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## Cruel Sorority, Or, Feminizing Enjoyment in American Romance

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

CRUEL SORORITY,  
OR, FEMINIZING ENJOYMENT  
IN AMERICAN ROMANCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

CARINA D. PASQUESI

CHICAGO, IL

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so he knows just what book to recommend. His passion for intellectual exchange gave me that necessary shot in the arm to keep at it, because the life of the mind is worth the struggle.

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## ABSTRACT

This project makes interventions in recent critical discussions in American Studies about being and (un)belonging, civility and anti-sociality, and the affective responses to the foreclosure of democratic promise. Reading across the genres of American Romanticism -- the convent tale, the reform novel, and the romance -- I analyze often-overlooked feminized figures that do not subscribe to the dominant models of representation and inclusion in antebellum America. These figures represent violent reactions against the dominant disciplinary institutions (e.g. marriage, motherhood, domesticity, slavery) that impoverish their lives, albeit to varying degrees. Their reactions are often the result of the characters' over-identification with that which dominant culture deems antisocial and pathological, the symptoms that need to be suppressed so that a "healthy" sociality can emerge. These characters often strategize within outmoded, premodern systems of punishment (e.g. the convent and plantation), where the interiorization of their lives defined by an emerging disciplinary culture is short-circuited. Embodying negative affects and desires, the figures I analyze seek to bring down the institutions that limit democracy's potential to social reform. This project finds at the center of American Romanticism not only a critique of these institutions and

the subjectivities that perpetuate them, but also an articulation of the period's imaginative potential to redefine subjectivity, eroticism, and sociality.

To be sure, I am not invested in rescuing feminized subjects from charges of violence, aggression, and cruelty as simply justified responses to patriarchal violence and injustice. Rather than perpetuating mainstream feminism's implicit belief in the idea that women are essentially nonviolent, and that if only power is rejected, a utopic, nonviolent society will come into existence, this project, in contrast, engages feminized "monstrous" agents of violence more invested in pulling down the dominant institutions, identities, and modes of association that condition their social existence. I read acts of eroticized violence in these literary texts as instantiating other ways of being and associating. Embodying negative intensity and aggression in opposition to the disabling affects of sympathetic fellow feeling encouraged by dominant disciplinary institutions, these figures offer glimpses, however unsustained, of other possibilities and intimacies not tied to romanticized notions of democratic community or conventional familial models.

Drawing on recent developments in queer theory and archival research, *Cruel Sorority* reconceptualizes the ways that dominant models of being and belonging have been analyzed in nineteenth-century American literary and sexuality studies. The antisocial turn in queer theory has enabled me to put into perspective what the archival records as an undercurrent of less than civil dissatisfaction with the ways that intimacy is organized in antebellum America. I focus attention on feminized figures at odds with the story of reform and

assimilation that many critics tell about antebellum America, for example, the reform of institutions like marriage via property ownership and divorce. Although some of my chapters focus on marginal figures, this project operates under the logic that the exception proves the rule.

The cruel sorority (existing beyond and in defiance to the category of woman) that makes up this project is not interested in reform but in transformative change. Taking a lead from the characters this study engages, this project not interested in a narrow definition of justice. I tackle the following questions: What does it mean to reimagine the social, and reject the institutions that govern our lives? Reject the dominant script of maturity? Refuse assimilation? That the figures in this study most likely embody what is often read as negative behavior is no surprise; these characters are seen as antisocial only because they break with the heteronormative logic that informs the dominant culture and its attendant institutions that organize bodies and property. From Maria Monk to Nathaniel Hawthorne to Elizabeth Stoddard, this project traces the persistence of the drive for new acts of creation in the face of democracy's unfulfilled promises. The figures I analyze compellingly submit to the vertigo of the unknown, with no script, "legend" or "myth" to teach them how to live in the world. They are, one and all, dazzling examples of dizzying inventiveness to the end.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**CRUEL SORORITY, OR, FEMINIZING**  
**ENJOYMENT IN AMERICAN ROMANCE**

The family, conventional sexuality, and gender are at the top of my hit list.

Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*

First of all, their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the *body*—a *willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.

Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

**I.**

In the anonymous short story “The Man Who Thought Himself A Woman” (1857), published in *The Knickerbocker*, we find in the cross-dressing protagonist the limit and potential of American freedom. Descending from a line of eccentric men, a great-grandfather who left his wife and children in order to

live alone, a grandfather who refused to kill any living creature and wore nineteenth-century America's version of a technicolor dream coat, and a father who banished his children from the house so he had more room for his beloved book collection, Japhet Colbones only truly lives at night, when he is able to dress as a woman, holding imaginary tea parties and knitting circles. Even though his wife and two live-in sisters learn of his secret life and only seem to mind that he steals their clothes, Japhet commits suicide, hanging himself in full high femme drag, leaving the room set up for a funereal (or a party, as his son and daughter read the scene). His only request is that his family bury him as they found him, dressed to the nines in gown, bonnet, heels, gloves, and jewelry, leaving out no accessory. The wife and sisters honor his request.

The Colbones represent a perverse genealogy. Whether choosing to live without family (great-grandfather), seeking a fabulous, life-affirming existence (grandfather), living the life of the mind (father), or living publicly as a woman (Japhet), the Colbones embody a patriarchal line at odds with the one we have come to know, representing a desire to live differently in the world, beyond prescribed models of adulthood. With the exception of Japhet, his ancestors find a way to live life publicly, rainbow coat and all, on their own terms without compromise. In his suicide note, Japhet expresses his inability to do so, writing, "I think I am a woman. I have been seven years making me a perfect suit of garments for my sex. As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself" (610). In

Japhet, we meet antebellum America's limit. The Colbones men can be in the world insofar as they do not renounce their male identity and symbolically-bestowed phallic authority. Why else won't his wife and sisters confront him when they espy him playing dress up and mining feminine gestures before the mirror? Amused by the sight, wife and sisters become keepers of the open secret that is his closeted existence.<sup>1</sup> Accepting of his eccentricities and enjoyment as long as they remain private, the Colbones women become complicit in maintaining the public illusion of male identity and its attendant organizing function in the household. The sorority Japhet might have found with the women in his life never materializes because the fantasy that structures society becomes more important to them than the reality of their situation. The burden of this shared secret is what kills Japhet. Why don't the women violate the silence, embrace the unknown, and discover where the acknowledgment of an unexpected fellow sister takes them? What kind of sociality might form beyond the script of conventional family and its prescribed gender roles?

This project tells the story of feminized figures (Japhet included) who seek other ways to be and belong in the world, rejecting and aggressively acting up and out at the dominant institutions that condition and limit their lives. This is not the story of reform and assimilation that some critics often tell about antebellum America, for example, the reform of institutions like marriage via property

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of late nineteenth century same-sex desire as the "open secret" of Western culture, see Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closest*.

ownership and divorce. Although I focus on marginal figures, this project operates under the logic that the exception proves the rule. For instance, the fact that Japhet Colbones cannot live publicly as a woman demonstrates that, despite the expansive reach of American ideology, belonging is always predicated on exclusion. This is not to say, as I will show throughout this project, that what these figures want is to elbow their way into the mainstream of American culture. Rather, what we find in the paradigmatic scene of Japhet's staged funereal/party is the troubling dramatization of a desire, from beyond the grave, to reorganize the social along different lines. Drawing on a long tradition of ceremonial scenes involving the mourning of an exceptional woman (I am thinking of those late eighteenth-century wayward girls, not-so-naive-virgins and coquettes, who resist and/or over-identify with their gender roles) the anonymous writer of "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman" appeals to the readership's sympathies, not unlike the way Japhet in death appeals to his neighbors to imagine a world where an eccentric, feminized man occupies the central position, where queer becomes the organizing principle.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

It is almost impossible not to read antebellum America's domestic sentimentalism, arguably the period's dominant (popular) mode of literary expression, as projecting a sympathetic feminine subject/reader suffused with masochistic affect: from Little Eva's classic deathbed scene of evangelical self-

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<sup>2</sup> Eliza Wharton and Charlotte Temple are cases in point.

sacrifice to Ellen Montgomery's bestial desire to be flagellated to Japhet Colbones' staged suicide in drag, these transformative scenes of abjection pervade a consumer culture starved for representations of self-abasement that promise to flesh out readers' affectively malnourished souls.<sup>3</sup> It is as if sentimentalism were an object in search of an injured (feminized) subjectivity it has no trouble finding. Receptive to the pathologized gender implications of this dynamic, a scandalized feminist criticism never tires of "exposing" the inherently masochistic psychic structure of woman as a product of sexist patriarchal fantasies concocted in Freud's late-Victorian mind -- an exposé I generally agree with.<sup>4</sup> But why, then, is domestic sentimentalism such a popular genre? Critical feminist responses to the genre still presume a monolithic gender identity fashioned out of masochism. However, it is possible that the affective spectrum and gender possibilities in antebellum American domestic fiction are more complex than the ones critics continue to presume? James Baldwin identified an inherent cruelty in the tears of the sentimentalist: "Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel . . . it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and

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<sup>3</sup>Aside from the famous scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), I am also referencing Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide, World* (1851). Warner's heroine Ellen Montgomery identifies with the horse being whipped by her fiancée in order to feel the pleasures denied her in her role as the angel in the house. With the example of Japhet Colbones, it is clear that by "feminizing" I mean something that has very little to do with biology.

<sup>4</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" (1931) and "Femininity" (1932). See Elizabeth Grosz and Kaja Silverman on Freud and psychoanalysis.

violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”<sup>5</sup> Taking Baldwin’s lead and expanding the parameters of sentimental fiction to include other writing by (though not always) and about women, this project looks at a feminized canon of writing not to reinscribe women with traditional gender, racial, and affective norms as others have in the past. While I agree with Baldwin’s attack on the colonizing force of sentimental sympathy, for him the cruelty at the center of sentimental fiction belies the insincerity of sympathy, an insincerity allowing for the disavowal of what can in fact be transformative about this fiction. I want to reconsider the sadistic strain in domestic fiction, finding in its inherent cruelty a symptom of patriarchy’s violent process of feminization. This violence is often manifest in feminized, marginal characters who do not seem to fit domestic fiction’s narrative coherence, but instead figure as externalized outbursts that threaten routinizing models of being and belonging.<sup>6</sup>

Critical discussions of sentimentalism tend to focus on either its enabling or disabling self-abasing affects but completely overlook the sadistic strain that turns those sentimental tears into the exteriorized evidence of our deep heartfelt humanity. In a review of much recent critical work on masochism in American culture, Michael Uebel reflects, “in no land has the passion for the rod been as

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<sup>5</sup> See Baldwin’s critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”

<sup>6</sup> The trick is to avoid the cycle of *ressentiment* that Baldwin argues Richard Wright is engaged in against Stowe via Bigger Thomas.

systematically examined and theorized as in America” (389).<sup>7</sup> He goes on to ask, “What makes masochism such a compelling object of study now?” Masochism’s “now-time” becomes an incitement for “the Left to think the unthinkable, beyond the reach of commodity, into the realm of the revolutionary” (Uebel 407).

Masochism is not a forfeiture of power, but an attempt to “recuperate it within different social and libidinal economies” (395). A subject is not worthy of power unless she/he can imagine her/himself in a state of powerlessness. One form of masochistic resistance for Uebel is mass fantasy, where an oppressed group resignifies social suffering “as a prelude to, and in reality a warranty for, the achievement of future satisfaction” (397). Uebel’s take on masochism follows a Christian, the-meek-shall-inherit-the-earth logic. In other words, affect (suffering) precedes justice.

Marianne Noble’s *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (2000) is one such study of the socially and politically promising, world-shattering force of masochism. Clearly following Jane Tompkins’ lead, Noble reads the masochistic strain in texts written by women as a “double-edged sword,” one that articulates oppressive ideologies while at the same time serving as a mode of expression of female desire (6).<sup>8</sup> Taking a provocative, more complex view of

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<sup>7</sup> See Uebel, “Masochism in America” (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Responding to Ann Douglas’ condemnation of the feminization of American culture, Tompkins finds political, social, and literary value in women’s sentimental writings. For instance, she reads Eva’s death not as ridiculous camp, as Douglas does, but rather as representing a female-specific brand of heroic sacrifice, in which Eva’s example represents an alternative to a

the masochism found in several antebellum texts that foreground the experiences of women, Noble reads this pleasure in pain as a “form of self-expression, beautiful—or at least fascinating—once one can see beyond its weirdness” (4). Working within the constraints of patriarchal culture, women writers were able to exercise power and experience pleasure.

However, despite the transgressive dimension Noble finds in sentimental masochism, she implicitly subscribes to the Freudian notion of an inherently masochistic female subjectivity, thereby overlooking the way sentimentalism bribes the reader’s perverse enjoyment in someone else’s suffering with the promise of participatory sympathetic identification (you too will cry), thereby cloaking the violent sadistic act that makes identification with suffering possible. That is, she is too quick in translating sadistic acts of aggression into “inverted form[s] of masochism,” thus short-circuiting a more complex analysis of sentimental literature and the function of desire and enjoyment in subject formation (163).<sup>9</sup>

The pervasive popularity of domestic sentimentalism with women readers suggests that women identify with the chaste, weepy heroines in these narratives. Most clearly do. Yet this is not to say that women readers identify

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patriarchal, capitalist economy. For Tompkins, women can be empowered through the rejection of power (which she reads as always already patriarchal), and men can learn from their example. See Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (1986) and Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977).

<sup>9</sup> See Noble, “An Ecstasy of Apprehension” (1998).

only with masochistic characters, or that the masochistic characters Noble engages are the only models of feminized agency, enjoyment, and expression in antebellum novels. In contrast, this study pays critical attention to the violent underside of feminized culture, engaging the sadistic intensity animating feminized figures who tear the fabric concealing the violence of sympathetic identification often overlooked by critics of the period.<sup>10</sup>

Whether critics find socio-political potential for women in sentimental and domestic fiction and/or masochism, or argue against its pervasive, infantilizing gag on those who advocate for an adult-centered sociality and politics, not many move beyond the critical embrace or outright dismissal of this dominant mode of literary expression. Even Lauren Berlant, who, unlike Noble, sides with Ann Douglas' uncompromising attack on the feminization of American culture, taking Douglas further in an even more "cruel" rejection of sentimentalism, does not engage the negative dimension of sentimentality and its potential to bring down the privatized domestic edifice the genre's "positive" side invites us to inhabit. Overlooking the unsympathetic and murderous Cassy in her reading of the

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of female violence and aggression in American literature, see Linda Grasso, *The Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women's Literature in America, 1820-60* (2002). Grasso argues that when anger is acknowledged as part of the national tradition, women's anger is either ignored or neutralized. She accounts for the disrupting potential of female anger in antebellum America. However, *The Artistry of Anger* does not consider the multiple manifestations of anger, such as violence, sadism, and their attendant enjoyment. Grasso counter-intuitively reads texts in which women's anger is implicit, that is, passively manifest in "illness, acts of sacrifice, supplicating tones, captivity motifs, death, hunger, and emaciated bodies" (7). Such a move, once again, silences unsympathetic and aggressive female figures, and perpetuates the traditional feminist strategy of ignoring the negative, intensive energy of fatal women. Like Noble, Grasso also subscribes to a passive-aggressive understanding of female anger/rage.

effects and uses of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* archive, Berlant does not allow the slave woman's unsentimental negativity to complicate and challenge her analysis of the archive.<sup>11</sup> Cassy is not the only model of cruel, destructive resistance in American culture overlooked in Berlant's work. The only women who are given the chance to address the nation in acts of "diva citizenship" in a pedagogical attempt to persuade those in power to confront the ongoing injustices of racism and sexism are those figures who desire to be "proper," "moral" "women," such as Harriet Jacobs, Lola Leroy, and Anita Hill.<sup>12</sup>

Yet if women who reject upward mobility and the disciplinary effects of sentimentality were to hijack the airwaves, they most likely would make different demands (a rare example of such a moment is when convicted killer Eileen Wornous rants against the court's disregard for her personal history of rape and abuse).<sup>13</sup> Hortense Spiller's discussion of Sapphire, the prostitute figure, is a

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<sup>11</sup> See Berlant, "Poor Eliza" (1998).

<sup>12</sup> See Berlant, "The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Notes on Diva Citizenship" (1997).

<sup>13</sup> Berlant casts the moment in which her "divas" have the nation's attention as desperately pedagogical, describing Hill's testimony before the Senate and the American people as "a scene of teaching and an act of heroic pedagogy, in which the subordinated person feels compelled to recognize the privileged ones, to believe in their capacity to learn and to change" ("The Queen of America" 222). Yet the feminized figures of violence this project engages do not represent moments of heroic pedagogy, but rather moments of sadistic instruction. As Gilles Deleuze explains, the sadist is not interested in persuasion, but rather in demonstration: "The libertine may put on an act of trying to convince and persuade . . . But the intention to convince is merely apparent, for nothing is in fact more alien to the sadist than the wish to convince, to persuade, in short to educate" (18). The sadist instructor stands in contrast to the masochist educator, not needing the subject-object relation. Simply put, it's all about her. She will ask for what she wants but will not beg or plead or try to override differences in an effort to get her audience to relate to her experience of suffering. How could an audience of middle class, white women, for example,

case in point.<sup>14</sup> Sapphire, “monstrous,” “castrating” and hence a “female subject with the power to name,” a product of the “peculiar institution” that legally turned blacks into not just bodies but flesh, cannot be a wife, mother, or woman. She is inhuman, and as Spillers argues, rather than force Sapphire into the “ranks of gendered femaleness,” we do well to heed Sapphire’s lesson of claiming that monstrosity her culture blindly assigns to her and “rewrite[ing] after all a radically different text for female empowerment,” one in stark contrast to the pedagogical act of diva citizenship (229).

Whereas Spillers advocates a strategic embracing of the troubling monstrosity assigned to black women as one of the few avenues of resistance open to them in the aftermath of slavery and the destruction of the black family, Berlant prefers a kind of reform in which black women can effect social change in the process of becoming respectable liberal citizens. Given Berlant’s alignment of Jacobs with Leroy and Hill, Jacobs, who also is a slave and therefore not a woman, can be read as desiring the respectability of a “proper” woman rather than directing that “monstrous,” inhuman energy against the very nation that categorized her as such. Any aggressive dissent in Jacobs becomes silenced in Berlant’s reading: Jacobs’ vexing sexual pleasure, as well as her redeployment of culturally dominant modes of association and generic forms against her

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identify with the “castrating,” “monstrous” Sapphire or Cassy, who certainly do not desire to pass on Eva’s lesson of self sacrifice?

<sup>14</sup> See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987).

“sympathetic,” abolitionist white readers and editor, are transformed in the pedagogical register of the injured subject.

In my readings of nineteenth-century American texts, written by both women and men, I will address what feminized sadistic figures, such as Cassy and Sapphire, desire and how they expose and alter the structures of dominance that define their existence. Such characters strategize within outmoded, premodern (e.g. the convent and plantation) systems of punishment, short-circuiting the interiorization of their lives defined by an emerging disciplinary culture.<sup>15</sup> Accounting for dissenting figures who either actively reject the models and identities, namely, marriage/motherhood, available to them in a dominant culture saturated in sentimental masochism, or who cannot even aspire to belong and participate in them (e.g. slaves like Jacobs), this project is not invested in rescuing women from charges of violence, aggression, and cruelty as simply justified responses to patriarchal violence and injustice. Rather than perpetuating mainstream feminism’s implicit belief in the idea that women are essentially nonviolent, this project, in contrast, engages feminized, “monstrous” symbolic agents of violence more invested in pulling down the dominant institutions, identities, and modes of association that condition their lives.<sup>16</sup> I read

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<sup>15</sup> For a critique of the calculating, more invasive cruelty of disciplinary models, specifically in reference to the transition from slavery to the supposed “freedom” of African Americans in the nineteenth century, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. For the broader historical shift in modernity from punishment to discipline, see Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

acts of eroticized violence as instantiating other ways of being and other ways of associating. Embodying sadistic intensity and aggression in opposition to the disabling cruel affects of sentimental masochism, these figures offer glimpses, however unsustained, of other possibilities and intimacies not tied to romanticized notions of democratic community or heteronormative familial models.<sup>17</sup>

So proceed with caution: these characters are not likable or sympathetic. They often have no interest in conventional models of community. In fact, they are straight-up nasty, finding criminal homosociality in infanticide (Maria Monk), oppositional subjectivities in acts “so perverse” and “malicious” that the author questions their humanity (Hawthorne’s Pearl), and strategies for survival that

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<sup>16</sup> As Elizabeth Grosz points out, the moment a subject thinks she has escaped power, she is actually within its grip. Grosz argues that, “Power is not the enemy of feminism but its ally. The goal of feminism cannot simply involve the dismantling of power, or its equal distribution . . . Feminists must aim at the reordering of power, not its elimination, that is, at the expedient use of power and its infinite capacities for transformation and rewriting” (qtd. in Noble 10). Grosz’s insistence that women get comfortable with power can be found in sex-positive feminism. For instance, Gayle Rubin’s proud leather identity speaks to productive engagement with the relation between sex and power. Rubin’s groundbreaking anthropological work on BDSM and fisting communities among GLBT folk, as well as her defense of pornography against anti-porn feminists has been an inspiring and influential model for my project. Rubin explores the socially and politically transformative “reordering of power” played out in lesbian BDSM, for example.

<sup>17</sup> This project articulates the important insights of historians John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman about sexuality in the U.S. In *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1997) they argue, following Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis,” that “The history of American sexuality is not one of progress from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom” (xi). For them, “sexuality has been continually reshaped by the changing nature of the economy, the family, and politics” (xi). Embodiments of feminized sadism in antebellum America highlight and challenge our twenty-first century impoverished notions of intimacy/pleasure and check our assumptions about the nation’s sexual past as one marked by repression.

often require keeping one's indecisive sisters-in-the-struggle in line under the threat of death (Cassy's intimidation of Emmeline in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*).

### III.

In order to analyze the dialectical relation between the inherent violence in the feminization of women and the sadistic acts it engenders, it might be a good idea to start with that matrix of sentimental, masochistic self-abjection known as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe we are forced to confront the challenge of theorizing sadism within the context of slavery. One possible objection to following this course is that the subject is so obvious that it should not require analysis: slavery was inherently cruel and sadistic. To be sure, my point is not to radicalize Cassy's actions. After all, Cassy is nothing but a product of a white woman's racist imagination. Stowe must create the cruel Cassy in order to justify her evangelical crusade. The text would have us believe that Cassy ultimately succumbs to sentimentality when reunited with her long-lost daughter, whose evangelical moral example seemingly transforms the disaffected mother into a loving mother.

In contrast to the reformist, reconciling function the text seems to dictate, the reading that I am suggesting imagines Cassy as a necessary autonomous figure constantly "thwarting" Stowe's interests. If Eva draws readers' attention to her lesson of self sacrifice, offering a sense of community, allowing us to participate as we cry for her, Cassy's gothic narrative keeps sympathetic readers

at arm's length, daring us to try even to relate to the sexual and physical violence she is subject to. Although Stowe may have written these gothic ruptures to distance and thus "protect" readers from the violence of Legree's plantation, the figure of Cassy instead turns this protection for the delicate ears of white (mostly female) readers into a warning, a "don't you dare identify/colonize" moment of textual distancing. The moments of terror are not so much enacted by Cassy in the narrative but by those sympathetic readers who override important racial differences in trying to relate to her struggle.<sup>18</sup>

Making Legree's plantation a place of horrendous abuse and cruelty not only allows Stowe an opportunity to imagine alternative sites like the Quaker Settlement, but Legree's plantation itself becomes an alternate site where fictive possibilities and oppositional subjectivities can emerge. As such, I read Legree's plantation as what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia, a space not to be confused with a utopia, counter- or subculture.<sup>19</sup> Heterotopias are a "kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 239). For Foucault, the ship, brothel, and convent are some examples of heterotopias. These sites are often linked to "slices in time" as they

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<sup>18</sup> In *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997) Teresa Goddu reads the reality of slavery in nineteenth-century American literature within a gothic framework. The horrors of slavery are revealed through gothic conventions, constantly erupting and disrupting the national narrative. Yet Goddu neutralizes Cassy's violence by describing her as a minstrel figure.

<sup>19</sup> See Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1984).

“open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies” (242). They function at full capacity when subjects break with traditional time operating in dominant culture, presupposing “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (243). Entry is either compulsory or else the subject must submit to rites of initiation.

In Stowe’s novel, Legree’s plantation is a space not of “benevolent” discipline (e.g. like St. Clare’s plantation), but rather a space of punishment.<sup>20</sup> As such, Legree’s plantation exists out of time, evoking an imminent historical shift with punishment on its way out: “Legree, like some potentates we read of in history, governed his plantation by a sort of resolution of forces” (Stowe 354). It is precisely in this space of naked power that Cassy, immune to disciplinary forms, can exploit the premodern, fantastic superstitions and fears that haunt Legree and turn them against him.

If the heterotopic space of the plantation can figure as a space of unspeakable inhumanity where slave women replicate white brutality in acts of infanticide that horrified white readers, the convent, also a racialized site in the American imaginary, represented a place of depravity where white femininity was held in bondage and at the mercy of monsters posing as saints. What the convent tale and the plantation novel share thematically is a fascination with an

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Brodhead, drawing on Foucault, argues that modern forms of discipline “replace the old disciplinary mode with new technologies—less visible but more pervasive, less ‘cruel’ but more deeply controlling” (69). See “Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America” (1988).

imprisoned objectivized feminine sexuality whose violation brings forth the embodiment of innocence in newborns that are yet again made to suffer either by being sold away from the cruel eyes of the white mistress who searched for her husband's features in the face of every child, or in the infanticides that fill the pages of both genres. Sympathy for beset femininity and its doomed offspring turns into an outrage against institutions that limit the potential of what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurity." The horror perpetuated by these institutions is that the brutalization of innocence in turn manifests itself in further acts of brutality. Black and white figures are then caught in a perpetual cycle of violence. The infanticide becomes the figure of potentiality-denied-innocence whose spectral presence haunts the social dimension of American culture. Centered on images of fetuses and children, the U.S national symbolic (dominant institutions and practices) is erected around the spectral figure of the child whose naiveté and purity are fetishized as objects to be enshrined and desired.<sup>21</sup> Critics like Edelman have recently argued that today's dominant politics are ideologically driven by reproductive futurism, a politics of perpetual deferred hope for "tomorrow's children," which discourages political action in the present.<sup>22</sup> Both

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<sup>21</sup> See Berlant, "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship," and "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus" in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.

<sup>22</sup> See Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In his defense of the unmarried, narcissistic pedophile Scrooge, Edelman poses the following challenge to the GLBT community: "Why not acknowledge our kinship at last with Scrooge who, unregenerate, refuses the social imperative to grasp futurity in the form of the Child, for the sake of whom, as the token of accession to Imaginary wholeness [which the subject can never accomplish], everything else in the world, by force needed, must give way?" (49). Edelman refreshingly advocates the following

feminists and queer theorists interested in dislodging the figure of the child from the center of politics and articulating an adult-centered politics/sociality can find in nineteenth-century American literature a rich, unsentimentalized archive of “monstrous” feminized figures whose brutal acts of infanticide symbolically destroy the oppressive social institutions articulated on behalf of that child.<sup>23</sup>

The figure of the Child has been critiqued rightly as instantiating disabling normative discourses deployed to regulate the already impoverished public lives of adults in the U.S. Yet despite Berlant’s and Edelman’s convincing arguments, does “the child” offer anything socially and politically strategic to an adult-centered politics? Although I argue against the dominant forms and logics of infantile citizenship, in throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, we might miss the disruptive/dissenting energy associated with children’s selfish

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imperative, and it is about time a queer theorist did so as many in our community opt for heteronormativity, further marginalizing those who are already abjected: “Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations [of negativity, of pathology, and most importantly, of death] not only by avowing our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand here anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Is and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29).

<sup>23</sup> To be sure, I am in no way endorsing infanticide. My reading of it engages its symbolic power in an attempt to displace the sentimental, spectralized figure of the innocent child which authorizes the social models that condition the lives of adults. Instances of infanticide in antebellum literature are difficult, yet important textual moments to engage. The adult woman does not die so that the infant may live: Cassy “mourned and cried over it [her act of infanticide],” but she claims that, “it’s one of the few things that I’m glad of, now, I am not sorry to this day” (Stowe 375). Sethe is not sent back to the Sweet Home plantation because her master, Schoolteacher, believes her insane for killing her infant daughter. Later in the text, inspired by her daughter Denver’s jealousy of Beloved, Sethe taps into her own selfish energy in order to let her guilt, and Beloved, be exorcised from the spiteful 124. In these instances, the dominant script of the heroine dying at the end of the novel so that the child survives is undermined.

petulancy. It is precisely this intrinsic “narcissism” that, if left unchecked, might turn sweet, young girls into child-hating monsters who violently resist the passage to maturity as defined by dominant culture. This project makes a case for a latent, selfish immaturity ascribed to young girls and women in nineteenth-century texts. While infantilization has obviously worked against women, as patriarchy’s move to de-authorize female agency, the negative energy I identify in these characters not only actively resists the gendering of proper femininity but also limns the outlines of a different model of being. Hester Prynne’s obstinacy, no doubt inspired by her daughter Pearl’s cruelty, Topsy’s intractable “racial nature,” and Cassandra Morgeson’s oral-anal sadism, all set in motion and make visible disciplinary models that operate through the double articulation of infantilization and feminization, while at the same time producing an inassimilable surplus over and against these dominant twin processes of female subjectivation.

Refusing the passage to adulthood by resisting proper models of being and association, these characters are symptomatic of nineteenth-century America’s preoccupation with the efficacy of dominant modes of relationality and being that organized life and subjectivity, such as marriage and motherhood. These characters embody an id-like selfishness that short-circuits self-sacrifice to hetero-normative temporality. Their stubborn demeanors and sadistic acts are

indicative of resistance to the passage to maturity defined by patriarchal culture.<sup>24</sup>

Inhabiting an infantizing form of social death, these characters are promised civic maturity through gendering channels of social being and belonging whose function is to organize and manage the whole of social life. Read as figures always in need of sentimental reform, these characters over-identify with the negativity ascribed to them by patriarchy in a mad effort to redefine social existence. Stripped of civic entitlement, such figures inhabit a space of death, what Julia Stern describes as the crypt in which the socially dead lie inadequately buried (2).<sup>25</sup> Sentimental literature, predominately a feminized genre, often expresses a deep sense of melancholia, an unfinished process of grieving, over the unrealized rights and privileges that seemed so promising at the onset of the democratic project. This process of unfinished mourning manifests itself in instances of rage and violence that are revealed and veiled by the heightened feelings and expressions of sentimentality. These sporadic outbursts bear witness to the violence visited upon the socially dead (slaves,

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<sup>24</sup> See Judith Halberstam on what she coins as “queer temporality” in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgendered Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005). Halberstam provides a useful critique of hetero-temporality and dominant culture’s passage to maturity (marriage, parenthood, retirement, when adults finally “begin” their lives, and death). However, Halberstam uncritically upholds subcultures as sites of alternative temporalities and resistance. In contrast, my project is not interested in glorifying counter- or subcultures as privileged sites of social belonging nor does it claim that the sadistic feminized figures I consider belong to a sub-or counter-culture despite my intuition that they make up a cruel sorority.

<sup>25</sup> See Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (1997).

freed blacks, Native Americans, women, children, and the poor), showing that the nation's "sentimental topsoil" is constantly disturbed by its "gothic bedrock" (4).<sup>26</sup>

It is precisely in this negative space of death where noncitizens, particularly the feminized characters that concern me, once bereft of the privilege of entitlement and the symbolic models that prop up the social, and faced with what Lacan calls "subjective destitution," desperately hold onto the pathologized symptom that identifies them, thus embodying a real threat both to themselves and the social order.<sup>27</sup> The risk in this project is in finding disruptive potential in an infantilized femininity without being trapped within that patriarchal articulation. Yet the dangerous feminization of subjectivity with its attendant infantilization

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<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Russ Castronovo traces civic death to the way that the nation's founding democratic principles are articulated as a discourse of death. See his *Necro Citizenship* (2001). However, unlike Stern, Castronovo reads the desire for freedom as a kind of death wish. Patrick Henry's "liberty or death" is translated as "liberty *and* death" in the postrevolutionary settlement and thus the purchase of liberty comes with a heavy price, one that turns citizens and noncitizens into specters desiring but never achieving the state's promise.

<sup>27</sup> The goal of psychoanalysis is to get the patient to achieve subjective destitution by traversing the fantasy, that is, when the analysand realizes that her/his existence does not depend on her/his symbolically identified mandate from the big Other. The danger of course is that subjective destitution might lead to psychosis, so in order to protect her/himself against madness and the void left after the total destruction of the symbolic universe, the patient holds onto her/his symptom. Not yet prepared to renounce this pathological formation, the subject suffuses her/his symptom with enjoyment, transforming symptom to *sinthome* and thus affording it existence, as Žižek notes, "not only beyond its interpretation but even beyond fantasy." For Žižek, "Symptom, conceived as *sinthome* [a signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment], is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way we—the subjects—'avoid madness,' the way we 'choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)' through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world" (*Sublime Object* 75).

produces a surplus of enjoyment that could potentially allow for different subjective formations, pleasures, and sociality.

While being mindful of the pervasiveness of reform in the nineteenth century, this project makes a case for the ontological primacy of enjoyment as an organizing principle of the social.<sup>28</sup> That is, what brings the apparatus of reform into being belongs to the realm of the Real but finds articulation in the imaginary, in literature. That it takes on gothic forms in the texts I read speaks to enjoyment's destabilizing potential. By enjoyment, I mean what Lacanian theory refers to as *jouissance*, the traumatic trace of existence, what remains after castration (language acquisition). This slippery, substantial surplus, always exceeding language's grasp, frustrates and mobilizes discursive systems that attempt to come to terms with the existence of this substance. It is important to note that in and of itself, enjoyment is not subversive or transformative. Rather it insists on its dumb existence. The symptoms of enjoyment that register in the texts that make up this project exceed the aims of reform without wholly subsuming enjoyment's disruptive potential. Enjoyment exceeds the limits of discourse, also belonging to the subject's lived experience in all her density.<sup>29</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of *jouissance*, see Slavoj Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies*.

<sup>29</sup> As Žižek argues, "*Jouissance* is thus the 'place' of the subject—one is tempted to say: his 'impossible' Being-there, *Da-Sein*; and, for that very reason, the subject is always-already displaced, out-of-joint, with regard to it. Therein lies the primordial 'decentration' of the Lacanian subject: much more radical and elementary than the decentrement of the subject with regard to the 'big Other,' the symbolic order which is the external place of the subject's truth, is the decentrement with regard to the traumatic Thing-*jouissance* which the subject can never 'subjectivize,' assume, integrate. *Jouissance* is that notorious *heimliche* which is simultaneously

the chapters that follow, I make a case for the transformative possibilities for imagining the social open to the subject when she over-identifies with that which dominant culture tells her she ought to reject, suppress, or channel into socially acceptable forms.

If trauma exceeds the limits of the Symbolic Order (i.e. the social), how, one might ask, can one find a sustainable alternative sociality to one predicated on suppression and normative socialization? We might look to the work of Lynda Hart and Laura Kipnis as a way to begin to answer this question. I am indebted to Lynda Hart and Laura Kipnis who argue forcefully for both the risk and transformative potential of over-identifying with those affects and acts that dominant culture deems “wrong,” “violent,” and “unhealthy,” from S/M (Hart) to adultery (Kipnis).<sup>30</sup> For both critics, a more just, radical sociality can result from seemingly antisocial behavior. Kipnis describes art’s potential, in the fantasies put forth in literature, film, and paintings, for instance, to disrupt psychic structures and therefore alter social structures:

If selves are constituted through networks of institutional, symbolic, and material everyday practices, then given the homologies between psychic and social structures, sufficiently disrupting the

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the most *unheimliche*, always-already here and, precisely as such, always-already lost” (*Plague* 49).

<sup>30</sup> See Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadoomasochism* and Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic*. For an analysis of the intimacies that come out of addressing and replaying trauma in safe spaces like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, see also Anne Cvetkovich’s *Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. In keeping with Hart and Kipnis’ strategy of finding transformative potential in “bad” behavior, Cvetkovich makes a case for reading both lesbianism and S/M as brilliant solutions to, rather than pathological results of, rape/incest.

first, must, in some corresponding way, rattle the latter . . .at the very least, shaking things up emblemizes the possibilities of subjective dissidence from symbolic law. (30-1)

In other words, if we challenge and change the fantasy that props up the social, then we might change the social. For Kipnis, adultery becomes a metaphor for breaking with the monogamous couple form and re-inventing how a diverse spectrum of intimacies might look in a world not structured around the conventional, privatized institution of marriage and family, which serves to organize bodies and property, often in disabling ways. In this spirit, the texts that I engage offer up different fantasies, however unsustained and sometimes at odds with the main line of the story, that challenge both antebellum and contemporary America's dominant (and mostly unjust) models for being and belonging.

Often nonstandard intimacies and families of choice are formed out of trauma. Given the violence that is at the center of disciplinary institutions like the family, it is not surprising that many folks do not move through such spaces without experiencing some form of trauma, whether it is the violence of proper gendering or more extreme forms like rape/incest. Hart then finds in what often gets read as pathological behavior like S/M self-empowerment and new forms of sociality for survivors of trauma. Reading Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Hart argues that the survivor of can reclaim her body, experience pleasure, and create an empowering sociality by replaying the trauma through

S/M, which de-dramatizes the violence, and changes the meaning that defines the act and its power dynamic. Drawing on the language of psychoanalysis, Hart encourages one to “traverse the fantasy” by over-identifying with the symptom (here sadism and/or masochism), and resignifying the trauma through repetition. This requires abandoning one’s prostheses (that prop up the Symbolic and keep one from changing one’s life), and embracing the free fall into what Hart describes as the “abyss” (200). Then the social can be reimagined from the ground up.

I find that Hart’s challenge to confront trauma by over-identifying with what dominant culture reads as pathological, and Kipnis’ challenge to embrace the “negative” tendencies women are supposed to reject, from narcissism (instead of self-hatred), selfishness (instead of self-sacrifice), and cruelty (instead of the desire to be well-regarded) are reverberated in the feminized figures at the center of this project. These characters move through institutions (albeit experiencing violence in varying degrees) from the conventional family to marriage to slavery. What Hart identifies as personal trauma, Stern locates in a broader historical sense: the failure of the revolution to deliver on its promises. Whereas for her and critics like Russ Castronovo, subjects remain arrested in states of grief and civic death, I find in the nation’s gothic bedrock, as represented by fatal figures, a social radicality and aggressive rejection of the institutions that render subjects

civically and socially dead and locked in grief and despair over the unfulfilled promises of the revolution.

The cataclysmic acts that define the texts in this project are encrypted in gothic conventions. The texts are either vehicles of social reform texts (*Awful Disclosures* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or flirt with conventions of reform (*The House of Seven Gables* and *The Morgesons*).<sup>31</sup> None are gothic novels proper, yet given that the gothic genre, since the eighteenth century, has signified excess, transgression, and monstrosity, it is fitting that the terroristic acts and social radicality that I find in these texts would erupt in gothic conventions.<sup>32</sup> The myths we tell ourselves and accept as “natural” are often reproduced in literature and contested in gothic fiction; for instance, myths about gender identity that are used to justify the oppression of women are disrupted in these texts through gothic conventions that extravagantly reimagine the limits of literature, the social and history.

Embodying an apocalyptic energy and granting themselves the power over life and death (usually patriarchy's providence), these feminized figures have no desire to aspire to proper white femininity through marriage/motherhood.

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<sup>31</sup> For a study of how the gothic becomes a way for Americans to comprehend and articulate historical trauma, specifically slavery, see Theresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. For Goddu, gothic conventions have a historical referent in New World slavery.

<sup>32</sup> For an introductory study of the gothic genre, both American and European, see Fred Botting, *Gothic*, and for a discussion of monstrous women in the eighteenth century (the predecessors of my feminized figures) that draws on gothic conventions and sensibility, see Adriana Craciun's *Fatal Women of Romanticism*. I am indebted to Craciun for encouraging my interest in these dangerous figures and the transformative potential they embody.

They become monstrous in the process. Because this project centers on fiction by (though not always) and about what the dominant culture reads a feminized figures, the gothic, much like its more respectable cousin the social reform novel, becomes a perfect vehicle for both unleashing and then containing female (sexual) monstrosity (as we see in the sexually omnivorous and socially imaginative character Lucy in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*).<sup>33</sup> It would seem that given such a dynamic, the law requires transgression as its supplement, both feeding off of one another in a perpetual loop of containment and subversion. However, rather than perpetuate the cat-and-mouse logic of containment/subversion, I find a stronger intervention in figures who over-identify with their symptom of enjoyment, enacting in the process an eclipse of self and world that holds the potential for bringing into being realities not yet imagined. I find in them a radical sociality at odds with emerging disciplinary institutions that impoverish public life. These moments are encrypted in gothic conventions that, in keeping with the genre, temporally dislocate us (evoking the Old World and its culture of punishment, at odds with emerging disciplinary culture), giving us alternatives to dominant institutions.

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<sup>33</sup> Unable to choose one husband from three promising suitors, Lucy asks Mina why a woman must only choose one husband (111). Lucy gets her wish when all three suitors give her blood transfusions to keep her alive after she is "bitten" by Dracula. Here we have a fantastic moment as Dracula and the suitors all exchange their fluids in Lucy. In order to stay alive, Lucy needs all of the suitors that she can get. One simply will not do. A more chaste version of this dynamic we find in *The House of Seven Gables* on when Alice Pyncheon spends the night with Matthew Maule (her master) and his new bride.

The content and form of the project's texts are in keeping with one another: both embody a flamboyant, over-the-top "aesthetic of the extreme," to use Lauren Berlant's term (Introduction to *Intimacy* 5). The eroticized acts I analyze, grounded in negativity (violence), allow for incipient forms of contact. Berlant terms these unconventional intimacies not sanctioned by dominant institutions "minor intimacies," arguing that

desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narratives it generates have no alternative plots. Let alone few laws and stable spaces in culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to . . . the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon? As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures. (5)

The over-the-top acts of aggression that inform the texts represent Berlant's "aesthetics of the extreme," which bring minor intimacies into being. Non-standard intimacies become occasions for rethinking the social beyond the predictable conventions most antebellum fiction give us. Many of the texts that this project engages are written in a jagged, abrupt style, like Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* and Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, a style best suited to convey non-standard intimacies and pleasures not easily articulated.

As with the expression of minor intimacies, minor characters often embody an extreme, over-the-top intensity. In my Hawthorne chapter, I read his infamous "daughters," the marginal characters Pearl and Alice Pyncheon, as the figures that he takes the most risks with. In my chapter on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I read

Stowe as taking the most risks with the marginal Cassy (as I discussed earlier). The transformative potential in these texts is found in their secondary and tertiary characters that act the most aggressively and refuse to compromise in their vision.<sup>34</sup> These characters often go unnoticed. The minor character, unlike the more three-dimensional protagonist, contains a single-minded intensity in her flatness. These writers take less risks with their protagonists, who are more “complex and “ambivalent,” often tortured by their own moral stasis and unwillingness or inability to act. For instance, Tom, a product of discipline, submits to his “benevolent” master but Cassy scares Legree to death and burns down the plantation.

As I read *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Seven Gables*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, I was taken with the minor characters and found that I did not have to read “marginal” antebellum texts to find moments of subversion. I found in canonical works such as these a radicality embodied in the minor characters at odds with the sometimes reformist (Stowe) and always compromising (Hawthorne) main line of the texts. Inspired by Tom Stoppard, I read these classic texts against the grain through their minor characters, turning the narratives inside out by focusing on the text’s almost “hidden” transformative

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<sup>34</sup> On the importance of minor characters in the nineteenth-century novel, see Alex Woloch, *The One VS. The Many: Minor Character and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Although often dismissed by literary theory, Woloch seeks to redefine literary characterization in terms of a “distributional matrix,” “how the discrete representation of any specific individual is intertwined with the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe” (14).

vision often overlooked by critics. Sometimes they become completely different stories than the ones critics have been telling about the novels, as in the ways in which Cassy gives us a radical vision at odds with Stowe's brand of sentimental reform—when read through Cassy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a different book.

As my analysis of minor characters attests to, my main critical strategy in this project is close reading; the claims that I make about the social radicality of these antebellum texts is found in the novels themselves. Although I use contemporary queer theory as a way to enrich my analysis of the fiction, I am in no ways forcing queer theory onto the texts. All of the evidence is found in the texts themselves. That these textual examples resonate with queer theory only speaks to how close we are to antebellum America: what we desire, imagine, hope for, the ways in which we want to see our world remade. Our historical moments rub up against one another. This kind of “temporal drag,” this historical “touching” are phrases that queer theorists like Elizabeth Freeman and Carolyn Dinshaw (respectively) have come up with for theorizing the ways in which our desires as queers in contemporary America speak to the desires of those queers in centuries past, for Freeman, nineteenth-century America, and for Dinshaw, Medieval England.<sup>35</sup> In some ways, the antebellum figures that I engage can be

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<sup>35</sup> See Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, Karma Lochrie *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (another queer study of the Middle Ages), and Christopher Nealon, *Foundings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*. See the 2009 issue of *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* edited by

called what Christopher Nealon terms “foundlings,” a term for “queer disaffiliation from and desire for family, nation, and history” (2). Rejecting and often times working to destroy the dominant institutions that impoverish their lives, the figures I center this project around represent a yearning for other ways of being and belonging not structured around conventional notions of family and nation. That their desires speak to ours connects us affectively and historically to antebellum America. To use Joan Copjec’s phrase, “historicity must not be ceded to historians” (X).<sup>36</sup> For Copjec, the “official” historical archive does not account for enjoyment. Foreclosed from the symbolic register, enjoyment manifests itself in symptoms (i.e. the minor characters I read), symptoms emplotted in gothic conventions that figure as “alien, anachronistic figures, specters from the past and harbingers of the future” (ix). The gothic becomes a vehicle for the articulation and legibility of these symptoms of enjoyment.

What follows is a brief summary of each chapters. I read both canonical and non-canonical texts written by both men and women, although the texts that

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Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Looby, dedicated to new work on sexuality studies and nineteenth-century America.

<sup>36</sup> Copjec argues, “For the incomplete—and permanently so—accessibility of any moment to itself, its partial absence from itself, forbids historicism’s motivating premise: that the past must be understood in its own terms. This is a simple impossibility: no historical moment can be comprehended in its own terms; the circuit of self-recognition or coincidence with itself which would enable such comprehension is deflected by an investment that cannot be recuperated for self-knowledge. This impossibility causes each historical moment to flood with alien, anachronistic figures, specters from the past and harbingers of the future. Historicity is what issues from this inevitable and constitutive misapprehension of ourselves—from what Freud would call the latency must not be positivized, as though something lay dormant but already formed in the past, and simply waited to emerge at some future time; this would indeed be a continuist notion. Instead, latency designates our inaccessibility to ourselves” (ix). See Copjec’s Introduction to *Supposing the Subject*.

fall in the latter category like *Awful Disclosures* and *The Morgesons* are being taught and written about with more regularity now than they were a decade ago. I read each in chronological order of publication, finding the most imaginative potential and fantastic social visions in the earlier texts. However, as the century progresses, we witness the worldview and horizon of possibilities becoming foreclosed.<sup>37</sup>

#### IV.

Engaging its exuberant fantasies, Chapter Two, “Bad Habits,” reads Maria Monk’s convent tale *Awful Disclosures: of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836) within the context of antebellum, anti-Catholic literature that pulled double duty as both sentimental reform and pornography, what David Reynolds describes as “dark reform.” Drawing on the conventions of sentimental literature, convent tales often required audiences to sympathize with the plight of the helpless nun at the hands of her cruel Catholic captors. However, having once “escaped” from such an awful place, Monk returns to the convent only to “escape” and return again, thus setting up a cyclic narrative pattern. This chapter will engage Monk’s penchant for repetition made manifest in her desire to return to the scene of

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<sup>37</sup> Ann Douglas argues that the drive to re-imagine the socio-political context that informs *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, is not present in Stowe’s later novels. The lack of change in dominant culture, specifically its ongoing unjust treatment of women, turned Stowe “bitter” (Douglas 244). The “little girl” whose work surpassed that of her minister father (Lyman Beecher) and brother (Henry Ward Beecher) abandons her ethical work to write novels that center on “the scene of man abject under feminine rule” (244). Her horizon of possibilities narrows as her characters become solely concerned with domestic tyranny rather than effecting change on a large scale. See *The Feminization of American Culture*.

debasement. Querying why, if dominant antebellum culture is a space saturated with sentimental self-abasement, as Noble has argued, Monk would need to return to the convent in order to experience the pleasures of abjection, this chapter explores the darker side of sympathy for the captive nun. With its endless catalogue of punishments and the clear absence of moral judgment, *Awful Disclosures* is at odds with the sentimental strain in most reform literature.

Throughout the narrative, Monk refuses to play the victim's role, relishing instead her position as the agent of punishment, thereby thwarting the logic and language of sentimental reform, which tends to rely on the reader's sympathy with the abject. Rejecting the affective trope of persuasion for the task of describing, in a sexually charged way, the vicious and violent behavior of women in the convent, Monk's Sadean world exposes in its over-the-top theatricality the power dynamic that renders the "angel in the house" at the negative pole in the spectrum of power.

I then argue that it is not abjection that Monk desires but the expression of sadistic rage. Monk's narrative tells a queer story of possible homosociality grounded in infanticide. In repeated acts of sadistic cruelty, *Awful Disclosures* chokes the life out of the angelic child whose often-martyred death binds the community of sentimental mourners. Monk's sorority is predicated on deaths that reveal the violence at the heart of the sentimental tradition. Rejecting both marriage and motherhood, she is able to find a homosocial community in the

convent where discipline is laid bare as cruel punishment, a system and logic in which she can exercise agency. I read this narrative of convent life as a heterotopic discursive space where same-sex bonds are established through eroticized acts of rage and aggression that are encrypted in gothic conventions. More than just anti-Catholic propaganda, *Awful Disclosures* creates a fantastic space where agency is re-imagined.

Chapter Three, “Hawthorne’s Unwanted ‘Daughters,’” reads the characters of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* (1851) and Alice Pyncheon in *The House of Seven Gables* (1853) as progenies who cannot or will not fit within an idealized version of domestic familial “bliss.” Literary analysis has not paid much attention to young girls in antebellum texts, yet as discussed earlier, the petulance these characters embody offers an elementary critique of a sanitized sociality, thereby forcing us to rethink the forms and logics that chart the passage to adulthood for U.S. women. Both embody a narcissistic selfishness that feminists and queer theorists should not disregard in their critique of the figure of the Child. In some respects, Pearl emerges as a better feminist model than Hester does. For example, Hawthorne describes Pearl’s violence (e.g. throwing stones at boys who shame Hester) as “so perverse” and “malicious” that he questions her humanity. Refusing to internalize abjection in her active defense of her mother, Pearl “laugh[s] anew . . . like a thing incapable and unintelligent of human sorrow” (91). When Hester mourns her loss of community, Pearl

“frown[s], clench[es] her fists, and harden[s] her small features into a stern, unsympathizing look of discontent,” as if intuiting her mother’s pathetic desire to belong to a community that will not accept her. Pearl’s sadistic, instructive resistance to Hester’s mournful tears thereby checks the desire to subscribe to the infantilizing lure of national belonging and the empty promises of hetero-conventionality.

If Pearl represents an almost savage anomaly, Alice Pyncheon, in contrast, seems like an obedient, dutiful daughter. Resisting her impending marriage arranged by her father to a European nobleman, Alice “falls” under the spell of her father’s enemy, Matthew Maule, allowing herself not to be used as a pawn in her father’s plan to marry her off in exchange for the symbolic capital of nobility. An active agent in her own seduction, Alice takes herself out of the triangulated traffic in women that leaves her with very few options.<sup>38</sup> Sabotaging reproductive futurism, she avoids the forms, logics, and pleasures of patriarchal culture, opting instead to stay within the heterotopic space of the ancient Pyncheon house.<sup>39</sup> Along with Hepzibah and Clifford, Alice short-circuits the

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<sup>38</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, from Levi-Strauss to Lacan, of the ways in which men have traded women as token of exchange through dominant institutions to solidify patriarchal power, see Gayle Rubin’s “Traffic in Women.” For an analysis of the homosocial bonds between men often routed through a nonsexual relationship with a woman, see Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Castiglia reads the Pyncheon family garden (where Alice’s erotically-charged posies grow) in a similar vein. With its “lawless plants,” the garden is in a liminal space in nature for deviants, queers, and nonconformists outside the home but not in the public sphere. See *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (2008).

passage to “proper” adulthood as defined by her father. Yet, her relationship with Maule comes to an end when he succumbs to the pressures of heteronormativity and marries.<sup>40</sup> Their farewell, however, bares traces of an alternative to the heterosexual couple form. In a striking scene, Maule and his new bride spend their wedding night with Alice, yet the possibility of another way of associating is foreclosed when Alice dies the next morning. However, her spirit lingers indefinitely in the Pyncheon house until Holgrave and Phoebe marry, bringing about the spirit’s final exorcism.

In Chapter Four I read the logic of sentimental romance against itself in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by foregrounding one of Stowe’s minor characters, the slave woman Cassy. The unsympathetic and murderous Cassy has been overlooked in readings of the novel, not allowing Stowe’s fantasy of a slave woman to work against the author’s predominant interpellative, sympathetic logic. Yet Cassy, though marginal, is a magnet of intensive energy. Reading the novel through Cassy turns the text inside out; it is no longer the Christ-like Tom at the center of the story (who is already reformed) but rather the terrifying and electrifying Cassy (she violently resists Stowe’s brand of disciplinary intimacy and

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<sup>40</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner inaugurate the term heteronormativity in their seminal queer theory essay, “Sex in Public” (1998). They define heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory forms) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment . . . Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might *not* be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality” (312).

even at the novel's end is not fully "reformed" like Tom). No wonder critics who are not quite sure what to do with her reduce her to a minstrel figure. If contemporary critics can domesticate Stowe's novel by ignoring the sadistic Cassy, we do well to turn our attention to a contemporary rewriting of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Cassy's perspective. Only then might we come to terms with the text's truly transformative potential.

Chapter Five, "There's No Place Like Home?," reads Elizabeth Stoddard's recently discovered novel *The Morgesons* (1862). Cassandra Morgeson, an older version of Pearl, is incredibly self-centered. She selfishly refuses the empty conventionality that posits equality as the healthy norm of human relations. Unless she is on top, Cassandra won't play. Anticipating Virginia Woolf's edict that women must choke the life out of "the angel in the house" (their mothers), Cassandra dis-identifies with her passive mother and overly identifies with her father's phallic power. Sometimes enabling models are found in unlikely places: in this case, in patriarchy. As an embodiment of a Nietzschean "will to power," Cassandra represents a murderous energy that allows her to experience erotic pleasure when her romantic love interests are symbolically castrated or killed off. Her sadistic acts return the erotic to the body in a familial setting that seeks to disembody sexuality. In other words, strategizing within a position of limited privilege, Cassandra's actions remain within the domestic. Her sadistic cruelty has none of the metaphysical overtones one finds in Hawthorne's Alice or the

more sensationally aggrandized acts of Maria Monk. Rather than strike out on her own and embrace the free fall of a life outside of the very institutions that she has spent her childhood violently defining herself against, Cassandra ultimately compromises. Turning her back on pleasure and invention, Cassy settles for the security of heteronormativity by owning her father's house and marrying the man of her choice.

## V.

As I argue in my last chapter, most critics of *The Morgesons* remain content telling the story of conventional models of self-determination for women, mainly marriage, property acquisition, and divorce. These are the most often engaged examples of female empowerment in antebellum America. However, as this Introduction has made clear, these texts trouble the fantasy of an expansive notion of American democracy. The figures I analyze here are not interested in reform but in transformative change. Reform an institution like marriage, an institution that by its very definition must exclude many to privilege some? No. Taking a lead from the characters this study engages, I am not interested in a narrow definition of justice. This project gives rise to the following questions: What does it mean to reimagine the social, and reject the institutions that govern our lives? Fly in the face of the dominant script of maturity? Refuse assimilation? In order to embrace the free fall required when one chooses to live without the prosthetics of conventionality, in order to truly embrace one's freedom without

compromise, one must be fearless, and risk being dismissed as crazy, immature, rude, extravagant, self-destructive, and selfish. That the characters in this study most likely embody what is often read as negative behavior is no surprise; these figures are seen as antisocial only because they break with the heteronormative logic that informs the Symbolic Order.

Short-circuiting the fantasy that props up the Symbolic Order entails a symbolic suicidal gesture that can be transformative, as Hart reads the survivor's over-identification with the trauma via S/M.<sup>41</sup> By this I mean a self-annihilating act that suspends the subject's relation to the social fictions that animate her being in society. Well-schooled in existentialist philosophy, queer writer James Baldwin understood that in order to build something new, one often has to free oneself from the weight of history, short circuit tradition, and strike out in a new direction. For Baldwin, Richard Wright was unproductively caught up in a symbolic agon with the great white mother, Harriet Beecher Stowe. In contrast, Baldwin refused to get caught up in a bad argument, one that would lead to the resignifying of old categories and the assimilationist logic of the American dream. This, according to Baldwin, called for an act of freedom grounded in the subject, equally liberating and terrifying:

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<sup>41</sup> Not to be confused with Japhet Colbones's suicide, which works more like a plea for acceptance after his death. The true act, in psychoanalytic terms, changes the coordinates of the Symbolic Order that prop up the fiction of the self. That is why it is the subject who traverses the fantasy, not the self, who, in contrast, needs all kinds of social prostheses to maintain her place in the social.

From this void—ourselves—it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding forever, a new act of creation, which can save us. (Baldwin 21)

Baldwin finds among his contemporaries an unproductive engagement with the past. Specifically, he identifies in Wright's response to Stowe not enough distance from the racial politics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Wright, according to Baldwin, remains caught in a tragic conflict where his heroes remain victims of the racist legacy his society inherited from the antebellum past. The persistence of this conflict is symptomatic of a fear of the dissolution of the bonds and institutions that make up modern society. Society, Baldwin reminds us, "is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into the void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden" (21). Baldwin's void is Hart's abyss; both require courage and invention. Baldwin bravely calls for a break with the historic cycle that reproduces the categories, bonds, and institutions that regulate our lives. His romantic language inaugurates an ontogenetic call for people to draw on that "unknown" part of themselves, that eternal reservoir of creative potential, and fashion for themselves a new world.

While I understand the desire to break with the past, this project predates the provenance of his transformative vision to mid-nineteenth-century America, when authors like Maria Monk, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stoddard, and the anonymous author of *The Knickerbocker* story

expressed a similar faith in the transformative potential that constitutes the void that is the subject. From Maria Monk to Cassandra Morgeson, this project traces the persistence of that drive for new acts of creation that have the power to save us. The figures I analyze in this study compellingly submit to the vertigo of the free fall, not fearing the lure of a void with no script, “legend” or “myth” to teach them how to live in the world— one and all, dazzling examples of dizzying inventiveness to the end.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BAD HABITS

Emerging from an abyss, and re-entering  
it—that is life.

Emily Dickinson, from Letter 1024

#### I.

Maria Monk's 1836 convent tale, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal*, is American anti-Catholic literature at its most fabulous, giving us a catalog (one that might make even Sade blush) of beatings, whippings, same sex acts, infanticide, grueling religious exercises, over-the-top displays of devotion, and sororal pranks that exceeds the aims of anti-catholic reform literature.<sup>42</sup> If Monk's tale recalls passages from Sade's aristocratic excesses, it also resonates with contemporary readers familiar with the writings on S/M subcultures by of Pat(rick) Califia, Gayle Rubin, Geoff Maines, and Dorothy Allison, all of whom emphasize the ways in which S/M empowers and even saved their lives. Monk describes many acts that would not be considered, at least by these contemporary S/M practitioners and theorists, as awful. In its days, *Awful Disclosures* performed this kind of temporal dislocation. It linked

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<sup>42</sup> Given that the authorship of this book is questionable, references to Monk in this essay will signify the persona in the book, not the author, unless otherwise noted.

well-to-do Protestants with old world, outmoded institutions and beliefs, and energized a nativist, working-class base which found itself politically and economically disenfranchised.<sup>43</sup>

While anti-Catholic literature served many functions, we know that it was certainly not intended to serve as sex-positive writing. Such exposes were crafted, often by male ghostwriters, in order to further prop up white patriarchal Protestant power in the U.S. Critics like Jenny Franchot and Susan Griffin have argued that convent tales were circulated in order to police young Protestant women and cleanse the new nation of racial and class difference and anxiety. The chief cultural and political work of convent tales was to demonize Catholicism as a religion of European excess and perversion, with convents figuring as dens of depravity used to not only lure young Protestant girls away from the influence of domesticity and family, but also to undermine women's prominent positions in Protestantism. Griffin argues, "The escaped nun's tale awfully discloses not only priests' plots and women's prisons, but also the fundamental weakness of the female self on which the future of American Protestantism rests," for the genre worked to undermine the feminization of American religion (Griffin 1). At the moment where American women were exercising power and influence over Protestantism, the escaped nun's narrative

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<sup>43</sup> See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, See Griffin, "'Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale,'" Caroline Levander *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth Century American Literature and Culture*, and Elizabeth Fenton, "Birth of a Protestant Nation: Catholic Canadians, Religious Pluralism, and national Unity in the Early U.S. Republic."

called the testimony of religious women into doubt by demonstrating that women should not be trusted with religious choice or authority, and that independent testimony from women could not stand on its own as proof (Griffin 10).

These narratives aimed to portray women overcome by emotions and seduced (spiritually and sexually) by Catholicism. Therefore, their testimony could not be trusted. The escaped nun might beg for forgiveness for what she was forced to do in the convent, as Monk does, but because she is now a fallen woman, the power of her testimony is only good as evidence, as Griffin shows, “evidence that incriminates herself and her sex” (Griffin 10). In Griffin's analysis of the convent tale, the ruined nun, much like her story, is a pawn in a triangulated power dynamic between Protestants and Catholics. Griffin disavows female agency by arguing that the convent tale is used by Protestant patriarchs to denounce Catholics and police women: hence the text figuring as both evidence of Catholic corruption, and pornographic trash. Griffin's argument short-circuits the more complex fictive and imaginative possibilities inherent in the construction of such lurid fantasies.

Where as Griffin's reading of convent tales remains within the narrative of containment (women as pawns/victims who could not be trusted), Franchot argues that although these texts were intended to fan the flames of xenophobia and class resentment, they also proved a powerful device for offering alternative historical accounts from marginalized voices (women) who through victim's

testimony supplanted “the protective and stratified structures of class, religious, and ethnic antagonisms with a rhetoric of undifferentiated anxiety—indiscriminate in diagnosis, negligent of boundary, resistant to closure” (154).<sup>44</sup> Focusing mainly on Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent* (1835), which is not at all pornographic like Monk’s tale, Franchot claims that the escaped nun also challenges the sentimental conventions laid out in novels like *Charlotte Temple*, arguing “she [the escaped nun] violates the sentimental literary conventions of female victimization (chief among which, if we are to believe *Charlotte Temple*, is that one should die rather than speak), by writing an expose that, while claiming her own continuing need for ‘retirement’ from the world, promptly invades and manipulates the public arena of the courtroom” (147).<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with Franchot’s reading of the convent tale as a disruptive form, my intervention complicates the model of sympathetic reader-identification with the female victims of Catholic violence; instead, the almost palpable (sadistic) enjoyment animating these texts betrays a perverse strain in antebellum American fiction completely at odds with the much-discussed figures of

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<sup>44</sup> Although she does argue that the genre gave women a voice, Franchot’s chapter on the convent tale is chiefly concerned with the ways in which Catholicism served as a scapegoat for class tensions between Scots-Presbyterian bricklayers and the Protestant, largely Unitarian elite, and how such tensions manifested themselves in the burning of Boston’s Ursuline convent in 1834 (where many daughters of the Protestant elite received an aristocratic French education). Franchot argues that, “to the working-class mob of Scots-Presbyterians, Catholics and Unitarians had formed an upper-class combination against Congregationalism” (138). Americans who feared that Jacksonian democracy could not prevent “mobocracy” and encourage self-discipline in the American male saw “the nun and the American worker as joint figures of unrest” (140).

<sup>45</sup> Here Franchot is referring to Reed’s testimony at the trial of the eight men who were accused of being the riot leaders of the Ursuline convent attack. All of the men were acquitted (140).

sentimentality. If we only read convent tales as female reform and as narratives of victimization, in other words as social texts, we miss engaging them as literary artifacts, which aside from their social function, thrilled readers with spectacular accounts of perverse sex acts, disregard of proper gender and sexual identity, and rejection of conventional kinship models and property relations, in other words, as imaginative constructs that redefine the coordinates of people's everyday lives. Literary critics who read the convent tale as serving only the negative purpose of scaring women into marriage/motherhood, inciting class antagonisms, infecting Protestant America with racial difference, and stunting democracy, overlook the fantastic social fantasies the genre also embodies, fantasies that make a mess of antebellum America's dominant life narrative of marriage and parenthood (with purpose of maintaining national, racial, and class sameness).

For instance, I read the acts of infanticide described by Monk not solely as anti-Catholic propaganda, but rather as a symbolic rejection of everything oppressive to women in antebellum America, representing freedom from the necessity to generate issue for the transmission of property and the perpetuation of Protestant values. In contrast, Monk's narrative tells a story of homosociality grounded in infanticide: the rite of initiation in the convent and simultaneously the covenant that makes the nuns members of a sorority. What could be crueler than killing an infant? What could be a greater rejection of domesticity and

motherhood in a culture saturated with sentimentality structured around the figure of the Child? My reading of *Awful Disclosures* then challenges and enriches the limited historical and literary narrative we tell about anti-Catholic texts. Any Inventiveness, pleasure, affective and erotic connection, sense of community, bodies in proximity, and homoeroticism/sociality, which are at the center of *Awful Disclosures*, are continually overlooked in most readings of this text. Through close reading, I hope to restore the affective dimension of the text, the historical density of enjoyment that, while articulated in a nativist, racist, and sexist form, nonetheless betrays a perverse and fabulous imaginary at odds with bourgeois propriety. What I am suggesting here is that the reformer is also a pervert, a pervert in the sense that the disciplinary structure that the reformer wants to bring into being is ultimately animated by a substratum of enjoyment that cannot be wholly exorcised: enjoyment is the substantial ghost in the machine of reform.

The real Maria Monk's life is emblematic of the subject of reform and of the need for a transformative vision of what antebellum America could look like. That anti-Catholicism become a wedge issue used to cement religious, class, and ethnic ideological homogeneity does not detract from the conditions that brought into being the kinds of fictive imaginaries that found expression in texts like *Awful Disclosures*. The real Monk's part in the crafting of this narrative probably stems from her own necessity as a working class woman, who as the record shows, prostituted herself to survive in New York City's Five Points, finds an opportunity

to lend her name to the anti-Catholic cause as a way to change her life.<sup>46</sup> Monk's life was just as scandalous as her convent tale but devoid of text's transformative potential. She was a prostitute and single mother who somehow teamed up with the Reverend J.J. Slocum, who penned her supposed experience in the convent. During this period, Monk and her male companion, the Reverend William K. Hoyt, circulated among the New York Protestant elite and were freely admitted into respectable homes as Monk openly confessed the awful crimes of the Dieu Nunnery (Schultz xvii). She was convincing enough in her story and attractive enough to almost elicit a marriage proposal from Samuel E.B. Morse, the mayoral candidate for New York City (Schultz xvii). *Awful Disclosures* was finally published in January 1836 by a dummy publishing company set up by Harper Brothers—Howe and Bates—because the dignified Harper Brothers did not want to publish pornographic material under its imprint (Schultz xvii).

After its publication, wild rumors circulated about the validity of the text's claims: Monk had both supporters and detractors. After inspections of the Dieu Nunnery failed to validate any of her claims, she disappeared from the scene as the scandal—and her fame—faded away. If this unwed mother and prostitute participated in Reverend Slocum's plan to write a fictional, sensational account of a Canadian convent for fame and money, she briefly enjoyed some of the former and none of the latter. After the birth of her second bastard child, and after being

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<sup>46</sup> For a historical account of Monk's life, see Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales*.

arrested in a brothel for robbing a John, Monk disappeared from public life and in 1849 died a sordid death in a New York prison at the age of thirty-two (Griffin 9). If we take into account the historical Monk, it becomes clear that her life speaks to the lack of options for women. As a prostitute and a single mother, crafting a convent tale was one of her only means of securing some money and position. Aware of the anti-Catholic sentiment in the U.S., she saw an opportunity to make money beyond sex work.

Yet despite the tale of woman-done-wrong-by-man Monk's personal life story seems to echo, I would like to consider *another* historical narrative, one based on the fictional persona and fantasies found in the text. Through close reading, by focusing attention on the pattern of "escape" and return that structures the text, it becomes clear that our (fictional) heroine prefers the pleasures and power convent life affords her over a woman's usual "choice" of marriage/motherhood (more on this to come). Given that *Awful Disclosures* sold over 300,000 copies, it clear that readers found something alluring about this fantasy as well.

Best sellers, anti-Catholic texts clearly offered readers more than simple outrage against their Catholic neighbors and queer religious practices: these highly popular texts doubled as cautionary tale and pornography, designed to both instruct and allure, belonging to the category of literature described by David

Reynolds as “dark reform.”<sup>47</sup> It is hard to believe that the text was consumed solely by horrified onlookers, or that they did not also become participants, affectively and imaginatively plugging into the fantasies offered up. The split nature of this porn/reform, this double articulation of containment and subversion, instantiates what Christopher Castiglia describes as the genre’s social ambivalence (92). For Castiglia, the convent tale articulates anxieties about institutionalism in antebellum America (92). Catholicism was seen as “both hyper-and inadequately institutional” (93). While I agree with much of what Castiglia argues about the space of the convent as a case study for displaced concerns about the increasing regulatory processes and disciplinary modes of identification in the culture at large, I am interested in teasing out the kernel of enjoyment that lies at the heart of the convent’s gothic imaginary. By reading the convent tale as a literary artifact first and a social text second, I engage the underside of antebellum America’s disciplinary consciousness and confront head on what brings programmatic reform into being.

While being mindful of the pervasiveness of reform in the nineteenth century, this chapter makes a case for the ontological primacy of enjoyment as an organizing principle of the social.<sup>48</sup> That is, what brings the apparatus of reform into being belongs to the realm of the Real but finds articulation in the

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<sup>47</sup> *Awful Disclosures* was a best seller in its day, with 20,000 copies sold within the first two weeks of its publication in 1836, and 300,000 copies sold by 1860 (Griffin 93). No other American text sold more until the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of *jouissance*, see Slavoj Žižek’s *The Plague of Fantasies*.

imaginary, in literature. That it takes on gothic forms speaks to its destabilizing potential. By enjoyment, I mean what Lacanian theory refers to as *jouissance*, the traumatic trace of existence, what remains after castration (language acquisition). This slippery, substantial surplus, always exceeding language's grasp, frustrates and mobilizes discursive systems in an attempt to come to terms with its existence. It is important to note that in and of itself, enjoyment is not subversive or transformative. Rather it insists on its dumb existence. From the eyes of the Protestant zealot, Catholics are seen to embody this disgusting substance, this enjoyment manifest in their reverence for hierarchy, pathological dependence on priests, and unquestioned belief in superstition. In Monk's tale, the symptoms of enjoyment register in those aspects of the narrative that exceed the aims of reform (e.g. jokes, pranks, beatings, suffocations, and infanticide, to name a few) and bring it into being without wholly subsuming enjoyment's disruptive potential. Enjoyment exceeds the limits of discourse, also belonging to the subject's lived experience in all her density.<sup>49</sup> If Monk's tale attests to anything, it is the transformative possibilities open to the subject when she over-identifies with that which the dominant culture tells her she ought to reject. The

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<sup>49</sup> As Žižek argues, "*Jouissance* is thus the 'place' of the subject—one is tempted to say: his 'impossible' Being-there, *Da-Sein*; and, for that very reason, the subject is always-already displaced, out-of-joint, with regard to it. Therein lies the primordial 'decentrement' of the Lacanian subject: much more radical and elementary than the decentrement of the subject with regard to the 'big Other,' the symbolic order which is the external place of the subject's truth, is the decentrement with regard to the traumatic Thing-*jouissance* which the subject can never 'subjectivize,' assume, integrate. *Jouissance* is that notorious *heimliche* which is simultaneously the most *unheimliche*, always-already here and, precisely as such, always-already lost" (*Plague* 49).

rest of this chapter is an attempt to come to terms with the symptoms of enjoyment in the context of antebellum anti-Catholic reform.

We might start by assuming the apostate's role in one's own discipline and commit the unpardonable sin of ahistoricism and look to the ways that pornography has been intelligently and imaginatively interpreted by our best critics. Pornography today is billion-dollar industry; clearly, Americans have always loved their porn, convent tale or DVD. One edition of *Awful Disclosures* sold today is marketed as erotica, complete with a cover featuring a woman in a nun's headdress and nothing else. Besides the obvious, what is it about porn that draws us to it? Laura Kipnis reads pornography not as social realism as anti-porn feminists have done, but rather as science fiction, a hopeful genre that embodies flamboyant fantasies about how the world *might* look, where bodies are re-imagined, erogenous zone remapped, sexual and social arrangements pushed to extremes and continually refigured.<sup>50</sup> *Awful Disclosures* does just this, which is why teaching it alongside Califia and Allison, which I have done in the past, is pedagogically and conceptually rewarding. Rather than limit readings of the convent tale to an anti-Catholicism encouraged by Protestant patriarchs, manifesting itself in rare, extreme acts like the burning of Boston's Ursuline convent in 1834 to everyday, banal sexism through controlling young women, I

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<sup>50</sup> Kipnis argues, "Pornography's critics take porn very literally, as if it purports to be social realism, but a better comparison would be sci-fi, another genre that takes the 'what if things were different?' approach to bodies and societies. Besides, what's so great about reality anyway, and if realism can't compete with pornography, why is it porn that's supposed to do the apologizing?" (66). See Kipnis, *The Female Thing: Dirt, Envy, Sex, Vulnerability*.

find in the homosocial space of the convent an opposition to domesticity's reforming function, a fantasy of options for living beyond conventional institutions.

The fantasy that I speak of is inscribed within the gothic conventions the convent tale exploited with lurid relish. Despite its reformist ends, the elements of the gothic in the convent tale participate in a fantastic imaginary that would find later find expression in American Romance. The emergence of the convent tale coincides with the burgeoning of American Romanticism as a response to modernization. Defined by the "exploration" of the subject's interior, Romanticism sought within the subject the source and solution to the dislocating forces of modernity, mostly defined in the U.S. by expansive democratization and territorial expansion. In contract to rapid modernization, the convent tale often depicted an Old World feudal model against which America defined itself. The convent came to represent pre-modern, outmoded institutions and principles. It is in this space of punishment wherein alternatives to modern, "benevolent" disciplinary institutions were imagined. The convent then represents a heterotopic, discursive space where same-sex bonds are established through eroticized acts of rage and aggression that are encrypted in gothic conventions.<sup>51</sup> The pre-modern, despotic logics operating in the convent short-circuit the interiorization of

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<sup>51</sup> For Foucault, "There are also, probably, in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by the way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (24). See Foucault's "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-7.

subjects' lives defined by the emerging disciplinary culture. The gothic easily lent itself to explorations of fantastic accounts, at once temporally and spatially dislocated, and yet palpably resonant with the lives of antebellum Americans.<sup>52</sup>

Drawing on gothic and sentimental conventions, convent tales portrayed nunneries as brothels that would corrupt American women and lure them away from marriage and motherhood. In her narrative, Monk exposes the “evils” she encountered as a young novice in the French-Canadian convent. What is odd about her condemnation of such an awful place is that having once “escaped,” she returns to the convent only to “escape” and return again, thus setting up a structural narrative pattern. It is important to note that Monk chooses to return to the convent after giving marriage and the chance at motherhood a try.

Dissatisfied with romantic attachments and conventional monogamy that demand self-effacing sacrifice, Monk returns to the convent and immerses herself in its cycles of cruelty. It is not submission to a husband and sacrifice for children that Monk desires but rather the expression of sadistic rage directed at institutionalized modes of association and social being outside the convent. If Monk claims to disclose what she describes as the “evils” she encounters in the convent, why when after easily “escaping” on two occasions, does she return? In what follows, I will account for her penchant to repeat, her desire to return to

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<sup>52</sup> Castiglia argues that, “Monk’s narrative dramatizes the debates brought about by institutionality among men such as Emerson, Garrison, Colton, Beecher, and Lieber. Perhaps this ambivalence is what led an estimated three hundred thousand readers to Monk’s narrative, making it the bestsellers of its day. Feeling institutionalism pervading their lives, perhaps they found in Monk’s narrative their own inexpressible ambivalence” (*Interior States* 92-3).

this space of cruelty. This compulsion to repeat of hers betrays the presence of enjoyment, at once thoughtless and animated of a life experienced as seemingly bereft of agency.

Given the ubiquitous and wildly popular motif of heroines who experience varying degrees of self-sacrifice and suffering in much antebellum American literature, one might assume that Monk fell into a pattern of escape and return because she enjoyed the pain and degradation she experienced in the convent, albeit a darker, more extreme version of the sentimental heroine's trials within the space of the domestic. Such a reading is in keeping with Marianne Noble's work on nineteenth-century women's sentimental writing. Taking a provocative, more complex view of the masochism found in several antebellum texts that foreground the experiences of women, Noble reads this pleasure in pain as a "form of self-expression, beautiful—or at least fascinating—once one can see beyond its weirdness" (4). As several feminists have done, masochism can simply be read as an unhealthy desire encouraged by and formed in response to the oppression women have historically experienced. Yet drawing on the work of Emily Dickinson and Susan Warner, Noble reads the masochistic strain in their texts as a double-edged sword, one that functions as a "discursive agent for the proliferation of oppressive ideologies and as a rhetorical tool for the exploration of female desire" (6). Working within the restraints of patriarchal culture, these women were able to express a broad range of conflicting affects and desires,

“exploiting a culturally overdetermined form of self-expression for the pleasures and powers derived from it” (Noble 5).

The heroine of the sentimental text lived in a state of subservience she strategically derived pleasure from since it enabled her to experience the body that she was supposed to continually deny. For example, Ellen Montgomery, the protagonist in Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, derives pleasure from watching her future husband whip a horse, imagining herself as the animal. As Ellen's desire attests to, there was a desire to ground oneself in one's body, rejecting the evanescent experience of the nineteenth-century “angel in the house,” and thus becoming more in touch with one's baser nature.

Yet, as Noble argues, if dominant culture is a space saturated with sentimental masochism, why then would Monk need to return to the convent in order to experience such pleasure? As the text makes clear, is not masochism that Monk desires but rather the expression of sadistic rage directed at institutionalized modes of association and social being outside the convent that reduce women's pleasure to the kind of masochistic identification that Noble describes. Monk makes it clear that she dislikes finding herself in a position where the older nuns “demanded self-debasement before them,” so having mastered the convent's power structure (because it is laid bare, unlike its counterpart in disciplinary culture), she is able to align herself with the Mother

Superior and the second most powerful sister on the convent, Jane Ray (more on Jane later), becoming the one who demands the self-debasement of others (57).

While I agree with what Noble has to say about women's complex manipulation of masochism in antebellum texts, my reading of *Awful Disclosures* reveals Noble's ultimate subscription to the old psychoanalytic claim that women are inherently masochistic and only experience pleasure through identification with the suffering heroine. Although female readers were encouraged to identify with the Ellen Montgomery types (protagonists are "safer," more vanilla characters and as such, readers are often encouraged to identify with them) surely there were readers who identify with the character who brandishes the whip, the character who is the active agent in the spectrum power.

Although she sometimes pleads for the reader's sympathy, a standard narrative convention in dark reform, such a appeal is undermined and proven as false by the ways that Monk ultimately refuses to play or derive pleasure from the victim's role, instead relishing in her position as the agent of punishment as she enacts eroticized acts of rage and aggression. Refusing to reveal her innermost feelings, Monk's tale is devoid of the moral judgment and naval gazing usually found in social reform texts. Filled with sentences that withhold information, concealing more than they reveal, "My feelings during the remainder of the day I shall not attempt to describe" (27). Often Monk refuses to give readers the juicy details of the depravity she partakes in, stating flatly, "there were other acts

occasionally proposed and consented to, which I cannot name in a book” (118). Although Michel Foucault finds in the Catholic confessional a central model for disciplinary culture’s “benevolent” technique of controlling and managing selves by putting sex into discourse, Monk simply states that she remains silent in confession, and is not punished as a result (57). It is only when she confesses that she is punished, not the other way around, for one would expect refusing to talk would get one in trouble: “I therefore preferred not to tell my sins to any one else: and this course I found was preferred by others for the same reasons” (57). That the other sisters also remain silent reveals that the convent is not a space of discipline bent on creating docile subjects through the confession of one’s “deepest,” “darkest” thoughts, intimating one’s depth.<sup>53</sup>

*Awful Disclosures* then complicates the ways in which power, fantasy, identification, pleasure, and sympathy work in antebellum texts that draw on sentimental conventions. In her narration, Monk thwarts the logic and language of sentimental reform, which tends to rely on the (female) reader’s sympathy with the abject. Monk rejects the affective trope of moral persuasion (which we see in *Charlotte Temple* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), for the task of describing, in a sexually charged way (which we see in *Sade*), the vicious and violent behavior of women in the convent.

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<sup>53</sup> For an analysis of Western dominant culture’s shift from punishment to discipline, and the emerging “polymorphous techniques of power” that informs disciplinary culture, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (11). In the context of antebellum America, see Castiglia.

It is not abjection that Monk desires but the expression of sadistic rage, and the space of the convent allows her to become an active agent within the spectrum of power in a way that the space of the domestic does not (as Noble's analysis of sentimental masochism ultimately attests to). Dominant institutions that organize bodies and property (e.g. the conventional family) do not offer women community with or often times agency as adults as they become infantilized by their children. The heterotopic space of the convent, existing in opposition to disciplinary culture, erases gender in a very material way as nuns don habits and take on the names of saints. The heroine claims her real name is Maria "Monk," aligning herself with male religious authority, which speaks to her desire to represent herself as someone with power. The Mother Superior is described as "bold and masculine, and sometimes more than that" (10). Whereas marriage and motherhood solidify proper white femininity, convent life is predicated upon a process of de-individuation. Through violent acts like infanticide, the nuns become monstrous and inhuman, saints and gods of a perverse theology. So yes, those Protestant patriarchs did have something to fear. Ironically, it was their own anti-Catholic fantasies that ended up presenting an alternative to the limited options for women in antebellum culture. The convent becomes space where young women did not have to become (or remain) women, and, in fact, could exist beyond gender identity all together (as Monk's description of her beloved Mother Superior attests to).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> At the Ursuline convent trial, the defense attorney for the riot leaders argued that it was the

Monk's narrative tells a queer story of possible homosociality grounded in infanticide: in repeated acts of sadistic cruelty, *Awful Disclosures* chokes the life out of the angelic child whose often-martyred death binds the community of sentimental mourners. Monk's sorority is predicated on deaths that reveal the violence at the heart of the sentimental tradition. Rejecting both marriage and motherhood, Monk is able to find a homosocial community in the heterotopic space of the convent where discipline is laid bare as cruel punishment, a system and logic in which she can exercise agency. This violence and rejection of proper (white) femininity turns upside down our dominant conclusions about antebellum culture.

## II.

The alternative options for women, manifest in acts of cruelty, selfishness, and violence that animate *Awful Disclosures*, complicate the ways in which feminists have analyzed identification, pleasure, power, and fantasy in antebellum writings about women. Caught in a cycle of self-sacrifice and masochism—whether read as disabling or enabling—critics tend not to allow other subject positions, desires, and pleasures to complicate what we think we know about antebellum America. To be sure, Monk's tale is a fantasy about what goes on in a “girl-on-girl” space like the convent, not unlike late twentieth century

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Mother Superior who incited the riot by “an ill-timed assertiveness that contravened customary female deference” (Franchot 144). According to trial documents, there was an open dislike of the Mother Superior based on her “masculine, aristocratic hauteur . . . she was a woman of masculine appearance and character, high-tempered, resolute, defiant, with stubborn, imperious will” (Franchot 143).

soft-core films like *Caged Heat* (1974). As I wrote earlier, this is not writing that folks would easily recognize as a proto-feminist/sex-positive. Yet taking Kipnis' lead, I find in this nineteenth-century porn/reform tale fabulous, wildly imaginative ways to be and belong in the world that break with disciplinary culture's dominant script of domesticity with its privatized, impoverished forms of intimacy and pleasure.

In *Awful Disclosures*, the prison becomes a convent. Instead of a cruel butch warden, *Awful Disclosures* offers a dom-like Mother Superior, who whips, brands, gags, and bounds her bottoms. Films like *Caged Heat* proliferated in the 1970s at the peak of the feminist movement, and worked to contained women's homosocial bonds by eroticizing them in disabling ways, not unlike how the escaped nun's narrative eroticizes female relations in order to undermine women's religious authority in antebellum America. Such a reading encourages both the film and convent tale to be dismissed simply as patriarchal fantasies that work to oppress women. Yet Judith Butler's analysis of pornography, representation, and violence offers a different way of emplotting such texts. Butler takes on feminists like anti-porn Andrea Dworkin who believe that the genre's sole function is to promote violence against women. As a result of such claims, anti-porn feminists form dangerous alliances with the conservative right in its efforts to police any sexual acts, identities, pleasures, and mode of association that break with heteronormative fantasies about how the social is

supposed to be organized and how people are supposed to get off. Dworkin's argument relies on a reading of pornographic representation as a debasing and discriminatory action, one that always automatically injures. This supposes a simple mimetic relation between the real, fantasy, and representation that assumes the precedence of the real (Butler 106).

Fantasy does not restrict identification to any one position. As Butler argues, "identification is multiple and shifting, and cannot be confined to 'me' alone" (109). Women viewers may identify with the woman in the "debased" position (who could ever agree on what a "debased" position is?), but they may identify with the aggressor, or with the entire scene of debasement (114). To read representation in terms of a simple causal dynamic suppresses the array of sex acts, identities, and pleasures that Kipnis argues pornographic texts make possible. Yet as Butler argues, for feminists like Dworkin, there is no interpretative leeway between the representation, its meanings, and its effects. If pornographic representations always constitute injury to women, how could Dworkin, the passive female viewer who *only* can identify with the "debased" female in the text, produce an analysis of pornography? Such an epistemology of pornography equates masculinity with agency and aggression, and femininity with passivity—thus fixing gender categories (113). To assume this causal relationship between representation and its viewers leaves no room for

interpretative distance and prevents muted, injured, and passive women from offering critical analysis within the field of social power (113).

*Awful Disclosures* offers a variety of subject positions, as the readers as well as the protagonist herself identifies with the several positions and pleasures the convent affords, or as Butler argues, the entire scene of “debasement.” Yes, convent tales did work to undermine women’s authority, as Griffin argues, but the text reveals other possibilities and fantasies for the very women it intended to oppress. Prohibitions both generate and restrict the spectrum of fantasy. Thus, *Awful Disclosures* contains the proliferation of vice it aims to denounce. The undecideability of fantasy resignifies and reappropriates the terms of regulatory regimes of representation, thereby undoing fixed identity categories. Rather than simply representing women in subservient positions, Monk’s tale creates a fantastic space where (female) agency is re-imagined.

The Monk persona occupies multiple positions in the narrative, not only as spectator and participant, but as a double for the Mother Superior and her friend Mad Jane Ray, thus complicating simple identification. As a witness to the degradation of her fellow sisters, she does not identify with their suffering, nor does she gesture to the reader for sympathy, the expected move in the sentimental genre; instead, she finds in the enactment of violence something empowering. Yet Monk never overtly claims to enjoy or dislike punishing and humiliating others. In fact, whether she is a spectator or participant, there is an

absence of moral judgment throughout the text. Reflecting on her participation in smothering of sister Saint Frances, she exhibits only “the confusion of my thoughts” (62). This amoral stance is characteristic of the narrative. Against the dominant sentimental strain, she seems either unwilling or unable to reflect on her actions or those of others. It is as if she were unwilling to look within herself.

If sympathy requires identification with the feeling of others, Monk’s refusal to be self-reflexive short circuits the economy of sentimental reading. The heterotopic space of the convent with all of its coldness and cruelty exists in opposition to the disciplinary institutions based on “warm” and “fuzzy” sympathetic identification. The convent is a different space from the domestic where the affects of sentimental fellow feeling—especially in young girls—are breed. Far from hearth and home, Monk’s characters move through dungeons and corridors. The domestic space of the drawing room and the convent operate under different structures and logics of power. The drawing room was a space where women enjoyed some power. Yet even though the home was a place where power was constantly negotiated, the drawing room disciplines through the elaborate routine of enacting domesticity. As Richard Brodhead argues, modern forms of discipline, “replace the old disciplinary mode with new technologies—less visible but more pervasive, less ‘cruel’ but more deeply controlling” (qtd. in Noble 94). Brodhead’s comments on the shift from punishment to discipline may shed some light on why Monk eventually chooses

the convent over marriage. She opens her story with an account her parents' marriage:

My parents were both from Scotland, but had been resident in the Lower Canada some time before their marriage, which took place in Montreal, and in that city I have spent most of my life. My father was an officer under the British Government, and my mother has enjoyed a pension on that account ever since his death. (Monk 1)

The suturing of marriage to capital is made apparent as Monk includes her father's pension in her description of her parents' marriage. It is significant that the only time she talks about her parents is in relation to her mother's financial independence as a result of her husband's death. If the only benefit of marriage for Monk's mother is money, then Monk's own marriage offers even fewer benefits. "Having been a novice for four or five years," Monk leaves the convent a second time (16). She finds work as an assistant teacher, and soon marries (17). However, after a few weeks, she leaves her husband and all she says of the matter is that she "had the occasion to repent of the step I had taken" (17). Monk refuses to say much about her marriage. The narrative promises the awful discloses of convent life, not marriage. Does Monk's silence on the subject allow her to leave the binary distinct, does the convent offer something different from marriage?

In the "Preface" Monk pleads: "It is to be hoped that the reader of the ensuing narrative will not suppose that it is a fiction, or that the scenes and persons that I have delineated, had not a real existence" (xv). Although such a

claim for the reality of the narrative is a common trope in nineteenth-century fiction, this plea is doing more when juxtaposed with Monk's silence on marriage. By not talking about marriage, she avoids drawing a parallel between the convent and the drawing room. To dissect marriage might collapse the distinction between the convent and the home, and she wants to highlight the differences between the two. Although she ultimately ends up leaving the space of violence and vice, Monk hopes to keep her experiences in the convent alive. There is something about the coldness and cruelty found in the convent that she wants to preserve against the sentimental subservience she experienced in her marriage and outside the convent. By not collapsing the convent/drawing room binary and emphasizing the radical difference the convent stands for, she is able to undo the evanescent self housed within the walls of the family home.

Along with her rejection of marriage, Monk also dismisses every aspect of life outside the convent, including her schooling, trade, and a life of spinsterhood: "I attended several schools for a short time. But I soon became dissatisfied, having many and severe trials to endure at home, which my feelings will not allow me to describe. . . . finding myself thus situated, and not knowing what else to do, I determined to return to the Convent" (8, 18). Her disavowal of school, marriage, and refusal to live in any kind of domestic space (not only her husband's house but also her mother's), brings her back to the convent. She prefers the knowledge and erotic possibilities open to her in the convent over

traditional schooling and heteronormative sex/sociality. Returning to the convent is so important to Monk that she keeps her marriage a secret and steals from her mother's pension to pay for her re-admission. Even though the Superior waives her entrance fee, Monk insists on paying. It is clear to her that getting in as a charity case will put her at a disadvantage. By paying, she preempts being slotted into a submissive position. This gesture reveals she has learned the power dynamics in life both in and outside the convent.

The Mother Superior models for Monk a way of being in the world that she can aspire to. She describes the Superior as, "bold and masculine, and sometimes more than that, cruel and cold-blooded, in scenes calculated to overcome any common person . . . I never saw in her any appearance of timidity" (119). Bold and cruel, the Superior not only complicates simple gender identification but is herself proof that the convent is a space of pure power, beyond good and evil, beyond disciplinary institutions where power dynamics are masked, where subjectivity or identity is unimportant. In keeping with the convent's economy of punishment, the Superior orders nuns to lick the floor, drink her bath water, chew glass, and brand and whip themselves. The more disobedient are bound and gagged or jailed (114). The Superior sometimes punishes Monk, and sometimes enlists her help in punishing others.

The Superior's demonstration of violence and existence beyond (gender) identity places her within the logic of a Sadean universe. The Sadean heroine

seeks to transcend her body/world and reach a space of pure power beyond good and evil, what Gilles Deleuze calls, in his reading of Sade, "primary nature" (27). Much like Juliette and the depraved gang in *120 Days of Sodom*, Monk's nuns seek through the repetition of violent acts to transcend the physical constraints of secondary nature (the body, the world of institutions and experience, in psychoanalytic terms, the world of language, the Symbolic) and exist in a state beyond good and evil (in psychoanalytic terms, the Real—see my discussion of "enjoyment" above, enjoyment being a symptom of the Real). As in Sade's work, *Awful Disclosures* is a long catalogue of violent acts, devoid of moral judgment. Through repetition, the sadist's chief aim is to transcend the world of experience and reach primary nature, free from the constraints of secondary. The sadist is ultimately not interested in orgasm, which is rooted in the body. Noble's insights about the subversive edge of the masochism found in women's texts, even though it enables women to experience bodily pleasure, ultimately limits women to their bodies (the paradox of the angel in the house--she is not supposed to have a body yet her culture sees her as only body because she is expected to reproduce). The sadistic acts in *Awful Disclosures* redirect aggression outward and allow for the sisters to exist on a plane of pure power where identity is undone.

In contrast to the scene in *Wide, Wide World* where the heroine identifies with the horse being beaten, occupying the masochistic position and grounding

herself in secondary nature, women in the convent have the chance to become sadists, not simply remaining within and subverting the institutions that prop up the Symbolic but finding another way of being and associating free from the constraints of proper sex/gender roles. The convent's logic of punishment allows Monk to see clearly how its power dynamic works, and she is therefore able to put herself in an active position of power, one that does not limited to her body, a position usually only available to men in dominant culture. Emerson's metaphor of the "transparent eyeball" is in keeping with Monk's description of the Mother Superior and the role she wishes to occupy. This central figure of American Romanticism (usually associated only with male subjects) is able to be in the world free from bodily constraints.

Seeking to negate identity through repetitive acts of violence, the sisters attempt to override all reigns and laws and free themselves "from the necessity to create, preserve or individuate," demonstrating this desire by committing countless infanticides, which are then dumped in the infamous lime pit in the basement of the convent (Deleuze 42). Monk and Jane Ray come across the Superior's record of the infanticides, a book that contains the names of nuns and the dates when their infants were strangled (128). It is important to note that no name appears twice in the record. Only after the infant is killed by either the nun

or the Superior does the nun cease to have sex with the priests.<sup>55</sup> Infanticide, then, is the rite of initiation in the convent, and simultaneously the covenant that makes the nuns members of a sorority. When describing an infanticide, Monk makes it a point to note that the priest present to baptize the infant first was “a good-looking European” (99). She is about to be a part of an infanticide and she makes it a point to check out the priest! In a scene that opens in pleasure (her attraction to the priest), Monk is not a horrified onlooker, but rather someone who does not take infanticide seriously and is enjoying herself in this social moment. And apparently Monk is a part of several infanticides, justifying her participation “merely owing to the accident that I was then present” and “only because I happened to be in the room at the time” (100). In keeping with her narrative style, Monk gives a flimsy excuse, for she seems to refuse to ultimately work hard to convince us of her innocence. She then quickly proceeds to describe the violent act at hand, with moral judgment absent from the description. If Monk claims to hate the incidents early on when as a novice she had to “debase” herself in front of the older nuns, then clearly she will not debase herself to readers by begging us to understand and forgive her for her participation in these violent acts.

Although the lime pit is in the convent’s basement, it is not hidden, for once one walks into the basement, the pile of whiteness it is right “in the middle

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<sup>55</sup> Though phallic power is a prerequisite for nuns to reach primary nature and thereby become unsexed, that “something more” Monk discerned in the Superior, it is significant that priests are conspicuously absent from the narrative.

of the cellar” (49). The exposed lime pit speaks to the women’s lack of shame for the act that binds them assisters. When Monk first comes upon the lime pit, she reacts in her flat, gnomonic style, “I can hardly tell how it affected me . . . I had undergone trials which prevented me from feeling as I should formerly have done in similar circumstances” (49). This is all that we get: no outrage, no tears, no overt gesturing toward the reader for sympathy, no desire to flee the convent immediately. It is important to note that Monk is free to go wherever she pleases; even though at times she claims that the crafty Superior keeps secrets (and people) hidden behind locked doors, whenever she comes across one of such door, it, much like the convent’s front door, is always open (132).

Not every sister in the convent could bring herself to kill an infant, though. Saint Frances is a case in point. She is killed by the sisters for refusing to participate in infanticides (60). In the killing of Saint Frances, Monk becomes an agent of violence, not just a spectator. Much like her description of the infanticides, she does not care what the audience thinks of her, and makes no attempt to persuade them of her innocence: “It is not necessary for me to attempt to excuse myself in this or in any other case. Those who have any disposition to judge fairly, will exercise their own judgment . . . I, therefore, shall confine myself, as usual, to the simple narration of facts” (59). Following the Superior's order, she and the other nuns drag Sister Frances to an apartment upstairs (60). Monk’s gnomonic, non-committal style allows her to move easily between distress

for what she is about to do to enjoyment in the leadership role she takes in this act. It is telling that in the narrative, the smothering of Saint Frances is book ended between incidents where she and Jane Ray play cruel jokes on other nuns and on each other, both moments simply erupting with laughter (59, 65). In fact, the most references to the sisters laughing and having fun take place before and after the smothering. Read between these two passages, all of the laughter works to de-dramatize any trauma or horror that the smothering scene could elicit.

As she makes her way to Frances' room, Monk states that she would "give anything to be allowed to stay where I was" not to have to participate in the punishment that was about to ensue, yet she is the one leading the group to Frances's room: "I entered the door, my companions standing behind me" (60). Taking on a leadership position only speaks to her enthusiasm, regardless of her claims to the contrary. Monk is also the one who takes on the role of the Superior, doing all of the talking: "I spoke to her in a compassionate voice, but at the same time with such a decided manner, that she comprehended my meaning . . . 'Saint Frances, we are sent for you'" (60). Any moments of doubt and pity are quickly undercut as Monk leads the pack to seize Frances by her "limbs and clothes" and drags her upstairs to the Superior's office to be questioned, as Frances maintains "all the calmness and submission of a lamb" (61). As the Superior questions Frances about her refusal to commit infanticide, giving her

one more chance to prove that she is indeed a part of their sorority, Monk feigns fainting, but then quickly springs to action when the Superior orders Frances' death by smothering (61).

It is telling that the smothering of Frances takes place on a bed, an erotically charged site. The pleasure is palpable as the sisters put Frances between two mattresses and jump up and down, smothering her between the two. In keeping with its reform/porn logic, this is the all girl, slumber party tickle fight gone horribly awry. As she helps smother Frances, Monk claims that at times she was "scarcely conscious." These scenes of shifting emotions, from sentimentality to murderous rage, speak to their artificiality in the text. The sadist has no emotion, but she has to pretend she does for her audience. Monk only pretends half-heartedly; the tone of the narrative is flat, almost devoid of moral judgment, with the heroine herself opaque, thus making identification for readers almost impossible. Monk's narration does not invite sympathetic identification with the martyrdom of Frances the ways in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Charlotte Temple* do.

As they drag Frances to her punishment, Monk writes, "I took hold of her, too, more gently indeed than some of the rest, yet I encouraged and assisted them in carrying her" (62). Here we have Monk's pattern of an attempt at pity and resistance to violent acts followed by her enthusiastic participation. She claims that she was gentle with Frances yet "encouraged" the others, revealing

the leadership role she takes on, despite her claims to the contrary. For example, as a novice becoming acclimated to convent life, Monk listens to the sisters describe their sadistic acts, “without any signs of shame or compunction, things which incriminated themselves” (26). At first, Monk claims to be disturbed by their actions and the pleasure they take in them, but then “questioned whether I might not be in the wrong, and felt as if their reasoning might have some just foundation” (26). Proclaiming just a touch of doubt and disturbance frees Monk to ultimately do whatever it is that she pleases. Convent life teaches Monk the art of storytelling, for whenever a friend or family member, someone from the “wicked world outside the convent” visits, the Superior sends one of the most talented nuns to engage them, asking, “Who can tell a good story this morning?” rewarding the sisters ‘in proportion to our ingenuity and success” (43). This is a favorite task of Monk’s, for she claims to have “learned many a speech, I had almost said many a sermon; and I was led to believe that it was one of great importance” (42).

Although a brutal act is obviously being committed here, I do not think the point is to identify with and cry for this sacrificial lamb, lamenting against the atrocities committed by the Catholic Church. Rather, by not behaving like meek lambs and directing the violence of proper gendering inward (as women are supposed to), the sisters redirect the violence outward, breaking with the strictures of femininity. Jumping on the bed is something children do, and the

cruelty and pleasure that structures this scene is in keeping with Freud's reading of children as "polymorphous perverse," a state in which he finds a great imaginative potential that adults lose as they mature.<sup>56</sup> The omnivorous sexual intensity and curiosity of the child gets funneled into an impoverished notion of sex as limited to the genitalia, solely reproductive and/or between a monogamous couple.<sup>57</sup> As convent life attests to, the sisters remain polymorphous perverse, refusing to become "mature" adult women, which is why Monk chooses to return after having tried to live as a married woman. Rather than become infantilized in disabling ways, the sisters' behavior is more in keeping with the petulant, often times cruel, and imaginative behavior of children, whose experience in the world, with all of its possibilities, has not yet been circumscribed by proper adulthood. Yes, infantilization obviously works against women, as patriarchy's move to de-authorize female agency, yet the negativity the sisters embody actively resists the gendering of white femininity and the practices and institutions that perpetuate and prop it up. Women are expected to be kind, nurturing, and self-sacrificing, and to act in any other way is to act monstrous and lose proper femininity in the process. If their culture considers

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<sup>56</sup> For Freud on the potentials represented by infantile sexuality and the loss of (sexual and social) imagination children experience as they become mature adults, see "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness."

<sup>57</sup> On the ways in which childhood curiosity and appetite can be sustained—rather than grown out of—see Adam Philips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (Faber and Faber 1998). Philips builds on Freud's theory of infantile sexuality. See the previous footnote.

them inhuman because of what they reject and what they desire, then it is fitting that the nuns over-identify with this monstrosity and act accordingly.

If the Mother Superior embodies the cold impersonality of the convent with its rituals and compulsory behavior, Jane Ray, Monk's gothic doppelganger, represents the insertion of the human in the Deleuzian space of coldness and cruelty. As the trickster who upends the logic of the convent, Jane Ray injects friendship and human contact into the geometry of the nunnery. Jane models for Monk how this space of punishment might be subverted. It is important to note, however, that Jane is a sadistic, and Monk experiences great pleasure in helping her punish and play cruel jokes on the other nuns. Yet unlike the Superior, Monk forms an intimacy with Jane that most readers would recognize as human contact, even though this intimacy is based on their sadism. Monk describes Jane as a "singular person," with "two distinct traits of character; a kind disposition towards such as she chose to prefer, and a pleasure in teasing those she disliked, or such as had offended her" (34).

Through Jane, Monk can exercise as much violence as she wants without risk of actual punishment. If Monk feels pity for Saint Frances, she never really attaches herself to such "submissive lambs." She is more drawn to strong sadist types, as her relationship with Jane shows. However, their friendship is conventional because it involves an affective connection that the audience could relate to, making it an anomaly in the convent. Yet theirs is a connection made

up of pleasures derived from cruel acts, placing their relationship firmly within the convent's logic. For example, Monk writes of their moments together in bed: "Jane for a time slept opposite to me, and often in the night would rise, unobserved, and slip into my bed, to talk with me, which she did in a low whisper" (80). Once in her bed, "Jane would tell me of the tricks she played, and such she mediated, and sometimes would make me laugh so loud" (80). Monk and Jane's relationship encourages readers to rethink what association and human contact are based on. The intimacy Monk experiences with Jane Ray offers a reprieve from the highly regimented existence in the convent, but oddly enough binds her to this space. For readers, Jane represents a foil to Monk's own opaqueness, her impenetrability, which Jane, through her quirkiness, is able to pierce. This bond between the two, as I said, lends a human touch to a book that is otherwise cold and impersonal, and as a result, signals the insertion of ideology in its humanist trappings (habits).

Jane becomes a mentor to Monk, enacting almost as much violence as the Superior. Because Jane appears to be mad, she has license to do as she pleases: "she would not do so if she were in perfect possession of her reason," the older nuns say as they make excuses for Jane's behavior, for "she behaved quite differently from the rest, and with a degree of levity irreconcilable with the rules" (73, 34). The only resemblance Jane has to the other nuns is in her dress and she does not take a saint's name upon her admission to the convent (12).

Monk describes Jane's condition as her "customary artfulness": "As soon as she perceived that the old nun was likely to observe her, she would throw her arms about, or appear unconscious of what she was doing; falling upon a bed, or standing stock-still, until exertions had been made to rouse her from her supposed lethargy" (73). Through her play acting, Jane works the convent to her advantage: she gets out of doing chores, and is able to punish whomever she chooses without consequence. Jane has no "fixed place to sleep in," and the other nuns "were all convinced that it was generally best to yield to her" (74). This absence of a fixed place points to Jane's pervasive influence in the convent.

For instance, Jane exerts her authority when she seeks revenge on a group of nuns who complain about one of her pranks. The trick itself is irrelevant (she switches the nuns' caps while they sleep), but it is Jane's reaction to her informants that is telling. When confronted by an older nun, La Mere, Jane flies into a rage and chokes her (78). Provoked by the accusation, mostly because her fellow nuns overlooked her position in the convent's hierarchy and ratted on her, Jane punishes her informants to reestablish order: "she beat some of her worst enemies quite severely, and afterward said, that she had intended to kill some of the rascally informers" (78). Whereas the other nuns are instructed to brand themselves with irons, whip their own flesh, and are bound and gagged for several hours for petty offenses, such as whispering during prayers, Jane is not punished for strangling a head nun (78, 114). Jane escapes punishment because

her actions reinforce the logic of power at the heart of the convent. Like the Superior, Jane has a masculine appearance and a cold and cruel nature. Monk's continuous doubling of characters further blurs the singularity of identity. The fact that Monk aligns herself with Jane speaks to both her desire to work within the structure of the convent, but not in a subservient position, and her need for sororal kinship.

As her gnostic, noncommittal style and close alignment with the Superior and Jane attest to, there is the dissolution of subjectivity in Monk's narrative. It is not an individual subject, then, that Monk identifies with, but rather a process of power. The two most powerful subjects in the convent, Jane and the Superior, could very well be the same person at times, and although Jane stands out for her quirkiness, what Americans prize as "individuality," it is impossible to tell whether or not Jane is an actual character or Monk's alter ego. Identification is multiple and shifting, and cannot be fixed on any one point. The convent is a space where nuns lose their identity as they disavow their former selves. By downplaying singularity, the lines that define the subject are blurred and what we are left with is a dynamic of power. Through repetition and uniformity the convent unmakes individuality.

The sadistic nuns attempt to negate identity through constant punishment that provides them with the pleasure of "negating nature within the ego and outside the ego, and negating the ego itself" (Deleuze 29). They become "something

more" than male or female. Habit, Monk further points out, "renders us insensible to the sufferings of others, and careless about our own sins" (122). For the most part, convent life destroys community building bonds structured around sympathy, as well as care for the self, opening up the space for another way of being, one founded on coldness and cruelty. However, unlike Sade's novels of utter depravity where characters can cut themselves off from the outside world and do as they please, the space of the convent is not immune from the forces of dominant culture, as Jane's moments of warmth and "individuality" reveal.

### III.

As Monk acclimates to the cold logic of the convent, and begins to carve a space for herself within its structure of power, the old Superior mysteriously disappears. Her replacement is warm and kind: "She walked with much difficulty, and consequently, exercised a less vigilant oversight of the nuns. She was also of a timid disposition" (119). Not fearless but fearful, the new Superior could hardly inspire terror and awe in her wards. Scared of ghosts, the superstitious Superior asks Monk to sleep in her bedroom (119). One night, the Superior climbs in Monk's bed, claiming to have seen a ghost. The new Superior's desire for Monk, her need for the proximity of bodies, define her as different from the old Superior. She represents a shift in the convent's logic of power. Whereas once it was ruled under the constant threat of ritualized violence, it now operates under

the benevolent order of discipline. The new Superior even volunteers Monk for charitable work in the convent's hospital (120).

Although Monk claims to expose and condemn the atrocities of convent life, she and the other nuns, particularly Jane, do not welcome the arrival of the benevolent Superior. The nuns immediately suspect the Bishop of murdering her predecessor. Jane informs the Bishop, "I'm going to have a hunt in the cellar for my old Superior" (103). The "my" is telling of her alignment and association with her mentor. The other nuns hush Jane, but she replies, "My mother used to tell me 'never to be afraid of the face of a man'" (103). Jane is described as having "a disposition to quarrel with nay nun who seemed to be winning the favour of the Superior. She would never rest until she had brought such a one into some difficulty" (80). Jane's reverence for the old Superior is echoed by similar gestures of the other nuns who keep her stray hairs and nail clippings: "One of us was occasionally called into her room to cut her nails, or dress her hair; and we would often collect the clippings, and distribute them to each other, or preserve them with the utmost care" (14). Monk herself wears a bag around her neck in which she keeps cloth from one of the Superior's old habits. She even held close to this bag during her marriage, claiming that she, "always relied on the influence of this little bag" (17). It is significant that as readers we know more of the bag than we do of her husband.

Gestures such as these suggest that the nuns preferred the way the old Superior ran the convent, for they reject the new benevolent Superior because she represents the world of disciplinary institutions outside the convent that they have fled. As Monk observes, "it is wonderful that we could have carried our reverence for the Superior so far as we did" (13). It is clear that the sisters enjoy a kind of intimacy with their old Superior, a relationship not based on conventional affects and notions of love. The violence of the convent does not work to isolate the women from one another (the ways dominant institutions do) but rather to bring them together as a sorority, albeit a family based on both cruelty and pleasure.

Shortly after the old Superior disappears, Jane Ray finally experiences punishment, found "hanging by a cord from a ring in the ceiling, with her head downward. Her clothes had been tied round with a leathern strap, to keep them in their place. . . . her face had a very unpleasant appearance, being dark coloured and swollen by the rushing in of the blood; her hands were tied, and her mouth stopped with a large gag" (122-3). Like the old Superior, Jane thrives in the convent under its logic of punishment. At one point, Jane claims "she expected to be Superior one of those days" (14). Yet now the old order of the convent has come to an end, and Jane loses her power and influence.

It is only after the cruel Superior disappears, and Monk becomes pregnant that she "escapes" a third time never to return. The arrival of the new

Superior coincides with Monk's pregnancy, thus stopping the cycle of punishment and pleasure that has defined life in the convent until this point. Her pregnancy grounds her deep into the gender position she rejects when she chooses the convent over marriage/motherhood. Because she has moved in spaces of discipline and sentimentality outside and now within the convent, in the end, sentimentality gets the best of her. Rather than strangling the infant as was expected of her, she flees: "My desire of escape was partly excited by the fear of bringing an infant to the murderous hands of my companions" (130). As in other instances in the text, Monk's language is ambiguous. Why only "partly excited"? If the convent has become a space of discipline through benevolent charity, why would Monk be required to kill her infant? Presumably the new Superior would put an end to these practices. With the disappearance of the old Superior and Jane's disempowerment, it is clear that the transfer of power from punishment to discipline is never smooth. The threat of violence always hangs over disciplinary regimes, as Jane's punishment bears out. Monk's ambivalence is registered when she claims, "I was occasionally troubled with a desire of escaping the nunnery, and was much distressed whenever I felt so evil an imagination rise in my mind" (129). It is clear that up until the end, Monk desires to stay within the confines of the convent. Thus her pregnancy and the arrival of the new Superior prompt "evil" thoughts of escape in her mind.

So we are left wondering if Monk's cold cruelty was eventually melted by the sentimental warmth, as embodied by the new Superior, that now pervades the convent? Were her mentors not successful in amply proving the virtues of sadistic violence? It was not her mentors' function to persuade her to stay (which is why Monk finds it easy to leave three times). As Deleuze shows, the sadist is not interested in persuasion, but rather in demonstration: "The libertine may put on an act of trying to convince and persuade . . . But the intention to convince is merely apparent, for nothing is in fact more alien to the sadist than the wish to convince, to persuade, in short to educate" (18). The sadist instructor stands in contrast to the masochist educator, not needing the subject-object relation. This short-circuits the economy of sympathetic identification encouraged by the literature of the time. This may sound like a radical individualism, reminiscent of Emerson, but in fact it is a program for the dissolution of the self.

Deleuze's reading of sadism ultimately leaves the subject impoverished, coming close to solipsism, where the constant beratement of the masochistic other within oneself is all that counts. Contra Deleuze, the sisters' acts of acts of aggression, redirected outward, are more productive since they have the destruction of the law as their object. However, what is of value in Deleuze's reading of sadism is his resistance to go "inside" the subject, a resistance also in keeping with the both the formal and affective logic of *Awful Disclosures* as Monk

rejects the force of sentimentality, in both her narrative technique and decision to return again and again to the convent, that define one's interior.

The old Superior demonstrates a doctrine of destruction that is reflected in Monk's own narrative: she abandons persuasion for the task of describing, in a sexually charged way, vicious and violent behavior of women in the convent. Perhaps the very act of crafting the narrative, with its endless repetition of punishments (adding victim upon victim) is an act of sadism itself, an act of impersonal demonstration. The repetition of punishment overrides the specificity of any one act, and leaves us with a vague narrative where the personal is not revealed (we never learn anything intimate about Monk's marriage, for example); rather, we are left with a catalogue of punishments and the cold logic of cruelty, which, at times, can be the basis of a radical sociality, one not based on the full disclosure, fellow feeling, and warm and fuzzy affect that defines "family" in most antebellum texts. Monk's sorority gives us another definition of family, albeit one not for the faint of heart.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HAWTHORNE'S UNWANTED DAUGHTERS

It may not be that children can't wait to grow up and have proper reproductive sex—a comforting belief for the adults; but that, in Freud's view, children have discovered, through their immature sexual constitutions, one truth about sex: that it is about the giving and getting of certain pleasures, and that civilized notions of relationship and family merely obscure this. Sex, as for children in this unlikely Freudian pastoral, issues in nothing but sensual delight, in appetite regained.

Adam Philips, *The Beast in the Nursery*

Women are still at war with what their fantasies say and what Mama said.

Nina Hartley, "Two Good Girls Gone Bad"

#### I.

In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne describes Hester Prynne's daughter Pearl as "so perverse" and "malicious" that he questions her humanity (82). Closer to nature, Pearl prefers the company of wild animals to that of her mother. She persistently seeks out the "Black Man" in the forest, Hawthorne's racialized figure for the devil, despite Hester's warning that should she find him, he will brand her with a scarlet letter of her own (161). Pearl is clearly undaunted by her mother's warning. It is as if in seeking out her own scarlet letter, a

signifier now doubly eroticized by association with her mother's act and the black man who would grant it with his touch, as Hester cautions, Pearl seeks to de-authorize the power her mother invests in the letter of the law while simultaneously schooling herself in the ABCs of sexual agency (162). It is precisely Pearl's defiant attitude against Hester's constant mothering that makes Pearl a better feminist than the novel's often-celebrated heroine. Showing no desire to become the proper (white) lady, who in order to achieve this rank, must forgo non-normative pleasures by submitting to the symbolic order ministered by her mother's heartfelt pleas, Pearl rejects the racialized hierarchy that charts the path to white femininity in the context of New World slavery.

In response to Hester's grief over her own slide down the racialized gender hierarchy, Pearl "frown[s], clench[es] her fists, and harden[s] her small features into a stern, unsympathizing look of discontent," as if intuiting her mother's pathological desire to belong to a community that will not accept her (83). Pearl's sadistic, instructive resistance to Hester's mournful tears reverses the parent-child relation, with Pearl admonishing her mother for wanting something that clearly is not good for her, and further checking Hester's desire to subscribe to the infantilizing lure of national belonging and the empty promises of hetero-conventionality.

In order to understand the gender/sex dynamic in Hawthorne's novel, we need to situate it in the context of New World slavery. Hortense J. Spillers' work illuminates the ways in which race and gender inter-animate each other. Spillers

argues that New World slavery “marked a *theft* of the body—a *willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*” (“Mama’s Baby” 206).<sup>58</sup> Bodies do not just lose gender difference but become “flesh” under New World slavery (206). The difference between body and flesh is a “motive will,” the difference between a “captive” and “liberated subject-position” (206). When bodies are made flesh, when gender difference is lost as bodies become cargo, a racialized gender hierarchy emerges in the U.S., with the white, upper to middle class “lady” at the top of the hierarchy (this identity is solidified through proper marriage/motherhood), followed by the biracial “woman” (for Spillers, the mythic “mulatta” figure—the “neither/nor” in the American imaginary), who is then followed by the black slave, the “female,” at the bottom of the hierarchy.<sup>59</sup> This rigid stratification makes movement on the hierarchy primarily a downward trajectory.

Yet alternatives to the racialized gender hierarchy and the limited modes of association and ways of being it reproduces are found in antebellum literature. Both Pearl and Hawthorne’s other fictive daughter, Alice Pyncheon from *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), go against their parents’ plans for them and

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<sup>58</sup> See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” and “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words.”

<sup>59</sup> See Spillers, “Notes on an Alternative Model: Neither/Nor.”

violently reject this racialized gender hierarchy and its attendant institutions, along with the privileges it would afford them as potential white “ladies.” Hawthorne’s progenies represent a radical moment in antebellum fiction: a complete rejection of marriage/motherhood and the racial and gender injustices these institutions perpetuate.

I am not drawing a simple analogy between the struggles of white middle class women and slave women in antebellum America. Alice and Pearl do not suffer from the oppression, “unimaginable from this distance,” to quote Spillers, of being rendered flesh: rape, forced reproduction, and other physical and psychic brutalities. Yet I would like to risk what some may read as overriding important differences: what does it mean that white girls who could have privileges via marriage/motherhood purposely reject these institutions that would grant them relatively safe, easy lives? What fascinates me about characters like Pearl and Alice is that they represent kinds of imaginative and dangerous risk-taking that has the potential to tear down a hierarchy oppressive to all women, albeit to vastly varying degrees. Such a rejection of gender and racial privilege is so antithetical to antebellum America’s sentimental “women’s culture,” the often analyzed and celebrated site of socio-political dissent for women during the period.<sup>60</sup> What is ultimately surprising about what Alice and Pearl embody is that

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<sup>60</sup>A new generation of feminist antebellum scholars, inspired by Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs* (1986), analyze representations of resistance such as subversive masochism (Marianne Noble) and implicit, passive-aggressive acts of anger (Linda Grasso). Such resistance may reform marriage/motherhood but ultimately does not tear down these oppressive institutions that

their strategies, as Hawthorne conceives them, are radically different from neo-colonial strategies that infantilize, disempower, and ultimately ship away the unwanted, newly “liberated” black subject. The latter were popular with abolitionist women writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe because they ultimately do not threaten their gender and racial privileges. Both Pearl and Alice strike against their privilege, not out of a proto-white liberal guilt, but in an effort to reimagine the conditions for a more just and equitable way of being in the world.<sup>61</sup>

Trying to escape “examination” by the governor and his men, Pearl is described as a “wild, tropical bird, of rich plumage, ready to take flight into the upper air” (98). The comparison of Pearl to a “wild tropical bird” demarcates her as an outsider to her New England community. She clearly does not heed of mandates of the racial gender hierarchy and as the description of her as a wild creature attests to, Pearl is not on the path to proper white femininity. Her rejection of racial and gender norms renders her an animal, a point the novel continually underscores. In order to appreciate today what Hawthorne is doing

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uphold racist, sexist hierarchies of power that do not require the “angel in the house” to give up her class and racial privileges. Strategizing within institutions like marriage/motherhood perpetuates the generative cycle that ensures that things stay the same. See Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Masochism* (2000) and Grasso, *The Artistry of Anger: Black and White Women’s Literature in America, 1820-60* (2002).

<sup>61</sup> For another critical analysis of Hawthorne that finds a feminist spirit in his novels, see Nina Baym’s ‘Revisiting Hawthorne’s Feminism.’ Baym argues, “In this essay I swim against the tide to argue—again—for Hawthorne as a feminist writer from the *Scarlet Letter* onward . . .the idea of Hawthorne as a feminist has been overwhelmingly rejected” (107). Clearly I stand with Baym since I find transformative potential for women in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables*.

with Pearl, we may want to look ahead at the twentieth century and briefly consider the closing scene of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936). Hawthorne's description of Pearl's affinity with the forest animals reverberates in Barnes' heroine Robin Vote wrestling with a dog in the forest. Whereas Barnes finishes her novel with a bestialized image, a nihilistic culmination of Enlightenment civilization, Hawthorne opens his with Pearl as a romanticized version of natural desire run rampant, something complexly attractive to his Puritanical sensibility.

For Hawthorne, Pearl represented the antithesis not only of Salem's unyielding religious codes but closer to his own life in what he experienced as the drudgery of keeping the Custom House ledgers in order. As he wrote to his wife Sophia: "I am a machine, and I am surrounded by hundreds of similar machines;- -or, rather, all of the business people are so many wheels of one great machine—and we have no more love or sympathy for one another than if we were made of wood, brass, or iron, like the wheels or other pieces of complicated machinery" (qtd. in Arac 144).<sup>62</sup> In opposition to the mechanization of life and increasingly diminished capacity of artistic expression that Hawthorne mourns in his letter and in "The Custom House," he flirts with the idea of Pearl as an unalloyed organic force unfettered by societal constraints. Whereas for Barnes the bestialization of humanity is the end of the civilizing process, for Hawthorne, the lawless nature that Pearl represents signifies untapped possibility for a reimagining of his immediate social reality.

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<sup>62</sup> See Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative* (Harvard UP 2005).

Yet Hawthorne could not follow through with conviction what remaining loyal to Pearl's anarchic force would lead to. Pearl's disruptive inhumanity becomes in the novel a subject of reform, not Pearl's, but her mother's as a way of regaining favor in the eyes of the village elders. Hester, like her creator, cannot seem to break free from the binds of belonging and association that define who she is. In "The Custom House," Hawthorne writes about his inability to leave home: "My doom was on me. It was not the first time, nor the second, that I had gone away,--as it seemed, permanently,--but yet returned, like the bad half-penny; or as if Salem were for me the inevitable center of the universe" (14). Hawthorne's comments here reveal a number of attempts to strike out on his own but the realities of an increasingly market-driven publishing world, that he saw dominated by the infamous "damned mob of scribbling women" who kept making it impossible for him to support himself and his family as a professional writer. It is not surprising that critics have drawn parallels between Hester's defiant yet complicit attitude to the Puritans and Hawthorne's relation to the pressures of the market. But if Hester represents Hawthorne's more compliant model, Pearl surely illustrates an uncompromising drive that has no regard for those reciprocal relations that bind subjects to existing institutions and identities.

Did Hawthorne fear his own creation? Did Barnes? I ask these questions in order to underscore how far from the transformative potential that these characters represent both writers deviate from in their fiction. Perhaps Hawthorne

and Barnes balked at pushing the drives these characters embody further because they recognized that the iconoclastic energy Pearl and Robin represent eerily replicates the dehumanizing discourses of slavery and fascism, respectively. But while these characters seem to over identify with the very dehumanizing processes that turn human bodies into flesh, the all significant difference that should not be overlooked is that the actions of these agents of good terror do not prop up exploitative and oppressive institutions. Unable to subscribe to the radical potential embodied in Pearl, by making her mother the subject of conscious agency in the novel and marginalizing Pearl to an impish entity, Hawthorne backs away from what could be a revolutionary moment in the text.

I am not interested in reading Hawthorne and Barnes' bestial associations as perpetuating the stereotype of woman as "savage" but rather as rejections of an oppressive hierarchy. When such hierarchies and the institutions they engender are rejected, one starts at the bottom, in the dirt like Robin, with the opportunity to build something new from the ground up. Hawthorne gives voice to these iconoclastic ideas in his main characters, Hester and Holgrave, yet they ultimately cannot live up to that radical spirit. When contemplating whether it would have been better for Pearl to never have been born, Hester goes even further, and wonders if life was even worth living for any woman: "Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of

womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?  
 “ (144). In order for social justice to be realized for women, Hester believes that,  
 “the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew” (144).

Holgrave, the radical reformer from *The House of Seven Gables*, passionately argues that, “in this age, more than ever before, the moss grown and rotten Past is to be torn down, and lifeless institutions to be thrust out of the way, and their dead corpses buried, and everything to begin anew . . . But we shall live to see the day, I trust, when no man shall build his house for posterity” (128, 131). Yet he ultimately sells out (or rather buys in) once he marries and acquires real estate. It is Hawthorne’s minor characters, Pearl and Alice, who act rather than make speeches.

## II.

As her actions attest to, Pearl does not fit the fantasy of the blonde-haired, blue eyed, angel-child (think Stowe’s little Eva here) around whom the social is erected and who must be protected at all costs. Lauren Berlant has argued that U.S. citizenship’s ideological infantilism installs childish naiveté and purity at the center of national politics, fetishizing them as things to be enshrined and desired.

<sup>63</sup> This kind of political infantilism deploys disabling, normative discourses that impoverish the public lives of adults. As such, critics like Lee Edelman have recently argued that today’s dominant politics are driven by reproductive futurity, a politics of perpetual deferred hope for “tomorrow’s children” that discourages

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<sup>63</sup> See Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*.

political action in the present.<sup>64</sup> Edelman poses the following challenge to queers in his defense of the unmarried, narcissistic Ebenezer Scrooge: “Why not acknowledge our kinship at last with Scrooge who, unregenerate, refuses the social imperative to grasp futurity in the form of the Child, for the sake of whom, as the token of accession to Imaginary wholeness [which the subject can never accomplish], everything else in the world, by force needed, must give way?” (49).

Not surprisingly, the figure of the child has been rightly critiqued as instantiating disabling normative discourses. Yet despite these critics’ convincing pedophobic arguments, does “the child” offer anything socially and politically promising to an adult-centered politics? Although I argue against the dominant forms and logics of what Berlant calls “infantile citizenship,” in throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, we might miss the disruptive/dissenting energy associated with children’s selfish petulance. Feminists and queer theorists interested in dislodging the figure of the child from the center of politics can paradoxically find in the notoriously weepy nineteenth century a rich, unsentimental archive of young girls whose selfish acts symbolically destroy the oppressive social institutions erected on behalf of children. Vain and antisocial, Hawthorne’s girls redefine dominant cultural models of intimacy and belonging as they reject the racialized passage to proper white femininity.

Infantilization obviously works against women, as patriarchy’s move to de-authorize female agency, yet the negative tendencies I identify in Hawthorne’s

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<sup>64</sup> See Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

progenies actively resists the gendering of proper white femininity and the practices and institutions that make it possible. The petulance Alice and Pearl enact offers an elementary critique of sanitized communities, thereby forcing us to rethink the forms and logics that chart the passage to adulthood for women in the U.S. Both characters' selfish actions set in motion and make visible disciplinary models that operate through the double articulation of infantilization and feminization, while at the same time resisting these violent twin processes of female subjectivation. The risk in this argument is in finding disruptive potential in an infantilized femininity without being trapped within that patriarchal articulation. Yet the dangerous feminization of subjectivity with its attendant infantilization produces a surplus of enjoyment, over and against the dose necessary to turn us into docile women that could potentially allow for a different subjective formation and sociality.

For Edelman, different subjective formations and socialities that counter heteronormativity come out of the negativity of the death drive, which "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). Queers should embrace the negativity that is ascribed to us, rejecting the disciplinary lesson of normalcy in the name of and demanded by child figures that Edelman reads: Tiny Tim, Little Orphan Annie, the waif from *Les Mis*, and I would add little Eva to the list. Yet the fact that a rejection of reproductive futurity is present in the figure of a child in

Hawthorne gives us pause. It is Pearl, not Hester, who embodies the negativity “opposed to every form of social viability”; it is not the scapegoat, the literally marked mother, but rather her young daughter who emerges as a figure of radical dissent.

For instance, when the local children stop their vicious game of “scourging Quakers” and “scalping Indians” to taunt Hester on one of her rare visits to town, Pearl fights back, unlike her mother, hurling stones and chunks of dirt at the kids who mock Hester, thereby redirecting outward the muted anger Hester continually directs inward:

Pearl, who was a dauntless child, after frowning, stamping her foot, and shaking her little hand with a variety of threatening gestures, suddenly made a rush at the knot of her enemies, and put them all the flight. She resembled, in her fierce pursuit of them, an infant pestilence,—the scarlet fever, or some such half-fledged angel of judgment,—whose mission was to punish the sins of the rising generations. (Hawthorne 91)

Pearl’s threatening violence symbolically puts an end to the brutal social injustices the children allegorically enact in their play, sending them running away.<sup>65</sup> Whereas the other children are merely imitating the crimes their adult counterparts have committed, Pearl’s form of resistance has no adult correlative, especially not in a mother who continually hopes to tame her daughter. Yet given the option for community—the nasty kids and unforgiving women who thought Hester should have been sentenced to death—it is no surprise that Pearl has no

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<sup>65</sup> I want to underscore that the perpetuation of injustices often relies on fun and games, as the photographs of the torture at Abu Graib reveal.

desire to belong. Instead, she “seemed always to be sowing broadcast the dragon’s teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle” and pretending that the “ugliest weeds of the garden” were Puritan children, “whom Pearl smote down and uprooted, most unmercifully” (85). All her make-believe training for battle comes in handy when Pearl is faced with real opposition that has to be met head on. What could be a better example, then, of what Edelman describes as his “fuck the child” politics if not Pearl whipping rocks at children?

Such great self-love, insistence on pleasure, and “toxic” antisocial behavior may be considered immature and selfish by many. One might even say that by refusing to grow up and become mothers who self-sacrifice for their children, Alice and Pearl are doomed to a perpetual state of arrested development. Drawing on Freud’s essay on infantile sexuality, “Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” Adam Philips makes a case for sustaining what is often labeled as immature omnivorous childhood curiosity and appetite in the face of the demand that adults settle for “realism” and “wanting sensibly” (2)<sup>66</sup>. For Freud, infantile sexuality is all about curiosity, which is akin to appetite (qtd. in Philips 15). Children are unimpressed by realism or adults’ explanations so they go about their own sexual “theory-making,” what Philips describes as their art: “Children live intensely; and their art—the making of sexual theories—makes life, makes interest, makes importance” (29). Rather than taking the risk of going

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<sup>66</sup> See Philips, *The Beast in the Nursery*.

what Freud describes as “grotesquely astray” with theory-making, adults settle for compliance to the ideals of dominant culture in order to achieve “civilized sexual morality” (qtd. in Philips 16).

Children’s endless questions have sex as their end goal and they refuse to sublimate and impoverish their desires through deferral (Philips 23). Yet adults want them to know something else (what Freud terms “culture”) and here is where education comes in. Education teaches the child to compromise or lose what she is most interested in, sex, in favor of the ideologies of her culture (Philips 29). Sexual interest has to be made acceptable via education and sublimated into “civilized sexual morality” to turn us into productive and mature men and women. The omnivorous sexual intensity and curiosity of the child gets funneled into an impoverished notion of sex as solely reproductive and/or between a monogamous couple. For instance, when determining whether or not Hester is a fit mother to raise Pearl, Pastor Wilson examines the “elf-child,” asking her, “Canst thou tell me, my child, who made thee?,” a question Hester had asked earlier, demanding that Pearl answer with “Thy Heavenly Father,” an answer Pearl of course refuses to give her mother (88, 99). Instead, she “positively” exclaims, “I have no heavenly Father!” (88).

At first Pearl, who Hawthorne describes as having a “tenfold portion” of the “perversity” manifest in all children, “ungraciously” refuses to engage the men here to examine her. Earlier, the governor had tried to place Pearl “betwixt his

knees”; sensing malice, Pearl almost jumps out of the window to get away—I will return to this scene later (98). Deciding finally to answer Pastor Wilson, Pearl engages in “theory-making” about sex, heretically replying that she “had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door” (99). Rather than accept Puritanical mythmaking about creation, Pearl rejects religious doctrine and instead offers an imaginative counter-mythology about her origins, a more sensual theory, closer to passion and enjoyment: she is “plucked” from a flaming red rose bush. Yet even Pearl’s ontogenetic fantasy isn’t mere playful mythmaking; by pointing to the site of the rose bush, next to her mother’s prison, Pearl intimates knowledge of the ways that sex and the law inform her reality. As Philips makes clear via Freud, children just don’t buy the theories adults tell them about the world, especially about sex. Pearl’s counter-mythology stands in opposition to the Puritan ideology perpetuated through gossip about her mother in the community.

Pearl’s rich imagination feeds on the kinds of things she encounters on a daily basis. The erotic life of children transforms the mundane into powerfully charged experiences. Dorothy Allison talks about how as a young girl she had the kind of erotic imagination that enabled her to take “banal movies, hackneyed best-selling romances, and the most clichéd television programs” and construct same-sex S/M fantasies that were “invariably more effective than mass market

stroke books no matter how explicit” (94).<sup>67</sup> When taking on the anti-porn feminists who attack sex-positive feminists like herself, Allison cleverly asks them about what fantasies made them “breathe hard” as young girls (94)? Have they simply deleted those “inappropriate” adolescent fantasies from their memories in order to accept impoverished, “appropriate” pleasures and intimacies as adult women? Self-righteous feminists lord their “maturity” over any woman who refuses to surrender her curiosity and appetite to heteronormativity, pathologizing her just as the men of church and state do Pearl.

It is infantile sexuality with its sole aim of multiple pleasures, not biological generational transmission of sameness, which is the basis of our erotic lives. In an anti-Darwinian move, Freud insists that sex is anti-reproductive (Philips 26). Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality and Philips’ more specific argument that infantile sexuality should be the basis for our social and erotic lives is in keeping with much work done by radical feminist theorists/activists and queer theorists/activists. Judith Halberstam, for instance, challenges us to break with dominant culture’s narrative of maturity that upholds biological generational transmission—monogamous couple form, parenthood, retirement, death—and instead imagine alternative life narratives that break this cycle. Halberstam’s challenge seems close to Freud’s notion of going “grotesquely astray” with imaginative “theory-making.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Allison “Puritans, Perverts, and Feminists.”

<sup>68</sup> See Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005).

For Halberstam, dyke subcultures, like drag king troupes and the Michigan Womyn's Festival, become sites for developing queer temporalities and counterpublics that break with the hetero timeline and its attendant gender and racial hierarchy (i.e. the musicians at the festival refusing to grow up and act/dress age and gender appropriate). Hawthorne's rebellious "daughters" refuse to grow up and sacrifice their pleasure, curiosity, and imagination to become proper (white) ladies through "civilized sexual morality." As the epigraph to this chapter illustrates, both Pearl and Alice realize that civilized notions of relationships and family obscure pleasure, curiosity, and "theory-making"—the capacity to do something radically different from what every other "proper" woman has done before. The persistence of a normative social matrix that includes racist modes of kinship promoted by institutions like marriage, conventional intimacies, and the idealization of motherhood continues to impoverish the lives of people by privatizing their existence within increasingly circumscribed spheres of social action.

In her discussion of the ways in which white, middle class American girls were taught to identify with and desire to become self-sacrificing wives/mothers in the nineteenth century, Kathryn Kent demonstrates "how the subject-forming structure . . . the intense maternal-pedagogical system . . . compelled young girls to internalize the mandates of bourgeois womanhood" (2).<sup>69</sup> However,

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<sup>69</sup> See Kent, *Making Girls Into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity*.

identification with the “maternal-pedagogical system” produced in some “less-normative desires and identifications,” which Kent calls “protolesbian” and queer (2). Taking Jo March’s declaration in *Little Women*, “Mothers are the *best* lovers in the whole world,” Kent argues that identifying with mother’s love can produce non-normative sexualities in young girls (1). Kent rightly points out that too many studies of female friendship and “women’s culture” in the nineteenth century, such as work by Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman, do not read same sex interactions between and among women in sentimental culture as queer.<sup>70</sup> Kent’s work underscores the erotic dimension that informs homosocial relations.

However, while for Kent alternatives to the dominant logics of gender formation and acceptable forms of desire emerge from mother-daughter bonds, this essay engages the ways in which non-normative desires and pleasures are born in opposition to dominant forms of kinship. For Kent, queer, in all its manifestations, is dependent on familial bonds and ties of affection. In contrast, I’m interested in fictive moments in antebellum fiction where those bonds and affects are undone.

Despite her attempt to model Pearl into a proper lady, Hester’s ambivalent relationship to motherhood underscores the ways in which motherhood is antithetical to the freedom to imagine and act on alternative life narratives.

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<sup>70</sup> On the centrality of female friendship in nineteenth-century America, see Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1980).

Hester's fantasies connect her to Pearl's defiant actions. Hester imagines that if she hadn't become a mother, "had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise"; she may have been a "prophetess," "com[ing] down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect," perhaps "attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment" (144). When Hester leaves the governor's mansion after ensuring her custody of Pearl, Mistress Hibbins, the governor's sister and a rumored witch, asks her, "Wilt thou go with us to-night? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne should make one" (103). Hester replies, "I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would *willingly* have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man's book too, and that with mine own blood" (my emphasis, 103). Momentarily freeing herself from the responsibilities of motherhood, Hester entertains the idea of a different life for herself, one deeply at odds with the strictly legislated world she inhabits. It is significant that Hester can imagine this racially transgressive, eroticized homosocial space only if unburdened by motherhood.

But why can't she bring Pearl with her? Why can't both mother and daughter dance with the witches in the forest? What kind of ridiculous, suffocating ideal of sentimental mothering does Hester feel she needs to live up to? It seems she may be trying to right her "sin" through Pearl—this is why Pearl must become the

proper adult woman Hester failed to be. As Serge Leclaire argues, this is a destructive kind of parental narcissism: “the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father’s place, and the girl shall marry a prince . . . parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents’ narcissism borne again”(13).<sup>71</sup> The ideal of the perfect child whom we will never be for our parents, who Leclaire describes as “His Majesty the Baby,” (Berlant’s blonde haired, blue eyed angel), must be killed off. Hester uses her fantasy of the angel-in-the-house she hopes Pearl will become as an excuse not to live a different life. Hawthorne astutely uses Pearl as Hester’s buffer against her own desire.

Hester has the chance to leave, to go off with the other outcast women, and she doesn’t because of what she has internalized as her “parental responsibilities.” Yet Pearl is not the impediment that Hester imagines her to be; Hester’s unwillingness to act is what is holding her back, not her daughter. It is telling that Hester is only willing to leave with Dimmesdale with the promise of sanctioned heteroconventionality. Hester’s problem, what keeps her from acting on her desire, is that she continually sees herself through the judging eyes of her community. Hester is not Flaubert’s hopeless Emma, who has nowhere to go and whose only choice is death. Hawthorne offers Hester another opportunity to transgress her community’s strictures but he seems more invested in showing how people submit to the injunctions of others. Hester can leave with Pearl, but

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<sup>71</sup> See Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*.

waits for Dimmesdale, knowing with his weak track record that he will never leave and therefore she will not leave either. In a representative moment of his weakness, Dimmesdale pleases Hester to help him make his Machiavellian physician and Hester's supposed long-dead husband, Roger Chillingsworth, leave his home: "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" (171). Dimmesdale cannot even show Chillingsworth the door. Hester replies, "Wilt thou die for very weakness? There is no other cause!" (171). Hester's sarcasm shows that she is not above pointing out the weakness in others, yet she uses this very weakness to justify her own inaction. Rather than act, Hester can only impotently fantasize how else her life might be if it weren't for Dimmesdale and Pearl, an instance of bad fantasy that binds her to the law through self-pity, unlike her daughter's world-making fictions.

In the novel's preface, Hawthorne describes the "vixenly . . . enormous specimen of the American eagle," which hovers over the entrance to the Custom House, as "apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw," even though people seek shelter under her wing (9). A mother figure, the eagle prefigures Hester's fantasies of infanticide. Imagining what she might have done in the world if she did not have the responsibility of the "education of her child," a child whose "own nature had something wrong in it," Hester wonders, "whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been borne at all?" (144). Moving from a fantasy born out of sympathy for a rebellious daughter who will have a

difficult time in the “hostile world,” Hester moves to a fantasy of outright infanticide: “A times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven” (145). Hawthorne follows Hester’s daydreams with the line, “The scarlet letter had not done its office” (145). Hester has not fully internalized the letter of the law. Motherhood has not fully domesticated her. Yet unlike Pearl, who confronts impediments to her happiness head on, Hester sublimates her desire for a better life by figuring in her daughter her own frustrations.

For Hester, Pearl is both a saving grace and the chief impediment to her own happiness: A saving grace in the sense that through her motherly devotion and care Hester hopes she will be redeemed in the eyes of the community, for those “unquiet elements,” Hester’s “enmity and passion” that she believed Pearl inherited, had “begun soothed away by the softening influences of maternity” (84-5). Yet daughter is a chief impediment to her mother’s happiness in the sense that Pearl is the embodiment of Hester’s sin, a constant reminder that she transgressed the law.

### III.

In contrast to her mother’s constant self-berating, Pearl seems unwilling to internalize authority. Always ready to redirect her rage outward to battle for justice, it is no surprise that Pearl is fascinated with the armor on display in Governor Bellingham’s mansion. As Hester waits to meet with the governor to

keep custody of Pearl, the “elf-child” was “greatly pleased with the gleaming armour” and “spent some time looking into the polished mirror of the breastplate” (94). Pearl loves the larger-than-life ways in which her image is distorted in the convex mirror of the armor: her “naughty merriment was likewise reflected in the mirror, with so much breadth and intensity of effect, that it made Hester Prynne feel as if it could not be the image of her own child” (94). Hester shrinks not only from Pearl’s reflection but also from her own: “the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions” (94).

Pearl, on the other hand, finds both reflections to be wonderful. What frightens Hester is the truth in the reflections. The images do not coincide with the idea that she has of herself and her daughter. For Hester, the image has the power to shatter her internal idealization of herself as a subject worthy of love. For Pearl, the distorted images are a source of delight, not discipline. In her large, distorted reflection, Pearl does not look like an obedient angel, looking graceful or “good.” Rather, she delights in the imperfections. A narcissist through and through, Pearl loves who she is, as her obsession with her reflection suggests. Since Pearl rejects the models Hester and Dimmesdale mirror for her, she has to be self-creating. That Hawthorne uses the surface of an armor and the breast plate to underscore Pearl’s self love makes it clear that hers is an embattled existence. Whereas Pearl, with kaleidoscopic curiosity, relishes everything that the armor reflects, Hester can only focus on the glaring and

magnified A. Hester's sense of self is mediated by the symbolic order whereas Pearl takes pride in her defiance. Hester shrinks back in shame, having internalized the community's judging gaze. In contrast, Pearl rejects the gaze of the Big Other and therefore does not see herself as ugly or evil but perfectly imperfect. If young girls' play in the nineteenth century, as Gillian Brown argues, encouraged "continuity between children and adults," emphasizing futurity and responsibility, Pearl's narcissistic play opts for unregenerate pleasure in the present thwarting the imperative to couple up and reproduce (89).<sup>72</sup>

Disturbed by the fact that Pearl's response to her own image lacks the disciplinary shameful function that it has on her, Hester pulls her daughter away from the armor and into the garden. Bored with the bland New England gardening, Pearl spots a few red rose bushes and cries for a rose, and in characteristic fashion, "would not be pacified" (95). She demands a bright red badge like her mother's. Hester of course is embarrassed as her repeated attempts to hush Pearl fail: "[I]n utter scorn for her mother's attempt to quiet her, [Pearl] gave an eldritch scream" (95). As her demand for a red rose signifies, Pearl takes pride in her mother's badge of dishonor, and is furious when Hester removes the badge when meeting with Dimmesdale:

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<sup>72</sup> Brown argues that girls' play was meant to "represent not the ancient history of the race that can be invoked as the pedigree of the nation [as boys' play does], but the history of the present that can be projected into the future" (91). "The history of the present that can be projected into the future" ensures that nothing will really change as the child's imaginative curiosity and inventiveness is killed off as the mature woman emerges. See Brown, "Child's Play" (*differences* 1999).

At length, assuming a singular air of authority, Pearl stretched out her hand, with the small forefinger extended, and pointing evidently towards her mother's breast. And beneath, in the mirror of the brook, there was the flower-girdled and sunny image of little Pearl, pointing her small finger too. . . . As her mother kept beckoning her, and arraying her face in a holiday suit of unaccustomed smiles, the child stamped her foot with a yet more imperious look and gesture. In the brook again, was the fantastic *beauty* of the image, with its reflected frown, its pointed finger, and imperious gesture, giving emphasis to the aspect of little Pearl. (my emphasis, 183)

While on the one hand, Hawthorne describes Pearl as the personification of childish petulance, he qualifies his description of her as beautiful. Hawthorne shows us Pearl not through the embarrassed eyes of her mother, but rather from a perspective that finds in Pearl's unconditional love for her mother a beautiful image of self love. Pearl will not come over to her mother until her mother places the letter back on her chest: "Bring it hither!" said Hester. "Come thou and take it up!" answered Pearl (184). Demanding that Hester actually act, not remain in the miserable state of tears that she usually witnesses her mother in, Pearl schools Hester in the virtues of disobedience and pride in one's shame. Having pride in her mother's big flaming red A represents a disregard for the community's moral strictures.

Pearl seems impervious to discipline, despite the community's best attempts at proper child rearing. The governor sees Pearl as a child of the "Lord of Misrule," and the community, along with Hester, considers her a "demon offspring . . . from old Catholic times" (82). Dimmesdale describes his daughter's actions as having "the cankered wrath of an old witch, like Mistress Hibbins"

(183). These epithets that brand Pearl an outsider she embraces as constitutive of her oppositional identity. Heeding her daughter's demand, Hester pins back the letter, but it is clear that although it is in Hester's best interest to take her daughter seriously, she infantilizes Pearl and dismisses her as a source of embarrassment in order to protect herself from the truth her daughter speaks.

Throughout the novel, Hester repeatedly protects herself from Pearl's insights by trying to mold her unruly daughter into a sympathetic, proper adult woman. She reads Pearl's "vigor" and "never-failing vivacity of spirits" as a "disease," hoping that, "a grief should deeply touch her [Pearl], and thus humanize and make her capable of sympathy . . . there was time enough yet for little Pearl!" (183). Yet Pearl, who Hawthorne describes as being "seldom tolerant of emotion," is unmoved by her mother's exhortations to behave properly (181). Rather than identify with, internalize and thus colonize another subject's suffering, Pearl directs her rage outward and does not hesitate to act violently in defense of others. Hawthorne's Pearl clearly stands in opposition to the passive sentimental model figured by Stowe's saintly Little Eva. What is described as Pearl's "hard, metallic luster," serves as a kind of armor—the armor she was so enchanted with—against the turn inward demanded by sentimental discipline (183).

In an attempt to break his daughter's defensives, Dimmesdale offers his affections through a kiss. But Pearl won't come near him. Ultimately Hester drags

her over to Dimmesdale for the kiss. But no sooner does he kiss her than Pearl runs to wash it off (185). In a parallel scene with Governor Bellingham, Pearl squirms until she frees herself from between his legs and “escap[es] through an open window and stood on the upper step, looking like a wild, tropical bird, of rich plumage, ready to take flight into the upper air” (98). Fleeing both figures of male authority, Pearl is clearly defensive in these moments, willing to jump out of the window in order to escape the governor’s touch and running into the brook to wash off Dimmesdale’s kiss. Whereas Hester pleads with Pearl, both the minister and the governor come in physical contact with her in ways that she finds constraining and threatening. Male authority encroaches upon her, as if by controlling her physically and limiting her sphere of action she would rendered be docile.

What these scenes illustrate are the ways in which patriarchal order relies on disciplinary intimacy to infantilize subjects and render them more dependent on patriarchal institutions. Karen Sanchez Eppler reads symbolic and enacted father/daughter incest-rape as enabled by new notions of discipline through “love” within the family: in temperance tales, for instance, alcoholic fathers are often reformed through the daughter’s embrace, the daughter who they first abused while drunk (74).<sup>73</sup> The family structured around “love” masks its own

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<sup>73</sup> See Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth Century Culture* (University of Chicago Press 2005). For Sanchez-Eppler, the redeeming power of the child’s touch cannot be circumscribed outside an erotic sphere. She reads the male narrators in Hawthorne’s children’s stories as taking inappropriate pleasures while in the company of little

often times violent power dynamics, and symbolic and enacted incest-rape ensures the construction and maintenance of patriarchal power (Sanchez-Eppler 80). Sanchez Eppler suggests that the incest taboo does not hold, a point further underscored by Spillers. Reading literary representations of father-daughter incest-rape in the context of New World slavery, Spillers argues that incest upholds patriarchal power because there is no female body off limits to the father/master; the idea that the daughter should choose another man invokes fears of impotence in the father, who worries that “his cargo is hardly sufficient to bring under permanent rein the sexual impulses represented (in his own febrile imagination) by the silent and powerful sexualities of the females within his purview” (234).<sup>74</sup> Proving that he can have any female and that the “daughter cannot want . . . to chose to say who and when she wants,” the father commits incest-rape to bring the daughter back under his control (245). I will come back to this discussion of patriarchal control of female sexuality in my discussion of *The House of Seven Gables* in the next section of the chapter.

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girls, yet at the same time reassuring readers that the girls make it home unharmed (#). Because of its inherent intimate sensuality, these scenes of redemption engender paranoid reassurances that nothing illicit is going on. The girl child is rendered all the more dependent because only her touch and love, according to the logic of disciplinary intimacy, can ultimately redeem wayward, downtrodden adults dissatisfied with the world (23).

<sup>74</sup> The history of New World slavery guarantees that the master’s daughter will end up in his bed since the figure of the father in any context does not exist for the slave child: the slave father is banished, having no rights to his children, and the master does not acknowledge that he is the father, only the owner of flesh (234). See Spillers, “The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)libly Straight’: In the Time of Daughters and Fathers” (1988) and “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor” (1987).

Because Pearl is the curious child who refuses to compromise her pleasures, she is read as “perverse, ”“depraved” and in need of reform by the men—the governor, minister, and pastor—who examine her (99). Although Governor Bellingham—the authoritative father figure who has the power to take the child away from her mother—does not rape Pearl, the governor’s attempt to control her through his menacing touch (that sends Pearl running) is in keeping with Sanchez-Eppler’s important analysis of the fine line between love and abuse in attempts to discipline daughters through “affection.”

However, Sanchez-Eppler remains mostly concerned with representations of young girls as dependent victims and does not consider their acts of confrontational resistance. In fact, she reads Pearl as an embodiment of the mandates of the Puritan community and overlooks the ways in which Pearl fights against disciplinary intimacy (61). The scene that I discuss above wherein Pearl demands that Hester pin back the letter is Sanchez-Eppler’s central example. Her reading misses what Hawthorne describes as a moment of beautiful confrontation: Pearl demanding that her mother not hide but take pride in her shame and own it in the face of the community’s judgments.

Pearl represents the embodiment of failed parenting, and this is good for her: Her mother’s attempts at modeling proper femininity only enrage her, and she flees from the disciplinary intimacy embodied in the governor’s touch and her

father's kiss.<sup>75</sup> Pearl sees through the sham of parental authority and therefore state authority has none of the coercive reality that parenting would have instilled in her. Some critics claim that Pearl ultimately finds her way, marrying a foreign nobleman. But it is important to remember that this is only a rumor, gossip among townspeople for whom the idea of a brazen, independent Pearl disturbs the foundation of the community. The community can reassure themselves that how they choose to organize their lives has meaning and purpose.

#### IV.

In his second novel, *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne links the novel's themes of lineage and property to the daughter's passage to maturity. Sabotaging her impending marriage arranged by her father to a European nobleman, Alice Pyncheon allows herself to "fall" under the spell of her father's enemy, the carpenter Matthew Maule. An active agent in her own seduction, Alice takes herself out of the triangulated traffic in women that leaves her with few options: namely, marriage and motherhood. If women have traditionally borne the responsibility of transmitting culture, nurturing and raising future generations, then Alice's actions, in a novel preoccupied with breaking out of an

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<sup>75</sup> Advocates of "loving" one's child into obedience such as Stowe argued that punishment only inspired uprisings and dissent, whereas discipline inspired docility (Kent 20). For an analysis of Stowe and child-rearing, see Kent, *Making Girls Into Women*. Pearl clearly resists being tamed through "loving" acts of discipline, and the description of her as being from "old Catholic times" places her in opposition to modern forms of discipline and the turn inward demanded of the subject.

oppressive generative cycle, represent a rejection of the very institutions and traditions that women have been entrusted to perpetuate.

Alice's father, the greedy Gervayse Pyncheon, contemptuous of vulgar American culture and planning on spending the rest of his life in England as a nobleman—if his daughter's impending marriage is successful—allows Maule to hypnotize Alice, using her as a medium to reveal the location of a lost Pyncheon land deed that would provide the necessary dowry for his daughter's marriage. However, Gervayse's permission is preempted by Alice's agency, because it is she who decides she wants Maule first, before he even knocks on her father's front door.

However, critics have traditionally read Alice's function in the novel as that of a flat character without agency. Walter Benn Michaels argues that Alice is completely "empty of desire" (389).<sup>76</sup> In retellings of Alice's story, within the world of the novel by Holgrave and by contemporary literary critics, Alice Pyncheon plays the role of the hopeless girl who falls under Maule's spell. Critics fall for Holgrave's patronizing narrative, reading Alice as the tragic victim of her father's ruthless greed, the object of Maule's revenge against the Pyncheons, or as a flat-footed lesson about the dangers of pride used to school young women in the virtues of humility. David Anthony reads Alice as a victim of a rape motivated by Maule's "emasculated class status," (454) and Amy Schragger Lang

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<sup>76</sup> See Benn Michaels, "Romance and Real Estate."

describes Alice as a “victim of the men who exploit her” who is forced to live in a “humiliating” bondage to Maule, which “excludes her from the office of woman” (467).<sup>77</sup> In contrast to these critical positions, I read Alice, much like Pearl, as exercising agency in order to avoid the limited options for women in hetero-conventionality. By rejecting the racialized gender hierarchy through her active desire for the “dark” Maule, purposefully taking herself out of what Schrager Lang describes as the “office of woman,” Alice “ruins” herself for marriage while simultaneously engaging in non-normative intimacies.

In order to substantiate these readings that de-authorize Alice, critics have to overlook key instances where Hawthorne makes Alice into a subject, not an object in the Pyncheon-Maule land feud. Consider the way that Hawthorne frames the scene, using the simple act of looking to convey not passivity but an agency on Alice’s part. As Maule approaches the house, Alice spots him from her bedroom window and looks down on him (136). She fixes Maule in her gaze, making him an object of desire before her father’s scheme is revealed to her. From her vantage point, up in her room, Alice enjoys the power of seeing without being seen. Hawthorne frames the scene by first establishing Alice’s commanding presence but as the scene progresses, it is as if Alice’s agency disappears in the ensuing contest for property between Gervayse and Maule for whom Alice will figure only as a token of exchange.

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<sup>77</sup> See Anthony, “Class, Culture, and the Trouble with White Skin” (2006) and Amy Schrager Lang, “*From Home, in the Better Sense: The Model Woman, the Middle Class, and the Harmony of Interests*” (2006).

Having fixed her sights on Maule, Alice, despite her young age, does not rush downstairs to make herself known to Maule. Very much in charge of the scene, Alice lets her presence be known through music. Attentive to the cues of the drama playing out downstairs, Alice begins to sing upon hearing name mentioned by Maule, further insinuating herself into the scene: “ever since Alice’s name had been spoken, both her father and the carpenter had heard the sad and sweet music of her harpsichord, and the airier melancholy of her accompanying voice” (143). Alice’s sweet, sad song has a seductive quality. It reveals a vulnerable femininity, creating the illusion of passivity and availability for patriarchal designs but at the same time her plaintive tone implies dissatisfaction with her present condition at home alone with her father that seeks through Maule delivery from her father and his marriage plot in order to fulfill his desire for aristocratic entitlement.

Maule tells the latest Pyncheon patriarch that the location of the deed can only be revealed if he is allowed to mesmerize Alice, using her as a medium to contact the dead. At first the sensibilities of this wannabe aristocratic are shocked, but Gervayse calls his daughter downstairs. As she enters her father’s study, Alice is described as “beautiful” but with a “cold stateliness,” echoing an earlier description of a female marble nude in the corner of the room (137). It would be a mistake to take this not so subtle clue and read the implied identification of the statue with Alice and turn it into a melodramatic scene where

Alice figures as one more priced object in her father's collection, even though as I have suggested, this is how Alice is often read. I am interested in the way in which Alice's "cold stateliness" becomes animated, glowing with a desire unmediated by patriarchy. That is not to say that Alice's glacial exterior, like Pearl's coat of arms, are impediments to the expression of a truly warm interior. Rather, these girls' body armor act as buffers against the colonizing touch of disciplinary intimacy. Hawthorne also describes Alice as having an air of "witchery," presenting us with a young girl who is not insecure or passive but proud and maybe dangerous (136)..

With her eyes fixed upon Maule, Alice immediately notices the long pocket for his carpenter's ruler running down the side of his pants, "the end of which protruded" (143-44). Hawthorne writes, "A glow of artistic approval brighten over Alice Pyncheon's face; she was struck with admiration—which she made no attempt to conceal—of the remarkable comeliness, strength, and energy of Maule's figure" (144). Alice is visibly aroused; in an uncanny textual moment, father and daughter's desires initially line up in that they both want this act to take place. Yet Alice soon senses her father's misgivings about Maule's plan, yet unlike her father, she refuses to compromise on her desire and is therefore quick to put herself in the hands of the wizard. With her haughty gaze, her desire barely concealed, Alice asserts her position, topping the scene from the bottom. Gervayse turns his back on the scene of penetration. Sublimating the greed that

led him to pimp out his daughter, or so he thinks, Gervayse focuses on a landscape portrait, “where a shadowy and sun-streaked vista penetrated so remotely into an ancient wood,” only to be reminded of the “supernatural endowments” of the Maule men (145). Gervayse hysterically orders Maule to stop but Alice counter-mands her father’s order, “without changing her position,” saying, “do not interrupt the young man!”(145).

It is important to consider the significance of Alice's alliance with Maule against her father, who for some reason, not explicitly clear in the narrative, backs away from his original plan. It might seem that Gervayse backtracks out of some sense of guilt in exposing his daughter to Maule’s “supernatural endowments.” But I would argue that Gervayse stops dead in his tracks because he recognizes in his daughter, in her “air of witchery,” her own threatening female desire, which Hawthorne links to Maule’s magic. What is important about this passage is the way that Alice becomes progressively embodied from gaze to voice to arousal, with the physicality of her desire acting as a disruptive force that castrates her father, as in the scene where an impotent Gervayse tries to regain possession of his daughter, embracing, kissing and violently shaking her: “It is indescribable what a sense of remote, dim, unattainable distance, betwixt himself and Alice, was impressed on the father by this impossibility of reaching her” (146). A rageful and impotent Gervasye is unable to rouse his daughter, who is unresponsive to her father’s voice and touch. What is important here is that Alice

chooses a man who is not her father and one whose racial and class status mark him as non-white.<sup>78</sup> Alice effectively sabotages her father's plans and in the process reveals Gervayse's bifurcated desire of wanting to acquire more wealth yet not trade on what he feels is rightfully his, his daughter's body.

Checking out Maule from her bedroom window, sizing up his long yardstick and wanting him to penetrate her, Alice embodies a rare articulation of female desire in antebellum literature. Another such instance appears in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Spillers reads Little Eva's desire for Tom, ordering her father, "You have the money enough, I know. I want him," as a demand coming out of a female mouth like no other in nineteenth-century fiction. Spillers argues, "'Desire' in any form for the female must be silenced, cut out, banished, 'killed' off, and in particular reference to African male sexuality" (192).<sup>79</sup> I would argue that Alice's open desire for the dark Maule is another rare expression of female desire. Yet whereas Eva ultimately wants Tom as a disciple of her pastoral mandate of self-sacrifice, Alice rejects her own privileges as a white lady, which would be guaranteed by a proper marriage, in order to imagine other identities and possibilities not tied to an oppressive racialized gender hierarchy. What Alice wants challenges the limited archive of female desire and pleasure put forth by

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<sup>78</sup> In an earlier scene, the Pyncheon's servant, Scipio, asks Maule, "What for do you look so black at me?" (134). Maule replies, "Do you think nobody is to look black but yourself?" (134). Maule's racial joke at Scipio's expense serves to underscore in the passage an affinity he shares with the black servant as a result of his working class status and "dark" heritage (the Maules are repeatedly described as a dark race).

<sup>79</sup> See Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed" (1987).

many antebellum scholars.<sup>80</sup> Challenging our existing horizon of possibilities is exactly what queer studies, according to Halberstam, should do: “make a mess, to fuck shit up . . .to be loud, unruly, impolite . . . to speak up and out” (824).<sup>81</sup>

A spectrum of queer pleasures and possibilities opens up for Alice now. In total disregard for the couple form, Alice and Maule do not live together in a shared domestic space. Alice repeatedly exhibits “wild laughter,” sometimes in Maule’s presence but often in his absence, which attests to an ongoing pleasure that is not tied to him (149). These “inappropriate” public outbursts (e.g. church) of pleasure further underscore Alice’s refusal to participate in an institution like marriage that impoverishes and privatizes intimacy, confining it to the limited

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<sup>80</sup>I consider Kathryn Kent an ally in my endeavor to challenge and expand the existing archive of female pleasure and desire in the nineteenth century, not only for hedonistic ends, but also as possible strategies to build and give voice to modes of association outside of heteronormativity. As Kent argues, what is most disturbing about studies of female relationships in the nineteenth century is that many completely reject the idea that some of these relationships were homoerotic. See Kent, *Making Girls Into Women*. Such a feminist denial of nonnormative pleasure and desire ensures that not only will women have a limited archive of pleasure, but not one at all if we can’t even acknowledge that women in the nineteenth century got off on all sorts of things, same-sex and whatever else. Dorothy Allison proudly proclaims, after finding porn hidden away in her supposedly anti-porn feminist friends’ closet while house sitting, “When the owners came home, I was friendly enough . . .I did not mention the hall closet or ask any questions. My dreams those last few days had all been angry argument and confusion, not books turned to the wall but woman—speechless, shamed, my aunts, my cousins, old lovers. . . From now on, no hiding, no confusion. Anyone who comes to my house can see my porn” (“A Personal History of Lesbian Porn” 182-3). Feminists like Allison, Patrick Califia, Nina Hartley, Lynda Hart, Achy Obejas, and Gayle Rubin have been fighting anti-porn feminists’ tactics of shame and silence when it comes to honest discussions and representations of a spectrum of female pleasures and desires since the 1970s.

<sup>81</sup> See Halberstam, “The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory.”

space of the home.<sup>82</sup> In fact, Hawthorne writes that Alice would “have deemed it a sin to marry” (149)!

Not surprisingly, Alice’s relationship with Maule comes to an end when he, not she, exhibits a lack of imagination and succumbs to the pressures of convention and marries. Their farewell, however, represents an alternative to the hetero-couple form. In a striking scene, Maule and his new bride spend their wedding night with Alice. Kissing them both goodbye, Alice leaves the newlyweds and dies (149). It is as if there is no narrative for someone like Alice, as Hawthorne does not seem to know what to do with her, except kill her off, with her spirit lingering indefinitely in the Pyncheon house until the “proper” union between Phoebe and Holgrave seems to resolve the conflict that informs the novel. Yet Hawthorne does give us an example of a playful alternative to the monogamous couple form in the Pyncheon’s rooster, Chanticleer, his two “wives,” and one chicken (108). While one can read Hawthorne’s allegory as replicating the same patriarchal model that informs the novel, Chanticleer and his family represent an alternative polyamorous model that cannot be sustained by their human counterparts.

In order to imagine new narratives, ones that do not demand that defiant, imaginative, female characters be killed off, it is imperative to stop casting

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<sup>82</sup> Christopher Castiglia reads the Pyncheon family garden (where Alice’s erotically-charged posies grow) in a similar vein. With its “lawless plants,” the garden is in a liminal space in nature for deviants, queers, and nonconformists outside the home but not in the public sphere. See *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*.

children as always already helpless victims in need of protection. The political and social consequences of this hysterical parenting are detrimental to modes of belonging and associating that fall outside institutions sanctioned by family values. For an unsentimental look at children, according to Slavoj Žižek, one need only look at Chaplin's films where children are "teased, mocked, laughed at for their failures . . . The question to ask here is from which point must we look at children so that they appear to us as objects of teasing and mocking, not gentle creatures needing protection? The answer, of course, is the gaze of the children themselves—only the children themselves treat their fellows this way; sadistic distance towards children thus implies the Symbolic identification with the gaze of the children themselves" (107).<sup>83</sup> By shifting attention away from the figure of the child at the center of the social, and focusing instead on the "negativity" associated with children's selfish petulance, as embodied in Hawthorne's unwanted daughters, a different view of both children and antebellum American culture emerges, one unsentimentally at odds with the institutions, identities, and modes of association articulated on behalf of kids.

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<sup>83</sup> See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NO MORE TEARS: SENTIMENTALISM AGAINST ITSELF IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

#### I.

At worst, patronizing, sexist, racist, and imperialist; at best, a mess of good intentions: discussions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* oscillate between these two critical poles. For James Baldwin, the novel's sentimental politics betrayed a "secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty" (21). Hortense Spillers writes that one needs a stiff drink after reading it.<sup>84</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Jane Tompkins famously recuperated the novel from critical opprobrium by historicizing Stowe's position without apologizing for it. For Tompkins, Stowe's moral vision "reorganizes culture" in a more equitable way "from the woman's point of view" (124).<sup>85</sup> Stowe's novel was the most socially and politically influential text in the nineteenth century, with its all-encompassing, individuating, heartfelt pleas against slavery. As Ann Douglas

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<sup>84</sup> See Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," 176. Spillers argues that Stowe's black female characters are "enclosed and fashioned by an essential silence, Chloe and Topsy, for all their sporadic 'talking,' remain the carnivalesque propositions of female character who inscribe 'growths' and 'bumps' on the surface" of the novel (185).

<sup>85</sup> For discussions of the politics of sentimental affect, see Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism*, Elizabeth Barnes' *States of Sympathy*, Marianne Noble's *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, Lauren Berlant's "Poor Eliza," and Maurice Lee's "'Lord, it's so hard to be good': affect and agency in Stowe."

has argued, its message of Christian moral reform consolidated the displacement of a rigorous critical tradition in favor of individual “right feeling” (13). Such right feeling will result from readers’ identification with the proper characters. In the case of Stowe’s best seller, the Christ-like Tom and Little Eva. Such sympathetic fellow feeling promises to flesh out one’s interiority, intimating one’s affective “depth.” The problem with “right feeling” is that sentimental sympathy locks the reading subject in an ultimately ineffective, weepy masochistic cycle, orbiting around an imagined object of suffering whose salvation, as well as the reader’s, will be found across the Atlantic in Liberia.

Whether critics of antebellum American literature find socio-political potential in sentimentality, or argue against its disabling moral imperatives, not many move beyond the critical embrace or outright dismissal of this dominant mode of literary expression. Critics, by and large, have not engaged the “negative” dimension of sentimentality and its potential to bring down the privatized domestic edifice that the genre’s “positive” side invites us to inhabit. The unsympathetic and murderous Cassy has been overlooked in readings of the novel, not allowing Stowe’s fantasy of a slave woman to work against the author’s predominant interpellative, sympathetic logic. Yet Cassy, though marginal, is a magnet of intensive energy. Her presence in the text is electrifying. No wonder critics reduce her to a minstrel figure. By ignoring the sadistic Cassy, critics overlook the transformative vision that the slave woman embodies, a vision at odds with Stowe’s reformist program of change through

right feeling. A contemporary rewriting of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Cassy's perspective, however, enables us to come to terms with the text's truly transformative potential.

Robert Alexander turns Stowe's matrix of self-abjection on its ear in his play, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*, returning us to Stowe with a new perspective. In Alexander's hands, Topsy, George, and Cassy become guerilla warriors who clearly heed Malcolm X's provocation of political change: "By any means necessary." Here is a scene from the final act of Alexander's play:

(Cassy enters, gun drawn—with Emmeline behind her.)

LEGREE (laughs). Nigger, you wouldn't dare.

CASSY. I'm tired of hearing that word. (Cassy shoots Legree. On-stage characters freeze.)

GEORGE. Cut, cut, cut. Who's writing this? Harriet [Stowe]! Get in here! Who said the women get to shoot him?

(HARRIET enters).

HARRIET. This is not the ending I wrote! Cassy . . .

CASSY. You wrote every word of the rage that's in me! You just didn't give me a gun. (Alexander 67)

Here is a scene from Stowe's novel:

It was not Sambo, but Legree, who was pursuing them with violent execrations. At the sound, the feebler spirit of Emmeline gave way; and laying hold of Cassy's arm, she said 'O, Cassy, I'm going to faint!' 'If you do, I'll kill you!' said Cassy, drawing a small, glittering stiletto, and flashing it before the eyes of the girl. (413)

A gun may have been substituted for a knife in Alexander, but in both instances, the slave woman Cassy seizes (phallic) power, not just in the obvious form of a weapon, but in arrogating to herself the power over life and death.

The similarities between Alexander's and Stowe's depictions of Cassy's threatening violence are striking, and Alexander does acknowledge the fact that Stowe has given us a rebellious figure in Cassy long before his incarnation of the freedom fighter. Cassy calls Stowe on the murderous role she is made to play within the novel's racist imaginary: "You wrote every word of the rage that's in me! You just didn't give me a gun." On the semantic level, as a meaningful figure in Stowe's fiction, Cassy functions as an impediment that eventually facilitates the author's transformative vision of antebellum America. However, what I am proposing here for a critical project is that we rewrite Stowe's novel, as Alexander does, at the syntactic level (what Cassy represents beyond Stowe's intentions) so that the fantastic dimensions in Stowe's universe can be redefined. Stowe's problem is how to convince the resisting object of punishment to internalize the law and assimilate into disciplinary institutions. In other words, Stowe creates Cassy in order to turn the intransigent object into a subject of disciplinary institutions. It is not Tom who is at the center of the novel because he is already the docile subject of sentimental discipline. Rather, it is the marginal Cassy who is Stowe's central example, the true object of reform in need of her proto-feminist brand of sentimental discipline.

**II.**

Sentimental abolitionism, deployed by writers like Stowe, often requires a racialized Christ-like figure to suffer so that people can construct an affective interiority that becomes the fictive marking of their soulful depth as human beings.<sup>86</sup> The fiction of one's interiority is the effect of subject formation through which one is constantly disciplined through various institutions (e.g. the family, marriage, workplace) where one is taught to internalize the law and self-regulate, becoming what Foucault terms a docile body. As Christopher Castiglia argues, this project of subject formation originates in the nineteenth century in the discursive practices of various reform movements (33). The self-defining matrix Castiglia analyzes excels in the discourse of abolitionism, where affective alliances between white women and slaves bypass racial difference in favor of color-blind, liberal interiority. So what happens when the object around which discourse is constructed resists being articulated by abolitionism? What happens when the object authorizes its own discourse and acts without aspiring to liberal subjectivity/interiority? What is significant here is that Stowe is that she imagines a voice completely at odds with the sentimental logic and political vision of her novel. As the object-turned-subject authorizing her discourse, Cassy complicates the idea that Stowe has created a character designed to ultimately justify her endorsement of colonization as the desirable political solution to

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<sup>86</sup> See Christopher Castiglia's "Abolitionism's Racial Interior and the Making of White Civic Depth."

emancipation. A more nuanced reading needs to engage the contradictions in Stowe and reconceptualize the function of minor characters.<sup>87</sup>

Feminist critics of antebellum American literature often focus on implicit acts of resistance by women, overlooking unsympathetic and aggressive female figures like Cassy, thereby perpetuating the traditional feminist strategy of disavowing power by ignoring the negative tendencies of women who redirect their aggression outward against the institutions that impoverish their lives.<sup>88</sup> For instance, in her study of women's representations of anger in antebellum fiction, Linda Grasso only considers acts that are directed inward: self-starvation and illness as resistance to oppression. However, outbursts represented by figures like Cassy that threaten to tear down oppressive institutions that perpetuate structural and social inequalities fall by the wayside in contemporary feminist analyses. Theresa Goddu, for example, neutralizes Cassy's violence by describing her as a minstrel figure in contrast to what she reads as the real resistance of the authentic black body found in Harriet Jacobs' narrative.<sup>89</sup> The

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<sup>87</sup> On reading through minor figures, see Alex Woloch, *The One VS. The Many: Minor Character and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*.

<sup>88</sup> For readings in this vein, see Linda Grasso's *The Artistry of Anger*, Marianne Noble's *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, and Theresa Goddu's *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. In contrast, what I have in mind is closer to what historians John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman argue, following Foucault: "The history of American sexuality is not one of progress from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom" (xi). I would also like to resist a teleology that suffers from the "repressive hypothesis" in its inability to discern radical, proto-feminist moments in nineteenth-century American literature, textual moments that challenge our understanding of antebellum America and our often times limited horizon of feminism today. See *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1997).

<sup>89</sup> See Goddu, "Haunting Back: Harriet Jacobs, African-American Narrative, and the Gothic."

problem with Goddu's historicist reading of Cassy is that it fails to account for the real effects of fiction. Goddu insists that in Cassy's gothic staging of Legree's superstitious fears, Stowe "spoofs the gothic to play the scene for laughs rather than fear" (144). If Cassy is successful against Legree, readers, according to Goddu, get the message that nothing truly subversive has taken place here.

But isn't the distinction that Goddu wants to uphold between fantasy and the social precisely what the novel invites us to short-circuit? In other words, aren't the conventions that define social relations and the larger framework that makes those relations meaningful ultimately fantastic? And isn't Cassy, arguably Stowe's most fabulous creation, the agent who traverses the social fantasy and puts an end to Legree's rule? What Stowe dramatizes for us is not the pathological dynamic between two benighted subjects caught in a cycle of superstition but rather her readers' pathological attachment to a social fantasy that structures their existence, and in the face of which they feel helpless to act.<sup>90</sup> So far from escapist, Cassy's "gothic machinations" confront the reader with the real of history. From Cassy, readers learn that if they alter the fantasy, they can change history.

I want to make a case for the social potential that the Romance brings to bear on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As I hope is clear by now, the transformative power of Stowe's novel lies not in the author's moral vision, which as critics have shown

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<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of the fantastic dimension of the social or what is but the same thing, "the objectivity of belief," see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 30-5.

is freighted with personal and social biases, but in fugitive moments throughout the text that bear the stamp of that rich, imaginative moment in mid-nineteenth-century America conventionally known as the American Renaissance. What is dismissed in *Uncle Tom* as minstrel or gothic is akin to what Hawthorne referred to as the “marvellous” in Romance.<sup>91</sup> But whereas Hawthorne only flirts with the possible social consequences of romance, almost apologizing for invoking its potential, Stowe inflects the romantic moments in her text with the zeal of the reformer. It is important that I differentiate between the zeal behind the main line of her novel—moral suasion, interiority, colonization—and the zeal that informs the fleeting romantic moments that concern me here.

It is as if, in creating Cassy, Stowe were turning against the form and logic of her own narrative and social project. Too often critics read sentimentality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as “too monolithic, too static” (Lee 78). Andrew Riss makes the case for “Stowe’s belief that racial homogeneity can provide the only secure foundation for either a familial or political community” (59). Only “after the stunning but painfully incomplete success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,” argues Maurice Lee, did Stowe question “in Calvinist terms the coherence of her sentimentality” (78). In contrast to Lee’s and Riss’ characterizations of what they perceive to be Stowe’s totalizing affect, I am arguing that what Stowe comes to realize years later about sentimentality is already at work as an inherent tension in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

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<sup>91</sup> See Hawthorne’s “Preface” to *The House of Seven Gables*.

Cassy functions for Stowe as a necessary impediment that cannot be fully subsumed or incorporated into the narrative or the reform project, yet without which the narrative or project could not function. Whereas the narrative desperately “needs” her, she does not “need” it. Cassy does not ask for anything or plead with anyone. She simply acts. When her indecisive sister-in-the-struggle Emmeline is hesitant to steal Legree’s money, the money that they will need once they escape from his plantation, Cassy instructs her against a politically disabling Christian morality and forces her to recognize the economic and social system that render such morality bankrupt:

“Money will do anything, girl.” And as she spoke, she put the money in her bosom. “It would be stealing,” said Emmeline. “Stealing!” said Cassy, with a scornful laugh. “They who steal body and soul needn’t talk to us.” (Stowe 415)

While Stowe creates passages like this one in order to show how low Cassy has sunk, it is hard not to recognize the truth she speaks over and against Emmeline’s moral platitudes. This exchange contrasts an earlier scene in which Eva teaches her cousin Henrique a lesson in kindness. After his striking his slave across the face, Henrique gives him money out of guilt. Eva is enraged, and soothes the slave with sympathetic words. Stowe writes, “One had given him money; and one had given him far more,—a kind word, kindly spoken” (275). In Stowe’s world of benevolent discipline, the slave prefers politeness over money. Yet Cassy’s theft represents a small-scale attempt to redress political and economic inequality, not the band-aid-and-tears reform of sympathy.

By overlooking the defiant Cassy, critics do not allow Stowe's fantasy of a slave woman to work against the author's predominant interpellative, sympathetic logic. In a strike against the turn inward demanded by sentimental sympathy, Cassy directs her rage outward: she "hates and curses," commits infanticide, an act she does not regret, refuses to commit suicide, stabs the man who sold her children, repeatedly emasculates Legree, steals his money and scares him to death. Her agency is further underscored by her constant "scornful smile" and "wild laughter," both of which attest to her pleasure. For instance, her elaborate fantasies of killing Legree are followed by a "wide, long laugh" (Stowe 376). Cassy's sadistic pleasure, constantly reconfigured within the plantation's libidinal economy, forces us to move beyond literary analyses that simply rally against the victimization of slave women. Without equating Cassy with real slaves, I do, however, want to evoke again the relation between fantasy and the social: that is, if in order to effect social change one has to alter the underlying fantasy, then Stowe has created in Cassy a powerful figure in excess of her own narrative. In the context of Nat Turner's and other abortive rebellions, the ever-present example of Haiti, not to mention random acts of violence against slave owners, Cassy's existence and actions are not out of the realm of the real.<sup>92</sup> In each of

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<sup>92</sup> On this last point, I have in mind the case of Celia, a nineteen-year-old slave woman who in 1855 was prosecuted for the murder of her owner, Robert Newsom. Celia confessed to striking Newsom, but maintained that she did it to put an end to the years of rape and abuse she suffered at his hands. For a discussion of Celia's case, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* and Jeanne Elders Dewaard, "The Shadow of Law': Sentimental Interiority, Gothic Terror, and the Legal Subject." Elders Dewaard contextualizes Cassy's actions, arguing like Hartman that Cassy, as the "sexualized, pathologized black woman," the "source of transgression," exercises a

these examples, we have acts of resistance against what seemed to some as unthinkable. My contention is that rather than acting as an escapist, sublimating form, art (yes, *Uncle Tom*) abstracts from the social without severing its ties to it. Art calls attention to its own artifice, allowing for critical interventions that can have social consequences. What I have in mind here is akin to what Laura Kipnis describes as art's potential to disrupt psychic structures and therefore alter social structures:

If selves are constituted through networks of institutional, symbolic, and material everyday practices, then given the homologies between psychic and social structures, sufficiently disrupting the first, must, in some corresponding way, rattle the latter . . .at the very least, shaking things up emblemizes the possibilities of subjective dissidence from symbolic law. (30-1)

Politically and socially neutral, the force of fantasy is rife with interventionist potential. Disabling fantasies of racial identification that work to subjugate people or uplift them trade on the same coin of subjectification, on the need for a racialized body to precede discourse. As Hortense Spillers argues, black women have historically served as the interstice, the empty space in the Symbolic Order (i.e. the social) that enables the production of discourse, the absence with shaping force around which narrative revolves. One could argue that Cassy is

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"criminal" agency, like Celia's, that is circumscribed in the law (14). While I agree that the language of reform and the law worked to emplot resistance, my reading of Cassy tries to engage the thing, that unnamable, unthinkable quality in their actions, both Cassy and Celia's, that brings the law and the reform novel into being. Rather than obsess over the logic of containment, I am concerned with the fictive and social possibilities that the mingling of romanticism and reform in Stowe's work yield.

that for Stowe, but Cassy's radical potential does not lie, as the novel bears out, in a fetishized black insurgency. As the novel shows, Cassy comes to see herself as black only after she left the convent where she was raised. Her racial identity becomes meaningful only within the space of the plantation and her radical reaction against that world has less to do with a sense of injury perpetrated against the race than a wrong against her. Cassy is fiercely individualistic. The racialized biopolitical fictions of species being do not apply to her. Blackness is not for her to identify with. When Cassy says, "I'd always known who I was, but never thought much about it" she is not making an ontological affirmation about her being. What she does acknowledge is her status as a racialized social construct, a quadroon, but she resists the interiorizing imperative necessary to suture skin color to the fiction of identity.

Spillers addresses the function of the interstice as a generative space of subject and social formation:

Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of a highly-rewarding generative act. She instead became the principal point of passage between the human and nonhuman world. ("Interstices" 76)

Not only does the slave woman become the "primary receptacle" for the reproduction of labor after the slave trade is abolished in 1808, but she becomes the flesh around which a discourse is developed and the flesh against which

others, most often her own “issue,” were classified as human or nonhuman (76). Not content to remain within critique, the moments in which the flesh becomes the subject who speaks for herself rather than being spoken of, the moments in particular when black women are in charge of their own discourse when it comes to their sexuality against a history of silence and invisibility, are central to Spillers.

Placing her argument in the context of Michele Russell’s work on the female blues singer’s social and political vision, Spillers looks to the female blues singer for positive articulations of black women’s sexuality, not so much interested in song lyrics like Russell (mostly heterosexual torch songs) nor biography (often tragic: drug abuse) but rather in the form of the performance itself: the singer on stage, being there in the moment, cutting a figure and separating herself from the audience with all eyes on her: “We lay hold of a metaphor of commanding female sexuality with the singer who celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of *form* that she both makes use of and brings into being” (my emphasis, “Interstices” 87). The power and control she displays over the song, giving it form, has an “ontological edge” (87). Through her control of the performance, the singer etches herself onto the world, making herself felt and heard as she comes into being as a subject who speaks for herself.<sup>93</sup> In Spillers’ terms, the

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<sup>93</sup> Spillers writes, “Whatever we might ultimately think of the message of [Bessie] Smith’s inversions and its quite heterosexual leanings, as in most of the discography of black female vocalists, we are interested in the singer’s *attitude* toward her material, her audience, and ultimately, her own ego status in the world as it is interpreted through form” (87).

singer hijacks the space of the interstice, figuring the historical contradictions of subjective embodiment.

The function of the performative as venue for subjective agency also finds articulation in the work of Fred Moten, who, like Spillers, engages a history of resistance given form in music, from slave spirituals to jazz. Shifting the focus from scholarship that solely analyzes the history and ongoing reality of racism in the U.S., and countering Marx's claim that the commodity cannot resist, Moten examines the ways in which the object does indeed resist: the phonography of Aunt Hester's screams opened "the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of freedom" for a young Frederick Douglass, for juxtaposed with the slave spirituals, we find the "happy and the tragic possibilities embedded in passionate utterance and response" (21-22).<sup>94</sup> For Moten, where there is enslavement there is always resistance: constitutive of Douglass' consciousness, Aunt Hester's scream reverberates in the spirituals of the field slaves, in Douglass' fight with Covey, in James Brown's wails and Adrian Piper's performance pieces.

In his deployment of what he calls "unorthodox essentialism," Moten upholds the fiction of racial difference in a tortuous definition that dialectically commingles essence and performance as improvisatory elements in the open-ended construction of blackness: "blackness, in its irreducible relation to the structuring force of radicalism and the graphic, montagic configurings of tradition,

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<sup>94</sup> See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*.

and, perhaps most importantly, in its very manifestation as the inscriptional events of a set of performances, requires another thinking of identity and essence” (255). Both Spillers and Moten ontologize identity, in the sense that they both racialize resistance in the black body.

However, these fantasies of identity, while objectively defined, which is to say that they find symbolic integrity and social currency, are not in and of themselves subversive, as some critics would have us believe. In contrast to the metaphysics of racial identity, and whatever sophisticated forms it might take, Robert Reid-Pharr asks:

Why, indeed, have Black Americans not allowed the demise of the black family, the site I have nominated as a central if not *the* central location in the production of American racial difference and thus a primary site in the production of racial assault, *racism?* (*Black Gay Man* 78)

Both black and white bodies are normalized and regulated through institutions like the family that uphold race as a biological given that cannot be transcended. The “family” strives for insularity and the reproduction of racial sameness that must be protected at all costs. For Reid-Pharr, it is specifically the mulatto/a figure that challenges the “separate but equal” mandate of racial distinction continually sanctioned by dominant models of kinship (*Conjugal Union* 5). It is then necessary for the biracial figure, who Reid-Pharr reads as queer against the hetero-normative, “truly” black bourgeois family, to be interpellated by submitting to this familial model lest our nation’s racial ambiguity be revealed.

Specifically, “female” and “male” lose their symbolic integrity under New World slavery; according to Spillers, slavery has undone what deconstruction—specifically Judith Butler here—claims to inaugurate: the deformation of gender identity.<sup>95</sup> The title of the essay, “Mama’s baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” plays off the false conclusions of the infamous Moynihan Report, which makes the mother and daughter responsible for the destruction of the “black family.” In the context of slavery, the black father is banished and the white master/rapist is the father who refuses to acknowledge the child as his own. According to Moynihan, in post-emancipation twentieth-century America, the black family is under the matriarchal rule; yet Spillers claims that this is impossible because we do not live in a society that allows women the power to name and bequeath property (204).

The goal should not be to reproduce (white) institutions like the family, for as Reid-Pharr argues, the destruction of the institution of the family—black and white—is necessary for us to reimagine the social from the ground up and end the perpetuation of racial difference, which only serves to perpetuate racism (78). As feminists Pat Parker and Cheryl Clarke have been arguing since the 1970s, the institution of marriage is akin to the institution of slavery and needs to be rejected if we are ever to truly effect deep structural change. For Clarke,

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<sup>95</sup>Spillers argues: “First of all, their New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft* of the *body*—a *willful* and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (“Mama’s Baby” 206).

Sexual politics, therefore, mirror the exploitative, class-bound relationship between white slave master and the African slave—and the impact of both relationships (between black and white and woman and man) has been residual beyond emancipation and suffering. . . .the white man learned, within the structure of heterosexual monogamy and under the system of patriarchy, to relate to black people—slave or free—as a man relates to a woman, viz. property. (131)

Unafraid of being prescriptive, Parker matter-of-factly calls on us to give up the nuclear family, “the basic unit of capitalism” (242).

Less prescriptive, Spillers also argues that we must reconceive the social through a rejection of the family and its attendant racialized gender hierarchy (white ladies/biracial women/black females). Race and gender buttress one another, creating an oppressive hierarchy that determines who is a “real” woman, a hierarchy feminism often upholds when we consider the fact that the white, middle class heterosexual woman has remained the unspoken subject of feminism. The mythic prostitute figure Sapphire becomes Spillers’s central example in the rejection of proper (white) femininity: Sapphire, “monstrous,” “castrating” and hence a “female subject with the power to name,” a product of the “peculiar institution” that legally turned blacks into not just bodies but flesh, cannot be a wife, mother, or woman. She is considered inhuman, and as Spillers argues, rather than force Sapphire into the “ranks of gendered femaleness,” we do well to heed Sapphire’s lesson of claiming that monstrosity her culture mistakenly assigns to her (i.e. Moynihan) as a subject with the power to name

and “rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment” (“Mama’s Baby” 229).

In *Sapphire*, Spillers moves from her earlier engagement with the sensuous physicality of the blues singer and into the fantastic potential of the stereotype, but ends her powerfully suggestive essay with a gesture that remains unfulfilled. In doing so, Spillers is not rejecting the corporeality of the blues singer for mythic *Sapphire* but rather shifting our attention to the social fantasy. If black women are to blame for the demise of the black family, even though, as Spillers points out, they never possessed that kind of power, what would it mean for them to act as if they did? This is what the myth of *Sapphire* does for Spillers. Rather than realign the social coordinates to reinstate a proper nuclear family, Spillers suggests that we reimagine the social beyond an oppressive racialized gender hierarchy perpetuated by institutions like the family.

Like the stereotypical *Sapphire*, *Cassy*, the prototypical quadroon, throws the monstrosity assigned to her back in the face of her oppressors, for there is no desire in her to effect a kind of upward mobility toward proper (white) femininity. *Cassy*, a slave, and therefore not a woman, is already beyond gender. She embodies a negative energy, perhaps the negative energy of the interstice that props up the social and the very energy that might be used to dissolve the symbolic order she makes possible.

Perhaps what is truly radical about Stowe's novel is not so much what she models for us in her characters but her conviction that literature can change the world. Lauren Berlant engages the world-making potential found in literature in her critique of Stowe's ideological message. Berlant overlooks the unsympathetic and murderous Cassy in her reading of the effects and uses of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* archive. Cassy's unsentimental negativity complicates and challenges her analysis.<sup>96</sup> In Stowian, world-making fashion, Berlant engages literature's radical potential in her analysis of what she calls "diva citizenship." By diva citizenship, Berlant means a mode of being and belonging that occurs when "a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startlingly the public, she puts the dominant story in suspended animation . . . diva citizenship takes on as a national project the need to redefine the scale, the volume, and the erotics of 'what you can do for your country'" ("Diva Citizenship" 223-4). Influenced by Berlant's (and Stowe's) work, I am also interested in literature's radical potential and its relation public discourse. Yet Berlant's divas (Harriet Jacobs and Lola Leroy), while out of place in the public sphere, behave like proper subjects. Anything that violates the protocols of civility does not register in Berlant's reading: Jacobs' vexing sexual pleasure, as well as her redeployment of culturally dominant modes of association and generic forms against her "sympathetic," abolitionist white

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<sup>96</sup> See "Poor Eliza."

readers and editor, are transformed in Berlant's analysis into the pedagogical register of the injured subject.

Yet figures who reject the terms of upward mobility and proper citizenship would most likely make different demands. Whereas Spillers advocates a strategic embracing of the power blindly assigned to black women, Berlant engages "divas" who act in "a scene of teaching and an act of heroic pedagogy, in which the subordinated person feels compelled to recognize the privileged ones, to believe in their capacity to learn and to change" ("Diva Citizenship" 222). Berlant has faith in the Habermasian model of affective communicative action.

The problem with Berlant's model is that she takes her cue from literary figures that buy into the fantasy that props up the social. If we are going to take our cue from literary figures and are truly invested in reimagining the institutions that organize the social, don't we want a figure who is not enthralled by the language of civility? Having said that, I am not saying that Cassy is a model to simply emulate. In fact, the mimetic logic that informs Berlant's reading is something I am taking issue with. What Cassy represents does not fit within the parameters of possible sociality. Her monstrosity lays bare the disciplinary conventions that authorize Stowe's worldview. Let us not forget that Cassy is after all Stowe's intractable creation, that enabling impediment that brings social reform into being and keeps it running. My fanciful reading (following Alexander's lead) makes it seem as if Cassy gets away from her creator. In

contrast to Berlant's well-behaved "divas," Cassy does not buy into the contractual logic of civic participation. It is hard to picture Cassy holding hands with Berlant's triad: Jacobs, Leroy, and Anita Hill. Unlike her camera-friendly (pardon the anachronism) "sisters," Cassy acts without concern for an audience. Who does not belong in this picture?

Cassy's anti-sociality accords less with injured identity and more with aggressive subjectivity. Perhaps an understanding of Cassy's function in the narrative can be illuminated via a reading of Gilles Deleuze's master/slave dynamic. As Deleuze explains, the sadist/master is not interested in persuasion, but rather in demonstration: the sadist "may put on an act of trying to convince and persuade . . . But the intention to convince is merely apparent, for nothing is in fact more alien to the sadist than the wish to convince, to persuade, in short to educate" (18). Remember, Cassy refuses to persuade the hesitant Emmeline to flee with her, instead giving her a simple choice. The sadist instructor stands in contrast to the masochist educator, not needing the subject-object relation. She will take what she wants and will not beg or plead or try to override differences in an effort to get her audience to relate to her experience of suffering. How could an audience of middle class, white women, for example, identify with the castrating Cassy, who certainly does not desire to pass on Tom and Eva's lesson of self-sacrifice? In contrast to the abolitionist figure who either hectors or harangues her readers, Cassy's hermetic narcissism requires only the flattery of

her own gaze. If Eva draws readers' attention to her lesson of self sacrifice, offering a sense of community, allowing us to participate as we cry for her, Cassy's gothic narrative keeps sympathetic readers at arm's length, daring us to try even to relate to the sexual and physical violence she is subject to. Although Stowe may have written this flat character to distance and thus "protect" readers from the violence of Legree's plantation, the figure of Cassy instead turns this protection for the delicate ears of white (mostly female) readers into a warning, a "don't you dare identify/colonize" moment of textual distancing, working against Stowe's program of fellow feeling.

We might read Stowe's vilification of Cassy against itself as a deconstructivist critic does. She may not have given her a gun, but Stowe does give Cassy a knife and has her threaten Emmeline. Such a representation is designed to highlight Cassy's absence of sympathy and heartfelt regard for others. In contrast, reading this scene from Alexander's revisionist perspective, we could ask ourselves, why does Cassy threaten Emmeline with death? Couldn't she simply leave her behind? Leaving Emmeline behind will not do: her moralism will sooner or later get them caught. Such a model of self-sacrifice would have to be killed off because, as Tom's example attests to, turning the other cheek will only keep the slave bound to the master. The threat of death should not be read as Cassy's way of urging Emmeline to action, but rather as a threat against the ethics learned by rote that will not serve them well on their

escape. This kind of ready-made ethics recalls scenes where Tom is confronted with Cassy and Prue's atheism. Rather than participate in debate with the two women, Tom can only quote random bible passages. As Prue talks about committing infanticide and asks Tom how can there be a God, he can only thoughtlessly attempt to convert her: "O, ye poor critter! Han't nobody never telled ye how the Lord Jesus loved ye, and died for ye?" (225). To which Prue smartly answers that rather than be converted and risk going to heaven where there could be white folks, she'd rather "go to torment, and get away from Mas'r and Misses" (225). Emmeline represents, much like Tom, what is wrong with the main line of Stowe's social vision. Not willing to survive on pious platitudes, Cassy's dictates her ethics through her actions.

In order to survive Cassy must strategize within an outmoded, premodern system of punishment, Legree's plantation, where structures of power are laid bare unlike the invisible logics of disciplinary intimacy, which as calculating and invasive forms, are far more durable than the horrors of slavery.<sup>97</sup> Making Legree's plantation a place of horrendous abuse and cruelty not only allows Stowe an opportunity to imagine alternative sites like the home in the Quaker Settlement, but Legree's plantation itself becomes a space of fictive resistance. As such, I read Legree's plantation as what Foucault calls a heterotopia.

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<sup>97</sup> Hartman analyzes "the ways that the recognition of humanity and individuality acted to tether, bind, and oppress." These "benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified the brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition" (5). See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

Heteropias are spaces “in which the real sites, all the real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (239). These sites function at full capacity when subjects break with traditional time operating in dominant culture, presupposing “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (243).

Legree’s plantation is a space not of “benevolent” discipline, like St. Clare’s plantation, but a space of punishment. Legree’s plantation exists out of time, evoking an imminent historical shift with punishment on its way out: “Legree, like some potentates we read of in history, governed his plantation by a sort of resolution of forces” (354). It is precisely in this space of naked power that Cassy can exploit the premodern, fantastic superstitions and fears that haunt Legree and turn them against him. For instance, Legree is terrified of his garret, which he believes is haunted by his dead mother, so Cassy keeps up the ruse, opening the garret window so “the wind had drafted down and extinguished the light . . . This may serve as a specimen of the game Cassy played with Legree, until he would sooner have put his head into a lion’s mouth than to have explore the garrett” (412). Cassy stores provisions there, knowing that the garrett will be the perfect space to hide in plain sight when she and Emmeline “escape” (412). Cassy does not simply kill Legree with her knife. As the historical case of Celia lays bare, this might have simply led to her arrest and execution. Rather, she

outwits Legree by orchestrating a “haunting.” Stowe describes her plan as a “stratagem,” something that requires thought.

It is important to remember that Cassy was educated in a New Orleans convent, itself a heteropic space like Legree’s plantation that Stowe imagines on its way out. Within the space of the convent, Cassy “never thought much” about the fact that her “black blood” could take away her freedom (371). Much like in Maria Monk’s narrative, the convent exists in opposition to dominant time and operates under a different logic, one in which slavery does not exist and where Cassy can unlearn the facile humanism of love thy neighbor (373). After her (white) father dies and Cassy must leave the convent because there is no money in his estate to continue paying for her education, she considers herself a free person and is shocked to find out that the man she fell in love with actually “paid two thousand dollars for me, and I was his property” (371). Rather than mourn her social death, Cassy resists a suicidal urge, saying, “the sisters told me things, when I was in the convent, that make me afraid to die” (385). Even she is when overcome with cholera and everyone in her household dies, her will to live allows her to survive (375). Unlike those figures who equate death with freedom, Cassy refuses the empty promise of liberal citizenship.

By the time we meet Cassy in the novel, she has rendered Legree a man who lives in fear of her. Unlike the slave Babo in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, Cassy is openly running the show: she “had always kept over Legree the kind of

influence that a strong, impassioned woman can ever keep over the most brutal man” (378). Her influence extends beyond Legree. All on the plantation think she is a “witch,” a ruse she maintains by speaking Creole, which all believe to be the devil’s language (379). Every time Legree attempts to dominate Cassy, she reminds him: “You’re afraid of me, Simon . . .and you’ve reason to be! . . . for I’ve got the devil in me!” (378). Assuming familiarity with Legree, Cassy verbally levels the unequal dynamic that informs their relation, only to subvert that equality by preying on his fears of her. This is a recurring dynamic that animates the master and slave relation that allows Cassy to experience something akin to freedom.

### III.

It came to me when I was fifteen, and that man came after me with a belt for perhaps the thousandth time and my little sister and I did not run. Instead we grabbed up butcher knives and backed him into a corner. And oh, the way that felt! For once we made him sweat with the threat of what we’d do if he touched us. And oh! The joy of it, the power to say, ‘No, you son of a bitch, this time, no!’ His fear was sexual and marvelous—hateful and scary but wonderful, like orgasm, like waiting a whole lifetime and finally coming . . . I know I’m not supposed to talk about sex like that, not about weapons or hatred or violence, and never to put them in the context of sexual desire. Is it male? Is it mean? Did you get off on it?

Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*

What I want to work through in this section is obvious in the novel yet remains mostly untouched by critics. Simply put, Cassy experiences great

pleasure in making Legree suffer. In this cast of sentimental masochists, she is a true sadist. In contrast to the subservient piety that Stowe typically foregrounds and bathes in sentimental tears, Cassy's haughtiness stands in sharp opposition: "There was a fierce pride and defiance in every line of her face, in every curve of the flexible lip, in every motion of the body . . . scorn and pride [were] expressed by her whole demeanor . . . she was erect and proud" (360). Whereas the novel's sentimentalism works to interpellate the reads as a caring subject in the act of witnessing unspeakable acts of injustice, Stowe's Cassy turns in the table on this spectatorial model of right feeling, complicating how an audience programmed and conditioned to associate the slave with an object of suffering, might respond to the slave as a subject of sadistic pleasure. Erect, proud, and defiant, despite her "white blood," Cassy is beyond proper femininity. Masculine in bearing, Cassy reduces Legree to a quivering girl in her phallic presence.

Mocking Legree for not producing as much crop as his neighbors, Cassy taunts, "If your crop comes shorter into the market than any of theirs, you won't lose your bet, I suppose? Tompkins won't lord it over you, I suppose,--*and you'll pay down your money like a lady*, won't you? I think I see you doing it!" (my emphasis, 386). In this inversion of the Hegelian master-slave dynamic, Cassy makes use of her imagination to picture a sissified Legree at the mercy of his (male) neighbors. This is not some private fantasy where the injured subject steals in isolation from her master the freedom to which she is entitled. Instead,

Cassy's flaunts her imagination in public, and rubs Legree's face in it. In this scenario, Cassy becomes one of Legree's neighbors, with the master beholden to the slave in a tableau designed to shame and ridicule Legree. Cassy's pleasure, in her fantasy of Legree's abjection before his neighbors, hinges on an element of spectatorship wherein the scene of debasement is witnessed by others. In this, Stowe anticipates Cassy's more elaborate manipulation of Legree's beliefs. An able manipulator of belief and fantasy, Cassy terrorizes her captor by exploiting his anxieties about his public persona. What makes this scene subversive is the way that Stowe upends the text's masochistic logic, intending to pin the reader in a model of identification wherein the slave's body is there solely to mobilize the white reader's sympathetic feelings. In contrast, this scene redirects the flow of sympathetic identification from the reader's interior space to the market place where Legree is symbolically castrated before his neighbors.

In moments like these it is easy to see what inspired Alexander's *I Ain't Your Uncle*. Indeed, Stowe did give Cassy that rage, that power, which is to say that Stowe's sympathetic universe is deeply informed by a power dynamic that cannot be neatly subsumed under the logic of sentimental masochism. Yet in turning Cassy into a freedom fighter, Alexander simplifies a complex relation wherein oppositions cannot be ranged neatly on opposite sides of the color line. Rather, Cassy's dynamic with Legree, informed as it is by a sense of (sadistic)

pleasure, is absent in Alexander's text. Here Cassy is a humorless, holier than thou militant whose actions antiseptically sever the entangled enjoyment that shapes her dynamic with Legree in Stowe. Yet Cassy manipulates the outmoded plantation along with its superstitious master in order to organize her pleasure, which ultimately renders her dependent on Legree. What Stowe gothicizes as Cassy's vengeance is what she imagines will happen after slavery is abolished. Like Jefferson, Stowe believes that blacks and whites will never be able to live together. Racism and resentment, both imagine, would keep Americans locked in the trauma of slavery.

Stowe's motivation to establish a clean break between the races is predicated on her own fantasy of racial contact between master and slave, an elaborate process she draws out throughout the novel.<sup>98</sup> On this point, Reid-Pharr's analysis of the eroticism informing the Hegelian master/slave dynamic is useful here. Although Reid-Pharr is ultimately interested in the representation of masochistic resistance that is engendered by an eroticized master-slave dynamic consisting of black male "bottom" and white male "top," the underlying logic informing his argument is relevant to my analysis. Reid-Pharr argues that neither master nor slave is "innocent" within this dynamic. What is shocking about the cross-racial eroticism he analyzes in contemporary poet Gary Fisher's work is not the S/M sex acts per se but the idea that "the black is not inculpable,

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<sup>98</sup> Another example of cross-racial contact is Eva's desire for Tom. Eva orders her father, "You have the money enough, I know. I want him." Spillers read her demand as an expression of desire by a female character like no other in nineteenth-century fiction. See "Changing the Letter."

that she is as much perpetrator as victim” (139). Reid-Pharr insists that we confront the “erotics of slavery” and the fact that “the black is always an active and potent agent within these erotics” (139). This narrative of complicit resistance stands in sharp contrast to the perpetuation of the narrative of freedom modeled on Frederick Douglass’ fight with the slave breaker Covey (136-7). In his protracted struggle with Covey, Douglass emerges triumphant in more ways than one. Not only does he learn that he can take on Covey, but he emerges from the struggle clean from any entanglements, entanglements that would define his identity as anything other than separate from his master.

That Cassy’s dynamic with Legree is pleasurable to her (and maybe Stowe) is evident in the novel’s depiction of her laughter. Consider the following moment when Cassy tells a scandalized Tom, who desperately tries to convert her to his program of passive resistance, what she will do to Legree: “I’ll send him where he belongs,—a short way, too—one of these nights, if they burn me alive for it.’ A wild, long laugh, rang through the deserted room” (376). Beyond redemption, Cassy mocks Tom’s religious superstition and exploits Legree’s. Her laughter haunts Legree even in his sleep. In one recurring nightmare, Legree stands over an abyss and Cassy pushes him to his death while laughing (386).

Cassy’s laughter, an ongoing metonymy of pleasure erupting in the face of oppression and the masochistic mandate of turning the other cheek, echoes in

Dorothy Allison's description of the pleasure that floods her when she threatens her stepfather, a dynamic that is affectively akin to the pleasure Cassy experiences in tormenting Legree. Historical differences notwithstanding, what these two scenes share in common are instances of subjects coming to terms with their own agency in a relation of pleasure and power. As with Allison and her stepfather, it is Legree's rape of Cassy when she first arrives on his plantation that sets in motion her ongoing revenge drama. Allison refuses to be victimized by the cycle of rape and abuse. However, her agency is troubling to many—"we're not supposed to talk about this—" because it has pleasure built into it, operating as an excess, in her but more than her, within her control yet beyond it, informing who she is and who she can be: "hateful and scary but wonderful, like orgasm, like waiting a whole lifetime and finally coming." Allison poses some very difficult questions: what does it mean to get off on a violent act or fantasy? Is one simply replicating patriarchal structures of power? The dismissal that comes from labeling sadistic resistance as a patriarchal fantasy of corrupt femininity avoids grappling with the complexity of act and affect, race and gender, and the structures of power that condition our existence.

To be sure, Allison's is the case of "if it feels good, it's got to be right." That is to say, her act of coming to power through self-consciousness is tied to that euphoric, almost orgasmic moment of self-authoring. For her the body's pleasurable response is confirmation enough that the act of resistance, in this

case against her abusive stepfather, is on the side of justice. In this, she is not unlike the conventional Stowe we have come to know, the Stowe of “right feeling.” But as I have been arguing, Stowe’s text complicates foregrounding the body and its sensations as the seat of ethics.

Read with Eva as the focal point, the novel invites readers to equate sentiment and injustice through “right feeling.” But how do we know “right” from “wrong” feelings? Stowe insists that we trust our feelings, but she assumes a correlation between morality and affect that readers already possess. In other words, Stowe believes there are good and bad people in the world. The good ones intuitively know that slavery is wrong. But if this is so, why does she need to write a novel cataloguing the evils of slavery? The problem is that despite there being many good Americans who feel right, slavery persists. The novel is not so much designed to convert people to right feeling but to action. However, this text functions in a culture primed to absorb calls to action into privatized structures of feelings. This is the ridiculous contradiction in Stowe’s text, its circular logic.

That is why Cassy is such an anomaly. She is the anti-Eva/Tom. The agency Stowe has imagined for Cassy is neither patient nor passive. If the book is a call to action, what does it mean that a slave takes action? This is the other contradiction in the novel. If we are to feel right about Tom and Eva, how are we to feel about Cassy? That critics have not engaged Cassy’s function in all its

complexity suggests that we do not quite know how to feel about her. Her presence signifies the way that the novel vectors the interplay of violence, pleasure, and subject formation. The sections of the novel where she appears dramatize elaborate scenarios, draped in gothic melodrama, that nonetheless get at the core of the erotic tangle of agency and enjoyment. Stowe relies on the body's response as a moral barometer, and in the case of readers' reactions to Tom and Eva's deaths, the novel's call to action remains trapped in masochistic sentiment. However in Cassy and in Allison, we get not internalized rage but its outward manifestation. Both refuse inaction and the disabling agency of victimhood. What these examples show is that these moments of agency and resistance never result in a simple detachment from larger structures of power. That is not to say that agency is always already circumscribed within a transgressive logic that "crosses the line" in order to provoke the law.<sup>99</sup> The transgressions that concern me here are not of an archival nature, fugitive historical manifestations of redressed injustice, but rather as I have been insisting those of a figural nature, operative within fantasy and as such capable of social consequences.

Cassy does not just haunt Legree but her author as well. Stowe's fascination with her own creation, with her fantasy of black agency is what motivates her Abolitionist support of for removal and colonization of freed slaves.

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<sup>99</sup> Hartman's work articulates the processes through which agency and enjoyment are bound within a structure of power elastic enough to allow the illusion of freedom to persist (85-87).

Cassy confirms for Stowe that cross-racial conviviality, after slavery, is an impossibility. With Legree's money and her knife, Cassy makes it north but once she reaches her destination, Stowe disarms her. Cassy's violent defiance must be contained in the North around "civil" white ladies like Stowe. Stowe's ultimate motive is revealed as Cassy is reunited with her daughter Eliza, whose evangelical moral example attempts to transform Cassy into a loving mother in a scene that mirrors Eva's taming of the unruly Topy, who comes to assume Eva's pastoral mandate by identifying with the racialized fetish object, Eva's golden lock, that makes "blonde ambition" the passage to docile, white subjectivity.

Yet does the lesson Stowe ministers in sentimental sympathy really take hold in Cassy? Does the "monstrous" slave woman now desire proper femininity? Eva Cherniavsky argues that Stowe fails in her mission: "For as much as Stowe seeks to reinscribe Cassy's face with the tender expression of white motherhood, and engineers that altogether implausible return of Cassy's children to her, Cassy stands out, apart, in the scenes of familial reunion that follow, a strange, unsettled figure" (137). Outside of a heterotopic space, Cassy still exists out of time against an emerging disciplinary culture as she fails to connect to her daughter's Christian model of love and self-sacrifice. It is precisely because of her resistant temporal dislocation that we should not back away from Cassy's cruel example just because it seems incongruous with Stowe's worldview. Through close readings of the function of marginal characters and unsustained

moments of aggression that break with politically correct notions of resistance, we can think more imaginatively about the period thought about viable and sustainable models for organizing the social. Such figures embody traces of enjoyment that the official historical narrative cannot account for yet whose existence call for a remapping of the coordinates that define the Symbolic Order. It is in literature, the providence of the imagination, where such symptoms become legible to us in fantastic forms.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### HOME IS WHERE THE HURT IS: RE-IMAGINING SOCIALITY IN ELIZABETH STODDARD'S *THE MORGESONS*

They're home, making dinner for their boyfriends, and that's as united as they're going to get.

Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*

#### I.

Masquerading as a domestic novel, concerned with recording a family's internal dynamic, Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons* (1862) demolishes the sanctity of the home and its attendant myths of harmonious kinship and fulfillment for women by exposing domesticity's primary function of producing socially docile, gendered subjects. The rage that animates the novel, what one critic refers to as the text's rendering of "the strange viciousness of life," I will argue, emanates from a dissatisfaction with the social models, filtered through the domestic in the novel, for being and belonging in the world (Feldman 216). Building on what Stoddard's father referred to as his daughter's "talent for the disagreeable," I am particularly concerned with the negative affects that pervade

the text, not as antisocial behaviors that need to be domesticated but as alternatives to the dominant life narrative and the institutions that perpetuate it. Informed by a nasty sensibility, this female *bildungsroman* enacts an anti-pedagogy against the domestic novel's lessons of romantic love, conventional family life, and private property. Stoddard foregrounds her heroine Cassandra Morgeson's life, from childhood to adulthood, as beset with frustration at the limitations that the prescribed passage to maturity entails.

In contrast to Stoddard's short story "Lemorne v. Buell" (1863), which ends with the heroine literally awakening to the fact that her dear aunt has prostituted her in order to secure a favorable ruling on a real estate deal, Cassandra knows what the deal is from the very beginning. In the end, the scales do not fall from her eyes revealing the truth of how the world really works. Her father's precarious business sends Cassy on extended stays at friends' and distant relatives' homes, in order to turn the wild child into a proper lady so that she might attract a rich husband. This early itinerancy from home to home exposes her to a hell of the same for both men and women, namely marriage and parenthood. This sameness manifests itself in the linkage between familial stability and property.

Recently, critics have read the Morgeson's unstable finances as representative of Stoddard's own precarious situation, arguing that Cassandra's desire for real estate ownership betrays Stoddard's aspirations for middle class

stability.<sup>100</sup> While I agree that Stoddard's novel reveals anxieties about the precarious nature of ownership in a market economy and women's dispossession of property, *The Morgesons*, in contrast to recent critical opinion, short circuits the connection between subjectivity and ownership, transforming domesticity from an imagined sphere divorced from market forces into a space of contested power dynamics. The novel disrupts the association of subjectivity with agency and property, making self-possession narcissistically self-reflexive. Stoddard rewrites the Emersonian fantasy of self-reliance, where the male subject constantly yearns for the regenerative power of nature in isolation, and gives us a world where subjects are, while fiercely antisocial, formed in close contact with strangers. Emerson, of course, owned his house and could criticize "the reliance on property, including the reliance on governments which protect it [as] the want of self reliance" (1637). But for Cassandra, owning her father's house is ultimately a limited means to autonomy. Without discounting the great

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<sup>100</sup> See Elizabeth Stockton, "'A Crusade Against Duty': Property, Self-Possession, and the Law in the Novels of Elizabeth Stoddard" and Louise Penner, "Domesticity and Self-Possession in *The Morgesons* and *Jane Eyre*." Stockton argues that in her writings, Stoddard "doggedly rejected the cultural claim that women were motivated primarily by emotion, and she affirmed instead that every person was driven by a desire for self-ownership . . . Stoddard explicitly connected women's lack of self-possession and their subjection to duty with their inability to control property" (416). Penner is more ambivalent about Cassy's empowerment through ownership at the novel's close, arguing that although Cassy "does voluntarily seclude herself within the domestic sphere, that decision is neither entirely positively nor negatively valenced. Her position as family caretaker restores domestic order at the cost of her realization that she will never fully control her own life" (143). Ayse Celikkol places Stoddard in an impossible position. For Celikkol, "In a setting where the market economy shapes not only economic but also social exchange, those who attempt to evade the logic of the market economy may find themselves secluded and lonely. Stoddard's novel allows us to witness a poignant aesthetic predicament in which either the endorsement or the rejection of the market economy's influence on aesthetic sensibilities has dire social consequences" (30).

historical importance of women being able to own property, I would argue that the novel ends on a sad note of the careful-what-you-wish-for variety: because subjectivity and social agency remain tied to property, Cassandra, in the end, is a prisoner in her own house. The mobility she longs for throughout the novel, as her childhood obsession with reading travel narratives attests to, is never fully realized. Cassandra sojourns from house to house to finally find herself stuck in her own. Hence, while critics are right to emphasize the drive to self-possession, they are wrong to suture agency and ownership. What is ultimately important to Cassy is not the stability real estate ostensibly offers, but rather the unscripted sociality she experiences while finding herself a stranger in someone else's home.

Anticipating Virginia Woolf's edict that women must choke the life out of "the angel in the house" (their mothers), Cassandra dis-identifies with her passive mother and overly identifies with her father's phallic power and ability to leave the home and be in the world. Sometimes enabling models are found in unlikely places: in this case, in patriarchy. As a young girl, Cassy fantasizes about being her father by snapping his riding crop at their dog, like he does to the horses, and imagining a suit for herself "to match his," thinking "how well we should look calling at Lady Teaze's house in London" (12). Because she is not allowed her father's mobility in the world, all Cassandra can do is read books set in faraway places (like Sheridan's comedies, hence the Lady Teazle in London comment)

and fantasize about her possible travels if she were a subject with power like her father. His suit signifies the masculinity that affords such agency and his riding crop implies not only the horses and carriage necessary for mobility but also the sadism attractive to Cassy that empowers her to act on others rather than being acted upon. Unlike her mother, whom Cassandra sees as a permanent, decorative fixture in the home, her father is a transient figure in the house. Cassandra does not incestuously desire her father but rather what she perceives to be his power.

Cassy's parents model for her not equality between the sexes but an unequal relation of power. Instead of experiencing a proto-feminist sense of outrage at this imbalance, Cassy refuses the empty conventionality that posits equality as the healthy norm of human relations. Unless she is on top, Cassandra won't play. As an embodiment of Nietzschean will to power, Cassandra represents a sadistic energy that allows her to experience erotic pleasure when her romantic love interests are killed (her first love, her cousin Charles) or symbolically castrated (her future husband Desmond). Cassy's identification with phallic power has nothing to do with her father's gender. She rejects him when he loses his wealth and redirects her admiration to his second wife, the wealthy woman who bails him out.

Cassandra puts this early lesson of identification to work when she leaves her house and visits the homes of others. These visits are marked by intense,

intimate relations borne out of Cassy's disregard for social etiquette. Cassandra neither has a sense of proper measure, nor does she know her place. She makes her way in the world with a sense of entitlement that clearly does not fit her position, which puts most people off who see her as combative and obnoxious. Refusing to fetishize the privatized space of the family as sealed off from intruders, Stoddard disrupts the domestic by turning her heroine into an interloper who upends the lives of others by making "inappropriate" attachments that redefine the norms of intimacy.

There is an act of rebellion against domesticity and privacy, sometimes minor, sometimes major, on every page of *The Morgesons*.<sup>101</sup> Its honesty about family life and the limited options for people—both men and women—is brutal yet breathtaking. The ways in which the frankness of the novel finds expression, however, has caused critics to remark on its strangeness in terms of both form and content. Christopher Hager writes, "*The Morgesons* simply is not what we thought fiction of this period, by women or men, was like. It does not take aim at the coarseness and competition of a male public sphere, nor does it valorize the antidotes of hearth and home" (699). Julia Stern describes the novel as "gnomic and elliptical in style, gothic in characterization and plot, and presciently modernist in form" (107). With its staccato dialogue and fragmented style which break with the familiar pattern and script of the sentimental, domestic novels

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<sup>101</sup> My reading of *The Morgesons* is indebted to my conversations with Christopher Castiglia, especially on those occasions when he generously invited me to come speak to his classes about the novel.

Stoddard writes against, *The Morgesons* has no telos, no end toward which it progresses. It is often hard to discern the plot, in that Cassy moves from house to house, as if the narrative consisted of nomadic episodes with no discernable objective. The flatness of the dialogue underscores the fact that the intimacy between the characters is not based on full disclosure or the sameness of sympathetic fellow feeling we see played out in sentimental novels.<sup>102</sup>

Cassandra's actions recall that of the Mother Superior in *Awful Disclosures*. Her narcissism and lack of fellow feeling evoke the mode of the Sadean heroine who instructs her charges through demonstration, not persuasion or sympathetic identification. If identification is at work here, it is not with the identity of characters, their charm or physical attributes, but with the coldness and cruelty of power relations.

Stoddard uses Cassandra to question her society's norms of intimacy and kinship. Cassy's bitter outbursts, often directed at those closest to her, are symptomatic of what Stoddard recognized as her society's foreclosure of public life. These scenes that may strike us today as incomprehensible and pathological, which critics are quick to aestheticize as stylistic faults or innovations, might in fact point to our inability to recognize different ways of being and belonging in the world that break with dominant life narratives. Cassandra's "bad

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<sup>102</sup> Stern finds in the characters' pathological psychologies based on failed identifications with each other an attack on sentimentality. She refers to Stoddard's novel as "antisentimental project" (108). While I agree with Stern that the novel is populated with characters who exhibited antisocial behavior, I am less interested in pathologizing them and more concerned with exploring anti-sociality as a critique of existing conditions and a possible model for being and belonging.

behavior” manifests itself in sadistic acts of aggression that make non-standard intimacies and socialities possible, allowing for those she has contact with to experience pleasures that break with the stifling script of proper gender identity.

This is not the family-as-redeeming sentimental story, where the home heals all wounds of the nasty public sphere. This is also not the sentimental story of the harmonious family with each member fulfilling his or her proper gender role. The novel’s oblique prose and gnomic style reflect the lack of disclosure and fragmented nature of the relationships that make up *The Morgesons*. Of her mother, Cassandra says, “I never understood her, and for that reason she attracted my attention” (17). While the logic of sentimentality would posit same-sex and blood identification as ready-made conditions for intimacy, Cassy and her mother are radically different in character and temperament, and neither wants to close those unbridgeable gaps between them. Whereas sympathy requires imagining relations with people based on sameness, at times collapsing differences, the unconventional intimacies that structure Stoddard’s novel leaves difference intact, thus creating conflict. In *The Morgesons*, we have constant eruptions that allow for a re-imagining of conventions of love, family, and intimacy. The novel shows us ways to have pleasure and intimacy without surrendering mystery and secrecy. Intimacy, for Stoddard, is possible without deep knowledge.

Cassy allows the people in her life to stay other. In a culture where, as Richard Brodhead has argued, people are rendered docile not through punishment but through forms of disciplinary intimacy where structures of power are made invisible and internalized, ministered in the name of love, Cassy resists the lesson of disciplinary intimacy that would render her submissive and prefers to lay structures of power bare through her actions.<sup>103</sup> This kind of honesty about who has the power and how power works allows Cassandra and the people she has contact with to negotiate the power relations structuring their lives.

Their differences engender interest in one another. Veronica tells her mother, "We are all so different; but I like you mother" (64). Cassy's best friend Helen tells her, "What is the use of talking to you? Besides, if we keep on we may tell secrets that had better not be revealed. We might not like each other so well; friendship is apt to be dull if there is no ground for speculation left" (151). Helen never "invaded" Cassy's sentiments, and for this she is grateful (151). Cassy corrects one of her early love interests, Ben Somers, who assumes the sisters don't love one another, telling him "I think I love her [Veronica]; at least she interests me" (101). Stoddard finds full disclosure repellent. Just like we cannot befriend our therapist precisely because we tell her everything, Cassy prefers to maintain distance in her intimacies. For her, it is the unknown known that make the other a subject worthy of company. What critics have identified as psychological pathologies are in fact necessary impediments for the continuation

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<sup>103</sup> See Broadhead, "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America."

of sociality, insofar as intimacy for Cassandra is dependent on the impenetrable kernel at the heart of social contact. What Cassy finds attractive to people is their lack of transparency. Her rage and antisociality are her way of keeping others at arm's length yet simultaneously within her sphere. Not surprisingly, not everyone sticks around and the body count is high.

Queer theory can be of use in understanding the dynamic in the novel between marginality and antisociality. The antisocial-turn in queer theory allows us to make legible what critics of the novel obscure by relying on the language of pathology and/or making dubious claims about the novel's avant-garde qualities. What I am suggesting here is not so much that we read the novel through the lens of contemporary queer theory, but rather that we recognize in Stoddard's anti-social turn, her "talent for the disagreeable," a sensational affinity with contemporary discourses and practices that have the transformation of conventional forms of community and pleasure as their aim.

Why do we tend to couple up and live only with that person? Queers who are interested in fostering other ways of being and belonging that do not involve the dominant life narrative of maturity, namely the couple form and parenthood, feel a sense of defeat in the face of what Leo Bersani calls, "the rage for respectability . . . in gay life today" (qtd. in Caserio 819). As Robert Caserio argues, Bersani's influential work on queer negativity, the ways in which sex is not future-bound and redemptive but rather self-shattering and destructive has

greatly influenced queer scholarship. For example, Lee Edelman argues that different subjective formations and socialities that counter heteronormativity come out of the negativity of the death drive, which “names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). For Edelman, queers should embrace the negativity that is ascribed to us, rejecting the disciplinary lesson of normalcy in the name of saving the children. The death drive is a cultural and political fiction that we should identify with, for embracing the death drive’s negativity enables one to reject the discourse of deferral in the name of future generations. We can then reject, rather than acquiesce to, the hetero-normative terms under which debates are set and public spaces shut down. Also arguing for the socio-political potential of negativity, Judith Halberstam challenges us to refuse dominant culture’s narrative of maturity that upholds biological generational transmission and instead imagine alternative life narratives that break this cycle. Dyke subcultures, like drag king troupes and the Michigan Womyn’s Festival (albeit a problematic space for its often lack of acceptance of femmes, BDSM and trans folks), become sites for developing queer temporalities and counter-publics that break with the hetero timeline.

The intimacies and counter-publics borne out of negative affects and acts disrupt the coherency of the dominant life narrative, showing us that we are clearly not married to only one way of being in the world. Queers have built

communities and spaces around negative affects like shame for decades. Tim Dean argues, “the shattering of the civilized ego betokens not the end of sociality but rather its inception . . . the movement of coming together only to be plunged into an experience of the nonrelational represents the first step in Bersani’s account of relationality. The second, correlative step is to trace new forms of sociability, new ways of being together” (827).

The work of sex-positive feminists like Pat(trick) Califia, Gayle Rubin, and Dorothy Allison on temporality, space, pleasure, and BDSM in many ways prefigures queer theory’s anti-social turn. All three participated in the infamous 1982 Pleasure and Danger Conference at Barnard College that was boycotted and nearly shut down by the National Organization of Women because it objected to the conference’s focus on non-normative sexualities. Not only provocative in its foregrounding of “queer” sex acts, Pleasure and Danger unsettled the class and racial homogeneity of mainstream feminism. I find that recent scholarship by queer theorists is critically affiliated with this radical feminist tradition. Both radical feminism and queer theory work aims to dismantle a normative social matrix that perpetuates racist modes of kinship, class hierarchies, and conventional intimacies. In the spirit of the ’82 conference and the work it inspired, I read Stoddard’s novel as an exhortation for us to imagine alternative models of being and belonging beyond traditional forms of kinship and intimacy that mediate (and regulate) our relation to the social.

Dean's joyful call to make the abject work for us finds its less exuberant counterpart in a branch of queer theory that in the words of Cassandra's contemporary "would prefer not to." From the potential of the abject, for instance, to bring people together to form counter-publics for pleasure and coalition-building (Michael Warner, Douglas Crimp), we seem to find ourselves in theoretical/political slump borne of defeat in the face of the overwhelming triumph of pride over shame, the valorization of the respectfully private over the luridly public, and celebrations of monogamy over shameless promiscuity.

Anne Cvetkovich's work on lesbian depression, Heather Love's pre-Stonewall accounts of "ruined and failed sociality," and Lauren Berlant's "slow death" all check Dean's optimism in the transformative power of the abject.<sup>104</sup> Yet far from resigned to concede defeat to the liberal strain of the gay and lesbian movement, these critics acknowledge not only that the "political landscape is bad but that it also makes you feel bad, and that it make you less capable of taking action" (Love 159). Rather than focusing on reclaiming public space for adults to engage in sex and talk, queers are home feeling sad that the project of queer world making never materialized on a grand scale.<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that these sad sisters would not want to see a turn away from the single focus on gay marriage in queer politics, for instance. There is a desire in their work for more

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<sup>104</sup> See Berlant, "Slow Death," Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, and Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*.

<sup>105</sup> On queer world making, see Berlant and Warner's manifesto, "Sex in Public."

queer counter-publics. But the focus on depression and failed sociality underscores a kind of melancholy and defeat that is palpable in queer studies now.

The two strains in queer theory that I have traced here—a public, world-building negativity and a negativity centered on depression and isolation—are affectively intertwined in Stoddard's novel. The first we locate in Cassy's youth, in her adversarial relationships with her younger sister, Puritanical grandfather, catty classmates, humorless teachers, and male lovers. The second we find later in life, when Cassandra marries into old money and secures her position as mistress of the house. Although Cassandra moves toward that fateful end that all Victorian heroines must inevitably confront, she inhabits a "now" temporality that has no business with the future, the deferral of pleasure, or the strictures regarding gender and intimacy.

The requirements of proper gendering demand that people, particularly women, lose their bodies and get caught in a loop of continually deferring their pleasure. We are trained to think and move in a narrow trajectory that takes us to a very fixed notion of gender and intimacy. Cassy pushes the bounds of this trajectory. She rejects the image of docile femininity her mother represents. Cassandra's sadism enables her to form relationships with people, particularly men, on her own terms. Sadism is synonymous with activity in the novel and allows Cassy and her male partners to feel their bodies. Charles Morgeson, her

first love interest and older, married cousin, loses his life by taking a carriage ride with Cassandra lead by a wild horse. Both Cassy and Charles know the horse is dangerous and yet choose to take it for a ride. Are Cassandra and Charles suicidal? Are these Byronic figures doomed by their incestuous desire for each other? Or does the ride represent a symbolic break with the mandates of “mature” adult sexuality prescribed by dominant institutions that structure and limit intimacy? Cassandra survives the ride but Charles dies, attesting to the real dangers of stepping outside social norms.

Yet Charles' death is structurally significant in the novel in that it allows Stoddard to resolve easily a conventional romantic entanglement. Stoddard frees her heroine but not without first allowing her to get close to the phallic power she first associated with her father. Stoddard completes Cassandra's lesson in the disentanglement of phallic power from gender identity by having her father marry Charles' widow. We might think that Stoddard is engaging in a perverse game by having Cassy's father slide into her lover's position, but Stoddard's endgame is far more subversive. Cassy's father is symbolically castrated through marriage. Not only is Locke Morgeson's financial situation saved by the marriage, but his new wife Alice assumes ownership of her deceased husband's business and becomes actively engaged in its day-to-day operations. From then on, the allure that men held for Cassy dissipates. No longer enthralled by the power she imagined men possessed, she realizes she

can avail herself of power at a relational and transactional level, that is rather than being something men inherently possess, the kind of authority that Cassy is drawn to stems from the power in ownership, something her Alice models for her when she takes over her deceased husband's business.

As she ages, the multiple possibilities for association and pleasure become foreclosed. This is first evident in Cassy's reservations about her life. Although Cassandra longs to break with tradition, she remarks that generations of Morgesons all did the same thing, and were not "progressive or changeable . . . no tradition of any individuality remains concerning them" (8). The family practice of naming simply involves choosing a name from the tombstones of deceased Morgesons. Cassandra's paternal great grandfather Locke refuses to do this and chooses original names for the Morgesons sisters. If the Morgesons had previously entered life under the sign of death, Cassandra and Veronica begin theirs under more auspicious terms. But no sooner does Cassy begin to think and act for herself than her mother sends her to her maternal grandfather to be broken as she was when she was a young girl. The move in *The Morgesons*, from endless possibilities and the energy to do things differently than previous generations to a defeat wherein one's power comes from managing one's house and husband resonates in the fiction of another antebellum writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Not disregarding the fact that many critics, including myself, read *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* ultimate colonial goal as clearly racist and unjust, the transformative power that informs the novel is astonishing. Writing to inspire Americans to work to end slavery, Stowe's concerns went beyond the domestic. Ann Douglas describes Stowe's masterpiece as, "a great book. Not because it is a great novel, but because it is a great revival sermon, aimed directly at the conversion of its hearers" (245). With *Uncle Tom's Novel*, the "little girl whose father had complimented her by wishing she were a boy grew up to be a woman and an artist whose achievement was to beat daddy at his own game, and, more important, to realize far more fully than he the meaning of the religious vocabulary they both employed" (245). One of Stowe's goals was to take to task weak clergymen like her father who, in her eyes, failed to realize the full potential of their evangelical mission to end slavery.

Yet the drive to re-imagine the socio-political context that informs one of the most popular works of U.S. fiction is not present in Stowe's later novels. The lack of change in dominant culture, specifically its ongoing unjust treatment of women, turned Stowe "bitter" (Douglas 244). The "little girl" whose work surpassed that of her minister father (Lyman Beecher) and brother (Henry Ward Beecher) abandons her ethical work to write novels that center on "the scene of man abject under feminine rule" (244). Her horizon of possibilities narrows as her characters become solely concerned with domestic tyranny rather than effecting

change on a large scale. In novels like *My Wife and I* and *We and Our Neighbors*, women's lives are whittled down to shopping, decorating the home, and (symbolically) castrating their husbands. Douglas reads the circumscribed sphere of action of Stowe's later heroines as indicative of Stowe's own feelings of impotence borne of defeat and disgust at the economic and political marginalization and disenfranchisement of women in her culture. Douglas writes, "Stowe's disintegration is evident in the New York novels [of the 1860s and 1870s]; and her curious relish at the thinness, the mediocrity of these stories is equally apparent . . . Stowe's failure of insight seems almost deliberate; she could not be making it clearer that her own days of great achievement are triumphantly over. . . her heroines are average with a vengeance" (247). Leaving her own brand of sweeping, nonconforming Byronic Romanticism behind, Stowe defends her friend Lady Byron against her philandering ex-husband in *Lady Byron Vindicated*. Byron, a hero of both Lyman Beecher and Stowe's, represented a creativity and nonconformity that inspired her early writings, but as she came to align herself with the figure of the "wronged wife" via Lady Byron, Stowe rejected Byronic nonconformity and creativity to the detriment of her work (Douglas 246). In Stowe's later work, we see the domestication of Romanticism, from world-making to house-making.

Stoddard, like Stowe, has an affinity with Romanticism—Cassandra devours Byron's *Don Juan*—and much like her contemporary, she chronicles the

narrowing of Romantic possibilities, not in the same panoramic sense as Stowe, but in a professional sense as writer. Stoddard's preoccupation with property betrays a desire for financial stability and rage at the conditions that make that preoccupation central to her life. By the end of *The Morgesons* Cassandra is reduced to ruling her father's home and her reformed alcoholic husband, Desmond Somers. They live with her catatonic yet once fabulously masochistic sister Veronica and her child. Veronica's husband and Desmond's brother, Ben, has died from complications due to alcoholism. Both Somers brothers are afflicted by the family curse: their tyrannical mother, Bellevue Pickersgill Somers, who gets off on withholding their inheritance until the youngest male heir reaches maturity. Their bed-ridden father has no money and relies on Bellevue's wealth. In one of the novel's many acts of "perverse" maternity (refreshingly, maternity is only represented as something unnatural in *The Morgesons*), Bellevue has a son when she is close to fifty years of age with her chronically ill husband. This rather impossible act keeps her children from their inheritance and hence their freedom until the youngest is of age (I will come back to this later). Although there are important differences between Cassandra and Bellevue, both women's sphere of influence is reduced to the home, representing a defeat of the (literary) imagination and a reflection of social limitations.

*The Morgesons* is set in Surrey, an isolated New England seaport town, where Cassy finds herself completely cut off from the world. The cold weather

keeps her indoors, bored and obsessed with reading travel narratives that betray a desire to break out of the house. Not content with staying home to “read the bible and sew,” Cassandra, from a very early age, shows no signs of paying her mother any mind (64). Intractably active, Cassandra is unsuited for domesticity. The novel’s opening lines give voice to feminized frustration with her impish determination: “‘That child,’ said my aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, ‘is possessed.’ When my aunt said this I was climbing a chest of drawers, by its knobs, in order to reach the book-shelves above it, where my favorite work, *The Northern Regions*, was kept” (Stoddard 5). “Possessed” certainly does not describe someone who is “normal” and content with the domestic, like a docile young girl should be. Cassandra is possessed with a drive for constant action and movement, made evident as she climbs the drawers like an animal, as if trying to escape her aunt’s judgmental gaze. The overdetermined qualifier conflates supernatural and economic registers, foreshadowing the conflicts that will define the book, both aesthetically and politically. Cassy soon realizes that she owns her self, and not much else. Possession becomes a metaphor for the fact that she and no one else is in control of her life. Her attempt to escape her aunt’s critical gaze illustrates a feminized version of Huck lighting out for the territory, except Cassy really has no place to go between her travel books and the desolate view from her window.

Fleeing to the top of the dresser telegraphs her future sad position as mistress of all things domestic.

As I stated earlier, at a young age Cassy defines herself against her mother, the proto-typical angel in the house, who has abstracted herself almost to the point nonexistence. Mary does not bother to tie her shoes and when she wants exercise, she watches the sea from her window: “her eyes roved over it when she wanted a little out-of-doors life” (24). Mary has no sense of self. She does not so much live in the house as haunts it like a ghost. Her unlaced shoes are a sign that she is not going anywhere. Mary’s sole function is to model for her daughter the virtues of femininity, which involve internalizing the violent process of making girls into women. Stoddard illustrates the result of this process in her picture of Mary: “her hand was pressed against her breast, as if she were repressing an inward voice which claimed her attention . . . I thought she wished me to believe she could have no infirmity in common with me---no temptations, no errors—that she must repress all the doubts and longings of her heart for example’s sake” (53, 64).

Intimacy between mother and daughter cannot be based on shared feelings of rebellion, what Cassy describes as the “infirmity” that Mary is repressing, that girlhood passion that is read by dominant culture as incongruous with her role as wife and mother. When Cassandra is sent to stay with her maternal grandfather to be tamed, or to use her word, “crushed,” she learns that her mother was once

somewhat like her. Stoddard repeatedly evokes the times that Mary “rode the white colt bare-back round the big meadow, with her hair flying” to convey who Mary once was as a young girl, or to put it more precisely, the independence Mary tried to cultivate before being crushed by her own father (39).

If Cassandra dis-identifies with her mother by over-identifying with her father, her younger sister Veronica does the exact opposite. Veronica is a caricature of their mother, a drag version of the angel in the house. Starving and infantilizing herself, Veronica subsists on a baby’s diet of milk and toast (51). A masochist, “Verry was educated by sickness; her mind fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it . . . upon each recovery a change was visible” (59). Veronica states that she “need[s] all the illnesses that come,” for she “acquired the fortitude of an Indian; pain could exhort no groan from her” (67, 59). Veronica performs the role of the proper white woman who is supposed to be weak, helpless, homebound, and desexualized. Veronica’s over-the-top performance actually undoes and reveals the artificiality of all gender identities.<sup>106</sup> She exaggerates femininity to such a degree that it no longer passes as natural. I mentioned that Veronica is Mary in drag, but with an important difference. Her staged performances of illness telegraph the ways that Veronica is actually in control of her body. Through her masochism, Veronica is able to actively perform an identity that allows for her empowerment. As Marianne Noble counter-intuitively argues, the Victorian angel in the house lived in a state of

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<sup>106</sup> See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

subservience she manipulated in order to feel the (masochistic) pleasure denied the evanescent self she was supposed to be.<sup>107</sup> Veronica tells her mother and aunt Mercy, “I believe that Grand’ther Warren nearly crushed you and mother, when girls of our age. Did you know that you had any wants then? or dare to dream anything beside that he laid down for you?” (64). As her statement makes clear, Veronica is keenly aware of the structures of power that govern and limit women’s lives. Her masochism allows her to avoid losing her own body and being “crushed.” She is fierce and powerful: “I feel evil still. You know, that my temper is worse than ever; it is like a tiger’s” (52). Veronica’s anger, which she expresses in masochistic acts, is a negative affect that enables her to actively maintain control over and feel her body. Her choice of animal, the tiger, shows that herself-abjection has a powerful dimension.

Masochism, as Noble argues, and sadism, which I have made a case for throughout this project, are important erotic modes for women. Sadism and masochism allow Cassandra and Veronica to take control of their bodies, albeit differently, in opposition to the cruelty and violence the process of proper gendering entails. Sadistic and masochistic relations affectively structure the novel: one sister’s action arouses the other, allowing them to break out of the monotony of their lives by eroticizing the quotidian. For example, as a young girl, Cassandra is kicked out of school for her bad behavior. Cassy comes home to report the news and doesn’t get much of a reaction from her parents. In

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<sup>107</sup> See Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*.

response, she takes her father's whip and strikes their dog (12). Cassy's violent action arouses a climactic reaction in Veronica, who smashes a pitcher of milk on her own head in response (12). The sisters' actions cause Mary to finally wake up, and in an uncharacteristic manner, stamp her foot, clench her hands and ask, "What have I done, to be so tormented by these terrible children?" (12-13). Now all three women are finally acting (out); it is telling that Locke Morgeson simply leaves the room as the women take over. With the father gone, the scene is set for relations between women unmediated by the law of the father. "At the right moment," Veronica delivers the scene's final lines, "Help Verry, she is sorry" (13). As Stoddard's language suggests, there is something tellingly rehearsed about what we just witnessed. Even Veronica's self-referential lines in the third person illustrate a meta-fictional comment on their routine. By neutralizing parental authority, the sisters can temporarily disrupt domesticity and reclaim that space as a site of pleasure where the conventional rules of the domestic do not apply.

The subversive limitations of this early ludic scene are highlighted later in the novel when the sisters, now much older, reenact their routine and find it lacking, even though they have included their servant Fanny in the theatrics. After one of her last extended stays away from home, Cassandra returns indefinitely, lonely and depressed with her lack of options: "I must be my own society . . . what a dreary prospect! The past was vital, the present dead! Life in Surrey must be dull" (131). No longer in the company of strangers, Cassandra

finds herself isolated and homebound, face to face with a future not unlike her mother's. Her only reprieve, as when a child, involves accompanying her father on business. Cassy's trips outside do not last, though, when her mother reproaches her father "for allowing me to adopt the habits of a man" (142). Like a heroine out of a late Stowe novel, Cassy now fills her days with shopping and decorating her bedroom, for she claims that, "I had a comfortable sense of property, when I took possession of my own room" (129). Her only sphere of influence is her room and she can only have a public life through consumption, in that shopping is one of the few ways for her to be out of the house. Her public self is certainly limited to commodity consumption for the ends of redesigning "private" space.

After months of decorating, Cassy unveils her new bedroom to the family. Veronica's response is that the only "reality" in the room is the fire in the fireplace (a remnant of Cassy's once strong passion), because the room simply seems filled with pointless commodities (145). Veronica's perception of the pointlessness to Cassy's room and vanilla life now spent buying stuff to decorate arouses Cassy's anger. She responds to Veronica with, "What if I should say you provoke me, perverse girl?" (145). To which Veronica replies, "I wish you would; I should like to hear something natural from you" (145). Disappointed with her sister's newfound interest in middle-class diversions, Veronica prefers the aggressive, nasty Cassy to this faux version of her sister. The bedroom décor

drama comes to a climax when the servant girl Fanny, overhearing the sisters' exchange, exclaims, "with an expression of enjoyment," that the "sisters don't love one another" (145). What starts out as Cassy's proud Martha Stewart moment begins to disintegrate into a cat fight. The passion that the fire symbolizes, the only "reality" in the room, according to Veronica, is now embodied in the intensity between the women:

Veronica's eyes shot more sparks than the disturbed coals, for Fanny's speech enraged her. Giving her head a toss, which swept her hair behind her shoulders, she darted at Fanny, and picked her up from the wood, with as much ease as if it had been her handkerchief, instead of a girl nearly as heavy as herself. I started up. "Sit still," she said to me, in her low, inflexible voice, holding Fanny against the wall. "I must attend to this little demon." (145)

No longer about showcasing middle class taste, the scene in the room becomes charged with violent intensity. By lifting Fanny off the ground, Veronica's show of force rouses Cassy out of her Stepford wife existence, and brings the sisters in close, interclass contact with Fanny, thus reinforcing the reality of economic inequality while also acknowledging Fanny's presence, not as an invisible menial but as someone who dares to enter the sisters' perverse game. The "fourth wall" is broken as Fanny insinuates herself in the sisters' conversation, and Veronica, rather than ignore the help, pulls Fanny into the scene.

Frustrated with their limited options as women, all three lash out at each other rather than at patriarchy. Yet what the routine played out by Veronica, Cassandra, and Fanny produces actually works against the process of

feminization. By acting up and experiencing their bodies, the women are not docile, desexualized subjects. Fanny responds to Veronica with, "I do believe, Miss Veronica, that you are going to be sick, I feel so in my bones." Fanny affectively identifies with Veronica's masochism, for her bones ache too (145). Fanny does not, "express any astonishment or resentment at that treatment she had received," hinting at the fact that Fanny is just fine with Veronica's violent outburst, perhaps experiencing some pleasure from the contact that is an excess of an abusive moment (145). Knowing that Veronica experienced pleasure from the scene she set up, Fanny predicts that Veronica will now have a masochistic release through one of her "illnesses," which is indeed what happens next.

Veronica dramatically exclaims, "It is winter that kills little Verry," which causes Cassy to erupt in laughter, soon followed by Veronica (147). Their laughter embodies the pleasurable release their performance enabled. Fanny adds that she likes Veronica because she is "fond of people who have their ups and downs": such a range of affect produces sensation which brings bodies together and engenders contact, not pathology or weakness (147).

Although they do not have a conventional relationship, Veronica's words and actions make it clear that she loves both Cassandra and Fanny. Veronica tells Fanny, "Are you, with your small, starved spirit, equal to any judgment against *her*? I admire her; you do, too. I *love* her, and I love you, you pitiful, ignorant brat" (145). What may be read as the mistress's angry scolding of the

servant becomes in Stoddard an honest expression of love across class differences. This is not to say that the Morgeson sisters are socialists, but, within the socially compromised conditions in which their lives unfold, the expressions of rage that punctuate the novel temporarily suspend the normal rules of society and at least affectively a different way of doing things is experienced. When Mary Morgeson worries that Fanny is not “grateful” for her job as a servant, Veronica responds with “why must people be grateful?” (129). Veronica accepts Fanny the way that she is and does not expect her to act like the humble, self-deprecating servant. What angers Veronica is not Fanny’s pride, but that Fanny (purposefully) misreads the unconventional intimacy between the sisters.

The affective connection among the women would not have been possible if they “knew their place” and behaved properly according to the strictures of nineteenth-century femininity. The pleasure resulting from the over-the-top acts of aggression—unsanctioned intimacies fighting their ways into expression—is a release of the tension and pain in a body forced into a straight jacket of proper femininity. Freud’s construction of femininity allows us to better understand society’s impact on the formation of feminine subjectivity. According to Freud, young girls have to let go of the aggressivity and active desire associated with clitoral stimulation in order to remap and limit their erogenous zones to the passive vagina, preparing the way for proper adult sex via penetration (resulting

in the baby-penis-substitute from the daddy-substitute).<sup>108</sup> Despite the many problems (I don't even have enough room here to work through these) with Freud's essentialist formulation, what I want to limn from his theory is that all adults, especially women, have to forgo the polymorphous pleasures of infantile sexuality in order to become mature adults. Whereas children find their entire bodies to be possible sites of pleasure, adult sexuality requires that we reduce that pleasure to the genitals and according to Freud, women have to go the extra step of reducing pleasure from the active clitoris to the passive vagina. This results in a lot of repressed tension and rage. It's no wonder that Veronica throws Fanny against the wall and both seem to enjoy it. The body is not reduced to one possible site of pleasure, but, as Veronica's chronic masochism attests to, an entire site of eroticism.

The Morgesons effectively neutralize the presence of their father in their play, allowing a kind of "promiscuous sociability," to borrow Tim Dean's phrase, to come into being "unconstrained by Oedipus" (827). The intensity of their rough housing aims to negate identity and foreground a plane of intensity charged with transformative possibilities. If, as Deleuze has theorized, sadism negates the ego in an attempt to transcend secondary nature (the world of experience—the Symbolic) and reach primary nature (a plan of transcendence where identity does not exist—the Real), then Cassandra's repeated acts of aggression enable her to work against the fiction of a coherent self and the

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<sup>108</sup> See Freud, "Femininity."

constraining mandates of the ego, opening her up to a promiscuous sociability beyond the couple form and conventional domesticity.<sup>109</sup> She can engage in pleasures and intimacies free from the restraints of proper femininity, which would require her to reject her mother (the female) as a possible love object, accept her “castrated” sexuality, and find a man-just-like-daddy to give her the penis/baby.

Foucault takes Deleuze’s philosophical understanding of the work of Sade and Masoch and develops a pragmatic model of sociality, theorizing the ways in which BDSM allows for people to remap their bodies beyond genital sexuality<sup>110</sup> BDSM requires a kind of bodily communication predicated upon affective response, not necessarily verbal disclosure. Foucault explains that “S/M is not a relationship between he (or she) who suffers and he (or she) who inflicts suffering, but between the master and the one on whom he exercises. What interests the practitioners of S/M is that the relationship is at the same time regulated and open . . . The idea is to also make use of every part of the body as

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<sup>109</sup> See Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty.”

<sup>110</sup> Feminists like Dorothy Allison and Lynda Hart have written about the ways in which BDSM allows survivors of rape and sexual abuse to reclaim and actually feel their bodies. Hart writes eloquently about how BDSM is a way for survivors to replay the trauma with a difference, to traverse the fantasy and “go into the abyss” with one’s partner(s), only out stronger. Drawing on Butler’s work on gender performativity and Eve Sedgwick’s work on performing shame, Hart argues that the repetition entailed in working through trauma changes the trauma and allows survivors to take control of and resignify their bodies as sites of pleasure through trust, communication, control, routine, and an understanding of the power dynamics that structure all relationships. See Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing S/M*, and Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* and *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*. While it is clear that Veronica and Cassy are not survivors of sexual abuse, I think their actions are informed by an S/M logic allows for them to work through the violence of proper gendering and take control of their bodies.

a sexual instrument” (“Sexual Choice, Sexual Act” 132). In *The Morgesons*, sadism and masochism represent ways to recombine pleasure and power that work better and offer possibilities for intimacy that are not based on sameness and equality. Foucault’s construction of modern day BDSM practices is similar to the theatricalized, aggressive intensity in *The Morgesons*. Rather than forgo their bodies and get caught in the loop of desire constantly deferring pleasure, the sisters take control of their bodies as surfaces of multiple pleasures, and engage in relationships with others on their own terms, rather than those prescribed for them by dominant culture. In Stoddard’s novel, sadistic and masochistic acts involve something one body does to another, therefore returning the erotic to a body in a familial and cultural setting that tries to take everything out of the body, especially for women. BDSM floods the body with intense, diverse sensations. Veronica’s frequent, self-induced bouts of illnesses, for example, allow her to master her body, not to necessarily suffer. Veronica’s future husband, Ben Somers, describes her as “master of herself . . . she is an extraordinary girl; independent of kith and kin” (100).

The structures of power and their attending violence that make up the domestic are laid bare and manipulated by the Morgeson sisters for their own empowerment, however limited or unsustainable. Cassy does not desire to make the men in her life suffer; rather, she will not participate in conventional romantic relationships that require the woman to forgo the active dimension of her power.

To return to Freud: if woman must be symbolically castrated (reject the clitoris and renounce the possibility for ongoing pleasure) in order to become docile feminine subjects, Cassandra is going to reverse that formulation and symbolically castrate her beaux. Rather than accept the impoverished notion of mature adult sexuality, Cassy's sadism allows her (and her male partners) to re-imagine their bodies. It is telling that there is no allusion to a traditional sexual consummation of any of Cassandra's relationships with men. Elizabeth Stockton argues that Stoddard, "like conventional novelists, condones sexual consummation only within marriage" (429). While true, this is a very narrow understanding of what constitutes sex. The eroticism in *The Morgesons* manifests itself differently, in far more compelling ways. This novel absolutely sizzles with passion. This is a sex-positive book. My students are always shocked that it was written in the 1860s, imposing their own repressive hypothesis on antebellum America as they first want to read the period as sexually repressed. This novel challenges their assumptions about the nineteenth-century as well as their own assumptions about how intimacy and pleasure work today.

If women are supposed to lose their bodies, deny themselves pleasure, if inter-class intimacy, for instance, is prohibited, what might such contact, such sensation, look like? These intimacies have no script. Why does only one way of being and belonging in the world count? As Michel Foucault argues, friendships,

unlike conventional relationships like the couple form, allows for individuals to define their relationships on their own terms. Friendships have no script, no “love plot,” and are relationships not necessarily based on full disclosure, equality, or sexual consummation. Foucault explains that friends, “face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure” (“Friendship As A Way of Life” 136).

The drive that motivates Veronica’s and Fanny’s actions is still formless yet powerful. The affect that women are required to suppress in order to be proper feminized subjects comes out as Veronica throws Fanny against the wall. This eroticized act, grounded in negativity (violence), allows for new forms of contact to begin to come into being. Berlant terms these unconventional intimacies not sanctioned by dominant institutions “minor intimacies,” arguing that

Desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narratives it generates have no alternative plots. Let alone few laws and stable spaces in culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to . . .the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon? As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures.  
(5)

The over-the-top acts of aggression and self abjection that inform the novel represent Berlant's "aesthetics of the extreme," which bring minor intimacies into being. Through her feminized figures, especially her heroine, Stoddard pushes against the love plot, one of the few narratives available to women writers of her time. Non-standard intimacies in *The Morgesons* become occasions for rethinking the social beyond the predictable conventions most sentimental domestic novels give us. For example, when Charles buys her roses and declares his love for her, Cassandra loses interest in him since she refuses to be trapped in the love plot. The outbursts of rage, cruelty, and passion take us out of the conventional narrative of desire and its deferral: pining away for prince charming until the novel's concluding act of marriage where the relationship is finally consummated in the most vanilla way imaginable. Stoddard's jagged, abrupt style is best suited to convey non-standard intimacies and pleasures not easily articulated.

Cassandra's flirtation with her married cousin Charles becomes an instance where her play-acting with her sister and servant finds expression in everyday life. Stoddard is not just rehearsing the standard tragic plot of doomed love. Neither is she saying that if Alice were not in the picture, Cassy and Charles could live happily ever after. The point of having these two together, of creating illicit friction between them, is Stoddard's way of having her readers confront compromised passion. Charles' and Cassy's affair is not just some

cheap, titillating trick. Rather, Stoddard mines this romantic convention to scandalously subversive ends. Cassy does not want to take Alice's place and end up miserable like her; she enjoys the minor intrigue, the pleasures of thwarted desire, and violating the sanctity of marriage.

Laura Kipnis writes about the ways in which adultery, what many consider antisocial behavior, actually engenders new feelings of possibility in people who have given up, who have been miserable going through the motions of the conventional love plot: "Among adultery's risks would be living, even briefly, as if you had the conviction that discontent wasn't a natural condition, that as-yet-unknown forms of gratification and fulfillment were possible" (42). Adultery allows "space for new forms to come into being" (42). Kipnis cautions that she is not being prescriptive—hers is not a "go out and commit adultery" argument—nor am I arguing that engaging in sadistic or masochistic behavior will remedy one's life or the social. But what these "bad behaviors" represent affectively is the possibility for "inappropriate" intimacies and minor gestures that can transform our everyday lives. Such possibilities are trying to force themselves into being, "like tiny, delicate sprouts struggling up through the hard dirt," against "an array of sharp-bladed mechanisms stand[ing] ready to mow them effectively into mulch before they manage to take root!" (Kipnis 43).

## II.

Crushed flowers are a recurring image in *The Morgesons*. An obvious symbol of budding sexuality, flowers are cultivated only to be trampled. Young

girls are sent off to stern patriarchs and cruel schoolmistresses to be instructed into docile womanhood. At school, Cassy is bored with the routinized exercises of learning by rote, lessons which do not encourage the use of her imagination. When the town minister visits the school, her teacher, Mrs. Desire, praises Cassy's work even though she has done her lessons with "dignified inaccuracy" (11). Cassy is angered by the false praise. Miss Desire, as her name implies, misses what Cassy really wants. Thinking that praise will make Cassy a better student, Miss Desire hopes that her comments will compel Cassy to see herself through the eyes of an authority figure. Miss Desire woefully misrecognizes that Cassy has no interest in seeing herself as an object worthy of love. The young Cassy is the self-reliant Emersonian subject *par excellence*. She is "determined to punish Miss Desire for the undeserved praise" and stomps on a loose floorboard (12). Cassy is permanently kicked out of school for her actions, and marches home with the "air of a conqueror" (12).

Her defiant behavior leads her mother to send her away to Grandfather Warren's to be "crushed": "It was because she wished me to comprehend the influences of her early life, and learn some of the lessons she had been taught" (27). When modern scholarly discipline fails, the old patriarchal, Puritanical order is called in to finish what benevolent suasion could not accomplish. A "puritan, without gentleness or tenderness," Grandfather Warren keeps his home cold, does not allow Cassy to eat much, talk much, or read any book other than the

bible. She must sit on an “oak chair, whose back of upright rods was my nightly penance” (33). Since the structures of power at her grandfather’s house are rendered visible, Cassy figures out how things work and avoids being crushed. When feeling pained, bored, and isolated, Cassy redirects her rage outward rather than internalize and suppress it. For instance, she stomps on the bed of chamomiles, pinches the cat’s tail, and crushes a cricket during a church service (31-33). Grandfather Warren’s strict policies do not work on Cassandra. If he managed successfully to crush his daughters through these practices, his granddaughter mimetically applies what is done to her onto things that she can exercise control over. In a sense, she does not become subservient to her grandfather but simply imitates him.

Cassandra’s only escape each day is her new school for girls, run by Miss Black. Miss Black’s school, which operates under the logic of cruel discipline, stands in stark contrast to Grandfather’s Warren’s house, where power is ideologically bare. Her schoolmates and teacher unite against her and are mean to her in a passive-aggressive way. Miss Black tells Cassandra that her name is too “extravagant” and attempts to strip her of her individuality by calling her “Miss C. Morgeson” (37). Through cruel stares and whispers about her appearance and family, the girls at first bring down the usually proud Cassy. The wealthy girls who come from old money (from the slave trade), not new money like

Cassandra, ask her questions like, “Is your father a tailor,” meant to bring about class shame in her (40).

However, Cassy will take no more passive-aggressive abuse and brings her grandfather’s lessons to the classroom. After one of the girls makes a comment about her mother, Cassy, “struck her so violent a blow in the face that she staggered backward (40-1). Cassy throws a book at another girl and hits her in the head (41). Miss Black, of course, sides with the girls whose bullying of Cassy she has ignored. Cassy will not ask for her pardon and Miss Desire tells her she is a “bad girl,” to which Cassy tells her that she is “a bad woman, mean and cruel” (41). Miss Black makes a motion to strike Cassy but does not. Rather, she calls her a “peculiar case” (41). Cassy takes control of the situation and lays the disciplinary violence of the classroom bare with her acts of aggression. According to the logic of discipline, Cassandra becomes a “peculiar case” as she is pathologized for her behavior. There is something wrong “inside” of her that must be addressed by her surrender to institutional discipline. In Cassandra’s world of punishment, there is simply an injustice that needs to be remedied, for acts are not meant to reveal the secrets of one’s interiority.

Sending Cassandra away to be civilized/feminized backfires. Rather than internalize discipline and produce an obedient subject, Cassy mimics her grandfather’s punitive strictures, resisting discipline’s inward turn and choosing instead to remain on the flat surface of punishment. Her stubborn pupilage

refuses identification with the disciplinary gaze of the other; instead, she is fascinated with the naked aggression of her grandfather's puritanical will.

Meaner and leaner, Cassandra returns to her father's house having honed her cruelty at the proverbial school of hard knocks. Cassandra "makes her debut as a grown girl" at a Surrey bible class, where she is the center of attention. Her old girlhood beau, Joe Bacon, offers to walk her home. After not having seen Joe in a long time, she is "disappointed in how young and shabby he looked!" and finds that "the suspicion that he had a serious liking for me was disgusting" (55). Her disgust of course implies that she realizes that she can do much better socially and economically than this "shabby" son of a "sea-going father" (54). Each of Cassy's subsequent male love interests will rise in social and class rank, from new money Charles Morgeson to old money Desmond Somers. Growing annoyed as she and Joe walk home, Cassy pulls her hand from his arm, but when she sees that his face "looked intelligent with pain" at her rejection, Cassy feels bad and lets him open the door for her as consolation (55). Cassandra's walk home with Joe Bacon is representative of her dynamic with men throughout her life: her cruelty towards them binds them to her, and their ongoing courting of her signals the sealing of a contract, with phallic authority transferred to Cassandra.

Cassy is not easy to love and her weaker suitors often do not survive the early stages of the romance. For instance, the unfortunate Joe Bacon dies,

allowing Cassy to move on to a more difficult conquest in her married cousin Charles. Cassy is drawn to self-destructive men. She recognizes in their death drive a desire for the undoing of proper masculinity and an inversion of existing sexual relations consistent with her own enjoyment. This is not always apparent to them and their courtship is marked by the internal conflict they exhibit when what they want clashes with what they do. For instance, Charles starts out courting Cassy in conventional ways, which flatters her at first, but she soon grows impatient, and begins to resist his romantic attentions. These gestures, in her mind, lead to the kind of relationship he has with his wife Alice, which Cassy has no interest in pursuing. Her rejection of conventional advances prompts him to meet her challenges in increasingly self-destructive ways. Their relationship becomes a *fort da* game, a give and take of erotic power that is momentarily enjoyable for both of them but tragically unsustainable.

Charles' brooding character attracts Cassy. Uncertain of what he is thinking or wants, Cassy enjoys "guessing each day whether I [she] was to offend or please him" (74). Not content with merely pleasing Charles, Cassy prefers to engage him in contests of "resistance and defiance" (74). With each romantic gesture—a ring, roses, proclamations of love—Cassy responds by prodding Charles to take her on a carriage ride with his wildest horse, rejecting his silly tokens of affection (103,106). Whereas Alice worries that it is Charles who tempts Cassy into taking the carriage ride, Charles sets her straight:

“Tempted! Cassandra is never tempted. What she does, she does because she will. Don’t worry yourself, Alice, about her” (98). Charles recognizes in Cassandra, not a passive subject, but someone very much in control of her life who knows what she wants, as daring and passionate as he is and not content to remain a spectator of his actions but an active participant in them.

It is important to note that Cassy’s relationship with Charles is not an instance of the Freudian family romance. It is not that she wants to consummate her relationship with her father through her cousin. What I have been tracing throughout this chapter are the ways in which Cassy identifies with phallic power. She initially wants to be treated as an equal but eventually seeks to surpass the men in her life. Cassy does not want her relationship with Charles to be properly consummated because then she will become like Alice and the multiple pleasures her acts of aggression afford her will be reduced to conventional sex. When trying to explain to others her relationship with Charles, she finds that she cannot because there is no script for their intimacy (101).

Their relationship is defined by Cassy’s initial resistance to Charles’ attempts to make her a part of his life. He sees her as both a flower to be cultivated and a horse to be tamed, the two favorite activities that occupy his life. Her resistance to this process is what turns him on. Charles treats her like one of his possessions, but she refuses to be another object that he uses to sublimate his passions and cope with his constrained existence. All of the gift giving

culminates in Charles' proclamation of love for Cassandra, to which she responds, "Never say those frightful words again. Never, never" (109). Charles attempts to force Cassy into a conventional romantic script, one that she upends, liberating them both from heteronormative conventions.

Stoddard does not give her characters many options. Not drawn to flowers, Cassy's passion is mirrored in Charles' wild horses. She keeps asking him to take her on carriage ride with his newest brute, a dangerous, untamed horse. But what appears at first a predictable metaphor for their frustrated love, the wild horse is actually Stoddard's critique of the suicidal Byronic hero, who, unable to break with convention, chooses death. Out on the fatal ride, Cassandra notices the agitated horse, but decides to ride on even though Charles tells her, "If you are afraid, you must not come with me. I can have you sent home" (120). To make matters worse, it starts to rain, and Charles, clearly working out his death wish, insists on putting the top up on the carriage knowing it will scare the horse (121). Startled, the horse throws them from the carriage, injuring Cassy and killing Charles. A femme fatale, Cassy incites Charles's desire for something other than heteroconventionality, but all he can do is flirt with the idea of reimagining his life. Unable to act on his desire, Charles is of no use to her and dies. One by one the novel disables the myths that make up the romantic sentimental tradition, hollowing them out from within the shell of this strange narrative.

When she awakes from the accident, Cassy feels no guilt. She “laughed loudly” upon learning that Charles was indeed dead, and does not cry (121). Stoddard thwarts sentimental identification by having the heroine show no remorse or guilt for her part in Charles’ death. Once she returns to her father’s home after the accident, depressed over her lack of options, Cassy is haunted by a “specter” of the deceased Charles (131). Rather than avoid facing responsibility for Charles’ death, Cassandra chooses to confront the ghost (131). The specter asks if she feels “remorse and repentance” for Charles’ demise, to which Cassy answers, “Neither!” (131).

We must be mindful not to make too much of Cassandra’s agency here. After all, as Charles’ counterpart, Cassy is often ridiculous in her Byronic postures. It is Alice who benefits most from Charles’ death. Yet again deflating conventions of Romanticism, Stoddard is not ready to dispatch her heroine. Rather, she uses Cassy to highlight, in Alice’s assumption of her husband’s business, where power in a capitalist economy truly lies. Alice does not shrink from power and responsibility but steps out of the home and becomes a successful businesswoman, much to Cassandra’s surprise. Alice makes Charles’ death work to her advantage in that she will now run the mills. Cassandra says of Alice that, “it was no longer society, dress, housekeeping, which absorbed her, but a larger interest in the world. None of her children were with her; had it been three years earlier, she would not have left home without them” (153). Alice’s new

found independence enables her to voice her affinity with Cassy, noting that she understands her former rival "to the bone and marrow" (429). Yet Stoddard is careful to check this deep connection by having Alice marry Cassandra's financially ruined father, thereby thwarting the possibility of sisterhood and burdening her heroine with the proverbial mean stepmother. Alice is too involved in reproducing the hierarchy at the center of the family romance, where Cassandra seeks ways to divorce kinship from power. Stoddard's protracted analysis of these characters allows her to explore the limitations of romanticism (i.e. Cassandra's and Charles's) in a society where kin and wealth are intricately intertwined, as suggested by the novel's title and the incestuous nature of Cassandra's mature love interests.

### III.

With Charles's death, Stoddard signals an end to Cassy's passionate romanticism. The symbolic appropriation of phallic power that defines her youth becomes associated in the later part of the novel with the generational transmission of wealth, as evidenced in Cassy's final visit to her distant rich relations, the Somers and the erotic possibilities that ensue thereof. In Bellevue Pickersgill Somers, Stoddard creates Cassy's most formidable rival and ideal ego. Mother to Ben and Desmond Sommers, both of whom Cassy considers prospects, Bellevue lords her wealth over her family, going so far as having a son late in life to maintain control of the family's wealth: her father, Simon Pickersgill,

“tied up the main part of his money for his grandchildren. It was to be divided among them when the youngest son should arrive at the age of twenty-one” (169). In an incredible scene at a Somers’ dinner party, Cassy narrates, “With the walnuts, one of the ladies asked for the baby,” prompting Bellevue to serve both on the table (169). Bellevue metaphorically serves her young to her other children, taunting her older sons to devour the impediment to their financial freedom.

Stern argues that the baby on the table, “swallowing its fists and fretfully crying,” is “the most heart breaking dimension of the entire episode: he is the novel’s youngest victim of motherly feeling gone to hell” (121). For this New England Medea, family ties are stronger when wealth is involved. But in this monstrous gesture it is not just motherhood that is emptied of sentimentality, but family life in general given that the brothers wish the “brat dead” (191).

Stoddard’s critique of family is devastating in that a woman in her fifties has to have a child in order to secure her financial position, pitying every member of the family against each other.

Stoddard follows this scene of domestic cannibalism with one of spinsterhood bliss. In contrast to the Somers’ barbarous conflict, Stoddard offers Cassy a view from the other side of family hell. On a visit to the unattached and intellectually impressive Miss Hiticutt, Cassy and Mrs. Somers are confronted with economic privilege devoid of familial attachments: even Bellevue finds herself in silent awe

of Miss Hiticutt, for she was “of the real Belem azure in blood as well as in brain . . . she was rich and would never marry.” In her company, Cassy experienced a “new pleasure” (170). By having the dinner party scene followed by the visit with Miss Hiticutt, Stoddard juxtaposes two models of sociality, both predicated on wealth and privilege, the second, a same-sex fantasy that sublimates the recrimination and violence of the first. Contra Stern, I am arguing that Stoddard does not inject a dose of maternal sentimentality into the dinner party scene: the poor baby swallowing its fist and crying as representative of maternal neglect. Stoddard’s description of the scene is clinical, uninvolved: “With the walnuts one of the ladies asked for the baby . . . Mrs. Somers took it from her, and placed it on the table; it tottered and nodded . . . When Murphy announced coffee in the parlor, the nurse took it away” (169). She is not interested in reforming Bellevue, making her a more loving mother. The juxtaposition of the scenes is designed to offer Cassy two fake choices. They are fake because, given her current situation, Cassy is cut off from any access to wealth. She is not born into it like Miss Hiticutt and Bellevue. The best that she can do is mortgage herself to the Somers family via marriage to Desmond.

To get to Desmond, Cassandra has to get past Bellevue, who sees Cassy as a social climber, an aspirant to her family money. Bellevue continually reminds Cassy that Desmond will break her, and not the other way around: “he has played with such toys as you are, and broken them” (193). Not content to

play the submissive role to Bellevue's domineering matriarch, Cassy stands up to Bellevue in a way neither Desmond or Ben can, for Desmond is all bravado but is really weak. Cassy warns Bellevue that, "If you touch me it will rouse me. Did a child of yours ever inflict a blow upon you?" (193). Stripped of any form of symbolic authority, when confronted, Cassy resorts to the threat of physical violence. She seems incapable of compromising, of going along to get what she wants. Imposing in their own ways, Cassandra and Bellevue are two of a kind. Not surprisingly, the Somers brothers are drawn to Cassy. In this contest, it is Cassy who has everything to lose.

Bellevue presides over Desmond and Cassandra's romance. In violent manner, typical of Stoddard's depiction of the relation between the sexes, Cassy and Desmond engage in naughty flirtation, of the "would you light my candle" variety. Offering to light her candle before she goes to bed, Desmond takes it from her and begins "thrusting it between the bars of the grate," causing Cassy to grow "chilly" (185). Surrendering the obvious symbol of desire does not sit well with Cassandra. Desmond must stoop to conquer, and he does, banging his head on his way up on "the edge of the marble shelf" (185). Visibly flushed with excitement over Desmond's accident, Cassy shuts the door, and "leaned against it" for support (185). Cassy is turned on by Desmond's failure at gallantry. This accident is a defining erotic moment for Cassandra. At the novel's conclusion, when the now reformed and weak Desmond comes back to her, Cassy tells him

that she has loved him since “you struck your head under the mantel” (251). But before she can resume her courting, this time enjoying the upper hand, Bellevue thwarts Cassy’s plans.

Fiercely protective of her wealth, Bellevue, who has been listening at the door, forces her way into the parlor. Having short-circuited her son’s liaison, Bellevue disrupts Cassy’s play with Desmond, setting Cassy off: “Anger raged through me—like the fierce rain that strikes flat a violent sea. I laid my hand on her arm, which she snapped at like a wolf, but I spoke calmly: ‘Allow me to light my candle by yours!’ I picked it from the hearth, lighted it, and held it close to her face, laughing” (186). Cassandra is back in control of the token of phallic power, the candle, which she uses to neutralize Bellevue’s attempt to control the scene. Even after Cassy has gone to bed, her candle’s wick still “glowed in the dark like a one-eyed demon” (187). But this symbol of Cassy’s ongoing passion is cold comfort as her options become more limited. No match for Bellevue in her own home, Cassy exits the parlor and leaves the Somers’ home shortly thereafter. In this last confrontation with Bellevue, Stoddard has her heroine realize something about herself and the society that she lives in that was not apparent to her when she played with her sister. Whereas Cassy’s mastery of the earlier scene was predicated on the financial stability her father’s business afforded, her now precarious situation hinges on her ability to secure a wealthy husband. Stoddard highlights the similarities between Cassandra and Bellevue, telegraphing her

heroine's path to maturity. Cassy loses this particular battle but eventually gains the upper hand when the baby dies and Desmond and Ben inherit the fortune. It is telling that with the death of her youngest son, Bellevue loses her power and vanishes from the narrative. The exuberant, passionate, and inarticulate outbursts that early on defied conventions of intimacy Stoddard now reduces in the novel's conclusion to a different kind of inarticulacy, one defined by romantic conventions and the desire for real estate.

Some critics read the conclusion of the novel with Cassandra's marriage to Desmond and ownership of her father's house as Cassy's "descent into ladyhood" (Alaimo 35). Stacy Alaimo argues, "Though Cassandra's inheritance of the house should empower her, the close identification between Cass and her house suggests that she has internalized her external entrapment within the domestic realm" (35). In keeping with Alaimo, Penner claims that, "Cassy realizes the impossibility of ever 'leaving the confines of [her] own life' and resigns herself to the notion that she will 'reign, and serve also' in her home, a paradox that suggests both her self-possession and subordination of her own wants to the needs or desires of others" (144). Cassandra may (or may not) own her house but her life is in some ways similar to Bellevue's, in that her financial situation is dependent on men, Desmond and Ben.<sup>111</sup> The possibilities for

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<sup>111</sup> Stockton argues that, "It is striking, for example, that the novelist fails to mention who actually owns the Morgeson house after the two [Cassy and Desmond] marry" (429).

intimacy with strangers that define the first half of the novel comes to an end when she marries and takes over her father's house.

Throughout the novel, Cassandra has found intimacy with men like Charles and Desmond who bring out her strength, who make her sadism possible, the sadism which allows for them to be broken. Cassy's destitute father must be rescued by Alice, and Charles lives out the limited plot of the Byronic hero. Yet Desmond comes back to her a shell of a man but stays. Pale, weak, and crying, Desmond returns, wanting to assume a submissive position (251). However, the cycle of sociality and the intimacy it makes possible comes to an end. Desmond stays and so does Cassy, but no one else comes or goes. No new contacts are made. At the novel's end, the Morgesons find themselves incestuously under one roof: the foursome of Veronica and Ben and Cassandra and Desmond embody the limits of promiscuous sociality. Stoddard strikes against this already bleak picture, killing off Ben by having him drink himself to death, sending Veronica into a near catatonic state: her "eyes go no more in quest of something beyond. A wall of darkness lies before her" (252). Desmond is practically a ghost, for he simply appears of out nowhere at the novel's end. He speaks to Cassy "in a voice deathly faint," and is described as "spare" and "gray" (250). In this scene, the once powerful Cassy tells Desmond that she wants to "cry by myself," to which Desmond responds, "cry here then, with me" (251).

Wait a minute. Has Stoddard's beautifully cold and cruel novel warped itself into a sentimental tale? We now have a crying circle as Cassy and Desmond let their tears roll and Desmond proposes marriage to her (251). How conventional. It ends in the usual way with marriage, not freedom. These are not tears of joy, however. I read the tears as a symbol of mourning for the death of the once powerful Cassandra who wanted to be in the world differently, the Cassy who never cried. Her pleasure is confined to the institution of marriage, and the activity, pleasure, and contact with others her sadism made possible is gone. She now wonders if "death is not a welcome idea to those who have died" (252).

This is not her first suicidal thought. After her mother's death, Cassandra considers throwing herself into the ocean rather than take on the role of caretaker. Looking down at the ocean, she hears its call, "Hail, Cassandra! Hail!" and contemplates drowning herself (214). But Cassy marches back inside the house and redirects her rage outward, turning over the dinner table, bringing food, plates, and glasses crashing to the floor. Then, in an uncharacteristic moment, one anticipating Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper," Cassy immediately redirects that rage back inward and swallows her bitter pill of domesticity, resigning herself to her role as caretaker she gets down on the floor and eats the meal of rice, ham, and glass shards (215). The glass she ingests foretells the painful life she has chosen, to use Berlant's term, her "slow death."

She imagines that “a wall had risen up suddenly before me, which divided me from my dreams; I was inside it, on a prosaic domain I must henceforth be confined to” (216). Cassy’s antisocial sadism that made different forms of intimacy possible becomes static and unproductive once she is homebound.

#### IV.

The truth for me, however, is that there is no real disconnection in my mind among the political, the sexual, and the discursive, no real distinction between the particular and the universal . . . I have attempted to refuse the easy distinctions between the political and the personal that continue to exist in so much of our work long after feminists presumably cleared the left intellectual environment of such odd notions. The disheartening thing for me is that although so many of us are inspired by the mundane, ever-present ache of desire . . . so few of us allow knowledge of that fact to seep into our writing.

Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man*

As I stated earlier, there is an important tradition in queer theory that engages the socio-political potential of negativity, a negativity manifest in those who refuse to lead proper adult lives via monogamy, home ownership, and the rearing of children. Rather than live for the future, queer theorists have been interested in those who live actively in the present, building counter-publics in opposition to the fictions of privacy that keeps us apart. Whether our current isolation is directly related to the loss of public spaces (e.g. Old Times Square, the Catacombs) and the absence (lack) of any meaningful alternatives, many of us find ourselves looking backward. Here I’m thinking of the Old Times Square Samuel Delany writes of, or the San Francisco BDSM clubs that Gayle Rubin

and Pat(trick) Califia describe.<sup>112</sup> Beyond the lack of space, I also find myself looking backward to the world-making potential of queer theory in the late 1990s, boldly articulated in Berlant and Warner's "Sex in Public," but which now seems focused on depression and failed sociality. The ways in which Cassandra's sociality and its attendant pleasures are diminished as her depression sets in is akin to a similar trajectory in recent queer studies and activism. What would it take to make Delany and Califia's romance of the not-so-distant past real? To be sure, there is no going back, but what is important about this work is less the nostalgia of what was and more the allure of the narrative for the possibility of a better sociality.

While I find that the recent work on "negative affects," "ugly feelings," and depression accurately diagnoses the foreclosure of sociality, this work is also symptomatic of a lack of daring inventiveness when it comes to living. Many of my students express a similar frustration. They want to talk to strangers. They don't want to rush home at 5:00 pm. They teach me about the queer groups they've formed, in the spirit of ACT UP, that "invade" straight bars and clubs once month. They've brought such great energy and sociality to these spaces that

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<sup>112</sup> See Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Rubin, "The Lesbian Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M" and "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," and Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*.

they've made these nights the most popular each month for straights and queers alike. Delany puts in best: we need more spaces for sex and talk.<sup>113</sup>

If we are going to re-imagine the present, we perhaps should look to the past and seize those moment of possibly, however unsustainable. Cassandra says, "I began my shore life again in a mood which made memory like hope" (229). Here it is not the future that gives Cassy hope but the past. As she returns home and resigns herself to take on her mother's role, it is memories of past sociality and pleasure that she clings to, not hope for the future. As Christopher Castiglia argues, new sex publics come out of an engagement with sex memories of the past.<sup>114</sup> The best way to honor those we have lost to AIDS is to keep alive the spirit of "inventive pleasure" that their creation of multiple sexual and social publics embodied (10).<sup>115</sup> Engaging "others in a collective invention of the present, of creativity and care, in the context of pleasure" ensures that we continually create new spaces for sex and talk, building on, rather than watching crumble, what those who have come before us ended up giving their lives for.

In keeping with the necessary turn backward for queer-world making, Heather Love's focus on pre-Stonewall moments of failed and impossible love in Modernist literature encapsulate what she describes as "feeling backward," a

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<sup>113</sup> See *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* and *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*.

<sup>114</sup> See Castiglia, "Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories."

<sup>115</sup> See Castiglia, "The Post-Traumatic Possibilities of Post-Queer Memory"

“disposition toward the past—embracing loss, risking abjection . . .the importance of clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury . . .resisting the call of gay normalization means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead” (30). Just as Love wants us to look back to and not disregard as embarrassing or irrelevant representations of queer intimacy, I want us to look to queers like Cassy in nineteenth-century American novels as we figure out how to re-imagine the social today. Embracing Cassandra’s example means embracing her eventual loss and failure. Yet her failure comes out of her having tried to live a different life from all of the Morgesons who have come before her. Such invention and risk are incongruous with the drive for normativity in contemporary America.<sup>116</sup> Stoddard’s lesson is not the one of having tried and failed. We do not have to become like Cassandra, stuck home and isolated, with only our memories of past contact. In our fine tradition of negativity, queers can refuse such a future, and accept the uncertainty of the free fall and its demand for invention, rather than the slow death of privacy and domesticity.

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<sup>116</sup> On this point, I am inspired by Karma Lochrie and Carolyn Dinshaw’s work on queer sexualities in the Medieval period. Instead of imposing the “repressive hypothesis” on the past, Lochrie and Dinshaw’s readings of the Lollards, female sexualities unfettered from a heterosexual/perverse binary, virginity, and sodomy challenge our often times limited horizon of possibilities today when it comes to pleasure, intimacy, and identity. They are allies in the critical strategy that Judith Halberstam terms perverse presentism, “the application of what we do not know in the present to what we cannot know about the past” (53). See Halberstam, *Female Masculinities*.

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## VITA

After completing a B.A. in English at Loyola University Chicago, Carina Pasquesi happily continued her education at her Alma Mater to pursue an M.A. and Ph.D. in American literature. She was awarded a Graduate Assistantship, which enabled her to work as a Teaching and Research Assistant for Professors Christopher Castiglia, Paul Jay, and John Kerkerling, and to teach her own courses in the Departments of English and Gender Studies. She has taught several courses at Loyola in composition, lower and upper-division courses in literature and theory, as well as the graduate seminar in gender studies and queer theory. Her queer theory seminar has now become a capstone course for the Gender Studies major. Given the work that she has done at Loyola, she has been asked to be the keynote speaker for events like Loyola's annual Social Justice Dinner Dialogue.

After having defended, with distinction, a dissertation on sexuality and antebellum American literature, Pasquesi now holds a full-time position at Indiana University Northwest, where she teaches composition, literature, and gender and sexuality studies. She was rewarded a research fellowship, and has been nominated twice for the university's teaching award.

Pasquesi has presented her work at regional, national and international conferences, and was recently invited to present papers at the Modern Language Association and C19: The Society for Nineteenth-Century Americanists. She is

currently writing a monograph on the often-overlooked anti-social figures and affects found on the margins of American Romanticism. Her research interests include nineteenth-century American literature and cultures, contemporary literature, queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, affect studies, and critical race theory.