nineteenth-century New England, were

newly and fashionably attractive as explanatory tools, somewhat the way – though its novelty

may be on the wane – biogenetics has seemed to be for the past few decades.

In the foundational essay in which he theorizes the uncanny, Freud usefully explains

that, though uncanny effects are more often produced by fictional than by real events, a

certain special class of experience produces uncanny effects as easily – perhaps more easily –

in life than in art. Earlier in the essay, Freud has paid particular attention both to strange

noises and such which otherwise-rational people suspect are ghosts, and to cases in which a

person's says (or silently wishes) that an enemy would die, only to find out later that this

enemy actually *did* die shortly after the wish was made; such experiences, or similar ones,

sometimes lead superstitious minds to suspect themselves of heretofore-undiscovered god-

like powers.

> Let us first take the uncanny effects associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfillment, secret harmful forces [of which presumably the devil is also one] and the return of the dead [with which a historical novel is, in its way, always in conversation]. There is no mistaking the conditions under which the sense of the uncanny arises here. We – or our primitive forbears – once regarded such things as real possibilities; we were convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having surmounted such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; *the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation* [emphasis mine]. Now, as soon as something happens in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny, and this may be reinforced by judgments like the following: 'So it's true, then, that you can kill another man just by wishing him dead, that the dead really do go on living and manifest themselves at the scene of their former activities', and so on [I will append to this list 'that the devil lurks on the edges of our society, hoping to seduce us into damnation']. Conversely, for anyone who has wholly and definitively rejected these animistic convictions, this species of the uncanny no longer exists. The most extraordinary coincidence of wish and fulfillment… [and] the most deceptive sights and most suspicious noises will fail to disconcert him or arouse in him any fear that might be called a fear of the 'uncanny'. It is thus solely a matter of testing reality, a question of material reality. (*The Uncanny* 154)

Freud clearly favors a clean break with the superstitions of the past. Hawthorne, though he shares much of Freud's mistrust of religious dogma, shares little of his faith in scientific rationalism. Hawthorne would be uncomfortable with a position that "wholly and definitively reject[ed]" any point of view, since in his eyes to put so complete an end to doubt and uncertainty, even on the side of what is factually correct, is always to become dangerous. Chillingworth, in seeking and eventually discovering what is true, does much to harm others and, in the end, nothing to save himself; the fact that his knowledge is genuine and grounded in fact does nothing to help anybody. The almost preternatural knowledge of medicine that allows him to relieve the infant Pearl's suffering (notably, as I've mentioned, it is the use of this knowledge that occasions the novel's first mention of the Black Man) has also, Hawthorne seems to suggest, both distempered his constitution and deranged his moral judgment. To know how to perform such miracles, Hawthorne seems to suggest, is to forget how to use them for good only. That Hester can more easily imagine Chillingworth's healing powers to be magical than medical is, to Hawthorne, not a sign of her ignorance but a sign of her humanity.

To unpack the structure of the Black Man's meaning, then, and to understand how its uncanny aesthetic effects are achieved in the shadow of his racist connotations, we need only recall that probably few if any educated or highly literate people in America in 1850 believed that the devil literally took human form and walked among us. Belief in the devil was a premodern, supernatural belief – what Freud, in the passage above, associates with animistic conviction and paganism. Not so the science of race, which in 1850 was new and avowedly materialist. Many, their numbers in 1850 increasing as racial science grew ever more elaborate and convincing, regarded as proven truths race's legitimacy as a fact of

nature, the inevitability and the desirability of its serving as a basis for social organization, and its infallibility as an index of temperament, capability, and moral worth. Most of those reluctant to accept the legitimacy of this racial science probably seemed both to themselves and to other to be reactionaries – advocating not the advent of some as-yet-uninvented post-racial model of the self, but a return to some earlier supernatural or humoral model.[23]

It is (alas) beyond the scope of this project to examine why it is that race, as a scientific and sociological concept, was so persuasive to so many people in the mid-nineteenth century, though I will offer some speculation in answer to part of this question at the end of this chapter. Certainly the reasons are complex; in the broadest sense, though, it is clear that, as people in Europe and North America came to know more about the history of the human species more generally, and the (longer than had been supposed) history of their planet, even those who were able to maintain some form of religious faith found less comfort in that faith than (they supposed) previous generations had. Perhaps the most lauded articulation of such sentiments published in 1850 is Tennyson's *In Memoriam AHH*, the popularity of which on both sides of the Atlantic[24] suggests its fidelity to an anxious zeitgeist. Tennyson's poem presents (and perhaps tries to help create) a world in which people, with the poet, continue to believe in God, but do not continue to believe that that

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[23] There are a few exceptions here, one of which, importantly, is William Wells Brown, who generally goes out of his way to provide explanations of individual differences in terms that depend wholly on individual experiences. Light-skinned slaves are, thus, for Brown more likely to resist slavery because, looking like white people, they are understandably more aware of the arbitrary nature of racial taxonomies. This in contrast to Stowe, who regards the resistance of light-skinned slaves to be the result of their white "blood," supposing that (to borrow a phrase from Brown) "the real negro, or clear black" of no phenotypically-obvious white ancestry to be naturally (we would today say genetically) docile, obedient, and gentle.

[24] The poem was first published in England in 1850. Unauthorized American prints probably started to appear a short time after (Tennyson had just been awarded his laurel crown), but Ticknor and Fields published what was probably the first authorized North American edition in 1854.

God had created a world governed by moral or social order. Race had already been doing a

great deal of cultural work in 1850, but with the new sciences of the mid-nineteenth century

it was increasingly called upon to supply a foundation of society itself, since the theological

explanations with which people had long had to make due were faced now with mounting

competition, and were crumbling faster than most people seemed to have thought was

possible. Without supernaturalism, without even the Deist faith in an ordered universe, with

only the material universe and the caprice of individually learned habit to depend on,

Victorians could find in race a sense that social inequalities and moral and aesthetic

judgments were written into nature itself. The privileges accorded whiteness may not be

decreed by God, but they were nonetheless rooted in biology; they were not merely learned

behaviors and social conventions. The whites who defended these privileges were thus

guided by truth, not mere self-interest or bigotry. Race provided whites with an intricate

latticework of *mauvaise foi* in which they could collectively find reassurance that the privileges

they had long enjoyed could not be taken away by any merely human intervention, and with

this came further reassurance that the suffering caused by racial inequality was suffering for

which white people could not be answerable morally. Charles Chesnutt, in *The Marrow of

Tradition* and with a generation's worth of hindsight beyond Hawthorne, presents the case

with the precision of true litigator when he has the white Olivia Carteret reflect on the

existence of her newly-discovered black half-sister. This sister, Carteret realizes, may be

morally – and perhaps even legally – entitled to half their long-dead father's considerable

fortune, of which Carteret herself currently possesses the whole. But Carteret would herself

have to make an overture to her half-sister, since "the woman" does not know the identity

of her father or that she may have inherited anything from him.

> If the woman had been white, - but the woman had *not* been white, and the same rule of moral conduct did not, *could* not, in the very nature of things, apply, as between white people! For, if this were not so, slavery had been, not merely an economic mistake, but a great crime against humanity. (266)

For some, notions of the divine could and did shift wildly in the mid-nineteenth century. The newly articulate possibilities for atheism and agnosticism, both of which were understandably attractive to those who found materialist cosmologies increasingly convincing, added to the bare quantity of possible religious differences in the north Atlantic world. That these differences could multiply without occasioning the same kind of bloodshed seen in earlier centuries (after, say, the Protestant Reformation) attests, partly, to the fact that the astonishing rate of imperial expansion which also characterized these years was the great religious war of the nineteenth century. But the relative lack of warfare between white people in the nineteenth century (compared to the abundance in the seventeenth and twentieth, say) should also remind us that race, racism, and racial sciences provided white people with a narrative logic through which to disagree wildly about how *the universe* was ordered while agreeing, for the most part, about how *society* ought to be ordered. Perhaps race arose on its own, or perhaps God put it there. Monogenesist and polygenesists might disagree about its origins, but race could still serve to guarantee both that social stability rested on a solid foundation[25] and that racism's violence, however much one benefitted from it, did not have to be owned as guilt.

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[25] Obviously race theorists in the nineteenth century feared the imminent collapse of the racial hierarchies they described *obsessively*. Perhaps the most dizzying feature of their work is the readiness with which such authors will pivot from certainty that racial inequality is absolutely fixed by nature to fear that, at any moment, this hierarchy could alter, and society fall into bestial anarchy. My point is precisely that the anxiety occasioned by this fear is among the reasons racial science existed, and when people became emotionally connected to this science they did so in part because they were looking both for a language through which to articulate this fear and for comforting signs that the fear itself was unfounded. Thus the bifurcated sensibility, in which the laws

This element of the uncanny in the Black Man thus explains *how* Hawthorne keeps racial blackness in the character's vicinity while, at the same time, never allowing that blackness to attach to him securely. But it also explains *why* he does so: viz., doing so draws on what he believes to be his audience's fascination with race in such a way that that fascination enriches the novel's pallet of uncanny effects, effects that Hawthorne seeks whenever possible to maximize. Far from going immobilized (or being mobilized only out of verbal carelessness, and to no interpretively crucial effect) the whole meaning of the Black Man, and the entire creepy aesthetic space into which he is meant to help usher the reader, *depends* on the racial blackness he connotes. To the extent that the reading of the character as the devil (without a hint of racial resonance) remains at all valuable, it remains so to remind us that, though racial blackness must be *connoted* for the Black Man to mobilize the particular kind of uncanny energies he does, it cannot be *denoted*. He must *suggest* racial blackness while at the same time always actually meaning *another* kind of blackness – an occult and Faustian blackness which, it should now be clear, operates as part of the uncanny's circuit of meaning by seeming to come from a superstitious medieval past – by seeming to predate modern science and thus modern racial identity. This gothic Faustianism is what is repressed and then returns. Racial blackness is the (thoroughly modern) idea to which that Faustianism connects itself in order to be derepressed – in order to arrive, an infantile fear preserved in amber for the adult mind, on the wings of what is new.

I suspect that these remarks on the Black Man might be extrapolated without too much difficulty so as to become a theory of the pseudoscientific itself – the pseudoscientific

of race are as immutable as those of gravity, and yet are at the same time constantly under assault from genuine threats and need to be defended at all costs.

in general.[26] In my own life I have taken to calling this particular confluence of superannuated belief and modern-seeming belief, when it appears under the sign of the uncanny, as "the *Y2K* uncanny," in honor of the feared "year 2000" computer bug. The relationship between the demonic Black Man and the racially black man is analogous to the relation between, on the one hand, the Biblical apocalypse which, some supposed in the late 1990s, had been predicted to occur in the year 2000, and, on the other, the collapse of technological civilization that was expected by some to attend the inability of computers to register twenty-first century dates correctly. Few people in the United States in 1999 believed Christ would literally arrive suddenly on January 1, 2000 to judge the living and the dead, but many who did not believe so *did* give some credence to the (it turns out, equally unfounded) prediction that any device that depended on computer technology would suddenly stop working, and that since the electric grid itself is controlled by computers (I never actually confirmed if even that small part of the myth was true) no electrical devices would work either. In the ensuing chaos, possible accidental launch of the world's nuclear arsenal, etc., humanity would either cease to exist, or would exist only in a bestial state. That the year 2000 came and went without event suggests that the people who found these predictions convincing were convinced by something beyond just rational fear – something beyond the

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[26] I will avoid, where I can, so clearly problematic a designation as *pseudoscience*, though here I am using the term to refer to the science-like belief, on the part of of non-scientists, in things for which their scientist contemporaries don't claim to have much actual evidence. I'm considering "pseudoscience" here as an explanation of the world which science as such either does not offer, or offers only as a hypothesis, but which the lay public, in responding to some need more deeply felt than the abstract desire to know the scientific truth, wishes to be fact, and dresses in scientific jargon. Phrenology, in this context, would not be called a pseudoscience, nor would race, since the advocates of both sometimes received actual scientific training, and were regarded in their time as practicing legitimate science. As a rule, I agree fully with Mason Stokes that the word "'pseudoscience' becomes a distancing rhetoric that covers over the political resonance and effects of so-called mainstream science" (205 n1, Stokes is paraphrasing Nancy Lays Stepan and Sander Gilman).

science made these fears seem legitimate to those who felt them, even if the scientific part of the apocalypse was the only part that entered consciousness and, thus, explicitly entered the public sphere. So it's true, then (we can imagine Freud saying), that the world will come to an end in the year 2000, that at the stroke of midnight on January 1 of that year, death, madness, and hell on earth will be unleashed in a way (or at least on a scale) no living person has ever experienced.

What "pseudoscience" offers may in this sense be seen as a way of accessing the content of discarded beliefs – of bringing that content mostly-intact into the present by encasing it in a protective shell of scientific rhetoric. The content – whether it posits that the world will end or that the devil is seducing white women into witchcraft – may be terrifying, but it's also easy to see why people would be attracted to such fears. As a cultural form particular to modernity, pseudoscience would thus play a useful role in mitigating or mollifying the continual sense of loss and disorientation modern living entails; it would allow people to assimilate the rhetorical norms of a scientific age while at the same time preserving some of what, among the things that age had forced them to relinquish, had made life richer and better. We need only accept that for some people, at an unconscious level, the suffering of feeling at a continual and ever growing remove from the past – a past that was imagined as coherent, stable, and organically connected to one another – is greater than the suffering of feeling that the world might end in a technological meltdown, or that the devil, in the person of black masculinity, might tempt, devour, and defile the "souls" of white women (which is to say, that racial purity which only white women's chastity, or the fierce regulation of their sexuality, can preserve).

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It is, at any rate, the more abstract terms of this debate over the Black Man that are useful here, those which concern not just the extent to which we might press the significance of *black* (specifically) beyond the limitations of a cautiously and narrowly apolitical faux-historicism but the extent to which we might press so upon that of color (in general) as a whole order of visual meaning. If I am right when, in the previous chapter, I argue that the title page of *The Scarlet Letter* must be regarded as a set of deeply and cryptically encoded instructions for interpreting or experiencing the novel proper, we can, by a similar principle, make our way from what the novel is doing specifically with the color black to what it is doing in general with color as such.

The Black Man notwithstanding, few words that are names for colors are explicitly deployed in the novel as names for racial identities. The word *black* is not one of them. It's never used unambiguously to represent a racial category, nor is it ever used to describe the complexion or appearance of characters who are not presumably white. It attaches most often to Chillingworth (who, as we will see, is identified by the narrator as "a white man" before any other description attaches to him) and does so in ways that are always tied to the complicated physiognomic assumptions of the novel; we're never sure, that is, when Chillingworth's appearance gets increasingly darker, if we are meant to think it is literally getting darker or only seeming to be expressive of an ever darker (in a metaphorical sense) emotional or moral state. The one color-naming-word which the novel *does* use to denote a non-white racial identity is, as it happens, *red* — as in the passage below. At the close of the previous chapter, Hester, in the midst of her public humiliation in marketplace, has been lost in a reverie of memory. In the passage that I quote here, which opens the chapter "The

Recognition," Hester spots Chillingworth in the crowd; she apparently knows instantly

whom she has seen, though as readers we at first know only that she has been startled by the

sight of some person. This state of readerly unknowing, and the order in which the narrator

relays the information necessary to correct it, turn out to be important, because by

introducing Chillingworth the narrator is also introducing actual racial difference into the

novel. (I'll be discussing this passage at some length and recurrently for the remainder of the

chapter. For the moment, though, I'm primarily interested in the phrase "red men;" the

context in which that phrase appears will be discussed later.)

> From this intense consciousness of being the object of severe and universal
> observation, the wearer of the scarlet letter was at length relieved, by discerning,
> on the outskirts of the crowd, a figure which irresistibly took possession of her
> thoughts. An Indian in his native garb was standing there; but the red men were
> not so infrequent visitors of the English settlements that one of them would have
> attracted any notice from Hester Prynne at such a time; much less would he have
> excluded all other objects and ideas from her mind. By the Indian's side, and
> evidently sustaining a companionship with him, stood a white man, clad in a
> strange disarray of civilized and savage costume. (71)

Thus, for the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*, a racial identity *can* be the literal denotation of a

word which, at its *most* literal, only denotes a specific hue. This type of use of the word *red* is

by no means uncommon in nineteenth-century writing, and, as I've already shown,

nineteenth-century use of *black* followed a similar pattern. Later in this very paragraph, as I'll

show, Hawthorne will use the word "white" to refer to Chillingworth's race, though this

whiteness is complicated both by the darkening to which (as I've just mentioned) it is subject

as the novel moves forward, and by its association here, by way of the misdirection of this

passage, with the "red man" who we learn is Chillingworth's companion.

To be clear, this "red man" is not Chillingworth; he is an Indian. But the appearance of this Indian is puzzling indeed. The narrator tells us quickly that the red man is not the person Hester is looking at and is not, indeed, important enough to notice at all. Once our gaze is redirected onto Chillingworth we realize that the Indian has served not a straightforward purpose, but a crucial one nonetheless, since he has allowed Chillingworth not only to be introduced by the phrase "a white man," but to be introduced at the same moment that the novel also explicitly introduces both racial difference itself and the verbal link between the color red and the idea of race. Chillingworth thus enters the novel exactly at the moment that racial difference, as an explicit theme, also enters it, and racial difference enters the novel as a question of color rather than as one of any of the other para-racial physiognomic discourses the novel has already mobilized.[27]

This kind of straightforward linking of color to race is not characteristic of the novel's famously evasive norm – that kind of slipperiness is better illustrated by the Black Man; but if "red" can carry the whole weight of racial difference here – can signify *Native American* without further gloss (such as red-*skinned*, which phrase, had Hawthorne chosen it here, would suggest rather the <u>in</u>adequacy of mere color as a means to communicate racial difference), then racial meanings *can*, at least in theory, orbit names for colors as part of a

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[27] Part of the point I'm making here is about the historical context for Hawthorne's treatment of color. Some readers of this project have suggested that I make more serious an inquiry into how the relationship between color and race was understood in antebellum America, and have done so out of a sense that I simply assume rather than demonstrate that the two concepts were connected intuitively in Hawthorne's social world. Such an investigation certainly seems worth undertaking, but it does not strike me as necessary to my argument, since *The Scarlet Letter* itself does so much to link color to race in passages like this one. If my argument is correct, *The Scarlet Letter's* intertwining of race and color will not need to be illustrated by contextual primary sources; rather, the novel itself will serve to illustrate how that connection worked in the mid nineteenth century, since my claim is that it is primarily because of the political importance of race that *The Scarlet Letter* makes so much of color in the first place. To provide such context in approaching the novel would, it seems to me, be to light a candle in approaching the sun.

field of signifying potential those names always carry with them. This is at least true for the color-names *red* and *white*, which Hawthorne uses in their racial senses in this passage, and *black*, which he pointedly avoids using in its unambiguously racial sense throughout the novel (though again, as I've already pointed out, Hawthorne's use of the word *black* depends for its uncanny effects on the fact that both he and his reader know that other writers and speakers in 1850 *are* using *black* as a racial designation). Even when we dismiss their racial connotations – even when those connotations *don't* make sense in context and *don't* participate in Hawthorne's intended meaning – names for colors in *The Scarlet Letter* are inextricable from their capacity (proved elsewhere in the novel) to denote racial differences. Because racial meanings for *red* are *sometimes* active in the novel, some particular semiotic work must be done to *deactivate* those meanings in cases where Hawthorne wishes to suppress them.

I'm making a structuralist assumption here that a word (that is, a signifier) communicates not just by signifying one thing but also by signaling its *refusal* to signify a whole range of other things. These refused signifieds include not just the signifieds of all a given lexicon's *other* signifiers (with the obvious exceptions[28]), but also, when a word is uttered in an unambiguous sense, all the other potential signifieds that belong to *itself* as a signifier. Thus if I use the word *cat*, and do so without ambiguity, it must be clear not just that I mean *not-dog* and *not-mouse*, but also that I am not using 1950s hipster slang to refer to a hip person. If it is not clear whether I am referring to a hip person or a feline I have used *cat*

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[28] Obviously this is a reduction, as most words have overlapping meanings with other words. They have synonyms or near-synonyms and are usually also part of systems of classification. Thus *cat* does not refuse any of the signifying value (in the Sausurian sense) of *feline*, shares, in most contexts, all of its value with the much larger category *animal*, and encloses all of the value of the more specific *kitten*.

ambiguously. If it *is* clear that I have set out to denote *feline*, *cat's* other potential signifieds do not remain as live possibilities for misreading, but they do remain as remembered, lost possibilities – that is, connotation. And such connotations, for the reader, are less dormant in language that comes to us under the conventions of poetic or otherwise imaginative writing than in what we take to be "ordinary language."

One can imagine, say, a man who as a boy thought with equal pleasure on his potential futures as a doctor, a lawyer, and an engineer. He will become, at best, only one of these; perhaps he will become something else entirely, something he finds more rewarding than he had ever supposed medicine or law or engineering could be. But there is a sense in which his experience of his career as, say, an architect, may be shaped by his abandoned anticipations of his life as a doctor, lawyer, *and* engineer – lost potential selves with whom he must negotiate, no matter how genuinely or fully he is satisfied with the path he chose. This is, after all, among the ways in which poetry and poetic language serve to connect us with a certain fantasy of a lost, pre-adult world; it may help also to explain why even the most rationalist of poets (say Pope) are nonetheless self-consciously ambiguous when they seek to perform what readers will recognize as particular "poetic" effects, and why it is that, after Wordsworth and Blake, so much of poetry in English is concerned with the kinds of losses that attend the fall into adulthood

I mean this hypothetical narrative of an individual life, which would of course unfold over several decades, to serve as an analogy for what, in the utterance and the receptive cognition of a word, happens (by way of another analogy) as quickly as lightning reaches the ground on a dark night. In the moment of communication, the signifier first illuminates some small part of the world – a field made up of all its potential signifieds – and then,

before the eyes can blink, it strikes, with greater or lesser precision, that one among all these signifieds which it initially sought. That one is the word's literal, denotative meaning. The other potential signifieds are left in darkness, but the initial flash of illumination that briefly illuminated them has left a lingering trace in the persistence of vision – or, to decode this analogy of the lightning, in whatever cognitive persistence attends verbal understanding for a listener or reader. The line of meaning connecting the two halves of the sign can be drawn only in the form of such a thunderbolt – one which, though it may arc directly from one spot in the sky to one spot on the ground, cannot help but illuminate for a moment an entire vista – the whole expanse on the ground which encompasses all the spots the lightning might have struck but didn't. When meaner connects with meaning, then, we see for a moment a whole broad field of things that are *not* meant, but are nonetheless *near* what is meant – spots the same bolt of lightning might, under different atmospheric circumstances, have hit: secondary meanings, connotations, ideational content that is not signified, but that the physics of signification bring out of the night's shadow into an eerie half-light.

The point here is that if we concede that "red" can denote Native American (and that it can do so not just in some cumulative amalgam of all the English languages that have ever existed, but in the particular, semi-autonomous English that, like any author in any book, Hawthorne creates in *The Scarlet Letter*) then "red" is *always* carrying with it the *potential* to mean "Indian" no matter where in the novel it actually appears. Even when we know it *doesn't*, we are compelled to remember that it *could*; even when the lightning of the word strikes some idea other than "Indian," the idea of the Native American identity remains a part of the field of objects this lightning brings momentarily into view. No matter, in other words, how obviously *red* means something else – hot, passionate, of-a-blood-like-hue,

embarrassed, fallen, or whatever else – to decode its meaning (in structuralist terms) the

signifier must disidentify with, and its reader must dismiss as misreadings, not just the

meaning of every *other* signifier the novel uses or might use, but of every dormant potential

signified this particular signifier, of the word spelled r-e-d or the color so named. Native

American is always among these potential signifieds, and because *red* is used in this racial

sense in *The Scarlet Letter* itself – rather than, like *black*, merely in other writing with which *The*

Scarlet Letter is contemporary – *red's* racial meaning is more live than *black's* on Hawthorne's

page.[29] From the moment of Chillingworth's introduction on (even if not before) neither the

color nor word *red* can become intelligible to the reader – no matter what they actually mean

in a given case – unless that reader is provided with means by which to exclude "Native

American" as the appropriate understanding. On cannot, in short, even *be* a reader of *The*

Scarlet Letter, without also being a person who understands that the denotation of the word

red is sometimes *Native American*. Such words – and in theory *all* words – are in this sense

haunted by both their connotations and their dormant denotations; in the moment of

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[29] To be clear, this does not mean that *black* is *not* a racially suggestive signifier in the novel, only that the racial sense of *black* is kept more remote from the novel's diegesis than that of *red*. We should remember that Hawthorne's readers would have had more familiarity with African Americans than with Native Americans. (This is clear when the narrator, in introducing the "Indian in his native garb," seems to anticipate readerly surprise, and reminds us that, in 1640 – unlike, the suggestion is, 1850 – encountering a Native American in Boston was in no way unusual.) We should also note that red is the color most at the novel's thematic core, though black is a close second. What all this tells us is that, by shifting color's share of racial signification from black (where it is always implied) onto red (where it is sometimes, as here, explicit), Hawthorne both connects the idea of racial difference in general more closely to the novel's thematics of color (where red is more important than black) and approaches racial difference by means of an emphasis that seems at first to help remove it from 1850's political climate (where black is more important [or at least closer to most East-Coast Americans' sense of political foreboding] than red). Add to this the novel's title page, which has already proven that red and black are, in a sense, interchangeable – that red can be substituted for black when doing so is "piquant and appropriate" – and the fact that, if my reading of the Black Man is sound, Hawthorne has written the novel thinking that racial blackness is a quality with which his readers will already be preoccupied, and that it may be used to manipulate that reader without openly being named, and the picture of the relation between *red* and *black* will be more or less complete.

transmission from author to reader they are attended the ghosts of unused signifieds, as if by half-repressed memories of a once anticipated future now lost. This should remind us of the way that – when Hester asks Chillingworth if he is the Black Man – she reminds us that this Black Man "haunts the forest." These are memories of those imaginable signifieds that are – among all the things we suppose a given word possesses the *potential* to mean when we initially *begin* to recognize it – discarded as unrealized meanings once cognition has been completed.

I belabor this point partly because it provides an intra-textual basis for my belief (otherwise a deductive rather than inductive one whose conclusions require for support not just the words of *The Scarlet Letter* itself but also the linguistic norms of Hawthorne's America more broadly) that the Black Man's blackness is racial as well as moral. If the "red men" need no other name to be designated Indians, and if, beginning with the novel's very title page, Hawthorne has conceived of the book as in some ways a verbal utterance under the sign of the substitution of red for black, then the phrase "Black Man" is that much closer, even though it does not *denote* a racial identity, to *connoting* a racial identity in ways that can't be refused, that can't be turned away as "reading too much into" the novel. As we read about the Black Man, we come to understand that he is not meant to stand for African Americans, and perhaps we do so quite quickly. But coming, as the Black Man's first mention does, so closely on the heels of this introduction of "the red men," and in the context of the special relationship red and black have possessed in this particular novel from the title page onward, we can read the Black Man as the devil only once we have considered and then rejected a racial reading. We are asked to do so repeatedly, and in several ways at once. Consider merely that Chillingworth, who, when we first meet him, has been connected

to and momentarily confused by the reader with his companion, the "red man" just as, in the very next chapter, Hester will momentarily confuse him with the Black Man, and thereby mention this Black Man for the first time. Working by a murkier and less certain set of metonymic substitutions, then, the "[color] man" phrase has substituted *Black* for *red*, reversing the action on the title page, by which Hawthorne had substituted red ink for black.

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But my discussion of the word and color *red* in this *first* of the novel's three scaffold scenes offers a way of reading the race-color dyad that will help us to interpret that dyad's more complicated reemergence in the *third* scaffold scene at the end of the novel. The red men are present here once again, but the relation between race and color is both better organized and more complicated:

> The picture of human life in the market-place, though its general tint was the sad gray, brown, or black of the English emigrants, was yet enlivened by some diversity of hue. A party of Indians – in their savage finery of curiously embroidered deer-skin robes, wampum-belts, red and yellow ochre, and feathers, and armed with the bow and arrow and stone-headed spear – stood apart, with countenances of inflexible gravity, beyond what even the Puritan aspect could attain.

Racial difference is imagined in terms of color here, but in no sense is it imagined as a difference between "white" people and "red" people; these are not so much differently colored peoples as they are peoples differently positioned in relation to color. Both groups, for one thing, are associated with several colors. The implicitly white Puritans are, furthermore, associated with those hues – brown and black – against which whiteness in

Hawthorne's America was most emphatically opposed.[30] The implicit theory of racial

whiteness at work here is not one in which whiteness is a color but rather one in which

whiteness is a set of conditions under which color cannot attach meaningfully to the material

body. The gray, brown, and black in the passage are just barely properties of material things

– of the same "sad-colored garments" mentioned in the first sentence of the novel. (Note

that, as had been the case for Chillingworth at the first scaffold scene, racial anxieties, and

specifically anxieties about racial mixture, are contained partly by being displaced onto the

clothing of white people.) They seem – particularly as they are "sad" – to be more like

metaphorical qualities of mood. These colors have some trouble attaching to physical things

in the passage, for the clothing itself is not explicitly referred to except by the metonymic

devise of "the English emigrants." These emigrants' bodies are racially white and – like most

people of unmixed European descent – probably some variety of pinkish-yellow. To read

the passage literally though would be to see the emigrants' *bodies* called gray, brown, and

black, and the only reason we are not confused by this – the reason we can recognize

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[30] I do not mean to suggest here that the histories of African Americans and Native Americans are interchangeable, or that the specific histories of each could be collapsed under some Eurocentric notion of race as a matter of *white* and *non-white* merely. I am suggesting, though, that within Hawthorne's avowedly Eurocentric understanding of the world, the Native Americans in *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as, in part, a displacement of questions of racial difference that, in 1850, were being asked by white Americans on the East Coast most urgently in terms of the relationship between white people and *African* Americans. Such questions about the current political landscape, as I've been saying all along, are ones about which Hawthorne is deeply ambivalent; he wants to ask them without actually asking them, and even when he *does* ask them he often can't decide if he's doing so out of his own commitments and curiosity or out of a cynical desire to manipulate a public he thinks of as wrapped up in fashionable concerns like abolitionism and racist persecution (both of which Hawthorne would have seen as naïve). We must recall here Hawthorne's ambivalence toward the red ink in the January 20 letter to Fields (its undated draft is relevant here too), where he, similarly, can't seem to decide if he wants to print the title in red because he thinks it's a good idea, or because he believes it will attract the capricious attentions of "the great gull" of the consumers – the fools whom Hawthorne must soon part from their money if he is to support his family as an author. As with this substitution of *red men* for *black men*, in the substitution of red ink for black ink Hawthorne is uncertain if his motive is to manipulate consumers or give voice to his own political and aesthetic concerns.

instantly that the emigrants are metonyms for the clothing they wear, is that we have assumed in advance that, for white people, the colors that can stand *metaphorically* for mood or temperament are allowed to be those that stand *antithetically* to those of the racial body as such. The passage can only make sense because we assume, in other words, that white subjectivity always includes both a white body and an inner psyche which is irreducible to the materiality (and therefore the epidermal color or colors) of that body.

The passage is a description of "the picture of human life" in this Election Day crowd. *Picture* here refers at a literal level to things that one can actually see, but two particular kinds of sights strike the narrator as worth mentioning: the colors of clothing (or effects, importantly Hester's scarlet letter fits into both categories), and the expressions on faces. Two groups of people are discussed: the whites, who are called first "English emigrants" and then "Puritans," and the Native Americans, who are here only called "Indians." (This nomenclature is itself important to the passage's management of racial difference, partly because its 1640s designation of "English" against "Indians" in North America carries the suggestion of the 1850 political relationship between England as such the *Asian* India, about which more later.) Each group is made up of individuals who, collectively, the narrator thinks of as possessing three relevant strata of being: clothing (which must be some color or other), the body itself (which includes both facial expressions and those qualities thought of as racially determinative, the former metaphorically associated with color, and the latter literally associated with color by way of the authority race grants to questions of skin pigmentation), and inner temperament or psychological interiority (which can be associated with color *only* metaphorically, since it alone among the three is invisible). My point is that the narrator's description of racial difference here aligns these three

elements differently for the white characters than for the Native American ones. The

Puritans wear clothing the colors of which match their inner gloominess but not their racial

whiteness. The Native Americans wear clothing whose colors *don't* match their inner

temperament (which their facial expressions suggest is no less gloomy than the Puritans) but

do match the chromatic designation of their racial identity, which the novel has already told

us is *red*. The description of the "English" is one of habit, mood, and body (in which the first

two of these three are metaphorically linked to one another, but both serve as counterpoints

to the racial[31] identity of the third which, since it only explicitly concerns facial "expression"

is dissociated from color). The colors linked to the Indians, though also linked by way of

their clothing and effects (including, pointedly, "skin," which verbally collapses even further

the distance between their bodies and the objects these bodies wear), are those colors – red,

yellow, ochre[32] – either literally or almost literally the colors which conventionally define

Native American embodiment (not, as with the "English," those *against* which raced

embodiment has been defined). Crucially, the impressive catalog of specific things in the

second sentence serves as the displaced materialization of the Puritan clothing described

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[31] True enough that race is not explicitly mentioned in the passage, and to the extent that it is mentioned it's displaced onto nationality (the Puritans are "English" rather than "white"), but the fact that Hawthorne is again commenting on the differences between white and Native American appetence draw his characterizations into the orbit of the novel's ideas about race anyway, even though the geopolitical "English" and "Indian" have been substituted for the chromatic "white" and "red" we will remember from the first scaffold scene.

[32] All three of these words are names for colors, of course, but, strictly speaking, the referent of *ochre* in this passage is not a hue but the clay-like substance after which that hue is named. This, as will become clear later in my argument, only serves to underscore my point, though, because the ochre – earth with which the Indians presumably paint themselves or their clothing – is a color that ties the Native American's skin to dirt itself, perhaps the privileged signifier of the material world. The fact that *ochre* is referring here both to a color and the physical thing that lends its name to that color consolidates the Indians' materiality further still, for the *ochre* (color) here seems to lack even the power to function as a quality of objects that are not literally *ochre* (earth). It has not even achieved the kind of abstraction it would need to function as a color independent of its object. It's as if we were told that, among the colors the Native Americans presented us, was *eggplant*, but were then led by the passage to infer that this was because they carried with them actual eggplants.

indirectly in the first, for it is only when, in the second sentence, we encounter the specificity in the description of the Native American garb that we become fully certain that clothing – rather than something else – is the real subject of the first sentence in the passage as well. The materiality of the "sad" puritanical colors in the first sentence is substantiated only by being displaced onto the Native American "finery" with which it is meant to contrast, since the passage doesn't actually specify that the sad colors of the Puritans are qualities of any particular garments – hats, overcoats, or otherwise – rather than some other element of "human life."

In other words, to the extent that the Puritan's clothing emerges as a literal presence in the passage at all, it does so by emerging after the fact, when the reader realizes that it's the point to which the Indians' "finery" serves as counterpoint. Just as the "red man" who appears alongside Chillingworth, when the latter is first introduced, seems to enter the novel not so that he can be discussed (we are told explicitly, after all, that he is not important) but so that Chillingworth can be identified first as "a white man" and described in avowedly physiognomic terms, the Indians in this Election Day passage appear so they can bear the burden of a materiality that whiteness would rather not support. Without the Native American "finery" here, it would not be clear how to read the sad colors of Puritanism – it would not be clear if the gray, brown, and black were literally properties of objects in the optical field or if they were mere symbols of Puritan temperament. The narrator ties the Native Americans to specifically named objects, and does so in the context of an inter-racial comparison that – as such comparisons between whites and non-whites often do – seeks to use non-whites to add color to the scene. These Native Americans are not only more irretrievably and more explicitly tied to the materiality of the world than the whites, but serve

also as the anchors by which the ghostly, quasi-physical white identities can access a sense of *their own* materiality. The relationship in this passage is a particular instance of a stock image which has long circulated in European culture's racist vernacular more generally. As Richard Dyer points out:

> Biological concepts of race… reinforced the notion of the inescapable corporeality of non-white peoples while leaving the corporeality of whites less certain, something that fed into the function of non-white, and especially black, people in representation [as] a kind of definite thereness by means of which white people can gain a *grounding* [emphasis mine] in materiality and 'know who they [themselves] are.' … At the level of representation, whites remain, for all their transcending superiority, dependent on non-whites for their sense of self, just as they are materially [dependent on them] in so many imperial and post-imperial, physical and domestic labor circumstances. … On the other hand, the emphasis on whites being distinguished by that which cannot be seen, whether spirit or… intelligence, means that it is complicated to represent white people visually. In a culture that at the same time places great weight on the visible, this is a liability. (24)

So the Native Americans' clothing, addressed in all its messy physicality, and linked both by its hue and by its status as "skin" and earth to a particular idea of their racial embodiment, bears the burden not only of said Native Americans' *own* physicality but the physicality of the *whites* in the passage as well.[33] Just as with the passage that introduces Chillingworth at the first scaffold scene, the Native American presence at this third scaffold

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[33] Dyer discusses this particular kind of racism at length in *White*, though his examples generally involve white people's attitudes toward black people specifically. Dyer frequently describes the attitude as one in which whites fetishize (sometimes with rhetoric of appreciation or admiration, and sometimes with antipathy) the "earthiness" or "groundedness" of blacks, and this, even in the most benign instances, tends to reduce those black people to their bodies, and deny them those features of human subjectivity that are *not* imagined as material (i.e. the soul, the intellect, etc.). Part of the importance of the *ochre* in Hawthorne's passage, then, is that, because ochre is clay dug from the earth and because the name of the clay is also the name of its color, it links the Native Americans in the passage to precisely the kind of materiality Dyer discusses: that which associates the non-white with the "grounded" or "earthy." On the specific importance of dirt to this symbolic chain, see Dyer's *White* 74-78.

scene is once again tied to the word "red" and once again serves, in its earthy materiality, to

solve a paradox in whiteness. The Indian(s) in both cases allow a discourse of embodiment

to attach to whiteness – allow whiteness to exist as (or be imagined as possessing) a physical

body – when excessive devotion to concerns of the intellect (Chillingworth) or spirit (the

Boston Church members) threaten to render white identity a kind of specter.

Among the several reasons for which this spectral whiteness is not wholly desirable

is that, as a racial identity, whiteness can only exist in the present by imagining itself as

connected to a biological past and future. A racial characteristic is by definition a

characteristic that children inherit (or are imagined to inherit) from their biological parents.

White people must have sex not just in order to produce more white people, but even to be

white in the present, since even to be chastely white in the present would be to presuppose

that generations of white forebears were *not* chaste. Whiteness (particularly in a nation like

America of the 1850s, in which vast numbers of mixed-race individuals must be classified as

legally black in order to be kept as slaves) means claiming uniformly white ancestry. But to

claim all-white ancestry is also to claim that white people do, sometimes, have sex. It goes

almost without saying, of course, that, since no mixed race identity in this context can qualify

as legitimately white, every instance of reproductive sex also imperils the very whiteness it

endeavors to preserve, since no individual actually knows the true identity of each and every

one of his or her forebears. People who appear (or even believe themselves to be) "truly"

white may, furthermore, carry what we would now call recessive genetic traits (but which in

the nineteenth century would probably be represented as one or more "drops" of non-white

"blood") unexpressed in their own bodies, but written scandalously in the face of a child. In

what is also, after all, a patriarchal society in which men assume they deserve and need

freedom of movement more than women, this situation also redoubles patriarchy's perceived

need to police women's sexuality, since any moment a white woman is not accountable for

her time to her father or husband is a moment in which she might be compromising the very

whiteness she – white patriarchy sometimes seems to think – only exists to safeguard and

preserve for future generations of men.[34]

We can speculate that this might be one reason that *The Scarlet Letter* so foregrounds

thematic links between unpoliced reproduction, sexual desire, and death. Dimmesdale's final

revelation of his scarlet letter constitutes a belated avowal of his own sexual history, of the

fact that even he has been, at least once, swept up in an erotic desire he knew

countermanded the rules of his society, and (crucially) of the fact that he is thus the father of

a child – a man who has assumed a place in the white reproductive order. With dialectical

poetic justice, this willingness finally to claim his body, to claim a material existence which

renders him morally impure but also perpetuates his racial purity, occasions his loss of that

body – his immediate death by what seems to be the act of a melodramatically-inclined God.

Importantly, this moment when Dimmesdale's status as a being of both body and

soul is fully affirmed for the first time (even as it is also suddenly withdrawn) is the one the

narrator designates as "the revelation of the scarlet letter." The incident is both the climax of

the novel's plot and the final disclosure of its title's meaning. Just like the forbidden

reproductive sex Dimmesdale here admits[35] to both having and wanting, the red letter *A*

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[34] The pages from Dyer's *White* just cited explore this link between white embodiment and the reproductive sex on which it depends as a racial entity (even though it is threatened by this very sex in two ways: the possibility of racial mixture and the identification with fleshly appetites which racism supposes belong exclusively to non-whites). Mason Stokes devotes much of his *The Color of Sex* to this paradox.

[35] This disclosure is, of course, indirect. The narrator tells us specifically that not all of the Election Day crowd interpreted the events in the same way, and many defiantly refused to believe what they nonetheless saw. (The description of the grave stone on the novel's final page seems to be a suggestion that those who deny

which he shows on his breast both sustains and compromises his whiteness. The sex sustains

the whiteness because without it Pearl would not be conceived and neither Dimmesdale nor

Hester (married to the impotent Chillingworth) would secure a future for their own

whiteness; both Hester and Dimmesdale would fail to incarnate their shared racial purity in a

vessel able to outlive their bodies. Because the sex is not sanctioned by marriage, though, it

cannot be presented as the fulfilment of an obligation to whiteness, and can be understood

only as an act of lust, rooted in erotic desire as such rather than in the abstract desire to

provide white society with a future. Thus it is that Dimmesdale's letter, which is the mark of

this desire, makes him partly, but *only* partly, a red man. If he were *entirely* red, the letter

might appear on his breast the same way, *but it would be invisible* because *it would be the same*

shade as the rest of his skin. That is to say, red men might act out of lust, and it would still be

immoral in white, Puritan eyes for them to do so, but because red men are already red they

would be perceived as acting in a way consistent with rather than in conflict with their racial

identity. Dimmesdale turns partly red because he has given way to lust, but because he is

white, and the social demands of this whiteness are in conflict with the appetites of the body,

the letter can be seen with the eyes. Lust is at odds with whiteness just as the redness of

Dimmesdale's letter contrasts with the whiteness of the rest of his skin. Indeed,

Chillingworth's apparent sexual impotence appears in this context to be connected to the

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seeing the letter nonetheless silently accepted the truth which it was seen by others as revealing.) We must remember two things here, though: first, the reader has privileged information which the crowd does not, including the title of the chapter and knowledge of what had passed a few days before between Hester and Dimmesdale; second, and more importantly, it is actually the racial ideology behind the scenes here that pulls everything together. As is so often the case for *The Scarlet Letter*, race is not among the things to which the passage pays attention, but serves as the best possible explanation of how the various things to which it *does* pay attention (Dimmesdale's status as a sexual being and the particular relationship of his skin to color) are meant to fit together.

complicated ways in which his whiteness is compromised; his lack of connection to the white community and his ever darkening "aspect" in the novel bespeak not just his increasing moral "blackness" but also the diminishing likelihood that he will ever sire an heir. His whiteness is tarnished because he has failed to safeguard it from his own death by fathering a child with a white woman.

Worth noting here is that, whatever the racist caricatures of Native Americans actually were in 1850, Hawthorne is careful in his description of the Election Day crowd to endow them with an air of stoic and joyless moral seriousness, a quality whose close resemblance both to the Puritan sensibility and to the Puritans' outward manner at a public gathering the narrator explicitly notes. This resemblance would seem to complicate the connection I assume above between epidermal redness and lustfulness. Renouncing physical appetites, Puritans' morality and whiteness's racial self-understanding may share certain pieces of ideological content, but the red men in this particular passage seem, if anything, even *less* lustful than the Puritans near whom they stand. It is not, then, my reader may suppose, actually true that non-whiteness in general, or racial redness in particular, can be identified with unbridled animal sexuality. The comparison would make slightly more sense, this line of argument goes, if the red men were rather black men, and if the scarlet letter (or at least Dimmesdale's letter) were not red but black, since, in 1850, white Americans would clearly be more concerned with the unpoliced sexuality of African Americans than Native Americans. As early as Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* the notion that the sex lives of African Americans were governed by massive bestial hungers untempered by morality, shame, or sentiment had been floated as evidence of whites' cultural and biological superiority over them, just as (again, in Jefferson's *Notes*) the apparently self-evident truth

that interracial marriages and families were unthinkable had been offered as an argument against the freeing of American slaves without also transporting them to some other continent. Aren't Native Americans specifically exempted in Hawthorne's description from the kind of racism that Dyer describes, in which everybody who is not white lives in a state of constant animal arousal? And doesn't the racism that attaches specifically to African Americans better fit such a description, particularly because the political and economic interests of white Americans in 1850 would seem to give them far more reasons to fear black men's sexuality than red men's?

Remember, though, the peculiar relationship of red to black in this book – the importance for his authorial process of Hawthorne's discovery that he could substitute red ink of black ink on the title page. This substitution of red for black unblocked his authorial powers, allowed him to settle on a title and to finish the novel, whose last three chapters had been left unwritten for most of January. The description of the Election Day crowd which I quoted, and which I am suggesting codes the Native Americans as more like the white Puritans than like the racist image of African Americans which would have made sense to most whites in 1850, is followed by just four descriptive paragraphs and a half-page's worth of dialog. At this point the manuscript would have stopped and remained stopped for several weeks while Hawthorne complained both of his inability to choose a title and of his inability to write the final three chapters. This gap in the novel's composition, which probably lasted from about Christmas 1849 until at least the following January 20, was lengthy enough that Hawthorne used it to write all of "The Custom-House" (roughly from January 1 until January 10) and, the spring season approaching, had to send the manuscript for chapters 1-21 to the printing house before work on the final three chapters had even

commenced. After this he writes nothing for at least ten days, in spite of his deeply felt need to finish the novel right away. On January 20 Hawthorne writes to Fields suggesting the red ink and the title *The Scarlet Letter*, and this substitution of black for red allows him, apparently, to start writing again right away. He writes to Horatio Bridge on February 4 that the novel has been finished the previous day. Such a substitution, I'm saying, also happens in the revelation of Dimmesdale's letter.

For whites, in the Election Day passage, color is a way to disavow material existence; color's relation to materiality is ambiguous, its visibility – as brown, gray, and black – of precisely the sort against which racial whiteness serves as an immunity. But for those whom we would now call "people of color," color is the sign by which the non-white self may be reduced in the white imagination to the bodily, material self. The "Indians" are obliged by their Indian-ness to be represented through a language that imagines them as reiterating rather than transcending the various material signifiers of their cultural differences from the Puritans – a language by which they are scarcely different from the clay (here "ochre," which is also a name for a color) with which they decorate themselves, attached in the European mind not to spirit God blew into Adam but to the earthen lump into which that spirit was blown.

This is the ideological narrative Richard Dyer outlines in the quotation I included a few pages ago. White people conceive of their whiteness as immaterial, but they must gain access to a material selfhood both in order to be seen and in order to have sexual bodies through which whiteness can be reproduced and sustained. As *The Scarlet Letter* allows us to understand, though, this dynamic has two important features Dyer does *not* mention. First, what Dyer usefully calls the "inescapable corporeality" of non-white people, though no

doubt it often has cast said non-white people as talismans of white embodiment in such curiously ritualized practices as blackface performance, can also operate *in reverse*. By consigning the Indians fully to the material realm (even the seriousness of the faces they wear is a quality of "countenance" rather than "expression," since the latter would presuppose a signifying relationship with a psychic interiority rather than a mere material facticity), Hawthorne here secures not a means by which his white characters can access their own material bodies, but a means by which the entire burden of that materiality can be displaced onto the non-white characters. The Native Americans are not *media of* white physicality, but *proxies for* that materiality. The Indians enter this "picture of human life" in order to remind us that white identity is never quite a matter of mere bodies. This is in many respects the reverse of the introduction of Chillingworth. When the leach and "white man" appears alongside his companion – the "red man" who is the first non-white character we encounter, the narration follows much more strictly the paradigm Dyer outlines; the non-white character is introduced so that Chillingworth can be described in overtly physiognomic terms.[36]

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[36] More speculatively, we can describe this relationship between white and non-white identity at the site of corporeal materiality as dialectical *wherever* it appears, both in *The Scarlet Letter* and elsewhere in nineteenth-century America. It's never just a matter of whites using non-whites to avow or disavow a racial body, but always in some measure a matter of both at once. This dialectical deployment of the non-white body thus always involves, on the part of white characters or their narrator, simultaneous identification and disidentification with some specific non-white group. Just so, for the (white) blackface minstrel, a *manifest identification* with the black body, because that identification is embedded in an ironic structure of address where the knowing audience is supposed to be aware that the performer is not, in fact, black, is attended by a *latent/implicit disidentification* with the black body – the human body – itself. And the work that irony does on the minstrel stage, ambiguity does in the introduction of Chillingworth, so that the "red man" gives Hawthorne access to a set of physiognomic tropes that, because they are used uncertainly and nervously by the narrator, both *do* and *do not* attach to Chillingworth's actual body.

My point, though, is that both on the minstrel stage and in the introduction of Chillingworth the manifest content is inter-racial identification, but the latent content white people's disidentification with racial otherness. In the present case – the Election Day crowd – this relationship is reversed. The explicit content of the passage foregrounds and emphasizes the materiality of the Indians and the transcendence of that materiality by the

Secondly, though, is the matter of how color participates in this dynamic, and my

point is less that the novel here deploys one of white authority's most predictable stock

responses to the spectacle of racial differences (viz.: whites have minds and souls but non-

whites have bodies only) than that it encodes this stock response by suspending it in what is

arguably the representational matrix closest to its thematic core: redness and, hiding in plain

sight, whiteness and blackness – the colors on the page and the colors, in 1850, of America's

racial landscape. Here again, we see the novel's ostensible lack of interest in race disrupted

by the fact that its seemingly peripheral and tangential meditations on racial difference make

elaborate use of that fields of visual meaning which – with the exception of letters – is most

central to its aesthetic project.

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In its content *The Scarlet Letter* is keenly interested in what colors can mean, and, as I

argued in the previous chapter, Hawthorne compounds the ways his novel can explore those

meanings when he introduces, on the title page, not just verbal signifiers of particular colors

but actual redness – real red ink that manifests on the page what would otherwise only be

indicated by a signifier of color (the word *scarlet*) rather than also the color so signified. Had

the signifier *scarlet* been inscribed in black, its link to its signified would have been

conventional and not material, but Hawthorne has conceived of the title page so that,

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English, but this disidentification is shadowed by the simultaneous (mostly sarcastic and comic, but with a
snarky wit that may seek to mask real insecurity and doubt) suggestion that white people are, like red people, no
more than their physical bodies and the clothing those bodies wear. This I take to be the tone of the curious
designation "the picture of human life," which, in a time before many novelists were sincerely identifying their
work with naturalism, seems drawn from a slightly inappropriate (and thus probably ironic) scientific lexis.
Hawthorne invites us to regard our forebears with the dispassionate curiosity Audubon or Darwin might have
brought to bear on exotic birds, but doing so does not worry that we might take seriously his sarcastic
suggestion that *white* people can be understood as mere specimens.

literally, every atom belonging to the signifier as good belongs to the signified. By introducing red ink onto this page, Hawthorne effectively denaturalizes the blackness of the words on every other page. The fact that all the words of the novel besides *scarlet* and *letter* (on the title page) are printed in *black* ink thus registers as, potentially, an aesthetic gesture in itself, rather than as the mere operation of a printing convention as it is in books printed *entirely* in black. The colors red and black, then, are particularly charged with meaning, and carry rhetorical weight even greater than that borne by color as such. Operating in tandem with red and black is white, which is the color of the paper onto which both colors of ink are printed. The whiteness of the page serves, as it does in most books, as (what we regard as) negative space; it does not form the letters of the text, but in its chromatic difference from those letters it enacts half the binary system that allows the words to be legible.

Hawthorne does not, in spite of his inventiveness with the red and black inks, use the whiteness of the page or the negative space it offers the eye in any unconventional way. No pages are unexpectedly blank; no differently colored or tinted paper is used; no subversions of conventional typography are to be found in *The Scarlet Letter*. The pages are white, but nothing about this fact seems meant to call attention to itself in the way that the redness of the title's thirteen letters (and by this intervention the blackness of all the novel's other letters) calls attention to ink, to redness, and to blackness. Both colors of ink depend on the whiteness of the page to communicate, but because we imagine that we are reading the ink rather than the paper the ink serves as what Dyer might call a "definite thereness," while the white paper seems to be invisible.

The three colors which operate to make *The Scarlet Letter* legible are also the three colors that, in 1850, would have been most central to an understanding of racial difference in

the United States, and that this is not a coincidence. The semiotic role of whiteness on the page – its simultaneous invisibility as a color and its domination of the visual field – is likewise, and likewise not coincidentally – analogous to the ideological content of *racial* whiteness. The whiteness of the page contributes to the transmission of meaning in ways that mirror the relation of racial whiteness to the United States as a multiracial society. Though African Americans are always officially invisible in *The Scarlet Letter*, the fact of red's substitutability for black is of no mean importance for the novel's design. As I've already said, after all, the blackness of most of the words on the novel's pages does not become legible as an aesthetic gesture simply by being, since it does not depart enough from conventional printing to be noticed. It is only because, on the title page, red is substituted for black that blackness becomes meaningful. All but two of the novel's words are black, but the two words that are not black, the two red words, foist authorial importance onto blackness, thus allowing Hawthorne to approach blackness typographically but also indirectly, by using red letters as a kind of cat's paw. In other words, Hawthorne did not need to ask Fields to print the vast majority of the novel's words in black. He only needed to mention redness. This redness, though, drastically alters how the novel deployed its blackness.

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To talk about color, even in just the two-sentences devoted to the Indians and their difference from the English in the Election Day scene, is to talk about more than one way of organizing meaning and more than one way of imagining the visible world. So far in my discussion of the passage I have been concerned mainly – as indeed I have been throughout both this chapter and the last – with names for individual colors. In the last chapter, *scarlet*, *red*, *gules*, and *black* all featured in my analysis of the novel as what I have been arguing are

particularly charged sites of meaning for its aesthetic and political energies. But the Election

Day passage also offers other ways of thinking about color, and a pair of words not for

specific colors but for color as a visual system: *hue* and *tint*.

This distinction between "tint" and "hue" (words we might accept as full synonyms

in a novel *less* concerned with color) draws its resonance partly from elsewhere in whiteness's

vast ideological repertoire, but nonetheless from a place that we can still describe in the

terms that Dyer for discussing people of color as seemingly more grounded in the physical

world than white people. According to the *OED*, *tint* as such usually refers to a subtly

transformed *hue*. A *hue* is primary and fundamental, a *tint* some alteration of it. *Tint* can also

refer to a principle of difference between instances of what we take to be the same *hue*, such

that *light blue*, *dark blue*, and *pale blue* are all *tints* of one basic *hue*.[37] In neither case, though, is

tint color *per se*; it is always a thing done *to* color or a subtle and irreducibly relational

distinction *between* colors. *Hue*, on the other hand, has always been, far more nearly than *tint*,

a true synonym for what seems to me the vernacular sense of *color* (which is to say that *hue*

can and often does mean *color* as such). But *hue* also has a rich history of meanings that attach

it specifically to the color *of the body*, and especially of the face. The etymological history of

hue is fascinating in its own right as a synechdocal index of the relation, in Anglophone

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[37] According to an acquaintance of mine who attended art school as an undergraduate, modern color theory does not recognize *tint* as such. *Color*, according to my friend, has three qualities: *hue*, which is the relative proportion of blue, red, and yellow; *value*, which is its darkness or lightness; and *saturation*, which is the degree of intensity present in the *hue*. I think there is a fourth quality some people consider, which is *luster*, but I'm not certain if this is agreed upon by color theorists. In their most agreed upon sense, it seems to me that *hue* is more or less what we mean by *color*, while *tint* can refer to *any* deviation of value, saturation, or luster from what is taken to be a given hue's base state. *Tint* is a change, but not a particular kind of change. It is etymologically, linked to tincture – that is, an additive or augmentation whose effects are subtle.

culture, between color as an abstract idea and race as a (putative) material facticity.[38] This distinction between *tint* and *hue* might seem to split hairs were not Hawthorne's usage of the two terms in such full collusion with the meanings of the two-sentence passage as a whole. Color attaches more firmly to the non-whites than to the whites, because among the narrator's conflicting impulses regarding these Native Americans is his desire to imagine them as no more than their bodies.

The passage describes the puritans as *gray*, *brown*, and *black* – each in its own way an antonym for *white*. Racial whiteness is legitimate only when it is seen as pure, as untainted (or perhaps un<u>tinted</u>) by racial mixture; *gray* inevitably connotes intermixture, though, and in some contexts it does so more reliably than any other color, as when we speak of a moral "gray area." White racism has usually seen pale complexions as both most desirable and most securely white,[39] but *brown* is the color that, historically, has given whiteness perhaps more anxiety than any other. Not only does it describe the complexion of many Africans, Asians, and Native Americans, it also describes the complexion of many bi-racial people, and is, perhaps most distressing of all, the color of white people whose skin is routinely exposed to direct sunlight.[40] It thus represents the threat that whiteness may become a kind of racially

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[38] Relevant definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are, for *Tint*, 1a and 1b, and for *Hue*, 2, 3a, and 3c. According to the OED's dating, *hue* has existed as a synonym for color since the Anglo-Saxon period (971), but its use to mean "external appearance of the face and skin" (the OED's definition 2) predates Chaucer (1205). The specificity of *hue* as a word for what we would probably now call *complexion*, and for which Hawthorne's favored term is *aspect*, is thus almost as old as the English language itself – and arguably thus grounded as firmly in the word's usage history as any of its other meanings.

[39] See: Dyer 48-49.

[40] White people who are not normally exposed to such light and then suddenly experience it for a long time will, of course, turn bright red before they turn tan. When I was young – growing up about thirty miles from Hawthorne's boyhood home in Raymond – and I would get sunburnt at the beach, my grandmother would often remark that I had become "as red as an Indian," though she eventually retired this phrase in favor of "red as a lobster." I point this out to acknowledge that redness is, of course, also a color white people's skin can assume, and that racial readings of this transformation are also possible. It's possible that the importance of the facial blush for whiteness – and particularly the perceived importance of the blush as a dual marker of white

ambiguous tanness at both the individual and collective level (by outdoor labor and miscegenation, respectively). Perhaps more counterintuitive than the use of *gray* or *brown* in the passage, though, is that of *black*, *white's* polar opposite.

As I've already argued, the passage's handling of color helps to disassociate the white characters' from their bodies in particular and from materiality in general. The "English emigrants" are white people being described in explicitly racial terms, and these terms are avowedly interested in color more than *almost* any other bearer of racial meaning (as we shall see, nation plays a part here too). The "red" people are accordingly rendered in red and reddish colors, while the white people are described not with whites but with gray, brown, and black. Our sense in the passage that the white characters are reducible neither to their bodies nor to any particular color is a *consequence* of our belief that they are white, not part of what *tells* us that they are white. In contrast to the introduction of Chillingworth – the novel's primal scene of racial difference and the one with which this Election Day return of the Native Americans to the marketplace is always in implicit, intratextual dialog – the white characters with whom the red ones are contrasted are not called "white men," nor are the Native Americans here called "red men." Color has become more complicated thing in the course of the novel – its relationship to the racial body an indirect one. Though the colors and color-names are important here, they are not the words that bear the primary burden of racial significance, since at the literal level they are attached to inanimate objects – garments

women's sexual purity and alabaster complexion – is powerful enough to render sunburns less racially polluting, for like a blush the sunburn is a kind of redness which seems to depend, physiologically, on the epidermal base-state of whiteness. Still, the important point is that brownness of skin usefully conflates, within the ideology of bourgeois European imperialism, fears about racial mixture, non-white people, the working classes, and labor itself, such that brownness signifies not just racial ambiguity and lower class identity but the perceived connection between the two. Still, redness (as in the phrase "red neck" for a rural, working class white person) has sometimes done the same work.

– rather than people. The words that bear that burden are "English emigrants" and "Indians" ("Puritans" enters the fray too, though belatedly enough, and enough without an obvious corresponding term on the Native American side, to render it less rhetorically potent).

Though not, strictly speaking, related to color, these are terms central to the political work of a passage that, short as it is, I have gone on about for long enough to cherish hopes of treating it exhaustively, so I will engage them here. Lost perhaps on modern readers, though probably still much in the 1850 thoughts of a man who had been a surveyor of customs as recently as March of 1849, is the fact that this language resonates with the British Empire's campaign, largely successful in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to present Britishness to the world (certainly, at least, to the English speaking world) as the best and most secure kind of whiteness. If whiteness signifies cultural sophistication, industry, reserve, and stoic command of "base" impulses, the British have been perceived historically as possessing the whitest identities of anybody (with the possible anachronistic exception of the ancient Romans as they were imagined by nineteenth-century English speakers).

The casting of the Native Americans as "Indians" and the whites as "English" both uses and strengthens the passage's connection to this ideology of English whiteness. In euphemizing racial differences as national ones, Hawthorne cleverly parallels Britain's seventeenth-century colonization of North America with its nineteenth-century colonization of South Asia, as if each were a historically descent iteration of a single unchanging, underlying ideal form. By rendering the manifest content, set in the distant past, in language of "English vs. Indian" which readers were used to encountering in discussions of present-day geopolitical concerns, Hawthorne deftly parries both horns of several narrative

dilemmas. As I've just mentioned, he maintains a sense of seventeenth-century historical specificity (the narrator must, after all, keep his reader at temporal distance from the events he describes, in order to keep them illuminated by that rhetorical moonlight through which they can seem simultaneously plausible and magical[41]), but he can also maintain the sense of the past he describes as a foreign place while endowing it – only ever by implication – with the urgency of the present. This is how the uncanniness of the Black Man works – its eeriness working by a precise Platonic cosmology to suggest that two separate and historically distinct ways of fearing "blackness" (the moralistic and the eugenic) might in fact be iterations of a single, eternal, hidden grammar that secretly structures, and always has structured, reality itself. [42] Naturally, the very designation of the white people as "English" rather than "Americans" is part of what keeps this sense of foreignness in place – a reminder that, though the past is always a foreign country, for an American reader in 1850 *this* past is *literally* a foreign country.

Hawthorne may be motivated entirely by aesthetic interest in producing uncanny effects/affects in his reader (though the idea of the "aesthetic" here needs to be seen as a compromise occasioned by his simultaneous desires to politicize and depoliticize history) but this typological vision of the past nonetheless imposes an ideological matrix on his aesthetic

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[41] I'm echoing here, of course, the famous description of moonlight's defamiliarizing effects from "The Custom-House."

[42] A related feature of the novel, which I've already mentioned, is Hawthorne's worry regarding a future civil war in the United States, which he suppresses by locating his novel in the distant past of the 1640s, a decade not coincidentally defined by the *English* Civil War. The treatment of civil war as a theme here may not share the uncanny sense of of a repressed past returning that we encounter in the dynamic of "English" and "Indians" or in the Black Man, but it shares with both of these its status as a symptom of Hawthorne's ambivalence toward current events in his America. The political landscape of 1850 is thus, in this manner, imagined as a typologically and treated only by way of its seventeenth-century types (the English Civil War thus a type of the possibly-imminent American Civil War, here figured as the former's antitype). He is thus able to keep the political concerns of 1850 explicitly absent but implicitly present throughout the novel.

material. It suggests in this passage, for instance, that the United States of 1850, though independent for more than half a century, can regard itself as proudly grounded in a heroic British imperialism which, we're invited to suppose, simply *must* be natural, ahistorical, and inevitable since, even after two centuries, it is still asserting the rights of the "English" over those of the "Indians." That is to say, Manifest Destiny and other racist narratives of westward annexation do not need to be considered as ideological projects motivated by economic self-interest and enabled by arbitrary imbalances of power since, for better or worse, they are but the symptoms of an underlying condition itself beyond cure. It's a rhetoric that is at only the smallest remove from those clumsier attempts to de-historicize racism which describe the relation of whites to non-whites as an eternal moral struggle between light and darkness.[43] The barely-contained antipathy of the English and Indians for one another thus takes its place among other seemingly-ahistorical and apolitical antitheses such as those between day and night or hot and cold. It's partly for this reason that that antipathy can seem to possess explanatory power vis-à-vis situations in which the Indians are not (east) Indians, nor the English (British) English,[44] but rather Anglo-American Bostonians and the indigenous populations their presence has displaced.

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[43] See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

[44] True, Hawthorne designates the whites not simply as the *English* but specifically as English *emigrants*, but this designation proves no more legitimate, factually, than *English* would have been unqualified. Indeed, had he left it at *English* and not further qualified the designation with *emigrants* there might have been some sense in which, invoking the diasporadic sense in which all those subject to the King's rule are in some sense English subjects regardless of their actual location, these people (and, one assumes, the Native Americans that live among them as well) actually *would* be English. Recall, though, that in May of 1647 there have been white people in permanent settlements in New England for nearly twenty seven years – and in Boston proper for nearly seventeen (even excluding Charlestown, settled in 1624 and only since 1873 part of Boston as such). Between 1640 and 1650 the population of Boston alone is estimated to have grown from 1,200 to 2,000 people (http://www.iboston.org/mcp.php?pid=popFig, earlier figures aren't recorded). Some of these people were, it stands to reason, born in Massachusetts or Plymouth, and among them would have been some fully grown adults in 1647 – people in their mid-twenties, assuming they were born not long after 1620. Mary Brewster, granddaughter of William (and the first of my own forebears recorded as having been born in North America)

So the rhetoric of *English* and *Indian* serves in part to dehistoricize and depoliticize racial difference by making it seem to be about something other than race, and it does so both by reducing race to a binary system in which the only values are *white* and *other*[45] and by casting this binarism as a mere extension of some basic polar logic of the universe. Like a symbol in a dream, the English-Indian dynamic rejects its manifest content as nonsensical and thus hints provocatively at its latent content; only in relation to this latent content will it finally assume real explanatory power. The euphemism encourages us to ignore differences

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entered the world at Plymouth on April 16, 1627. By May, 1647, when the "English emigrants" are supposed to be contrasting with the "Indians," Mary Brewster had married John Turner (the elder), and had born two sons, among them Jonathan Turner, my ninth great grandfather; they would go on to have eleven more children who lived to adulthood. Plymouth itself was growing so quickly that by the 1630s new arrivals from England were being given land grants to relocate further toward Boston, as Humphrey Turner (John's father) was in 1633. Humphrey's home in Scituate was nearly as far from Plymouth Rock (16.5 miles) as it was from the marketplace in Boston (20 miles). My family tree was likely unknown to Hawthorne, and may not be typical, but in these respects it resembles one that certainly *was* known to him: his own. English emigrant William Hathorne arrived in Salem in 1630; his son John – later the "hanging judge" of the 1690s witch trials and reportedly the source of Hawthorne's obsession with inherited guilt, was born there in August, 1641, and would have been a summer away from his sixth birthday in May, 1647. (This age puts John Hathorne on Election Day 1647 within two months of Una Hawthorne's age in mid-September 1849, when Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter*.)

My point in all this is that the Massachusetts coast in 1647 was already densely populated with alarmingly fertile people, so the whites in the Election Day crowd are only "English" in a limited sense, and a significant minority of them can in *no* sense be called "English emigrants" since they are subjects of the English monarchy but of Plymouth or Massachusetts-Bay birth. At least some of the "English," in other words, are little more English than the "Indians" are (east) Indian. The fantasy of the whites' shared Englishness is an ideological fiction. Though obviously of historical importance to English nationalism, this fiction serves in this particular passage as a euphemism and misnomer for what Hawthorne actually wants to call our attention to: racial whiteness.

[45] In this particular paragraph, I mean that the designation of people who are not exactly English as "English," alongside the simultaneous designation of people who are not exactly Indian as "Indians," effects a rhetorical withering of differences among whites (such as those between whites who are English emigrants and whites who have never left Massachusetts) and between distinct non-white groups (such as the two continental populations called "Indian" – the American and the South Asian). Recall, though, the various ways in which *The Scarlet Letter* displaces onto *red* racial anxieties that, in an 1850s context, white culture would more intuitively link to *black* (a displacement which I argued in that discussion serves further to implicate in the novel's *racial* politics of color in the more strictly *graphic* elements of color on its title page). The ease of substitution by which some (but to be clear, by no means all) of white America's anxieties about African Americans can be restructured as some (but, again, not all) of the ways the novel thinks about Native Americans – the easy switching, that is, between black and red – resembles the easy switching between American and Asian enabled by the word "Indian." Both the black/red dynamic and the Indian/Indian dynamic serve to understate differences among non-white groups who are nonetheless recognized within the ideology of race as distinct from one another.

both between "English" and Anglo-American and between "Indian" and Native American –

to assume that the former term in each pair is synonymous with the latter. Though two

centuries separate the (fictional) 1640s scene from its 1849-50 conception and composition,

the rhetorical erasure of these differences has as much power to explain the imperialist

fantasies of the nineteenth century as it does to explain those of the seventeenth. For in the

nineteenth century this uneasy confrontation of expanding *English* and guarded *Indian*

societies, so long as we understand both these terms in their most elastic senses, was

occurring on two continents simultaneously, in North America as Manifest Destiny and in

South Asia as the British wars of Indian conquest. The actions of the English vis-à-vis

Indians in the late 1840s bears a striking – we might almost say "uncanny" – resemblance to

the actions of the North American "English" vis-à-vis the North American "Indians" in the

same years.

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In 1844, James K. Polk won the US presidency for the Democrats largely by

promising to expand the empire, and to accomplish this expansion not just by shoring up

control of the western territories but, west of the Mississippi, by annexing new territories

north and south. Though the slogan "Fifty-Four forty or fight" does not seem actually to

have been associated with Polk's presidential candidacy (as I had always been taught it was),

it's a useful index to both the content and the tone of his campaign and presidency. This

tone was more than anything else one of belligerence and entitlement, a combative

America's oedipal insistence that, having wrested the virgin land away from his authoritarian

father England, the son was now as entitled to enjoy her as his father had been. Parading a

sense that, like other empires, America had an innate right to whatever territory it could

secure by military force, and in particular that America's imperial prerogatives were no less sound than England's, the Democrats of 1844 appeared almost to hope for a chance to prove by arms how strongly they believed their own rhetoric. The Mexican War would eventually offer just such a chance, though we might forget that had war erupted over the northern rather than the southern territories the conflict would have been instead with England over the U.S. border with Canada, an alternative which the enduring resonance of the Fifty-Four Forty or Fight slogan suggests would have been more in tune with America's emotional needs even if it had been less in tune with its territorial goals. It was against the British, after all, that America had fought its only previous major wars, the latter of which Polk would have remembered from his youth.

Born in 1795, Polk would have been old enough in 1812 to fight, though health problems kept him out of military service. Polk was a southerner, though not a vocal supporter (or for that matter opponent) of slavery. His 1844 electoral victory served as evidence that most people did not want to hear about slavery anyway, and found more palatable from their presidential candidates speeches about territorial expansion. Candidates did not have to take an explicit stand on slavery if they could build a coalition around expanding the nation, and before 1848 the reality (that each new annexation would mean the slavery battle would have to be refought at the national level) does not seem to have been accepted common sense. Polk's administration oversaw what was, with the exception of the Louisiana Purchase, the biggest territorial expansion of the United States to take place in a single presidential term. The territory seized from Mexico would place the question of slavery's future at the center of national politics from 1848 until 1865.

There's no reason to think that Hawthorne, who seems to have been both genuinely and strategically a passivist and gradualist wherever possible, would have particularly liked the sound of war with Mexico or England, though if such wars were the only ways to avert a (for America) more devastating civil war over the question of slavery his morality could accommodate them. What we can know with certainty is that Hawthorne would have followed this campaign pretty closely, thinking probably even before the election that with a Democratic victory he could garner a government appointment by which he could support his growing family. He had married Sophia Peabody in 1842, and Una their first child was born in March of 1844. Una's first birthday, Hawthorne may have noted to himself in those first months of fatherhood, would fall exactly one day before the next President would be inaugurated.

What I'm saying is that Hawthorne would have had a conscious sense, in the in the six years leading up to his composition of *The Scarlet Letter*, that England was an impediment to America's imperialist ambitions, whatever his actual feelings toward those ambitions. The English share a language with that United States with which Hawthorne identifies himself, but in the 1840s the two were longstanding military adversaries – rival empires competing for what little uncolonized land the globe still contained.[46]

The British had been a political and economic presence in Southeast Asia since around the same time they established their first successful permanent settlements in North

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[46] Compare, for instance, Thoreau's similar sense that Americans and the English are peoples simultaneously at odds with one another and possessing a shared destiny (perhaps as, or by virtue of, their shared language) in the last paragraph of *Walden*. Though seldom in agreement, Hawthorne and the Thoreau (the latter thirteen years the former's junior) dined together occasionally in the 1840s. Hawthorne seems to have found Thoreau to be uniquely good company among Concord eccentrics in that his eccentricities were endearing rather than grating (*Letters*).

America: the very early seventeenth century. Before the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 few could be convinced that a global empire was possible for Britain; after it they rushed to build one. With the loss of the American colonies, though, India acquired a new importance to British Imperial national identity, and during the first half of the nineteenth century England greatly added both to its territorial claims in Asia and to the range of kinds of power it sought to exercise over the Indians themselves. The domination of India was a great point of pride for British nationalists, since unlike Canada or Australia, India was perceived by the British themselves as possessing a rich pre-colonial culture and history. The Empire may have lost America, but whatever cultural or racial merit America could claim was the result of its British parentage. India, on the other hand, credentialized Britain's status as a great empire because it showed that the British could subordinate and exploit what *itself* had once been a great empire.[47]

The rate of territorial expansion escalated suddenly and significantly with the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-46 and 1848-49, the end result of which was England's annexation of the Punjab (which includes most of what is now Pakistan and also extends into what is now north-west India – a huge region). We should note that the years of the two Anglo-Sikh Wars overlap almost exactly with those of 1) James K. Polk's presidency, 2) those of the Mexican War, and 3) those of the period during which Hawthorne had a family to support but was not yet able to support himself by his pen. The details of those conflicts are less important than the fact that Hawthorne, despite his proud indifference to politics as such, had personal and professional reasons to have paid some attention to them, just as he had

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[47] Richard Dyer's brilliant reading of the ITV/Channel 4 mini-series *The Jewel in the Crown* deals extensively with the particular meanings that attach to India in the Anglo-Imperial imagination (see: 184-206, esp. 194-95).

for those of the 1844 presidential race. Surveyor of the port of Salem from 1846 until his well-documented dismissal in 1849, the wars in India, of importance to nothing so much as international trade, were likely much talked about around him, even if the aloof romancer never actually participated in the conversations. That is, even if Hawthorne was temperamentally cut off from current events, his need to make money during these years, and the fact that he made this money by way of a political appointment, and one that, furthermore, required him to be familiar with matters of international maritime (including spice) trade, mean that he likely would have been paying more attention to wars and their consequences between 1844 and 1850 than at any previous time in his life. When he turns to *The Scarlet Letter* in the fall of 1849 both to relieve his sense of grief at losing his mother and, self-consciously, to make enough money as a litterateur to support his growing family, he does so with a relieved sense of turning his back, finally, on the world of politics and trade that he never cared for, and that had spurned and publically shamed him. As so many (myself included) have suggested, though, the things Hawthorne turns his back on in writing the novel manage to enter it and help to undergird its concerns. When "Indians" appear, then, and especially when they appear as a counterpoint to the English, their meanings are always refracted off of these two armed conflicts – the Mexican and Anglo-Sikh Wars.

The important point here is that the language describing the Election Day crowd allies the imperialism of American whiteness with the whiteness of British imperialism, and that it does so in multiple ways. The passage plays punningly with the word "Indian," refracting its meanings through what must, at the time, have been clear parallels between simultaneous American and British imperialist wars against "Indians." The effect of this alliance is that distinctions of nationality – even between military adversaries like the United

States and Great Britain – are rendered largely meaningless except insofar as they stand for distinctions of race. These distinctions are not between different racial groups so much as they are between a diasporadic whiteness imagined to be "English," and a composite non-whiteness of "Indians" that can include, at least, undifferentiated Native Americans and South Asians. But this rhetoric can only work by radically collapsing time and space – so that the "English" seem to be waging both sides of a single war (as, indeed, and most fittingly, had literally been the case in the 1640s). Fifty-Four Forty or Fight predicts a war against England that, when it actually arrives, turns out to be against Mexico. In either case, though, white Americans would have been expanding by annexing "unsettled" territory that was in large part controlled by Native Americans (in the case of the Mexican territories, principally Comanche). These Indians are, like Mexico, for the English, since – again by the logic of Fifty-Four Forty – since the psychology of America's belligerence and territorial expansion in the 1840s was tied not only to imperial ambitions as such but, again, to an oedipal desire to demonstrate an imperial prerogative equal to or greater than that of the father. The hunger for rebellion on the part of the son was not sated by victory over the father in the Revolution, and in the nineteenth century that hunger attached more and more to the fantasy of raping the father's bride: the unsettled world.

Part Two of Two

"Notes for tales and sketches" from *The American Notebooks* (all three from 1840):

A man, unknown, conscious of temptation to secret crimes, puts up a note in church, desiring the prayers of the congregation for one so tempted.

Some most secret thing, valued and honored between lovers, to be hung up in public places and made the subject of remark by the city, – remarks, sneers, and laughter.

A coroner's inquest on a murdered man, – the gathering of the jury to be described, and the characters of the members, – some with secret guilt upon their souls.

When I began work on this project, its stated focus was the role of secrecy in the novels I discuss. It was to examine Hester's, Dimmesdale's, and Chillingworth's respective secrets, and the strange compulsion the narrator has to regard those secrets in visible (and almost always either bodily and/or alphabetic) terms with a series of tales of racial passing. I would have discussed not only *Clotel* and William Wells Brown's nonfiction but probably Charles Chestnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* or Pauline Hopkins *Of One Blood*, and finally Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. The argument was to be that, from a secret whose content was essentially a forbidden Eros (Hester and Dimmesdale's adulterous desire for one another), but which could only be represented compellingly in terms borrowed from the language of race, literature focusing on secrets transformed itself inside out. By the time of *Of One Blood* and *Nightwood* (another possibility was Nella Larsen's *Passing*), secrets whose content was essentially understood to be racial could now only be represented compellingly in terms of forbidden Eros – in particular in the new terms of the homosexual closet and Freudian psychoanalysis.

I had arrived at about this point in the writing of this dissertation when I realized that, first, I could address at most two other books, and, second, that the question of secrecy – though still utterly central to *my own* understanding of the dissertation's argument, had assumed a backstage role. I had written a hundred pages demonstrating, I think persuasively, that *The Scarlet Letter*, even if Hawthorne saw it as an attempt to distance himself from the

political concerns of 1850 (slavery, race, civil war), was guided throughout by a perhaps unconscious will to engage those concerns with extraordinary sophistication. *The Scarlet Letter* isn't just *about* race – it's among the most brilliant, subtle, and tragic theories of race that nineteenth-century America produced – the kind of book W. E. B. DuBois might have written if, like Hawthorne, he had been allowed the luxury of pretending to himself that racial difference was of no particular importance to his experience of the world.

This dissertation's avowed concern with the novel is a concern with the way it marshals the idea of the alphabet and the idea of race like rooks on a chessboard. They move in just the same way, and once both have entered the field of play few onlookers can say for sure which piece started the game on which square. The alphabet and race are thus distinct things that Hawthorne, for all the reasons I've been discussing, imagines as weirdly linked and nearly interchangeable. But the role of secrecy in *The Scarlet Letter* can't be ignored wholly. The range of motion these two rooks share with one another – that quality race and the alphabet have in common which allows Hawthorne's project to make sense – is that each allows us to imagine as visually encoded meanings that would otherwise not be visible because they would remain locked in the mind. Thoughts, proclivities, emotions, hesitations, capacities, and social roles would all remain invisible unless they were either written down as language or realized on the body as some kind of physiognomically intelligible performance. Both thus make external, visible, material, and fixed what might be experienced in the mind as indefinite, fluid, and uncertain. The only difference, in these epistemological terms, between race and writing is that, in theory, race *compels* the inner self to be visible and open to judgment – *compels* what might have remained private knowledge to become public knowledge. The alphabet, on the other hand, allows the one who writes to wield letters

voluntarily, to reveal in writing only what he or she wills the world know; nothing else, presumably, need be written down. This difference would disappear, though, if through some contrivance a person were forced to confess the spoiledness of his or her identity in alphabetical terms, indiscriminately and to everyone, the same way non-white people have to wear what racism deems the spoiledness of theirs. This is what precisely what Hawthorne forces on Hester – what it is that he imagines as the central conceit of the novel. Hester is forced to display the stigma of adultery to everyone she encounters, but is forced to do so not physiognomically or racially but alphabetically. (The slightly different structure of meaning Hawthorne forces on Dimmesdale, because he can hide his letter under his clothes, makes his confession more voluntary and less compulsory, but compensates for this divergence from the racial paradigm by making *his* letter a matter of *skin* color, rather than just the color of cloth.)

This is what motivates the device of the scarlet letter for Hawthorne; this is what makes the idea of a woman compelled to wear a scarlet letter in token of her shame a compelling one to him and to his readers. It imagines the alphabet doing the cultural work of race, and speculates that the two may even have been performing overlapping cultural work all along – from the time the Romans invented both the imperialist politics and the alphabet to which nineteenth-century Anglophone culture was heir. Race and the alphabet become one another at the site of secrecy. To sustain my chess metaphor, secrecy is that square on the board where, at any given moment, we can imaging the paths of the two rooks crossing.

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The Scarlet Letter is organized around several distinct secrets, but it shares with Hawthorne's entire oeuvre a preoccupation that is primarily with secrets of a certain kind –

secrets for Hawthorne obtain as *important* secrets under the pressure of particular social

relationships and specific structures of feeling and ways of seeing. The three quotations from

The American Notebooks with which I open this second part of the current chapter are each

concerned with secrets of a private nature that have been forced into one of three

unequivocally public systems of meaning: the church, the judicial court, and the city square

or street.[48] At least two of these three spaces are not merely public systems of meaning but

also technologies of confession. The church and the court are, in different ways, systems that

specifically concern themselves with the discovery of stigmatizing content – individual

misdeeds, moral failings, etc. – deliberately withheld or hidden – that is, these institutions

unearth secrets, and assign a shared, public, often quantifiable meanings to what had

previously been a private guilt. Much of the cultural work the court and the church perform

would have no reason to exist in a world where secret guilt and shame were impossible states

of being. Each manages its own economy of transgression and penance (though part of what

fascinates Hawthorne so much about seventeenth-century Massachusetts is the absence in its

society of any distinction between religious and juridical truth – and for this distinction to

disappear the two would have to possess congruent functions). If people did not do things

of which they were ashamed, there would be no need for church – or at least no need for a

doctrine of sin or redemption. And if people did deny having broken the law when they had

in fact done so there would be no need for criminal courts.

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[48] We can note here that one reason *The Scarlet Letter's* marketplace – when it is used for official purposes as it is in the first and last scaffold scenes – so compels Hawthorne with its narrative potentials is that it combines church, public square, and criminal court into a single place, and even maps these onto a fourth: the commercial center.

But these ideas for tales and sketches do not describe the engagement of these public institutions with private secrecy in terms of confession; the describe it in terms that register exactly what Hawthorne seems to regard as the inadequacy of confession's epistemology – the failure of any confession to bear the whole weight of the "truth" it attempts to publish. In the third passage, after all, it is not the *accused* whose secret guilt Hawthorne finds fascinating, but that of the jurors – people whose role in the trial is to judge. Perhaps they carry guilt in their hearts, but any confession of their crimes would be meaningless because they are not on trial. Their official role is to keep quiet and to pass judgment on those compelled to speak up, and the fact that they have transgressed has no bearing on the trial, nor even does it disqualify them from serving as jurors. Part of what Hawthorne seems to find captivating here is that the judicial system separates the subjects and objects of judgment so that, officially, no one ever occupies both positions at the same time; it is thus in conflict with the realities of human imperfection, since we all judge and are judged, and our awareness of our own vulnerability to judgement, if we are moral people, will temper our judgement of others. This, for Hawthorne, is the origin of sympathy. Knowing how an another person has transgressed – as confession and trial by jury insist – makes sympathy impossible, since what sympathy requires is precisely ignorance of *others'* specific transgressions, mixed with profound knowledge of *our own*.

The three ideas for stories place secrets in three different contexts, but they also show it occupying three distinct relations to writing, as if they two problems (secrecy's relationship to institutions of knowledge and secrecy's relationship to writing) were linked in Hawthorne's mind. By far the most direct in its treatment of writing is in the first of the three. In it the nature of the secret is defined in part by the fact that it has been confessed in

written form. Hawthorne does not specify (in what we should remember was a notebook entry meant for his own later use, so he need not include what he believes he himself will have no trouble remembering) if the note in the church is anonymous, but part of what seems to make the idea fascinating to him is that writing – unlike traditional verbal confession – makes such anonymity possible.

Is it confession that cleanses us of guilt, or the cauterizing shame that public confession is supposed to entail? Given that confession corrodes sympathy, would it not be best to seek its benefits while avoiding its costs? This sense of the written and probably anonymous confession being, perhaps, an invalid one is linked for Hawthorne with the sense that the sins in question likewise may not actually count as sins, since all that has been confessed in the note is the *desire* to sin. Biblical literalists may regard such a desire as sin enough in itself, but more interesting to Hawthorne, I think, is the fact that, because what is read has by definition already been written, a written confession was uttered by a past self. The reader of the note in the church has no way to know if its author has not *already* succumbed to the temptations which, when the note is written, he had resisted successfully.

The other two ideas resemble the first, but in each the place occupied in the first by the written confession is usurped by something that isn't – or at least may not be – writing. In the second note some token of private affection between lovers is displayed in public. If the token is a signed love letter the couple will be publically embarrassed because their identities will likely be known, but if it is a flower or ribbon or piece of jewelry the identification will likely be less sure. Since we don't know if this "most secret thing" is a written document or not, more important becomes the fact that – whatever it is – it has been posted in the manner of an official (written announcement. By treating what may be a

ribbon or a lock of hair *as if it were* a written text Hawthorne experiments with an inversion

of the device that would become the scarlet letter (which treats a written text *as if it were* a

bodily sign). The most Hawthornian explanation would be that the townspeople, though

they jeer and laugh, can only successfully decode a private token of affection– can only

recognize such a thing for what it is – because they have privately exchanged similar tokens

with *their own* lovers. The derision the citizens use to perform their snide disidentification

with the lovers who have been outed is actually an inadvertent confession of those citizens'

kinship with the lovers, a frank admission of being no better than they. This is how *lack* of

sympathy works, Hawthorne seems to suggest: the unsympathetic sadistically and publically

shame others in an effort to hide their own guilt. And because only the guilty themselves

must do this hiding, the jeers and laughter serve in fact as a double confession since they

reveal not just that the ones who jeer are or have been lovers, but that they commit the more

serious crime of refusing to sympathize.

In the third note, the focus is again on the guilt of those who would judge, but this

time it is the narrator who is reading the guilty, not the guilty who are reading some

published token of another's wrongdoing. Importantly, here the judged party is not just

absent, something all three notes have in common, but completely unknown. (My

understanding of "coroner's inquest" is that a grand jury has been gathered to determine,

based on the coroner's testimony, if a murder has been committed, and to indict the

murderer (who must exist somewhere, if there has been a murder) *in absentia*. Their

"character" (a word that here means something like appearance, but often means letter or,

more archaically, penmanship[49]) will be described, and Hawthorne appears not to regard it as worth mentioning that this description will somehow be important to the question of their own "secret guilt," which I suspect Hawthorne would have hinted was secret guilt of a murder, and perhaps even this specific murder.

Shades of *The Scarlet Letter* here are everywhere. The novel begins with the guilty Dimmesdale judging the shamed Hester, when he is and knows himself to be in every imaginable sense just as guilty as her. The fractured physiognomy of Chillingworth, which, as I will show, is often described as – paradoxically – an inscrutability that is also a confession of moral depravity, exists in the secret guilt of the jurors. The narrator will "read" this guilt from the "character" – that is, the appearance – of the jurors, but will maintain, as he does with Chillingworth, that the physiognomic confession of this guilt on the face does not compromise its status as a secret.

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If we remember *The Scarlet Letter* at all we will remember that it, too, is concerned with secrets which both assume and forgo their full meaning at the nexus of public and private, and which find their most aesthetically satisfying articulations in an intermediate zone somewhere between the alphabet and the body. The experiences that the novel finds most fascinating are those which bring public and private zones of experience into contact with one another, for only in this contact – Hawthorne seems to suggest – can we determine what zones of experience defy this public/private binarism, and, irreducible to either, go

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[49] What we now call graphology had been used in forensic and criminal investigations as a way to ascertain unconfessed guilt as early as the sixteenth century, but the modern scientific sense of handwriting analysis, and its use in courtrooms, seems to date to the 1830s with the amateur researcher and clergyman Jean-Hippolyte Michon. Michon's research was not published until shortly after Hawthorne's death, but is clearly part of an intellectual climate that also gives us fingerprinting and Poe's Dupin.

unjustly unexpressed (or cruelly violated) by both. Dimmesdale's identity as Pearl's father,

for instance, is kept from being articulated in any decisive way partly because, as a matter of

both of his private sexual and emotional world and of public legal concern, it finds in both

public and private lexica only half-formed languages through which to be confessed. His

status as a father is not merely a private one, because it is criminal, but his status as a

criminal is not merely a public one, because his sin is his status as a father. He cannot locate

or imagine a language through which he could confess both to his church and to his

daughter, because even though the two confessions would share the same content, they are

not the same confession. And so – his secret being a matter both of public and private

spheres, he is able to confess it only in the most indirect terms (as we see most strikingly in

the vague declarations of guilt he makes at the pulpit). When he finally *does* confess, his

confession is enabled not merely by his newfound knowledge of Chillingworth's true

identity, nor by some inner sense that he is about to die, but also by his access to a

representational register that sufficiently melds private concerns with public. The letter A

appears on a part of his body which is normally covered by clothing.[50] Dimmesdale's secret

is, of course, the central secret in the novel. It's the information Hester is openly withholding

from those who know they wish to know, and its "revelation" is the novel's climactic event.

Chillingworth's secret, which Hester also keeps, is kept from those who don't realize they are

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[50] To be sure, alphabetical writing is not always public. People within the home leave notes for one another, and epistolary conventions usually require that a private letter which moves through a public postal service maintain the integrity of this boundary with an envelope of seal (though the fact that envelopes and seals are needed at all suggests the de facto public nature of writing's base state). That said, there is one place where written language is not just public by definition, but is itself the very definition of what is public: a published book. When we consider a published novel, we consider a commodity made entirely of words.

missing important information, and this information only obtains as important because of its

relation to the primary secret, which is, again, always Pearl's paternity.[51]

We might be less likely to remember, though, that within the fictional frame

provided by "The Custom-House," the status of the cloth scarlet letter itself, like the

Surveyor Jonathan Pue manuscript upon which Hawthorne claims to have based his

romance, enjoys something of this same status between public and private worlds.[52] It is,

indeed, only because Pue's "history" – for reasons utterly independent of its actual content –

has managed to span public and private spheres so as to fail to belong properly to either that

Hawthorne is supposed to have happened upon the story at all. Rummaging on his lunch

break in the second floor of the custom house, Hawthorne happens upon a carefully

wrapped parcel left there by Pue nearly a century before. Gingerly unwrapping it he finds a

cloth letter A and a bundle of papers, the meaning of neither being immediately obvious.

> They were documents, in short, not official, but of a private nature, or, at least,
> written in his private capacity, and apparently with his own hand. I could account

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[51] Note, though, that Chillingworth's secret, too, problematically straddles both public and private discourses. His anger at Hester and Dimmesdale results from what he sees as a betrayal both legal and personal (and it's worth speculating that, one reason seventeenth-century texts became so fascinated with the cuckold may be the figure's capacity to articulate public and private concerns as part of a single psychology). In deceiving Dimmesdale, Chillingworth is, likewise, committing an act of betrayal both as a doctor and as a friend. Those descriptions of Chillingworth's relationship with Dimmesdale which, famously, seem to anticipate psychoanalytic practice, strike me as interesting to Hawthorne in part because they position Chillingworth as an uncanny figure able not just to betray Dimmesdale as both physician and friend but able to move openly between those two roles – the one public and the other private. What is meant to be disconcerting about Chillingworth is not just that he is *secretly* plotting revenge against a man who trusts him, but also that he is *openly* claiming a professional scientific interest in a man's most private self.

[52] I've called upon this too-familiar distinction between "the public and private spheres" a sufficient number of times now to warrant a disclaimer. Obviously, society has at no point in history been so simple as to be described adequately in these terms. No firm difference between public and private can be identified, and the model of the two spheres understates the complexity not only of how society *actually* works but even the complexity of how society has *appeared* to work. Even those easily seduced by reductive explanations are probably too savvy to be seduced entirely by this one. *But*, the three passages from the notebooks which I quote at the beginning of this section (particularly the second of the three) show, I think, that the violent transgression of the boundary between what *ought* to be private and what *must* be public is one of continual fascination for Hawthorne. This fascination is also a clear part of the Surveyor Pue story, as I will show. Compare, too, Freud's formulation of the uncanny as *that which ought to have remained hidden*.

for their being included in the heap of Custom-House lumber only by the fact, that Mr. Pue's death had happened suddenly; and that these papers, which he probably kept in his official desk, had never come to the knowledge of his heirs, or were supposed to relate to the business of the revenue. On the transfer of the archives to Halifax, this package, proving to be of no public concern, was left behind, and had remained ever since unopened.

My point here is not that the idea of a distinction between *public* and *private* spheres can or should be appealed to as a master narrative that can explain all of nineteenth-century society. Public and private spaces (the word "spheres" tends almost to make them sound like different planets!) overlapped in complicated ways, and the distinction between them was never more than an explanatory model by which *some* people in the middle class explained *some* parts of their lived reality. That said, it's an explanatory model Hawthorne explicitly invokes in this passage, and if scholars sometimes risk overestimating the critical utility of the public-private dyad that's partly because some of those whom we study have taken the same risk with far more abandon. This Pue manuscript episode is easy to ignore, in part because we know – and we know Hawthorne knows we know – that it is a fabricated device linking an otherwise more-or-less truthful autobiographical sketch with the romance that that sketch introduces. But whatever importance of the passage is to be accorded, though it has no bearing on what actually happens in the novel, must reckon the fact that this is the only explanation the pages of the book actually give for its own origin. The anecdote concerns the risk that, in a two-sphere system, valuable things are likely to fall through the cracks; such losses, Hawthorne suggests, are among the things literature can and should reverse. So the existence of the romance as the book we hold, and the relationship between that romance and its introductory sketch, needs to be seen as ultimately an accident of what Hawthorne sees as other people's overly schematic understanding the public/private

binarism. Without this invocation of the inadequacy of the two-sphere model, the story of

the scarlet letter (at least within its own fictional frame) does not become a book, and that

story and its introductory sketch do not combine meaningfully into a coherent diptych.[53]

At least one critic[54] has argued (providing, I think, one of several equally plausible

answers to *the* great riddle of the book, if it really be the great riddle – a point which another

age can determine better than ours) that this relation between public and private spheres of

action – and the location, specifically, of secrecy on the ever-so-thin margin between them –

are cumulatively the key not just to both *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Custom-House" but the

long searched for *global* key to relationship between the two. That the two spheres could

articulate the reason Hawthorne saw fit to offer them only as the two parts of a single

aesthetic whole. The nest of relations between/among public shame and private guilt, public

guilt and private shame, is arguably the most resonant point of thematic contact between the

semi-autobiographical preface and the romance it introduces. The volume's generic odd-

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[53] Gorden Hutner, in *Secrets and Sympathy*, offers a convincing reading of "The Custom-House" which argues that it is precisely the thematic of private shame intersecting with public embarrassment that links Hawthorne's autobiographical narrative with Hester's fictional one – that it is Hawthorne's uncomfortable sense of being a private person having his private matters scrutinized by an unfeeling public that links him to Hester, and links "The Custom-House" to *The Scarlet Letter*. Hutner's reasoning is sound, but he does not consider this description of the Pue manuscript in terms of the relationship between public and private importance, and thus tends (mistakenly, I think) toward presenting Hawthorne as lobbying for an even *greater* separation between public and private meanings. Private matters could thus be known only in private and among those predisposed to sympathy: friends, family, the likeminded. In his description of the Pue manuscript, though, Hawthorne seems to be lamenting the fact that *private* and *public* are the only kinds of importance material and verbal objects seem to be accorded, and that much of what really matters in life possesses a value that can be better explained in terms of some third sphere for which the public/private binarism makes no room. Among the things possessing such a third-sphere importance would be not just Hester's story, but also the labors of a professional author, who uses his private thoughts to work (usually, and certainly in Hawthorne's case, inside his own home) to produce a publically sold commodity the use value of which its capacity to enrich the private thoughts and domestic moments of some stranger. See, in light of this, Hawthorne's own description of his relationship to an ideal reader in his preface to *The Marble Fawn*, remarks that Hutner discusses extensively.

[54] Again, Gorden Hutner in *Secrets and Sympathy*.

couple share a painfully keen sense of the catastrophic embarrassment that can result from the publication of a person's private affairs.

This is something that, we know from the notebook entries with which I started, Hawthorne was already interested in 1840, long before he even began, let alone lost, his position as surveyor in Salem. His sense of shame at having been fired from, and then having tried unsuccessfully to win back, a job that he had long thought, not so secretly, he was far too good for is compounded by his knowledge that much of his personal drama had been played out on the pages of newspapers – and thus, importantly, in writing and in public. Hester's guilt is also a private matter, as is Dimmesdale's, and both are, like Hawthorne's, transformed into a public display of writing.

But in Hester's and Dimmesdale's cases both the transgression itself and the alphabetic signs by which knowledge of that transgression is made available to the public bears a closer and more strange relation to the physical body than Hawthorne's secret of having begged to be reinstalled in a job he hated. It is this transfer of alphabetic power from the printed page to the visible body that "The Custom-House" gives us no way to explain.

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There is, of course, something intuitively satisfying about the centrality of adulterous transgression to any narrative in which this collision of public and private meanings constitutes the most reliable terra firma. Adultery is always already a narrative – it presupposes a sequence of events (for adultery to occur, a marriage must already have happened) and characters (at least three) and conflicts (individual desires with the rules of society, the appetites of the body with the dictates of the spirit, the spouse with his or her rival). It's, furthermore, often a narrative about the friction between private desire and public

interests – one that lends itself to the aesthetic needs of a century in which marriage began as a public duty and ended up the site of individual, emotional fulfilment.[55] We can overestimate how important adultery is to the plot of *The Scarlet Letter*, of course, and we can badly misconstrue what, exactly, Hawthorne would have regarded adultery as meaning. As products of the twentieth century (now sojourning foreigners in the twenty-first) we know that we're always tempted to place undue stress on the role of sexual desire to any plot. One great hunger of the twentieth-century mind is, after all, to see everything that means as ultimately meaning sex.

But then, even when we correct for our affliction of twentieth-century prurience, Hawthorne really does seem to have seen his novel in proto-Freudian terms. He recoils at Chillingworth's capacity to treat the innermost secrets of Dimmesdale's heart without sympathy, and with instead of this sympathy a mix of professional curiosity and vengeful malevolence. Part of what makes such a figure – a doctor who probes the soul, and in probing it discovers the forbidden erotic desires hidden in its core – so menacing a villain for Hawthorne is precisely the fact that the assumptions on which such a villain acts, though evil, are founded. Hawthorne seems to anticipate that a doctor skilled enough *really could* probe the soul of a patient who blindly trusts him or her, and to suspect that, at the core of this patient's soul, *really do* reside forbidden erotic wishes the patient dare not admit to having, and may not even recognize as his own. Thus Hester is not just a married woman who has born a child to a man not her husband, but someone impressed into personhood itself by this very sexual history. The erotic desires, and the history of those desires and of

[55] A great of scholarship on this subject exists, but among the most useful for my project have been, on courtship, Karen Lystra's *Searching the Heart* and, on marriage and divorce, Elaine Tyler May's *Great Expectations*.

the objects to which they have attached, is what installs her in the very matrix of subjectivity. To cast aside the scarlet letter, as she learns facing Pearl by the side of the brook, is to cast aside all else that she is – to be as a ghost, and to be only formerly a human being. If the old-fashioned sense of Hawthorne as a writer out of step with his times retains any of its power to convince, one reason it does so, at least for scholars born in the twentieth century, is doubtless that *The Scarlet Letter's* model of identity reminds us more of the twentieth century's than the nineteenth's: Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth are each the site of an ongoing conflict between the id's desires and the repressive energies which, internalized, are the super ego.[56]

I'm not suggesting that sexuality was *never* thought of in these terms before the twentieth century. But before Freud, and as late as the trial of Oscar Wilde, it cannot have been clear to many people that what we now think of as the Freudian self would soon constitute a hegemonic orthodoxy beside which every other model of the self would suddenly seem either old-fashioned (if familiar) or subversive (if strange). Reading *The Scarlet Letter* we are in a place that at least *seems* very modern – one very much on the twentieth-century side of what, drawing on Foucault, we can think of as the historical divide between "sexuality" as a set of acts and "sexuality" as the seat of the authentic self. *The Scarlet Letter* is,

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[56] I'm not suggesting that the twentieth century was the first to perceive sexuality as a thing possessed of a privileged relation to truth – the first to think in terms of innate drives, repression, sublimation, etc. I have a sense, though, impressionistic but probably one I share with other scholars, that the nineteenth century tended to think of those drives as threats to human subjectivity rather than as that subjectivity's foundations. A person was fully human in the nineteenth century to the extent that he or she mastered these drives, not to the extent that the drives were psychologically present in the first place. Those who lacked sexual desires entirely (middle class white women, John Harvey Kellogg, et al.) were not therefore less human but rather less bestial (which is to say *more* human) than those who experienced them. Hawthorne's suggestion in the scene by the brook is that Hester, in casting of her sexual history, casts off identity itself – that a subject without a sexual past is no easier to imagine than a subject without a body (hence, for Hester to cast of the letter is for her to become a kind of ghost).

like psychoanalysis (and other parapsychoanalytic narratives like the closet), partly about the

way that secrecy makes identity possible, the way that secrecy divides the mind's interiority

from the external world, just as it divides the public from the private. It's also a novel in

which every secret (at the level of content, anyway) is a matter of sex. Once we discover to

whom "Chillingworth" has had sexual access,[57] and when, and under what circumstances, we

are authorized to believe we know who he "really" is – to know the "true" identity he keeps

hidden: *Prynne*, a name the novel uses in reference to him only once (in "The Recognition,"

shortly after he is introduced as "a white man" but before he has been identified as Hester's

missing husband and before the name *Chillingworth* has appeared). In *Prynne's* only appearance

that refers to a character other than Hester it is observed by an onlooker that, in Hester's

two years living in Boston, "no tidings have come from that learned gentleman, Master

Prynne."

So, what locates the novel firmly in the nineteenth century is not the content of the

secrets with which it is concerned. It is in secrecy's formal features – the rhetorical norms

the novel establishes in order to describe the structural logic of secrecy which obtain

regardless of the content of any individual secrets – that the novel bears the mark of its

nineteenth-century origins. It's a mark from which, as I suggested earlier, *The Scarlet Letter*

would seem to have every reason to distance itself, because the formal features that govern

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[57] I differentiate access from sex as such because of the suggestion that Chillingworth is sexually impotent, though despite devoting one entire read-through of the novel to looking for some specific proof of this I've not found any. The question of Hester's sexual history before Dimmesdale, and specifically of whether or not her marriage to Chillingworth was ever consummated, would seem to be of great importance to the plot, and I tend to think that Hawthorne's relatively strict moralism (after all, he regards Hester as a woman worthy of forgiveness and entitled to her privacy, not – as we might regard her now – as a woman who had really done no wrong in the first place) renders this lack of comment the best evidence for Hester's virginity at the time of her affair with Dimmesdale. If Hester had been guilty not only of adultery but also of having slept with two different men, Hawthorne would probably have mentioned this fact.

the novel's management of secrecy are, in 1850, so energetically politicized that Hawthorne cannot take them up without also taking up their politics.

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The Scarlet Letter begins several times over. It begins first with "The Custom-House," then with the opening chapter – "The Prison Door" – which concerns matters of setting entirely, and involves no plot or characters, and then, at last, begins telling its story with the second chapter – "The Market-Place" – a title that, I've already suggested, connects Hester's onerous encounter with her public with Hawthorne's debut as a novelist, and does so in both geographic and economic terms. That second chapter begins as follows:

> The grass-plot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston; all with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door. Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand. It could have betokened nothing short of the anticipated execution of some noted culprit, on whom the sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of public sentiment. But, in that early severity of the Puritan character, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be drawn. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be, that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle and vagrant Indian, whom the white man's fire-water had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest. It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows. In either case, there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators; as befitted a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. Meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for, from such by-standers at the scaffold. On the other hand, a penalty which, in our days, would infer a degree of

mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a
dignity as the punishment of death itself. (58-59)

I indulge myself a little by reproducing the entire opening paragraph of the second

chapter, especially since I won't be able to address many of the more subtle ways in which

the passage resonates with my reading of the novel as a whole (for instance, notice, alas, its

recurring preoccupation with the confluence of public and private codes of behavior). But

the self-corroding trope of the *bearded physiognomy*, a phrase the narrator uses only in this

passage, is one which I see as both instructive enough and obfuscatory enough to suggest its

being introduced in as full a context as possible. Before engaging the specific question of

bearded physiognomies, though, it will be best to look at what the novel has to say about

physiognomies more generally.

Besides its appearance here the word *physiognomy* appears three times in the novel,

once in reference to the face of Ann Hibbins ("the same who, a few years later [in 1656], was

executed as a witch"), and in both the other cases it refers to Pearl's face. Neither of these

faces, needless to say, is bearded. Pearl in particular, not just female but also prepubescent,

possesses a face that is two-fold the kind *against* which the semiotic force of a beard is

constructed. Beardedness, historically, has been linked with the capacity to beget children,

and has served as a way for men to perform their disidentification with both women and

boys. I'll return to the question of beards later; for now it will do to observe that a beard

both serves a physiognomic function (it communicates knowledge about the one to whose

face it's attached) and disrupts physiognomy (as in the science of reading faces) by

concealing the physiognomy (as in the face, to which the beard is strictly speaking an

accessory).

The doubleness of *physiognomy* – the fact that it means *face* but also means the *science of interpreting* the face – obviously performs aesthetic work on Hawthorne's behalf. The word's latter meaning – the etymological and scientific one – assumes an interpretive grammar which, because, it is always also attended by the former meaning, it imposes not just on some faces under some circumstances but on all faces everywhere and in general. *Physiognomy* refers to a face that is part of a legible body – one embedded both in assumptions about *how* the body means and in an overriding imperative that the body is to mean *something*.[58] However limiting that imperative might be in theory, in practice it also participates in a certain ideal of innocent liberation, at least where Pearl is concerned. The word is part of the novel's participation in a Wordsworthian ideology of childhood that frames Pearl most effectively when she seems to defy it. The compulsion of the body to mean is not a lack of autonomy to Hawthorne but a lack of corruption, since to be perfectly legible in body is to be untouched by the morally compromised adult world of secrets. The lawless wild-child of nature, uncorrupted by either the ties of mutual responsibility or the mendacity by which the adult world is defined, and unable to feign for good or ill, represents innocence and liberty not because she is free to ignore this physiognomic grammar of the face, but precisely because she is *not* free to do so. As the narrator remarks:

> Pearl's aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there
> were many children, comprehending the full scope between the wild-flower

[58] That is to say: *physiognomy*, unlike *visage* or *countenance*, already presumes that the face is not just an object of sight but a conduit of knowledge. This is primarily due to the word's etymological dependence on the Greek γνῶσις (*gnosis*, or "knowledge" and more or less a synonym for Greek ἐπιστήμη [*episteme*] from which we get *epistemology*), but I want to stress here that its inscription of the face into a representational logic that compels it to signify is more than just a etymological vestige which goes unobserved in practice, like, say, the "Thor's Day" in our *Thursday*. This is because *physiognomy* also had such currency in the 1850s as, without further gloss, the name for the science of *reading* faces. Little actual ambiguity exists between the two uses, because when referring to the face physiognomy generally takes an article or possessive, while the science is usually unmarked by either (though I suspect the names of books like "Combe's *Physiognomy*" could cause occasional confusion).

prettiness of a peasant-baby, and the pomp, in little, of an infant princess. Throughout all, *however*, there was a trait of passion, a certain depth of hue, which she never lost; and if, in any of her changes, she had grown fainter or paler, she would have ceased to be herself; – it would have been no longer Pearl!

This outward mutability indicated, and did not more than fairly express, the various properties of her inner life. Her nature appeared to possess depth, too, as well as variety; but – or else Hester's fears deceived her – it lacked reference and adaptation to the world into which she was born. *The child could not be made amenable to rules*. (Emphasis added)

Except, apparently, those rules governing the calibration of "outward" "aspect" to "inner life;" in these Hawthorne maintains a perfect faith, or at least locates a representational order with which he believes his fiction cannot dispense. Even those who, like Pearl, seem to have multiple identities that they can don or not like so many costumes cannot pass for something they simply aren't. (Those who do pass, like Chillingworth, do so as part of some deeper and larger moral corruption, and even these people do so ineffectively, since their moral corruption is less something successfully hidden than something people merely pretend to themselves that they do not see.) The Franklin-esque rags-to-riches vacillation of "the child" – condensing into her tiny frame a whole bourgeois poetics of unhindered class mobility, though in curiously feudal terms[59] – demonstrates through her, just as the narrator had through the bearded physiognomies in the marketplace, the unfailing accuracy of certain physiognomic "rules" (pointedly, Pearl can frolic playfully from the top to the bottom of a whole feudal serfdom because her identity is contingent entirely on an epidermal "depth of

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[59] Lacking the space to pursue it here, I'll just point out that this strange confluence of mercantile, market-driven economics with a Romantic (in the archaic, Arthurian sense) fantasy of a pre-capitalist past is another motif in The Scarlet Letter to which Hawthorne appends several broad ranging concerns. Most notably we encounter it in the suit of mail Hester and Pearl encounter as they leave Governor Bellingham's house. It is also, arguably, a feature of Hawthorne's own wounded and confused class identity as he is writing, since he had sought to work as a gentleman author while enjoying a life-long, relatively work-free government appointment (which is to say, a kind of feudal court appointment), but has instead fallen prey to the whims of modern democracy and been forced to turn professional, and enter, just like Hester, the "marketplace."

hue" impervious to change) which hold true even under the stress and strain of unique circumstances.

And Hawthorne is not above claiming a "uniqueness" for his characters' circumstances that is more or less literal. Recall that,

> Amongst **any** other population, or at a later period in the history of New England [i.e., at any other point even in the history even of **this** population], the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful business in hand… But, in that early severity of the Puritan character, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be drawn.

We are invited here to suppose that physiognomic laws, which have at every other time and place been as inviolable as the law of gravity, have nonetheless been suspended for the length of a generation or two in seventeenth-century Boston. The grammar of physiognomy is inescapable – almost (but not quite) a kind of biological determinism.[60] But the fact that these characters are apparently exempt from those laws seems to maintain (or to want to maintain) a Romantic, humanist hope that people are more than mere machines – agents in the world rather than the helpless effects of causes in themselves aimless. This hope is maintained only briefly, however, since after a catalog of the various things the crowd might, from the reader's point of view, be expecting to see – a contrary child about to be scolded, a serious malefactor about to be hung, or anything in between – our sense of these early Bostonians as inscrutable proof that not everyone can be read as easily as a book is dealt a harsh blow.

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[60] Physiognomy certainly has much in common with various kinds of biological determinism, but it's rarely clear in the work of actual phsyiognomists if the outward bodily signs of, say, criminality are the causes or the effects of the criminal temperament – what biological determinists today might call "a genetic predisposition to commit crime." So I'm not saying that physiognomy was *always* biologically deterministic in its outlook, though certainly it was so some of the time; I'm saying rather that it's always *potentially* biologically deterministic.

> In either case, there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators; **_as befitted a people_** amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and **_in whose character_** both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful.

The failure of certain otherwise (the narrator insists) universal physiognomic laws to obtain in Boston in the 1640s serves itself as a kind of advocate not for a belief in a soul, or for a transcendence of the body, or for a sense of identity that allows inner and outer selves to operate with some degree of mutual autonomy, but for the legitimacy of an *even broader* epistemological and somatic grammar whose operations not even these non-conformists can defy. To risk concocting a bitter proverbial cocktail, the Puritans in this passage are the exception that proves the rule that you can, in fact, judge a book by its cover.

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Most racism depends for its perceived legitimacy on people's belief that one can judge a book by its cover (or, failing that, their belief that one *would* be able to do so in a perfect world). There are exceptions, of course, but it seems to me that at its core the most pedestrian kinds of everyday racism are experienced (by those who think in racist terms) as ways of reading. Someone's body is seen and that body is classified within a system the seer has internalized. This system offers a fixed number of categories to which individual bodies can belong. What is produced is an interpretation. Race sorts types of visible bodies and thereby uses the visible body as a means by which to know things that cannot, in themselves, be seen.

Hawthorne was all too aware that, in the increasingly commercialized business of writing and selling fiction, the relationships of books to their covers (or, more importantly for *The Scarlet Letter*, books to their titles and title pages) could literally determine an author's

success at supporting his family by writing rather than doing something else. The title page, Hawthorne well knew, could for some shoppers determine if *The Scarlet Letter* was worth parting with seventy five cents to own. A less beautiful book – with a less piquant or appropriate title page – one might, after all, be content simply to borrow.

These two beliefs – that surfaces always represent what they conceal and that the literary marketplace is increasingly crowded with goods competing for attention and money – guided Hawthorne's intervention in the design of *The Scarlet Letter's* title page. Anyone judging *his* book superficially would be dazzled. The book would be, like Pearl herself and her scriptural namesake, a thing of both beauty and intrinsic value – a thing of, perhaps, great price, but of a value too nuanced to admit of mere quantification.

The expressive vivacity of Pearl's face could hardly be more different from the "grim rigidity" of the faces before which, in the opening of the novel, she is about to appear, an infant. In constant flux, her face seems to deny the spectator access to any stable identity within (Hester often gazes into Pearl's eyes hoping to discover something, and yet can see only her own reflection in their shine). Yet it is the apparent impossibility (implicit in the "however" to which I added emphasis in quoting the passage about Pearl a few pages ago) that so many faces could belong to just one child which, for the narrator at least, authenticates Pearl's countenance as the privileged and most artless signifier of her inner life. The difficulty is in the fact that, just as the "child" cannot be made amenable to rules (excepting the core physiognomic directive: that the *outer* self must legibly mean the *inner*), nor can the "throng of bearded men"[61] appear *to appear* to be what they are. For both the

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[61] The first words of *The Scarlet Letter's* opening chapter are "A throng of bearded men." Appropriately, the first word of the novel is "A."

bearded men and the elfin child, the freedom to mean something other than or more than

the visible body (a freedom upon whose existence – because we know that we have little

conscious or direct control over how our body looks – the reality of any genuinely free will

must itself depend) is suggested, briefly, by what seems to be an ungrammatical self. At first,

both with the bearded men and with Pearly, we seem to have entered a domain of freedom

in which the body's tyranny over the self is on a kind of sabbatical. Quickly, though,

Hawthorne reasserts the grammar of physiognomy. It's not, he offers, that the rules of

physiognomy don't apply here, but that the range of kinds of selves in the world is greater

than we imagined. The force of these physiognomic laws, now that the narrator has

explained away what had seemed at first a successful attempt to escape them, is now all the

more ironclad for having been challenged unsuccessfully. The throng of bearded men,

whose faces never change, and the elf child, whose face is always changing, testify not to a

kind of personhood outside the law, but to the stunning range of different kinds of

individual people the law is authorized to being under its absolute authority.

The almost cadaverous severity of the bearded throng is not the only way they

contrast with vivacious, ever-changing Pearl. I come now, as I said I would, back to the

subject of beards, for of all the faces in the novel that are called "physiognomies" only these

men's faces are bearded, and their beardedness is important enough to be mentioned as early

as the novel's fourth word. As a physiognomic signifier in its own right, the beard has

historically had two roles: it marks the wearer as not-a-woman and it marks the wearer as

not-a-boy.[62] In this sense it announces not just masculinity, but more specifically male

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[62] Much of what I say here about the cultural work of beardedness in general draws on Will Fisher's
"Staging the Beard: Masculinity in English Culture." Fisher's essay concerns the British stage in the late

generative powers. To wear a beard is to have the biological capacity, though not necessarily the permission of your society, to beget a child. Though Hawthorne gives us little sense of how to read these beards, it's worth noting that the novel as a whole, and the specific work this throng of men has gather to perform, has everything to do with questions of paternity, and with the extent to which fertility and parenthood may be kept secret. Dimmesdale (who, we later learn, is one of this throng) repeatedly worries that someone will see in Pearl's features some resemblance to his own, and he will be discovered. Hester, on the other hand, has no capacity to hide, since – though *The Scarlet Letter* consigns it entirely to backstory – we know that Hester's adultery has been discovered by the simple fact that, when a woman is pregnant, her body is visibly transformed. The whole action of the novel – that Hester's sin has been discovered already but Dimmesdale's as yet goes undetected – relies both obviously and crucially on the physiognomic difference between motherhood and fatherhood, on the fact that a pregnant mother can be recognized by looking, but an expecting father cannot.

To the extent that such meanings obtain specifically around beards in *The Scarlet Letter*, the beards these men wear are something like phallic transliterations of the pregnant, distended belly which the reader never sees. Both beard and belly are understood to mark the barer as a sexed body able (though, again, not necessarily authorized) to participate fully in the work of reproduction. Both, at the same time, produce the body to which they are

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sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and so it tells us far less about the culture *within* which *The Scarlet Letter* was written than about the one *about* which it was written, and even then does so only indirectly by way of English culture (from which the very existence of Massachusetts was partly a way to cut ties) and the theater (which, notoriously, Puritans despised). But Hawthorne appears to have been at least familiar enough with the English renaissance to have borrowed the name Prynne from William Prynne (1600-1669), a Puritanically-inclined pamphleteer who wrote, as it happens, specifically on the evils of the theater, and his sense of the transatlantic, seventeenth-century, Anglophone sensibility doubtless benefitted a great deal from his study of Renaissance dramatists poets (his first daughter, or course, was named Una in reference to *The Fairie Queene*).

attached as a site of epistemological rupture – produce both new knowledge about that particular body and new ignorance of it as well. The beard might thus accordingly be said to function both as a physiognomic signifier and as counter-physiognomic screen – like a veil, the beard codifies one kind of knowledge as a visual cue while (indeed *by*) overtly refusing the spectator access to another. What the beard communicates is communicated by obscuring the face. What the pregnant body communicates, on the other hand, is communicated imbedded in a question which that body, notoriously,[63] cannot answer: with whose participation was the child conceived?

And yet the beards in this passage fit uneasily into this model, and not least because, semantically, the phrase "bearded physiognomy" actually *excludes* the beard as such from the epistemological economy to which it consigns the rest of the face. A "bearded physiognomy" may well perform certain kinds of disclosure in its beardedness, but the phrase calls our attention to the physiognomic status of precisely that which the beard partly obscures: the face beneath. Implicit in the phrase is an assumption that there are some faces (like Pearl's and Mistress Hibbins's, as the novel, I have already argued, will later show us) that qualify fully as "physiognomies" despite having no beards. If a beard is therefore not already denoted by the word *physiognomy* (which of course it isn't), and if beards literally

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[63] "Notoriously" because this is one explanation for the origin of patriarchy itself. Because men, until recent decades, had no way of being sure who beget the children born of any particular woman, and because (for reasons that have never made sense to me, personally) being biologically related to the people to whom you will your property after your death is considered important, societies in which men hold property have had (patriarchy claims) to control and survey women's behavior whenever they mixed with men. This is incredibly simplified, of course, and quite problematically assumes that, though patriarchy is a cultural fiction, the notion of a biological heir has some claim to prediscursive truth, as if men's desire to enjoy privileges at women's expense needed to be explained as a means rather than an end, but their wish to determine what happened to their land after their deaths makes perfect intuitive sense as an end in itself! Cold and merge comfort it must be, in facing the grave, to know that the young man who will end up owning all of your possessions also already has half of your genes.

obscure our view of that which *is* denoted by the word *physiognomy* (which of course they do), the "bearded physiognomy" is a thing defined by its resistance, because *bearded*, to the epistemological order to which, as a *physiognomy*, it simultaneously declares its loyalty.

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Hawthorne is extremely fond of this sort of paradox. In "The Minister's Black Veil" he is concerned with almost nothing else, and, as Hooper's black veil anticipates both Hester's scarlet letter and the throng of men's beards, that veil is worth considering once again at this point. To comprehend the knowledge which either the veil or the beard communicates is to apprehend something real, but it is also to apprehend something that serves to impede the further discovery of additional knowledge, and to frustrate the seer's desire to know more. This desire is not just something the veiled/bearded faces refuse to satisfy, it is also something those faces court, since the veil says nothing, and the beards say little, besides "I'm hiding something." Like a wrapped gift that appears mysteriously at your doorstep, it can be known, and offers secure knowledge of a sort, but what it says is that there is something specific, something with a sensible size, shape, and weight, which is being concealed from you. To interpret the sign correctly is necessarily to feel that you know less than you did before, even though the bare quantity of raw information you possess about the world has actually increased. It is to be told *I know something you don't know.*

Many of the mysterious symbols at the hearts of his stories – the portrait of Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*, the mysterious flower in "Rapaccini's Daughter" – and much of what scholars have come to recognize as ambiguity in his work owe their continuing power to entrance to this. "The Minisher's Black Veil," though, among the tales Hawthorne submitted to Samuel Goodrich when he (Hawthorne) was still an unpublished

amateur, serves to consider this dynamic entirely as it regards the human face. (The word *physiognomy* never appears in that tale, though *visage* does four times, and *face* twenty four, and though it is certain that in October, 1828, Hawthorne had read a translation of Johann Caspar Lavater called *Essays on Physiognomy*.[64]) Hooper's face is, in a sense, the original from which the other inscrutable mysteries in Hawthorne are descended, just as the black veil is the short-story-type for which the scarlet letter is the romance-antitype. Indeed, because it depends from his hat and conceals his face as far down as his lips (so that there is some question in the tale if it does or does not hang low enough to flutter when Hooper raises his voice to preach), the black veil is a kind of anti-beard. It covers exactly those parts of Hooper's face that a beard would *not*, including the uncertainty around the mouth, which some beards cover and others don't.

The tale does not tell us if Hooper wears a beard or not (which is somewhat striking since, in just the first five pages of *The Scarlet Letter*, the uniform beardedness of all the men is mentioned twice). But the physiognomic logic that fascinates Hawthorne must intersect at some point with questions about free will – about the extent to which our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, and intents are (as we believe them to be) subject to unfettered, autonomous, elective choice in the way that the color of our hair, for example, is not. If the mind and body shape one another irresistibly, the novel's literary project draws power from producing the uncanny aesthetic effects by disclosing, or seeming to disclose, a hidden, biologically deterministic order of being. This would be a particular breed of the uncanny – one to which Hawthorne finds himself drawn again and again, and about which I have already said much

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[64] See Marion L. Kesserling, 11, 55.

in the course of my remarks regarding the Black Man. It would, furthermore, be thematically appropriate to this particular novel, since it draws upon a bio-racial determinism to cast that which we all subjectively experience as free will as a vain illusion, thus offering the new science of the racial body not just in the place of God or nature, but in the place *specifically* of the Calvinist God of the Puritans. Once again nineteenth-century conceptions of the racial body – like late-1990s fears of the Y2K computer bug – provide a seemingly rational and materialist object to which affective currents long used to supernatural channels of expression can attach

The flirtation with biological determinism in *The Scarlet Letter* – perhaps most visible in the three paragraphs that introduce Chillingworth – performs something like the same work vis-à-vis Calvinist notions of election and predestination. "So it's true, then, that we are not masters of our own fate, that our inner lives are no more under our autonomous control than our complexions." As I've already suggested, the Black Man plays at the same game: "So it's true, then, that an avatar of darkness haunts the edges of society, eager to corrupt us, and hoping, by our individual corruption, to undermine the social stability that depends on our shared purity." Eager to access such emotions, always looking for new objects to which the residual feelings of our forgotten early lives can attach, we scarcely stop to worry that, even in the most conservative imaginations, moral purity and racial purity are not precisely the same thing.

With Hawthorne's physiognomy, the Calvinist denial of free will, and to some extent an older, Aristotelian belief that physical beauty is a sign of inner goodness, physical ugliness of inner corruption, join forces with the nebulous fears attending everyday racial hostility

and the more specific claims of physiognomy, phrenology, and comparative anatomy, to

offer itself as the reader's own discarded beliefs, rewritten for a scientific age.

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Part of this fantasy seems always to have been, though, that in such epistemological

paradoxes the human body and the written word came to seem much alike. In the same list

of ideas for tales and sketches from which I quoted the secrets of church, street, and court,

Hawthorne writes

> Letters in the shape of figures of men, etc. At a distance, the words composed by
> the letters are alone distinguishable. Close at hand, the figures alone are seen, and
> not distinguished as letters. Thus things may have a positive, a relative, and a
> composite meaning, according to the point of view. (183)

This is essentially the genesis of *The Scarlet Letter* – as much as is the image, recorded around

the same time in the same notebook, of a woman condemned to wear the letter A. The

condensation here – the same one in which we engage when we refer racial or ethnic

stereotypes, and more indirectly when we discuss a person's temperament or integrity as

matters of his or her *character* – is one that imaginatively collapses distinctions between

people and writing or printing.

The passage from the notebooks works mythologically precisely because it is not in

any way overtly political, or for that matter naturalistic. Its fantastical content, its complete

lack of context (when is this happening? who is the one watching?), and the unstable spatial

and temporal relationships between seer and seen all suggest a half-remembered image from

dream – the kind of dream where one is living a narrative but simultaneously watching that

narrative passively as it happens to somebody else, as if in a film or play. The agent of the

passive verbs, the one who *sees* and *distinguishes*, occupies several such mutually exclusive vantage points simultaneously.

From far away, only the words can be perceived, but from close up, only the *figures*, a word which, seeming to court confusion, can mean letters but in this case means bodily shapes, since these are the "figures of men" mentioned in the previous sentence. So part of what the notebook entry is doing with its wordplay is imagining a situation in which the reader might reasonably expect figure to refer to a letter, but then finds that it actually refers to the absence of a letter, or the presence of a letter that cannot be recognized because it is also in the shape of a person, and because outside of the context of some recognizable word, the human shape overwhelms the alphabetic. The idea is not just that the shapes of letters and people might be distinguishable from one another only on the level of scale – that, in other words, letters may be tiny pictures of people and pictures of people in fact giant letters – but that the status of a letter as a letter rather than something else depends entirely upon its role in the formation of words. In the situation Hawthorne imagines, it would seem there must be some intermediary distance where the letters are visible but the words are not – where, depending on what was spelled out, only a *part* of a single word, consisting of what seems a meaningless string of letters – say TTE – is visible. This sense is balanced against a counterpoint in the suggestion – nonsensical, but syntactically valid and itself strengthened by the double meaning of *figure* – that when "the words composed by the letters alone are visible" what Hawthorne means is that not only the *men* but the *letters* too disappear.

We know of course that at so great a distance, where the letters could not be recognized as letters, the words would not be legible as words either. And yet we also know what it is to see a person at such distance where we can see *hair*, but not individual *hairs*, or a

tree on which we can see *greenery*, but not individual *leaves*. Letters may not be unique in this regard, but the fact that to read words we must also recognize the individual letters that make it up would seem to test the powers of sight in unusual ways. One suspects that, were this not so, the testing of eyesight would not so often consist specifically of the ability to recognize letters at a distance.[65] The passage, though admittedly written as a memo to the author himself and thus not in need, perhaps, of absolute clarity, continually obfuscates which "figures" are the ones obscured by a particular vantage – those of the letters or those of men.

The fantasy of the notebook entry tends to organize things into groups of three. There are three visual elements (words, letters, and figures of men) and three possible meanings (positive, relative, and composite), and each potential meaning, the final sentence suggests, is attached to a particular point of view. But only two points of view are actually specified, and they differ in terms of their proximity to what is seen. At a distance, only the words are seen, and close at hand only the figures of the men. The third point of view, which I take to be the "composite," can be imagined in two ways. One possibility is that it synthesizes the other two, and offers a point of view different from the others not spatially but temporally – that is, it is neither far from nor near to the object of vision, but having surveyed that object from both vantages in the past, is able in the present to integrate the discoveries of both and overcome their respective limitations by means of memory and

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[65] What we now think of as an "eye chart" for testing visual acuity dates from continental Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. I've been unable to locate a specific date of introduction, but the three ophthalmologist who produced early charts were Heinrich Kuechler (1811-1873), Eduard Jäger von Jaxtthal (1818-1884), Herman Snellen (1834-1908), who in 1862 developed the Snellen chart, which improved on earlier designs and is in essence the version still in use today. Like Braille, Morse code, and Bell's "visual speech," in other words, the eye chart is an alphabetic technology that dates to roughly the same historical moment as *The Scarlet Letter*.

imagination rather than vision as such. The other possibility is that it offers simply a medium vantage which is between the two extremes of the others – neither as far from the object as the one, nor as close to it as the other. This, as I already suggested, would be the middle vantage at which whole words would no longer be visible, but the shapes resembling human bodies not yet discernable: the domain of individual letters, where a consciousness of the shapes as letters would dominate that of the words seen from a distance and that of the human shapes seen from close up. Here we have encoded an image of Hester (and to some extent Dimmesdale as he exists in his dying moment), where both the word *adultery* and the particular body of the adulterer disappear behind the imposing image of one of that word's letters. Detached from its linguistic situation in the word, and reattached to the body that that word is supposed to describe, the letter's signifying power speaks both for the body *and* for the word. To say the word *adultery* and to know the individual adulterer, the letter says, are alike unnecessary, suggesting not just that the A can render both the word and the bodily acts of adulterous sex (both of which are, of course, flamboyantly banished from *The Scarlet Letter's* pages) superfluous, but that, because the letter A can so satisfactorily "stand for" both, they are in some ways the same thing as one another. In this respect, the two ways of imagining the "composite meaning" of the letters in the shape of figures of men – the point of view which synthesizes the discoveries of near and far, and the point of view in which the visibility of the individual letters supersedes the visibility either of whole words or individual bodies – are the same as one another. The individual letter is authorized to speak both for the word and for the body, rendering both word and body things remembered rather than things seen.

I suspect that this "composite meaning," in which vision, memory, and imagination all temper what in one another can be unforgiving or incapably of sympathy, *and* in which individual letters are authorized to stand both for the form of the body and for the communicative power of written words, is the register of meaning Hawthorne sets out to explore in *The Scarlet Letter*. The point of view where all one sees is letters is occluded from the dream-like sketch of the letter-men, but it is this point of view which dominates the romance. The description of the letter-men explicitly explores only two of the three meanings/points-of-view it identifies – because it specifies our distant gaze at the words (again, probably the "relative" meaning) and our intimate recognition of a nearby human shape (the "positive") – it suggests some uncertainty or ineluctability lingering around the "composite," that third point of view which avoids extremes, and in which individual letters – I have supposed – but not whole words are what the seer sees.

I don't pretend to know exactly what force compels Hawthorne's reluctance, in the notebook entry, explicitly to describe the letter-centric middle (or synthesizing, or "composite") register – the register in which he would ultimately become most interested.[66]

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[66] That register of meaning which, again, imagines letters as authorized to supplant both words and bodies in signifying potential. I see as indicative of Hawthorne's unusual level of interest in this body/word/letter dynamic the simple fact that, until this point in his literary career, he seems to have been satisfied with exploring his ideas in the short story, a genre with which he had had considerable artistic and critical (though not commercial) success, and to which, long into writing *The Scarlet Letter*, he remained convinced his future lay. Until late-January Hawthorne remained basically convinced that *The Scarlet Letter* was a long short story and not a short novel or romance. "The Custom-House" itself mentions his plans to collect some of his previously published tales in the volume. On January 15, in the letter accompanying the manuscripts for the just-finished "Custom-House" and the first twenty-one chapters of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne, in between his usual complaints of not being able to settle on a title, *drastically* misgauging how long a work *The Scarlet Letter* actually was, supposing that, with the republished tales, the new romance, and the introductory sketch, the new volume would run to four hundred pages, of which "The Scarlet Letter" would be a mere two hundred. As published, and not counting "The Custom-House," *The Scarlet Letter* runs two hundred sixty eight numbered pages its first edition. The third and subsequent editions run slightly shorter because a smaller font was used in the production of the stereotype plates from which they were printed. My point, though, is that Hawthorne long resisted the idea that what we was writing was not simply an unusually long tale, and exaggerated its brevity in

One thing the notebook entry makes clear, though, is that, at least some of the time, Hawthorne regards individual letters as visible under the terms of a way of seeing distinct from reading. To see "the words composed of the letters" is not necessarily to see the letters, nor is it to see the "figures of men." The composite view, in which we are aware of both the body and the word, is implicitly linked to that view in which the only thing we actually see is the letters. (Again, if the word is, say, "letter" we would see, perhaps "tte," which we recognize as a string of letters, but not as a word.) What strikes me as most useful in the notebook entry, though, is that it allows us to see more clearly Hawthorne's ambivalence about the status of letters, an ambivalence that persists even when, in *The Scarlet Letter*, these letters seem to take over. In *The Scarlet Letter's* fractured turns of certainty and uncertainty, turns we notice especially when it subjects its characters to physiognomic schemes of interpretation, we see a compulsive repetition of the conflicting wishes to see and not to see the letter which we encounter in the notebook. Like the weirdly self-corrosive trope of the "bearded physiognomies," the notebook entry simultaneously proposes and refuses to propose a situation in which people's bodies could be read in the same way we read words. That is, the notebook entry actually imagines some strange world in which people's bodies actually *can* be read like words, in which they actually *are* letters that have merely assumed the shape of human bodies, but it also protects these bodies from what Hawthorne finds distasteful in such legibility – its denial of privacy and secrecy, its refusal to limit those who,

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his mind to accommodate this resistance. Something about the idea itself – the conceit of the scarlet letter – arguably exerted a pull on his imagination which, in spite of effort, he was unable to resist. He could not stop writing about this idea, whereas every idea he had previously treated in his fiction seems to have obeyed his intention to write tales rather than novels. Indeed, Hawthorne's frequent protests that his long fictions were *not* novels, to the extent that it makes any sense at all, makes the most since in this context: that he was unwilling to graduate from the tale, and thus would cling to his apprenticeship.

like Chillingworth, seek without sympathy to read the secrets of a heart to speculation an conjecture. Thus we cannot see the words and the bodies at the same time. We either see only part of the image in the present, or we see the whole image through the diffusive fog of memory. We have to see the words, *then* the bodies, then *imagine* what it would be like to see them at the same time. It is while we perform this imaginative work that the individual letters come into view. While the adulterous body and the word *adultery* are synthesized by the mind into a thing that is both body and word, the eye seizes upon the letter A.

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When I suggest, as I am suggesting now, that this fantasy of "reading" the body in a literal alphabetic sense owes something to the logic of race, I do not mean to limit its meanings to racial ones, nor do I mean to suggest that, were the same words written at some time or place other than Massachusetts in 1850, the implication of the fantasy in ways of thinking about race would necessarily still obtain. I am not saying that any time anybody imagines the body as a letter racial meanings are activated. What such imagining activates is a certain physiognomic notion of the body – a way of thinking about the body that either hypothesizes or wishes that its visible materiality could be decoded according to reliable interpretive norms so as to impart knowledge that, while announced through the visible body, is not reducible to that visible body. The spectacle of embodiment would thus convey ideas about more than merely the body in the same way that written language can (and usually does) communicate ideas about more than merely written language.

I belabor the details here because, if my argument is right, the phrase "bearded physiognomies" works by appearing to be a harmonious and balanced conceptual pairing, and thus introducing surreptitiously into the novel a radically unstable dialectical opposition

from which the narrator can then mine the ambiguity upon which the novel's project depends. If this logic sounds familiar it's because, in the previous chapter, I argued that a similar semiotic bait and switch takes place on the title page. At first the images seem to make perfect sense – they seem, as Hawthorne said of the red ink on the title page, piquant and appropriate. Beards grow on faces, after all, and our faces reveal things (our mood, the focus of our attention) about us to others; furthermore, beards convey information about the people who wear them (such as biological sex and approximate age) to the people by whom they are seen. Similarly, the printing of the words *Scarlet Letter* in scarlet ink creates what seems at first to be a self-reinforcing sign – one within and through which two distinct representational modes (color and letter) are marshaled in order to represent the same referent – appearing, for that, only to underscore the clarity of one another's (reciprocal) meanings. But the two (*color* and *letter*, though my point here is that the same may be said of the pairing of *beard* and *physiognomy* as well) initiate a churning dialectic in which each is divested of unambiguous meaning. The more we look, the less we take for granted; the images signify, increasingly, as we ponder them, only an unrealized potential to signify. Like Reverend Hooper's black veil, the letters, and to an even greater extent the beards, announce only that something which *might* have been announced has *not* been. Like the mysterious wrapped gift I mentioned earlier, it tells you only that there's something you don't know.

The crucial points for my argument, though, are: first, that in *The Scarlet Letter*, no matter what specific information is being revealed or concealed, revelation and concealment are always taking place simultaneously in the iteration of knowledge; and, second, that for information in this novel to be activated as epistemologically valid "knowledge" in the first place, it must be able to be both revealed and concealed in *visual* terms. The novel constructs

a fictional social world (not to mention a real reader relation) in which the eyes are both the *only* and the *least credible* aperture through which the external world can be sensed. To *know*, we must first *see*, but to *see* is nearly always to know no more than the profound epistemological limitations against which we struggle.

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The interpretations I offered in the previous chapter had two parts. I began by focusing on the way a seemingly benign textual detail (the use of red ink for the printing of the book's title on its title page) enact in advance for the reader a kind of epistemological grammar which structures this reader's response to the more properly "literary" pages which follow. In the first half of the current chapter, chapter two, I have offered readings of some heftier sections of prose drawn from what we normally think of as the novel "itself," showing – I hope – how the signifying domains of color and character, fused together as abstract philosophical problems in the self-corroding image on the title page, unravel into separate strands of meaning at strategic points in the novel. I've just finished a lengthy discussion of another two-word phrase – not "Scarlet Letter" but "bearded physiognomies" – and I'll now move on to discuss the way in which the self-corroding logic of *that* phrase plays out in the larger space of some of the novel's sentences and paragraphs.

Many of the scholars who have discussed *The Scarlet Letter* in terms of its relations to race, racism, and slavery have either argued or assumed that Roger Chillingworth deserves special attention in such a discussion. Chillingworth's darkening aspect, remarked upon with Dickensian regularity whenever he makes an appearance, has been enough to link him both with the Black Man and, sometimes through and sometimes independently of the character so named, black manhood. In at least one article he is also argued to be a surrogate for the

legally a-paternal black male body, insofar as he is without any legal or biological ties to Pearl

(any which could be asserted meaningfully, that is) but upon his death bequeaths her his

estate.[67] The more "romantic" (in the vernacular sense) parts of this romance thus constitute

a partially disintegrated love triangle (one might almost imagine it shaped like the letter A

itself!) which, some have argued,[68] resembles nothing so much as the more salubrious slave

narratives, in which a licentious master and a female slave who bares his light-skinned child

render the female slave's "husband" (a title he, like Chillingworth, cannot legally assert) not

just cuckolded but reproductively irrelevant. Indeed, because the sexual exploitation of slave

women by white men meant that, legally, slavery could only work in the south as a condition

that passed from mother (rather than biological father) to child, black masculinity was

essentially excluded from an official role in reproduction even in cases where black men

actually did sire children.

Chillingworth's darkening is a singularly striking motif of the novel's

characterization, and – as is the case with the Black Man – it's hard to imagine that

Hawthorne's contemporaries understood the range of meanings it is so certainly meant to

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[67] Leland S. Person, "The Dark Labyrinth of the Mind." See especially 43. Person's essay as a whole is representative of the scholarly treatment of Chillingworth that I mention above.

[68] Again, I mean principally Leland Person, though Person attributes what strike me as his own original contributions in part to Yellin and Grossman. Person's argument in "Dark Labyrinth" is useful and provocative, and though it seems at times to over-reach in pointing out resemblances between plot elements of *The Scarlet Letter* and those typical of antebellum slave narratives, I find that Person's observations, even at their most speculative, to be fruitful, and, in scattering their light more broadly and less neatly, to illuminate the novel in ways safer criticism does not. Needless to say, I've found in some of the loopier suggestions license for my own intensely ruminative and speculative discussion of the novel's meanings. What I find inadequate in Person's reading of the novel is what I find inadequate in all the others I admire, like those of Yellin, Grossman, Bercovitch, and Crain: each of these readings presents a cogent argument that (respectively) slavery, or race, or the politics of ambiguity, or the visibility of the alphabet constitutes the central site of the novel's meaning, but none sees fit to connect race, slavery, ambiguity, and alphabetic visibility together into a single aesthetic program. The question isn't if these discourses participate in the book's design; the question is why they all participate in *the same* book's design, why it makes sense that they work together as part of a unified aesthetic project rather than separately as the dominant tropes of several separate such projects.

convey (corruption, a-morality, a claim to full humanity that, in any case, could hardly to be

taken for granted) without drawing on the vast racist symbology to which their status as

white Americans allowed them access. We are never told in absolutely concrete terms if

Chillingworth's is a literal darkening of the skin, as might be imagined to result from

exposure to the chemicals with which the leech works, or if it is a less-literally dark

joylessness, hostility, or sorrow one senses in or experiences near him. What's striking to me,

though, is the extent to which what the narrator calls the "darkening" of what is usually

called Chillingworth's "aspect" is implicated in the same cycle of tentative declaration and

qualified retraction we see in the description of the bearded physiognomies.

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I have so far treated Chillingworth primarily as the character who, with his first

appearance, ushers racial difference into the novel. We encounter him beside (and, strangely,

as a paradigmatic substitution for) a "red man." This gives Hawthorne a reason to introduce

him with the phrase "a white man," and I've discussed the weight of those three words for

the novel already. But the explicitly racial "a white man" is merely an overture for what

follows, an operatic and extended attempt to read Chillingworth's body for signs of who he

is. In this section I will discuss the three-paragraph characterization of which the three word

racial designation is just the beginning.

The sort of ambiguity that attends this tour-de-force introduction is extreme even by

Hawthornian standards, but it is also peculiar. It obeys a particular structure ordered less in

terms of *uncertainty* – which sometimes seems a synonym for "ambiguity" (though the latter's

etymological spirit is, like that of *ambidextrous* or *ambivalent*, more that of "both") – than in

terms of two incompatible certainties; it's not the ambiguity of gray but that of both black

and white at the same time. This does not appear to be among William Empson's seven canonical varieties of ambiguity,[69] though it is closest in spirit to Empson's sixth type: "what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations" (vi). Hawthorne's mode here is defined by the fact that the "contradictory or irrelevant" information conveyed to the reader prefers a particular flavor of content – content marked, often explicitly, by certainty, legibility, or obviousness, and by a guarantee of its own legibility which, in context, is nonsensical. This is not a middle state but rather a pair of quantum states: perfect, certain knowledge, and absolute ignorance. Hawthorne does little to court the grayness and mistiness of the descriptions with which, for example, Melville opens "Benito Cereno," in which darkness and light, whiteness and blackness are melded and confused. In *The Scarlet Letter's* first description of Chillingworth our capacity to know has no middle state; it is either *on* or *off.* The content of the novel becomes ambiguous not because Hawthorne introduces subtler gradations of half-knowing between these two states, but because the quantum leap[70] from one state to the other happens repeatedly and quickly. Hawthorne's ambiguity, which with its abrupt and potentially jarring shifts from knowing all to knowing nothing generates an aesthetic experience that seems to make room for various kinds of uncertainty – a subjective impression of suspicion tempered by doubt – but never actually deploys the rhetoric of such uncertainty.

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[69] *Seven Types of Ambiguity: A Study of Its Effects in English Verse* (see v-vi). The cited pages are those of Empson's descriptive table of contents, which, in the place of chapter titles, offers brief descriptions of each type of ambiguity to be considered (which Empson, with a true New Critic's flair for systemic rigor, has numbered ordinally and arranged from least to most complex) and some of the authors drawn upon for examples.

[70] In the relatively strict sense of a leap between two points in space which does not traverse the distance between them, as when an electron jumps from one atomic shelf to another in a given atom.

Chillingworth's introduction is jarring enough rhetorically to warrant examining in full. I quote here the whole of the three paragraphs. Of particular importance for illustrating the confluence of absolute knowledge and absolute ignorance I discuss above is the second sentence of the second of these paragraphs (because I will discuss this sentence at length in the coming pages, I have underlined it for ease of reference). In the third paragraph we encounter, for the first time, the motif of Chillingworth's "darkness."

From this intense consciousness of being the object of severe and universal observation, the wearer of the scarlet letter was at length relieved by discerning, on the outskirts of the crowd, a figure which irresistibly took possession of her thoughts. An Indian, in his native garb, was standing there; but the red men were not so infrequent visitors of the English settlements, that one of them would have attracted any notice from Hester Prynne, at such a time; much less would he have excluded all other objects and ideas from her mind. By the Indian's side, and evidently sustaining a companionship with him, stood a white man, clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume.

He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which, as yet, could hardly be termed aged. <u>There was a remarkable intelligence in his features, as of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens.</u> Although, by a seemingly careless arrangement of his heterogeneous garb, he had endeavoured to conceal or abate the peculiarity, it was sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne, that one of this man's shoulders rose higher than the other. Again, at the first instant of perceiving that thin visage, and the slight deformity of the figure, she pressed her infant to her bosom, with so convulsive a force that the poor babe uttered another cry of pain. But the mother did not seem to hear it.

At his arrival in the market-place, and some time before she saw him, the stranger had bent his eyes on Hester Prynne. It was carelessly, at first, like a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind. Very soon, however, his look became keen and penetrative. A writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them, and making one little pause, with all its wreathed intervolutions in open sight. His face darkened with some powerful emotion, which, nevertheless, he so instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will, that, save at a single moment, its expression might have passed for calmness. After a brief space, the convulsion grew almost

imperceptible, and finally subsided into the depths of his nature. When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and laid it on his lips.

These paragraphs introduce chapter three, which is usefully titled "The Recognition." As with the climactic chapter, "The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter," the precise referent of the chapter title is less than clear. In "The Revelation" Dimmesdale reveals his scarlet letter (so that the letter is the *object* of the titular revelation), but in doing so publically claims his paternity of Pearl, and thus reveals the long-hidden truth of *Hester's* scarlet letter (so that the letter is the *subject* of the revelation – the thing that, all along, had been doing the revealing). In "The Recognition," after but three paragraphs, we have already witnessed two recognitions: Hester's of Chillingworth and Chillingworth's of Hester. In each case, the singularity of a major chapter's titular referent is assured by the definite article, but "the recognition" in question may be Hester's or Chillingworth's, just as "the scarlet letter" which reveals or is revealed could be Hester's or Dimmesdale's. Again, Hester's story is encoded in the novel's details. It is Hester who begins her journey at the prison and ends it at the graveyard; it is Hester who is married first, under the law, to Chillingworth, and then, in the eyes of heaven, to Dimmesdale.

What should amaze about this long passage, particularly in its second and third paragraphs, is that it conveys almost nothing that we have been authorized by the narrator to regard as real information. Most of what is described, of course, seems plausible as actual narrative; the novel describes things that seem like they could be happening to these people one morning in Boston in 1640, and so we are tempted to regard what we are told as, within the fictional frame of the novel, real life. This temptation is frustrated by the passage's

dangerous attraction to simile, that rhetorical figure which most explicitly reminds us that what is being narrated is fundamentally distinct from what is literally being described. To say that I am "like a lion" is to say not just that I have some qualities for which a lion is an apt metaphor, but, in a way distinct from "metaphor" in its strictest sense, also to state explicitly that I am *not* a lion. No actual *Panthera leo* is "like" a lion. That's not a simile, it's a tautology.

Like the color and the letters on the title page, and like the beard and the physiognomy to which it's attached, the "remarkable intelligence" in Chillingworth's features, which we are told is "as [that] of a person who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens" presents an impossible oil-and-water confluence of absolute certainty with insoluble doubt. It is crucial, I think, that this is Chillingworth's first appearance in the novel, because, in presenting us with a character of whom we have no prior knowledge, the passage denies us access to a reading which would explain away the weird tension within the description as mere ironic understatement. Readers who have already read the novel know that Chillingworth does not merely resemble but in fact *is* such a person, because such readers already know how the story will end. And because we are such readers we're tempted to view the description along the lines of the sarcastic complement we might pay to a friend who is "acting almost like a real human being." The intelligibility of this irony rests entirely on my friend's and my mutual knowledge, before the utterance has been spoken, that the friend *is* a human being, while the irony's wit, to the extent that it has any, rests on the very fact that the *literal* meaning of my simile, like that of any simile, designates its vehicle as wholly distinct from its tenor. Simply because I have used a simile, I have pretended not to realize that my friend *is* a human being.

We have no prior relationship with or knowledge of Chillingworth which might ground so anti-literal a reading of his introduction. Reading *The Scarlet Letter* for the first time, we cannot know much more than the narrator tells us. What little we *can* know which might help us to make sense of this passage comes from one of two places. First, it might come from our knowledge of novelistic conventions; these conventions do, of course, include that of a narrator who ironically and disingenuously claims a lack of omniscience over his or her story,[71] but "The Custom-House" has explicitly told us to disregard this knowledge, since Hawthorne has asked us to regard this work as something other than a novel. Secondly, then, our knowledge might be not of literary conventions but of physiognomic assumptions. That is, we might regard Chillingworth as, in fact, precisely the man we have only been told he merely *resembles* not because we have read novels and so know that the narrator would not be describing a character in these terms if it were not important, but because we really believe ourselves to know just what an "intelligence" looks like. So one way this description of Chillingworth could make sense is as the deployment of a physiognomic way of knowing which the reader must provide – a kind of BYOB physiognomy in which, though his use of simile shows him to be reluctant (or at least to

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[71] Exemplary here, and a useful touchstone in my own reading experience, is the third-person (unnamed, and ostensibly omniscient) narrator's comical claim in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* that on one particular evening Parson Adams, who had been ill the night before, "was pleased… that he had not the least fever… [and] accordingly ate either a rabbit or a fowl, I never could with any tolerable certainty discover which" (102). *Joseph Andrews* is itself so rife with physiognomic modes of characterization – as are the engravings of Fielding's aesthetic fellow traveler, William Hogarth – that a fuller exploration of *The Scarlet Letter* than that which time permits me to present in this dissertation could usefully situate Hawthorne not just more fully in his mid-nineteenth-century context by means of his physiognomic preoccupations, but more fully in the tradition of the novel (and para-novelistic expressions of allophone, middle-class sensibility like Hogarth's) as well. My reason for bring up *Joseph Andrews* now, though, is that it is among those novels that helped establish the rhetorical norms of the English novel, and one with which both Hawthorne and his readers would have been familiar.

want to appear reluctant) to endorse it himself, Hawthorne nonetheless believes "the great gull" of his public believes strongly.

I've said that similes tell us two things: that the tenor resembles the vehicle and that the tenor is, at the literal level, distinct from the vehicle. Metaphor, for example, doesn't work this way, since on the page nothing about a metaphor lets us know that it is figurative. Out of context, "he was a lion" could be a metaphorical description of a person or a literal description of a lion, but "he was *like* a lion," though it may not describe a person, cannot describe a lion. But similes also tell us a third thing, and the third thing is about neither the tenor nor the vehicle; it's about us. If I say that "Menelaus fought as fiercely as a lion," I am, as my first order and most literal meaning, saying that Menelaus has exhibited certain qualities that lions also exhibit. One secondary meaning that my simile entails, though, is that Menelaus *is not* himself a lion. These two points I have already discussed as they pertain to the "remarkable intelligence" in Chillingworth's features, which is "as of a person who had…" etc. etc. But my simile also entails that I, as its author, believe, whether rightly or wrongly, that, though I am giving you information about Menelaus's manner of fighting which you do not yet possess, I *am not* giving you any new information about *lions*. I interpellate you as somebody who *already knows* the manner in which lions fight. To communicate successfully as a simile, a narrator must draw on knowledge he or she has about the way the world works, must assume that the reader also possesses this knowledge, and must be right enough in this assumption that the reader experiences the utterance not

just as conveying new information but as mapping a set of values and interpretive protocols which narrator and narratee share – a consensus.[72]

Similes thus draw upon a social consensus about the world – on a reserve of beliefs and experiences which is supposed (by the author, and if supposed correctly then also supposed thus by the reader) to be shared by all the people for whom a given text is legible. They reflect and invoke a paradigm in the specifically Kuhnian sense. Through them an author says, "if you can understand this, you are one of us." I have just done precisely this; in failing to gloss my reference two sentences ago to the work of Thomas Kuhn, or to footnote his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, I have made a rhetorical choice which defines the boundaries of my dissertation's readership by excluding those unfamiliar with the gist of Kuhn's argument about the nature of paradigms.[73] The fact that I (pretended that I) don't regard Kuhn's name as in need of further explanation reflects my assumption, correct or incorrect, that the professional community within which my dissertation constitutes a speech

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[72] Simile is thus a particular form of citational performance, a concept I borrow from Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* and which, though I discuss it briefly below, originally enjoyed a much larger place in this project.

[73] Though in this case, I hope it's obvious, I have used Kuhn's name gratuitously and with hidden motives. That is, I'm not actually using *paradigm* in a more specialized sense than scholars normally do, and have invoked Kuhn's name not because my reader is supposed to know who he is but to illustrate how Kun says paradigms work. That is, they are not just clusters of shared assumptions generally, but rather they are clusters of shared assumptions which pertain specifically to the range of things that *do not need to be explained out loud*, the range of things that it is safe to assume any reader of a given document will already know and believe. So the crucial points are two: 1) that paradigms concern not what is said but what isn't said – what doesn't need to be said – what a given community regards as already established by its initiates, and 2) that, at the level of rhetoric, similes work the same way paradigms do, since when they say "X was like a Y" I have reminded you that, if I am talking to you rather than to a group of experts you have not yet joined, you and I share the relevant knowledge and assumptions regarding the nature of Y, and I am always telling you something about what X is positively, telling you that X is not a Y negatively, and telling you that, though I know about X and you don't, you and I belong to a community of people who already know about Y. If you don't know about Y, the simile is opaque to you, and I have told you instead that you are eavesdropping on an utterance meant for a community of readers to which you do not belong.

act is one that demands its members know Kuhn's name and remember his relationship to the history of the word *paradigm*.

Following the general thread of Foucauldian thinking enabled by figures like Kuhn, though, we can see how each citation of a social consensus also reinscribes, regulates, and nourishes that consensus. In other words, and returning to Menelaus and the lion, by assuming that you know something about the manner in which lions fight, and by drawing upon this knowledge for my simile, I do not simply draw upon a passive store of unchanging beliefs. By piloting this consensus out of the garage of *langue* and onto the crowded public highways of *parole*, I subject it to changes and deformations, wear and tear and even possible catastrophe, through my use or misuse. I also reauthorize the consensus, providing fresh evidence that, in at least one writer's opinion, it reflects the current state of knowledge about lions. Should future historians wish to reconstruct when knowledge about lions began to disappear, they might remark, "as late as 2013, Turner assumes his reader is familiar enough with lions so as to understand them as usefully illustrating qualities of Menelaus."

So in the paragraphs of Chillingworth's introduction we are told that Chillingworth's body and face look like those of a man who has devoted himself to study, though – in light of my understanding of the simile's performative force – we are also told that Chillingworth actually *isn't* such a man, and we are also told that the narrator regards us as people who possess a clear idea of exactly how such a man *would* look. We are assured that there is an "intelligence" in his features, a word that can refer (as it does here) to elevated intellectual capacities but also – I think tellingly – to information that is hidden or secreted. *Intelligence* has no clear visual meaning of the kind possessed by words like *scowl* or *squint*. For Chillingworth's intelligence to be real for us we must allow recognize ourselves as the

narrator has recognized us; we must identify as readers not just of books but of bodies, and as interpreters who assume that the invisible "mental part" of the self can, at least under some circumstances, "become manifest by unmistakable tokens." If we know what this intelligence looks like, we have already offered our assent to the novel's physiognomic program. Because simile works the ways it does, though, either Chillingworth has *not* actually cultivated his mental part in this extreme manner or, despite the fact that he has done so, the narrator hesitates to commit to his own description.

What's so remarkable about this sentence (again, the second of the passage's second paragraph) is that, though everything after "as of a person" appears under the rhetorical sponsorship of simile (suggesting that Hawthorne himself doesn't quite believe it), the description of the simile's vehicle insists multiple times that physiognomy is not only plausible but inevitable and infallible. Even though we're told that Chillingworth's "intelligence" is *not* actually the externalization of some inner morbidity of intellectual monomania, we are twice told that such an externalization would be characterized above all by its own legibility – that what he resembles is not just a smart man but a man who absolutely could not fail to be recognized as smart. The "intelligence" in Chillingworth's face resembles (but is not) that "of a person who had[74] so cultivated his mental part that it *could*

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[74] I have laid great emphasis on the word "as" in this simile, since, as I have argued, that word encodes the description which follows it as of a state of affairs contrary to fact. More tentatively, I think a case could be made for the entire verb tense and mood of the sentence. Though without any explicitly conditional markers (such as *if* or *would*), the sentence makes the most sense to me read not as a direct statement in the past perfect tense but as a statement in what grammarians call the *third conditional* ("if you had eaten you would be full"). If the narrator believes such people really obey such physiognomic rules, then he has no reason not to use the present tense, and since the "person" about whom he is speaking is a generic fiction rather than a particular individual, he has no obligation to use the past tense. And if no counterfactual spin is attached to this description, wouldn't "had not failed" make more sense than "could not fail?" Wikipedia's indecisive definition of the third conditional is usefully indicative of the mode's lack of specificity, and strikes me as particularly apropos of its function in the Hawthornian sentence presently under consideration: "'Third conditional' or 'conditional iii' is a pattern used to refer to hypothetical situations in a past time frame, generally counterfactual

not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by *unmistakable* tokens." Unless

the moulding has failed, or the tokens have proven less unmistakable than advertised, there

can be little room for doubt. If Chillingworth looks *like* such a person, and such a person's

appearance is defined by the ease with which it can be read, how can Chillingworth not *be*

such a person? We are told almost nothing about his actual appearance, nothing about hair

or eyes or apparent age. (This last quality is addressed, but in the form of a double negation:

"hardly-yet-aged.") He is "a white man." The rest of what we're told about him is only with

difficulty interpreted pictorially. We are told that his outward appearance is dominated by

features which we will best understand as the outward manifestation of inner qualities, as if

these outward manifestations were ontologically no more than infallible indices to the inner

qualities to which they're tied. And yet Chillingworth himself may or may not possess such

qualities; the narrator – preposterously – seems to hesitate for lack of evidence. He actually

tells us nothing about what those features look like. It is hinted to us that we don't *need* to

know what Chillingworth actually looks like (besides, again, that he is white, which in

retrospect comes to seem singularly important) because, the text assures us, we are people

who would have no trouble recognizing the physiognomic features that reflect intelligence

and scholarly pursuits. How could we not? These facial features are those whose legibility is

virtually their only quality! What do the tokens look like? They look unmistakable! How can

we be sure they express intelligence? Because they look like the expression of an intelligence

that could not fail to be expressed! As readers, we are drawn into a physiognomic grammar

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(or at least presented as counterfactual, or likely to be counterfactual)"
(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_conditional_sentences).

that, when we find it, is already in our own hands – a consensus about what and how the body means, even as Hawthorne's narrator keeps himself beyond that consensus's reach.

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There is an interpretively ham-fisted reading available here – one that I think the text fully supports but which still strikes me as a little cheap – which uses as its evidence the fact that we are told in the second paragraph that Chillingworth resembles a person whose identity is reducible to the visibility and materiality of his body just after, in the first paragraph, we are told that he resembles an Indian. The algebraic sleight of hand by which Chillingworth's similarity to both X and Y implicitly suggests X's and Y's equivalence to one another should explain itself. Just as we saw in the description of the Election Day Indians, Native Americans show up at just the right time in order to relieve whites of the materialist racial determinism they can dish out but don't want to take. This substitutive logic has among its virtues that of offering an additional rationale for the weird insistence in the passage that Chillingworth only *resembles* this most physiognomically legible of scholarly types. The simile keeps alive our sense that Chillingworth is being examined *next to* somebody else and that this somebody else can be safely reduced to outward bodily signs. The hypothetical "person" Chillingworth looks very much like has merely taken the place of the Indian he is dressed very much like.

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We are asked to ignore the "red man" next to Chillingworth because he is not, after all, the man who "irresistibly [takes] possession of [Hester's] thoughts." Indeed, Hester's fugitive mind has actually only been *re*-possessed. However much the language of ownership suggests an unethical and invasive domination of this unhappy young woman by this

unappealing stranger, when Chillingworth arrives in Boston and takes possession of Hester's thoughts he is metaphorically invoking rights that, though neither the reader nor the marketplace crowd realize it at the time, are legally valid because he is actually Hester's husband. Chillingworth's "possession" – which carries in this context suggestions both of sexual and commercial subordination – represents a form of patriarchal entitlement, but one with which – taken literally – few of even the most virulent advocates of patriarchal power would feel comfortable. The most reactionary misogynists in history have asserted that a wife is the property of her husband, and perhaps that wives – or women more generally – were capable of having no thoughts of great importance, but surely few since before the Renaissance would actually suggest that a husband's rights of ownership extend even so far as those very thoughts!

If in certain ways this first of the novel's three scaffold scenes resembles, as some have argued, literary representations of slave auctions,[75] it draws much of its power as well from the fugitive slave legislation which, in 1849 and 1850, posed perhaps the most sectionally divisive of legal questions. Such must have been, at least for northern readers, the specter of a semi-savage white man, a stranger, appearing suddenly on the streets of Boston in order to take "possession" of a human being, and to do so by rights afforded him at some other time, and in some other place, but which are for that exercised no less "irresistibly." If Chillingworth is not something of a slave-catcher here, he nonetheless anticipates certain features of the dirty, bestial slave-traders Harriet Beecher Stowe would later use with such

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[75] Leland Pearson (36-37) offers a usefully concise overview of such scholarship. His survey includes works which I have already discussed by Arac, Bercovitch, Yellin, Madsen, and Grossman, and also positions his argument in relation to work but Toni Morrison and Hazel Carby which I have consulted by have not directly engaged in my argument.

abandon in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. True, the slave-traders we encounter in abolitionist fiction are, in direct contrast to Chillingworth, defined partly by their utter *lack* of intellectual capacity or curiosity, but they are repulsive to Stowe reasons not entirely unlike those for which Chillingworth is repulsive to Hawthorne. Though white, they exist outside Christianity, and outside middle-class morality which troubles Stowe. Hawthorne is troubled by Chillingworth's inability to sympathize with the suffering of others, which is not an entirely different thing from a secularized version of Stowe's evangelical zeal. The slave traders (like Chillingworth, but possibly unlike Roger Prynne, about whom we know little but what Hester remembers) invariably have no families, and neither offer nor desire affection.

Chillingworth has arrived in Boston, a stranger. Besides the physiognomic non-information which the narrator provides, he has only these credentials: he is white, he is a man, he is physically repulsive, and – judging by the company he keeps and the manner of his dress – he exists beyond the "civilizing" influences of family, home, church, and community. He is like a Kurtz whom we cannot even suspect of sexual debauchery since, broken in body, he is even more perversely blissful in his impotence than was Kurtz in his orgiastic rites – Shakespeare's Richard III combined with Peter Abelard.

The appearance of this stranger on the streets of Boston – a man who is privileged enough to be a scholar but who unaccountably dresses in rags; who has with a perversity greater, perhaps, than any hedonism, shown no eagerness at all since arriving in the New World to reunite with a bride who we know is beautiful and who is apparently much younger than he; who represents, in his mania to see into the soul, both the amoral secularism of the coming (in 1640) scientific era and the atavistic persistence of savagery and despotic cruelty that, it is feared, exists just behind the civilized veneer of middle-class republicanism – is an

appearance which, a moment ago, I connected with the Fugitive Slave Act. This Act was the most incendiary (to many northerners, including Hawthorne) of the bills that comprised the Compromise of 1850. Recall Hawthorne's exasperated tone on 8 May 1851 writing to Longfellow (of whose polemical antislavery writing Hawthorne disapproved):

> This Fugitive Law is the only thing that could have blown me into any respectable degree of warmth on this great subject of the day – if it really be the great subject – a point which another age can determine better than ours. (*Letters* 431)

Though passed in October when Hawthorne was already working on *The House of the Seven Gables* and conversing with Melville in the peace and quiet of extreme western Massachusetts, the main features of the Compromise of 1850, including the Fugitive Slave Act itself, had been proposed with much fanfare by Henry Clay on the floor of the Senate in January, while Hawthorne was busy writing "The Custom-House," agonizing over what to title his book, and promising himself and his publisher that the three final chapters of the novel would be finished in a matter of days.[76]

That the Fugitive Slave Act was first publically proposed during one of the five months when Hawthorne was actually writing *The Scarlet Letter* is remarkable enough. Even if it had not been, though, the presence of fugitive slaves in the North, and the politics of their recapture, had already in 1850 been much discussed in the Boston area, and had had a turbulent history throughout eastern Massachusetts. The moment probably of greatest

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[76] To review the chronology: composition on *SL* begins about 15 September 1849, Fields reads a short manuscript and urges Hawthorne to expand the piece (offering to publish) around Thanksgiving, before the new year the first twenty-one chapters are written but at this point Hawthorne becomes blocked. He writes "The Custom-House" over the first week of 1850, sends the manuscript for it and for *SL's* first twenty-one chapters to Fields, promising to have the last three chapters finished in a matter of days. He writes weekly making the same promise for the rest of the month, while agonizing over the question of the title. He finally writes to Horatio Bridge on 4 February saying that the manuscript (most scholars seem to assume the entire manuscript, but Hawthorne must actually have meant only the last three chapters) had been read aloud to Sophia, giving her a migraine, the previous evening.

consequence in that history, not counting the Compromise of 1850 itself (which as I've already said entered debate while Hawthorne was still working on the novel) occurred nearly a decade earlier, between October, 1842, and February, 1843.

George Latimer and his wife escaped the Virginia plantation on which they were enslaved on 4 October 1842 and arrived in Boston about a week later.[77] Hawthorne was, obviously, not working on *The Scarlet Letter* at this time (though he had already recorded the germ for Hester's story in his notebook) nor was he even living in Salem. He was at the end of his year-long tenure at Brook Farm, about seven miles southwest of the Old Corner Bookstore. Brook Farm was distant from urbanized Boston in 1842, but since, unlike Salem or Cambridge, it was not a city, it likely got much of its news from the Boston papers, having few local events of its own of which to speak.[78]

Hawthorne's time at Brook Farm is famously connected to his caustic mistrust of utopianism and social movements because of *The Blithdale Romance*, in which a fictionalized Brook Farm itself offers Hawthorne an opportunity to dwell more persistently upon this mistrust, and to do so at greater length, than in any other document in his oeuvre. We should recall, though, that his rejection of utopianism and his melancholy resignation to humanity's irredeemable imperfections are where *The Scarlet Letter* too begins: the prison and the burial ground. Always a skeptic, Hawthorne in 1841 was nonetheless utopian enough to sign on as an investor and founder of Brook Farm, hoping thereby to live cheaply and to

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[77] I'm drawing here on a recent episode of the PBS series *American Experience*, the second hour of their three-hour "The Abolitionists" (2012). Where possible, dates have been confirmed with sources in my bibliography.

[78] An 1832 map of Roxbury shows about thirty-five buildings near what would become Brook Farm. Of these one is a church and another is labeled as a school. There is also a "burial ground" (if there is a prison as well it is unlabeled). There is no indication of a newspaper or even a town hall, and the map offers distances in miles to the Boston State House as if it were the closest major public building in the area.

earn and save enough money to marry Sophia Peabody, to whom he was by now engaged. He didn't. He would marry Sophia anyway in June of 1842, but would not officially resign Brook Farm until 17 October. Three days later, George Latimer was arrested in Boston.

Before the construction of the Back Bay landfill (in the 1860s) Boston was connected to the mainland by a thin neck along which Washington Street, then as now, was the main thoroughfare. In 1640 to enter Boston by land, and from the wilderness as Chillingworth seems to have done would necessarily be to enter it from the southwest. Early maps show what is now Washington Street as essentially the only public way running continuously from the mainland all the way to the center of the city, and so Chillingworth would simply walk along what would in 1640 have been the only road to Boston and continue straight on until he reached the marketplace, where the sight of Hester stops him in his tracks. This is the same path Hawthorne would have been traveling leaving Brook Farm. When he left he had – if we can take *The Blithedale Romance* as our guide – developed that antipathy towards utopian schemes which would, in one way or another, mark all four of his romances. He had, like Chillingworth (though in his case, miserably) been living a Spartan life outside the city, separated from a young bride with whom he had never yet properly made a home. Newly frustrated with utopian designs of even what had seemed at first to be the most practical stamp, he left Brook Farm three days before a major event in Boston's history of antislavery agitation – by some accounts[79] *the* event which solidified the city's status as the center of national abolitionism.

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[79] Again, PBS's *The Abolitionists.*

Perhaps Hawthorne was not in Boston on October 20. Even traveling by horse he would have had ample time to get back to Salem in a single day, a journey of some twenty-five miles. Eager to be with Sophia, he would have had every reason to hurry; this is one reason that Chillingworth's utter lack of haste in reuniting with Hester – his decision to spend months (or perhaps as long as two years) in the woods before venturing into Boston – would strike Hawthorne as particularly inhuman. But he would not have to have been in Boston itself to have heard something about George Latimer's capture, incarceration, and impending extradition to Virginia. Latimer wasn't just *discussed* in the Boston papers, he was the *titular subject* of one of them: the *Latimer Journal and North Star*, the first number of which was issued November 11, 1842.[80] For a time, antislavery meetings across Massachusetts were referred to as "Latimer Meetings," and a state law forbidding cooperation with slave catchers passed the following year called "Latimer's Law." The week Hawthorne seems to have most officially and most bitterly parted ways with the causes of social reform, the social issue most on people's lips was not just reform, or even just slavery, but specifically the need to prevent southerners from asserting barbaric rights of "possession" over escaped slaves on the streets of Boston. The week Hawthorne finished *The Scarlet Letter*, they were undoubtedly talking about this same issue again because of Henry Clay's failed initial attempt to pass what would become the Compromise of 1850. One reason the Fugitive Slave law struck New Englanders as so much *more* patently outrageous than the rest of the slaveholding South's political demands (all of which, to a modern ear, sound more or less *equally* outrageous) is that George Latimer's recapture in 1843 had helped to solidify opposition to slavery in the

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[80] See: edison.rutgers.edu/latimer/ljns.htm.

region. The Fugitive Slave act didn't just threaten violation, but threatened a kind of violation that would also, since it had already actually happened, reactivate a painful memory.

Though, by 1850, both Latimer and Brook Farm were old news, and were distant memories for some, Hawthorne makes Brook Farm central to *The Scarlet Letter* when he makes it the unavowed subject of the novel's second sentence – a rejection of utopian scheming which, unlike *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Scarlet Letter* doesn't actually need to include in order to make sense. And since the *avowed* subject of the novel's *third* sentence spans the prison (where Hester's journey will start) and the burial ground (where it will end), Hawthorne's bitter chuckle at Brook-Farm-style naiveté in a sense not just at the novel's threshold, but a filament running its entire length. Indeed, if Hawthorne *was* in Boston on 20 October 1842, it was probably the only time he actually had seen a crowd of Bostonians huddled at a prison door.

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So Chillingworth's whiteness is registered in part by his "possession" of Hester at this moment – especially because the kind of possession he takes of her resembles the kind slave hunters would take of fugitive slaves in Massachusetts should a fugitive slave law be passed.[81] His whiteness is also registered by the presence of his Native American companion, who occasions his introduction as "a white man" rather than just "a man."

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[81] This resemblance might be slight, especially since, as I've noted already, the Fugitive Slave Act was only proposed in January, when Hawthorne had already written the novel's first twenty-one chapters. But in 1849 the possibility of such legislation coming into effect was already much talked about in eastern Massachusetts, perhaps because the George Latimer affair was, in the abolitionist community, still a recent event. William Wells Brown fled Boston for England in mid-1849, just weeks *before* Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter*, because it was widely assumed that fugitive slave legislation was on its way to becoming a reality, and he would

Furthermore, just like the Election Day "English," whose whiteness is certified when it rises above the mere materiality of the very *un*-white grey, brown, and black they wear (the "Indians," remember, are imagined into Indian-ness by those qualities they *share* with their "finery"), Chillingworth's whiteness is performed only the more convincingly when it's performed as a superficial, nominal, or sartorial crossing of racial boundaries. The strange hybridity of his "costume" does not destabilize his whiteness (though it probably *does* mark him as a perversely careless steward of the status to which that whiteness grants him access), and in failing to compromise Chillingworth's racial identity it helps to demonstrate the ideological resilience of that identity. By cladding himself in his "strange disarray of civilized and savage costume," Chillingworth shows us that his unambiguous status as "a white man" – a status that offers the narrator his one and only certainty about the character – is rooted somewhere both more transcendent and more real than the vicissitudes of mere disguise. Indeed, that Chillingworth's garments *are* a disguise, a "costume," is part of the point. He is using the clothing to hide his disfigurement, as a means of "endeavor[ing] to conceal or abate the peculiarity" of the merely material defect which, though it compromises his body, cannot compromise that whiteness which, again, is as far as the narrator is concerned the only one among Chillingworth's identifiers on which it is possible to lay a firm hand. Like the Election Day "English emigrants," Chillingworth's clothing countermands his obviously racially white body, and thus serves as a material emblem precisely of whiteness's unwillingness to be reduced to mere materiality.

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be in danger of recapture. It's reasonable to assume that, thick as the air was with abolitionist rhetoric, the idea of fugitive slaves being recaptured and returned south was at the front of people's minds anyway.

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I have confined my remarks on the nature of racial identity in general mostly to the margins of this chapter, but at this point I will attempt to clarify some of my assumptions about what race actually is and where it comes from.

The discourse of race took shape during the Enlightenment, which, as an "age of reason" for Europe tended toward scientific and materialist rationality and (or perhaps *as*) the brutal subjugation of the non-European world.[82] Most of what would become race in the modern sense predates the Enlightenment, of course: the aesthetic privileging of light over dark, the regarding with fear and hostility of those who look or live differently from you, and the conviction that anyone who has something you want doesn't deserve to keep it. Even the strange ideological clustering of coloration, embodiment, and temperament has an eerily predictive precedent in humoralism – a (if not always the) dominant model of both physiology and psychology in Europe from the death of Hippocrates through the middle of the seventeenth century.[83]

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[82] Dyer reminds us that the troping of the "age of reason" as the "Enlightenment" is itself too consistent with the guiding assumptions of European racism (light=reason=good, darkness=irrationality=bad) to be fully without its own racially descriptive power (*White* 109). Throughout this section I'll be drawing liberally on a few key secondary texts – themselves grounded in original research and primary materials – in order to present a tentative-but-functional theory of race which can in turn provide context for the analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* I've been presenting in this chapter. This theory of race I will also draw upon in my discussion of William Wells Brown, in the coming chapters While I'll cite trhe secondary texts as appropriate, I want to emphasize from the beginning my more general debt to such scholars as their works have not only provided me with answers to my questions but, in more subtle ways, have framed my thinking so as to structure even those lines of inquiry which I experience as original thoughts. I'm thinking specifically about Dyer's book, but also, Haller's *Outcasts from Evolution*, Stokes's *The Color of Sex*, Somerville's *Queering the Color Line*, and somewhat less directly Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* and Smith's *American Archives.*
Relevent works specifically about African American identity, aesthetics, and politics I will cite in the chapters that follow.
[83] Though not explicitly concerned with race, much of what I say here about humoralism, and my general ambition of tracing the demise of humoral physiology so as to show how it lingers in more recent models of selfhood has been inspired by Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex.*

The four humors in humoral theory were understood to be bodily fluids which, in their relative proportions, regulated physical health and determined what people would now call personality. To blood, phlegm, bile, and melancholy (or black bile) attached, respectively, the colors red, white, yellow, and black, the temperaments sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic, and various textures, temperatures, flavors, and degrees of humidity. It was supposed that an excess of one humor – say, melancholy – in the body would produce not just a tendency in the mind toward its corresponding disposition but would lend its hue (it's not usually clear whether literally or metaphorically) to the complexion. For reasons not difficult to discern, the humoral model was among the first casualties of the scientific method.[84] Its rhetorical power, though, outlived its scientific credibility by a significant margin, and it's one of the many superannuated representational schemes to which *The Scarlet Letter's* narrator appeals.[85]

The point here is not that the particular associations of specific humors with their respectively specific temperaments tells us very much about *The Scarlet Letter*, but nor is the point *only* that the positioning of color in humoralism as the semiotic copula linking the visible body to the invisible mind helps to explain how, when race began to take over the cultural work of linking body and mind, color assumed a key place in the description of it (race) as well. I will argue in this section, speculatively but I hope still usefully, that the fact

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[84] That is to say, according to a canonical progressivist narrative of history, humoralism's use as an explanatory model for human temperament came to be regarded by some in the Enlightenment as inadequate, if not inaccurate. Some form of humoralism, though, remained scientifically defensible well into the nineteenth century (when it was finally disconfirmed by cellular theory) and the rhetoric of the humors remains, one might argue, into the twenty-first.

[85] Often with, as is typical both of humoralism and The Scarlet Letter, a marked obfuscation of the boundary between temperament and appearance, as: "the squirrel is such a choleric and humorous little personage, that it is hard to distinguish between his moods."

that race has something to do with color – a fact which centuries of racial hegemony have rendered natural and transparent, as if race could not be theorized *without* color – has less to do with the needs of race than with the needs of humoralism. That is, race is not a matter of color because it just *is*, race is a matter of color because *humoralism* is a matter of color, and race turns out to have a more complicated relationship to humoralism than scholars have usually noticed.

The four *particular* colors humoralism deploys are precisely the same ones that have attached themselves to racial populations – with, it seems to me anyway, an even greater suspension of disbelief demanded in the latter case than in the former. Blood is much closer to the color red in its naked state, after all, than the skin of any so called "red man." Though people's pigmentations can be very different from one another, nobody's is *literally* white, or red, or black, or yellow in the way these colors appear in nature. No people are the color of snow, or of the night sky, or of the red and yellow that appear in a rainbow.

So in many respects race merely draws on humoralism, and in particular the conventional representations of various continental populations as red, yellow, white, and black owes more to the enduring influence of humoralism over Enlightenment scientists than to any phenomenological reality of the body those scientists could observe. In early formulations of race these links are even more obvious. Historian John S. Haller observes that:

> While [anthropologist Carl von] Linnaeus [in the first edition of his *Systema Naturae* (1735)] advanced classification with his use of a color criterion, he also fixed on his four families of man certain moral and intellectual peculiarities that continued into the nineteenth-century anthropological vocabulary. He described *Homo americanus* as reddish, choleric, obstinate, contented, and regulated by customs; *Homo europaeus* as white, fickle, sanguine, blue-eyed, gentle, and governed by laws; *Homo asiaticus* as sallow, grave, dignified, avaricious, and ruled by

opinions; and *Homo afer* as black, phlegmatic, cunning, lazy, lustful, careless, and governed by caprice. (Paraphrase of Linnaeus by Haller 4)[86]

Several things should be clear here, among them the fact that in 1735 you could say "homo" as many times as you wanted without, apparently, the least risk of making anyone giggle. The serious and startling point, though, is that when we describe people as *red*, *black*, *yellow*, or *white*, we are not only participating in a history of racial naming, we are participating in the history of humoral science, and this latter history apparently persists in our collective memory in the same way that pagan celebrations of the solstice and equinox persist in the nominally Christian observance of Christmas and Easter. If race, in a sense, replaced humoralism by consuming and digesting it the same way Christian holy days replaced pagan feasts, there is a suggestion not just that race is itself a kind of humoral metaphor, but that (extrapolated to the furthest point imaginable) ideology itself might best be understood in these Hegelian terms. Like a dialectical praying mantis, *new* ideology ensures its survival by simultaneously joining with and devouring its mate and rival; that mate and rival is whichever *old* ideology or ideologies it most closely resembles.

I call attention to this weird resemblance between racism and humoralism partly because, given how much explanatory power it seems to have, it's not much talked about. If

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[86] Haller introduces the quotation above with this: "Carl von Linnaeus (1707-1788), who developed a taxonomic system based on a criterion of skin color, laid the basis for nineteenth-century racial classification. Linnaeus properly began the science of anthropology. Although color classification of races dated back to the ancient Egyptians, anthropologists referred to Linnaeus's taxonomy in his *Systema Nature* (1735) as the first modern study of man" (4). However reductive it might be to assume that Linnaeus's work represents the absolute beginning of race as a modern discourse, Haller's argument suggests that we would be justified in believing that his work *was regarded as such* by most of the nineteenth-century scientists working to naturalize white privilege. The quotation from Haller to which this note is appended is Haller's paraphrase of material from a seven-volume English translation of Linnaeus, *A General System of Nature*, published in London in 1806, an edition I was unable to examine for this project. It is presumed to be (or be much like) the edition to which Hawthorne's contemporaries would have had access. See: Haller 4 n2.

race grew out of humoralism then its dependence on color, and its dependence on these four *particular* colors, no longer needs to be regarded as either a) a mystery or b) a nomenclature of "natural" of "real" bodily differences. No clever critic needs to convince us that white people are not literally white (the way that, say, many had to spend generations convincing the world that one is not born a woman); white people simply aren't white, nor are black people black. And yet the "whiteness" of white people has, in any society where there is racism, the rhetorical force of "real" whiteness.

The discourse of race invented during the Enlightenment (which the nineteenth-century would build upon, but would not challenge as a foundation) was in some ways a consequence of imperialism. The dwindling power of feudalism vis-à-vis capitalist markets created technology that allowed for broader exploration of the globe, but it also created an economy that could only sustain itself by continually expanding the markets in which it traded, and once this expansion had saturated all the nations voluntarily engaged in international commerce it would need to transform into something other than capitalism or begin using force to create new trading partners. Europeans' increased contact with the populations of other continents helped to create a desire and a perceived need for a new way of articulating, disseminating, and policing differences among continental populations. But even as transoceanic empire was made possible by technology and necessary by an economy newly centered on international commerce rather than landholding, the same increasing knowledge of physiology undermined scientific faith in the humors.[87]

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[87] I realize I'm being extremely reductive here, but I offer this narrative as a simple one produced on the fly. My contention is not that more nuanced version of this story don't exist but rather that, in the main, even the more nuanced ones reflect (or at least do nothing to contradict) the links I am trying to establish between humoralism and race, and the secondary links between this humoralism-race dyad and the

So race, as it was invented over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, functioned pretty much in the way that, ever since the poststructuralist turn of the 1970s and 1980s, it has *seemed* to function. That is, it has served as a discourse through which the materiality of bodily differences, which racial taxonomies claim merely to describe, could in fact be produced. This model supplants the earlier, humanist one, in which racial difference is a fact of nature that, whether or not it is seen as corresponding to some hierarchy of human potential or value, is regarded as really existing. What I am suggesting is that, though the generic poststructuralist account of the origins of race has value in showing us that race was invented rather than discovered by the Enlightenment, the idea that its invention was motivated by the needs of intercontinental exploitation is only half right. Some other way of thinking about different populations could have served imperialism's needs. The reason what was invented was this specific thing we call *race* rather than some other discourse or institution has not to do with the waxing power of imperialism but with the waning authority of humoralism. When race was invented it served *two* needs: the need to explain the power relations of a new global economy, and the need to replace humoralism with some more creditable discourse of the visible body's relationship to the invisible inner self. Race is just humoralism globalized.

One problem with this analysis, though, is that humoralism did not serve primarily as a taxonomy of embodied "types," which is what we usually think of race as doing, and what

Enlightenment/imperialist context in which it was formed, and of which it bears the imprint. Still, this is the kind of paragraph one cringes to write, hearing with every word a whole chorus of possible objections. One of the best is Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, which – spanning as it does the classical origins of humoralism and the nineteenth-century cellular theory that finally buried it – presents a compelling and complete vision of humoral theory's history in spite of the fact that Laquer's nominal subject is not bodily fluids in particular but biological sex.

early theorists of race spill the most ink trying to accomplish. Humoral physiology was,

before racial science, sometimes called upon to assign individual people color-coded

identities that, to a greater or lesser extent, were regarded as immutable features of a self-

identical subject, but humoralism's primary practical application was the diagnosis of illness,

in which race has historically not had a major role. Racists sometimes suggest that certain

racial groups are congenitally infirm, and have used the metaphor of illness to talk about the

people they despise, but nobody – as far as I know – has ever actually suggested that

blackness or Asian-ness should literally be regarded as a disease.

In other words *race*, conceived of strictly as an attempt to account for and naturalize

bodily differences between Europeans and non-Europeans, would have no real need to

compete with humoralism. The two discourses share superficial similarities, but there's no

reason they couldn't both exist simultaneously, since they serve different explanatory

purposes and perform separate cultural work. Astrology remains a feature of everyday life

because, even after whatever scientific credibility it once possessed was assumed by

astronomy, the needs it meets are fundamentally different from the needs met by modern

science. Astronomy and astrology offer different kinds of knowledge, and those who read

horoscopes are no more bothered by astrology's lack of scientific credibility than

astronomers are bothered by their own inability to predict the future.[88] Humoralism and race

are not so alike that they could not have complemented one another the way astrology as a

mysticism compliments astronomy as an academic field. The fact that the two did not

compliment one another, unless that fact is proof of the inexorable triumph of progress

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[88] Obviously I mean *the future* as it pertains to individuals' fortunes. When it comes to planetary and galactic motion astronomers predict the future with great accuracy.

toward absolute truth,[89] suggests that they must have been competing with one another for the exclusive right to perform some other cultural work which, secondary in both discourses, was nonetheless a defining element of each. That fact suggests, in other words, that race may have served *from its beginning* not just as a way of producing inter-continental bodily difference as a legitimate site of knowledge but of producing, as humoralism often had, the visible body as both a symptom and a signifier of that part of the self which others cannot see. I mean by this that race not only took on physiognomic work that humoralism had been performing, but that race *was invented as* a way to perform that work – that the cultural and economic changes that created the need for a way to describe different continental populations might also have created demands for quantities and qualities of physiognomic knowledge in excess of the modest amounts which the vague guesswork of humoral psychology could produce.

The Linnaeus summary I quote a few pages back[90] seems at first to complicate this by trafficking in an amalgam of humoralist and racialist language (mixed with hints of a few other ideological flavors: aesthetics, imperialism, capitalism, etc.). In straddling the line between humoralism and racism, Linnaeus seems at first to lend credibility to both. When I initially discussed that passage, I noted that the four colors invoked as racially descriptive were the same four colors associated with the four humors: red, yellow, white, and black. This, combined with the smattering of other terms borrowed from the humoralist lexis,

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[89] My point is partly that astrology's enduring role in so many lives, in spite of what is universally believed to be its complete lack of scientific legitimacy, suggests precisely that the systems of meaning which govern people's lives are *not* in turn governed by any simple trajectory of "progress."

[90] Again, to be clear, I am quoting Haller's paraphrase of Linnaeus because Haller's source is an early-nineteenth-century translation into English of Linnaeus's original Latin, and is thus the kind of text Hawthorne (who had studied Latin as a boy, but did not make a habit of reading it after his schooling was over) would have read. I have been unable to consult the specific translation Haller paraphrases.

grounded my argument that Linnaeus's seminal[91] understanding of race owed as much to humoralism as it did to imperialism or European chauvinism. Looking more closely though, we can begin to notice how the rhetoric of humoral temperament appears here not just to echo humoralism's central words but simultaneously to challenge and discredit its ideas. He is using humoralism's rhetoric, but using it against humoralism itself.

All four races are, again, assigned a humoral color (red, white, "sallow" [etymologically yellow], black) and three are assigned a temperament named for one of the fluid humors themselves (choleric, sanguine, and phlegmatic; we get no *melancholy*, but "grave" may mean something not entirely unrelated to the black bile), but in every case the color and temperament are from a humoralist perspective misaligned. *Homo europaeus* is *white* but *sanguine*, with what should be an overabundance of the *red* humor, blood. To the extent that race is invented here, it is invented not in order to complement the study of the humors, or even to subsume it within a larger or newer system, but to smother it in its sleep. Even if race, as Linnaeus understands it, presents itself as a rationalization and systemization of humoral folk wisdom, the rational and systematized rending of the humoral language produces meanings that are closer to humoralism's antithesis than its reiteration. Humoralism's "white" (phlegm, the white humor) is racial science's "black" (the "phlegmatic" *Homo afer*).

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[91] Haller, as I said, insists that, even if Linnaeus *did not* invent modern notions of race singlehandedly, the nineteenth century regarded him as having done so; the singular importance of his work to racial science and biological science more generally was such that to treat it as representative of the origins of racial science is *not*, as might seem, to generalize from a single case. Indicative of Linnaeus's continuing importance even now is the fact that he invented the Latinate, two-word mode of species classification that renders cat as *Felis catus* and human as *Homo sapiens*, both named by Linnaeus himself in 1758, in the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*.

I suspect that if humoralism and rac(ial)ism are, in fact, competing for a single conceptual territory and explanatory authority, knowing the extent and the shape of that territory would tell us a great deal about what race originally meant, and what it meant to American's in the 1850s, and even what it continues to mean today. If the notion of race Linnaeus imagines is, in its fundamental meaning, a replacement for and refutation of humoralism, this fact would offer a new way of explaining not just the origin of race but the reasons for which racism proved so indispensable and so persuasive an explanation of the world for so many people in the nineteenth century. Obviously, many of those for whom race's narratives were persuasive were colonists or imperialists of one kind or another - white people who either lived outside of Europe (for instance, in North America) or who lived in Europe but worked to maintain or profit from the machinery of empire. These people benefitted directly from racism, both because racism endowed racial whiteness with tremendous social advantages and because it created a conveniently miniaturized narrative circuit of *mauvaise foi* by which these advantages could be regarded as consequences of natural and immutable hierarchies; the unearned privileges whiteness guarantees could thus be regarded as assets white people could enjoy without moral accountability for the suffering this enjoyment imposed on nonwhite people. As Conrad's Charlie Marlow points out in 1899, colonists both ancient and modern have always "grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got." But even in articulating, while the sun sets on the nineteenth century, a theory of empire's motivations which he means to be as troublingly curt and as stripped of ornamental rationalization as he can make it, Marlow cannot help adding that "the conquest of the earth… mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves" (7).

The greed of imperialism *seems* to make sense on its own – both to Marlow and, I suspect, to us – as does the impulse to explain away one's moral responsibility for having acted on this greed by claiming the sanction of a natural hierarchy of human beings whose laws are as inevitable as gravity's. But Marlow can't stop there because empire's greed is never its whole story, even when that story is meant to shock us with its brevity. Trying to reduce the narrative to as terse, as naked, and as un-pretty a string of words as possible, Marlow cannot stop by naming the greed, or exposing the veneer of benevolence under which the greed operates as fraudulent. Anything, in theory, might have been summoned to naturalize the taking of imperial spoils – other cultures could have been dehumanized by virtue of the food they eat or the plants that grow in their climate. So why this thing called *race* – why the color of the skin or the shape of the nose – in particular? The science that made imperialism seem just did not *need* to be about the body, and in being about the body it did not *need* to draw on the conceptual framework of color. Drawing on that conceptual framework, it could have summoned any colors; it didn't need to summon *four* colors, and it did not need to summon the particular colors *red*, *yellow*, *white*, and *black*, but those are the four colors on which it fixated. Marlow, who deliberately jettisons every ornamental explanation, still can't jettison color. Marlow's point is that imperialism cannot be explained without some reference to both greed and racism. Stripped to its ugly core of truth, Conrad suggests, imperialism is about three things: the distribution of the world's wealth and the features of the visible body.

But *my* point is that *racism* cannot be explained (even by Conrad's sailor-raconteur trying to shock us with his cynical willingness to face the naked truth) without reference to *color*, something with which race would not have needed to ally itself if its only job were to

justify the greed of empire. My point is not just that the history of humoralism needs to play

a greater role in any future attempts to study or explain the history of race; my point is that,

if my suspicions are correct, the history of race is *part of* the history of humoralism.

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Linnaeus uses humoralism's language, but in misaligning the humors with their

colors he does so in a way that forces the reader to choose sides; if Linnaeus's theory of race

is right, humoralism's theory of the relationship between epidermal color and psychological

temperament is necessarily wrong. But Linnaeus remains utterly tied to humoralism in his

distribution of the whole into four parts, in his choice of colors, and, in at least three out of

four cases, for the qualities of temperament he believes sort people into meaningful types.

What has changed is not the colors or the temperaments but the way the colors align with

and are imagined to express the temperaments.

As I've already argued, this shows us that color is part of race's design, and not an

accident of that design's application to lived reality. This fact, I've further argued, suggests

that initially race was as much an affront to humoralism as a justification of European

imperialism. In its dependence on color, race was not a way to describe the difference

between Europeans and Africans, Asians, or Americans; it was a way to describe the

difference between *modern* Europeans and *medieval* Europeans. Important too, though, is the

fact that, in challenging humoralism, race shows itself to be initially constructed *not* primarily

as a physiological, visual, or geopolitical paradigm but as an epistemological one. It is less

concerned with continentally distributed differences of visible embodiment (which, in any

case, had been remarked about by Europeans for centuries, and which in real life have

almost no literal connection to the colors Linnaeus chooses) than it is with the terms under

which the visibility of the body is authorized to articulate meanings with which that body is not, itself, identical. Race serves, like humoralism had before it (and to some extent continued to do through it), as a set of terms under which the body we see might be made always already the ambassador of the psychic world the senses cannot reach.

So, when we talk about race, we are always talking not just about a way of producing and policing differences among visible bodies, but a way of producing and policing differences (and therefore, of course, ratifying correspondences) between the body that is seen and inner self that is not. For all but the most hardened materialists, this inner self is irreducible to the body's physicality – it has a mind or a soul or something similar. But it might surprise us that this self is also irreducible not just to the material body but to social relationships *between* such bodies. Richard Dyer points out that,

> all concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality.
> Race is a means of categorizing different types of human body which reproduce
> themselves. It seeks to systematize [those] differences and to relate them to
> differences of character and worth. (20)

Dyer's is, like Linnaeus's and Marlow's, a highly compressed definition of race – one that surprisingly manages to proceed without any attention to color. But it does not proceed without attention to "character," which serves as a Derridian supplement to Dyer's materialist articulation of the racial body just as *color* serves vis-à-vis Marlow's articulation of the geopolitics of greed (that is to say, as a postscript and seeming afterthought which, appended to a definition that is clearly trying to be as short as possible, highlights its indispensability to rather than its peripheral subordination to that definition). "Character" here serves Dyer as that joint where the visible self meets the invisible one; Dyer's "character" is race as letter, just as Marlow's "complexion" is race as color.

Race thus both challenged and recapitulated humoralism because, like humoralism, its core mission was at least partly physiognomic one. What the two were fighting over was the right to determine the grammar by which a visible body would predict or perform the inner self's psychological temperament. So humoralism serves not just as a way of situating race in a more complete historical context but as a way of further linking that context to the even broader history of the body's legibility. Needless to say, the nineteenth-century's obsession with physiognomy must be regarded as inescapably *racist* in at least some of its implications for my argument about *The Scarlet Letter* to make sense, since it is in novel's manifest physiognomic preoccupations that its latent racial preoccupations become most obvious. To these I will now once again turn my attentions.

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Three quotations from the chapter called "The Leech":

> Thus Roger Chillingworth scrutinized his patient carefully, both as he saw him in his ordinary life, keeping an accustomed pathway in the range of thoughts familiar to him, and as he appeared when thrown amidst other moral scenery, the novelty of which might call out something new to the surface of his character. He deemed it essential, it would seem, to know the man, before attempting to do him good. Whenever there is a heart and an intellect, the diseases of the physical frame are tinged with the peculiarities of these. In Arthur Dimmesdale, thought and imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense, that the bodily infirmity would be likely to have its ground-work there. So Roger Chillingworth – the man of skill, the kind and friendly physician – strove to go deep into his patient's bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollections, and probing every thing with a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern. Few secrets can escape an investigator, who has opportunity and license to undertake such a quest, and skill to follow it up. A man burdened with a secret should especially avoid the intimacy of his physician. If the latter possess native sagacity, and a nameless something more, – let us call it intuition; if he show no intrusive egotism, nor disagreeably prominent characteristics of his own; if he have the power, which must be born with him, to bring his mind into such affinity with his patient's, that this last shall unawares have spoken what he imagines himself only

to have thought; if such revelations be received without tumult, and acknowledged not so often by an uttered sympathy, as by silence, an inarticulate breath, and here and there a word, to indicate that all is understood; if, to these qualifications of a confidant be joined the advantages afforded by his recognized character as a physician; – then, at some inevitable moment, will the soul of the sufferer be dissolved, and flow forth in a dark, but transparent stream, bringing all its mysteries into the daylight. (147-148)

When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound and so unerring, as to possess the character of truths supernaturally revealed. The people, in the case of which we speak, could justify its prejudice against Roger Chillingworth by no fact or argument worthy of serious refutation… Two or three individuals hinted, that the man of skill, during his Indian captivity, had enlarged his medical attainments by joining in the incantations of the savage priests; who were universally acknowledged to be powerful enchanters, often performing seemingly miraculous cures by their skill in the black art. A large number – and many of these were persons of such sober sense and practical observation, that their opinions would have been valuable, in other matters – affirmed that Roger Chillingworth's aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he had dwelt in town, and especially since his abode with Mr. Dimmesdale. At first, his expression had been calm, meditative, scholar-like. Now, there was something ugly and evil in his face, which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the more obvious to sight, the oftener they looked upon him. According to the vulgar idea, the fire in his laboratory had been brought from the lower regions, and was fed with infernal fuel; and so, as might be expected, his visage was getting sooty with the smoke. (151-152)

"Freely, then, and plainly," said the physician, still busy with his plants, but keeping a wary eye on Mr. Dimmesdale, "the disorder is a strange one; not so much in itself, nor as outwardly manifested; – in so far, at least, as the symptoms have been laid open to my observation. Looking daily at you, my good Sir, and watching the tokens of your aspect, now for months gone by, I should deem you a man sore sick, it may be, yet not so sick but that an instructed and watchful physician might well hope to cure you. But – I know not what to say – the disease is what I seem to know, yet know it not."

"You speak in riddles, learned Sir," said the pale minister, glancing aside out of the window.

"Then, to speak more plainly," continued the physician, "and I crave pardon, Sir, – should it seem to require pardon, – for this needful plainness of my speech. Let me ask, – as your friend, – as one having charge, under Providence, of your life and physical well-being, – hath all the operation of this disorder been fairly laid open and recounted to me?"

"How can you question it?" asked the minister. "Surely, it were child's play to call in a physician, and then hide the sore!"

"You would tell me, then, that I know all?" said Roger Chillingworth, deliberately, and fixing an eye, bright with intense and concentrated intelligence, on the minister's face. "Be it so! But, again! He to whom only the outward and physical evil is laid open knoweth, oftentimes, but half the evil which he is called upon to cure. A bodily disease, which we look upon as whole and entire within itself, may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part. Your pardon, once again, good Sir, if my speech give the shadow of offence. You, Sir, of all men whom I have known, are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument." (162-163)

I select, and reproduce with only one short elision, these three long passages in part because I find *quantitative* properties such as density and abundance often help to substantiate interpretive insights and speculations which, in the close readings of literary prose, tend to be gleaned from (or at least explained on the critic's page in terms of) *qualitative* properties of form and content. The fact that *The Scarlet Letter* deploys these physiognomic tropes at all says something, but the fact that it can deploy them so relentlessly within a single paragraph or dialogue – and the fact that *three* such passages might be drawn from a single chapter – I believe to say something more. If it does not, it at least says the same thing with greater force, by demonstrating the frequency with which these terms asserted themselves on Hawthorne's page.

That is the principle reason both for quoting on such a scale and for quoting three passages clustered together in the novel rather than three spread out. And, had I elected to

quote passages drawn from all over the novel, there would have been plenty of candidates, since these three are remarkable mostly for how closely they are clustered. In their content, they're in every respect representative of the whole novel's ambivalence toward visible meanings – the ambivalence upon which both its aesthetic project and that project's relation to its own semiotic status as a written document both depend. The three passages represent in ways slightly more manifest than, say, the three paragraphs of Chillingworth's introduction, the skepticism and principled uncertainty Hawthorne is always careful to maintain in the face of what would otherwise threaten to become as dangerously reductive as the most over-reaching strains of, say, phrenology.[92]

For these three passages are all indictments of rather than endorsements of the privilege accorded visible experience – cautionary tales meant for those who believe that the knowledge we arrive at by seeing is, on its own, sufficient entitlement to judge or understand. *Judgment*, a word that as I've already observed almost made its way into the novel's title, carries an epistemology that exceeds the boundaries of the seen.[93] Indeed in its first few sentences the second of the three passages hinges upon the same opposition as the difference in rhetorical force of "Judgment Letter" and "Scarlet Letter." The lay public sometimes "attempts to see with its eyes" but it usually "forms its judgment… on the

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[92] Tellingly, Hawthorne found both phrenology and physiognomy fascinating, but was far more skeptical of phrenology's comparatively concrete (and sometimes numerological) claims, which left less room than physiognomy for uncertainty and nuance. See Taylor Stoehr's "Physiognomy and Phrenology in Hawthorne."

[93] I'm thinking here mostly of the same stuff I discussed in the last chapter – to judge is not always just to see, to judge fairly, Hawthorne seems to say, is never just to see; but there is a philosophical history (too rich to explore here with any subtlety) in which the exercise and ethics of judgment and phenomenology of sight closely but unpredictably related. See, for example, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime seems to be between two kinds of visual experience, but that distinction is also determined primarily by a relation of scale – invisible in itself – between observer and observed. The complicated relationship between judgment and sympathy in Hawthorne is discussed extensively, and sometimes in terms of epistemology, by Hutner.

intuitions of its… heart." The eyes alone merely *see* – and erroneously at that; to *judge* (though in this case the word is without its draconian connotations) is to do more than see, and is for even the lay public to arrive at cloistered orders of knowledge which "possess the character [there's that word again] of truths supernaturally revealed."

It's clear that, if by "seeing" we mean the kind of passive and disinterested "practical observation" in which Chillingworth engages, the kind Hawthorne would have associated with science and photography, this "seeing with the heart" is not seeing in the strict sense. It resembles the kind of seeing which, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is specific to the daguerreotype, which reveals Judge (not a neutral title in this context) Jaffrey Pyncheon's true self in visual terms, but does so by distorting what he actually looks like (as daguerreotypes, because they demand such long exposure, usually do when a sitter can't be completely still). But if "seeing with the heart" is a kind of seeing in which the eyes *don't* participate, why then is it described a kind of "seeing" at all? Why do the objects to which this seeing attaches, though they impart knowledge which possesses the character of truths supernaturally revealed, nonetheless remain phenomena *imagined* to be experienced through the eyes? It's not clear if Chillingworth is becoming darker of complexion literally or figuratively. What *is* clear is that those who believe him to be a bad person can only explain this belief to themselves by imagining that his skin is darker than he should be and/or once was. Only two kinds of knowledge, it seems, exist about other people: physiognomic knowledge in which the visible body communicates "intelligence" of another's inner self, and this *reverse* physiognomic knowledge, in which what is known about that self possesses no strictly phenomenological basis, but is nonetheless imagined as grounded in visual experience, and must be so imagined before it can count as knowledge. Sometimes, as when

Hester sees the serpent wriggle across Chillingworth's face while she is on the scaffold, or notices the slope of his shoulders, seeing is believing; in instances like this one of the uninstructed multitude, though, believing is seeing. What matters to us here is less the polarity which obtains in individual cases than the fact that belief is never *ever* unattended by visual experience real or imagined. Hawthorne suggests that it would be both easier and more perceptive of truth to see things that *aren't really there* than to suppose that the outer self and the inner self lacked a meaningful signifying relationship to one another. Even if and when the body does *not* mean the mind, we can maintain an ordered universe only by pretending to ourselves that it *does*.

Hawthorne appears to assume that his reader is unwilling to believe that Chillingworth is literally (to mix allusions) some kind of Faustian modern Prometheus. We discount the supernatural explanations for Chillingworth's darkening aspect as products of a more superstitious age, and congratulate ourselves for being the beneficiaries of "progress." The only other explanation Hawthorne offers, though, is that those who suspect Chillingworth of some mischief are hallucinating sagaciously. Curiously, we are not told if any Bostonians regard Chillingworth's darkening complexion as a *real* phenomenon which can be explained *without* recourse to supernaturalism, perhaps the result of laboratory research performed with materials incompletely understood. It could plausibly be identified with the kind of jaundice that by Hawthorne's time was a well-known consequence of long term exposure to mercury. While such would be a viable explanation in naturalistic terms,

Hawthorne's whole project as a writer specifically of "romances" constitutes precisely a symbolist resistance to this kind of naturalism.[94]

Without the promethean machinery, though, what is there that the "multitude" does in this paragraph but "see" Chillingworth "with its eyes?" The public attributes his knowledge of medicine to his supposed participation in pagan rites of Native Americans, but this is neither less superstitious nor less a matter of skin color than the attribution of it to his consorting with devils. And because the uninstructed multitude regards Chillingworth's medical knowledge, however acquired, as one of "black arts," he is painted very much as the Black Man: the threat of moral chaos he poses is suggested by the demonic parts of his story, while the perceived political threat posed by racial difference is registered by the part played by the Indians (who, in a condensation familiar to any reader of Puritan captivity narratives, might as well be devils themselves). The two threats meet at the site of blackness, and particularly blackness of the skin – a progressing blackness at that, one which suggests

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[94] It is indeed in these terms that "The Custom-House" defines the authorship of a romance against not just other kinds of labor (e.g. surveying) but against the authorship of other forms of prose narrative – the history and the realist novel. The now-famous allegory is one that relies specifically on differences among what we might call registers of visual experience. Hawthorne's specific examples in the passage (41-43) are the crisp transparency of daylight, on the one hand, and the transformative and mystifying interplay of moonlight and coal-fire, on the other. In symbolist (I'm using this word as a catch-all for any anti-literalist, anti-rationalist, privileging of the "heart's" perception of noumena over the eye's perception of phenomena) terms, moonlight and coal fire make us less able to discern the surfaces of things, but thereby better able to ascertain their hidden essences *as if* we were literally seeing them. The romance so conceived is thus at once primarily visual and prophetically visionary; the genre is, in Hawthorne's sense of it in "The Custom-House," differentiated from the novel precisely because it uses the power of fancy to intervene in practice of seeing *only* so far as is necessary to restore the legibility of inner truths by way of outer ones, and thereby rescue sight from its own limitations.

Worth remembering it that this difference in register between literalist and anti-literalist ways of seeing had, in the mid-nineteenth century, a faddish infrastructure in which Hawthorne was involved, and which was linked specifically to the problem of writing's visibility: Egyptology. The decoding of the hieroglyphics in the last years of the eighteenth century had by 1850 long been a source of order and point of comparison in the writing not just of Hawthorne but of many of his compatriots as well. See Irwin's *American Hieroglyphics*, particularly Chapters 1 and 15.

that a white man, or a white nation, might measure its moral decay by the extent to which it fails to preserve its whiteness.[95]

If seeing with the heart still amounts to no more than seeing what is really there, though, what can reliably set it apart, even in theory, from seeing with the eyes? The uninstructed multitude (one almost wants to call them "the great gull" of the reading public) may not be troubled by such hairsplitting, but Hawthorne clearly is. Though he mentions it rarely (in this story of one woman's persecution in the 1640s in Boston) he is aware throughout *The Scarlet Letter* that he is setting the cultural stage for the events of 1692-93 in Salem. If the multitude, rather than being sagacious, are in fact just giving way to their irrational suspicion of someone whom they have no actual reason (that they know of) to fear, the fact that Chillingworth *is* secretly a bad man will not alter the fact that this multitude is complicit it a great evil. If the beliefs of the masses are, for Hawthorne, to possess the "character of truths supernaturally revealed" rather than those of mere suspicion and mistrust, they must mine their legitimacy from the duality inherent in the literal force of words like "character" and "reveal" – duality subtended by the apparent paradigmatic interchangeability in the paragraph of "aspect," "face," and "visage" (all explicitly names for a the front of the head) with "expression," which like *physiognomy* circumscribes the "face" within a signifying logic that has always already interpreted it as an emblem of the inner self. The public is apt to be deceived in seeing with its eyes not because it will distrust those who are ugly, but because it will distrust those who are ugly *because* they are ugly. Hawthorne

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[95] I naturally want to observe as well that the book, once again, is managing its manifest moral (and latent racial) anxieties by returning to the chromatic grammar of its title page: this is a story of white, red, and black, and one that is enabled by Hawthorne's discovery that it is within his authorial powers to substitute red for black.

suggests that it *should* distrust the ugly not on aesthetic but on moral grounds – should regard them with fear and awe not because they are ugly but because that ugliness is a sign of their inner malevolence.

To judge with the heart thus seems here to see only *more* exclusively with the eyes. When the power of sight summons (and, Hawthorne suggests, is right to summon) the authority of emotional hesitation or antipathy, and enlists the aid of affective energies less clearly tied to the phenominological world than what a camera might see, we may trust our eyes not just to report on what *can* be seen but even on what *can't* be seen. We are justified in trusting what our eyes seem to be telling us even when what they tell us is not, strictly speaking, an accurate report of light's behavior in the world. To see with the heart is to trust the sense of sight so fully as to grant it but *greater* authority when its reporting appears compromised by bias, paranoia, or the intractable entropies of memory and desire. This is what the residents of Boston see in Chillingworth – what, the narrator suggests, they are right to see and are imprudent to dismiss as mere illusion. The fact that Chillingworth's face appears to be getting darker, even in the absence of any real proof that it actually *is* getting darker, may warrant not just vague suspicion but action. If his blackness is not quite evidence of a crime or a transgressive nature, it is at least the imaginary mark that produces his visible body as the site of the collectively felt *absence* of such evidence, the *invented* object which their *justified* dread of his *real* inhumanity requires in order to be made available to the conscious mind. Like the pregnant body that reveals Hester's sin and produces the secret of Dimmesdale's, Chillingworth's blackness materializes *as* the visible body not just knowledge, but a gap in what is already known. It tells us that there's something we don't know. It is

upon this body that Hawthorne is able make secrecy and revelation happen, and to transform that which simply *isn't* known into namable lacunae in the fabric of what *is*.

This is, again, the uninstructed multitude, a group to which neither Chillingworth nor Dimmesdale (nor for that matter the narrator, we assume) belongs. But both the first of the three passages I've quoted (the one in which the narrator discusses secrecy in both particular and general terms) and the third (in which a similar discussion takes place between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth themselves) present the reader with the same complicated double vision among the erudite rather than the great gull. All three of the quotations subordinate the visible body to what Chillingworth calls "the spiritual part" – the invisible inner space of the "heart," "intellect," and "soul." If the authority and intellectual capital wielded by the narrator, the minister, and the physician equip them with powers of apprehension the uninstructed multitude lack, those powers still do not offer a way out of the physiognomic assumptions of nineteenth-century racialism. Indeed, Chillingworth seems to entertain some doubts on this point only because he is *lying*. He is sadistically prodding Dimmesdale for a confession, and claiming that the minister's outward form has *not* already revealed his hidden guilt, precisely because the form *has* revealed this guilt. Chillingworth *already knows* what Dimmesdale is hiding, and knows it precisely *through* the illness that, as a doctor, he claims tells him of "but half the evil which he is called upon to cure." To Chillingworth's "penetrating" eye, Dimmesdale's illness is both the proof of and the punishment for his crime, and in suggesting that it may be the latter and yet not the former he seeks only to twist the knife.

When Dimmesdale protests the suggestion that he has called a doctor only to "hide the sore" he is speaking in metaphorical terms (though, after his climactic revelation of the

mark on his chest, we have to accept that it is either a metaphor of awesome power or one far more literal than the novel, at this point in its narrative, will admit). But the problem here is not that this "sore" is anything other than a metaphor; the problem is that this is the only metaphor to which Hawthorne[96] seems to have access – the only one, at least, by which he seems to feel he can convey to his readers the sense that Dimmesdale's illness is itself a barer of meaning. It is part of Hawthorne's continual fascination with stories that "symbolize moral or spiritual disease by diseases of the body; – thus, when a person committed any sin, it might cause a sore to appear on the body" (*Notebooks* 222). This is precisely Dimmesdale's sore, and even in the notebook entry we can see the vaguely racist logic behind it. What makes *The Scarlet Letter* so remarkable is that, at its climactic moment, this "sore" turns out also to be part of the same representational order through which the book itself, as a book, must act and mean: the alphabet.

Curiously, it is the inscription – even figuratively, as a sore that is *not* a letter – of the disease onto the body's surface as a "sore" that convinces Chillingworth, unexpectedly, of its *psychological* axis. The symptoms are bound to the malady in this metaphor of the sore not just

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[96] Or the nineteenth-century narrator. These are, of course, Dimmesdale's words directly reported (although the narrative frame of "The Custom House" and the surveyor Pue manuscript suggests that, though Dimmesdale, within the novel's conceit, was real, this conversation has to have been invented by either Pue or Hawthorne). The important point in making this distinction is that the seventeenth-century *did* have other metaphorical schemes by which the body might be understood as a barer or meaning. See, for example, John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (which Hawthorne undoubtedly knew well) in which the symbolic use of the body pivots not on an opposition between surface and depth but an opposition between part and whole: "The definition which the Scripture gives us of love is this: 'love is the bond of perfection.' First it is a bond of ligament. Secondly it makes the work perfect. There is no body but consists of parts and that which knits these parts together gives the body its perfection, because it makes each part so contiguous to others as thereby they do mutually participate with each other, both in strength and infirmity, in pleasure and pain. To instance in the most perfect of all bodies: Christ and His church make one body. The several parts of this body, considered apart before they were united…" &c. &c. (*Norton* 211). The point here is that the rhetoric of the real historical community about which *The Scarlet Letter* is written organizes itself around a metaphor of the body distinct from the nineteenth-century one that dominates *The Scarlet Letter* itself. Also noteworthy is the deployment of Christ's body as the exemplary body: see Dyer on Christian embodiment and whiteness (15-18).

by the ties of effect to cause but those of signifier to signified. Without the confessional

interplay of the visible body with the invisible dynamics of "the spirit whereof [the former] is

the instrument" Dimmesdale's illness might fail to represent anything at all. The

consequences of this would endanger more than just the stylistic ambiguity upon which

Hawthorne depends both personally and professionally. (That ambiguity, after all, demands

both that specific *content* be withheld and that, in the same gesture, it be revealed as *form* –

that we be kept from knowing *what* a thing means by the same tokens which compel us to

know *that* it means.) The more important danger here is to the legitimacy (if not the very

existence) of the bourgeois American social world in which Hawthorne was so invested.[97] If

the semiotic ligaments of physiognomy that tie the body to the psyche ever dissolved, the

secret Dimmesdale keeps might go to the grave with him. In its most extreme form, the

consequence of such a state of affairs might mean that his mind, however wracked by guilt,

would have no empirically grounded proof that both it and the material world really existed

at all. It is, indeed, as a kind of response to this possibility (that either the mind or the body

might be illusory) that Dimmesdale seeks to *force* their demonstration of one another into

existence by flogging himself in what the narrator tellingly calls his "closet."

> His inward trouble drove him to practices, more in accordance with the old,
> corrupted faith of Rome, than with the better light of the church in which he had
> been born and bred. In Mr. Dimmesdale's secret closet, under lock and key, there
> was a bloody scourge. Oftentimes, this Protestant and Puritan divine had plied it
> on his own shoulders; laughing bitterly at himself the while, and smiting so much
> the more pitilessly, because of that bitter laugh. It was his custom, too, as it has

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[97] For the seriousness of Hawthorne's investment in that social world (and the ways in which this investment helped to determine the contours of his authorial project) see: Bercovitch's *Office of* The Scarlet Letter. For the ways in which that social world required for its maintenance and stability a philosophy of mind and body in which passing was supposed to be impossible, but in which the supposition of this impossibility was so insecure as to need for its sustenance countless narratives of people who come close to passing successfully, see Karen Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

been that of many other pious Puritans, to fast, – not, however, like them, in order to purify the body and render it the fitter medium of celestial illumination, – but rigorously, and until his knees trembled beneath him, as an act of penance. He kept vigils, likewise, night after night, sometimes in utter darkness; sometimes with a glimmering lamp; and sometimes, viewing his own face in a looking-glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it. He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself. (173-174)

The secret can thus be kept hidden and embodied in a visible form by deploying the body's very corruption as both confessor and confession. But in this passage, Dimmesdale's literal closetedness is not a solution to his problem; he is only able to postpone what the narrator is right (in this ideological context) to term "inevitable."[98] The wounds he secretly inflicts on himself will heal, just as the pregnant body of Hester Prynne, which first accused her of criminal acts, eventually expelled Pearl and was thereafter no longer pregnant; Dimmesdale's body will only be allowed permanent corruption, as if magically at the moment of his final revelation, when it begins in death to decompose. The novel's physiognomic assumptions are thus maintained, but maintained in a way that suggests the possibility that passing – however doomed in the long-term – may yet succeed in the short. The suggestion, particularly when the outcome is less surely "inevitable," engages a core mid-nineteenth century anxiety (that those who pass may be undetectable[99]) – one whose expansive cultural significance is indicated by its being attended here by a whole set of *other* anxieties for which it serves as an all-connecting roundhouse. Dimmesdale attempts to circumvent the consequences of physiognomy (or one specific consequence: someone's discovering of his

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[98] The "inevitable moment" referred to in the first of the three passages I quote at the beginning of this section.

[99] Again, Karen Halttunen examines this fear – and the various literary and social conventions meant to contain it – at length in *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

guilt by accurate reading of that guilt's bodily signs) *not* by denying the semiotic bond of mind to body, but rather by fortifying that bond in visibly damaging the body in which his damaged soul resides. His hope appears to be that, since this restoration of physiognomic order is painful and undertaken willingly, it will serve as a penance, and thus appease the moral code which he feels continually urging hjim toward an even greater pain: the public confession he is too frightened and ashamed even to consider. Dimmesdale unites his body to his soul, and in that united self combines confessor and penitent.

In Dimmesdale's closet is a nightmare (in)version of the privacy upon which middleclass individualism and temperance depend. This nightmare turns nineteenth-century America's faith in the mind's autonomy (and its even stronger faith in the legitimacy of compromise as the solution to every problem) into a grotesque spectacle combining all those forces, both internal and external, which seek to destroy the culture of middle-class republicanism in the United States: Catholicism, masturbation, fanaticism, over-stimulation, and every narcissistic "self-abuse" or orgasmic tremble of dissipated vitality simultaneously to fetishize and degrade the body.

What will save Dimmesdale (just as it saves Hester once she has given birth to Pearl) from the secret guilt and physiognomic rupture he clings to in his closet is the scarlet letter. Hawthorne's pen is Dimmesdale's scourge, and written language that technology which restores coherence to a world in which the guilty do not always look like the guilty. To the (limited) extent that Hawthorne regards guilt as something the body might *successfully* hide, he is somewhat out of step with the pedestrian racism and physiognomic reductivism of his historical moment. But to the extent that he thinks the body *ought* to serve as a legible inscription of what the soul both contains and seeks to hide – to the extent, that is, that he

believes social order depends on the impossibility of the body truly and completely keeping

the soul's content secret even from the most sagacious and penetrating observer – he is his

moment's most eloquent spokesman, a spokesman but more eloquent for having imagined

that the very artistic medium in which he works – the alphabet – might restore order where

there is chaos, and reassemble reality where it appears to have fallen apart.

Epilogue: Ambiguity as the Cloud of Ink behind which All Enduring
Ideologies Hide from their Predators

> The ability to read character in the form of the human face and figure, is a gift
> possessed by comparatively few persons, although most people interpret, more or
> less correctly, the salient points of human expression… To detect the peculiarities
> of the mind by external marks, has been the aim of the physiognomist of all
> times; but it is only in the light of modern evolutional science that much progress
> in this direction can be made. The mind, as a function of part of the body,
> partakes of its perfections and its defects, and exhibits parallel types of
> development. Every peculiarity of the body has probably some corresponding
> significance in the mind and the causes of the former are the remoter causes of
> the later… Not that a perfect physiognomy will ever be possible, a mental
> construction so complex as that of man cannot be expected to exhibit more than
> its leading features in the body; but these include, after all, most of what it is
> important for us to be able to read, from a practical point of view. (618)

This isn't from *The Scarlet Letter*. As is suggested by the casual reference to "modern

evolutionary science" – words that would not have a clear meaning without some more

lengthy explanation, at least to the lay public, until the 1860s – it's from a book not

published until after Hawthorne's death. But knowing this quotation is from a scientific

article published in June of 1883 tells us not only that it post-dates Hawthorne's life by

nearly two decades, but that the chilling hint of eugenic regulation in the reference, in the

final sentence, to physiognomy's "practical" applications already flirts with a kind of proto-

fascism.

The article, "The Developmental Significance of Human Physiognomy," appeared in *The American Naturalist*, and is authored by anatomist and racist zealot E. D. Cope. Excepting the Darwinian allusion, though, the passage would not be out of place in Hawthorne's fiction – not just because it's a discussion of physiognomy but because it's a discussion of physiognomy in which the languages of absolute certainty and paralyzing doubt seem perversely to regard themselves as compatible with one another. Not all late-nineteenth-century thinking on the subject of physiognomy sounds this much like Hawthorne, though. Witness this advertisement placed by Fowler and Wells in the back matter of a major phrenologist's 1882 autobiography:

> **"How Can I Learn Phrenology?"**
> "I desire to be able to understand strangers at sight as a means of success in business and as a source of interest and pleasure."
> In responding to such questions we may say that the perusal of the best text books on Phrenology, such as are embodied in the
> **"STUDENT'S SET,"**… [100]

The fact that, however disingenuously, nineteenth-century concepts of race (represented here by E. D. Cope's article) sought to accommodate the limits of physiognomic knowing, and admitted that no body could ever be *completely* legible, while phrenology was only too willing to traffic in the nonetheless desperately longed for promise of a "perfect physiognomy" should tell us something – should tell us, perhaps, something about the reason race continues to be a narrative of subjectivity by which every American's life is forcefully shaped and phrenology is, to the extent that it remains anything at all in the

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[100] This is a short advertisement in the back matter of Sizer's *Forty Years in Phrenology*. I reproduce roughly the first half of the advertisement, the second half of which concerns how to order the *Student Set* by mail firstly from Fowler and Wells.

twenty-first-century, an academic curiosity and a cautionary tale about the limits of faddish scientific claims.

In the overview of secondary sources I included in this dissertation's introductory antechapter, I suggested that scholars have been unable to theorize the political force of *The Scarlet Letter* partly because they have taken its aesthetic of ambiguity for a mist covering its political investments rather than the formal logic by which those investments are performed. This Hawthornian investment in the ever unfinished nature of knowing, I've suggested, is what makes *The Scarlet Letter* ideological and political, not what keeps it from becoming so. I'm concluding my discussion of Hawthorne by suggesting, somewhat more tentatively, that the kind of ambiguity we encounter in *The Scarlet Letter*, seeing as how we also encounter it in an undisguised racist polemic like Cope's, may be what makes *all* successful ideological projects ideological – what makes ideology in general so resistant to demystification and collective counter-ideological activism.

If ideology functions partly as a set of material or representational contradictions in the lives of those by whom it is inhabited; if its status as ideology and its power as coercion are both derived from its ability to harness the power of those very contradictions, which allow it both to remain dynamic and to appear conceptually coherent (to provide, in other words, satisfactory answers to an ever growing list of potentially delegitimating questions); if, because hegemonic ideology is narrative deployed under the sign of truth, and because it is coercion deployed in the guise of freedom, its very existence depends upon its claims never being subject to tests constructed in terms not of its own making; if all these criteria are met, then, indeed, the fabric of ideology must never appear to explain anything *all that well* in the first place.

Ambiguity would then be not just the most political thing about *The Scarlet Letter*, but the most political thing about *politics*. For it is only by deferring any final or binding commitment even to *its own legitimacy* that a given ideological system like race can preempt any and all challenges to the narrative it offers. It is for this reason that phrenology becomes a "pseudo-science" while race remains (and I mean this without irony) an objective fact. A reality. The truth of who we are.

What Jean Fagan Yellin calls the "studied ambiguity" of *The Scarlet Letter* would under these conditions not (or not just) make it a more successful *literary* project than, say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*;[101] it would make it a more successful *ideological* project as well – not just an equally propagandistic utterance,[102] but a more successful utterance of propaganda. The novel's unwavering commitment to the contingency of knowledge, the instability of representation, and the provisionality of all interpretation would represent not a humanist attempt to preserve a zone of autonomy and dignity in the face of an ideological culture of scientific rationalism (one which feeling people find increasingly unforgiving, always limiting, and always at least potentially eugenic), but rather the impenetrable armor which that ideology dons in order to protect itself from even the possibility of disconfirmation.

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[101] With which, as we see in Arac, it is often contrasted, rightly or wrongly.
[102] As, again, Arac suggests.

Interchapter: From H to B

Published just three years after *The Scarlet Letter*, William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter* – the first novel by an African American – would seem to share little with Hawthorne's less recently canonized romance. Where *Clotel* is defiantly political, *The Scarlet Letter* is just as defiantly – on its surface – *a*political. Where Brown calls urgently upon his readers to change the world, Hawthorne calls just as urgently on his to preserve the status quo – and to do so no matter how politically compromised it might be, or how arbitrary its imbalances of power might appear.[1] *Clotel* frankly urges precisely the kind of social transformation which *The Scarlet Letter* insists is always the result of naiveté or hubris, and, no matter how well-intentioned, fraught with unintended, usually-disastrous consequences. For

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[1] I echo here the famous turn in the opening of Jonathan Arac's "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*" that "*The Scarlet Letter* is… propaganda – *not* to change your life" (251, emphasis in original).

reasons not unrelated to their ideological differences, *The Scarlet Letter* was meant as (and was recognized immediately and almost universally as being) a triumph of literary artistry, whereas *Clotel* has often –wrongly – been regarded as a propagandistic curiosity of greater historical importance than literary merit.

As dissimilar as the books are, Hawthorne's and Brown's personal histories are – again, on the surface – even more obviously unlike one another. This may not seem all that important from the standpoint of literary criticism after the death of the author, but (in the first of what will turn out to be a great many points of uncanny resemblance) both men's personal histories are made textually substantive in their respective novels by the inclusion in each of a long, autobiographical preface; I see their biographies, under these conditions, as worth considering critically so long as, methodologically, we are wary of the potentially reductive trajectories to which biographically centered interpretation sometimes risks pledging its allegiance. Both novels explicitly demand *some* kind of biographical interpretive response, and thus, more than most novels, bestow their greatest rewards upon those readers who endeavor to balance the impulse to read biographically with the desire to minimize the risk of reading fallaciously.

Hawthorne's life had been, in the early 1850s, regionally bound to an unusual degree;[2] but for a few youthful excursions it had been lived entirely in or near Massachusetts. He was born in Salem, where, he tells us in "The Custom-House," two centuries of Hathorne (and in some instances Hauthorne[3]) forebears had lived, died, and been buried.

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[2] Perhaps not *actually* unusual, but consider the scope of Melville's travels in those same years, or those of Hawthorne's father the merchant seaman, or for that matter those of Hawthorne himself later in his life.

[3] This is the spelling that appears on seventeenth-century court documents signed by Judge John Hathorn which I examined on UVa's Special Collections. The same box contains an invoice filed by Hawthorne's father before the author's birth charging his in laws the Mannings for some building he'd performed for them. It's not clear who drafted the invoice, but the name there is also spelled Hauthorne.

When his studies at Bowdoin began in 1821 Maine had been a state in its own right for just a

year. He spent virtually his entire early career as a writer in the Boston area (until appointed

to government posts overseas, a phase of his career during which he would produce only

one major work: *The Marble Faun*, the only one of his four romances not set in

Massachusetts). He wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in Salem; it was published by Ticknor, Reed, and

Fields in Boston, and was physically printed in Cambridge.[4] Though well-travelled later in his

life, Hawthorne's most productive years as a writer of fiction were spent almost entirely

within a twenty mile radius of Boston, and this sense of location is, furthermore, carefully

built into his public persona as litterateur, marked not only by the genealogical inventory of

Hathorne forebears in "The Custom-House" but by the titular emphasis his books place on

local landmarks like the Old Manse in Concord or the Turner house of the seven gables in

Salem. Hawthorne was also white and, though he often worried about money before 1850,

comfortably middle class; he was not merely brilliant, but well educated, having been

schooled off and on as a boy, tutored privately for much of 1820, and awarded a college

degree. Though he resisted close public identification with any overtly political cause, he was,

paradoxically, also involved directly, throughout his adulthood, with partisan political life in

both official and unofficial ways.

In contrast, Brown's life – even his early life – was as broad-ranging as Hawthorne's

was sedentary. Born in Kentucky in 1814, he was transplanted to Missouri in 1816 because

his owner relocated. Though still a child in 1821 Brown witnessed the advent Missouri's

statehood at as close a range as Hawthorne – ten years older than Brown – witnessed that of

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[4] Ticknor and Fields' operations in the 1840s and '50s are, recall, discussed at length in Michael Winship's *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* and in the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* in the Centenary Edition from Ohio UP.

Maine's the year before.[5] To whatever extent the Missouri Compromise was, to use

Jefferson's famous phrase, "like a fire bell in the night," its peal must have been at least as

deafening in Salem or Saint Louis as it was at Monticello.[6] In 1830, six years before

Hawthorne would serve as editor of *The American Magazine*, Brown, still in Saint Louis, was

leased out (or "hired") to Elijah P. Lovejoy as an assistant at the printing office of *The Saint*

Louis Times; unlike Hawthorne, obviously, Brown was not paid for his work at the

publication, and did not know how to read the words he was helping to publish, but both

came to literary authorship, like, among others, Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman, in

part through experience in periodicals. In the early 1830s Brown served as something like a

valet to a traveling slave trader named Walker, and in this capacity traveled by riverboat from

Saint Louis to New Orleans and back twice a year – a journey of over six hundred miles each

way. Nor were his travels limited to the south. His 1834 escape took him on foot through

Ohio, and his search for work in the decade after escaping as far west as Detroit and as far

east as Buffalo. In the summers, from 1834 until 1843, he would help to convey escaped

slaves to Canada, and this a full two decades before Hawthorne, ten years older than Brown,

would leave American soil for the first time. His growing involvement with the antislavery

and temperance[7] movements in Buffalo during the 1840s eventually brought Brown to

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[5] I discuss the possible relevance of the Missouri Compromise to Hawthorne's life and writing at length in an excised section of my first chapter, a section I am currently molding into a conference paper.

[6] Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 April 1820.

[7] Brown does seem to have been sincere in his advocacy of alcohol prohibition, and apparently it was his involvement in the temperance movement which first politicized him, though temperance's relations to his antiracist and antislavery politics are far from simple. His autobiographical writings suggest that he became involved in temperance not so much to effect legal change (though he was a supporter of what, at the time, was called "the Maine law") as to persuade other free blacks in the North that, by abstaining from alcohol, they could challenge racist stereotypes, help themselves to rise out of poverty, and demonstrate their embrace of northern middle-class values. It's suggestive (but, alas, no more than suggestive) that his first concern as a political activist was with the racism and poverty affecting free blacks in the north rather than with slavery as such. The role of temperance politics in Brown's career has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, but it should be clear even from what I've said in this note that temperance activism was both part of Brown's

political gatherings in Rochester, and then finally to Boston, where he settled until,

anticipating the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, he fled to England via Canada in 1849,

leaving Boston on July 18, twelve days before Elizabeth Manning Hathorne died in Salem,

and thus five or six weeks before Hawthorne would begin work on *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne, in sum, was born in Salem and wrote his novel there, having lived all of

his forty-six years in the Boston and Portland[8] areas, and his novel, which is about

Bostonians, was published by a Boston firm and printed in Cambridge. *Clotel* was written in

London – thousands of miles from where Brown grew up, and an ocean away from Virginia,

where its action begins, though that action ranges over the whole south, and in its final

chapters the novel's characters too cross the Atlantic. In the first edition of 1853 *Clotel*

explicitly addresses a British readership, though none of it is actually set in Britain. Brown

was black, an escaped slave, a proudly autodidactic reader and writer, well-traveled by any

nineteenth-century standard, and unashamedly wedded to two political projects the advocacy

of which was, he sometimes claimed, the sole occasion for his writing at all. If Hawthorne's

life in the early 1850s was an apolitical one lived at (or close to) the center of American

political power, Brown's was its reverse: a politically impassioned life pushed so far from that

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challenge to racism and a way for him to demonstrate that a black man could feel passionately about political causes with no necessary connection to race. (Though, of course, this is itself of course an implicit affront to a limiting stereotype of black people as people defined entirely by their racial difference from white people.)

　　Most of Brown's published writing includes some kind of lip service to the temperance movement, but his first autobiography rather unapologetically describes how he would help himself surreptitiously to his owner's pitcher of mint julep once the master and his entire family would pass out in drunken stupor each Sunday afternoon. In his travel writing, Brown says that he is always careful to stay in temperance inns, but this might be partly because temperance activists tended to be abolitionists too, and thus in theory less likely to turn a black man away out of mere racism; if one can judge by descriptions in novels, furthermore, nineteenth-century inns at which alcohol was served offered an environment not conducive to a good night's sleep.

　　[8] And, again, recall that when Hawthorne lived in Raymond, Maine was part of Massachusetts. It was only during his undergraduate years in Brunswick (1821-25) that he resided in the State of Maine. Salem and Concord are each about twenty miles from Boston, Raymond and Brunswick each about twenty miles from Portland.

center, and so inconsistent with that center's understanding of what an "American" was or should be, that, in living such a life, Brown was forced to expatriate himself in order to enjoy the basic liberties in defense which, Brown is always eager to point out, the United States was ostensibly founded.

Brown is the focus of this second half of the dissertation partly because, as the biographical sketches above should make clear, he occupies a political and social position quite different from Hawthorne's. My reading of *The Scarlet Letter* is centered on the ways in which that book stages both the materiality of printed language and the materiality of the body in racial terms, and on the way the body and the language combine in the book's titular symbol. But much of my interpretation pivots on the fact that these racial tropes enter the novel's frame in spite of Hawthorne's seemingly sincere desire to refuse them – to create characters, situations, and images so amorphous and historically distant that they offer the potentially reductive logics of race and political dogma no solid ground on which to build.

Discussing Hawthorne this way leaves unanswered at least one obvious question: how might the methodological and historical concerns I raise in relation to *The Scarlet Letter* behave if they were brought to bear on the work of a writer who, unlike Hawthorne, *did* want to talk about race – work that engaged political and racial questions head-on, work that was not afraid to seem propagandistic, or to take explicit, absolute positions on complicated issues, or to tell people what to think, or how to act, or to tell them which injustices demanded immediate action, and what kind of action they demanded, and why they demanded that action rather than some other?

Part of what makes *The Scarlet Letter* an artistic triumph – for Henry James, for the New Critics, and for most of us today – is its unwillingness to be reduced to any single

paraphrasable message, moral scheme, or practical project. We're not wrong to admire it for this, nor does our admiration demand that we think of its artistry as somehow taking place within a political vacuum. At the same time, though, there's something delightful in Brown's unwillingness to let his artistic ambitions be intimidated by his simultaneous commitment to a specific, actionable, often moralistic political vision which is routinely given, in its literary expression, to unembarrassed sentimentality and explicit didacticism. If Hawthorne refuses to be overtly didactic, we may rightly interpret that as a sign of his aesthetic sophistication, but his refusal is not a vote of confidence for the resilience of his novel's aesthetic power, for it suggests that the vision in which that power inheres is a fragile enough thing to be spoiled by any gesture readers might interpret as the articulation of an agenda or program. The pleasures of reading Brown are different ones, but they are not less properly literary and they are not less sophisticated; they are, partly, the pleasures of reading a work so sure of its own literary merit that it feels in no way threatened by its own polemicizing or, in *Clotel's* case, even by its unabashed plagiarism of other works, which the novel openly cannibalizes whenever it sees a chance to do so. It is the pleasure that attends many of the great revolutionary styles of Romanticism and Modernism (which, obviously, do not include Hawthorne's among them, since his, though great, is clearly reactionary rather than revolutionary): the unwillingness of Blake to be cowed by a fear of sounding infantile or mad, of Wordsworth to fear sounding unlearned, of Emerson to appear ungenerous, and anticipating Whitman unafraid of seeming low bred, Browning unafraid of sounding harsh, Wilde unafraid of triviality, Stein unafraid of nonsense, Hemingway unafraid of brevity, Eliot and Joyce unafraid of difficulty.

So Brown in the 1850s seems at first to share little with Hawthorne besides an ambition to be a novelist and a gift for writing in English. Brown's novel is only too eager to engage a political crisis from which *The Scarlet Letter* is in in most respects a strategic retreat; Brown's life encourages him to represent these political themes from a subject position (that of a human commodity, a slave) the existence of which, in the modern world, *The Scarlet Letter* is only too glad to let its readers forget. But *Clotel's* importance for my project is not merely that it's different from *The Scarlet Letter*, for the points of meaningful contact between the two novels are neither so few nor so insignificant that the they fail to shed important light on one another. Indeed, my point is partly that, just as Hawthorne cannot think about writing and bodies for very long without being drawn into his society's ongoing discussion of the epistemology of race and its attendant politics, Brown cannot think about race very long – at least not as an author of books – without beginning to think about the visibility of the body, the semiotics of the alphabet, or the materiality of the page in new and oddly racial terms. Brown and Hawthorne are both major figures in the same story: the story of how ideas about the racial body and ideas about writing and printing overlapped and interdepended in the 1850s. The difference between them for the purposes of my argument is that Hawthorne's concerns with letters, writing, and printing leads him, through bodies, to a preoccupation with race, whereas Brown's concern with race leads him, through bodies, to a preoccupation with letters, writing, and printing.

Brown and Hawthorne constructed their respective literary personae while living in different parts of a single social whole – eastern Massachusetts in the 1840s. Brown lived in Boston from early 1847, when he published his first book, until mid-July, 1849. Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter*, about fifteen miles away in Salem, that September. It's not

impossible that the two men literally passed one another in the Boston streets at some point while each was mentally plotting the trajectory of his future literary success, perhaps even on Washington Street, where Brown was bound to buy books (a favorite pastime) occasionally. Though not on Washington Street, William Lloyd Garrison's original office for *The Liberator* at 12 Post Office Square was about three hundred feet from the Old Corner Bookstore,[9] more or less a straight shot down Water Street's two short blocks. The point isn't that such a sidewalk encounter did or didn't actually happen, but rather that it doesn't *need* actually to have happened to assert a gravitational pull on our interpretive energies. The mere fact that it *might* have happened – that we can't ever be certain that it *didn't* – brings the two books into a proximity close enough for each to deform the other in unexpected ways – for each, like two magnets, to reshape, even in the absence of direct contact, the field of potential meanings by which the other is surrounded.

Of course, the force each novel exerts on the other could in theory prove interpretively barren – mere biographical noise in an otherwise clear textual signal path – were it not also the case that *The Scarlet Letter* and *Clotel* share some peculiarities of structure and theme. Besides the story-length autobiographical essays that introduce the works – a commonality whose consequences are, obviously, both structural *and* thematic – there is the fact that both narratives pivot on questions of paternity (though such questions are, to be fair, deeply ingrained in the tradition of the novel as such), the fact that both are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the frustrated and compromised promise of political

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[9] Not wanting to assume either that life was easier for an African American in Boston than it actually was in 1850, or that Ticknor and Fields were complicit in racist sales practices, I've not ventured a guess as to if Brown ever shopped at the Old Corner Bookstore or if he would have been welcome to do so. He is not listed among the authors' names (Hawthorne, Longfellow, Stowe, Emerson, and Thoreau) on the plaque which currently marks the building as a protected landmark, though the fact that Stowe's name is there suggests that the Ticknor and Fields circle overlapped to some extent with the antislavery community.

justice that America seems both to offer and to retract at the moment of its founding,[10] and the fact that both appeal, at last, to an imperfectly envisioned Europe in order to resolve what are regarded throughout each novel as profoundly American sets of conflicts. Both novels are also deeply fascinated by the political meaning of biological inheritance, and interested in questions about the limits and uses of the legibility (and *il*legibility) of the material body. Admittedly, *The Scarlet Letter* is more overtly invested than *Clotel* as such in the semiotic paradoxes that attend alphabetic representation. This is one reason that, though I will turn in the dissertation's final chapter to *Clotel* itself, my third chapter one will be concerned mainly with *The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, in which Brown more deeply engages the problem of writing's dependence on the material world.

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[10] That Hawthorne identifies this birth of a nation with the founding of Boston and Brown with the signing of the Declaration of Independence should not obscure the fact that both novels approach the irresolvable contradictions of American history as above all else questions simultaneously of national and paternal origins.

B

Cases, Forms, &c. in The Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave

Accounts of the struggle to become literate – a struggle that was often criminal for slaves

and free blacks after 1831 – are so obligatory in autobiographical slave narratives that readers

familiar with the form's conventions might not notice how strangely, in Brown's 1848

Narrative[1], printing as forced labor enters the scene long before reading or writing do so as

means of personal empowerment. (I'll discuss this passage briefly here, and return to it in

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[1] *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1848). Unless otherwise noted, all references to Brown's *Narrative* are to the reprinting of the second edition in the William L. Andrews-edited *From Fugitive Slave to Free Man: The Autobiographies of William Wells Brown* (1993). When it has become necessary to consult to the first (Boston: 1847) or third (London: 1849) edition I have referred to the electronic texts at the University of North Carolina's invaluable *Documenting the American South* (http://docsouth.unc.edu/), which appear in the bibliography.

much greater detail later in the chapter.) Brown is sixteen years old and his owner, Dr. John

Young, begins to contract him out as a laborer.

> I was soon… hired to Elijah P. Lovejoy, who was at that time publisher and
> editor of the St. Louis *Times*. My work while with him was mainly in the printing
> office, waiting on the hands, working the presses, &c. Mr. Lovejoy was a very
> good man, and decidedly the best master I had ever had. I am chiefly indebted to
> him, and to my employment in the printing office, for what little learning I
> obtained while in slavery. (34)

It's difficult for a modern reader to ignore the passage's echoes of Benjamin-Franklin, both

in its tone and in its content. Franklin's importance to Brown's *Narrative* may be less taken

for granted than that of, say, Frederick Douglass, but both Karen Halttunen and William

Andrews suggest that Franklin's influence on American didactic storytelling in general

(Halttunen) and slave autobiography in particular (Andrews) exists almost beyond measure.

Franklin's autobiography, not unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, was probably an important enough

book in nineteenth-century America that it helped to structure the narrative projects

undertaken even by people who had never actually read it.[2] Brown does not discuss

Franklin's work specifically, but his interest in America's founding era, which is pronounced

from the beginning of his public career,[3] makes it inconceivable that he would not be

familiar with the narrative contours of Franklin's accomplished life, even if the *Autobiography*

itself had never actually made its way to him.

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[2] On Franklin see Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (2-3), and Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* (page numbers coming). Brown's political alliance and professional rivalry with Douglass is discussed at length in Andrews's introduction to *From Fugitive Slave to Free Man* (1-12).

[3] Typical of the sentiments that would later define the political argument of *Clotel* is Brown's bitter observation in the last chapter of the *Narrative* that he writes of his enslavement "seated here in sight of Bunker Hill Monument" (47).

Franklin's autobiography is paradigmatic in several ways at once, though for my

purposes the most important of these senses is that in which its narrative project and deictic

organization depends on Franklin's own capacity to read and write, and depends on these

capacities not just practically (because Franklin must be writing the content down) but at an

explicit thematic level. Early in the *Autobiography* Franklin recalls that sometime during his

twelfth year

> [My] bookish inclination… determined my father to make me a printer, though
> he had already one son (James) of that profession. In 1717 my brother James
> returned from England with a press and letters to set up his business in Boston. I
> liked [assisting James in printing] much better than [working in the candle shop]
> of my father, but still had a hankering for the sea. To prevent the apprehended
> effect of such an inclination, my father was impatient to have me bound to my
> brother. I… at last was persuaded, and signed the indentures…. In a little time I
> made great proficiency in the [printing] business, and became a useful hand to my
> brother. I now had access to better books. (18)[4]

Even if the resemblance between the two passages is subtle enough to suggest against a

direct line of literary descent, my point is less that Franklin "influenced" Brown than that

Franklin's sensibility circulated powerfully enough in Brown's America to allow his words to

shed useful light on Brown's rhetorical aims. The episode of Lovejoy's newspaper is an

important one for Brown in placing him in Franklin's shoes, and it does so not just because

– like Franklin's – his first employment outside the home into which he was born is at a

newspaper, but because it is in connection with the nine-year indenture that Franklin

remembers having signed (voluntarily, but under significant pressure from an adult world

with little regard for his preferences) that the *Autobiography* first presents a version of an

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[4] *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. Joyce E. Chaplin (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 34 (hereafter cited as *Autobiography*). I maintain the spelling used in Chaplin's text, which preserves Franklin's orthographic idiosyncrasies, but I have regularized his erratic capitalization.

argument thar will later prove pivotal for Brown in *Clotel.* Franklin muses in a footnote that "I fancy [James's] harsh and tyrannical treatment of me might [have been] a means of impressing me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has stuck to me thro' my whole life" (24). Which is to say that, as far as Franklin is concerned, the energies of slave resistance do not just *partake* of the spirit of liberty which national mythology supposes to undergird the American Revolution, but that these energies helped indeed to *constitute* that spirit, insofar as no less an authority than Franklin himself supposes here that involuntary servitude is that condition of which the founders' (or at least *one* founder's) understanding of natural rights was most directly a negation. Though, obviously, not every so-called founding father shared his view, Franklin's singular importance to the success of the war for independence (in centuries-old myth even if not in fact) is such that American nationalism depended on his support as much or more than on that of any other one man.[5]

The substance of this echo, then, is the simple fact that Brown, like Franklin, serves involuntarily assisting in a printing office where the work, though pleasant enough in itself, is made less so by not being compensated,[6] and by its rendering unactionable a wish to escape. Considered in the contexts of their respective works, though, subtler echoes of Franklin structure our response to Brown's presentation of his employ with Lovejoy, and to the role of this episode in the narrative arc Brown traces as an autobiographical subject. Both youths cleverly (but begrudgingly) make the most of a bitter experience, improving themselves to

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[5] There were, of course, men just as import to the cause as Franklin, even if such men were few in number; that some of these were tainted by the culture of slavery would serve, of course, as *Clotel's* original premise.

[6] *Autobiography*, 18. Franklin was to serve until his twenty-first birthday, and was to receive no pay except during the last year of his indenture.

the greatest extent that forced, uncompensated labor will allow,[7] both will eventually flee

from this servitude under conditions of, at best, dubious legality, despite each's knowledge

that his freedom may cost him any future contact with his family.[8] Brown too will claim his

freedom by means of clandestine escape, but Brown's path from slavery to freedom will also

be longer than Franklin's, and will deliver him to snares Franklin need not face.

Among such snares is, imposingly, Brown's illiteracy, a condition about which the

Narrative has curiously little to say. Like most slave narratives, Brown's assures the reader on

its title page that it is a document "written by" the autobiographical subject "himself," but

the narrative which we're assured Brown has written without the aid of an amanuensis gives

us no clear sense of how an illiterate slave became a professional writer. This lacunae is in

contrast to, perhaps most obviously, the continuity of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of*

Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, published two years before the first edition of Brown's

Narrative, in which the heroics of surreptitious literacy acquisition serve not only as a major

plot point but as a crucial conceptual ligature binding Douglass-the-narrated to Douglass-

the-narrator. The need for such a ligature might seem to be class- or race-bound, arising

from the fact that those who write their own autobiographies must be literate, but slaves and

other African Americans generally are not. To the extent that Franklin is any indication,

though, such is not the case. In the opening of the *Autobiography*, after discussing first his

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[7] Franklin notes of an epistolary dispute he carried on with his friend John Collins (one in which, perhaps not incidentally for Brown, Franklin was arguing in favor of the education of women and girls) that "I had the advantage of my antagonist in correct spelling and pointing (which I ow'd to the printing house)." *Autobiography*, 19.

[8] Too lengthy to detail in this essay, the particulars of Franklin's five-year employ at the *New England Courant* and his eventual flight from Boston (*Autobiography*, 18-25) are among the swiftest-moving in a book of no modest pace; Franklin's clandestine escape from a life of toil to one of, potentially, self-determination in another region of the country abounds, of course, with tropes which would later appear in numerous nineteenth-century slave narratives.

forebears in the Old and then the New World, then his parents and older siblings, and finally

his father's specific hopes for himself, Franklin has not yet even properly introduced *himself*

as a character, and thereby begun the truly *autobiographical* portion of his autobiography,

before he calls attention to his "early readiness in learning to read (which must have been

very early, as I do not remember when I could not read)[.]"

For Franklin, the representational space of autobiography precludes a

phenomenology of illiteracy, such that an *autobiographical subject* who can't *read* is nearly as

inconceivable a thing as an *autobiographer* who can't *write*.[9] Autobiography itself in Franklin's

narrative takes as its constitutive act an explicit disidentification with illiteracy – even that

illiteracy which babies necessarily inhabit until they learn to read. It's as if, were Franklin the

autobiographer to identify with a remembered past self *un*able to read and write, he would

actually undermine the conceit by which author and protagonist are the same person in the

reader's mind, and spoil not only the authority of autobiography but the whole ideology of

self-identical subjectivity.

Even if our sense that we remain the same individual from birth to death would not

actually be undermined by an autobiographer's admitting to once having not been able to

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[9] I've settled on these terms "autobiographical subject" and "autobiographer" (though sometimes I will call the former the autobiographical "character" and the latter an autobiographical "narrator" or "author") to distinguish between the character who inhabits the diegetic space of an autobiographical text and the narrator who is behind the scenes, remembering and writing down that character's experiences, and usually addressing the reader (of whom the character, in theory, has no knowledge) directly. This after a brief survey of some recommended scholarly works – among them Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* – failed to provide me with any terms I found to be preferable or more consistent with current professional consensus.

As this initial discussion suggests, Franklin's *Autobiography* seeks to knit as tightly as possible the subject and the narrator into a single textual fabric. For slave writers, on the other hand, the discontinuities between the autobiographical subject and the autobiographer (discontinuities which usually include not just different relations to literacy but entirely different first and last names) are often performed openly as evidence of fragmented subjectivity slavery forces its victims to inhabit.

read, the specificity of autobiographical writing truly does rest on our sense that the person being written about and the person writing are one individual, differentiated only by their temporal distance from one another. This is because autobiography possesses a particular relation to authority that most other kinds of writing do not; it depends upon, cites, and reasserts that most-Enlightenment of certainties: that experience is the foundation of all knowledge. From this point of view, the unusual measures slave autobiographers took (or were asked to take) to safeguard their narrative authority, and preempt any accusations of invention or exaggeration, may come not just from the genuinely immense political stakes of antislavery writing, but from the fact that, because the temporal dislocations inherent to all autobiographical writing were accompanied, for Douglass, Brown, and their peers, by other kinds of dislocations specific to the experience of slavery, more work had to be done to assure the reader that the autobiographical subject and the autobiographical narrator were indeed the same person, and thus spoke with the same authority of experience as any other autobiographer, such as those who, like Franklin, had seemingly never been illiterate, had always possessed the same name, and – though suffering some degree of geographical displacement – been able to return to the cities of their births without fear of capture.

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Just six paragraphs after Franklin *first* claims that he cannot remember a time when he was unable to read, he mentions a *second* time that "from a child I was always fond of reading, and all the little money that ever came into my hands was ever laid out in books." This is a point which, even were it not already the second time he'd mentioned this youthful precocity, would be driven yet further home in the next paragraph where, as already quoted,

Franklin observes that his indenture to brother James was of consequence in his life initially only because he "now had access to better books" (14, 17-18).

All this suggests that, for Franklin, alphabetic knowledge isn't just fundamental to the internally coherent author-subject hybridity he wants the *Autobiography* to present him as possessing, but that such knowledge is also fundamental to the medium through which this representation moves. Franklin is able not just to link his past and current selves *through* the medium of print, but link both his past and his future selves *to* that medium by claiming to have been illiterate only under conditions that, because he cannot remember them, could not enter the text under the sign of autobiographical truth anyway; Franklin would not be presenting them as certified by the authority of personal experience. It's as if simply being a self *available to* written, narrative representation, under the conditions that Franklin presupposes for his *Autobiography*,[10] demands that one first be a self *able to wield the tools* of such representation. These tools include knowledge of how to read, but for neither Brown nor Franklin are they limited to that knowledge, since the kind of literacy Franklin models is, famously, one that links reading not just to writing in the mechanical sense, but authorship, typesetting, and printing.[11]

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[10] Though of course my point in all this is that Franklin's *Autobiography* served as paradigmatic for American autobiography in general in the nineteenth century, and exerted but stronger force on works that, like most slave autobiographies, present a narrative that leads from enslavement to self-position by way of hard work and calculated risk. Again, Brown's well-known fascination with the founding era also plays a part in connecting him to a figure like Franklin, and helps to keep the sensibilities of Franklin and his generation of Americans ever relevant to his (Brown's) work.

[11] Franklin notes with mild contempt that Samuel Keimer, his first employer in Philadelphia, needed his (Franklin's) assistance "to put his press (which he had not yet used, and about which he understood nothing) into order," and that Keimer furthermore, "tho' something of a scholar, was a mere compositor, knowing nothing of presswork" (*Autobiography*, 30, 31). In a manner of integration analogous to his suggestion that, because he must be literate to write the *Autobiography*, the *Autobiography* must only ever present him as a literate person (thus integrating subject and narrator), Franklin seems to assume that a whole relation to print requires a person to be both scholar and technician, which is to say that a true man of letters, for Franklin, must conceive of ideas, articulate them in elegant writing, set the type by which these words are to be imprinted on

But in casting of himself as a latter-day Franklin, Brown does more than foreshadow his eventual escape from slavery into freedom, economic self-determination, and upward mobility. Brown's argument – one he would make more explicitly in *Clotel* by way of a fictionalized Nat Turner – casts slaves' nineteenth-century resistance to slavery, even at its most violent, as a legitimate continuation of the American Revolution, a wars whose ideas, Brown suggests, were just, but whose promise has been unrealized because it reserved emancipation for white people. Franklin, as I've already shown, makes something of the same argument (though in claiming to have been radicalized by his own experience of serving in chains he neither does nor does not suggest that the chains of African American slaves could or should similarly radicalize them, and he thus leaves the question of a slave rebellion's moral equivalence with the War for Independence an open one). In casting his autobiographical subject as among Franklin's spiritual heirs, Brown not only seeks to justify his own (or, in *Clotel*, Nat Turner's) legal transgressions by appealing to higher laws and natural rights, but recasts slaves' resistance to slavery as not *opposition to* but *participation in* the ongoing project of American nation building. Brown's escape from slavery, however criminal it may be under the letter of the law, is justified in epic terms – terms *epic* in the fairly literal sense that they link a heroics of bravery and personal risk explicitly to the founding of a nation and the production of a national identity and a national literature.

But these echoes of Franklin also foreground two important differences between the fugitive slave and founding father, and it is this implicit contrast we are ultimately meant to notice. Brown's work in the printing shop is not the *most* but rather the *least* draconian form

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the page, and mass-produce a finished document conforming not just to the highest rhetorical but the highest technical standards of excellence.

taken by the forces that dominate him. The moment at which Brown's narrative most closely resembles Franklin's is that at which Brown is most at liberty, but Franklin most in chains, and precisely that labor which, when compulsory, Franklin finds intolerable is, for Brown, the most tolerable that slavery has to offer. Furthermore, Franklin will escape from *The New England Courant* directly to freedom in Philadelphia, his journey offering no adventure more perilous than he seems to have wished.[12] But Brown's first attempt at escape, undertaken with his mother, fails badly, and in retaliation for the attempt Brown's mother is sold to traders bound for New Orleans. Though he regards the prize of freedom as having been worth the risk of such disaster, the loss of his mother is among the post painful he records in the *Narrative*. His second escape attempt is successful but fraught both with real dangers and with the painful isolation of a person traveling alone in an unfamiliar land who knows he can trust no one whom he meets. Both these attempts occur years after Brown's employment at the *Saint Louis Times* ends, and in a sense the second attempt succeeds only by being prolonged for decades and involving ever greater distances. As I've already noted, Brown writes *Clotel* in England in 1853 because the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 made him vulnerable to recapture in Boston. His justified fears of such recapture would continue until the purchase of his manumission by a benefactor in 1854. He was running from slavery for eighteen years.

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[12] Franklin had been an avid reader of DeFoe, quoting liberally from him in the "Silence Dogood" letters (Franklin 18). *Robinson Crusoe* was first published when Franklin was thirteen. Besides this, and perhaps in part because of it, Franklin had long entertained fantasies of going to sea in some capacity to seek his fortune (something it's hard to imagine a man so at home in the city doing). As the material I've already quoted from Franklin indicates, it was partly because of his dreams of maritime adventure that his father sought to bind him to Boston by indenture.

So Brown's story is not one in which he runs away from a printing house and begins building a life for himself in Philadelphia; it's one in which the printing house and the eventual self-possession, both of which echo Franklin, are separated by torturous expanses of time and space. Importantly, this narrative logic will reappear in *Clotel*, where the sentimentally earned happy ending befalls the characters not immediately upon the resolution of the story's conflicts – as in, say, *The House of the Seven Gables* – but after a decade has passed and the characters have relocated across the Atlantic. In her chapter on Brown in *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*, Giulia Fabi points out that "This deferment of the happy ending [in *Clotel*], which [also] characterizes the novels of post-Reconstruction African American women writers such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, indicates Brown's determination to defy the complacency of easy solutions to the familial disruption engendered by slavery" (21). Employing Fabi's language, we can speculate that, like *Clotel* (which draws liberally from Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons," among a miscellany of other intertexts and found verbal objects), the *Narrative* wants its debt to its generic forebears to be obvious, but it also wants the various ways in which it transforms what it borrows to be telling. Once Brown has activated the reader's memory of Franklin, and with that memory its attendant narrative expectations, his authorial refusal to meet those expectations blossoms into a bearer of meaning. In this case it is the meaning Fabi associates with *Clotel's* use of the sentimental: by differing the happy ending, Brown can gesture toward a utopian future *without* slavery while remaining realistically grounded in the dystopia of the slave's present. As a methodological point, though, I want to emphasize with Fabi that Brown's authorial practices, especially in *Clotel*, which has long been regarded by unsympathetic readers as overly derivative, parade Brown's debt to his influences not because he wanted to

embrace more straightforward standards of originality but could not, but rather because they

perform, in a manner similar to the work of Eliot or Joyce, a complicated interrogation of

originality and citation as ideological structures.

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The temporal dislocations of Brown's delivery from slavery – the facts that, unlike

Franklin's, it requires two attempts, entails the permanent loss of his mother, and occurs

some four (or twenty-two) years after the end of his so-Franklinesque employ with Lovejoy

at the *Saint Louis Times* – together constitute the first of two ways in which Brown's *Narrative*,

I'm arguing, seeks to diverge from, and to be noticed diverging from, Franklin's paradigm. A

third is Brown's illiteracy.[13] (As I've already mentioned, Franklin calls attention to his

precocious literacy repeatedly in the first pages of his *Autobiography*.) Whatever "learning" he

might have been able to garner working for Lovejoy, it can't be the literacy which he,

nonetheless, must have acquired at some later date in order for us to be reading his words.

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[13] Jonathan Senchyne's "Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper," which was published while this chapter was in the late stages of its development, deals with some of this material from Brown's *Narrative* that I discuss here. Senchyne's argument is persuasive, but his focus is slightly different from mine, since in most respects I am interested specifically in alphabetic and orthographic marks, and how their visual status engages dialectically with their verbal significance, while Senchyne's focus is on the visual experience of book elements without regard to their different respective relationships to language or writing. Senchyne discusses paper and ink qualities at length, though I do not, partly because, though they are clearly important in themselves, Brown does not seem to me to be particularly interested in them. (The question of ink became important in my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* not because my focus is on ink in particular but because the novel itself makes it clear, as do Hawthorne's letters, that ink and its colors are particular problems in which the book is interested.) Brown is, like Hawthorne, profoundly fascinated with the visual and material nature of writing, but both he and Hawthorne attach a particular importance to the alphabetic and orthographic which privileges them over other (also important) site of meaning, like the quality or color of paper stock.

At this particular moment, though, I should point out specifically that Senchyne presumes that "to perform basic tasks in [Lovejoy's] shop Brown would have needed, at minimum, the ability to recognize basic letter shapes in order to sort pieces of type in the cases" (141). This may be so, but I attach some meaning to the fact that Brown does not explicitly tell us this. The "little learning" he acquired with Lovejoy is never specified, and he never describes himself doing anything but working the press itself, waiting on Lovejoy's other employees, and running errands. We are left to speculate that he may have remained completely illiterate during this time, and I think given the centrality of writing to the content of the episode we should hesitate to explain away the absence of the semi-literacy that Senchyne infers.

For Franklin the printing of type and the making of phrases are almost a single activity, but Brown is a printer (and like the young Franklin a man who helps to produce a newspaper) long before he is an author, or for that matter even a reader. Recall that Franklin would read Addison or Steele and then rewrite the piece he had just read in his own words so as to strengthen his prose style (20), and that, furthermore, he has only just initiated this part of his self-improvement routine in the *Autobiography* when his eloquence begins to get him published under the name Silence Dogood (23). Reading, writing, printing, and publishing are not separate theaters of action which exist independently; they are only real for Franklin to the extent that they are woven into a single fabric (one meaning, the original one, of the word *text*) of literary self-invention. Franklin is supposed (like, apocryphally, Whitman) to have sometimes composed and composited simultaneously, "writing" wholly new compositions by arranging them in type. Despite the obstacles the young Franklin must overcome, he regards himself as entitled even as a youth to regard reading, writing, and printing as organically linked zones of a single sphere of activity. Brown's enslavement and oppression are, conversely, registered by his inability to read the documents he helps to print, and by the dissociation of reading, writing, and printing from one another as domains of knowledge.

So just as Brown's works are characterized by familiar narrative beginnings and endings kept distant from one another by the violence of slavery, his relationship to written language is, because of his enslavement, configured as multiple disconnected relationships – discrete behavioral norms that develop independently of one another, as if the Brown who writes were literally a different person from the Brown who reads or the Brown who prints pieces of writing. This discontinuous subjectivity characterizes Brown's employment printing

a newspaper he cannot read, but it also characterizes the deictic organization of the *Narrative* itself, since the Brown who narrates, and who presents a story of his past which is "written by himself," cannot read and never accounts for the literacy which enables the authorship he claims for the document in which the story appears.

One reason we can suppose this kind of discontinuity posed problems for writers and readers of autobiography is that Franklin, in claiming repeatedly in the first pages of the *Autobiography* that he has no memories in which he is illiterate, works so hard to close precisely this structural circle. In light of this feature of Franklin, we can regard the emphasis Frederick Douglass places on literacy in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life* as an attempt to satisfy not merely, as some scholars[14] have suggested, the demand that he affirm the values of middle-class republicanism, but that he affirm as well the internally coherent, rationalist structure of autobiography as it was imagined in the eighteenth century. For Brown, slave subjectivity as it encounters verbal inscription, in a trope readers of Frederick Douglass would recognize, is a kind of incomplete humanity. The psychic and representational violence of slavery is registered by the abundance of precisely those internal discontinuities that Franklin most ardently seeks to overcome: as Franklin writes his memories, these memories expel any trace of a past self which could *not* write; writing, reading, and printing are knit ever more tightly into a self-governing and self-creating man of letters. Though not a slave in anything like the same sense as Brown or Douglass, Franklin nonetheless suggests, by placing such emphasis in the *Autobiography* on his indenture at the *New England Courant* as a formative experience, that the kind of autonomy he has structured his life and his

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[14] I'm thinking here mostly of Paul Gilmore's *The Genuine Article*.

nationalist politics around is best imagined in negative terms – as, specifically, the opposite

of slavery.[15] To the extent that the *Autobiography* represents this autonomy in *positive* terms, it

is does so by means of Franklin's relationship to reading, writing, and printing.

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Douglass and Brown can both be understood in terms of their revisions of

Franklin's model. Even if not consciously aware of Franklin's influence, and even if that

influence was indirect, the narratives of both men reflect a tacit understanding of intact

humanity as a thing enjoyed only by those who are not slaves, and as intimately bound to

reading, writing, and printing. But for Douglass the incompleteness of the slave's humanity

originates in the chattel principle, the legal doctrine that slaves – as property that was also

alive – were subject to the same rights, privileges, and vulnerabilities as cows and horses.

> Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My
> natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read
> departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of
> slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (Douglass
> 45)

Douglass has been transformed by the abuse he's suffered into a mere animal, and has thus

finally succumbed to the tremendous pressure on him to identify with the institution by

which he is oppressed – to become in practice the livestock as which the laws of his state

have always regarded him in theory. However much to be a man transformed into a brute is

to have once, at least, been a man, it's nonetheless curious that manhood, as Douglass

articulates it here, is defined less by a realized potential to be human in the present than by

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[15] James Thomson, lyricist of "Rule, Britannia!," famously imagines Britishness the same way in 1740, seventeen years after Franklin escaped his indenture, and thirty-one years before he began writing the *Autobiography*.

the long-term capacity to realize other human potentials in the future. A man is less

someone who possesses certain definite qualifying properties than someone who possesses

both the capacity and will to work toward a particular kind of future by particular means.

Douglass has already learned *how* to read by the time he is hired to Covey, but, broken in

spirit, he has forgotten why he should bother. Reading is the exemplary human trait here,

but most of the others are, similarly, not about *being* but *becoming* – humanity, the condition

of not being a brute, is bound to the will and capacity to change and to improve, just as

Franklin is always changing and improving himself. "Elasticity" is a quality of movement and

transformation, and of the flexibility to respond to what is new or unforeseen; and because

in "languishing," the "intellect" becomes, apparently, worthless, it resembles a sword which

rusts if not used in battle; it is less a set of static skills or cognitive norms than a continual

process of self-making and learning. What Douglass has lost is the will to be and know and

understand more tomorrow than he does today. What he suggests here that the slave loses,

in his dehuminazation, is not some set of particular qualities which define whole

personhood, but rather the will continually to become, by means of independent initiative,

more whole and *more* fully human as time passes. Douglass's literacy is not a thing which he

had been lucky to find and internalize, and now working for Covey, of which he has

unluckily been robbed. The *capacity* to read remains; it's the *disposition* to do so which has

departed. Douglass's gloomy sense of his transformation, though, is such that, without that

disposition, the capacity is as good as naught.

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Douglass clearly attaches great importance to reading – far more than Brown does in

the *Narrative*. What this difference between Douglass and Brown means, though, will be

better understood if we take note of some famous and startling remarks of Douglass's on the subject of *writing*. (Because it helps to connect my argument about the role of writing's materiality in this passage to the rest of Douglass's project in the *Narrative of the Life*, I reproduce several sentences before and after the famous one about the pen, which I have italicized).

> I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. *My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes* [italics mine].
>
> We were not regularly allowanced [with food or clothes]. Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush* [italics Douglass's]. It was put into a large wooden tray, or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. (26)

We should note first of all that the famous image of the pen in the gash, in which the materiality of the writing implement literally renders whole a body made incomplete by the violence of slavery, is flanked forward and back by linked images of bestial desperation. Made to sleep, like an animal, on the bear earth, and driven by a desire for warmth common to all mammals, Douglass enters this bag upside down. His animal body perversely but needfully privileged over his intellect, he puts his feet where his head should be, and confines his head to a literal enactment of "the dark night of slavery." This reluctant adoption of animal priorities – warmth, sleep, survival – is the origin of Douglass's literally incomplete body. Whatever slavery has taken away from him – that thing which writing brings back – is represented by the gaps his feet suffered here.

That this condition of incompleteness and woundedness represents, to Douglass, a bestial condition, is signaled by the reappearance, in the following paragraph, of the milled corn. The bag Douglass uses as a blanket is used to transport corn to the mill, so it plays a part in producing the mush that feeds the slave children, turning them (Douglass, perhaps unwilling to describe himself so unflatteringly, has shifted to the third person) into swine. Just as Douglass lacks a bed, the children eating the mush have no spoon. The pen Douglass writes with must compensate for the absence of both of these, just as it fills the gash in the foot. Throughout, to be literate is to be human, and to be human is to be whole.

I admit I am asking some strange questions about Douglass – questions like *what actually happens to the parts of humanity of which the brutalized slave has been robbed after that robbery has been committed?* It is not a question that Douglass seems to anticipate, and not one that the *Narrative of the Life*, taken on its own terms, suggests. I entertain this questions because I think it is one that Brown seems to have gone out of his way to answer, one that he may have regarded Douglass as having overlooked unwisely. For in Brown, as in Douglass, we encounter reoccurring dialectical images of broken and whole subjectivity; in both (following, perhaps, Franklin's lead) we also encounter images of reading and writing serving as objective correlatives at the site of this dialectic. But in Douglass these images tend to be Wordsworthian, organic, and tied to a notion of writing that privileges both the intimacy of epistolary communication and the continuous fluidity of penned script. Brown's *Narrative*, as I will argue, does something telling in its differences from Douglass's *Narrative of the Life*, something much closer to the logic of print.

Like Franklin, but unlike Douglass, Brown tends to imagine the printing press rather than the pen as the privileged metonym for the practice and products authorship. Douglass's

pen image (even were we not startled by the intimacy of Douglass's describing his gnarled,

bare feet as he writes to us) denies the mechanical impersonality of writing for print to the

extent that it draws us into a fantasy that he is writing personally to us rather than

impersonally to a broad readership of people he has never met. The pen in the gash is a

prosthesis that gives Douglass's foot the appearance of wholeness, but the imaginative work

of attaching this prosthesis also occludes the materiality of print, and transmutes Douglass's

authorial relation with the reader to an epistolary one. In a sense, the startling materiality of

the pen and the foot which we *imagine* are offered to us at the cost of the only materiality to

which we have direct, *non*-imaginative access: the book whose words we are actually reading.

The power of the image is partly in its capacity to draw us into the fiction that the page we

actually hold and read has been touched by Douglass's pen, which in turn has touched his

wounded feet. What we imagine is that Douglass's book offers us access to the authenticity

of the slave's suffering which, though indirect, is mediated by a set of material substitutions

of things (foot, pen, page) that have physically touched one another rather than a set of

verbal representations.

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Even for those reading *The Narrative of the Life* in 1845, the individual pages of the

actual book being read had almost certainly never even been *looked at* by Douglass himself,

let alone touched in some indirectly intimate way.[16] For Brown it is often the printing press

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[16] Though it's somewhat out of the way of my argument, it's worth noting that writers other than Douglass and Brown approached the issue in a variety of fascinating ways. Douglass's construction of a fictional space in which the book itself gives the reader intimate (though indirect) access to his body, is mitigated, of course, by the fact that each copy was printed, rather than literally written by Douglass in holograph, but it is aided somewhat by the fact that Douglass was a major presence on the lecture circuit, and most of his first readers would arguably have memories of having at least been in the same room as he. Hawthorne, it need hardly be mentioned, cultivated the public image of (and seems in fact to some extent to have been) a homebody who

rather than the pen – the book rather than the manuscript – around which the various meanings of literacy and authorship cluster. One consequence of this distinction is that, if for Douglass slavery destroys parts of the slave's humanity, and reduces that slave to a beast, for Brown it destroys the slave's wholeness, but not the pieces of which that wholeness would, in freedom, have been composed. While this wholeness can be restored (perhaps) outside of slavery, the lost objects themselves, the components of whole personhood that Brown imagines himself to have lacked in slavery, sometimes turn up as the property and properties of other people. Douglass, again, thinks of slavery as defined primarily by the chattel principle; it is slavery because it treats people like animals, and thus as incompletely human. For Brown, though, the defining feature of slavery is that the master receives the compensation for the labor performed by the slave – that is, one complete laborer is split into two semi-laborers, the one who actually performs the work, and the one who collects the payment for that work.

> The Christian religion is opposed to slaveholding in its spirit and its principles; it classes men-stealers among murderers; and it is the duty of all who wish to meet God in peace, to discharge that duty in spreading these principles. Let us not deceive ourselves into the idea that slavery is right, because it is profitable to us.[17]

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preferred reading privately or conversing with close friends to anything else. I argue in the previous chapter that his intervention in the design of *The Scarlet Letter's* title page signals, among other things, his desire nonetheless to overcome his estrangement from his readers by adding what I think we could best call a "personal touch" to the book's physical appearance. Other examples abound. Whitman, like Douglass, seems to have worked in his writing to convince the reader that the book was, in fact, an extension of his physical presence, though the fact that, like Franklin, Whitman was a printer helps to make that illusion convincing. To hold a first edition of *Leaves of Grass* really does seem, in my experience, at least, to be to come closer to Whitman's actual physical presence, since he almost certainly had held the book himself at some point.

[17] Note the ambiguity of this sentence, which can be interpreted in at least three different ways: we should not think that something which is profitable is therefore necessarily morally right, we should not let the fact that something is profitable skew our moral judgment (the subtle but crucial difference between these two is the difference between the equally bankrupt morality of laissez-faire capitalists and Romantic apologists like, arguably, Hawthorne), and, most radically, we *should* consider the profitability of an enterprise ass sufficient evidence that it is immoral; let us not, in other words, regard slavery as right, because what is profitable is *never* right. Like the passage as a whole, then, this sentence articulates a moderate republican critique of slavery's excessive brutality in terms that never actually *dis*allow a more radical critique of capitalism more generally.

> Slaveholding is the highest possible violation of the eighth commandment. To take from a man his earnings, is theft; but to take the earner is a compound, life-long theft; and we who profess to follow in the footsteps of our Redeemer, should do our utmost to extirpate slavery from the land. (*Clotel* 127)[18]

The monitory value of the slave's labor, after all, doesn't simply disappear because the slave's work is uncompensated in any way from which the slave him or herself actually benefits. That labor is indeed exchanged for money, but it is the slaveholder who collects this money, not the laboring slave. And part of what's so cunningly subversive here is Brown's suggestion that when slavery denies whole subjectivity to the slave it also denies it to the slaveholder, because while the former does work for which someone else is paid, the latter is paid for work someone else performs. It is an argument designed to attach intuitively to specifically middle-class prejudices already firmly in place – deeply held suspicions of both the idle rich and the idle pauper, of everyone who doesn't go to work. In *The Genuine Article* Paul Gilmore notes that, though they were expected to embody the "blackness" northern whites knew from the minstrel stage, "black abolitionists like Brown… were [also] expected to mirror the ideal traits of middle-class, white manhood – intelligence, eloquence, self-restraint, and, above all, literacy" (38). Which is to say that the work of fugitive slave activists always took place within a set of audience expectations we are probably used to thinking of in racial terms, but which are also, in important ways, inflected by the class interests of that

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[18] It's worth noting that the images that cluster here, in other contexts, are ones that Brown connects both to money and to slavery, and to the strange fungibility slaves and money possess in relation to one another in the south. The epithet *Redeemer* for Christ is one that, in a Whitmanesque flourish, links Brown to Christ because, in *Clotel's* introduction, Brown casts himself as a *redeemer* twice – once as a banker who *redeems* the currency he issues, and immediately after that as a political activists who seeks to *redeem* black Americans both from slavery and from the evils of alcohol. I'll return to this punning later in the chapter, but we can see here closely Brown's theory of the interchangeability of slaves and money is linked to his notion of absolute meaning (Christ as divine transcendence) and contingent, continually reinvented meanings (which, because manifested by wordplay and punning rather than by something else, is here equated with authorship and the performative power of figurative language).

audience. These class interests can be understood as middle-class in the more-or-less straight-forward sense that they depended upon two distinct disidentificatory maneuvers; a middle class must see itself as between two other classes, rather than simply above or below another in a binary opposition. So we can regard the cultural work of the slavery question for middle-class northern whites as interpellative work insofar as, when they pondered that question, such whites experienced as a coherent narrative what might otherwise have been unformed anxieties about a lower class presumed to be illiterate and an upper class presumed to be idle.

In tales of slave life, these audiences found renewed certainty that literacy and duly compensated work were the best guarantees of moral fortitude. This sense of respectably middle class (which is to say, literate, hardworking, and justly compensated[19]) subjectivity as being, for the slave, spread across several people is an undercurrent throughout the Brown corpus, but it's one that Brown most fully literalizes in an episode from the *Narrative* set about two years after his departure from Lovejoy's newspaper, probably in 1832 when Brown was around eighteen-years-old.[20] The still illiterate Brown is has been hired out to a Mr. Walker, a slave trader working between Saint Louis and New Orleans, and while staying briefly in Vicksburg Brown displeases Walker by being insufficiently deferential to some

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[19] There are gendered implications here too, obviously. For middle-class women, though generally literate, were not supposed to work very hard, and were almost never compensated for what labor they performed. Unfortunately the ways in which Brown's rendering of whole subjectivity is implicitly a masculine subjectivity (which it often is) exceed the scope of my project. Paul Gilmore's book, which includes a chapter on Brown, is a compelling and subtle analysis of precisely these issues, and it is chiefly to Gilmore that I owe my understanding of the centrality of literacy to the self-understanding of the ante-bellum middle class.

[20] In dating the events of Brown's life, I've used primarily the excellent chronology in Robert S. Levine's edition of *Clotel* (29-43). Taking this chronology to be the gold standard (in the absence of any more authoritative source, and with full knowledge that many of the events are impossible to date precisely) I've checked each date I use to ensure that it at least *does not contradict* the information Levine has collected.

guests the trader is entertaining in his hotel room. The next morning Walker instructs Brown

to carry a written note and one dollar to the local jailer (49-51). Sensing that something is

being hidden from him, Brown asks a "sailor" he passes by on the street leading to the jail

what the note says. (The oddly specific designation *sailor*,[21] rhyming as it does with the *jailer*

who was the note's intended recipient, is the beginning of a complicated process of doubling

that characterizes the entire anecdote.)

> Said [the sailor],
> "They are going to give you hell."
> "Why?" said I.
> He said, "This is a note to have you whipped, and says you have a dollar to
> pay for it." (49)[22]

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[21] And somewhat suspect, given that "sailors" proper – whether merchant or naval – would probably have little business so far upriver. My suspicion is that Brown has (perhaps deliberately) misnamed some other kind marine worker in order to get the rhyme with *jailor*, and that, if deliberate, the inaccuracy serves to call attention to Brown's privileging of the sound of the word over its exact meaning.

[22] Not entirely unimportant here is Brown's presentation of the sailor's words as direct discourse, which is superimposed over the sailor's *indirect* reportage of the note's content; the sailor paraphrases the note and resists verbal identification with its author (even though he has the note right in front of him to read from). The sailor thus refuses to identify with the slave trader while Brown, as narrator, elects to quote the sailor's words directly, even though his access to the sailor's words (those of a short conversation he had with a stranger decades ago) can hardly have been remembered exactly. It's strangely appropriate that Brown the autobiographical subject, later in the anecdote, begins for the first time in the *Narrative*, telling out-and-out lies – deliberately presenting as if true stories of things that he knows did not, in fact, happen. The implausibility of Brown's reportage here (are we really meant to believe that he remembers this conversation word for word? that this sailor's mediation of a note he holds in his hands is more elaborate than Brown's mediation of words spoken by a stranger a lifetime ago?) can be seen in retrospect to anticipate Brown's interest in the mixing of fiction and non-fiction, an interest that would serve as *Clotel's* major aesthetic preoccupation and which endured, as revolutionary practice, well into the twentieth century in, for instance, the films of Jacques Rivette or Vilgot Sjöman. In a sense, the paradigm that would later serve *I Am Curious Yellow* and *Blue* so well begins with *Clotel*, and *Clotel's* shuffling of documentary and fictional materials begins here, with Brown's need not just to combine the journalist's credibility with the artist's authority, but to do so in such a way that the credibility is achieved not, as in journalism proper, by rendering the artistry transparent, but, paradoxically, by showcasing this artistry – by calling attention to it. It's one of the many ways in which Brown, especially in *Clotel*, anticipates the Brechtian strain of twentieth-century art. (Think here of Jean Luc Godard, especially.) The credibility of his political vision, and the veracity of his reporting, are assured by the jarring, overt, and sometimes deliberately clumsy use of what are obviously fiction's tools. Brown's writing strikes us as *more* rather than *less* true because it parades, and does not journalistically conceal, the ways in which, like any representation, it transforms what it transmits.

Brown is, of course, eager to avoid the beating which he now knows the note promises him, and while wondering how to do so he espies a free black man of about his own age and build (for the sake of clarity I'll call this man *the double*). Concocting an elaborate fiction, Brown tells the double that a trunk is waiting at the jail to be picked up and delivered to a river steamer, that the dollar is payment for the job (which Brown claims he is too busy to do himself), and that the note is instructions for the jailor concerning the truck. With this ruse Brown tricks the double into delivering the note, and arranges for the free man to receive a beating intended for the slave.

But of course this plan only works because, though one is the property of another man and the other belongs to himself, both Brown and the double are black, and thus Brown seems sure on site that a) the double will not be able to claim credibly before the jailer *not* to be a slave, and b) the double, like Brown, will be unable to read the note for himself in order to discover its true contents. The double's "freedom" from being himself enslaved is not, by itself, free access to the meanings of written words or, apparently, free access to the education that would make literacy available. At the same time, Brown's ability to recognize the double's vulnerability to this ruse links the stakes of literacy to something distinct from slavery per se: *race*. Brown's successful physiognomic[23] navigation of a racist

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[23] I'm using the word here in the sense that Brown is making correct judgments about other people's capacities by looking at them, and in this case he has recognized the double as a man who likely cannot read and likely would be interested in earning a small sum of money. These are qualities that might reasonably be presumed of anybody who is obviously poor, and the signifiers of poverty are not physiognomic in the strict sense – the sense of having to do with innate features of the face or head. People who are unwashed, whose hair is ungroomed, and whose clothes are ill-fitting, of inferior cloth, or heavily worn are probably poor, and in the nineteenth century a man who is very poor is likely also illiterate and interested in earning some extra money. Brown does not tell us how the double is dressed, though; he only tells us that the double is a free black man. While the double must be black for the trick to work (since the jailor must believe that the double is in fact a slave), this *racial* designation is the closest thing we get to an explanation for Brown's ability to make the two other key assumptions he must make at first sight: that the double would be interested in an opportunity to make some money easily, and that he would not be able to read the note himself. So Brown has

culture, his ability immediately to recognize a man vulnerable to this particular trick on sight,

pits his inability to read the note (for which he enlisted the help of the sailor) with his deft

capacity to read people. Brown and the double are positioned differently in relation to

slavery – one is a slave and the other is free – but this turns out to matter less than what they

share: the blackness that allows both to be read as slaves (one correctly and the other

erroneously), and the illiteracy that prevents each from decoding the note Walker has written

to the jailer. So writing and race circulate in the episode as visual codes that some people can

read and others can't. Sometimes they collude, and at other times they contest one another.

That Brown, in approaching the double, has interpreted the double's blackness as suggestive

of illiteracy only serves to emphasize further the multiplicity of potential bonds between the

two codes.

When the double reemerges from the jail a few minutes later – hurt, humiliated, and

predictably enraged – he accuses Brown of a cruel deception, but Brown disingenuously

claims that, being illiterate, he can't have been expected to know what the note actually said.

Brown is betting that the double will be able to read his (Brown's) blackness as an

inscription of his illiteracy just as, minutes earlier, Brown had read the double's blackness.

And it's of course true that Brown is, like the double, both black and illiterate. Whatever sets

them apart (and given what little information Brown offers, it's neither more nor less than

the fact that one is a slave and the other is free) joins itself to the cleverness with which

Brown overcomes his illiteracy by enlisting the aid of the sailor, while the double fails

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identified himself with Walker here, both by sending the double on the same errand with which Walker has
charged Brown himself, and by correctly determining, at least partly because of the double's blackness, how the
double might best be manipulated to advantage, how he might take racist advantage of the double's illiteracy.

similarly to circumvent his own. That is, the double, being black but also free, is essentially imagined as a coherent and whole subject. He may undertake work, but will do so voluntarily and in exchange for monitory compensation, just as he has agreed to do for Brown, who has offered to pay him a dollar to move a trunk. This wholeness would seem to be an advantage, and a privilege denied slaves who, because they work for pay reaped by another, are broken into semi-subjects by the defining properties of their enslavement. It's as if because Brown is denied full humanity by slavery, he is able to enlist prostheses in the form of other people in a way the double can't or wouldn't think to. Just as the whites who own and hire him collect the money that Brown's labor earns, Brown – already broken and incomplete – enlists the aid of the sailor who serves him as a set of prosthetic, literate eyes, and dupes the double into serving as a prosthetic back which absorbs the pain of the beating intended for Brown himself. The double, because he is not a slave and, we can assume, owns no slaves himself, is less well equipped to accommodate the realities of a slaveholding culture. It does not occur to him that Brown may have access to literacy stored in another man's body, or that, in delivering the note for Brown, his own body might receive wounds in Brown's stead.

When the double emerges from the jail he is carrying a second note, this one from the jailer to Walker, in reply to the note from the first half of the episode. The jailer wrongly believes he has just successfully followed Walker's instructions, and is writing on that occasion. Once again taking somewhat perverse advantage of the double's authority to conduct his own business, Brown buys this second note for fifty cents "that being all the money I had." Upon reaching the hotel where Walker is lodged, Brown sees yet another character – "a stranger whom I had not seen before" – and asks to be read aloud the contents of the new note. This stranger does what the sailor did not do: he reads the note

verbatim. (Brown admits his recollection of the note's wording may be inexact, but its content is set typographically in the manner of a letter and a direct quotation.)

> Dear Sir – By your direction, I have given your boy twenty lashes. He is a very saucy boy, and tried to make me believe that he did not belong to you, and I put it on him well for lying to me. (51)

"I remain," the jailer somewhat absurdly concludes, "your obedient servant;" the jailer (presumably a poor white) implausibly identifies more closely with the slave he believes he has just beaten than with the slaveholder as whose proxy, in delivering this beating, he has acted. This closing enacts a dual-displacement, in which the jailer stands simultaneously for the slave he is asked to beat and the slaveholder on whose behalf the beating is delivered. While the sailor had merely paraphrased the first note for Brown, this stranger (himself a paradigmatic substitution for the sailor, the one met on the road to the jail, and the other met on the same road traveled in the opposite direction) quotes it directly, assuming the voice of the jailer and delivering to Brown an address, in the second person, meant for Walker, casting Brown – suddenly and significantly – as his own master. The epistolary structure of address in the second note, because Brown, in asking the stranger to read it to him, has cunningly deployed that structure catachrestically, mines interpellative effects specific to written (as opposed to oral) communication so as to heal the psycho-structural violence of enslavement. Because the content of the note exists as a material artifact, the relationship between Walker and the jailer can be appropriated and inhabited by other people, in this case Brown and the stranger. This is a subtle continuation of the tricksterism Brown used when he fooled the double in that, just as with the double, Brown looks for ways to stage the problem of the disordered subjectivity he is forced to inhabit as its own solution. Because, illiterate, he *must* ask the stranger to read the note to him, he is cast

verbally in the place of Walker, to whom the note is actually addressed. The words create a counterfactual verbal order in which Brown belongs to himself, and is both the man who does the work and the man who gets paid for it. The various prosthetic substitutions Brown employs to overcome his illiteracy and avoid the punishment to which he's been consigned come together here – a virtue born of necessity – as an opportunity to imagine a life outside of slavery, a subjectivity intact rather than shattered.

Literate reading for Brown is in this episode a project which must be sustained across several social encounters with several distinct people. Reading is in this sense, Brown would suggest, of a piece with every other form of labor in a social order sustained by the existence of slavery. Though the slave's subjectivity is here imagined as fragmented and weirdly scattered, it remains one in which there are crucial moments of access to written texts, and as this access becomes fuller and less indirect (symptomized here by the transition from indirect to direct quotation as we move from sailor to stranger) the slave becomes more interchangeable with the free black, better able to protect himself from slavery's violence (though, in this case, that violence is unfortunately redirected onto the innocent and vulnerable), and closer, at least rhetorically, to self-possession.

The anecdote's final substitution, in which Brown is cast as Walker, completes the circle of identification in such a way that writer, reader, currier, and recipient are all phases of a single imagined subject who can both read and write, and who can determine the paths by which written texts circulate through the world – a subject who claims ownership of himself, but not of anybody else. The episode begins, after all, when Walker substitutes the jailer for himself by asking the jailer to administer a beating that he (Walker) would like to see Brown suffer. Brown then substitutes the sailor for the jailer when he delivers the note, at least

initially, for the former rather than to the latter; after the encounter with the sailor, Brown

substitutes the double for himself by tricking the double into delivering the note (and

receiving the beating) in his own stead; the jailer then composes a note of reply in which he

casts himself as Walker's "servant," rhetorically putting himself in Brown's shoes (as, in a

sense, Brown has done to Walker – like his master, Brown has sent somebody to the jail to

be whipped, thus using the jailer's body to commit an act of violence for which he is

ultimately himself to blame). On the way back from the jail, Brown replaces the sailor with

the stranger by the hotel, by casting the latter in the same role which the former had played

on the journey's first leg; in giving the note to the stranger, Brown furthermore substitutes

the stranger for Walker, the note's intended recipient. In reading the note verbatim and

aloud, the stranger takes on the voice of the jailer, and casts Brown in the role of the master

(here, because of the structure of address, the master of "your servant" – the jailor – whose

voice has been assumed by the stranger, a man who, unlike the note-paraphrasing sailor,

actually has done *exactly* as Brown instructed, casting himself as more nearly *Brown's* servant

than any other character in the episode). Like the prosthetic literacy offered by the sailor and

the stranger, the prosthesis of the double's body, in suffering a beating to which Brown

wishes not to subject himself, shows Brown making use of others' bodies in order to

overcome the limitations of his own. Strewn across all of these characters is the wholeness

that slavery denies its victims (and to a lesser, or at least a less brutal extent, its perpetrators

as well): a full humanity which Brown imagines in terms consistent with those of middle-

class republicanism as defined by literacy and the willingness to do one's own work.

Complete subjectivity here is marked by the capacity to read, write, work, and be

compensated for one's labor. Slaveholding society denies or disrupts this capacity, but that

disruption takes a particular form; the illiterate subject is, in effect, a literate subject broken into several distinct people – people whose relations to one another are only ever mediated by anonymity, willful deception, or money.[24] The anecdote is not just an image of the social and intra-subjective discontinuities produced by slavery, but a refracted vision of what it would mean for those discontinuities to be repaired, for the slave's damaged subjectivity to heal and become whole. For the slave, though, that wholeness is only ever imagined – the literate subjectivity to which Brown lays claim in the very act of writing his autobiography is, for his enslaved past self, broken up into the acts of six seperate people.

Brown may (like Franklin) enjoy this kind of tricksterism, and the episode certainly makes him seem to be both clever and enterprising. Indeed if we assume that the beaten man is not badly hurt, or that we've no reason to care about his wellbeing, the episode is darkly comic (though, partly for this reason, the "darkly comic" is an aesthetic mode better suited to fiction, where the suffering of real people is never felt to be at stake). But in tricking an innocent man into taking a beating, Brown is also casting himself as the agent of slavery's brutality. Even if we sympathize with Brown here, we do not do so with the kind of sympathy mobilized by a sentimental protagonist like Uncle Tom, or Brown's Clotel, or even Hester Prynne.

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[24] Again, this representational scheme presents a stark contrast to that of Frederick Douglass, in which the things which a slave loses and needs to recover in order to feel whole stop existing for a time, and reappear only when they become recoverable in and as writing. It's as if the two-fifths of full humanity slaves were denied in the Constitution has been represented differently by the two writers. For Douglass it is simply gone until it comes back. For Brown it seems to belong to somebody else.

In an act of (perhaps perfunctory) damage control, Brown tellingly offers that had he "entertained the same views or [sic][25] right or wrong which I do now, I am sure I should [as in *would*, or as in *ought*?] never have practiced the deception upon that poor fellow which I did" (51).[26] Brown's trickster-like misbehavior is here opposed explicitly to the middle-class values he now assures us he embraces, and these values are thus implicitly linked to literacy and liberty, the package of liberty, literacy, and sincerity being offered as a vision of wholeness which overcomes the social- and self-divisions of the narrated events themselves: "I know of no act committed by me while in slavery" the chapter concludes in, disingenuously, the passive voice (the *Narrative's* first edition had used the active), "which I have regretted more than [the deception of this man]; and I heartily desire that it may be at some time or other in my power to make him amends for his vicarious sufferings in my behalf" (51). Thus the sentimental energies restore wholeness to Brown's subjectivity and order to his relation to his audience. Where, as a slave, Brown had contrived for another man to feel bodily pain in his stead, he now, in true sentimental style, feels in his heart emotional pain on behalf of the deceived man. Alienation is replaced by empathy, the body by the emotions, and the eagerness to deflect pain, intended for you, onto the body of another is replaced by the willingness to accept another's pain as your own.

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[25] I'm not sure if "or" here is a printer's error for "of" (which seems plausible given that the lowercase r and f have a superficial similarity) or if it is an arcane (but my reading would suggest grammatical) usage for what, in modern English, would be "either."

[26] I quote the longer and more contrite passage from the second edition. In the first edition Brown takes less of the blame for himself and casts himself more as the victim of slavery's morally corrosive influence. The entire paragraph in the first edition reads: "This incident shows how it is that slavery makes its victims lying and mean; for which vices it afterwards reproaches them, and uses them as arguments to prove that they deserve no better fate. I have often, since my escape, deeply regretted the deception I practised [sic] upon this poor fellow; and I heartily desire that it may be, at some time or other, in my power to make him amends for his vicarious sufferings in my behalf" (57-58).

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At the beginning of this chapter I observed that, in describing his work at the *Saint Louis Times*, Brown implicitly compares himself to Benjamin Franklin, and in particular to the authorial persona Franklin deploys in the first pages of his *Autobiography*. This kind of imaginative identification with Franklin would likely have been attractive to Brown for several reasons beyond Franklin's well-known accomplishments as a public figure. Franklin's name is inextricably linked to anything we could call American "national identity," and after Jefferson's and perhaps Adams's it is the name most closely associated with the Declaration of Independence, a document that would be thematically central to *Clotel*. In this sense Franklin is tied not just to the principles of America's founding but to the *most radical* principles of its founding (though the politic Franklin would, of course, avoid the more heated excesses of a Patrick Henry or Thomas Paine). In spite of his general goodwill and gentle rhetorical touch, Franklin represents a willingness to countermand the letter of the law if this transgression is necessary to safeguard the higher laws the Declaration famously outlines – laws which, like racial hierarchies in the nineteenth-century United States, are imagined by most to be the political and structural epiphenomena arising from deeper, immutable facts of nature. It is this willingness that Brown would claim posthumously for Nat Turner in *Clotel*, thus casting the 1831 slave rebellion (of which the criminalization of black literacy was a major consequence) as an extension of – and not a resistance to – the rights demanded by American independence.[27] That Franklin (unlike, notoriously, the Declaration's principal author) was in life neither a slaveholder nor a man particularly

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[27] Most explicitly in George's impassioned plea to the jury at his trial (224-5).

tortured by ambivalence over slavery's morality may help to explain Brown's eagerness to

identify with him as, in the *Narrative*, he embarks upon his own career as a writer.

(Paradoxically, though, it also suggests the reason for which the older Brown of *Clotel* – now

bitterly disillusioned by the compromise of 1850 and scornful of empty American promises

both northern and southern – would turn his attention away from the Franklinian paradigm

and toward the more irredeemably corrupt and dramatically intriguing Jefferson, a man

whose inner moral conflicts served as a template for the nation now tearing itself in two.)

But I've also shown that, where for the young Franklin the experience of working

involuntarily at a newspaper constitutes an exercise in literary self-fashioning and a catalyst

for a new and newly multivalent relation to reading and writing, for the illiterate Brown, the

experience of working at the press, while as good as anything else slavery has to offer, is not

an opportunity to create a coherent literary subjectivity but rather a symptom of the slave's

disunity. This disunity is both particularly acute and particularly obvious in Brown the

autobiographical subject's relationship to the printed word, which he helps by his labor to

produce, but which he cannot read. In a world that made sense, a man who helped to

produce a newspaper would also be, at least potentially, a newspaper consumer, just as a man

who performs economically valuable labor should also be the man who collects the payment

for that labor, and just as, if Franklin is any indication, a man writing an autobiography

should be writing about an autobiographical subject who possesses (or at least comes in the

course of the narrative to possess) the specialized verbal knowledge required to produce

such a document. In other words, the doubleness Brown performs at the site of printed

textuality (both as the author of an illiterate man's autobiography and as an illiterate

autobiographical subject who prints a newspaper he cannot read) serves as a practical

illustration and elucidating allegory for the basic fact of what slavery does: it takes what should be a society of self-ruling individuals who earn their bread by the sweat of their own brows and divides them into a class who labors for no pay and a class who is paid for no labor. This dynamic might manifest itself in any of several ways in the course of an individual life, but for Brown it manifests itself repeatedly as a relation to writing. For a southern slave, worse off even than Franklin during his indenture, learning to print is not organically linked – or indeed linked in any way – with learning to read or write. Even years later, as we see in the incident with the jailer, Brown still can only gain access to documents which directly concern him by means of the prosthesis of other people's bodies.

But even if we confine ourselves to matters somehow related to print culture, the unjust distribution of literacy is only one of the ways that Brown seeks to stoke his northern, white, middle-class audience's moral indignation. Part of what marks the social relations of the world Brown describes as polluted for this audience is those relation's implication – simultaneously one of instability and dependence – in acts of monetary exchange. Though the entire anecdote of the sailor and jailer is couched in terms of a corrupt economy in which labor and remuneration are misaligned, it is also peppered with a strange amount of detail regarding cash payment. The dollar Brown has been given to pay the jailor (and then uses as part of his ruse with the double), and the fifty cents Brown gives the double in exchange for the second note, stand out partly because neither they nor their exact monitory value are of decisive importance to the plot; the episode would make as much sense without them. Alongside this (presumably coined) money are the two notes, which, as the other physical objects of exchange, function as a kind of shadow currency – one that is

significantly in the form of inscribed pieces of paper, a form they share with paper money and the pages of the *Narrative* itself.

In a move we might see as symptomatic of middle-class ambivalence toward the marketplace more generally, in Brown's *Narrative* the "bad" marketplace of bribes and slave auctions is attended contrapuntally by a Franklinesque "good" marketplace where hard work is reliably rewarded with wealth, and wealth reliably indicates integrity and moral rectitude. Brown walks a fine line here; he can get his audience to identify strongly with his narrative, and thus mobilize their antipathy toward slavery and slaveholders, by tapping into that audience's frustrations with the injustice of the marketplace, but for that identification not to redound upon the reader as an unpleasant sense of shame and complicity in the economic injustice of capitalism (which would threaten the reader's identificatory bond with the slave by enabling a competing identification with the slaveholders) Brown must be careful to direct the reader's frustrations – which are arguably rooted not so much in slavery in the South but in the horrors of industrial life in the North – not at markets in general but at *slave* markets in particular. Thus what makes slavery a problem must be seen to be the fact that it makes *human beings* objects of the marketplace, but the solution to that problem, more often than not, needs to be for those objects to become *subjects* of the marketplace. Slavery must be shown not to be a symptom of the evils of capitalism in general but to be a threat to what is *good* in capitalism.

So it should not surprise us that, in Brown's description of his work for Lovejoy, this ambivalence toward the marketplace manifests itself partly through a verbal alchemy by which Brown renders social relations as if they were relations of economic exchange; this is what allows him to solicit his reader's identification (because that reader has a vague sense

that money is ruining life, but also that capitalism offers, or should offer, everyone a chance to get rich) blaming slaveholders for all that is spiritually deadening about the marketplace while insisting that, if only capitalism were allowed to work the way it was supposed to, no one would be exploited and everyone would be happy. So the bond Brown seeks to establish with his readers, which will open a channel of communication with them by which he hopes they can be (further) politicized as abolitionists, is one that solicits identification from those who – consciously or not – see the logic of business as a threat to the bonds of fellowship. At the same time, to prevent his readers from opposing capital markets in general rather than slave markets in particular, Brown uses the language of business itself as a way to imagine a path out of slavery and toward the economic self-determination that capitalism supposes is everyone's due.

As it happens, this is a kind of inversion of slavery's logic. The actual relation of master to slave is one of economic coercion, but it is yet often described by the paternalist ideology of the pro-slavery establishment as belonging to the harmonious southern private sphere. Slaves are regarded within this ideology not as the brutalized prisoners they seem to many northerners to be but rather as cherished and almost-human domestic companions, like dogs only too pleased to serve faithfully. By introducing economic language into relations that *do not* seem exploitative (like, as I will show, his own relationship with Elijah Lovejoy) Brown takes what seems genuinely friendly and describes them as if they were an economic transaction, returning to the foreground the economic base which slavery shrouds in the cloying rhetorical superstructure of the plantation myth. So these economic relations are among the things that slavery's rhetoric tries to hide, but they are also things that inhabit

a rhetorical register from which, as a slave, Brown is barred; they name states of being from which, like the republic of letters, he is officially excluded.

Let's return to the scene of sixteen-year-old Brown working at Lovejoy's press, the first passage of which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. (Because I will be focusing on that passage, and its sequel, for the next several pages, I'll quote it again here.)

> I was soon… hired to Elijah P. Lovejoy, who was at that time publisher and editor of the St. Louis *Times*. My work while with him was mainly in the printing office, waiting on the hands, working the presses, &c. Mr. Lovejoy was a very good man, and decidedly the best master I had ever had. I am chiefly indebted to him, and to my employment in the printing office, for what little learning I obtained while in slavery. (34)

After the impotent passive voice of "I was soon… hired to Elijah P. Lovejoy, who was at that time publisher and editor of the St. Louis *Times*," the tone abruptly shifts: "My work while with him was mainly in the printing office, waiting on the hands, working the presses, &c." Brown's designation of his labor here as "*my* work" is, though perhaps not revolutionary, still noteworthy. The phrase "my work" only appears twice in the *Narrative*, first in the voice of a proudly resistant slave refusing to be whipped (29), and a second time here in Brown's own voice.[28] There's nothing unusual, of course, about the mere use of the possessive to refer to the work performed by slaves, and Brown refers to "their work" or

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[28] The physically imposing but usually docile Randall addresses his bullying overseer: "Mr. Cook, I have always tried to please you since you have been on the plantation, and I find you are determined not to be satisfied with *my work*, let me do as well as I may. No man has laid hands on me, to whip me, for the last ten years, and I have long since come to the conclusion not to be whipped by any man living" (29, emphasis added). Randall is later severely beaten and subdued in a sequence which some have argued shows Brown to be critical of Frederick-Douglass-style direct resistance (see especially Gilmore 58-59). My point here, though, is that slaves in Brown's *Narrative* only describe their work as their own when the burden their enslavement is felt to be lighter than it actually is; it is an emblem of their unwillingness to cede ownership of their labor to the white men who own their bodies. Both Randall and, as we shall see, Brown are rudely awakened by violent assaults on "their" bodies to the fact that those bodies are always vulnerable to violence and never actually theirs at all.

"her work" several times elsewhere in the *Narrative*. But in the context of antebellum writing

such phrasing, even when there is nothing stylistically unusual about it, is always attended by

the general truth that slaves are forbidden from owning property, and the particular truth

that slaves are *especially* denied ownership of the work they perform, this being the denial in

which, for Brown, their condition as slaves most fully inheres. It is only as a figure of speech

that a slave may be said to possess *anything*, but slavery as such is above all the proscription

of the slave's laying claim to the work he or she performs, for to claim possession of that

work would be to claim the economic value of that work, and the money for which that

work is exchanged.

Brown is, likewise, "indebted" not just to Lovejoy but to his own (again, "my")

employment in the printing office for what little learning he "obtained" (not *was given*) while

enslaved. The printing office, however meager the knowledge it actually afforded him,[29]

allows Brown to represent himself after the fact as an agent in imaginary economic

transitions, and not as merely an animal whose labor and body are owned and traded by

others. It's important, then, that this sense of self-mastery (even if a fleeting and illusory self-

mastery) is closely connected for Brown to the memory of having worked at Lovejoy's press

– that he is "indebted" to Lovejoy, that it is only in this episode that Brown refers to the

labor he performs as "my work." Brown the autobiographical subject can only be described

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[29] Again, Senchyne makes much of this learning, arguing that to be useful to Lovejoy Brown would at least
have to recognize the shapes of letters so as to be able to sort type back into its cases. That might be true. The
laborious process of sorting such type, and the desire to remove the need to pay for that labor, was one of the
reasons for which Ottmar Mergenthaler's late-nineteenth-century invention of the Linotype machine, which
automatically returned the matrices and spacers to storage, was so important for economics of the printing
industry. I repeat, though, that given the centrality of the question of literacy to most slave narratives, the fact
that the reader is never told the content of the "little learning" is a significant omission we would be unwise to
ignore. We should not simply disregard the fact that Brown *never tells us* he learned any kind of reading skills
while working with Lovejoy, even if it stands to reason that he must have.

as possessing this work because the norms of English usage seem to make no room for the dehumanizing realities of slavery – the same way the slave might say "my hand" though all the while painfully aware that that hand, likewise, is not his own. But Brown the narrator, who knows what future awaits the slave about whom he writes, will go on to possess his own work in fact, and it is a particular kind of work that, here midway through the composition of what will become his first book, concerns him most: authorship. Indeed, in the second edition of the *Narrative*, once he has in every sense arrived as a professional author of published volumes, Brown seems to have only more in his thoughts the fact that, because he is now someone who arranges the words to be printed rather than someone who merely pulls the leaver which actually imprints them, *his work* is now not merely the act of making the texts but, as their author, the texts themselves. Witness, for example, the prefatory "Note to the Second Edition" which, running only three sentences, still allows Brown to refer to the volume itself as a "work" three times.[30] So the self-possession and economic agency Brown imagines for himself in the vicinity of the remembered printing press helps to unite Brown the author and Brown the autobiographical subject into a single and whole subjectivity – meeting the same integrative need that Franklin's inability to remember his illiterate infancy had met in the *Autobiography*. But where Franklin could meet these needs simply by failing to remember a period in life which most people forget anyway, the particular intra-subjective discontinuities experienced by slave autobiographers –

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[30] In full, the "Note" reads: "The first edition, of three thousand copies, of this little work was sold in less than six months from the time of its publication. Encouraged by the rapid sale of the first, and by a demand for a second, edition, the author has been led to enlarge the work by the addition of matter which, he thinks, will add materially to its value.

"And if it shall be instrumental in helping to undo the heavy burdens, and letting the oppressed go free, he will have accomplished the great desire of his heart in publishing this work" (19).

including most importantly that they write as free people the autobiographies of enslaved ones, and that they write *at all* the autobiographies of illiterate ones – levy tolls that Franklin did not have to pay.

It matters that this unity is contingent upon the *printing* of words rather than, as for Douglass, with his pen in the gash, writing which is (or imagines itself to be) holograph, epistolary, intimate, and not mechanically reproduced. By writing the *Narrative* as words to be read from a printed book (words describing a past in which he had printed words but could not read or write them) Brown the autobiographer both stages his continuity with the autobiographical subject about whom he writes and redresses in freedom the alienation to which a person must *always* be subject before the fruits of his or her labor (and indeed before that labor's value) under slavery. The work of a slave who can print words but cannot read them offers an allegorical synecdoche for the labor of all slaves everywhere, one made but more poignant and more aesthetically satisfying because it intersects with (and attempts to heal the divisions of) the fissures along which the narrating autobiographer has most sharply broken from the autobiographical subject whose story he has been asked to tell.

Brown the narrator recalling his work for Lovejoy – not just literate but professionally so, and yet writing about a part of his past during which his illiteracy probably weighed heavily on him – must have inhabited a kind of alphabetic double consciousness. He would have been, in a sense, literate and illiterate simultaneously. For the passage to qualify as autobiographical at all we must allow ourselves to believe that the person writing and the person being written about are distinct iterations of what is ultimately a single, coherent subjectivity. Brown's authorial relation to the *Narrative* thus inverts his past self's relation to Lovejoy's the press, but possess the same self division. The present Brown and

his enslaved past self must each regard his identity as shaped both by access and lack of access to what is written. For the autobiographical subject, words can be printed but not read or written; for the autobiographer, the past self whose story must be told is irrevocably lost, since to *write* that self's autobiography is by definition no longer to be the same person. This doubleness is manifested in striking and subtle ways in the passage, almost as if the ink on the page were a means by which to reenact the fall into alphabetic knowledge that divides the young slave from the middle-aged author – a fall we can call, using Patricia Crain's useful term, Brown's "alphabetization."[31] For one thing, the meaning of the passage depends in marked ways upon visual cues that would seem to stand for precisely the semiotic technologies that the aural/oral linguistic space of slave life is denied: that is, words made visible as ink on paper. Brown's "work" (a word which is, again, always attended by its potential also to signify both the *Narrative* itself and the act of laboring) is not that of waiting on the hands working the press, but of waiting on the hands *and* – which is to say: *comma* – working the press. His direct contact with the text-making machine (rather than merely with the paid and presumably-literate laborers who enjoy such contact) is both enabled by and represented by a nonverbal cue with no direct counterpart in spoken language. Without the comma the passage is intelligible, but it means something else – and, crucially, the something else which it means would describe Brown's relationship to the printing press as one mediated by probably-white "hands." Our sense that Brown is actually physically printing

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[31] See Crain's *The Story of A*, especially 6-7. Crain means by *alphabetization* not merely the acquisition of the ability to read and write (though this is certainly the *most* significant element of alphabetization) but also the subject's internalization of a broader range of alphabetically structured knowledges, such as, for instance, the arrangement of individual letters in "alphabetical order," an order which need not exist for the alphabet to represent sounds or words. In Japanese, for instance, competing publishers produce dictionaries arranged in terms of proprietary and wholly distinct sequencing algorithms, such that, to find a given word, one must first know how that particular dictionary has sequenced the characters of which Japanese words are built.

with *his own* hands – that his is the arm that pulls the lever that moves the plate that inks the page – depends entirely on the presence of this comma, which possesses a positive orthographic presence as punctuation, but which, if we read the passage aloud, has only negative existence as aural speech. It suggests a verbal pause, in which no sound is made for a semiotically meaningful length of time, and it affects the intonation of the phrase which follows it, but this comma makes no sound itself. And the fact that, as a technology, the comma bears an unstable and less-than-intuitive relationship to ordinary speech is evidenced by the difficulty which, even when they are fluent and native speakers of English, all grade school children (and even some graduate students) experience in understanding how and when to use it. Furthermore, Brown's unmediated contact with the press, in which his "working" (again a crucial word) of it entails his hand actually touching it, and presumably touching the paper and documents themselves too, initiates an infinite (or at least indefinitely contained) field of potential relations to the world, since "working the press" is followed by the open-ended, and unspeakable "&c." I will want to dwell at some length on this &c.

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How many other tasks is Brown charged with at the press? Does he, as Senchyne assumes, learn how to recognize letters, and thus begin his journey toward literacy and authorship? Are these other tasks not specified because they are not important to the story, or because they can be easily guessed? If the latter, does Brown suppose we can guess at them because they are already suggested by, and similar to, those he has already specified by name, or has he instead assumed that the reader, as someone reading a book, must naturally know what kinds of things go on at a printing press? Is he assuming that we, as literate

northerners, must have a Franklin-like relationship to books, in which, because we consume them as buyers, we must also write them as authors and produce them as printers?

All we can say for sure is: a set of unspecified tasks Brown performs for Lovejoy, whether small or large, resists the limits of both (or does not merit either) exact quantification and precise specification. Is the potential interminability of this list, its refusal to hint at how many items it might contain, meant to suggest an unfettered state of freedom antithetical to enslavement, or to suggest the unceasing labor, the never-ending catalog of meaningless tasks, which *is* enslavement? Which more fully, for Brown, exceeds the bounds of quantification under slavery: the burden of toil, or the opportunities for Franklinesque self-improvement? In other words, is our uncertainty over how many items would feature the *full* version of this list a symptom of Brown's condition as a slave, or a way for him to manifest that slave's capacity to imagine the freedom he is denied? A second question must be laid over any of these several formulations of this first one: Is the *et cetera* which signifies this unstable, open-ended list meant to show us that writing is so powerful as to represent even what is unspeakable about slavery, or is it meant rather to show us that writing is so impotent as to fail even to represent that which is most mundane in life: work? As a physical medium, print is subject to the limits of time and space, even though it can also represent and communicate the content of that which sees itself as free from these limitations: the imagination. That is, the *et cetera* designates an unspecified quantity of unspecified other things. In being so designated, are these things more akin to slavery or to freedom? Is the fact that they are not specified evidence of language's power or of its futility?

Perhaps we can't answer these questions, but I think we can be sure that they are the right questions to ask – that the position from which to engage Brown's writings is one that

assumes slavery and the printed word to be, in his understanding, mutually linked in ways

both crucial and obscure – in ways liable to reverse their political polarity from hegemonic to

subversive or subversive to hegemonic instantly and without warning. In this discussion I'll

be treating Brown's notion of this list's refusal to be contained – its insistence on being

interminable – as one that is ultimately affirmative, one that associates Brown's &c. with

what is emblematic of freedom, literacy, and language's power. I do so because it seems to

me more consistent with Brown's ideas about language and writing as they're expressed in

his other works. But it's worth remembering that the list of tasks with which Brown

remembers having been charged also resists the hegemony of print in certain ways, and that

Brown is, like many other writers (Hawthorne's name comes to mind), continually fascinated

with the capacity of seeming freedom to contain elements of bondage, seeming bondage to

offer tools of potential liberation.

The ampersand of the &c. straddles the boundary between what counts as written

language and what does not so count. Like Brown the autobiographical subject as he works

the presses, the ampersand situates itself imperfectly in an alphabetic machinery to which it

both does and doesn't belong. I will be assuming that, for Brown at the level of conscious

intent and manifest content, agency lies in identification with, absorption into, and mastery

over that machine, whether this machine be the alphabet itself or the communicative,

inscriptive, and distributive capacities for which the print shop and the printing press itself

serve in the episode as emblems. But I shall not make this assumption without noting that

literacy, particularly within a cultural landscape still coming to terms with the legacy

Romanticism, can also be viewed as the imposition of an artificial order upon a more organic

and authentic (if perhaps less conventionally grown-up) pre-literate self. In this

Wordsworthian notion of literacy, the capacity to read is what compensates a grown man (or woman) for the loss of something possibly even more precious – contact with an invisible world in which the deeper life of things resides.

If one of the two qualities we must note about this list of printing house chores is that it ends with *et cetera*, the other is that the *et* here is not written out like the *et* in the abbreviation *etc.*, nor is it represented even by an initial letter, like that abbreviation's *cetera*. Brown inscribes the *et* as an ampersand. While &c. was more commonly used for *et cetera* in the nineteenth century than it is now, even then it was not universally accepted as standard usage, nor is it usage Brown observes consistently.[32] The ampersand is a figure that, like the enslaved Brown himself, straddles the very margin of the alphabetical,[33] and ties freedom (both in the sense of the unlimited signifying potential of *et cetera* [rendering the list of chores potentially infinite] and in the sense of the right of economic and political self-ownership) to verbal potentials which exist on the page but not in speech. Freedom is here figured as at least partly freedom from the prison house of the merely aural/oral. The ampersand, whose utter independence from spoken language as such is underscored here by its less-commonly-

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[32] In *The American Fugitive in Europe* (Boston: 1850, a version of *Three Years in Europe* revised for the American market) for example, Brown uses &c. six times (32, 163 [twice], 183, and 227 [twice]) and *etc.* four times (59, 237, and 276 [twice]). &c. is always used for *et cetera* in all three editions of the *Narrative*, and in the original *Three Years in Europe*. I've been unable to examine first printings of all four versions of *Clotel*, but limited investigation has turned up &c. consistently. The point, though, is that Brown didn't use the ampersand consistently or exclusively throughout his career, and so his use of it in this passage, or anywhere else, can't necessarily be shrugged off as an authorial idiosyncrasy. It needs to be treated as at least *potentially* an artistic choice governed by the thematic demands of his material.

[33] The ampersand, Crain notes, was sometimes included after *Z* as a "letter" of the alphabet in its own right until about 1800, and is prominently so featured in most versions of *The New England Primer* (Crain 42). It both is and is not a "letter" just as Brown, in remembering his pre-literate self for the express purpose of writing down that self's experiences, is both inside and outside alphabetization's symbolic order. The self-division inherent in this position is further manifested by the ampersand's *own* self-division, being as it is the ligature of *e* and *t* (the Latin *et*, for *and*) which gives us the form of the &. Two selves in one body, combining e and t into itself just as it signifies the verbal continuity of what has just been named __and__ what is about to be named, the ampersand can be seen as an ideographic rendering of double consciousness.

seen Latin pronunciation (you say *et* rather than *and*, even though you are speaking English rather than Latin), manifests that which cannot be linguistically circumscribed by definite naming ("and other things" – things which, as I've already discussed, refuse to be specified, reified, counted, or fully cataloged) with that which cannot be spoken (the "sound" represented by the character &, which is really *no* single sound, since sometimes it's pronounced *and* and sometimes, as here, it's pronounced *et*). More properly, the ampersand shows Brown endeavoring to represent freedom by means of a language wholly visual, untranslatable into directly equivalent aural speech, and thus, crucially for Brown, uncoupled from the materiality of the racial body. The ampersand stages a direct refusal to do what Alexanders Melville Bell and Graham Bell spent so long attempting to do – what, in its phonetic aspects, ordinary writing in English pretends to do: inscribe on the page a representation, whether iconographic or purely conventional, of the behavior of air as it passes through the larynx, mouth, and lips. The ampersand is the opposite of the Bells' dreamed of "visible speech" – it is a visible mark on the page that makes speech not just invisible but inaudible; it produces rhetorical effects, and poses interpretive challenges, that simply cannot be reproduced by talking or by reading aloud.[34] If I say "ampersand" you do not know if the thing I have named is meant to be sounded as *et* or *and*. If I say "*et cetera*" you do not know if I have imagined the first of the three syllables I've spoken as written with an ampersand or with the letters e and t.

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[34] The Bells are, of course, American Studies mainstays, but the account of their work which has most shaped my remarks on them here is Jill Lepore's "Visible Speech," the chapter on the Bells in her *A is for American* (162-185).

So the ampersand can exist only on the page. It cannot be spoken because, unlike *et*

or *and*, it does not represent a sound. For Brown, the problem with speech, the verbal

economy to which most slaves were limited by their illiteracy, is that it is wholly tethered to

the material body (something that would obviously change with technology introduced a few

decades later, but which – for all the time that antislavery activism existed with a sense of

purpose – defined what it meant to talk or listen). Writing solves the problem of language's

dependence on bodily presence by simply creating a verbal space – the page – which does

not depend on bodily presence, which can go where the body is not. At the same time,

though, writing also introduces a new problem for Brown – or at least does so to the extent

that his ultimate goal is to uncouple the subject who utters from the kind of materiality in

which race is imagined to inhere, since the written words are now themselves like a body –

the ephemeral materiality of vibrations in air, which we call the human voice talking, is

replaced by the persistent materiality of ink and paper, which can be seen and touched and

smelled just as the body can be, and which thus threatens to reproduce modes of

exploitation and cruelty to which the body is subject.[35] Writing does not actually

dematerialize the racial subject in the way that the telephone and phonograph (my

speculative sense is) later would; it only shifts the burden of materiality from the speaker to

[35] *The Scarlet Letter*, as I argued in my previous chapters, can be seen partly as a thought experiment which seeks to investigate both how literal this resemblance might be made and low literally it might be inhabited actual people: *how much* like a book could somebody's socially visible self actually be? Hawthorne wants to discover how fully the way we look at letters might be contaminated by the pathologies which plague the way we look at other people, and to what extent, on the other hand, the way we look at people might partake of interpretive protocols which originally attached only to the way we read books. But Hawthorne's was, of course, not the only project engaged with such questions, nor was Brown's – which is only slightly less cynical than Hawthorne's – the only alternative. For a less gloomy and more affirmative engagement with many of the questions both men struggle with, see *Leaves of Grass*, in which the identification of book and man serve, most of the time, wholly liberating and affirmative purposes.

the utterance itself. And even the new technologies of the *fin-de-siècle* would only begin a transformation which arguably was not fully realized until the digital revolution arrived, and people began interacting with electronic texts as often as they did paper ones.

The ampersand thus registers the paradoxes of Brown's position. It is alphabetic, but liminally so (or, if you prefer: it is *not* alphabetic, but, as Patricia Crain reminds us,[36] it recently *had* been, just as Brown working for Lovejoy soon *will* be), and lacking any fixed phonetic value it fails to cross the boundary between the written and the spoken – the seen and the heard. (And this, again, even as it effortlessly crosses the boundary between the alphabetical and the nonalphabetical.) Remembering and narrating the life of an autobiographical subject who, as a past, illiterate self, is unable to know what it is to write or to be written about, this is in a real sense the subjectivity Brown must inhabit – caught between alphabetized and pre-alphabetic states of being.

To be clear, I'm not saying that the mere use of an ampersand ushers in some kind of apocalyptic end to the tyranny of meaning after which all of us will be free to inhabit fluid identities liberated from boundaries and rules. To make such an argument I would have to be saying that ampersands were revolutionary in any author's hands and in any book. So what I'm saying here about the ampersand is like what I say about the spelling of the words "scarlet" and "letter" in my first chapter. My point there was not that we should go looking for patterns in the letters that spell the title of any book, but that we are justified in doing so in this particular book because the content (the meaning of the words, the color of the ink used to print the words, and the relationship between the two) has given us encouragement

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[36] See note 33, above.

to look for such patterns. The ampersand's particular context does likewise. It ionizes the interpretive air so that even its own subtle orthographic coup carry's a charge sufficient to light up the sky. Brown can assume that, reading the passage, we will naturally begin wondering where and how he learned to read, since the work he recounts doing casts in such bold relief the disjunction between the illiterate autobiographical subject and the literate autobiographer. Just as we begin to wonder, we encounter this ampersand. It does not answer the question, but instead raises the stakes assumed in the asking, since what it tells us is not how or when Brown learned to read, but that – beyond being simply literate – he is clever enough to condense the thematic of literacy he invokes here into a single character of type.

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So we return now to Brown's *Narrative*, and specifically to the portion of the *Narrative* concerned with the *end* of Brown's tenure at the *Saint Louis Times*. The incident which precipitated Brown's severance from Lovejoy is so grossly allegorical it almost doesn't seem like it could really have happened.[37]

> Once while returning to the office with type, I was attacked by several large boys, sons of slave-holders, who pelted me with snow-balls. Having the heavy form of type in my hands, I could not make my escape by running; so I laid down the type and gave them battle. They gathered around me, pelting me with stones and sticks, until they overpowered me, and would have captured me, if I had not resorted to my heels. Upon my retreat they took possession of the type; and what to do to regain it I could not devise. Knowing Mr. Lovejoy to be a very humane man, I went to the office and laid the case before him. He told me to remain in the office. He took one of the apprentices with him and went after the type, and soon returned with it; but on his return informed me that Samuel McKinney had told him he would whip me, because I had hurt his boy. (35)

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[37] For this reason it's been a favorite of critics. (See, for example, Senchyne 141).

The incident eventually costs Brown his job. Lovejoy attempts to protect his employee, hiding Brown when McKinney comes to the office to make threats; but a few days later, while Brown is on an errand outside the print shop, he is attacked by McKinney in the street. The injuries suffered in this attack confine Brown to bed for a month, and Lovejoy reluctantly replaces him.

The form of type here is something Brown is clearly proud to be associated with, given how reluctantly he parts with it. He is loyal to and wants to please an employer of whom he is understandably fond, but he also knows that, out of the same evenness of temper that earned this loyalty, Lovejoy will not blame (let alone beat) Brown for an incident he did nothing to provoke. His willingness to strike back at the boys is not rooted in self-interest, then, since Brown can expect worse to befall him (as indeed it does) for striking these white boys than for losing the forms. So Brown wants to please his employer and prove himself worthy of so agreeable a job, yes, but neither of these things on its own makes what, in the contest of slavery's realities, is so clearly a pargmatically unwise decision assume the appearance of a rational one. There is something more at stake in the form of type for Brown than either the instrumentality of his economic value to Lovejoy's business or his own personal safety – the burden he carries represents in some imprecise way what, in the academic humanities, we so often say that literature *should* represent: the capacity to imagine a life beyond your own, a world other than your own, the capacity to recognize value in yourself and in the world that goes beyond mere rationalism, instrumentality, or material comfort.

The form of type also, of course, gives Brown work in which he has some degree of dignity, and it puts him in the employ of a master he genuinely likes. Carrying it connects

him more closely to literate bourgeois respectability than anything else he might do without first being taught to read and write, and carrying the form through a public thoroughfare allows him to perform this proximity. It's worth not just noticing but admiring the lengths to which Brown goes in this episode to protect an emblem of a verbal world to which, as an illiterate slave, he is still denied access. But he is subject to a kind of harassment that makes it literally impossible for him to protect both his person and the alphabetic knowledge he carries. The events in this passage are the inverse of those in the episode with the jailer, where Brown succeeds in evading a beating by dividing the literacy he imagines for himself across several characters. Here he tries to combine literacy and illiteracy into a single enslaved body, and this frustrates both his attempts to protect himself and the attempts of others to protect him.[38] One way or another, slavery will force him to choose between safety and reading, unless, of course, he reads through the prosthetic eyes of somebody else.

And yet, in a move consistent with the pattern that's emerging, Brown's narration of his past life assumes the form of a verbal poultice which helps to heal the wounds suffered in slavery – the equivalent, by means of images connected with presswork rather than writing in the strict sense, of Frederick Douglass's pen in the gash. The narrating Brown uses words to enact an alternate history – a new representational space in which the sacrifices slavery

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[38] True, there is no actual literacy at stake here, the type Brown carries is only metonymically the literacy he doesn't yet have. At the same time, though, Brown makes clear to us that Lovejoy is not only a kind man but a dedicated abolitionist, and as literacy, in any event, could only have made Brown more useful an employee at a newspaper, there's reason to think that, had Brown been able to keep working for him, Lovejoy would have taught him to read. Though Brown doesn't mention it, Lovejoy also ran a private school at this time, and was a committed educator as well as the publisher of a newspaper. As Brown would have known in 1847, Lovejoy had also, eventually, had to leave Saint Louis because of his public opposition to slavery and his willingness to help improve the lives of black people. He relocated to Afton, Illinois, where, in 1836, he was murdered by a pro-slavery lynch mob. In this sense, then, the form of type represents a text Brown cannot actually read, but it represents both the textual world to which future literacy would grant him access and his faithful service to Lovejoy, which he has reason to believe would eventually reward him with that literacy. In putting down the type and raising his hands in his attempt to retain possession of it, he loses hold of both.

demands were not made, its losses not suffered. The act of writing serves here as a melancholia in which it is not the ego (nor, as it is for Douglass, the pen) but the *page* that preserves lost objects and negates the reality of their loss; the page posits the *fiction* of a wholeness that in turn makes it possible to survive the painful *facts* of fragmentation, discontinuity, bereavement, and shame. The page here becomes like a prosthesis, like the bodies of the other men in the episode of the sailor and jailer; but where those bodies served as surrogates for Brown's own – others' backs with which to suffer beatings, others' eyes with which to read – the printed page is a prosthesis for the psyche – for the part of the mind in which memories are stored. In producing the pages of the *Narrative* itself, it's almost as if Brown is taking the form of type back from those who stole it, working once again in an official capacity with a publisher, offering now forms whose words he has been strong enough to create rather than failing to offer forms which he has not been strong enough to retain. He reaches back to an autobiographical subject damaged, incomplete, bereft of literacy and not even able to defend the form of type he's been asked to transport, and has restored, just as Douglass does with the pen, what is imagined to be the shape of an intact humanity. The literacy, the form, and the book are all now his.

This friction between the literate present and illiterate past in the *Narrative* – with its attempts to repair damage that exists only in the memory – is underscored by the absence of direct quotation in the passage. We do not hear the past conversation itself, or even an approximation of it; we hear only Brown's description of it as indirect discourse – in effect relocating the entire exchange between himself and Lovejoy from the oral/aural space in which slaves interact with masters to the authorial and visual space of the book. In telling his past self's story, Brown imaginatively supplies that past self after the fact with the things that,

as a slave, he most painfully lacks: literacy and the physical things you need to print, which are here – significantly – equated with one another. Furthermore, in substituting "the case" for whatever words we suppose the teenage Brown actually said to Lovejoy in explaining how the forms were relinquished, the authorial Brown not only insists on his access to verbal spheres which don't exist in spoken language, but, in the course of doing so, reimagines the scene of his failure as one in which he possessed, in the moment of appearing before Lovejoy, the two things he had most badly needed: the right to due process of law and the lost form of type itself – here, too, significantly linked to one another within a single condensation. The "case" here refers both to that legal proceeding which *should* have occurred had a white man been subject to the kind of harassment Brown has just suffered, and to the majuscule and miniscule – the *upper* and *lower case*, respectively – type which has been lost. At the office of a printing press, after all, when people mention a *case*, just like when they mention a *form*, they are most often referring to a thing which physically holds metal pieces of type in place.

The pun on *case* suggests implicitly that, had Brown enjoyed the right to file suit (to bring a *legal* case against his attackers) the type he had so reluctantly abandoned would be as good as recovered already – as good as sorted and distributed back into the *cases* where the fonts are stored. Were Brown not a slave, in other words, legal protection (or the threat of legal retribution) would have kept the form of type in his hands, or allowed him to recover it swiftly.[39] Could he legally lay his *case* before a judge, he could literally lay the lost *form* before

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[39] True, *case* and *form* are different things, but they're similar enough to enable a substitution of one for the other in the displacement that here characterizes the boundary between latent and manifest content. Either the majuscule or miniscule half of one size of one font is what a single *case* would contain. *Form* can mean a couple

Lovejoy instead of reporting its theft. The word *case* as its used here links the kind of legal

protection slaves lack with literacy and language, but more specifically with the world of

print and mechanically reproduced media, for, when Douglass writes with his pen, he need

not return each page's characters back to their respective cases when he is done with them.

The illiterate slave here is a victim of racism, to be sure, and of legal and social

structures which systemically prevent him from protecting or defending himself. Mere

literacy would not have helped Brown to do so in this case, and so I am not suggesting that

the tools of redress, for Brown, begin and end with the ability to read, or for that matter the

opportunity to be published. But those to whom he appeals for help are nevertheless,

significantly, those who wield the power of print (Lovejoy and his allies at the *Times*); they do

not wield the entitlements of racial whiteness merely. Furthermore, the language through

which Brown remembers these events (writing about them years later) is itself embedded in

print's logic – its nomenclature and its physicality. It is the case which Brown the slave has

laid before Lovejoy, and it is in the office of the press, and only there, that he can expect to

be kept safe. The capacity to read and write, and particularly to write for publication, is

rhetorically embedded here in the legal protections and personal safety slaves are most

precariously without, while the spatial logic of the passage suggests that, even for those who

carry the tools of inscription, there is no safety outside the republic of letters or the house of

literacy. Partly this is a matter simply of insisting on the value of literacy as a skill, which all

slave narratives were expected to do, but the unusual attention paid to the physicality of

textual mass production – to those aspects of printing as a material practice that distinguish

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of different things in printing, but in this context it probably refers to the type for a single newspaper page's worth of text held tightly in a wooden frame and ready to be inked.

it from mere writing – privileges what we normally think of as "publication," rather than

reading or composition, as the site of writing's social power. What does print do here, and

how does it help us to read Brown's other works? Why, besides the mere fact that Brown is,

by composing this *Narrative*, completing his transformation from slave into author

(something that would be true of any slave author completing his or her first book) does

printing seem to matter so much?[40]

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To read the printed page is always also to see it. But in looking at the that page a

person is generally able to recognize the gaps and slippages separating signifier from

signified, to see how the shapes of the letters that make the words are linked arbitrarily and

conventionally rather than organically to the sounds and ideas they represent. Except in the

case of actual onomatopoeia, words in English tend not to be in any way iconographic, and

we know this partly because most of us, Benjamin Franklin excepted, can remember

something about the frustration we experienced when first learning to read. Part of what

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[40] I don't mean to understate the importance of the fact that, in practical terms, Brown's ability to read and write is directly linked to his political and economic autonomy. His work as an author and journalist allowed him full and highly visible participation in the antislavery movement, won him powerful allies without whom he might well have been recaptured, and, as a professional identity and means of being paid for meaningful work, served as a constant reminder of his status as a free man. But most fugitive slaves, even those who could read and write, weren't published authors, and printing thus figured less directly in the maintenance of their freedom than it did Brown's. My point here is that Brown's specific investment in print as a medium (one he shared with only a small minority of his fellow fugitive slaves) provided him with a vocabulary through which to explore and rethink the meanings of race and slavery as they applied to all Americans' lives. Because his experience of slavery was marked in important ways by work at a press, and because the means by which he maintained the freedom and economic independence he won in his escape depended not just on knowing how to write but on being published and selling books, Brown had reason to think about the relationship between race and the page more than did most other Americans of his moment (this is why Senchyne, for example, singles Brown out in his discussion of material textuality, one that, in theory, could serve as an explanation of *any* nineteenth-century author's books). Brown's experiences positioned him in such a way that the ideas Hawthorne seems to have stumbled upon in *The Scarlet Letter* occur naturally to him as an extension of his experiences as a professional writer of books who, because black, is also subject to racist oppression; specifically, of course, I'm talking about the ideas on which this dissertation focuses: the various ways in which the reading of written works and the reading of the racial body intersect and overlap.

acquiring literacy means to us is the surmounting of this sense of newness and strangeness that, for novice readers, attends all of what is arbitrary in writing but not also shared with speech – why, for example, the letter s must be open at top-right and bottom-left rather than, as in its mirror image, the reverse. As adults, we no longer struggle, if we ever did, to understand why the word *cat* has three letters rather than four, or why it begins with a c rather than a k. And few if any readers, even the newest readers, will literally mistake the sequence of letters *c-a-t* on a page either for the auditory syllable they represent phonetically or for an actual feline. Literature, and especially lyric poetry, sometimes tries to mitigate what we feel are the alienating and dissociative effects of these arbitrary relationships among sound, sight, and sense. (Think of Herbert's "Easter Wings" or the more audacious passages in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*; Hawthorne, of course, does something similar and only more self-reflexive on the title page of *The Scarlet Letter*, though – as I argued earlier – part of Hawthorne's coup is in isolating the visual from the aural, just as writing itself does.)

But if, like most literate people, nineteenth-century readers were quite accustomed to (but thereby largely unconscious of) the gap between printed texts and the real world of things and ideas represented by those texts, the distance between the text and the world it represented could still provoke genuine anxieties in at least one area of their everyday lives: money. Nineteenth-century Americans were keenly aware (and often profoundly troubled) by the fact that that banknotes, as a printed article, existed in a complicated and ever-changing relation to specie. The meaning of the banknote did not, as perhaps it does to many Americans today, seem to be absolute or fixed, and did not seem to inhere in the ink in paper of which the article was physically composed; such a meaning would necessarily be (and, more importantly, would necessarily *seem* to be) dispersed across multiple fields of

material and immaterial semiosis.[41] To see a page of print is not necessarily to read it, to read

it is not necessarily to understand it, and to understand it not necessarily to know if what it

says is actually true. This does not ordinarily trouble anyone in novels, but it troubled many

nineteenth-century Americans when the thing being represented was economic value and the

document doing the representing was offered as payment for a debt. Even now, printed

documents that need to be true in anything like the absolute sense, must usually be signed by

hand.[42] This notably includes any personal check, most other kinds of bank checks, and even

Federal Reserve Notes, which bear reproduced images of the holograph signatures of the

Secretary of the Treasury and the Treasurer at the time of issue, and do so even though,

firstly, these signatures are too small to have been inscribed except by a machine, and

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[41] Both Paul Gilmore and John Ernst discuss the importance of money in Brown's writing, and Gilmore goes as far as to observe the connection between counterfeit banknotes and the racially indeterminate women in *Clotel* who, by passing, don a kind of "counterfeit" whiteness. Both, though, do far less to push Brown's treatment of money toward the theory of race which I believe it is meant to be, nor do they deal, for the most part, with the particular passages I favor in my discussions of Brown. Largely separate from the critical discussion about Brown's writing are some texts which have helped to ground my understanding of nineteenth-century attitudes toward money: Gerald P. Dwyer Jr's "Wildcat Banking, Banking Panics, and Free Banking in the United States," Stephen Mihm's *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*, and Michael O'Malley's *Face Value: The Entwined Histories of Money and Race in America*. O'Malley, who draws on Mihm, actually discusses Brown (59-63) but, like Ernst, sees the importance of Brown's relationship to banknotes as limited to the "banking anecdote" I will discuss momentarily, and concerned primarily with content. I, on the other hand, obviously see Brown's relationship to money, and the distinction between banknotes and coin, as crucial to Brown's entire theory of slavery, and am eager to point out all the ways in which, in the absence of content to that effect, the formal and structural devices Brown deploys tend to direct our attention toward matters of money.

[42] This kind of hybridity – in which a printed document is rendered meaningfully binding when it is signed by hand – is, of course, common throughout *Clotel*. As I'll discuss below, Brown must sign his banknotes before he can circulate them as currency, but the foundational example for the novel is obviously the Declaration of Independence (though the Declaration "itself" is a unique holograph manuscript, it obtains its performative force only in being signed by the men for whom it speaks – none of whom, presumably, was its scribe). The *A* that is revealed to be on Dimmesdale's chest at the climax of *The Scarlet Letter* serves as another version of this hybridity; like the signed banknote, Dimmesdale's scarlet letter makes use of the inherent instability of meaning in printed language, but contains that instability by joining it to what are seen as the more reliably fixed meanings that attend the material body. Both Dimmesdale's chest and the banknote (and, one might argue, the blackface performance) serve partly as responses to the powerful wish that, in the visible world, the extremes of fixity (which seems to attach to the body) and of instability (which seems to attach to printed writing) might be avoided entirely, or at least joined dialectically into a synthesis which overcomes the limitations of each.

secondly, no person inside or outside the Treasury actually pretends that the officials whose signatures certify the notes actually, personally, sign each one.

This is partly because, ideologically speaking, print, compared to holograph writing, is supposed less closely allied to the body, and the body is supposed the ultimate ground of truth. Truth – or at least what is regarded to be true by what is regarded to be a consensus among those regarded to be the public – is in turn the ground of credit, the system of codified belief on which all paper money still depends. Note that even now coins in the Unites States do not bear anybody's signature, or any engraved image of anybody's signature, even though the relationship between the face value of the coin and the use value of the metals of which its composed is just as conventional and arbitrary as the relationship between the face value of a twenty-dollar bill and the use value of the paper on which it's printed. None of us today would go with a twenty dollar bill to a bank and ask for twenty dollars in pennies – we're far more likely to do the opposite! – and tend to regard paper money as of real value and coins as something of which, in a kind of game, we spend each transaction-filled day trying to rid ourselves. But that we (or at least some still-living American) remain comforted by the signatures on Federal Reserve Notes, and do not demand the same accrediting touch of our coins, shows us to maintain the rough outline of the anxieties that attended the production of paper money in the nineteenth-century.

Like Michael O'Malley (whose *Face Value*, I'm eager to point out, was published in late-2012 when the working drafts of all my dissertation's chapters, including the ones on Brown, were already complete[43]) I see these anxieties as intimately tied to America's

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[43] This anxiety of influence is exacerbated somewhat by the fact that, in the spring of 1994, I took a class with Professor O'Malley at Vassar College. The class was an interdisciplinary, sixty-person lecture which

understanding of racial embodiment. The regulation of race and the regulation of paper

currency were both conscious obsessions for many people in mainstream nineteenth-century

America. Today both are conscious obsessions (or at least publically avowed concerns) only

for people on the far right, where nativism, racism, and suspicion of the Federal Reserve

System fit together as a conspiracy theory explaining what's wrong and why it's getting

worse. And yet both race and paper money undeniably continue to exert a shaping influence

on the public and political lives of moderate and left-wing America in ways of which, in our

daily lives, we may not be fully aware. There can be little reason, for instance, that banknotes

continue to bear the signature of the acting Secretary of State at their time of issue,

particularly if even those who believe the money's value to be genuine hold no such beliefs

about the signature itself, were there not, in some recess of the ideological psyche not fully

under the command of our conscious and rational minds, a suspicion of paper money which

does not attach to coins.[44] Like O'Malley, I find compelling the argument that this

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O'Malley team taught with two other professors, a mathematician and an anthropologist; the subject of this interdisciplinary "College Course" was the idea of time (O'Malley's first book was on the history of daylight savings time). I do not remember him mentioning anything about money or race or the relationship between them, but I note somewhat sheepishly a review excerpted on the back cover of *Face Value* which proclaims that "This is a… book that no one but Michael O'Malley could even have thought of." I should repeat that O'Malley discusses William Wells Brown for exactly seven pages, and that the arguments I develop in these chapters on Brown do not resemble his methodologically.

[44] This endurance may finally be ebbing as payments increasingly happen electronically, and both cash and check tenders become rarer. I've noticed lately in the United States, and as early as the year 2000 in Europe, that merchants no longer require a signature as universally for credit card purchases, and it has been ages since anyone has bothered to confirm, when I've paid by credit card in person, that the plastic card I've used has actually been signed on the back. Often transactions involving small sums can be completed without signing a slip or even entering a PIN. But the fact that we can see the beginning of this change does not mean that it will be completed in our lifetime; people whose financial routines were established before credit cards became ubiquitous in the 1970s may always feel more comfortable with paper, whether cash or check, and the forms of the anxiety I'm talking about will probably have to endure at least as long as such people as these earn or spend money. Nor can we assume that the anxieties which so long cathected to paper money will fail to preserve themselves; they might easily cathect to something else, such as fluorinated tap water.

In an idea which I will *not* claim to have thought of independently, O'Malley in his Epilogue ties the weird upsurge in advertisements for gold on right wing broadcasters like Fox News around 2009 *not* to the financial crisis of 2008 (a connection which would be intuitive but boring) but to the election of the first black president.

parallelism of money's and race's respective political trajectories over the past two centuries is no mere coincidence; unlike O'Malley, though, my point is not that such a connection between the two actually exists or explains anything. It's rather that *Brown* believes such a connection exists, and that *he* thinks it explains *a great deal.*

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Print uncouples bodily meaning from the visual cues – marks on the page – by which this meaning is transmitted. Holograph writing does not do this. We believe, rightly or wrongly, that even though the linguistic signs that make up a personal letter are fully arbitrary, some trace of the body's truth remains in the form of handwriting. We think we can learn things – mood, degree of haste, approximate age – by looking at how the words are written rather than what they say. As we do with banknotes, we continue to believe this even when all of the important content of a given letter is rendered in impersonal, regularized type (which, in any case, didn't exist when Brown was writing, since this was before the typewriter, and a document of which only one copy needed to exist would have no reason to be set in type for a press). Business epistles must still be signed by hand, or at least contain an inscription that *looks* like it was made in holograph. (I am in the process of relocating to Knoxville, Tennessee, and both the lease on my apartment and the contract for my employment have been emailed to me as electronic documents which I am to print out, sign by hand, scan back into the digital domain, and email back.) Typed or digitally printed letters thus join checks and banknotes as hybrid documents. Everything about them that matters to

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Mistrust of paper currency among these viewers (or at least what companies selling gold *believe* and *hope* to be such mistrust) serves as a psycho-political and economic response to what is perceived as a disruption of *racial* certainties and *racial* hierarchies.

their meaning is printed, and is therefore, in theory, infinitely reproducible. But the signature

on such documents must carry at least the pretense of uniqueness, though (and, perversely)

that signature doesn't even need to be legible. If I did not know that a recent Secretary of the

Treasury named Timothy Geithner existed, I would not know that the signature on the 2009

series one-dollar bill before me was his rather than that of somebody else's. Business letters,

in which we often do not know the sender personally, routinely contain the name of this

sender both as a signature and as mechanically produced print. The signature does not need

to communicate alphabetic content, and so it doesn't need to be legible, and usually isn't. It

could say anything, and even those who – for whatever reason – subject a given signature to

special scrutiny will be concerned not with the extent to which it may be read as language

but with the extent to which it resembles other signatures thought to be by the same hand.

But the signature must be there to affirm the signifying bond between the printed text and

its meaning.[45] The dollar bill says, in print, that it is worth one dollar. The Treasurer's

signature, which I cannot read, doesn't need to say anything, but *without* that signature the

dollar's printed claim to be worth the equivalent of ten dimes would not be a true one. By

holographically routing the printed (and thus spurious) claims of the text through the body's

aura of authenticity, these claims take on some of the body's authority.[46]

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[45] I gather that, in Japan – where the intricacy of many written characters, of which there are thousands, tends to make handwriting differ less wildly among individuals, since even a minor change might drastically change a character's meaning or pronunciation – all adults have a personal rubber stamp with which they certify documents. The stamp impresses the name, but does so in exactly the same way each time, and presumably differs in perceptible ways even among individuals with exactly the same name.

[46] There are, of course, real-world limitations to this way of thinking. Things that need to be *really* true often need not only to be signed but notarized, and the process of notarization, I'm told, involves not just the notary's signature but his or her authenticating rubber stamp as well (a fact which, like the rubber stamps of Japan, stands the whole equation on its head, suggesting that certain kinds of print have come to be seen as *more* authentic than handwriting; such is the case for our paper money, too, in that the printed elements of the bills' design have become more technically difficult to counterfeit than the signatures which authenticate them). Still, this notion of the authenticating signature is a fantasy in which all Americans take part whenever we sign a

So printed language doesn't just (like any other kind of language) divorce words from their meanings by reminding us that the relationships between the words and their meanings are arbitrary. It enacts this divorce by simultaneously divorcing words from the bodily nexus at which they're imagined to originate, and this print does more or less alone; this is a quality it shares with neither speech nor holograph writing. A printed book bought in a bookstore or borrowed from a library is usually a text whose unique pages have never actually been seen or touched by the individual credited as its author; its history as, simultaneously, a physical object and a verbal act, leads at best only as far back as its compositor. Hawthorne has never touched the copy of *The Scarlet Letter* you're reading, even if it happens to be a first edition. Probably he never even visited the Cambridge printing house Metcalf and Company, where the pages of the first edition were actually produced. All print works this way, but under capitalism (which, in its modern form, was born alongside the culture of print – the two are litter-mates) full awareness of how print works tends to be most easily accessible to us when the print in question is being offered as tender.

Many people worried about the proliferation of banks and banknotes in antebellum America, but Brown only rarely seems to have been one of them. This is partly, of course, because he once ran a bank. But we must also recognize that dispersal of meaning which print makes real and paper money makes impossible to ignore offers Brown a new and politically useful way to describe race. In print three things that we take to be organically related to one another in a hand-written document – the page's visible signifiers, the body of

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check, credit card slip, or speeding ticket. Curiously, as the digital world increasingly relies not on signatures to authenticate identity but PINs and passwords which we are supposed to remember, the truth on which everyday economic transactions depend is certified less by our sense that each person has a unique body than by our sense that each person has unique memories.

the person from which the message those signifiers comprise originates, and ideational

content of the words of that message – have no preordained or immutable relations to one

another. It is from within the liberatory chaos of this endless polysemic potential that Brown

hopes to remake what racial blackness is and means.

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Four paragraphs from the end of the *Narrative's* concluding chapter, Brown (still, as

far as we know, illiterate, and having just escaped from slavery into northern Ohio) mentions

having

> purchased some books, and at leisure moments [having] perused them with
> considerable advantage to myself. While at Cleveland, I saw, for the first time, an
> antislavery newspaper… [T]hough I had no home, I subscribed for the paper. It
> was my great desire, being out of slavery myself, to do what I could for the
> emancipation of my brethren yet in chains[.] (49) [47]

Whatever sense we have here that Brown might be showing himself actually reading is

abetted by his suggestion that homelessness rather than illiteracy is the reason we might be

surprised to find him subscribing to a newspaper. The meaning is inscrutable. Are we meant

to applaud his dedication to the cause because he will spend his money in support of it even

when he is severely poor, or rather because he will spend his money to support that cause's

organs even when he cannot read them? And if he cannot read them, is this because he still

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[47] I am following here the first (1847) edition of the text, rather than the second (1848) edition which I have tended to favor in my discussion of the *Narrative*. The conclusion of the second edition is considerably more verbose, and its emphasis is much more on Brown's abolitionist and temperance advocacy than on his relationship to newspapers. The second edition's ending is more polished, more graceful, and seems to be more self-consciously propagandistic (in the ending of the first edition Brown appears more strongly to believe his readers genuinely want to know about his life, rather than about slavery and its horrors). The roughness of the first edition's ending is something Brown was, as he gained technical skill, understandably eager to revise away, but I have favored it in this one case because it makes clear how, from the Lovejoy episode until the final page, Brown's relationship to newspapers and books serves as a unifying thematic motif.

(I should clarify that the second edition retains, with minor alterations, all of the material I quote here, but supplements that material with several new paragraphs.)

lacks the capacity to read or because he has no home at which he could receive delivery of the paper? Contextual evidence (supported by later, more specific autobiographical writing) suggests that Brown was employed on a lake freighter, a ship on which he also made his home, and that he lacked not a roof over his head but a fixed address, such that he would have no way to accept the newspaper's delivery only *after* which his illiteracy (which may or may not have been significantly abated by the "advantage" he gained from his small private library – as with Lovejoy and the "little learning," we just don't know) would be a decisive reason he could not read it. In either case, what we are told is that Brown has begun a meaningful relationship with printed texts that *might* involve him *reading* them, but that *certainly* involves him *buying* them. In the case of the newspaper the political and commercial force of the relationship is, indeed, far more the point of the anecdote than whatever verbal relationship might exist, since whether we understand "I had no home" as indicative of a lack of discretionary funds or a lack of a place to have document delivered, this lack tells us that he spent money on a subscription either in spite of great want or in spite of his knowledge that he would never actually receive the goods for which he paid, and in either case leaves us, once again, to guess blindly at how much functional literacy Brown actually possesses.

As the *Narrative* comes to its end, this tangle of verbal and commercial concerns (in which the latter is always treated less ambiguously and more explicitly than the former) makes one final appearance. The *Narrative's* two-sentence penultimate paragraph describes Brown's activities ferrying escaped slaves across Lake Erie in 1842 and 1843. The final paragraph, in a temporal recursion unusual for a book which normally obeys a strictly linear chronology, says this:

> Soon after coming north, I subscribed for The Liberator, edited by that champion of freedom, William Lloyd Garrison. I labored a season to promote the temperance cause among the colored people, but for the last three years, have been pleading for the victims of American slavery. (49)[48]

These remarks are then themselves "subscribed"

> William Wells Brown.
> Boston, Mass., June, 1847.

such that the "subscription" to *The Liberator* is allowed both to obfuscate and to explain several narrative dislocations. In a coy tribute, the mention of Garrison's name is treated as in itself an adequate explanation not just for how Brown became involved in the antislavery movement, but for his relocation from Cleveland to Boston. It's almost as if Garrison's name, or at least Brown's decision to subscribe to Garrison's newspaper, is offered as, likewise, explanation enough for how Brown came to be literate, how he came to publish a book, and – again with the double resonance of *subscription* – how he came to be in a position to sign his name on this page. The name is printed, of course, not personally inscribed, but it serves as much of an authentication as Brown – who, Robinson Crusoe-like, has already explained that William Wells Brown bears little resemblance to the name he was born with anyway – elects at this point in his career to offer. Just as his enslavement once, memorably, took the form of work on a newspaper he could neither read nor buy, his involvement with antislavery activism takes the form of his choice, against what appear still to be significant challenges, to buy (and read?) newspapers. His relationship to the political cause with which he's identified himself is mediated by two things, and neither is a pen laid on or in a foot so

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[48] The major difference between this ending and that of the second edition is that, in the second edition, Brown removes the suggestion that he has given up his participation in the temperance movement, and goes on for several sentences about how abolitionism and temperance are linked because (what he seems to see as) rampant alcoholism is frustrating the progress of racial uplift.

as to recover the self's wholeness by means of the body's truth. As always, for Brown, the concerns are print and money.

Shinplaster Whiteness and the Racial Reserve in Clotel

Man has often made man himself, under the form of slaves, serve as the primitive material of money.
<div align="right">--- Karl Marx in Capital</div>

At the heart of the slave market… was a contradiction and a contest. The contradiction was this: the abstract value that underwrote the southern economy could only be made material in human shape – frail, sentient, resistant. And thus the contradiction was daily played out in a contest over meaning.

<div align="right">--- Walter Johnson in Soul By Soul</div>

Stephen Colbert: *Can <u>anything</u> be money? Because, before there were dollar bills, what was money?*
Niall Ferguson: *It can be anything.*
Colbert: *Could <u>I</u> be money? Am <u>I</u> money?*
Ferguson: *Yeah. Stephen, if people will accept you as payment for goods, then you are money.*

<div align="right">--- The Colbert Report, January 2009</div>

Part One – "Memoir of the Author"

Brown held a number of jobs along the American shore of Lake Erie in the years between

his escape from slavery on New Year's Day in 1836 and his debut as an author in June of

1847. These jobs helped to maintain him while he learned to read and write and gradually

became well known in the temperance and abolitionist movements. Most of the work seems

to have been on ships transporting goods and people around Lake Erie, work which allowed

him to become familiar with many of the cities on the lake's shore, and he would sometimes

take odd jobs in these cities when ashore for any length of time. But of particular interest for

my argument is Brown's tenure as a barber and banker in Monroe, Michigan, about a year

after his escape. Brown does not mention any of this in the *Narrative*. He first writes about

his barber shop in his 1852 travel memoir *Three Years in Europe*, but the entire anecdote from

Three Years… is reprinted, more or less verbatim,[1] in the autobiographical sketch that

introduces the first edition of *Clotel*, published the following year.[2] Its importance for Brown

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[1] More or less verbatim in that the words themselves *are* taken verbatim from the earlier work, but the anecdote (several pages long) is reproduced in *Clotel* as one continuous paragraph rather than as the three paragraphs into which *Three Years…* divides it.

[2] This "autobiographical sketch" – called "Memoir of the Author" in *Clotel's* table of contents but "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown" on its opening page – has been a major stumbling block for critics writing on *Clotel*. Most (Ernst, Gilmore, Fabi, Raimon) describe it as an autobiographical piece which is, for reasons none pretend fully to understand, written in the third person, and which draws liberally from Brown's previously published autobiographical work (though these earlier works are always quoted verbatim, and is thus in the first person). The introductory sketch is in fact a more complicated collage, in which two biographical essays – William Farmer's "A Memoir of the Author," which served as an introduction to Brown's *Three Years in Europe*, and J. Passmore Edwards's chapter on Brown in his *Uncle Tom's Companions* (a who's who of prominent fugitive slaves which had been published in 1852) – are interwoven and abridged by Brown, thus constituting the voice of a new synthesized narrator who, though a fiction invented by Brown himself (an invention-by-selection which takes place almost entirely as strategic appropriation of other writers' words), nonetheless quotes liberally from Brown's writings, as if he and Brown were separate people. The anonymity of this narrator has sometimes led critics to credit Brown with sole authorship, and to regard his introduction of his own book as an act of resistance to the usual obligatory introduction, in black authored books, by a white abolitionist patron. This is, indeed, not far off the mark, but Brown's playful plagiarism of Farmer and Edwards (white British abolitionists both) here – which aligns the introduction with the novel's overt borrowing from Lydia Maria Child – implicates all such introductions, whether written by a black author or by his or her white benefactor, in a dynamic of mutual imitation and masquerade. (Both Farmer's and Edwards' accounts of Brown's life draw heavily, of course, on Brown's own previously published

might be gauged partly by the mere fact that he uses the material twice, and uses it in the introduction to *Clotel*, furthermore, in spite of the at best subtle relation of its content to the abolitionist project that that novel declares itself to be.[3] That the anecdote has been set as a single very long paragraph suggests, furthermore, that Brown may have faced practical limitations of page count or printing expense in publishing *Clotel*, and one might expect him to have omitted an episode which does not connect what comes before it to what comes after it in any obvious way. Certainly readers would not have been perplexed by its absence the way they would have had Brown omitted, for example, the story of how he learned to read, which – though he includes it here – did not appear in any of the three editions of the original *Narrative*. Something in the anecdote is important enough to say a second time, in spite of what seem to be plausible reasons not to do so (he has already said it in another book, it is too long, it is not relevant). Among the questions that should encourage us to examine the episode more closely is, thus, the question of how its seemingly superfluous content contributes to Brown's political project.[4] How does this passage inflect what the

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autobiographies, which the two men sometimes paraphrase and sometimes directly quote.) The "Memoir" is not so much a refusal of white authentication in favor of authentic blackness as it is a refusal of the notion that such distinctions (between white and black, authentic and inauthentic, original and copy) are stable enough to retain their full integrity in the face of their mutual and irreducible relationality. It's worth noting, too, that novels often do this; they begin with an introductory piece by the author in which said author pretends not to be the person who wrote said novel – usually by posing as the editor of a nonfiction manuscript. Hawthorne does precisely this in "The Custom-House," and Defoe does this in *Robinson Crusoe*, arguably the paradigmatic novel in English, and one to which Brown refers explicitly in the *Narrative* (74).

[3] Brown, of course, writes about more than just slavery, and even his observations of racism in the north or the evils of alcoholic beverages don't exhaust the scope of his narrating eye which, like that of all great writers, is sometimes drawn into aesthetic contemplation irreducible to any concrete real-world means or ends. But one reason I chose *Clotel* as a counterpoint to *The Scarlet Letter* in this dissertation is the extent to which the former is untroubled by the latter's distaste for programmatic polemics. Brown does not hesitate to be didactic or pretend to disinterestedness when his beliefs are strong.

[4] Of course even in being superfluous the anecdote might serve, indirectly, Brown's political ends in that it shows that black people can, indeed, talk about things for which their blackness does not serve as any special mark of authority; they need not limit the scope of their commentary to topics upon which no white is qualified to comment. This is not what I argue Brown is doing, though. I argue that the banking anecdote, however tangential it may seem, is deeply connected to the novel's project vis-à-vis slavery and race, and that

novel says more broadly about slavery or race? And if it's saying nothing about these things, how does its presence transform those passages of the novel which *do* discuss slavery and race?

Like most of the jobs Brown held between his escape from slavery and the beginning of his career as an author, the hybrid barber-banker position originated as a way he could make a living using the "little learning" he acquired while enslaved – learning which, it turns out, extends far beyond whatever Lovejoy taught him at the office of the *Saint Louis Times*. Like Sam, the dark-skinned dandy whom Brown will use for serio-comic effect throughout one of *Clotel's* many subplots, Brown has been a "good scholar" (155) of slavery's systemic content. While working for Walker (who, you'll recall, is the slave trader who once sent Brown to be whipped by a jailer) Brown spent much of his time on river boats, and among his other duties prepared Walker's wares for the New Orleans market, preparation which included grooming them and cutting their hair. Using these skills Brown is able to find work on steam ships, and even to use his position to help ferry escaped slaves across Lake Erie to Canada and the protection of the British Empire – the last leg of the underground railroad's brutal track north.

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we are given the tools we need to bridge the seeming distance between banknotes and slaves early in the novel proper. My argument is closer to those of Gilmore and Ernst, though I place significantly more emphasis on both Brown's wordplay and his engagement with the materiality of money. Gilmore in particular makes no more of the role of money in the episode than he does of the role of signage (the sign on Brown's barber shop is, as I'll discuss below, misleading) and sees both as mere examples of the privileging of performance over essence. Original to my argument are, therefore, among other things: 1) my assertion that, because of slavery, the idea of money is of particular importance to the idea of blackness, 2) my assertion that the printing of money serves as a bridge between Brown's work as a slave (which, as we know, briefly involved printing) and his work as an author, 3) my assertion that the relation between performance and essence in the episode is aligned (imperfectly) with the relation between banknotes and specie, and this underscores the importance of material specificity in Brown's treatment of money, specificity that, again, calls attention to what money has in common with race and with literary texts, respectively.

When, one season, Brown is not compensated for this work, even his unpaid labor

serves to some extent as a register of his freedom. It is, not by coincidence, precisely this

experience of being defrauded that leads Brown to set off from Cleveland for Monroe in the

first place.

> In the autumn of 1835 [*sic,* Brown misremembers the year here], having been
> cheated out of the previous summer's earnings by the captain of the steamer in
> which I had been employed running away with the money, I was, like the rest of
> the men, left without any means of support during the winter, and therefore had
> to seek employment in the neighboring towns. (66)

Brown is here treated much as a slave – unpaid for his work and unable, it seems, to appeal

to the courts for protection.[5] But the theft of his labor does not, finally, rob him of his

humanity. To cheat Brown and his shipmates the unscrupulous captain must, first of all,

dissolve his relationship with them all. He cannot steal their labor without fear of retribution

from either the law or those he has robbed, and cannot return to do so the next year. The

mere fact that the captain must "run away" – and has not instead driven his laborers to run

away from him – marks the occurrence both as a reversal of the politics of mobility Brown

knew in slavery and as an aberration within (rather than a systemic norm of) the politics of

mobility in the North. Furthermore, Brown's individual experience is part of a collective

experience – he is left as penniless as his shipmates, but precisely for that reason not made to

bear his suffering alone. In slavery as Brown's autobiographies present it, slaves are capable

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[5] It may seem like I'm placing undue or ahistorical emphasis on the court system in my analysis, but the law court, along with literacy (important throughout Brown's writing) and the right to choose one's employer (crucial in this particular passage) serve as privileged metrics of freedom in a revealing passage from *Three Years in Europe*: "the more I see and learn of the condition of the working-classes of England the more I am satisfied of the utter fallacy of the statements often made that their condition approximates to that of the slaves of America. Whatever may be the disadvantages that the British peasant labours under, he is free; and if he is not satisfied with his employer he can make choice of another. He also has the right to educate his children; and he is the equal of the most wealthy person before an English Court of Justice. But how is it with the American Slave? He has no right to himself, no right to protect his wife, his child, or his own person. He is nothing more than a living tool" (*Three Years* 139-40).

of forming and being sustained by social ties even under the weight of the chattel principle, but these ties exist and can be dissolved at the pleasure of the slaveholder. Indeed, as in much anti-slavery writing, Brown suggests that it is not in the slave-owner's capacity to inflict pain that slavery's evil most inheres, but in his capacity to negate the collectivity of the pain he inflicts by dismantling families and communities at will (see *Narrative* 65). In being cheated of their wages, Brown and the other sailors suffer at the hands of a thief who enjoys no direct power to undermine the collectivity of the suffering he has caused. The captain is likewise unable to keep any of the sailors from leaving to find other and better employment. Brown here strikes a blow on behalf of an argument he would make in different ways throughout the 1850s: the industrial laboring class is, even when paid no better than slaves, still better able to defend its rights.[6] Though workers may be as poor as slaves, they need yet not be worried that their families or allies will be sold or that their employer will demand work without offering a legally binding pledge to pay. The exploitative employer of the north may cheat the worker, but not without fear of punishment, and the threat that he himself may lose his liberty.

So in the winter of 1835-36 Brown arrives in Monroe, Michigan with no money and no job. Remembering his experience grooming slaves for the New Orleans market, he sensibly seeks work in Monroe's only barbershop and, gruffly refused there (we are given no indication if the owner refuses to hire Brown because of his race or for some other reason), opens a competing barbershop across the street. A savvy self-promoter, he quickly finds his business making enough money to support his taking advantage of the extremely forgiving

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[6] Again, see especially *Three Years in Europe* (138-141).

banking regulation of the time[7] and begins operating not just a barbershop but a bank as well; this venture allows him to expand his business by issuing banknotes secured by (but collectively worth several times) the gold and silver coin he's amassed as a barber.[8]

I will quote from what I'll be calling "the banking anecdote" as I move through my argument about it, but because this argument will presume some sense of the anecdote's entire shape I'll briefly summarize beforehand how it is that Brown makes use of what he calls western banking's "sad condition." Somebody suggests that Brown use the success of his business as a barber to become one of those who "floods the country with worthless paper." Brown does so, and uses the money he gains thereby to improve his barbershop. In the first weeks of this experiment, few in Monroe will accept Brown's notes, since they lack a history and thus public credit, but Brown and his allies promote the notes so that eventually the townspeople begin to credit them. Annoyed with this, the rival barber across the street attempts a run on Brown's bank, but Brown is able to keep himself in business by periodically closing for ten minute intervals while he runs to friends and exchanges his notes for others. Thus, no matter how many of his own notes his rival arranges to have cashed at Brown's barbershop, Brown never needs to produce any actual coin, because when he runs out of some other wildcat bank's notes he simply ducks out to buy more with his own.

Despite a vague sense of fiduciary recklessness and economic underhandedness which attends, for Brown as narrator, the rhetoric through which he describes his issuing what were then called "Shinplasters" (reportedly because this paper so often came to worthlessness that some would line their boots with rolls of bills for warmth during the

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[7] See Gerald P. Dwyer Jr's "Wildcat Banking, Banking Panics, and Free Banking in the United States."
[8] This is the episode that Michael O'Malley discusses in *Face Value*, though O'Malley is primarily interested in content, and does not connect the episode to others in Brown's writing.

winters, feeling that the notes' use value had come to exceed their exchange value), Brown

the autobiographical subject is less wary of either the economic or ethical implications of

unregulated banking. It's a customer getting a haircut who first jokingly suggests that Brown

"do as other business men [and] issue [his] Shinplasters," and the enterprising barber finds

the suggestion to be "no laughing matter, for from that moment I began to think seriously

of becoming a banker" (100-101).

Most discussions of *Clotel* have rightly called attention to this episode as paradigmatic

for the novel. Paul Gilmore is representative in arguing that "Brown's descriptions of his…

success as a barber and a banker establish his central strategy for dealing with images of

blackness and slavery in his novel" (43). In this chapter I seek to show that this central

strategy has, nonetheless, been incompletely understood in earlier critical assessments of

Brown's work. Scholarly consensus, of course, is right in holding that this banking anecdote

serves as a reserve of tropes for Brown's writing in general, and for *Clotel* in particular; it's

perhaps the best example of what John Ernest calls Brown's "ability to chart the course of

his later career [including his career as an abolitionist] by following the maps provided by the

material he encounters along the way" (26). But my argument seeks to pay closer attention

than has yet been paid to the *materiality* of such "material," and in the vicinity of this banking

episode that means, most importantly, the banknotes themselves.

Like the *Saint Louis Times* in the *Narrative*, the banknotes are available to us as readers

in a particular (if indirect) way because, as printed matter, they're analogous to the object

through which we read about them: the book itself. The notes' physicality is foregrounded in

Brown's narration, but it is also manifested homologically as the pages of the novel (or, in

Three Years in Europe, the travelogue). I will argue in my discussion of *Clotel* proper, paper

money and the social relations it engenders allow Brown to work toward both a theory of the racial body and a model of black authorship, establishing a theoretical nexus linking race, slavery, and the printed word in counterhegemonic ways. As I've already shown, Brown is supremely conscious of both the problem of slaves' illiteracy and the paradoxes inherent in the representation of that illiteracy in writing. He is also, in 1853, acutely conscious of his position as a literary pioneer – of *Clotel's* position as the first novel authored by an African American. (William L. Andrews, in the introduction to his edition of the *Narrative* in *From Fugitive Slave to Free Man*, implies that Brown's consciousness of his pioneering gesture in writing a novel is equaled, and in some ways engendered, by his consciousness in the *Narrative* of writing in the shadow of Frederick Douglass.) Interleaved with his argument against slavery is an overlapping and less explicit argument that black people and former slaves can and should be taken seriously as writers of imaginative works. He must thus not *only* argue that slavery is wrong and that fugitive slaves can write books (Brown himself had already made these points in other books anyway, and, again, seems to have been annoyed that Frederick Douglass had done so earlier and more famously than he). He must also argue that those who have been enslaved can and should wield for abolitionism the rhetorical powers peculiar to fiction as a mode of writing, a power which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had just made so clear to so many (but which, perhaps just as importantly for Brown, had not yet been attempted by Frederick Douglass or any other former slave).

Part of the problem here seems to be that Brown (or his advisers) thought readers would have a hard time seeing him both as someone who had been subject to the dehumanizing cruelty of slavery and as someone who could possess verbal and imaginative capacities slavery corrodes. (This is, of course, part of what was *always* at stake in ante-bellum

black authorship – proof of humanity.) Brown needed to produce a model of authorship that could conceptually link the condition of slavery with the conditions of authorial production. Readers would then be able to recognize him as a person writing, as he had already written in the *Narrative*, with the authority of having experienced slavery first-hand, but they would also credit him with the imaginative capacities necessary for the creation of fiction – capacities supposedly unique to precisely the intact humanity that, as we've seen, the violence of slavery tends to destroy and fragment.

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Money in *Clotel* is one of the two important devices by which Brown forges this link between the disordered subjectivity which registers slavery's violence and the *re*-ordered subjectivity which assures literary authority over materials that are not remembered but imagined. (The other of the two is his "sampling" of other texts – of his own autobiographies, biographies written about him, newspaper articles, other fugitive slaves' lecture pieces, Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons," etc.) The counterhegemonic utility of the banking anecdote is by no means obvious, though. After all, we might reasonably ask, how does thinking about race or blackness as similar to money even *differ from* – let alone *subvert* – the ways in which the culture of slavery already thinks about and describes black people? Isn't the fact that black people circulate within a cash economy as particular dollar values precisely what's *wrong* with slavery, what is most dehumanizing about it? Connecting black people to money would be to reiterate the problem, we might think, not to solve it.

Whether out of impish tricksterism, pragmatic flexibility, or hunger for a political puzzle worthy of his considerable intellectual powers (and probably it was all three of these in some measure), Brown is determined to find abolitionist uses for what is, to some (and at

times to Brown himself) most morally objectionable in slaveholding's ideology. He has few reservations about using the material which that ideology offers, as if, standing apart from mainstream, evangelical abolitionism, he was eager to make a case that, even if there were nothing *unethical* about keeping people as property, slaveholding would still make bad economic sense.

This is a far cry from either the sentimental humanism of Stowe or the defiant contrarianism of Douglass.[9] And, to some extent, those who would fault Brown for being too pragmatic, for lacking the sense of ideological and ethical purity that characterizes some abolitionist writing, have a valid point about his project's limitations. As I will show, both the economic and the rhetorical norms of slaveholding society were often be characterized by a cavalier elision of the distinction between slaves and money, verbal sleight of hand by which the black body was always also the cash for which it could be exchanged. In *Clotel*, Brown often describes crass slaveholders talking about slaves as if they were in fact not people but various kinds of tender, usually coin – and historians like Walter Johnson suggest that this kind of talk really did go on and really was commonplace in the antebellum south. But Brown doesn't just present vilified whites as talking this way, he sometimes talks this

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[9] "What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both" (Douglass 34). Douglass is a Romantic, not a pragmatic. He (or at least the persona in the *Narrative of the Life*) will oppose slaveholders staunchly and absolutely, and if he would rather die than compromise. Indeed, so thoroughly is Douglass's sense of his identity in this famous passage an absolute negation of his master's that to compromise – to identify with qualities that were not a negation of the qualities of his master – would be a kind of death already. Brown, though just as committed to abolition, is much less committed to the idea that abolition must be won on grounds of absolute doctrinal purity or not at all. In this, as in his relation to the materiality of the word (which is to say, his privileging of the printed over the written word) Brown casts himself as, far more than Douglass, the heir to Franklin's political and aesthetic sensibilities.

way himself, willing to mine the very commodification of the black body for whatever

political and rhetorical capital might be gained for the antislavery cause thereby.

In doing so, Brown takes up a tool we're used to seeing in the hands of slaveholders

and their apologists – one which, we can suppose Brown must have known, seems routinely

to have been used to terrorize slaves with the threat of their being sold on the open market.

Walter Johnson, drawing on a transcription of a field interview conducted in the late

nineteenth century with a man who had grown up as a slave, records a figure of speech

which I think is particularly telling, and which compresses a whole economics of the slave

body into a single metaphor. The man remembers that he and the other slaves on his

owner's plantation would sometimes be told that if they displeased in any way they would be

"put into the pocket" of their masters.[10]

Incredibly, among the performative effects of this complicated dual-metonymy is the

disappearance of the money itself – a disappearance which happens in spite of the fact that

money is the *implied* meaning of both sides of the metonym; both the slaves *and* the pocket

are displacements of the cash which is the figure's real content. The *slaves* are not literally

going to be put in the pocket, the *money* is (thus, the slaves stand for the money). But at the

same time this money itself isn't so much going to be "put in the pocket" as it is going to be

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[10] The ex-slave, William Johnson (no relation, as far as I know, to the Walter Johnson in whose book the anecdote is recorded) told the interviewer that "Master used to say that if we didn't suit him he would put us into his pocket quick – meaning he would sell us" (Johnson 19). Johnson gives no indication that his master had to explain his meaning at the time, but decades later Johnson offers to gloss it for the interviewer, who may be a northerner, or a younger man, or both, and who perhaps strikes Johnson as unacquainted with figures of speech that were only commonplace during slavery and among slaves. This suggests that "put into the pocket" was a euphemism that was common enough to be unambiguous while slavery existed, but quickly dropped out of usage after emancipation and needed to be explained to those who had not experienced slavery firsthand. It does not, in other words, seem to have been a phrase that was used for the liquidation of non-human assets. Whether the euphemism was used just on the one plantation where Johnson worked or throughout the south I've not been able to determine.

added to the plantation's cash accounts (thus, the pocket, too, stands for the money). The slaves and the pocket are both metonymic substitutions for cash – the former as *bread* too sometimes stands for money, because it is an exemplary commodity, and the latter as *bank account* stands for *money* when we say that our bank account is dwindling.[11] Without necessarily saying that this euphemizing of selling slaves as "putting them into the pocket" was in widespread use in the antebellum south, I'd like to suggest that that euphemism, in being uttered at all and in being remembered by one of those terrorized by it decades later, articulates with some precision assumptions deeply laid in the ideology of slaveholding. Even if these assumptions are usually implicit, the power of the "put into the pocket" turn of phrase lies in its putting words to a way of seeing shared by many. What the phrase shows us about the ideology of which it's a symptom is important to my argument about Brown in two ways. First, it suggests the readiness with which actual slaves themselves were thought and spoken of as substitutions for the money for which they could be exchanged; second, it suggests that when slaveholders talked about their slaves this way, they sometimes preferred to do so in language that, though the content of its threat remained clear, did not actually name money, or value, or any act of exchange, but hid these explicitly economic operations behind a very thin veil of figuration.[12]

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[11] The slaves "put into the pocket" of their master is a case in point, and an instructive one, because it shows that money could disappear into verbal figuration even when it was the thing most directly being talked about. Needless to say, far more common were those instances in which the economic motives behind slaveholding were kept *fully* silent, as in the paternalistic fantasies that sustained the image of slavery as somehow an extension of and consistent with the plantation family household. Point being: many slaveholders preferred not to talk about money's centrality to slavery unless they were buying slaves, in which case they often imagined themselves to be saving the people they bought from the vulgarity of the very marketplace that, in their purchase, they were helping to enact (see Johnson 109).

[12] We normally think of slaves' economic role as one of laborers, but Brown seems to suggest (with what, following Johnson, strikes me as as much truth) that the actual labor they performed was not as important economically as the exchange value of their *potential* to labor (or to bear a new generation of laborers) at some future date.

So part of what's potentially subversive in Brown's project is his eagerness to transfer money from the latent to the manifest stratum in discussions of slave (and slaveholding) life. In putting money itself (back) into representations of slavery Brown restores visibility to the economic base in a story that slaveholders were only too willing to have dominated by the rhetorical superstructure of paternalism and Arthurian pretense.[13] But Brown also seeks to do more than expose the economic logic underlying the myth of the picturesque southern plantation. That is, even if the unmasking of slavery's sordid economic base constitutes a political end in itself for Brown, that base, even once unmasked, is hardly self-explanatory. The base is itself composed of texts which demand interpretation, and require yet another round of ideological disassembly. Money can be hidden away in figures of speech – as it is in the slave-in-the-pocket metonym – but money is also itself a kind of figure. It is this, in part, that the banking anecdote seeks to show; money may be slaveholding ideology's latent content, but money, once unearthed and made manifest, has latent content of its own.

Importantly, among the events triggered by Brown's decision to open a bank is his return (as far as we know for the first time since he worked for Lovejoy at the *Saint Louis Times*) to a printing house.

> I accordingly went a few days after [the patron suggested issuing shinplasters] to a printer, and he, wishing to get the job of printing, urged me to put out my notes, and showed me some specimens of engravings that he had just received from Detroit. My head being already filled with the idea of the bank, I needed but little persuasion to set the thing finally afloat. Before I left the printer the notes were partly in type, and I studying how I should keep the public from counterfeiting them. The next day, my Shinplasters were handed to me, the whole amount being twenty dollars; and, after being duly signed, were ready for circulation… At first my notes did not take well; they were too new, and viewed with a suspicious eye. But through the assistance of my customers, and a good deal of exertion on my

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[13] The ideology of paternalism is a constant refrain in Johnson's book. (See, for example, 110-111.)

part, my bills were soon in circulation; and nearly all the money received in return for my notes was spent in fitting up and decorating my shop. (*Clotel* 68)

Brown here triangulates the materiality of paper money, the materiality of print, and the weirdly spectral threat of illegitimacy posed by fake money's potential to pass for the real thing. The possibility of misreading, among many possibilities introduced by this mention of counterfeiting, assures us that surfaces do not mean on their own, but must be called into meaning by a specific interpreter assuming a particular vantage. These interpretive dynamics will become more important once, when the fictional portion of *Clotel* actually begins, they are redirected at the racial body. Right away, though, the banking anecdote allows Brown to revisit what, as the *Narrative* shows us, is the scene of both his greatest personal victory and his most brutal defeat while a slave – Lovejoy's printing house, where he learned what little slavery could teach him and where he was beaten so severely that he nearly died. In reenacting the *Narrative's* Lovejoy episode in this northern printing house Brown reverses the terms of his illiteracy, since by guarding against counterfeiters, presumably by including in the design for the notes subtleties that forgers wouldn't notice or know how to imitate but for which he himself will know to look, Brown creates not only a text which he can read, but a text which *only* he can read. He has returned to the world of the printing house not just literate, but authorized to determine the scope of *others'* literacy.

The barber-banker's attitude toward counterfeiting in this passage is one of far more marked ambivalence than critics have tended to notice.[14] Brown is, to be sure, himself a kind

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[14] See particularly Gilmore's discussion, in which the privileging of performance over essence, the substitution of multiple copies for a single original, seems to be lauded – and characterized as something lauded by Brown – as an unmixed good. This has the effect of sanitizing Brown for twenty-first-century academics, casting his notions of authenticity as a validating mirror for our own. We in the present may not (and probably shouldn't) believe in an absolute distinction between the real and the fake, but Brown, I would argue, must have. He did not see the existence of counterfeit images or bills as an occasion to dismiss the whole idea of

of counterfeit; he has built his reputation as a barber in Monroe by circulating stories about his past that are, at best, only partly true. Indeed, he privileges semblance over substance throughout the banking episode – a tendency evident here especially in his deadpan observation that his new income was used almost entirely to make his shop seem more inviting. ("Fitting up" here could refer to the purchase of new equipment and not merely new decorations, but we've no reason to assume it does so, and even if it does, that still doesn't make Brown a better barber, only the proprietor of a better barbershop.) Elsewhere in the anecdote Brown describes the sign he hangs over his shop's door: "Fashionable Hair-dresser from New York, Emperor of the West." Customers are meant to infer that he has learned his trade, and the latest styles, in Manhattan, though he has in fact only been as far east as Buffalo, and as far as we know his business there did not involve cutting hair. "I need not add that my enterprise was very annoying to the 'shop over the way,' [which, recall, had refused to give Brown a job on his first day in Monroe] especially my sign, which happened to be the most extensive part of the concern" (31). There's unquestionably – as Paul Gilmore recognizes – a glib, almost proto-camp elevation of seeming over being in the passage, one that recalls the more impish Brown of the 1848 *Narrative*, and contrasts with the sanctimoniousness of *Three Years in Europe* and with the more serious strains of the main plotline in *Clotel*. But the celebration of the counterfeit's liberatory potential – its potential to

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authenticity, but rather as a way to adjudicate among competing claims *to* authenticity, not all of which were equally valid in his eyes. This is apparent in his sense that such claims, made by slaveholding ideology could, because dissimulative in the first place, be dislodged from their apparent legitimacy by counterfeit images; but it is even more apparent in his description of the Bank of England (the original context for the banking anecdote as it appeared in *Three Years in Europe*) in which, precisely because England is more just a society (i.e. less tainted by slavery) it is less threatened by the possibility of counterfeit images. See: *Three Years in Europe* (97-104). It is precisely because there is a transcendent real to which economic life can be made to conform that slavery, in its failure to conform thus, can be shown to be illegitimate.

dismantle oppressive orthodoxies and restrictive notions of authenticity – is not without

misgivings and points of unease.[15] These dissembling shenanigans are, for Brown, fitting

responses only to improperly constructed social worlds – the anarchic west or the

slaveholding south. For the middle-class of New or old England, with which Brown in 1853

identifies and whose antislavery sympathies he hopes to stoke, such misbehavior must be

disavowed, even if not wholly despised. Brown's discussion of the incredibly lax regulation[16]

in Monroe begins with his observation that

> At this time, money matters in the Western States were in a sad condition. Any
> person who could raise a small amount of money was permitted to establish a
> bank, and allowed to issue notes for four times the sum raised… The result was,
> that banks were started all over the Western States, and the country flooded with
> worthless paper. (67)

He thus codes the situation as both lamentably anarchic and regionally bound – precisely the

kind of thing that Britons and New Englanders could use as a barometer of their own civility

and enlightenment vis-à-vis the lawlessness of the American frontier.

If there's anything subversive just in Brown's explicit reintroduction of money into

descriptions of slavery's economic relations, there is also something subversive in his

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[15] Not, I'd argue, unlike Brown's entire stay in Monroe, which has the feel of a kind of exile made bearable only by the fact that he will be free to leave once the winter is over and the boats start running again. Note that Monroe, Michigan was so named (in 1817) for President James Monroe, just as was (in 1824) the Liberian capital of Monrovia. Like most abolitionists and all Garrisonians Brown was vigorously opposed to the colonization of blacks "back" to Africa. Brown's stay in Monroe is for him a more mild colonization, less foreign, less remote, slightly less forced on him, but foreign, remote, and compulsory nonetheless.

[16] This is my paraphrase of Brown's view, not my own view, though one would have to imagine that, in at least some free states, racism in 1836 would have prevented most black men from being authorized as bankers, whatever the letter of the law. Furthermore, recall that Brown, in addition to being black, has only been in Monroe a short time (weeks or months), has no family anyone knows, has one recent employer – a thief – current whereabouts unknown, has either *no* legal name or a legal name by which he has been known for but a year, and has either no personal or professional references or has such references but only from people who have known him a year or less. We can assume furthermore that he has reported his recent past to townspeople only in vague terms, for if they knew – or thought they knew – all he had done they would know that he had never been to New York City, or even cut hair in New York state. Besides his work ethic about the only thing Brown has to his credit is that he doesn't drink alcohol.

introduction here of the idea of counterfeiting as, in theory, a concern separate from money as such. Virtually from the moment Brown introduces it, the idea of the counterfeit, which we normally think of as exclusively a problem with currency, casts its stigmatizing shadow on nearly everything in the passage *except* money: Brown's connection to the New York City fashion world, his trade as a barber (which he learned, as I'll discuss later, not in order to offer ordinary haircuts but in order to make the older slaves Walker brought to market appear younger than they actually were), even his signature, which imparts to the notes all the legitimacy of a name he has borne for but a year or so. The very fact that Brown's shinplasters are accepted, eventually, is due *not* to the actual solvency of his bank but to a "good deal of exertion" on his part – his efforts to foster others' *belief* in that solvency. Furthermore, belief in this solvency is a thing quite independent of solvency in fact, for Brown has just told us that he's not legally required to have on hand coin enough to redeem more than one quarter of the cash he has actually put in circulation. When the rival barber and his allies attempt a run on the bank in order to damage its reputation and credit, Brown is able to stay in business not by redeeming his notes for coin, but for redeeming them for *other* notes, his supply of which he replenishes by temporarily closing his shop whenever necessary, a notion suggested by the same unnamed customer who suggested Brown open the bank in the first place.

> "This was, indeed, a new idea for me. I immediately commenced putting in circulation the notes which I had just *redeemed*… before I slept that night, my Shinplasters were again in circulation, and my bank once more on a sound basis."
> [The "Memoir" then shifts again to the third person] In proportion as his mind expanded under the more favourable circumstance in which Brown was placed, he became anxious not merely for the *redemption* of his race from personal slavery, but for the moral and religious elevation of those who were free. (69, emphasis added)

The key to the banking anecdote's presence in *Clotel* has less to do with banking itself (as was the case when the anecdote first appeared in *Three Years…*) than with the substitution Brown is able to effect by placing a quotation from himself and a quotation from a biographer next to one another. The "redemption" of African Americans from slavery – that is to say, emancipation – will move forward by the same operations that Brown used to keep his bank afloat. Southern slavery is, like western banking, a sad state of affairs built on lies. Brown will fight fire with fire.

A subtler version of this substitution, hanging not on a word like redemption but on a numerical relationship, will begin the novel. Only one of every four among Brown's dollars is secured by hard currency. This ratio will be redeployed, unexpectedly, in *Clotel's* first paragraph, but there Brown will be discussing not banking but miscegenation: "the real negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population" (81). In turning now to *Clotel* itself, I trace the consequences of this redeployment.

<center>*Part Two – "The Negro Sale"*</center>

The opening of *Clotel* seeks to examine *exactly what it is* in the hegemonic version of the link between slaves and money that serves to consolidate the power of the slaveholding southern establishment. The novel opens with a curious triptych: a verse epigraph, followed by a generalized polemic, followed finally by the introduction of some characters and the opening of the narrative itself. A stanza borrowed from the Brown-edited *Anti-Slavery Harp* (an 1848 lyric anthology) serves as the epigraph.

> Why stands she near the auction stand,
>> That girl so young and fair?

> What brings her to this dismal place,
>   Why stands she weeping there? (81)

The quatrain is typical of light verse in nineteenth-century America, even if the disordered syntax of the second line (in which the adjectives follow the noun they describe) risks a Latinate stylistic flourish that attempts to rise above the absolutely vernacular. The ballad stanza, though itself a popular form with a vernacular and (as the Common Meter of the hymnal) sacred pedigree, also signals some degree of disorder. Of all the most familiar stanzaic forms in English, the ballad stanza is, in fact, the least regular: its even-numbered lines *must* rhyme but its odd-numbered ones *may* or *may not* so that, until the quatrain reaches its last syllable (particularly if it is the first in a song or if, like this one, it is a single quatrain alone taken out of its original context), we're not completely sure if we're reading rhymed or unrhymed verse. Those lines which do rhyme are, furthermore, never adjacent to one another. Much of this irregularity has been worn away for readers of English by acclimation. We are so used to hearing songs and hymns structured in this way and we do not realize how much more jagged the edges of the ballad stanza are than are the edges of couplets or abab quatrains (whether pentameter or tetrameter) or even blank verse (where we are never cued even to expect a rhyme). This jaggedness, I suspect, is in some ways not present in musical performance, since melodies tend to be structured in four-beat sections and a singer would, quite sensibly, sing for seven consecutive beats and then take a breath on the eighth. Sung, the alternating four- and three-stress lines make sense, since their irregularity merely accommodates the organic demands of the body. On the page, though, the alternating lengths of line have no such excuse, and come to seem a form constantly interrupting itself.

There are structural parallels here between the stanza and the whole prose portion of this opening chapter; this prose begins with a polemic and only in its final paragraphs, once

we might reasonably have begun to wonder if we are in fact reading a novel at all, begins to

offer actual characters and narration. We go from the weeping girl, to something else, then

back to the weeping girl. And this interruption models the structural logic of the novel as a

whole as well, which famously displaces, in both space and time, the sentimentally earned

happy ending from the events leading up to it, and which never lets off introducing new

characters and subplots which may or may not reappear in later chapters.[17] As we already

know, *Clotel* begins with an unusually long autobiographical prologue which, in its uncertain

relationship to the fiction, serves the novel as a whole in much the same way that the verse

epigraph serves this opening chapter, and as unrhymed line endings of that epigraph serve

the ballad stanza's rhyme scheme, which emerges only in its last sound. From the

microtextual (the syntactic dislocations of the lines, and the rhyme of the stanza) to the

macrotextual (the whole novel) and in between (the first chapter considered on its own)

there is a pervasive sense of interruption – of a well-mated beginning and ending kept

separate from one another by a middle both lengthier and less obviously relevant than we

might expect. So in the structure of the novel's first chapter, the epigraph asks a question –

why does this girl stand weeping by the auction stand? – and, before that question is

answered, Brown explores a set of ideas which do not answer or even directly relate to the

question, or at least do not at first seem to. How does the polemic which opens the novel's

prose prepare us for the "Negro Sale" which closes the opening chapter, the event for which

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[17] This is among M. Giulia Fabi's major arguments about *Clotel* – that the deferral of emotional gratification in the conclusion allows Brown to combine the conventions of sentimental narrative with his journalistic insistence that slavery, in reality, denies all its victims happy endings (Fabi 21).

that chapter is named and toward which the rhetorical questions of the epigraph look for its answers?

There is a Hegelian logic here,[18] one in which we might anticipate that the disjunctive relation between the chapter's first and second gestures will be overcome by the synthesizing demands of its third. But, even anticipating some grand synthesis to come, we might rightfully be disoriented by the abrupt shifting of gears in the transition from thesis (epigraph) to antithesis (polemic). So we must ask a few additional questions: How then does the polemic serve the needs of the epigraph by interrupting it? How does it serve the needs of the plot by delaying that plot's entry onto the novel's diegetic stage?

Clotel's opening pages – like much of its so-called sentimental plot[19] – concern the complicated relationship between marriage and reproduction in the slaveholding south, and the consequences of that relationship's structure for moral and racial order. After its epigraph, this is how *Clotel* begins:

> With the growing population of slaves in the Southern States of America, there is a fearful increase of half whites, most of whose fathers are slaveowners, and their mothers slaves. Society does not frown upon the man who sits with his mulatto child upon his knee, whilst its mother stands a slave behind his chair… In all the cities and towns of the slave states, the real negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population. This fact is, of itself, the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America. (81-82)

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[18] In case it's not clear, I'm talking about the first chapter performing three basic moves. A first move (the verse epigraph, which asks why a girl is crying, and serves as the thesis of the chapter's dialectic), a second move (which is a polemic about miscegenation, and, as antithesis to the epigraph, doesn't at first seem to be connected to it), and a third move (which answers the question of the thesis/epigraph, combines the seemingly-unrelated concerns of the first two moves into an organic whole, and uses the energy released by this fusion to propel the narrative forward).

[19] Scholars have tended to discuss *Clotel* as consisting of two intertwining narrative energies: the "sentimental plot" of the daughters and granddaughters of Thomas Jefferson and the "realist plot" of the dark-skinned men they encounter along the way. See, for example, the chapters on *Clotel* in Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* and Raimon's *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited*.

As I've already suggested, Brown's remarks in this opening paragraph do more than manipulate white fears of moral and racial disorder; they also cast the threat of sexual anarchy and racial amalgamation in terms that recall the economic logic of the banking anecdote from the "Memoir." The "half whites," like Brown's unsecured shinplasters, outnumber by a margin of three to one the "clear blacks" who are secured by what we might think of as a reserve of "real" blackness. But the lightest-skinned slave is no less enslaved, and legally no less non-white, than the darkest-skinned, just as each shinplaster is worth its full face value. We act as if each shinplaster is worth what it claims to be worth, even though we know that there is not enough "real" money to account for the proliferation of paper. But this, Brown believes (and believes his reader will also believe) is a dangerous game we agree to play. We agree to suspend our disbelief and give ourselves over to a collectively shared illusion (something which, notably, we also do when we read fiction), and we do so because it offers short-term economic advantages, but these advantages (Brown was not alone in suggesting) come at the cost of long-term economic and social stability. Only one in four slaves, according to Brown, is secured by actual blackness, the vast majority constituting real emblems of a nonetheless imaginary solvency in which those with the power to make the rules, because they are greedy for what this solvency offers, have agreed pretend to believe. Slavery as it currently exists, particularly insofar as it depends on the sexual slavery of black women, is a dangerously inflationary practice in which there are far more slaves being circulated than the store of actual black "blood" in the United States should allow. Greedy for what this inflated wealth can buy them, the ruling class of the slave economy flirt dangerously with a market verging ever closer to collapse.

This is an economic logic that Brown seems to think his readers will find discomforting even when it is not describing "money" in the strictest sense, and these economic anxieties mobilized here are tied to the moral and sexual anxieties to which Brown turns explicitly in the last of the sentences I quote above. This relationship between the economic and the erotic is, in a loose sense, paratactic to the extent that racial and sexual boundaries are both collapsing at the same time and with the same importance. Like a portrait whose eyes seem to follow the spectator, Brown is vague enough to emphasize whichever vision of anarchy a given reader personally finds more upsetting: racial, libidinal, or financial.

Unlike the explicit racial and moral argument, though, Brown's economic point is not overt; for readers today it depends almost entirely on the memory of a minor numerical detail from the banking anecdote which, at this point, appeared several pages ago. But the fear of bank failure might arguably have been a real enough concern for sufficient numbers of people in the 1850s that, for them, it doesn't *need* to be explicit in order to inflect the meaning of the racial and sexual disorder that *is*. Worthless banknotes, sexual anarchy, and racial indeterminacy are marshaled here in such a way that they, and emotions provoked by any one of them in the reader, are wired to one another in series as if an electrical circuit. To be panicked by one is, Brown hopes, necessarily to be panicked by all three, and the three panics mutually amplify and strengthen one another. The point is not that one is standing for the others but is precisely that each is standing for all.

This kind of knotted anxiety, in which each specific worry compounds and overlaps with all the others, makes for effective propaganda because readers who come to the novel consciously troubled by only one of these three might well leave it troubled by all of them –

thus a crusader only against rape, free banking, or miscegenation has, from reading *Clotel*, begun to oppose slavery too, because slavery entails rape, and this rape entails miscegenation, and the unregulated proliferation of "unsecured" blackness this miscegenation entails constitutes a kind of free banking in which people are the currency. If such people are not reliably black – if their blackness is not an immutable fact of their bodies but merely a value that attaches to them by means of a strategic fiction, then their status as a currency could, in the future, either evaporate when their blackness is no longer taken for granted by creditors, or rescored only at the cost of (unthinkably) also reducing *white* people to a currency.

In order for Brown to make this kind of argument work, though, the links the argument establishes must appear genuine to readers, must ideally seem to the readers to be their own thoughts rather than Brown's. This is part of what the relegation of the economic links to the novel's latent content signifies. This arrangement of race, sex, and money, if it successfully persuaded anybody, must point to a broadly shared assumption (how broadly shared it's difficult to say, but Brown clearly hoped this breadth would be great indeed) that racial indeterminacy, sexual immorality, and uncontrollable inflation of currency resembled one another – that each could function as a fit metaphor for the others.

By linking the embodied slave to the shinplaster – a connection already hinted at in the punning on "redemption" in the "Memoir" – Brown connects money, race, sex, and slavery to one another in a circular chain of political associations, one whose focal point – the center around which these satellite concerns orbit without ever approaching directly – is the bourgeoisie's worst fears for the world it was creating. For Brown, though, this looming threat of an inauthentic world is obviously not the final point. That final point is that slavery

makes counterfeits of everything and liars of us all,[20] one that Georgiana, the novel's most

unsullied figure of white benevolence, asserts aphoristically in remarking that, "Our system

of slavery is one of deception" (155). This is what allows Brown to present the struggle

against slavery – sometimes dismissed as a radically and recklessly utopian experiment – as

not just consistent with but part of a conservative, nationalist agenda. Abolitionism does not

threaten but *helps to maintain* a bourgeois social order whose real enemy is unreliable surfaces.[21]

The close resemblance Brown forces between slaves and money makes pragmatic political

sense as an antislavery argument for precisely this reason – it allows him to oppose slavery in

terms which might convince those on the political right, who are not normally eager to

support social transformation of any kind. As Michael O'Malley argues in *Face Value*, after

all, those Americans most likely to favor aggressively anti-inflationist economic policies (and,

in the twentieth century, a return to the gold standard) have historically been among the *most*

hostile toward both racial minorities and governmental attempts to correct the institutional

injustices with which these minorities are forced to contend. This does not necessarily mean

that restrictive monetary policies are racist (O'Malley 10), but it suggests that a person –

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[20] I paraphrase here Brown's own moral in the anecdote of the sailor and jailer: "slavery makes its victims lying and mean." For an interesting instance of prose in which the specter of paper currency is assumed a priori to compromise the authenticity of everything it touches, and used as a fit metaphor for broader concerns over a crisis in authenticity seen as new or newly unbearable, see Emerson's *Nature* – written and published, as it happens, during the same year that Brown was in Monroe. Like Brown, Emerson seeks to motivate his reader to agree with his argument by playing upon economic misgivings he believes that reader already to entertain: "When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise, – and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults" (33).

[21] *Confidence Men and Painted Women* makes the case that the anxious preoccupation with various kinds of disguise in mid-nineteenth-century America was caused ultimately by the relocation of people from villages to towns and cities, and the transformation of villages into towns. These shifts in population density and geographical dislocation and migration necessarily accompanied the transformation of an agricultural economy into a primarily industrial one, but they also meant that, in a way that was (or at least seemed) new, large numbers of people were now living among total strangers.

especially a person who possesses some measure of power but feels powerless (a description fitting agrarian whites in industrial America as much as it fits anyone) – might reap the same emotional and ideological rewards by committing to restrictive economic views as by committing to racial tribalism. The nineteenth-century Americans who feared what paper money was doing to their economy tended not already to be committed abolitionists. Moving such people to voice their opposition to slavery, even if they did so only because black people, it turned out, were no safer an investment than shinplasters, might make a real and measurable difference to the power and reach of the antislavery movement.

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If Brown's argument has the disadvantage of not insisting on the humanity of black Americans, it has by the same token the pragmatic advantage of being able to insist that slavery be dismantled without presupposing that humanity. This argument does not necessarily conflict with the sentimental arguments rooted in the shared humanity and vulnerability to suffering of black slaves and white non-slaves (and Brown sometimes also deploys this kind of sentimentalism), but it supplements those arguments with something altogether different from them, something with a chance of persuading even those readers, should Brown find any, utterly unwilling to sympathize with the suffering or identify with the humanity of African Americans. Brown reaches out to people who don't necessarily care about shared humanity or shared vulnerability to pain, but might care about the fact that the racial blackness which underwrote the wealth of the entire American South is no more grounded in stable, prediscursive value than the ink on a dollar bill.

When the novel finally turns to its plot, Brown returns to the scene – and the sentimental aesthetic and affective vocabularies – of the epigraph: the public slave auction.

Several lots of slaves are presented in turn to the crowd of bidders, but Brown's description

of his title character's appearance on the block is, in particular, worth considering at length.

(Note that Brown sometimes punctures the membrane separating direct from indirect

quotation,[22] thus making verb tense intractable; this is an anachronistic mannerism about

which I'll say more shortly, because it produces some useful ambiguities in the passage.)

> The auctioneer commenced by saying, that "Miss Clotel had been reserved for the last, because she was the most valuable. How much gentlemen? Real Albino, fit for a fancy girl for any one. She enjoys good health, and has a sweet temper. How much do you say?" "Five hundred dollars." "Only five hundred for such a girl as this? Gentlemen, she is worth a deal more than that sum; you certainly don't know the value of the article you are bidding upon. Here, gentlemen, I hold in my hand a paper certifying that she has a good moral character." "Seven hundred." "Ah, gentlemen, that is something like. This paper also states that she is very intelligent." "Eight hundred." "She is a devoted Christian, and perfectly trustworthy." "Nine hundred." "Nine fifty." "Ten." "Eleven." "Twelve hundred." Here the sale came to a dead stand. The auctioneer stopped, looked around, and began in a rough manner to relate some anecdotes relative to the sale of slaves, which, he said, had come under his own observation. At this juncture the scene was indeed strange. Laughing, joking, swearing, smoking, spitting, and talking kept up a continual hum and noise amongst the crowd; while the slave-girl stood with tears in her eyes, at one time looking towards her mother and sister, and at another towards the young man whom she hoped would become her purchaser. "The chastity of this girl is pure; she has never been from under her mother's care, she is a virtuous creature." "Thirteen." "Fourteen." "Fifteen." "Fifteen hundred dollars," cried the auctioneer, and the maiden was struck for that sum. (87)

Brown seems to think that a meaningful representation of slaveholding society, or at

least one in which his readers would be interested, needs to include an abundance of

quantitative detail. This detail is not entirely usual in abolitionist writing; the only thing like it

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[22] A bad habit he may have picked up by reading Fielding. Brown never actually mentions Fielding's novels, but his familiarity with Defoe would suggest that he had some contact with the major British novelists of the eighteenth century, who tend to be less scrupulous in the distinction between direct and indirect discourse than their nineteenth-century heirs.

in Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842, the tale from which Brown lifted *Clotel's*

main plotline) appears near the end of the story, also at a slave auction. The differences

between the two are striking, especially since Brown has no qualms about quoting Child

verbatim when it suits him.[23] This is part of what I've called his "sampling" strategy, which

with its partner (the "money" strategy) serves to anchor his aggressive problematizations of

originality and authenticity at both the site of the racial body and the site of the printed text.

(Again, this dynamic is also what unites the prefatory "Memoir," in which Brown treats his

own words as if they *were* borrowed, with the fictional portion of the novel, in which Brown

treats Child's [and several other writers'] words as if they *were not* borrowed.)

> There she stood, trembling, blushing, and weeping; compelled to listen to the grossest language, and shrinking from the rude hands that examined the graceful proportions of her beautiful frame. "Stop that," exclaimed a stern voice, "I bid two thousand dollars for her, without asking any of their d--d questions." The speaker was probably about forty years of age, with handsome features, but a fierce and proud expression. An older man, who stood behind him, bid two thousand five hundred. The first bid higher; then a third, a dashing young man, bid three thousand; and thus they went on, with the keen excitement of gamblers, until the first speaker obtained the prize, for the moderate sum of five thousand dollars. (283)[24]

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[23] Much of *Clotel*, of course, *is* taken from Child's "The Quadroons" verbatim. There are elsewhere in the novel whole paragraphs that are identical to those in Child's story but for the changes Brown makes to characters' names. See especially chapters four, eight, and twenty-three in *Clotel*.

[24] References to "The Quadroons" are to its appearance as a supplement in Robert S. Levine's Bedford Cultural Edition of *Clotel*, pages 274-284. Brown, more infatuated with realism than Child, refuses the improbable five thousand dollars for which Xarifa sells in "The Quadroons," telling us that Clotel fetches a significant but credible fifteen hundred. A page of slave trader John White's 1851-52 ledger book reproduced in Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul* shows girls in their teens were bought in the north usually for around seven hundred dollars and then sold at the south for rarely more than a thousand (Johnson 45-46, part of White's ledger is also provided in facsimile in Johnson's illustrations insert). The more journalistic restraint of the economics in Brown's auction may be due less to aesthetic concerns than to audience expectations. When Child published "The Quadroons" in 1842, three years before even Douglass's *Narrative of the Life*, the audience for fiction about slaves would likely have been smaller and more poorly informed than the post-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* audience Brown addresses. In the first chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Haley notes to Shelby that young women as beautiful as Eliza could sometimes fetch prices of over a thousand dollars.

To be clear, this is not one of the sections from "The Quadroons" which Brown

seeks to reproduce in *Clotel*, and the two slave auctions whose descriptions I've just quoted

are not meant to be the same one. When Child's tale begins, Clotel (whom Child calls

Rosalie) has already been sold and is living with her owner/lover, and Brown does not

reproduce this particular slave auction from the last part of "The Quadroons" in *Clotel*. The

two passages share some details, and this is doubtless more than coincidence, but the fact

that Brown seems to have been thinking of this scene from the end of "The Quadroons" for

the beginning of *Clotel* should alert us to the differences as well as the similarities. When

borrowing from Child, again, Brown is no more original than he has to be – he never

introduces words of his own to her material without good reason. The ways in which

Brown's handling of the stock "auction scene" differ from Child's in "The Quadroons"

should thus be accorded particular weight, as they could not have been motivated by mere

whim.

Child's prose in the passage I've just quoted favors indirect discourse and visual

description, though what direct quotation there is in this paragraph has a particularly sharp

edge; it consists of an abrupt "stop that" which lacks an introductory clause or any prior

designation of a speaker. The auction of Clotel is comparatively dramatic – in the sense of

being in some ways more closely linked to the stage than to the page. It consists almost

entirely of direct quotation, though the characters' speech is nonetheless sometimes worded

as if it were indirectly reported. Recall: "The auctioneer commenced by saying, that 'Miss

Clotel *had* been reserved for the last, because she *was* the most valuable'" (emphasis mine).

The authorial voice of the novel – Brown's antislavery voice – must here embed itself within

the voice of the auctioneer, and that auctioneer, given no proper name or unique history to

differentiate him from the archetypal slave hawker, is in a sense the slave market incarnate.

Except for the traveling slave trader, no stock character in abolitionist fiction is more vilified.

The words of the auctioneer here *should* signal unequivocally that his speech is being

reported at second hand – that the narrator, not the auctioneer, is addressing the reader –

but the quotation marks tell us that, if he is doing so, it is from within the diegetic space of

the story, by way of the auctioneer's imagined body.

For the purposes of my argument, what's important in this act of ventriloquism is

that it is both a performance of and an interrogation of the dependence of black artists on

white structures of power – abolitionist utterances on pro-slavery forms.[25] In particular, it

mimics what Brown does throughout *Clotel* with the commodification of the black body,

something does *overtly*, as it happens, in the thematics of this very passage. He enters into the

mouth of the slaveholding and slavetrading establishment, but will not surrender his voice to

its villains. The result of this appropriation may be incoherent and ungrammatical, but

therein lies its genuine novelty as an antislavery tactic, and thus its unharnessed subversive

potential.

In a more meta-thematic way, such a *verfremdungseffekt* as the crisis of verb tense in

Brown's description of the auction can, furthermore, serve to suspend, disrupt, or otherwise

foreground the means by which a work of fiction veils its artificiality and achieves its

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[25] I don't mean to imply here that black artists always or only produce anti-slavery utterances or that white structures of power are always also pro-slavery forms. Even if the categories (white, black, pro-slavery, antislavery) were stable enough to mean the same things all the time (which they aren't) the two pairs wouldn't align so cleanly or predictably. What I *am* thinking of is, for example, the fact that fugitive slave writers and speakers could not be heard without accommodating the (sometimes but not always benign) demands of those whites who managed newspapers, lecture halls, anti-slavery societies, printing presses, etc. As several scholars have argued over the past three decades, a less concrete version of the same dynamic exists wherever descriptions of slavery – of whatever political persuasion and in whatever medium – draw on the tropes of the minstrel show in order to find an audience. See, for example, Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story* and Gilmore's *Genuine Article*.

verisimilitude. By allowing itself for a moment not just to *be* but to *seem* staged, such a fiction

can direct its reader's attention toward real-world injustice without the risk of substituting

the palliative aesthetic satisfactions of formal coherence for the curative achievement of

genuine political transformation. The audience is denied catharsis within the space of the

artwork so that it will be left hungrier for political change where it matters most: in the real

world.[26] This, and the quantitative precision of detail throughout the auction scene,

introduce profoundly anti-sentimental impulses into what might otherwise be (and the

chapter epigraph has led us to believe *would* be) a particularly weepy episode at the beginning

of a predominantly sentimental novel.

So this ventriloquism – the verbal palimpsest by which the auctioneer's words are

spoken by his body within the diegesis but, because of their unstable verb tense, seem from

the reader's point of view simultaneously to emanate from outside the diegesis, from

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[26] While the refusal of a stable point of view in the first chapter of *Clotel* really does anticipate, I'd argue, the modernisms of Brecht and Godard, the war of ideas between acerbically political meta-fiction and sentimental calls to fine feeling is and was longstanding. It goes back at least to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) of which Brecht himself is perhaps the most astute admirer (though George Washington was another). When Brown began writing *Clotel* in 1852, Stowe's unabashedly sentimental *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had just raised the stakes of these questions for the anti-slavery movement considerably, and both the promise and the limits of sentimental politics must have weighed heavily on everyone's mind. I'm arguing here, as I do throughout this chapter, that Brown's importance (and his brilliance as a politically engaged artist) may be measured partly by his capacity to draw heavily on the sentimentalism of Stowe, Child, and others whom he regarded as allies, but at the same time to recognize the limitations of their projects both aesthetically and politically, and – without ever seeming to disidentify with or reject sentimentalism – to draw simultaneously on other vocabularies, ones with which sentimentalism itself is not exactly compatible. This kitchen sink approach puts him in the company of Whitman and Franklin (notably, both printers) as part of a pragmatic tradition that would later include, in different ways, William and Henry James and, also in even more different ways, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. It also makes him something of a liberationist-provocateur, like Whitman and later Gertrude Stein, Duchamp (*Clotel* is in a sense the first "readymade" novel), Brecht, William S. Burroughs, and Godard. (By the time we get to Andy Warhol, Sylvia Plath, or R. W. Fassbinder, though the desire to provoke remains, any hope that it will lead to liberation has vanished.)

One consequence of Brown's promiscuity, and the reason I've tried to place him at the center of a few canons in this chapter, is that doing so also puts him, in my view, beyond the terms of the late-twentieth-century scholarly debate where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was most frequently invoked – a debate over the literary and ideological merits of sentimentalism, which have often been underestimated out of what, it now seems clear, is little more than institutional and habitual misogyny. Brown shares thematic material with other abolitionist writers, but there are other ways to group him, and these other ways help to illuminate what is most worth preserving and noticing in his writing.

Brown's deictic position as author/narrator – serves partly just to disrupt the readerly suspension of disbelief on which all novels depend. Though we tend to associate such disruptions, at least where they are deployed for overtly political ends, as part of a mid-twentieth-century Brechtian school of revolutionary aesthetic practice, we should recall that Brecht himself made no secret of his debt, for this part of his politico-aesthetic practice, to works at least as old as John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. The visible fractures in *Clotel's* verisimilitude – and this matter of the auctioneer's voice is only the first of many – allow us to plot the course of what, in retrospect, we could call a Brechtian strain in the novel: Brown's abrupt shifts of spatial and temporal point of view, his coarse collage-work of genres, his refusal to distinguish clearly between fiction and non-fiction or original and near-plagiarized material.

What I'm calling the ventriloquism of the auctioneer's voice is but one part of the Brechtian strain, but the distancing effect produced by the auctioneer's words is conversely but one part of what this specific act of ventriloquism hopes to accomplish. Unlike the other distancing effects we encounter in *Clotel*, the unstable point of view in the auction serves not only to disrupt the coherence of (and thus direct our attention toward) the mediating role of the narrator himself, but also specifically to reverse the relations of domination that the slave auction dramatizes. Most importantly I mean those relations by which the slave on the auction block is not allowed to speak for herself, either in abolitionist fiction or in actual historical practice, and is allowed by the auction's ritualized protocols (and by those men who, like the auctioneer and bidders, are authorized to wield those protocols) as little if any authority over how she is represented or interpreted. The slave on the auction block is not allowed to speak, and generally must remain erect but passive while the bidding takes place;

that this bidding, unlike most other business arrangements, takes place as a series of audible

speech acts but further emphasizes the gap between the silenced slave and the verbose

buyers and seller.[27]

It's worth pointing out that this stark division between the silent slave and the noisy

crowd of white men who assign her a value is in contrast not just to some egalitarian utopia

where everyone is allowed a voice but even to the norms of the "slave market" *per se* – the

New Orleans pens where planters who wanted to buy slaves would usually conduct a verbal

interview with any slave they considered purchasing before negotiating a price with the

trader.[28] The slave auction as a forum thus works partly by silencing, and dramatizing the

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[27] Little wonder that Hawthorne appropriated this abolitionist trope (among many other stock images from other genres, of course) for Hester's introduction to the reader, as she appears on the scaffold to be judged and ridiculed, to have her moral worth appraised just as, here, Clotel's economic worth is decided.

[28] The economics of slave trading in the 1840s and '50s are discussed at length by Johnson. In brief, the process followed a six-month calendar, so that traders would make two trips from and back to New Orleans each year. These traders, either working independently or for trading firms usually located in New Orleans, would travel the northern and/or eastern slave states assembling a gang of slaves from either private sales or from public auctions (usually, at least in abolitionist writing, the public auctions result from the dissolution of an estate, but even if the reasons are misrepresented in such fiction there's no doubt that such auctions really did occur regularly). This gang would be assembled as the trader moved from state to state toward the Mississippi River. Once reaching the river, the trader would book passage for himself and his cargo on a river boat bound for New Orleans, making stops in towns along the way that may or may not involve purchasing more slaves. In the New Orleans markets (which I'll describe in the next paragraph) the gangs of slaves would be housed in relative comfort (since their apparent health increased the prices they could fetch) for weeks while planters from all around the deep south could come to buy from the markets, usually making arrangements for specific slaves with specific traders. At the end of the market season (which seems to have lasted about a month) the New Orleans houses would then have their own auctions, to sell off remaining stock at lower than usual prices so the traders could leave again on another journey. So when we talk of "the slave auction" we are really talking about two things, both of which differ from the slave *market* itself. There are the public auctions which are held when occasion demands throughout the south, and then there are the end-of-season auctions at which bargain hunters would go to the New Orleans markets to buy the slaves none of the wealthier planters had found worth the asking price.

The New Orleans offices kept by slave trading firms were not all the same, but most had two enclosed pens (one for each gender) where the slaves for sale lived until they were purchased. Sometimes the slaves would be displayed on the street in front of the office. In such cases the market would be simultaneously a dormitory/prison, a warehouse, a showroom, and the point of sale. In theory this practice could (and probably was) also common before slaves were called at auction in other parts of the south. Those selling them would likely want to get as much money as possible for their trouble, but on the other hand slave auctions like this of Clotel (which takes place in Richmond) would have been officiated by amateurs rather than the professionals of the New Orleans firms.

silence of, the African American being offered for sale, while simultaneously giving the white

men bidding or taking bids the opportunity to perform the distance of their own positions

from that of the slave, since the business of bidding and soliciting bids is expected to be

conducted as actual speech.

The emphasis on audible speech here (though, as I've said and will continue to say,

Brown intertwines that speech with writing in complicated ways) allows us to see how the

restorative powers of autobiography, which so far I have discussed only insofar as they

concern the idea of writing specifically, also attach themselves in Brown's mind to oral/aural

language. As I argued in the previous chapter, slave writers like Brown and Douglass often

use the splitting of the self (into an autobiographical subject and an autobiographer) which

autobiography necessarily entails, as a therapeutic opportunity – a means by which the

present self can reach imaginatively back to the past one, who is understood by the

autobiographer in the present as damaged and incomplete. (Recall that Douglass literalizes

this by laying his pen in the gash of his foot.) Slavery entails innumerable traumas, though,

and illiteracy may not be the most painful or scarring among them; that illiteracy so often

comes to the surface in these narratives might have less to do with the actual importance of

education to those still in chains than with the fact that the therapeutic work of any slave

narrative takes place by definition in the form of *writing*, and usually concerns healing the

wounds of a past self who could not read. Writing can shift the locus of therapeutic action

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Slaves being housed in the market itself or its adjacent pens were allowed/compelled to speak when asked a direct question, and such questions were often asked. The chance to answer such questions afforded few opportunities for dissent, to be sure, and answers seen as impertinent, or which embarrassed or otherwise displeased either seller or buyer, were often met with brutal and retaliatory "correction." Still, slaves were often extremely resourceful in making use of what means of political resistance came their way. (Johnson discusses this at length in *Soul By Soul*.) Even if such interviews were carried out *before* an auction, though, the space of the auction itself was always one in which the slave was effectively silenced, and the business of bidding and soliciting bids carried out, unlike most private economic transactions, by means of public speech.

from trauma in general to the trauma or illiteracy in particular, not because reading and writing are much in the thoughts of slaves, but because they are much in the thoughts of anyone writing a book. In forcing the auctioneer to *speak* from the narrator's *written* point of view, Brown enacts a more complicated version of Douglass's pen in the gash, since, though the tool of restored wholeness is still specific to the domain of the page (for Douglass it's the pen, and for Brown it's the narration of a novel), in Brown's case the *wound* is *also* a verbal wound. What Clotel lacks is not a part of her foot but a voice – or, more exactly, authorization to use that voice to address a public and affect the terms by which she will be interpreted.

The auctioneer, though he is speaking, is in two ways silenced by Brown. First, he is silenced by the misalignment of verb tense to his point of view, which, as I've already said, effectively pulls back the curtain on the fiction's authorial construction, thus reminding us that it is Brown himself, and not the invented auctioneer, who chooses what words will be spoken in this scene. Secondly, though, the auctioneer is silenced in the form of the elision of the anecdotes he relates in a "rough manner." These Brown decides are not worth writing down, in a unilateral show of force which, once again, reminds us that everything the auctioneer *is* allowed to say within earshot of the reader has been conveyed to us by Brown and not by the narrator himself. The auctioneer may go on talking, and Clotel may not be allowed to break her silence, but Brown, who is writing rather than talking, is free to silence the auctioneer, or to impose his own voice onto, and to the exclusion of, the white man's.

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Forbidden from speaking words, the "slave girl," to the extent that she does anything expressive of a psychic interiority, only weeps. Weeping is, of course, a complicated social

and symbolic act, and never more so than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the culture of sentiment endowed the shedding of tears with a whole host of classed and gendered meanings. Tears are shed and interpreted within social codes than determine when and how they may be shed and what they can mean, just like words. But weeping is not a *linguistic* utterance in the strict sense. However much it may be subject to behavioral norms in fact, part of weeping's expressive power is constituted precisely by the fact that, unlike linguistic speech, it is interpreted as involuntary. It wields an authority constituted in part by the perceived authenticity of an unwilled act, and this authority is probably greatest in the context of aesthetic cues we associate with the sentimentalism of Child or Harriet Beecher Stowe – the same cues that Brown is using for most of that line of plot concerning Clotel and her two daughters. To the extent that the norms of sentimental antislavery fiction will decide what Clotel's weeping means, then, her tears cannot count as speech. They function as undeniable proof of the pain she is in precisely *because* they do not count as speech, since speech obeys the will, and thus can be untrue, counterfeit.

This could be otherwise, of course. For one thing, weeping is not reliable evidence of authentic emotional or physical hurt. Many people can cry on cue, and most people can probably hold back tears in most situations if they feel they must. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people facing extraordinary hardship will often weep only after the worst is over, and the pain, in a sense, safe enough to be experienced consciously. In other contexts Clotel's cries would constitute less an authentic articulation of suffering which bypasses the will than a kind of anti-language – a vocal insignia of what Elaine Scarry would call the "unmaking" of Clotel and her world – the dissolution of the subject position from which

Clotel could speak, or emote involuntarily, even in theory.[29] In Scarry's formulation – a humanism highly charged with the politics of sympathy, but not a sentimentalism – Clotel's tears would *not* serve as a link between her inner and outer worlds – as a way to read the inner self through the outer one – but as the dissolution of that inner world, and of any meaningful distinction between, or bridge connecting, inner and outer life. As the novel progresses, and Brown introduces aesthetic orders other than the one he borrows from Stowe and Child, we will come to require tools like the ones Scarry offers, since it is by means of such tools – or ones like them – that we can begin to understand how and why Brown works simultaneously in sentimental and anti-sentimental modes.

So the auction presents itself as an arena within which the slave is robbed both of the authority to speak and (perhaps) of the very subject position from which speech can be imagined as emanating. But it also presents a site of contested meanings, and not just because the sentimental aesthetic norm transforms Clotel's tears from evidence of her humanity's disintegration (which her complete absence from the scene as any kind of agent suggests that they might be here) into proof of its invaluable wholeness (which the tears of

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[29] "The prolonged interrogation [like other forms of torture] graphically objectifies the step-by-step backward movement along the path by which language comes into being… what we are looking at is the structure of unmaking" (20). Scarry's theoretical model, applied to the auction of Clotel, would look something like this: The trauma of standing on the auction block is not merely painful, and thus Clotel's tears are not merely an expression of an inner sense of pain. The violence (representational, social, and physical) she suffers here serves actually to disassemble her subjectivity by reversing the processes by which it came into being. She is returned by this torture to an infancy in which she has, like Tennyson's infant crying in the night, "no language but a cry." Plausibly, continued or additional torture would further unmake the subject, regressing it all the way to a kind of non being – perhaps through suicide, or the emptiness of a disassociative trance or loss of consciousness. But the distinction between Scarry's mode and that of the sentimental is that, in Scarry, the incoherent cries are the sound of subjectivity slipping away, whereas for the sentimental they are the proof of ordered subjectivity. For Scarry the tears are the absence, or near absence, of humanity, while for sentimentalism they are the proof of humaneness.

the girl in the epigraph seem to be).[30] Brown's narrator's identification with the slave

(accomplished partly by way of the introductory sketch, in which his narrative voice

describes his own enslavement) pays off here in that, while the auctioneer silences Clotel by

speaking for *her*, the narrator silences the auctioneer by speaking for *him*. The novel as a

form – in particular the dialogic and dialectic properties by which novels contain multiple

voices, and therefore moments of incompletely synthesized rupture within the deictic space

such voices presuppose – overturns the brutality of the auctioneer's right to speak for the

slave whose purchase he superintends.[31]

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It's the kind of reversal Brown uses again and again throughout *Clotel*; the voice of

the resistance to slavery is ventriloquized subversively through the corporeal designates of

pro-slavery hegemony. This reversal also helps to explain why it is that *Clotel* seems to court

its status as a formal collage (a status which, in the first hundred years of its reception, was

usually seen as a damning flaw in its artistry). Whatever Brown is doing with the relationship

between politics and prose, it seems he wants to accomplish it by foregrounding and

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[30] *Proof* might be too strong a word here. What I mean is more like "something that we are trained to accept as proof in the context of the particular aesthetic cues the passage mobilizes." This is part of how sentimentalism works in this novel, and it's really no more than a (perhaps) more self-conscious instance of how sentimentalism works in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or "The Quadroons." Certain things (particularly suffering) are simply accepted as proof of another person's humanity, and certain signifiers (particularly tears) are accepted as proof of that suffering.

[31] Indeed, auctioneers serve literally as narrators in a sense. They provide exposition in describing whatever is being auctioned, and then serve as a central authority in describing the bidding process as it takes place. They both organize and articulate relations of sequence and causation, the bread and butter of narrative coherence. True, the bidders use their voices to call out dollar amounts, but the fact that their voices seem limited to calling out numbers and nothing else allies them, on the printed page, almost more with the novel's pagination at the margin than with the authorial and directorial presence of the narrator. Like the page numbers of a book, too, the bids move from lower to higher in a relatively predictable way, and never in the other direction. It strikes me as telling that in the twentieth century auctioneers of livestock, particularly in farming communities, would become known for almost preternatural verbal skills – feats of fast talking unmatched, as far as I know, in the English-speaking world for as long as there has been recorded sound. Are these the cultural descendants of the slave auctioneer, or do these auctions of cows and horses merely share with the slave auctions a guiding assumption that an auctioneer possesses powers of speech the rest of us lack?

exaggerating the kinds of abrupt shifts among multiple points of view and narrative modes

that most novels (though they certainly contain their fair share) smooth over with unfailingly

consistent stylistic virtuosity (*Pride and Prejudice*) or contain within carefully balanced frames

(*Frankenstein*) or a plausible epistolary conceit (*Pamela*, or Foster's *The Coquette*). All novels

contain multiple voices and deictic possibilities, but *Clotel*, like, *really* contains multiple voices

and deictic possibilities. Like, totally.

In the particular instance of Clotel's auction, though, the hegemonic *content* which is

articulated through so jarring and subversive a *form* is content overwhelmingly concerned not

with politics but with money. In Child's auction scene from "The Quadroons" we hear only

two actual bids called and then we hear the final price at which bidding stopped; an

unknown number of bids – enough, indeed, to double the price from two and a half

thousand to five thousand dollars[32] – is elided. In Brown's writing we overhear what we take

to be the entire process. The one omission of dialogue in the scene, while notable, does not

include any actual bidding, and refers only obliquely to the auction actually at hand.

This kind of detail shapes not just the content of the passage but, to some extent, its

narrative contour as well. Money determines, for instance – in a rather forthright way – the

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[32] Thinking more about these preposterous sums of money, which I originally regarded as evidence of Child's lack of real knowledge about slavery, I've begun to wonder if she may not be deliberately exaggerating the sums of money for which a young woman could be sold to achieve a propagandistic effect. By suggesting to northern audiences that single slaves were routinely bought and sold for such outlandish stockpiles of wealth, she may have hoped, like Brown (though he uses different tools) to stoke industrial middle-class hostilities toward what, from her point of view, might have been a southern aristocracy. We should hate these southern white people (she would thus suggest) not just because they buy and sell human beings, and not just because they live off the labor of serfs while doing no work of their own, but because, living in such a way, they have also become far richer than we in the North could ever hope to be. The antipathy toward the morally tainted means by which southern whites earn their money could thus, in Child's story, enter into a mutually reinforcing loop with the more general antipathy toward those with more money than we ourselves have.

sequence of events leading up to the sale.[33] The order of crying at this auction, the auctioneer-narrator tells us, has been determined by the relative prices the slaves are expected to fetch. We can only assume, particularly from the way in which the rate of increase in the bids seems here to diminish and then, at the end, to pick up again in a climactic jump of three hundred dollars, that the auctioneer (or someone) has authored in advance a similar narrative sequence for the bidding on Clotel specifically. He lets the bidding continue for a while without saying much, but when it slows down before it has completed the narrative arc he has projected, he intervenes.

But note too how closely attended the language of money and dollar amounts is by the language of authenticity! The first word the auctioneer uses to describe Clotel which does not directly pertain to her place in the auction or the price she is expected to fetch is *real*. Though this *real* seems to carry, like a shadow, the suggestion of itself as hyperbole. Are

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[33] True, the preceding events of the auction have not actually been represented to us. But part of what Brown is doing here is calling attention to the fact that the slave auction has, like a novel, a narrative logic of its own. It is this, I think, that leads him to represent the auction scene dramatically – that is, to represent it with a reliance on spoken dialogue more at home in a play than in a novel. Brown is drawing attention to the stagecraft of the slave auction, to the artifice of it. This is not in order to insist that the auction is wanting in some sort of authenticity which all good things must possess, but to insist on the ways in which, though such an auction concerns the fates of real people, it is nonetheless a site of carefully managed and deliberately deployed meanings, and one which seeks to govern interpretations at least as much as to make money.

Again, this is all part of the way that Brown will insist that slaves circulate within slavery as texts which *describe* real value, and not as materializations of that value in themselves. This is ultimately the reason that Brown is interested in the distinction between paper and coin: slaves, he argues, are more like paper money, but they have been wrongly accorded the status of coined specie. Slaves do not embody their economic value but rather refer to economic value which exists in some other place, value for which they may or may not be redeemable. Slavery and race are therefore not "natural" but "artificial," and this is important not because artifice is "bad" in some puritanical sense (Brown is, after all, writing fiction), but because what is artificial is subject to different laws than what is real. (Needless to say, this distinction between real and fake is not one I'm actually endorsing as legitimate or philosophically sound, but it's one that has circulated in commonsense notions about the world since the rise of Romanticism, and one that I see Brown using in an interesting way.) Suffice it to say, a gold coin may not be more valuable than a banknote in an absolute sense – they both are, obviously, subject to conventions of usage and discursive matrices – but they differ in the kind (even if not in the degree) of artificiality they bring to the table. In this light we can usefully compare what Brown is doing with the distinction between the "real" woman vs. the drag queen in the later chapters of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

we meant to think that Clotel is, in fact, a *genuine* albino, or simply that she very much (which is to say, *really*) looks like one?

If I were to say to you "You're a real Albert Einstein," I may sincerely mean that you're very smart, but I also mean, implicitly, that you are *not*, in fact, *really* Albert Einstein, because if I were to speak these words to Albert Einstein himself, it would no longer convey the meaning "You're very smart" and, indeed, would carry the opposite meaning, because it would imply that Einstein was not smart enough to remember his own name. If, on the other hand, I wanted to remind the real Albert Einstein, for rhetorical effect, that he was in fact Albert Einstein, the phrase would paradoxically convey this meaning only once I omitted *a real* from it, and said "You're Albert Einstein!"

In such instances, at least, the word *real* marks not the authentic but the inauthentic. Likewise, without the auctioneer's hyperbolic "real" (that is, if the auctioneer simply said "[she's an] albino") we would be *more* not *less* likely to misinterpret his meaning – to believe, mistakenly, he asserted that Clotel was literally an albino, rather than merely a light-skinned girl of mixed racial descent. *Real* here is, in an ironic inversion still common in our vernacular, a synonym for *fake*, for the *only apparent*, the *seeming*.

So, if the crisis of authenticity is one of the important elements in the passage, the interleaving of that crisis with the language of money and cash value is the other. But though we can tell just by reading it that the passage is overwhelmingly concerned with epistemological questions of authenticity and quantitative questions of exchange value, we must still ask how it is that these two sets of questions overlap, and why it is that Brown has them, in this passage, speak to us in and through one another. What do they have to do with

each other? We can see how each is performed by the passage, but how is the relationship *between them* performed?

The answer to these questions is suggested partly by the auctioneer's climactic revelation (always the masterful narrator, he once again reserves his most valuable piece of intelligence for his conclusion) of Clotel's purity. "Pure" is, of course, primarily meant in the sexual sense,[34] but the rhetoric of sexual chastity emerges here on the crest of an ancillary rhetoric that is more numismatic than it is moralist. Girls may be pure, after all, but so may precious metals. And when a girl's purity is being sold at auction (which is to say, turned into money) the superior relevance of one purity over the other is hardly to be taken for granted.

It is thus that Clotel is "struck" for the sum of fifteen hundred dollars. My sense is that this is not standard usage, for the meaning of *strike* which most obtains here should take as its object either the girl's price itself or the transaction as an event. You *strike* a price, or a bargain, but not normally the thing being sold. You can also *strike* something in the course of digging or, especially, mining, like bedrock or gold or oil. *Strike*, of course, particularly when

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[34] Though its latent meaning is epidemiological; the suggested guarantee seems to be that the girl is not syphilitic, and her concubinage will not pose a health risk to her new owner. The risk posed is not just to the master's health, though, as his infection would likely lead to that of his wife, which would mean discovery and possible public humiliation. Recall that much of the opening of the chapter is devoted to describing both the preponderance of light-skinned blacks among the slave population of the south and the sexual exploitation of black women by white men which Brown assures us has caused the "fearful increase" of slaves of mixed race. Furthermore, the (fictional?) newspaper advertisement announcing this auction, which Brown includes verbatim, promises that some of the slaves offered for sale are "very prolific in their generating qualities, affording a rare opportunity to any *one* who wishes to raise a strong and healthy lot of servants for *their* [*sic*] own use. Also several mulatto girls of rare personal qualities: two of them very superior" (85, emphasis added). The neuter-singular "their," though today it serves primarily to aggravate teachers of undergraduate composition classes, serves in this passage to obfuscate the fact that the generating qualities in question are of use not to people indiscriminately but specifically to men (the grammatically and factually correct but unbearably shame-inducing word would have been *his*) even in the absence of any male slaves with which the female ones might be bred. The suggestion is that the purchaser might not only *raise* but *beget* a small army of servants. Johnson notes that Virginia at this time was in fact producing far more slaves than it had economic use for, and that the way in which most Virginia slave owners made their position profitable was not by using their slave's labor but by selling the young slaves to the cotton plantations of the deep south, where conditions were so often fatal to the slaves involved that labor was always in short supply.

it is a transitive verb with a person as its object, also names a more-or-less-standard unit of

physical violence, and when slaves are being "struck" in antislavery fiction that usually means

they're being beaten. Even when the slaves in such fiction are, like Clotel in this case, *not*

literally being beaten, the word's power to refer in other contexts to a punch or slap is always

finessing its overt meaning.[35] And joined to this suggestion of physical brutality are echoes of

several other meanings, among them some drawn from printing and textual editing (to cross

out, to mark for deletion) and the minting of coin (to imprint on a given quantity of precious

metal the image that officially designates it as money).[36]

It's as if, in the transaction by which ownership of her changes hands, Clotel is

somehow transformed not just from a human being into a piece of property but, further,

into a piece of living currency. The exchange value by which her status as a slave is always

attended – the money for which she could always be (and here actually is being) sold –

assumes her shape and takes her place among the assets of her late master's estate. She isn't

merely liquidated in the sense of being exchanged for cash, the way the *non*-living goods of

the estate are liquidated; by experiencing herself as the object of this transaction, she

imagines herself (or, at least, is imagined by the narrator [whose identity, as I've already

discussed, intersects with the auctioneer's]) to retain some of money's liquidity even when

the transaction is complete and she in unfamiliar hands, just as her tears, after the auction,

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[35] By a logic analogous to that which attends "black" in *The Scarlet Letter's* "Black Man," which I discuss at length in chapter two.

[36] Note that the pair of meanings by which *strike* assumes contranym status are precisely those that arise in relation to the specialized fields of printing and minting (or, more specifically, coining), and these are the discursive orders in relation to which Brown seeks to triangulate the discourse of race. These are the meanings in which *strike* can mean to inscribe or certify (a coin) or to raise or expunge (a portion of a manuscript).

continue to flow like water.[37] She is *struck* in this sense, too: she is coined, minted.[38] Standing

here at her own enactment of what Frederick Douglass, with Dantesque flourish, calls "the

blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which [any young and as-yet

happy slave is] about to pass" (15), Clotel watches through tears as she is examined and

appraised by the men who return her gaze. In being appraised (a process with an agonizing

duration, since the mechanics of a public auction are such that her value is all that is talked

about, and must be continually renegotiated until she is sold) her economic worth is cruelly

smelted from the ore of her humanity. And when the sale is complete the unformed metal

thus extracted is impressed – struck – with an image which regularizes her, renders her value

in terms of its fungiblility with any other commodity, and attests, of course, to her "purity."

The laboring chattel has become the legal tender.

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But Brown is careful to make us sure that no actual paper money or coin changes

hand in the purchase of Clotel. He tells us, for instance, that Horatio Green, the suitor who

intends to purchase the girl and make her [unofficially] his wife, has come to the auction

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[37] The OED has *liquidity* in the strictly financial sense we use when we refer to "liquid assets" appearing in the London's *Daily News* in 1879 (the quotation glosses the word as if it is of recent coinage), and subsequent OED citations suggest that this sense of *liquid* was in wide use in England long before America. So "liquid" probably was not a financial term of art when Brown wrote *Clotel*, but the absence of a play on any one word does not necessarily mean that the liquid tears about which we hear so much and the fluidity of particular kinds of wealth fail to form a reflective pattern. Furthermore, Brown, recall, was himself a banker, and by the standards of 1830s Michigan a pretty good one, and had visited the Bank of England with great interest in September of 1849 (see *Three Years in Europe* 97-104). Among professional London bankers the term may possibly have been in use so long before its apparent 1879 debut before the lay public.

[38] Interestingly, *strike* and *mint*, particularly as verbs, overlap not only with one another (the English *mint* comes at least in part from the Middle Dutch *munten* – to aim at, allude to, or hit) but with *meaning* and *mind* as well. The word seems also to have arisen from the already existing English noun *mind*, to which, in Old English, the suffix *-ett* was added to form a verb. Though more etymologically distant, *mean* (as in to intend or signify) seems to have entered English from the similar Middle Dutch word *menen*. Though loosely, the process of producing coin is here linked with violence (the meaning of *to strike* most central to the usual representations of slavery would be the most brutal one) and likewise, though *mean* or *meant*, with the sometimes unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified.

"with a blank bank check in his pocket" (86). Though Green is made, at this early stage of the narrative, to seem sympathetic and kind, this blank bank check is cause for worry if (as Brown seems to assume) the reader does indeed regard all non-coin tender with some measure of suspicion. The personal check compounds paper money's unverifiable claims of worth with its own status as a denominative tabula-rasa – its readiness to be inscribed, on a whim, with whatever value the inscriber happens to find expedient in the present. Needless to say the fact that, whatever his more altruistic or noble motives, Horatio's particular blank check is to be filled out in order to purchase sexual satisfaction only compounds this readerly anxiety, joining as it does the intractability of paper money with that of libidinal hunger and transgressive eroticism. We are asked to approve of Green, who we're assured loves and is loved by Clotel, but we are also expected, like Humbert Humbert when his beloved asks him mid-coitus to raise her allowance, to be troubled by an economy that rewards fiscal discipline with sexual frustration. If Green doesn't win this auction he is going to sleep alone tonight, and such emotional and libidinal stakes do not lend themselves to prudential use of a blank bank check.

Heterosexual desire and bank checks present similar problems here for the world of white respectability, North and South alike. They are necessary instruments of republican society, which needs both to reproduce itself in successive generations and to exchange, in the course of business, sums of money too great to carry around as gold or silver. They are also threats to, specifically, white, unmarried manhood – risks of dissipation, exhaustion, and

depletion faced by the people on whom the future construction and maintenance of bourgeois America was understood most to depend.[39]

If gold and silver coin are the least dubious of tenders, and paper currency a distant second, the personal check introduces yet another level of spuriousness. Even if the dollars that I pledge to pay in signing my check are dollars secured by and available to the bank of issue, I may not have enough of such dollars in my account to make good on my pledge. That is, I can write bad checks even if the institution I bank with is itself solvent. Banks may be scrupulous or unscrupulous, but the notes they offer, including the dollar amounts for which those notes could be exchanged, are printed; as Brown has already reminded us, only the name of the banker and the date are entered by hand. The rest of the banknote is fixed in its meanings by the press – a technology of mediation of which we're always slightly conscious as we read, since *Clotel* is a book rather than something else. Furthermore, even wildcat banks must obey some sort of regulation. Bankers cannot simply issue more currency because doing so, however reckless, will allow them to possess the woman they love in a matter of minutes. Even counterfeiters, to produce passable forgeries, must expend more time and labor in printing than Horatio Green must expend in filling out a check, since

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[39] This was obviously a real concern for mid-nineteenth-century Americans. The sheer number and popularity of guidebooks for young men in the era (see Halttunen) shows that people often worried that young men might easily overspend either financially or sexually, and end up in debt or emasculated. Predictably, pastimes involving visceral thrill-seeking and unnecessary spending (gambling, liquor, prostitution) were seen as serious threats to social stability. Young men, the conventional wisdom seems to have run, were prone to spend more money than they actually had, and to pursue more and better sex than was good for their health. A well-meaning young man carrying a blank check and hoping to buy absolute authority over (and unhindered access to the body of) a teenage girl – one who, at that, the young man knows he will not actually marry, since he is legally barred from doing so – would strike many readers as a perfect storm of moral chaos. Mason Stokes makes a similar point about the way in which white identity must reproduce itself in the form of white children, but in doing so always puts its own racial purity at risk. White patriarchy can only insure its future so long as there are fertile white women whose bodies it can use to reproduce itself, but the fact that these women are fertile poses a threat to the stability of whiteness because, unless tightly controlled from cradle to grave, such women could as easily conceive (what Americans would regard as) a black child rather than a white one.

counterfeit money dashed off by hand would not resemble a genuine banknote closely enough to pass for it. The logistics of printing fake money place natural limits on how much wealth even the counterfeiter can accumulate by his trade.

So unlike the banknote, the real value of a check depends not just on the bank's *institutional* promise to pay, but on the signer's *individual* promise to pay. Banks – even though they may of course be run by unintelligent or dishonest people, or be subject (perhaps especially when they are the enterprise of a single individual) to all the imperfections of the soul, cannot be subject to the same fluctuations of mood we find in people. They cannot issue currency as quickly as a check can be filled out, cannot fall to worthlessness as quickly as a person can rise to anger. Bankers have whims, but must usually sleep on them before acting (recall that Brown becomes set on opening a bank and then visits the printer "a few days later" [68]). The slow pace of doing such business uncouples banking from the rhythms of the body. Banknotes do not suddenly become more likely to promise people undeliverable sums of money merely because the banker who issued them is hungry, or must sleep, or is in the throes of desire; but many otherwise trustworthy people might lapse into fraud and overstate their capacity to pay if, by keeping their integrity, they must sacrifice food, or sleep, or sexual satiety. Whatever good private enterprise can do for society must, in this sense, depend on the clear and obvious distinction between corporations and people.

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But even a check's vicissitudes of value are at least bound by the grammar of check-writing. A check may only be *blank* or be *filled-out*; it promises to the recipient a sum which must either *be* or *not be* in excess of the signatory's balance. Once its value is declared – once some dollar amount has been entered – it can only be voided or traded. It cannot reassume a

state of blankness, or declare itself to be worth more or less than its face value. A check for

five dollars is worth either five dollars or nothing. A check can thus deceive, but only in very

specific ways. On the other hand, the auctioneer holds in his hand "a paper" which, in

conjunction with the performative force of his words in the context of the auction, enjoys

multiple and ever-changing relations to actual dollar value. If, in the eyes of the nineteenth

century, coin is real value, banknotes slightly less real, and personal checks an accident

waiting to happen – a necessary evil certain to cause disaster sooner or later, then the

auctioneer's magic piece of paper is a mercurial toxin corroding the cash economy from the

inside.

As I've already mentioned, the auctioneer and the narrator not only overlap in the

fluid confusion of their respective points of view, they also – even when those points of

view are not confused – perform similar kinds of work. The auctioneer is a central authority

whose speech insures that all his auditors possess the same up-to-date information about the

proceedings, and insures that sequence and causation obey an agreed upon grammar of

auctions which all involved already understand. He is also like an author, though, in that he

doesn't just explain what's going on, he has decided in advance, to some extent, what events

will unfold. He has, as I've already said, reserved Clotel for last because she is expected to

fetch the highest price, and thereby seeks to avoid an anticlimax. But he has also decided

roughly *the price* for which Clotel will sell. Each time the bidding stalls, the auctioneer makes

a declaration which increases her value, and each of these declarations, he assures the crowd,

is authenticated by the paper he holds. In theory, he can do this until the price he has in

mind has been reached. When bidding stops at a point he regards as premature, he simply

appeals to his paper to make it go on longer, the price go slightly higher.

The blankness of Horatio Green's check suggests that he will be willing to pay whatever price is necessary to make sure Clotel falls into no hands other than his own. Just as the auctioneer is a malevolent double of and foil for the narrator, the auctioneer's paper is a malevolent double of and foil for Horatio's check. Like the check, the paper is (I think we should assume) blank, and this piece of paper can similarly be inscribed (imaginatively by the auctioneer's speech rather than literally by Horatio's pen) with whatever sum of money meets the needs of the holder. There is nothing written on the paper, but the auctioneer can turn that nothing into whatever amount of money, within reason, that he deems expedient.

The auctioneer tells the bidders first that the paper certifies Clotel's moral character, and only when this has failed to move the bidding as much as he seems to have hoped does he add that the paper also certifies something else. If it is not simply blank, it could in fact certify something *other* than Clotel's moral character. It could be a license granting the bearer permission to conduct slave auctions, or for that matter a citation *revoking* the bearer's permission to conduct slave auctions, or an affidavit affirming that Clotel *lacks* good moral character, or even a spread of the odds for an upcoming horse race. The facts which the crowd is asked to believe that the paper certify do not depend on writing but on speech, they inhere not in what the paper actually says (words whose point of origin would by definition be temporally in the past, before the bidding started) but in what the auctioneer *says* it says (words whose point of origin is the present, that is an auction which is already underway). The authority of the paper truthfully to certify anything which has a bearing on Clotel's value depends on the disinterestedness of its author not yet knowing how the bidding itself would play out, for the same reason that bets on the outcome of a sporting event must be entered before the event is underway. It is, indeed, only for this reason that the auctioneer must

declare this certification to be written on a piece of paper in the first place. The meaning of ink and paper here is really the disinterestedness of an economic past, since it would be absurd for the auctioneer to pull out a pen in the midst of taking bids and *himself* certify in writing, in full view of the bidders, that Clotel possesses good moral character. The certification then really would exist, and would be no less in writing than the auctioneer claims it to be, but mean nothing since, like his speech, it would emanate from a position inside rather than outside the vested interests of the auction itself. Since the bidders, presumably, cannot read the paper themselves, though, it is ready to certify whatever, in the chaos of a marketplace unfolding in real time, the auctioneer might deem in need of certification.

Thus, in spite of what the auctioneer claims, the mysterious paper, which nobody even seems eager to examine (it is never mentioned again in the novel), doesn't serve to combat but to exploit the bidders' ignorance. It is no mere happenstance, then, that the auctioneer reveals the magic paper precisely at the moment when he opines out loud about what he takes to be the bidders' collective illiteracy in reading slaves. When he observes that the bidders "certainly don't know the value of the article [they] are bidding upon" he seems to offer generously (if disingenuously) to relieve them of their ignorance. But because it is at exactly this point that the magic piece of paper appears these words have a tinge of dramatic irony, as if, with a wink, the auctioneer's offer to school the bidders is also his impish observation to himself that he now knows they are stupid enough to fall for the old "this piece of paper…" routine. One almost thinks the auctioneer would have deployed the paper even sooner but for the fact that he had first to confirm that the bidders were, as he had suspected, unable to judge by appearances alone the value of "the article" upon which they

bid. The paper comes out once the auctioneer has had a chance to test and confirm his estimation that this crowd could be manipulated so easily, and in doing so this paper opens up a tear in Clotel's dollar value. The auctioneer claims to know the real value of Clotel, and assures the bidders that they don't share that knowledge. In driving up the price, is he genuinely correcting the bidders' in aligning their bids to this real value, or, having confirmed their ignorance, is he seizing an opportunity to drive that price *higher* than the real value? In admonishing the bidders for (as he knows they'll interpret it) calling out a naively *low* bid, he has insulted their abilities to read slaves' bodies and thus their ability to successfully navigate the marketplace as a whole. He at the very least *hints* that these bidders would be easy marks for an unscrupulous business man, even if he is also letting them think (for all we know, correctly) that he himself is *not* unscrupulous. In order to prove that they are not suckers, the bidders must prove that they share the auctioneer's estimation of Clotel's worth – must prove that they can appraise her as skillfully as he. They thus become vulnerable to retail manipulation precisely in their eagerness to appear to themselves and to one another as expert consumers. What the men bid on is not just Clotel but also permission to regard themselves as knowing consumers with keen judgment. But, since we already know that the auctioneer believes them to be, in fact, unable to recognize an article of extraordinary quality, we have reason to believe that they may easily be led into overpaying for both.

At each turn, with each incremental rise in the price, the crowd is willing to pledge further its faith in the magic piece of paper and the credit it accords the auctioneer. He will simply continue to "read" from (notice that the auctioneer's reportage is indirect – he does not quote or pretend to quote directly from the paper itself) the mysterious document until the price he has in mind has been reached. The paper is thus a kind of money – like a check

or bank note – but one whose real value is tied to spoken self-styling rather than coin *or* print.

So this sheet of paper introduces into the novel a higher degree of textual instability than either the bank note (which has no intrinsic value but has at least the stability of print) or Horatio's check (which also lacks intrinsic value but has at least the stability of handwriting). The instability of the magic paper, though, is not of a different kind from that of the other paper monies; all of its ingredients – paper and (perhaps) ink, the deceptive and counterfeit uses to which the power of print may be put, and the fraternal kinship of all this paper money both with *Clotel* (as a material book) and Clotel (as a racially ambiguous character). After all, the auctioneer's list is, he claims, a sheet of paper that says these things about Clotel, and the page on which we read about this auctioneer is *also* a piece of paper that says these very same things about her. Both are written texts, and both are descriptions of the same girl.

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After Clotel is "struck," Brown, who has, perhaps, given too much authority over to the voice of the auctioneer (in spite of the subtle ways in which Brown's narrator colonizes and distorts that voice) renarrates the scene with moral indignation blaring enough to reassure every reader unconvinced that subtlety and irony will bear the fruits of real political change.

> This was a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more. And this, too, in a city thronged with churches, whose tall spires look like so many signals pointing to heaven, and whose ministers preach that slavery is a God-ordained institution! (88)

As I've already suggested, in being sold Clotel has moved from a state of raw metal to a state of coinage (again, this is what *struck* means in minting – the conversion of gold or such into the form of a spendable coin) and yet it is when her value is officially organized as her reification – when, like a coin, she is made both separate from everything else and legally spared any further division – that she is again subject to further fragmentation. In being sold she has been assigned a value, but Brown seeks to point out the absurdity of the buying and selling of human beings by suggesting sarcastically that it would make as much sense to assign each of Clotel's separate qualities its own value, as if these could be parted out for resale to separate owners.

This disintegration has, in a sense, actually happened. Brown's reiteration faithfully recreates the sequence of bids at the auction; each trait announced by the auctioneer is accompanied by an increase to the value already proposed, as if Clotel were a picnic basket into which, with each pronouncement, the auctioneer placed one additional sandwich or bottle of wine. Where Brown finds both cruel rhetorical violence and an opportunity for literary intervention is in the fact that to render Clotel thus is to insist that she is worth neither more nor less than the sum of her (in theory, separable) parts. But recall that, in the anecdote of the sailor and jailor, Brown implies the same about his own enslaved past-self – showing how the various capacities that he deserved as a human being to possess but was, because a slave, denied (literacy, freedom from the lash, the right to collect money for his labor under terms entered into voluntarily) could be reconstructed by enlisting the aid of other people. The whole humanity that Brown would have enjoyed had he been free did not exist *as* Brown himself, but in an emergency it could be reassembled by borrowing parts of various other people's minds and bodies. Sent by Walker to be whipped at the jail, Brown

thus effectively moves through the world *as if he could* read, *as if he were* exempt from physical brutality. All the parts of an intact self are there, and it makes surprisingly little difference in the end that those parts are scattered around the city in the bodies of six different people.

This matters because people are *not* divisible; liberalism insists that each individual is an end and not a means, a whole and not an assemblage of parts. At the same time, though, Brown is willing to deploy the image of the dividedness and divisibility of enslaved subjectivity not just as a register of slavery's dehumanizing effects but as a site of resistance and rhetorical reversal. Out of slavery, Brown suggests that he not only becomes whole but realizes that wholeness is one of the things to which all people ought to be entitled. Remembering the past self that lived within slavery, though, Brown casts his experience of disunited and disordered subjectivity as a problem and a puzzle. Though painful and costly, this experience also presents him with intellectual challenges worthy of his cunning, and becomes, when he begins to use others' literacy, a mode of critique – a way of challenging slavery's hegemony *by* representing the ideological structure of slaveholding.

But it matters if one's literacy is inside or outside one's own body and mind, since it is in this distinction that freedom, for Brown, inheres. The difference between the commodified slave and the economic agent in freedom is less like the difference between money and something else than it is like the difference between kinds of money. Banknotes, after all, are not divisible either. An intact banknote is worth its face value, half of the same banknote is worthless. The same does not hold true for coins. In suggesting that Clotel might be subdivided into several pieces without destroying her – suggesting, however facetiously, that the unity of her various qualities in and as a single human being has no worth of its own – Brown continues puzzling through, and starts to combine, the various

problems in which he'd been interested in his literary career so far. In the second chapter of *Clotel*, this process continues.

Part Three – Going to the South

Slavery's commodification of its human chattel is part of what makes it slavery in the first place. Its understanding of the slave as a thing analogous to money – coin, cash, or whatever else – might less clearly be a matter of course. What is clear, though, and clear quite early in *Clotel*, is that for Brown a slave is not just a human being with a price but a human being by means of whom *something else's* price can be paid.

After the novel's opening chapter, in which his titular protagonist has been purchased (happily, given her other options, by a man who loves her), Brown doesn't pick up Clotel's narrative thread again for several chapters. The second chapter concerns Clotel's sister Althesa and the two girls' mother Currur (the latter Brown's fictional and speculative rendering of a woman whose identity we now know something about: Sally Hemings). Currer and Althesa, whose sales have already occurred when the novel opens, are herded onto a river boat by a man Brown did *not* need to invent, a slave trader named Walker. But most of what Brown describes happening on this steamboat (a world he knew extremely well) concerns characters who appear only in this chapter.

> It was now twelve o'clock at night, and instead of the passengers being asleep the majority were gambling in the saloons. Thousands of dollars change hand during a passage from Louisville or St. Louis to New Orleans on a Mississippi steamer, and many men, and even ladies, are completely ruined. "Go call my boy, steward," said Mr. Smith, [neither Smith nor his opponent Johnson has been mentioned before in the novel, both simply arrive as if requiring nothing so elaborately polite as a narrative introduction] as he took his cards one by one from the table. In a few moments a fine looking, bright-eyed mulatto boy, apparently about fifteen years of age, was standing by his master's side at the table. "I will see you, and five hundred dollars better," said Smith, as his servant

Jerry approached the table. "What price do you set on that boy?" asked Johnson, as he took a roll of bills from his pocket. "He will bring a thousand dollars, any day, in the New Orleans market," replied Smith. "Then you bet the whole of the boy, do you?" "Yes." "I call you, then," said Johnson, at the same time spreading his cards out upon the table. "You have beat me," said Smith, as soon as he saw the cards. Jerry, who was standing on top of the table, with the bank notes and silver dollars round his feet, was now ordered to descend from the table. "You will not forget that you belong to me," said Johnson, as the young slave was stepping from the table to a chair. "No, sir," replied the chattel. "Now go back to your bed, and be up in time to-morrow morning to brush my clothes and clean my boots, do you hear?" "Yes, sir," responded Jerry, as he wiped the tears from his eyes. (91-93)

The episode is representative of *Clotel's* notorious sterile narrative tangents – a branch which grows sensibly enough out of the trunk of the main story but which rather unexpectedly fails to bear any fruit (though, to be fair, anyone who names his lead characters Currer, Clotel, and Althesa probably never intended in the first place to devote much time to characters for whom he chooses the names Smith, Johnson, and Jerry).[40] But the relative anonymity of the characters and their names here allows Brown to present the crassness of this wager as entirely typical, the enterprise of ordinary men with ordinary names, without compromising the fairytale-like exceptionality of his light-skinned heroines or the minstrel-esque quirkiness of the dark-skinned men (who have names like William and Sam) he'll introduce later in the novel.

Note, though, some peculiarities of the language in the passage – peculiarities which reprise thematic material the reader will remember from the slave auction a chapter earlier.

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[40] Ernest notes that this sterility is one of the main complaints critics have had about the novel – that there is no discernable logic to its development of some characters and not others, and that there is no way for the reader to know who in the book will reappear in later chapters and who will simply fade into obscurity after a paragraph or two of episodic content (see, for example, Ernest 26-27). According to Ernest, scholars of Brown's work have tended to regard this as evidence of Brown's lack of literary technique rather than as a literary technique in its own right.

Both most striking and most important for my reading of Brown is the absurdist suggestion (*you bet the whole of the boy, do you?*) that slaves might be so absolutely the mere sum of their parts that, like a bag of wheat, they could be divided in half and the two halves retain exactly fifty percent of the value accorded the whole.[41] Again, among the reasons for which this divisibility matters is the fact that *some* but not *all* of the money circulating in the nineteenth century could be subject to such subdivision (in mentioning both notes and coins the passage itself reminds us of this fact). Half of a silver dollar would no longer be a coin, but would still be worth roughly a half-dollar. If the division were carried out in a way that could be measured exactly and certify perfect bifurcation, each half would presumably be worth *exactly* a half-dollar, the parts having surrendered no portion of their value in the dissolution of the whole. But half of a one dollar banknote would be worthless, no matter how exactly bisected.

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At this point I should offer a paragraph from the first volume of *Capital* that, though it will be obvious in its relevance to my reading of Brown's project, is so pervasive in that relevance as to offer no single place in this chapter where its introduction makes intuitive sense.

> The truth of the statement that 'although gold and silver are not by nature money, money is by nature gold and silver,' is shown by the appropriateness of their natural properties for functions of money. So far, however, we are acquainted with only one function of money, namely to serve as the form of appearance of the value of commodities, that is as the material in which the magnitudes of their values are socially expressed. Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour. On the other

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[41] A version of this joke appears famously in the first chapter of Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and explains the origin of the derogatory nickname by which Wilson is thereafter known.

hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money commodity must be capable of purely quantitative differentiation, it must therefore be divisible at will, and it must also be possible to assemble it again from its component parts. Gold and silver possess these properties by nature. (183-84)

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Jerry is clearly dehumanized in being wagered with the money (note again that he has both silver dollars and banknotes around his feet), but, as the passage shows, simply getting him down from the table does nothing to restore the dignity he lost in mounting it. Johnson's apparent stupidity (or his Pudd'nhead Wilson-like sarcasm, though Brown is more likely to be joking at Johnson's expense than painting him as an urbane wit) in asking whether Smith intends to wager all or part of Jerry, together with Smith's equally inexplicable lack of shock, as if Johnson's were a perfectly reasonable question to be asking under such circumstances, suggests that the two men intuitively regard Jerry as, metaphorically, among the coins rather than the bills in the pot. Again, Smith's lack of surprise is as crucial as Johnson's initial suggestion, because in so failing to be nonplussed Smith suggests that Johnson's question reflects an ideological common ground the two men already share with each other – but which Brown as narrator implicitly suggests they do not share with the British or northern reader. This marks the assumption in question as an ideological feature of, and unique or nearly unique to, slaveholding society.

Johnson's question strikes us as genuinely crazy, but it will be worth our time to imagine a context within which it reflects some rational assumption about the world rather than merely the madness of a man who mistakes his wife for a hat. To the extent that Johnson has not simply forgotten that Jerry is physically indivisible, he must already know that both he and Smith are bound for New Orleans to do business connected with the slave

trade. A future plan to sell Jerry in New Orleans and only *then* divide his value between them in some proportion would thus be known by both men to be one that would take neither out of his appointed rounds, and would be so easily absorbed into already existing plans that it need not even be mentioned to be understood.

This would then make the suggestion that Smith might wager *part* of Jerry a figurative rather than a literal one, and I think we can learn something by considering how this figuration works. It is, first of all, a metonymic figure; but it is a particularly telling one since it is *the same* metonymy by which paper money works. Jerry's value, in other words, would have been established in precisely the same way as that of the banknotes on the table, and would require no actual plan to liquidate him for precisely the same reason. The only real difference between the metonymy of the banknotes and the metonymy of Jerry as a wager is that the New Orleans markets, rather than some reserve of actual coin, serve as the bank which underwrites his value and offers to redeem him for cash. The lack of a need to make specific arrangements to sell Jerry is itself congruent with the way paper money was handled with at a time when, before the Federal Reserve, each note's value depended on the real possibility of exchanging it for silver or gold at its bank of issue (a choice that remained live in the United States until 1968, when even Silver Certificates were made redeemable only for Federal Reserve Notes rather than for a choice of notes or actual silver coin). A nineteenth-century American could pay a debt with a banknote because the party to whom ownership of that note was transferred *could* if he or she had some reason to do so, withdraw gold or silver from the bank of issue in exchange for that note. This possibility didn't have to be acted upon to constitute the perceived value of the note itself; the receiving party only needed to *believe* (the original meaning, of course, of the word *credit*) that the *possibility* was a

real one. For Smith and Johnson to discuss the logistics of Jerry's actual liquidation – to plan

how and when that business would be conducted once they reached New Orleans – would

be as absurd as for them also to discuss how the banknotes in the pot would be redeemed at

the various banks for which they were printed. The very fact that such notes have images

and words printed on them at all is meant to relieve the parties of a transaction from having

to discuss such things, since they are not the concern of whoever is holding the note *now*, but

of whoever is holding the note when some catastrophic need for silver arises. You don't

worry about the logistics of redeeming each particular banknote, because by the time you for

some reason need actual silver you'll probably have passed the notes you hold today onto

some other party.

The quality of divisibility with which Johnson credits Jerry, though, even if it is

meant only to apply to precious metals, and not literally to Jerry himself, remains important

for several reasons. First, because even though the relationship between banknotes and real

value seems to us literal, and the relationship between Jerry and that value seems figurative,

they are in fact the same relation. By suggesting that Jerry may be split in half, Johnson not

only reminds us of the logic of economic and representational displacement by which both

Jerry and the banknotes are congruently positioned, but, as with the "striking" of Clotel at

the moment of her sale, figures the (often but not always physical) violence of slavery (here,

the image of Jerry literally being cut in two) as locked in a dance of mutual reflection with

the economic principles by which – bought, sold, or wagered – every transaction of which a

given slave is made the object serves further to encode that slave as a living currency and a

creature of less-than-human status. For a slave to change hands is for that slave to be made a

kind of monetary description of value, and to thus assume the status of money is – Brown suggests – always already to have suffered the sting of a physical assault.

So this economic metonymy, even if it allows Johnson's question to make rational sense, and makes both Smith and Johnson seem less like the fool for which Pudd'nhead Wilson is mistaken in Twain's novel, does not make Jerry less like the money at his feet. It only distills that resemblance, making him less like the banknotes and more like the coins. And if Smith and Johnson treat this metonymy as more figurative than the one governing the banknotes, if they regard Jerry's relationship to "real" money as one more indirect than that of the notes, there would be no need to have him literally mount the table.

We can best understand this bizarre poker game by looking back to the banking anecdote, which, as I've already mentioned, John Ernest persuasively describes as a key example of Brown's tendency to hide in a given book's earlier passages the interpretive tools the reader will need in order to make sense out of later ones (26), and thereby "to guide familiar antislavery argument toward unfamiliar results" (23) – results that sometimes fly in the face of conventional antislavery logic, and that take (indeed, that seem sometimes to *court*) extraordinary political and literary risks in doing so (25). Brown seeks not so much to refuse that Jerry *has* a meaningful relation to the other money on the table (a liberal-humanist refusal we can easily imagine Douglass making in like circumstances) but to seek to intervene in that relation so as to reorganize it.

The poker game is also the first of what, as the novel progresses, will turn out to be many refracted reenactments of the slave auction that dominates its opening chapter. In the course of the hand of cards Jerry is examined and appraised, he mounts a makeshift stage where he is made yet more embarrassed and yet more vulnerable to the unfeeling gazes of a

crowd, and he steps down again in tears, at each turn recalling and reframing Clotel's sale at auction. The moment at which he, like Clotel, changes hands is signaled by a word (in Clotel's auction it is *struck*, in Jerry's wager it is *beat*) that both denotes the transfer of ownership itself and suggests, as a secondary meaning, the physical violence to which slaves are often subject, and to which, if tears are any indication, Clotel and Jerry each suffer a representational equivalent. The violence in these cases is figurative – the *striking* and *beating* that happens in these passages do not involve the literal hitting of a slave's body – but the trauma inflicted assumes an economic and emotional form we're meant to recognize as no less real. The object rather than the subject of a commercial transaction, each slave's suffering retains the nomenclature of bodily torture (*struck*, *beat*), and it does so most forcefully in and as the precise instant of exchange – the calling of the auction's winner and the hand's loser.

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In *Soul by Soul*, Walter Johnson writes of a Louisiana community in which, for at least part of the time between 1825 and the Civil War, "slaves accounted for eighty percent of the security offered in recorded mortgages." The figure is a startling one, but Johnson gives no reason to regard it as atypical of the antebellum South. Indeed, he notes that, regularly, "slaves were used as collateral by purchasers of shares in Louisiana's investment banks."[42] And what was true of Louisiana, even if it was not true of slave states generally, needs to be taken as symptomatic of the institutional logic of slavery more broadly. Louisiana was not a

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[42] Both quotations Johnson 26. The town is East Feliciana Parish. Johnson credits the figure to Richard H. Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment, Slavers: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, 1825-1885* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), a monograph I was, regrettably, not able to examine (see Johnson 26 and 230-31 n. 20).

typical slave state, but that's precisely because it played so disproportionately great a role in determining the economic shape slavery assumed throughout the South.

The poker-playing Smith and Johnson, remember, are only able to set agreed terms by which Jerry may be wagered by explicitly invoking the spectral presence of the New Orleans markets. Each slave's price resided permanently in New Orleans the same way that, today, the potential exchange value of each thing a person owns exists not so much in the thing itself as on amazon.com or eBay. In the antebellum South, though, each slave was also shadowed by his or her price no matter where or in what southern state he or she happened to be. Like Brown's literacy and vulnerability to corporal punishment which, in the episode of the sailor and jailor, are distributed among several bodies, slaves as economic beings were always both their own bodies in and at the present *and* their potential future selves being exchanged for money in New Orleans. The New Orleans markets were, ideologically, everywhere there were slaves and people to judge those slaves' worth, and each slave (except, of course, when actually awaiting sale in a New Orleans pen) was always both in and outside the market. Louisiana was for slaves and slaveholders both a state and a state of being. Slaves and their owners in Virginia, Missouri, or Mississippi – like Smith, Johnson, and Jerry on the steamer – found their worth or wealth to be intelligible and articulable only once it had been filtered through the idea of New Orleans.

That slaves could function as security for other investments – that, in theory, it must even have been possible for a slaveholder to use them the way Brown uses the capital he acquired in Monroe, and print money secured by those slaves[43] – again suggests that slaves

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[43] I'm not aware of such a venture – a bank whose issue of currency was secured by slaves – actually occurring, but I would be shocked if it did not. Wildcat banking was so common in Ohio, the state's

were understood to function like gold or silver coin (there is a suggestion of land too, of course, though it – unlike gold or slaves – cannot be moved when it changes hands). They are understood by the culture of slaveholding to circulate in the social reality of the South as money, but as money which, unlike banknotes, possesses *intrinsic* exchange value. Paper money, be it banknote, personal check, or IOU, merely describes or represents actual value held *somewhere else* in reserve.

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In coin, the representation of an exchange value and the exchange value itself are spatially coextensive. Coins describe value by means of the words or images imprinted on them, but this description is inscribed onto the surface of that material in which the value is imagined to inhere. Gold and silver, as Marx reminds us, are ideally suited to the work of representing value – of materializing value that would otherwise exist only in an abstract form – because of their particular divisibility and, in gold's case, at least, resistance to corrosion. But gold and silver also have a use value that they would possess even if were they not the material forms assumed by money. Marx observes that "gold, for instance, serves to fill hollow teeth" (184). This means that precious metals would be worth something even if they were not accorded special authority in the representation of value, and this quality – combined with their physical properties – endow them with a kind of credit that paper will always lack. Paper has, of course, a use value too, and when it is not being used to represent monetary value it can be used to print novels. But paper cannot be melted down and reused,

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production of surplus one-dollar bills so profligate, that these banknotes, which usually featured an image of a buck's eye as a mark of regional pride, are one theory for the origin of the term *buck* for dollar. I can think of no reason that slaveholders from northern Kentucky would not have ventured to open banks in southern Ohio, even if Kentucky's laws forbid such practice.

and even blank paper, as it is subdivided, quickly becomes useless. No one needs a single piece of confetti.

Paper money divides the signifier (the paper note) from the signified (the actual value in the reserve or bank, which, whatever its nature, we are supposed to believe is minted gold or silver coins). That it does so by means of the technology of print is crucial for Brown, not least because he as an author is both separated from (because, as an orator, what print allows him is precisely the chance to talk to people he will never see) and connected to his readership by means of this same technology. By harnessing the mere fact that *Clotel* is a book – a book with paper pages inscribed with printer's ink which the reader must look at and presumably touch in order to read – rather than something else, like a dramatic performance or a speech or a piece of music, Brown draws the reader into the phenomenology of paper money more than into that of either coin or the body. When we read a book our estrangement as readers from any printed matter being described to us is always less by one degree than is our estrangement from any other thing the book might describe in words.[44] It is by association with the printed page itself – an association enabled

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[44] Though there's no evidence of which I'm aware showing any influence in either direction, Walt Whitman would obviously call upon the relative immediacy of the page per se throughout his project. Whitman worked out as a poetic theory what Brown, I'm arguing, used in order to engage his readers in his political project – that, to a person in the act of reading, nothing is more physically real than the paper and ink that make up the page. The assumption seems to be that whoever seeks to involve the reader as fully as possible in the world of materiality, and particularly in that of material embodiment, could do worse than to embed the logic of print and of paper into the story. Note that the same may not be said of written (as opposed to printed) documents, such as letters, in which the handwriting itself, even if it's just an obligatory signature, authorizes the document's materiality as a surrogate for that of the author's body. Whitman, of course, went as far as to set some of the type for the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* with his own hands, apparently trying to reclaim some of the intimacy lost in the mass production of his writing. Later editions also regularly featured a facsimile of his signature. Of note here may be the fact that Brown's money in the banking anecdote hybrid – a printed paper to which he adds his actual signature. This process is echoed to some extent in the modern world, for while the Secretary of the Treasury does not personally sign each federal reserve note by hand (notice that even the semblance of a signature we find on bills is not used on our coins) we must sign as consumers when we make a credit card purchase – as if the absence of any actual exchange of physical currency is made up for by our signature on what amounts to a de facto note for which we are the bank of issue.

partly by the novel's preoccupation with *money's* materiality – that Brown is able to manifest

the materiality of the racial body anew – is able not to dematerialize race or even sever race's

ties to the marketplace, but to reinvent the way in which blackness is compelled to

materialize itself as a form of tender within that marketplace.

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If Clotel's sale to Horatio Green casts her as coin, and Jerry is similarly minted at the

poker table, we need to recognize that there are other models of racial currency afloat in

Clotel, some of which we will encounter even if we limit ourselves to the river steamer in this

chapter. While Jerry is being wagered in the saloon, below deck the gang of slaves which

includes Currer and Althesa – those purchased in Richmond by Dick Walker for resale in

New Orleans – is being readied for market. In an oft-remarked scene (one almost wants to

call it a routine or skit) Walker's personal assistant Pompey engages in systematic deception

and introduces into the novel what we might think of as *shinplaster blackness*.

> Walker had already advertised in the New Orleans papers, that he would be there
> at a stated time with "a prime lot of able-bodied slaves ready for field service;
> together with a few extra ones, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five." But,
> like most who make a business of buying and selling slaves for gain, he often
> bought some who were far advanced in years, and would always try to sell them
> for five or ten years younger than they actually were. Few persons can arrive at
> anything like the age of a negro, by mere observation, unless they are well
> acquainted with the race. Therefore the slave-trader very frequently carried out
> this deception with perfect impunity.… Walker called his servant Pompey to him,
> and instructed him as to "getting the negroes ready for market." Amongst the
> forty negroes were several whose appearance indicated that they had seen some
> years, and had gone through some services. Their grey hair and whiskers at once
> pronounced them to be above the ages set down in the trader's advertisement.
> Pompey had long been with the trader, and knew his business; and if he did not
> take delight in discharging his duty, he did it with a degree of alacrity, so that he
> might receive the approbation of his master. "Pomp," as Walker usually called
> him, was of real negro blood, and would often say, when alluding to himself, "Dis

nigger is no countefit; he is de genewine artekil." … Pompey had been with Walker so long, and had seen so much of the buying and selling of slaves, that he appeared perfectly indifferent to the heartrending scenes which daily occurred in his presence. (89-90)

If Pompey's Faustus-like use of the third person in reference to himself (which Brown, at least, thinks is strange enough to demand an anticipatory gloss) bespeaks a sense of shame that belies the "alacrity" with which he does his job, then we should regard his claim to be "the genuine article" as no less ironically intoned, with irony at least on Brown's part if not on Pompey's as well.[45] It is Pompey who introduces the novel's second and more episodic narrative filament, the shadow narrative characterized by dark-skinned men speaking in dialect, usually for comic and very-nearly-racist effect. Pompey may not be a counterfeit, but given his inability to annunciate *counterfeit* (notable in part because his non-rhotic pronunciation of the word is inconsistent with his pronunciation of the *r* in *artekil*, which he apparently *does* voice, meaning his speech is not actually non-rhotic at all) we need

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[45] This is of course the passage from which Paul Gilmore borrows the title of his book. Faustus's idiosyncratic use of the third person in Marlow's *Dr. Faustus* is usually understood as a symptom of his repressed guilt; unconsciously he does not want to be the man who has so transgressed, and this unconscious guilt manifests itself hysterically as a verbal disidentification with himself as both transgressor and speaker. Pompey, I'm arguing, may be consciously untroubled by his complicity with the slave trade for similar reasons – he has so completely hidden his guilt and shame from himself that they appear only as unconsciously formed habits of speech.

Obviously Brown did not know Freud, but he probably did know Marlow; his knowledge of Shakespeare, at least, was extensive enough to warrant casual references to *Coriolanus* (Brown, *Three Years* 260), as far then as now from the Bard's most well-known work. Pompey's name is itself a kind of Faustian cautionary tale in code, for it phonetically exists both as *pomp* (the pride that portends a fall) and Pompeii (the apocalyptic fall so portended). According to the OED, *Pompey* was in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries a name frequently used for dogs. If this is indeed among the associations Brown means to mobilize with the name it's a grim one, for it suggests not only Pompey's sub-humanity, reducing him to the level of Walker's pet, but allies him with the other dogs in the novel – dogs always owned by slave-hunters and used to capture and sometimes maim or kill runaways. The association would not be all that strange, though, since Pompey, if he is acting with sincerity, is guided by a desire to please his master which outweighs any ethical considerations. In its most historical associations though – with Pompey Magnus – the name Pompey calls upon a historically real practice of naming slaves after major figures of classical imperialism, one which links Brown's Pompey to the ur-literary slave: Behn's Oroonoko, who is renamed Caesar when he arrives in Surinam.

to ask of what *particular* authenticity he is no mere simulation, and how, unless we are one of the "few persons" well acquainted with the race, we can be sure he's telling us the truth.

Among the things we can know about Pompey is that – even if the inconsistencies in his speech are just Brown's imprecision, and they *don't* imply that his dialect is part of an imperfectly maintained self-minstrelizing disguise – he is nonetheless a semi-professional liar. For Pompey's work readying the chattel for the New Orleans market consists mostly in coaching them to answer the questions of potential buyers with deceptive or false answers, and in grooming them to look significantly younger than they actually are. Crucially, Pompey is also himself a mask – and a deliberately unconvincing one – because we know that he is in fact a fictionalization of Brown himself. Much of the first half of *Clotel's* preface concerns Brown's own real-life hire to a slave trader who, as we already know, bears the same surname as Pompey's fictional master. Not even bothering to change Walker's name, Brown obviously doesn't seek to deceive his readers, though the obviously unflattering light in which he paints Pompey's cavalier subservience to Walker contrasts sharply with what we already know was Brown's feelings working on the river steamers. There is, though, what seems to be evidence of real shame – or at least ambivalence – on Brown's part. Though the name "Walker" removes any doubt that Brown shows us some version of some part of himself in Pompey, the actual information we need (that Brown, working for Walker, had done exactly the work Pompey does here) is presented in the "Memoir" in one of the third-person passages Brown borrows from a biographer.[46] At the all-important moment when

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[46] "William had to prepare the old slaves for market. He was ordered to shave off the old men's whiskers, and to pluck out the gray hairs where they were not too numerous; where they were, he coloured them with a preparation of blacking with a blacking brush. After having gone through the blacking process, they looked ten of fifteen years younger. William. Though not well skilled in the use of scissors and razor, performed the office of the barber tolerably" (52). The resemblance between this cosmetic work and the blackening of the minstrel stage is discussed by Gilmore.

Brown needs to explain why he elected to become a *barber* in Monroe, he tells us only that he "had, while employed in the steamer [on Lake Erie the previous summer], occasionally shaved a gentleman who could not perform that office himself" (66). We are given enough information to link Brown himself to Pompey's dishonest manipulation of the marketplace (and among that information is, of course, Brown's own such manipulation when he cast himself in Monroe as "Emperor of New York"), but the reader is left to build the chain without Brown's help.

The compounding of dissimulations in the narrative packaging of a story motif (whose content is *itself* about masks and dissimulations) gestures toward the novel's overwhelming concern with secrets and lies – things which accrue critical mass as they begin to interweave Brown's pioneering decision to write a novel, the estrangements of signifier from signified that attend the technology (print) upon which that decision depends for its meaning and its political force, the rhetoric of money, and the cultural logic of slavery. In a sense, Pompey's use of the third person, by which he seems to distance himself from his own apparent unwillingness to resist the systemic exploitation of which he is both object and agent, is mirrored in Brown's (barely) extra-diegetic invention of him as a character, and further in Brown's use of the third person throughout so much of his prefatory "Memoir."

Pompey may, of course, be a kind of nightmarish double for Brown – an image not of what he was but of what he feared he may have become had he lacked the courage to attempt his escape or the skill and luck to succeed in that attempt. But in escaping slavery Brown did not escape his history as Pompey, for it is his instrumentality in Walker's deceptive marketing that allows Brown, notwithstanding his claim elsewhere to have learned everything he could learn as a slave from Lovejoy's print shop, to set himself up as a barber

in Monroe. Lovejoy's newspaper is paired with the dissimulative laboratory in the belly of

that riverboat as the two halves of slavery's lesson; Lovejoy the abolitionist and Walker the

soul driver – like Brown and Pompey – are two iterations of the same basic truth. Just as

Brown in Monroe was both a banker and a barber, and in both roles both practiced and

offered to his customers a kind of superficial self-fashioning. All these pairs are symptoms of

the same system.

Several things come together in the Pompey scene, and I'll catalog them before

explaining why Brown links them together. First, and most powerfully in the passage, is

Pompey's catachrestic insistence that he is no counterfeit. While the statement implies that

Pompey lives in a social world where there is (or he believes there is) such a thing as a

"counterfeit nigger," without knowing the contextual occasion for the utterance (which in

any case, as a kind of catch phrase Pompey would "often say," must have been occasioned

by different things at different times) we can't really know what such a counterfeit is, or what

authenticity it seeks to ape. Brown provides an immediate context for the direct quotation

which suggests (though by no means definitively) that Pompey claims not to be a counterfeit

because he is of "real negro blood" – that is, he is not of mixed African and European

ancestry (this in contrast to Brown himself, whose father, recall, was white). But the only-

slightly-less immediate context is one to which the notion of counterfeiting seems more

applicable, for Pompey is more than anything a counterfeiter of young slaves. We are thus

unsure if he is casting the miscegenated or the cosmetically rejuvenated black person as the

counterfeit against which he defines himself as authentic. The former of these possibilities

connects the notion of authenticity (and the notion of deceptive fraudulence by which it is

always closely shadowed) to race in terms of its hereditary logic – and it compounds the

connection between counterfeiting and deception by implicating this hereditary logic in a secret history of miscegenation.

Brown calls attention not just to this history but to its status as secrecy and subterfuge when, in the first paragraph of the novel proper, he identifies the "fearful increase of half whites" as "the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of mast and slave in the United States of America" (81-82). For if the increase itself is evidence of the sexual exploitation of black women which always lay at slavery's heart, the fact that such issue constitutes *the best* evidence testifies to its status as not simply a history but a secret one. However objectionable some people might have found the mere existence of light-skinned blacks in the South, however much their existence might have seemed in itself to threaten social order, it is only evidence of anything "immoral" insofar as it is the most public articulation of libidinal transgressions and sexual cruelties which are themselves carried out in secret: the rape of black women by white men.

But if what Pompey means by telling us that he is the genuine article is that he is of unmixed African descent, he means something entirely different from this – but something at the same time intimately related to the "truth" of his racial composition – in telling us (if he *is* telling us) that he is genuinely no older or more weathered than he appears. More to the point, if Brown, with Pompey's catch-phrase, drops hints about miscegenation (as he seems to do, having Pompey echo Brown's own words on the first page of the novel, where the narrator calls dark-skinned African Americans "the real negro"), he nonetheless also hints at those qualities of the counterfeit which endow it with its particular transgressiveness and air of conspiracy. In figuring as a mode of "counterfeiting" the deceptive cosmetic practices by which Pompey prepares slaves to enter the market, Brown emphasizes not what makes the

blackening of their hair and the shining of their skin *racial*, but what such trade secrets among slavers most share with trade secrets among bankers – precisely the kind of subtle manipulation of even subtler visual codes that Brown, in the banking anecdote, tells us he studied in order to thwart those who might circulate counterfeiters of his shinplasters.

These two notions of counterfeit identities – the first the counterfeit whiteness of the phenotypically-white African Americans like Clotel and her sister Althesa (which threatens the stability of racial categories) the other the counterfeit youth and vigor of slaves past the prime of lives already spent underfed and overworked (which threatens the long-term credit of the slave trade itself in the interest of maximizing short-term returns) – are by no means mutually exclusive. The "fearful increase of half whites," after all, is never without its particular financial reverberations.[47] But the point here is that Pompey may be referring to either or both of these two distinct branches of the novel's counterfeiting motif when he claims he is the genuine article; both (in, albeit, different ways) connect Pompey's rhetoric of legitimacy to race, money, and visible legibility all at the same time. Race is always a matter of disguise and dissimulation for Brown, because even those whose racial identity is genuine must still lay claim to that authenticity in words, and in that must concede beforehand that the authenticity must be spoken or written into being, that it cannot go without saying. It is not enough for Pompey simply to *be* the genuine article, he must also actually *say* that he is the genuine article, nor is it enough for him to make this proclamation once to preempt confusion – apparently he must say it rather frequently. Each time he does so, the "genuine" Pompey must also explicitly invoke the counterfeit against which he measures and defines

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[47] See Carla L. Peterson, "Capitalism, Black (Under)development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s," especially the fourth section, "The Tragic Mulatta as Surplus Value" (567-574).

his legitimacy, asserting the truth of his blackness and economic worth in terms that also remind all who hear him that the truth of the slave body – whether its racial truth or that of the market value to which blackness makes that body subject – cannot, as a matter of course, be taken for granted. It's a kind of Derridian paradox by which the real becomes a particular mutation of the fake, rather than the fake a deformation of the real, since the real must always remind us of its reality, and must do so by reminding as well that not all of what seems to be true actually is.

In practical terms, the deception which Walker orders Pompey to orchestrate below decks may seem to differ little from the poker game in the saloon. Both are, for Brown, examples of the crude excesses of slavery. They are not acts of physical violence as such, but they are offences against an economic order which many of Brown's readers believed to be a mere extension of the laws of nature: the bourgeois social order that dominated the northeastern United States and the urban centers of Great Britain. Gambling and false advertising are both, at best, threats to the credit on which the entire marketplace depends, and at worst symptoms of structural flaws intrinsic to that marketplace – not just local breaches of trust which would make capitalism *look* bad, but systemic moral toxins which would indicate that it *is* bad.

But the important difference between gambling and cosmetic rejuvenation for Brown is that the poker game offers few tools of politically transformative potential. Jerry is allowed no real exit from the situation because the illusion under whose sponsorship he materializes – namely that he is a kind of coin – is one that conflates his materiality itself with his exchange value – again, as if his thousand-dollar body could be cut in half to form two semi-slaves worth five-hundred dollars each. The gambling scene possesses

propagandistic value for Brown, but not propagandistic value of an actually transformative nature, because writing about the poker game can do little but stoke the outrage of readers whose sensibilities are already offended by slavery (and/or gambling). The scene does nothing to make abolitionists out of those without strong feelings about the way African Americans are treated, since it doesn't suggest how the moral baseness of slavery might compromise the dignity or well-being of anybody who is not black. White people who see nothing wrong with playing cards and who are not bothered by the suffering of a person with whom they are unable to identify in racial terms will likely see little wrong with the picture.

Indeed, Brown seems not only to believe that only those already mobilized by moral reforms like abolition, temperance, and game prohibition will care that Jerry is made to stand on the table, but to believe that even *these* readers will need the image of the boy on the table to be accompanied by images of drinking and gambling to become really incensed.[48] One gets the sense that, if he could have, Brown would have liked to include some suggestions of prostitution or masturbation in the scene, and so reach out to virtually every moral reformer in the country![49] He is preaching to the converted, and even the converted seem to need for Jerry's story to be about more than just slavery in order to be properly outraged.

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[48] By *image* here I refer both to the verbal description and its accompanying illustration, to which I'll return later. Strangely, though the game takes place in the saloon, nobody in the illustration is shown with a drink in hand. Several other details are included in Brown's description of the saloon, though, in a kind of scatter-shot attempt to offend middle-class sensibilities. Slave trading, drinking, and gambling are probably the big ones, but Brown goes out of his way also to mention smoking, staying up late, and – perhaps most offensive of all, and a detail I wish I could spend some time unpacking – the fact that all of these activities were undertaken not just by men but by women sharing the social space with them. That is, men and women are socializing together, and the women themselves are said to smoke, drink, and gamble.

[49] Looking at the illustration of the game, it's not entirely clear that hints of prostitution and masturbation *aren't* there. A motivated interpreter could certainly find some.

Part of the problem with Jerry's story, though, is that the discursive space of the poker game admits no understanding of his enslavement in which the corporeal signifier that is the slave's body and the signified economic value with which that body is wrongly conflated might be disarticulated from one another. But there is a sense in which, by turning the scene into a piece of writing, Brown opens a fissure by which to imagine doing exactly that. Indeed, it may be this dynamic – the representation of a thing (a coin, a slave) which is a representation of itself – from which both the propagandistic use of the scene and the seemingly strict limitations on that use stem.

Pompey's prettifying of the older and more haggard slaves is thus a kind of study in separating a thing's exchange value from its corporeal materiality, and in separating what its materiality *seems to be* from what its materiality *actually is*. Pompey's counterfeiting, in other words, of youthful slaves introduces into the traffic in human commodities an element of uncertainty not supposed by whites (or at least by whites who are not also professional slave traders) to belong there. Those who shop in the slave market believe themselves to be investing in specie; Brown shows that, in fact, those who shop for slaves need not only to interpret the goods they want to buy, but to solve interpretive riddles which may be well beyond their acumen. These counterfeits force slaveholders and would-be slaveholders to ask questions and harbor suspicions that, ordinarily, they would much more readily have asked of or harbored toward paper currency issued by a bank of which they'd not heard. Such skepticism as Pompey encourages retranslates the black body so that the value of that body is imagined not to be innately a part of its material ontology but merely to be represented as existing somewhere – somewhere *else*. Brown wants to make people just as scared of buying slaves as they would be of accepting unfamiliar banknotes, and this

possesses obvious advantages over the sentimental antislavery tropes[50] in that it is an argument which might actually dissuade whites from buying blacks, might encourage slavery's defenders to question the institution's transparency and its economic wisdom, even if not its morality.

In order for such a transformation to be effected, though, Brown can't stop with apparent age. He needs to show that this kind of uncertainty can also attach to apparent race. Much of the rest of *Clotel* is devoted to showing exactly this – to undermining the whole physiognomic grammar of which both the cultural logic and the political capital of race constitute at once the seed and the fruit.

Part Four – In Which We Briefly Return to Brown's Autobiographical Writing

Physiognomy, the word itself, has something of a marked though marginal presence in Brown's writing, just as it does in *The Scarlet Letter*. It appears twice in *Clotel*, but always under conditions that distance it from Brown's authorial voice. In neither case is the word employed in the sense that nineteenth-century usage favored, that of a rhetorically heightened and somewhat poetical synonym for *face* (today the same sense is probably best matched by *countenance*), but neither does it quite denote, in Lavater's strictest sense, a true science of discerning temperament by *examining* that face for legible signs of the inner life behind it. *Physiognomy* in *Clotel* is a kind of vernacular skill set – less than a science but more

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[50] Again, I'm not saying that Brown *avoids* the tropes of sentimental antislavery writings. He uses those in abundance, too, and his debt to Child's "The Quadroons" seems to me in large part unironic; Brown genuinely admires the story and wants to identify its project with *Clotel's*. But Brown is never satisfied with sentimentalism alone. He is keenly aware of its political limitations – those of what, in modern political parlance, we would call "rallying the base" – and he uses the episodic content of *Clotel* as a kind of intellectual hero's quest in search of – and a verbal laboratory in which to test the properties of – unsentimental ways to challenge slaveholding. This fragmentation has, notoriously, cost *Clotel* admirers among those who value aesthetic unity before all else, but the novel, in the very jaggedness of the shards which make it up, insists that we take it seriously as one of nineteenth-century America's strangest and most daring books, a status which would affiliate it less with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than with *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*.

than a mere superstition – by which people make sense of an increasingly inscrutable world.[51]

Physiognomy served at least two purposes in the nineteenth century: in one it served as an auxiliary racial science, helping to rationalize the centrality of race in particular to the century's ideas about the self in general; in the other it broadened the underlying grammar of race – the signifying relations between the socially visible body and the invisible psychic life it encased – to differences between individuals and groups who shared the same racial identity. Thus two individual people could both be racially "black," but still be imagined to differ in ways that drew from the credibility of race because these differences would be simultaneously of temperament and visible embodiment. For the most part, neither Brown nor his characters ever strike us as overly concerned with the reading of people's appearances, but nor do they explicitly struggle with the legibility of such appearances; neither the word nor the concept *physiognomy* appears as a discrete body of knowledge or an interpretive protocol. Where the word does appear, though, it is always in reference to this interpretive protocol, and never (as in, say, Hawthorne) as a rhetorically heightened synonym

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[51] For more on the ways in which the social and demographic changes of the Jacksonian world created the need for new kinds of vernacular literacies of this kind, see, again, Karen Halttunen. Halttunen is particularly interested in the ways that a new urban world of displaced strangers promoted the development and promotion of codes of etiquette and attire for the middle class; she discusses, for instance, the ways in which a young lady's "proper" use of cosmetic makeup would not to *conceal* her features but *reveal* her internal knowledge of middle class gender expectations, expectations which, it was either wishfully or naively believed, could only be understood by those who actually believed in and lived by them. Thus, because the body did not always produce that blush of the cheek by which innocence was performed – but, quite naturally, a truly innocent young woman would quite naturally possess such a blush anyway as a credential of her sexual purity – rouge did not hide the truth of the body but revealed the truth of the soul, and restored the "natural" correspondences between inner and outer selves.

But Halttunen's argument has broader applicability; indeed, the middle class fussiness on which she focuses was only *one* symptom of the crisis she rightly links to the expansion of capitalist hegemony. As my argument suggests, the nineteenth century's preoccupation with race (and with race particularly as a way to restore social order in a community of strangers, and make knowledge of the body perform work that had been done by knowledge of your neighbor's individual histories) can usefully be thought of as another.

for face. The word is, furthermore, for Brown reserved for scenes of escape from slavery and the particular challenges facing slaves who attempt such escapes. Physiognomy is an important concept neither under slavery nor in freedom, but emerges in the paranoid middle-ground between the two states.

It's appropriate that the passage that, in *Clotel*, begins directly engaging physiognomic reading is one that itself possesses a complicated transmission history. If the physiognomic world is one which seeks, like a financer exchanging paper money for coin, to (re)unite the signifiers and signifieds of relative value to one another, the transmission history of Brown's description of his physiognomic encounter with Wells Brown (the Ohio man who will give the newly-escaped slave a middle and last name) challenges the logic of coin by dispersing competing paper versions of the encounter across a multitude of texts. The first version, which appears in Brown's 1847 *Narrative*, is notable in suggesting Brown's willingness as a free black to turn on others the preemptive physiognomic judgments which he had long suffered in the form of racism.[52]

After traveling for several days on his own, Brown becomes ill and decides to risk asking for help. Far from home, though, he has no idea whom he can safely ask. After pondering this problem without reasoning his way to any clear solution, he hides behind a bush on the side of a country road, "for I thought it probable that I might see some colored person, or, if not, some one who was not a slaveholder; for I had an idea that I should know a slaveholder as far as I could see him" (75). What's most interesting here is the slippage from race as such to more strictly physiognomic distinctions between, presumably, different

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[52] The passage appears in all three editions of Brown's slave narrative, though in the first edition it spans a chapter break.

whites – those who own slaves and those who don't. Brown doesn't tell us how he thought he would be able to recognize a slaveholder, or even if we are meant to think his belief that he could do so a reasonable or a naïve one. He might plausibly be assuming that slaveholders would be accompanied by black servants, or be equipped for interstate travel (recall that he is at this point in free Ohio, so slaveholders would not be near home). On the other hand, the passage suggests against such specificity; Brown tells us he *had an idea* that he would recognize a slaveholder by sight alone, suggesting both that his belief at that time was not rooted in specific assumptions about what visual cues would supposedly give the slaveholder away and that the autobiographical subject's faith in his ability to read strangers is one not shared in the book's present by Brown the autobiographer. For Brown is, after all, playing a materialist's game in supposing that slaveholders look like slaveholders, and in the context of such a game "ideas" are of little certain value. It is, indeed, the fundamental assumption (of Brown the autobiographical subject) in this passage that nothing real can exist in a wholly ideal form but must, one way or another, materialize itself – that all truths are somehow discernible on the phenomenologically available surfaces of things.[53]

In the bushes, supposing that slaveholders might be recognized while he himself remains concealed, Brown watches and waits.

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[53] This is the primary reason I've avoided an avowedly Marxist analysis of Brown's work, in spite of the fact that Marx offers by far the richest theory of commodities and the origin of money available – one of which I've made (albeit limited) use. Brown's intellectual victories as a writer are often marked by his ability to reject materialist conceptions both of race and of money. Indeed, where Marx and Engels bemoan that all that is solid melts into air, Brown works tirelessly (and largely successfully) to use precisely this sublimative property of commodification's ideology (and of slaves' place within that ideology) to dematerialize race, and so to sweep away the illusion of material value that serves as slavery's economic foundation. I've avoided Marx here essentially in order to prevent his materialism from interfering with Brown's project, and that project is one which I see, both in its evangelical moralism and its faith in the liberatory potential of counterhegemonic interpretation as anti-materialist. Brown more nearly regards interpretation as giving rise to the material world than the material world as giving rise to interpretation thereof.

> The first person that passed was a man in a buggy-wagon. He looked too genteel for me to hail him. Very soon, another passed by on horse-back. I attempted speaking to him, but fear made my voice fail me. As he passed, I left my hiding-place, and was approaching the road, when I observed an old man walking towards me, leading a white horse. He had on a broad-brimmed hat and a very long coat, and was evidently walking for exercise. As soon as I saw him, and observed his dress, I thought to myself, "You are the man that I have been looking for!" Nor was I mistaken. He was the very man! (75-76)[54]

Writing this in the 1840s, Brown of course knows that his readers will properly decode the man's dress. But how could the sick and tired fugitive, who knows nothing of the abolitionist movement or of the Quaker community's political sympathies, do so with such self-assurance? Does the fugitive trust the old man because he knows what the hat most likely means about him, or is he blindly taking a chance approaching the old man who looks humane? Is Brown's emphatic certainty that he has found a friend an extension of his "idea" that he could spot an enemy? What does the fugitive see? A Quaker and thus, probably, an abolitionist? A man too frail, should he be an enemy, to fight back against the blows of even the most fatigued nineteen-year-old laborer? A white man who seems to value outdoor vigor and dignified simplicity of dress over the opulence and leisure typical of the slaveholding elite? Are his clothes a sign, to Brown, of Quakerism, of agedness, or of a lack of the ostentation and vanity which Brown associates with the slaveholders he has known? We know that Brown has taken to reading people in primarily visual ways, but we do not know what specific range of qualities the visual is imagined as being authorized to express, nor do we know if the visible markers here are only Wells Brown's clothing or include features of

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[54] Page references here (and in the prior run-in quotation) are to the second edition of the *Narrative* in Andrews, ed. *From Fugitive Slave to Free Man*. In the *Narrative's* first edition, though the same text is used, what I've presented as a run-in quotation closes chapter 13, and this block quote opens chapter 14 (in the second edition the two are separated only by a paragraph break, and both are part of that edition's chapter 12) (see: *Narrative*, Hardpress edition 45,46).

his body as well, nor do we know if Brown the autobiographical subject is meant to seem wise or foolish for trusting his eyes.

J. Passamore Edwards's condensed version of the narrative[55] seems to gesture toward resolving the contradictions that give rise to such questions, though ultimately his revisions only bring the incongruence itself into sharper focus.

> He thought he might see some coloured person, or one who was not a slaveholder, who might render him some assistance. He had an idea he should know a slaveholder as far as he could see him. Accordingly, he perched himself behind some logs and brushwood, intending to wait until some one should pass.
>
> The first person who passed looked too genteel to be addressed. The second, Brown attempted to speak to, but fear deprived him of his voice. A third soon made his appearance. He wore a broad-brimmed hat and a long coat, and was evidently walking only for exercise. Brown scanned him well, and though not much skilled in physiognomy, he concluded he was the man. (Edwards 115-116)[56]

The narratologically superfluous Goldie-Locks structure of the incident remains intact, but there are several changes, too. The language of racial distinction (what the right wing might now call rhetoric "reverse-discrimination") is softened here. Where in the *Narrative* a *colored person* had been more ardently hoped for than a white benefactor, and a friendly white person explicitly a second choice, in Edwards's rendering the *coloured person* is merely paratactically first in the sequence. This expurgation is relatively easy to account for, though, since Edwards – a white Briton writing to an audience for antislavery fiction that, in 1852, was suddenly far more numerous and more diverse than it ever had been – was probably himself

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[55] *Biographical Magazine* editor Edwards's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Companions; or, Facts Stranger than Fiction* was a collection of tale-length biographies of fugitive slaves active in the abolitionist lecture circuit. Edwards's essays combine his digests of published memoirs (sometimes in direct quotation and sometimes in paraphrase) with material from lectures he'd attended in London (though not knowing exactly what these lectures were, it's often difficult to tell what material comes from what source. In Edwards's account of William Brown's first meeting with Wells Brown the synthesis of original and borrowed turns of phrase is particularly tight and seamless (see Edwards 115-116).

[56] I have used the electronic edition at the University of North Carolina's *Documenting the American South* (http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/edwardsj/edwardsj.html).

offended or believed members of his audience might be offended by Brown's implied mistrust of white people. Edwards's introduction of the word *physiognomy* into the episode may be less obviously tied to such an agenda, but in the context of the suppression of Brown's mistrust of white strangers which I've just described, the apology that Brown is "not much skilled in" that science seems motivated in part by a desire to prevent Brown from deploying the kind of racial and para-racial distinctions to which he had so often been subject, or from describing himself returning the racial gaze which, as a slave, he had come to understand so well.

To be fair, Edwards's explicit invocation of physiognomy as such also clarifies much of what, in Brown's original account, remained ambiguous. Edwards attaches Brown's judgment, because it is not an inexpertly wielded *physiognomy*, to Wells Brown's body and face rather than his clothing (though the details Edwards actually provides for the reader, perhaps because they are the only ones that Brown explicitly describes in the *Narrative*, remain purely sartorial), and his periphrastic rendering of the episode suggestively casts luck or divine providence, rather than interpretive skill, as the reason Brown reached out to a Quaker rather than someone less likely to help him. And yet Edwards's rendering also renders even more mysterious Brown's "idea he should know a slaveholder as far as he could see him," one of the phrases in the passage that Edwards does not revise. Though fewer questions orbit Edwards' version of the scene, the sense that Brown both *does* and *does not* understand the world in physiognomic terms remains problematically in place.

By 1883, Brown too seems to have noticed the *Narrative's* ambiguity, for in *Clotel's* introductory "Memoir" (the episode's next reappearance in print) he has borrowed back from Edwards and done even more than he to eliminate the contradictory narration.

> The poor fugitive resolved to seek protection, and accordingly hid himself in the woods near the road, until some one should pass. Soon a traveller came along, but the slave dared not speak. A few moments more and a second passed, the fugitive attempted to speak, but fear deprived him of voice. A third made his appearance. He wore a broad-brimmed hat and a long coat, and was evidently walking only for exercise. William scanned him well, and though not much skilled in physiognomy, he concluded he was the man. (61)

In eliminating his belief that he will know a slaveholder by sight, and removing any description of any of the three men which does not refer directly to clothing, Brown eliminates much of what I've been saying is contradictory in the episode, but retains the ambiguity of *physiognomy* – a word he seems happy to redeploy while at the same time cutting most of Edwards's other additions to the original passage from the *Narrative.* The fugitive remains both outside of the logic of physiognomy; he is still not much skilled in it, (and in this version he doesn't even seem to think he can tell a slaveholder from any other white man), but he has also been bolstered by it in successfully choosing which stranger will help him. Notice, though, that interpretive work of identifying the passer as a Quaker now falls wholly to the reader, for the fugitive is now making no such judgments. He is rendered dumb not just by the second traveler, but by the first (who had formerly been too well-dressed) as well. Brown, increasingly competent as a writer, has found a way to tell this story coherently, but only by writing himself completely out of the competing physiognomic gazes that characterized his and, to a lesser extent, Edwards' earlier passes. And yet the story still seems to rely on the spectral presence of physiognomy – of, at least, the possibility of physiognomic reading – in the borrowed designation of the fugitive as "not much skilled" in that field. The fact that Brown is thus distanced from the assumptions of physiognomy is only more strongly emphasized by his use of the third person, giving the impression that the

words are not his own (though, having just considered their textual history, we can safely say that they frustrate any attempt to credit them to a single author in any final sense).

<center>*Part Five – The Escape of Clotel*</center>

As I've already mentioned, both times *physiognomy* appears in *Clotel* it does so in scenes saturated with paranoia; in both cases the reader's attention is centered on a slave in the midst of an attempt to escape – a person traversing a discursive space that is neither slavery nor freedom but a state of unique vulnerability in between the two. The word first appears in the novel as part of the third-person narration of Brown's own escape from slavery in the introductory "Memoir," and as I've already shown, this appearance occupies a similarly liminal discursive order – not between slavery and freedom but between quotation and invention, or derivation and originality. The sentence "William scanned him well, and though not much skilled in physiognomy, he concluded he was the man" is quoted almost verbatim from J. Passamore Edwards, Brown having only substituted the name *William*, which his autobiographical subject already bore at the time these events occurred, for the name *Brown*, which, prior to the encounter with Wells Brown that this passage narrates, he bore not.[57] Still, the fact that Brown bothers to make these subtle corrections and revisions

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[57] I should say something here about Brown's various names, particularly since, like Edwards, I refer to the author of *Clotel* as "Brown" even when I am talking about his experiences in slavery, a convenience of which Brown himself (in correcting Edwards's sentence in this regard only) clearly disapproves. Brown was born with the name William, which was given to him by his mother, but, as he explains in the *Narrative*, had been renamed Sandford when he was probably between five and ten years old ("though young, I was old enough to place a high appreciation upon my name" [*Narrative* 74]) so as not to have the same name as nephew of his master, Dr. Young. Soon after crossing into Ohio, Brown resolves to be known once again by *William*, and when he offers Wells Brown the authority to choose a name for him does so with the provision that he is still to be called *William* (explaining Brown's particular attachment to his three-part name). The dance of naming and renaming is discussed by Ernest (22-23) and Andrews in *To Tell a Free Story* (151), and because I find their arguments convincing I've seen fit not to recapitulate them here, maintaining the name "William Wells Brown" somewhat anachronistically as a constant, because this is the name Brown usually published under. To the extent that my practice presents a theoretical argument, I mean to suggest – as an alternative to Andrews's and Ernest's arguments, but one which even I don't necessarily find more persuasive than theirs – an understanding

shows him not to be blindly recycling another writer's material. Just as he does with Child's "The Quadroons," Brown continually tinkers with the material be samples, thus lending his authorial approval to whatever he elects not to change, though doing so while maintaining a distance from the authorship of these words that he does not maintain over the words of, say, the *Narrative*, or *Three Years in Europe*. *Physiognomy* thus enters *Clotel* at a moment when, in the book's content, Brown the autobiographical subject both does and does not belong to himself, and under the sponsorship of a narrative point of view which both does and does not belong to Brown the author.

When physiognomy next appears in *Clotel*, for the second and last time, it does so not in the introductory "Memoir" but in the novel's fiction proper. Though once again a slave's attempt at escape is underway – too far along to be aborted but not yet so far along as to be at all certain of success – this time the escape in question is Clotel's own, and partly because, as a fiction, the existence of the book we are reading does not serve to assure us in advance that her escape will ultimately succeed,[58] the physiognomy here circulates in a more ominous context.

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as Brown's autobiographical subject as a character created retrospectively and under the generic conventions of autobiography but distinct from the historical person – called *William* or *Sandford* – who would actually go on to author the autobiographies in question. That is, when Brown writes the *Narrative* in 1847, he is inventing a new character as he writes, but because that character is understood to be autobiographical he must also be regarded as an avatar of the author.

    This is, I admit, an extremely fine distinction, but it's an important one for readers of autobiography, and it possesses practical implications for how we refer to and understand the diegetic and non-diegetic figures we encounter there. The character we read about in Brown's *Narrative* and his other autobiographical writings is not the slave who, in the 1820s and '30s, would later author books under the name William Wells Brown; he is the slave who, in the 1840s and '50s, that author remembers having been.

    [58] In case it's not clear, I mean here that, reading Brown's *Narrative*, the reader may be caught up in the tension of his escape, but maintaining any critical distance at all such a reader will know that Brown ultimately *will* make his way to freedom, since by no other means could he in the first place have authored the book through which we read of his adventure. One advantage, in this context, of fiction over the kind of non-fiction slave authors had previously favored – an advantage of which Brown makes deft use in having his title character kill herself rather than submit to recapture about two-thirds into the novel – is that the book's mere

Shortly after Clotel (in partnership with another slave named, as it happens, William) has run away from the plantation on which she lives, and boarded a steamship headed north, the narrator seems to lose track of her, and – in another of Brown's tour-de-force interrogations of artistic originality – begins appearing to quote from newspapers.[59]

> But the most probable [published description of the two slaves' escape] was an account given by a correspondent of one of the Southern newspapers, who happened to be a passenger in the same steamer in which the slaves escaped, and which we here give:--
>
> "One bright starlight night, in the month of December last, I found myself in the cabin of the steamer Rodolph, then lying in the port of Vicksburgh, and bound to Louisville. I had gone early on board, in order to select a good berth, and having got tired of reading the papers, amused myself with watching the appearance of the passengers as they dropped in, one after another, and I being a believer in physiognomy, formed my own opinion of their characters.["] (170)

Interestingly, "physiognomy" is here not something you need "skill" to practice – the way Edwards (and then, quoting him, Brown) suggests it must be. Physiognomy is something in which you need only believe in order to wield with authority – an "idea" like Brown's that he will recognize slaveholders by sight. In this sense the physiognomic meanings deployed by the body constitute a system of credit – that is, an economy of representation which possesses real descriptive value, but which possesses that value as an *effect* rather than a *cause* of individual people's belief in its veracity.

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existence as a document in no way spoils the events of the narrative. Though slaves who attempted escape were by no means assured of success, all those who went on to publish their stories (at least before the Civil War) would by definition be those who, one way or another, had freed themselves from slavery's clutches. The political risk of thus understating the odds against which fugitive slaves struggled should be obvious.

[59] It's not clear if Brown is actually quoting from a real newspaper article, inventing an article which he then pretends, within the diegesis, to have found in the world, or some combination. The important point here for my argument, though, is that once again the word physiognomy appears as part of a verbal register which we cannot satisfactorily resolve into Brown's authorial voice, but which we cannot extricate from that voice either, since we know that, ultimately, he has decided to annex this text, and we do not know how much (if any) of it has actually been borrowed verbatim.

The correspondent for a southern newspaper suggests that his personal belief in physiognomy is explanation enough for how the legibility of the body, the body considered as an interpretive puzzle, enters the scene set by the rest of his description, as if any scene of any nature, to a man with such beliefs, would be treated physiognomically. But much of the detail in the scene nonetheless binds his eagerness to read people to the contextual circumstances under which it occurs to him that he might pass the time this way. The witness assumes the fungiblility of "the papers" – a perfectly plausible but, especially in this particular novel, by-no-means insignificant metonym for the *news* – and the faces of passersby. He has tired of one kind of reading, but elects to pass the time with another which, his abrupt transition implies, he believes his readers will intuitively understand as offering comparable qualities and quantities of diversion, and as governed by the same basic relations of displaying, seeing, and knowing. Note too the use of *characters* for *temperaments*, which only compounds the physiognomic equation of the body with the written or printed word, since a character – originally a visible mark – only comes to signify (as it does today) an inner temperament by way of humoralism's physiognomic grammar.[60]

The witness deploys the logic of physiognomy in a way that, while Brown is still careful to distance himself from it,[61] also serves his needs by distancing signifier from signified – particularly physiognomy's bodily signifier from its interior signified. The body here may be legible in a certain sense, but it is not legible as a thing whose medium is its message. It is not – like a coin – legible as a material signifier of qualities themselves material,

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[60] On this see the OED's entry for *character*. The complicated history of this word is traced in greater detail in a now-discarded section of my chapter on *The Scarlet Letter's* title page.

[61] Not only does Brown claim to be quoting directly from a newspaper but, in most editions, the newspaper excerpt is even rendered in a distinct typeface, set apart visually from the narration proper.

qualities bound in and as that very signifier, something which must be interpreted merely to become itself. It is legible as is a paper, or paper money, or a novel. To possess it is not necessarily to possess its meaning or its value – any more than to possess a banknote is to possess the actual gold or silver that note represents – represents, indeed, without wholly affirming its existence.

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The reappearance of *physiognomy* – and indeed of the concept the word designates – at this point in *Clotel* accords both the word and concept some additional significance. The correspondent's account marks the crux of the novel's elaborate passing plot, the convergence of its interlocking stories of racial, gendered, and textual imitation and subterfuge. Passing's meaning in and importance to nineteenth-century African American literature in general (and *Clotel* in particular) have been much debated by critics.[62] For the purposes of my project, though, it's enough to say that Brown's aim is partly to deploy the "fearful increase of half whites" in the South, which he offers in the novel's opening paragraphs as "of itself, the best evidence of the degraded and immoral condition of the relation of master and slave in the United States of America" (81-82), as a catalyst for a kind of poetic justice. Usually regarded as among the most seductive and least naturalistic of the emotional satisfactions offered by sentimental fiction,[63] Brown sees an opportunity for *real-world* poetic justice in the vast numbers of phenotypically-white, legally-black slaves who, now several generations from their African forebears, are increasingly able to move

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[62] For a useful overview of these debates, see Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* and Raimon's *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited*, particularly the introduction to each. Both books also contain chapter-length discussions of *Clotel*.

[63] See Fabi's chapter on *Clotel* in *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (7-43, especially, for example, 14).

unmolested through the south and assimilate into white society. For Brown, the undoing of the racial binarism on which slavery seems to depend as a coherent ideology has been made possible by the sexual subjugation of black women by white men, a subjugation which is itself an inevitable consequence of slavery as an institution. Wherever slavery exists, Brown argues, masters will have unchecked power over female slaves, and, either because of that power or because slaveholding is simply toxic to the ideals of restraint and libidinal self-control, that moral rectitude which the northern middle class regards as the highest personal good will be impossible both for slave and master. (Note Brown's frequent outbursts of astonishment in the narration that many of those who hold slaves also pray, attend church, and in some cases even head congregations; he has, clearly, the sense that nothing which can legitimately call itself Christianity can also condone – or even coexist with – the ownership of human beings.) It is thus that such chickens come home to roost. The passing narrative allows Brown to imagine that the evil of slavery will bring about its own institutional collapse without the need for a divine moral order which rewards goodness and punishes evil.

If Brown here seems to be depending either on northerners' puritanical outrage over slavery's sexual excesses, or on the fiery perdition which dogmatic Christians know awaits licentious masters (behind the veil, behind the veil), he's not. He's careful enough after all to show that, just as it is whites who benefit from institutional racism, so too is it whites who have something to lose as new kinds of illegibility are introduced into the symbolic order upon which racism depends: the physiognomy of race itself. The two intertwining plots of the novel's fugue-like narrative polyphony bear this out most obviously. (Again, the novel contains a plot centering on light-skinned, female characters who inhabit a sentimental universe, and a second, more episodic plot centering on dark-skinned, male trickster

characters, who inhabit a series of comic plots.) Brown's female characters – Clotel, her mother, her sister, and her daughter – are phenotypically white; the dark-skinned male characters, though not capable of passing for white, nevertheless prove skilled manipulators of the racial performances expected of them, playing the part of the deferential servant when it serves their needs, but always with a repertoire of other roles in reserve, roles which may contrast significantly with the profoundly limited one slavery and racism have assigned them.

I remind my reader of this structural logic because it is in the light-skinned Clotel's escape with the dark-skinned William that the novel's two plots briefly become one. The novel begins, recall, with Clotel's auction to Horatio Green – though, as we later learn, her mother Currer and her sister Althesa have been sold to the villainous trader Walker. Years later, when the dissipated, spineless, and now-legally-married (to a white woman with a powerful father) Green sells his cast-off mistress to Walker, the reversal has been anticipated not just by Walker's earlier purchase of Currer and Althesa, nor just by Greens slow-but-steady descent into corruption and self-loathing, but by the titles of the chapter in which the sale occurs *and* the interchangeable title of the previous chapter. Green's sale of his once-beloved Clotel to Walker marks the structural midpoint of the novel; it is the fifteenth chapter of twenty-nine, called "To-Day a Mistress, To-Morrow a Slave," and it's preceded by the chapter called "A Free Woman Reduced to Slavery." Brown's introductory narrative, though unnumbered, might be counted provisionally here as an auxiliary chapter, such that, depending upon how we classify that preface, either the fifteenth chapter alone (both preceded by and in turn preceding fourteen numbered chapters), or the fourteenth and fifteenth counted together (preceded by one preface and thirteen chapters, and then followed by fourteen chapters) would constitute the numerical midpoint of the novel's table

of contents. The point here is not that one or the other is the true center of the story, the point is that the introductory memoir wreaks much the same kind of havoc on the structural coherence of *Clotel* as "The Customs-House" wreaks on *The Scarlet Letter*, that, furthermore, this havoc serves as a skeletal system for the aesthetic and political ambiguities both books work to mobilize; and finally that the ambiguities that characterize both books are homologous insofar as they both stem from the political world created by slavery and racism. (That such ambiguities, despite even the uncanny kinship of their importance in the global structure of their respective novels, have served to demonstrate Hawthorne's literary sophistication and Brown's lack thereof should say more about the limitations of our critical tools than about any unbridgeable aesthetic gap between what, were we judging by reputation alone, might be regarded respectively as the *most* and *least* well-crafted of nineteenth-century American novels.)

So Clotel must be consigned to slavery twice, as it were, first (though her surrogate) as a free woman being reduced to slavery in chapter fourteen, and a second time, in chapter fifteen, as a mistress being made a slave in the course of a single evening. The differences which, in the two halves of this diptych, the novel is able to schematize are myriad and rich, but I will start with those which we can discern from the chapters' titles alone, without even having yet considered their contents. Though a *slave* is a *slave*, a *free woman* is not necessarily a *mistress*, and a *mistress* not necessarily *free*. Indeed, *freedom* in these chapter titles is semantically opposed not to *slavery* but to involvement in the slave system as a slave *or* as a slaveholder, since to be a *free woman* is to be neither a *slave* nor a *mistress*. Room is left in the differences between the two chapters' titles for *a free woman* to be reduced to the state of *a mistress*. Room is, pointedly, *not* left for a *slave* to retain a gendered identity, whether male or female. *Free*

woman and *mistress* are each a gender-specific designation, *slave(ry)* neuter. The important point, though, is that either of these chapter titles might just as easily summarize Clotel's position, for though not technically "a free woman," she is, within the logic of slavery, precisely to that extent not technically "a mistress" either. Each chapter title presents Clotel's story, and each with the same inaccuracy, since Clotel's claims on freedom or on her life as a mistress have never been legally actionable.

But the "free woman" of chapter fourteen is *not* Clotel. She's a character (like the ill-fated Jerry, whom Smith lost to Johnson in a poker game) who appears in the novel just once and one who (also like Jerry) constitutes a lynchpin of the novel's overarching argument regarding the relationship between race and money under slavery. While peripheral to the action of the plot, several elements of the story of chapter fourteen's "free woman" – Salome – connect her to the novel's sentimental "main" plot of Clotel and her family. Like Currer, for example, Salome is a slave woman allowed to hire her time, though she does so as a house servant, not as a laundress. Like Clotel, as I noted above, she is a woman once at liberty made to serve as a slave, the story of her transformation from mistress to slave appearing at the novel's structural midpoint. Salome is connected to Currer's other daughter, Althesa, by her servitude, for it is to Althesa – now living as a white woman – that Salome hires her time. Althesa and her white husband Henry Morton pay Salome for her work as part of their seemingly doomed attempt to maintain middle-class respectability in the South without owning slaves. Salome tells her story to Althesa:

> I will tell you why I sometimes weep. I was born in Germany, on the banks of the Rhine. Ten years ago my father came to this country, bringing with him my mother and myself. He was poor, and I, wishing to assist all I could, obtained a situation as nurse to a lady in this city. My father got employment as a labourer on the wharf, among the steamboats; but he was soon taken ill with the yellow fever,

and died. My mother then got a situation for herself, while I remained with my first employer. When the hot season came on, my master, with his wife, left New Orleans until the hot season was over, and took me with them. They stopped at a town on the banks of the Mississippi river, and said they should remain there some weeks. One day they went out for a ride, and they had not been gone more than half an hour, when two men came into the room and told me that they had bought me, and that I was their slave. I was bound and taken to prison, and that night put on a steamboat and taken up the Yazoo river, and set to work on a farm. I was forced to take up with a negro, and by him had three children. A year since my master's daughter was married, and I was given to her. She came with her husband to this city, and I have ever since been hired out. (146-147)

Slavery's defenders, if arguing that slavery is moral because it is no more than an institutional recognition of immutable racial hierarchies, can do little with such a story but claim that it isn't true. (Brown notes emphatically in the chapter's final paragraph that New Orleans newspapers covered the story in 1845 and 1846, and that they furnish abundant proof that it, in fact, happened.) If some whites might crassly disidentify with Salome because she is poor or dislocated, and comfort themselves that immunity from such circumstances might be secured by being middle-class or staying in a town where you're well known, the compulsory miscegenation at the story's conclusion probably quiets them. This is the white South's worst nightmare: that, as blackness becomes more elastic in its bodily signifiers, whiteness alone might not be enough to secure liberty, that blacks might be masters and mistresses over whites, the apocalyptic scenario so often invoked by the pro-slavery establishment as the unendurable but inevitable consequence of emancipation, and one reason that many even among those who opposed slavery in principle favored Liberian colonization.

We need not work hard to trace the logic of Salome's predicament back to the opening paragraph of the novel's first chapter, and even beyond that chapter to the banking anecdote. The fact that whites might be sold into slavery results from the fearful increase of

half whites – slaves who are not visually distinguishable in racial terms from the whites by whom they're owned. The abundance of counterfeit whites has not merely created all-but-white slaves, or even legally black mistresses like Clotel and Althesa, nor has it merely imitated whiteness fraudulently. The counterfeits have become so convincing and so numerous that they've begun to compromise the value of the genuine article – so prevalent and so persuasive that even the authenticity which it apes can no longer assert itself intelligibly. The exchange value of whiteness – which we usually imagine as immunity from actually being bought and sold – has come so to be debased by the circulation in the same social space of perfect imitations, that it no longer outweighs the use value of the body onto which it is inscribed. Like banknotes so worthless they would be more wisely plastered to the shins as boot insulation than traded for goods, whiteness is no longer necessarily worth any more than the body onto which it's (im)printed.

Brown clearly means for us to sympathize with Salome. He does not mean, as Twain seems to at the end of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, to make slavery *itself* the agent of poetic justice, such that white people, because they benefit from slavery, as seen as deserving no better than enslavement for themselves, and so are people whose enslavement we can cheer, and with whom we need not empathize. It's perhaps for this reason that Brown appends to Salome's story a note about her successful appeal to the State Supreme Court (after losing her suit in the local court) to secure her freedom. At the same time, Brown cannot leave matters thus, since this would imply that white people are ultimately *not* truly vulnerable to slavery, and that they need not fear being enslaved. He warns the reader "Salome Miller is free, but where are her three children? They are still slaves, and in all human probability will die as such" (148). The implied threat to the pro-slavery reader is not that those children will

die in slavery, for they are no less black than Brown himself. Salome regains her freedom but not the whiteness that, because she has black children, has been permanently compromised. Her body has been rescued by her whiteness, but that whiteness can do nothing to help her children. She remains embedded in an interracial family even after proving the illegality of the coercion by which it was forced on her. The damage here is thus done less to Salome herself (or, at least, Brown suggests thus) than to the integrity of the cultural logic which distinguishes whites from blacks and which conflates blackness with enslavement, whiteness with liberty.

The credibility of this cultural logic is the real target of the novel's most sustained attacks, and Salome's story (which, again, seems located in the novel at that point which most courts our confusing it with Clotel's) is one of an enslavement that, for Brown and the committed abolitionists among his readers, is in reality no more wrong than that of any other slave. Though Brown is eager to distance himself from the sadism that might wish retributive racial justice even on those whites who, like Salome, never owned slaves, he does want at the same time to compel (to frighten, if necessary) racist and proslavery whites into sympathizing with slaves, and this, he feels is the best way to do it.[64] It is here that the model of paper currency developed in the banking anecdote serves Brown as a template for a viable strategy of resistance to slavery. The economic value of the slave body has become so detached from the racial body itself that one could just as easily redeem a white body for that value as a black one. This inflationary embodiment of race is a consequence of

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[64] I'm not trying to deny that there is a pinch, so to speak, of sadism here. The misogyny which critics sometimes complain of in Brown's work, and which usually isn't there to a greater extent than in the works of, say, the Bronte sisters (at least one of whom he seems in *Clotel* to be admiring openly in the homage of the name of a major character) is never *more* real than here, where some pleasure for Brown probably does attend the fantasy of compelling a white woman to submit to sex with a black man, and thus reversing the sexual exploitation of black women by white men over which the novel obsesses.

miscegenation, but it is *not* a consequence of miscegenation *alone*, for Salome's protestations can be explained away by her owners only if there already exists within the culture of slavery a narrative of passing, in which a person who looks white and claims to be white is nonetheless not believed, and assigned a black identity. That is, in order not to heed Salome's protests that she is white, there must be (or her owners must believe that there are) "black" people in the world who look white and who will claim dishonestly to be so. There must be a precedent for refusing to give weight to her claims that, though a slave, and thus legally denied whiteness, she is indeed white and that her enslavement is thus criminal.

It's crucial to note here that Brown's argument is a pragmatic one that places little value on absolute internal consistency. Indeed, the disjointedness that critics often complain of in *Clotel* is but the aesthetic fruit born by the piecemeal political seeds the book sows. But the apparent contradictions also serve to give Brown's political project an internal dissonance that mirrors the estrangement of signifier form signified within the sign – an estrangement made particularly legible and economically toxic when that sign is paper currency. It is this estrangement Brown hopes to attach to race.

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The passing narrative, by 1852 already a well-worn literary device, is the last piece of this puzzle in my reading of *Clotel*. The narrative arc which Salome Miller[65] initiates by serving (again, heed the titles of those adjacent chapters) as a surrogate for the story of Clotel – the descent from relative comfort into slavery and the eventual escape thereof – also introduces into the novel for the first time a bona fide story of racial passing. True to the

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[65] Robert S. Levine's invaluable annotations to the 2000 Bedford Cultural Edition of *Clotel* identify the woman as Salome *Müller*, though Brown, perhaps because English libraries afforded him no way to check the spelling, anglicizes her name as *Miller*.

weird emptiness which he finds so endlessly fascinating – standing in his Monroe

barbershop at his empty safe, redeeming shinplasters for even more dubious shinplasters –

Brown gives us a story of racial passing in which nobody passes. (Salome actually *is* white,

but her story can make no sense outside a society in which black-for-white passing is seen as

a frequent occurrence.) But the novel has nonetheless finally introduced a social practice at

which – with characters like Pompey – it had heretofore only hinted. It will remain a central

motif of the rest of the novel.

Part of what makes this remarkable is that neither Clotel nor Althesa has made any

attempt to pass for white earlier in the novel, at least not one that the narrator has explicitly

identified as willful deception. Described throughout as being "as white as most white

women" (a designation that smuggles into the novel an indictment of the supposed racial

homogeneity of whites) she might have easily passed for such a woman earlier and

potentially have become Horatio Green's wife in fact rather than simply in deed had the

couple simply moved to a place where they were not known. Nor does the word *pass* (or any

word of which it forms the root, as *passed* or *passing*) appear in the novel in order to denote

deception or masquerade until it is proposed specifically as means of securing liberty in the

nineteenth chapter. And when the word *does* appear, as it does about every five pages or so,

it is frequently in passages lifted directly from Child's "The Quadroons."[66] The word's

position in the book changes drastically, though, in the nineteenth chapter, "Escape of

Clotel."

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[66] This is based upon my word search of electronic web editions of both texts. I'm excluding words in which the meaning of the verb *to pass* is changed so significantly as to render its status as the root word debatable, as *passage* (of a ship), *passenger*, *passion*, etc. I am including the noun *pass* – in the sense of written permission to travel through or occupy a space. *Pass* and other words definitionally linked to its verbal sense almost never appear more than once in a single paragraph before the novel's nineteenth chapter, at which point – as I will show – they proliferate.

The chapter's first paragraph does not relate directly to Clotel's escape but rather provides a kind of template for it by using surrogates (just as Salome Miller's story provided a template for Clotel's deception and enslavement). It presents two anecdotes of clever slaves who successfully escape to the North. This paragraph never actually refers to racial passing as such, but it uses the word *pass* seven times. Using the pagination of the first edition, this is seven instances in slightly more than two pages of text (164-166). The word appears only nineteen times in the previous one hundred nine pages of text which make up the novel proper (55-163), but fourteen times in the fifty-two pages of the preface (1-52).[67] Indeed, the first and shorter of the two anecdotes is particularly striking in its repetition of *pass*; in the first edition this anecdote is in fact contained almost entirely on the chapter's first page, as a kind of tour-de-force visual performance.

> A slave was one day seen *passing* on the high road from a border town in the interior of the state of Virginia to the Ohio river. The man had neither hat upon his head or coat upon his back. He was driving before him a very nice fat pig, and appeared to all who saw him to be a labourer employed on an adjoining farm. "No negro is permitted to go at large in the Slave States without a written *pass* from his or her master, except on business in the neighbourhood." "Where do you live, my boy?" asked a white man of the slave, as he *passed* a white house with green blinds. "Jist up de road, sir," was the answer. "That's a fine pig." "Yes, sir, marser like dis choat berry much." And the negro drove on as if he was in great haste. In this way he and the pig travelled more than fifty miles before they reached the Ohio river. Once at the river they crossed over; the pig was sold; and nine days after the runaway slave *passed* over the Niagara river, and, for the first time in his life, [page break] breathed the air of freedom. A few weeks later, and, on the same road, two slaves were seen *passing*… . (164-165 emphasis added)

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[67] The averages: in the "Memoir" about once every three and a half pages, in the first eighteen chapters of the novel about once every five and three quarters pages, and in the first paragraph of chapter 19 three and a half times on each page.

There are only about two hundred words in this anecdote, and four of them are *passing*, *pass*, and, two times, *passed*.[68] The pressure placed on passing as an act by this talismanic repetition of the act's verbal insignia is achieved retroactively, but achieved nonetheless, for the clever purloined-letter-style hiding of an attempt at escape mirrors the arrival in the novel of a new concept, not actually mentioned as such but nonetheless named four separate times on one page.

When Clotel arrives at her new southern home, her hair is cropped short by her mistress, and she is befriended by the industrious William – not just the author's own name (though it *is*, of course, his name) but that of Brown's peer on the British abolitionist lecture circuit in the early 1850s, William Craft, on whose convention speech the story of Clotel's escape with this fictional William draws heavily.[69] William has saved a few hundred dollars by working as a stone mason when Clotel arrives on the plantation, having now been conveyed by Walker from Richmond to New Orleans. Feeling that Clotel (looking like, and having lived essentially as, a white person) must deserve her enslavement even less than he does his, William offers her his savings.

> [H]e came into the quadroon's room, and laid the money in her lap, and said, "There, Miss Clotel, you said if you had the means you would leave this place; there is money enough to take you to England, where you will be free. You are much fairer than many of the white women of the South, and can easily pass for a free white lady." (167)

No mention is made of the exact physical form taken by this money, but the one hundred fifty dollars William offers to Clotel, if all in silver coin, would weigh nearly nine pounds, and

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[68] Like *passed*, of course, *passing* too appears twice in the quotation, but after a page break and as part of the second anecdote.

[69] William Craft and his wife Ellen were both illiterate when Brown wrote *Clotel* in 1852 and '53, but Craft eventually learned to read an published the story of his escape as *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* in 1860.

probably be difficult to conceal or to carry about noiselessly in the course of a clandestine escape.[70]

But let's note the various ways in which *passing* is constructed a paragraph earlier in the pig anecdote. To pass is, first, to do something in theory visible. One can be *seen* passing, and can be recognized by strangers in the act as one who passes. Note especially the intransitive sense of *passing* in the chapter's first sentence – the slave is seen *passing*, not passing *something*. But the visibility of passing as an act is compromised by its almost immediate absorption into the logic of writing, for it is not long after the slave is seen passing that a disembodied voice (the voice of the law, one might guess, though since no one in the diegesis seems actually to be saying this out loud the statement's status as a quotation from nowhere serves to privilege the fact of its having been *written* somewhere over the idea of it being spoken dialogue) introduces into the dense reticulation of the meanings of *pass* one that is both conscriptive and inscriptive. A *pass* is the text one must produce in order to enjoy the privileges of mobility, but it is, after all, a text that obeys the laws of optics, just as the passing slave may be seen while passing. It is by exercising control over the visual cues by which a particular person's race and condition of servitude become visible – a kind of control that would later be theorized as double consciousness, in which the marginalized self is always monitoring its behavior as if from another person's point of view – that the slave

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[70] This is assuming the use of the so called Seated Liberty dollar, first issued in 1840 (the historical Crafts escaped in 1848). Few silver dollars were minted in the early nineteenth century, but silver dollars of the first government issue (1794-1804) were likely still in circulation, too, though they would likely have weighed about the same as the new Seated Liberties. It's also possible, and indeed likely, that Spanish silver dollars remained in circulation throughout the first half of the century, as, before issuance of currency was brought under the control of the federal government during the Civil War, it was common for private banks to secure their own paper money with silver dollars of either US or Spanish origin. The Seated Liberty dollar was, by the way, composed of ninety percent silver and ten percent copper, locating its value as precious metal firmly within its own substance.

gains a kind of strategic *in*visibility, and wrests from slavery the hard won mobility that his

lack of a pass – mere shorthand here for his illiteracy, for a slave who could read and write

could, like Frederick Douglass (*Narrative of the Life* 58), forge his or her own pass – seems to

force on him. This slave then *passed* (now transitively) a white house with green blinds, and

then finally into the freedom and safety of British Canada. Before doing so he sells the pig

that accompanied him, and with which in the south he was on equal legal footing as a living

commodity.

The way that *pass* functions verbally here – the way it yokes liberty, mobility, paper,

and subterfuge together as a single representational circuit – both anticipates and structures

the revelation endemic to *racial* passing as it will function in the rest of the novel. For

Clotel's "passing" (the racial sense of the word introduced into the novel, in the passage I

just quoted, by William who, at least in this respect, is a surrogate for the William authoring

the book, and who actually *does* structure its verbal economy) is like the pig which serves as

the unnamed Virginia slave's alibi as he walks unmolested to Canada. By this I mean that

racial passing in the novel it is both a revelation and a concealment, and that it, importantly,

has this in common both with all forms of verbal inscription (hence the *pass* slaves must

ordinarily carry to travel) and with paper money (hence the sale of the pig upon arrival in the

north).[71] Once we begin to see Clotel's passing as framed by this dialectic of concealment

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[71] Admittedly, Brown doesn't actually say for what the slave exchanges the pig, but by passing into the state of Ohio he is passing, at least nominally, into something like the American west. The slave is in fact not much further east than the Monroe in which Brown worked as a barber and banker. Again, Ohio was a state particularly notorious for its wildcat banks. It would have suggested images of western-style funny money, and was so well-known for it that such money even today gives us the "buck." Thus "Ohio" might have served Brown's readers as a metonym for spurious paper money much as, say, in the presidential election of 2004, "Massachusetts" served in Republican rhetoric as a metonym for gay marriage and high taxes. The reader might well assume, therefore, that that pig was exchanged for paper money simply because the exchange took place in Ohio, and that this paper money was part of the unregulated banking with which Brown has already identified both himself and the western states.

and revelation – a dialectic which deconstruction has made our discipline accustomed to regarding as writing's defining property – nearly all the seemingly-unrelated images that circulate in the chapter fall into coherent alignment. The scarf Clotel wears in her travels both hides her face and performs her (fraudulent) identity as an invalid. The close crop of her hair both reveals her head, neck, and shoulders and, by breaking with Americans' nineteenth-century norms of gender performance, conceals her femininity, allowing her, with the help of the scarf, to pass for a man. Even the whiteness of her skin might be said to conceal her legal status as black, just as it reveals (as Brown would put it, serves as "the best evidence of") the debauched miscegenation that Brown identifies as slavery's capital moral transgression in the novel's first paragraph.

Clotel thus travels disguised as a white youth too sick to speak in anything but a hoarse whisper and too contagious (or maybe too worn by illness) to uncover "his" face. Brown, as narrator, begins referring to Clotel as a man, to use the name under which she travels as her actual name, and to refer to William as her servant.[72] Brown names the disguised Clotel *Mr. Johnson*, an innocuous enough name in any case, and one made

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[72] Again, the issue of Brown's use of names is worthy of consideration in itself, but unfortunately exceeds the scope of this chapter. It's worth noting that in the course of Brown's own history of name changes, though, the power to name is implicitly linked both with racial power and with literary authority. When Brown, in the *Narrative*, Brown ponders what last name he should take while free, he suggests that he would sooner take the name Friday (Brown already imagining himself as the seminal figure in a novelistic tradition – a kind of Defoe of color) than the name of any of his owners, or of the white man who biologically beget him (98). Then there is the Wells Brown incident, in which the permission to name the newly free man is given over to his benefactor as a show of deference and trust. And look how eagerly Brown, in the "Memoir" begins referring to himself as *Mr. Brown*. All of this helps to substantiate what other critics have rightly identified as the privileging in Brown of the performative, the shifting identity, the self that is made and remade by social interactions. Recall that, while he was a barber/banker in Monroe, Brown ironically pronounced himself the "Emperor" of cutting hair – a move which was meant to suggest his New York origins (though he was in fact from the state, not the city, as he wanted people to think) – and it's hard not to think that this echoes in some ways Crusoe's dominion over his island, his reinvention of himself as monarch of what, had the name not already have been taken, he might well have called "New England."

particularly so by the fact that it is probably the one Ellen Craft actually traveled under in making her daring escape with her husband.[73]

So common a surname is Johnson, in fact, that Clotel's persona isn't even the first Mr. Johnson we've met! The *first* Mr. Johnson is, of course, the presumably white steamboat passenger who wins Jerry from Mr. Smith in a card game. Indeed, retrospectively, we have just been invited to suspect the *original* Mr. Johnson of racial passing, even though nothing about his appearance in the novel's second chapter suggests that he is anything but white. Accordingly, Clotel boards a steamer as Mr. Johnson, pretending to be white, and pretending to own as a slave and personal servant William, her partner in flight. The reader only knows that "Mr. Johnson" is not who he claims to be because we know from earlier chapters that he is, in fact, Clotel. This may seem obvious, but were this Mr. Johnson, like the earlier one, among the characters who appear in *Clotel* for but one paragraph, the reader may be none the wiser.

The first Mr. Johnson, who appears only in that second chapter at the card game, has his credit secured by his ownership of Jerry, whom he has just won. But his ownership of Jerry is secured by his whiteness. By what is his whiteness secured? His appearance? The prior knowledge of the other passengers on the steam boat, which might serve to credit his status as a white man the same way our readerly knowledge of Clotel serves to discredit hers? We're not told that any of the boat's passengers have ever met Johnson before. The novel has suddenly confirmed for us that not all white men named Mr. Johnson who travel on

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[73] William Craft gives his wife's false name as William Johnson in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom.* Brown was familiar with the Crafts' lecture-circuit speech, but it's not clear whether the name is the one they actually used or if, in the published version of his story, William Craft combined a surname Brown invented for *Clotel* and his own (and Brown's) forename. The point here is that, even if Brown was simply using for Clotel's escape the name under which Ellen Craft actually traveled, he refers to her as "Mr. Johnson," a name which he had already used for an invented character earlier in the novel.

steam ships with their slaves are white, or male, or named Mr. Johnson, or actually own any slaves.

If we as readers turn back to chapter two at this point, we will be greeted with an illustration not of Pompey or Walker (who dominate most of that chapter) but of the scene that this nineteenth chapter has just cued us to remember: the poker game. The white men in the picture are not identified, but Jerry has mounted the table from the left side, suggesting that when he did so he belonged to the man on the left – logically this is Smith, who has risen to his feet in astonished disappointment. On the right Johnson reclines, smugly gesturing toward his winning hand as it lay on the table. Mr. Johnson's hair here, dark and considerably more frizzy than even Jerry's, his exaggerated forehead and jaw line (his chin is as dark as Smith's, even though Smith appears to have a chin strap and Johnson appears to be clean-shaven), his imposing physical size (he is nearly the size of Mr. Smith's full standing height while slouching in his chair, even though their feet, in relation to the table leg, show them to be at equal distance from the viewer), the vague sensuality of his unbuttoned waistcoat, and the phallic lump, slightly lower than it should be but all the more inexplicable for that, in his pants, all recall the physicality nineteenth-century Americans would have more readily attached to black than to white people. Indeed, with the exception of Mr. Smith, the whitest people in the illustration (both least shaded and most securely racially white) seem not to have any bodies at all. None is visible below the waist (the woman's butt at the extreme right of the frame dissolves into the shadows around her and out of the field of vision). Nathaniel Hawthorne (or his lost twin) sits with typical formality (his tie is still on) playing cards with a woman whom we barely see at all. A hooded figure

with back to the viewer on the left of the illustration is darkly colored, but his or her body is rendered completely invisible to all except the woman earnestly listening at the extreme left.

I'm not arguing that the illustration, on its own, indicts Mr. Johnson's whiteness and implicates him in any kind of masquerade. He is merely the most "black" looking of any "white" person in the picture. It is only after we learn that Mr. Johnson is a name which, in this book, is also assumed by a slave passing for white, and learn as well that this passing furthermore involves "passage" on a ship (which returns us to the world of river steamers), that these details in any way compromise the first Mr. Johnson's whiteness. Nor does it even matter if we decide that the first Mr. Johnson must be passing. It *doesn't* matter, and that's precisely Brown's point; the successful passing of one slave destabilizes all "legitimate" whiteness. If we can no longer take for granted the whiteness of a person *so* secure in that whiteness that he can literally stage his legal right to own black people as part of a card game, then whiteness itself is compromised, and no one's whiteness is worth its face value. Racial whiteness's market value has been diminished by the appearance of successful counterfeits, and, as the case of Salome shows us, no longer even safeguards a value in excess of the body's use value. Whiteness has ceased to be a protection against the forced expropriation of the body's capacity to labor just as the inscription of the words "One Hundred Dollars," if it is not credited, is no protection against a piece of paper being burnt for warmth.

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Brown's adaptation of William and Ellen Craft's escape, rich though it is, actually omits one of the more strikingly clever features of the plan the Crafts executed in December 1848.

Though the context of the novel as a whole makes it unavailable to Brown (for Clotel, as a daughter of Thomas Jefferson, is supposed to have been educated as a lady), among the key reasons Ellen Craft assumed not only the appearance of a white youth but that of an *invalid* in particular was her inability to read or write. The young man's illness was invented to explain not just his androgynous whisper and his refusal to take the scarf from his face, but also his need to keep his right arm in a sling, and thus gave the illiterate Ellen Craft a plausible alibi for Mr. Johnson's inability, as a southerner of rank, to write, or even to sign his name. William and Ellen Craft were able to stay at hotels (she in the guest rooms) because her inability to sign a guest register was explained by the sling, which simultaneously concealed her real illiteracy and revealed her counterfeit disability. No one expected that his black servant William would be able to sign on Mr. Johnson's behalf, and as he had no other traveling companions he aroused no suspicion in asking that hotel clerks or other guests sign the register for him. By understanding and cleverly manipulating the textuality of her own body, Ellen Craft was able both to get white men to serve her (at least as her proxy) and to exercise indirect control over written representations to which she had no direct access (recall Brown's own experience when, still an illiterate slave, he served in Lovejoy's printing house). The disguise – particularly those elements of it bound to illness and physical ability – effectively substitutes her very physical presence as Mr. Johnson for the orthographic code she is unable to interpret or inscribe on his behalf; in this the bearers of the white manhood Craft impersonates thus become dupes willing to do *her* bidding.

William and Clotel part ways once the ship reaches Cincinnati, and the following chapter concerns her progress toward Washington, D.C. Before her story resumes, though, there is a remarkable interlude which focuses on William's journey to Canada. William tries

to buy a railway ticket north to the lake shore, but is told by the attendant that he will be required to ride in the baggage car.

> "Why?" asked the astonished negro. "We don't send a Jim Crow carriage but once a day, and that went this morning.' The 'Jim Crow' carriage is the one in which the blacks have to ride. Slavery is a school in which its victims learn much shrewdness, and William had been an apt scholar. Without asking any more questions, the negro took his seat in one of the first-class carriages. (171)

There's something perfunctory about this whole passage; it is stuffed with what need not be said or has already been written. Brown is explaining the meaning of "Jim Crow" to people who, even if they don't already know the phrase, could easily infer from context what it means here. In addition to providing an unnecessary gloss, Brown redeploys a sentiment he has presented just three chapters earlier in the novel, when abolitionist Georgiana defends to her fiancé the duplicitous behavior of a house servant whom she has just inherited from her father: "Our system of slavery is one of deception; and Sam, you see, has only been a good scholar" (155). The paraphrase of a remark still fresh in the reader's mind works in consort with the designation of William (twice in four sentences) as "the negro" to reinforce our sense that, like trains, and for that matter the cultural impact of the railway more generally (these are always a favorite image among nineteenth-century Americans of industrialism's catastrophe) people, and perhaps especially enslaved people, have been forced to become more interchangeable than they have a right to wish.[74]

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[74] Railways appear as menaces throughout much of Thoreau's *Walden*, and in Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad" seem to stand (like taxi cabs and ragtime in Eliot's *The Waste Land*) for that within modernity which will disallows epic grandeur, even if not in itself threatening. I'm thinking more generally of the way in which railroads were involved in the invention of standard time. *Clotel* was written after standard time was adopted in Britain, but a few decades before its adoption in the US. In both cases the argument for the adoption of standard time appears to have been – and was seen at the time as being – centered upon railroad schedules.

But the fact that the interchangeability of subjectivities formed under slavery – their mutual reducibility to "the negro" as a type – here involves the substitution for Sam of *William* (who, again not incidentally, shares the author's name) troubles the very project of Brown's writing. If, even after his escape into Ohio, this "William" remains so fully subjugated to slavery's hegemony that his experience can literally be narrated with material borrowed from a chapter about the still-enslaved Sam, to what extent can the *authorial* William – Brown himself – possess realistic hopes of unmaking his oppression through writing? Here Brown is borrowing his own words from one of *Clotel's* earlier chapters rather than the words of Lydia Maria Child or J. Passamore Edwards, but his interrogation of originality is, if anything, only more penetrating. Though in the ostensibly free North, William finds that less has changed than might be expected. He is still a self shaped by the trauma of slavery, and his movement through the world is still compromised by caprices of a racist nation. Freedom, for the fugitive slave, is not the same as slavery, but in no sense is it an original relation to the world. It is merely slavery's content paraphrased, so long as America remains one nation and the South remains wedded to slavery.

It is a rare moment of self-doubt for Brown, as if he is suddenly chilled by an inner dread that, even in the midst of unprecedented accomplishment (that of being the first black American to author a novel), he may ultimately still be defined by his experience of enslavement. Narrating the scene of a *William* still dogged by racism and largely confined, for better or worse, to the lessons slavery has taught him, Brown's own powers of invention momentarily falter, and his *novel* begins to present material that, within its pages, is not *new*.[75]

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[75] The point here is that Brown is a pioneer in being the first African American to write a novel, and thus to prove (to racist doubters) that black people are capable of invention, but also that *all* novels, as the genre's

It's partly (though strangely) for this reason that the characterization of William becomes quite inconsistent at this point. As brash, Douglass-esque resister, too proud to challenge racism covertly, William simply sits down in a whites-only car as if he belonged there. In the very next sentence, though:

> He was soon seen and ordered out. Afraid to remain in the town longer, he resolved to go by that train; and consequently seated himself on a goods' box in the luggage-van. (171)

As is so often the case in Brown's work, what to some readers might at first seem to be cowardice turns out to be a kind of pragmatic cleverness by which the presence of heroic transgression is gladly sacrificed to flexible achievement of desired ends.

> The train started at its proper time, and all went on well. Just before arriving at the end of the journey, the conductor called on William for his ticket. "I have none," was the reply. "Well, then, you can pay your fare to me," said the officer. "How much is it?" asked the black man. "Two dollars." "What do you charge those in the passenger-carriage?" "Two dollars." "And do you charge me the same as you do those who ride in the best carriages?" asked the negro. "Yes," was the answer. "I shan't pay it," returned the man. "You black scamp, do you think you can ride on this road without paying your fare?" "No, I don't want to ride for nothing; I only want to pay what's right." "Well, launch out two dollars, and that's right." "No, I shan't; I will pay what I ought, and won't pay any more." "Come, come, nigger, your fare and be done with it," said the conductor, in a manner that is never used except by Americans to blacks. "I won't pay you two dollars, and that enough," said William. "Well, as you have come all the way in the luggage-

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name suggests, do something unprecedented, in that, by definition, a novel tells a story that is not borrowed from an earlier source. (This is, after all, what initially differentiated the novel from, say, the epic, or the nonfiction prose account. But it's worth noting that, before the novel, most imaginative writing of even the highest artistry [say, the plays of Shakespeare] justified itself by having *some* basis in either history proper or already existing stories.) The task Brown has chosen is one in which he must *invent* an authorial subjectivity (the black novelist) which is itself defined by the capacity to *invent* – to invent stories and characters. As the fear grips him, in this moment, he worries that this subjectivity may yet be defined by its anonymous blackness or its prior enslavement, and verbal invention gives way to verbal repurposing. This is why Brown's near-verbatim quotation of himself is important, and why it happens here, as "William" begins to see that slavery cannot so easily be left behind, that the new may yet be the old, and that, if this is so, the creation of *novel* scenarios may be illusory, or merely cosmetic. Again, the unusual amount of textual borrowing in which Brown engages throughout *Clotel* is mean both to keep the question of artistic originality (with its obvious stakes both for any novel and for the first black-authored novel in particular) in view for the reader *and* to keep Brown's engagement with that question ever on dialectical footing.

van, pay me a dollar and a half and you may go." "I shan't do any such thing." "Don't you mean to pay for riding?" "Yes, but I won't pay a dollar and a half for riding up here in the freight-van. If you had let me come in the carriage where others ride, I would have paid you two dollars." "Where were you raised? You seem to think yourself as good as white folks." "I want nothing more than my rights." "Well, give me a dollar, and I will let you off." "No, sir, I shan't do it." "What do you mean to do then—don't you wish to pay anything?" "Yes, sir, I want to pay you the full price." "What do you mean by full price?" "What do you charge per hundred-weight for goods?" inquired the negro with a degree of gravity that would have astonished Diogenes himself. "A quarter of a dollar per hundred," answered the conductor. "I weigh just one hundred and fifty pounds," returned William, "and will pay you three-eighths of a dollar." "Do you expect that you will pay only thirty-seven cents for your ride?" "This, sir, is your own price. I came in a luggage-van, and I'll pay for luggage." After a vain effort to get the negro to pay more, the conductor took the thirty-seven cents, and noted in his cash-book, "Received for one hundred and fifty pounds of luggage, thirty-seven cents." This, reader, is no fiction; it actually occurred in the railway above described. (171-172)

I reproduce the passage at length and in full not because the content somehow

resists summary but because the rate at which the content is relayed constitutes a rhetorically

potent feature of its form. What we read here is, of course, the auction scene from the

novel's first chapter played in reverse. To the extent that the stakes are smaller here, though

still congruent with the auction that opens the novel, the one hundred and fifty pounds

which William weighs is a diminutive one tenth (just drop a zero) of the fifteen hundred

dollars for which we saw Clotel "struck." And what was played as tragedy in the opening of

the novel appears here as a farce in which the auctioneer (here the conductor) is forced to

accept progressively *lower* bids on a slave who seeks to deploy his very status as a commodity

in order to get a bargain on *himself.* The insane figure "three-eighths of a dollar" doesn't even

exist in any practical sense. The thirty-six and one half cents with which it is equal need to be

rounded up to thirty-seven (with alarming and machine-like efficiency by the conductor –

what is he, a robot?) before it can even constitute an exchangeable amount of money.[76] In this respect the passage recalls the absurdity of Mr. Johnson I's "you bet the whole of the boy, do you?" to Smith at their poker game. Where Johnson and Smith seem almost to think that Jerry's body might be divided into smaller denominations in order to accommodate the sums they wish to wager, William here insists that the sum given him (one quarter dollar per hundred pounds of freight) be scaled to accommodate the particularity of his body. The demands of his body's properties will be met by the terms of exchange, not vice-versa. Once again, the insistence by white society that black people may be treated as things, may be reduced to their mere physicality as objects, that they may be owned as property, is redeployed in such a way that it does not consolidate but rather disassembles the claims of slave-owning culture. By insisting on being treated, at least in a strategically limited way, as a thing rather than as a human being, William is able to get to Canada and freedom both more cheaply and more safely (risk of discovery, it stands to reason, must be less in the baggage car than in the passenger carriages themselves) than he otherwise would.

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The episode of the baggage car is emblematic of Brown's whole project in *Clotel*. For one thing, thematic echoes like this (here, again, he is playing off of reverberations that come specifically from the auction in the first chapter) help to unify the book's sometimes centrifugal narrative energies. Those who complain about the novel's lack of focus and its sterile narrative branches have, I'd argue, tended to overlook the extent to which the two major lines in which *Clotel* works – the titular tale of the "president's daughter(s)" and the

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[76] There were, in fact, half-cent coins circulating in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, but the inconvenience of accounting for halves of a cent seems to have outweighed any added profit or savings gained in almost every kind of transaction. The conductor in the passage, at any rate, speaks as if the division of a cent into halves is not standard practice even for transactions of even less than half a dollar.

episodic tangents which deal with characters like Jerry, Pompey, Sam, and here William –

cooperate in a recognizable structural design. I point this out not because *Clotel* must still

somehow satisfy New Critical expectations of literary quality in order to deserve serious

critical attention, but rather because the fact that it *does* satisfy such expectations must

register with us if we are to make sense out of what Brown uses the book to accomplish.

The dialectic of structural chaos and structural unity in *Clotel*, like the aesthetic ambiguity in

The Scarlet Letter, is not what makes the novels worth talking about as literature, but both

books *are* worth talking about, and this dialectic must be part of what we say when we

discuss them. The fact that *Clotel* achieves hard-won structural synthesis out of its

antiphonal, almost fugue-like narrative order helps us to see how Brown, like Hawthorne,

sought to participate in a serious conversation about the idea of literary achievement as it

came into being with Romanticism, an idea which, though it would only become fully

articulated with the New Criticism, was already in a nascent state during the waning years of

the eighteenth century.

This is why I point out that the two narrative strains in *Clotel* are intertwined by more

than a series of (quite plausibly crucial) binary oppositions, though to be clear, such a series

would arguably include, for the titular strain and the episodic strain respectively: *female/male,*

tragic/comic, sentimental/cynical, light-skinned/dark-skinned, coherent/incoherent, and *generative* (I mean

this both literally in that the characters have kids and figuratively in that their choices in one

chapter have consequences in later chapters)/*sterile* (ditto). The lack of balance in the

episodic strain (represented by the latter term in each pair) must be regarded as part of a

larger structural unity in the novel, partly just because that strain's incoherence is itself so

carefully balanced against the well-ordered politeness of the "Clotel" strain (represented by

the *first* term in each pair). Like Milton's Chaos, the "male" strain of *Clotel's* plot is the walled-off place over which, a well-ordered universe has decreed, anarchy shall be allowed to have its way. The fact that each of these twin narrative impulses is given dominion over roughly half the novel is part of the proof that both obey the will of a larger design.

But my local point right now is that *Clotel's* structural unity is reinforced by devices like the repetition of key narrative shapes at key moments – repetition that cuts across the dialectical balance between the two antithetical strains and gestures toward these strains' synthetic integration. The bidding on Clotel is the thing that happens in the novel just before she is claimed, for the first time, as a slave in the strict sense. The exchange (in the sense both of *conversation* and of *transaction*, like the auction) between William and the conductor takes place as soon as Clotel has escaped the South, and serves as a coda to the enslavement that began with that auction.

What happens next serves to secure the tragic ending we expect, for when William heads north to Canada his freedom takes him out of the novel, which will continue to follow Clotel as she heads back across the Mason-Dixon line in a disastrous attempt to save her daughter from being sold south. After we leave William, this chapter ("Escape of Clotel") continues with a few more anecdotes which report ostensibly real examples of northern racism. The last of these concerns a church in New York which allowed blacks to attend services but, like the train in whose baggage car William travels, designated a separate and inhospitable place for them to sit:

> It was a dark, dismal looking place in one corner of the gallery, grated in front like a hen-coop, with a black border around it. It had two doors; over one was B. M. – black men; over the other B. W. – black women. (175)

These are the last words in the chapter. Brown doesn't tell us if the whites were also

separated by sex,[77] but the point here is more about the ways in which racism functions not

just by separating black people from white people but by separating black men from black

women. The most sinister face of such separation is always, of course, the dissolution of

marriages and families by the slave trade – something Brown discusses at length in the

novel's first chapter. But this is also a turning point in the novel. This nineteenth chapter has

been largely about the ways in which black men and black women working together can

achieve real victories against their enslavers. Clotel's androgyny and cross-dressing literalize

this cooperation to an extent, in that her capacity to enact both black and white, both male

and female social presences, is the key to her successful escape. Rigid insistence on the

differentness – on the spatial separateness – of black and white people and men and women

from one another is here both symptomatic of the cultural disease of slavery and part of the

means by which that disease prevents itself from being cured. William and Clotel leave this

chapter by these separate doors, he on his way to another country and she on her way to

another world.

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When the narrative returns to Clotel and her journey to Richmond, we find her

traveling by stage-coach from Cincinnati through what is today West Virginia, still in her Mr.

Johnson disguise. The chapter is concerned largely with the stories exchanged by those who

ride in the coach with her, and seems intended primarily as a lampoon of white America for

Brown's British audience. The Americans here are presented as a set of stock characters who

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[77] We should also note that Brown's attitudes toward mixed-gender social spaces are not always so liberal. Recall that, with some disapproval, he observes that both men and women drink, smoke, and gamble in the saloons on river boats.

– though not particularly foolish or ugly – are nonetheless never more than picturesque. It seems to satisfy, like a great deal of British antislavery activity focused on the United States, two less-than-perfectly-aligned desires on the part of the British readers: a wish for self-congratulatory cultural superiority and a genuine curiosity about Americans. In this the episode owes something to the structure of feeling mobilized (this time for white Americans about black ones) by the minstrel show, though Brown's actual template seems to come as much from, say, the Leonora episode in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (chapters 4 and 6 of Book II) than from the minstrel stage. Indeed, the air of gentle satire, in which all are mocked, no one is mocked with any real malice, and the only thing approaching real disapproval is reserved or extreme views or inflexible dogmas, smacks of Fielding's conservatism particularly, and more broadly eighteenth-century British fiction (of which Brown was an avid reader) in general.

The remarkable quality of the chapter is that it is almost entirely about regional political differences among Americans, and yet it makes no mention of slavery or abolitionism (excepting one moment in which a northerner offhandedly refers to the south as "the slave states" to make a point which is not in itself about slavery). Eight, and later nine people are aboard the coach. One man, whom Brown identifies by his speech and dress as a New England clergyman (we later learn that he is from Connecticut) argues eloquently (though at times with comically sermonic airs, Fielding's Parson Adams is a clear antitype here) with a Southerner wearing a white hat, whose face is tanned and whose speech, Brown tells us, mark him as poorly educated. The argument concerns temperance rather than slavery, and later turns to, of all things, bull fighting on the Sabbath (it's not clear if the objection is that such fighting occurs at all or that it occurs on the Sabbath).

At one point in the conversation the coach stops to take in a ninth passenger, a

farmer. The other eight, to be clear, are: Clotel as Mr. Johnson, the southerner, the northern

preacher, an elderly man traveling with two young women, evidently his daughters, and "the

other two, who might pass for ordinary American gentlemen" (186). This last designation is

a particularly startling one since, though Clotel's disguise is described as having given her

"the appearance of an Italian or Spanish gentleman" (186), and thus, presumably, not that of

an "ordinary American" one, she *does* seem to be attempting to "pass for [an] ordinary

American gentlem[a]n" as the name "Johnson" would suggest.[78] These two men are given no

further attention, but the weirdly dubious description of them in the enumeration of the

coach's passengers, in light of the fact that Clotel herself actually *is* passing as a gentleman,

reminds us of the ways in which the success of one disguise, of one act of racial or sexual

passing, serves to undermine the authority of all other performances of race or gender. If I

am understood to be saying nothing else about *Clotel*, let it be that this basic fact of race –

that, because of the rape of black women and the presence of large numbers of light-skinned

slaves, the relationships among color, race, and servitude have become unstable – allows

Brown to see before virtually anyone else that race functions not as a fact of the body but as

a text, and that this text has more in common with paper money than with any other cultural

artifact.

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[78] Obviously this connotation depends on a shared assumption that "ordinary Americans" have a particular ethnic background, but the assumption that "ordinary Americans" tend to have surnames like "Johnson" is Brown's, not my own. He's used the name twice, and Clotel (or Ellen Craft) has chosen it as part of a disguise which is mean to call as little attention to itself as possible. Surnames ending in –*son* are common to people of Saxon or Scandinavian heritage, as this is how patronymics functioned in early Anglo-Saxon society. According to Melvin Bragg, such names are even today more common in the east of Britain than in the west of it because of medieval contact with Scandinavia. The given name *John* is of course an Anglicized form of the French *Jean*, among the most common of given names in the Anglophone world since the Battle of Hastings. *Johnson* thus constitutes its "ordinary Americanness" as a compound of the two most important colonial invasions of southern Brittan.

The chapter ends with an odd turn in its comedy. The man with the two daughters, as he and they get off the coach at Lynchburgh [*sic*], is prompted by the older of the two girls to invite "Mr. Johnson" to stay the week at their estate. All three are disappointed when Clotel must refuse the invitation. In practical terms, she is refusing because she has important (and secret) work to do in Richmond, though no doubt to some extent she really would fear discovery of her race, gender, or both. The gender-play in the passage is an old joke – the ostensibly straight person more attracted to someone of his or her own gender in drag than to an "authentic" person of the opposite. The joke remains entertaining in spite of its familiarity because people like it, balancing so adroitly as it does a need to fantasize about homosexual desire with a (perceived) need to disidentify with actual homosexual sex. Phebe's love for Ganymede (really Rosalind) in *As You Like It* is an old instance, and Osgood's love for Daphne (really Jerry) in *Some Like It Hot* is a more recent one.[79] The joke's enduring power is due in part no doubt to its incredible capacity to suggest for the audience a concrete fantasy of same-sex desire fulfilled (what would happen if Osgood really *did* get Daphne in bed?!?!) while at the same time containing that desire within acceptable social limits. Even the famous ending to *Some Like It Hot* manages to contain most of the forces it lets loose, as, presumably, no matter how open-minded Osgood has decided to be, Jerry, having finally taken off his wig, is not going to agree to go to bed with him. (Although anybody who wants to make a gay-affirmative sequel to *Some Like It Hot*, in which Osgood and Jerry sail around the world together as an official couple, would have my blessing.)

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[79] I also see a little of this in the weird exchange of kisses in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain "wins" kisses from the seductress which he must then "give" to the host, but the seductress seems always to be asking for more than a kiss, and as the game seems to escalate, the reader inevitably begins to wonder if or how Gawain would "give" to the host sexual favors he happened to "win," particularly if these favors were of a sort two men, anatomically, would have trouble exchanging.

What happens in *Clotel* is that an act of racial and sexual passing has suddenly privileged its sexual component over its racial one, and in doing so has introduced into the scene a new (new for this novel, but as I already pointed out, not new for the world in general) dynamic of same-sex desire. It is an instance of cultural foreshadowing. For as race's importance as a site of cultural meaning doesn't diminish in the least, its connection to the logic of interpretation and transmission, which has always been fraught with multiple possibilities of misreading – begins more and more as the nineteenth century progresses to be aided – to *require* the aid of – illicit sexuality in order to matter. Why does the Phebe-Ganymede joke appear in this chapter, near the end of a novel that has, up until now, been interested in sexuality only insofar as it also constituted a means of reproduction?[80] Because, as the United States rounds the bend of the nineteenth century and begins to move toward the twentieth, that's increasingly what the writing on the body means.

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[80] I mean that *Clotel's* interest in sexuality, such as it is, has only really extended to questions of racial mixing or, occasionally, monogamy and fidelity. Miscegenation, which is the issue around which *Clotel* is most willing to politicize sex, is only an issue when sex between people of different races is also between people of opposite sexes.

Coda: Since in a Net I Seek to Hold the Wind

When Hawthorne had the opportunity to publish a second edition of *The Scarlet Letter* just

two weeks after the first, he was counseled by reviewers with Whig sympathies to republish

the romance on its own, without "The Custom-House." Response to the novel in the press

had been overwhelmingly positive, but politically inclined reviewers tended to single-out

"The Custom-House" for comment – Democrats claiming to like the piece even more than

they did the novel itself, and Whigs lamenting the fact that Hawthorne would mar so

beautiful a story with what was obviously the public nursing of a petty partisan grudge.

Hawthorne's preface to this second edition runs just seven sentences, the first six in one

long paragraph which euphemistically gives the reception history I have just summarized.

The preface's final, one-sentence paragraph reads thus:

> The author is constrained, therefore, to republish his introductory sketch without the
> change of a word.

Defiantly refusing to change, is Hawthorne lashing out against those who would read politics into his art, or at those whom he blames for his dismissal? Maybe he's lashing out, as he does in the opening of the novel itself, against all who maintain hope that, where there is some great flaw in our world, we should be willing to risk reaching out and effecting some change to correct it.

The preface, dated March 30, has been attached to editions of *The Scarlet Letter* ever since. It's the reason that third and subsequent editions of the novel are sometimes miscataloged by libraries as second editions. Because two-thirds of the forms from which the first edition of *The Scarlet Letter* had been printed had, by late March, already been reused by Metcalf and Company for other projects (including, apparently, all the forms for "The Custom-House") a few printer's errors slipped into the introductory sketch. But even if we did not know (as we do) that these variants were the fault of the typesetter rather than the author, Hawthorne's defiance in the preface would suggest that he gave no thought at all to "improving" the novel before it went to press again. He steadfastly refuses to reach back into his book and try to make it better, or even to make it less personally hurtful to those who found "The Custom-House" insulting and unwarranted. We must tolerate, the second edition's preface suggests (nay *insists*), even what causes great pain, since to do otherwise would be to embrace a dangerous belief in the perfectibility of an irredeemably fallen humanity.

It's sometimes difficult to tell, looking back to the earliest of the figures with whom my argument is directly concerned, exactly when Benjamin Franklin is being ironic and when he's not, but he certainly (and quite famously) *says* that perfectibility shouldn't be all that hard to achieve. For Franklin humanity's fallenness is largely the result of some cosmic

misunderstanding, the introduction of needless complexity and overthinking into an existence which is really a simple matter of the judicious application of sound and straightforward principles. Franklin was also, I hasten to point out, an obsessive rewriter. Indeed, teaching himself the craft of prose by paraphrasing *The Spectator*, it's almost as if he learned to revise before he learned to compose anew, learned to *re*write before he learned to *write*!

William Wells Brown, for his part, published *Clotel* four times, and, though I have only treated the first edition in this dissertation, all four editions have been studied extensively by critics, and possess significant differences from one another. Sometimes, though the novel remains named *Clotel*, this name is born not by the character called Clotel in the first edition but by that character's daughter (whom our Clotel dies trying to rescue) – the daughter who, in the first edition, is called Mary, and who, like Hawthorne's Pearl, eventually finds marriage and happiness in Europe. Sometimes the title *Clotel* is spelled *Clotelle*. In the third edition, which was serialized in 1860, the name Clotel is done away with entirely, and the tale is called *Miralda; or, The Beautiful Quadroon*. In *Miralda*, Thomas Jefferson's place is occupied by a fictional U.S. Senator. In no edition other than the first does Brown's introductory "Memoir" appear, though he would continue to redeploy the memoir's content, just as he redeployed the novel's, in the new autobiographies he continued to publish throughout his life. The first book Brown published after *Clotel's* first edition of 1853 was *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad*, a revised and expanded reworking of 1852's *Three Years in Europe* meant specifically for the American market. Like Franklin, then, Brown was a professional rewriter as much as a professional writer, and his revisions and reorderings took place in print and in public. He

authored more distinct iterations of his autobiography *alone* than Nathaniel Hawthorne authored books of *any* kind.

Brown has this quality in common not just with Franklin, the great printer-autobiographer and crafter of aphorism of the American *eighteenth* century, but also with the great printer-poet of the American *nineteenth* century, Walt Whitman. And we can see in Brown's and Whitman's shared compulsions to revisit their past works (and, in Brown's case, to absorb and reimagine the past works of others, like Child and Edwards) something akin to Franklin's figuring of his life's missteps as "errata" – printer's errors which, in subsequent editions, will be amended. Franklin, of course, never published his own autobiography – it was something he never finished and which he worked on, periodically, for decades. In *not* publishing it Franklin does something akin to what Brown does in continually *re*publishing his – he denies his life story a single, official form.

Franklin, Whitman, and Brown were all, likewise, involved in printing – actual presswork – while Hawthorne, in spite of his micromanagement of certain aspects of mise-en-page, seems to have had little interest in the craft. All four men worked for perodicals (as did Frederick Douglass), but Hawthorne, unlike the others, did so for only six months – finding the work ill-suited to his temperament. Franklin and Brown had both worked specifically in printing money, Franklin as printer and Brown as banker. All but Hawthorne were politically liberal (though Brown arguably has a conservative streak). All but Hawthorne opposed slavery to one extent or another. Whitman and Brown share a remarkable sense of the book as a kind of organic growth – a thing that can absorb other texts, grow fatter or leaner by the years, and continually renegotiate its relationships to the world through which it circulates and the embodied readers it encounters. For different reasons, both Whitman

and Brown found it useful to imagine the pages of books as being like the material, visual, and tactile presence of a human beings.

These men tend to regard the text as a always open to future transformation, an imperfect but pragmatically publishable instance of a thing that grows and changes and never pretends not to be subject to future transformations (or, we might say, *amendment*). Against all this we have Hawthorne, who refused to step back into his novel, who seems to have regarded such an ingress not as something that keeps a book alive but as something that kills it, something which violates the sanctity of its magic. Hawthorne was not a particular fan of slavery, but he regarded the antislavery activism of people like Garrison, Douglass, and Brown to be more dangerous than slavery itself. *Don't try to make it better*, Hawthorne says to us, *you'll only end up making it worse.* To attempt to end cruelty by abolishing slavery would be, for Hawthorne, like attempting to end death by abolishing graveyards, or crime by abolishing prisons; it would be to act not just out of hubris but out of a confusion of cause and effect.

My argument has been, essentially, that there is always a politics to the way that authors think about how reading works, how writing engages with reading, and how printing mediates this engagement. This politics is probably activated wherever words are printed and read, and in that sense it is not specific to the American nineteenth century but to modernity in the broadest sense, even if in looking at the form this politics assumed in, say, the Renaissance, we would struggle to recognize the youthful image of whatever politics attends today's digital revolution. Certainly, though, the politics I discuss in this project (in which the existence of books as mass produced commodities that are also ambitious works of high art intersects with seemingly unrelated scopophilic and physiognomic desires) is fully formed by the time Blake begins printing his illuminated poetry in the 1790s. And when we discuss the

moral, political, environmental, and economic consequences of the transition from a society

of books to a society of digital information, we enter a discursive field on which we can see

Blake has already left his footprints. What we are saying, or what these footprints should

allow us to say, I'm not sure. But I am sure that it is as much about our ideas about the body

and the political trajectories along which these ideas are situated as it is about the status of

books or words themselves.

So the relationship with which I've been concerned throughout this project, in spite

of the fact that my focus has been more or less exclusively on the years between 1845 and

1855, has existed since printing with movable type first became less expensive than funding a

monastic scriptorium, and it continues to exist today. My focus on mid-nineteenth-century

American should be regarded, then, as indicative as a suggestion not that this relationship

only existed during these years but that something peculiar happens to it in the social context

more-or-less particular to those years. What happens is the relationship's political

unconscious – in which books and bodies stand for one another – briefly threatens to

become derepressed. The threat of this derepression emerges because the way people look at

books begins to resemble more than it usually does the way people look at each other. It is

this element of the zeitgeist to which Hawthorne, though he projects it onto an earlier

moment, lays hold in *The Scarlet Letter*. What Hawthorne realizes is that: 1) in a nation

increasingly at war with itself over slavery, race briefly becomes the most important

discourse of both individual identity and social organization; and 2) in an industrial and

market economy (with, of course, its attendant geographic and social displacements) – one

which, in an eighteenth century that antebellum grandparents can still remember, had seen

itself as essentially an agrarian one – writing assumes unprecedented importance as the

primary means by which people use language to communicate and affiliate; under such circumstances, 3) the intrinsic similarities of the racial body and the written text enter into a reciprocity of positive feedback. An echo chamber. A dialectic of mutual amplification. A hall of mirrors.

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In discussing his transformation from a fugitive-slave autobiographer to the first African American novelist, Paul Gilmore observes that "Brown's descriptions of his acquisition of literacy and his success as a barber and banker establish his central strategy for dealing with images of blackness and slavery in [*Clotel*]" (43). I've discussed at length the role of Brown's banking and his cutting of hair play in *Clotel's* later engagement with race, and I've also discussed Brown's complicated relationship to reading and writing throughout his oeuvre. For the full length of the past two chapters, though, I've (perhaps perversely) neglected to discuss Brown's actual descriptions of *learning* to read – the *acquisition* of literacy on which Gilmore places such emphasis. I've done so deliberately, partly because I think Brown goes out of his way to decenter this acquisition in his works' treatment of written semiotics, but also because I believe that part of the power and strangeness of his *Narrative* is derived from its refusal to close this circle – the circle of the autobiographer's literacy which Franklin goes to such lengths to have closed from the beginning. Denying the reader the satisfaction of seeing the autobiographer and the autobiographical subject synthesized into a single persona, Brown enacts as point of view (and insists on the centrality of literacy and writing to his theory of) precisely the dislocation and discontinuity by means of which, in the episode of the sailor and jailer, he characterizes slave subjectivity itself.

For the sake of completeness, though, I shall discuss Brown's acquisition of literacy here, in this liminal space of the coda. Brown has been free and living in Cleveland only a matter of weeks. He has not yet gone to Monroe to cut hair or operate a wildcat bank,[1] as, obviously, the events of the banking episode can only make sense if Brown has some way or another learned beforehand to sign his name.

> I obtained a job, for which I received a shilling. This was not only the only shilling I had, but it was the first I had received after obtaining my freedom, and that shilling made me feel, indeed, as if I had a considerable stock in hand. What to do with my shilling I did not know. I would not put it into the bankers' hands, because, if they would have received it, I would not trust them. I would not lend it out, because I was afraid I should not get it back again. I carried the shilling in my pocket for some time, and finally resolved to lay it out; and after considerable thinking upon the subject, I laid out *6d.* for a spelling-book, and the other *6d.* for sugar candy or barley sugar. Well, now, you will all say that the one *6d.* for the spelling-book was well laid out; and I am of opinion that the other was well laid out too; for the family in which I worked for my bread had two little boys, who attended the school every day, and I wanted to convert them into teachers; so I thought that nothing would act like a charm so much as a little barley sugar. The first day I got my book and stock in trade, I put the book into my bosom, and went to saw wood in the wood-house on a very cold day. One of the boys, a little after four o'clock, passed through the wood-house with a bag of books. I called to him, and I said to him, 'Johnny, do you see this?' taking a stick of barley sugar from my pocket and showing it to him. Says he, 'Yes; give me a taste of it.' Said I, 'I have got a spellingbook too,' and I showed that to him. 'Now,' said I, 'if you come to me in my room, and teach me my A, B, C, I will give you a whole stick.' 'Very well,' said he, 'I will; but let me taste it.' 'No; I can't.' 'Let me have it now.' Well, I thought I had better give him a little taste, until the right time came; and I marked the barley sugar about a quarter of an inch down, and told him to bite that far and no farther. He made a grab, and bit half the stick, and ran off laughing. I put the other piece in my pocket, and after a little while the other boy, little David, came through the wood-house with his books. I said nothing about the barley sugar, or my wish to get education. I knew the other lad would

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[1] The temporal confusion here is a byproduct of Brown's recycling and sampling. As I will explain shortly, when Brown prints his account of how he learned to read in *Clotel's* "Memoir" it appears more or less in chronological sequence – that is, before the banking anecdote. But the banking anecdote had been published earlier (in *Three Years in Europe*) and the account of his acquisition of literacy had not. So anyone reading Brown's books in the order in which he published them would encounter the banking anecdote before the story of his accusation of literacy.

communicate the news to him. In a little while he returned, and said, 'Bill, John says you have got some barley sugar.' 'Well,' I said, 'what of that?' 'He said you gave him some; give me a little taste.' 'Well, if you come to-night and help me to learn my letters, I will give you a whole stick.' 'Yes; but let me taste it.' 'Ah! but you want to bite it.' 'No, I don't, but just let me taste it.' Well, I thought I had better show it to him. 'Now,' said he, 'let me touch my tongue against it.' I thought then that I had better give him a taste, but I would not trust him so far as I trusted John; so I called him to me, and got his head under my arm, and took him by the chin, and told him to hold out his tongue; and as he did so, I drew the barley sugar over very lightly. He said, 'That's very nice; just draw it over again.' 'I could stand here and let you draw it across my tongue all day.' The night came on; the two boys came out of their room up into the attic where I was lodging, and there they commenced teaching me the letters of the alphabet. We all laid down upon the floor, covered with the same blanket; and first one would teach me a letter, and then the other, and I would pass the barley sugar from one side to the other. I kept those two boys on my sixpenny worth of barley sugar for about three weeks. Of course I did not let them know how much I had. I first dealt it out to them a quarter of a stick at a time. I worked along in that way, and before I left that place where I was working for my bread, I got so that I could spell. I had a book that had the word *baker* in it, and the boys used to think that when they got so far as that, they were getting on pretty well. I had often passed by the school-house, and stood and listened at the window to hear them spell, and I knew that when they could spell *baker* they thought something of themselves; and I was glad when I got that far. Before I left that place I could read. Finally, from that I went on until I could write. How do you suppose I first commenced writing? for you will understand that up to the present time I never spent a day in school in my life, for I had no money to pay for schooling, so that I had to get my learning first from one and then from another. I carried a piece of chalk in my pocket, and whenever I met a boy I would stop him and take out my chalk and get at a board fence and then commence. First I made some flourishes with no meaning, and called a boy up, and said, 'Do you see that? Can you beat that writing?' Said he, 'That's not writing.' Well, I wanted to get so as to write my own name. I had got out of slavery with only one name. While escaping, I received the hospitality of a very good man, who had spared part of his name to me, and finally my name got pretty long, and I wanted to be able to write it. 'Now, what do you call that?' said the boy, looking at my flourishes. I said, 'Is not that *William Wells Brown*?' 'Give me the chalk,' says he, and he wrote out in large letters '*William Wells Brown*,' and I marked up the fence for nearly a quarter of a mile, trying to copy, till I got so that I could write my name. Then I went on with my chalking, and, in fact, all board fences within half a mile of where I lived were marked over with some kind of figures I had made, in trying to

learn how to write. I next obtained an arithmetic, and then a grammar, and I stand here to-night, without having had a day's schooling in my life. (63-65)

This episode (we'll call it the "barley sugar episode") makes its first printed appearance in *Clotel*. It's presented in the introductory "Memoir" (which, recall, is framed by an anonymous third person voice Brown has synthesized from at least two biographers) as a direct quotation from Brown. But unlike the bulk of the material so presented, this episode isn't among the Brown-authored documents excerpted by J. Passamore Edwards for *Uncle Tom's Companions* or by William Farmer for the "Memoir of William Wells Brown" that introduces *Three Years in Europe*. Nor is the barley sugar episode – like the banking episode, which had already appeared a year earlier in *Three Years in Europe* – drawn from something Brown had before published in a book.[2]

What the episode offers in its content is, of course, the crucial missing link of the *Narrative* – the cohesive sequences of causes and effects which renders fluid and continuous the development of the work's illiterate and enslaved autobiographical subject into its narrating autobiographer. Without somehow accounting for the autobiographical subject's literacy in the content of the story, an autobiography must always be at odds with its own status as a book. The *Narrative* explains the origin of the name "William W. Brown," but refuses to authenticate or account for the connection between that name and the phrase "Written by Himself" which, on the title page, appears under it. As Benjamin Franklin

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[2] Brown wrote frequently for the abolitionist press, and it's possible that the episode draws on something that actually *had* been published in a periodical or miscellany. All my research has been able to confirm is that it does not appear in any of the books Brown authored before *Clotel*. The episode appears to have been lifted verbatim from a speech Brown wrote especially for oral performance (and, as I'll discuss, the text bears the marks of the lecture-circuit's rhetorical norms) but such speeches were often published in newspapers nonetheless. My point, then, is not that these words had never appeared in a printed form, but that, in appearing in printed form here, they retain the marks of their alien relation to the discursive space of the page.

suggests (when he insists so emphatically that he has known how to read for as long as he can remember) the internal friction caused by an autobiography's failure to close this circuit could be a source – or at least was imagined by Franklin to be a potential source – of profound anxiety for the readers even of autobiographies by people who, like Franklin (but unlike Brown or Douglass), were *not* subject to racist proscriptions against reading, and whose works *didn't* proclaim on their status as "written by himself." The autobiographical disharmony against which Franklin is so careful to shore his narrative is the very one which Brown courts, and courts so as to measure and articulate the internally discontinuous subjectivity which slavery forces the enslaved to inhabit.

But in articulating this particular subjectivity in these particular terms Brown also demonstrates the extent to which the politics of literacy and authorship could themselves illuminate the contours of such discontinuities. Needless to say, these and other intertextual echoes of Franklin in the *Narrative* also signal Browns desire to anchor his understanding of the particular challenges facing black authors both to a nationally (but not racially) specific tradition of literary autobiography in the United States, and in the nationally specific (and, in a view Brown would specifically set out to change in his later works,[3] specifically *white*) heroics of the founding era. Brown's literary and political ambitions would again conscript his preoccupation with the "founding fathers" (a twentieth-century coinage whose irony would no doubt amuse Brown) to guide *Clotel*, in which we can watch the disheartened Brown, in exile, turn his attention away from Franklin and toward Thomas Jefferson. More corrupt than Franklin – but not, at the last, utterly irredeemable in either his literary or

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[3] See both the aforementioned *The Black Man* (1863) and, especially, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and his Fidelity* (1866). The latter, whose title refers to what we now call the Civil War, is actually a full military history of African Americans whose early chapters deal with both the Revolution and the War of 1812.

genetic legacy – Jefferson is for Brown a representative man for an America after the passage of the Compromise of 1850.

Brown clearly has no desire to keep his literacy, or the acquisition thereof, a secret, but Gilmore is nonetheless a little premature, I think, in suggesting that it is specifically the scene of this acquisition that, when combined with the banking anecdote, establishes Brown's central representational strategies. There is no doubt that Gilmore is right to argue that literacy and the slave's unique experience of written textuality are major motifs in Brown's writing, or that this concern with writing, plus Brown's unique economic fixations, represent the key to his political and aesthetic project. But even in sharing the details of his acquisition of literacy with his readers here in the "Memoir," Brown has nonetheless still kept these details out of all three editions of the editions of the *Narrative*. Nor, as I've already said, does the episode of the barley sugar appear in *Three Years in Europe*, in spite of the fact that much of that book recounts events in Brown's life – including the banking anecdote – which happened *before* the three years in question. Though focused mainly on the recent past, *Three Years* is also a work of autobiographical nonfiction. It's only when he turns to fiction – that is, to somebody *else's* story rather than his *own* – that Brown introduces the barley sugar episode into his books. He does so, furthermore, as part of this hybrid "memoir" that, in staging itself as a collage of Brown's old and new _auto_biographical writing (framed in turn by a second, outer collage of Edwards's and Farmer's _bio_graphical writings *about* him) defies easy categorization, and disassembles the very category of "the autobiographical;" Brown suggests nothing less than that that the (ostensibly "true") story one tells about one's self is – like the Bakhtinian novel – always already an assemblage of multiple voices, transmitting and

retransmitting fragments of narrative that always themselves predate the performative

utterance – the telling – itself.

So Brown does, finally, offer his readers a book in which he explains how he learned

to read, and seems to close the Franklinian circuit of autobiographical address. But the book

in which he makes this offer is, crucially, the first he has authored that can in *no* sense be

called an "autobiography;" *Clotel* is the first of Brown's books self-consciously working in a

genre defined by its very made-up-ness: the novel. The missing piece of the circle has been

found, but it has been found separated from the narrative lacuna it seems meant to amend

by an unbridgeable distance, found in another book, another genre, a separate way of

thinking about how books communicate truth and how reading politicizes audiences.

Nor is this the only way in which the barley sugar anecdote, like a botched organ

transplant, courts the rejection of the body into which it has been clumsily sutured. The very

existence of the anecdote's words' as print – as ink on a page – is treated by the meanings of

those words as a foreign, alien thing, since these words address their *reader* as, in the literal

sense, an *audience*. When, in what is clearly meant to be the episode's punch-line, Brown says

that he "stand[s] here to-night, without having had a day's schooling in [his] life," we realize

(at the very end of an *unreasonably* long paragraph, which seems almost deliberately to strain

the eyes, to resist optical absorption) that what we have been reading is *not* this book's (or

any book's) attempt to close the gap between Brown's past illiteracy and his present vocation

as an author. Rather, it's a speech to be delivered in person at an antislavery event, a

performance at which Brown would – the speech explicitly remarks – be present before his

audience in person. It enters the space of the page not in order to close the gap between the

narrating Brown and the narrated Brown – to explain the continuous development that

allows the former to speak autobiographically for the latter – but rather to reinscribe the gap between the oral/aural verbal world to which the slave is confined and the written/visual one to which he or she can gain safe access only in freedom. Strictly speaking, the episode probably *does* have a history as a written document, but that history is almost certainly as a *hand*-written document, one intended to be read from aloud in a lecture hall.

I don't know if this performance would have involved Brown actually looking down at the page and reading from it verbatim as he stood before his auditors, but the question seems to me to be a deeply fascinating one. If we are meant to *listen* to Brown while *watching* him read from a page only he can actually see, we watch him demonstrate his literacy even as he explains how he won it, and allow him to cast us in the role he had assumed working for Lovejoy – *seeing* people read, but ourselves allowed only to *hear*.

But the passage contains much more than just literacy, and this is part of both Brown's point and mine: literacy and textual transmission are always implicated specifically in a broad range of other concerns, so that the site of any textual encounter can serve Brown as an occasion to explore the systemic norms of America's whole ideological landscape. All of Brown's usual concerns thus appear in the barley sugar episode, but their arrangement is somewhat curious. For one thing – in a move both typical of Brown and unusual for stories about literacy – the passage does not start out being about reading or writing; at first, it's only about money. Brown is understandably proud of having earned some money by his labor, since it's precisely this mode of exchange from which, as a slave, his condition had barred him by definition. But once the money is earned and possessed it does not long remain, in his mind, a mere symbol of freedom; its meanings quickly proliferate. Brown becomes attached both the instrumental and the intrinsic value of the shilling, realizing

woefully that in order to enjoy what the coin's worth can buy him he will need to resign the pleasure of possessing the coin itself.

His mistrust of the bank – though doubtless true to the notorious facts of life in Ohio in the 1830s – perhaps gives us a chuckle, since we know that in less than a year's time Brown will be in Monroe accepting deposits from people whom he regards as, apparently, more gullible than he. The purchase of the spelling book does not surprise us, though, since, as readers of the *Narrative*, we know that Brown spent much of the money he earned in his first year of freedom on books and newspaper subscriptions, even though he was – as far as the *Narrative* itself told us – still unable to read them. What interests us, then, and what Brown seems to know will interest us, is the six pence worth of barley sugar, which readers at the time would have recognized instantly was an enormous quantity of very inexpensive candy. Something akin to seventy-five dollars' worth of candy corns today.

This candy circulates in the episode as the spelling book's fraternal twin, the two of them having shared a single existence as Brown's coin (each, notice, has cost Brown *exactly* half the shilling),[4] and each serves as an avatar of half the qualities that, in the coin, were combined in and as a single entity. In exchanging the shilling for books and candy, Brown finds a way to retain some sense of the purchasing power he so enjoyed (importantly, just as the shilling was kept in Brown's pocket, the barley sugar and the speller are likewise both hidden under his clothing), since he has done little more than divide the coin's various properties between the two commodities, both of which retain meaningful ties to the

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[4] I resist here the temptation to discuss Brown's bizarre use of British currency values in describing events that happened in Ohio, but, recalling my introduction's remarks on the dollar sign, we should note that his doing so – relying on d. for pence – eliminates any need for that emblem. For what it's worth, one of the cities though which Brown would have had to travel on his way from Monroe to Detroit to have his shinplasters printed is called Gibraltar.

domain of money. The barley sugar, Brown knows, can function as a currency just as easily

as can the shilling, assuming Brown can find the right market in which to trade it (a task

which, even for the shilling itself, was by no means negligible – recall that the entire chain of

these events begins because Brown isn't initially sure in what economic context the exchange

value of the shilling can best be deployed to his advantage – where and how to invest it). If

candy's potential as tender usually goes unnoticed (and Brown seems to assume that it will

go thus, since he is able to joke that his audience may initially disapprove of his lavish

expenditure on sweets, imagining them to be good for eating but nothing else) that's only

because its *use* value is so much more obvious, and, indeed, so much closer to the *ur*-use

value – caloric content. Money is what one uses to buy, after all, and food is what one buys.

The *biological* need to eat is, we imagine, at or close to the root of the *economic* need to

represent exchange value in the form of tender in the first place. And yet however inedible

money is, and however incommensurate coin and candy are, the very fact that, within the

logic of commodification, the two different things must be regarded as in some underlying

sense the same as one another – reducible to measurable quantities on the same scale of

value – tends to erase the difference between them, and disrupt our belief that money is for

spending and food is for eating – that money must be spent *because* food must be eaten, in an

exchange of brow-sweat for bread fundamental to the postlapsarian world. Both the

differences between food and money and the weird interchangability that, under capitalism,

they possess as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, are underscored by Brown's

metonymic reference, twice in the passage, to his employment – for which we already know

he is paid in coin – as the situation by which he earns his *bread*. Bread and candy. Flour and

sugar. Calories so concentrated that, even in the absence of other, better nutrients, they can

keep the poor from wasting away, but which, as we're learning today, turn to poison in the hands of the rich. The stuff of life.

If my readings of Brown's works have been as consistent as I've meant them to be in their concerns then I will not have to lavish attention on many of the other details in the passage. Brown is navigating his social world with a keen understanding of the power that comes with writing and reading – his usual, penetrating understanding of that power which recognizes it as simultaneously aesthetic and economic, and as implicated both in the work of verbal self-fashioning (the writing of his name as an act of ego-driven self-assertion, the spreading of his alphabetic seed all over the neighborhood) and economic self-determination (*this* writing of his name as a foreshadowing of the *next* time the "Memoir" will show him writing his name: the signing of the banknotes in Monroe). Also in abundance is Brown's playful tricksterism – his general reluctance to give a sucker and even break. He has decreed that the barley sugar will serve him as a currency. He arranges things so that it will do such – lining up the most likely customers and advertising his wares. Already a banker in his soul, he deliberately withholds from his customers any knowledge of his bank's actual reserve of sweets. This keeps John and David from ever being sure of the actual value of any one piece of candy. Since each piece could be the last, or could represent (as far as they know) a greater proportion of the whole stock than (Brown knows) it actually does, its value is inflated. Meanwhile the value of the spelling lessons the boys offer remains unchanged, and trading candy with boys both easier and more profitable than taking it from babies.

Learning to write as well as read, Brown keeps up his inflationary campaign, continually laying out what he knows to be worthless counterfeits of the spelling of his name so as to draw – when the neighborhood boys inevitably seek to reveal his fraud – knowledge

of the real. When has he mastered spelling? When he can spell *baker* – the tradesman just

one *n* away from *ba_n_ker* – and, of course, the man who makes the "bread."

Here, as in the rest of Brown's work, writing, money, and masquerade are all avatars

of race. Continually drawn to stories in which economic and aesthetic value intertwine, and

in which both are shown to be products of (rather than inert occasions for) interpretation

and conjecture, the relative absence of any explicitly antislavery content from the passage is

not all that surprising. The *consequences* of slavery – Brown's recent change of name, his pride

in having earned his first shilling, his lingering illiteracy – are all present the passage, and, as

I've already suggested, the intertwining of deception, transaction, and textual production

(that is, of the staging of the candy, the writing of the name, and the comically-merciless

manipulation of every boy in the neighborhood) shows Brown even in a relatively light

episode he plays for laughs to be working out the problems of racial politics and racial

epistemology. Race is present enough in the passage because, by this point in his career,

Brown has taught us how to look for it. What's somewhat surprising, though, is the fact that

the absence of explicitly racial themes in the episode, just like the absence of explicitly racial

themes in Clotel's stagecoach ride, gives way to the presence of something we do not see

coming: the passage's overt homoeroticism.

●

> You have spoken of homosexualism, that profound problem in human nature of old
> or of today […] which more and more is demanding the thought of all modern
> civilizations, however unwillingly accorded it…. Its diverse aspects bewilder me….
> Homosexualism is a symphony running through a marvelous range of psychic keys
> […] Is there really, as ages ago, a sexual aristocracy of the male? […] A race with

hearts never to be kindled by any woman; though, if once aglow, their strange fires can burn not less ardently or purely than ours? (*Imre* 34)[5]

Edward Prime-Stevenson's 1906 *Imre* concerns a love affair between an American expatriate and a Hungarian army officer in 1890s Budapest. The description on the back cover of the 2003 Broadview edition I have used in my research bills the work as "one of the first openly gay American novels with a happy ending," a description which – besides spoiling the ending of the book for anybody actually hoping to be entertained by it – communicates some sense both of what the novel is about and of the difficulties that attend making absolute claims about a literary history that has only in the past few decades begun to be recovered. *Imre* was published privately in a run of just five hundred copies, none of which (though the novel was published under a pseudonym) one imagines Prime-Stevenson would have wanted to end up in the hands of potentially unsympathetic strangers. We should suppose, as the author of my edition's back cover seems to have supposed, that our present unawareness of any earlier "openly gay American novel with a happy ending" should not be taken to mean that such a book doesn't exist and won't later be rediscovered. Those authors most motivated to write such a book would also have greatest reason to limit the scope of its audience.

When I first began work on this dissertation, I hoped that in it I would be able to trace the transformation of a culture's concerns over several decades. Specifically, I was interested in how the racialist, biologically determinist science of the nineteenth century (which at that time included psychology) came to be displaced by the psychoanalytic sciences of the self in the early twentieth. Among the assumptions on which psychoanalysis most

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[5] Except where indicated by brackets, ellipses appear in the original.

forcefully insisted in its early years was that mental illness is not caused by the body itself –

that it is not biologically inherited and that it is neither tied to nor structured like racial

identity. This rejection of racial science in the study of abnormal psychology was

controversial at a time when even the study of, for example, trauma was essentially interested

in the effects of trauma on the body's nerve cells and brain tissue, and the Lamarckian

mechanism by which iterations of these damaged organs could be inherited by, and produce

mood disturbances in, the traumatized's offspring.[6] The advent of psychoanalysis, at least in

the United States, struck me, and still strikes me, as tied both the diminishing *official* role race

played in American life as the twentieth century progressed (as liberal intellectuals, then

scientists, then even the political right wing came to prefer describing themselves as "color

blind") and to that diminishing official role's uneasy coexistence with the continuing

importance of racist norms to the country's institutions in practice. Indeed, in what is now a

recognizable cliché of right-wing rhetoric in America, the refusal to recognize racial

distinctions as real, a hallmark of progressivism in the interwar years, has actually become a

way to *fortify* what remains of white privilege, since if race simply doesn't exist then racism

need not be addressed or challenged.

This transition in the dominant paradigm of the subject – the transition around the

turn of the twentieth century from a racial body which also has desires to a desiring body

which can also be classified in racial terms – seems to me tied to several other changes in

American culture, but the most important of these changes for my project is a change in the

way writing was understood to align with the self. Writers seemingly came less to be

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[6] See Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1979*, especially Hale's chapters "The Somatic Style, 1870-1910" and "The Crisis of the Somatic Style, 1895-1910," (47-68, 71-97)

fascinated with the act of looking at others' bodies (except, of course, in situations where the act of looking was part of an erotics of scopophilia). A world of telephones and phonographs did not presuppose that a person acting upon you was a person whose body you could see, or even a person who had authored an artifact at which you could look. Lisa Gitelman notes that, in early demonstrations of the phonograph, witnesses would ask to examine the actual wax cylinders themselves with a magnifying glass, assuming (naturally enough) that the words spoken by the machine must be written on the cylinder in tiny script.[7] The turn of the twentieth century, which, like Gitelman, I see as a moment "of particular upheaval and importance in the relations between words and things" (98), was characterized in part by the diminishing importance of the wish or fear – so clearly the central conceit of *The Scarlet Letter* – that people can be read like books. People no longer seemed to obey a logic of being that so clearly privileged the visible or the corporeally present. Even the person with whom you converse intimately and in "real time" might now be only a voice on a telephone, and – in a shift I think is connected – the real and authentic location of the self was not now in the visible body or in the body's also-visible proxy, the written text, but somewhere else, somewhere invisible. When, before he sets out for Africa, Conrad's Marlow is examined by a company physician who wants to measure his skull, even the doctor himself seems to regard the exercise as perfunctory, a prior generation's practice maintained into the present more because of bureaucratic inertia than medical necessity or scientific curiosity. Marlow asks the doctor if colonists like himself must have their heads measured a second time when they return to Europe. "Oh, I never see them" the doctor replies, "and, moreover the changes take place inside, you know" (11).

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[7] See Gitelman's *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (21-22).

In the full, unrealized version of this dissertation's narrative, my discussions of

Hawthorne and Brown would be followed by a fully formed discussion of Prime-

Stevenson's *Imre* and a fourth movement concerning Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, a novel

remarkable in part because it is composed almost entirely of characters speaking out loud.

This full version proved unworkable as a dissertation, since to accord all four authors their

due, and to honor the nuance and complexity that makes their works worth reading and

worth writing about in the first place, would be to outstrip the inherent limitations of the

genre (and perhaps the mortal flesh) in which I work.

But I accord Prime-Stevenson a small space here at the end so that he can speak

briefly for what I regard as the denouement of the textual dynamics I've described in these

four chapters. *Imre* begins with a prefatory letter from the novel's protagonist and narrator

Oswald to Xavier Mayne (the pseudonym that appears on the novel's title page) explaining

that the enclosed manuscript (the novel itself) recounts

> an episode that at first seemed impossible to write even to you… My apology is that
> in setting forth absolute truth in which we ourselves[8] are concerned so deeply, the
> perspective, and what painters call the values, are not easily maintained. (32)

Mayne is, of course, really Prime-Stevenson, as is Oswald, the tripartite structure of authorial

personae serving to introduce the first of the novel's three chapters, called (what else?)

"Masks." Between the prefatory letter and the opening chapter, though, is a curious

epigraph, the one from which I quoted at the beginning of this section. The epigraph is cited

only as "Magyarbol" – Hungarian for "from the Hungarian" – and even James J. Gifford,

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[8] The exact nature of Oswald's relationship to Mayne is left in James-like ambiguous territory. The plural
first person here is probably a rhetorical flourish rather than a suggestion that Mayne too is gay.

the editor of the scholarly edition, is not sure if the passage is genuinely from any text which predates the novel and, if it is, where and in what language it originally appeared.

In his letter to Mayne, Oswald offers an apology which in its context we might mistakenly take to be for his frankness in depicting a gay relationship. Explicitly, though, he is only apologizing for the fact that, when such absolute frankness is attempted, the dispassionate neutrality which is sometimes seen as guaranteeing a faithful representations of the facts is not always easy to maintain. But Oswald is also, seemingly, apologizing for the difficulty with which the sensibility he wants to convey – an unashamed, self-accepting gay masculinity (one which, for better or worse, eschews the savage brilliance of a Wilde's camp, protective exoskeleton) – can be represented in the overwhelmingly *visual* discourses he regards as most available to an artist of his moment. That is, the episode seems impossible to *write*, even though – as we will learn – Oswald has *spoken* openly about it on many occasions, including to the titular beloved, Imre.

There is, perhaps, a plausible reluctance on (the semi-fictional) Oswald's part to commit to the permanence of a signed letter personal information that might, at some later date, be used for blackmail (or worse, a criminal prosecution). Perhaps Oswald finds these things difficult to write about because, unlike speech (and, in an era when sound recording was still difficult and marked by almost uselessly low fidelity to real voices, this would apply even to recorded speech), writing leaves behind a permanent record which we imagine to be tied to an individual hand in a legally binding way. This is, after all, why we sign checks. Writing a decade after the Wilde trials, Prime-Stevenson (writing as Xavier Mayne, in print) may bravely take on a real but comparatively small risk of exposure, but his fictional

character – Oswald – writing under his own name and presumably by hand, understandably hesitates.

So protection from blackmail and prosecution might be one reason for which love between men was easier to celebrate in speech than in writing, but it's not the only reason. The clarification that Oswald offers directly after his apology, in which the image is not of writing but of painting, makes it clear that maintaining secrecy is less important to Oswald than the representational limitations of the medium itself – any medium, it seems, that must be apprehended by the eyes. That within which "homosexualism" resists codification is neither writing nor painting; it is, rather, those qualities common to both writing *and* painting.

The letter is signed

Faithfully yours,
Oswald
Velencze, 19—

Prime-Stevenson (or Mayne? for it cannot be Oswald) elides the date for no discernible purpose (in 1906 there would have been but few possibilities, none of which demand the obscuring of *both* the last two of the year's digits). Thus truncated, the date suggests little more than that, though the events of the novel, we know, take place in the 1890s, the particular representational problems Oswald's letter outlines are those Prime-Stevenson wants to identify with the new century. What Oswald has described is a representational crisis that Prime-Stevenson believes to be a historically specific, and as in some ways relatively new, though its new qualities, he thinks, will not be short-lived. The problem of the twentieth century is, for Prime-Stevenson, the problem of gay identity as it took shape in the

1890s, and the two numbers missing from the letter's date are less important than the two that aren't. *Imre* is a tale of life in the year 19—.

It is thus that, when we turn the page of *Imre*, we find the elaborate metaphor of "homosexualism" as music with which I began this final section. Here too there is a profound sense of gay identity constituting a recent – or at least recently-escalating – representational problem. The problem is one with, seemingly, two distinct forms, though, since there is the homosexualism in human nature "of old" and that of "today," and even though there was clearly a Hellenic "sexual aristocracy" of old, the (scarcely believable, the author implies) existence of one in *today's* world is "more and more" a problem endemic to "modern civilization." Like Oswald in the letter to Mayne a page earlier, the anonymous Hungarian author (again, probably Edward Prime-Stevenson/Xavier Mayne/Oswald himself) struggles to regard gay masculinity as representable in visual terms, but unlike Oswald (or at least the Oswald who signed the letter to Mayne on the previous page) this Hungarian author has found an alternative to the codes of the visual: *music*, which – with its distinction between melody and harmony and its complete invisibility – can admit not just of a linear sequence of utterances (like writing being read left to right) but of a multiple, simultaneous performance of discrete elements, notes sounded in concord (like writing not being read, like the words we imagine sitting side by side on a page when we are not actually reading, like the spatial or sculptural form of the text when it is not performing for us).

Is it regressive or progressive when, the music metaphor done with, the author designates what, elsewhere in the same passage, he describes as "a mystic and Hellenic Brotherhood [of] super-virile man" (34) as a "race?" This "race" is one unmoved by heterosexual desire, and so presumably it would, in many if not most cases, select of its own

choice against procreation. Is this some new twentieth-century mode of identity for which the name of the nineteenth-century concept of "race" is a misnomer, or is "race" actually being used in its properly nineteenth-century sense in the passage? By what mechanism does the word "race" appear on this page, given that it refers – presumably – to a group entirely composed of men, and who are differentiated from men more generally not by anything that can be seen on the body, or any feature that necessarily can or must be inherited biologically, but by a mode of identitarian difference both as real and as invisible as music?
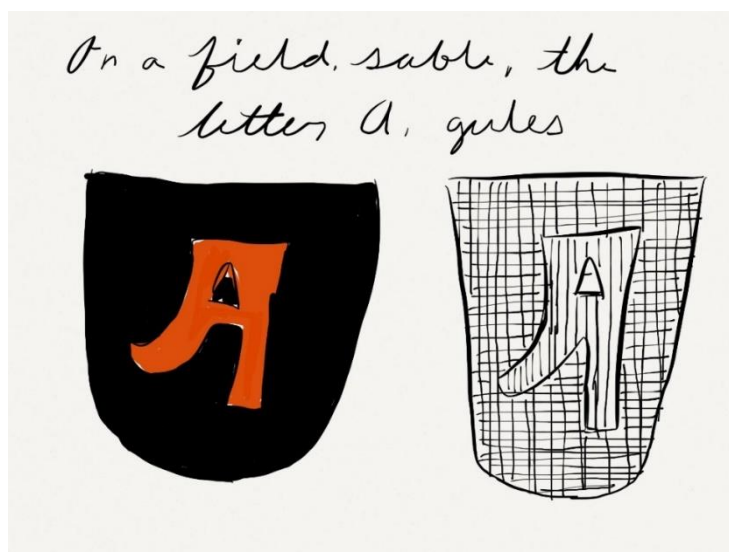
Gallery of Images
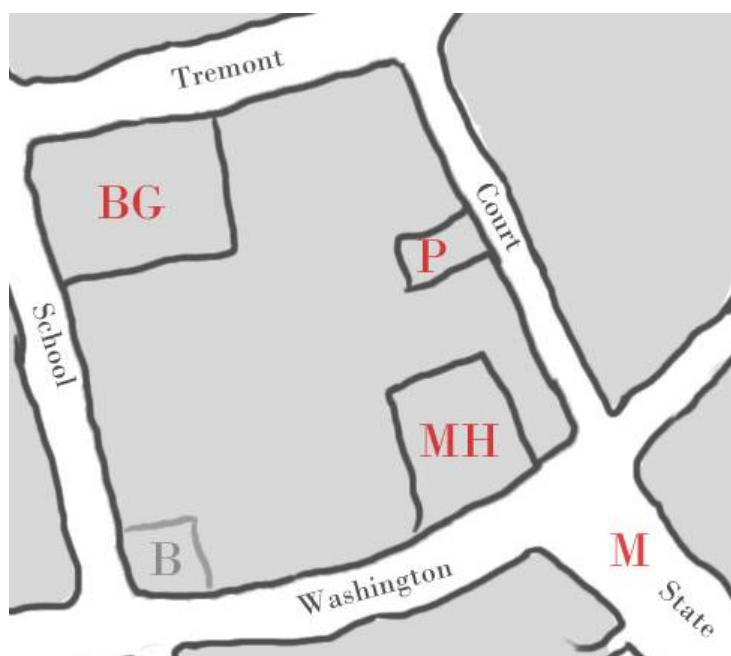
Map of Boston showing 1640 locations of <u>B</u>urial <u>G</u>round, <u>P</u>rison, <u>M</u>eeting <u>H</u>ouse, and <u>M</u>arketplace (in red) and 1850 location of <u>B</u>ookstore (in gray). The street names are those in use today, which date from about 1820.

Exterior of Old Corner
Bookstore, c. 1863

On a field, sable, the
letter A, gules

My renderings of the crest
the novel describes on
Hester's and
Dimmesdale's gravestone,
in both color and
monochromatic.

Gravestone of Elizabeth Pain (1652-1704) in Kings Chapel Burial Ground. The stone certainly existed in the nineteenth century, and is apocryphally supposed to have inspired *The Scarlet Letter* in that the right side of the heraldic crest is said to resemble the letter A.

Digitally enhanced detail of Pain crest. Depending on what code governs the crest, and if the diagonal band is meant to be part of the hatch pattern, the right side of the escutcheon could be colored either sable or azure.
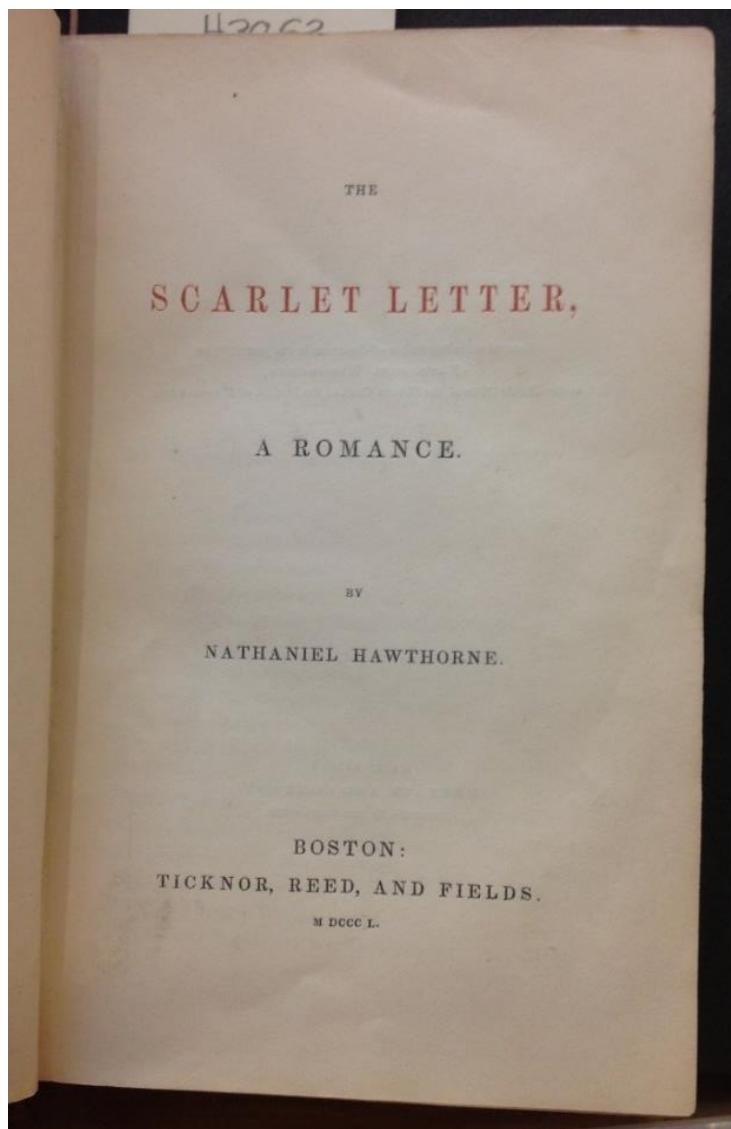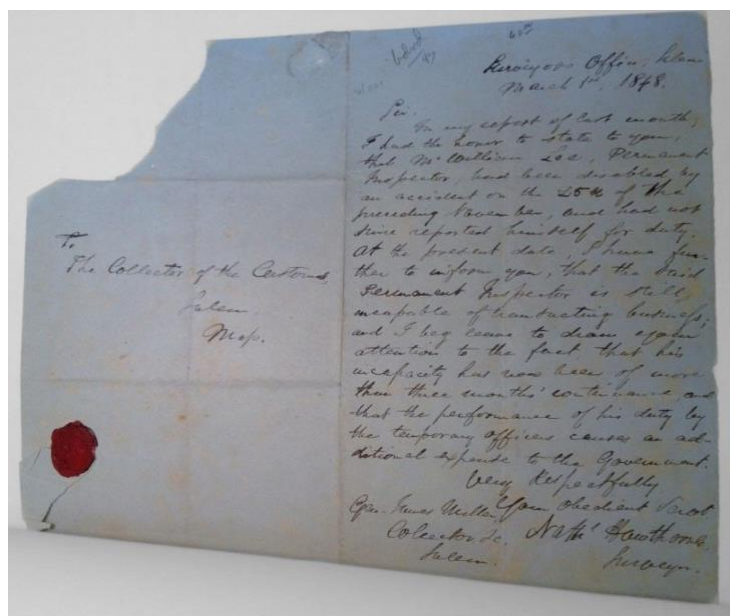
Title page of *The Scarlet Letter*, first edition.

Detail of title page.
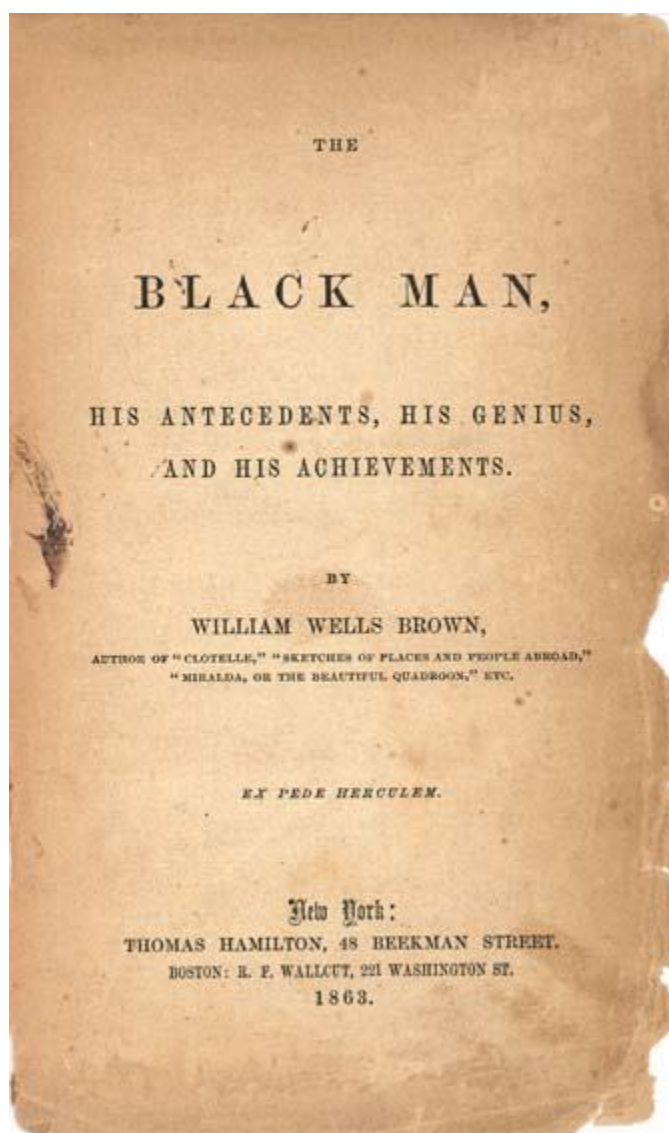
Hawthorne's personal seal, red on blue paper.

Letter of 1848 with red seal on the blue paper Hawthorne used for his personal correspondence between about 1848 and 1851. This was probably the stationary in Hawthorne's study on Mall Street, and the stock on which the (lost) manuscript of *The Scarlet Letter* was written. All of Hawthorne's letters from the period, except those written at the Custom House, are on this paper.

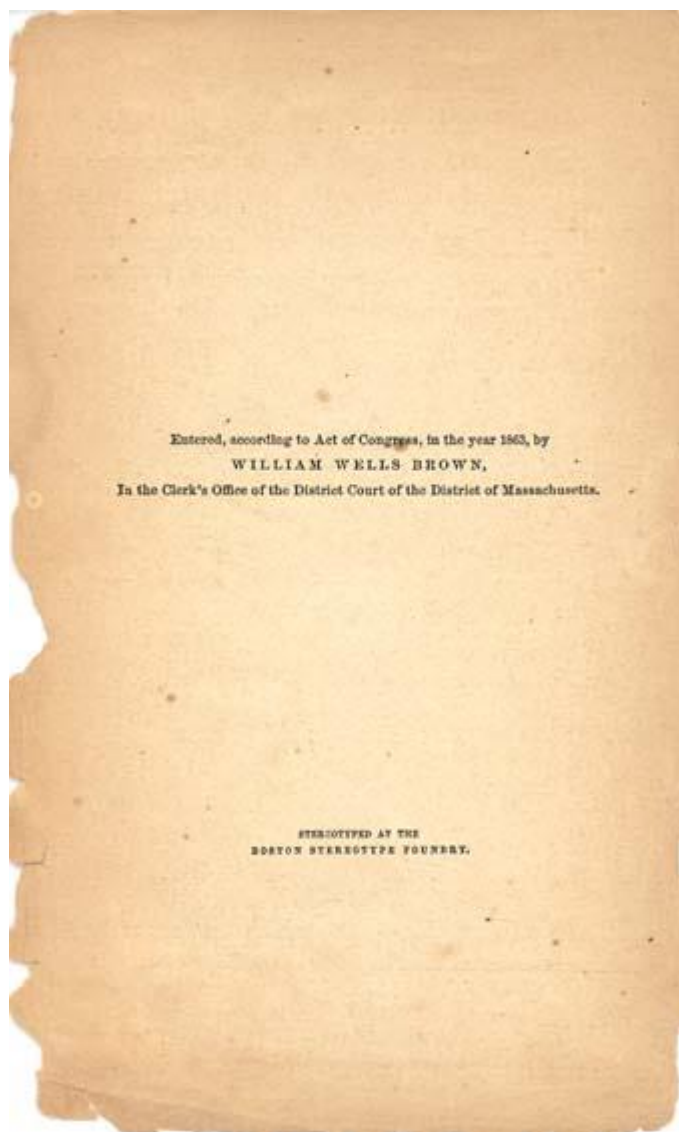Detail of 1850 letter on the blue paper in which Hawthorne writes out the title *The Scarlet Letter*.

Smith, Johnson, and Jerry in the ship's saloon. The caption reads: *"Betting" a negro in the southern states.*

THE

BLACK MAN,

HIS ANTECEDENTS, HIS GENIUS,
AND HIS ACHIEVEMENTS.

BY

WILLIAM WELLS BROWN,

AUTHOR OF "CLOTELLE," "SKETCHES OF PLACES AND PEOPLE ABROAD,"
"MIRALDA, OR THE BEAUTIFUL QUADROON," ETC.

EX PEDE HERCULEM.

New York:
THOMAS HAMILTON, 48 BEEKMAN STREET.
BOSTON: R. F. WALLCUT, 221 WASHINGTON ST.
1863.

Title page of Brown's *The Black Man*

Verso of *Black Man* title page,)above).

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1863, by
WILLIAM WELLS BROWN,
In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts.

STEREOTYPED AT THE
BOSTON STEREOTYPE FOUNDRY.

CLOTEL;

OR,

THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER:

A Narrative of Slave Life

IN

THE UNITED STATES.

BY

WILLIAM WELLS BROWN,

A FUGITIVE SLAVE, AUTHOR OF "THREE YEARS IN EUROPE."

With a Sketch of the Author's Life.

"WE hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among these are LIFE, LIBERTY, and the PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS."—*Declaration of American Independence.*

LONDON:
PARTRIDGE & OAKEY, PATERNOSTER ROW;
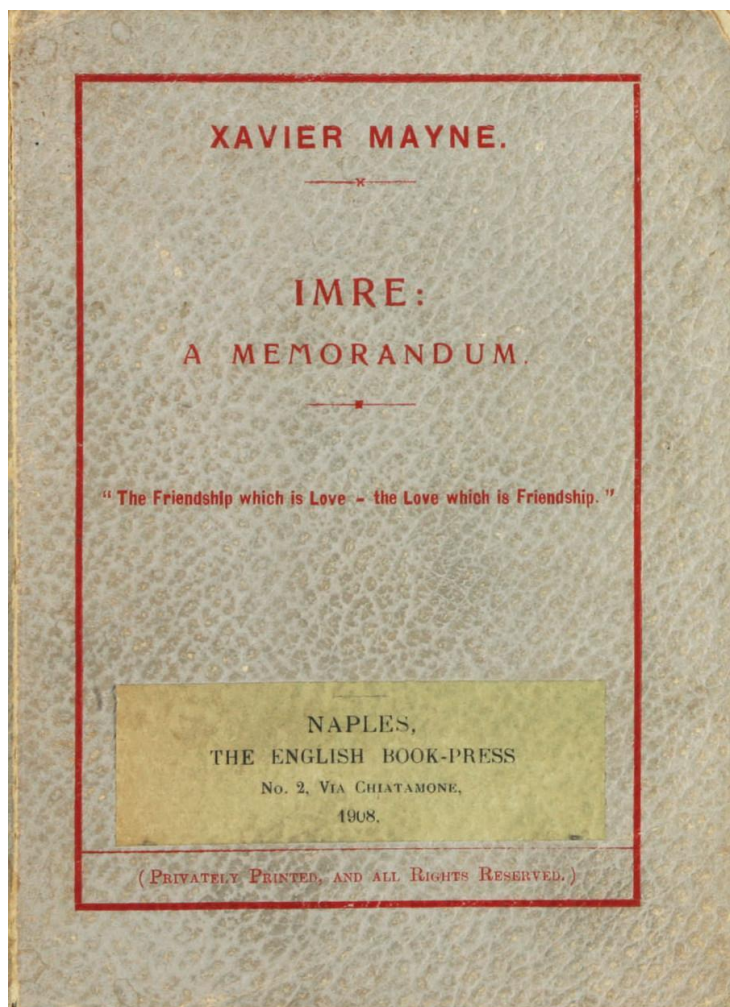AND 70, EDGWARE ROAD.
1853.

Title page of *Clotel* first edition.

Shinplaster issued by the Bank of Monroe, July 1, 1836 (a few months before Brown moved there). From my collection.

Cover of I*mre: A Memorandum* first edition (originally printed in paperback). Note red print.

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