

Coons, Queers, and “Human Curiosities”: White Fantasies of Black Masculinity, 1840-

1915

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Forwarding a narrative that, in many ways, runs contrary to ‘official’/sanctioned accounts which designate the body of the black woman as the principal star of nineteenth-century racial science’s empirical investigations and sexual exploitations, I propose instead a vision of our nation’s 1800s that marks this era as *the* moment in *American* history in which Hottentot Venus turned Hot-to-trot-Penis. Remaining indebted to the works of Sander Gilman and his contemporaries, and paying special attention to the ways in which both the erotic vicissitudes and imperialist vagaries of the European empire effected a fairly fluid cross-Atlantic exchange during this time period, I locate the late 1840s and early 1850s as the seminal moment in which, through a collaboration of scientific, social, and popular texts the black *male* body *specifically* first becomes installed in this country, on the mainstages of both our early spectacular culture and the American psychic theater, as a ‘pornographic body’: an indigenous site of sexual taboo upon and through which the dark fantasies of the Whites who had imported these bodies might be projected.

Recognizing, in this mid-nineteenth century moment, what should be seen as a distinctive, while as yet unremarked, shift in both the discourse and displays offered by America’s peculiar brand of ethnography as well as within our national arena—one which turns to and turns on the conception of the black male as sexual subject—my dissertation hopes to offer a better understanding of the compelling forces, both social and salacious, that might be said to account for this distinctly American, and distinctively perverse, representational refocusing.

Dedication

For small o.

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Foreword

Of African-American author Chester Himes' 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*—a novel which tells the story of Robert Jones, a black shipyard worker during the early years of World War II who is falsely accused of raping one of his white female co-workers—Frantz Fanon has two things to say. First, that “[t]he Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands,” and second, that “[t]hat big blonde...*was always*, in [Jones’] way, weak, sensual, offered, open, fearing (desiring) rape.”¹ While Himes’ text itself recognizes that Jones’ role in this scenario, as pornographic actor, had been scripted for him long before he realized that his acting was being managed by some agent/agency other than his own, its author *inadvertently* gives an exact date to the beginning of a drama which Fanon simply relegates to the “always,” and, perhaps, forever.

Himes’ protagonist laments:

Before, up in the room with her, with the mob beating at the door, I'd been instinctively scared of being caught with a white woman, screaming “Rape.” Scared of the mob; scared of violence; just scared because I was black and she was white; a trapped; cornered; physical fear...But now I was scared in a different way... Not of physical hurt. But of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion—that I was guilty. In that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody believing it. A white woman yelling “Rape,” and a Negro caught locked in the room. The whole structure of American thought was against me; American tradition had convicted me *a hundred years before* [emphasis mine].²

In Jones’ delineation of this master/The Master’s script, the stage direction and the audience, the judge and jury of this performance, call for, “A white woman yelling

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 140.

² Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1945), 187.

‘Rape,’ and a Negro caught locked in the room,” and like it or not, Jones’ black male body has been cast/‘trapped’/‘cornered’ in this sequence’s starring role. In “one brief flash”—*Have the stage lights just come on? Has the cameraman made himself manifest? Is Jones’ black image already on the way to press? Is this the image that will be used to publicize this American-made ‘skin flick?’*—Jones finally realizes that his black body has been *fixed* within a system of representation that has (re)produced this body as the quintessential American Other (suddenly, outside himself, he ‘can see himself’ as mirrored in the eyes of his white audience). Inescapably evident, at the same time, is the fact that this Othering, and the negative image that it has contrived, have indelibly imprinted the Black male in the American Imaginary as nothing short of sexual spectacle; to quote Fanon again, “[T]he Negro...is *viewed* as a penis symbol [emphasis mine].”³ The ‘inexorable conclusion’ of this scenario frames the black male as guilty, guilty by way of his very corporeality, his *physicality*. Within a representational and ideological system in which “Whoever says *rape* says *Negro*,”⁴ Jones can never be ‘innocent;’ “overdetermined from without” he must remain “the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of [him] but of [his] own appearance.”⁵ In short, both the ‘fact’ of the black man’s blackness, and “[t]he whole structure of American thought” have marked his body as pornographic site...a process of inscription that was, according to Himes, perfected “a hundred years before.”

While one can assume that what the text intended in designating its protagonist the victim of one hundred years of American tradition was simply to call attention to the

³ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 159.

⁴ *Ibid*, 166.

⁵ *Ibid*, 116.

endurance of the type-casting that is being enacted—to mark the hypersexualization of the black male body as one of the longest running spectacles on American soil—what Himes, through his protagonist, has actually managed to do is to point to what proves to be *precisely* the moment during which this staging first took place. For if Himes' text focuses on the inexorability of the black male body's overdetermination in 1940s American society, what my own interrogations into the dark underside of American history have evinced is that it was through a collaboration of scientific, literary, social and theatrical texts in the mid-1840s and early 1850s, “a hundred years before,” that this body came to be institutionalized in our culture's ‘official’ discourse as a ‘pornographic’ body.

If, for Toni Morrison, the African is early America's favored “vehicle for illegal sexuality,”⁶ it is in mid-nineteenth century America that the black *male* body specifically, becomes manifest within the arena, and on the spotlighted center stage, of American spectacular culture as more than simple mediator of illicit sex, but rather as a meditation on sex in and of itself; ‘pornotroped,’⁷ the black man's body *becomes* sexuality writ large, and written in accordance to the excesses, exigencies, exegeses, and ordinances—the *tropes*, both utopian and unseemly—of the pornographic medium. My project, then, is to explore this seminal mid-nineteenth century moment, a moment during which both the term and the genre of pornography as we know it in its modern sense⁸ exploded onto the

⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1992), 52.

⁷ See Chapter One, note 1.

⁸ Lynn Hunt, in her essay “Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800,” explains, “Pornography came into existence, both as literary and visual practice and as a category of understanding, at the same time as—and concomitantly with—the long term emergence of Western modernity... The middle of the nineteenth century was certainly crucial [to pornography] in linguistic terms. The word *pornography* appeared for the first time in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1857, and most of the English variations on the word (*pornographer* and *pornographic*) date from the middle or the end of the nineteenth century. The

Continental scene, and, in America, the body of the black man, as indigenous site of sexual taboo upon and through which the dark fantasies of the Whites who had imported these bodies might be projected, first gains currency as spectacularized commodity of fetishistic use and abuse, as “obscure object of exchangeable desire,”⁹ within an American visual economy and within the ‘black market’ of our (erotic) cultural imagination.

Setting the Stage/ (Un)staking the Posts

*His name isn't important.
It would be coincidence
if he had a name,
a face, a mind.
If he's not hard-on
then he's hard up
and either way
you watch him.*¹⁰

Before beginning the exploration promised above, I think that it is important to understand the stakes of the argument that is to follow. Working within a contemporary critical arena in which Fanon's assertion, “[O]ne is no longer aware of the Negro but only of his penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis,”¹¹ has become a guiding principle of sorts in discussions concerning black masculinity, it seems

words emerged in French a little sooner...and *pornographique*, *pornographe*, and *pornographie* in the sense of obscene writing or images dated from the 1830s and 1840s.” Lynn Hunt, “Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. same, (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 10-11, 13.

⁹ Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 53.

¹⁰ Essex Hemphill, “If His Name Were Mandingo,” in *Ceremonies*. (1985; repr. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), 155.

¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 170. Fanon makes this reading in relation to a passage quoted from author Michel Cournot.

important at this juncture to begin to defamiliarize a mantra that, rather than offering an inroads into *new* ways of looking at the (S)ubject of this discourse, has, in some ways, come to reinforce the reductive regard it derides. Which is to say, that while the majority of our current cultural criticism is more than able to limn out the various ways in which the black male body continues to enter into the field of vision as sexual signifier, the uncritical acceptance of this formulation and the general failure to question *how* representation turned signification—to chart the black male’s movement from body with a penis, to ‘symbol’ of the penis, to embodiment of the penis itself, right before our eyes as it were—threatens to naturalize its tenets, to figure the black male body as *transparent* signifier of sexuality. To refer back to my earlier engagement with the Himes passage, if Fanon’s white woman was *always* in the way of an *always already* hypersexed black male body, then this body must *naturally* be capable of delivering the goods.¹² In this way, “Sex is confirmed as the *nature* of black male identity,”¹³ and this streamlined signification is enabled to eclipse the standard signifiers of identity: name, face, mind. There is nothing natural, however, about a sex-as-essence-alism (*I’m prick, therefore I am*) that is as socially-constructed as the very images that lend themselves to the projection of the black Self-as-erection. My argument insists, therefore, that in order to understand the black man’s position as such within our contemporary arena of representation it is important to understand the historical forces that coalesced in this

¹² And here I should indicate, although I hope it is not necessary, that we must also avoid naturalizing discourses that confuse rape with sex, and confuse women’s desires in relation to both. I would like to add, as well, that it should be understood that in both Fanon’s and Himes’ scenarios, the white woman, in her almost hysterical and hallucinatory desire for the black man’s sex, is both the product and the pawn of patriarchal fantasy.

¹³ Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 185.

conception, and which attached to and fed the after-birth of his various visual reproductions.

My focus on the visibility of this body (“and either way/you watch him”) is key, as well. For while the hypervisuality of the black male body has also come to be accepted as a given within current cultural debates concerned with both the circulation of images of blackness and the modes of their production, I will hold that it is through this projection of the black male body as *always already visible*, that both ideological and state apparatuses of (white male) power have constructed and reinforced discourses meant to concretize the ‘reality’ of the ontological integrity of black male Otherness. As celebrated cultural critic Homi Bhabha put it in a 2003 address given at Duke University, the black male body is a “terminal signifier” and, relegated to racism’s “ground zero,” it remains “petrified” in this positioning “like flies in amber.”

As such, and if we have come to see the black male’s Otherness as in fact written on the body, it is because this body did not in a sense *exist* until it was written into the field of representation; and the field of representation was not ready to contain it until it could indeed be (ideologically) contained within an epistemological schema that located the nexus of Otherness in the realm of the biological/the body. Within this schema, interiority—associated with the mind, rationality, reason, and (S)ubjectivity—became the domain of the empowered white male, while the body—as it had come to signify pure exteriority, irrationality in its subjugation to the senses, and objectivity/objectiveness in its correlation with the realities of the external world (as both theological and post-Enlightenment thought contend ‘the body is simply the *vessel* for the soul’ and hence finds itself relegated to ‘thingness’)—was, in the earliest discourses concerning the

mind/body split, associated with the domain of the feminine. Thus, within Western white male minds and philosophy, the white woman was the original Other, and the methods by which Otherness is brought under the rei(g)n of white male empirical knowledge and prying eyes were first exacted on her figure.

One understands, then, why contemporary discourses of racial Otherness have so often found themselves both aligned with, and formulated in opposition to, white female alterity. As Mary Ann Doane acknowledges, in her *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, one of the early feminist critiques to engage this often vexed coupling:

[I]t is particularly tempting, in the light of theories of visual politics informing analysis of cinema, to see certain similarities between [‘the position of the white woman and that of blacks’]. When Fanon claims the black represents to the white the body, the biological, or corporeality in all its specificity, when he speaks of the hypersexualization of the black or of a kind of paranoia of the visible attending an identity chained to appearance, it is difficult not to recognize these categories as playing an important role within feminist analysis (particularly feminist film theory) where they have been applied to the situation of the woman and her representation/self-representation.¹⁴

Doane goes on, however, to warn against the temptation to assign an automatic covalence to these two positionings. Exhorting us to resist the urge to simply plug individual and grouped bodies into seemingly ‘fitting’ theoretical discourses, she points out many of the snags inherent in such impetuous analytical *accoutrements*. First and foremost, she cautions that easy attributions of parallelism between categories of race and gender have already been shown to fashion critical dialogues that overlook the fact that the body of the black woman could not possibly conform to their narrow outlines. She attests to her concurrence with Hazel Carby in that “The experience of black women does not enter the

¹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 231. For more on this racial/sexual pairing, see chap. 11, “Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema,” *Femmes Fatales*, 209-248.

parameters of parallelism. The fact that black women are subject to the *simultaneous* oppression of patriarchy, class and ‘race’ is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible.”¹⁵ The other, and even more troubling, flaw in this theoretical design, a flaw that effectively guarantees against black women being neatly (or even nearly) accommodated by these analytic models, is the fact that their bodies, quite literally, do not even figure into the terms of the discussion. As we should all be aware by now, thanks to the various and vocal interventions of black feminist critics such as Carby, “the category of women is usually used to refer to white women, while the category of blacks often really means ‘black men.’”¹⁶ Which leaves black women in a category and a doublebind all their own; as Doane quite cogently sums it up, “[I]n terms of oppression, she is both black and a woman; in terms of theory, she is neither.”¹⁷

And there is further reason to be uneasy in regard to a too hasty acceptance of the parallel terms by which raced and gendered subjectivities have frequently been addressed in the realm of white feminist criticism. Unfortunately, practitioners of such criticism have often failed, in their focus on a long-standing history of patriarchal oppression, to acknowledge the fact that when it comes to issues of racial oppression their assumed position of static ‘innocence’ within binary structures of power is also indicative of a certain sort of critical erasure, or selective memory, as it were. As Anne McClintock, has so nicely put it, “[W]hite women were not the helpless onlookers of empire but were

¹⁵ Ibid. Doane quotes from Hazel Carby’s “White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood,” in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1982), 213. Additionally, it should be remarked that these early discussions failed to take into account modes of oppression faced by gays and lesbians, both white and of color.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.”¹⁸ And indeed, moments of white female empiricism have not been confined only to the historical specificity of the colonial project, nor to the actional realm of racial oppression. As much-lauded film critic Jane Gaines suggested as early as 1988, a reevaluation of the *gaze*, sexed as male, might be in order as we (re)consider white women’s position as not only ‘helpless onlookers of empire,’ but occasional masters of “the look” themselves. In her now-famous essay, “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory,” Gaines makes the salient observation:

The radical feminist notion of absolute patriarchy has one-sidedly portrayed the oppression of women through an analogy with slavery, and since this theory has identified woman as man’s savage or repressed Other it competes with theories of racial difference which understand the black as the ‘unassimilable Other.’ Finally, the notion of patriarchy is most obtuse when it disregards the position white women occupy over black men as well as black women.¹⁹

She continues later in this essay, “Framing the question of male privilege and viewing pleasure as the ‘right to look’ may help us to rethink film theory along more materialist lines, considering, for instance, how some groups have historically had the licence [sic.] to ‘look’ openly while other groups have ‘looked’ illicitly.”²⁰

A look to material history is certainly in order here, especially as we acknowledge the fact that for black men ‘illicit looking’ has often resulted in immediate lynching. Official social interdictions erected in order to deny African-American men the ‘right to look,’ therefore, must be examined against specific moments of patriarchal approbation

¹⁸ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

¹⁹ Jane Gaines, “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory,” *Screen* 29 (Autumn 1988): 17.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 24-25.

(even if only halting approbation) in respect to white female-looking. As will be discussed later, the historical moment in which my conversation begins is remarkable not only in that it was an epoch in which the black male body was first consolidated in its position of *to-be-looked-at-ness* (to coin a phrase from feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey²¹), but also because it was a moment in which white women, in very public moments of looking at this body, can be seen to have possessed themselves of the *gaze*—in all the vivisectional vivacity with which it is attributed in traditional discussions of patriarchal-looking practices.²²

If one remarks a general unwillingness on the part of white feminist critics—many of whom continue to have difficulty breaking away from trusted if ‘tired’ formulations in which a man is a man is a man—to address the fact of the black male body’s representational objectification, one has seen, on the part of many black male cultural critics and activists (at least *straight*-identified black male critics and activists), an even more pronounced rejection of modes of critical inquiry that necessarily take as their point of departure the fact that in the realm of the white Imaginary, and within the

²¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th edition, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²² The difference between the look and the *gaze* resting, of course, in the fact that the latter is the province of an (idealized) omnipotent, all-knowing subject able to penetrate and master the object of its inspection through a scrutiny that is both fetishistic and sadistic in its nature. The look can be returned, while the gaze does not allow for reciprocity and ‘fixes’ or ‘neutralizes’ its object “as a bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Ibid, 747). In Mulvey’s original formulation of these looking relations, as evidenced in regard to traditional Hollywood cinema, it is the disembodied white male cinematic spectator who wields the gaze, while the spectacularized onscreen (white) woman, is always the (hyperembodied) object of this look. Mulvey would later reformulate the rather limited strictures of this theory (first forwarded in 1975) in response to criticisms, similar to those later leveled by theorists such as Jane Gaines, that questioned the necessary maleness of the spectator/gazer. See Mulvey’s “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*,” in *Feminism and Film and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (1981; repr., New York: Routledge, 1988). For early feminist critiques of this theory, see also Mary Ann Doane’s “*Caught and Rebecca*: The inscription of Femininity as Absence,” (1981) in *Feminism and Film Theory* ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), Janet Bergstrom’s “Enunciation and Sexual Difference” *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (Summer 1979), E. Ann Kaplan’s famous “Is the Gaze Male?” (1983) in *Feminism and Film*, ed. same (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and David N. Rodowick, Miriam Hansen, Gaylyn Studlar, Jackie Stacey, and Kaja Silverman in same.

perspectival parameters of the *gaze*, the black man might not, in fact, *be* a man. In her 1994 article “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic” bell hooks lays this castrating equation out as such. Holding that the (ph)antastic circulation of the black male body as item for voyeuristic consumption within the realm of visual exchange should be understood as a commodification meant to neutralize the potential threat to “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” posed by the very maleness (a maleness mythologized as “hypermasculine,” hypervirile) of this body, hooks argues that “this perceived threat, whether real or symbolic, [is] diffused by a process of fetishization that renders the black masculine ‘menace’ feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification.” To support this assertion, hooks refers to art historian Melody Davis who, in her *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography*, hooks says, “explains feminization this way: ‘specularized, men will lose their potency and force....they will be subject as are women to conditions, like pregnancy, beyond their control....they will become the sign for exchange value, and, as is custom for women, be mere objects, voids for the gaze.’”²³

One understands, then, the opposition with which theories taken from feminist criticism and applied to the critique of racial oppression—even after being reformulated both by, and in the wake of, black feminist criticism—were met by many black men when they were first brought into dialogue with then contemporary academic discourses concerning black masculinity. The suggestion that the black male’s Imaginary and imagistic reduction to the level of the body might position him on the same level as the oft-fetishized and objectified “Woman” (white or otherwise), was certainly not one that was quickly or easily embraced by the black male establishment. Such pronouncements

²³ bell hooks, “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. for Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 131.

coming in the wake of the Black Power Movement, and all its residual “Black Macho,” it is understandable that many of these men might have been loathe to relinquish whatever newfound claims the black man might lay to patriarchal authority. At the same time, this backlash was also fueled by the fact that such claims were being made in the midst of what had become a heated debate between black male and black feminist critics concerning the very notion of the body, its “ontological status as well as the interpretability of biological difference.”²⁴ Many of the abovementioned black male academicians having been formally trained in the poststructuralist and “psycholinguistic” tenets of white male European theory, they became necessarily pitted against a black female intelligentsia whom they characterized as overly mired in essentialist discourses that naturalized the biological and inadvertently lent credence to white supremacist modes of thought that sought to regard “race” as a material, rather than socially-constructed, fact. It was a debate the dynamics of which Women’s Studies specialist Margaret Homans would later refer to as, quite simply, “painful.”²⁵

As Homans recounts the details of this exchange, these men, chief amongst them Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, indeed the *grands pères* of African-Americanist theory, while helping to generate an entirely new and vibrant critical discourse by dint of which we have been able to come to the now widely accepted and “liberatory understanding that gender is not the same as biological sex—indeed that sex is an effect produced by gender—or that race is an idea or a metaphor,”²⁶ can nevertheless be said to have promoted a metaphorical view on gender that did little to

²⁴ Margaret Homans, “‘Racial Composition’: Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race,” in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 77.

²⁵ Homans, “‘Racial Composition,’” 79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

revitalize woman's position within these theoretical frameworks. In fact, by way of their privileging of "figurative (especially metaphoric) language" over "(relatively) literal language" as well as their adherence to Lacanian constructs that figured "the maternal body as the absence that makes language's substitutions possible," they ended by inadvertently taking on a position that "[could] be seen to identify and celebrate the abstract as masculine and devalue embodiment as feminine."²⁷ In short, they seemed to have inherited the master's biases along with his tools. The protest that this engendered, led by Joyce A. Joyce but closely followed by a host of black feminists and African-American women writers and critics, took issue not only with what as seen as an intentional exclusion of women from the terms of a discussion that in its "privileged discourse"—as bell hooks would refer to the language of "high theory"²⁸ in which Gates' and Baker's arguments were set—was inaccessible to many, but also what seemed to be a move on the part of this discourse to dismiss race as a lived experience; "To say that race is a metaphor [was, for Joyce], a denial of the body."²⁹ As Homans explains it, to many of these women "the body is experiential, including but not limited to the erotic, and context-bound. It bears the traces of remembered histories and is not separable from the mind... What [Joyce and others were] defending [was] not the body alone, but the inseparability of body and mind, against a philosophical tradition that depends on a mind-body split."³⁰

This debate continues to rage on, as we know, in confrontations between adherents of poststructuralist thought and contemporary champions of identity politics.

²⁷ Ibid, 81, 80.

²⁸ Homans, "Racial Composition," 83, 82.

²⁹ Ibid, 80.

³⁰ Ibid, 80.

This said, the specific reason that I feel it necessary to lay out the dynamics of this debate, particularly as it took place between black male and female cultural critics, is because it points to what Hazel Carby was to say as late as 1998 is a situation in which;

While contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society that “conceives African American society in terms of a perennial ‘crisis’ of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority.”³¹

Since this “proper affirmation of black male authority” necessarily requires (if this authority is to be ‘properly’ affirmed/read: posited according to the standard doctrines of patriarchal rule) a rejection of any recognition of male embodiment and, although inherently paradoxical, an embrace of narrow and normative notions of black male virility (imbricated as they are with heterosexist assumptions of what constitutes ‘authentic’ masculinity and, hence, pitting many of these male intellectuals against their gay male counterparts), it is not surprising that it seems to have so consistently found itself at odds with modes of analysis offered by feminist theories proposed by both women of color and their white counterparts. It has also, rather regrettably, limited the very scope and possibility of the critiques offered within the field of black masculinity studies—many of the best of which have been offered by the women and queers of color³² who continue to be marginalized within the very discipline that they take as their focus.³³

³¹ Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

³² With the exception, of course, of Maurice O. Wallace’s groundbreaking *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African and African American Men’s Literature and Culture*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

³³ As Hazel Carby indicates, “In the late 1990s the work of black women intellectuals is still considered peripheral by the black male establishment. It is true that, superficially, the situation appears to have improved. The words ‘women and gender’ are frequently added after the word ‘race’ and the appropriate

My purpose here, however, is not to point fingers or to take sides. Nor am I trying to reinvent the wheel; indeed, I make no claims to be doing anything new. Rather, in the same spirit outlined by Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham in their seminal and cross-seminating collection, *Representing Black Men*, what I hope to present is a study that, “As a site for exploring the intersections of race, gender, and sexualities...is of necessity composed of a series of border crossings and engagements with the ‘multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages’ defining black men as discursive subjects or objects.”³⁴ Unlike Blount and Cunningham, however, I do not see the various discourses that I will bring to bear on my analysis of the construction of the black male body within the white Imagination and within the field of representation as co-existing in a state of “*antagonistic cooperation*.”³⁵ I see my work, rather, as consisting of a theoretical call and response that allows what have traditionally been considered disparate modes of thought, each with its “privileged subject,” to enter into dialogue with each other in hopes of discovering inspiringly innovative ways of articulating a *common* subject...and perhaps to inspire the practitioners of these supposedly self-contained fields of critical inquiry to do the same.

At the same time, and although I plan to take the ‘good stuff’ from each of these theoretical frameworks and ‘run with it’ (performing a sort of critical *bricolage*³⁶), I by

commas, and increasingly the word ‘sexuality’ completes the litany. On occasion a particular black woman’s name will be mentioned, like that of Toni Morrison. But the *intellectual work* of black women and gay men is not thought to be of enough significance to be engaged with, argued with, agreed or disagreed with. Thus terms like women, gender, and sexuality have a decorative function only. They color the background of the canvas to create the appropriate illusion of inclusion and diversity, but they do not affect the shape or texture of the subject.” Carby, *Race Men*, 5.

³⁴ Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, eds., *Representing Black Men* (New York: Routledge, 1996), ix.

³⁵ *Ibid*, xi.

³⁶ As Jacques Derrida explains, the practice of *bricolage*, a term originally coined by Claude Levi-Strauss, involves a *bricoleur* who “is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his

no means intend to run wild. Taking very seriously the exhortation to, as Kobena Mercer phrases it, “acknowledg[e]...the historical contingency of context, and in turn raise significant questions about the universalist character of some of the grand aesthetic and political claims once made in the name of cultural theory,”³⁷ I do hope that in my deconstruction of a very specific time period (1840-1915) I will be able to gesture towards the ways in which some of this period’s specificities have managed to transcend the particularity of their particular landscape in order to limn/liminalize the parameters of both our current claims and America’s cultural unconscious. (We should not forget that the psychic landscape, in the non-linearity of its chronology, in the simultaneous diachrony and synchrony of its remembrances and its repressions, is founded on a system quite similar to that which has now come to be called “diasporic time.”) And, in the midst of all this theorizing and materializing, I hope to remain true to the “vernacular” by virtue of the fact that, as a product of African-American and West-Indian cultures that have had to rely to a great degree on oral modes of transmitting our pasts into the present, I cannot help but see history as a *story*. Thus, my purpose here is to craft this ‘story,’ not necessarily as a series of causes and effects—it is a story, a story told in only one of the myriad ways in which it could be, not a scientific theorem—but, nevertheless, as a coherent tale...complete with key players, foils and doppelgangers, underlying themes, recurring images and motifs, and, of course, a series of exciting and unexpected plot twists.

disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous—and so forth.” Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, 4th edition, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1992), 88.

³⁷ Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism,” 190.

The first and most radical of these new twists on an old story—a re-visioning of American history that incorporates the narrative of this nation’s pornographic productions and preferences, that privileges the darker side of American culture—is to be the suggestion that it is, in fact, the extreme objectification of the black male body as captured within the field of representation that makes this the position from which it is *most* possible to subvert the dehumanizing and docilizing masteries of the sadistic and voyeuristic gaze that seeks to contain him. As Lacanian film theorist Slavoj Žižek first suggested (and recent work by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Linda Williams, and Jane Gaines has seconded), “Contrary to the commonplace according to which, in pornography, the other (the person shown on the screen) is degraded to an object of voyeuristic pleasure, we must stress that it is the spectator himself who effectively occupies the position of the object. The real subjects are the actors on the screen trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze.”³⁸ If, then, and as I will contend, the black male body was to become, in the images and imagination of mid-nineteenth-century America, a pornographic site, it was also from this site that the black man was often, and may still be, able to stage a rather visionary act of resistance, a ‘looking back’ that has the potential to pervert the workings of power...racial uplift figured, here, as a lifting of the eyes.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 110.

Chapter One. The Hottentot/Hot-to-Trot Penis: Louis Agassiz and the Panoptics of Pornotropic¹ Otherness

What does it mean to say pornography and ethnography share a discourse of domination? For one thing, they represent impulses born of desire: the desire to know and possess, to know by possessing and possess by knowing.²

[T]he visual representation of male bodies and sexualities within modern regimes of corporeal and sexual knowledge cannot be separated from the erotic pleasures of the look that are usually disavowed so categorically by empirical science.... The microscope is also a peepshow.³

In 1846, the Swiss born natural historian and archivist who was to become this country's most celebrated scientist by 1850, Louis Agassiz, emigrated to America where he was to fill a position at Harvard University. Before settling in Boston, one of Agassiz's first sojourns in the States was in Philadelphia, where the thirty-nine year old specialist on fossil fish traveled to view, not the Liberty Bell, but renowned polygenesist Dr. Samuel Morton's 'American Golgotha' exhibit, a collection of 600 skulls of various ethnic and indigenous types meant to establish "that the races of mankind had been separately created as distinct and unequal species."⁴ It was in this Pennsylvania city that

¹ Hortense Spillers first employs this term in her 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 67.

² Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham and Bill Nichols, "Pornography, Ethnography, and the Discourses of Power," in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, ed. Bill Nichols (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 209.

³ Thomas Waugh, *Hard To Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film From Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 70.

⁴ Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 9 (Summer 1995): 40. Morton, famous for his *Crania Americana* (1838) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), was not the first to amass a large cranial compendia. His own series of specimens was nicknamed after renowned naturalist German Johann Blumenbach's 245 skull "Golgotha" collection. Blumenbach, "widely recognized as the father of physical anthropology," unlike many of his successors, including Morton, did not believe that racial differences were as patent as was the common consensus, nor were they necessarily as static. Also, although he was famous for having, in 1790, divided the globe into five principal racial classifications: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American (Indian) and Malay, Blumenbach was quick to point out that there were diversities to be found even amongst the members of these various groups.

Agassiz encountered his first Black men, "domestics" at his hotel. In a letter to his mother he offered the following account of this meeting:

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, so much are the feelings they inspired in me contrary to all our ideas about the brotherhood of man and the unique origin of our species.... But truth before all. The more pity I felt at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, the more...impossible it becomes for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as we are. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away. And when they advanced that hideous hand towards my plate in order to serve me, I wished I were able to depart...rather than dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race—to have tied their existence so closely with that of negroes in certain countries! God preserve us from such a contact!⁵

Scientists like Morton, and soon Agassiz, were to take up similar classificatory schemas that pointedly discarded any notion of variability between or within racial types. For Morton, racial differences were “aboriginal,” had nothing to do with environmental factors, and could be traced to an originary moment in which man had been created pluralistically and unequally in different parts of the globe. Josiah Nott, who made his name in the 1840s for his theories of hybridity, would take Morton’s argument even further, instituting the notion that the races were not merely different types, but comprised different *species*. In 1854 he published *Types of Mankind* with co-author George Gliddon (the third in a trio that are to be credited with founding American ethnology), a text that was to greatly influence the nineteenth-century obsession with the study of *physiognomy* (the practice of assessing inner character based upon exterior physical features) and that can be seen as precursor to both later theories of eugenics and the creation of photographic archives meant to root out and document the criminal and the insane. Agassiz was to contribute an article to this same volume which sought to revise Blumenbach's earlier five racial categories; Ethiopians were dropped, and "Arctic," Australian, Negro, and Hottentot were added. This essay would also contend, in the course of offering zoological and geological ‘evidence’ to support Agassiz’s arguments concerning the separate creation of men, that the notion of monogenesis was "contrary to all the results of modern science" (Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 264); a statement that we would now read as not a little ironic. During his lifetime, however, Agassiz would oppose Darwin’s theories—from his earliest hypotheses, published anonymously in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), to the revolutionary *Origin of Species* (1859)—until the end and long after it was fashionable to do so. For more on Agassiz’s interactions with, and contributions to, the school of American ethnology, see Edward Lurie’s biography, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), as well as the same’s “Louis Agassiz and the Races of Man,” *Official Quarterly Journal of the History of Science and Society* 45, (Summer 1954):227-242. Brian Wallis recommends William Stanton's *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Towards Race in America, 1815-50* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) and, of course, Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981) for more on Agassiz and the American School of Ethnology. See also Londa Schiebinger's *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), for a very comprehensive discussion of Blumenbach and early anthropological science, particularly as these discourses inflected early conceptions of gender differences. Shawn Michelle Smith's *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) offers a fascinating discussion of Morton and Nott's contributions to photographic and literary constructions of social identity/racial/sexual.

⁵ The text of this letter, as cited, is composed from both Edward Lurie’s and Stephen Jay Gould’s translations of this correspondence. Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 257; Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 44-45. Gould

While Agassiz's depiction of these black men as beast-like savages was to be expected given the climate of the times, what *is* rather striking about this bit of correspondence is the evidence that it gives of what seems to be a spontaneously generated phobia in Agassiz: a hypersexualization of the Black male body that borders on the pathological.⁶

If Agassiz's panicked desire to tell these black men to "stay far away" were not indicator enough of the sexual apprehension that they inspire on his part ("*Contact alone is enough to evoke anxiety. For contact is at the same time the basic schematic type of initiating sexual action [touching, caresses—sexuality].*"⁷), the fact that he is immediately drawn to, and yet repelled by, these men's "thick lips and grimacing teeth" (*The better to eat you with?*); his fascination with their "*elongated hands...[and] long curved nails*" (*You know what they say about a man's hands*); the special attention given to their "livid" palms, which together with the hands themselves seem to signify, for Agassiz, the engorged penis which he imagines their owners to possess (one should remember that 'livid' means both "deathly pale, pallid, ashen" *and* "having a discolored bluish appearance caused by bruise, congestion of blood vessels...etc."⁸); and, finally, the fact that while he testifies that he "could not take [his] eyes off their face," Agassiz's very text betrays the fact that his eyes have indeed made the full tour (a lingering tour) of these

explains in the addendum he attaches to his own reprint of this letter: "Agassiz's wife, omits these lines in presenting an expurgated version of this famous letter. Other historians have paraphrased them or passed them by. I recovered this passage from the original manuscript in Harvard's Houghton Library and have translated it, verbatim, for the first time so far as I know." Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 45. Brian Wallis, whose article on Agassiz inspired my own study—an inquiry into his life and works that also hopes to stand as an original unexpurgation—provides a partial citation of the Gould translation. Wallis, "Black Bodies," 42-43.

⁶ And one should here recall Fanon's, "the Negrophobic woman is nothing but a putative sexual partner—just as the Negrophobic man is nothing but a repressed homosexual." Reductive, but nevertheless apt in this case. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 156.

⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

⁸ Definitions taken from *Webster's College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1991) s.v. "livid."

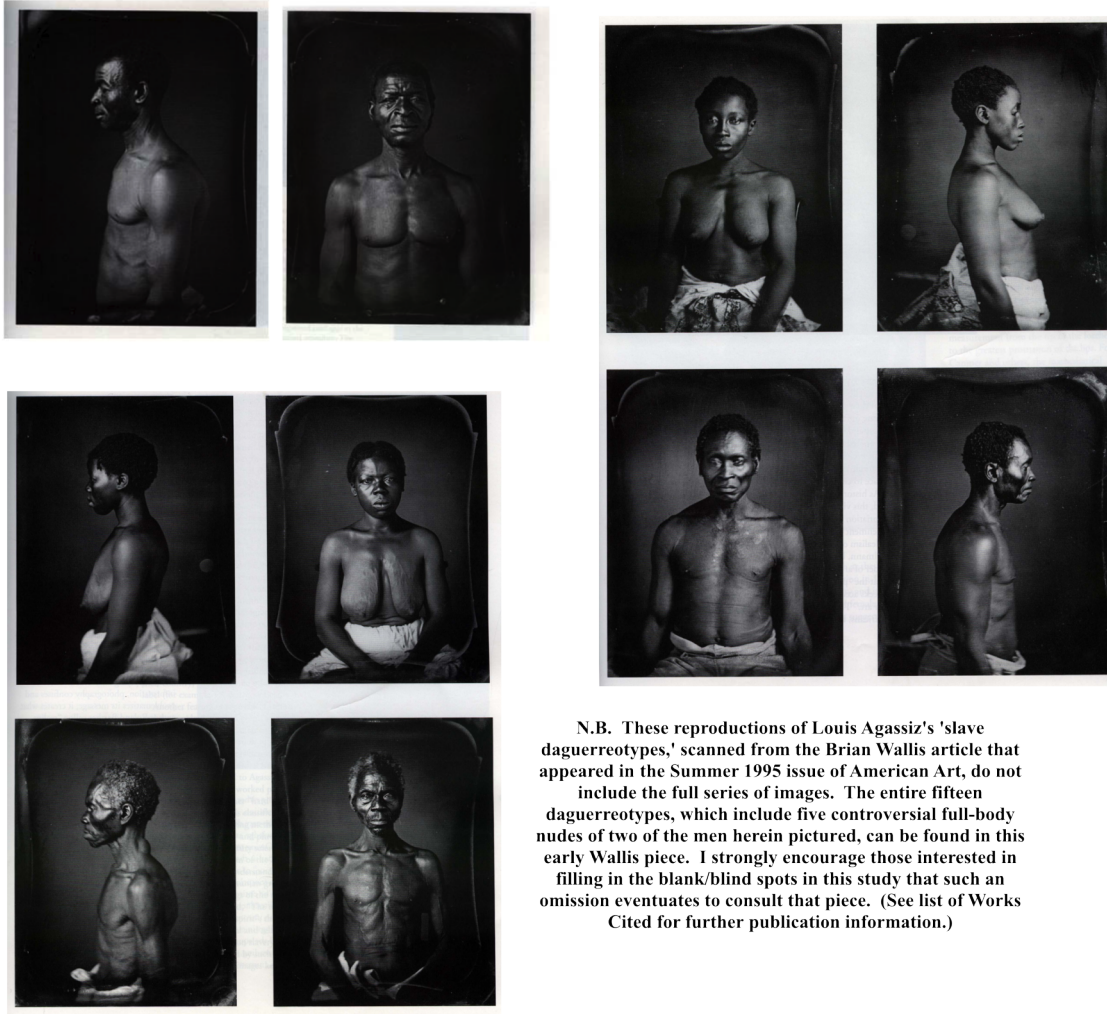
black men's bodies (ending at a point about waist-high), would certainly support the assumption that these bodies hold a sexual charge for the scientist which resonates of the taboo.

Are we to be shocked, then, that it was soon after this incident that, having “shown little interest in racial typologies and...not yet embrac[ing] the theory of separate creation”⁹ prior to his arrival in America, Agassiz would set out to develop his own polygenist project. Even less unexpectedly, it was to be a project that would not only posit the Black bodies that it scrutinized as having been formed ‘far away’ and different from his own White body, but it would also afford the empiricist the opportunity to travel down South where, from amongst the African slaves presented for his voyeuristic delectation, he would be allowed to *hand-pick* two Black men to be sequentially photographed “fully nude...showing front, side, and rear views..[and to produce a] second series...showing the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women”¹⁰ (fig. 1.1).

The titillation, the *scopophilic* pleasure, that these photographs and the black bodies captured therein would have inspired not just in Agassiz but in the public to whom they were to have been displayed, during a time period in America when the framed full-frontal nudity which they portrayed was *absolutely* unheard-of, and indeed *any*

⁹ Wallis, “Black Bodies,” 40.

¹⁰ Ibid, 45-46.



N.B. These reproductions of Louis Agassiz's 'slave daguerreotypes,' scanned from the Brian Wallis article that appeared in the Summer 1995 issue of *American Art*, do not include the full series of images. The entire fifteen daguerreotypes, which include five controversial full-body nudes of two of the men herein pictured, can be found in this early Wallis piece. I strongly encourage those interested in filling in the blank/blind spots in this study that such an omission eventuates to consult that piece. (See list of Works Cited for further publication information.)

Figure 1.1

photographic representation of African-Americans extremely rare,¹¹ should be obvious. What is perhaps not so obvious are the ways in which these daguerreotypes fit into a larger, and distinctly pornographic, scientific and sexual trend operating during the moments preceding and closely following their production. As Brian Wallis provocatively indicates in one of the most thoughtful and thorough essays to engage these images, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes”:

It is perhaps not coincidental that by their unprecedented nudity, the slave daguerreotypes intersect with pornography, that other regime of photography so central to the 1850's (at least in Europe) and so exclusively concerned with the representation of the tactile surface of the body.¹²

It is perhaps also no coincidence that, as Linda Williams, in her seminal study of the pornographic film, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”*¹³ indicates, American scientist and inventor of the zoopraxiscope Eadweard Muybridge's 1887 anatomical studies of “naked male and female bodies...performing, in a series of usually twelve to twenty-four instantaneous photographs, short tasks” would later come to be regarded as the genesis of modern cinematic pornography¹⁴ (fig. 1.2). This said, what *is* indeed coincidental about the study under observation, yet absolutely loaded with relevance, is that European-born, and Paris-educated, Agassiz was the favorite pupil of Baron George Cuvier, the now infamous French zoologist, credited with having not only performed the autopsy of the “Hottentot Venus”—Saartjie Baartman a young woman of

¹¹ It should be noted here that these daguerreotypes are amongst the few photographic records that exist of Southern slaves during the antebellum period. As Brian Wallis points out, “That these slaves were denied individual identity is merely underscored by the near total absence of photographs depicting them.” Wallis, “Black Bodies,” 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54.

¹³ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39. For further information on Muybridge and his zoopraxiscope, “a machine that could synthesize...photographic fragments back into an illusion of the motion from which they were originally taken,” see 37-43 in *Hard Core*.

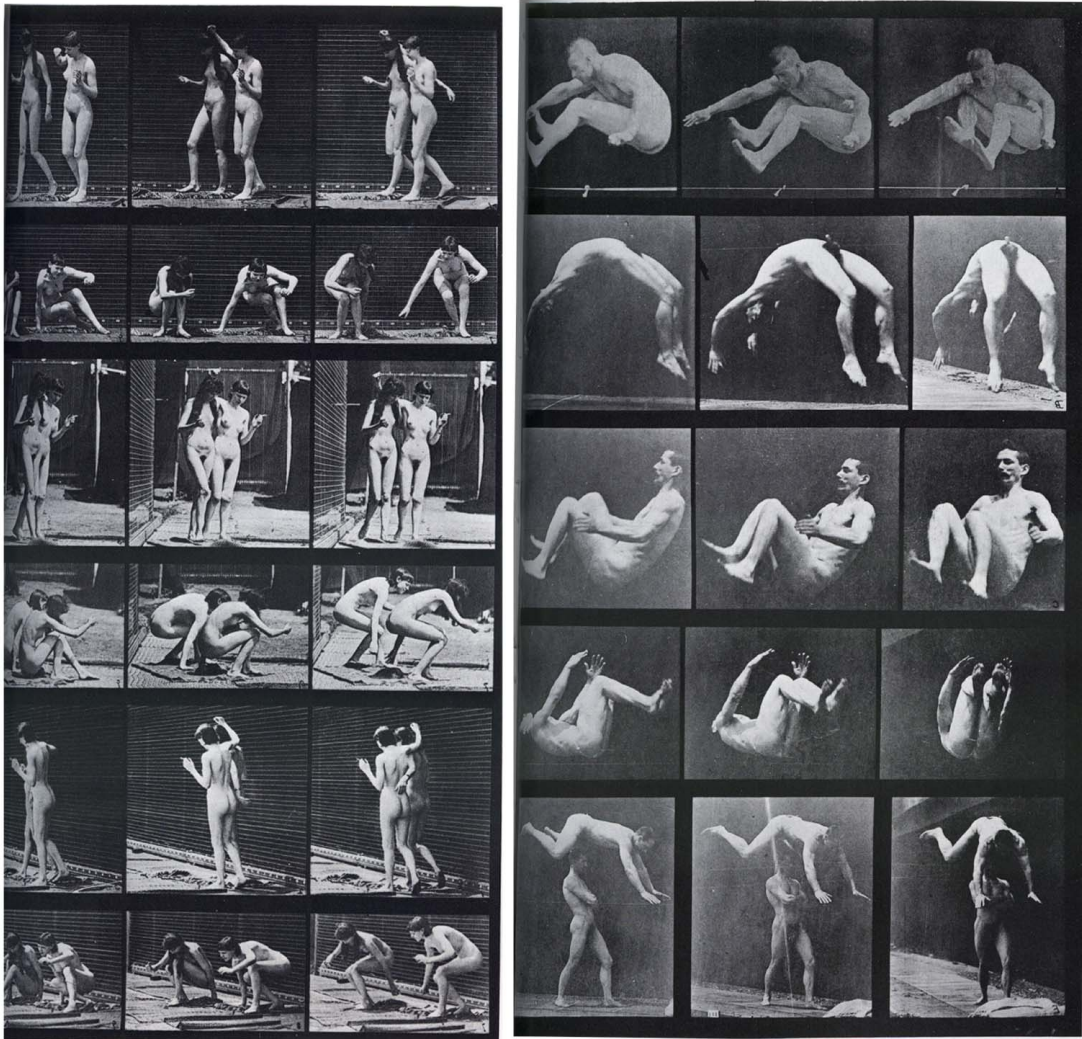


Figure 1.2

the Hottentot (Khoi khoi or Bushman) tribe of Southern Africa whose naked body was displayed in England and France for more than five years until her death in 1815¹⁵—but having also prepared her dissected body in such a way that her celebrated ‘private parts’ were preserved and positioned so that they might be clearly viewed for all posterity. As Wallis aptly summarizes, “The case of the Hottentot Venus marked the collapse of scientific investigation of the racial other into the realm of the pornographic”¹⁶ (fig. 1.3).

Placing Agassiz's work within this trajectory in which the study of “the tactile surface of the body” clearly facilitated a fusion of the scientific with the sexual, empirics and erotics, the exotic and the pornographic, and keeping in mind that “pornography reveals current regimes of sexual relationships as ‘a coincidence of sexual phantasy, genre and culture in an erotic organization of visibility,’”¹⁷ we must then recognize the moment in American history during which these daguerreotypes were produced—America’s first, scientifically-sanctioned, Black ‘nude shots’—as a pivotal juncture in the official installment of the Black male body as an item for spectacular public erotic consumption. Indeed, it should be seen as *the* moment in which Hottentot Venus turned Hottentot/Hot-to-trot Penis.

¹⁵ Specific details on the “Hottentot Venus” are taken from Sander L. Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” in *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). The fascination that this African woman held for European audiences lay in the supposed distinctness of her sexual organs and ‘grossly protruding’ buttocks, which were taken as a sign of her peoples’ inherent sexual licentiousness. Her remains (genitalia, skeleton, and a cast of her body) were, until only recently, still on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. Her skin was also supposedly stuffed for display in England. For more on Baartman and early discourses on the Hottentot consult Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body*, especially 160-172.

¹⁶ Wallis, “Black Bodies,” 54.

¹⁷ Beverly Brown, qtd. in Williams, *Hard Core*, 30.

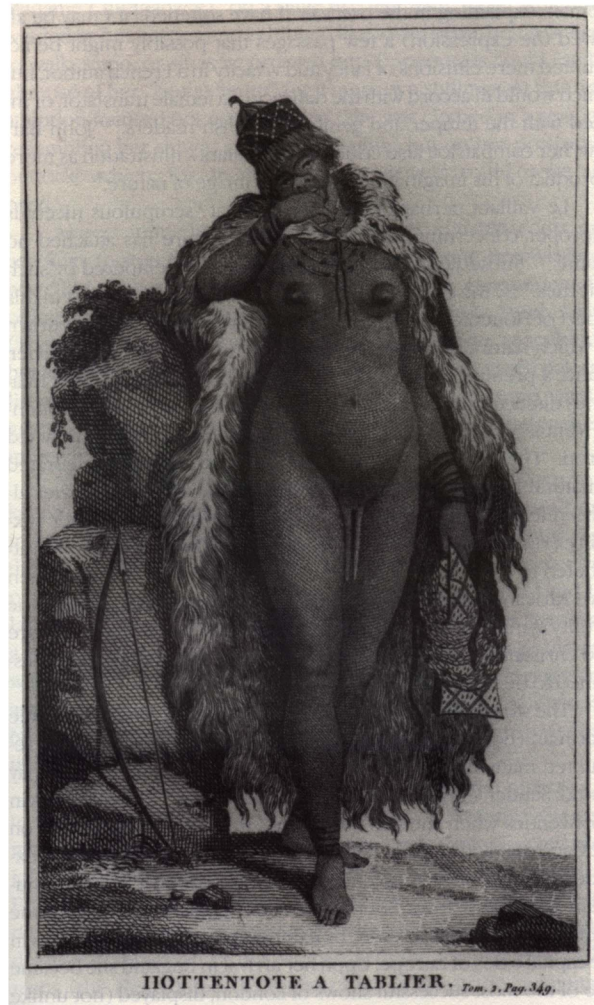


Figure 1.3

The Erotics of Empiricism: Pinning and Mounting the Black Male Body

Having offered this skeletal outline of the history attached to these “medical icons,”¹⁸ I’d like to flesh out the story of their production and circulation a bit more fully; for it is a conversation that will clearly indicate the necessity of (re)viewing these framed slaves as *erotic* icons, the first in a chain of photographic signifiers that would most certainly lead us directly back, and offer richer interpretations of, contemporary representations of black male nudes such as those controversially produced by Robert Mapplethorpe (fig. 1.4). Indeed, I am puzzled as to why such a project has not yet been attempted; puzzled but not surprised, considering the general dearth of critical attention on the part of practitioners of race, sex, gender and visual studies that these early photographs have received since their 1976 “discovery” in an unused storage cabinet housed in the attic of Harvard’s Peabody Museum.¹⁹

One expects this sort of silence on the part of members of the scientific community, and those who have attempted to commemorate Agassiz’s life therein.

¹⁸ Phrase taken from Sander Gilman, who reminds us, “[M]edical icons are no more ‘real’ than ‘aesthetic’ ones. Like aesthetic icons, medical icons may (or may not) be rooted in some observed reality. Like them, they are iconographic in that they represent these realities in a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions they employ.” Gilman, “Black Bodies,” 224. As I hope to make evident, Agassiz’s daguerreotypes, constructed in keeping with the conventions of the pornography that was being circulated during his own time, are so deeply rooted in an ethos of the erotic that the very real libidinal impulses that they would have inspired in a nineteenth-century audience also relay to the present-day observer of these images—even those who ingenuously believe that Agassiz was *really* attempting a scientific study.

¹⁹ Elinor Reichlin, the staff member at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology who first found these photos later published a brief article announcing her discovery and situating the images within nineteenth-century polygenesist discourses. Elinor Reichlin, “Faces of Slavery,” *American Heritage* 28 (1977): 4-7.

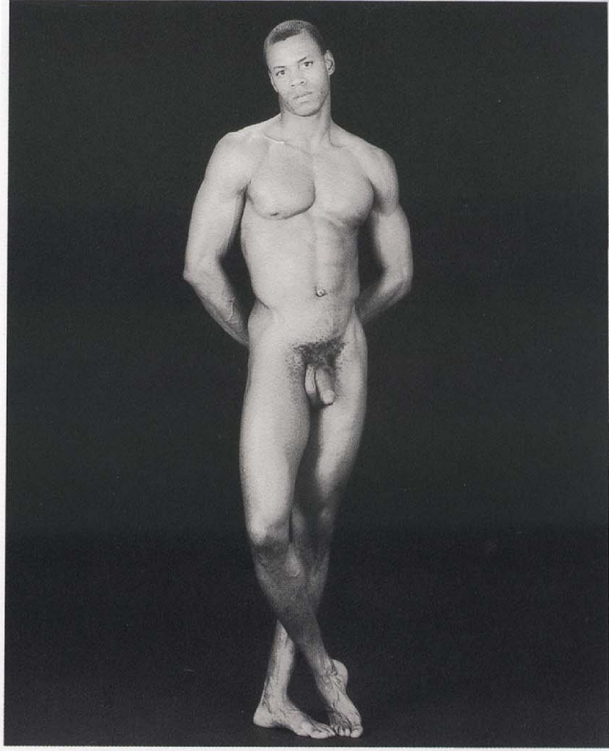


Figure 1.4

Clearly, there are those who would, understandably, prefer to remember the naturalist as the visionary lauded for his truly brilliant contributions to the fields of ichthyology, paleontology, and geology, rather than as a man whose personal biases (and hidden desires) led to radically *unscientific* forays into a dark continent of ethnological study from which he would not return untainted²⁰—Agassiz, as he was both publicly celebrated and (eventually) discredited amongst many of his scientific contemporaries, becoming inseparable from his views on the Negro (a perpetual proximity that, ironically, his very theories were meant to guard against). One must, however, question the general failure to confront Agassiz’s racial theories and, more importantly, the “evidence” that he offers to support these, within the arena of cultural studies—the realm to which the scientific establishment has tacitly relegated this material. Trained in the most intensive (and often unmerciful) of interrogative procedures—particularly when the critical interaction with the subject, and subjects in question, promises to yield the most

²⁰ While there have been many books published devoted to Agassiz’s life and scientific works, very few provide any extended discussions on the scientist’s views on race, and not one mentions the production of these daguerreotypes. Despite the fact that Agassiz’s interventions into contemporaneous debates concerning the separate origins of the ‘species’ of man were in large part responsible for his overwhelming fame in the States, his own wife, Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, whose much-lauded compendium *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, formed the basis of many subsequent such studies, relegates this aspect of her husband’s career to a single exchange between the scientist and a Dr. Samuel G. Howe. She introduces the epistles with a brief preface that is absolutely remarkable in its understatement; “Agassiz’s letters give little idea of the deep interest he felt in the war between North and South, and its probable issue with reference to the general policy of the nation, and especially between the black and white races. Although any judgment would now be premature, the following correspondence between Agassiz and Dr. S. G. Howe is nevertheless worth considering, as showing how the problem presented itself to the philanthropist and the naturalist from their different stand-points.” Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, ed., *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1886), 591. I will, later in this project, most certainly be considering this correspondence, especially as it contains a rather frenzied diatribe from Agassiz concerning the “unnatural amalgamation” of the races. For transcript of this correspondence see E. Agassiz, *Life and Correspondence*, 590-617. The best Agassiz biography that I have found is Edward Lurie’s *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science*. Jules Marcou’s *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1896), although blasted by Lurie—“Jules Marcou’s [text] was based in large degree on Mrs. Agassiz’s *Life*. Where Marcou departed from this account, the results are often strange and misleading. Certain discussions, as for example those regarding glacial theory, are excellent; others, as in the case of the evolution controversy, are entirely unreliable” (Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 422)—is actually *most* interesting in the moments where it departs from ‘reliability’ and starts to dish some absolutely *fantastic* gossip concerning Agassiz’s personal life and relations. More on this later.

tantalizing of treasures—how is it that these contemporary critics have so readily accepted Agassiz’s empirical alibi, accepted that his penetrating scrutinies fall simply on the side of science (albeit “bad” science, racist science) rather than within the realm of flat out prurience? Finally, and most importantly for the present discussion, how is it that the black male bodies (and penises) that are the central locus of this study (and the objects of such disavowed desire for its author) continue to be essentially overlooked/elided by this current day critical gaze?

The extremely limited number of engagements with the subject (and Subjects) of Agassiz's images that have been undertaken within the arts and humanities,²¹ as well as what appears a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the machinations of desire at work within the frames of/which enframes these images, seems to reflect, at best, what Laura

²¹ Not only did it take nearly ten years after the Reichlin article for the photos to reappear in Melissa Banta and Curtis M. Hinsley’s *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography, and the Power of Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986)—Renty’s photo gracing the cover of this text—but, in Alan Trachtenberg’s 1989 extended reading of the daguerreotypes (the earliest such attempt that I have discovered), the Reichlin essay and the Banta book are the only sources mentioned in connection with these images. (As pointed out in earlier notes, while there were some few texts published before 1989 that address Agassiz’s connections to racial science, none make mention of these photographic ‘proofs.’) Interestingly enough, a recent internet search turned up syllabi from several Universities’ art history classes that included the photos amongst their visual documents but, even in the face of this increasing acknowledgement within the academy, Agassiz’s daguerreotypes remain fairly untouched within published works. Following is list of some of the limited texts that make more than passing mention of these images, beginning with Trachtenberg’s own, and best known, discussion. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); Martha A. Sandweiss, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1991); Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville, 1991); Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fischer Sterling, eds., *Carrie Mae Weems* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994)—Weems, an African-American female artist produced an art installation that incorporated (and recontextualized) Agassiz’s daguerreotypes; Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science”; Laura Wexler, “Seeing Sentiment: Photography, Race, and the Innocent Eye,” in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)—a revised and expanded version of this essay appears as Chapter Two of Wexler’s *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and in both discussions of the Agassiz prints Wexler cites Harryette Mullen’s reading of these works: originally part of a PhD dissertation entitled, “Gender and the Subjugated Body: Readings of Race, Subjectivity and Difference in the Construction of Slave Narratives” (University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990) and later reprinted as “Indelicate Subjects’: African American Women’s Subjugated Subjectivity,” in *Sub/versions: Feminist Studies* (Santa Cruz: University of California, 1991); and Melissa Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art: Reflections on Daguerreotypes at Harvard* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000).

Wexler has coined as *anekphrasis*, “an active and selective refusal to read photography—its graphic labor, its social spaces—even while, at the same time, one is busy textualizing all other kinds of cultural documents.”²² At worst, they are representative of a drive recently introduced into the terminology of black masculinity studies by Maurice O. Wallace, *spectragraphia*, “which names a chronic syndrome of inscribed misrecognition.”²³ Wallace expands, “[W]hat racialists see gazing at the black male body, is a ‘*virtual image*,’ at once seen and unseen, spectacular and spectral, to their socially conditioned eyes,” eyes that “see black men half-blindly as a blank/black page onto which the identity theme of American whiteness, with its distinguishing terrors and longings, imprints itself as onto a photographic negative.”²⁴

One might venture, further, that we are perhaps loathe to take these photographs on because we are afraid that if we “go there” we might find that our analyses of our own encounters with Agassiz’s “Africans” might just expose, like the young scientist’s frenzied letter to his mother, much more than a putative critical distance can contain. Alan Trachtenberg, in one of the earliest works to attempt a reading of Agassiz’s ‘slave daguerreotypes’—a reading that probably does in fact say a lot more about the author than he might like—attends to the discomfort that these photos provoke in even the most enlightened spectator:

The illustrations are trapped within a system of representation as firmly as the sitters are trapped within a system of chattel slavery. And they powerfully inform us of our own entrapment. We know how to view conventional portraits—but to gaze upon naked bodies, male and female, of persons dispossessed of themselves

²² Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 58.

²³ Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African and African American Men’s Literature and Culture*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 30, 32.

is another matter. The effect even now can be confusing, erotic response mingling with moral disgust and outrage.²⁵

Endeavoring earlier in the essay to rationalize (explain away) the erotic/‘bad’ feelings that the photos inspire—freeing one to focus more on feelings of good clean ‘moral outrage’ and humanistic sympathy—Trachtenberg compares these captured images of human chattel to, those monuments of free civilization and ideality of form, Roman portrait statues. Maintaining that the author “might well be speaking of these very pictures,” when he illuminates the effects on those confronted by the “‘great eyes’ in Roman heads,” Trachtenberg inserts the following quote from Sheldon Nodelman’s “How to Read a Roman Portrait”:

We encounter unqualified presence, no longer limited by empirical time, place or contingent experience. No faces had ever been so totally, unqualifiedly present as these that accept no distance from us, no social pretense or merely personal, psychological obstacle: none that had ever been so naked, stripped of everything but that one thing through which all else exists and is here declared the unqualified essence of humanity.²⁶

The comparison registered, Trachtenberg concludes, “this states precisely the effect of Zealy’s [Agassiz’s photographer] pictures and helps us understand the logic of our response.” He continues, “Without a public mask to mediate their encounter with the lens, the eyes of the enslaved Africans can only reveal the depths of their being—for, as naked slaves, they are permitted no social persona.” In a surprising, and dubiously so, move, Trachtenberg then marks these slaves’ state of absolute degradation and disenfranchisement—their positioning as the abject victims of a visual violation—as a prerequisite to the liberatory work that these images do:

²⁵ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The Zealy pictures reveal the social convention which ranks blacks as inferior beings, which violates civilized decorum, which strips men and women of the right to cover their genitalia. And yet the pictures shatter that mold by allowing the eyes of Delia and the others to speak directly to ours, in an appeal to shared humanity. This represents an extraordinary achievement. Zealy allowed the camera and the silver plate simply to show the event.²⁷

Let us begin with the more apparent fissures in logic that mark Trachtenberg's written response to these photos. One wonders, for example, at the logical efficacy of offering a reading of the pictures of these debased black slaves that holds that they can be understood if only we would approach them as we would the most idealized portrait statues of (white) antiquity; to then follow this up with the idea that viewing “conventional portraits” is something entirely distinct from looking at “persons dispossessed of themselves” (one type of viewing we “know how to [do]” one we don’t); and to emerge from this already fraught formulation with the conclusion that Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes, when properly viewed, reveal the exact same quality in their sitters that Nodelman’s Roman heads did: “the unqualified essence of humanity.” In the process of getting it all wrong, Trachtenberg is absolutely right, it seems we do know how to view only “conventional portraits”—to hold all bodies up to scrutiny within a representational system that continues to proffer an idealized image of whiteness as a gauge against which all bodily, aesthetic, and cultural forms are to be measured even when that decidedly anachronistic response clearly does not fit. (And even when that regard is further vexed by the decades of African-American scholarship that culminate in Maurice Wallace’s observation, “[T]he racialist gaze...congeals black male bodies into *statued* rigidities, arresting representation at the threshold of human being [emphasis

²⁷ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 56.

mine]”²⁸). Trachtenberg's critical framework reveals that we are, indeed, as trapped within a culturally-codified matrix of disciplined and disciplining vision as Zealy's sitters; this is the ‘real’ event that both viewing apparatuses, Zealy's camera and Trachtenberg's critique, record.

Slightly more pernicious, is the subtext that attaches itself to the particular event of Trachtenberg's comparison, a reading that reveals a genuine sense of self-satisfaction on the part of its originator, who seems to revel in the notion that here he has initiated an analysis that expresses truly enlightened liberal, universally humanist, sentiments. Yet, implicit in Trachtenberg's critique is the idea that it is a boon in the favor of any reader of these portraits that they are even *able* to see the whiteness in the black; hence, the Roman eyes that look out of Delia's ensuring her humanity *against all odds* and yet that *must* be superimposed there in order for the White who encounters her image to ignore the fact of her black body, a body that forever marks her as separate, distinct, degraded, and less human than they themselves. This latent dialectic is unwittingly made explicit amidst the final rallying cries of Trachtenberg's dissertation on these daguerreotypes:

Stripped of everything deemed intrinsic to selfhood and ‘character,’ if not humanness itself, they are simply themselves—what we see...black slaves constrained to perform the role of specimen before the camera...By stripping these figures of all but their bodies (and eyes), the pictures depict the base degradation of such relations. They also encompass the possibility of imaginative liberation, for if we reciprocate the look, we have acknowledged what the pictures most overtly deny: the universal humanness we share with them. Their gaze in our eyes, we can say, frees them. And frees the viewer as well.²⁹

²⁸ Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 7. Kobena Mercer's 1986 response to Robert Mapplethorpe's images of nude black men like Thomas (fig. 1.4) is also fitting here: “Like Medusa's look, each camera angle and photographic shot turns black flesh to stone, fixed and frozen in space and time: enslaved as an icon in the representational space of the white male imaginary, historically at the centre [sic.] of colonial fantasy.” Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge: 1994), 177. See fig. 1.9, an illustration taken from Nott and Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), for an example of racial science's use of the Roman head as a basis for racial comparison.

²⁹ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 59-60.

As Laura Wexler warns, in her *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, a text that attempts to root out the power relations at play in several early representations of Black Americans, “Carla Kaplan and Franny Nudelman have recently argued, [that] the assignation by a would-be ‘emancipatory reader’ of a language of resistance to individuals who are placed in situations of domination and oppression is a complex wish, and such assignation, when it is merely projection, may be a subtle form of ‘othering.’”³⁰ And here, Trachtenberg’s “imaginative liberation” of these slave specimens does seem to have further disenfranchised them—it is an emancipation that takes place only in, and for the pleasure of, his own imagination.³¹ Projections abound in the course of an argument in which Trachtenberg has not only inserted himself into these black bodies—seeing his own gaze reflected in the *whites* of/in their eyes—but has also managed, in many ways, to project himself directly into the person for whose eyes they were originally posed as evidence of ‘Otherness.’

³⁰ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 311 n.69. See Carla Kaplan, “Narrative Contracts and Emancipatory Readers” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6 (Spring 1993): 93-119; and Franny Nudelman, “Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering” *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 59 (Winter 1992): 939-964.

³¹ As Wallace says, citing Ellison, “Theirs is a vision that sees only ‘a simulacrum of sensible visibility,’ the effect of a ‘peculiar disposition of the eyes’ as Ralph Ellison put it, that compels racialists ‘to see...only themselves, or figments of their imagination.’” Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 30. John Tagg would, I think, further critique Trachtenberg’s insistence on having attained some transcendent communion with these slaves that is founded upon an imagined ability to glean a humanity that exceeds these slaves degraded representations. Tagg insists, in his discussion of Roland Barthes’ “nostalgic” view of photographs that somehow lends them the power “to make present what is absent or, more exactly to make it retrospectively real—a poignant ‘reality one can no longer touch,’” that:

What exceeds representation...cannot, by definition, be articulated. More than this, it is an effect of the production of the subject in and through representation to give rise to the phantasy of this something more. We have no choice but to work with the reality we have: the reality of the paper print, the material item.

John Tagg, *Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 4. Tagg is, of course, referring to Barthes’ theorization of his engagements with photos of his recently deceased mother, as discussed in Barthes’ *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

Trachtenberg's *spectragraphic* misreading of these slave figures, the vexed recognition and disavowal of the erotic sensations that his confrontation with these bodies engender, the sense of empirical and moral privilege that his arguments both express and reinforce, in many ways mirror Agassiz's own responses to the domestics who inspired his later daguerreotyped study. Despite appeals to a putative 'confraternity of men' and a sympathetic recognition of these blacks' "degraded and degenerate state," Trachtenberg, who, like Agassiz before him, cannot help but see these alterior beings as so very different from himself, initiates a study at the heart of which is a comparison of their forms to those of Whites. Similar also to Agassiz, whose physiognomic studies were founded upon the central belief that the internal character traits of his subjects could be gleaned through the study of their external physical characteristics ("the material form is the cover of the spirit"³²), central to Trachtenberg's analysis is a resolute faith in his own powers to *really* see into the deepest recesses of these black slaves' souls through his study of the photographic representations of their bodies. Even if what Trachtenberg eventually spies there is humanity, the erotics of mastery being played out here is undeniable. Investing himself with an all-seeing, all-knowing critical gaze, able to completely penetrate the material before him (people possessed in picture form: see my first epigraph) and to return to share the innermost secrets of these men and women, the fruits of his conquest, with his audience (who are not, however, allowed the same erotic access to these bodies that he is—he does not reprint the full frontal shots of the men), Trachtenberg becomes the illustration that proves his own thesis:

The pictures imply more than the cruelties of slavery. They make starkly visible what is usually hidden within the cultural ideals of American selfhood and identity—the weighted distinctions of race, gender, and social class which

³² Agassiz qtd. in Wallis, "Black Bodies," 49.

contradict the republican credo of equality, and the uncontrollable erotic energies which lie as a further threat to the convention of this credo.³³

Let me say here that I mean no disrespect to Trachtenberg in offering this view of the possible negative side that an opening up of his ‘take’ on these photos might expose—obviously the man is a brilliant scholar whose work in the field of photographic studies is highly esteemed.³⁴ What I *am* saying is that he has unwittingly fallen prey to the prodigious work that Agassiz’s/Zealy’s photos do to ensure that such moments of misrecognition will in fact occur—their “graphic labor” is to vouchsafe that the story that they reveal to the eye of their beholder will be misread, that the ‘evidence’ that they offer will be accepted “half-blindly.”

To develop my point a bit more clearly, let me offer an excerpt from another recent consideration of these pictures that Laura Wexler refers to in her above-cited text:

For Mullen, Agassiz’s “coercive recording of [Delia’s] barebreasted image leaves her silent, underscoring Delia’s materiality as ‘property,’ and ‘exhibit,’ as ‘scientific evidence,’ a unit of data within a discourse controlled by white men, bent on denying her subjectivity.... [But] the lowered lids shade what is otherwise a direct outward gaze without the least suggestion of embarrassment. Stripped naked, her objectified body functions as a veil for her soul, her

³³ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 60.

³⁴ In fact, Trachtenberg himself would be the first to acknowledge the fact that images carry cultural and (ph)antastical baggage, as does the viewer of any photographic representation. He would, therefore, also be the first to endorse detailed examinations of all photographic readings. As he indicates, in his prologue to *Reading American Photographs*:

Photographic images do not become history automatically. Destined by the medium’s technology to represent a specific moment in the past, they are also free to serve any representational function desired by a photographer and his audience. It is by virtue of motives, desires, and choices beyond the medium itself that images become tokens of a relation between then and now, between the “having been” and “is.” Images become history, more than traces of a specific event in the past, when they are used to interpret the present in the light of the past, when they are presented and received as explanatory accounts of collective reality. They become history when they are conceived as symbolic events in a shared culture. Between an exposed photographic plate and the contingent acts whereby people read that inscription and find sense in it lies the work of culture....” Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 6.

subjectivity retreating before the gaze of scientific objectivity materialized by the camera.”³⁵

Although ending with the idea that, ostensibly, Delia’s eyes deny the gazer access to her soul, this is Trachtenberg’s argument all over again. We begin with a catalog of the many traits that would foreclose the possibility of a recognition of Delia’s humanity—not the least of which would be her failure to be embarrassed by her nakedness, which, as Trachtenberg owns, goes against the dictates of “*civilized decorum*”—only to conclude with the idea, once again, that if we can get past the fact of her “objectified [black] body” and just look into her eyes, we will find this humanity/*her soul* glistening in their limpid depths...this time in spite of Delia’s attempts to thwart the penetration that this retrieval necessitates.

I’d like to suggest that the critical focus on the (wide-open or half-lidded) eyes of these black slaves allows the theorist who gazes upon these figures to make a certain claim to blindness. Recalling Agassiz’s insistence that he could not take his eyes off the singular faces of the Blacks that inspired in him such a panicked monocular vision (he fixes on “their *face*,” the men congealing into one mass of seething Black flesh), and that this assertion was clearly belied by his extended survey of the minutest details of their black bodies, we must ask ourselves whether these contemporary critical exchanges might be similarly read. If Agassiz’s avowed focus on the face was meant to disavow the intensity of his erotic investment in what lay down below, might these critical exchanges be understood in the same way?

³⁵ Wexler quotes from Harryette Mullen’s dissertation, “Gender and the Subjugated Body: Readings of Race, Subjectivity, and Difference in the Construction of Slave Narratives.” PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990: 227. Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 88.

While Trachtenberg makes several references to erotic responses that the slave daguerreotypes illicit from their viewers, he consistently endeavors to contain these erotics—which he himself posits as “uncontainable”—within a discourse of moral preeminence that cannot, itself, mask its dark underbelly of desire:

It is difficult to view these images now without a sense of outrage at the indecency of the poses and the system of bondage they reflect—the absolute power of masters over the bodies of their slaves. The *response is heightened* by the extraordinary fact of male nudity, of genitals presented directly to the daguerrean eye in what must have been a genteel Columbia, S.C., daguerrean gallery or “parlor,” of women asked to disrobe not for prurient purposes but for “science.” The inevitably prurient effect makes a further comment on the master-slave relation...these images may well have *cast more fuel upon abolitionist passions* [emphasis mine].³⁶

As will be made evident in a later portion of my dissertation, it is precisely the repulsive allure of Uncle Tom’s black penis that underlies much of famed abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe’s highly charged sentiment; and the same may be said here. The specter of the Black male’s *extraordinary* member overshadows a text and an author/ emancipatory reader whose erotic investments/ passions are only heightened/fueled by the fact that this black body has been cast in an archetypal scene of sadomasochistic decadence that is posited in marked contrast to the supposedly genteel response of this author to such “prurient” displays of exploitation. Surely no one viewing these statements “now” could read that overdetermined “bondage” reference innocently, or continue to take the amount of lip service paid by the rest of the text to the ultimate desire of liberating these naked slaves from a representational system that degrades them to the purely bodily at *face-value*.

This said, what needs to be questioned as well is the guilelessness of the focus that is placed upon Delia in both of the above essays. It is obvious that a great deal of

³⁶ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 54.

erotic energy attaches itself to her figure; one sees that even Mullen's woman-centered, feministic attentions to barebreasted Delia actually serve to enact a sort of mental rape of her denuded eyes that mirrors the symbolic rape threatened by the white men with their cameras (a sex and violence scenario set up in much the same way as Trachtenberg's). It is also no surprise that Wexler would make sure, later, to point out to her readers that the bared breasts that Mullen speaks of are "teenaged,"³⁷ because these perky young mounds stand in sharp contrast to those of the only other woman pictured in the Agassiz photos, Drana, whose pendent mammon show the obvious wear and tear of nursing (one can, of course, construct a [ph]antastic history of repeated childbirth and frenziedly excessive sexual activity around these breasts if that would help to 'heighten one's response' to her image, but that is a matter of individual preference). Delia would, of course, be more to the taste of most (white) viewers of these photos because she is closest in conformation to Anglo standards of beauty, both physical *and* spiritual—her youth, in spite of her visually debauched body, implying a kind of virgin purity.³⁸ Thus, it is, again, not surprising that it is in Delia that Trachtenberg most readily recognizes a sense of humanity that might tally with his own conceptions of ideality—it is her he names, before all "the others," as

³⁷ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 88.

³⁸ Londa Schiebinger, in her *Nature's Body*, includes a fascinating discussion of shifting views towards the female breast, from antiquity through the twentieth century, and the ways in which these views were determined by the distinct social and political needs of various time periods. See Chapter 2, "Why Mammals are Called Mammals." In the course of this conversation, and here one cannot help but reflect upon the daguerreotypes of both Drana and Delia, Schiebinger observes:

Colonial relations also affected perceptions of the breast. Late nineteenth-century anthropologists classified breasts by beauty in the same way they measured skulls for intelligence. The ideal breast—for all races—was...young and virginal. Europeans preferred the compact "hemispherical" ["moderately-sized, nicely oval breasts with small but protuberant nipples"] type, found, it was said, only amongst whites and Asians. The much-maligned breasts of the African (especially Hottentot) women were dismissed as flabby and pendulous, similar to the udders of goats....When women of African descent were portrayed sympathetically, they were typically shown having firm, spherical breasts...." Schiebinger, *Nature's Body*, 64, 62.

Need I ask again why it is in Delia that these authors most readily locate 'universal humanity'?

the one upon whom he would most like to rest his reciprocating gaze...and to be the first to do so.

While both male and female theorist can obviously be seen to be vying for position amongst those already in line (cameras and calipers in hand) to probe Delia's depths, I am much more interested in what remains essentially unfathomable within the logics of these texts. I'd like to (re)direct our attention towards those who remain *virtually* unspoken for, "at once seen and unseen, spectacular and spectral" to the "socially-conditioned" eyes of these critics. The present absence of the bodies of Jem and Alfred, the two men who appear in the series' full-form shots, haunt these readings and the blank spaces that the lack of regard given to them opens up in the pages of these arguments. Their "genitals presented directly to the daguerrean eye," these un-named men³⁹ have nevertheless been pushed into the blind spots of these photographic histories.

That Wallace's conception of racialist *spectragraphia* is founded upon a notion of willful, "self-serving blindnesses," and the 'virtual images' that supplant 'reality' as viewed via the racialist gaze⁴⁰—blindnesses and substitutions that guarantee the anonymity and preclude the Subjectivity of black men—becomes especially pertinent here as it both encompasses and enhances the discussion of these blind spots that I'd like to unveil. While Wallace maintains that he is not necessarily speaking of actual "ophthalmological defects,"⁴¹ I'd like to restore a sense of biological dysfunction to his

³⁹ Brian Wallis was the first to reprint all fifteen daguerreotypes, including the full frontal images of Jem and Alfred. In keeping with this omission, these men's names remain extant from most critics' references to these enslaved daguerrean subjects. (In her original article, Reichlin does, however, name Jem.) In the two essays being discussed, Jem and Alfred receive no mention whatsoever. Trachtenberg limits his acknowledgments to "Jack the Driver and Renty,...Delia and Drana" (Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 56) and in Wexler's discussion these two fully denuded men are doubly ignored; Wexler refers only to Delia, Renty, and Jack, and, as has been made evident, Mullen mentions only Delia.

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

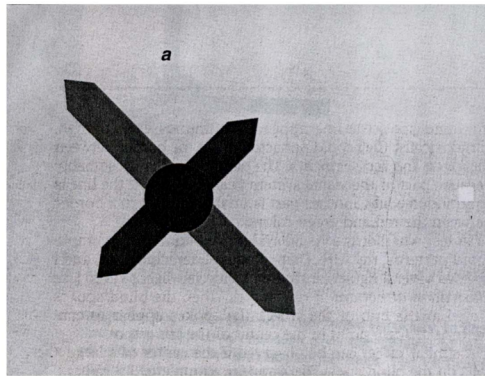
notion, because the actual physical presence of a blind spot on the human retina, an area “insensitive to light”⁴² holds such theoretical promise that it cannot be ignored. The material “blind spot” on the eye, which occurs at the site on the retina in which the optic nerve attaches itself to the eyeball, results in a limitation in the visual field, a dark cavity in our line of sight usually existing at a point just at the periphery of our vision. The brain, however, compensates for that which it does not see by filling in this blank space based on both visual (perceptual) cues it receives from the surrounding environment and on logical (conceptual) inferences as to what might conceivably be *expected* to exist within this present visual landscape given certain trained ways of viewing the world, a process called “surface interpolation”⁴³ (fig. 1.5). The blind spot can be understood, thus, as a site of what is at once a present absence; and sight itself seen as inextricably entrenched in processes of fetishistic disavowal and substitution; our brains fully aware that there is something which we cannot see, that our perceptual powers are *lacking*, we tell ourselves nonetheless that we have received the *whole* picture, exchanging (often faulty) versions of a reality that we expected/wished to see for the reality with which we are actually presented.

⁴² *The Random House Dictionary* succinctly defines the blind spot as “a small area on the retina where the optic nerve leaves the eye and which is insensitive to light.” *Webster's College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1991) s.v. “blind spot.” A more detailed, and much more elementary, explanation, at a Bryn Mawr-affiliated forum fills in the holes left by this definition (and my own):

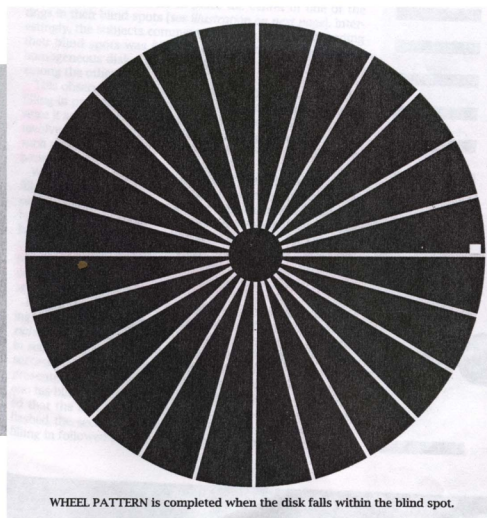
The front of the eye acts like a camera lens, differently directing light rays from each point in space so as to create on the back of the eye a picture of the world. The picture falls on a sheet of photoreceptors..., specialized brain cells (neurons) which are excited by light. The sheet of photoreceptors is much like a sheet of film at the back of a camera. But it has a hole in it. At one location, called the optic nerve head, processes of neurons collect together and pass as a bundle through the photoreceptor sheet to form the optic nerve..., which carries information from the eye to the rest of the brain. At this location, there are no photoreceptors, and hence the brain gets no information from the eye about this particular part of the picture of the world. Because of this, you should have a "blind spot" (actually two, one for each eye), a place...in the middle of what you can see where you can't see.

Serendip forum, Bryn Mawr University, <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/bb/blindspot1.html>. (Accessed November 29, 2009)

⁴³ See Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, “Blind Spots,” *Scientific American* 266 (1992): 86–91.



FILLING-IN PROCESS associated with the blind spot is a sophisticated visual function. If the blind spot falls on the center of a cross (a), only the longer segment appears complete.



WHEEL PATTERN is completed when the disk falls within the blind spot.

***To Test for Blind Spot:**
 Shut your right eye, and hold page about a foot away from your face. Focus your gaze on the square and at the same time slowly move the illustration toward your eye. At some point, the disk will disappear and will be filled in.

Figure 1.5

I'd like to suggest, therefore, that the blind spots that exist in the textual material cited above, the holes/blank spots in these arguments to which the black male subjects of the Agassiz daguerreotypes have been relegated, coincide with the black man's (ph)antastical and fetishistic positioning within the darkest regions of the psychic landscape/the mind's eye. Directly confronted with the "extraordinary fact of [black] male nudity" and the unwanted erotic residue that adhere to these images, the extreme monocularity of these critics' empirical scrutinies—the rigid focus on the eyes of these slaves, the singular direction of their arguments on the figure of Delia—can be read as processes of avoidance and substitution in which that which one has been trained to focus upon, what one is expected to see, a privileged and complete (if not superhuman[istic]) sight, has been posited so as to deny the darkness that shrouds that which one really sees.⁴⁴ In this mimetical reenactment of the cognitive processes that shield us from knowledge of our visual blind spots, these critics' theoretical blind spots nevertheless reveal the fact that the black penises of Jem and Alfred, virtually absent within their discussions of the Agassiz photos, continue to exist as ever-present, oft-fetishized objects of desire (perpetual *dark spots*) lurking always on the edge of perception (and discourse), and just at the back of their minds.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ If, according to Wallace, racist *spectragraphia* leads the half-blinded masters of this gaze "to see...only themselves, or figments of their imagination," one might, here attach a similar reading to these critics' mis(sed)readings of the Agassiz photos. See Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 30. The blind spot existing on the periphery of vision, just in the corner of one's eye, as it were, if one were to attempt to turn one's attention/head towards this forever fleeting site of veiled vision, all that would be revealed would be the contours/borders of one's own body. We see a similar dynamic in these Delia-focused readings. Jem and Alfred's black male bodies relegated to the blind spots of these critical visions, in the moments in which attention should be directed towards them we find, in their stead, the image of an Anglicized (contoured according to White ideals and hence humanly accessible) Delia.

⁴⁵ Although I arrive at this reading from a slightly different direction, my argument is, again, quite similar to that forwarded by Maurice Wallace. Wallace, using Freudian analytics as a framework, maintains that the hypervisibility of the black male body is both the sign of this body's disenfranchisement—in keeping with Lauren Berlant, Wallace cites the ability of the white male to accede to invisibility as part and parcel of the white male's omnipotent authority—and a function of white society's *overinvestment* in this

It is in this light that one should (re)read an earlier statement quoted from Trachtenberg and referring to “the social convention which ranks blacks as inferior beings, which violates civilized decorum, which strips men and women of the right to cover their genitalia.”⁴⁶ Drana and Delia’s genitalia are never pictured in the Agassiz photos, his study of these women’s bodies is limited to the chest and head. Thus, Trachtenberg is not really addressing the bodies of *both* men and women here, in actuality he can *only* be referring to Agassiz’s male subjects. Yet, women’s bodies are inserted/superimposed where none exist. So, in the midst of a conversation which turns around such key concepts as degradation, exploitation, violation and, the opposite of civilization, savagery, we have yet another instance in which the direction of the text’s critical focus on the female is meant to direct attention away from the actual focus of this study: the black man’s sex. Trained to view women as the quintessential sexualized and objectified Other—how else to interpret the notion that women asked to disrobe for prurient purposes would somehow be less shocking than women asked to strip naked for science—Trachtenberg simply cannot believe what his eyes clearly must be seeing, nor can he patently avow homoerotic longings as strictly tabooed as women’s sexual exploitation is socially tolerated; he thus creates an alternate/virtual image more in keeping with American identity themes and imprints it overtop of Zealy’s original

psychically omnipresent body. Referring to the Freudian notion of the “memory-trace,” the image permanently left on the psyche as an after-effect of perceptual stimuli that the conscious mind may or may not have acknowledged (and might, hence, be considered “not so much...*after* memory but *after perception* in preconscious deposits before memory”), Wallace holds that “[I]t is by an abiding bankruptcy of vision that black male bodies in public spheres go phantasmatically misrecognized....It is the insufferability of the inescapable afterimage of the absent black antecedent that seem to worry the effort, at least in the white imagination, to ‘cover [one’s] tracks and traces.’ For the traces of black male visibility [his ‘historical possession of the (white) American mind’] are retained in the white unconscious ‘permanently’; they defy cover.” Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 33-34.

⁴⁶ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 56.

proof.⁴⁷ Yet and still, the black man's penis is the primary object of Agassiz's 'scientific' observations as much as it remains the main subject of Trachtenberg's above sentence, despite attempts on the part of both to make it appear otherwise. Homoerotic longing, *and* transgender role-playing, might be read, as well, in Mullen's interactions with Delia's image. Noting that the subjectivity which Mullen attempts to penetrate is in the process of "retreat" from the prying eyes of the white men who survey the virginal young slave woman, Mullen's own endeavors at forced entry would, necessarily, have to occur from behind. Considered from this angle, and repeating my earlier assertion that, in her present theoretical posturing she occupies the same position as Delia's male interlocutors, might Mullen's sodomitically humanistic approach be interpolated on a level that goes beyond its surface, revealing, perhaps, a desire (in this instance identificatory with white male representatives of patriarchal power) to subject Jem and Alfred to similar such encounters? Is this yet another moment of substitution/superimposition?

In Brian Wallis' discussion of the Agassiz shots, by far the best essay out there at present, he ventures, "While there is no absolute connection between photographs of the nude body and pornography, the vaguely eroticized nature of the slave daguerreotypes derives from the unwavering voyeuristic manner with which they indiscriminately survey the bodies of Africans, irrespective of the subjects' lives."⁴⁸ As a corrective appendage to this statement, it should be understood that there is, in fact, a distinct connection between photographic nudes and pornographic 'nudies.' While a great deal more could obviously

⁴⁷ The male nude, from its earliest artistic inception, has always been a vexed a form. As freelance art/photographic historian Emmanuel Cooper argues, in his *Fully Exposed*, "While lip service was generally paid to the idea that the naked female body could be accepted as a signifier of 'pure' thought and ideals, no such formal qualities were extended to the male nude, which was often linked to homosexual desire." Emmanuel Cooper, *Fully Exposed: The Male Nude in Photography* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9. The substitutions made by these critics, then, can be seen as a form of lip-service meant to deny the ways in which these images of naked black men 'work on'/libidinally service viewers of *both* sexes.

⁴⁸ Wallis, "Black Bodies," 54.

be said on the subject, let me cursorily point out for now that both the Academic nude (images originally produced to aid artists in their anatomical studies and offering, for a one time fee, frozen poses that no warm-bodied model could ever sustain or perfectly duplicate on successive visits) and photographed depictions of pornographic nudity arose pretty much simultaneously, and followed immediately upon the heels of the 1839 introduction of Louis Daguerre's now famous photographic device. (The subsequent invention of the calotype, as well the collodion printing process—early versions of reproducible photography that corrected for the 'flaw' of the single and unique image produced by the daguerreotype—dramatically reduced the costs associated with producing and procuring captured images and can also be credited, in part, with the emergence into widespread circulation of such pictures, licit and illicit, in the 1850s.⁴⁹)

⁴⁹ For further discussion of the calotype and its place within photographic and art history, see Abigail Solomon-Godeau's "Calotypomania: The Gourmet Guide to Nineteenth-Century Photography," in her *Photography at the Docks: Essays in Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1991), 4-27. Briefly stated, the calotype, first introduced in England by Henry Fox Talbot in 1841, but supposedly conceived even earlier than the 1839 unveiling of Louis Daguerre's more famous photographic device*, did not emerge into widespread use until the 1850s. Unlike the daguerreotype, which produced a unique image on an iodized silver plate, the calotype made use of a "negative-positive photographic process using a paper negative and either printed out or developed out on various papers" (Solomon-Godeau, *Photography on the Docks*, 11). Because these paper negatives could be reprinted later, and their cheaply reproduced images pasted directly into books, albums, etc. they offered a popular alternative to the daguerreotype which, not only non-reproducible but smaller in format as well (the metal plates needed for the daguerreotyped image were much more costly than the calotype's paper negatives), did not lend itself to public circulation. The 1851 advent of the collodion printing process, invented by Frederick Scott Archer and also known as the "wet-plate process," is said to have revolutionized early photographic practices. This process, which, with an exposure time of one second or less was a dramatic improvement on the daguerreotype and the calotype (the calotype, in particular, requiring exposures of between 30 seconds and *twenty minutes*), produced high quality, high-definition reproducible images through the use of a glass plate negative, and was the closest of all these early forms to the photographic processes that we employ today. The only drawback of the collodion process was that the plate, which had to be kept wet during both exposure and processing, required immediate development; hence, its practitioners had to have darkroom access as well as a water source ready at hand—these requirements accounted for the emergence of traveling darkrooms (often horse-drawn caravans) and for the fact that one often spies lakes, streams, etc. in the background of many of the early collodion location shots. * Talbot's photographic process, the history of which is actually quite hard to trace given the various and often differing accounts of the calotype's origins, is said to have been invented anywhere between 1833 and 1839—1841 being the date on which it received its patent in England. At the same time, the history of the daguerreotype is slightly complicated as well due to the fact that, seeing its most primitive development in 1827, when Joseph Nicéphore Niépce produced the first pewter-plate photographic image, the process was

These early images of the Academic nude and the pornographic nude should, further, be seen as effecting a fairly fluid cross-semination; the former often barely succeeding in masking the erotics that circulated both within and around its bared bodies posed in every possible position, the latter not only co-opting many of these “high art” icons for under the counter sale, but also utilizing the nominal license given to their circulation (an official license constantly vexed and frequently revoked) as fronts for businesses whose main merchandize were certainly of the ‘lowest’ sort.⁵⁰

For queer historian Tom Waugh, the primary difference between the two genres, the Academic versus the pornographic, particularly when approaching the subject of the male nude, lies in one’s ability to construct better alibis. From its earliest moments of production;

[T]he Academic nude...documented the body that was being increasingly spoken; it popularized and legitimized the representation of the nude male body and thereby the (homo)sexualized body. It legitimized and conventionalized also the idea and the practice both of photographing the sexual body and of sexualizing photography. The apparatus it set up, at the same time, was one of alibis, a disingenuous system of furtive sexual commodification and subtextual gratification that is all too familiar to gay constituencies of this century, and even to heterosexual erotic consumers (though in a more peripheral way).⁵¹

Waugh, as cultural critic, thus sees his job to be that of “peeling layers of alibis off of images that are primarily erotic but that seemed or pretended to be something else.”⁵²

The critics that I have been discussing (with the notable exception of Wallis who does indeed make gestures towards rooting out that which should be labeled “porno” in the

not perfected until six years after his death in 1833. As such, Daguerre, who had formed a partnership with Niépce before his passing and was responsible for the refinement of Niépce’s early techniques, has long been credited as the inventor of the process to which he eventually gave his name. Among contemporary photo-historians, however, Niépce is acknowledged along with Daguerre and Talbot as one of the founding fathers of modern photographic technology.

⁵⁰ For more on the circulation of the Academic nude within pornographic venues, see Chapter Two, “Art and Arousal” in Waugh’s *Hard to Imagine*, 59-175.

⁵¹ Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 70-71.

⁵² *Ibid*, 366.

graphic representations of these stripped African subjects), however, have, as a result of what I would identify as their own processes of dissimulation, accepted Agassiz's alibis—the most baldly fallacious of which would be the suggestion that these photos are to be considered documents of *scientific* study. Surely there is a reason why these daguerreotypes ended up secreted in an attic rather than in the annals of science.

The fact of these images' ornamental gilded frames, velvet-lined keepsake casing, and parlor setting may be explained away as the inevitable detritus of the professional daguerreotypist's studio in which these photos were conceived (fig. 1.6). One might forgive these fetishistic and commodified trappings as the unintentional excesses of a fledgling practice of medico-scientific photographic documentation that had not yet produced its own technicians, nor yet established specialized guidelines for presenting the subject of the scientific gaze. Practitioners forced to rely upon the services of the still rather limited crop of individuals instructed in both the aesthetic and technical mechanics (lighting, exposure times, development processes) of this emergent art/archival form,⁵³ that the earliest photographic documentations of the human body as site of scientific/medical study should follow the classical/artistic conventions of the portrait study in which these empiricists were trained is not astonishing (fig. 1.7). One might also ascribe the sense of voyeuristic delight that overhangs images somehow “too familiar, too

⁵³ John Tagg points out that the commonly held notion that the invention and introduction into fairly widespread use of early photographic devices was responsible for a great “democratization of vision” is in many ways a falsely utopian view of a fledgling representational mode that evidenced as much of the power of the state as it did the vision of ‘the people.’ Maintaining that even amateur photography was utterly inflected by established social hierarchies and mores due to the fact that training in the basic techniques of photographic exposure and development (and these early image-making apparatuses did require fairly complex chemical processing) were virtually unavailable to the common man, Tagg holds, “If amateur photography operate[d] in an exceedingly limited institutional space and signifying range...[it was because it was hemmed in on all sides by divisive barriers to technical and cultural knowledge, ownership, and control.” Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 17-18. In looking at the Agassiz daguerreotypes, therefore, one must consider not only what these images were *trying* to reveal but also what these images would have been *allowed* to reveal given the social and political landscape of the time period during which they were produced. I will discuss this more fully later in this chapter.



Figure 1.6



Figure 1.7

personal for our eyes,” and that stands in direct contrast to the clinically detached perspective of later medico-scientific records of “anonymous patients shot against plain backgrounds, eyes blacked out or faces out of frame entirely,”⁵⁴ to the caprices of an untrained eye: a photographer not yet versed in the performance of the various subterfuges meant to mask subjective investments in objectified bodies and unable to deny the illicit pleasure accompanying up close and personal access to the naked bodies of subjected strangers. These potential vindications duly noted, in the case of the Agassiz

⁵⁴ As Banta notes, images like these produced (probably in the early 1850s) for Dr. Henry Jacob Bigelow often allow the viewer access to the body *as well as* the personal life of the ‘pathological’ subject: “Early medical photographs often revealed more than the diseased parts of the body; [the] view of the young woman with the nose construction fully discloses her identity, attire, and social class.” Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, 63. An interesting aside, while these illustrative photos were included in this text with little premeditation, I have just recently discovered that Bigelow’s photos can be placed alongside the Agassiz images based upon more than simple historical contingency and objective deficiency. In fact, much less than six degrees separate the physician and the scientist. In her discussion of Bigelow, Banta indicates that one of the doctor’s primary claims to fame (aside from the fact that his uncommon nose for fashion and generally dashing accoutrements made him a standout amongst his colleagues, much like Agassiz who could also thank a Paris education for his rare sense of style) was that he had been present at the very first surgical procedure to use anesthesia to alleviate pain. As she recounts in the chapter preceding her dissertation on Bigelow, it was on October 16, 1846 (coincidentally about two weeks after Agassiz first arrived in this country), at Massachusetts General Hospital, that Dr. William T. G. Morton removed a tumor from the neck of a man anesthetized using sulphuric ether. Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art*, 52-59. This said, it is also a point of fact that several months before, on February 18th of the same year, Josiah Nott (later to publish *Types of Mankind*, the definitive text of nineteenth-century racial science and a tome to which Agassiz would make a key contribution) took a step away from his usual discourses concerning amalgamation and the dangers of hybridity, to deliver a lecture in which he prefigured this operation’s use of ether in suggesting his *own* vision for the future of surgical anesthesia: the use of mesmerism as analgesic. And where had Nott picked up this interest in hypnotism? Through the introductions of his close associate Robert W. Gibbes...the same man who was later to act as intermediary for Agassiz in relation to this scientist’s interest in procuring photos of naked Africans. Nott’s calls for the professionalization of mesmerism marking him as a bit of quack amongst many of his scientific cohorts (a number of whom had already denounced his theories of hybridity), his close colleague Charles Gliddon (and co-author of *Types*), also an associate of Gibbes, was to lose a great deal of his credibility through a similar foray into the sensational just four years later. Having generated a pronounced fervor in Boston surrounding the much-anticipated public unveiling of one of two mummies, imported directly from Egypt and which Gliddon claimed contained the remains of ancient priestesses, Gliddon unwrapped, before an audience of distinguished scientists and medical practitioners, the decayed remains of a *man*. Present at the moment of this public humiliation were Dr. Jacob Bigelow, instructor at Harvard’s Medical College and *father of Henry Jacob Bigelow*, and, fellow Harvard Professor, *Louis Agassiz*; as the reports ran “Dr. Bigelow blushed, and Professor Agassiz put his hands in his pockets.” Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 146; See 217 n.11 for Nott, Gibbes, and hypnotism. Perhaps Agassiz’s spontaneous gesture of utter abandon had something to do with his own recollection of the black bodies that had been sensationally unveiled at his behest only four months before Nott’s debacle (Gibbes had procured Zealy’s photographic services in March of 1850, the preceding event occurring in June of the same year). That a series of coincidences link four of the central figures of this chapter to Bigelow’s medical photos, included pretty much *par hasard*, is, I think, a symbiosis worthy of note.

study, the daguerreotypes serve as crime scene photos of sorts, containing trace evidence that refutes all such alibis and levels culpability upon not Zealy, as simple accomplice, but rather upon the mastermind at work behind the scenes.

The Agassiz photos were commissioned works and although the scientist himself was not present at their execution, trusting instead in the expertise of the reputed Columbia, South Carolina photographer enlisted into service through the same middleman who had first insured Agassiz access to some of the finest slave specimens the Southern town had to offer (plantation owner, physician, and friend of Samuel Morton, Dr. Robert W. Gibbes⁵⁵), it is evident that he left rather explicit instructions as to the manner in which he wanted his subjects to be ‘taken.’ The division between the two series of images was obviously instituted at the scientist’s behest; the first set of full-body poses casting a *physiognomic* gaze upon the body’s “shape, proportions, and posture,” the second series of upper body shots following the tenets of the then wildly popular science of *phrenology* and “emphasizing the character and shape of the head.”⁵⁶ Agassiz would also have had to specify that the subjects were to be photographed nude, and have requested the enregistration of multiple shots taken from various angles (poses

⁵⁵ Gibbes, who hosted Agassiz during his stay in South Carolina, was not only one of Columbia’s leading citizens (a former town mayor the physician was well connected with the area’s leading families and wealthiest citizens—including the plantation owners to whose property Gibbes procured Agassiz access), he was also an amateur fossil collector, whose interest in natural science and personal investments in the ‘race question’ had led him to form friendships with not only Samuel Morton and Josiah Nott, but to have played host as well to George Gliddon only two years before Agassiz’s sojourn. Eulogizing Morton in 1851, Gibbes published a brief essay in the *Charleston Medical Journal* calling the scientist a “benefactor” of the South, who was to be lauded for “aiding most materially in giving to the negro his true position as an inferior race.” Adding to this, Gibbes effuses, “[T]he time is not far distant, when it will be universally admitted that neither can ‘the leopard change his spots, nor the Ethiopian his skin.’” Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 144. While Gibbes’ role in the production of Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes is mentioned in most articles on the subject, Stanton’s *The Leopard’s Spots* and Banta’s “Framed: The Slave Portraits of Louis Agassiz,” in *A Curious & Ingenious Art*, 42-51, provide the most background information on this Southern ‘gentleman.’

⁵⁶ Brian Wallis makes the distinction between these two series in his article, “Black Bodies,” 45-46.

reminiscent, to a modern audience, of the police mug shot, a view on criminal identification first instituted in 1893 by French police clerk and aspiring taxonomist Alphonse Bertillon⁵⁷); both requests ostensibly meant to provide the penetrating eye of the empiricist with the most detailed evidence of these bodies' anatomical peculiarities. While these specifications might not seem in and of themselves out of the ordinary range of practices of scientific discernment—the rather untoward fact of these slaves' heretofore unprecedented nudity raising the only red flags for contemporary critics of these photos (who while troubled by this overexposure seem to tacitly accept its epistemological imperatives)—it takes but little detective work to construct a string of inquiries that might illuminate the truth behind a “cover story” that “obscure[s] its embedded contradictions by drawing attention to the evocative logic of its emplotment.”⁵⁸

The first question that should be asked of Agassiz's scientific master-narrative seems to me quite obvious, but has been generally ignored by critics reading/acknowledging only the “evocative logic” of these photos. If these images are meant to stand as visual testimonies to the postulate that Blacks and Whites are the offspring of

⁵⁷ For more on Alphonse Bertillon's contributions to nineteenth-century taxonomies meant to distinguish the citizen from the criminal, the normal from the deviant/pathological, see Allan Sekula's “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-61; and Shawn Michelle Smith's “The Criminal Body and the Portrait of a Type,” in *American Archives*, 68-92.

⁵⁸ Laura Briggs, “The Race of Hysteria: ‘Overcivilization’ and the ‘Savage’ Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology,” *American Quarterly* 52 (June 2000): 266. Briggs employs Wahneema Lubiano's idea of the “cover story” to think about the ways in which 19th century medical discourses shaped women's bodies (both white and of color) and sexuality, alternately inscribed as either excessive or lacking, and the ways in which these discourses were intricately linked to a need to police and maintain the bounds of whiteness. Quoting Lubiano directly, her text continues, “Cover stories cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that redirects our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen.” Briggs, “Race of Hysteria,” 263. For more on the “cover story” see Wahneema Lubiano's “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 323-363. Lubiano's “cover story,” like Wallace's “spectragraphia,” speaks directly to the substitutive dynamics that adhere to the blind spot as I have envisioned it.

separate creations, what are the ‘proofs’ that they evoke? What exactly are we supposed to be looking at here: physiognomically and phrenologically what is it that we are intended to see? Were the differences between Black and White so obvious to a nineteenth-century audience that attention need not be directed towards the bodily sites on which they were supposed to be so distinctly written, that no scientific notations need be appended to these photographic proofs? Is this difference as glaringly present as the above-pictured man’s goiter?

While the series of head shots might conceivably be conceded to speak for themselves, could the same be said of the full-body sequences? Trachtenberg and Wallis surmise that we are meant to note racial differences in “size of limbs and configurations of muscles,”⁵⁹ yet with no verification of this fact offered by Agassiz (available correspondence provides no such *précis*) we cannot assume this to be the case; nor do any clear deviations present themselves, at least to my (undiscerning?) eyes, between the limbs, muscles, and rather unremarkable bodies of Jem and Alfred and their potentially comparative white counterparts (who, if subjected to endless hours of plantation toil would presumably exhibit a sinewy musculature comparable to that of these two men). And *what of* the counterparts to whom these men are to stand in contrast? Lacking a similar series of images that center on white male bodies (a series which Agassiz would have been hard-pressed to procure on this side of the Atlantic⁶⁰) the very notion that these

⁵⁹ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 53.

⁶⁰ As late as 1886, artist and photographer Thomas Eakins was dismissed from his post at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for having presented his class with a nude male model sans loincloth as a figure study. That this sort of prudery was still prevalent in the States as late as the 1880s, especially within its artistic community (which stands in distinct contrast to the French Academy), further emphasizes the extremely anomalous nature of Agassiz’s 1850 daguerreotypes. It also indicates the effectiveness of black skin and ‘scientific empiricism’ as “cover-stories”/blinders and enablers—both facilitating and obscuring the erotic investments of what, behind these alibis and at base, was a reckless eyeballing fueled by (blind) lust. For more on Eakins, his later collaborations with Edward Muybridge, and the status of his work

photos are meant to stand as scientific studies of comparative anatomy becomes suspect at best; skepticism that is increased by Agassiz's failure to request, or include, any information that would make quantitative assessments of these representative Africans' physiognomic features possible if such a comparative survey were to be fabricated at a later date (fig. 1.8).

Content with the most minimal, and often extraneous, of statistical information on his subjects: name, tribal affiliation, plantation origin, and, occasionally, specialized métier, Agassiz (a man renowned for his standardization of scientific cataloging techniques) appears to have neglected to request that any actual measurements be made of the subjects of his taxonomic inquiry; and in these photos' failure to provide even the most rudimentary of indicators of scale no such appraisements could even be hypothesized. Settling for the 'all too personal and familiar,' the naming of the slaves precluding their designation as simple specimens and reifying their status as naked *men*, Agassiz's clinical detachment must, once again, be interrogated. To be interrogated also would be the necessity of extending a shot meant to focus upon the characteristics of the face and head to include the full, and fully denuded, torsos of the subjects of phrenological scrutiny. Skull size, facial angles, and 'racially distinct' features aside, let us cast aside euphemism as well. These images should be apprehended for what they are: titty shots. The women pictured being, for the most part, extraneous to this study—supposedly intended to offer indications of the endurance of racial traits passed on by pure African fathers to their American offspring, Drana and Delia appear to be inserted into the five man survey almost as an afterthought and might easily (if not probably) have

(Eakins produced both paintings and photographs of male nudes) within the history of gay iconography, see Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, and Cooper, *Fully Exposed*.

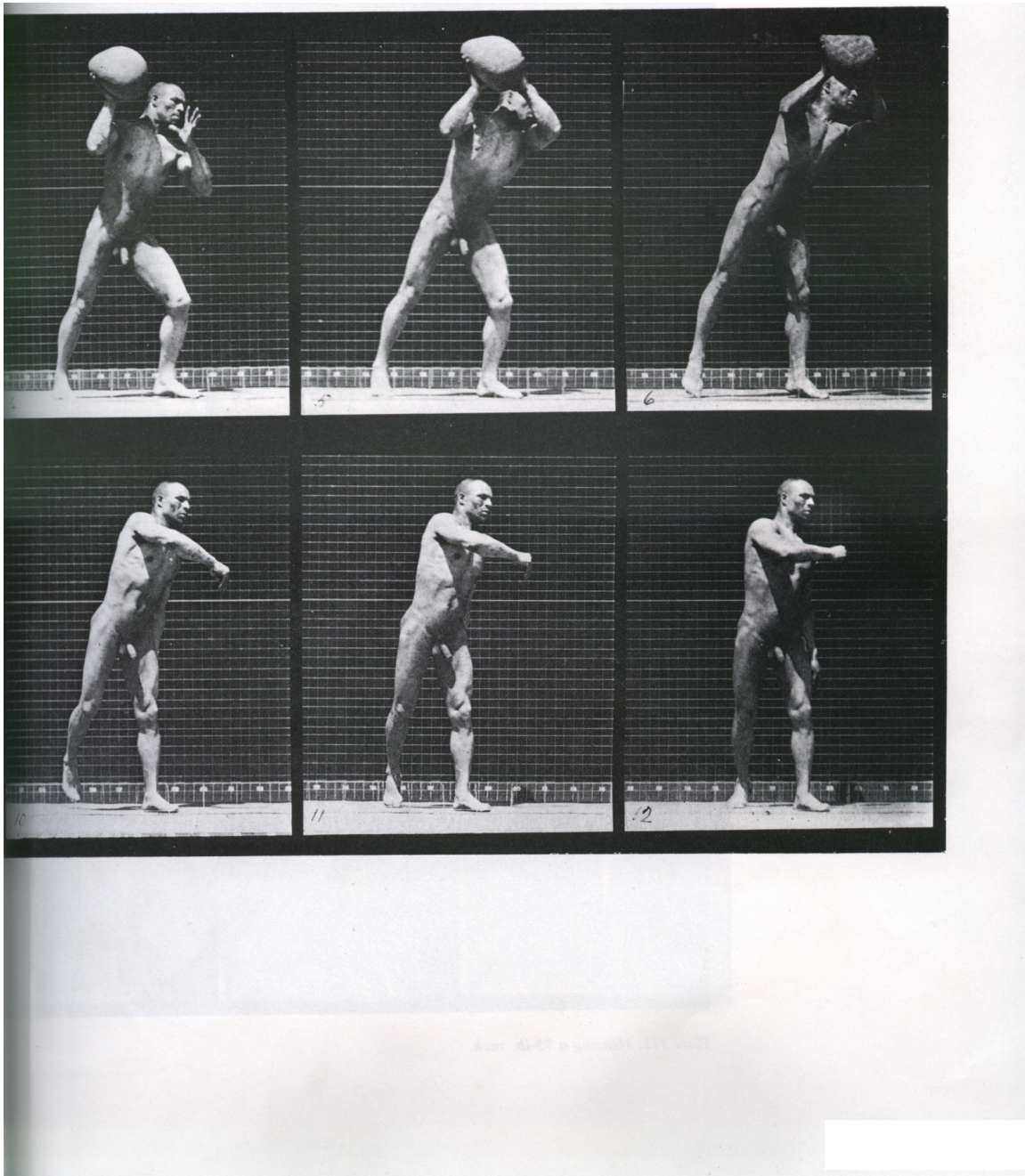
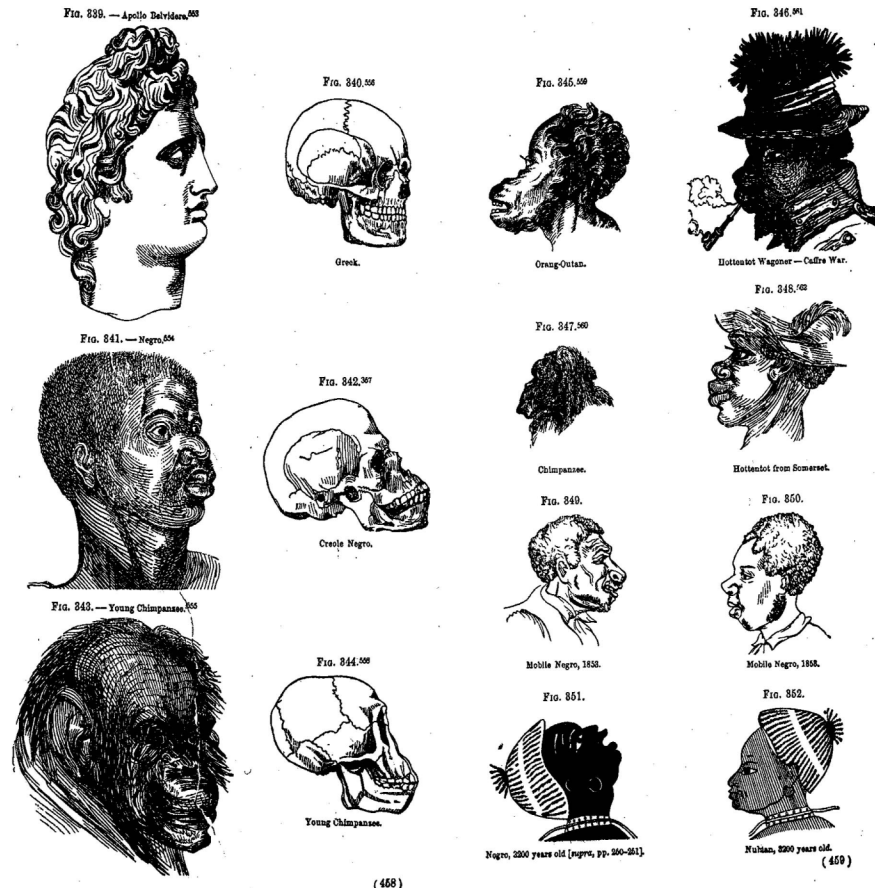


Figure 1.8

been replaced by male heirs if these were available⁶¹—the inclusion of their naked breasts surely would have provided ample pleasure for many amongst Agassiz’s potential viewing audience; as would have the vague implications of incest provoked by a rather taboo proximity between naked daughters and their equally denuded fathers. This said, it is nevertheless quite apparent that for Agassiz these women’s mammillae were not intended as the main attraction of this work, as the next subject for scrutiny should begin to make prominently clear. Ironically, the inclusion of varied angles of inspection being just about the only standardly anthropometric element of these photos, it is the appearance of an *extra* angle in the physiognomic series focusing on Jem and Alfred, that should be considered one of the most definitive markers clueing observers into the fact that this is primarily a *sexual*, rather than a scientific, study. While the frontal and profile depictions of the two men, like the mugshotsque images of the remaining sitters, do (at least in terms of angle) conform to then established modes of scientific representation—one need only look to the various craniometric studies of the time or to the myriad (and often racistly hyperbolized) engravings meant to depict the diverse ‘types of mankind’ to

⁶¹ We do not know whether or not these men had sons, but one might assume that had these male offspring been sired their high market value (assuming that they were in good health) would have encouraged their owners’ to take advantage of such profitability. These daughters, on the other hand, as ‘property’ that reproduces itself, gain worth through ‘appreciation’ of value rather than immediate sale. Additionally, in an American culture in which the measure of one’s manhood was (is) very much tied to notions of patrilineal inheritance (by which both the rights and rites of masculinity are conferred by fathers to their male heirs) it is no surprise that, in maintaining a slave system that necessitated what Hortense Spillers would call “the [removal] of the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law” the imperative to separate slave father from enslaved *son* (thus suppressing the threat that the seeds of insurrection might pass between the two) might have been felt more imperatively than the need to sever ties between father and daughter. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 80. Spillers’ article well-established as the premiere exploration of the social mapping of the body of the enslaved African, commodified first and foremost ‘it’ comes to be gendered (and disciplined) by consequence of ‘its’ value within a network of economic exchange. This said, and as I will discuss at some length later in this chapter, in the eyes of many nineteenth-century audiences, the women pictured in the Agassiz daguerreotypes might not have been viewed as “women” at all—a gender ambiguity that would have enhanced their worth within the network of (homo)erotic libidinal exchange that, as will be made clear, circulated around both these images *and* the man for whom they were commissioned.



(458)

Figure 1.9

verify that Agassiz has taken his cues from the visual traditions of his discipline (fig. 1.9)—the rear shot is actually an anomaly of sorts.

The majority of scientists seemingly having come to a general consensus concerning the back of the body's inability to offer any information of value to those who wished to uncover evidence entailing the physiological differences that existed among men, the main arena in which the discussion did, in fact, move rearwards was in specific relation to the sexual and sexualized anatomy of women.⁶² As Sander Gilman has indicated in his much-referenced essay, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," the widespread and frenzied obsession with the buttocks of Saartjie Baartman, and the whole of the women of the 'Hottentot' tribe, led to a host of "scientific" and popular depictions that placed this mythologized rear end at the center of their attentions—attentions which would later reinscribe this b(l)ackside⁶³ as the anatomical

⁶² Pointing out that the "nineteenth-century fascination with the buttocks" was clearly to be read "as a displacement for the genitalia"(238), the Hottentot Venus renowned for her 'exceptionality' in both of these areas, Sander Gilman makes the interesting observation that "[t]he uniqueness of the genitalia and buttocks of the black is...associated primarily with the female and is taken to be a sign solely of an anomalous *female* sexuality" (237). While Gilman holds that this distinction remained in effect as late as 1896—citing several "description[s] of the autopsies of black males..[in which] the absence of any discussion of the male genitalia whatsoever is striking" (237), a direct contrast to the numerous autopsies performed upon women of color for the sole purpose of examining the anomalies in this same area—Agassiz's 1850 daguerreotypes obviously mark a turning point in the focus of the white male empiricist gaze, at least in America, that stands in contradiction to Gilman's analysis. In keeping, also, with my assertion that the spotlight placed on the hypersexualized body (and privates) of the black male in mid-nineteenth century America was in many ways unique to this nation—as it was particularly influenced by concerns that were peculiar to our country—while Gilman is able to find support for his claims in references from several different English sources which, as I said, extend well-into the last decade of the century, the only such citation that he offers from an American autopsy refers to a procedure that took place in 1862 (259 n.24). See Sander L. Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed. *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) 223-259.

⁶³ I borrow this terminology from Maurice O. Wallace, who explains his own use of this formulation, which he uses to designate the site to which the black masculine has been relegated in American masculinity studies, as such: "To speak of the 'b(l)ackside' of masculine identity in the West is, first, to speak metaphorically of the hidden (i.e. the *backside*) dimension of race which is, on the one hand, inextricable from our contemporary discourse about masculinity, yet severely neglected on the other hand.

marker of the prostitutive woman's inborn proclivity towards the licentious life. This said, as far as I know, no such precedent existed for the empirical study of the male bum, black, white, or otherwise. Even amongst the early Academy nudes, images (ostensibly) meant to provide artists extensive visual information on the contours of the male body, very few images can be ferreted out which offer dorsal angles of observation, and these go to great pains to draw attention away from the idea that those posteriors proffered might be the object of prolonged analysis; bodies are most often depicted in motion, in the midst of performing tasks or participating in various athletic activities, lending credence to a visual narrative intended to present these rear shots as simply spontaneous rather than studied documentations of bodies in motion (fig. 1.10).

The anomaly of the focus on the black male's backside in the Agassiz daguerreotypes, then, would have signaled to a nineteenth-century audience that the bodies placed before them were so positioned for sexual inspection (and, subtextually, homosexual gratification)⁶⁴; an understanding buttressed by the very fact that this study

Because of the prevailing 'whiteness' of scholarship on masculinity, the back- or unfamiliar side is also necessarily the *black*side; hence, the interpolation of the parenthetical *l* to the *b(l)ackside* of this discourse is de rigueur. Finally, the b(l)ackside of masculinity is meant to evoke black men's anatomical b(l)ackside because men's homosocial/homosexual relations, black and white, seem so critically governed by both/either a dread and/or desire for anality." Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*, 180 n.10.

⁶⁴ The general absence amongst early images of the male nude (at least in the great number that I have inspected) of statically posed rear shots of individual male subjects, contrasted as this dearth is with the many photos that are to be found of the backsides of naked women, often, even in the putatively 'non-erotic' Academy images, pictured laying supine upon a variety of day-beds and comfortably inviting chaise lounges, points to the sense of taboo that attached itself during this time period to the study of the male buttocks. That, within the context of these early photos, the desire to inspect the male ass, and the subject's willful 'offering' of this ass for exploration, seems to be explicitly linked to homosexual proclivities is further supported by the fact that the few photos that one does find that level their focus on the male posterior display fairly obviously their status as homoerotically inspired cultural artifacts. Tom Waugh takes a similar observation even further, maintaining, "Homophobia and the fear of one's own homosexuality are so overwhelming as the cultural theorem of the dominant heterosexual male caste that its corollary has also historically been borne out: the representation of the male nude since the nineteenth century has been almost entirely the province of homosexual artists. Sorry but it's true: scratch the surface of a male nude by a male and, chances are, you will find a queer artist. And photography and cinema entrench this truth all the more because of the extreme sensitivity of media that are indexical (real models

depicted male *bodies* at all. While women's bodies and sex organs had long been the subjects of scientific (and salacious) scrutiny, early materialist taxonomies had almost exclusively limited their comparisons between men to the region above the neck—"the lower regions shaded off into varieties of animality and pathology," as Allan Sekula notes, inquiries into the essential characteristics of *man* were "discourses of the head for the head."⁶⁵ Indeed, up until this point, men of color, although consistently animalized and pathologized within both social and scientific discourses, might still be said to have been considered, at least within the official annals of natural science, men of reason: contrasted against Whites primarily along the scale of an Enlightenment-inspired hierarchy of intellect, rather than at the 'base' level of the body. (A look at the above reproduced charts taken from Nott & Gliddon bears this assertion out.) Naturalist scientist Louis Agassiz's unofficial study, therefore, was actually amongst the first such

with real bodies, rather than the oblique abstraction of say painting and writing)." Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 9.

While, one must, of course, contextualize the use of the term "homosexual" to describe individuals operating during a time period in which this terminology had not yet been established—this phrase not entering the English language until 1892, nearly half a century after the time period in which I begin my discussion (see David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* [Routledge: New York, 1990], 15)—it is, nevertheless true, as Tom Waugh indicates (in accordance with Foucault), that the emergence of discourses that sought to explore and mark the bounds of human sexuality (to render legible both sex itself and the bodily signs that might expose the individual proclivities of its various practitioners), and that would eventually lead to the creation of identificatory categories such as heterosexual and homosexual, began much earlier: "The naming and theorizing of homosexuality, extending from its earliest murmurs in the 1840s (by coincidence the first decade of photography), reached its peak in the years between the world wars of the twentieth century." Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 24. This said, my use of terms such as "homoerotic" and "homosexual," to discuss libidinal responses elicited by Agassiz's daguerreotypes and to designate certain within the nineteenth-century viewing audience for whom these images were intended (Agassiz included amongst these perusers), must not be held to adhere to the exact same classificatory imperatives that they maintain in our present day but should, nevertheless, be understood as indicative of impulses and identities that, although much more fluid in their definition, do speak to the materialities of a burgeoning nineteenth-century sexual subculture. Therefore, I would adopt, similar to Waugh, "John Boswell's definition of gay as 'persons who are conscious of erotic inclinations toward their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic'" and include under this loose banner "a wide range of options: from the inarticulate and unlabeled homosociality of [some]...to the cunning and strategic closetry of [others]...to the highly politicized and self-designated group affinity of [still others]." Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 16.

⁶⁵ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 12.



Figure 1.10

endeavors to turn the empirical regard away from the contours of the head of man and to redirect this gaze towards the head of the (black man's) penis.

Perhaps taking his cues from his late, and much-beloved, mentor Georges Cuvier, who, as said earlier, had dissected the body of Saartjie Baartman and mounted her genitalia for perpetual public inspection, Agassiz seems to have left one last, and particularly salient, cue for the photographic executor of his pornographic project: the daguerreotypes of Jem and Alfred were to be sure to figure these men's genitalia as prominently as possible—as Trachtenberg himself bears witness, these men's penises are “presented *directly* to the daguerrean eye [emphasis mine].” Directed down perspectival lines to the middle of the framed image, the eye of the daguerrean viewer is also inevitably drawn to and perpetually pricked by the black penises winking in their spotlighted center.⁶⁶ As if this were not enough to make the point apparent, the sole prop enlisted in the pictures, the lone headrest—normally used to aid the portrait-sitter in maintaining the rigid posture of the head necessitated by prolonged exposure times⁶⁷—is here positioned so as to target this same center. The converging metal poles of this apparatus coming together at the bulls-eyes of each of these black men's bollocks and

⁶⁶ Noting that the paunches that Jem and Alfred display seem quite out of keeping with the general tautness of their otherwise quite muscular forms, and that none of the other men pictured in these photos were shown to have similarly protruding bellies, I began to suspect that this peculiarity might hold some significance. Performing an informal experiment, for which my partner was good enough to act as guinea pig (public embarrassment to be his primary thanks), my suspicions were confirmed. I thus put forth that these men, directed to pose in such a way as to ensure that their genitals would remain wholly visible even in profile, have been forced to thrust their stomachs forward in order that, through this straining, their penises will be lifted into full view. Deliberately arranged, and professionally exposed, great pains (quite literally) were gone to ensure that these black men's members would clearly be seen to occupy centerstage in Agassiz's study.

⁶⁷ Early exposure times for daguerrean images were often quite long. As John Tagg tells us, the earliest daguerrean processes often required as much as half an hour of exposure time, although by 1842 this interval had been reduced to little more than half a minute. As for these first would-be potraitees, “Sittings were drawn out and uncomfortable. The face was powdered white and the head held in a rigid clamp. Sitters also had to close their eyes against the harsh sunlight required to expose the plate, and the necessity of keeping still invariably resulted in rigid expressions.” Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 43.

buttocks, the insertion of the headrest rigidly insists that we aim our attentions towards these exposed posteriors, directing our eyes (and heads) to rest on the heads of Jem and Alfred's penises, and also seeming to suggest an alternate head that might find its rest *up their black asses*. Do forgive my crudity, but this is pure, and purely pornographic, satire! I continue to be surprised that I appear to be the only one to have spied out this joke.

And here we have come full circle (as we are perhaps meant to have 'come' while circling the fleshy targets of these black men's daguerreotyped genitalia) to the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. In a 1986 essay on the artist's controversial collection of black male nudes, cultural critic Kobena Mercer makes the following observation:

Each of the camera's points of view [in Mapplethorpe's "takes"] lead to a unitary vanishing point: an erotic/aesthetic objectification of black male bodies into the idealized form of a homogenous type thoroughly saturated with a totality of sexual predicates. We look through a sequence of individual, personally named, Afro-American men, but what we *see* is only their *sex* as the essential sum total of the meanings signified around blackness and maleness.... Regardless of the sexual preferences of the spectator, the connotation is that the "essence" of black male identity lies in the domain of sexuality.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism," 174. Mercer would later revise some of his original critique of Mapplethorpe's work (published first in 1986 as "Imaging The Black Man's Sex"), pointing out in his 1989 essay, "Skin Head sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," that gay porn complicates simple notions of dominance and marginality, subjectivity and objectification as delineated by conventional theories of the gaze that assume a heterosexual male/female visual encounter as the standard of their analyses. Acknowledging the ambivalence of his own reactions to the naked black men captured by Mapplethorpe's camera—both "anger and envy" as a result of "identifications with both object and subject of the gaze" (Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism," 194)—Mercer argues, "[Mapplethorpe's authorial] gaze certainly involves an element of objectification, but, like a point-of-view shot in gay male pornography, it is reversible. The gendered hierarchy of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly coded in homoerotic representations, since sexual sameness liquidates the associative opposition between active subject and passive object." Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism," 195. While I am absolutely in accord with Mercer's first look at Mapplethorpe's photos, I do take issue with certain aspects of his reformulation—the above statement being, in my estimate, particularly problematic. First, Mercer's reasoning in many ways naturalizes the power dynamics inherent in male/female heterosexual oppositions. His assertion that relations between men can easily be assumed to be relations of equality and reciprocity not only is belied by the realities of gay male life—one need only counter: and what of "tops" and "bottoms"?—but it also seems to indicate a tacit legitimization of woman's position as perpetual "bottom"—implicit in his formulation is a sense that woman *is* indeed a passive figure willing to tolerate a total objectification that (the gay) man (in his active, 'non-rigid,' 'reversible,' 'liquidity') would not. Second, and especially as we are discussing the display of raced-male bodies here, despite the utopian potentiality that does, I believe,

Mercer could very well be speaking directly of Agassiz's 1850 polygenist project. Despite the host of alibis offered by Agassiz, in the scientist's varied taxonomic takes on Jem, Alfred, Jack, Renty, and Fassena, it is the predicatively present fact of the black penises of Jem and Alfred, as well as the penises that lay beneath the phrenological takes on the other three men in this survey, that stand as the essential and original/originating locus of the racial difference that Agassiz wishes to evidence. Drana and Delia, tainted by association in their position as offspring and inheritors of this African essence, serving

exist in gay-porn—in the concept of the queer space in and of itself—one simply *cannot* ignore the fact that the body of the raced-subject, as socially constructed Other, carries with it “associative oppositions” that are not to be easily trumped by ‘samenesses’ based on sexual preference. As Tom Waugh ends in admitting, after himself making a similar utopian claim for gay porn:

This is not to deny that difference remains the most fundamental format for erotic operations of gay image-making and fantasy. In erotic representation, difference operates pervasively as structure, as focus, and as stimulant. The requisite pull of difference in homoerotic fantasy overrides same-sex symmetries, and no doubt stems from the compulsory and universal heterosexual construction of our binary and gendered social identities. *The gender difference that underpins straight male eroticism transfigures in gay male eroticism into other structures of difference that compensate for genital sameness....In the iconography of cultural/racial difference, domination has in fact proven an ineradicable dynamic* [emphasis mine]. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 49.

This said, what I am identifying throughout the study at hand as a fairly consistent cultural relegation of the black male body to a position of passive object before an actively voyeuristic and sadistic public gaze was, for all intents and purposes, first perfected under the direction and for the delectation of white men who would, under our current identificatory standards, be considered ‘homosexuals’—and whose sexual ‘marginality’ did not, in any sense, preclude their ability, nor inclination, to claim hegemonic dominance in relation to the black male bodies they took as their subjects of scrutiny. As such, I would contend that the ambivalence that is felt, as a person of color, when encountering Mapplethorpe's images, is, perhaps, less an effect of a ‘marginalized’ author's complex commentary on the hypocrisies and prejudices of dominant culture and more the result of a discomfiture felt at finding ourselves, like Mapplethorpe, prey to the same proclivities of this hegemonic gaze. Inherent in Du Bois' notion of “double-consciousness,” founded upon the precept that the black subject (and one can insert ‘marginalized’ subject here as well) cannot help but see themselves as they are viewed by/‘through the eyes’ of others, is a critique of the dominated subject's inability to operate/view the world from a position wholly outside of hegemonic structures of power and vision. As such, and sight itself being socially-constructed, one cannot help but, if only for an instant and upon first glance, submit those with whom we might on a conscious level claim absolute sameness and political solidarity to a gaze which necessarily marks them as Other (carrying all this designation's concomitant libidinal investments). In response to feminist inquiries as to the intransigence of the gaze's white-maleness, I would hold that the look of dominance of which we speak *is* to be forever aligned with the domain of white patriarchal power; simultaneously stressing, however, that this domain is so far-reaching that it extends to the eyes of the very Others that it objectifies—visually speaking, we are all first and foremost, straight white males, conscious intervention alone allowing us to see things otherwise. As such, if gay porn is able to offset/throw into flux the active/passive binarisms of the gaze, this capacity is to be attributed, not to its status as *gay* porn, but, as I will later argue, to the unsettling dynamics of the pornographic look in and of itself.

as little more than referents to this central source, it is the black male's sex and sex with the black male, that are at once the subtext and the *hypertext* of this 'scientific' typology; look at this study any way you like, at bottom you will find the same information.⁶⁹

But, to return yet again to the beginnings of this discussion, what of the critical disavowal of this fact? How is it that the "essential sum total of the meanings signified around" these daguerreotypes continues to fall into the blind spots of contemporary criticism? After all that has been said, one might read the failure on the part of otherwise adept cultural critics to "peel the layers of alibi" off these photos as exhibiting (willful) complicity in the predicates of Agassiz's project; their supposed attempts to "contain" the erotics invoked at the sight/site of the nude black male body, actually intended to check their dissipation. Just as the scientific master narrative offered by Agassiz acts as a veil shielding the sex that these black men signify, while at the same time allowing the naturalist unlimited access to the black bodies that lie behind the veil, as we have seen, critical attempts at objective liberal/liberatory detachment often only further the objectification of bodies caught in a perpetual striptease. Repeatedly clothing these black nudes in humanity, insisting that that which is "base" in these images be veiled from vision, these theorists' denial of that which is right before their eyes renders that which lies in their discursive blind spots that much more pronounced. Although critics appear determined to see only the racist 'science' at work in these pictures, rather than acknowledging the interracial (homo)sexual desire also clearly evoked (insisting that that which is seen is not seen, that that which is desired is not desired), the penises of Jem and

⁶⁹ I am put in mind of a quote from feminist film critic and originator of gaze theory Laura Mulvey that Kobena Mercer includes in his essay on Mapplethorpe: "Women are constantly confronted with their own image...yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with men. The true exhibit is always the phallus..." Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 13; and Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism," 202.

Alfred—both the *studium* (that which is viewed “without acuity” through socially-conditioned eyes) and the *punctum* (“the sting, speck, cut, little hole,” the detail that “pricks,” the “‘detail,’ [that] fills the whole picture”)⁷⁰ of the Agassiz images—continue to be wholly discernible (the return of the repressed, the persistence of [the dark spot on]vision) even when obscured by critical readings that posit themselves as a *reverse-striptease*, that maintain that they are looking into the eyes of Delia even when their every perspective leads elsewhere. A less generous interpretation of the *heightened responses* arising from these emancipatory scrutinies of, only thinly-veiled, black male bodies might conclude that they are fueled by, and give even freer rein to, the very erotics that they are meant to master; especially as the precondition of desire is that it must never be fully met/*realized* (“Desire...is sustained only by want”).⁷¹

In his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes delineates the dynamics of such blind desire;

The presence (the dynamics) of [a] blind field is...what distinguishes the erotic photograph from the pornographic photograph. Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish), flattered like an idol that does not leave its niche; there is no *punctum* in the

⁷⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26, 45.

⁷¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 5. This understanding of desire comes, of course, from the psychoanalytic teachings of theorist Jacques Lacan. Juliet Mitchell summarizes nicely:

...Lacan states that desire itself, and with it, sexual desire, can only exist by virtue of its alienation. Freud describes how the baby can be observed to hallucinate milk that has been withdrawn from it and the infant to play throwing-away games to overcome the trauma of the mother's necessary departures. Lacan uses these instances to show that an object that is longed for only comes into existence *as an object* when it is lost to the baby or infant. Thus any satisfaction that might subsequently be attained will always contain this loss within it. Lacan refers to this dimension as ‘desire’. The baby's needs can be met, it demand responded to, but its desire only exists because of the initial failure of satisfaction. Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that, in this area, there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction itself. It is this process that, to Lacan, lies behind Freud's statement that ‘We must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable [sic.] to the realisation [sic.] of complete satisfaction....’

Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), 5-6.

pornographic image.... The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward “the rest” of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.⁷²

In short, these ‘cover stories,’ both Agassiz’s and those of his cultural inheritors, only serve to make the uncovering of that which they intentionally/ingenuously ignore all the more tantalizing.⁷³ Animated by what Thomas Waugh would call “the old song-and-dance about [the nude as] the repository of humanist values and formal perfection,” a “mystification [that] confirms, quite simply, that the nude is automatically and fundamentally an erotic discourse,”⁷⁴ Trachtenberg’s and Mullen’s inverse/perverse analytic stripteases breath new life into what might otherwise be a flattened out fetish. Sexual organs obviously at the center of this photographic study are pushed into the margins of the text so that naked bodies can be taken *beyond*, to a site in which total communion with these bodies might be (ph)antasied—an empirical incorporation able to penetrate to the depths of these Others’ souls and projecting back, through their eyes, an idealized image of the empiricist as Transcendent (Wo)Man, “unqualified presence, no longer limited by empirical time, place or contingent experience,...the unqualified

⁷² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 58-59.

⁷³ While every critic that discusses these images makes sure to note that the slaves depicted therein are naked, and that the photos depict denuded women *and* men, Brian Wallis remains the only person to have reprinted Agassiz’s daguerreotypes in their entirety as well as the only one, by consequence, to have included the full-frontal shots of Jem and Alfred. As such, the figurative striptease that I have been describing is accompanied by a very literal sort of *teasing* on the part of these critics who, with the exclusion of Wallis, make tantalizing references to images that offer black male genitalia unveiled yet never share these stripped figures with their readers; the majority of whom, I would assume, fill in the blanks/these blind spots with Imaginary pictures much more in keeping than the actual images are with the larger cultural phantasies, and stereotypes, that attach to the black man’s penis. Fantasies in which, beneath it all, every Brother holds the promise of Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1980 *Man in Polyester Suit*.

⁷⁴ Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 9.

essence of humanity,” or so says Trachtenberg.⁷⁵ This divine sight, predicated on the notion that the black male penis is not the actual center of one’s line of sight, allows it, and desire itself, to be discovered anew each time it is inevitably confronted at the end point of perspective. Sliding in and out of the visual field, circled but never fully divulged, the admittance of its presence conceived as initiating a downward spiral towards the/that which is base, this penis, now experienced as *punctum*, is thus rendered perpetually able to ‘trigger the viewer: to provoke a tiny shock...an explosion’⁷⁶ every time it dances into view. Thus, tabooed and tormenting, these critically fleeting encounters with black male genitalia allow *guilty* pleasures—“the association of the erotic with the forbidden seem[ing] to be a culturally determined characteristic of Euro-American civilization”⁷⁷—to expand infinitely as they are (re)experienced each time this transgressive detail rises again to ‘prick’ the eye and fill the frame.⁷⁸

If, however, one (re)views Agassiz’s scientific survey under a lens that (re)establishes it as a pornographic study, one in which the black man’s black penis is quite clearly the central star and central referent, nothing more, nothing less—the

⁷⁵ These critics’ interchanges with Delia offer an interesting twist on Morrison’s notion of “the process by which it is made possible to explore and penetrate one’s own body in the guise of the sexuality, vulnerability and anarchy of the other.” Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 53.

⁷⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49: “A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer ‘anything whatever.’ This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void.... [L]inked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph....”

⁷⁷ Waugh, *Hard to Imagine*, 6-7.

⁷⁸ One can view this theoretical game of hide and seek and the holes that are produced in these analytical frameworks/stilted conversations (as well as the desire that they both conceal and maintain) in the exact same manner that Kobena Mercer reads Robert Mapplethorpe’s use of cropping in the artist’s photographic images of nude black men. Mercer observes, “Th[is] cropping is analogous to striptease...as the exposure of successive body parts distances the erotogenic object, making it untouchable so as to tantalize the drive to look, which reaches its aim in the denouement by which [in typical pornography] the woman’s sex is revealed. Except here the unveiling that reduces the woman from an angel to a whore is substituted by the unconcealing of the black man’s private parts, with the penis as the forbidden totem of colonial fantasy.” Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism, 183.

“immobile” *studium* of a genre in which, like Barthes’ reading of the Haiku, “everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion”⁷⁹—these denuded black male bodies would most certainly lose some of their powers to arouse. Nothing withheld from view, no secrets left to be revealed, the nudity no longer shocking (at least for contemporary audiences) but to be expected given its function, the pornographic excesses of these images made obvious, perhaps desire would, at last, be sated. That is, in brief, the end goal of the extended focus that I am here attempting, one that will move in a moment from the rather basic questions thus far asked of these images to an extended critique of the historical framework of their production.

This said, such an aim, that of *ultimate* unveiling, is, of course, an impossibility—especially as it repeats the epistemophilic phantasy of absolute mastery that has already been shown to lie behind the penetrating scrutinies addressed above (the dream of infinite knowledge revealed, originally, by Freud as *always already* a sexual[ized] drive⁸⁰). It is an endeavor made all the more difficult in that it flies in the face of a host of socially-conditioned and *enforced* drives *not to know*; as Foucault has shown us, power functions by rendering itself and its various disciplining agents/agencies invisible, concealing its workings under the guise of the natural, the inevitable. The dynamics of power following the dynamics of (dis)simulation that accrue to the blind spot—a hole in the visible patched over by certain “logical”/culturally-coded information —our vision is never transparent; what we see and what we do not see is always inflected by culture, our line of sight always intersected by lines of power. Irit Rogoff, visual culture critic, summarizes quite nicely, “[B]odies of thought produced a notion of vision in the service

⁷⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.

⁸⁰ I speak, of course, of *epistemophilia*.

of a particular politics or ideology and populated it with a select set of images, viewed through specific apparatuses and serving the needs of distinct subjectivities.... [W]hat the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses.”⁸¹ The ‘fix’ being on, therefore, from the moment we open our eyes on the world—multiple agents already working from multiple angles and aided by myriad apparatuses to insure the outcome of our apprehensions—the odds are heavily stacked against the prospect of seeing things differently, of changing our outlook on that which has come to be signified by certain signs.

The sign/stigmata of black skin, naturalized as a brand that marks certain amongst our national bodies as sites of and for spectacular objectification (and delectation),⁸² is perhaps one of the hardest to re-signify, particularly as it is so thoroughly saturated within a system that absolutely requires its/this obfuscation in order to make sense of itself. The objectification of the black Subject necessitating, on the one hand, that we be believed to embody all that our black skin has thus far come to signify (relegated to corporeal existences, our subjectivities unseen, black *people* are marked/masked as bodily instantiations of a racist master text, or, to paraphrase Robyn Weigman, ‘marked bodies made to *be* bodily marks’⁸³), it requires, at the same time, that this darkness, while signifying *essentially* everything that whiteness is not, act as a shield rendering certain white bodies, and whiteness itself, invisible (allowing a disembodied

⁸¹ Irit Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21-22.

⁸² “According to [Homi] Bhabha, unlike the sexual fetish *per se*, whose meanings are usually hidden as a hermeneutic secret, skin color functions as ‘*the most visible of fetishes*’.... Whether devalorized in the signifying chain of ‘negrophobia’ or hypervalorized as a desirable attribute in ‘negrophilia,’ the fetish of skin color in the codes of racial discourse constitutes the most visible articulation of what Stuart Hall (1977) calls ‘the ethnic signifier.’” Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism,” 183.

⁸³ Robyn Weigman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 25.

whiteness figured as *pure* subjectivity to remain the universal producer and possessor, rather than the bearer, of meaning). To defer to Weigman again, “Modern citizenship functions as a disproportionate system in which the universalism ascribed to certain bodies...is protected and subtended by the infinite particularity assigned to others.... [T]his system is itself contingent on certain visual relations, where only those particularities associated with the Other are, quite literally, *seen*....”⁸⁴ How to see our way out of a system, then, that so thoroughly dictates both the way in which we encounter the world and others in the world, but that also so thoroughly determines “our own conceptions of who and what we are”?⁸⁵ No matter which side of representation we fall on, whether our identities are formulated in resistance to or in complicity with the tenets of this visual ur-text/ur-text of the visible, we cannot help but view the world according to its logics.

This, as I hope to have shown, has been the case in relation to much of the criticism that has attempted to salvage the (S)ubjects of Agassiz’s ‘scientific’ work from the dustbin(dusty attic)of history and the ‘dirtiness’ that is evidenced in the look of the daguerrean eye. Lost in the raptures (and ruptures)of a (ph)antasy of absolute identification with these long dead specimens of the “base degradation” of America’s ‘peculiar institution,’ these critics, most likely inadvertently but perhaps deliberately, specularly reproduce the speculative (in both its conjectural and contemplative senses) logics of the ideological systems that were institutionalized so as to structure and support this same unequal social arrangement. That their theoretical dream of access to and the exchange of “universal humanness” with these slaves must take place at the expense of

⁸⁴ Weigman, *American Anatomies*, 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

these Blacks' peculiar/distinctive bodies, the corruption/darkness of which must be transcended in order to achieve enfranchisement ("imaginative liberation"), only further naturalizes the position of the disembodied (white) subject as rightful heir to the privileges granted those not made manifest by destiny. This becomes especially the case, as it is the critical detachment of these theorists' own disembodied gazes that legitimates their positions as the interpreters and bestowers of meaning on enslaved subjects over whom they wield the power of emancipation *and*, here figured as *or*, imaginative reincarnation—a recall of bodies familiarly spectralized in that their flesh has been rendered as transparent purveyor of their essences (for Agassiz the tactile surface of these black bodies yielding evidence of their inner racial essence, for these critics the essence of humanity is disinterred from blotted out black bodies, *erase-ial* essence is the yield). That Trachtenberg is capable of constructing such a discourse, and to see it as a way out of "a system of representation" in which Agassiz's "illustrations are trapped...as firmly as the sitters," indicates just how firmly entrenched this system is. Capable of ventriloquizing, or perhaps it would be oculoquizing, themselves through the body of an intermediary who, thanks to the seductive logics of this very system is allowed to imagine himself as un-captured within its frameworks, representative ideologies display the power to turn would-be agitators into nothing more than mechanisms (like the chemical agitators used by mass-market photographers) that guarantee that their enregistrements are distinctly reproduced.

Mieke Bal, in her article "The Politics of Citation," offers a series of strategies that might be initiated if we, as contemporary cultural critics, wish to produce critical readings of "visual representations of Western imagination" that do not *simply* (read: un-

critically) reproduce the “distortions and exploitations” of this world view. Bal’s final suggestion, and the caveat that it carries with it, seems to me her most salient:

Acknowledging the contagion of colonialism rather than repressing it so that it will inevitably return is to my mind the route to remedy. An unproblematic emphasis on the difference of the colonial past is a sure way to keep it alive in an unacknowledged present—hence the paradoxical conclusion that is, in fact, close to the first rule of psychoanalysis as a practice: insight alone is not enough; we have to live through our past traumas again, not looking at them from a false distance but immersing ourselves in them.⁸⁶

In keeping with Bal, therefore, who apologizes for the “perhaps unfairly harsh” critiques to which she has “subjected” the authors of several celebrated studies that take nineteenth-century erotic(ized) anthropological images as their focus and which “take for granted that colonialism is excised by their postcolonial intent,”⁸⁷ I offer the same conciliation. The impetus of my rather extended and, also, perhaps overly ungracious readings of contemporary critical mis(sed) readings of the Agassiz ‘slave daguerreotypes’ emerges from the conviction that in order to understand the prodigious *work* that these images did for and to the nineteenth-century viewership for whom they were destined, it is crucial that we critically examine their effect on our own twentieth- and twenty-first century workings: analytical, ideological, *and* physical.

Rather than attempt to explain away the ‘bad’ erotic feelings that arise in response to the Agassiz photos, it is imperative that we own to and initiate lively explorations of the dynamics of the desire that they produce in order to understand the cultural mechanics behind the proliferation and reproduction of these dark fantasies. My own initial reaction to these images—I ascertained immediately that I was looking at pornography and not classic typology—had everything to do with the erotic allure of these bodies and nothing

⁸⁶ Mieke Bal, “The Politics of Citation,” *Diacritics* 21 (Spring 1991): 39, 43.

⁸⁷ Bal, “Politics of Citation,” 43.

to do with the ‘science’ of this study. As an African-American woman, it is perhaps due to the fact of my “own” body’s having long been forwarded as the principle subject of the sexual scrutinies of early racial science, that I was both drawn to these images and stopped in my tracks by the sexualized bodies of the Black men therein displayed. The first question that I had to ask was how these black men’s bodies had come to occupy center stage (and the spotlight) in the Agassiz study, why their genitalia and buttocks were mounted for full exposure and not, for once, “my” own. Having been well-versed in the history of the hoopla that had surrounded the exhibition and exploitation of the “Hottentot Venus,” I immediately wanted to know how and especially *why* the space she, and the bodies of black women like Drana and Delia, had once commanded in the cultural [I]magination (and even in my own attentions) had come to be supplanted by these hot-to-trot-penises—especially as the denuded bodies of men who seem to be well-into their sixties did not strike me as corporealities commonly considered, by myself or anyone else, to be “hot.” If one detects a tinge of jealousy in these initiating investigations, one should: abjection is infinitely preferable to unwilling absenteeism. As I said earlier, we are all invested (brought into being) in our own images, often preferring to throw our hats and bodies into the arena of representation, even as it is currently staged and in the understanding that this means bearing the burden of its objectifications, simply because the alternative, an invisibility that *does not* hold any promise of any *real* power for the racial subject, is to bear no social meaning: rather than becoming not-a-thing, one would become *nothing*.

My own over-identification with the subjects of this study, then, was, confessedly, as driven by narcissism as those of the critics whom I am critiquing. Our approaches to

these bodies and the desires they provoke, however, differs in that I, the occupant of a black body, already “dis(-)possessed” need initiate no theoretical transmogrification to imagine myself in their place. As such, the “fantasy of *praxis*” towards which the sight of these naked black bodies “launched” me was not fueled by a desire for a deeper penetration and *ultimate* knowledge of *their* interiors (one that would further efface exteriors similar to my own), but was aimed, indeed, ‘beyond what these photos permit us to see’—toward the source of the voyeuristic gaze that lay somewhere exterior to these frames, “toward the absolute excellence [and immanence] of a being, body and soul together”: in short, toward the “universal” White man, the *human* being, behind this objectifying examination. My look strove to be as pornographic as Agassiz’s own.

To quote from Slavoj Žižek, whose critical theorem frames the pornographic studies that I am both producing and reproducing in this project:

Contrary to the commonplace according to which, in pornography, the other (the person shown on the screen) is degraded to an object of voyeuristic pleasure, we must stress that it is the spectator himself who effectively occupies the position of the object. The real subjects are the actors on the screen trying to rouse us sexually, while we, the spectators are reduced to a paralyzed object-gaze.⁸⁸

Recalling Trachtenberg’s own enjoinder for a look that would reciprocate that of the sitters spectrally enslaved by the daguerrean eye—a reciprocity inconceivable in that, powerless to shield themselves from scrutiny, the “look” of *Jem*, *Alfred*, *Delia* and the others can never truly counter(act) that of those who disembodiedly “gaze” upon them—according to Žižek, it is the pornographic gaze that gives as good as it gets. If the ‘on-screen’ *object* of pornography is to be ‘reduced’ to the corporeal, so is the spectator ‘off-screen,’ whose visceral—nay, let us at last throw *all* euphemism aside—whose *genital*

⁸⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 110.

responses to the sexual[ized] subjects of their “gaze” entraps them in their bodies just as surely as these “Others” are entrapped: both become slaves to erotic drives, both are penetrated by the *look* of the other. The pornographic spectator equally becomes a subject for sexual scrutiny.

This is the fungible look that I would like to extend to the subjects of Agassiz’s ‘slave daguerreotypes.’ Recognizing the naiveté of the fantasy of liberating them from the “debasement” they must endure within the realm of representation—no simple denial of the rules of this “game” will disqualify them, or myself, from participation in it, just as the denial of the erotics that circulate around their images has in no way checked their propagation—one *can*, however, muck things up a bit. By giving as good as one gets, by turning the tables on this spectacular system, by turning our attentions upon ourselves as well as the others holding stakes/at stake in this visual match, perhaps we might, at the very least, disturb the “fixity” of its outcomes, de-naturalize/render less transparent the workings of power; exposing *all* bodies (our own included) as marked (if only by the “taints” of desire), perhaps the body of the Other will cease to be the ur-“mark”/quintessential(ized)*victim* of the vicissitudes of visuality. Mieke Bal’s third strategy towards the de-colonization of the gaze, narrativity, speaks exactly to this sort of unfixing of the unilateral directives of our current scopic regime and towards a re-fluidizing of the visual field. Forgive me for quoting at length:

[O]nce the viewer is involved in interpreting [the colonized subject’s] gaze as a response to [a] white male photographer, a certain sensitivity to one’s own position on this side of the scene, on the side of the colonial, the wrong side, makes one aware of the wrong sight one is partaking of.... [A] critical analysis that involves the critic could gain strength by making explicit the *narrative* dimension of images. I do not mean the narration of events within the scene, but the way the story of reading the image happens. In such a way, the image loses its rigidity and fixity, the viewer his or her safe position outside the scope of the

study. The narratological question of the focalizer, the vision that informs and colors the image in time, suggests a processing of a motivation.... Narrativizing the image-viewer interaction makes room for differentiated viewing positions.... More intriguing than the colonized, the colonizer; more intriguing than the object of scholarship, its subject.⁸⁹

I have thus far offered the narrative of my own erotic encounter with these images, and that of other critics pricked by the perverse allure of these black male ‘nudie’ shots. In the upcoming chapter, I will provide a closer look at the personal narrative of the man and the “science” behind the (porno)scopic study of the “specimens” pictured therein. The exhumation of these vestigial tales—the historical narrative that colored and luridly coalesced in these images as well as the *history* of the motivating forces behind Louis Agassiz’s frenziedly pornographic focalizations on the black male body—meant to lay bare both colonizer and the colonial undergirdings that subtended his particular world view, I mean also for this focused eyeballing to serve as précis to what is to be a project dedicated to the extended unveiling of the persistent blind spots in a much larger story, one that has at once evolved and devolved to enduringly position the body of the black man on the mainstages of American spectacular culture and our national psychic theater as ‘pornographic projection’: as both, to return to Wallace, “‘*virtual image*,’ at once seen and unseen...onto which the identity theme of American whiteness, with its distinguishing terrors and longings, imprints itself as onto a photographic negative,” and, to take a page from Eric Lott, “*virtual condition*” for a “sexuality where freedom and play meet—that fascinating imaginary space of fun and license outside (but structured by)...bourgeois norms.”⁹⁰ And so our story begins.

⁸⁹ Bal, “Politics of Citation,” 43.

⁹⁰ Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 51.

Chapter Two. Louis Agassiz and the American School of Ethnoeroticism: Scientific Self-Making and the Sexual Regard

I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage.... I am...bone of their thought and flesh of their language....I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the workings of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious!... And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human.¹

Like a car accident, in which, in the last moments before impact, the occupants of each vehicle simply close their eyes and give themselves over to the force of physics, the explosive event that the camera flash records represents an instant of mechanical collision with the world. It is a collision that, while it may for all intents and purposes encapsulate a real occasion in time, is nevertheless a moment, some would say of crisis, that exists only through the interpretation of the result—the “real” has been lost somewhere in those seconds of the shutter’s snap. Thus, in the same way that in order to speak of the “truth” of the crash that was to bring two automobiles and individual worlds into violent, often fatal, contact we must begin by piecing together the story that preceded proximity, in order to get to the “truth” that the photograph synthesizes, we need first ask what came before—a before that necessarily includes, in my mind, not only the person(s) driving the camera to that shape-shifting, earth-shattering *click*, but also the forces that steered the individual(s) to this instant of impact. To return, then, to the arguments presented in the preceding chapter, and more importantly to Laura Wexler’s wonderfully evocative notion of *anekphrasis*, again to be understood as “an active and selective refusal to read

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois (1920) qtd. in Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 215.

photography—its graphic labor, its social spaces—even while, at the same time, one is busy textualizing all other kinds of cultural documents,”² I would like to begin my present discussion, one which hopes to make sense of the moment and the trajectory that would bring Louis Agassiz into such charged collision with the black bodies whose reproductive faculties—as sexual subjects, sexual surrogates/screens, and most importantly, as fetishized commodities of spectacular/photographic exchange—would both fuel and mask the libidinal drives that could be said to have propelled much of nineteenth-century science’s investigations and “truth”-tellings regarding the racial Other in general and, for my purposes, the black male in particular, with the assertion that any and all labors towards the iconographic contextualization of the cultural documents before us are to require as much active and studied *detection* as they do direct and candid *introspection*. The conversation that is to follow is, therefore, as much concerned with the histo-material reconstruction of a specific time period (a moment, some would say, of crisis) and the personal proclivities that would synthesize themselves in Agassiz’s slave daguerreotypes, as it remains determined to urge forward an interrogation of the ways in which our contemporary critical reading practices, in all their laudatory deconstructiveness, often serve as screens themselves, shielding us from the subjective rather than objective “truths” of a history that many actively and selectively wish to view as, to take a page from Toni Morrison’s text, “not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”³

² Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 58.

³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 52.

My opening epigraph from Du Bois staging its own moment of eye-opening collision, one in which the head-on returned gaze of the racial Other at once exposes, eviscerates, and steelily penetrates the bodies and machinations of those who would make him the object of what will prove a familiarly Agassizian scientific scrutiny—in DuBois’ text, ‘white folks,’ submitted to the scopic drive of their “specimen,” are stripped and set flying, mangled and damned, in the impingement of a look, a pornographic gaze even, that would give the Other access to their interiors—what some may, perhaps, think my overly indulgent attention to scientist Louis Agassiz’s biography in the chapter that follows is meant to stage a similarly violent rupture of discourses. This clefting intended to lay bare a well-worn plotline that, in confounding the gaze of the scientist with the *gaze of science*, and thereby allowing the individual redress to the cloaking powers of a putative empirical objectivism, serves also to naturalize science’s—even bad science’s or racist science’s—narrative of progressive cultural and technological advance, I will argue also that it is a narrative that ignores the extent to which the “advances” made by early Western science in particular can be said to have been directly inflected by and intended to cater to the very distinctive demands and desires of a minority segment of the population: the white, privileged and learned classes, on the one hand, and, on the other, and most importantly, the white, privileged, and learned *men* who themselves comprised this science’s early circles. Which is to say that the history of the evolution of the “science” that Agassiz is said to represent is, at base, a story of individual exploits (and exploitations), a narrative aimed at self-promotion and advancement more so than universal human achievement—social advancement often the *accident* rather than the *aim* of its inquiries. If we ignore this aspect of the story, a story that is far from innocent in its

far-reaching implications, if we close our eyes and let ourselves be drawn along by the force of a now-established cultural physics that, like photography itself, as according to Laura Wexler, “generates images which are coercive to the extent that they are able to mobilize powerful modes of social behaviour [*sic.*] and appearances according to which the major divisions [and, we should add, hierarchies] of age, race, class and sex are made to appear natural and desirable,”⁴ we are damned to keep crashing in the same car, as is evident in critical interventions with Agassiz’s images that find themselves seeing through Agassiz’s eyes, repeating and naturalizing the same convoluted, and often fatal, peregrinations of domination and desire, simply because the alternative—ignoring appearances and digging through the wreckage to look for answers and impetuses, examining both *his* and *their* own stripped, ugly, human, entrails—has been deemed empirically irrelevant...if not embarrassing and infuriating.

I say, therefore, that while the author of the slave daguerreotypes may be dead, his biography is as much a valid cultural document as the documentations of cultural Otherness that he has left behind at the crash site where personal drives bumped up against the demands of his larger social world. My reading of these photographs viewed as a sort of salvage job, these two texts simply cannot be disentangled from one another. Agassiz’s life in science marked, or marred depending on how one looks at it, by, as biographer Edward Lurie has phrased it, a tendency to “stud[y] nature more subjectively than anyone realized,”⁵ what my interlocutions, or interlopings as the case may be, into this life will hope to reveal is that Agassiz’s decision to move from the study of fossil fish to the study of the black male penis, a move that would prove absolutely instrumental in

⁴ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 4-5.

⁵ Edward Lurie, *Louis Agassiz: A Life in Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 155.

the reliquation of this bit of dark flesh, had both everything and nothing to do with an actual commitment on the scientist's part to the doctrines of racial difference. To approach Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes as the obvious and expected, if alarming, end products of the man's enthusiastic adoption of polygenist beliefs is to both utterly *misinterpret* the import of these images *and* to read them exactly according to plan. No one as yet attempting to unpack that "something more" sensed in the penned account of Agassiz's "sudden conversion" from standard creationism to a polyvalenced racism,⁶ there is something more to be said as well of the "naturalism" that preceded this moment of uncanny crisis, and which would eventually *necessitate* the specimenal switch that would propel Agassiz to success in this country while successfully shielding him from the fallout of a scandal that would briefly place the scientist under the microscopic scrutiny of the public eye. In short, and if Toni Morrison has discussed the ways in which the "Africanist presence" was invoked in the literature of "young America" as a means "to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power; [to serve] as a marker and vehicle for illegal sexuality,"⁷ my discussion of Agassiz's life, both in, out of, and prior to early American ethnography, hopes to reveal the polygenist project that would result in the daguerreotyping of five stripped Africans, most notably the dusky derrieres of two of the men therein pictured, as a mode of scientific and substitutive ass-covering: a slight of hand that made use of difference

⁶ In a now infamous letter to his mother, composed in the wake of his first encounter with Black men in America, a near hysterical Agassiz proclaims, "I hardly dare tell you the painful impression I received, so much are the feelings they [Negroes] gave me contrary to all our ideas of the brotherhood of man and unique origin of our species." Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 257. This letter taken as marking the naturalist's first turns towards polygenist beliefs, it is oft-quoted (and variously translated) in a series of different articles and texts. See, for example, Brian Wallis' "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 39 (Summer 1995): 42-43. Also, rather striking about this bit of correspondence is the evidence that it gives of what seems to be a spontaneously generated phobia in Agassiz: a hypersexualization of the Black male body that borders on the pathological.

⁷ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 51-52.

even while indulging desires rooted in masculine sameness and which was to allow the Swiss-born scientist to continue the sorts of homosocial exchanges that he had grown accustomed to prior to his arrival in America, while maintaining access to the privileges, power, and panoptic disembodiedness of “manliness” as asserted on this side of the pond. If this has yet to be read in these images...crash, boom, bang, “I see in and through them,” I say.

The Return of the Repressed; Or, Louis Agassiz, ‘Viewed from Unusual Points of Vantage’

In an essay which explores Louis Agassiz’s thoroughly “modern,” approach to nineteenth-century science, one which attempted to erase the body of the scientist from the empirical equation and to produce instead a vision of “the scientific seer [as] a pure vessel for the transmission of truth from nature to humanity,”⁸ Laura Dassow Walls says of the Swiss-born naturalist, “While today he is notorious for fighting a losing battle with Darwinian ideas, what carried his fame into our century was his astonishing success in organizing American science into an institution and in promoting his vision of science through innovative, and enormously influential, teaching techniques. Agassiz liked to claim as his greatest achievement neither a theory nor an institution, but a method: ‘I have taught men to observe.’”⁹ Clearly seeing himself as participant in the structuring of a representative apparatus that was to determine both what and how people were to see (I refer you back to my earlier quote from Irit Rogoff), it would seem clear also that the mode of vision suggested by the scientist, if it was to become so “enormously influential”

⁸ Laura Dassow Walls, “Textbooks and Texts from the Brooks; Inventing Scientific Authority in America” *American Quarterly* (March 1997): 3.

⁹ Walls, “Textbooks and Texts,” 1.

in America, served a social need that was to transcend the bounds of science just as the scientist himself promised to transcend the singularity of vision in the service of a greater social “truth.”

While Walls is to offhandedly dismiss Agassiz’s affiliations with the ‘American school’ of ethnology, its polygenetic theories losing out to Darwin just as its white supremacist applications are to be lost in the footnotes of her article, it is this association that makes the “scientific” vision promoted by Agassiz so very interesting. Offering on the one hand a way of looking at *nature*, and the various specimens to be gathered, pickled and preserved therein, it is not to be forgotten that the science that Agassiz forwarded was at the same time absolutely centered on the observation of *bodies*, the “truth” of which the scientist also offered to embalm and immortalize. That a science so focused on the study of the corporeal was to be so pronouncedly invested in the decorporealization of its observers seems to me the greatest irony of the model of scientific scrutiny as forwarded by innovators such as Agassiz. I will argue, however, that this irony was, perhaps, not lost on the men to whom Agassiz’s vision proved so appealing. The renunciation of what Jonathan Crary would call the “carnal density” of the seeing subject—the role of the flesh in determining one’s sight (and the manipulability of such) and the effect that one’s embeddedness in Merleau-Ponty’s “flesh of the world” has on the same—in many ways necessary in order to (re)consolidate a notion of an ordered “reality,” based in ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ truths, during a moment in which white men’s dominance over this increasingly *destabilizing* natural order was being called into question, that desire itself was somehow seen to be at the base of all the current chaos absolutely required, if the white man was to maintain ascendancy, a denial

of his fleshly investments as well as a supposed “de-eroticization” of the white man’s look. That the same look that was to purify the white man and the ‘innocence of his eye’¹⁰ was to petrify the black man within a representational framework dedicated to what is best defined by Ann Laura Stoler as, ‘the pornographic aestheticization of race,’¹¹ is to again prove Foucault’s point that it was only through “systematic blindnesses” that the nineteenth-century’s scientific seers were able to construct “around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth was to be masked at the last moment.”¹² It will also prove crucial in supporting my assertion that the truth behind the visionary apparatus produced by Agassiz and American racial science is that the “essentially lascivious black [male] body was...not born but made,”¹³ made in America, in the mid-1800s, and inaugurated specifically to prop up certain institutionalized systems of white male dominance while masking forms of white male deviance that threatened the same. To get us there, let us begin the biographical, historical, and ideological inquests promised at chapter’s open.

To say that Agassiz was a racist would not be untrue, few would have been found amongst his white contemporaries of which the same could not be said. To say that Agassiz was a racist, would also be apt, although the foreign-born scientist was certainly less virulently so than the majority of those who used his ‘scientific’ treatises on the separate origins of man as justification for the continued oppression and political

¹⁰ John Rusking qtd. in Jonathan Crary’s “Modernizing Vision,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1999), 41.

¹¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s ‘History of Sexuality’ and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 184.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage, 1990), 55-56.

¹³ Cynthia J. Davis, “Speaking the Body’s Pain: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” *African American Review*, vol. 27, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 395. Davis is talking primarily about women—but this just proves how well the production of black *male* lasciviousness has been well hidden.

disenfranchisement of the African in antebellum America. To conclude, as most current day critics have, however, that the main purpose of Agassiz's daguerreotyped study was to offer "empirical proof of the supposed inferiority of his South Carolina subjects"¹⁴ would be a misstatement (if not a patent falsehood), and would indicate, yet again, the remarkable powers of dissimulation that these photos, and the scientific "cover stories" in which the nude black bodies depicted therein have been clothed, continue to exert.

While Agassiz is known to have expressed a belief, both patronizing and stereotypical, in the "submissive, obsequious, imitative [nature of] the negro,"¹⁵ he was not an advocate of the slave system and held that, although of a separate species, Blacks were nevertheless *human* beings and as such were entitled to "legal equality...the common boon of humanity."¹⁶ Legal equality entailing, in Agassiz's mind, the "negro's" basic rights to "freedom, to the regulation of their own destiny, to the enjoyment of their life, of their earnings, of their family circle," the 'inferiority' of the African was of little concern to the scientist as long as Blacks and Whites continued to maintain distinct social spheres; as he himself held, "I believe that a wise social economy will foster the progress of every pure race, according to its natural dispositions and abilities, and aim at securing for it a proper field for the fullest development of all its capabilities...."¹⁷ The unwritten logic of this statement taking as a given that the Black race's "natural dispositions and abilities" placed them in a position inferior to that of whites, the empiricist felt little need to further prove this 'fact' to his nineteenth century audience; and, certainly, there were

¹⁴ Melissa Banta, *A Curious and Ingenious Art: Reflections on Daguerreotypes at Harvard*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 51.

¹⁵ Agassiz qtd. in Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 47.

¹⁶ Quote is taken from correspondence between Louis Agassiz and Dr. Samuel G. Howe, in Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, ed. *Louis Agassiz, His Life and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1886), 67.

¹⁷ E. Agassiz, *His Life and Correspondence*, 599-600.

many others who had already undertaken this task—and had been, for the most part, overwhelmingly successful in this mission—long before Agassiz arrived on American shores. That the races must remain “pure” as they progressed into the future was, however, something that the naturalist felt had to be spelled out/documentated in no uncertain terms.

As such, this would-be young republican is quick to make a distinction between the African-American’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and the same’s right to pursue this happiness outside of the special sphere to which Agassiz’s scientific theories had relegated him: as opposed to legal equality, social equality was “at all times impracticable—a natural impossibility” between two species “more widely different from one another than all other races.”¹⁸ Although it pretends to mean much more—to encompass not only political equality but a host of other ‘progressive’ liberties, liberties only vaguely hinted at but never clearly delineated¹⁹—Agassiz’s “social equality” is, quite simply, a euphemism for the unregulated exchange of sex across racial lines. The very idea of such carnal commingling was, as Agassiz primly protested, “most repugnant to [his] feelings,” the scientist going further to say that such an unholy union, to be supported only if and when “the heavens fall,” was “discordant with natural instincts and cultivated tastes.”²⁰

As Stephen Jay Gould has summed it up, “For Agassiz, nothing inspired more fear than the prospect of amalgamation by intermarriage.”²¹ This may be true enough, but, as Agassiz’s earlier epistle to his *chère maman* has certainly evidenced, this is only

¹⁸ Ibid, 605, 595.

¹⁹ Ibid, 607.

²⁰ E. Agassiz, *His Life and Correspondence*, 599, 614.

²¹ Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 48.

half the story. If Agassiz's "conversion" to the doctrines of polygeny has commonly been held to be based upon the "pronounced visceral revulsion"²² inspired by his first introduction to the black man—a violent bodily response climaxing in a violent modification of his very views on the universe and universal brotherhood—at the moment of this physical and doctrinal epiphany/revelation it is not to the potential admixing of *marriageable* bodies that the wandering son and errant husband (Agassiz had left both mother and *wife* behind in Europe) exhibits this most pronounced reaction, it is to the prospect of immediate physical contact occurring between his own white *male* body and those of the black *men* sent to service him. Indeed, it is hard to ignore in Agassiz's protested revulsion, his intense desire to "stay far away" from these black men's bodies, a barely disguised and fairly convulsive/compulsive straining (perhaps felt in some part of the body other than the viscera) *towards* these same captivating corporealities—especially, as it is Agassiz who describes an encounter that would most surely *not* have included any physical interaction with the domestics of whom he speaks, individuals who would have been well familiar with the trespass that their touch upon a white client would have constituted, as a moment of "prolonged contact." It is also he alone, one might safely assume, who is immediately transported into fantasies of interracial contacts/couplings occurring the world over. These idiosyncrasies observed, one must then reconsider the vicissitudes that underlay the young scientist's intense fixation on the subject of interracial amalgamation. If, as noted in my earliest engagements with current day discourses circulating around Agassiz's daguerreotypes, one spies a sort of libidinal disingenuousness in the retouching that results in Alan Trachtenberg's superimposition of female genitalia overtop of the male genitalia that are

²² Ibid, 44.

the pronounced yet unspoken loci of Agassiz's penetrative study, one might similarly read the scientist's *conversion* of the fear of (and desire for) 'unnatural' male/male sexual interaction across racial lines into the obsession with the repugnancy of racial interbreeding/*amalgamation* as a sort of *reaction-formation* meant to mask, for both scientist and his contemporaneous audience, preoccupations that most surely ran contrary to both "cultivated tastes" and heteronormative reproductive imperatives.

Yes, there is, to paraphrase Alexander Doty, clearly something queer here, actually quite a few things. This said, however, the conversions, substitutions, and preoccupations that underwrote Agassiz's famous early letter, and the more infamous racial texts of his later years, are only able to be fully understood with a look to the wildly popular and much-revered scientist's individual history—a history that has thus far been told only elliptically, its 'meatier' bits relegated to the same blank spots that encompass Jem's and Alfred's dark flesh, and requiring the same sorts of systematic blindnesses to mask the "truth" (from here on in a term forever requiring the caveat of the scare quote) of its subject's erotic investitures and excesses. So, what is it, indeed, that close readings, cross references, and illuminating interpretations of four authorized biographies—as well as one fairly well-secreted trial transcript!—can tell us about the unauthorized narrative of Louis' entrance into the annals of racial study? My findings follow.

A man as renowned for his brilliance as he was for his considerable charm and physical attractiveness—as one incredibly effusive female biographer has gushed, "He was a . . . man with a kind of radiance which [American] ladies had not often seen. High color in his cheeks, dark glowing eyes, a massive head of chestnut hair, and great grace

of bearing. A fine figure of a man!”²³—the fineness of the figure cut by Agassiz was of a sort irresistible to both women *and* men. Men equally inclined to ruminations upon Agassiz’s flushed fluidity and the magnetism emanating from his ‘massive head,’ they were also of consensus in designating him an uncommonly alluring and “fascinating” fellow, the appeal of his “powerful and well-proportioned body, . . . with remarkably large, and at the same time well-formed *hands* [emphasis mine]” matched only by that of the “perfect harmony” of his “mouth and somewhat voluptuous lips . . . with an aquiline nose and well-shaped chin.”²⁴ Even American journalists sent to cover Agassiz’s lecture events were often unable to disengage themselves from the powerful pull that the scientist’s physicality seemed to exercise upon one and all. Often placing the naturalist’s physical virtues ahead of his intellectual faculties, accounts of Agassiz’s public speaking engagements frequently begin not with a tally of the scientist’s various professional credentials, but instead with a catalog of the man’s good looks²⁵ (fig. 2.1).

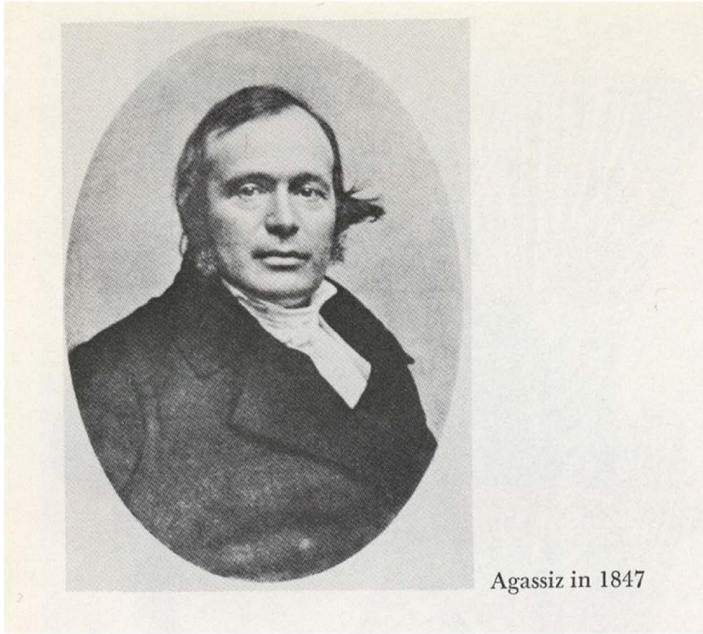
Agassiz’s shocking good looks certainly accounting for much of his appeal to American audiences, one can, in fact, addend that a great deal of Agassiz’s scientific success *in general* found its origin in, and was to be attributed to, his ability to inspire, upon first sight as it were, a devotion both instant and enduring in his fellowmen. As one oft-reported story demonstrates, even in the midst of his tenderest of teen years, Agassiz was already in possession of a “charismatic force”²⁶ of exceeding potency. In an account that offers what, to our contemporary sensibilities, seems a quite blatant example of pre-

²³ Mabel L. Robinson, *Runner of the Mountain Tops: The Life of Louis Agassiz* (New York: Random House, 1939), 164.

²⁴ Jules Marcou, *Life, Letters, and Works of Louis Agassiz*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1896), 217-218. (Marcou’s quote varies from that listed in Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 18.)

²⁵ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 143.

²⁶ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 19.

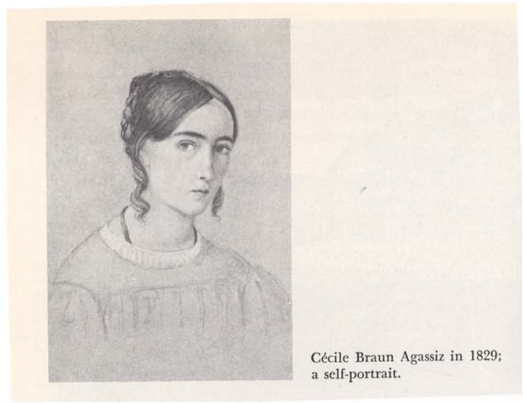


Agassiz in 1847

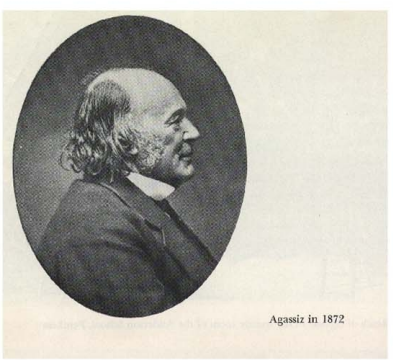


Baron Georges Cuvier about 1832.
(The Bettmann Archive.)

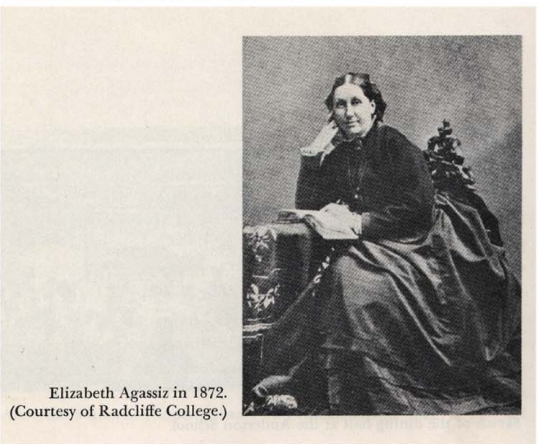
Alexander von Humboldt. (The
Bettmann Archive.)



Cécile Braun Agassiz in 1829;
a self-portrait.



Agassiz in 1872



Elizabeth Agassiz in 1872.
(Courtesy of Radcliffe College.)

Figure 2.1

modern ‘cruising,’ we are told of a certain wealthy Swiss bachelor who, chancing upon Agassiz and his older brother attempting the long hike from their University in Zurich to the small town in Orbe in which they lived, became so taken with the young Louis that he not only offered his “fine carriage” as conveyance for the remainder of the students’ journey, but, upon depositing his engaging new traveling companion at home, quickly petitioned the boys’ parents to agree to allow him to affect a more binding engagement with their younger son. Willing, after only the briefest of encounters, to quite literally pledge his life to the captivating boy who was later to become the apple of the American public’s eye—“For then and there, this fine gentleman from Geneva found the kind of boy whom he would have liked for his son, liked so much indeed, that he decided then and there to look into the matter”²⁷—this fine man proposed, in short order, to provide for both Agassiz’s education and lifelong upkeep and, through legal adoption, to make the boy sole beneficiary of his rather sizeable holdings. While Agassiz declined to entertain the wealthy bachelor’s generous offering, “such was the effect that Louis made...that for as many years as the man lived his letters came regularly to the boy whom he would have liked for a son.”²⁸ Although, if we are to believe Dickens, the European countryside of the 1800s readily produced mystery men willing to adopt a boy as consequence of a single chance meeting, one hardly feels anachronistic in presuming the admiration for Agassiz expressed by his would-be patron as homoerotically, rather than patronymically inspired. And the same might be held for many of the intimate attachments Agassiz would later form with the host of prominent men under whose tutelage he was to labor.

²⁷ Robinson, *Runner*, 49.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

Edward Lurie, the most credible of Agassiz's biographers, can barely contain the (I believe, unmeditated) innuendo that overhangs his final observations on the episode, "The gentleman of the Swiss highway was only the first in a long and impressive series of people [read:men] who, during the course of more than fifty years, were won in an almost magical way to the support of projects, causes, and endeavors inspired and captained by Louis Agassiz.... [Yet the] Agassizes did not need the incident of the affluent gentleman to convince them that their son was no ordinary student."²⁹ And "captained" is a key word here, for while Agassiz was, throughout his, life to be on the receiving end of the ministrations of a series of older men who could constantly be counted upon to provide pecuniary assistance whenever required, the funds extorted from these patrons were, more often than not, necessitated by, and spent to sustain, the often quite large circle of young male intimates that Agassiz kept close at hand, and at service, at all times. Indeed, from his early student days, Agassiz had been known to both board in his small apartment and financially support—much to the chagrin of his already overextended parents—a number of young men whom he employed as artists, consultants, and aids in his scientific strivings. The friendships forged between this intimate and close-quartered fellowship extending well-beyond the professional interests they jointly held—"Almost everything was shared in common; work, pleasure, journeys, pipes, beer, purses, clothes, ideas political and philosophical, or poetical, and even literary"³⁰—all accounts of Agassiz's early years sketch a portrait of the empiricist as the potentate of a utopianly homosocial sphere in which the circulation of knowledge, desire, *and* women was, decidedly, an affair between men.

²⁹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 19.

³⁰ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 22

While I am, of course, borrowing the above terminology and turn of phrase from Eve Sedgwick,³¹ one need never have consulted the methodological architectures of queer theory to chart the frameworks of homoerotic investment and attachment that were concretized within these sequestered realms of male edificatory exchange. It was in one such site, Sendlinger Thor No. 37, a suite of rooms in old Munich where, between 1827 and 1830 (during which time Agassiz would procure doctoral degrees in both philosophy and medicine from the city's most distinguished University), one could find closeted Agassiz and his two closest companions of the time, Alexander Braun and Karl Schimper (both to later become recognized savants in their own right). It was here, too, that Agassiz's plans for future scientific and social sovereignty were first galvanized into action. Although both Braun and Schimper were singular figures and would later garner some renown of their own as scientists, the most prominent figure behind No. 37's façade was clearly Agassiz, who "through the thick tobacco smoke, . . . the rumble of voices in splendid discord[,]. . . dominated the disorder, the noise, the confusion of men and books, even the stray professor in the corner."³² Recognizing in this tangled, almost orgiastic, "confusion of men and books" a sanctified (almost seraglio-esque) space of socially sanctioned all-male intercourse over which he might reign supreme, Agassiz, a man whose fine carriage was hailed by one and all, 'then and there' decided to redirect his prior life-route. Renouncing his previous plans to practice as a medical doctor, this Swiss gentleman-in-training, pledged instead to dedicate himself to the study of natural science and to the sponsorship and instruction of "[his] young countrymen' in the mysteries of

³¹ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985).

³² Robinson, *Runner*, 66-67.

nature.”³³ Associating/‘confusing’ books with men—or, put another way, recognizing that aligning oneself with certain institutionalized forms of knowledge production and circulation often provided ample opportunities for much more intimate, and unlicensed, forms of exchange between men—it is not surprising that Agassiz would later take to studying the male body as if it were an open book, nor that his empirical perusals would so clearly (and cacologically) communicate the *unauthorized* affinities that obviously underwrote these moments of close/penetrative reading. But we are not there yet.

If, the then twenty-three year-old, Agassiz’s plans to rescript himself as great patriarch of natural science—to one day play ‘Platonic’ father to the sons of Switzerland—vaguely recalls that earlier encounter with the “gentleman of the Swiss highway,” he nevertheless realized that the unbeaten path of bachelorhood was simply not a feasible option in a world where “success could be achieved by breaking the ties of environment and doing the unusual; but such feats must be accomplished by personally distinctive yet traditionally acceptable modes of behavior and social relationships.”³⁴ Agassiz knew that he needed a wife with which to present society as surely as he had needed the veil of scientific circumscription to obscure the sorts of private lessons that were most likely taking place behind-doors at his “Little Academy.”

As said before, not only were purses, pleasures, and philosophies shared in common by the inhabitants of the rooms at No. 37, women were equally exchanged as truck in this traffic of and between men. As such, the lucky lady consigned to serve Agassiz as helpmeet, mother to his children, and mummer in a conjugal union/masquerade in which she would never garner the undivided attentions of her

³³ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 45.

³⁴ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 12.

husband was to be Cecile Braun, the younger sister of Agassiz's most bosom of buddies, Alexander Braun. And, indeed, it seems that in those rooms in old Munich Agassiz and the boys had imagined engagements that remain beyond the pale of even Girard's and Sedgwick's calculations. Not only was Agassiz to marry Braun's youngest sister, but Karl Schimper was to tie the knot with the eldest of Braun's female siblings—a knot becoming ever more Gordian in its hyper-Girardian strictures, desire here not triangulated, but closer to rhomboidal in its geometric mapping.

While Agassiz seemed to believe that in his marriage to Cecile Braun he would not only be “merg[ing] his fortunes with a devoted and uncommonly attractive young woman...[while] acquir[ing] membership in a distinguished family,” but, and likely more importantly, “[h]is friend Alexander would now be even closer,”³⁵ this union, both as proposed and as later lived, actually ended up driving a bit of a wedge between the two men. Braun, perhaps because he was, as commonly regarded, “the most reasonable and practical of the three,” and perhaps, more so, because he realized that it was his own flesh and blood at stake, “had the good sense not to go too far”³⁶ with the marital schemes he and his two friends had concocted. Clarifying the terms of his own engagement to the sister of another close friend of the trio (a woman also, and ironically, called Cecile, a name shared, coincidentally, by Agassiz's own younger sister), Braun forged an alliance with that young woman that was known, even by the girl's family, to be a “*mariage de convenance*” rather than a “*mariage d'inclination*.” His honesty allowing his companion to be “[contented] instead of becoming Madame Braun,...to call her old sweetheart ‘son

³⁵ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 77.

³⁶ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 56.

bon frère Alex,³⁷ brother Alex began a campaign to force his fellow bridegrooms to make explicit their own determinations or to break off their engagements to his kindred.

Alex was eventually successful in cutting ties between his older sister and Schimper—a fairly prudent save, as this member of the Stedlinger trio was later to die, after a life of ‘dissipation’ (and a bitter falling out with Agassiz over the latter’s failure to offer proper credit for his contributions to glacial theory³⁸), in a German mental asylum in 1867. The engagement of Cecile and Louis, however, proved impossible to stay. Convinced that his association with Cecile would serve a key function in his pursuit of scientific excellence—guaranteeing his social standing, she was not only the perfect beard but a talented artist as well, whom he had already set to work copying the various specimens to be included in his scientific publications—Agassiz managed to persuade his dubious brother-in-arms, at least for the time being, that he meant to be straight with the girl. In an 1830 letter to his mother, Braun was to confirm Agassiz’s honorable intentions in relation to Cecile; while confirming, at the same time, our suspicions as to the nature of his own relation to the man to whom he would, in turn, be wedded for life. Braun concedes;

You ask me what I think of the bond connecting the friend and the sister...Formerly I hesitated to talk about this; I could not suppress a certain fear because *I knew Agassiz from all sides and always saw two natures in him between which there was as yet no decision*. Therefore I am most happy that now I see only goodness in him...You can see how serious is his love from the copy of a letter I send you and which you will please not show anybody. (Emphasis mine.)³⁹

Although we *are not* shown those letters, we do see others in which Agassiz proclaims in no uncertain terms, “Whatever befalls me, I feel that I shall never cease to

³⁷ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 56.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 208-209.

³⁹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 47.

consecrate my whole energy to the study of nature; its powerful charm has taken such possession of me that I shall always sacrifice everything to it; even the things that men usually value most.”⁴⁰ Why Braun, knowing Agassiz as he did, knowing the passions by which he was possessed—having experienced them firsthand and “from all sides” as it were...I cannot help thinking of my DuBoisian opening—and knowing that his bosom friend had long preferred the *unusual* over the usual ‘things men value,’ would have consented to Agassiz’s engagement to his sister is rather baffling; especially since he might have saved her from a fate in which she was to die young and all but abandoned by the man to whom both she and her brother seem to have been so fiercely devoted.⁴¹ But, as has been suggested, so seductive was the scientist’s allure that most men “surrendered to the determination of Louis Agassiz and [were] pleased to be of service to him,”⁴² even when, as in the case of Braun, such fealty often involved the sacrifice of one’s own flesh/lifeblood.

And now we return to Baron Georges Cuvier, dissector of the “Hottentot Venus,” and one of the earliest and most influential benefactors of our potent young genius. While Agassiz had always posited himself as (a) top amongst men, there was one before whom he was willing to take a prostrate position. Having not only dedicated his first book (a tome entitled *Brazilian Fishes*) to Cuvier, “the only man whom [Agassiz] ever acknowledged as his intellectual master,”⁴³ upon graduation from the University of Munich the young scientist also sent along a letter of introduction to the elder gentleman in hopes that the self-portrait sketched therein would prove sufficiently enticing to inspire

⁴⁰ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 111.

⁴¹ Upon her death, Braun was to say of his sister Cecile, “[She], who has had so many afflictions, has found to-day her rest after her stormy life. She has suffered much.” Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 18.

⁴² Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 63.

his idol to take him in hand. Hoping that Cuvier, too, might think of him as someone ‘he would like for a son,’ Agassiz begins and ends this communiqué with a plea to that within the senior that might make him wish to play sire to the strapping, hotbodied and hotblooded, youth: “Allow me to ask some advice from you, whom I revere as a father...I am strong and robust, know how to swim, and do not fear forced marches...I seem to myself made to be a traveling naturalist. I only need regulate the impetuosity which carries me away. I beg you, then, to be my guide.”⁴⁴ Leaving out only that he liked ‘making love at midnight and getting caught in the rain’ Agassiz’s personalized petition worked its magic and Cuvier was won. Responding to the young man’s missive with sundry advice as to how he might pursue his immediate scientific goals, Cuvier eventually requested Agassiz’s presence in Paris, where it was assumed that the veteran naturalist would take the journeyman in charge and set to himself the task of helping to quell the most violent of the youth’s impulsive urges. Thus, leaving his then still bride-to-be for yet another year (during the course of their six year engagement Agassiz spent very little time in physical proximity to his betrothed Cecile, this trip coming only shortly after his return from the extended stay in Brazil that had produced the volume with which he had presented Cuvier), Agassiz arrived in the city that was the world’s center of natural science in 1831.

Cuvier, at that time amongst the premiere scholars housed at Paris’s National Museum of Natural History, instantly recognizing in the twenty-four year old who appeared on the institute’s doorstep in December something that placed him beyond the ordinary rank file, something beyond the fact that Agassiz had appeared with already two doctorates and over two hundred pages of a manuscript on fossil fish in hand, also

⁴⁴ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 40.

seemed to have seen in the young scientist a kindred spirit: “Cuvier watched the lad intently, and he realized also a truth which must always seem incredible, that here was a *man of his own sort* [emphasis mine].”⁴⁵ Thus, in a move that was both entirely out of keeping with the character of a man said to have had “a love of power and a tyrannical spirit which surprised and grieved some of his best friends,”⁴⁶ and which belied the initial reserve and cold formality of his dealings with Agassiz, “[a]fter a few days of intercourse, Cuvier was so satisfied with [young Louis]”⁴⁷—I do not invent these phrasings—that he granted the consummate charmer use of the Museum’s lab facilities *and* complete access to the coveted fossilized specimens to which the older man claimed propriety. And finally, the *coup de grace*, after only two months of ‘intercourse,’ Cuvier was so gratified at having found in the strong-willed and indefatigable Agassiz “traits...that struck a responsive chord,”⁴⁸ that he was moved to discharge a great portion of his life’s work to the young scientist who had long ago vowed, by any means necessary, to some day be entered as one of his generation’s most seminal savants.⁴⁹

Upon receipt of the entire portfolio of findings Cuvier had amassed in his own studies on fossil fish, Agassiz wrote home victoriously: “M. Cuvier...has been led to make surrender of all his materials in my favor. I foresaw that this was my only chance of competing with him.... Had I not done so, M. Cuvier might still be in advance of me. Now my mind is at rest on the score.”⁵⁰ A man loathe to be long positioned beneath

⁴⁵ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 231.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁴⁸ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 57.

⁴⁹ In a letter to his father in 1829 Agassiz had proclaimed, “I wish it may be said of Louis Agassiz that he was the first naturalist of his time, a good citizen, and a good son, beloved by those who knew him. I feel within myself the strength of a whole generation to work toward this end, and I will reach it if the means are not wanting.” Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 30.

⁵⁰ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 57.

anyone, Agassiz had made quite a score, indeed, one far out of proportion to whatever Cuvier might have copped from his young companion, as in addition to providing our conquering hero the material means by which to assure the success of his career in science (and with which to ‘tear down his master’s house’), Agassiz’s relation to Cuvier was also to furnish the cultural capital required to affect this rise to eminence. Cuvier, allowing Agassiz access not only to all that the Museum had to offer but also into the inner sanctum of his home and private study (where the protean protégé is said to have spent many long hours in intimate consultation with his ever-attentive mentor⁵¹), it was soon after their initial embrace that the senior scientist was to introduce the youth into the inner circle of his celebrated Saturday evening soirées, “the gathering place of all the most original thinkers in Paris.”⁵² Amongst the most original of these thinkers would most certainly have been cast the extraordinary Alexander von Humboldt, the “one person in all of Paris who equaled Cuvier in power, political influence, and commanding rank in natural history.”⁵³ The next in Agassiz’s string of scientific sugardaddies, Humboldt proved an invaluable source of income to Agassiz and an even more precious connection in terms of “shaping Agassiz’s outlook towards the world.”⁵⁴

“Geographer, geologist, world traveler, . . . philosopher of nature . . . Councilor of state and court chamberlain to the Prussian monarchy,” Humboldt stands as a most remarkable figure in gay and lesbian history (into the annals of which his name, unlike Agassiz’s, has officially been entered) as well as in the history of Louis Agassiz’s rise to

⁵¹ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 42; and Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 56.

⁵² Lurie, *Life, Letters*, 56.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 64.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 65.

international renown.⁵⁵ A man known for both making and breaking the careers of many a young scientific talent, renowned also, “because of his devastating tongue...as the terrible Humboldt, a man who slew both enemies and friends with biting brilliant sarcasm,”⁵⁶ the habitually arch aristocrat is said to have felt an ‘instant attraction’ to the young man who came to him having already earned Cuvier’s enthusiastic and unequivocal backing:

Louis walked into his laboratory in the Latin Quarter one day, and never did the strange magic of his charm perform a greater miracle. Humboldt looked at the young man, ingenuous, keen-eyed, sure of himself yet with tribute in his hands; and exceedingly good to look at in his strength and youth and poverty....“Come to breakfast with me ,” he said, and took him around the corner to the Café Procop, a place so celebrated that Louis had not dared to enter it....The two parted warm friends.⁵⁷

This first meeting described in the most romantic of terms, the story of Humboldt’s involvement with Agassiz is, in many ways, a Cinderella story of sorts, the older man playing both fairy godmother and wealthy prince to the young ward who was soon to be left orphaned and adrift with the untimely death of his former mentor (and master) Cuvier.

If Agassiz had “determined to model his intellectual efforts after Cuvier,”⁵⁸ Humboldt was to serve as a guide in more worldly matters, “things he could not have learned from former teachers and only dimly understood from his short acquaintance with Cuvier.”⁵⁹ Offering Agassiz a crash course in what might, euphemistically, be called ‘cosmopolitanism,’ Humboldt, “by personal example and intimate advice,”⁶⁰ taught the

⁵⁵ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 64.

⁵⁶ Robinson, *Runner*, 90-91.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 91.

⁵⁸ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

⁶⁰ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 66.

youth how to become a ‘man of the sort’ that he, and presumably (but less flamboyantly) Cuvier were to be recognized as. Below I offer an extended excerpt from Edward Lurie’s account of the exchange:

[T]he older man and his young friend did not talk often of science or metaphysics. Humboldt’s teaching was more personal, its implications as challenging to Agassiz’s imagination as thoughts of great explorations. With Humboldt he went to dinner at fine restaurants, where the bill of fair was far beyond the reach of an impecunious student. He had permission to visit his new friend as often as he pleased. “How much I learned in that short time!” Agassiz fondly recalled. “How to work, what to do, and what to avoid; how to live; how to distribute my time; what methods of study to pursue—these were the things he taught to me. . . .” These were lessons not to be learned in museums. They were modes of behavior, and Agassiz absorbed with uncommon interest the manner of a man of science and the world, a man who was an adviser to kings, a friend to artists and poets and a respected figure in polite society. “He was as familiar with the gossip of the fashionable and dramatic world as with the higher walks of life and the abstruse researches of science,” Agassiz noted with pride. . . . He became Agassiz’s model of the scientist who knew fame and distinction because of his understanding of the larger world, of power, prestige, personal influence, and the social and institutional support requisite for intellectual activity.⁶¹

The model offered by Humboldt, clearly of the Greek ilk, seems to have also offered some valuable lessons as to discretion; we are told that it was based upon Humboldt’s example that Agassiz was later, in his American incarnation, to recognize the virtue in, as “Humboldt did while in Paris. . . . ke[eping] two residences, a ‘public dwelling’ . . . and a private room of unknown location where he could work undisturbed.”⁶² This said, prudence was never to be the impetuous Swiss scientist’s strong suit, nor were his private workings as discretely sequestered. And it was because of Agassiz’s repeated failure to follow his leader in relation to this tract in particular that Humboldt’s continued friendship proved most indispensable to Agassiz’s career and continued success.

⁶¹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 65-66.

⁶² *Ibid*, 126.

The sudden death to cholera of Georges Cuvier in May of 1832 might very well, if it had not been for the timely interference of Alexander von Humboldt, harbingered a similar decline in Agassiz's own professional prospects. While the death of the master should have guaranteed, as surely as had his conferment of the crowning works of his career, Agassiz's swift coronation as reigning heir to the title of natural science's premiere figure, the young scientist had not counted on the animosity that was harbored against him by several amongst his Parisian colleagues. Loathe to see the foreigner advanced further from a position which many seemed to have felt he had garnered through favor rather than hard work, the mad scramble to take over the positions that Cuvier's death had left vacant became quite unsavory, and with Cuvier's "protection withdrawn, the young scholar found himself surrounded and attacked by intrigues."⁶³ Luckily, Agassiz had secured, in Humboldt, a surrogate protector and surviving savior. Turning in supplication to his German fairy godfather (I continue the Cinderella analogy), he received not only the support needed to hold him over in Paris for the time being—along with a check for one thousand francs, Humboldt forwarded the sentiments, "A man so laborious, so gifted, and so deserving of affection as you are should not be left in a position where lack of serenity disturbs his power to work"⁶⁴—but also a professorship in the Swiss village of Neuchâtel. Although this position in small-town Switzerland was considered, by some, to be beneath the ambitions of one so talented as Agassiz, it was a post that saved him from potentially falling prey to the cutthroat politics of his chosen profession as practiced *chez les Parisiens*, and it also placed him in a fairly exalted position amongst his fellow citizens, as with the appointment came the distinction

⁶³ Robinson, *Runner*, 96. For more on the death of Cuvier and Agassiz's subsequent difficulties, see Ibid, 96-98; Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 64-71; and Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 46-49.

⁶⁴ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 66-67.

that he was a gentleman with ties to the Prussian monarchy, whose influence Humboldt had enlisted in order to secure the station for his young charge.

Despite this temporary salvation, Agassiz would soon enough be forced to enlist Humboldt's favor to save him from yet another 'less than serene' situation into which failed circumspection would cast him, and which threatened to unsettle the advanced social-standing that he had come to achieve thanks to the affectionate elder's advice and aid. Seven months after the dear departure of Cuvier finding Agassiz newly arrived in Neuchâtel and newly wed—as Humboldt would tell him, "It is not enough to be praised and recognized as a great and profound naturalist; to this one must add domestic happiness as well"⁶⁵—Agassiz's marriage to the sister of Alexander Braun had done little to curb the naturalist's appreciation for the homosocial living arrangements he had so cherished in his early days of 'scientific' discovery. Refusing to embrace the more domestic(ated) lifestyle expected of him after marriage, in little time Agassiz had once again populated his private quarters, quarters now shared with his wife and, later, his three children, with a peculiar bunch of 'houseboys.' This new crew included both familiar male faces—amongst these those of former schoolchum Schimper (before the split) and Arnold Gruyot, sibling by birth to the wife of 'dear brother' Braun and later founder of the Princeton Museum of Natural History—as well as a newly-acquired, and fairly untamed and irreverent, band of scientific eccentrics with whom Agassiz became acquainted during the numerous explorations he was to conduct during this time period both at home and abroad.

His rather prim and proper wife Cecile having taken a fairly instant dislike to the strange bedfellows with whom she was expected to divide both her house and her

⁶⁵ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 78.

husband—“jokes of doubtful politeness were indulged in; remarks rather satirical, cynical, and anti-religious were not rare”⁶⁶—a distaste heightened, particularly after the births of her children, by the fact that the money used to board this unruly lot (at one point numbering as many as twelve men) was being siphoned from the already meager income with which she was expected to provide food for her family’s mouths. It was, however, Cecile’s husband’s relationship with, and the unrestrained appetites of, one of these men in particular that led to the ruin of Agassiz’s marriage and almost destroyed his scientific career. The man was Edward Desor, who, from the beginnings of his association with Agassiz, was considered by both Agassiz’s wife and family to “exert an unwholesome influence over [the naturalist’s] affairs,”⁶⁷ and who was later said to have established a dynamic in the men’s volatile relationship in which the young apprentice hired as Agassiz’s personal secretary/servant “had subtly become his master.”⁶⁸

If this last observation seems rather ironic considering Agassiz’s earlier courtship and subsequent conquest of his ‘only acknowledged master,’ Georges Cuvier, it begins to appear very much like poetic justice once understood that it was, in fact, after Cuvier that Agassiz was attempting to model himself in taking the younger man on as amanuensis: “For Louis had always cherished a secret longing for the able, selfless helper who belonged body and soul to Cuvier in the old Paris days.”⁶⁹ Cuvier having come to represent, for Agassiz, the epitome of the ‘great man of science,’ an idealized form that Agassiz had from boyhood been so determined to himself embody, much of the allure attached to this exalted and almost omnipotent position for Louis was, as I have

⁶⁶ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 245.

⁶⁷ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 112.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

⁶⁹ Robinson, *Runner*, 131.

suggested, owing to the purchase it might provide the ambitious scientist *over* the young men he imagined in turn adopting as his underlings (...amongst other things). Seeing in Cuvier's assistant, Charles L. Laurillard, a man who "was completely devoid of any ambition, except to receive and always deserve the approbation of Cuvier,"⁷⁰ it is not surprising that Agassiz, himself an individual who "wanted to be surrounded at all times by pupils or admirers,"⁷¹ should become obsessed by the aspiration to "get, as soon as his means would allow it, his own Laurillard."⁷² Once again caught up in a 'confusion of men and books,' Agassiz seemed to have believed that people were to be catalogued and added to one's private collection in much the same way that inanimate objects might, and that a rare and precious collection of both were the distinguishing marks of a man of means. This associational slippage is made clear in biographer Lurie's assessment of the situation: "Agassiz felt compelled to create an environment that reflected his social, public, and professional distinction. Late in 1836 he decided that a private secretary and his own publishing house were primary requirements for intellectual achievement."⁷³

Yet while Agassiz might very well have acceded to the position once occupied by the great collector Cuvier, he lacked the *sangfroid* of Laurillard's master. Agassiz was never able to maintain the professional aloofness of Cuvier, nor the public prudence required of one of such high-standing. Unlike the man who "treated Laurillard with dignity, never familiarity, much less a spirit of comradery and companionship" and who had been clever enough to engage a servant who while "often accompany[ing] Cuvier on his journeys...had the great tact to remain in his subordinate position of assistant, taking

⁷⁰ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 116.

⁷¹ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 232.

⁷² *Ibid*, 116.

⁷³ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 107.

care to keep himself always in the background,”⁷⁴ Agassiz “never knew how to keep his assistants at a distance. They were soon become intimate with him, or were allowed privileges not proper to their subordinate position.”⁷⁵ In the case of Desor, it seems fairly evident that from the very beginning Agassiz was looking for an assistant who would serve more as second spouse than secretary; approaching the father of yet another close friend with his list of specifications as regarded his ideal administrator, Agassiz is said to have entreated the man who would be matchmaker, “If you can find for me somebody of that sort, Papa Vogt, I shall bless the day which has brought me here.”⁷⁶ “Papa” soon produced Desor, *né* P. J. Édouard, and from the moment of the blessed event of his arrival at Neuchâtel conferred upon the supposed servant were all of the privileges, and prominence, of the most sanctified position he was in fact to occupy in Agassiz’s home.

Agassiz’s wife, quite understandably, did not relish being supplanted by the hired consort who in no time had taken over both run of the house as well as her husband. Receiving no set salary, but rather being paid out of Agassiz’s personal pocket—“‘When Agassiz had money, he gave what was wanted,’ ... a singularly unbusiness-like arrangement”⁷⁷—it is said that Desor urged Agassiz to spend extravagant sums on various unnecessary expenses, many of which were to provide for the assistant’s ‘personal indulgences,’ one such exorbitance entailing the secretary’s commission of his *own* private assistant to perform the various mundane tasks abandoned in lieu of the more pressing imperatives to which Desor directed himself. This first assistant not responding well to the “continual and rather severe exactions of Desor...the head man, and not any

⁷⁴ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 116.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 118.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

easy one to please,” a second assistant’s assistant, one willing to be “kept...very close, and punished... remorselessly by sharp reprimands,”⁷⁸ was added to the list of Agassiz’s increasing household expenditures. Add to this the fact that Agassiz was increasingly spending greater amounts of time away from his home, holed up in a private mountain retreat/laboratory and in the exclusive company of these men he considered so necessary to his scientific endeavors, and one understands the hostilities that must have been brewing up *chez* Cecile.

Despite the admonitions of both his friends and his mother, the latter being one whom the scientist had always trusted as supreme confidant, Agassiz ignored the warning signs that his already strained domestic and financial situations were headed for collapse; ignored also were the indicators that his intimacy with Desor might prove costly to Agassiz’s professional aspirations as well. If Cuvier’s Laurillard was a man with no individual ambitions, Agassiz’s Édouard possessed a determination and drive for personal advancement that rivaled that of Agassiz himself. Having come to Agassiz with little training in science and even less knowledge of his master’s chosen discipline, within two years Desor had picked up enough of natural history to begin to make small contributions to Agassiz’s works.⁷⁹ Unfortunately for Agassiz, however, no contribution made by Desor was ever, in the secretary’s own mind, insignificant. Seeing himself as a naturalist worthy of both the title and distinctions by which it was to be accompanied, Desor began to insist upon recognition as Agassiz’s personal collaborator and equal partner. This self-aggrandizing vision leading Desor to take a great many liberties in his dealings and correspondence with the numerous distinguished colleagues with whom

⁷⁸ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 151.

⁷⁹ For more on Desor’s history and previous training see Marcou, 118-122; see also *Ibid*, 222-223.

Agassiz maintained contact, Agassiz often found himself consumed with the task of putting out the various fires his secretary's insolence had occasioned in fellow members of his scientific community; more damaging to Agassiz' career, master often sided with servant in these disputes, thus losing many a potential professional ally due to his inability to separate himself as scientist from his personal interests/intimate investments as man of the world.

As another of Agassiz's biographers, Jules Marcou, a personal acquaintance of the scientist, presents the case, "Science and friends working in the same field were everything [to Agassiz]. 'Agassiz et ses amis,' or 'Agassiz et ses compagnons de voyages,' became supreme....Desor saw this very quickly and took advantage of it....It was an unfortunate day for the future of Agassiz when Desor entered his service."⁸⁰ Setting himself, thus, to the one task that even Agassiz's wife had been unable to accomplish, Desor embarked upon a campaign to achieve a position of primacy in Agassiz's life. Establishing himself first as Agassiz's ultimate and most intimate 'friend in the field'—"Agassiz was...convinced that he needed Desor's services for the success of his scholarly ventures"⁸¹—he then began slowly but surely to drive away all others who might stake claims to equal portions of the scientist's attentions. "[Desor] dominating the Neuchâtel establishment by devious manipulations that had shaken the confidence of the men who worked there," many of these men began to quit Agassiz's side in the wake of the assistant's ascension, amongst them the scientist's oldest, if 'constitutionally weak,' friend Schimper. This ancient foundation at last unsettled in 1840, Desor set to work in earnest on the woman to whom Agassiz had pledged to be eternally joined.

⁸⁰ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 122.

⁸¹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 113.

Cecile having “despised” from the beginning the man she found “to be a crude, vain, irresponsible person,”⁸² Desor seemed to have returned this dislike in spades, all the more so because the wife was a constant voice in Agassiz’s ear urging him to reevaluate his relationship with the secretary. Desor’s “frequent off-color remarks” and “harassing”⁸³ presence in the house serving as “a constant source of annoyance to her,”⁸⁴ Mrs. Agassiz had, like her husband, chosen to undertake frequent absences from the Neuchâtel home that she had long ago recognized could not in any earnestness be called her own. In 1845, after nine years of Desor’s torment had made her homelife “intolerable,” and with the family facing near bankruptcy due to the collapse of Agassiz’s publishing venture and the various debts amassed as a result of Agassiz’s extravagant and indiscreet expenditures, Cecile had had enough. “Feeling strongly that Desor was the essential cause of all her domestic unhappiness,...[she] evidently pleaded with Louis to get rid of Desor and, her pleas ignored, determined to take direct action.”⁸⁵ Agassiz’s wife left him that spring and, taking the children with her, retreated to the home of her brother Alex.

The dissolution of his marriage, as well as the widely-publicized failure of his scientific business venture, coupled with increasing gossip in the scientific and lay community concerning his relation to Desor, threatening to unmount the career and the public persona that Agassiz had worked so arduously to construct, the now mature scientist turned again for succor to the old friend who had so helped him in his youth.

⁸² Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 112.

⁸³ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 245. Marcou says, “That Agassiz thought that he was acting wisely in receiving...Desor at his table..., and giving a room in his apartment to Desor, there is no doubt. But, in the long run, the scheme proved expensive, and most harassing to his wife.”

⁸⁴ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 113.

Alexander von Humboldt, charged once more with ‘shaping the way in which Agassiz looked to the world,’ took advantage yet again of his ties to the king of Prussia and secured Agassiz passage to America, where it was hoped that the naturalist would be able to regain professional and public esteem and, as such, return to his homeland both face and scientific career saved: “Success in America was for [Agassiz] a necessity, as he plainly saw....”⁸⁶

Agassiz in America: Polygenesis, Sexual Politics, and Other “Perfidious Influences”

It is important at this juncture to step away from what may, at first, appear to be a rather ‘unscholarly’ scrutiny of those elements of Louis Agassiz’s life *avant* America that seem best suited for inclusion in a nineteenth-century scandal sheet rather than in a discussion of nineteenth-century science, in order to attempt to understand the ways in which the narrative presented in this unofficial story can be said to have inflected upon, if not directed, the empirical discourse(s) that would end in the scientifically-sanctioned daguerreotyping of Jem and Alfred’s dark manhood. Far from offering, or endorsing, a simplistic and, even more pernicious, irresponsibly *anachronistic* argument inferring that an ‘outing’ of Agassiz might explain all—my insistence on the homoerotic energies that circulate around the images of these stripped black slaves to be unequivocally authorized by the attribution of homosexual tendencies to the author of this pornographically polygenesist project—I hope to suggest a much more complicated account of Agassiz’s

⁸⁶ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 277.

investitures, both public and personalized, in the body of the black man as first encountered in America.

Having indicated that Agassiz's timely escape to the States was necessitated as much by his personal indiscretions as it was by his professional missteps, what my summary (and studied decoding) of Agassiz's early life, both in and out of science, has hoped to reveal is the large extent to which the personal and the professional seem to have been absolutely intertwined for the naturalist. His choice of vocation as well as his success therein both apparently founded upon the young scientist's penchant for the company of men, as well as his inclination to form the most intimate of attachments to his male confreres, particularly those who were 'men of his sort,' it seems that the pursuit, and the exchange, of scientific knowledge was, for Agassiz, always "an impulse born of desire" (I refer again to the epigraph with which I opened the previous chapter)—science, and its circles, serving for the young licentiate as both mediator and *mask* for the exchange of otherwise unsanctioned desires for and between men.

Agassiz and those amongst his more cosmopolitan former colleagues in Europe were, in fact, by no means alone in taking this view of the exclusive and exclusively fraternal society that the scientific community constituted in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In his move to America, Agassiz would have found many who similarly saw the profession as a domain in which, with the privilege of membership, one was also afforded certain male-male affectional opportunities that remained beyond the pale of those allowed amongst the ordinary citizenry. As Dana Nelson underscores in her *National Manhood*, a study of early American consolidations of white male identity and fraternal citizenship, in an age in which the formation of a coherent (at once unified and

hierarchically delineated), authoritative, and visible (if abstracted) white male subjectivity had become a national project, the medical field (which during this time period would have also included natural science within its parameters) was regarded by many Americans as an “effeminate” profession. Although practitioners were “overwhelmingly male, and [the field] required both 'manly reason' and book learning,” the fact that in an age in which the competition of the marketplace had become one of the main arenas in which American ‘manhood’ was constituted, scientists and medical professionals “conducted their activities away from concentrations of men and power...direct[ing] their activities as much at nurture as competition” and hence their chosen area of application “conferred a lower status than other nineteenth-century professions.”⁸⁷

So saying, and as Nelson would later suggest, American science was to go to great lengths to rescript itself as an occupation that, while quite “sentimental” in its valuation of the bonds forged “behind the veil” and behind closed doors within this secret society, was, in its heart of hearts, decidedly un- if not *anti*-feminine. Of the two major fields of scientific inquiry within which the United States was first to establish itself as a force worthy of recognition on an international scale, gynecology and ethnography, the latter as much as the former was distinctly, if not desperately, concerned with the policing of female (specifically *white* middle-class female) sexuality and reproduction. Whereas one might say that the gynecological and obstetric fields addressed the threatening potentiality of women’s libidinal and procreative powers on a more localized level, racial science quite obviously shared a most intimate investment in the same, particularly

⁸⁷ Anthony Rotundo qtd. in Dana D. Nelson’s *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 131-133.

insomuch as the aforementioned carried such heavy sway as related to the global future of white male patriarchal authority. The fear of racial amalgamation matched in intensity only by the growing discomfiture occasioned by (white) women's increasingly empowered social positioning as well as their increasingly vocal claims to even further enfranchisement, these American fields of specialization, once viewed dubiously in terms of both merit and amorphous positionality as 'manly' pursuit, purchased their legitimacy—as well as, I will try to argue, a tacit public acceptance of any illegitimate expenditures of libidinal energies that might take place amongst their male practitioners—through the disciplining of white women and the display of the racial Other.

While 'the woman problem' will be addressed more explicitly in the coming chapter on Stowe, a quick gloss of the gender wars being waged on the front onto which Agassiz landed in 1846 is absolutely necessary for the conversation at hand. As numerous social and literary historians have noted, in addition to the cultural shifts that would come to locate the home as the moral seat of the republic, and thus attribute to the female who oversaw this establishment a hitherto unprecedented sway in terms of her abilities to mold both the hearts and minds of the men who were to govern the general polis—a cultural turn which Ann Douglas, generating heated debates amongst later feminist scholars such as Jane Tompkins, has derisively dismissed as the "feminization" of American culture—with the industrial advances that were to give rise to the earliest urban centers and in turn spell the demise of America's former agrarian existence and ideals, more and more women were actually leaving these same homes, to become both economically and practically manumitted from the various constraints, and the fathers,

under the rule of which they had once lived. Additionally, the 1830s onward seeing a huge increase in women's participation and ability to set policy within various reform groups (American abolitionism, in particular, known to have produced such boisterous advocates for the condition of the female slave as Lydia Maria Child, the Grimké sisters, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton amongst others), grumblings regarding women's suffrage had begun even earlier in the century and seemed to signal a worldwide revolt in that American women were obviously following the lead of, and were closely in league with, their sisters across the pond on this count.⁸⁸

Colonial European science can be credited, as the previously cited Gilman article confirms, with having initiated some of the earliest attempts to counter white women's claims to greater freedom through the circulation of authoritative theories that, in their rehearsed collapse of the distinctions between sex and savagery, hoped to posit these women as subjects equally requiring submission to the white man's civilizing mission—white women's sexuality conceived, as Freud would later and most famously articulate, as “a dark continent” demanding domestication, comparisons that equated both the body and *mind* of (white) woman with those of the ‘childlike’ races encountered in colonial journeys of enslavement reinforced women's position as worthy of a similar paternalistic supervision: “The colonial mentality which sees ‘natives’ as needing control is easily transferred to ‘woman.’”⁸⁹ However, when, by 1833, slavery had been outlawed in both

⁸⁸ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 103.

⁸⁹Gilman, Sander L. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature.” In *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 223-259. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986. ; and Gilman, “Black Bodies,” 256. See also Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.” 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson. 1955. 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986), 20: 212.

France and the British territories, such parallels could no longer be feasibly enlisted, at least within public parlance, as guiding principles.

Even in antebellum America, representatives of the patriarchal power structure were finding such arguments ever more difficult to make; especially insofar as abolitionist-feminists had already co-opted the equation in order to rally public opinion against the maltreatment of the black female slave. These women arguing first that if both paternalism and the chivalric code called for the protection and superintendence of the “weaker sex,” then *all* women, regardless of skin color, merited the consideration due those of such innate and “shrinking delicacy,”⁹⁰ they would also be able to invoke the language of sentimental abolitionism as a basis for lobbying for the increased rights of white middle-class women as well. According to these early suffragists, if white women were too be regarded as supposedly superior by virtue of their racial (and socioeconomic) affiliations, they were, nevertheless, no better than slaves if they were to be held to be utterly subordinate to men on both the political and physical level. As one 1856 letter between two prominent affiliates of the women’s rights movement nicely sums up this latter sentiment:

[I]t is clear to me that question underlies the whole movement, and all our little skirmishes for better laws and the right to vote, will yet be swallowed up in the real question viz.: Has woman a right to herself? It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, etc., thousand can do that if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right. Not one wife in a now.⁹¹

Faced with the daunting task, then, of justifying not only the American refusal to immediately follow their overseas brethren in the emancipation of the African, but also of

⁹⁰ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 87.

⁹¹ See Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 97.

developing new and improved ways of devaluing (white) women's threatening claims to social and sexual isopolity, this country's two newest authoritative endeavors quickly stepped to the plate, and onto the radar of the international scientific community.

Discovering an apparatus finally able to bring enlightenment to even the deepest regions of the 'heart of darkness,' in 1845 American medical surgeon and sometimes merchant, J. Marion Sims, also known as the "Architect of the Vagina," introduced the speculum to the medical practice. A man who had priorly lived in self-confessed horror of the genitals of the fair sex—often referring women with 'female complaints' to other physicians rather than submit himself to such loathsome examinations, Sims would later admit in his autobiography that in the inauguratory years of his practice, "if there was anything I hated it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis"⁹²—it was through the invention and insertion of the device first christened the "Sims speculum," best used on women placed in the medically-necessitated 'doggie-style' of the "Sims position," that the man who would come to be known as the "father" of the gynecological practice was, indeed, able to perform one of the most remarkable feats of surgical finesse that America had yet seen. I refer not to the groundbreaking (and breathtakingly sadistic) operations that resulted in remedying the vesico-vaginal fistula, but rather to Sims' ability to provide relief, in one nimble suturing, to man's fear of woman's excessive sexuality and, by extension, to the white man's fear of the racial other (the horror, and hatred, of that which takes place in the dark), through the illumination, conquest, and resculpting of the vagina as both the foundation of woman's identity (as Sims famously suggested, just as no two faces are the same, so too the vagina uniquely identifies its owner) and the dedeed

⁹² Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 93.

property of the white patriarchy—its representatives alone privy to both the secrets of this fleshy frontier and the means by which to mold, repair, or even raze its walls.⁹³

As G.J. Barker-Benfield writes, “Sims raised himself from obscurity to the dazzle of success by the elevation of woman’s organs from darkness into the light.”⁹⁴ Or, as Sims himself would record, “Introducing the bent handle of a spoon, I saw everything as no man had ever seen before...The Speculum made it perfectly clear from the beginning.... I felt like an explorer in medicine who first views a new and important territory.”⁹⁵ ‘Hated investigation’ turned gloriously self-making and self-aggrandizing narrative of destiny made manifest through the taming of a terrifying and uncharted wilderness, Sims, who, it should be pointed out, is said to have harbored misgivings as to his suitability to the demands of American manhood (small in stature, unsure of his own intellectual ability, and prone to suffer from nervous disorders, his early life was plagued with doubts as to whether he would be able to “go out into the rough world, making a living as other men do”⁹⁶), is to be credited, as well, with having single-handedly carved out a niche in which American gynecology would come to bear the patent stamp of virility. In a country known for its pioneering spirit, “[t]he spate of gynecological activity in America and America’s international prominence in gynecology were characterized by flamboyant, drastic, risky and instant use of the knife.”⁹⁷

⁹³ See Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*: “Sims very soon came to ‘look upon the knife not as the last weapon, but as the first.’ He became famous for his surgical appetite, and it was largely Sims’ successful career that served as the catalyst in speeding up the tendency toward general, frequent, and drastic use of the knife in American gynecology” (94). “Sims’ career was devoted to countering the dark power of woman, of overcoming his hatred by his use of the knife” (107).

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 92.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 95. As Barker-Benfield adds, “[Sims’ obituary writer Dr. W. O.] Baldwin caught up the metaphor: ‘Sims; speculum has been to diseases of the womb...what the compass is to the mariner....’ Sims could see himself as a Columbus, his New World the vagina.” Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 95.

⁹⁶ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 166.

⁹⁷ Baker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 90.

If American science succeeded where European science had failed, in terms of the mission to generate a sovereign discourse that would not only substantiate woman's position as man's ward while quelling anxieties concerning the chaos which her unchained sexuality might ward for the future of patriarchal purity, at the same time being able to meet the challenges of an age in which the divine providence of the white man was itself being questioned, it was because more than promoting a mode of social control in which woman's sexual expenditures were quite literally policed at knifepoint, it was able to invert earlier notions of woman's interiority being written *on the body* and inscribe instead a narrative in which woman's interiority—her thoughts, desires, and the actions these produced—were determined *by her body*, more specifically by her genitals. And if this body, which she herself could never know as well as the men who had discovered a unique access back into the place from which they had first been ejected, could be remolded, so too could her mind and behaviors. The crucial difference between the old and the new science thus rests on discipline. Knowledge being nine-tenths of possession, until it could be guaranteed that woman's sexuality, like her body, could be both apprehended and controlled, it was risky to pin one's philosophies as to the nature and naturalness of sex-based gender distinctions on organic specificities that were as yet uncharted, ineffably horrifying, and potentially subject to change. The scientific discipline of gynecology, and the speculum Sims gave the States, however, 'made everything perfectly clear from the beginning.' Providing, for the first time, a detailed blueprint of the internal landscape that lay beneath the mound of Venus, Sims' subdermal investigations, like Cuvier's taxidermal exploitation of the celebrated posteriors of his

own dark Venus, were able to structure the female sex as a stable, subject to even further fixture at the hands of man.

Gynecology derived its power, then, from the fact that while external bodily signs of sexual difference might be as inconstant as the women whom it quite literally had to force to perform the conjugal functions of faithful wives, it offered a vision of woman's sexual distinctiveness as both housed and *vaulted* in the very depths of her *being*; in short, women might call for a change in gender roles, but they could never change their genitals. And so long as this was the case, and woman "was what she is in health, in character, in her charms, alike of body, mind and soul because of her womb alone"⁹⁸ it was incontrovertible that her very *raison d'être* was to give issue to the fruits of this womb. Separate spheres were then, of course, in keeping with the natural order of things; the health of the womb would be negatively affected by the physical pressures of the masculine world, which would lead, in turn, to various mental disorders on woman's part—as is well known, *hysteria* is literally translated to mean suffering of the uterus. And finally, these logics taken to the next level, woman could never claim to 'keep her body, and its uses, in her absolute right,' because her reproductive organs were not only the seat of her identity, they were the seat, birthright, and justified subject of surveillance, of the nation. In response to the question, "Why take so much trouble with a fibroid?," Sims is said to have insisted that "[c]hildbearing was the foundation of legal male identities—'perpetuation of names,' 'descent of property,' 'welfare of the State,' and 'permanence of government.'"⁹⁹ Operative in Sims' reasoning, therefore, is a vision of woman not only or simply reduced to her childbearing properties, but, the organs of her

⁹⁸ Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 88-89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 110.

parturition here become the unique property of man, women themselves become abstracted from the very process of reproduction and men take over. Name, property, governance, and the State all falling under the purview of man's power, woman becomes simply the conduit through which he *reproduces himself*; in much the same way that, attributed a godlike generative power in the obituary that eulogizes him—" [I]t took Galileo, Herschel, Gregory, and Sir Isaac Newton to invent successive parts of the telescope. Sims alone discovered his speculum, and like Minerva from the brain of Jupiter, it sprang from his hands alone, full fledged and perfect when he gave it to the world"¹⁰⁰—the gynecologist is similarly credited with having given birth, not only to the speculum which marked the beginning of his rise to fame (and, thus, the "fathering of himself in the conventional terms of self-making"), but to the vagina itself, which Sims similarly bestows upon the world in offering it for the first time in 'full fledged and perfect' view.

If J. Marion Sims was to be dubbed "the architect of the vagina," Dana Nelson, in her article "'No Cold and Empty Heart': Polygenesis, Scientific Professionalization, and the Unfinished Business of Male Sentimentalism," a piece which builds on groundwork first laid but left unfinished in *National Manhood*, would, with no slight irony, come to call Samuel G. Morton, of 'American Golgotha' fame, "a scientific architect of whiteness."¹⁰¹ The polygenesist doctrines Morton championed contradicting theological authority in their opposition to what was once considered the fundamental narrative of man's origins, the scientific community that sprang up around this challenge to the creation myth, in giving light to a new vision of the Family of Man—as Sims had offered

¹⁰⁰ Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 92.

¹⁰¹ Dana D. Nelson, "'No Cold or Empty Heart': Polygenesis, Scientific Professionalization, and the Unfinished Business of Male Sentimentalism," *differences* 11 (Fall 1999-2000): 35.

a new view on the sex organs of women—were equally concerned with a project of self-making that was necessarily homosocial, if not downright homogamous.¹⁰² Usurping while policing women’s procreative powers, if the American gynecologist planted his flag by laying claim to the inner sanctums of the female body, American racial scientists can be said, according to Nelson, to have set their sights on the colonization of the sanctum sanctorum of the female domestic sphere. Recognizing that the future purity of the nation was to rest as much on the purity of the white (middleclass) woman’s body as it was on the consolidation and propagation of an overarching white male sovereignty—placing under the jurisdiction of white patriarchal command the body politic as well as the private bodies and private lives of the citizenry—the home, as site of feminine instruction and potential insurrection, had to be wrested from the grips of female rule. Towards affecting such a master stroke, scientists sought to refigure the *study*, rather than the parlor or kitchen, as the center of household dominance. Reminded, here, of the ‘promiscuous housekeeping’¹⁰³ set up by Agassiz at his Neuchâtel establishment, the study as sanctified locus of masculine initiative, thus became, following Nelson’s argument, “an emotionally charged, intellectually reproductive space that culminate[d] in the professional arrogation of power and knowledge to science in the private regions of male affiliation.”¹⁰⁴

The dissemination of ultimate knowledge (the godlike power to “make meaning”), denied to women, and figured as far superior to the simple generation of flesh attributed to the female of the species (and, indeed, without definitive masculine

¹⁰² Nelson, *National Manhood*, 109.

¹⁰³ I reference P. Gabrielle Foreman’s “‘This Promiscuous Housekeeping’: Death, Transgression, and Homoeroticism in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Representations* 43 (Summer 1993): 51-72.

¹⁰⁴ Nelson, *No Cold*, 41.

designation of meaning to this flesh, the engendered product was not to be recognized as a social *body* at all¹⁰⁵), once again the frightening potential of women's reproductive capabilities were at once downplayed and co-opted by men who, through the transmission of intellectual authority to other men, were able to reincarnate themselves endlessly, and fully-formed, in their own images (Jupiter, in this case, springing from the brain of Jupiter to recall Sims' early obituary); a scenario which, of course, adds yet another valence to Agassiz's attraction to "men of his sort." Appropriating the reproductive function, as well as the language of sentiment to describe the affiliative bounds and affective contours of scientific fraternity—the inner circle of the scientist's study figured as a "[womblike] sentimental space, [in which] men enjoyed the 'overflow' of 'gentle affections'"¹⁰⁶—in designating the private space of the domestic sphere as yet one more realm, like the vagina, in which this establishment might hold sway, male science can be seen as quite literally assimilating what would have been considered the final mainstays of female prerogative. Following Nelson,

[T]he contemporary emergence of scientific professionalism worked in part as a cultural countermove against women's growing claims to civic agency formulated through the moral logic of domesticity. The cultural authority that professional men claimed over crucial aspects of the "female domestic sphere" during this period—over "their" homes, families, hygiene, habits and bodies—illustrates how science worked to authorize a new class of men in their professional oversight of the very 'virtue' women had begun claiming and acting on as their right.¹⁰⁷

While one certainly cannot claim that Nelson's "new class of men" were all cut from the same cloth as the men who had formerly usurped Cecile Agassiz of power over *her* home, what is to be understood of the adopted American cohort of which Louis

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of the difference between "the body" and "the flesh," see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65-81.

¹⁰⁶ Nelson, *No Cold*, 41.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

Agassiz was to become a naturalized citizen, is that the new ‘manliness’ to which their profession laid claim was, as much as it had been in the case of gynecology, purchased in many ways at the expense of women—women once more caught up in a complex system of exchange between men. Contradictorily requiring, as virtue for its existence, both the presence of women and the effective evacuation of all things feminine, particularly the designation of science itself as a “feminine profession,” it was through both the reification of woman as potential threat to the purity of the nation and the ratification of white male homosocial endeavors as offering the best possible means of quelling this threat, that the nation’s second great science, ethnography, was able to take hold of both the national and international imagination while at the same time recasting some of its own male-male affectional excesses as themselves virtues. Which is to say that while gynecology would win masculine and world legitimacy by portraying its pioneers as great frontiersman capable of taming the wildest of bush, American racial science, would sell itself as a similar sort of civilizing mission. Promising, in its “symbolic occupation of domestic spaces emptied of actual women,”¹⁰⁸ to take unto itself (by coup as the above language suggests) and contain—through exclusionary, and exclusively white male, self-directed and self-propagating exchanges—the “overflow” of ‘feminine’ emotions and affective expenditures usually associated with such spaces, this burgeoning discipline was also to “bracket the emotionally, socially, and politically miscegenous implications of white middle-class reform as womanish excessiveness” and through “professionally purifying practices of fraternal sentiment guard the ‘domestic’ space—the masculine heart of nation, race, and home—against contaminating ideological penetration.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Nelson, *No Cold*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

The boundaries of the home, as architectural vagina,¹¹⁰ necessitating the same knife-point policing as the pudenda itself—if the home was to be compared to a womb, its emotional excesses were clearly troped as reminiscent of the execratory excesses of this other ‘tumultuous’ fleshly dwelling, unwanted “ideological penetration” aligned with unsanctioned (interracial) sexual promiscuity—in carving out the study as central site of surveillance and patriarchal power, inaccessible to women yet harboring the true secrets of creation, the man of science refashioned this space as a site of “‘white radiance,’ [a] heart space in which whiteness is affectively privatized, purified, interiorized, normalized.”¹¹¹ Sims “raising himself from obscurity to the dazzle of the light by the elevation of women’s organs from darkness into the light,” Sam Morton, “architect of whiteness” and skull-studier of American ‘Golgotha’ fame, was thus to be known for not only having popularized, through his many dubious ‘proofs,’ theories of racial separation that were capable of delineating the borders between black and white as both immemorial and erstwhile (as I said earlier, in promoting ideas of the ‘types of man’ as separate *species*, racial difference, like sexual difference, becomes located in an immutable interior not subject to shifts in environment or turns of the times), but to be celebrated as well for shedding light on, or, opening to authoritative scrutiny and private policing, the interiors of the ‘feminine’ household realm (within which the men of racial science maintained a panoptic *invisibility* ... I will return to this later); a move that Nelson credits with thus “extend[ing] the purity campaign of polygenesis—its ‘natural repugnance’ from all contaminatory mixing—into the space of sentiment, the domestic space.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Nelson, *No Cold*, 43.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

So, for those who have not already made the connection, what does all of this have to do with Agassiz? Having secured access to his first professional successes by obtaining access to the hearts and studies of men like Cuvier, in moving from the Old Country to the New World, and from a personal background in which he had long come to be accustomed to sharing ‘work, purses, pleasure, and ideas,’ as well as the most intimate of proximities, in common with a scientific band of brothers with whom he shared a calling for which he was willing to forsake “the things men usually value most,” it is fairly obvious that the dashing and, although now middle-aged and slightly worse-for-wear, still ambitious scientist would have settled on doing whatever was required to work his way from outsider into the innermost circles of American science. Especially as this was a fraternal sphere that promised to make him feel right at home. Add to this the fact that Agassiz, having recently faced near bankruptcy with the failure of his scientific enterprise and a man forever short on funds, found himself forced to rely for his only subsistence primarily on the kindness of these new strangers and the money that he could amass in the course of his various lecture series, and we begin to develop a bit more of the picture that surrounds the naturalist’s ‘sudden conversion’ to the doctrines of polygenesis. This shift usually seen as finding its inspiration in little more than “an immediate visceral judgment and some persistent persuasion from friends,”¹¹³ it is clear that his newfound friends shared similar, and similarly emotional, investments in their ethnographic specialty’s ability to counter many of the social and *economic* pressures faced by those within their burgeoning field of professionalization during a moment in which contemporaneous notions of race, sex, and gender roles as well as *the scientific*

¹¹³ Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 43.

discipline itself were undergoing dramatic upheavals and even more dramatic retrenchments in both America and elsewhere.

Nelson's analysis focusing more on the ideological imperatives that shaped early racial science's assault on the language and the locus of sentimentality—as at once a show of masculine *puissance* as well as the desire to forego the 'roughness' of the more typically 'manly,' and markedly competitive, power structures of the marketplace in favor of a kinder, gentler system of affectionate masculine exchange—she does, nevertheless, allude as well to the fact that certain economic imperatives may have inflected the scientific 'objectivity' supposedly exercised by men like Morton. The 'unfinished business' of these allusions taken up, and the production of 'whiteness' itself seen as a money-making venture—why else choose to speak of it as a “consolidation” of white male authority?—it actually becomes quite difficult to separate ideology from economy in relation to the earliest moments of this fledgling field of American scientific enterprise. The cooption of the domestic sphere by the American man of science having as much to do with the desire to harness the feminine nature of this space as it had to do with the fact that, unlike their laboratory-equipped European colleagues, the majority had *nowhere else to go* but home, the lack of government funding and the scarcity of university facilities to support truly uninhibited experimentation necessarily forced these practitioners to make very pragmatic choices in terms of where their intellectual energies were to be best expended.

Complicating, but hopefully not contradicting, both Nelson's and my own foregoing arguments, it should be understood, then, that this early 'life in science,' portrayed as existing at a remove from the marketplace, was in many ways absolutely

determined by the market. As our scientific historians point out, the majority of America's original scientific thinkers had pursued a variety of other trades previous to, and in the wake of, their adoption of the profession, and just as many simply considered their scientific works sidebars to the real business of securing subsistence. Not only had very few of these early practitioners received any formal education in the field—only an intellectual elite, many of whom had received their training overseas, could boast a truly esoteric knowledge of pure, as opposed to applied, science—but the very idea of pursuing scientific research that did not have any immediate use-value for the general society, or promise any economic gain, was an idea equally foreign to many.¹¹⁴ Almost one-third of America's first men of science also boasting the title of physician, many must have found quite a bit of inspiration in gynecologist Marion Sims' Cinderella story, a story that surely figured certain pseudo-scientific applications of one's talents as not the least promising of the schemes then open to a man who wished to get rich quick. First following his father out West in hopes of taking advantage of the scarcity of physicians on the frontier, only to return East to eventually strike gold in the mining of the female reproductive organs, as Barker-Benfield tells us, "Both [Sims] and his contemporaries were impressed by the social and financial heights his surgery enabled him to scale... [Later in his career] he came as close to the style of the monied 'robber baronry' as a gynecologist could get."¹¹⁵ So saying, and gynecology, as money-making industry, responding, as noted, to a rise in the demand for modes of disciplining the female body and female sexuality that might prove more suitable and sustainable given the climate of

¹¹⁴ See Clark Elliot's "Antebellum American Science: A Thematic (and Somewhat Bibliographic Review)." Available at <http://home.earthlink.net/~claelliott/antebellumsciencereview.htm#c01Antebellum>. (Accessed November 29, 2009.)

¹¹⁵ Barker-Benfield, *Horrors*, 105.

the times, one also recognizes a rather marked coincidentalness, and economic pragmatism, in scientist Samuel Morton's and his followers' own decisions to mass-market their refutation of race's previously assumed relation to climatic indices, with their correlative proofs of immutable Negro inferiority, directly in the midst of widespread debates concerning the legitimacy of maintaining the peculiar institution that played so intrinsic, if immoral, a role in the financial structures of the nation.

With a degree in medicine, yet turned geologist as trade—one of the few scientific fields that had garnered early support from the government, geological surveys providing valuable information regarding previously untapped resources that might be exploited¹¹⁶—Morton's move from the study of fossils, to the study of human skulls, to the use of these skulls as evidence to support original and enduring differences between men, can also be seen as paralleling a move up a financial food chain that would eventually propel the scientist from the general anonymity that accompanied his position as “the founder of invertebrate paleontology in this country”¹¹⁷ to the international acclaim that would catapult him into both history and the uppermost echelons of society, particularly the Southern plantocracy that found his most recent findings so very priceless. To refer again to historians of the field, pre-institutionalized science and scientists in antebellum America relying chiefly on the economic backing of various “learned societies” composed of both lay and professional individuals concerned with the promotion and publication of hitherto unshared and novel forms of knowledge, these groups, many of which claimed members who may have been only vaguely interested in science and more

¹¹⁶ Elliott, “Antebellum American Science.” Online resource. See note 114 for site information.

¹¹⁷ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 102.

so in their position as “cultural stewards for the community,”¹¹⁸ proved extremely influential not only in fashioning the scientific lecture as a form of cultural entertainment, but also in shaping the very sorts of ideas that would and could be entertained by science itself. According to Clark A. Elliott, administrator of the online *Antebellum Science Review*, “While the non-science employment sector made it possible for some scientifically active individuals to make a living, the scientific societies...were a venue for the exercise of social influence by persons who were, at most, only marginally involved in scientific research or practice,” and because of this “science, while in the process of developing a social and cultural niche of its own, was still, in practical terms, embedded in the traditional and general matrix of antebellum American life...[a] situation [that] gave the private commercial and professional sector a role and influence over science that they would not have after the Civil War.”¹¹⁹

While I hope to remain sensitive to Dana Nelson’s cautions regarding a tendency to “suggest that the South is where racism resides, thereby downplaying Northern racism and investments in racist institutions privileging whiteness,”¹²⁰ the influence of Southern sentiment, and its private and commercial antebellum needs, on early American scientific “objectivity” is not to be passed over lightly. If Nelson cites Stephen Jay Gould’s

¹¹⁸ Elliott, “Antebellum American Science.” Online resource. See note 114 for site information.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. George H. Daniels also seconds this idea in his, *Science in American Society: A Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 163: “[T]he ‘science’ imparted by lecturers was seldom the most up-to-date, for their was a common tendency to give the same lecture again and again, over long periods of time that witnessed fundamental changes in the data and the theories underlying it. Moreover, most lecturers realized that popular audiences could not be expected to comprehend much above the level of superficiality, and so generally contented themselves with engendering ‘enthusiasm’ for science by retailing ‘wonders.’ Nevertheless, by mid-century social democracy had gone so far in science as to make it possible for the common man to believe he was capable of understanding and making decisions in that area as he was in comprehending and evaluating religion and politics. Cheering the lyceum lecturer who brought fascinating exhibits sowing nature’s wonders had a great deal in common with applauding the stump politician whose vision of progress one admired. One voted for a particular scientific doctrine, just as one did for a particular vision of the social order or a particular piece of legislation. For its support, science, in common with other areas of national culture, became subject to popular taste and approval.’

¹²⁰ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 112.

puzzlement as to what might have motivated a Northern, non-slaveholder, such as Morton, a man “widely hailed as the objectivist of his age, the man who would rescue American science from the mire of unsupported speculation,”¹²¹ to have been so invested in forwarding an agenda that was so clearly supportive of the anti-abolitionist cause, I offer a repeat of the partial answer already suggested above: Sims striking gold in gynecology, Morton and his cohort were also speculators sorts. The South, during the moment of Morton’s and American ethnography’s rise, playing host to one of the lesser, but nevertheless well-patronized, scientific centers then recognized in this country, association with its “learned societies” offered a wealth of promise and concomitant wining and dining to persons willing to repay the generosity of their scientific stewards in kind. The region, as a whole, widely declaimed for its failure to produce any practitioners of real merit—a dearth variously ascribed to the lack of the sizable urban centers that seemed to favor scientific spawnings in the North, a love of languor resultant from the compromised work ethics promoted within slave-holding societies, a climate unfavorable to conducting extended research out of doors (see reason number two), and also to a general lack of literacy in the South that was not limited to the third of the population comprised of the enslaved—that Charleston, South Carolina even made it onto the map of American science, and was to be considered in this respect next in line to Boston and Philadelphia (inconceivably beating out Washington and New York), would thus seem in no small way attributable to the fact that the city’s foremost families and scientific philanthropists were amongst the most moneyed below the Mason Dixon.¹²²

Enticing to the area, if only briefly, many of America’s top men in the profession with the

¹²¹ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 112.

¹²² See Joel Williamson’s *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 40, 62.

lure of riches untold, some still saw the concomitant deal with the devil that must be struck in order to secure this fortune as occurring at the expense of his ideals, both scientific and moral. As one man wrote, “science is not desired by this community, and *black-legs* are much more welcomed than the gentleman of science.” Seconding this derision, in justifying his refusal to accept a position at South Carolina College, a leading mathematician of the time, William Chauvenet, was to tell his renowned colleague in the field, scientist Benjamin Pierce:

I will not go *south* any further...if I can help it. I certainly need more salary to educate my children but I will not sacrifice them to money—for I should regard it as a sacrifice to the best part of their characters to bring them up under S. Carolina influences. I do not talk this way to my good friends in Columbia, because it is useless to stir up their prejudices.¹²³

Samuel Morton, on the other hand, did not seem to harbor any of these misgivings.¹²⁴ In fact, his work guaranteed to work upon Southern prejudices, Morton allowed George Robins Gliddon (collaborator, co-author of the later *Types of Mankind*, and key figure, along with Josiah Nott and Louis Agassiz, in American ethnology) the privilege of orchestrating, in Charleston, the 1844 public unveiling of his widely influential tome *Crania Aegyptiaca*, which laid out his theories of separate creation and provided detailed descriptions of his studies in the varying cranial capacities of the species of man. News of the book having already garnered favorable attention amongst Southerners (“to the astonishment of Northerners,” or so said Gliddon), “[b]ecause its ‘conclusions as to the

¹²³ See Robert V. Bruce’s *The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846-1876* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 60-61.

¹²⁴ Nor would a later Agassiz who was to publicly launch his career as polygenesist from Charleston, his hosts well pleased with his findings concerning the slaves that they had provided for his inspection, just as Agassiz was well-pleased with the hospitality and rich financial rewards reaped in his Southern surveys. Gliddon, in 1848, writes Morton to tell him of Agassiz’s journeys in S.C. suggesting that their colleague had probably “reaped *golden* tokens of his scientific success there.” See William Stanton’s *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes Towards Race in America, 1815-50*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 100.

unvarying physical characteristics of races’ exploded the ‘one-sided arguments’ for unity,” there is no evidence that Morton was anything but pleased by his messenger’s report that this work “would soon be ‘fairly launched down South’ ...[and] ‘draw plenty of customers.’”¹²⁵

As one distinguished historian, Robert V. Bruce tells us, the scientists that had earlier toured the South were often received as little more than showmen:

Popular lecturers...found travel difficult in the South, towns small and scarce, and crowds hard to gather for anything less visceral than horse races, cockfights, and revival meetings. So their “scientific exhibitions” amounted to magic shows—though they might profess, as did one advertisement, to “render the entertainment instructive as well as amusing,” and the audiences might be “particularly asked not to keep time with the music.”¹²⁶

Morton and his men, then, seemed both well-suited and well-prepared to follow in the tradition of bringing the Southern public exactly what they wanted: instruction that was both entertaining and that catered to their gut beliefs, and, hence, was well worth the price of admission. Gliddon, an Englishman and one time insurance agent who during his appointment as United States vice-consul at Cairo had provided Morton with many of the skulls he would use for his studies (thus garnering the resulting book’s dedication), variously described as “A name-dropper, a sponger, a swinger on the shirrtails of the great, a braggart, pretender, and scatologist,” was also, “a master of the art of puffing.” Earning the preceding designation from the author of *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America 1815-59*, William Stanton goes on to say that “Hopelessly addicted to the polysyllable and relishing the ponderosities of Victorian prose, [Gliddon] never blighted with boredom the life of anyone.”¹²⁷ Known to seduce

¹²⁵ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 52-53.

¹²⁶ Bruce, *Modern American Science*, 58-59.

¹²⁷ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 46.

scientific consumers of Egyptology through a mix of visuals, verve, and vitriol—“In 1848, with farseeing eyes fixed firmly on the box-office, he obtained a ‘GRAND MOVING TRANSPARENCY,’ or panorama of the Nile, which he displayed to induce audiences to attend his lectures. Making the most of the drama inherent in the subject and exploiting to the full his flair for histrionics, Gliddon lectured between two large tables, one piled high with copies of the chief works on Egyptology, the other with relics of Egypt...while majestic scenes of ancient Egypt moved slowly along the walls and soft strains of appropriate oriental music filled the hall.”¹²⁸—in the South, in particular, it was such showmanship coupled with even more attractive racial/racist rhetoric that would have ensured quite a hefty ‘take.’ Insisting that his display’s were not representative of a civilization founded by Blacks, but instead by individuals of a much higher mind and whiter hue, and also that the races had been distinct even at this earliest of dates, the ‘truth’ of both these assertions ‘evidenced’ by the skulls shared with Morton, he was able to assure audiences, and help his colleagues do the same, not only that the racial hierarchies that they depended upon were, indeed, primordial, but also that “because the passing centuries had not ‘whitened the Negro, or darkened the Caucasian from their primitive types,’...[one] could only conclude that racial distinctions—either at the Creation or at some time subsequent—were impressed upon man by the hand of God.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 48-49. As the exhibit was described: “‘Once placed within a hall thus adorned,’ wrote one enthusiastic viewer, ‘the visitor found himself in a new and magic region; the present vanished, and the men, and the events of thirty and forty centuries back arose before the gaze. In such a scene, the most dull could not fail to be impressed, the coldest could not resist the contagion of enthusiasm.’ Enlightened and entertained at once, Americans flocked to hear the young Egyptologist. Arriving in numbers from two hundred to two thousand, his hearers averaged ‘in large cities, 500 of the elite of American Society,’ and by 1849, it was estimated, more than a hundred thousand had heard him.” Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 49.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

Josiah Nott, born in Charleston's near neighbor Columbia and third player in this traveling sideshow of P.T. Barnumesque scientific stumping, although probably fashioning himself as more genuine a man of science than Gliddon, can still be seen as more than a little opportunist in his exploitation of ethnology as a field in which to win money and other support for his cause from the masses. Certainly the most virulently racist of the founders of the American School, and known to have referred to his area of study as "niggerology," or "the nigger business," Nott would have surely known also that, in a day in which the relations between Black and White loomed large in the public (especially the Southern) mind, any science that took the subject of race as its focal point was, indeed, big business; particularly one that in suggesting that all Blacks were of a separate species from Whites, suggested as well that certain Whites might be well justified in continuing to employ them as beasts of burden. Furthermore, and as clearly concerned as was Gliddon with making his findings as amenable to paying audiences as possible, Nott, in an 1845 letter to proslavery politician and South Carolina planter, James Henry Hammond, himself admitted that "The Negro question was the one I wished to bring out and [I] embalmed it in Egyptian ethnography, etc., to excite a little more interest,"¹³⁰ conceding in passim that his Mobile, Alabama medical practice "had been much enhanced by his identification with the new ethnological theory," eventually growing so busy that it was "almost beyond endurance."¹³¹ Becoming most widely known for his fairly spurious theories on hybridity, doctrines that held that the mixing of races as intrinsically different as those currently occupying the nether poles of civilization and savagery would result, as it had in other inter-special breeding, in physically and

¹³⁰ This famous "niggerology" line is taken from an 1845 letter from Nott to James Henry Hammond. See Frederickson, *Black Image*, 78.

¹³¹ Frederickson, *Black Image*, 85; and Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 161.

mentally inferior offspring that could be expected to eventually degenerate and die out, Nott was also a fierce champion of the idea that the “natural repugnance” felt by both races as regarded such intermixing was owing to an inbred understanding of the negative consequences of crossing this special divide.¹³² Yet, having conducted very little, if no, “scientific” research to support his assertions, both of the aforementioned quite easily proven false by any extended look at the sexual relations that had occurred both under and around slavery and had yet failed to extinguish resultant “hybrids” as far gone as the ‘quadroons’ and ‘octoroons’ to be found in particularly plentiful distributions in New Orleans and Charleston, SC, George Frederickson is quite right in concluding that “[t]he fact that Nott was recognized as a leading scientist was perhaps more indicative of the racial preconceptions of his audience than of the quality of his research and theoretical formulations.”¹³³ It is indicative also, as one should add, of the sexual prejudices of his largely male audiences, since both of the above theories can be seen, again, as aiding in a campaign to promote white male ascendancy: washing away both the past and present sexual sins of the white man, one theory denies the existence of his desire for black women, the other promises that the evidence of such would eventually be erased.

Although Nott insisted that he “never wrote to please the crowd, but for the advancement of truth,”¹³⁴ it is clear that there was very little truth in his theories and rather quite a bit in his findings that would both delight and bolster many amongst his Southern audiences (“where,” as Nott said in 1848, “the public mind is at present

¹³² Frederickson, *Black Image*, 80.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³⁴ Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 188.

morbidly excited about the nigger business”¹³⁵) as well as proslavery supporters in both the South and even farther afield, not the least of which being his insistence that “Negros had reached the highest level of civilization of which they were capable after one or two generations of ‘domestication’ under slavery.”¹³⁶ Such cash-minded cronyism again evidenced in the fact that the infamous 1854 compendium *Types of Mankind*, which served to further publicize Nott’s slavery-supporting findings, was undertaken not with the advancement of truth in mind but rather as a favor to Gliddon who at the time was desperately in need of funds and had applied to his good friend to aid him in a venture that promised a quite sizeable payoff for both parties, equally seems to belie the scientist’s assertions of disinterested objectivity.

Enlisting his own scientific savvy to aid his friend who, while “‘going it strong on niggerology,’ as Nott observed” had not foreseen that “the cost of presenting the Panorama [would] greatly reduce[] the income from his lectures,”¹³⁷ Nott and Gliddon’s text did, indeed, garner sizeable sales. As William Stanton observes, “not an original work and...relatively expensive (five dollars to subscribers, seven-fifty to others)...[b]y the middle of November, 1853, subscriptions were coming in at a rate of six a day, and when the book was issued in April, 1854, the subscription lists stood at 992. The first printing sold out immediately. It reappeared in at least nine editions before the end of the century.”¹³⁸ It also generated quite a bit of controversy, as had their earlier lectures on the separate origins of man, amongst the religious orthodoxy across the country. Gliddon

¹³⁵ Frederickson, *Black Image*, 85. Frederickson goes on further: “In 1845, after his initial formulation of the concept of Negroes as a separate species, he wrote Hammond about how his views had been received in Mobile: ‘The grounds I have taken in my lecture were never for the mass, but they have been much talked of and read here and public opinion has come over to me as I was I was sure it would *in the South*—the few that hold out admit that it is debatable ground and ought to be investigated.” Ibid, 85.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 80.

¹³⁷ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 161.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 163.

vehemently and vociferously anti-clerical, and Nott, too, having little respect for the men that he and his partner privately referred to as “skunks,”¹³⁹ one of the things that ultimately saved their work from being dismissed as pure heresy and humbug, was, in fact, its ‘unoriginality.’ Dedicated to the memory of George Morton, who had died three years before its publication, *Types of Mankind* first benefited greatly from the fact that it included masses of data taken from the well-respected scientist’s books and manuscripts—even if it was complained that Nott and Gliddon were not worthy of handling this inheritance, their text “lacking the ‘cool argument and well-arranged facts of the philosopher”¹⁴⁰—and second, and more importantly, from the inclusion of an essay penned by Agassiz, whose belief in the theory of polygenesis had in no way shaken his piety, or at least his religiosity in presenting views made much more palatable to the public when spoken by a man who professed a belief in the Divinity. And one sees the placating powers of Agassiz’s religious rhetoric evident in that Yale geologist and faithful believer James Dwight Dana, while damning the many faults of this text written by “infidels,” and complaining of the fact that “its pages abounded in ‘vituperations, sneers, and expressions of con-temptuous [*sic.*] triumph,” had to add that he found “Agassiz’s contribution ‘wholly different’ in spirit, and ‘altogether out of place.”¹⁴¹

I point to the above episode, although it represents quite a jump ahead in chronology, because it serves to better situate Agassiz’s position both within American science and within the nation’s school of ethnological thought. Indeed, Agassiz was

¹³⁹ Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 162. Also, referring to Gliddon’s tirades in their 1857 tome *Indigenous Races*, Nott wrote his friend Ephraim G. Squier, author of the then acclaimed *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley (1848)*, and later member of the American ethnological crew, that he was “disgusted that ‘in spite of all sorts of pledges,’ Gliddon had ‘pitched into the Bible & Parsons again.” Nott concludes, “I have no longer any doubt about his insanity on the subject.” Nott said that he himself “wished ‘simply to post science up to date without condescending to notice the varmonts [*sic.*] in any way.” Ibid, 176, 162.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 169.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

often employed as straightman by the members of the confederate into which he had officially cast his lot in 1847 (not surprisingly choosing Charleston as the venue in which to first present his views on racial diversity¹⁴²). It was at once the authority that Agassiz's association with the great European centers and scions of science lent to not only his own work but the endeavors of anyone who could claim his endorsement—in an era during which American science was still massively underdeveloped, not particularly theoretically-inclined, only beginning to move towards specialization, and living under the shadow of a European empire that could boast at least a century of “higher” knowledge in the field—as well as his startling ability as a lecturer to win the public favor through both a great personal magnetism and a rather unlikely blend of belief in the scientific quest for ultimate truth and the belief, at least so-stated, that these truths pointed always to the influence of the hand of God in all things, that made the man so invaluable to the polygenesisists' cause. Charges of infidelity being the main obstacle faced by the American ethnographer who wished to promote multiple-creationism while insuring popular box office sales, especially in the South where religiosity often beat out even racism, it is more than obvious why this group would have issued Agassiz a hearty welcome; as Nott would write Morton, “[W]ith Agassiz in the war, the battle is ours. This was an immense accession for we shall not only have his name, but the timid will come out from their hiding places.”¹⁴³ And “come out from their hiding places they did”

¹⁴² Agassiz first talked about these views in lectures in 1847 then published three *Christian Examiner* articles in 1850 repeating his ideas. The second and most widely discussed of the series, entitled “The Diversity of the Origin of Human Races,” appearing in the July 1850 issue. Ibid, 104-105.

¹⁴³ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 261. As Stanton puts it, “Charles Pickering, unable to persuade Congress to underwrite the unscriptural doctrine of the specific diversity of man, hid his theories under a bushel of confused verbiage. Morton approached the radical doctrine with caution. But, in Louis Agassiz, America gained a new scientist of recognized authority who felt no such compunctions.” Stanton continues, “the doctrine of the diversity of origin was still considered heresy, Squier noted, and had yet ‘few open advocates,’ so that ‘investigators in this, as in many other departments of science, hesitate in pushing their

for at one point separate-creationism, although scoffed at by science, had become the most accepted view on the origin of the species amongst the common man, Agassiz being single-handedly credited with having held up the popular acceptance of Darwinism for over a decade after it had been embraced within scholarly circles.¹⁴⁴

If we can easily understand why racial science needed Agassiz, it will eventually prove fairly obvious as well, why Agassiz would have coveted such a welcome from, and become so doctrinally wedded to (and one might take a moment to note the interesting blend of metaphors of martial conquest and marital merger apparent in Nott's above declaration), individuals who might appear to our contemporary gaze as vastly misguided, if not profit-driven confidence men. Asa Gray, the nineteenth century's premiere American botanist and earliest proponent of Darwinian theories, first an Agassiz ally later turned Agassiz's chief antagonist, was one of those during their own time who questioned his fellow scientist's affiliative motivations. Feeling that the great man had lowered himself by engaging in racial debates so foreign to his early work in the field and, in so doing, had been hindered from making real advancements in the domains that were to have been his true calling, by 1854 Gray was of part in the pronouncements of some of Agassiz's scientific colleagues who felt that:

His opinions are too extreme for respect and hence are mere prejudices. They are further contradicted by facts.... Agassiz [is] an extraordinarily clever fellow and a treasure too as a scientific man, but there are many people whom we personally like and men of science too, but whose views on individual points are best left alone. Giving too much attention, even to oppose, the startling views of such people rather encourages them, and there is an inherent love of getting fame *at any price*, i.e. *of getting notoriety*, amongst these French, Swiss, and Italians that

researches to their ultimate results." Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 100, 99. Asa Gray purportedly maintained, "so far from bringing this against the Bible, he brings the Bible to sustain his views,—thus appealing to its authority, instead of endeavoring to overthrow it.... We may reject his conclusions, but we cannot find fault with his spirit." Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 104.

¹⁴⁴ See Frederickson, *Black Image*, 83.

leads them to commit themselves on such questions.... We have too many clever people in the world, too few sound ones [emphases in the original].¹⁴⁵

Gray was probably absolutely right in his assessment of Agassiz's overarching avarice. Upon his arrival in the States the Swissman had written a friend back home, "If I could for a moment forget that I have a scientific mission to fulfill,...I could easily make more than enough by lectures which would be admirably paid and are urged upon me, to put me completely at my ease hereafter,"¹⁴⁶ yet it seems that forget his "mission" he did, for while very few of the scientific projects he proposed ever came to fruition, Agassiz, particularly after his attentions shifted from glacial formation to separate creations, was to become one of the States' most popular and well-paid lecturers. Nevertheless, the above analysis fails to comprehend the almost Machiavellian 'soundness' of Agassiz's decision to early align himself with Morton and his crew. Perhaps it was because Gray—a homebody, so notably happy in both his marriage and his "closet botany" that he passed up participation in field work and expeditions that would have significantly enhanced both his career and pocketbook, a man dedicated to science, yet decidedly loathe of public speaking and not one to court the spotlight nor the society of scientific cliques¹⁴⁷—was so absolutely opposite to Agassiz (long before the Darwin controversy would turn this polarity into rancor), that he was unable to understand exactly what was at stake in Agassiz's adoption of America's racial prejudices as well as just what sorts of even more startling biases might be floated beneath the pressing controversies spurred through the Swissman's fraternal alliances with those men who were, in fact, of Agassiz's sort.

¹⁴⁵ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 269. Joseph Dalton Hooker to Gray, January 26, 1854. Gray himself would write Hooker in May of 1863, "This man, who might have been so useful to science and promised so much here has been for years a delusion, a snare, a humbug, and is doing far more harm than he can ever do us good."

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 128-129. Letter to Cancellor Favargez, Dec. 31, 1846.

¹⁴⁷ See Bruce, *Modern American Science*, 40, 44. Also 222 on opposition to Lazzaroni

Samuel Morton essentially the closest thing to Cuvier to be found in the States, it is said of the original meeting between Agassiz and his new American mentor, one which reads almost exactly like the life-altering encounter with his first great master that occurred fifteen years earlier, that Agassiz found Morton “a remarkable man, entirely to [his] taste,” and that Morton, in return was “delighted with [Agassiz’s] astonishing memory, quick perceptions, encyclopedical knowledge of Natural History and most pleasing manner.”¹⁴⁸ This distinguished and discriminating gentleman not only the nation’s most prominent naturalist at the time, was also, like Cuvier, host to his own series of Saturday night soirees, at which the chosen band of brothers over which he lorded could court the favor of the crème de la crème of American and foreign “men of letters and science.”¹⁴⁹ Association with Morton, who, as America’s premiere scientist at that time, “provides us,” Dana Nelson maintains, “with a particularly rich example of a figure who consolidated professional respect and cultural authority through a carefully built system of formal and informal relations with other men,”¹⁵⁰ and access into the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of this authorizing agents’ study, where it is said that Agassiz did, in fact, spend a great deal of time in the year before Morton’s death,¹⁵¹ would, thus, have allowed the Swiss scientist still relatively new to America several very important advantages. First, having left wife, children, mother, and the majority of his friends

¹⁴⁸ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 285; Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 125.

¹⁴⁹ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 191. Dr. Charles Meigs writes of these events in his Memoir of Morton, “[W]e must, with one accord, regret the dissolution of those pleasant reunions, in which we have participated there, with men of letters and science of our own country or from foreign nations....”

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁵¹ Marcou says “Agassiz saw a great deal of Morton during his two month’s stay... frequently visiting him, for Morton [close to death] was already confined almost constantly to his library.” Marcou, *Life, Letters*, ii.29. Marcou’s goes on to say, “I must say that after Cuvier, Morton was the only zoologist who had any influence on Agassiz’s mind and scientific opinions.... I several times enjoyed the privilege of accompanying Agassiz on these visits, and was much impressed by his enthusiasm. He had, at last found a naturalist of his liking, without any reserve.” *Ibid.*, ii.28.

(most importantly, his *benefactors*) behind in Europe, affiliation with Morton's "American school" would provide membership in a fraternal community, like those of Agassiz's Sendlinger Thor University days and his Neuchâtel overnights, that in offering a "a haven where [scientific men] can feel an almost familial support" and "a great tenderness for one another" was located as a "site where the professional, objective pursuits of the group interpenetrated with the emotional subjective ones."¹⁵² Second, this closest of camaraderies accompanied by invaluable networking possibilities, both outside of the group and in relation to the next great naturalist he was set to succeed, Agassiz's embrace of ethnology would seem almost inevitable. Add to this, too, that the immense popularity of racial science assured its practitioners not only high financial returns but high favor in the public eye—in a country, and during an era, in which it was the popular vote, more so than evaluations of one's peers, that determined the man of science's professional and social standing—and it would not be hard to guess that a man of Agassiz's well-documented ambition would find the combination hard to resist. Finally, and this is crucial, if the American ethnologist, in particular, was to be, as Nelson insists, "promise[d] privileged access to a pure world cordoned off from abrasive encounters with 'otherness'—from for instance, the black waiters that so upset Agassiz in his Philadelphia hotel, from women who were challenging the rights, spaces, and habits of manhood, from the frictions, the woundings, professional men experienced amongst other white men, in scholarly marketplace competition"¹⁵³—then racial science, more so than any other of the fields in which he could have chosen to focus his energies, offered Agassiz an affiliation that in its elutriating ascendancy might be able to wipe clean the

¹⁵² Nelson, *National Manhood*, 193.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195.

slate of a reputation tarnished by his past professional missteps, as well as by the break-up with Cecile and his indiscretions in regards to Desor. Particularly as this was a reputation forever threatening to be compromised anew by the ‘unnatural’ urgings and ‘improbis attachments’ that continued to plague the notorious naturalist.

“I Could . . . ‘Moralize’ this Spectacle for a Month to Come”: Process Verbal of the Case of Desor vs. Agassiz

And here we return to the juicy bits. If much has been made of Agassiz’s now-infamous letter of December 2, 1846, the message to his mother that would contain America’s newest son’s perversely panicked dissertation on the almost demonic (because so diabolically delectable) contours of the black man’s body, there exists yet another letter that must be introduced into the paper trail through which I have been attempting to trace Agassiz’s journey from the boy who inspired the infatuation of the “gentleman of the highway” to the man behind the documentation and base exploitation of Jem’s and Alfred’s full-frontal nudity. The epistle is one penned by mother Rose in November of 1846, and to which one must assume Louis’ own letter is meant as reply. Hitherto buried in the Harvard archives—much like Agassiz’s slave daguerrotypes, not discovered until 1976 and not reproduced in their entirety until nearly twenty years later, this document, referenced but never fully-quoted in Edward Lurie’s 1960 biography of said-scientist, is to see light for the first time only now, almost forty-four years since their last citation—I offer below an extended excerpt from a missive in which Rose Agassiz expresses a

mother's sincere desire that Orbe's errant (and erring) son should finally, in America, free himself from the "perfidious influences"¹⁵⁴ that had corrupted him in his past life.

Still unable to understand how a man once captain over all had come to be so ill-steered by a creature so beneath him, Agassiz's mother expatiates at length:

I will, with the frankness of a mother, whose anxiety is well known to you, unbosom myself upon the matter.... You have shut your eyes, but mine have remained open, & without communicating to you my observations, I have watched.... Desor... has become your master; with much shrewdness he has taken his position; not succeeding, as [he] had planned, in separating you from your own caste, in bringing you down to [his] own level, he has perceived that the best thing for him was to share your glory, at the same time that he should deny himself none of the indulgences that his tastes required.... Abusing your confidence, he has possessed himself of all of your most intimate secrets; if they are known, & have reached me, it is through him. I have burned the letters he wrote to me; they have remained unanswered. It would have been too hard a task for me to break the chains that bound you to this man. He was too superior to me in means; the struggle would have been too unequal. I therefore left things as you had arranged them. But now that you are separated for a season, that you have each to enter in new career [sic.], that it is in your power to provide for him advantageously in America, I beg, nay I entreat you to ponder this matter deeply. At forty years of age, it is time to provide for yourself a better future, live according to your necessities & your tastes & in your return to your native land, form to yourself a home happier, with God's blessing, than your former one. I have always hoped that an amiable wife would one day be your portion. To this end, M. Desor must no longer partake your labours [sic.] & reenter your house as master. No woman will submit to his dominations & you will be once more between the hammer and the anvil. Louis! My dear child, my best loved son, do not reject the counsels of your mother.¹⁵⁵

Agassiz would, in fact, and once again, ignore the counsels of his mother concerning "that man who [had] so long fascinated him with his infernal spirit."¹⁵⁶ As the letter suggests, shortly after his arrival in America Agassiz *had* sent for his secretary to join him in the States, and, rather than getting certain "necessities &...tastes" out of his system before pawning the assistant with whom he shared these "indulgences" off on

¹⁵⁴ Rose Agassiz to Louis Agassiz, in "Process Verbal of the Case of Desor vs. Agassiz" (November, 1846). Agassiz Papers, Houghton Library, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Rose Agassiz to Louis Agassiz, "Desor vs. Agassiz," 19-20.

¹⁵⁶ Rose Agassiz to Rev. M. Christinat. (July 27, 1848). Ibid, 20.

others, he had instead installed Desor in his Boston residence and himself back in the tenuous of bondsman to his assistant's wayward whims. As such, there was to be no joyfully heterosexual return to his motherland and to a life where he was to pass into old age in God's and his mother's blessing and in a happy home with Cecile. Instead, Agassiz's first wife was to die in her brother's house in Frieburg, consumed with grief and by tuberculosis, three years after her initial split with Agassiz and approximately six months and three weeks before the preceding letter was to appear as key evidence in the private court proceedings that were to follow the very ugly and very public breakup of her husband and his amanuensis, a scandal that shook Agassiz's 1849 milieu and put in serious jeopardy the scientist's chances at achieving American acclaim.¹⁵⁷ While I will return, in a moment, to the particulars of a case that, while public knowledge, has been much glossed over by those charged with presenting Agassiz's lifestory to posterity, I would like here to first direct further attention to the above communication because, beneath the guise of a mother's advice, I would argue that one discovers therein a dialectic that further illuminates what I have previously held to be the deeper, and deeply subjective, motivations that would drive, both consciously and unconsciously, Agassiz's sudden conversion to the doctrines of polygenesis as well as his later determination to become one of the most vocal and vigilant supporters of America's particular brand of ethnology.

If, as many have held, it was Agassiz's first encounter with the black man, and the pronounced "repulsion" that this contact evoked (pressures from friends and pressures on

¹⁵⁷ An interesting note, although Cecile died on July 27, 1848, Agassiz, who had been away from Cambridge conducting field work, did not hear of her death until a full month later. While she did not live to learn of the trial and its subsequent verdict, recorded on February 15, 1849, she did survive long enough to outlast the end of the affair between Desor and Agassiz.

his wallet aside), that for the most part fueled his growing conviction that the black man could not be the white man's brother, the now cited missive from the scientist's *maman* begs a reevaluation of the communiqué that has thus far been held to candidly document this catalytic moment of disgust. In view of the events, both professional and personal, that were earlier shown to have occasioned the scientist's initial journey to America, events addressed fairly explicitly in Rose Agassiz's unpublished November letter, Louis Agassiz's own oft-quoted epistle—again, penned just one month after the counsels relayed above—far from offering a pure, unmediated, account of this isolated and isolating exchange with America's Africans, now asks to be understood as a premeditated, although at times seemingly preconscious, attempt to deplete his own ties to a dark past through the invocation, and mediation, of the black bodies of this uniquely “degraded and degenerate race.” Spontaneous, viscerally-inspired, reflection now seen as scripted deflection, Agassiz's lament concerning the “unhappiness of the white race—to have tied their existence so closely to that of negroes in certain countries!” seems at once a concessionary acknowledgement of the scientist's own collaborative missteps and mishandling of his supposed “secretary,” while at the same time, as studied refringement, the shift from the local to the global allows the miscreant to shelter himself from the judgmental eye of his ever-watchful mother through the substitution of a vision so apocalyptic for the fate of the *entire* white race that his personal demons must, even when submitted to the harshest of scrutiny, pale by comparison.

Surely there *are* times when, to paraphrase Freud, a pipe is just a pipe—or, to return to the language of crash-site inquest with which I began this investigation into the strange case of the Agassiz daguerreotypes, times when there's nothing to see and one

might as well just move along. This is not one of those times. My first reading of Agassiz's famous letter from Philadelphia suggesting that one finds there evidence of both a longing for, and disavowal of, 'improper' forms of male-directed (non-reproductive) sexual desire harbored by the scientist (frozen in a moment of psychic spasm provoked by the proximity of the repellant/alluring body of the black man he is immediately possessed of visions of interracial couplings that might harbingers the eventual demise of the white man), I would now like to forward the idea, given all that has been thus far uncovered, that this near-death moment of Agassiz's (paralyzed, unable to speak, eyes locked in a petrified stare he gazes into darkness) is not only saturated by the strains of sexual desire (and how appropriate that Agassiz can only "shudder" in recounting the tale of his 'little death' to his mother), but that this is also a moment in which, true to that proverbial instant when one finds oneself confronting the edge of the abyss, the scientist must surely be seeing *his* whole life passing right before his eyes.

The dissolution of his marriage, as well as the near extinction of his entire scientific career, brought about by his own unfortunate ties to the man whose ministrations he had relied on so exclusively (I recall for you the earlier quotation, "Agassiz was...convinced that he needed Desor's services for the successes of his scholarly ventures"), Agassiz, even in this newest of countries, had found himself certain that he could not exist without his servant at his side, a proximity that, as is often the case with the "house Negro" to whom Desor might be compared, had allowed the other access not only to the most intimate of contacts with his superior but also to all of this man's "most intimate secrets." What unhappiness for Agassiz! If the parallels that I am drawing here seem at all attenuated to the reader, a closer look at Rose's own

exclamations would indicate that she herself intended to initiate such reflective readings. First to have suggested a relationship between the two men that is to be aligned with that between a slave and his “master” (the anticipated roles unfortunately reversed in this scenario), mother carries the point home in her reference to the “chains that bound” her son (in unholy matrimony?) to the demon Desor. Similarly dark ruminations voiced in yet another letter introduced into evidence in the legal case, this one written in 1848 to a close friend of the family and from which I have pulled the quote describing Agassiz’s secretary as a man “who had so long fascinated him with his infernal spirit,” Rose Agassiz extends upon the monstrous analogy just cited to the refer to the couples’ split as her “son[’s] escape[] from the *claws* of that man [emphasis mine].”¹⁵⁸ Making use of language that, if never engaged when speaking directly of the relationship to Louis, and perhaps not as early as 1846, is nevertheless shockingly reminiscent of Agassiz’s admission of enthrallment (“I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away”) in the presence of Philadelphia domestics who, in “advanc[ing]...hideous hand[s]” to serve the scientist his meals, reveal to the diner something much closer to claws themselves: “elongated hands [with] large curved nails.”

Rose’s original letter suggesting, also, what would seem, at least to the mother’s empirical eyes set on scrutinizing the behavior of the specimens before her (actually designated in her writing as “object[s] of...study”¹⁵⁹), that Desor and Agassiz’s connection represents a perversion of the natural hierarchical orderings of men who are not only of a different “caste,” but clearly of a different species as well—one a “dear child” and “best loved son,” the other a hellish creature/“infernal spirit” capable of taking

¹⁵⁸ Rose Agassiz to Rev. M. Christinat, “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 20.

¹⁵⁹ Rose Agassiz to Louis Agassiz, *Ibid.* 19.

possession of/transmogrifying into his unsuspecting host (“with much shrewdness he has taken his position.... M. Desor must no longer partake your labours [*sic*] & reenter your house as master”)—a pseudo-scientific Rose appears to be formulating a homebrewed doctrine of man’s gene-based distinctions that prefigures what is to be yet another shift in her son’s own positioning on that matter; Rose’s repeated references to “separation” provoking in her son a correspondent treatise on separate creations. Finally, Mme. Agassiz’s closing warning to her *fiils*, that, if he does not orchestrate a permanent break with the man that would mount him, Louis’ future chances at forming a ‘normal’ heterosexual union will be forever thwarted, reiterates, with a resounding little twang reinforced by its clever double-entendric melding in a fairly common turn of phrase, her son’s ultimately, and ultimately ungainly, submissive status in relation to Desor’s “dominations.”¹⁶⁰ Rose’s “between the hammer and the anvil” means at once the more familiar ‘between a rock and a hard place’ and would, to a nineteenth-century reader accustomed to yet another phrase widely in usage at that time, also most probably call to her son’s attention that his position in the scenario that his mother has scripted, ‘on the block’ as it were, or, more to the point, ‘under the hammer,’ is the same as that used to describe an item to be sold at auction. Reports of slaves being “put up to hammer” or “come under the hammer,” presumably being fairly common as well during the era (one need only look in one’s OED to find an 1828 reference to such human sale by hammer¹⁶¹), this interesting employment of language, in a sentence that turns on the absolute power that Desor is wont to wield over others, seems then, at least to *this* writer,

¹⁶⁰ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 11.

¹⁶¹ *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 9th reprint, s. v. “hammer” def 2.e. There is also the following interesting quote from Thomas Hamilton: “The moral character of [Thomas] Jefferson is repulsive....Continually puling about liberty, equality, and the degrading curse of slavery, he brought his own children *to the hammer*, and made money of his debaucheries.” Stanton, *Leopard’s Spots*, 56.

a final parting jab of a mother towards a son that has thus far allowed himself to be so debasingly ‘mastered’ by his inferior. Confiding to her friend, in her 1848 letter, that news of Louis’ decisive break with Desor has allowed her “to look upon the prospects of my son under very different colours [*sic.*], now that he is free,” it appears that while Agassiz had, at long last, managed to shake Desor, his mother was still unable to shake the master/slave analogies with which she had become so used to peppering her dialectics on the duo’s interrelations.¹⁶² The “color” under which Rose had previously viewed her son’s gloomy prospects as well as his personal aspect while captive is thus quite clear.

Although Agassiz, at the time of the earlier 1846 exchange, may not yet have been able to detach himself from the degraded and degenerate Desor, he was at least ready to counter his mother’s concerns in regards to the implied infidelities he had committed against both his wife and his master class with the assertion that, no matter how far he may have sunk in her estimations, he could surely say, “truth before all,” that he was in no way to be placed in league with, the very lowest of the low: Blacks, he was unequivocally certain, were not of the same blood, caste, or genus as himself. The letters of Agassiz and his mother taken in tandem, the fact that Louis (who, again as pointed out by many critics, had "shown little interest in racial typologies and...not yet embraced the theory of separate creation" prior to his arrival in America) was to suddenly turn preacher of polygenesis (via which he was to reestablish both his social high-standing and his status as scientific *master* in the States), now seems as likely inspired by his gut reactions at first sights of “Sambo” as by the scientist’s unique ability to grasp and elementally negotiate the much larger picture—whether that be God’s plan of creation, or his own future plans to underwrite his dark indulgences in illicit relations through participation in

¹⁶² Rose Agassiz to Rev. M. Christinat, “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 20-21

the circulation of discourses that were explicitly directed towards ensuring authoritative white men's dominations. There are surely good reasons that Agassiz was to first begin sharing his position on the diversities of man during an 1847 tour of South Carolina in which his favor had been lavishly courted amongst the local plantocracy *and* that this trip and Agassiz's talks occurred directly precursory to his reunion with Desor: Agassiz starts speaking on the subject of separate origins in December, his secretary arrives in February.

Like the other race-baiting Barnum's that comprised his classmates in the "American school," and whose "magic-shows" had tugged on the heart and purse-strings of a very large portion of the nation's populace, Agassiz, then, also became a master of the scientific slight of hand. His mother calling into question his personal class (and racial) affiliations, he aligned himself with a group that not only "promise[d] privileged access to a pure world cordoned off from abrasive encounters with 'otherness,'" but also, through the dissemination of their doctrinal teachings, held out to *all* (white) men the reassurance that racial (and class) distinctions were both primordial and immutable. Rose speaks of Agassiz's secretary's plan, through close association with her son, to raise himself up to an equal level, and to "share...glory," with the man whom he then hoped to permanently overtake as "master," Agassiz and American ethnology offer to the nation theories that hold that close association of unequal castes (intermarriage) results not in elevation but degeneration and death; they doctor as well a picture of an ancient and enduring eminence in which from the beginning of time "[t]he social position of Negroes had been the same as it was in the nineteenth century, that of servants and slaves."¹⁶³ As counterpoint to his mother's insistence that any and every woman would be repelled by

¹⁶³ Stanton, *Leopard's Spots*, 51.

the prospect of sharing her home with a man who shared unheard of intimacies with her husband, Agassiz propagates the idea that the most instinctively and ‘naturally repugnant’ of notions would be to share one’s bed with, not a member *of the same sex*, but with a member of *a different racial species*. And finally, the *coup de grace*, when Agassiz and Desor’s dramatic falling out had called the private dark doings of the great man into public account, the scientist would respond with a discovery that might prove much more titillating, and distracting, to popular audiences: he enters, for the first time, the dark privates of the black man into America’s photographic annals.

The charges brought against Agassiz by Desor, charges that would require such a sensational riposte on the scientist’s part, are as worthy of analysis as those pressed by Agassiz’s own mother, especially since what was clearly intended as a letter of accusation on Rose’s part was to be entered into the evidence of the court proceedings as a crucial element of her son’s *defense*. To begin by summarizing the fairly long and complicated account of the two men’s ultimate break, it seems that the couple’s relationship in America had been rocky from the moment of their first reunion. True to his mother’s reportage, Agassiz learned that Desor had been spreading rumors throughout Europe concerning Agassiz’s neglect of his wife as well as the nature of their own relationship, a relationship which, according to Desor, was of such intimacy and equal standing that he might claim to himself not only Agassiz’s affections, but co-authorship of certain of the naturalist’s publications as well. In addition to this, the secretary had misappropriated funds that the scientist had been sending to settle former debts incurred overseas, supplementally increasing Agassiz’s owings by a thousand dollars as a result of travels taken by Desor at the older gentleman’s expense. Finally, and having already

done this damage in Europe, Desor's American visitations were to be no less injurious to his former mentor. Heaping insult upon injury, it was in America that, according to biographer and eyewitness to the rupture Jules Marcou, a far from servile Desor became so domineering as to have augmented his abuse of Agassiz's financial backing and character with the psychological abuse of the man who would be his master. Marcou, who was commissioned by an Agassiz who had finally had enough to deliver to Desor tidings that he was to vacate the East Boston dwelling in which the two had been living, recounts Agassiz's emotional reaction to the news that this mission had been accomplished:

There, Agassiz, moved to tears, took me by both hands and kissed me in the old Swiss fashion. He was full of thanks and compliments. He felt himself another man, because he had been relieved of a constant burden in his social and even mental life. For little by little Desor had taken such a hold on him, that he was not even free to express all his opinions on scientific subjects. In fact, he was controlled by Desor as by a manager [we see shades of Rose here!], and not always considerately, being too often handled rudely. He had to provide all the money, and instead of being thanked for it, he was subjected to all sorts of moral tortures.¹⁶⁴

Ignoring the irony of such a statement being made by a man who had similarly, if much more kindly and subtly seduced his way to the top, one of the main "tortures" to which the captivated scientist had been subjected, and which he was to employ as decisive factor in ending his intimacies with his young protégé, was Desor's insistence on introducing his cousin Maurice, a man of most dubious morals, into Agassiz's household and under his monetary upkeep. In a scenario which one might then call poetic justice, Agassiz was to be placed in a position paralleling that of his unfortunate and abandoned wife, for it was when Desor refused to eject the relation that had come to make the lives

¹⁶⁴ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, ii11. See *Ibid*, i298-299, and Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 154, for references to Desor's misdeeds in Europe.

of his host and the other inmates of the Boston house intolerable that the scientist was forced to initiate this final separation. Yet while a tearful Louis may have found some momentary relief in his release from the grips of his amanuensis turned nemesis, this newfound sense of freedom was to be short-lived as the spurned partner quickly moved to make good on his threat to expose the great man to public scandal if he did not retract his decision.

Although Agassiz tempered his refusal to continue to bend to Desor's will with the offer to make it worth the man's while to keep his mouth shut—in a letter introduced as 'exhibit A' in their legal process, Agassiz, standing firm, informs the helpmeet once held so dear, "You have afforded to me...the measure of what I was hereafter to expect from you.... There can be no further fellowship between us; you have rendered this life odious to me by your intrigues.... If you are capable of appreciating that I am acting without passion, in the sole view of my own preservation, you will let me know what I can do for you. I write to avoid a fresh scene"¹⁶⁵—what was Agassiz's final offer of a hundred dollars for Desor's dispassionate silence was, however, ultimately rejected. Ignoring Agassiz's appeals for a deference that would honor the memory of their most (un)familiar of fellowships, Desor commenced to publicize a series of accusations against the renowned naturalist concerning "acts of levity in [his] past life," and other "improper moral behavior on Agassiz's part."¹⁶⁶

The complaints forwarded by Desor ranging from a repeat of the charge that Agassiz had cared little for the wife he had left behind in Europe, to the more serious allegations that the scientist had falsely taken professional credit for scientific research undertaken

¹⁶⁵ Louis Agassiz to Edouard Desor. (April 8, 1848,) "Desor vs. Agassiz," 2.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid; and Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 154.

by his secretary and had failed to provide monetary compensations owed his assistant as well, Desor topped all off with the most damaging of recriminations: “that Agassiz had enjoyed an ‘improper connection’ with Jane, a servant in the East Boston home.”¹⁶⁷

News of the couple’s explosive falling out quickly spreading, and followed even faster by lurid insider accounts of the private proclivities enjoyed by one of the city’s most prominent men, Desor’s allegations, as well as Agassiz and his secretary’s intimate relations, were soon the talk of the town. One contemporaneous exchange between scientists Charles Henry Davis and Alexander Dallas Bache (later to found the National Academy of Sciences with Agassiz and others comprising the “Cambridge clique,” as they were derided, or the Lazzaroni, as they called themselves) serves as exemplar of all this chatter. Davis writes:

I am not yet able to tell you about the quarrel between Agassiz and Desor—partly because I am not sufficiently well-informed....The subject is to be referred to friends. These quarrels are, as you intimate, truly wonderful. I could...’moralize’ this spectacle for a month to come. “‘Tis passing strange and wondrous pitiful.” But as it takes all sorts of men to make a world, so it takes all sorts of dispositions to make a man. Of one thing I feel certain, that in this quarrel...[Agassiz] must be right; this is an opinion fire would not melt out of me....The sincere admiration inspired by his character carries me with him without inquiry.¹⁶⁸

Bad enough that the public was now involved in his personal business but, finding that, unlike Davis and Bache, many of his professional associates had given ear to his secretary’s stories and sided against him, Agassiz decided that some equally public yet less publicized action must be taken if he was to clear his now besmirched name. Calling together a panel of arbitrators, consisting of John Amory Lowell (Agassiz’s friend and representative), D. Humphreys Storer (Desor’s choice), and Thomas B. Curtis (an independent third party), private deliberations were arranged in which Desor’s charges,

¹⁶⁷ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 155.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 156.

as well as Agassiz's counterclaims, would be evaluated and any guilt on either side adjudicated. Importantly, the specificities of the recriminations made, as well as the evidence introduced in the proceedings, were to remain sealed to outsiders, the dirt mongering and sensation driven public was to learn, at least from these judges, only the end result of the inquest.

Pity for the public that they were denied the details of the case, for they would have found them both "truly wonderful" and "passing strange" indeed. The most spectacular segment of the trial, in which Agassiz's relationship with the servant girl was interrogated, including testimony from Desor in which he offers, as proof of the scientist's "improper intercourse" with Jane, the fact that not only did the girl treat Agassiz with "a familiarity of manner...otherwise unaccountable" (a fairly humdrum observation at best, especially since Jane was said to be equally "free & bold towards other men"), it also included much more shocking allegations. Claiming also (and here's where it gets good) that Jane was known to make lengthy and inappropriate visits to the scientist's private quarters, Desor also held that his cousin Maurice might be called upon as eyewitness to a scene occurring in those chambers in which both Jane and the scientist were to be discovered in an extremely compromising position: in Desor's version of the story Agassiz was without a shirt in front of the girl, and in Maurice's later deposition "the front of M. Agassiz's trousers was in disarray; & Jane afterwards told him that she was sewing a loosened button!" That exclamation mark well-merited, Agassiz was, nevertheless, cleared of charges of impropriety in respect to the girl. Agassiz's acquittal based on cross-examinations of the scientist himself (who, interestingly, countered that it was not Jane but *Maurice* who had been guilty of entering his room unannounced and

when he was not fully dressed, and this while cousin Desor was out of town!), it also relied heavily upon the questioning of several other residents of the household who held that the girl had not made any visits to Agassiz's private quarters that seemed out of the ordinary or outside the realm of the housekeeping duties that she performed for them as well. Innocence was also adjudged due to evidence that the girl was already engaged during this time period to "a person of some property" whom she had subsequently married, and, finally, based on the referees' opinion that the discrepancies between Desor's original account of the bedroom scene and Maurice's much more fantastic version of this same tale were further indicative of the cousin's generally troublemaking and noxious character (friends of Agassiz called Maurice a "lazy parasite") and that they thus could not "attach the slightest value to such testimony."¹⁶⁹

Once questions concerning Jane were resolved and the arbitrators were "satisfied not only that this charge [was] not proved but that it [was] utterly untrue,"¹⁷⁰ they made short shrift of Desor's remaining allegations. Convinced that Desor was simply trying to "undermine [Agassiz's] reputation"¹⁷¹ at any and all costs, they quickly reviewed and dismissed his claims of plagiarism and other professional misconduct on Agassiz's part and just as quickly turned from Desor's opinions on Agassiz towards the various detractions that Agassiz had, in their minds justifiably, leveled on Desor's person. Moving from Desor's pecuniary dishonesty, to his "jealousy" of the other important men who shared Agassiz's life and home (it was claimed that Desor, following a similar tack to that taken at Neuchâtel, had brought his cousin to Boston in order drive these others

¹⁶⁹ For above quotes, see "Desor vs. Agassiz," 5, 8, 17. Lurie translates the French terms introduced into the court documents to refer to Maurice, "paresseux & gourmand," as "lazy parasite." Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 54. Lurie's is a nicely succinct way of expressing the originals' designation of a lazy and greedy person.

¹⁷⁰ "Desor vs. Agassiz," 9.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 10.

out and “in this way to get more fully the control of the house”¹⁷²), Agassiz, now sounding more than a little like his mother, alleged that Desor had concocted an intricate plan to usurp not only his house but his career, and that his secretary’s recent calumnies contra his character were all part of a scheme in which Desor had been “waiting till he was established in Cambridge, in order to get his place.”¹⁷³ The judges holding all of Agassiz’s countercharges to be, for the most part, true to the letter, it was, in examining what they held to be “the gravest charge made...against M. Desor,” that the secretary “had been the cause of [Agassiz’s] domestic troubles & especially of Mrs. Agassiz leaving her husband’s house,”¹⁷⁴ that a two-page transcription of Mrs. Rose Agassiz’s 1846 letter to her son, as well as the 1848 excerpt discussed above, were entered into the records as “conclusive evidence.”¹⁷⁵ Closing the case with Rose’s definitive texts—mother *does* know best it seems—the final words of the judges in this “Desor vs. Agassiz” and following Mrs. Agassiz’s account of Desor’s homewrecking ways are conclusive: “the referees do not see how a charge of this nature could be more thoroughly made out.”¹⁷⁶

I call this court case, as well as the events and intrigue that surrounded it, to our attention not in an attempt to align myself with the muckraking Desor, but because, as I have been trying to stress throughout, it is intensely important to understand *who* Agassiz was, as a “real,” i.e. material, person rather than simply as an (a)historical figure—a figure whose story has been continually ellipsed and eclipsed in moves, both intentional and unintentional, to elide the practicing scientist with the science he practiced—if we are

¹⁷² Ibid, 17.

¹⁷³ “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 10.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 18.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 21.

to understand not only *what* the stripped slave figures that people the scientist's daguerreotyped displays were meant to convey, but also, authorial intentionality aside, what it even, and really, *meant* to figure as a person during the materiality of this historical moment. What has become evident, then, looking at the evidence presented above, is—and this was made obvious to us long before Nelson located the four walls of the scientist's study as screens shielding the pulsating hearts and scrutinizing white hot subjectivities irradiating panoptically outwards—that with the powers and privileges of (white) personhood comes immateriality. What that means in a real/lived, rather than a Foucauldian or otherwise theoretical (and thus, distancing and, often, facilitative) sense, however, has, perhaps, never been more obvious than in the case of M. Jean Louis Rudolphe Agassiz:...the man behind the myth, the man that class, race, calling, and, eventually, the camera, would consolidate to obscure.

The suit of Desor vs. Agassiz was clearly one in which the professional controversies (most importantly, the charge of false authorship assistant had made against employer) that were supposedly the basis of the action were of little consequence to the referees; of a twenty-one page handwritten transcript of the proceedings only four are specifically addressed to this aspect of the dispute. What was on trial, rather, was the established scientist's sexuality and, as was the case in the letter from Mrs. Rose Agassiz that becomes the arbitration's final meditation on the matter, whether or not it could be established that Agassiz's sexual proclivities, if dispositionally out of the ordinary, were to categorically position the man outside of the protective parameters of deindividuating white male mastery. That Desor's base accusations against Agassiz have been variously described as placing a "shadow" over the scientist, "tarnishing [his] standing in the

community,” and threatening to “blacken his reputation in Boston,”¹⁷⁷ colorfully, if inconsciently, delimit the stakes of a contest in which the (hyper-embodiment) mark of “immorality” is to be pitted against the unadulterated “invisibility” of racial and class ascendancy.

The trial beginning with an inquiry into the allegations of sexual misconduct with the servant Jane, and ending with the “gravest charge” of Desor’s interference in Agassiz’s intercourses with his wife, fascinatingly, the issue of Agassiz’s intimate interrelations with this male servant is, in a sense, a *non*-issue. If the referees and others in Boston’s distinguished society were in fact scandalized by what should by now be regarded as the longtime and undeniably homoerotic union in which the scientist and his assistant were engaged, it appears that what would, by the end of the century and in the much more famous trial of Oscar Wilde, seem to be the most serious of transgressions for which Agassiz would have been called to account, in America in 1849 the man’s misdemeanors as related to these specific earthly matters were as cursorily passed over as the professional charges pressed against him. Davis’s “it takes all sorts of men to make a world, so it takes all sorts of dispositions to make a man” apparently to be tacitly accepted as the final pronouncement on the subject, at least amongst those who shared Agassiz’s putative social status in the States, it is to a certain extent not so astonishing however that this dispensation, although slightly disingenuous, might be made when we consider the fact that our contemporary notions of homosexuality, *as well as* heterosexuality, had not yet been rigorously delineated in this pre-modern moment. If Wilde was later to be prosecuted and persecuted as a “homosexual” it was only after the “love that dare not speak its name” had, in fact, been given a name—landing on this

¹⁷⁷ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 158, 153, 155.

previous designation only after making the rounds of “Sodomite,” “Uranist,” and the later “Invert” amongst other early markers for those whose same-sex directed desires had come, under the scope of Continental science, to be considered both definitional and, often, pathological. In Agassiz’s time, however, and particularly in America where, although a forerunner in the field of gynecology, sexology was not to become a forte until well into the 1940s, the great taxonomer was not yet to fall prey to the sexual taxonomies of which the racial (and decidedly hierarchical) taxonomies that he himself was to encourage were, in many ways, the precursors.¹⁷⁸

Alexander Humboldt’s early advice to Agassiz, “It is not enough to be praised and recognized as a great and profound naturalist; to this one must add domestic happiness as well,” was now to become salient in all its many meanings. That the first categorical understandings of the “Sodomite” were intended to mark (as Other) not those who practiced sodomy, but rather individuals who engaged *exclusively* in sodomitic sexual practices, it was Agassiz’s marriage to Cecile, unhappy or otherwise, that allowed his “homosexual” relations with Desor to be dismissed as one of many libidinal leanings/“dispositions” entertained by the scientist rather than as a defining predilection that might unmake his designation as “man.” (Even Agassiz’s mother, in the midst of her most scathing of critiques of her son’s indiscretions, can see no reason why his particular “tastes” would preclude him from heaping “an amiable wife” in with his other “portion[s]”). And if his recognition as not only a man, but a man of authority, “a great and profound naturalist,” was in part to raise Agassiz above probing scrutiny—again, Davis is illustrative of a more widespread eye-shutting: “[Agassiz] must be right The

¹⁷⁸ See Siobahn Sommerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

sincere admiration inspired by his character carries me with him *without inquiry*¹⁷⁹—it was the scientist’s demonstrated commitment, through his domestic endeavors, to carry on making the sorts of men who, like himself, Davis, and others sharing the characteristics of their race and class, ‘make the world,’ that was to ultimately seal the deal on Agassiz’s manly purchase. That “manhood” during this time period was—perhaps no less so than it is today—intricately linked, as our previous segues into Marion Sims’ story stress, to the transmission of masculine identity and authority to other men through “[c]hildbearing...the foundation of legal male identities—‘perpetuation of names,’ ‘descent of property,’ ‘welfare of the State,’ and ‘permanence of government,’” the one product of Agassiz’s “labours [*sic.*]” of which Desor could not partake was the scientist’s fulfillment of the reproductive function. Having performed this duty and produced, most importantly, a male heir, Agassiz’s good name, sexual excesses be they what they were, could be, both figuratively and literally, guaranteed in perpetuity by this small expenditure.

Jules Marcou, who, stumbling upon the scene of Desor and Agassiz’s dramatic, almost *Dynasty*-like, split, admits that he did not initially relish being forced to become implicated by association with the men’s nefarious affair—“My first impulse was to be out of the way, for I was much frightened by the responsibility and awkward position in which I was placed”—and goes further to say that his first discussions with Desor had “prejudice[d] [him] against Agassiz...to a certain extent.” This representative of the establishment is, nevertheless, dissuaded of his indetermination upon consideration of an equally dynastic association capable of rendering any personal judgments on Agassiz’s character immaterial. Marcou concludes:

¹⁷⁹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 156.

[It was] insisted...on the immovable determination of Agassiz's mother, not to permit one of Agassiz's children to join him in America, so long as Desor remained in the house. This part of the information...was decisive for me.... Next day, after a sleepless night, my decision was made; I had chosen to side with the father, wife, and children against the adventurer, introduced in a fatal moment into the Agassiz household; and I told Agassiz that I accepted his mission, however disagreeable it might be....¹⁸⁰

Marcou placing both scientist and this situation within the context of a larger social network representing "permanence of government," one in which "Agassiz's mother" might be said to stand for "social welfare," while "Agassiz's children" obviously bespeak "perpetuation of names," and the reference to "Agassiz's household" putting one in mind of "descent of property" and of legacy, it is clear "the adventurer" hardly stands a chance. Desor, whose reputation and social standing in America were not as well established as Agassiz's, and who could be said to have been of little use-value in terms of both his scientific contributions (what little he may have accomplished was not in areas particularly interesting to Americans) as well as his reproductive functions (he remained unmarried and produced no children as far as I know), was thus left open for labels such as the above that would spuriously mark the man as existing definitively outside of proper social circumscriptions and beyond being offered the benefit of the doubt within this powerful circle. In fact, Marcou would later come close to calling the man a downright savage who had refused empiricists' civilizing missions even while scorning the missionary position, referring to the secretary as "one who was elevated from nothing to a recognized place in the scientific world, and then turned against the hand that raised him from poverty and obscurity."¹⁸¹ The barbarous fellow might have guessed that his observations on the nature of the scientist would have been dismissed and his own

¹⁸⁰ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, ii10-11.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, ii14.

character placed under examination in these arbitrations. His countermeasure, then, was quite clever although it failed. The introduction of the alleged Jane/Agassiz alliance, much more jeopardizing to the Agassiz name if true than any homosexual dalliances with his (ill-bred, but still indisputably *white*) male secretary might be—because of the larger social significations and, of course, the procreative potentialities of which this laborer partakes—was perhaps the one thing that might lower Agassiz below even Desor’s level; hence, this charge’s precedence in the proceedings.

Noting that any remarks made by Agassiz concerning Desor’s character, remarks that Desor wished to be judged libelous, had been pronounced only *after* the couple’s quarrel and the secretary’s defamatory parting threat, the arbitrators held that “no just opinion could be formed of the spirit in which [the scientist] had spoken of M. Desor, without knowing the nature and extent of the provocation [Agassiz] had received.” As regarded the charge of impropriety with Jane, then, “far from considering this to be an irrelevant matter, it appeared to them that it must form the primary subject of their inquiry.”¹⁸² As stated earlier, the allegations of Agassiz’s affair with Jane disproved, the remainder of Desor’s recriminations were overruled and all Agassiz had said against the man allowed, the judges decreeing, “that the...charge of M. Desor against Prof. Agassiz was a calumnious one & deprived him of all right of calling upon Prof. Agassiz to explain or apologize for anything he may since have said against M.Desor.”¹⁸³ If this is any measure of the “nature and extent of the provocation” that this charge constituted, the seriousness of this claim must certainly have been of the highest order, a level of insult that might begin to be inferred by the order in which the personal identifiers that modify

¹⁸² “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 4.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

and mark this woman are ranked in her introduction into the discussion: “M. Desor put abroad reports reflecting upon the moral character of Prof. Agassiz, whom he charged with an improper connection with *an Irish girl, by the name of Jane, a servant in the family* at East Boston [emphases mine].”¹⁸⁴ Jane’s ethnic affiliation, mentioned only once in the course of the trial, but as the very first thing that we are to learn about her, would indicate that this, perhaps even more so than her position as servant, is of no small consequence in the judges’ minds. To understand the true relevance of these particular charges as pressed against Agassiz, then, one must make a small detour, a detour that will eventually reveal that the discourses that circulate around the figure of Jane serve as substitutive significations in which the implicit yet unspoken allegations of sexual perversity, “homosexuality,” and *race-*, as well as class-traitorship that adhere to the Desor/Agassiz pairing are able to be articulated through the particularized and particularly abhorrent, almost pornographic, pairing of Agassiz and an Other who was definitely *not* one of their own, and whom it was decidedly the white man’s duty to discipline rather than desire.

So now, more on Jane, Irish girl and servant. Although it was to be expected that a “white” female domestic in Boston in the mid-1800s, after two huge immigration waves occurring in the 1820s and 1840s, was to be found to be of Irish descent, the majority surely were, the fact that the referees are to make a point of stating this bit of the obvious, makes all the more pointed the mindset of a mid-century moment in which while the majority may have been able to adjudge Jane’s social standing at first accent, a consensus had yet to be reached concerning her racial designation. The Irish, well into the twentieth century, held up to ridicule and abuse because of their relative poverty and decidedly

¹⁸⁴ “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 3.

proletariat status, were also, particularly within a nineteenth-century culture obsessed with racial chains of being, held to be decidedly downscale from the average Anglo-Saxon; if not *exactly* black, they were much closer to those relegated to this rank in the Family of Man than they were to the elect members of the indisputably white stock whom they served.

The ‘look’ of the Irish eliciting from some the same sort of response evinced by Agassiz in his first face-off with Blacks—Anne McClintock, in her *Imperial Leather*, quotes these telling reactions from two visitors to Ireland, one in 1783 who notes that “Shoes and stockings are seldom worn by these beings who seem to form a different race from the rest of mankind,” the other nearly a century later in 1860 who, although allowing for the Irish’s “whiteness” insists, nonetheless, “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country.... To see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black one would not feel it as much.”¹⁸⁵ (fig. 2.2)—the Irish servant woman was considered even worse yet. If Irish men were to be deemed “degenerate and degraded” as compared to the rest of *mankind*, “Irish working-class women,” were, according to McClintock, “depicted as lagging even farther behind in the lower depths of the white race,”¹⁸⁶ a position shared with the prostitute and not quite far enough removed from the Hottentot woman to consider the characteristics they were said to partake atavistic rather than consonant.

Furthermore, and like these, her dark sisters, the lasciviousness of the Irish woman was equally notorious, for like them she was “figured as biologically driven to

¹⁸⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 52, 403 n. 93.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

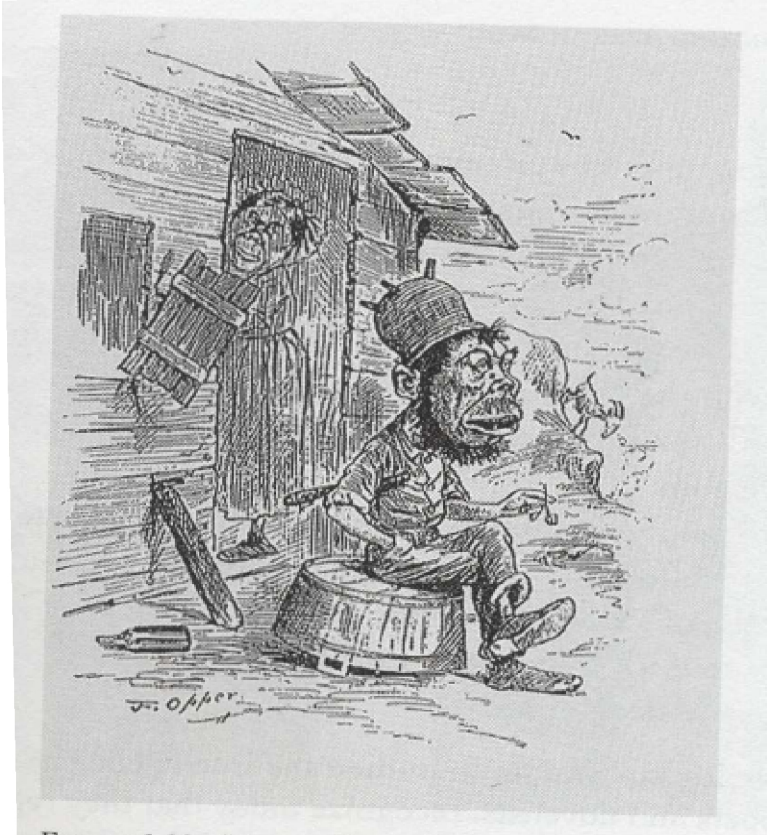


Figure 2.2

lechery and excess.”¹⁸⁷ If the sexual availability of the black female slave, an availability more often than not cast as subjectively instinctual rather than systematic to slavery, was considered to be a provocation against which the most willing-spirited of white masters and their sons had difficulty dressing their weaknesses, the Irish servant girl, too, was frequently blamed with being the root cause of much “domestic degeneracy.”¹⁸⁸ Female domestic servants, a designation which, again, should be understood at that time to be largely synonymous in many minds with “Irish women,” often indicted as having lured into sexual apprenticeship the upper- and middle-class children they were hired to care for, Freud, who spoke of “unscrupulous nurses [well known] to put crying children to sleep by stroking their genitals,” was not alone in portraying the family domestic as potential seductress, as McClintock’s additional citation of Eugene Talbot’s 1898 *Degeneration: Its Causes, Signs and Results* would indicate: “The sexual history of boys [and presumably many girls as well] often demonstrates that their initiation into the sexual life was first at the instance of women older than themselves, often servants.”¹⁸⁹ While McClintock goes on to say that the sexual power and influence that female servants exercised over the children that were their class superiors was thus, “not identical to the power relations between the maid and her adult employers,”¹⁹⁰ it is the same Freud whom she berates for not devoting enough attention or “theoretical status” to the domestic primacy of the working-class woman who first suggested that the seduction of the boy (Freud, like Talbot, has not so much to say, in this case, about the girls) might play so powerful a role in the psycho-sexual functionings of the man that the early

¹⁸⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 86.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

dominance of the servant-initiatrice might be much more far-reaching than McClintock herself here owns in terms of its effects on the relations experienced between adult employer and his later inferiors.¹⁹¹

Claiming, in his 1912 essay “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love,” that most “civilized” men were absolutely unable to negotiate the idea of sex as an act of love with the contradictorily held belief that the sexual act was essentially debasing, Freud writes:

There are only a very few educated people in who the two currents of affection and sensuality have become properly fused; the man almost always feels his respect for the woman acting as a restriction on his sexual activity, and only develops full potency when he is with a debased sexual object; and this in its turn is partly caused by the entrance of perverse components into his sexual aims, which he does not venture to satisfy with a woman he respects. He is assured of complete sexual pleasure only when he devotes himself unreservedly to obtaining satisfaction, which with his well-brought up wife, for instance, he does not dare to do. This is the source of his need for a debased sexual object, a woman who is ethically inferior, to whom he need attribute no aesthetic scruples.... It is to such a woman that he prefers to devote his sexual potency, even when the whole of his affection belongs to a woman of a higher kind. It is possible, too, that the tendency so often observed in men of the highest classes of society to choose a woman of the lower class as a permanent mistress or even as a wife is nothing but a consequence of their need for a debased sexual object, to whom, psychologically, the possibility of complete satisfaction is linked.¹⁹²

Arguing that the basis for this phenomenon—which is, of course, a redaction of the psychological supports that undergirded the pedestalled-positioning of those pristine members of America’s cult of “true womanhood”—lies in men’s internalizations of sexual taboos concerning incest, internalizations which are representative of a decisive moment in the child’s sexual development in which a split must be made between the sensual and affectional currents that underlie the infant’s earliest fixations on the mother

¹⁹¹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 87-95.

¹⁹² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey with introd. by Peter Gay. (1930; repr.; New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 399.

(sexual feelings for the mother necessarily, if with difficulty, jettisoned), implicit in this scenario is the presence of the nursemaid, the upper-class child's other early caregiver and the one with whom sensual inclinations were often explicitly indulged. The subsequent adult desire for a "debased sexual object"—and Freud need never have added those final lines to this passage for the reader to understand that the ethically, aesthetically, and socially inferior object of whom he speaks is the working class/laboring woman, and that the choice of the term "ethically," rather than "morally," is perhaps meant to suggest an inferiority of an *ethnic* nature as well—could therefore be easily attributed to the fact that the man's first objective sexual experiences were themselves *debasings*, in that in the downward exchange of affections between charge and nurse, master and servant, they involved a most intimate form of class- (and, often, racial-) leveling. If the women of the lower classes could then inspire in the adult man a "full potency" that he is unable to achieve with his bourgeois wife, the adult recipient of his affectional outpourings (and, hence, psychologically linked to the mother and by extension to a sensuality governed by guilt-feelings and restraint), it is because these women represented not only the 'mothers men could fuck,' but, in their linkage to many men's earliest of sexual cravings and sexual *satisfactions*, they came to stand (not only psychically but within the common parlance) for the possibility of a return to and fulfillment of the most infantile, omnivorous, and all-encompassing of polymorphous perversities. Recalling psychoanalytic writings on the child's pre-Oedipal understandings of the mother as knowing no lack, capable of fulfilling all of baby's most pressing desires, imagine the power of the woman that the adult man might view as such! McClintock might really be missing something here.

Early in her discussion of the “profound sway...working class women held over their young charges” in the Victorian household, McClintock refers as well to the prevalent position of the domestic servant in “male Victorian writings,” citing by way of these “pornography and memoirs.”¹⁹³ To address the former, which during this time period very frequently took the form of the latter, if the nursemaid and governess made many a cameo in the frenzied sex romps of pornography’s initial heyday, these persistent appearances went hand in hand with the incessant incest fantasies that were also a mainstay of Victorian porn, both scenarios part and parcel of a medium which itself constituted a “debased sexual object” and which utopianly held out the promise of complete satisfaction of the most “perverse components” of the sexual aims of the men (and their infantile alter-egos) for whom it was then written. Peter Gay, renowned psychoanalytic scholar and author of *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, in volume one of his collection, *The Education of the Senses*, wonderfully capitulates this vision of pornography’s appeal to the inner child:

Small children wish to possess, to dominate, monopolize, incorporate, destroy. Every part of their little bodies may serve as a playground for erotic gratification, and their capacity to differentiate libido from aggression is rudimentary at best. Touching and kissing, stroking, biting and swallowing are, in the constricted universe of the nursery, all acts of love. Freud captured this quality when he said that children are polymorphously perverse. Pornography elaborates this childish capacity for adult consumers.¹⁹⁴

Of course the figure of the female domestic servant would haunt this “pornotopia” (as *The Other Victorians*’ Steven Marcus was first to call it¹⁹⁵). Not only the mother who

¹⁹³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 85.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: The Education of the Senses*, 1984 rpt (New York: Norton & Co, 1999) 374.

¹⁹⁵ See Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*. (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

willingly provides sexual gratification, but a woman who, as household ‘possession’ could be, and often had been/was, dominated, monopolized, bitten, swallowed, spit out and destroyed with relative impunity, if pornography can be said to trade in circulating the sexual taboos of the society it services (taboos, in pornotopia, purged of the guilt-associations and glutted with the titillations), the taboo broken in scenarios of sex with servant girls did not lie so much in the act itself (as it did in the fullblown incest scenes), but in the mature acknowledgement of what was for many a childhood reality *and* perhaps more importantly in the embrace of the idea of an adult, flagrant, and public rather than private continuance of these caste-crossing relations. (The black slave figure would share in these magnificently pornographic potentialities, it would simply take a little longer for the smutpeddler to fantastically capitalize on a condition that had long been leveraged by the slaveholder.) Put bluntly, in Victorian porn, men revel in the sexual(ized) dissolve of distances between the “dominant” and the supposedly “submissive.” They *openly and exhibitionistically* screw their servants, in front of wives, friends, social superiors, and, often, in front of their own children (nicely initiating subsequent incestuous engagements)—that’s what servants are there for and *everyone* knows it.

This said, I now offer a caveat. There is, in the end, perhaps a bit more to Victorian pornography’s (and mid-nineteenth-century society’s) fascination with the degenerate domestic. As should be fairly obvious by now, the taboo of class-crossing was to be intimately, if subconsciously and subtextually, linked to the titillation of race-crossing, a societal and sexual taboo that, if frequently (although for the most part covertly) broken in reality, was pretty well enforced in early pornography’s utopian

universe; swarthy Celtic nannies, prostitutes, and other such dark denizens were to come close enough to fit the bill without actually placing the spotlight on the other Others they were psychically upstaging. At the same time, the aforementioned women were also, I would now like to argue, to come as close as was comfortable to acting as surrogate stand-ins for a very certain variety of the spectral sodomitic male sex partners that shadowed a genre that while it was in those early days (and as it is now) chock full of scenes of Sapphic sexual couplings, was at the same time almost completely devoid of scenes of male-male pairings. Pornography catering, until rises in literacy and advances in printing and photographic reproduction had made its wares affordable and accessible to the masses, specifically to the desires of men of the moneyed classes (as again intimated in the fact that in its many nurse and governess fantasies a familiarity would have had to have been supposed), it necessarily presented them at their very best even while depicting them indulging in the most base of their fornicative impulses. Thus, following Steven Marcus, amongst others, who has pointed out that, “there is almost no literature of a homosexual kind surviving from the period and...as far as can be determined very little was produced,”¹⁹⁶ it seems that this sort of sexual transgression, if participated in by men of the higher classes was, as in the case of the Agassiz and Desor coupling, to be an open secret that, being still beyond words/explicit signification (“I am not yet able to tell you about the quarrel between Agassiz and Desor—partly because I am not sufficiently well-informed”), was to subsist behind closed (study?) doors, above promiscuous exhibition (“[t]he subject is to be referred to friends”), and “without inquiry.” The few pornographic works during this period that can be cited as depicting scenes of male-on-male iniquity are, again reminiscent of our previous discussion of

¹⁹⁶ Marcus, *Other Victorians*, 261.

Agassiz, staged so as to seem freaks of disposition rather than a static predilection; “homosexual play...still disguised in heterosexual activities,” in the midst of pansexual orgies men find their bodies suddenly juxtaposed, but there is always a female co-conspirator close at hand and as such “the homosexual experiences are not ‘direct’...the woman is there to mediate, as it were between [the two men].”¹⁹⁷

Finding a multitude of ways to mediate yet cloak upper class men’s same-sex directed libidinal urges in a variety of other scenarios—for example, and most frequently, scenes of sadomasochism in which the whip becomes the woman’s absent penis (more on this with Stowe!), or even the rarer scenes of duel penetration in which the double-saddling of the female other substitutes for the fantasy of the two men’s riding each other—I’d like to suggest that yet another of these maskings, again mediated by a woman, might have involved that most popular and, on first glance, seemingly simple scenario of sex with the servant girl (or, sex with Irish *Jane*, for example); for maybe she was no girl at all. The working-class woman variously described as “coarse,” “manly,” and “unsexed,”¹⁹⁸ for many her sexual status was as ambiguous as her racial standing. To return to Anne McClintock, who, using a man by the name of Arthur J. Munby as her own Agassizian case study, performs a reading of the cultural discourses and private fantasies that adhered to the idea of the ‘female masculinity’ of women of the lower classes, we find in *Imperial Leather* numerous examples in which the “white” female

¹⁹⁷ Marcus, *Other Victorians*, 234, 174.

¹⁹⁸ McClintock discusses this at length in *Imperial Leather* pp.95-118 also calling in the ways in which working women are not only masculinized, but they are represented as racialized males as well. Of course, the idea of the woman who steps outside the bounds of class and behavioral norms as masculinized has been discussed by many critics—particularly those addressing black women, McClintock seems to be one of the first to chart this specific representational alignment of working class white women with black men.

proletariat comes to be iconographically resignified not only as male but as *Black* male (fig. 2.3). (It should be noted here, that McClintock's analysis of the ways in which economic and social standing contributed to the gendered- and racial-(re)construction of the white female working woman also provides an interesting inversion and addendum to theories concerning the socio-economic and representational *un-gendering* of the African male slave in antebellum America perhaps most famously articulated by Hortense Spillers. More on this later.) So saying, and for the purposes of our present discussion, if McClintock's Munby's fantasy-life can be said to be representative of a portion of the prevailing socio-sexual preoccupations (and taboos) of his nineteenth-century cultural moment and milieu—the multitude of supporting materials that McClintock offers to this effect suggesting that they can, and the very existence and economic-viability of the pornographic genre, in all its mediums, attesting, in ways that perhaps even the writings of Freud have been unable to lay claim, to a certain universality of the psycho-sexual drives that is fairly incontrovertible—it seems that it may have been the associational black maleness of the Irish servant girl that accounted for some of her libidinal appeal as well as to the polymorphously perverse sway that she held in the realm of sexual fantasy.

And certainly one could read intimations of this double-valenced charge underlying the accusations made concerning Agassiz and Jane's indiscretions. To be put aside are the threatening procreative potentialities of this relationship, for Jane's engagement to be married and the surety of economic and social advance that this promised would have certainly made the woman, if not the man (Agassiz), particularly hesitant to participate in sexual exchanges that might have portended pregnancy. More

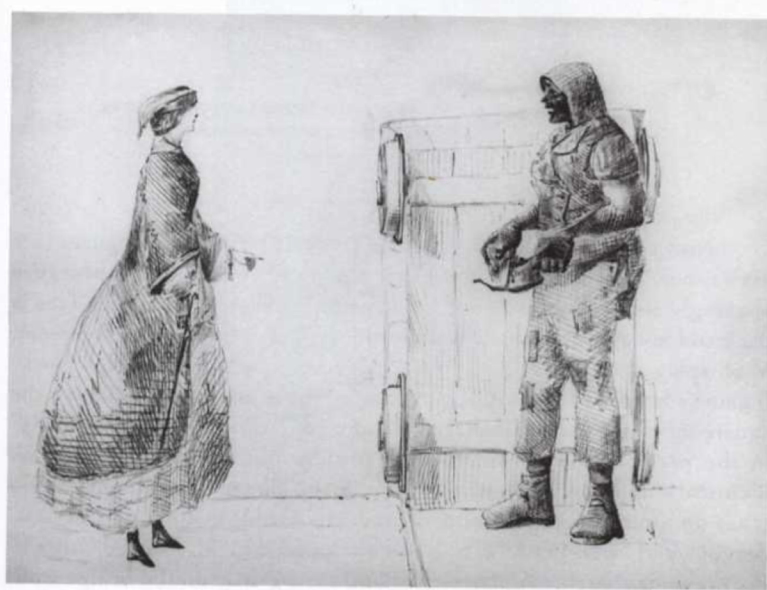


Figure 2.3

important is the fact that the very idea of sex with this servant woman was, as Freud would have it, to be considered inherently perverse in and of itself—the fantasized couplings of Agassiz and Jane to immediately call to the mind of arbitrators promises of sexual fulfillment and unchained-potency not to be had with the “well-brought up” and truly domesticated American women whom they were expected to take as wives. And both Desor’s original telling of the story and cousin Maurice’s later revamp go to great pains to attach elements of the luridly pornographic to their accounts of the alleged affair. Desor’s initially delineated arsenal of damning evidence focusing on the openness and near exhibitionism of this degenerate domestic duo, his tale in which the couple’s indiscretions were common knowledge amongst the household’s intimates, and in which the two exchanged gifts as well as brazen repartee in full-view (nearly an entire page of the proceedings are dedicated to the significance of a gold watch presented by Agassiz and “worn openly by Jane”¹⁹⁹), culminates with a scene suggesting that an either pre- or post-coition Agassiz and Jane have been caught in the act *with the door wide open*, inviting voyeurs and obscenely mocking social opprobrium. Something may be made as well, especially if one were Freud, of Desor’s decision to present this moment of damning intimacy as a particularly perverse inversion of a an exchange that, had it involved wife or *mother* rather than servant as stand-in for the preceding two, would have been considered pristinely innocent; the scientist’s, almost childish, trying on of shirts in front of this woman twisted so that what would normally be an act bespeaking nurturance is now imbued with a sexuality deemed absolutely unnatural. In Maurice’s fantastic, and by no means innocent, revision of the story, the door has been closed, but “on his

¹⁹⁹ “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 8-9.

bursting into the room, he [finds] the parties standing by the stove,”²⁰⁰ engaged in a scenario that is clearly meant to suggest that servant has been playing fellatrix to her master; again, “the front of M. Agassiz’s trousers was in disarray; & Jane afterwards told him that she was sewing a loosened button”...exclamation point. Jane’s Irishness, distinctively marked out by the referees of this “Process,” as is her “free & bold” manner in her interactions with any and all men she encounters, the servant-girl’s association with perverse lasciviousness and female-masculinity are here highlighted and advantageously appropriated within a scripting that would frame her as Agassiz’s sodomitic sex partner. Fellatio at that time, and as it still exists in law, synonymous with sodomy, Irishness akin to racial otherness, the working-class woman easily conflated with the black male exotic, the insertion of the detail of the stove, to which the couple stand in marked proximity, seems the final, and fairly overdetermined accoutrement in a scene that hardly need introduce sooty analogies to fully spectacularize that there is perhaps more than one sort of dark dirtiness with which one is to align Jane, servant and stove-“girl,” in this act of illicit love-making.

I think that we can now say that we have some measure of the “nature and extent of the provocation” that Desor’s charge of “improper conduct” between Agassiz and Jane constituted. We should understand also the full-measure of the racially-charged language used to describe the tainting effects that the trial and the accusations forwarded therein threatened to have on Agassiz’s social-standing in the States, even after he had been putatively cleared on all major counts concerning his indiscretions in regard to Jane. For while, on the one hand, suggestions that the scientist has been guilty of a metaphorically miscegenated relationship with his Irish domestic had in fact been dropped, on the

²⁰⁰ “Desor vs. Agassiz,” 7-8.

other, the allegations concerning Agassiz's affair with his female servant in many ways making use of the body of this "dark" woman" to mediate and recapitulate the even darker doings that could be said to have been the actual, yet (necessarily) unspoken, foci of the trial—Agassiz's carnal relations with Desor—contrary to the referees' claim that with the dismissal of the charges involving Jane everything that followed was to be considered extraneous and invalidated, nothing in this case was to prove that the suspicions that the scientist had maintained a "homosexual" union with his secretary were not, in fact, well-grounded. Rose Agassiz's 1846 and 1848 letters, introduced as the final words in the proceedings and as a testament to Desor's roguery, effectively incriminate her son as well, serving only to resubstantiate a view of Agassiz that, in its send up of the scientist's particular "tastes" and peculiar perversions, would not only further blacken him by analogy—the same sort of degenerative linkage that was to both racialize and lascivate Jane, to align the lesbian and the Hottentot woman in Sander Gilman's analysis, and, in my own argument in Chapter Four, queer the black man while blackening the homosexual—but that would also make even more explicit the ultimately unspeakable imputation that lies beneath all. Pornography only able to allude to this desire at the third degree of analogy, Maurice's pornographic description of Jane's stoveside interlude with Agassiz following a similarly circuitous route in its suggestive strainings, even the narratives of former slaves, full of firsthand accounts of rapes, murders, and tortures, finding this trespass too horrible a sin to consider straight out (Stowe, by the way, *would* do what pornography, Maurice, and the ex-slave could not), Rose's early missive especially, in which son has become the slave of the man over whom he would be master, concomitantly calls to question whether the master's desire

for this male servant might extend to *all* servile men over which he might profess mastery. Mother's discourse proposing the premierly perverse possibility that the white man may just harbor sexual desires for the black man, if Rose is unaware of the logical endpoint of her letter's implications, her son obviously was not: "God preserve us from such contact!" cries Agassiz, stressing (however unconvincingly) that the only "feelings" that the Negro 'inspires in him'—the scientist's semantic insistence on his 'feelings' regarding Black men, variations of the word used three times in his Philadelphia confession, to be seen as Agassiz's belabored acknowledgement of the fact that what is *required* of him in this instance is an assessment of his libidinal, rather than rational, response to the stimuli placed before him—is the desire to tell the Black man to "stay far away." Agassiz's 1846 exclamations, held to mark the spontaneous and sudden turn to the doctrines of polygenesis of a man just arrived in America, again read as a carefully scripted and by no means arbitrary response to the recently expressed epistolary cautions and subtextual recriminations of his mother, I would argue that it is only after the same letter is to make its second coming—three years later and within the context of the refereed mediations that would bring these early inculcations back to the fore—that the true conversion, or baptismal immersion as the case may be, occurs.

Following the trial's end in February of 1849, and stopping on the way in Philadelphia to cement his connection to Morton, the scientist retreated to Charleston, S.C.; only to emerge several months later, freshly engaged to one of Boston's most respected ladies, Elizabeth Cabot Cary (formerly courted by U.S. statesman Charles Sumner), his children in the process of being sent over from Europe, with a series of articles about to be published in the *Christian Examiner* in which the naturalist would

make markedly and publicly clear his views on the separate origins of the species, and with his sequence of slave daguerreotypes well in the works. Agassiz's hasty move to take a new wife, as well as the immediate arrangement for the importation of his offspring, in my mind clearly indicative of the scientist's pressing need for new beards, I think that we should, finally, begin to grasp both the import and inevitability of Agassiz as Accused's determination, in the wake of a scandal that had so spectacularly placed his dark private-doings and private-person in the full-public eye to pronouncedly associate himself with the American school of ethnography.

If, Sims' manhood called into question, he answered with the blueprints to the female vagina, Agassiz's sexual proclivities and racial positioning on the block, it is not surprising that he should realize that Jem, Alfred, and their dark privates might be sold out instead. Dana Nelson, like Tagg, Sekula, and others before her, holding that, "As 'other' bodies were investigated, inventoried, and invested with particularized materiality, scientific authority located the Observing Subject in... 'an artificial space of evacuated materiality,'" ²⁰¹ it was to be through Agassiz's publicized adoption of the doctrines of polygenesis, and his admission into the "puritivizing" sphere of the leading men of racial science—behind whose study walls the sanctity of the radiantly whitened racial scientist's body, mind, and affectional excesses could be protected—that the naturalist, stigmatically embodied in the course of his proceedings with Desor, was finally able to shake the taints, both real and implied, that were to momentarily mark him as darkly desiring subject. Agassiz, as he had done when called to task by *maman*, once again employing the body of the black man as a deflector, a deflector by which, in a classically Derridean (by way of Morrison) deployment of self-defining *differance*, the

²⁰¹ Nelson, *National Manhood*, 124.

invocation of the “not me” meant to reassert the scientist’s own position as free—free from guilt yet free to do as he pleased, freely ‘sinning’ yet to be freed from scrutiny, imbued by the sanctity and the sanctions that protected the purity of the high-bred White while eschewing associations with/investments in all things black and lowly, particularly those things occurring as low as the genital level—in subjecting the dark privates of the black man to empirical scrutiny, a scrutiny both sanctioned and sanctified by racial science, Agassiz seems to have meant these images to stand as the visual equivalent of his Philadelphia protestations. And, indeed, they have.

Like Flowers in the Agassiz Museum: Naturalizing the Enterprise of the Obscene

*It’s a strange curse my ‘generation’ has we’re all
like flowers in the Agassiz Museum perpetually ardent.*²⁰²

*The more one advances willy-nilly in sex’s veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more enclosed one becomes in the endless over-signification of a real that no longer exists, of a body that never existed....Sex is produced like one produces a document, or as one says of an actor that he performs (se produit) on stage....Everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded. This is sex as it exists in pornography, but more generally, this is an enterprise of our culture, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity.*²⁰³

Having made a fairly astonishing come back—elected president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science within a year of the scandal’s being put to

²⁰² Frank O’Hara, “For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson,” in *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Merriam Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 389.

²⁰³ Jean Baudrillard, “Stereo-Porno,” in *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer. (New York St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 33-35.

rest, Agassiz had also signed on for a five-year term as professor at Harvard, and had already begun preliminary steps towards the establishment of what, in his mind, was always to be known as the “Agassiz Museum”—the scientist was frequently to toast his good fortune in the presence of affiliates of the “Saturday Club,” men with whom Agassiz was to form yet another powerful alliance in the mid-1850s while keeping alive the social traditions of Cuvier and Morton, the latter having passed in 1851. Of a typical monthly dinner attended by these club members, Jules Marcou says the following:

They lingered long round the table, while hour after hour passed in animated conversation, in which *bon mots* and repartee were exchanged as rapidly as a discharge of fireworks—an encounter of anecdote, wit, and erudition. At such times Agassiz was at his best, with his inexhaustible *bonhomie*. With a lighted cigar in each hand, he would force the attention of every one around him... Then would come one of his made-up stories—a mixture of dream and science. He knew perfectly well that it was a fiction, and the first time he told it he hesitated a little. If he thought anyone in the company was doubting its truth, he would look at him with a dumb request not to betray him. On the next occasion he would repeat the same story without any hesitation; and the third time he told it, he was sure that it had really happened and was true. Agassiz would have been very truthful, if he had less fire and brilliancy in his imagination, always too easily excited. In principle he was honest, because he believed all that he said. For him the Italian proverb, “*si non e vero e ben trovato,*” was an article of the code of conversation in after-dinner talk among witty gentleman.²⁰⁴

Perhaps Agassiz did, in fact, believe the dream that the daguerreotyping of five naked slaves stripped of subjectivity and articulated as different species was about science. Maybe he believed, too, after telling the same story enough times that his excitement when encountering the black man was animated by repulsion and a sincere wish to force separation rather than evidence of an inexhaustible, and equally strong, urge to draw these men towards him in *frictive*, rather than fraternal, embrace, a closeness portending the most fantastic of fireworks. Perhaps Agassiz held cigars in each hand while embroiled in that much-referenced 1863 exchange with Samuel G. Howe (Julia

²⁰⁴ Marcou, *Life, Letters*, 133. For more on “Saturday Club,” see Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 193, 202-203.

Ward's husband) that is said to offer proof of Agassiz's "fear [of] the prospect of amalgamation by intermarriage," but which should actually be interpreted, at base—as should Agassiz's initial decision to come out strongly and publicly as naturalist cum separate-creationist—as a frantic protestation of Agassiz's own pure white manliness (a manliness achieved only by remaining in, within the race, within the thinking man's study, and in the closet as it were). Portions of this exchange cited in the earliest sections of this chapter, I offer yet another excerption;

In the first place let me insist on the fact that the population arising from the amalgamation of the two races is always degenerate, that it loses the excellences of both primitive stocks to retain the vices and defects of both, and never to enjoy the physical vigor of either....Conceive for a moment the difference it would make in future ages for the prospects of republican institutions, and our civilization generally, if instead of the manly population descended from cognate nations the United States should be inhabited by the effeminate progeny of mixed races, half Indian, half negro, sprinkled with white blood.²⁰⁵

Similar observations offered over the course of three frenzied letters, maybe even Howe was so convinced by the repetition that he never stopped to question the fact that in Agassiz's take on racial admixture the pure and vigorous parents/parent races that come together to produce the "effeminate progeny" that are to forever bear the vice in which they were conceived have both (or, in the last example, as a threesome), according to the text's logics, been sexed male. Unnoticed by Howe, also, may have been the fact that, read carefully, one finds in this extended discourse of Agassiz's on "intermarriage" few, if any, designators that would explicitly mark his imagined sex partners as anything other than gender neutral and, hence, universally masculine. Agassiz's discourses of disgust always bearing the indelible imprint of desire (to paraphrase the oft-cited Stallybrass and

²⁰⁵ E. Agassiz, *Life and Correspondence*, 601, 603.

White-ism²⁰⁶), perhaps what the scientist actually said mattered little and what the saying of it meant for science, for a narrative of American progress and the fulfillment of a destiny made manifest, was what really mattered.

Two cigars in hand, Agassiz's pure manliness, and phallic mastery, so insisted upon by the scientist as to force attention to its own construction, Agassiz was not the only one seemingly invested in the furthering of this "fiction." Fellow "Saturday Club" socialite Ralph Waldo Emerson saying of Agassiz that he was, "a man to be thankful for.... [He] has a brave manliness which can meet a peasant, a mechanic, or a fine gentleman with equal fitness,"²⁰⁷ and James Russell Lowell, also part of this party, seconding, in a statement that makes the scientist sound very much like the "primitive stock" signaled in the above citation, "Blood runs quick in his veins, and he has an animal vigour [*sic.*] to a degree rare among men—a true male, in all its meaning,"²⁰⁸ those who in calling Agassiz a "true male" would have meant this as a reference to the earliest of manly men mythologized in Plato's *Symposium* nevertheless recognized that the naturalist was "a great acquisition for America." His ties to the scientific establishment in the Old World (even if these ties included an "unnatural" connection to Desor) adding a new sort of legitimacy to New World scientific endeavors, his embrace of ethnography mutually advantageous for both himself and the men consolidating this rapidly expanding field of American specialization, and his plans to install in the States its own Jardin des Plantes, by the 1850s and by all accounts the naturalist had "gained a great and controlling influence which [might] be very beneficial perhaps for generations

²⁰⁶ See Peter Stalleybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

²⁰⁷ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 203. Lurie quotes from Emerson's journal entry for May 28, 1857.

²⁰⁸ Marcou, *Life Letters*, 132. Lowell quoted without source notes.

to come.”²⁰⁹ Accession to Agassiz’s “dumb request not to betray him” thus augured the advancement of all, and just imagine the “difference it would make in future ages for the prospects of [America’s] republican institutions, and [white] civilization generally” if the most fiery and brilliant of his imaginative fictions could not be put to good use.

Which is to say, and as I have been trying to make as explicit as possible, that what was really at stake in Agassiz’s moves to secure membership in American racial science’s private and privatizing scientific community—one in which power (authoritative *and* financial), over both fellow professionals and one’s fellowmen, was at once hard won (in a social system becoming increasingly market-driven, this “manly” authority could only be attained through the evidencing of individual and professional *use-value*), and practically purchased (through the scientific display and social disciplining of the comparatively disempowered: white women and people of color)—was that membership therein would make Agassiz both ultimately invisible and practically *untouchable*. Particularly after the death of Morton had made him the most powerful scientific man in America. Firmly ensconced within the crèche of American ethnography, a discipline that posited its practitioners as forerunners in the battle to ensure the reproduction of white male patriarchal power systems, he had also found a niche in which he was to prove so invaluable that even the potential homoeroticism that might adhere to the sorts of homosociality which he relished, rather than un-manning or embodying him (and thereby leaving him open to racial resignification), could be effectively incorporated into a definitive narrative of (abstracted) white male dominance.

²⁰⁹ Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, 179. Letter of George Engelmann, “St. Louis physician, botanist, and former student with Agassiz at Heidelberg.”

American racial science's polygenist and anti-amalgamationist focus on the special differences between the races obviously intended to cater to rising social concerns regarding the increased social and sexual freedom of women and what this might mean in terms of the possible emancipation of the black male slave, it clearly catered as well to the reification of a (panoptic) vision of white male purity that stood in opposition to the corruptive constitutions of these Others. One sees in their discourses concerning miscegenation that the white male's primary role in the 'mongrelization' of the race that had thus far occurred within the bounds of slavery is often (and disingenuously) swept under the rug, a focus on the detrimental effects of the interracial marriages that might occur if blacks were to be given social equality conveniently casting the issue as relating to the potential right of black men to *choose* white women as sexual- and life-partners (and white women's promiscuous potential to choose them right back) thus deflecting attention away from white men's illicit and lascivious mistreatment of black women who were rarely given a choice as concerned copulation with their masters. At the same time, "racial theory," as pointed out by Robert J.C. Young in his *Colonial Desire*, "invested in—if not defined by—the compulsive imaginings of interracial sex....[A] Malthusian fantasy of uncontrollable, frantic fornication producing the countless motley varieties of interbreeding, with the miscegenated offspring themselves then generating an endless *mélange*, 'mongrelity,' of self-propagating endlessly diversifying hybrid progeny,"²¹⁰ it also comes to construct white male homosociality as a "constitutive element" in the regulation and stabilization of whiteness. White women imagined paradoxically as "the

²¹⁰ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 181.

key to whiteness's future and its weakest defense"²¹¹ Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex:*

Whiteness, Heterosexuality, & The Fictions of White Supremacy, argues:

[T]he homosocial may be a necessary component of any attempt to keep whiteness white, to keep whiteness pure. If, as Dyer points out, "race is a means of categorising [*sic.*] different types of human body which reproduce themselves" (*White* 20), white reproduction becomes a necessarily unstable process. To reproduce whiteness sexually is to risk contamination, and so heterosexuality becomes a threat to whiteness, one that can only be avoided if that heterosexuality is ultimately less important and less central than the homosociality it facilitates. Homoeroticism becomes, paradoxically, the only structure of desire that can keep whiteness white.²¹²

The only obvious glitch in this logics entailing the possibility of cross-racial homoerotic desire, this glitch will remain unrecognized just as the potential for such desire is to remain unspoken. If theories on natural repugnance and the sterility and degeneration of "hybrids" were betrayed by both the reality of these "mongrels's" continued existence as well as by scientists' endless and "compulsive" fascination with interracial reproduction, and if Agassiz's interest in the origins of the different species betrayed a "perverse" fascination with the black man's organs of generation that bespoke an obsession with contact rather than separation, *si non e vero e ben travato*. Alternately translated as "if it isn't true it ought to be" and "if it isn't true, it's well invented," this Italian proverb proved to be an article and code of both early racial science and standard white supremacy. If the arguments and 'evidence' produced by Agassiz in particular were more fiction than reality, more dream than science, not only did they do much to

²¹¹ Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, & The Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 17.

²¹² Stokes, *Color of Sex*, 18. Stokes' quote putting us eerily in mind of our early discussions of gynecology's and ethnography's alternating attempts to both police and co-opt white women's reproductive powers—culminating, in Nelson's article, in racial science's homosocial takeover of white heterosexuality's central locus, the home—it recalls also the stakes of Agassiz's sex trial, one in which the taints of heterosexual cross-caste transgression were pitted against homosexuality's possible effect on the wages of whiteness; Agassiz's homoerotic desires, once "proven" to be structured, i.e. directed exclusively towards whites and thus non-contaminatory, he is placed categorically outside of marking practices that would make his body the subject of surveillance.

enregister an understanding of inherent racial differences that while helping to resolve the inherent contradictions of America's republican credo also, the truism above following the same contradictory yet somehow complimentary logics of fetishism (I know very well, but...), helped to fix a view on the black male body that was meant to check the potentially disruptive effects of white desire for this Other even while allowing for the pursuit of endless (if unspoken) pleasure in adopting the liberties of such a look.

Sexualizing Surveillance: Patriarchy, Pornography, Sensation, and Black Male Emancipation

*[T]he historical variation of cinematic techniques [as well as 'representative apparatuses as such (painting, theatre, cinema, etc.)'], their appearance-disappearance, their phases of convergence, their periods of dominance and decline seem to me to depend not on the rational-linear order of technological perfectability nor an autonomous instance of scientific 'progress', but much rather on the offsettings, adjustments, arrangements carried out by a social configuration in order to represent itself, that is, at once to grasp itself, identify itself and itself produce itself in its representation.*²¹³

To return, as we draw to our close, to the Walls essay with which I began my discussion of Agassiz's singular yet eventually institutionalized mode of observation, I would like to rethink the author's designation of Agassiz's much-lauded methodology of sight as somehow more "modern" than that of his American contemporaries. Positioned in contradistinction to men like Henry David Thoreau, presented in Walls' article as offering an alternative worldview in which the body of the man was absolutely imbricated in his work and hence "knowledge...could only be relational, not absolute, for the preconceptions of the knower inevitably inflected the knowledge of any object,"²¹⁴

²¹³ Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible" in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 121.

²¹⁴ Walls, "Textbooks and Texts," 3.

Walls is to attribute Agassiz's ability to shut down the scientific pretensions of such potentially contestive rivals to 'modernist' advances in science in which 'sensual' experiences of one's natural environment were to be abandoned in favor of 'factual' and authoritative reports on the world purportedly offered at a remove from this very realm. This claim made, however, Walls' argument also makes moves to indicate the contradictions inherent in this narrative of progress. Recognizing that science itself was/is "a technology of vision," Walls marks those that Agassiz had "taught to observe" as far from unmediated in their spectatorship.²¹⁵ Instead, as Jonathan Crary would have us understand the difference between the spectator and the "observer," the latter "not connot[ing] the passivity of onlooking but rather the *disciplined* activity of *observing* codes of vision, of conforming to a prescribed set of possibilities and conventions,"²¹⁶ these "detached" empiricists' experience of their world is revealed to be as subjective and relational as that which would relegate Thoreau's writings (alongside Emerson's, despite his celebrated "transparent eyeball") to the generic class of literary conventions. If Thoreau sketched a view of nature as seen through his own eyes and reflecting his own personal desires, Agassiz's students were simply learning to see the world via their master's vision (the gaze of the great scientist perhaps seeming more "universal" because his desires reflected their own; we will return to this).

Noting the pratfalls in this master discourse of natural(ist) sight and in the previously accepted oppositionality of visionaries such as Agassiz and Thoreau, Walls concedes that "modernity has gone slightly stale and we are learning to distrust

²¹⁵ Walls, "Textbooks and Texts," 7.

²¹⁶ Jonathan Crary qtd. in Linda William's "Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the 'Carnal Density of Vision,'" in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

transparency, it might be time to refract the old dichotomies through a ‘nonmodern’ lens.”²¹⁷ Yet “transparency” as the mass-mantra of modernity is a concept much more than day-old in its staleness, for Crary, with whose base arguments Walls has essentially shown herself to be in agreement, had long ago taken the turn past suspicion to the next level of reflection and, ultimately, rejection, exposing our very ideas of “modernity’s” constitutive vision as itself *already* “nonmodern.” Following Crary’s visual chronology, the sort of Cartesian perspectivalism championed by ‘moderns’ like Agassiz not only belonged to a much earlier time, it had, in the two decades prior to Agassiz’s arrival in America, been in the process of being *supplanted* by the very vision that Walls is claiming for Thoreau, and concomitantly claiming had no purchase on the “modern.” To explain, while the nineteenth-century and the advent of Modernity spawned the outgrowth of a variety of visual apparatuses and scientific discourses some of which *did*, in fact, and according to the standard narrative, seek to confirm and augment the superiority of sight as interpreter of the world and unoccluded empirical mediator, there were also many scientists and men of vision who, like Thoreau, were actually calling this “hegemony of the eye” into question.

As Crary makes clear, between the 1820s and the 1840s numerous European philosophers and scientists in the then-burgeoning field of physiology were conducting experiments on the eye that would end in revealing that, far from neutral and somehow disincarnate, “vision occurs from within a body and is therefore also of and in the body.”²¹⁸ Vexing earlier visual truisms, then, these disruptive findings were to suggest that seeing and believing should *not*, in fact, be considered synonymous, for if sensitivity

²¹⁷ Walls, “Textbooks and Texts,” 4.

²¹⁸ Williams, “Corporealized Others,” 11.

to sound, taste, smell, and touch varied between individuals, so might sight. Furthermore, “the body [having] an innate capacity...to *misperveive*,”²¹⁹ this already subjective vision was proven to be fairly easily tricked. From the initial discovery of the blind spot, to the study of afterimages and the persistence of vision, and, perhaps most significantly, to the discovery that different stimuli (such as electricity, pressure, chemical agents, etc.) might *produce* in the eye “the sensation of light” and, hence, an experience of vision that “is conceived without any necessary connection to the act of looking at all,”²²⁰ by the middle of the decade these discoveries had decidedly altered people’s perceptions of their world and the very idea of what constituted the “real.” The tensions produced by this radical new worldview apparent in the obsessive production of and interest in both devices touted as visual prosthetics—the microscope, the daguerrean camera, as well as the speculum invented by Sims, for example—and those equally popular mechanisms meant to manipulate one’s vision—the kaleidoscope, the thaumatrope, the phenakistoscope, and the stereoscope, amongst others—we might read a similar struggle to negotiate the bounds of the seen and the unseen, the natural and the unnatural, the knowable and the unknowable, in contemporaneous fascinations with the occult and other popular pseudosciences such as mesmerism, spiritualism (which included trance-induced communication with the dead), and even phrenology (which, as mentioned, promised that interior mental and character attributes might be read exteriorly through facial features and skull formations).

Agassiz’s championing of a model of vision that was both universal and unencumbered by the body, and which could be considered at once “truthful” and

²¹⁹ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 39.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39, 38. See 32-43 in particular.

authoritative, was thus far from progressive in its leanings and, as I continue to argue (along, perhaps most influentially, with Robyn Wiegman) far from “pure” in both its imaginative mediations and its intents. That a dominant majority of Americans on the verge of what has been termed the “Progressive” Era should find this vision so attractive is, however, absolutely in keeping with historian and professor of Psychiatry Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s assertion that this time period in American history was itself representative of a retrenchment rather than a moving forward:

Crisis and uncertainty had marked the gradual emergence of the American bourgeoisie. Throughout the slow and at times stumbling process of formulation and elaboration, the bourgeoisie reached back systematically into America’s past for collective memories into which to place its experiences, and a familiar language through which to express them. In this way it attempted to transform the formless and uncertain into the structured and familiar. Its efforts succeeded. By the 1860s and 1870s, America’s most revolutionary class had convinced itself and others that its values, its life style, its institutional creations, represented simultaneously the epitome of progress and the oldest of America’s traditions.²²¹

Agassiz’s role, and the role of the representative apparatuses and the visual language he helped to institutionalize, in the formation of these “collective memories” and the elaboration of the bourgeoisie Self is thus not to be taken lightly; in fact, what Walls and others have tended to view as a scientifically modernizing move meant to advance humankind was, in its appeal to a familiar, traditional, “rational” (“rational” plainly synonymous with hierarchicalized) order of vision, the advancement instead of an ideological formulation in which, most importantly, vision, like nature, might be presumed subject to the *mastery* of a very distinctive class of (white) men. The “scopic regime” represented by Cartesian perspectivalism, a form of observation which, according to Martin Jay, Crary’s colleague in the field of visual studies, constructs the

²²¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 167.

disembodied observer (disembodied like the Creator whose natural “truths” he conveys) as looking out upon the world from “*the imagined apex* of the beholder’s visual pyramid [emphasis mine],” it also transforms the world viewed from this height into “a ‘standing reserve’ for the surveillance and manipulation of a dominating subject.”²²² And this was exactly the sort of subject needed to turn “the formless and uncertain” world that was America in the 1840s and 1850s back towards “the structured and familiar,” and the disciplining dominance of the white man.

This said, that Agassiz’s retroactive and implicitly oppressive visual methodology was able to win out over a variety of competing worldviews becomes at once obvious and obviously complicated, for his vision appealed to more than simply those authoritative white males who, I hold, would most markedly profit from the dissemination of Agassizian ideals. The question thus becomes, how do we account for the fact that this vision gained such a *wide-spread* acceptance, even amongst individuals who were not of the class or gender whose preeminence it served to bolster; how did he convince these ‘others’ to toe his party’s line? As Foucault tells us, “What makes power accepted is that it traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms of knowledge.” I would contend, therefore, that the psychic trauma that surely accompanied the revolutionarily modern disturbances of the “referential illusion” of vision, its reconstitution of “a perceiver whose very empirical nature renders identities unstable and mobile, and for whom sensations are interchangeable” a reconfiguration that not only “threaten[ed] any coherent system of meaning,”²²³ but threatened as well any coherent view of the Self, rendered the fluid potentiality suggested by such a radical revamp of subjectivity, and, by

²²² Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1999), 10.

²²³ Jay, “Scopic Regimes,” 40.

implication, the social, quite difficult for many to digest. The alternative, a willful self-subjection to an established social order that offered its adherents ontological integrity as the primary sweetener in a deal that promised that chaos and psychic crisis might be stilled, stabilized, fixed, if one were only willing to submit to the “*disciplined* activity of *observing* codes of vision” forwarded by certain powerful men, also offered much more tantalizing conciliatory treats to those who assented to assimilate to the unequal power relations of this socio-sopic regime. Perhaps the sweetest of the spoonfuls of sugar that was to make this medicine go down was that “conforming to a prescribed set of possibilities and conventions,” of both vision *and* belief, promised to afford pleasures and forms of (sexual and racial, or sexualized racial) knowledge hitherto unimagined/unimaginable...especially during a time period in this country when pornography was scarce, if not virtually unattainable.

To conclude, if the images that sprang from Agassiz’s lascivious lens were to escape official censure (and effect the scientist’s escape from such censure, as well) while at the same time ensuring public pleasure, it was because, for all of their pornographic transgressions, they might still be seen, finally and ultimately, as working within the service of the state. As my larger project will hope to make clear, the official sanction given during this era to these frenzied fixations on black male corporeality had everything to do with the phobic magnitude of this figure as, in a nation on the verge of both the modern era and Civil War, his dark being appeared poised to be set loose upon the body politic and the body of the white woman. (It should be noted here that the size of this threat in America was more pronounced than elsewhere. The 1833 abolition of slavery in England having, of course, overarching effects on the economic and political

underpinnings of that country, its immediate social ramifications would not be as localized, and potentially incendiary, as they would in this country. English slaveholding occurring, for the most part, on the colonies and at a remove from home, the fear of the manumitted black man installing himself in the abodes and beds of Victorian ladies was understandably not as prominent as it would be in a country where the pulsations of black and white proximity were felt so frictively.) The libidinal thus put in service of the political, voyeurism recast as “vigilance,” as the black man threatened to emerge up from slavery and out from under the policing eye of the plantation overseer, a proto-Pavlovian association of this figure with the pornographic promised to make a culturally enforced system of racial surveillance *pleasurable* for those who were to perform this “civic duty.”

So, if we have spent so much of our time thus far in relating the story of Louis Agassiz and his various proclivities, both professional and personal, it is because the immense power of his influence on both scientific and social seeing in America and elsewhere is not to be understated. Not only is Agassiz to be credited, not single-handedly, but surely most significantly, with putting mid-century America on the map as a legitimate center for ethnographic study, he can also be credited with having both transplanted and transformed the vision of Europe’s great naturalist masters in a thoroughly of-the-moment, if not actually “modern,” way. Playing to the particular geographies that mapped the desires of his new American masters, his pornographic aestheticization of the black man and his black penis in particular would come to rival even Cuvier’s earlier takes on the Black Venus. Agassiz’s images proving inspirational for other like-minded scientists in the field, as these later shots, one the byproduct of a search set up by the London Ethnographic Society in 1870, the other an anonymous

“anthropological” shot from approximately the same era, would indicate (fig. 2.4), they would also inaugurate an immediate epoch in mid-century America’s mass culture during which similar, and similarly pornotroped visions of black masculinity would take center stage. These popular images grounding themselves and their erotic ethos in this initially advanced and authoritative take on the black male body as both sexual exhibition and sexual intermediary, it was also a moment in which this body became stand-in for/representative of *all* deviant bodies, became The Other *par excellence*. Not only sexual beast, but sexual aberration (genderbender/ homosexual projection), not only nature's freak but the sideshow's as well, the black male body, always seductive and always repulsive, fetishized, codified, and commodified was, from the 1850 publication of the Agassiz daguerreotypes onwards (as said in my opening chapter, no such images can be found prior to their release), repeatedly set before the nineteenth-century public's eye for voyeuristic dissection and delectation.

Further, and following Wiegman’s assertion that, “If rethinking the historical contours of Western racial discourse matters as a political project, it is not as a manifestation of an other truth that has previously been denied, but as a vehicle for shifting the frame of reference in such a way that the present can emerge as somehow less familiar, less natural in its categories, its political delineations, and its epistemological foundations,”²²⁴ I’d like to insist that if Agassiz’s personal story matters so very much it is because the alternative narrative of race in America that it suggests reveals quite a provocative truth. For it seems that, similar to the “fairy’s wing” upon which the rock of

²²⁴ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 35.

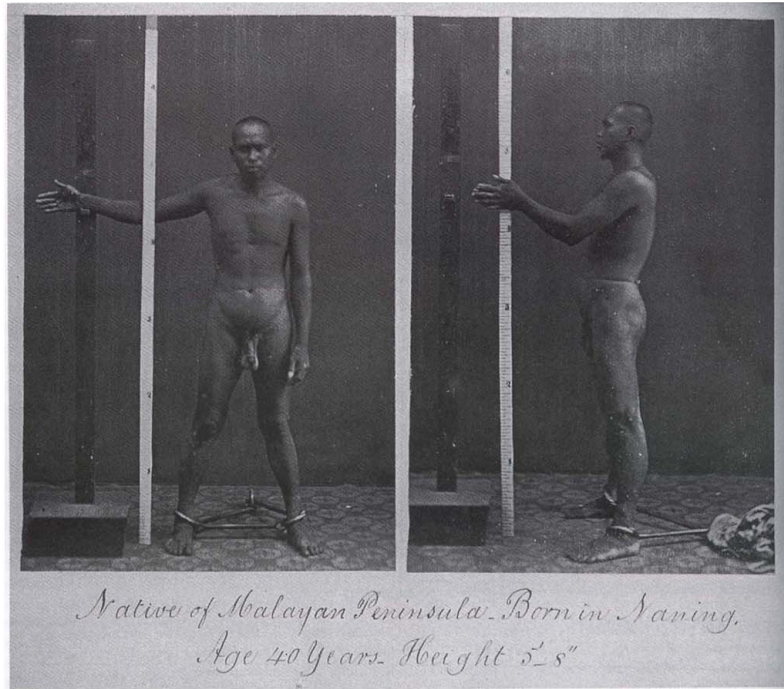


Figure 2.4

Fitzgerald's *Gatsby's* world was founded, the vision of the black male's ontological essence that has been passed down from this mid-Nineteenth-century world may have been grounded in little less than something both as simple and as complex as one man's socially transgressive and class-crossing love for his male secretary. And, if so, how embarrassing and how infuriating for us all. To discover, that after all of this time, as epistemological inheritors of this Agassizian vision, our own empirical drive towards the chimera of critical objectivism has done little more than render us, à la Du Bois "bone of [his] thought and [flesh] of his language," when we might long ago have denaturalized this world view seems twistedly tragic, indeed.

In closing, I ask again, then, if pornography is, according to Baudrillard, a love affair with the very notion of the "real"—with its constant promise to reveal the truth of the body, the truth of sex, the truth of pleasure—but it is nonetheless a real emptied of any erotic promise as, in giving *too* much, it offers a "real" emptied of the possibility of desire, might we not see the desire to ignore the possibility of new "truths" as a desire to sustain the erotic promise that lies in existing fabrications? If the theoretical "striptease" just performed in the revelation of Louis Agassiz's naked, "ugly, human" self seemed somehow anathema to many readers—too much, too close, too uncritical—yet his images of stripped slaves continue to be regarded as epistemologically valid, if disturbing, *scientific* artifacts, I ask only that we ask ourselves *why?* (I ask also, that my readers ask themselves if, in the pornographic exercise preceding, they are willing to admit that there were many moments that even in the midst of critiquing the pleasure *I* was obviously taking in my position as provocateur—the fun with which I dispatched of the 'dirt'—there were not many a time when instances of my more staid historical-grounding and

critical distancing might have been quickly passed over in search of subsequent ‘sexy bits.’) If, ultimately, my reading of Agassiz’s now infamous slave daguerreotypes is, in revealing the incredibly subjective urges that underwrote these shots, to leave us rather than with a lasting image of “black slaves constrained to perform the role of specimen before the camera,”²²⁵ but forced instead to see their white author—ugly, human—in every aspect and angle of the camera’s perspective, might we be rejecting this “unusual point of vantage” because it would deny us the unusual and endlessly erotic pleasures that we have long ago grown accustomed to taking in the spectragraphic/phantasmagoric spectacle of black male sexuality on display?

²²⁵ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 311, n. 69.

Chapter Three. ““Oh Tom...we’s been awful wicked to ye!”¹: Stowe, Sex, Science, and the Dark Side of 19th-Century Sentiment

I had read Uncle Tom’s Cabin compulsively.... I was trying to find out something, sensing something in the book of some immense import for me: which, however, I did not really understand.

My mother got scared. She hid the book. The last time she hid it on the highest shelf above the bathtub. I was somewhere around seven or eight. God knows how I did it, but I somehow climbed up and dragged the book down. Then, my mother, as she herself puts it, ‘didn’t hide it anymore,’ and, indeed, from that moment, though in fear and trembling, began to let me go.²

Distorted and fantasmatic images of white desire, black men have been obliged to take part in a fatal scenario, consumed by what James Cameron calls ‘the murderous appetite’ of racist culture.³

As Agassiz moved to channel the currents of his personal desires into arenas and projects that would make those desires at once less visible to the general public and more viable as drives reconstituted to cater to larger systems of social control, there is no downplaying the extent to which the model of racialized seeing, and consumption, which he helped to indoctrinate influenced those in his extended mid-century milieu, on both sides of the Atlantic. While we’ve already looked at two examples of the sorts of native nudie shots that would subsequently come to constitute “legitimate” scientific takes on the black male body in the wake of Agassiz’s inaugurating forays into the field of *ethnopornography*, it bears a moment before we turn to the seer who is to be the star of this chapter—Harriet Beecher Stowe, who would do for wider contemporaneous

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, intro. Alfred Kazin (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 412. All subsequent textual quotations will be taken from this edition of Stowe’s novel.

² James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (Dell: New York, 1990), 16-17.

³ David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 40-41.

audiences what Agassiz had done for science—to consider yet one more of the twisted offshoots that sprang from the salacious seeds sown by the Swiss transplant.

If Agassiz's images of fully-frontal black masculinity were to end up hidden within the annals of American history, the Brits were, even at the time, far from apologetic in their in-your-face delectation of this denuded form, as figure 14 should have suggested. They were also far more blatant about just who and what their own interest in the study of stripped colonial subjects was meant to authorize. The study that would proffer the shackled, and spread-eagled, Malayan "native" previously pictured commissioned by the London Ethnographic Society, it was the London Anthropological Society, founded in 1863 by Richard Francis Burton and Dr. James Hunt, that would create and circulate a body of work trading in the bounteous possibilities authorized through the study of the *Other* which would make the staid ethno-exploitation of their more politically and racially "liberal" predecessors seem perfectly conservative. The latter Society formed after a break inspired in large part by doctrinal disagreements regarding the "Negro question"—the earlier-founded (1843) London Ethnographic Society supporting Darwinism, and its dissenters clinging to the polygenist beliefs championed by Agassiz and men of his sort—members of the London Anthropological Society made no pretense towards a desire to maintain a physical divide between species they believed divided at creation. Publicly, and frequently, extolling on the inferiority of the African Other and their suitability for little other than slavery—"Anthropologicals" were strong supporters of the American Confederacy—the charnel house to which they damned blacks was of both a real and psychic variety. Indeed, there was a reason why

the elite members of the inner circle of this group were to nickname themselves “The Cannibal Club.”

In Lisa Z. Sigel’s fascinating discussion of this consumptive cohort, in her ever-provocative *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*, she says of the London Anthropological Society:

[It] became a forum for delivering papers on hermaphroditism, the effects of incest on offspring, clitoridectomies, the dancing girls of southern India, fertility rituals, prostitution, polyandry, and polygamy. While the society explored a diverse range of interests besides sexuality—including skull size, Mayan hieroglyphics, and early tool use—a fascination with biological and cultural differences in sexuality repeatedly marked their writings. They saw race and sex as central to understanding their rapidly expanding world.⁴

This group of self-confessed sodomites, Sade devotees, consumers of dark “flesh” (both literally and figuratively, Richard Burton notorious for having tried to procure the skin of a live African with which to bind a friend’s collection of the works of the Marquis⁵), and side-producers and perusers of a large portion of the pornographic works circulated in Britain in the two decades that were the Club’s initial heyday, were not all scientists. They were, instead, “writers, adventurers, scholars, and politicians,”⁶ including in their ranks such luminaries as Algernon Charles Swineburne, Richard Mockton Milnes, Sir James Plaisted Wilde, and Simeon Solomon, amongst others.⁷ They were, at the same time, of one in their understanding that forwarding themselves as a society in which the pursuit of “science” was to be constructed as its titular purpose was to license any and all indiscretions engaged beneath this header, particularly if that science was to further aid in the cataloguing, hierarchical classification, and domination of the cultural others that

⁴ Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 52.

⁵ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 50.

⁶ *Ibid*, 51.

⁷ For a brief description of each of these men, see Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 58.

populated “their rapidly expanding world.” No wonder, then, that “members of the Anthropological Society used a gavel shaped like a ‘Negro’s head’ to call their meetings to order.”⁸ No wonder, also, that they should stand as a sort of end/ur-link in a chain that would stretch from Cuvier’s caged and taxidermied Hottentot, entwining Agassiz’s enframed slave specimens, and intricately knotting⁹ black skin to a posterity of perversely pornographic sexual signification to which even our current day black-leathered BDSM culture owes its homage.

Sigel must not have known of Agassiz, however, despite her knowledge of these Cannibals’ appropriation of his polygenist cause and self-preservatory measures, for she places the American turn towards London Anthropological Society-like “scientific pornography” at the end of the nineteenth century¹⁰—an anachronistic inaccuracy that would ignore the very real affect that the sorts of perfidious visions Agassiz’s sort of science had already helped produce in his immediate surrounds. As Brian Wallis would tell us:

[T]hese ‘scientific’ representations preceded most of the more familiar stereotypes and derogatory images of African Americans in popular culture. The popular images built on the scientific ones and enhanced or exaggerated distortions of the black body. The subject’s clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded, or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor. Moreover, many of the exposed and attacked bodies were shown in explicitly erotic poses...¹¹

Indeed, it appears that White Southerners having learned long ago and first-hand the delights that the black body in bondage might offer its immediate witnesses, in the early

⁸ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 53.

⁹ This phrase is obviously a nod to Jean Fagan Yellin’s *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York University Press, 1972).

¹⁰ Sigel, *Governing Pleasures*, 178 n. 83.

¹¹ Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” *American Art* 9 (Summer 1995): 54.

1850s America's pornographically-starved general public having received its first, yet incomplete, introductions to these perverse pleasures—the Black bodies proffered by Agassiz had been suggestively naked, true, but while their black skin alone was sufficient to announce their status as human chattel Agassiz had failed to fully dress this photographic fantasy with the props proper to the skin-trade in which these bodies were enregistered—was simply clamoring for more. And here we arrive, finally at Stowe, for it was, ironically, her celebrated 1852 *anti-slavery* novel, a novel in which its principle black male player, Uncle Tom—“a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man of a full glossy black...”¹²—is not 'introduced' to the reader, but rather, (à la Agassiz) is, and I quote, '*daguerreotyped*' for us, that was to fill this void.

So saying, I'd like to offer, in the chapter that follows, an alternative reading of that novel that so vexed and beguiled James Baldwin (and disturbed his mother, who rightly tried to hide it where “dirty” books often go), and that has so moved generations of readers from Stowe's time onwards. Problematizing contemporary conceptions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that uncritically cast the novel as simple feminist-abolitionist classic, and placing this text instead within the context of mid-nineteenth-century pornographic culture, I hope, in turn, to vex recent reclamations of this evidential artifact as a book 'by, for, and about women' (to paraphrase Jane Tompkins' best known assessment of the novel) and to recast it, rather, as a book about the sadistic savoring of the black male body, written by a woman, most subversive in that it was meant for the erotic enjoyment of *both sexes*, and least transgressive in that, for all its emancipatory rhetoric, it simply mimicked and, in the end, served only to reinforce, the disciplinary structures of the State. As one critic would have it, “Stowe invites us as

¹² Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 21.

readers to desire and consume the slave body, and her narrative gaze mimics the trade that it deplores.”¹³

Cannibals All!: Or, Mrs. Stowe, The American Sade¹⁴

*Until the mid-nineteenth century, there was little indigenous American pornography: the Americans largely contented themselves with importing and sometimes reprinting English and, to a lesser degree, continental European erotica.*¹⁵

If Agassiz, polygenesist, amateur ethnographer, and former specialist on fossil fish, was determined to deny all points of contact between himself/the white race and the flash-frozen black specimens he had such a difficult time regarding as “brothers,” Stowe’s novel, “a wonderful ‘leaping’ fish,”¹⁶ clearly posits its visions of racial fraternity and ‘loving,’ often frenzied, contact between black and white as a vital alternate image to be imposed ovetop of these scientific stills—the authoress means to offer us “moving pictures” to use a double-entendric turn of phrase that Stowe herself may have neologized. These wrenching images, however, seem only to have furthered racial science’s perversely pornographic project, for they perhaps proved most “moving” to the great unwashed masses of American (and European) readers in their ability to animate libidinal, rather than liberatory, pulsations in relation to the body of the black male

¹³ Peter Stoneley, “Sentimental Emasculations: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Black Beauty*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54 (June 1999): 59; and 53-72.

¹⁴ I borrow this cannibal comment from the title of George Fitzhugh’s oft-referenced *proslavery* treatise, *Cannibals All!; Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1857). Interestingly, one of the major premises of this text, that Northern wage-laborers were in many ways worse off than Southern slaves, is an idea taken up in Stowe’s novel. Augustine St. Clare, author of this thought in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, does not, however, go to the extremes that Fitzhugh did in his argument; St. Clare does not champion extending the slave system to encompass poor whites as well.

¹⁵ Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* (April 1995): 315.

¹⁶ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (London: MacMillan, 1913), 168.

slave—particularly as the sadistic exchanges within which Stowe would position her Tom found their purchase in their relation to a much larger and most peculiar regimentation of sexual fantasy that was then taking the culture by storm. If, as Elizabeth Alexander suggests, “Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries,”¹⁷ I would append that the black male body found itself as part of a particularly attractive recipe when served up à la Stowe in the 1850s.

In her groundbreaking, although perhaps not yet widely-known essay, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” Karen Halttunen cites three main social and scientific trends which contributed to the “pornography of pain” that was to captivate both worldwide and American audiences in the nineteenth century—finding its most celebrated expression in this country with the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They are the following: A) The emergence in eighteenth century England of the culture of sensibility which, taking its cues from John Locke's psychology of sensation and focusing evermore generously on the sufferings and the torments of others, spawned both the sentimental literary genre and its twisted offshoots—Gothic fiction and the pornographic works of the Marquise de Sade; B) The introduction of anesthetic surgical procedures and pain-killing medications, which began to be developed in the mid-eighteenth century and were implemented in common usage by 1846; and C) The rise in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries of an increasingly visual and sensationalistic turn in commercial and public texts, manifest in England and magnified in America. As Halttunen concludes, “[T]he pornography of pain was highly voyeuristic in nature...The spectacle of

¹⁷ Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be Black and Look At This?: Reading the Rodney King Videos,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Henry Abrams, Inc., 1994), 92.

suffering—which first emerged from moral philosophy, found its full articulation in sentimental literature and art, then assumed increasingly sadistic forms in popular sensationalism—became the dominant convention of sexual pornography by the early nineteenth century.”¹⁸

Fully fleshed out, Halttunen’s argument holds that the culture of sensibility, which by 1724 had begun to emerge in England, “broadened the arena within which humanitarian feeling was encouraged to operate, extending compassion to animals and to previously despised types of persons, including slaves, criminals, and the insane,” and encouraged “a reformist critique of forms of cruelty that had once gone unquestioned.”¹⁹ While, up until this moment, which preceded the institution of medical anesthetics by roughly thirty years, cultural views towards pain had been those of resigned acceptance if not affirmation, the “cult of sensibility redefined pain as unacceptable and indeed eradicable and thus opened the door to a new revulsion from pain”—as Halttunen’s essay notes, “Pain...is always historical—always reshaped by a particular time, place, and culture.”²⁰ Having made these claims, and thus prompted medical moves towards the mastery and elimination of pain, reformist attitudes towards suffering took hold of the cultural Imaginary, resulting in a wide variety of literary and social movements that took the spectacle of human suffering as their point of focus. The spectacular paroxysms of the body in pain, however, proved to possess an unexpected allure, and what had begun as the sympathetic study of suffering became a bit of a cultural obsession.

¹⁸ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 317.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 304. The former quote employs Halttunen’s own words, and the latter is attributed to David B. Morris, author of *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

From the early sentimental novels of Samuel Richardson—which, rife with “sexual victimization, psychological torture, and sadistic voyeurism,”²¹ proved inspirational to the later works of Sade²²—to mid-nineteenth century American journalistic sensationalism, with its “reliance on steamboat explosions, train wrecks, and horrid murders to sell newspapers to a readership with an insatiable hunger for...shocks and thrills,”²³ more and more the public seemed to be developing a visible taste for pain. Further provocative of what was to develop into a pornography of pain was the fact that, having asked their fellowmen to turn their attentions to the sufferings of others, and thus provoked a radical new mindset in regard to physical pain (resulting in the medical eradication of much of the discomforts that had hitherto been accepted as natural and acceptable sensations), what the reformists had also accomplished was the elevation of pain to the level of the taboo and, hence, into the realm of the pornographic. Halttunen writes:

If pornography is best defined as the representation of sexual behavior *with a deliberate violation of moral and social taboos*, then the growing violence of pornography in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is attributable to the new shock value of pain within a culture redefining it as forbidden and therefore obscene... Throughout the eighteenth century, humanitarian reform had played a major causal role in this cultural reconstruction of pain, identifying a range of formerly unquestioned social practices as unacceptable cruelties and demanding that virtuous people, men and women of sensibility, endeavor to put a stop to such practices.²⁴

Which brings us to America in the 1850s—during a moment in which a man by the name of Perry Davis had just recently patented his ‘Celebrated Pain Killer,’ “which promised to

²¹ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 308.

²² Halttunen notes that both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were extremely appealing to Sade, “who reveled in the prolonged torment and rape of Clarissa and based his novel *Justine* (1791) on the perils of Pamela.” Ibid, 308.

²³ Ibid, 312-313.

²⁴ Ibid, 318.

treat not disease but pain itself”²⁵; when the worldwide “flagellation mania” had climaxed to new heights and the “pornography of sadism [had] entered its heyday”²⁶; when scientist Louis Agassiz had just earned widespread acclaim with the publication of his ‘slave daguerreotypes,’ at the same time that one of America and Europe’s most popular artworks was Hiram Power’s *Greek Slave*, a “life-size standing nude sculpture, ostensibly representing a modern Greek woman captured by Turks...the slight chains on [her] wrists only accentuat[ing] the work’s mildly erotic and highly sentimentalized view of slavery and the body”²⁷ (fig. 3.1); and Harriet Beecher Stowe was dreaming up/of Uncle Tom’s ecstatic transports under the slavemaster’s lash. To quote Halttunen yet again, “Anglo-American humanitarianism first appeared in a culture of *sensation*, which assigned great importance to the role of the senses, and developed within a culture of *sensationalism*, which tended to treat pain as alluring, exciting, and ultimately obscene. The emergent pornography of pain became a troubling moral dilemma within the literature of humanitarian reform.”²⁸ The emergent and highly fetishized principle star of the pornographic drama that was being enacted, the Black male, should have been a bit troubled too, for as it is becoming more and more evident, this typecasting was going to stick...and it was going to sting.

Having noted the philosophical, social and medical factors that contributed to the general rise of the pornography of pain in mid-nineteenth century pornographic and “moral” texts, what Halttunen neglects to address are the more dubious legal and socio-economic issues that played a very central role in the production of the literary works of

²⁵ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 310

²⁶ Ibid, 315.

²⁷ Wallis, "Black Bodies," 52-53.

²⁸ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 318-319.



Figure 3.1

America's social reformers—for their interest in the commodified bodies of the enslaved seems to have been as much inspired by their personal sentimental and sensationalistic investments in (and titillation by) the disclosure of the slave-master's immorality as it was by a larger, and *specifically American*, social and legal investment in the “sins of the flesh”; a subject taken up quite explicitly by pornography’s historians. In brief, it was Stowe’s ability to inspire in her readers what literary critic Leslie Fiedler has called, “an orgy of *approved* pathos [emphasis mine],” that allowed a novel clearly sadistic (and erotically so) in its torments of the black bodies of Tom and his compatriots in suffering to escape the silencing strikes of the Puritanical censor’s black pen. As Fiedler concludes, “The notion that Mrs. Stowe...might be a pornographer was...unthinkable to the great audience of her age...an age in which no one would have suspected that the shadow of the Marquise de Sade might fall upon the [American] social reformer. All was permitted the writer capable of combining...erotic evocations of death with attacks on slavery....”²⁹ The images depicted in the next illustration make clear the tensions inherent in these two visions of Stowe’s text (fig. 3.2).

What the mid-nineteenth century American public was permitted in terms of erotic expression was, however, very little. According to porn-historians, while the first “significant” obscenity trials had been conducted in England and France, and could be

²⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 268.

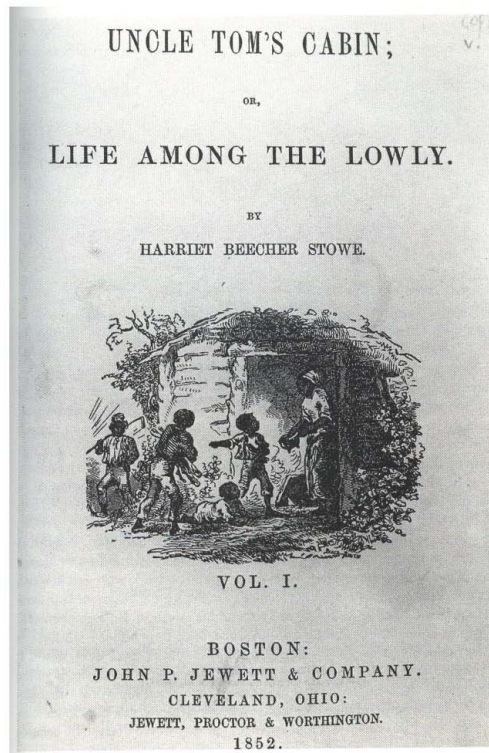


Figure 3.2

dated as far back as the mid-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century “the battle...shifted to the United States, where it was waged with a fervor and a ruthlessness that made the European experience look halfhearted.”³⁰ In a country where, under Puritan rule, even blasphemy had been considered synonymous with obscenity:

As early as 1711, the Massachusetts Bay Colony had prohibited the ‘Composing, Writing, Printing or Publishing, of any Filthy Obscene or Profane Song, Pamphlet, Libel or Mock Sermon, in Imitation or in Mimicking of Preaching, or any other part of Divine Worship’...Other colonies adopt[ing] similar laws and carr[ying] them over to statehood, despite the fact that any such prohibition would seem to contradict the freedom of speech and religion guaranteed in the Constitution.³¹

and which issued its first conviction on the specific charge of obscenity in 1815, when six men were indicted for having *exhibited*, “for money,...a certain lewd, wicked, and obscene painting, representing a man in an obscene, impudent, and indecent posture with a woman,” the threat of official censure and imprisonment ran high for any American who dared try his/her hand at the actual creation of “the literature and art of Eros.”³² Indeed, so sure were censors of their powers to control the expression of the indecent amongst American citizens, that the United States did not produce any official anti-obscenity legislation until 1842—and this was directed towards the importation of salacious materials from abroad. The Customs Act of 1842, not only severely limiting most American’s access to the pornographic material that was being enjoyed by their French and English counterparts, also served to further reinforce the notion that the

³⁰ Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987), 124.

³¹ *Ibid*, 127.

³² Terminology borrowed from Peter Wagner’s *Eros Revived: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1988), 7.

domestic production of pornography in America³³ was, at least in the minds of its governing bodies, an inconceivability.

If, then, as Toni Morrison maintains, “[l]ong after the movement in Europe, romance remained the cherished expression of America,”³⁴ it remained so because it was through the sentimental novel and its tales of rape and seduction—or, just as often, rape *as* seduction—that the general American public was allowed to indulge in watered-down/soft-core versions of the impure fantasies that constituted unfiltered/harder-cored pornography's lustily-potent punch; which, due to its overseas origination and blackmarket status, had become a taste to be savored only amongst the very rich. As Walter Kendrick, author of *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, points out in his exploration of early porn in the U.S.A., the fact that even the lowest quality of pornographic book would probably have fetched more on the underground market than the majority of 19th century Americans made in a week,³⁵ and the fact that these materials were considered pleasures to be consumed only by the male members of the sect privileged enough to possess them, contributed greatly to the popularity of the novel—and, as it should be added, particularly to the popularity of the sentimental novel that had so captured the imagination of early American audiences. Kendrick states, “The novel was the universal entertainment of its day, accessible to both sexes and all classes, bearing none of the built in barriers that restricted the circulation of other potentially harmful books.”³⁶

³³ It should be noted that the word “pornography” did not even exist in English until 1850, although it had been recognized by the Academie Française eight years before—the same year that the Custom's Act was passed. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 126.

³⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (Vintage Books: New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 37.

³⁵ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 77-79.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 92.

So saying, and returning to Stowe's *Uncle Tom*, written in an era in which explicitly pornographic material was scarce, if not virtually unattainable, in this country; and during which even "female middlebrow fiction" had been purged of its seduction scenes—it seems as though American women had "grown too genteel for sex,"³⁷ not only in fiction, but in reality, since the two had combined in 1849 to inspire "the passage of an anti-seduction law in the state of New York"³⁸—we begin to understand the enormous popularity (in both the North *and* the South) of an anti-slavery novel that managed to sell more than 300,000 copies in its first year of publication in antebellum America, combined sales in America and England reaching 1 million by 1853.³⁹ Recognizing (although she would surely own to no consciousness of such a recognition⁴⁰), as many social reformers before her had, that something about the growing taboo associated with pain had "simultaneously [reconceived] it [as] alluring, 'delicious,'"⁴¹ in Stowe's novel the death of Uncle Tom becomes its main event since "potential readers...[could] find in the threat of death the thrill once provided by the fact or threat of sexual violation. Death [becomes] the supreme rapist who threatens when all other seducers have been banished

³⁷ Fiedler, *Love & Death*, 259.

³⁸ Ibid, 245. Fiedler relates this historical anecdote, "The immediate occasion for *The Monks of Monk Hall* [George Lippard's 1844 sentimental novel] was an actual incident in which a Philadelphian who had killed the seducer of his sister, aboard the Camden ferry, was held a New Jersey prisoner, tried in a New Jersey court, and then—to the relief and joy of his fellow citizens—acquitted by New Jersey justice. The sentimental popular acclaim that followed the release of the murderer led to the writing of the novel, which itself apparently swelled an upsurge of public opinion that resulted in the passage of an anti-seduction law in the state of New York in 1849."

³⁹ Ibid, 264. See also, Eric J. Sundquist's introduction to his edited volume *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Cambridge Press, 1999), 18. One imagines why the novel was so popular with the Brits.

⁴⁰ Stowe evidently attributed much of the writing that produced *Uncle Tom* to the unconscious channeling of a heavenly Muse—claiming that it was God, rather than herself, who wrote this book; an affirmation of which even her supporters have been skeptical. As Alfred Kazin, who wrote the generally overly positive introduction to the 1981 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was to say, "Nowadays we smile at such talk. The famous 'unconscious' exists for us as covert sexual desire rather than religious inspiration." Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, x. "Covert sexual desire"—indeed!

⁴¹ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 332.

to the...pornographic.”⁴² At the same time, however, and taking off from the distinct cultural cues that “anatomical scientist” Louis Agassiz had banked upon for the public exhibition of his ‘slave daguerreotypes’—the understanding of the black body as “surrogate and enabler...[as] vehicle for illegal sexuality”⁴³—Stowe is able to take certain liberties of sexual expression in relation to the female slaves of her novel that would possibly have had her brought up on charges if the characters whose misadventures she penned had been posited as white women. For, if pornography had come to be understood as material which had the power to “excite sexual passions or desires,”⁴⁴ who amongst her “liberal” and “refined” Northern white audience would have admitted, especially in a court of law, to having been aroused by depictions of slavewomen in compromising positions (an admission that would have smacked, almost, of bestiality), and who amongst her Southern slaveholding audience would have wished to draw attention to the immoral origins of the many lightskinned blacks that composed the South's plantation populations? Hence, the true brilliance of Stowe's fictional work is that, through the mere inclusion of a truly “inspired” account of the beating death of the “saint-like” black male protagonist from whom the novel takes its name, and a few high-minded diatribes against the institute of slavery, the text manages to capitalize on the flagellation-craze of its day *and* the pornographic demands of the American public (both male and female) while ascending, under the guise of abolitionist Christian morality, any threat of censorship. To quote again from Leslie Fiedler:

No more do the really erotic episodes [of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] stick in the collective memory of America: neither Legree's passionate relationship with the half-mad slave girl, Cassy, nor his breathless, ultimately frustrated attempt to

⁴² Fiedler, *Love & Death*, 266.

⁴³ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 50, 52.

⁴⁴ Montgomery Hyde, *A History of Pornography* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1964), 1.

violate the fifteen-year-old quadroon, Emmeline... We do not remember the turncoat puritan Legree squeezing the virginal breast of Emmeline, eyeing her lustfully; he is frozen forever, the last enduring myth of the book, in his role of slave-driver, at his purest moment of passion, himself the slave of his need to destroy the Christian slave Tom....⁴⁵

While agreeing with Fiedler that Tom's death becomes the novel's archetypal scene, I would contest his assertion that the text's "really erotic" episodes are those which pass between the novel's white male antagonist and its black female protagonists. For the charge of this final scene, arises from the ultimate investment of the author—who, although she submits her novels male *and* female slaves to a host of sadistic delights, saves her most intense, and intensely *jouissant*, torments for Tom—in the charged site of this martyred slave's body as a black man: "Nerve and bone of that poor man's vibrated... as if touched by the finger of God;... His soul throbbed... and the hour of release seemed at hand."⁴⁶

Keeping in mind, then, that Stowe is famous for having claimed that "the beating death of Uncle Tom came to her as if in a vision... that 'God wrote it,'"⁴⁷ and for a moment accepting her belief that she was the vehicle through which God was making his presence known in this world, it seems fairly feasible to designate "the finger" which so electrifying connects with, and even penetrates, Tom's throbbing body, as fantastic surrogate for Stowe's own digits—fingers that long to explore the ecstasies of the black male body through direct touch, but must content themselves (as Legree does) with the voyeuristic pleasure gleaned from the spectacle of this body brought to climax by the tickle of a whip. As Marianne Noble, in her essay "The Ecstasies of Sentimental Wounding in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," an essay that relies heavily on the foundational work

⁴⁵ Fiedler, *Love & Death*, 264-266.

⁴⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 409-410.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, ix-x.

of Karen Sanchez-Eppler,⁴⁸ puts it, “In the climactic whipping scene in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, wounding is so intimately connected with desire that torture seems to express longing and an intensity of imagined pleasure more than it does literal physical agony.”⁴⁹ Noble adds, also, that, “racialized masochistic fantasies in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* served as a mechanism enabling [Stowe] and her female readers to experience [sexual] ‘pulsations’ while retaining their self-conceptions as ‘true women’”⁵⁰—and, I would append, for her white male readers who, clandestinely identifying with Legree as “top” man in the sadomasochistic and blatantly homoerotic climax of this drama, could be inspired to spew forth their own foaming fluids in tandem with the whip-wielder (“foaming with rage, [Legree] smote his victim to the ground”⁵¹), while maintaining a conception of themselves as ‘true men.’ In short, there is no denying the fact that the shadow of Sade clearly hung over this text, a shadow which was not, in fact, quite so obscure to mid-nineteenth century American audiences that they would not have taken particular pornographic delight in the frenzied throes of Tom’s ‘little’ death— especially since this death would allow them a furtive glimpse ‘behind the veil’ and into “secret chambers,”⁵² revealing the shadowy soul of *Justine* that lurks beneath the darkened skin of Stowe’s

⁴⁸ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92-114.

⁴⁹ Marianne Noble, “The Ecstasies of Sentimental Wounding in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 308.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁵¹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 411.

⁵² *Ibid.* In some ways, Stowe text seems almost to be taunting her would-be censors. In the midst of this description of Tom’s death, the narrator interposes:

Scenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart. What a man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul! And yet, oh my country! these things are done under the shadow of thy laws! Oh Christ! Thy church sees them, almost in silence!

What, exactly, is it that is so harrowingly “done under the shadow of [the law]”—the actual acts of cruelty, or Stowe’s deliciously protracted descriptions of them?

Uncle Tom.⁵³ Or, put another way, the cruel torments imposed upon Tom's black enslaved body dramatically increased Stowe's novel's popular market value, due to the high, and highly exclusive, blackmarket value in the mid-nineteenth century of pornographic materials depicting eroticized 'scenes of subjection.'⁵⁴

In furthering this discussion of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as erotic text, it should be pointed out that while censors had turned a Christian cheek to anything potentially blush-provoking about this text—and the collective American conscious, like its author, has chosen to relegate the covert desires the novel (un)veils to the realm of the unconscious—there were, indeed, those amongst Stowe's contemporaries who were very

⁵³ In fact, Stowe's famous whipping scene has much in common with an equally celebrated scene in the Marquis de Sade's celebrated pornographic work *Justine* (1791). One might compare Legree's frenzied vow to kill Tom, "to take every drop of blood he has, unless he confesses" (Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 411), as to the whereabouts of the escaped slaves Cassy and Emmeline, with the oath of Justine's sadistic tormentor, the Count de Gernande, who, after he discovers that the virtuous young woman whom he has been keeping as sexual prisoner has been plotting, along with his wife, to escape the cruel confines of his isolated chateau, rages:

I gave you warning that the crime you have committed is punished here by death...[and] I am going to dispatch you... You deserve to have me open your four veins this instant... and if I postpone your death, be very sure it is only in order to rend it more horrible... [Y]ou will be bled three times a day, I want to see how long you will survive the treatment.

Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965), 652-653.

While the alignments between the two novels—the victims of both torturers are "slaves"/sex slaves, both are implicated in escape plots, and both are threatened with being bled to death—may be purely coincidental (although Stowe, may indeed, have had the opportunity to familiarize herself with the works of Sade considering the fact that she was intimate friends with Lord Byron and his Lady Byron, renowned for their libertinism—and whose personal exploits she later set to print in a story that recounted the tale of Byron's incest with his sister [Hyde, *A History*, 139]), later pornographers certainly took advantage of the texts' similarities, and at the turn of the century a "spoof" pornographic novel was released in publication (and to huge success in both Europe and America) which replaced Tom as plantation porn star with a virtuous young white woman who seems to be a blend of both Sade's Justine and Harriet Stowe. As porn historian Montgomery Hyde notes:

The Memoirs of Dolly Morton, the Story of a Woman's Part in the Struggle to free the Slaves. An Account of the Whippings, Rapes and Violences that preceded the Civil War in America, with curious Anthropological Observations on the radical diversities in the conformation of the Female Bottom and the way different Women endure Chastisement... [was] "by far the best of all books whose main theme [was] Flagellation"... *Dolly Morton* is an interesting and moving book which certainly captures the plantation atmosphere even more graphically and convincingly than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, also a favourite [sic] with devotees of the whip in spite of its high moral tone.

Hyde, *A History*, 132-133.

⁵⁴ Phrase borrowed from Saidiya V. Hartmann's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

publicly vocal in their recognition of this novel's pornographic appeal. As one reviewer, George Frederick Holmes, decried:

Are scenes of license and impurity, and ideas of loathsome depravity and habitual prostitution to be made the cherished topics of the female pen, and the familiar staple of domestic consideration and promiscuous conversation? Is the mind of the woman to be tainted, seduced, contaminated, and her heart disenchanted of all its native purity of sentiment, by unblushing perusal...of such thinly veiled pictures of corruption? Can a lady of stainless mind read such works without a blush of confusion, or a man think of their being habitually read by ladies without shame or repugnance?⁵⁵

Clearly invoking legalistic definitions of pornography that, above all, concern themselves with the idea that this “loathsome” material serves as “evil example” and contributes to “the manifest corruption and subversion of youth, and other citizens of [the] commonwealth,”⁵⁶ and, at the same time, appealing to social conventions that might forgive men their pornographic trespasses but expressly forbade ‘ladies’ to venture down these same promiscuous paths, what is most remarkable about these damning observations are that they also *descry* the specter of the spectacular that is so intrinsic to Stowe's novel and to pornography proper. For the true sign of truly “good” pornography, is its ability to paint a spectacularly vivid “picture of corruption”—which is to say, that its powerfully visual aspects must have the power to produce ‘blushingly’ visible affects in its spectators.

To refer once again to the work of Linda Williams, who firmly aligns the origins of modern hardcore pornographic films with eighteenth-century scientific trends—again, what Foucault has called the *scientia sexualis*—early pornography was as concerned with “surveillance,” with a quest to expose “the measurable, confessable 'truths' of a sexuality

⁵⁵ Noble, “Sentimental Wounding,” 311.

⁵⁶ Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 127. Quote taken from court ruling in 1815 Philadelphia obscenity case.

that governs bodies and their pleasures,”⁵⁷ as were the medical and scientific fields of which it was the ‘lowbrow’ contemporary. So saying, what Williams is to describe as pornography’s “frenzy of the visible,” its endeavor to provide its audience with the ability to see *everything*—to allow its viewers, much like Cuvier in his taxidermy of the celebrated ‘posteriors’ of Saartjie Baartman/the Hottentot Venus, “the ideal position for witnessing bodies confessions of pleasure”—becomes intricately bound to pornography’s desire to provoke equally manifest displays of the pleasure that its audience takes in viewing these bodily confessions. But here, arises a problem, “seeing everything...proves a more difficult project than one might think, especially in the case of women’s bodies,” whose sex is not without effort exposed to visibility, and whose bodies do not offer the same visibly “measurable”—and, hence, “authenticated”—evidence of their pleasure.⁵⁸ While Williams’ arguments here might at first seem most germane to the particular genre of pornography that she is examining, the hardcore pornographic film—or at least to those genres of pictorial and photographic pornography whose contents could be labeled explicitly visual—she does introduce Diderot’s pornographic novel *Les bijoux indiscrets* into her discussion. And so might we, without indiscretion, address these arguments to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The hyper-visual qualities of many of the erotically-charged scenes in Stowe’s novel—many of which, as she herself said, appeared to her “as if in a *vision*”—might easily enough align these literary “pictures of corruption” with the works of the pornographic visionaries of Stowe’s day. However, when these voyeuristically inspired

⁵⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 35, 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32. See pages 30-32 for a brief summary of the argument that will become the overarching theme of Williams’ text.

scenes are coupled with various other visible ‘proofs’ of the novel's pornographic intents, the line that has traditionally separated her work from actual inclusion within pornography's penetrating scope becomes *absolutely* blurred. First, Stowe’s attempts, as ‘sentimental author,’ to “provoke emotional connection” between her audience and the black slaves of her novel, attempts which lead her, as Marianne Noble puts it, to “emphasize the importance of bodily presence and the bodily signs of emotional presence”⁵⁹—a sentimental device which “reads internal characteristics from the external signs offered by the body”⁶⁰—seem to be based upon the exact same premises that justify pornography's visual frenzies. Just like the anatomical scientists of the late-eighteenth century and early-nineteenth century (amongst whom Louis Agassiz would be included), who believed that the signs of the African’s inherent corruption were written on their black bodies, so pornography, and evidently a sentimental Stowe as well, believed that the ‘truth’ of a body's affects—and pleasures—could be discovered on/by sight. Furthermore, and further eliding the sexual with the sadistic, it has been argued that the tortures that occur in Stowe’s novel and the “sentimental wounds” that they expose are indicative of the text's desire to provide deeper insight into the ‘core’ of these tormented black characters’ authentic selves. To quote from Elizabeth Barnes’ response to Noble’s essay:

Noble cites the sentimental wound as a trope for knowing, for seeing inside the other. Although such real certainty, such absolute knowledge is always already a fiction, the *idea* of it becomes the driving force behind readerly pleasure. One could say that the will to know produces sadistic, masterly forms of penetrating scrutiny: one wounds another in order to see inside the wound, to know what lies

⁵⁹ Noble, “Sentimental Wounding,” 300.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 300. Quote attributed to Karen Sanchez-Eppler.

below the surface...Both sexual and violent impulses represent attempts to gain access to a center we can't see.⁶¹

Do we not recognize in Stowe's quest to reveal to her audience the ultimate secrets of these black bodies evidence of a shared thirst to uncover the same sorts of subcutaneous knowledge that occupied her scientific and pornographic contemporaries? And could we not see in the obsessions of the sadist, and in Stowe as sadistic pornographer, the intimate intimations of a mad-scientism: one that has discovered that pain—like pleasure—although experienced internally manifests its marks on the body; and, more importantly, that—unlike sexual pleasure—authentic confessions of pain can be easily and visually measured in *both* sexes? And finally, might we not read Stowe's investment in Tom's black male body as it is transported to its tortured ecstasy as her recognition of this body as the ultimate pornographic subject: A) because of the fact that his black body is so easily penetrated—as human chattel it fulfills perfectly the fantastically submissive role which is, according to psychoanalysts, “the aim and end of all masochistic ideas...[which fetishize] the unlimited power of life and death, as exercised over slaves and domestic animals,”⁶² or, as Legree says of Tom, “I *hate* him! And isn't he MINE? Can't I do what I like with him? Who's to hinder, I wonder?”⁶³ and, B) because as black *male* body Tom's body's confessions of its pain *and* its pleasure can be so easily and so visibly witnessed?⁶⁴ How telling, then, Legree's frenzied

⁶¹ Elizabeth Barnes, “The Epistemology of the ‘Real’: A Response to Marianne Noble” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 324.

⁶² Noble, “Sentimental Wounding,” 297. Quote taken from sex researcher Richard von Krafft-Ebing's notes on Case #57—a patient of his who was a “self-diagnosed” masochist.

⁶³ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 407.

⁶⁴ In *Hard Core*, Linda Williams cites pornography's overinvestment in the “money shot”/“visible penile ejaculation”(8) as a form of compensation: “[T]he pornographic film 'accepts that visually 'knowing' the act in the sexual interior is impossible' and...it therefore displaces this visual knowledge onto the narrative event of masculine orgasm” (84). This said, one might see Stowe's novel's dramatically pornographic

proclamation to the blacks who are ordered to beat Tom after his white master has dealt the initial blow that has “smote his victim to the ground”: “Pay away, till he gives up! Give it to him!...I'll take every drop of blood he has, unless he confesses!”⁶⁵ And how very moving to the reader is that final image of Tom, who, shortly after Legree’s ‘withdrawal,’ arouses from his pain-induced faint and “pour[s] forth” a few last blissfully “energetic” ejaculations, only to die—utterly spent, his body having confessed while his mouth remained “shut”—on a bed of cotton.⁶⁶

How very ‘moving’ indeed—and how very fitting that this plantation porn star die in a cottony bed. As Noble points out, “Sigmund Freud claims that many patients used *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for ‘onanistic gratification.’”⁶⁷ It seems not very hard, then, to read the billowing white “refuse” that buffets Tom’s dead black body as perhaps symbolic of the same ‘foaming’ essence that had earlier been so copiously issuing forth from Legree—this time, however, the cloud-like/cloudy-white substance standing in as sign of the visible affect with which the reader was meant to respond to the masterly strokes of Stowe’s penetratingly pornographic pen. In fact, it is Stowe’s assertion that the sufferings of her enslaved characters which she belabors throughout the pages of her novel were meant to “‘cut [her audience]...to the quick’...to pierce through anaesthetizing abstractions and make readers think through subjective responses of intuition, imagination, and sympathetic extensions to others”—in short, to elicit involuntary, visceral responses from her readers that were to arise in direct response to their

wounding of Tom as its attempt to (over)compensate for its inability to penetrate to the ‘truth’ of Tom’s black body—hence, *visibly* bringing its captive sexual body to *both* agonized *and* orgasmic ejaculation.

⁶⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 411.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 412. The text tells us that after Legree has quitted the scene, Sambo and Quimbo, Tom’s repentant black torturers, “washed his wounds...[and] provided a rude bed of some refuse cotton, for him to lie down on...”

⁶⁷ Noble, “Sentimental Wounding,” 296.

observation of the bodily confessions of her black slaves—that becomes the final bit of material evidence needed to cement *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s status as sentimentally sensational pornographic enterprise. For, as mentioned earlier, and as Linda Williams best sums it up in her short essay, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” pornography is, at base, a “body-genre”—its visually excessive depictions of “the spectacle of...bod[ies] caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion”⁶⁸ are meant to provoke similar bodily excesses in its spectators; and so, too, are the genres of melodrama and horror. Williams notes:

The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping...Another pertinent feature shared by these body genres is the focus on what could probably best be called a form of ecstasy...components of direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture, a rapture which informs even the melodrama. Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body “beside itself” with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness...[and] what may especially mark these body genres...is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen...⁶⁹

That *Uncle Tom's Cabin* manages to combine all three of these “body genres”—the “tear jerker,” the “fear jerker,” and the “meat-jerker”—into one ‘discreet’ text is truly remarkable, and as such, it comes as no surprise that Stowe's novel received such an ecstatic reception from its early readers, both male and female. But how very obscene, the “public *orgy* of weeping”⁷⁰ the novel stirred up, especially when one considers the fact that of all the emotions the novel provokes—pathos, horror, and desire—and that of all the uncontrollable convulsions that it inspires in its audience, the ultimate fluid that is to be engendered as the end result of all of Uncle Tom's and the reader's sweat and tears,

⁶⁸ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991): 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ Fielder, *Love & Death*, 87.

is to be, finally, the liquid bliss of spasmodic orgasm. As one nineteenth-century aficionado of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tells it, "It has fascinated and repulsed me at the same time, as a reptile that enchants you, while it excites your loathing and abhorrence...moving and melting and swaying my heart and sympathies...."⁷¹ And what a world of identification one reads in this impassioned confession, for here we see snakecharmer being charmed by his snake. And we wonder, if the reptile of this passage, that so fascinates its observer, is the supple black whip that is to tickle Tom into heavenly transports, or whether this snake, so revolting and yet so enchanting, is dear old Uncle Tom's black penis; an ever insightful Spillers is quick to remind us, there's a lot to be made of the double-valences of Stowe's original subtitle for the novel: *The Man That Was A Thing*.⁷² As Karen Halttunen concludes her essay on the nineteenth century's "pornography of pain," she sums it up as follows: "The humanitarian sensibility fostered an imaginative cultural underground of the illicit and the forbidden, accessible through the expanding cultural practice of solitary reading, at the center of which was a flogging scene"⁷³; a flogging scene and, we should add—at least in mid-nineteenth century America—the body of a black man.

Black Slaves, Greek Slaves, and Lustful Turks: Homoerotics and the Harem in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

It should be asked of Stowe's novel how a text so pornographically devious and sadistic in its leanings, which portrays American slavery as such a *deliciously* diabolical

⁷¹ Noble, "Sentimental Wounding," 311-312. The reader is Rev. Henry Clarke Wright.

⁷² Hortense J. Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1994), 560-561.

⁷³ Halttunen, "Humanitarianism," 334.

institution, and its main tortured black character as quite literally 'asking for it'—if Legree is to extract every drop of Tom's life-force, he is to do so only after Tom has expressly *offered* his black body and his bodily fluids for his master: “Mas”...I'd give ye my heart's blood...every drop of blood in this poor old body... I'd give 'em freely...Do the worst you can...”⁷⁴—could possibly have been deemed the most effective abolitionist text of its time. How could Mrs. Stowe have been named by President Lincoln himself as sole catalyst of that most bloody of Civil uprisings over which he presided, Honest Abe referring to author Harriet as “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war”⁷⁵ Marianne Noble asks the same question in her essay's close, and comes to the rather attenuated conclusion that, “The pleasures of suffering [the novel purveys]...fostered a fiction of interracial bonding in many white Americans that inspired action on behalf of the community as a whole.”⁷⁶ While it would certainly be comforting to accept this fictional empathy as a reality, the hypothesis simply does not hold up—as even Noble must admit—when one considers the pro-slavery audience with whom this novel was so popular and in whom the *only* action this text inspired was self-gratification. While hoping that I am not being too reductive—although, perhaps, only equally as reductive as our great dead president—I should like to suggest that if *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could indeed be said to have sparked a massive outpouring of emotion against this nation's slaveholding class, emotions that proved so inspirational to the Civil War, this affect sprang, perhaps, from the basest of origins: put bluntly, what *Uncle Tom* may have essentially inspired in its readers was a very active jealousy.

⁷⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 410.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 410.

⁷⁶ Noble, “Sentimental Wounding,” 314.

As I've pointed out, the widespread popularity of Stowe's novel had much to do with the fact that it provided a lusty outlet for the repressed fantasies of a general public starved for the sensational, denied seduction, and deprived of the pornographic texts that were the champagne of only the elitist of classes. Assuming, also, that the majority of the masses that huddled over the novel's titillating pages—taking Sadean delight in the rapes, tortures, and beatings that were exacted upon the novel's black martyrs by their god-like masters—did not have the luxury of possessing slaves themselves—in fact, many could not even afford to possess the book itself, reports coming in of California miners paying 25¢ a piece for a peep at one of the few available copies⁷⁷—it seems not too far a stretch of the imagination to hold, as many have before, that, in the end, the seminal factors that brought this country to Civil War had more to do with class revolt than with Christian revulsion. And if Stowe's novel fueled a fire that had been burning in the blood of her countrymen for quite some time before it was to boil over in 1861, one of the reasons for this conflagration of the emotions might certainly have been the lower classes' refusal to allow the upper classes to continue to be allowed access to a host of privileges which they themselves were being denied: amongst these privileges being both the vicarious pleasures of the pornographic medium proper, *and* the very tangibly real pleasures to be extracted through the medium of the black bodies to which these upper classes were also privy. Stowe's *Uncle Tom* having offered the general public, both Northern and Southern, a glimpse into the 'truths' of plantation life and into the truly pornographic pleasures being enjoyed amongst the upper echelons of their nineteenth century American society—the orgy of *forbidden* privilege that was being played out while the

⁷⁷ Ellen J. Goldner, "Arguing With Pictures: Race, Class, and the Formation of Popular Abolitionism Through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 24 (2001): 73.

poor were forced to content themselves with the few lascivious scraps that might be picked out from amongst the refuse of the sentimental novel's "orgy of *approved* pathos"—it is no surprise that the novel's depiction of 'life amongst the lowly' raised such fevered cries of indignation; read: envy. And it may have been the subconscious/conscious resentment the novel aroused, much more than the conscious Christian sentiments that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its supporters espoused, that actually accounts for a portion of Stowe's text's ability to have sparked such an explosion of anti-slavery activism in its wake.

As Ernest Hemingway rather crudely jokes in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*:

That was what the Civil War was about. Abraham Lincoln was a faggot. He was in love with General Grant. So was Jefferson Davis. Lincoln just freed the slaves on a bet...Sex explains it all.⁷⁸

While sex certainly cannot explain it all—and the sexual preferences of this country's founding fathers are a subject for yet another project—I'd also like to argue that Hemingway might actually have been on to something in marking the fact that there might have been certain queer energies circulating around the exchanges that would eventually lead to black manumission; energies that Stowe, in perhaps her most deft of rhetorical feats, both exploited and denounced in her novel.

⁷⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 121. As an aside, it should be noted also that Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* offers some support for the thesis that "sex explains everything"—e.g. that the perverse sexuality at the core of *Uncle Tom* could easily have become a catalyst for class/social revolt. Fanon, citing G. Legman's analysis children's comic books of the 'Cowboys vs. Indians' and 'Tarzan's Adventures' variety, quotes:

There is still no answer to the question whether [their] maniacal fixation on violence is the substitute for a forbidden sexuality or whether it does not rather serve the purpose of channeling along a line left open by sexual censorship, both the child's and the adult's desire for aggression against the economic and social structure which, though with their entire consent, perverts them. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 146-147.

What happens, then, if a novel which encompasses all the elements meant to channel white aggression towards 'the establishment,' at the same time posits itself as a call to action against the system?—it seems as though the white reader would find themselves caught in the grips of an internal conflict...and so might the nation.

As has been illustrated, the sadomasochistic paces that Tom is put through in the course of the novel were meant to, and *did*, titillate readers of both sexes. Stowe serves them up, however, in such a manner that they offer a fairly easily accessed framework of substitution and disavowal to shield the male reader from conscious acknowledgement that his desire to truly connect with her big black brickhouse of a masculine lead might not necessarily be altruistic, but rather homoerotically cannibalistic (in that good old Club sense). Yet while she may shield her audiences from personal implication in the queer crises that reading her novel may have engendered, she does not, within its pages, clear her male characters of “guilt” as relates to their own dabblings in interracial male-male desire. In fact, her novel offers an extremely complicated, if at times convoluted, subtextual narrative in which Stowe takes the standard abolitionist stance on slavery’s contribution to sins of the flesh as wielded against Blacks and rescripts it so as to present the ‘homosexualization’ of the White man as the most pernicious of this peculiar institution’s depravations *and* one of the biggest threats to the continued progress and social order of the nation.

To take a step back then, it does merit that a moment be taken in laying out the foundation of the abolitionist arguments from which Stowe’s text borrowed and built upon, arguments that themselves, although centered on sex, were equally concerned with larger issues of corporeal and social integrity. To return to Smith-Rosenberg who, taking a familiarly Foucauldian bent on the subject, suggests in her *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, that “[t]he nineteenth century’s obsession with categorizing the physical, and especially the sexual, with describing the abnormal, and with defining the legitimate must be seen first and foremost as an effort to impose order

upon the chaos of the nonsexual world,”⁷⁹ this theorist makes clear that it had not been simply the re-incarnation of vision in the early-to-mid-1800s that had problematized the ways in which Americans were able to connect (both more and less closely) with each other, with their own bodies, with their society, and with the “real.” Although I would like us to keep in mind the influence of the revolutionary visual methodologies that contributed to this complication (as mentioned in our discussion of Agassiz), it should be stressed again that other ‘advances’ in civilization, had also served to engender drastic shifts in Americans’ sense of themselves both as individuals and as a nation. Amongst these changes, of course, were: massive rises in immigration, the advent of industrialization and the subsequent shift from an agrarian- to an urban-centered social order and “capitalist class structure,” a concomitant secularization of society that spawned a series of religious revolts and radical religious communities, the rise of the Women’s Reform Movement (which grew out of the earlier male-based and primarily continental Humanitarian Reform Movement and set the stage for the emergence of the “New Woman”), and, finally, growing sectional disputes and increased confrontations over the issue of slavery.⁸⁰ If all of this uncertainty somehow came to be filtered down to and filtered through a fairly frantic fixation on the taxonomic ordering of bodies and the discursive and social disciplining of these bodies’ sexual expenditures, Smith-Rosenberg, ever concerned with the psychological underpinnings of societal impulses, maintains that:

[W]hen the social fabric is rent in fundamental ways, bodily and familial imagery will assume ascendancy. At such times individuals will revert to their most primitive experience of human interaction and social ordering. On an even more instinctive level, when all the world spins out of control, the last intuitive resource

⁷⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 91.

⁸⁰ Smith-Rosenberg offers a wonderful and comprehensive discussion of the shifting American physical, commercial, social and sexual landscape from the Jacksonian through the Progressive Eras.

of any individual is her or his own body, and especially its sexual impulses. That, at least, one can control and manipulate. Thus sexuality and the family, because of their primitive psychic and social functions, serve as reservoirs of physical imagery through which individuals seek to express and rationalize their experience of social change.... The ocean of sexual words that rhythmically beats against the nineteenth-century's awareness initially came into being not so much to control the behavior of others as to control that which was perceived as uncontrollable, the process of change itself.⁸¹

Whether or not we agree with Smith-Rosenberg's provocative hypothesis—which does, in fact, go a long way to explain the massive explosion of Continental pornography (not simply of the flagellistic sort) during this exact moment, when not only America but the entire Western world was undergoing dramatic religious, social, and political upheavals⁸²—what cannot be disputed is that the increasing concern with and the great wave of discourses surrounding miscegenation, at that time called “amalgamation,” in mid-nineteenth-century America clearly merged a vision of the world spun out of control with a vision of sexuality spun out control: a chaos that threatened the family (both nuclear and ‘The Family of Man’), the nation-state, the social fabric, and the physical predominance and psychic Wholeness of the white man in particular.

The threat of miscegenation offering a metaphor of sorts for the crisis of identity and “the real” in which modernizing America found itself—this crisis presenting a

⁸¹ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 90.

⁸² As Lynn Hunt tells us in her introduction to *The Invention of Pornography*: “Pornography did not constitute a wholly separate and distinct category of written or visual representation before the early nineteenth century. [The term itself entered the OED in 1857, ‘and most of the English variations on the word (*pornographer* and *pornographic*) date from the middle or the end of the nineteenth century.’ French variations used ‘in the sense of obscene writing or images dated from the 1830s and 1840s.’]... Pornography came into existence, both as a literary and visual practice and as a category of understanding, at the same time as—and concomitantly with—the long-term emergence of Western modernity. It has links to most of the major movements in that emergence: the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.... Its political and cultural meanings cannot be separated from its emergence as a category of thinking, representation, and regulation. Early modern pornography reveals some of the most important nascent characteristics of modern culture. It was linked to freethinking and heresy, to science and natural philosophy, and to attacks on absolutist political authority. It was especially revealing about the gender differentiations being developed within the culture of modernity.” Lynn Hunt, “Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1996) 9-11.

blurring of boundaries that dissolved traditional/standardized notions of a stable reality and stable identities founded upon binary (and visibly legible) classifications—it was, paradoxically, through the absolutely unreal re-imagining of what miscegenation really represented, and who its true representatives really were, that America’s authoritative white men attempted to bring this threat under control. Towards the middle of the century, miscegenation *rescripted* as an illicit, and socially disfiguring, practice involving the transgressive exchange of desire between white *women* and black *men* (fig. 3.3), this new narrative served as a sort of substitutive blanket discourse by way of which white women’s greater demands for political and sexual freedom, which in and of themselves threatened both traditional ‘order’ and the ‘real’ power and authority of the white man, might be negotiated, at the same time that its rewrite of history might also, in purifying the white man’s past, vouchsafe that this purity (and phallic control) could be carried into a future that threateningly portended the black man’s emancipation.

Leading up to this moment, which had seen the banning of the U.S. importation of slaves in 1808 and the subsequent outlaw of slavery of in England in 1830, as well as the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (the same year, interestingly enough, that the Census counted mulattoes for the first time, for perhaps it was the officially documented existence of this subset that fed into official attempts to more tightly police the traffick of black, or threateningly *un-black*, bodies), abolitionist-dissenters in the States had with increasing vociferousness begun to enlist sexual rhetoric, particularly the language of sexual degeneracy, to support their lobby for American emancipation. The 1830s famous, as outlined above, for its groundswell of moral reform literature—from temperance pamphlets, to anti-prostitution and anti-masturbation tracts, to the seamy

WHAT MISCEGENATION IS!

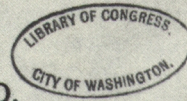
—AND—



WHAT WE ARE TO EXPECT

Now that Mr. Lincoln is Re-elected.

By L. SEAMAN, LL. D.



WALLER & WILLETTS, PUBLISHERS,
NEW YORK.

Figure 3.3

“city crimes” novels and anti-seduction literature, American’s obsession with vice and licentiousness, albeit ‘differently’ expressed, was matched only by the Continental pornographers for whom vice was the central tool of their trade—anti-slavery agitators of the era had decided that if appeals to Christian charity and spiritual salvation were not enough to change the hearts and minds of slaveholders and their supporters, than the repeated reiteration of slavery’s carnal crimes against the flesh might just prove more persuasive to common sentiment.⁸³

Launching a host of attacks against the institution of slavery that portrayed it as promoting the unrestrained indulgence in the darkest of man’s depravities, and by “man” they meant the *white* man specifically, by 1834 abolitionists were frequently heard to utter declarations to the effect that “THE SOUTHERN SLAVE STATES ARE ONE GREAT SODOM [caps in original].”⁸⁴ Absolute power over others at best blunting the slavemaster’s ability to fully empathize with those placed under his mastery, at worst it had led to a situation in which, violence and lust daily visited upon the body of the slave, the very mastery of the white male planter was menaced by his own excesses as physical dissipation was, at that time, widely believed to accompany moral dissipation. Ronald Walters, in his article, “The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism,” quoting anti-slavery activist Louisa Barker, makes clear such a standpoint, “Planters...exemplified the ‘wreck of early manhood always resulting from self-indulgence.’ They were ‘born with feeble minds and bodies, with just force enough

⁸³ Although a wealth of literature, too much to list, focuses on reform writings, I’m partial to David Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) because he, like Halttunen, makes moves to tie this literature to pornography—see Ch. 2, “The Reform Impulse and the Paradox of Immoral Didacticism.” See also Ronald G. Walters’ “The Erotic South” which I am about to enter into the conversation.

⁸⁴ Ronald G. Walters, “The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism,” *American Quarterly* 25 (1974): 183. Walters quotes James A. Thome from *Liberator* May 10, 1834.

to transmit the family name, and produce in feebler characters a second edition of the father's life."⁸⁵

The unchecked expenditure of libidinal energy thought to wreak havoc on both the body and the mind of the individual, it was also viewed, even in this pre-Freudian moment, as contrary to the progress of (white) "civilization" itself. Theodore Dwight Weld as representative of this prevalent opinion stating that "Restraints are the web of civilized society, warp and woof," the licentiousness of the Southern white male threatened to warp American society as a whole for "the baneful influence did not stop there" and, according to Weld's contemporary William Goodell, the moral laxity and general degeneration of the antebellum South "pollutes [the North's] splendid cities, and infects the whole land with the leprosy of Sodom."⁸⁶ This comparison to leprosy likening the dissipation of Southern white men to the withering of a bodily limb of the white republic that might infect and weaken the entire system of the body politic and its patriarchal circulations of power, in much less abstract ways the wages of the slaveholders' disease and deviance could be seen to be spreading throughout the nation. The most obvious means by which Southern 'pollution' might travel Northward was, of course, through the miscegenated bodies of the offspring of slaveholders and the slaves they counted as their courtesans. The abolitionist movement often thought of as promoting interracial *unions* as well as interracial unity, anti-slavery writings were in fact amongst the first to publicly condemn "the slave system's 'dreadful amalgamating

⁸⁵ Walters, "The Erotic South," 183. Quote from Louisa Barker's "Influence of Slavery on Slaveholders," *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine* 1 (1836): 326.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 187, 190. Weld quoted from *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic systems on the Subject of Human Rights*, 4th ed. (New York: American Anti-Slavery Soc., 1838) 7; William Goodell from *Emancipator*, Jan. 14, 1834.

abominations.’”⁸⁷ One of the strongest arguments for immediate emancipation, strongest because it catered to popular fears concerning miscegenation as earlier stated, then became the hypothesis that it was only through the manumission of the slave and their removal from close proximity to whites, either through geographic dispersal or recolonization if the former distancing tactic were to prove still too close for comfort, that the ‘disproportionate growth’⁸⁸ of the black population in the States was to be stunted. For the majority of abolitionists, the prevention of the possibility that the number of blacks might swell to the point whereby it would “enable them to overpower the nation,”⁸⁹ far from being a matter of policing black sexuality and controlling *intra-racial* propagation amongst slaves, it was, instead, a question of regulating *white desires* for the blacks placed at their disposal; not wont to mince words, LaRoy Sunderland would declare in 1837: “That the blacks should increase faster than the whites, is easily accounted for...from the fact, that the former class are increased by the latter, but the blacks cannot increase the whites.”⁹⁰ Slavery thus formulated as a social institution in contrast to which “a Turkish harem [was] a cradle of virgin purity,”⁹¹ the burden of the promiscuity practiced therein was firmly placed on the shoulders of the white men who stood as the potentates of these state-sanctioned seraglios, as was the responsibility for having sired the great mass of miscegenated progeny that sprang forth

⁸⁷ Walters, “The Erotic South,” 185. Quote is from *Emancipator*, Sept. 14, 1833.

⁸⁸ Walters points out that this disproportionate growth was itself a fantasy, at least according to the 1840 Census. See *Ibid*, 184 n.15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 184. Walters quotes John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery, Addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin, Merchant at Middlebrook, Augusta Co., Va.* 1838, rpt. (New York: Arno, 1969), 108.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 184. Walters quotes LaRoy Sunderland, *anti-Slavery Manual, Containing a Collection of Facts and Arguments on American Slavery*, 2nd ed. (New York: Benedict, 1837) 11-12.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 183. Walters quotes Thomas Wentworth Higginson, from Tilden G. Edelstein’s *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1968), 100. *Walters wrongly attributes this quote, which actually came from Henry Ward Beecher. In a May 23, 1850 piece in the *Liberator*, Beecher makes the quoted assertion adding, “There is no sensual vice which we are taught to abhor, which Slavery does not monstrously engender.” See Paxton Hibben’s *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait*, foreword by Sinclair Lewis (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1942), 122.

from the debauched depths of the libertine playground that was America's peculiar institution.

(An aside, if Mark Twain's late nineteenth-century novelistic return to antebellum America is said to represent a longing to recapture, via the romantic adventures of Nigger Jim and his "honey" Huck, a purer, simpler period in the nation's history, the contemporaneous return of pornographers to the "*Plantation Heat*" of decades gone by follows a similarly idealistic embrace of a particularly *pornotopic* moment in America's past. In fact, both the smut peddlers and sly Samuel might just be embracing the same ideals.)

While this is obviously a vast reduction of the diversity of abolitionist writing and rhetoric during this era, the main point, for our purposes here, is that the debased vision of the white man frequently forwarded within these frameworks was understandably not an image that appealed to many, on either the anti-slavery side of the fence or, more pointedly, the powerful majority of men who stood their ground, and had much at stake, on the other side of this issue. For the great mass of Americans who may have thought themselves fence-sitters in this debate, it would, in turn and however ironically, have been the very liminality that such arguments suggested that was the most disturbing aspect of the situation. Oppositions such as those of savagery to civilization, enslaved to free, and, to quote Morrison, "not helpless, but licensed and powerful,"⁹² upon which so many of the ideals of American individuality had been grounded, having previously found their easiest delineation in what had been established as 'fundamental' distinctions between Black and White, even more troubling than abolitionist insistence on "ideas about the brotherhood of man"—ideas that, as we have said, Agassiz and company found

⁹² Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 51-52.

so very difficult to accept—was their suggestion that the white man’s moral shortcomings and sexual depravity should place him on a rung in the Great Chain of Being even lower than the “beast-like” African. This formulation questioning not only that the white man’s ethical fitness for rule, it also necessarily portended his, and by extension white civilization’s, eventual confutation; a proposal that was, understandably, just too much for many to handle. Add to this that miscegenation’s further disruption of the binary logics of race in America had resulted not only in a “race” of individuals who, despite all attempts to argue to the contrary, and despite the taxonomic pretensions of the “one drop” rule, were not always able to be quickly and categorically recognized as “Black” (even Sunderland’s quote above relies on such pretensions), but also, as abolitionists repeatedly stressed, in the enslavement of individuals who, for all intents and purposes, *appeared* to be White—importantly, whether these slaves really “were” White was not the issue, the representational crisis that such an *image* effectuated in terms of American identitarian imaginings was enough—and we can see why all of this foment may have been coming to a head in the exact era that would make a literary star out of Mrs. Stowe.

In Stowe’s novel we are treated to a fairly brilliant incorporation of all of these arguments and fears; Stowe taking the sexual rhetoric of her fellow abolitionists to a fevered pitch (ever accompanied by the promise of cathartic release through orgasm) and to the next level, for, as suggested above, her novel’s most salient feature, aside from all of its sadomasochistic glory, may be that her strongest indictment of slavery lies in the queer cautionary tale her text forwards. Ever keen to the scientific landscape of her time, Stowe —armchair phrenologist and physiognomist, empiricist, as well as ‘daguerreotypist,’ her novel peppered throughout with nods to the authoritative

discourses of the day⁹³—takes up on the subtleties of the previously-forwarded rhetoric regarding Southern degeneracy and “dissipation” and calls it for what it is: a thinly veiled suggestion that the sexual despotism and polymorphously perverse free range of the Southern slaveholder was turning these men into “homosexuals.” (I refer you back to Freud’s suggestion that it was with the debased, servant-like, sexual object that men of the highest classes could achieve ultimate satisfaction and ‘introduce perverse components into their sexual aims.’⁹⁴)

Although, again, the actual term “homosexual” did not exist at the time, ideas concerning the effeminacy, physical enervation, and degenerative inability to potently transmit blood lines of those who had given themselves over to the ultimate vices of the sodomitic lifestyle were fairly common⁹⁵—as we saw many of these ideas similarly invoked in the discourses surrounding Agassiz’s and Desor’s queer courtship. Also fairly common, as popularized in the display of that famous statue of the era, Hiram Powers’

⁹³ One such example, Stowe offers the following description of the savage slavetrader, Haley: “He was dressed in a coat of buffalo-skin, made with the hair outward, which gave him a shaggy and fierce appearance, perfectly in keeping with the whole air of his physiognomy. In the head and face every organ and lineament expressive of brutal and unhesitating violence was in a state of the highest possible development.” Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 60-61.

⁹⁴ See Chapter Two, note 192.

⁹⁵ Maurice Wallace, in his *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African and African American Men’s Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), also refers to such discourses as hinted at in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in which she speaks of a friend, Luke, whose master “took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism” in dealing out tortures to his black male slave that were clearly sexual in nature. Wallace points out, “The unnamed slaveholder, having been ‘deprived of the use of his limbs by excess dissipation,’ [‘a prey to the vices growing out of the patriarchal institution,’] is portrayed by Jacobs as showing all of the worst symptoms of sexual deviancy according to certain popular discourses of illness and health current in the United States from the 1830s to Freud in the twentieth century, discourses in which euphemisms like ‘vice,’ ‘excess,’ and ‘dissipation’ connote a pathological aberration from the cultural norms of the human sexual economy. According to the medical science of the period, such dissipation and palsy as that manifested by Luke’s master, once vigorous and virile, were consequences of sexual perversions including masturbation and sodomy, for which the usual prognosis was progressive dementia” (89). See, Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 504. Wallace also refers us to Robert A. Nye’s, “Sex Difference and Male Homosexuality in French Medical Discourse,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 63 (1989): 41. I would recommend, as well, Ch. 3, “Inverts: Pointy Penises, Hysterical Mollies, and Literary Homosexuals,” of Vernon A. Rosario’s *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 69-111.

Greek Slave, and subtly referenced in the above quote comparing the slave plantation to the “Oriental” seraglio, was a vision of the Turk—the man behind the market into which Powers’ slave is to be sold and the principal of the 1828 pornographic classic, *The Lustful Turk* (we will return to this)⁹⁶—as potentate of an orgiastic space of license in which not only an infinite variety of heterosexual pleasures and perversions were exchanged, but where “buggery” and general male-on-male action were also par for the course. In fact, so widespread was this belief in the nineteenth century that Richard Burton, of Cannibal Club fame, was eventually to pronounce the Turks, “a race of born pederasts.”⁹⁷

There is good reason then, that the vision that Stowe includes of “kindly” master Augustine St. Clare’s New Orleans mansion sticks in the minds of readers and in the craw of contemporary critics like Hortense Spillers and P. Gabrielle Foreman⁹⁸ (to whose initial queer reading of the novel I am heavily indebted) who sense therein a sensuality that lies beyond the pale of, and which cannot even be contained within, the domestic logics of the novel. From the quaint, if comically minstrel, space of Tom’s lowly little cabin tumbling over with molasses mouthed black babes, to the pristine harmony of Rachel Halliday’s Quaker kitchen, and ever outwards/downwards towards the hell-like horror of the “antihome” that is bachelor Simon Legree’s gothic mansion,⁹⁹ the site that the novel’s hero will share with his second master is decidedly outside of the bounds, or

⁹⁶ For a detailed discussion of this novel, as well as several excerpts from the actual text, see Steven Marcus’ *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 197-216.

⁹⁷ Burton quoted in Colette Colligan’s “‘A Race of Born Pederasts’: Sir Richard Burton, Homosexuality, and the Arabs,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25 (2003): 5.

⁹⁸ See Spillers, “Changing the Letter,” and P. Gabrielle Foreman, “‘This Promiscuous Housekeeping’: Death, Transgression, and Homoeroticism in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Representations* 43 (Summer 1993): 51-72.

⁹⁹ For more on Stowe’s homes, see Leslie Fiedler, “Home As Heaven, Home as Hell: *Uncle Tom’s Canon*,” in *Rewriting the Dream: Reflections on the Changing American Literary Canon*, ed. W.M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), 22-42; and Karen Halttunen, “Gothic Imagination and Social Reform: The Haunted Houses of Lyman Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe” in *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 107-134.

the bonds, of mid-nineteenth-century American understandings of domesticity. In a novel which is obsessed with homes—as Fiedler points out, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “contain[s] the most compendious gallery of homes in all American literature”¹⁰⁰—and obsessed also with the threat that slavery poses to “parents and children, husbands and wives, in monogamous Christian households”¹⁰¹ the St. Clare mansion is figured as so “heathenish,” as Aunt Ophelia is to pronounce her new environs on first sight,¹⁰² that it is to be considered no “home” at all. The enduring image of the St. Clare mansion focused on its surrounds rather than its interiors, it exists from its introduction as a sort of “third space,” a queer space at once outside, betwixt, and between—not homestead, but harem site, it is the *locus generis* of the Lustful Turk:

The carriage stopped in front of an ancient mansion, built in that odd mixture of Spanish and French style, of which there are specimens in some parts of New Orleans. It was built in the Moorish fashion,—a square building enclosing a court-yard, into which the carriage drove through an arched gateway. The court, in the inside, had evidently been arranged to gratify a picturesque and voluptuous ideality. Wide galleries ran all around the four sides, whose Moorish arches, slender pillars, and arabesque ornaments, carried the mind back, as in a dream to the reign of oriental romance in Spain....

The galleries that surrounded the court were festooned with a curtain of some kind of Moorish stuff, and could be drawn down at pleasure, to exclude the beams of the sun. On the whole, the appearance of the place was luxurious and romantic.¹⁰³

In case the reader has not quite understood the many allusions made in this description, Stowe throws in some “Arabian jessamines” to complement the reference to the galleries’ ‘Arab-esque ornaments,’ as well as their multiple Moorish markings, and then brings her point home by marking Tom himself as both the latest of the scene’s exotic accoutrements and the rightful heir to their hedonistic allure:

¹⁰⁰ Fiedler, “Home as Heaven, Home as Hell,” 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 161.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

Tom got down from the carriage, and looked about with an air of calm, still enjoyment. The negro, it must be remembered, is an exotic of the most gorgeous and superb countries of the world, and he has, deep in his heart, a passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful; a passion which, rudely indulged by untrained taste, draws on them the ridicule of the colder and more correct white race. St. Clare, who was in his heart a poetical voluptuary, smiled...and turning to Tom who was looking round, his beaming black face perfectly radiant with admiration, he said,
 “Tom, my boy, this seems to suit you.”
 “Yes, Mas’r, it looks about the right thing,” said Tom.”¹⁰⁴

That Tom is to be recognized here as a “Turk”—the embodiment of a generalized notion of an eroticized “Orient” that encompassed for the mid-century American the Arab, the Moor, and the Mediterranean—would have been absolutely clear to the vast majority of Stowe’s audience. The aforementioned abolitionist rhetoric priming Stowe’s readers to make such a connection (above linkages between the plantation and the harem espoused in 1850 by none other than Stowe’s own brother, Henry Ward Beecher¹⁰⁵), the recent run of Powers’ famed statue would have also guaranteed that this personage would have been at the forefront of the popular imagination, as would have all of the pornographic and perverse potentialities that would have adhered to Tom as Turk, particularly when deposited in the “pleasure grounds”¹⁰⁶ that were considered the sultan’s natural habitat.

Powers’ *Greek Slave* having earned an astounding \$30,000 in receipts during its American tour, which began in 1847, the statue had provoked in viewers veritable

¹⁰⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 161.

¹⁰⁵ See note 91. It should also be pointed out that Henry Ward, despite his position as clergyman, might also have been said to have had a lot in common with Stowe’s St. Clare. In Hibben’s biography, he suggests that Henry Ward’s wife found Harriet’s brother to be “too sensitive, too easily moved—vain, pleasure-loving, tender, sensuous—essentially a child still.” (See Hibben, *Henry Ward Beecher*, 121).

¹⁰⁶ I borrow this phrase from Martin R. Delany who was clearly no fan of Stowe’s and, I believe referencing her perversity in his *Blake*. His sadomasochistically inflected scene with Rube in the “pleasure grounds” meant to superimpose a pornographic image of Eliza’s son ‘jumping Jim Crow’ (Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 3) at the St. Clare mansion. See Martin R. Delany’s, *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-1862), ed. Floyd J. Miller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 66-67.

paroxysms of emotion quite similar to those later to be inspired by Stowe's tale of her Black Slave.¹⁰⁷ Like Stowe's novel, as well, these orgies of empathetic weeping were often fairly disingenuous, leading at least one critic to conclude that, "Despite the disclaimers of Powers and his supporters, the statue's success at least partially depended on its ability to provide erotic pleasure"¹⁰⁸—pleasure provided not only by the vision it offered of a nude white woman in alabaster, but also by the backstory it suggested regarding her eventual and inevitable ravishment at the hands of her dark captors. Dissimilar to Stowe's text, however, the black man imagined in the fantasy scenario that would leave this white woman wholly at his will, and her every orifice at his whim, is nothing like her Tom, this Turk is conceived as all-powerful and absolutely unwavering in his authority.

Playing on, and profiting from, contemporaneous associations that would have called to mind images like the one below (fig. 3.4)—indeed, there may have even been those Americans who would have had actual knowledge of the picture painted of the Turk in hardcore pornography, as *The Lustful Turk*, one of the early nineteenth-century's most popular erotic works, was also one of the last pieces to make it in from Europe before the 1842 Custom's Act officially shut the door to such overseas "filth" in America—Stowe then begins a flipping of this script. For Stowe, while Tom's erotic attraction as black man is indeed limitless, he is not, however, full master of his sensual

¹⁰⁷ See Joy Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body: *The Greek Slave*," in Shirley Samuels ed. *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 172-190.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 180.



Figure 3.4

powers—he is, for the most part, acted upon, not actor in the sexual dramas he inspires *chez* St. Clare's. As Spillers would have it, "If the markings of the landscape all signify the 'exotic,' the strange, the foreign, then what better gaze to preside over them than Tom's—that of the gagged, bewildered, 'unreading,' but 'read,' object who representationally embodies, historically, North America's most *coveted* body, that is, the *captivated* man/woman-child who fulfills a variety of functions at the master's behest?"¹⁰⁹ Indeed, in his New Orleans abode Tom may be a Turk, but he is simply a harem dweller, not its Dey. This role Stowe reserves for St. Clare, the Byronic "poetical voluptuary" and the true Sultan of this seraglio.

While Legree may represent the worst form of master—his desperate desire to find recognition of his ultimate power in the eyes of the Other turning his Hegelian strivings towards hellish ends¹¹⁰—his homoerotic leanings are not, according to Stowe, of the worst sort. In fact, it is St. Clare, the novel's most kindly of masters who stands as the text's most dangerous of "deviants." As Spiller's says, "'Simon Legree' is 'really' 'Augustine St. Clare' with his drawers down."¹¹¹ And for Stowe, the fact that folks like St. Clare were most likely to *get caught* with their pants down was exactly the problem. Exhibiting none of the civilized and civilizing drive towards absolute and objectifying mastery normally attributed to "the colder and more correct white race" St. Clare is a complicated figure, at once more "decent" in his general treatment of Tom, but at the

¹⁰⁹ Spillers, "Changing the Letter," 544.

¹¹⁰ Leonard Cassuto, in speaking of slave narratives' use of scenes of torture to objectify the masters that inflict these torments on their slaves, he attempts to theorize some of the drives that may have impelled such feats of violence. Cassuto suggests, "This striving for ever greater reflects the dilemma of the master in Hegel's dialectic: he is trying to get human recognition from someone Spillers, "Changing the Letter," whom he has already reduced to the status of a thing. Fueled by frustration, the torture becomes a compulsive search for an unattainable goal." Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 119.

¹¹¹ Spillers, "Changing the Letter," 548.

same time wholly “indecent” in his indulgence in the vices that mark him as absolutely antithetical to Stowe’s vision of acceptable white masculinity. (And Stowe is right there, in the figure of the priggish Aunt Ophelia, to call each and every one of these deviations out.) According to Stowe, then, it is not simply St. Clare’s insistence in regard to both his female *and* male slaves on “be[ing] willing to do as Christ did,—call them to us, and *put our hands on them* [emphasis in the original],”¹¹² but it is the fact that the sort of close and constant contact he champions actually inspires a seeming *equality* between the two parties that blurs the bounds between master and servant, black and white, and, dare we say it, penetrator and penetrated, that is the true threat to American ideals and identitarian imperatives.

In the “promiscuous housekeeping”¹¹³ that reigns at the St. Clare estate, just as common household items are strewn about indiscriminately with no regard to the standard logics of order and classification, sexual aims and objects are indulged equally indiscriminately. St. Clare and his wife, Marie, supposed to comprise the head of a hierarchy of socially sanctioned sexual unions (the monogamous Christian household that Stowe so reveres), have clearly failed in this regard—in part because Marie St. Clare, universally reviled by both the writer and her textual referent, has been so perverted by the despotism in which she was raised that she had become ‘un-sexed,’ if not sexed male.

¹¹² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 281.

¹¹³ Foreman borrows her title phrase from Gillian Brown’s article, “Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah: Domestic politics in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” Although Foreman provides the general impress of the article, she does not supply the actual quote. It is as follows: “Nowhere in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is [slavery’s] domestic violation so marked as in the careless condition of the Southern kitchen. Dinah’s kitchen in Little Eva St. Clare’s New Orleans home, ‘looked as if it had been arranged by a hurricane blowing through it.’ In Dinah’s domestic arrangement, ‘the rolling pin is under the bed and the nutmeg grater in her pocket with her tobacco—there are sixty-five different sugar bowls, one in every hole in the house’ . . . ; she ‘had about as many places for each cooking utensil as there were days in the year’ This promiscuous housekeeping scandalizes the St. Clare’s Northern cousin Ophelia, offending her domestic propriety as much as slavery disturbs her moral sense.” Gillian Brown, “Getting in the Kitchen with Dinah: Domestic Politics in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *American Quarterly* 36 (Fall 1984): 503.

Lamenting St. Clare's wife status as other than "whole woman" the text goes on to say of her:

Marie never had possessed much capability of affection, or much sensibility, and the little that she had merged into a most intense selfishness; a selfishness the more hopeless from its quiet obtuseness, its utter ignorance of any claims but her own.... When, therefore, St. Clare began to drop off those gallantries and small attentions, which flowed at first through habitude of courtship, he found *his sultana no way ready to resign her slave* [emphasis mine].¹¹⁴

Marie's failures as 'true woman' as defined by the nineteenth-century's Cult of Sensibility, as well as her failures to play mistress to her husband—the never-ending "sick-headaches" to which she is subsequently prone suggesting that her constant state of supineness does not extend to the marital bed—in part to blame for St. Clare's turn to those others in the seraglio over which he is the accepted Sultan for succor ("The fact is, St. Clare indulges every creature under this roof but his own wife"¹¹⁵), it is, perhaps, the husband's own fluid gender markings that have led to his own 'perverted' dispositions, as well.

Described in terms that call to mind later sexological discourses on "The Uranist" (or the *Urning*)—an early classification of the male homosexual that would pathologize him as 'a woman trapped in a man's body'¹¹⁶—St. Clare is decidedly designated as different by design from the text's other white men. At once, his mother's child, "[h]aving inherited from her an exceeding delicacy of constitution," he is also

¹¹⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 152-153.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹⁶ Vernon Rosario first presents the history of this appellation in his early work, "Histoires d'inversion: Novelizing Homosexuality at the Fin de Siècle," *Articulations of Difference: Gender Studies and Writing in French*, ed. Dominique D. Fisher and Lawrence R. Schehr (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997). He expands upon it in *The Erotic Imagination*, pointing out, "A psychological theory of congenital same-sex love was advanced by a Hanoverian legal official, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (writing under the pseudonym Numa Numantius)...Ulrichs coined the word *Urning* to identify the 'third sex' to which he and his fellows belonged. He proposed the classic model of gender inversion: *Urnings* were female souls caught in male bodies. Ulrichs argued that their nature was a psychological condition without intellectual deficits and should not be the object of legal persecution." Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination*, 83-84.

“remarkable” from childhood because of his “extreme and marked sensitiveness of character, more akin to the softness of a woman than the ordinary hardness of his own sex...this softness...living and fresh still lay at [his] core.”¹¹⁷ In a dwelling where men’s and women’s gender roles are so clearly and promiscuously “confused,” then, it is in no way out of keeping that St. Clare, repeatedly described being of the “Greek” ilk (“His fine face, classic as that of a Greek statue, seemed actually to burn with the fervor of his feelings”¹¹⁸), another loaded cue, would have given over the run of his home and its keeping to his prized male slave, Adolph, a clear fop and the novel’s most unabashed of queer figures. The man presented as being at the center of St. Clare’s “domestic relations” prior to Tom’s appearance on scene first presented as, “a highly-dressed young mulatto man, evidently a very *distingué* personage, attired in the ultra extreme of the mode, and gracefully waving a scented cambric handkerchief in his hand,” he is also said to have “an air that would have done credit to any dandy living.”¹¹⁹ Yet while Stowe’s initial description is to make of Adolph a bit of comic relief of the Zip Coon minstrel variety, his laughable queerness becomes not quite so funny (just as the minstrel dandy had his serious side, as will be discussed in our closing chapter) to readers as they are to discover that he stands as nothing less than a mirror that brings into startling relief St. Clare’s own “homosexuality.”

St. Clare himself calling Adolph’s “airs” indicative of “the poor dog’s wanting to be like his master,”¹²⁰ it is this desire in this most petted of “puppy,”¹²¹ as his master diminutively marks him, that leads Adolph to actually take to donning St. Clare’s gaze as

¹¹⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 150.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 221-222.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 161, 163.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 174.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 163.

well as his clothes. Of the charged initial meeting between Tom and Adolph we have this description:

As St. Clare turned to go back, his eye fell upon Tom, who was standing uneasily, shifting from one foot to the other, while Adolph stood negligently leaning against the banisters, examining Tom through an opera glass....

“Puh! You puppy,” said his master, striking down the opera-glass; “is this the way you treat company? Seems to me, Dolph,” [St. Clare] added, laying his finger on the elegantly figured satin vest Adolph was sporting, “seems to me that’s *my* vest.”

“O Master, this vest all stained with wine! of course a gentleman in Master’s standing never wears a vest like this. I understood that I was to take it. It does for a poor nigger-fellow, like me.”

And Adolph tossed his head, and passed his fingers through his scented hair, with a grace.

“So that’s it, is it?” said St. Clare carelessly. “Well here, I’m going to show this Tom to his Mistress, and then you take him to the kitchen; and mind you don’t put any of your airs to him. He’s worth two such puppies as you.”

“Master always will have his joke,” said Adolph, laughing. “I’m delighted to see Master in such spirits.”¹²²

As Foreman contends, “St. Clare clearly sees his man’s visual gesture as an appropriative one. The master strikes the glass down, as he does likewise to Adolph’s attempted transcendence of the class and racial status that informs the power behind, rather than the mere gesture of, the gaze.”¹²³ Although Foreman does not remark it, St. Clare’s immediate move to then claim Adolph’s clothing as his own is meant to bring the initial point home and to effect a similar sort of leveling. It is a gesture that fails, however, because if St. Clare’s final commentary on Tom’s new status as alpha-dog in the house “speaks,” as Foreman expands, “beneath the pants of his two favored slaves,”¹²⁴ he has been moved to make that pronouncement because Adolph, not tamed but taunting, has just spoken beneath St. Clare’s own drawers (to employ Spillers’ vernacular). His self-deprecating move towards minstrel-like mushy-mouthness

¹²² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 163.

¹²³ Foreman, ““This Promiscuous Housekeeping,”” 60.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

presented as obvious spectacle, and obviously indicating that the head-tossing Adolph is anything but the shuffling “coon,” his commentary on how he has come about St. Clare’s clothing is intended to show his hand as to the sexual mastery he holds over his remonstrator; for, really, how might Adolph have come upon his master’s wine-stained vest, if it had not, perhaps, been left behind in his quarters after a night of drunken debauchery of which a gentleman of St. Clare’s standing might not wish to be publicly reminded. Thus, St. Clare’s “So that’s it, is it?” is not pronounced “carelessly” at all—whatever that might even mean within the context of the action—as the carefully crafted retort that follows his ‘puppy’s’ dig would indicate.

St. Clare is later to relate the incident to his wife as follows: “As to Dolph, the case is this: that he has so long been engaged in imitating my graces and perfections, that he has, at last, really mistaken himself for his master; and I have been obliged to give him a little insight into his mistake.”¹²⁵ As to the reader’s view on St. Clare, however, moves to ‘strike down Adolph’s glass’ have done little to veil the insight that his mirroring status as imitation of his master has revealed. If the appropriative and sexually suggestive gaze that Adolph has leveled on Tom is meant to mimic St. Clare’s, just two pages after St. Clare has condemned this trespass in his recount to his wife, we see yet another look that lands on Tom (as well as a laying on of hands) which speaks a world of identification. The trio of St. Clare, Marie, and Miss Ophelia having just rehashed one of their interminable arguments regarding the ills of slavery, occasioned by St. Clare’s commentary on Adolph,

A gay laugh from the court rang through the silken curtains of the verandah. St. Clare stepped out, and lifting up the curtain, laughed too.
“What is it? Said Miss Ophelia, coming to the railing.

¹²⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 174.

There sat Tom, on a little mossy seat in the court, every one of his buttonholes stuck full of cape jessamines, and Eva, gaily laughing, was hanging a wreath of roses around his neck; and then she sat down on his knee, like a chip-sparrow, still laughing.

“O, Tom, you look so funny!”

Tom had a sober, benevolent smile, and seemed, in his quiet way, to be enjoying the fun quite as much as his little mistress. He lifted his eyes, when he saw his master, with a half-deprecating, apologetic air.¹²⁶

The exchange between Tom and Eva absolutely loaded with sexual significance—there is a reason that the shades to the courtyard have been drawn down (“a curtain . . . could be drawn down *at pleasure*,” and, certainly, a great deal of pleasure is being indulged here)—Spillers is quick to conclude, “the author invests ‘Little Eva’ with the desire to touch, to embrace, the forbidden, concealed like a serpent beneath a bank of flowers.”¹²⁷ This tiny replica of Eve, however, is also the tiny replica of her father—who is himself the copy of his own mother after whom Eva has been named—thus, if she is holding out any apple to her generative Adam, it is the forbidden knowledge of how very delightful it is not simply to have congress with Tom’s black serpent, but to play penetrator to him, as well. As Foreman perfectly sums it up, “If we read all of the images Stowe presents, this scene does not represent a purely heterosexual moment. Every one of Tom’s receptive holes are quite full, for example, much to the pleasure of his voyeuristic master.”¹²⁸ The call and response of Eva’s and St. Clare’s laughs, as well as the fact that only moments before St. Clare had sat at a piano, “His touch . . . brilliant and firm . . . his fingers fl[y]ing over the keys with a rapid and bird-like motion,”¹²⁹ would also suggest that Stowe means for her reader to note not only St. Clare’s appropriative gaze from afar (as Tom seems to

¹²⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 175-176.

¹²⁷ Spillers, “Changing the Letter,” 557.

¹²⁸ Foreman, “‘This Promiscuous Housekeeping,’” 62.

¹²⁹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 175.

recognize his enjoyment is meant for master not mistress), but also to insinuate him into Eva's "chip-sparrow"-like seat in the scene.

In a truly Sedgwickian formulation, Eva continues to stand as the mediator of her father's and Tom's mutual desires for one another until the end—her death serving only to bring the two men closer as they unite over their shared grief at her passing, even as it has stripped away the only barrier that stood between them. Their post-Eva romance threatening any sense of decorum—the fairly frequent and frenetic contact between the two men as well as their declarations of love barely contained by Stowe's casting of this courtship as Tom's attempt to bring St. Clare over to embrace the "bridegroom,"¹³⁰ Jesus—Foreman quotes the following scene as example:

Tom spoke with fast running tears and choking voice. St. Clare leaned his head on his shoulder, and wrung the hard, faithful, black hand.
"Tom, you love me," he said.
"I's willin to lay down my life, this blessed day to see Mas'r a Christian."
"Poor, foolish boy! Said St. Clare, half raising himself. "I'm not worth the love of one good, honest heart, like yours."¹³¹

Were Tom and St. Clare's love of a purely Christian variety, it would not require the two to be punished for having formed a bond that far outstrips the usual relations of Black and White. All things conspiring to place Tom in a position where he has become his master's equal, if not his superior—even St. Clare formulates himself above as not up to the standards of one such as Tom—their *mutual* exchange of affection stands as their ultimate transgression. Tom's elevated moral status, St. Clare's state of vulnerability due to his grief at Eva's passing, Tom's continued eminence as part of an economy of exchange facilitative of linking St. Clare to this departed daughter ("[St. Clare] attached

¹³⁰ At Eva's death, Tom quotes scriptural text that clearly links death and sexuality, "At midnight there was a great cry made. Behold, the bridegroom cometh." Ibid., 292.

¹³¹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 300-301, qtd. in Foreman, "This Promiscuous Housekeeping," 64.

himself to Tom more and more, every day. In all the wide world, there was nothing that seemed to remind him more of Eva; and he would insist on keeping him constantly about him....”¹³²), as well as Tom’s ‘manly’ ability to play ‘rock in a storm,’ allowing him to effect through his romantic union with St. Clare what the superficial and ‘effeminate’ Adolph had been unable to, Tom is able to both master his master and, through this, *become his own master*. Tom having moved from desired object to desired and desiring *subject*, his ‘manhood’ insists that it be recognized, and St. Clare offers Tom his freedom. If the reader is at all unsure about whether it is Tom’s piety or his phallic *puissance* that has helped him to achieve this promised manumission, the text makes it clear:

Tom thought of his home, and that he should soon be a free man, and able to return to it at will. He thought how he should work to buy his wife and boys. He felt the muscles of his brawny arms with a sort of joy, as he thought they would soon belong to himself, and how much they could do to work out the freedom of his family. Then he thought of his noble young master....¹³³

Recognizing in his strong and muscular arms their pivotal power in the attainment of freedom—powers made evident to their soon-to-be owner in all the claspings that they have received via St. Clare (“St. Clare wrung the hard, faithful, black hand,” “[St. Clare] laid his hand on Tom’s, and bowed down his forehead on it,” ““O, God this is dreadful!” [St. Clare] said, turning away in agony and wringing Tom’s hand, scarce conscious of what he was doing”¹³⁴)—it is, however in their final hold on a dying Augustine that it is made clear that it is not in this world that they will be able to embrace his white male lover with impunity: “St. Clare reached out and took [Tom’s] hand, looking earnestly at him, but saying nothing. He closed his eyes, but still retained his hold; for in the gates of

¹³² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 303.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 301, 300, 294.

eternity, the black hand and the white hold each other with an equal clasp.”¹³⁵ Agreeing with Foreman that Augustine St. Clare’s fatal wounding is meant to stand as a sort of “phallic penetration”—he is stabbed in the side while trying to get between two grappling white men at a café—I would disagree slightly with her reading of the scene as an “inversion” in which St. Clare is penetrated by “white men of a similar class *whom he cannot regulate and define* [emphasis mine],”¹³⁶ and recast it, instead, as a sort of textually endorsed and preordained purification ritual where St. Clare is sacrificed by his kind for the sin of having *already allowed* himself to be, figuratively if not literally, penetrated phallically *by a black man*. And a not-freed but even further disenfranchised Tom will eventually get his, too—sold further down the river and into the crushing not clasping hands of Simon Legree, Tom is to die, held between two of *his own*, resoundingly returned to his status as penetratee.

Although Stowe’s novel has paid much lip service to the ideal of equality for all, and it has had much play with the black man’s seductive allure, in the end, its author seems to be suggesting that these two very things cannot be countenanced if the American way of life, its values, its homes, and its people’s sense of self are to be maintained. Indeed, within the logics of the text, the repatriation of Blacks to Africa is the only way to free the nation from the evils of slavery, in part because so doing might release American *men* from the potential erotic powers of the black male bodies they covet while corralling the true threat that this ultimately tabooed desire might pose to American politics and the American family—Africa being the only safe place for individuals such as, for example, the George Harrises of the world whose original master

¹³⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 316.

¹³⁶ Foreman, ““This Promiscuous Housekeeping,”” 65.

in the novel had realized from the first possessed, in addition to exceptional intelligence, a “handsome and manly”¹³⁷ look that required he be relegated to a position in the farthest reaches of the field and ‘far away,’ à la Agassiz, from any white male interlocutors.

Having played out that nightmare scenario of which Agassiz’s mother and her novel’s St. Clare himself spoke,¹³⁸ where servants have become the masters, Stowe firmly repositions this threat as an issue arising not from white women’s mythologized attraction to black men, but instead from the possibility of white men’s more patently homologizing attraction to black men. The sin of sodomy seen in and of itself as ‘blackening’ to one’s character (I refer you back to Agassiz’s, and the Lustful Turk’s, tales), and the fact that in the minds of Stowe’s readers it would entail a concomitant confusion of gender roles as well as similarly-gendered ‘topping’ or ‘bottomed’ sexual positioning, the idea that the unregulated exchange of homoerotic desire between white man and black man would *inevitably* lead to the white man’s degradation and a subsequent loss of domination—and hence involve a confusion/reversal of social roles where ‘blackened whites’ must counter ‘whitened blacks’ (i.e. blacks made masterful, and, potentially, even made masters of themselves...the ultimate love token)—seems to be a point that Stowe is determined to bring home. Not only does this inverted scenario whitewash any imagined interracial sexual transgressions on white women’s part—for their indiscretions would not have the same power to actually elevate the black man (he might be able to “master” the white woman, but that would not necessarily entail any concomitant purchase on [white] male phallic mastery; additionally, his manumission, for

¹³⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 9.

¹³⁸ St. Clare was not alone in lamenting the transposition of roles in the slave states, as his wife Marie has pouts, “Talk about our keeping slaves, as if we did it for *our convenience*....I’m sure, if we consulted *that*, we might let them all go at once,” adding, “it’s we mistresses that are the slaves, down here.” Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 166.

those not already freemen, was an even further stretch of the imagination as women were rarely the primary owners of property, human or otherwise, and, hence, had little power to grant such rights)—it also further reifies the importance of the white woman and her necessary position of prominence in the properly heterosexual home.¹³⁹

Following the rhetorics of Stowe's novel, then, it is the white woman's status—in her sensible, housemaking and housekeeping, heterosexualizing splendor—as the *true* guardian and enforcer of whiteness, that should then grant her at least some control over the upkeep of the nation, the sins of which she might purify as well. As Jane Tompkins would have it:

It is the *summa theologial* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story of itself—the story of salvation through motherly love. Out of the ideological material at their disposal, the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture; and of these efforts *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the most dazzling exemplar.¹⁴⁰

Perhaps most dazzling, in fact, was the novel's ability to grant at least one woman this exalted position as moral and political arbiter of the nation, Harriet Beecher Stowe's now famous text making her an overnight literary sensation and one of the chief individuals responsible for shaping, and making enduring, her mid-century moment's mythoi. And, on a very personal level, as well, it got Harriet into the public lecture circuit and out of her own home, the keeping of which, by all accounts, she actually loathed.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ We can also see this as countering claims, such as those elaborated by Mason Stokes in the previous chapter, regarding homosociality's unique ability to keep whiteness white: "To reproduce whiteness sexually is to risk contamination, and so heterosexuality becomes a threat to whiteness, one that can only be avoided if that heterosexuality is ultimately less important and less central than the homosociality it facilitates. Homoeroticism becomes, paradoxically, the only structure of desire that can keep whiteness white again." See Stokes, *Color of Sex*, 18.

¹⁴⁰ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 125.

¹⁴¹ Of her Stowe's domestic situation, one 1927 biography (see Constance Mayfield Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee: Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher, Horace Greeley, P.T. Barnum* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927]) says:

Black Markets, Black Bodies, Black Looks: Uncle Tom in the National Unconscious

*'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was the most popular novel of the period not necessarily because it exposed the horrors of slavery—Hildreth, Garrison, and others had done that better than Stowe—but because it provided an outlet for every Subversive [sic.] notion associated with the slavery debate and yet managed to invest the Conventional [sic.] with a mythic sanctity it had never known before. Henry James shrewdly captured this mythic quality when he wrote that 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' "had above all the extraordinary fortune of finding itself, for an immense number of people, much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling, and of consciousness."*¹⁴²

*[F]or better or for worse, it was Mrs. Stowe who invented American Blacks for the imagination of the whole world.*¹⁴³

Indeed, there was nothing particularly groundbreaking about the basic theological, feminist, or abolitionist arguments that Stowe's novel espoused (or the personal aims to which they were put). What was unique about the novel, however, was that it built upon the groundwork already laid by racial science and men like Agassiz, as well as the political concerns and pornographic tendencies of its time period, and in placing the

As if by blind instinct Harriet placed herself in a situation almost precisely like that which had been her lot under the sway of her father; against each those absorbed, impervious, masculine minds she could raise her cry for recognition in vain; she was not truly a center of imaginative regard for either of them. Calvin Stowe expected much of her, yet he ignored her....Children came in rapid succession, first twin girls...fifteen months later another child, within a brief space another, and then another. Once Mrs. Stowe nearly died of cholera. With passionate irregular energy and a spasmodic courage she struggled with her situation, but she hated the domestic routine" (97).

The text later quotes a letter to her husband in which Harriet writes, "It is a dark, sloppy, muddy, disagreeable day...and I have been working hard, washing dishes, looking into closets, and seeing a great deal of the dark side of domestic life... I am sick of the smell of sour milk, and sour meat, and sour everything, and then the clothes *will* not dry, and no wet thing does, and everything smells moldy; and altogether I feel as if I never wanted to eat again..." (99).

It would seem no stretch of the imagination to conclude, as the author of this biography does, that Stowe's fascination with those living in bondage was reflective of her own view of her household situation.

¹⁴² David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 78-79.

¹⁴³ Leslie Fiedler, *The Inadvertent Epic: From "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "Roots"* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1979), 26.

increasingly provocative, and increasingly pornotroped, body of the black man at the center stage of all its action, resoundingly propelled this body into the spotlight of a widespread public gaze hungry for flesh. In short, having already pointed to many of the more dubious motivating factors behind much of Louis Agassiz' and colleagues' scientific racialism—work that was prevalent during the exact same historical moment that spawned Harriet Beecher Stowe's great liberatory masterpiece—it seems not at all far-flung to conclude that Stowe's preoccupation with the plight of Uncle Tom (if not the nation's) could be found to be lodged much less deeply in the realm of the spiritual than in the realm of the economical: in an economy of desire that, like Agassiz' slave daguerreotypes, measured the spectacular black male body as the ultimate, and ultimately fetishized, commodity of exchange.

Thus, if Stowe's novel, which while espousing a pro-abolitionist, theologically based rhetoric of color-blind brotherly love, only thinly veils the spectacularly and sensationally pornographic investments of its authoress in the black male's dark body as “obscure object of exchangeable desire”¹⁴⁴ *can* be seen as mediating, and providing outlets for, subversive desires—sexual, sadistic, and homoerotic—that were otherwise able to find few venues of expression in a country living under strict erotic censure, the ‘state of vision’ it gave rise to should, nevertheless, also be seen as participating, like Agassiz's work, in a disciplinary framework dedicated to the repression of such dark passions.

Stowe's readers invited to implant themselves into the body of her dark plantation hero, they were also participants and test specimens themselves in an “implantation of

¹⁴⁴ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 53.

perversions”¹⁴⁵ (Foucault) that continues to inflect current day images and imaginings (conscious and unconscious) of the black male in America, and which guaranteed that even when released from their actual physical bonds, the black man would remain a slave within a panoptic prison house dominated by a voracious white public gaze bent on regulating and commodifying his issue. As Richard Yarborough points out in his discussion of the vast catalog of commemorative items meant to celebrate (read: fetishistically [re]incarnate) Stowe’s martyred main character, “Stowe’s best-seller inspired a veritable flood of Uncle Tom...dioramas, plates, busts, embossed spoons, painted scarves, engravings, and other miscellaneous memorabilia, leading one wry commentator to observe, ‘[Uncle Tom] became, in his various forms, the most frequently sold slave in American history.’”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ As Foucault reminds us, “Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 48.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Yarborough, “Strategies of Black Characterization in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel” in *New Essays on Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63.

Chapter Four. Carnival Attractions: (Re)Imagining the Spectacle of Black Male Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America and Beyond

*The freak show, like the minstrel show, is a site of racial conflict, not of resolution. It represented fears and anxieties at a time when the ideology of inequality tried to sustain itself against powerful social and political forces that threatened to erode it.*¹

*What is best left alone, that accursed thing is not always what least allures.*²

I'd like to begin this closing discussion, one that will act as a as a bridge between the antebellum and postbellum periods, while serving as a connective tissue that will link all that has thus far been said, with the following descriptions of two of the Nineteenth Century's most famous "freaks":

H]er movements had something of the brusqueness and capriciousness which recalled that of a monkey. She had a habit of protruding her lips quite like what I have observed in the Orang-Outang.

Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both. It is beyond dispute THE MOST MARVELLOUS CREATURE LIVING. It was captured in a savage state in Central [Africa], is probably about 20 years old, 4 feet high, intelligent, docile, active, sportive and PLAYFUL AS A KITTEN. It has the skull, limbs and general anatomy of an ORANG OUTANG and the COUNTENANCE of a HUMAN BEING [emphasis in original].³

The first of the above pronouncements offered in 1810 by none other than Baron Georges Cuvier (racial scientist, human taxidermist, and surmised love interest of Louis Agassiz) upon his first viewing of his Black Venus, the "Hottentot" Saartjie Baartman—at that

¹ Leonard Cassuto, "'What an object he would have made of me!': Tattooing and the Racial Freak in Melville's *Typee*," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 245 n. 3.

² Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 564; quoted in Leonard Cassuto's *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 10.

³ Both quotes taken from Bernth Lindfors, "Circus Africans," *Journal of American Culture* 6 (1983): 10, 12.

point safer in her sideshow cage than she would subsequently be in the hands of science—the second is exemplary of the ballyhoo and bunkum that surrounded the figure of one of American P.T. Barnum’s most famous mid-century freak exhibits, *What is It? Or The Man-Monkey*. These two figures entering the public eye forty-years and an Ocean apart, the similarities in the ways in which audiences were meant to visually vivisection these dark “specimens,” as well as the shift in gender of the American object of this fetishistic focus, says much towards the arguments that I have been trying to make in the course of this project.

A variation on the numerous “Missing Link” exhibits that sprang up in the mid-1800s, and which promised ocular evidence corroborating racial science’s various theories of polygenesis, the career of this particular “nondescript”—actually a shy, microcephalic black man named William Henry Johnson, born in New York and not in the wilds surrounding “the River Gambia”⁴—which began the year after the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and spanned from 1860-1924, is unique in that his “enfreakment”⁵ would carry him from serving as the concatenation of the American School’s empirically perverse fantasy of the animalistic Other, through blackface minstrelsy’s pornographic reshaping of his body as delicious but docilized dandy, and into a post-Reconstruction Era evolution as Coney Island’s comic castrato. *What Is It?*—later reinvented in the 1870s as “Zip,” a name derived from the list of blackface

⁴ Lindfors, “Circus Africans,” 12.

⁵ Phrase borrowed from disability theorist David Hevey. See Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s “Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 10.

minstrelsy's stock characters, Zip Coon⁶—becoming one of the most viewed freak exhibits of all time, estimated to have been seen by over a 100 million spectators and amassing one of the most comprehensive photologues in freak history,⁷ was to serve during the time period of his debut as a medium through which cultural anxieties centering around the breakdown of once 'stable' standards of classification and conduct, the chaotic byproduct of both American civil war (internal chaos) and global modernization (external chaos), could be 'safely' addressed.

The increasingly consumed corpus of the black man coming to stand by the late 1850s, thanks to visions endorsed and disseminated via Stowe's sadistic sentimentality and Agassiz's erotic ethnography, as the quintessential borderline body capable of encompassing all deviance, and all deviant bodies, within the outlines of the dark continent that was his flesh, the freakshow, quickly picked up on this (ph)antastic positioning. And, quick to cater to the psychic and sensationalistic demands of a vast audience of newly-urban consumers eager to spend their small earnings on spectacular distractions, this side-stage of American culture was to make the body of this racial Other its star attraction—hence one of the freakshow's nicknames amongst those in the trade “The Nig Show.”⁸

Offering an ever-shifting display of Aztecs, Igorots, Wild Men, Fijian princesses, and Albino Africans (many of the preceding being nothing more than African-Americans dressed, or un-dressed as the case most often was, as the public would imagine these

⁶ Eric Lott describes the minstrel character Zip Coon as 'urban dandy,' with all the implicit homosexual connotations that attach to this persona. See Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁷ Robert Bogdan, *Freakshow: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 141, 220. In speaking of Charles Tripp, the “armless wonder” also known as “The Armless Photographer,” Bogdan holds that Tripp, “[left] as comprehensive a set of photographic images as any human oddity, with the possible exception of William Henry Johnson ('Zip').”

⁸ Lindfors, “Circus Africans,” 10.

exotic Others to be), the freakshow, in all of its soft-core pornographic glory—scopophilia's dream (scarcely clothed 'savages' could be relied upon to perform a host of 'indecencies' upon command) and sadist's delight (many of the freakshow's 'displays' were kept in cages and beaten when they refused immediate cooperation with the demands of their captors)—was, in fact, linked to nineteenth-century science in more concrete ways than the taste for the ethnopornographic that both enterprises shared.

Actually born out of the Anthropological Museum proper (later to spawn the dime museum), the freakshow was from its earliest incarnations a low-brow stop on the lecture and lyceum circuit that centered around these sites. Holding out the promise of bringing enlightenment to the general public via its 'scientific' study of the various wonders—animal, vegetable, and mineral—that made up a larger world that the majority of the unmoneyed masses would never get to see, the “human oddities” displayed alongside these museum’s “cabinets of curiosities” soon started to garner more attention than many of their more ‘respectable’ exhibits. P.T. Barnum, self-made man and promoter *extraordinaire* (indeed, he earned the title of “father of modern day advertising”⁹), the first to reimagine the museum as amusement center—alongside his curious displays he offered “skits, magic shows, lectures, ballets, and such edifying drama productions as *Uncle Tom's Cabin...*,”¹⁰ the latter often performed by minstrel troupes—Barnum was also the first to officially put this form of entertainment on the map; Barnum’s American Museum, opening in 1842 and prominently lodged in the midst of downtown New York City, quickly became a popular destination spot.¹¹

⁹ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 32. Title given to Barnum by business historian Frank Presby in 1929.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

¹¹ See *Ibid*, 29-39 for more on the American shift from museums to dime museums.

To be credited with having moved the freakshow into the mainstream, then, Barnum can also be credited with having recognized early-on that his audiences wanted, in the freakish amusement offered in his edifice, not only racial display, but also for the “play” that these spectacles entailed to hold out the very serious promise of racially and socially/psychically empowering their viewers. As critic Eric Fretz would put it in his essay, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition,” “The exhibition culture of the nineteenth century was a site of cultural exchange and conflict...The public selves on display became ideological mirrors that reflected the values of a developing American middle class by confirming notions of success, otherness, and...blackness.”¹² An example of just this sort of “mirror,” Fretz points, as many others have, to the very first freak that Barnum was ever to exhibit, Joice Heth, a black woman purported to be 161 years-old and the former nurse of George Washington. Heth’s display considered, on the one hand, to “[mark] the ironies of a nation that subscribed to the notions of the Declaration of Independence yet institutionalized African American slavery,”¹³ at the same time under its auspices were promoted both the grandeur of the White founding father of this country (Heth’s act included colloquial accounts of Washington’s early childhood) as well as commonly accepted American religious ideals (Heth also presented herself as devout Christian and churchgoer and included hymns and scriptural citations as part of her act). Heth’s own participation in a mythos of a pure American past partially easing the tensions inherent in

¹² Eric Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 105.

¹³ Fretz, “Theatrical Selfhood,” 103-104. A particular irony of this act that should be pointed out, the critique that it potentially offered of the American slave system was decidedly belied by the reality that Heth was, in fact, the slave of Barnum himself, the showman having *purchased* her for display.

American's failure to live up to its Republican credo, her very appearance (as both reported and no doubt "stylized" by Barnum himself), only further served to reinforce audiences' belief in the inherent differences between this "Other" and themselves and, most likely, helped many to justify the lowly position of the African in America overall:

Toothless, blind, and nearly completely paralyzed, her eyes were "were so deeply sunken in their sockets that the eyeballs seemed to have disappeared altogether." Her decrepit hand bent inward and the fingernails projected beyond her wrist. Rounding out the picture, Barnum tells us, "The nails upon her toes had grown to the thickness of nearly a quarter of an inch."¹⁴

Seeming to resemble nothing that viewers might definitively pronounce "human," and, indeed, having apparently been presented in a state of near-mummification that might also have blurred the boundaries between the living and the non-living for some, when Heth was pronounced upon her post-death autopsy to be only 80 years-old, even P.T. Barnum himself, "The Prince of Humbugs," held that this was one act that had fooled even he. He was not fool enough, however, not to capitalize on the immense cultural fascination he saw that this sort of "borderline" body could garner. Having well-recovered from the Heth scandal by the time that his Museum was to enter the height of its popularity, it has been well-agreed that Barnum's decision to present his next most-famous of racial displays as a "nondescript" was absolutely inspired.

Adorned in costumes meant to suggest either partial nudity (a provocative, and enticing, reference back to promotional materials claiming that this 'freak' was found "in

¹⁴ Fretz, "Theatrical Selfhood," 102.

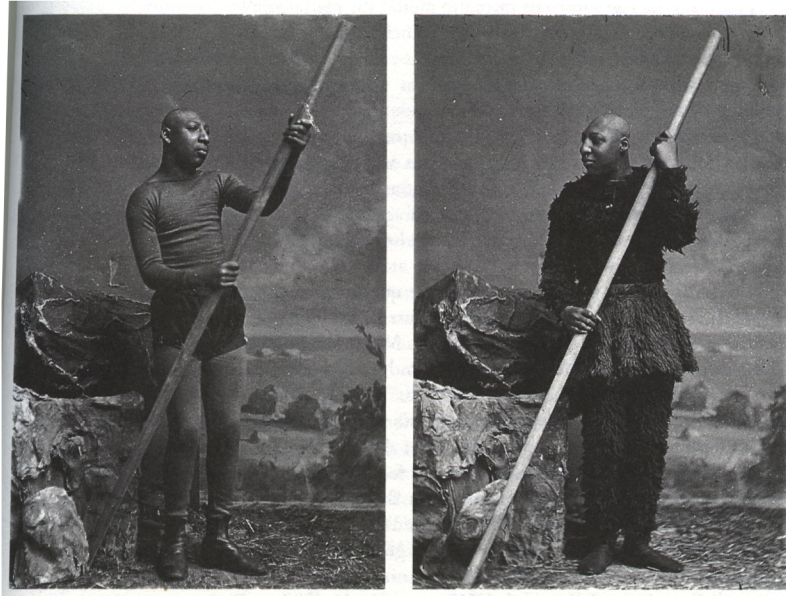


Figure 4.1

a PERFECTLY NUDE STATE [emphasis in original]¹⁵) or the ‘fur’ befitting his animalistic leanings (fig. 4.1), the supposed liminality of Barnum’s latest publicly-offered oddity—either a living example of a species from which his audiences took their origin, or yet further proof of the African’s/African-American’s failure to fully evolve—was its biggest selling point. Providing a focal point through which the most pressing controversies of the day, both anthropological and political, might be engaged *without having to be explicitly addressed*, *What Is It?* provided audiences with both the god-like power of the empiricist—to *make* meaning, as it were—while at the same time imbuing their subsequent discourses with the sort of detached Cartesianism that rendered all such pronouncements as coming from some “objective” on-high Otherworld that would free the pronouncers from any subjective stakes in this game and further naturalize the disciplinary structures also staking claims within this debate. As James W. Cook, Jr. sums it up in his fascinating discussion of Johnson’s career:

Above all, Barnum never used the word “negro”—not even a modified, more ambiguous version of the term...—to describe his character. Rather he offered a kind of categorical stand-in: a racially undefined persona that included clear physical signifiers of “blackness,” but allowed public discussion of this “blackness” to take place in a kind of abstracted, liminal space. Or to put it more directly: by positioning his dark-skinned Museum character as “nondescript” rather than “Negro,” Barnum provided white mid-century New Yorkers with an arena in which to talk openly about black people, often in brutally dehumanizing ways—to glide seamlessly between straightforward physical description and gross cultural caricature, and thus alternate between the guises of armchair biologist and political juror—without even acknowledging *who*, exactly, they were speaking about.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lindfors, “Circus Africans,” 12.

¹⁶ James W. Cook, Jr., “Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum’s ‘What Is It?’ Exhibition,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 149. It should be noted that Barnum, for all his racialism, and at times overt racism, was, in the end, of the antislavery party. In a speech made shortly after the Civil War, Barnum is quoted as saying, “You look at [Blacks’] low foreheads, their thick lips, their woolly heads, their flat noses, their dull, lazy eyes, and you may be attempted to adopt the language [of recent ethnological studies] and exclaim: Surely these people have ‘no inventive faculties, no genius for the arts, or for any of those occupations requiring intellect or wisdom.’ ... [But with education

At the same time, just as Barnum knew that in providing audiences this dark medium through which to covertly explore what race meant for them in their current moment he would make a mint, he also knew that his job as showman was to service the dark desires of these spectators, as well. As has previously been suggested, the freakshow was a venue where sex *sold* and in which the sanctioned semi-nudity of its spectacles, particularly those of the ethnic variety, was one of the primary forces behind ticket sales. As such, there is no denying that shadow discourses linking *What Is It?* to both fantasies of bestiality and, in many ways synonymous to the previous designation, fantasies/phantasmagoric nightmares of miscegenation—“a Malthusian fantasy of uncontrollable, frantic fornication producing the countless motley varieties of interbreeding, with the miscegenated offspring themselves then generating an ever-increasing *mélange*, ‘mongrelity,’ of self-propagating and endlessly diversifying hybrid progeny”¹⁷—also fueled the popularity of this display. Coming out of a history that saw both Continental pornography’s linking of women with “the ‘less evolved’ sensuality of beasts,” and hence a tendency to picture them in sexual scenarios coupled with actual animals,¹⁸ and the sensational reception of Edgar Allen Poe’s 1841 detective tale, and

and further cultural evolution] the low foreheads will be raised and widened by an active and expanded brain; the vacant eyes of barbarism, ignorance and idleness will light up with the fire of intelligence, education, ambition, and Christian civilization.” It’s almost as if there were a bit of Booker T. in Barnum. Quoted in Benjamin Reiss’ *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 197.

¹⁷ Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, & The Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 17. Stokes is quoting Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 181.

¹⁸ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124. As Pease explains, “A long-standing pictorial tradition, women have frequently been paired with animals. Typically dogs or monkeys, as functional male substitutes....When in the nineteenth century scientific discoveries led to an entire discourse associating women with the ‘less evolved’ sensuousness of beasts, late nineteenth-century representations of women with animals began to take on a different overtone, a practical assimilation of erotic interests. Playing upon the associations, there was an entire sub-genre of Victorian pornography featuring women in erotic poses with animals.”

thinly disguised meditation on miscegenation, “Murders in the Rue Morgue”—a story in which *an orangutan* is found responsible for the murder of two white women in their bedroom¹⁹—there was much more to be gleaned in that question—“What Is It?—than whether Johnson was man or monkey. Indeed, we seem to have returned to a query that appears to have been being asked incessantly throughout this time period, even while the questioners themselves were deep in the midst of constructing/incorporating a seemingly inevitable answer to their own question: Was the black man *Man* or *Thing*?...“Thing” here, yet again, nothing short of euphemism for *penis*. (See below for an 1864 example of Victorian erotic imagery depicting the sexual exchange of woman and “ape,” as well as an 1895 illustration by Aubrey Beardsley depicting Poe’s “murderer” as yet another version of the man/monkey. The racial linkages adhering to these two pictures seem fairly obvious. [fig. 4.2])

In the end, the freakshow took the *carnavalesque* potentialities of the black man’s dark flesh to their ultimate extreme, while making sure that after the carnival order would be restored. In a venue in which the repulsive allure of the borderline body was the main attraction (think of the Half Man/Half Woman, The Dog-faced Boys and Alligator Men, the Living Skeletons), sideshow spectatorship offered at once a vision of a world unbounded—a world free from the rigidly enforced social and sexual norms and mores of Victorian America and in which the lines between man and woman, man and beast, man

¹⁹ Interestingly, Poe’s story suggests that its main detective figure C. Auguste Dupin, comes to his discovery of the orangutan as murder suspect through an account of the species offered by “Cuvier.” Most critics agree that this is most likely a reference to Baron Georges Cuvier. It obviously lends much to a reading of the animal in the story as meant to implicitly reference Blacks.

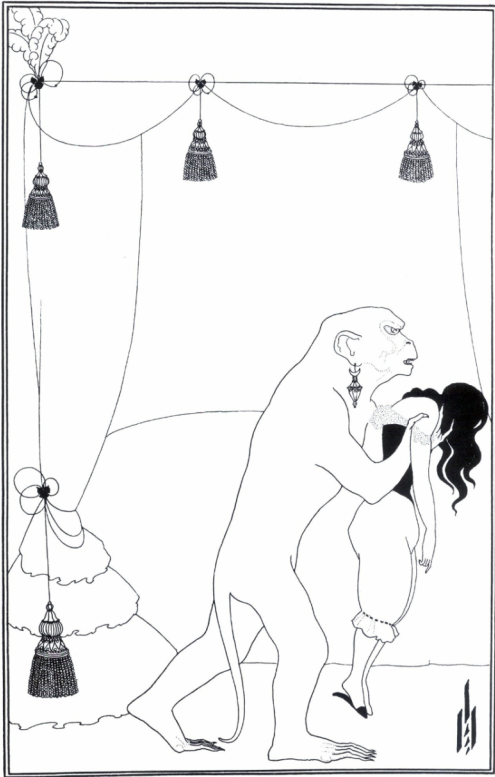


Figure 4.2

and monster, man and more-than-man/*god* were absolutely blurred—and a momentary respite from the uncertainties of a rapidly changing America tottering on the brink of structural collapse—invited to 'classify' the freakish displays they encountered, visitors were offered the reassurance not only of individual 'normalcy,' but also that from chaos eventually would/could be (re)born order. Part of that restoration of order when it came to William Henry Johnson's borderline body, would be its post-Civil War reinscription as "Zip."

The question of what it might mean for a black man to be a *Man* no longer a safe discussion to entertain in the midst of Reconstruction's reconfiguration of the American social landscape, that *What Is It?* should be reborn as a twisted mirror of blackface minstrelsy's hypermasculine, and yet definitively emasculated, dandy *par excellence*, Zip Coon (fig. 4.3—note the almost vaginal configuration of Zip Coon's crotch in this image; note also the spectacles that harken us back to Adolph's opera glass-leveled gaze on Uncle Tom), shows that the great showman behind this act indeed had an uncanny sense of the pulsions of his paying audiences, as he both "created and sustained a desire to see racially"²⁰ while safely containing and caging that desire within a visual and narrative context that allowed it to be, "docile enough to demonstrate the complete control of [its] trainer, as well as ferocious enough to demonstrate the need for such control."²¹ It bears a moment, now, then to turn our attention over to the blackface stage, the last link in the

²⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index" in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 112.

²¹ Cook, "Missing Links," 152.

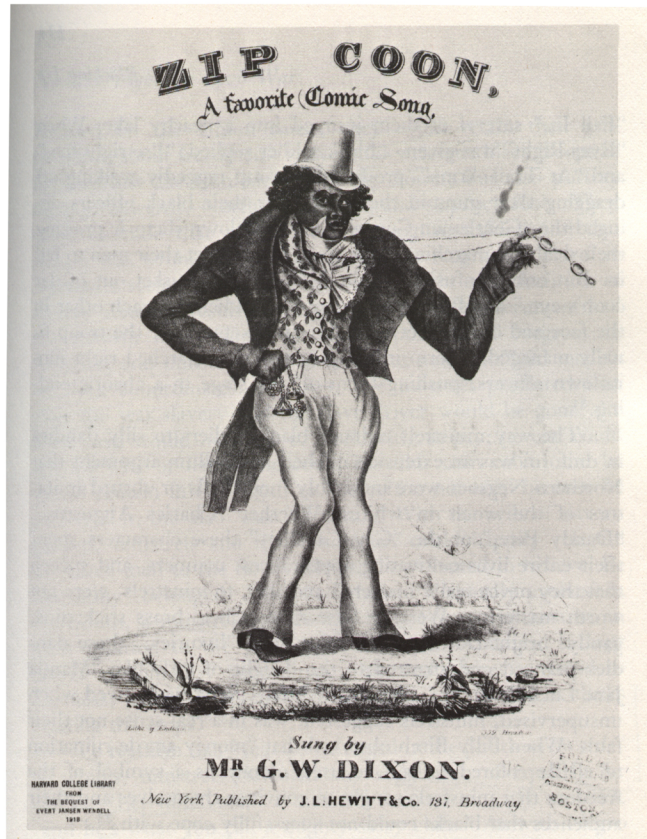


Figure 4.3

chain of the black man's mid-century reincarnation as wholly sexualized subject and white America's sexual surrogate.

“I'd like to kiss dem lubly lips”²²: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Homoerotics of Race Play

If, in the mid-1800s, science, sensationalism, social reform, and the sentimental novel attempted to be rather covert in terms of their investments in the black male body, like the freakshow, blackface minstrelsy (the ‘popular’ alternative to mainstage theatrical productions), which emerged in the 1830s and hit the height of its popularity in the decades preceding the Civil War, turned a glaring spotlight upon this body—which was displayed and delectated as the chief focus of blackface’s theatrical preoccupations. From its “plantation rustics,” as figured in the character of Jim Crow, to its Zip Coon urban dandies²³, blackface minstrelsy blatantly capitalized on America's fascination with the imported racial Other—and, through its appropriation and commodification of both the culture and the corporeality of the African in America, was, perhaps more than any of the social and scientific texts of its heyday *or* the sideshow acts of latter days, most significantly responsible for the permanent installation in the national imaginary of this dark subject's body as “obscure *object* of exchangeable desire [emphasis mine];”²⁴ a desire that, like the black body which was its focus as well as its locus (whites finding in

²² Lyric taken from the minstrel tune “Bowery Gals” (as sung by W.B. Donaldson). Cited in William J. Mahar's *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 278.

²³ For a brief discussion of these minstrel ‘types’ see Eric Lott’s *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), 23.

²⁴ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 53.

their *own* blacked-up bodies a “vehicle for illegal sexuality”²⁵), it both revered and reviled. As Eric Lott, whose *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* is clearly one of the most insightful studies yet produced on minstrelsy in the United States, expounds:

We are justified in seeing early blackface performance as one of the very first constitutive discourses of the body in American culture. Certainly minstrelsy's commercial production of the black male body was a fundamental source of its threat and its fascination for white men, anticipating Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous “vision” that the whipping of Tom would prove the most potent image of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.²⁶

Blackface minstrelsy's spectacular, and pornographic, fixation on the black male's alluring and revolting body anticipating not only Stowe's (and Agassiz' and Barnum's) own, but also, the deprivation and ‘depravity’ of a sex/erotica-starved mid-nineteenth century American public, it was minstrelsy's blackfaced embrace of/elision with the ‘low art’ of pornography—a marked turn towards hyper-vulgarized re-stagings of what had once been simply bad-taste or bawdy ‘fun’—that accounted for its sudden upsurge in spectatorship and elevation to the level of “national art”²⁷ between 1846 and 1854. As Lott holds, “the localizing of ‘vulgarity’ in minstrel shows and other popular forms coincided with their gain in visibility and importance around the mid-1840s. It should also remind us that nothing *intrinsic* to minstrelsy accounted for its popularity; it was less the performers than working class demands and preoccupations that brought blackface into the limelight.”²⁸ While I certainly agree with Lott that it was minstrelsy's

²⁵ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52.

²⁶ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 117.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 153.

pornographic allegiances²⁹ rather than its artistry that so captivated American audiences, I think that it is important that it be made clear that there was, in fact, at least one aspect intrinsic to blackface's performers that placed their pornographic work in such high demand: blackface acting troupes were composed, exclusively, of men. As Lott himself admits, "It was perhaps the good and proper 'vulgarity' of veiled homoerotic desire that was the jewel in minstrelsy's crown, ensuring crowded houses night after night."³⁰

Just as the word "pornography" could not be spoken in America until 1850, until 1892 the term "homosexual" did not exist in the English language.³¹ This said, and if blackface minstrelsy was indeed "one of the very first constitutive discourses of the body in America,"³² what blackface clearly constituted was a discursive site in which, to paraphrase Toni Morrison, the unspeakable (body) could be spoken: "Since women were a major presence in the 'legitimate' mid-century American theater, one must surmise that cross-dressing in the minstrel show intended to clear a space in which homoeroticism could find halting, humiliated, but nonetheless public expression."³³ And what the black male body, as constituted by minstrelsy, represented was a site on which this forbidden discourse could be writ large: "[I]f for men sexuality is where freedom and play meet, 'blackness' was for antebellum bohemians its virtual condition—that fascinating imaginary space of fun and license outside (but structured by) Victorian bourgeois norms."³⁴ So saying, the ribald preoccupation of the minstrel show with what it posited as the hyper-corporeality of the Other—like Agassiz and Barnum, minstrelsy was

²⁹ Lott actually calls the minstrel stage a "pornotopia," a "carnival space devoted precisely to the excesses outgrown in the service of workday rationality." Lott, *Love & Theft*, 145.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 164.

³¹ David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15.

³² Lott, *Love & Theft*, 117.

³³ *Ibid*, 165.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 51.

obsessed with the “fat lips, gaping mouths” and other enormous appendages with which it attributed its blackened characters—was obviously a manifestation of its hyper-investment in that other corpus with which it was largely enamored, and into which it was in part responsible for the transfiguration of the black man: the penis. The minstrel man, “[b]old swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display,” according to Lott, “*was* the penis, that organ returning in a variety of contexts, at times ludicrous, at others less so.”³⁵ And perhaps this penis was at its least ludicrous when it was greeted by blackface audiences’ loudest of guffaws—for this laughter was often intended to silence the hysterical fears of a white male viewership afraid that their investment in this spectacular organ would be unmasked, and that they themselves might be unmanned. As Lott concludes, “Because of the power of the black penis in white American psychic life, the pleasure minstrelsy’s largely white and male audiences derived from their investment in ‘blackness’ always carried a threat of castration,”³⁶ and, hence, “hilarity” was used in the minstrel show as “both a denial and conversion of a hysterical set of racial [and sexual] fears.”³⁷

Titillation, anxiety, fear, and ecstasy—no wonder, then, that Linda Williams’s essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” makes side mention of comedy as a fourth “body genre.”³⁸ And no wonder also, that, like pornographic science/scientific pornography and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—which was a favorite of the minstrel stage³⁹—much of blackface’s regard for black male bodies was structured around

³⁵ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 25-26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁸ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991): 4.

³⁹ Lott devotes an entire chapter of his text to the various blackface re-stagings of Stowe’s famous novel. See Ch. 8, “Uncle Tomitudes: Racial Melodramas and Modes of Production,” in *Love & Theft*, 211-233.

knowledge and surveillance. On the one hand, and “train[ing] a rather constant regard on the body”⁴⁰ blackface minstrelsy hoped, through this penetrating gaze—which sought to uncover and to co-opt the ‘truths’ of the black bodies which it portrayed—to reconnect with the essential white body behind the mask: “[W]hite pleasure in minstrelsy was a kind of social responsiveness...It was a rediscovery, against all odds, of repressed pleasure in the body—vulgar enough in taste, and worse in politics, but nonetheless a measure of what Jameson calls the ‘deeper subject,’ the libidinal body.”⁴¹ And, at the same time, this all encompassing ‘look’ was meant to contain the black bodies and the sexuality that it probed with such ardor: “‘Black’ figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a lot of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior controlling [and controlled] figures.”⁴² (Indeed, this sounds quite a bit like the freakshow!) Thus, to turn the conversation back to the essentially homoerotic nature of the minstrel show, the black male body became, for blackface—and within a voyeuristic economy based on looking but not touching (we are reminded again of Agassiz’ frenzied encounter with his first black men; whom his eyes lasciviously survey, while his mouth endeavors to tell them, “stay far away,” or perhaps it is the lash-length distance that the foaming Legree places between himself and Tom that we recall)—the vehicle through and onto which white male actors and audiences might project the most forbidden of their desires, while at the same time constructing these disturbing impulses as controllable, contained/“far away” and within the bounds of their mastery. In this sense then, we might read the minstrel

⁴⁰ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 118.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 149.

⁴² *Ibid*, 140-141.

show's construction of the black man's hyper-masculinity—for he is phallic figure *extraordinaire*—as a rather anxious attempt to re-appropriate a ‘true’ masculinity to which white male minstrel audiences stood in rather vexed relationship; industrialization having recreated in its factory settings the homosocial environment/‘wilderness setting’ that had once been the playground of America’s oh-so-masculine founding father's and frontiersman (and which would later be outted as ‘queer utopias’ in the male adventure novels of Herman Melville and others), while at the same time insisting on the “discipline...abstemiousness...and ‘morality’ of [its] workers.”⁴³

To sum up with Lott's help:

In rationalized societies such as the one coming into being in the antebellum years, the Other is of prime importance in the organization of desire. Whites own ‘innermost relationship with enjoyment’...is expressed in their fascination with the Other; it is through this very displacement that desire is constituted. Because one is ambivalent about and represses one's own pleasure, one imagines the Other to have stolen it away, and ‘fantasies about the Other's special, excessive enjoyment’ allow that pleasure to return. Whites get satisfaction in supposing the racial 'Other enjoys in ways unavailable to them....[a]nd yet at the same time, because the Other personifies their inner divisions, hatred at their own excess of enjoyment necessitates hatred of the Other. Ascribing this excess to the 'degraded' blackface Other, and indulging in it—by imagining, incorporating, or impersonating the Other—workingmen confronting the demand to be ‘respectable’ might at once take their enjoyment and disavow it.⁴⁴

So saying, and if the black bodies in which minstrelsy trafficked were such ‘obscure objects of desire,’ they were so in the sense that these bodies served both to obscure minstrelsy's pornographic excesses under the guise of good clean racist ‘fun’ *and* to obscure a fantasy of same-sex (often cross-racial, but just as often not) desire as exchanged between the white men behind and before minstrelsy's black masks. But perhaps the greatest feat of legerdemain that minstrelsy accomplished, was the way in

⁴³ Lott, *Love & Theft*, 148.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 148.

which it managed to subdue the very insecurity that it had fostered in its white male audiences—the idea that the black man that this white Imaginary had constructed as *all penis*, did indeed have the larger penis. For, in the end, blackface minstrelsy's commodification of the black body as object of exchange ensured—beyond the shadow of a doubt—that whether they were paid to be it, or whether they paid to see it, it was the white man who *possessed* 'the biggest one.'

“A pair of trousers stiff/ with black blood”⁴⁵: The Lynching Ritual as Reconstruction's 'Nig Show'

The late 1800s, particularly the 1890s, marked a serious decline in the popularity of the freakshow, as well as what can be seen as the decline of William Henry Johnson's career as freak exhibit. Moving from *What Is It?*, to *Zip Coon/Zip*, to settle finally on the simple, and simply reductive, *Zip* (later caricatured in the clownlike cartoon figure of *Zippy the Pinhead*), Johnson's persona shifted also from exotic, and perhaps exotically delectable, *Wild Man* to more of a comic buffoon—his last press releases to feature him “playing golf on the beach in Coney Island dressed in a suit and jacket, shirt, tie and knickers,” and the final tales of his exploits mockingly describing a man clearly stripped of all phallic power “jealously...guarding his spot [on the number one platform in the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey sideshow] with a pop gun.”⁴⁶ While several reasons can be given for the freakshow's fall from grace—chief amongst these being the

⁴⁵ Line taken from Richard Wright's poem, “Between the World and Me” (1935), reprinted in *Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature*, Abraham Chapman, ed. (New York: Signet Classics, 2001).

⁴⁶ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 140-141.

fact that theories of eugenics (first promulgated by scientist Francis Galton in the 1860s and gaining widespread adherence in the 1880s⁴⁷) and the increased medicalization of all forms of physical and mental ‘abnormality’ reconfigured the once ‘wondrous’ body of the freak as ‘diseased’ body, worthy of medical attention and not that of the public (from whose presence they should be quarantined⁴⁸)—I would add to this catalog one more possible explanation. A Nation desperately trying to come to terms with itself in the aftermath of the Civil War and deep in the midst of the Jim Crow Era no longer found the *carnavalesque* potentiality of the black body so prominently displayed in the freakshow, or on the minstrel stage (which was also facing a decline in popularity, although the latter would not officially ‘die,’ like William Henry Johnson himself, until the 1920s), quite such a source of amusement. Indeed, the fear that this *threatening* potentiality generated as it was ‘let loose’ upon post-emancipation (white) society certainly was no laughing matter. Play can only occur in a safe and fairly structured arena, the carnival is but a momentary respite that celebrates both the liberation from order and the surety of its return. When order seems an impossibility and chaos reigns, only ritual can restore stability. In late-nineteenth century America, the once-feared structural collapse having in fact occurred, the time for play had ended. Fantasy became reality and what had once been race ‘play’ was transformed into a grotesque ritual bearing the strangest of fruit; indeed, one might say that the lynching scenario became yet another sort of “Nig Show” for late nineteenth-century audiences.

⁴⁷ See Ch.4 "'Baby's Picture Is Always Treasured': Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album" and pages 42-50 of Shawn Michelle Smith's *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999) for more on Galton on the ways in which his theory of eugenics inflected/affected American cultural and scientific discourses.

⁴⁸ See Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 62-68, for a very Foucauldian explanation of science's hand in the decline and demise of the freakshow.

In order to explain, again, how we got there, I'd like step away from our tale of William Henry Johnson, and to turn to current day cultural theorist Winthrop Jordan for further support of one of the main hypotheses that I have been making throughout: that the vision of the black man as phallic symbol and phallic threat *extraordinaire* upon which the lynching scenario depended for its purchase, was decidedly *not* widely prevalent before the mid-century moment that we have been exploring throughout the course of this project. Which is to say that while the black male's frightening potential to mongrelize the nation has long been considered a product of age-old discourses surrounding black male sexuality, what I have been trying to suggest is that until very close upon this time period this threat *was not* explicitly linked to voracious sexual cravings on the part of the black male for the white female *nor* to a given and naturalized black male hypersexuality, or at least it was not widely disseminated as such—and this is perhaps why it required so much 'fluffing' on the part of popular science and the popular culture figures we have been discussing to inculcate the general public into a way of looking at the black man that would produce this sort of reductive refraction.

To refer, then, to Winthrop Jordan's oft-quoted *White Over Black*, still one of the most thoroughly researched works on early race relations in America, although many critics are to cite his text as offering a host of definitive examples of white beliefs in the sexual depravity of the black man—referenced most frequently his inclusion of reports from the 1700s that make much of the "extraordinary greatness" of the African male's penis—a close perusal of Jordan's entire tome reveals that white male fascinations with black men's allegedly "large Propagators,"⁴⁹ were not, in fact, to be credited with having

⁴⁹ Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 35, 36.

generated any lengthy speculations as to an equally exorbitant propensity towards licentiousness on the part of the black man. Indeed, prefiguring the arguments of theorists from Gilman to Weigman, Jordan makes clear that as far as discourses on the lasciviousness of the African were concerned it was the black female who was generally regarded as the sexual degenerate of the race. From reports of African tendencies towards bestiality, “*always conceived as involving female Negroes and male apes* [emphasis in the original]” to “descriptions of ‘hot constitution’d Ladies’ possessed of a ‘temper hot and lascivious, making no scruple to prostitute themselves to the *Europeans* for a very slender profit, so great is their inclination to white men,’” as Jordan concludes, “By the eighteenth century a report on the sexual aggressiveness of Negro women was virtually *de rigueur* for the African commentator.”⁵⁰ If, by the second decade of the nineteenth-century, as Sander Gilman claims, black women, thanks to rigorous scientific and social commentary circulating around the figure of the Hottentot female, had been thoroughly reduced to standing as dark symbols of sexual aberrance, of which their genitals were to serve as the stigmatizing signifiers, what I hope to have shown is that it would take at least another four decades to enact and inculcate the conflation of the black male with his member; a supplantation of the diversities of black male subjectivity with a totalizing sexuality that would end, according to Fanon’s report, in a situation in which: “[O]ne is no longer aware of the Negro but only of his penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis,”⁵¹

The sexual(ized) redaction of the black woman necessary in order to justify her treatment *within* slavery, it was primarily in the context of the black man’s imagined life

⁵⁰ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 238, 35.

⁵¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 170.

outside of slavery that his sexual nature was to become an item for inspection. Jordan listing the two greatest fears of white (implicitly male) America from the Revolutionary period onwards—revolution giving birth to a new nation as well as rising debates as to the philosophical/ideological and practical viability of maintaining America’s slave system—as “[i]ntermixture and insurrection,”⁵² that the anarchic capacities of the black man’s dark corporeality, his black penis in particular, were to become a subject of great interest to many is hardly surprising. First and foremost, to follow the ordering of Jordan’s twin terrors, because, through racial intermixture, the black man’s penis carried with it the inherent potential to disrupt the very bounds of, and to destroy whiteness itself. Second, and actually more troubling to most, was the far more pertinent and pressing reason that if freed (through self-motivation or massacre-eliding/massacre-avoiding emancipation), and hence moving from subjected to social subject, the very *fact* of the black man’s penis would necessarily attest, within the patriarchal logics of the time period, to his right to *all* of the privileges of manhood as granted to white *men*.

If, as Jordan says, the risk of slave insurrection had not “existed in anything like the proportions that [white men] saw; the proportions were much more theirs than the Negro’s,”⁵³ he also makes clear that the assumption that freedom for blacks “*had* to result in physical intermixture”⁵⁴ was equally based more in fantasy than in reality. And while this fantasy may indeed have been partially founded on certain preconceptions concerning black male virility, what is important about this pairing is that it points more pronouncedly to an understanding of interracial sexuality, as potentially practiced by the black man, as a matter *not* wedded to lascivious *proclivities* per se, but captioned more so

⁵² Jordan, *White Over Black*, 579.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 579.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 578.

as a further *phallo-political* challenge issued by the African to the white man. The point being that the focus on black male sexuality in these debates had more to do with the nature of his sex (sex read as *gender*) rather than with his *sexualized* nature.⁵⁵

To clarify, within an American cultural complex, structured by ideological, social, political, and legal systems founded upon and privileging white male patriarchal phallic power, the black man's penis, as bearer of his racial essence, possesses the hugely threatening potential to disrupt this system and the entire 'natural' order of things; not only as purveyor of racial pollution but also, its presence putatively protesting the black man's 'right' to full purchase on the privileges of both citizenship, and *manhood* itself, the 'fact' of the black male penis stands as dark portend comminating the potential rupture of the logics of this system. This "phobic object," as "threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself"⁵⁶ thus taking on monstrous proportions commensurate with the amount of *unpleasure* it could potentially produce, in a move in which primal fear becomes primal fantasy, the black man's penis as site of a mythologized hyperpotency, subsequently (if paradoxically) also comes to be figured as a font of *pleasures* equally mythic in their proportions. As such, and as it forever threatens to fan the flames of both civil discord and carnal desire, disciplinary apparatuses must be

⁵⁵ Robyn Weigman makes a similar argument in her *American Anatomies* concerning post-Civil War lynching practices and the ways in which the linkage of the black male with a primitive and excessive sexuality were meant to screen the actual investment in black men's 'phallic' "claims to citizenship—voting rights, employment, and more abstract privileges of the patronymic" (84)—that rather than the ascribed crime of "rape" actually animated the need to discipline these bodies. She also goes on to say that:

In the contours of Western racial discourse, of course, the primitive sexual appetites associated with blackness was not a new articulation at the end of the nineteenth century, but its crafting in the highly stylized and overdetermined narrative structure of the rape mythos—along with the sheer frequency of its deployment—marks a particular historical configuration of the sexual and gendered in their U.S. relation to issues of race and nation.

Robyn Weigman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 98.

⁵⁶ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 185.

manufactured that will contribute to the actual and (I)maginary containment of the threatening potential of the black male body. (insert quote from p.98 of Weigman)

During an era in which the lynching of black men was at its height, the construction of the black body as deviant/borderline body was played out in both the national arena and within the bounds of the lynching scenario itself. Here, cultural anxieties concerning the entrance of the black man into American society and its body politic (a body feared to be already disjointed in and of itself), were often channeled into near hysterical meditations on the dangers of miscegenation (again, the fear of borderline bodies creating more borderline bodies, and hence throwing an already chaotic cultural landscape into an even greater crisis of classifications—one cannot help but think of René Girard's “crisis of distinctions”⁵⁷). These anxieties then became exorcised in the process of ritualistic lynchings that not only physically removed the threat of miscegenation (a fate doubly prevented against in both the death *and* castration of the victim), but also allowed for homoerotic expressions/projections to abound—and all in the course of re-relegating the black man to his (safe) status as sub-human. (Not only ruled sexual 'beast' by his vigilante jury, he is also shown to be unworthy of the protection of the law as it is afforded other ‘persons’).

It is clear, thus, that the lynching scenario can, indeed, be regarded as yet another sort of “Nig Show,” and, like the freakshow, can be linked via “the voyeuristic impulse...to the pornographic display.”⁵⁸ As Shirley Peterson maintains in her article “Freaking Feminism,” both pornography's exhibitions and those of the freakshow

⁵⁷ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 8th ed. (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁵⁸ Shirley Peterson's “Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freaks Shows,” in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 295.

“operate out of a consumer culture that creates its taboos only in order to turn them into viable commodities.”⁵⁹ The lynching scenario surely to be seen as operating within this same economy of exchange, since not only were its various tales of taboo and punishment circulated amongst the American populace as a source of infinite titillation—as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall puts it, minutely recounted and “progressively embellished” tales of the ‘assaults’ that led to these lynchings “gripped the white imagination far out of proportion to their statistical significance. Rape and rumors of rape became the folk pornography of the Bible Belt”⁶⁰—the lynching ritual itself certainly became, by the close of the 19th century, nothing short of mass spectacular entertainment (press releases were sent out, spectator trains were chartered, souvenirs sold).⁶¹

And here a comparison can and should also be made between the pornographic postcards that were being circulated on the Continent during this era and the lynching postcards that were making American rounds (fig. 4.4).⁶² Interestingly enough, and if “pornography is best defined by the representation of sexual behavior with a deliberate violation of moral and social taboos,”⁶³ it is not surprising that what own research

⁵⁹ Peterson, “Freaking Feminism,” 295. Peterson goes on to say, “The violence of such an economy ensures the management of otherness safely within the limits of dominant culture.”

⁶⁰ See 335 of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence” in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell & Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 328-349.

⁶¹ See Leigh Raiford’s “The Consumption of Lynching Images,” in Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 267-273.

⁶² Interestingly, due to the 1873 Comstock Law—which prohibited “any obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character...nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature...nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or postal-card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed...to be carried in the mail” (See Walter Kendrick’s *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* [New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987], 134)—the erotic postcards produced on the European continent were not generally available in the United States, yet somehow the lynching shots and the National Geographic-esque native nudies made it past the postal censors.

⁶³ Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* (April 1995): 318.



Figure 4.4

findings have uncovered is that in exactly the moment in which the lynching of black men was at an all time high in America—as are the numbers of clitoridectomies and oophorectomies (surgical removal of the ovaries, or “female castration”) performed on white women—we begin to see the beginnings of a sudden surge of pornographic images produced in Europe that depict black men and white women in flagrante delicto as well as a surge in pornographic stories and novels depicting plantation life past as an era in which America played host to the most seductive of seraglios (fig. 4.5). (These tales included titles such as *The Secret Life of Linda Brent, a Curious History of Slave Life* [1882], *Plantation Heat* [1890?], and, perhaps the most famous, *The Memoirs of Dolly Morton, the Story of a Woman’s Part in the Struggle to free the Slaves. An Account of the Whippings, Rapes and Violences that preceded the Civil War in America, with curious Anthropological Observations on the radical diversities in the conformation of the Female Bottom and the way different Women endure Chastisement...* [1899].)⁶⁴

It is not surprising also, and finally, that America’s first cinematic masterpiece, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of A Nation*, produced on the 50th anniversary of the Civil War should take this image of black lust for white women as its central focus (fig. 4.6). Used to indoctrinate America's rapidly growing, and primarily illiterate, immigrant population into the ways of American whiteness—European immigrants, many of whom (particularly the Irish and Italians) had until only recently been regarded as racial outsiders themselves and who were now gradually being assimilated into American society (partially because their 'whiteness' could be used to shore against a dreaded

⁶⁴ For more on late-nineteenth century turns towards plantation life in Continental pornography, see Collette Colligan’s “Anti-Abolition Writes Obscenity: The English Vice, Transatlantic Slavery, and England’s Obscene Print Culture” in *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800-2000*, Lisa Z. Sigel, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 67-99.



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6

‘rising tide’ of blackness)—were being taught that in order to *be* white, they must first learn to *see* white—which means, of course, keeping a constant eye on all things not-white while remaining, by implication, invisible oneself. Where better to learn this lesson than under the tutelage of the movie camera’s lens: newly-whited and invisible in a darkened theater, they (like the white director before them) focus in on scene after scene of dramatized darkies. They watch and they watch frenziedly, for to be able to look, in and of itself, is a privilege afforded only to whites (speaking, of course, not simply of segregated theaters and the inaccessibility of films to many potential black audiences, but also of a world in which looking, when practiced by blacks often resulted in lynching).

Birth of a Nation sharing its release date with America’s first extant pornographic film, *A Free Ride*, Griffith’s famous film, at once a soft-core masterpiece (and it should be noted that the film originally contained a scene in which its dreaded black rapist Gus is castrated, but this was later censored) and the birthing ground of the modern cinematic tradition also marks, in my mind, both the culmination, and mass-indoctrination of a pornographic vision of the black man first birthed into this nation in the mid-1800s and which continues to live on into the present day.

Last(ing) Impressions

*The essentially lascivious black body was...not born but made.*⁶⁵

As this project has hoped to show, the pornotrope black male body that is the subject of Chester Himes' 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, was in no way a product of its time, but rather the net result of a century's worth of reinforcement on a myth that became firmly embedded in America's collective Imaginary and this country's 'official discourse' ("[t]he whole structure of American thought...[and] American tradition"⁶⁶)—a myth that posited the body of the black man as a commodity for pornographic use and abuse—one hundred years before. Mid-nineteenth century science having postulated the black body as internally lascivious and externally delicious—this hypothesis finding visible support in America with the publication of scientist Louis Agassiz' 'anatomically correct' black male nudie shots—at the same time that the American cult of sensation and a worldwide passion for the 'pornography of pain' was to find in the body of a black Uncle Tom the makings/markings of a worldclass S&M star—a star that was not above making numerous cameo appearances as freakshow fetish and gay blade in the sex romps of the minstrel stage—it is no surprise that by 1945 "American justice" would have felt as if it were doing an injustice to the black man if it did not cast/fix his body in the lead role of the pornographic scenarios it had/has not yet stopped dreaming up/of.

Recognizing, then, that Robert Jones' 1940s fictional 'rape trial' was as 'fixed' as these last decades' very real Mike Tyson trial, Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings,

⁶⁵ Cynthia J. Davis' "Speaking the Body's Pain: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*," *African American Review* 27 (Fall 1993): 395.

⁶⁶ Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1945), 187.

Rodney King-beating verdict, and OJ Simpson witch hunt, and as ‘fixed’ as the castrations, lynchings, and beatings of black men that were rampant in the decades that began these last hundred years—or, perhaps, the crimes committed daily against the black male body were not more rampant at the beginning of the century, they were just more *visibly* so thanks to the good work of D.W. Griffith’s Gus⁶⁷ and to the perverse postcards that were circulated as souvenirs of the many public lynchings that this “spectacular” (blockbuster *cum* ball-buster) film both exploited (as perversely erotic fuel for its fire) and, as perverse-mimicry, inspired—it seems crucial that today’s cultural critics, ethnographers, and high-art intellectuals take the lead of pornography’s historians and turn their attention back to the seminal ten-year period in which the ‘low art’ of porn was born in the U.S.A., and the black male body was re-birthed in this nation as the principle medium through which its diverse and depraved pornographic fantasies could take center stage. Only then—by shifting the angle of their focus—will they be able to spy a way to splice a new ending onto a script in which, as of now, the stage direction still calls for: “A white woman yelling ‘Rape,’ and a Negro caught locked in the room”; for ‘queer’ black men to be mockingly viewed as the blackfaced pawns of white men (like minstrel players they are considered either ‘white on the inside,’ pathological victims of a “racial death wish” and the desire to “have the white man’s baby,” or, as the objects of “white” desire, sex slaves in a game of role-playing that recreates colonialist ‘plunder and pillage’ fantasies); and for (hypersexualized) black male bodies to be perceived as a product for spectacular/*scopophilic* and *phantasmic*/ecstatic consumption. In short, for black male bodies to occupy a starring role in a scenario which scripts this body as the focal point of an American pornographic panopticon, in which, whether

⁶⁷ *Birth of a Nation*’s “renegade negro”/black rapist, played by a blackfaced Walter Long.

visibly pleased or visibly pained, the black body will always be frenziedly so—and frenziedly *visible*. And, it is a script that has guaranteed sold out shows for over a century.

More than fifty years after Robert Jones' was cast/'trapped'/'cornered'/'fixed as a black John Holmes, and more than a hundred and fifty since Uncle Tom was framed as Long Dong (Silver) on the "silver canvas"⁶⁸ of Agassiz's dirty daguerreotypes, the spectacle of the black male body—star of stage and screen, porn icon and media's whore—continues to greeted by...a "mob beating at the door." Perhaps it is time to trace the trajectory that has led the black male body to its pornographic prison house, thus unlocking a door that, instead of allowing this imaginary mob access, will access the Imagination of the mob, and, hopefully, will liberate, from the cage of his fleshy confines, the Hottentot Penis...lest he, like Saartjie Baartman before him, be destined to live out the end of his days on display and in bondage.

⁶⁸ The idea of the daguerreotype as "silver canvas" is gleaned from an article by Abigail Solomon-Godeau entitled "The Truth of Appearances: Nineteenth -Century Photography at the Getty" (*Afterimage* [Nov./Dec. 1998], v.26, n.2, pp.9-18), and was used in the title to the adjunct publication to the J. Paul Getty Museum's 1998 exhibition, "The Art of the Daguerreotype"—the associated publication called *The Silver Canvas: Daguerreotype Masterpieces from the J. Paul Getty Museum*. An interesting observation which the article's author makes, in terms of our current discussion, is that beginning "in the 1840s, daguerreotypes [began to] be gussied up in various ways; gold toning produced better quality images with richer tones, handcoloring augmented their realism, and stereographic forms (*widely used for erotic and pornographic imagery*) produced a dramatic illusion of three dimensional depth and volume...[emphasis mine]" (5). This observation seems a jumping off point for an even deeper examination of the collusion between Agassiz' daguerreotypes and the pornographic demands and mediums of his day—demands that seem to be deeply entrenched in a desire to prove the indexicality of vision, and the reality of the 'real.'

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Biography

Suzanne N. Schneider has had a varied career, both within and without academia. She has worked in the documentary film industry, served as Visiting Professor of English and Black Studies at Amherst College, and, most recently, has focused on the development and evaluation of children's media products.