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Directed Reading, Directed Writing:  
Sentimental Exchanges in the Antebellum United States

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Sentimental Exchanges in the Antebellum United States

By

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B.A., University of South Carolina, 2004

Advisor: Michael A. Elliott, Ph.D.

An abstract of  
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
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2010

## Abstract

### Directed Reading, Directed Writing: Sentimental Exchanges in the Antebellum United States

By Jennifer L. Brady

“Directed Reading, Directed Writing” contends that sentimental narrative consistently returns to the problem of its reception, to the power and danger of the emotive reading it seeks to produce. We see this concern both in sentimental novels and in the world in which they circulated: characters form deep, emotional attachments to their beloved books; letter-writing fans profess their devotion to an author while scolding her for failing to produce sequels; and anxious commentators worry about the power that novels exert over their audience. I attend to these moments in order to unravel the networks that unite author and reader through and around the sentimental text. I argue that these networks – dynamic, emotional relays among writers, texts, and readers – allow authors and audiences alike to imagine how reading sentimental narrative affects both readers and the world in which they live.

To pursue this claim, “Directed Reading, Directed Writing” turns to a wide variety of sources, including sentimental novels, nineteenth-century fan letters, antebellum debates about reading novels, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century theories of affect. In the antebellum United States, sentimental fiction operated as a crucial site in which the nation confronted the basic, but radical premise that reading can entangle us – that it can produce pleasure, passion, and change. By demonstrating how sentimental fiction insisted that writers and readers reconsider the very function of reading, my project seeks to push the critical discussion of sentimentality past its political triumphs and disappointments. Instead, I contend that the experience of reading sentimental fiction precedes and even licenses its political ramifications, and also points to a broader conception of the cultural work that sentimentality accomplished in antebellum America. Today, we continue to argue about why and how reading should matter, and that argument has become increasingly fraught as literary reading has declined. “Directed Reading, Directed Writing” suggests that we can look to the nineteenth century for an illustration of how the passions of literary reading might radiate out into the public sphere – and a way to finally name the risks and rewards of such a thrilling pursuit.

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## Introduction: Feeling and Reading Right

The final chapter of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) offers "Concluding Remarks" on the novel that precedes it, remarks that simultaneously point back to the novel and forward to the world that exists outside, if alongside, its fictional realm. Stowe demonstrates her concern with suturing these two worlds together throughout her novel, but she redoubles her efforts in this final chapter, calling on readers to serve as the embodied link connecting the fictional to the real.<sup>1</sup> Stowe's greatest push to make this chapter and the novel it concludes persist beyond the moments of their reading comes in a famous passage, one in which she addresses what action people might take in response to the horrors of slavery. Stowe writes:

There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! (385)

Stowe's injunction to "*feel right*" is inextricably, if implicitly, bound to another imperative that animates her sentimental novel – to *read right*. By making her novel an agent of right feeling, of "*feel[ing] strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity,*" Stowe conjoins right feeling and right reading, making them mutually articulating, co-dependent, and even synonymous. What is particularly striking about Stowe's utopian vision is the way that this form of moral feeling prompted by reading so easily mediates between "every human being" and "the human race," between individual feeling and "the great interests of humanity," and, ostensibly, between her novel and the



antebellum world.<sup>2</sup> That, in her conception, is the essential action of feeling and of reading. This passage therefore prompts us to envision, as Stowe does, a nation of individual readers with their noses buried in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and with “[a]n atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircl[ing]” each one of them – and with those individual atmospheres combining to create a climate of sympathy that enfolds the nation. The acts of reading and feeling forge the link that ties Stowe’s novelistic world and this final chapter to the world outside, that mobilize her text and its promise to reform the nation.

Stowe’s claim about the direct results of reading with feeling did not go uncontested in her own time. The year after Stowe published her novel, Samuel Harris assembled his objections to novel-reading in an essay titled *Pernicious Fiction: or, The Tendencies and Results of Indiscriminate Novel Reading* (1853). Harris refutes the potential Stowe locates in emotive reading, in the connection she posits between feeling and action, individual and nation. He writes:

Under the touch of [the novelist’s] genius the reader weeps and laughs; he rejoices in hope, he trembles with apprehension; he experiences the most violent alternations of feeling; his own heart quivers in all the vicissitudes of his hero’s history; with interest too feverish to pause, and curiosity strained to its highest tension, he follows him to the happy consummation. And that is all. Nothing is effected by all this commotion – nothing to be learned, nothing to be purposed, nothing to be done. The excitement has burned itself out, and nothing remains of the great illumination but

smoking wicks, the drippings of tallow candles, and a pervading offensive odor. (13)

In Harris's argument, novels do not deliver a reader transformed by feeling back into the world, but squander the reader's energies and sympathies on fictional persons and events – an argument that Ann Douglas would make more than 120 years later. The feeling that the novel prompts is the problem for both Harris and Douglas, not the solution.

According to Harris, “the novelist addresses the heart, exciting the feelings without imposing any obligation to effort”: feeling is therefore not effort and certainly not action (10). Instead, feeling drives the luxurious indolence and the isolating self-indulgence of novel-reading, which offers the thrills of excitement and passionate feeling but puts that feeling in service of no productive ends.

Stowe and Harris respond in these passages to a question that confronted the antebellum nation, the question of if and how the passions of literary reading might radiate out into the public sphere, how fictional worlds might gain entrance into the real world via readers and their emotions, and what the risks and rewards of reading with feeling are. The marked divergence of these two accounts of reading dramatize how contested and unknown the transition from reading to world was in the antebellum United States. However, what emerges from these accounts is not only divergence, but also confluence. Stowe and Harris share an emphasis on how important emotion was to the imagination of reading, how the perception of reading as a dynamic experience that involved excessive, exhilarating, and passionate emotions drove the conceptualization of what reading could and might do. Together, these accounts anatomize the deep, potent contradictions contained within the deceptively simple, quotidian acts of reading and

feeling. What these accounts also share is a desire to manage, and even resolve, those contradictions; consequently, they share an imperative to direct reading.

My dissertation also takes up the question of how reading and feeling combine and to what effect, and it anatomizes how antebellum culture asked and answered this question in myriad and often contradictory ways. To do so, I turn to sentimental narrative, a form of literary expression that was extremely popular in this period and that self-consciously staged debates over the potential and politics of reading with feeling. Sentimental narrative assumed this role during a period when the print industry was being transformed by a number of factors, including increases in literacy, the development of national transportation networks, and advances in printing technology. As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, a variety of populations – writers, readers, commentators – struggled to make sense of what they understood to be unprecedented changes to how and what they read. Though I am not arguing for the exceptionalism of this age, its denizens often did, anxiously surveying these changes and designating the antebellum United States as having entered a new “*reading age*,” as forming a new “nation of readers” (Dana *Hints* 6; Dewey 9). The sentimental novel emerged from this changing literary climate as a dominant, omnipresent, and best-selling literary genre, with novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) captivating the nation and recording unprecedented sales. Though sentimentality had made its entrance onto the literary stage some hundred years before in eighteenth-century Britain, it gained new life in the antebellum United States. In this period of flux, sentimental fiction served as the locus for the rich imagination and anxious interrogation of the experience and the stakes of emotive reading. It is here where I locate my inquiry.

In this dissertation, I contend that sentimental narrative consistently returns to the problem of its reception as it measures the promise and danger of the emotive reading it seeks to produce. We see this concern both in sentimental novels and in the world in which they circulated: characters form deep, emotional attachments to their beloved books; letter-writing fans profess their devotion to an author while scolding her for failing to produce sequels; and anxious commentators worry about the affective power that novels exert over their audience. In these moments, sentimental novels and antebellum culture stall over reading, hesitating over the imagination of how text might radiate out into the world through readers and their emotions. In the antebellum United States, sentimental fiction therefore operated as a crucial site in which the nation confronted the basic, but radical premise that reading can entangle us – that it can produce pleasure, passion, and even, perhaps, political change. As Stowe’s concluding remarks make clear, sentimental fiction pushed readers and writers alike to reconsider the very function of reading, to contemplate what readers’ emotional entanglement in a novel might do.

I access the antebellum imagination of the stakes of emotive reading particularly by looking to how sentimental narratives and a variety of antebellum responses to them demonstrated a desire to manage, or direct, both the experience of reading and the practice of writing. In this light, “Directed Reading, Directed Writing” traces dynamic, emotional relays among authors, readers, and texts, sentimental exchanges that these actors use to engage and direct one another. I attend to representations of reading in sentimental novels, fan letters, and conduct books to unravel the networks that unite author and reader through and around the sentimental text. I argue that these networks

played a crucial role in allowing authors and audiences alike to imagine how reading affects both readers and the world in which they live.

“Directed Reading, Directed Writing” is therefore concerned most fundamentally with the experience of emotive reading in the antebellum United States, and it uses the passions of and for sentimental fiction in the mid-nineteenth century to provide a window on that experience. I do so, in part, because that passion for nineteenth-century sentimental novels is largely lost to us today. We simply do not read books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Wide, Wide World* with the intensity that they provoked in the age that produced them, and numbers that document the hundreds of thousands of sentimental novels sold during the nineteenth century ultimately emphasize our distance from the readers who bought and read them in droves. As this distance defamiliarizes the passion of reading, it also reveals the scaffolding that makes it possible.

Throughout the project, I am attentive to the ways in which reading was put in service of other cultural aims, how discussions of reading and its passions functioned as an occasion for the nation to address some of its most powerful contradictions and to make sense of societal changes that were both imminent and ongoing. In the imaginations of reading that circulated through antebellum culture, reading served as an indicator not only of the morality of individuals, but also of the health of the nation. In other words, sentimental fiction, conduct books, and fan letters make clear that the United States imagined itself particularly through its reading – not only through particular texts or genres, but through how those texts were received, through what they did to their readers. Reading therefore served as a lightning rod for divergent, distinct concerns, as

the battleground on which skirmishes over women's rights and gender roles, slavery and prejudice, individuality and nationalism, emotion and reason were fought.

As we have directed our critical attention to these important concerns, though, the experience of reading itself has often been obfuscated, simplified, or simply neglected, passed over to arrive more quickly at larger, seemingly more important issues.

Accordingly, Stowe's argument about the role that reading can play in redressing wrongs and advancing reform, about the essential action of reading and feeling right, has been amply refuted when it has not been dismissed outright. However, historicists have silently reproduced Stowe's reasoning by too often understanding reading as an easy conduit from text to world, as a familiar experience with predictable rhythms and outcomes that we can and do know. Book history scholars have challenged the assumption that we can extrapolate from present reading practices to gain knowledge of historical acts of reading, but the study of literary texts still often includes unexamined assumptions and inferences, often drawn from the text itself, about how a given text was received in its own time. "Directed Reading, Directed Writing" seeks to restore the sense of reading's opacity and its dynamism and to locate the politics, the effects, and the very potential of texts in the experience of reading. I take note that Stowe and Harris ground their estimations of the work of reading in accounts of what happens to readers as they read, that what these writers direct us towards is the experience of reading itself. This project aims to effect a return to the historical imagination of the function, the stakes, and the passions of emotive reading.

## I. Recovering Sentimental Reading

Our current critical vision of sentimental literature continues to rehearse – and remains invested in – the debate in which Stowe and Harris participated some one hundred and fifty years ago. Stowe and Harris aptly define the poles of that debate, with Stowe’s idealistic estimation of the action of feeling and reading on one side and, on the other, Harris’s deep skepticism and ultimate refusal to grant the transformative potential of reading “pernicious fiction.” These diametrically opposed perspectives seem all too familiar to those acquainted with the debates and the disputes that continue to frame the study of sentimental literature. Part of the aim of this project is to underscore the longevity of this debate and to situate current critical theories and arguments about this period, its literature, and reading itself within a trajectory that stretches back through the nineteenth century. “Directed Reading, Directed Writing” both measures the distance that separates us from the antebellum United States and argues that we continue to turn over the same concerns that occupied writers, readers, and commentators then.

For the past thirty years, critical work on American sentimental literature has focused almost exclusively on the effects of reading sentimental fiction, debating the political ramifications of doing so and identifying sentimentality as either essentially progressive or retrograde. These accounts are fundamentally about reading, but they locate their critical interventions in the realm of politics. From Jane Tompkins to Laura Wexler, critics of sentimental literature have largely delineated what happens when a reader puts down a sentimental text rather than what happens as that reader bends over its pages: they treat reading as a prelude to what they consider to be the true work of the text.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this dissertation understands reading not as a prelude to action but as an action in itself. The experience of reading sentimental fiction therefore does not merely

precede but *licenses* the political ramifications of that fiction. The critical focus on the effects of sentimental reading has largely elided the literary, deeply-felt experience of reading itself, and I aim to restore an understanding of how instrumental that experience was to the real-world effects of reading sentimental fiction.

Explicating the experience of reading sentimental fiction sets into motion the terms and the oppositions that have structured the historical and critical discussions of sentimental fiction itself. Foundational arguments by Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, June Howard, Richard Brodhead, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Lauren Berlant, Lori Merish, Glenn Hendler, and many others have advanced our understanding of sentimentality's negotiation of agency, its incorporation and exclusion of difference, its address to and location in gendered bodies, its participation in the private and/or public spheres, and its involvement in the rise of consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> Sentimentality emerges from these accounts as a rich, vital, and deeply contradictory form – and it is precisely by inhabiting those contradictions that sentimentality gains its power. However, those same contradictions, coupled with what is most often regarded as sentimentality's specious claim to mediate between them, account for a pervasive and deep suspicion of this particular form of culturally-packaged emotion. My project engages these concerns over the nature of sentimentality but redirects them to the dynamic experience of reading sentimental fiction, explicating how reading participates in, aggravates, and exploits the oppositions on which sentimentality is founded.

Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins set the initial terms of the critical debate over nineteenth-century sentimental literature with their opposing viewpoints on whether it is useless and pernicious (Douglas) or efficacious and redemptive (Tompkins). What has



come to be known as the Douglas-Tompkins debate is, most fundamentally, an argument about whether sentimental literature extended or compromised women's agency that then informs a larger argument about the cultural value of this literature. In short, then, the Douglas-Tompkins debate concerns what effect reading sentimental literature had on nineteenth-century readers. In *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Douglas argues that sentimental literature and culture extended a compensatory agency to women that gave them buying power but little else, and that made women complicit in their downward trajectory "from the exercise of power to the exertion of 'influence'" (77). For example, in explicating the paradigmatic sentimental scene in which Little Eva dies in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Douglas reminds us, "It is important to note that Little Eva doesn't actually convert anyone" (4). Instead, Douglas locates Little Eva's "force" not in what she accomplishes in the novel but in what she does to readers, in her ability "to precipitate our nostalgia and our narcissism," to mire readers in "self-indulgence," and to stop there (4). Douglas therefore identifies a kind of trickery in sentimentality, arguing that it extends the promise of political and moral agency but does not ultimately make good on that promise. In her eyes, "Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one had already in part capitulated. It is a form of dragging one's heels" (12).

In marked contrast, in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985), Tompkins asks her readers to reconsider the "cultural work" and credit the "sentimental power" of sentimental fiction. Like Douglas, Tompkins argues that "domestic fiction is preoccupied, even obsessed, with the nature of power," but Tompkins sees sentimental literature as making a claim to power on behalf of its heroines and female readers, not relinquishing it (160). Instead, Tompkins claims that the

“ethic of submission” propounded by sentimental novels offers readers a way to gain power by turning from a corrupt secular world to a transcendent spiritual reality (161). Tompkins contends that we should value sentimental literature for its ability to express and validate the concerns and experiences of nineteenth-century, white, middle-class, Christian women and, by doing so, to provide them with the means to claim spiritual power and to accomplish cultural work in a dismissive and often hostile society. The Douglas-Tompkins debate therefore understands sentimental literature through the quality of the cultural work that it did, through the real-world effects on women’s agency that reading sentimental literature either threatened or promised to have. The respective conclusions of Douglas and Tompkins about the value of sentimental literature hinge on those projected effects.

This debate has long structured our inquiry into sentimental literature, and it is time to push past the questions of value, the assumptions, and the either-or mentality on which it is founded. As Paula Bernat Bennett and Laura Wexler have argued, the Douglas-Tompkins debate is as important for what it obscures as for what it brings to light.<sup>5</sup> For me, a fundamental oversight of this debate, and one that has hampered our understanding of sentimental literature, is the experience of reading by particular, historical readers and the act of reading rather than its outcomes. As this debate indicates, the critical imagination of how sentimental fiction worked on its audience has served a foundational role in its scholarly study, and critics like Wexler, who considers sentimentality’s non-white, non-middle-class “unintended reader,” continue to revisit and revise that imagination (102). However, that imagination often remains largely unmoored from historical evidence: the nineteenth-century readers who populate the

study of sentimental fiction are most often implied readers, constructions (or exclusions) of the sentimental text who, as such, respond to it in predictable ways.<sup>6</sup> These readers, then, are often our critical constructions, built from sentimental texts and from what we know of the world in which they were initially published and read. They are therefore closer to the abstracted readers of reader-response theory than to the historical readers who drive book history scholarship.

My project therefore aims to return actual readers to the study and understanding of sentimentality, to recapture what happened to nineteenth-century readers as they read and cried along with the sentimental novel. To do so, I rely on the methods of book history scholarship and what it has taught us about both the historical experience of reading and the evidence through which we access it. To give readers flesh and to place them in history, scholars working in the history of the book and reception studies have turned to the few records that historical readers have left us, reconstructing historical reading practices from references scattered through family papers, journals, autobiographies, and correspondence and from polished, public evidence like book reviews.<sup>7</sup> Each of these sources, however, allows us only a limited view of a complex, dynamic process. James L. Machor goes so far as to argue that all evidence of reading is somehow limited, as reading “can never be fully recorded in performance because such a ‘recording’ is always selective, always a reconstruction, and hence always a reconstitution” (“Introduction” xxi-xxii). Despite these limitations, critics have made important strides in reconstituting modes of reading in times distant from our own, slowly and carefully building a comprehensive, but nuanced, description of the multiple ways in which reading works. Book history scholars have argued that reading is active rather

than passive and defined it as a mode of appropriation; recovered modes of communal, public reading to complement and complicate the dominant image of the private, solitary reader; and posited and then revised the concept of a reading revolution. Together, these insights flesh out Robert Darnton's simple, but important, assertion that "[r]eading has a history" (*Kiss* 155). In this dissertation, I access that history through both the evidence that particular readers left and the larger imaginations of reading circulating through antebellum culture.

By demonstrating how sentimental fiction grappled with the function of reading, my project particularly seeks to push the critical discussion of sentimentality past its political disappointments. Douglas initially voiced her deep distrust of what Tompkins would call "sentimental power" some thirty years ago, but that distrust echoes through the study of sentimental literature, as critics continue to search out sentimentality's political failings and to qualify its few political triumphs.<sup>8</sup> This fundamental suspicion of sentimentality has driven important contributions to its study, contributions that map how sentimental literature failed to account for racial and class difference, struck a problematic bargain for the kinds of agency it promoted by excluding certain populations from its promises, and short-circuited political action because of its privatizing tendencies.<sup>9</sup> However, this project involves a turn away from the palpable disappointment in sentimental writing's failed engagement with the political that appears in work by critics from Franny Nudelman to Lauren Berlant.<sup>10</sup> Instead, I reconsider the many ways in which antebellum sentimental literature engaged its readers, and the many purposes that reading sentimental literature was imagined to serve in its own time. Rather than focusing on the politics of certain texts, then, I locate sentimentality's

engagement with the political in the dynamic experience of reading, and I understand sentimentality's engagements and designs not within an often abstracted political realm but within embodied, particular readers. To do so both requires and advances a precise understanding of what sentimentality is and what it does.

To achieve that understanding and to comprehend, most foundationally, what sentimentality does, my project retrieves the historical practice and imagination of what I term sentimental reading. Sentimentality was a powerful and pervasive cultural discourse in the antebellum United States; as such, it informed not only literary production, but also literary reception, both the bestselling novels through which we partially characterize this period *and* a practice of reading that is less familiar to us today. As this project developed, I struggled to name that reading practice and to trace its contours. Part of the difficulty of doing so lay in retrieving the imagination of sentimental reading from a variety of locations – from sentimental novels and an autobiographical narrative, from fan letters written to Susan Warner throughout the nineteenth century, and from a variety of cultural materials that sought to prescribe and proscribe novel-reading. That difficulty was compounded because sentimental reading was a contested practice in the antebellum United States, with the volatility of its component parts – popular novels, individual readers, passionate emotions, and absorptive reading – rebounding onto it and making sentimental reading an unstable, fluid act.

However, common threads run through the at times divergent imaginations preserved in the pages of sentimental novels, fan letters, and conduct books. Sentimental reading involved intense emotion, limited agency, and reader desire, and it worked through solitary readers to achieve social consequence. Sentimental reading, or emotive

reading, was both the product and producer of networks of exchange that operated through the sentimental text, that erected partially imaginary and unstable connections through emotional relays and structures of direction. Most fundamentally, sentimental reading was understood in the antebellum United States to be a consequential action, one of great and far-reaching importance that worked, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad, in the world. Sentimental reading was a site of contest both because of what it did to readers in the moments of their reading and because of what it claimed, or threatened, to do when readers put their sentimental novels down.

The resistance to sentimentality, as both literary mode and reading practice, is often routed through the most insistent evidence of its attempt to balance its inherent contradictions – to negotiate between the individual and the universal, the solitary and the social, emotion and action. That evidence is the conventionality of sentimental literature and the particular form of excessive, discursive emotion in which it traffics.

Accordingly, more generous estimations of sentimental literature, which see it as capable of offering an honest, measured, and thoughtful engagement with the uncomfortable realities of antebellum life, have encouraged us to rethink both its conventionality and the very definition of sentiment. Joanne Dobson has therefore urged us to reconsider the formal characteristics of sentimental literature and to discern how they serve its content. She argues, “An emphasis on accessible language, a clear prose style, and familiar lyric and narrative patterns defines an aesthetic whose primary quality of transparency is generated by a valorization of connection, an impulse toward communication with as wide an audience as possible” (“Reclaiming” 268). In this vein, Tompkins contends that the stereotypes that figure so prominently in sentimental literature “operate as a cultural

shorthand,” serve as “the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value,” and establish “the power of the copy as opposed to the original” (*Sensational* xvi).

However, sentimental literature’s aspiration to encompass and express universal experience through the activation of sympathy is punctured by its clear, foundational complicity with discourse and culture, by its deployment of a “cultural shorthand” that remains particularized even as it seeks to be universal. In offering a definition of sentimentality, June Howard therefore suggests, “Most broadly, when we call an artifact or gesture sentimental, we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible” (245). Howard also notes that sentiment’s overt reliance on convention and discourse undercut “the spontaneity, the sincerity, and the legitimacy” of the involved emotion and so weakens its claims to authenticity (219). Elizabeth Maddock Dillon rightly contends, though, that it is precisely the construction of sentiment by discourse that advances its utility. Dillon argues that sentiment involves “both an affective immediacy (subjective autonomy) and a formal heteronomy – the connection of emotion to political and cultural ideals and aims” (“Sentimental” 515). Dillon therefore defines sentimentality as emotion with an agenda, as emotion that joins its subjective experience to an objective, utilitarian purpose and that believes in the instrumentality of that conjunction. In Dillon’s formulation, the “formal heteronomy” of sentiment, its “putting to use of emotion,” makes it both suspect and useful (“Sentimental” 515).

As these definitions of sentimentality suggest, and as recent work by Naomi Greyser, Glenn Hendler, and Karen Sánchez-Eppler demonstrates, sentimentality can be both understood and credited through the oppositions it contains and puts into motion. In

Greyser's attention to the "affective geographies" of sentimentality that can both reach across and acknowledge difference and in Sánchez-Eppler's argument that antebellum commodity culture could, in fact, circulate emotion that was not falsified by its movement from private grief to public mourning, sentimentality's seeming inability to resolve its essential contradictions begins to look less like failure and more like success.<sup>11</sup> These characterizations of sentimental literature, and of sentimentality itself, push us to see sentimentality as constructing a form of emotion that is both private and social, embodied and discursive, temporally-bound and timeless, feeling and action.

We can clearly see that form of emotion, and sentimentality itself, when we look through the lens of sentimental reading. Most fundamentally, sentimentality's brand of emotion can connect distinct readers through their bodies to narrative and to each other. Sánchez-Eppler has identified reading sentimental fiction as "a bodily act," and she argues that "[t]his physicality of the reading experience radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader" (*Touching* 26, 26-27). This is the basic premise of both sentimental literature and sentimental reading, the foundation on which projections of the action and utility of reading sentimental literature are founded and also the fundamental contradiction at its heart. Reading sentimental fiction was therefore more than the transfer of emotion from text to reader that accomplished the progressive or retrograde aims of the text at hand. Reading was itself a contested, contradictory, and dynamic act, as the debates between Stowe and Harris, Tompkins and Douglas make clear.



Rather than trying to resolve the contradiction of feeling an emotion or reading a narrative that was at once both particular and universal, both embodied and abstract, my project excavates the potential of that contradiction and argues that its irresolution was fundamental to both the experience of sentimental reading and its power. In the antebellum United States, debates over the emotional valences of reading achieved a startling immediacy in the pages of sentimental novels and in the imaginations of a self-conscious nation of readers. The power and the fluidity of sentimental reading account for why we find versions of it in far-flung and unexpected places – not only in the pages of *The Wide, Wide World*, but also in anti-novel discourse, which sought to prohibit novel-reading and, in the process, presented an imagination of sentimental reading that envisioned the nation cohering around the passive, emotive reading of bad novels. By assembling such imaginations of what reading and feeling accomplished both in the moments of reading and beyond them, “Directed Reading, Directed Writing” articulates how emotion circulated through the antebellum United States in the imaginations and the bodies of individual readers, in the pages of sentimental texts, and through the vehicle of sentimental reading. Sentimental reading presented a crucial opportunity for a number of populations to imagine and interrogate the function of reading and emotion and to articulate how the act that combined them inflected the nation. I argue, then, that an understanding of sentimental reading is foundational to an understanding of the literary world of the antebellum United States.

## II. Chapter Descriptions

In order to recapture the experience of reading and feeling in the antebellum United States, the chapters that follow offer case studies of how that experience was both

imagined in and interrogated from a variety of locations – sentimental novels like Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), fan letters written to Warner, and anti-novel discourse. Each of these chapters unearths the networks that operated through and around sentimental narrative, connecting authors and audiences alike through emotional relays. Those networks were simultaneously material and abstract, real and imagined: they became embodied and tangible by way of the materiality of emotions and by their interpellation of the reading bodies through which those emotions moved, but they were also, fundamentally, the product of an act of imagination that transcended physical constraints and distance to produce unified communities of response. In constructing this dissertation, I assembled case studies that surveyed a variety of locations from which those networks were imagined – from commentators who stood outside but were also implicated in novel-reading, from a paradigmatic sentimental novel, from readers who wrote fan letters, and from two African American authors who sought to manipulate and exploit those networks for a political purpose. Each of these chapters offers a different view on the precarious nature of these communities, on the success of direction, on the desires of these actors. Together, they assemble a fluid, changeable picture of the promise and the danger – and the power – of sentimental reading.

Chapter 1, “Sentimental Reading in the Antebellum United States,” considers public, prescriptive discourses about reading in antebellum America. Using sources such as conduct books and public lectures, I argue that commentators imagined novel-reading as sentimental reading, defining it by its invocation of an excessive, conventionalized emotion that delimited readerly agency and both expressed and fulfilled readerly desire.

That imagination of reading was balanced on a knife's edge between the solitary and the social, and commentators used this particular understanding of the promise and danger of reading to create a portrait of susceptible readers who felt as a single national body.

Chapter 2, "Directed Reading and Directed Feeling in the Sentimental Novel," puts the scenes of affective reading staged in Susan Warner's paradigmatic, best-selling sentimental novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, in conversation with twentieth- and twenty-first century theories of affect developed by Brian Massumi and Silvan Tomkins. I argue that sentimental fiction confronts both halves of the narrative problem arising from the conjunction of text and emotion: how to translate emotion into text and then to translate that text into readerly emotion. Sentimental fiction seemingly neutralizes the potential volatility of reading and emotion by directing readers; however, in lingering over moments when readers and their emotions become unruly, it registers the insufficiency of its direction. Sentimental discourse therefore provides an ultimately but productively imperfect solution to the problem of reading and writing emotion; in doing so, it unexpectedly licenses passionate, undirected reading.

Chapter 3, "Readers Write Back," accesses readers' estimations of the power of sentimental reading through a trove of fan letters written to Warner by nineteenth-century readers. As they recorded both the tears and the conversion experiences produced by *The Wide, Wide World*, readers made a variety of claims on Warner, asserting that they knew her through her novels and directing her to write sequels. In doing so, these artifacts of sentimental reading participated in networks that united author and reader through and around the sentimental text and so forged an unstable and partially imaginary community united and galvanized by sentimental reading.

In my final chapter, I turn to two sentimental texts written by African American men, William G. Allen's autobiographical narrative *The American Prejudice Against Color* (1853) and Frank J. Webb's novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). "Writing Race, Reading Sentiment" argues that Allen and Webb understand race as a matter of reading. Through their attention to interracial marriage, amalgamation, and passing, these authors self-consciously place raced identity – and their own narratives – at the fluid intersection of representation and reception, and they use sentimental discourse both to stabilize the slippery racial identities circulating through their texts and to direct how their narratives will be read. As they both write and model how to read racial identity in the antebellum North, Allen and Webb consider, and then exploit, the instrumentality of reading with feeling. In doing so, these authors provide a concrete example of the political efficacy of reading as they dramatize its real political and material stakes – and they return us to the debate between Stowe and Harris about the action of reading and what purposes it could and did serve.

That question of the utility of emotive reading drives my project, and the following chapters turn to authors, readers, and texts in the antebellum United States to assemble provocative, and at times divergent, accounts of the multivalent power of sentimental reading. This persistent concern with how reading might and does matter continues to fascinate us. Nineteenth-century sentimental novels, conduct books, and readers strove to capture the experience of reading and to articulate its stakes: they demonstrated a desire to know and to name what reading does for and to us, and they turned to the emotions prompted by reading to do so. That desire was founded on an enduring, if shifting, belief in the power of reading, and a parallel sense of the difficulty

of mapping that power. Current debates over the place of reading in our society show how elusive and contested the experience of reading continues to be – but also that reading continues to occupy the national imagination. Then and now, we use reading to know ourselves and to measure the vitality of our culture. A foundational tenet of book history is that reading *has* a history. By looking back to sentimental reading’s contested place in the antebellum United States, my dissertation articulates why we need to know it.

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<sup>1</sup> Stowe tellingly begins her final chapter by explicitly responding to her readers, addressing a question posed “by correspondents from different parts of the country, whether this narrative is a true one” (380). Her answer is, of course, that the events and characters she describes are “to a very great extent, authentic,” that there is no great distance between the world of her book and the world of the antebellum United States (381). Stowe would expound on this answer, and again solicit the attention of her readers, in *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published two years later in 1854.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive account of Stowe’s incorporation of Scottish Common Sense philosophy and its argument for the morality of feeling into her writing, see Camfield 22-59.

<sup>3</sup> See Tompkins *Sensational* and Wexler 94-126.

<sup>4</sup> As I argue in the pages that follow, Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins debated whether sentimental literature extended or compromised agency. See also Sánchez-Eppler *Touching*; Howard; Brodhead; Dillon “Sentimental”; Berlant *Female Complaint*; Merish; and Hendler.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett defines the Douglas-Tompkins debate as “center[ing] on whether high-sentimental sympathy politics...is a politics of bad faith, with the preponderance of scholarship holding that it is” (fn. 25, 228). She argues that “the Douglas-Tompkins debate will continue as long as scholars persist in viewing sentimentality as a *female* discourse rather than a *feminized* one” and thereby perpetuate the “sexist stereotypes” that this debate is founded upon (fn. 25, 228). In her identification of “the expansive, imperial project of sentimentalism,” Wexler argues that a key limitation of the Douglas-Tompkins debate is that it defines “[t]he problem of reading and responding to sentimentalism...as an intimate matter” and neglects the public and social function of that literature (100). Wexler instead defines sentimentality as a necessarily exclusive art that “encourages a large-scale, imaginative depersonalization of those outside its complex specifications at the same time as it elaborately personalizes, magnifies, and flatters those who can accommodate to its image of an interior” (105).

<sup>6</sup> Even when that historical evidence is present, its power and representativeness can be overestimated. For example, Elizabeth Fekete Trubey uses a single letter written to Stowe by a friend about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a handful of reviews to argue for a wholesale reconsideration of the cultural work accomplished by Stowe’s novel. Trubey is right to warn that we should not believe that all women readers were spurred to public, abolitionist work by reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; however, her conclusion that, “in fostering pleasure that was simultaneously domestic and political in nature, reading tended to focus women’s attention more on their own circumstances than on the plight of slaves” does not have the necessary support to be entirely convincing (“Success” 54).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Nina Baym and James L. Machor have used contemporary reviews to reconstruct past reading practices; see Baym *Novels* and Machor “Historical.” Critics also take advantage of other texts written by people professionally associated with the book trades that have a prescriptive, rather than descriptive, intent. For example, Catherine Sheldrick Ross analyzes the ways in which librarians in the late nineteenth century discuss reading; David Paul Nord mines colporteurs’ reports for the American Tract Society, using their “statistical summaries, travelogues, and narratives of grace via reading or, as we might say, of reader response” to offer a picture of religious reading in the antebellum United States (243); and Louise L. Stevenson focuses her critical attention on postbellum individuals she calls “reading advisers,” writers who offered reading instruction in household manuals and in books devoted solely to the conduct of

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reading (30). For the work of critics who have used unpublished records such as family papers, journals, correspondence, and autobiographies to reconstruct the reading practices of particular historical readers, see Hall 36-78 and Zboray and Zboray “Have You Read.”

<sup>8</sup> For another diagnosis of this problem, see Weinstein *Family 2*.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of these arguments, see the essays in Samuels.

<sup>10</sup> See Nudelman “Harriet” and Berlant “Poor.” Lora Romero provides an important call for this turn, asking us to move away from “the assumption that culture either free or enslaves” and to “temper our disappointment when we realize that authors have not done the impossible, that is, discovered the one key for the liberation of all humankind” (4, 5).

<sup>11</sup> See Greyser and Sánchez-Eppler *Dependent States* 101-48.

## Chapter 1: Sentimental Reading in the Antebellum United States

In *The Young Lady's Guide to the Harmonious Development of Christian*

*Character* (Boston, 1839), Harvey Newcomb devotes his thirteenth chapter to “Mental Cultivation. Reading.” As this chapter title indicates, Newcomb advises that young ladies should approach reading as “an important means of intellectual improvement” and never undertake reading “for mere amusement or mental excitement” (193). In pursuit of this aim, Newcomb urges his readers to adopt an active stance towards reading; he writes, “[W]hen you read, do not make your mind a mere reservoir, to hold the waters that are poured into it; but, when you read the thoughts which others have penned, think them over, and make them your own, if they are good, or mark their defects, and reject them, if they are bad” (194). After considering *how* one should read, Newcomb’s task is to advise *what* one should read, and so to distinguish between “good” and “bad” books. Newcomb decidedly places novels and romances in the latter category. Though he concedes that not all novels are all bad, that “[i]t would be strange, indeed, if there were no gems of intellect, no fine sentiments, in the deluge of productions emanating from the exuberant imaginations of novel writers,” he nonetheless says that “to attempt to separate the precious from the vile, would be like diving into a common sewer to hunt for pearls” (194-95, 195).

But why exactly are novels pernicious? Newcomb addresses this question by marshalling seven specific objections to novel-reading, almost all of which are predicated on how novels work on their readers. For instance, Newcomb attributes the production of “*an undue development of the imagination,*” “*a morbid appetite for excitement,*” and “*a sickly sensibility*” to the reading of novels (196, 200, 201). In order to illustrate just one

of these dangers, that of “*a sickly sensibility*,” Newcomb relates the story of a young lady made “so nervous and excitable, in consequence of reading novels, that her head would be turned by the least appearance of danger, real or imaginary” (201). This young lady, of course, came to a bad end: on a carriage ride with her mother and sister, she was spooked by “some fancied danger,” grabbed the reins, and drove the carriage off a bridge, “dashing to pieces” all of its occupants (201-202). Newcomb ominously warns, “If you wish to become weak-headed, nervous, and good for nothing, read novels” (201). For Newcomb, and for the culture in which his advice circulated, novel-reading obviously had very real consequences.

This chapter interrogates the causality that Newcomb announces here, excavating the conceptualization of novel-reading that allowed commentators in the antebellum United States to state unequivocally that reading novels leads to dissipated mental powers and an altogether good-for-nothing man, woman, or child. To do so, I turn to public, prescriptive discourses about novel-reading and evaluate how they figure and contend with reader agency and emotion. For instance, Newcomb advocated active reading by advising his readers to think over what they read and to make it their own, but his objections to novel-reading are predicated on the seemingly irresistible affective power that novels wield. Though Newcomb probably did not foresee all novel-readers accidentally driving carriages off cliffs (though this is not the only instance of death by novel-reading that appears in this discourse), he did attribute extraordinary power to novel-reading – but not to novel *readers*. Indeed, his fifth objection to novel reading is that it “*strengthens the passions, weakens the virtues, and diminishes the power of self-*



*control*” (204). By cultivating passions, Newcomb implied, novels disempower their readers and produce the effects that he cataloged.

In the antebellum United States, such pronouncements linked emotion and passivity to novel-reading in order to deny the agency of readers and to standardize the imagination of reading. Materials like conduct books, lectures on the dangers of city living, and state education department reports argued that readers lose control when faced with fiction, and they measured that loss of control particularly through readers’ affective responses to novels. In arguing that *all* novels produce what one commentator called “the passive luxury of excited feelings,” these prescriptive discourses strategically refused taxonomies among novels, and often among readers (Whitman 142). For example, in *The Young Lady’s Guide*, Newcomb explicitly offered his advice about novel-reading to young women. However, he authored two additional conduct books, *How to Be a Lady* (Boston, 1846) and *How to Be a Man* (Boston, 1847), that included the same abbreviated version of this advice and also advised all readers, regardless of gender, to refer back to this portion of *The Young Lady’s Guide*. In a parallel move, commentators often declined to distinguish between good and bad novels – and therefore characterized all novels as bad – and then stated that (bad) novels produce standardized and predictably deleterious effects on all readers. By contending that *what* one reads ineluctably determines *how* one reads and thereby denying the creative, individual nature of reading, antebellum anti-novel discourse fashioned both a normalized reading subject and a “generic” picture of genre. More precisely, this discourse disabled readers through affect to construct a cohesive imagination of reading, imagining novel-reading as an embodied practice in which the discrete bodies of individual readers were synchronized

through the affective power of novels. By casting that imagination in nationalist terms, anti-novel discourse created a portrait of susceptible readers who feel as a single national body.

As it defined novel-reading through its inevitable production of a conventionalized, excessive, and passive form of feeling, antebellum anti-novel discourse imagined novel-reading as sentimental reading. By stretching sentimentality across all novel-reading, this discourse linked novel-reading to a particular vision of limited agency and desire, of passivity and emotional consummation, in which novels produced the thrills of passionate feeling in readers who are overwhelmed by the affective power of novels. In a perverse move, then, conduct book writers democratized reading by sentimentalizing it, by relocating power from the people to the novels that they read and arguing that novel-reading posed a universal threat to a nation of readers.<sup>1</sup>

Commentators used this particular, paradigmatic vision of sentimental reading to unite the individual to the collective, to imaginatively position the individual reading, feeling subject in the midst of a nation of novel-readers. This discourse therefore balanced its imagination of novel-reading on a knife's edge between the solitary and the social, between the privatizing tendencies and the unifying power of sentimental reading; moreover, it located both the promise and the danger of novel-reading in its sometimes private, sometimes public valences. As it considered novel-reading, advice literature in the antebellum United States therefore labored to think the private and the public together, and to articulate if and how this particular vision of sentimental reading could unite them.

That is not to say that advice cataloging the dangers of reading fiction originated in the antebellum period or even in the United States. Early conduct books that were written in England and circulated through the United States in the colonial and early national periods also stressed the dangers of imaginative reading. For example, in *Letters Addressed to a Young Man, on His First Entrance into Life* (London, 1801), Jane West warned her readers against the dangers of reading fiction and taking the views it propounded to heart. Much earlier, in *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692), which Sarah Newton designates as the first conduct book for women to be printed in the United States, Cotton Mather illustrated the “*Devotion*” of “[t]he virtuous maid” by the fact that “she *prudently* avoids the reading of *Romances*, which do no less naturally than generally inspire the Minds of young People with *Humours*, that are as *Vicious* as they are *foolish*...” (82).<sup>2</sup> In *The Boarding School* (1798), Hannah Foster also advised readers to beware of novels, which she calls “the favorite and the most dangerous kind of reading, now adopted by the generality of young ladies” (16). Noting the tendency of novels to “pervert the judgment, mislead the affections, and blind the understanding,” Foster recommended caution, but did not go so far as to “condemn all novels indiscriminately” (17, 21). Instead, she noted that some novels “exhibit striking pictures of virtue rewarded; and of vice, folly, and indiscretion punished” (22). Of course, Foster is designated on the title page of *The Boarding School* as the author of *The Coquette* (1797).<sup>3</sup>

Though novel-reading had been both a topic of conversation and a cause for concern long before these antebellum commentators began writing, they nevertheless both perceived and identified themselves as inhabiting a *new* age of reading and a *new*

nation of readers. Accordingly, in 1839 Orville Dewey designated the United States as “the great reading country of the world” (3); in the same vein, Daniel Dana proclaimed in 1834 that “[t]he present age, far more than any which has preceded it, may be pronounced a *reading* age; and ours, probably more than any other community, a reading community” (*Hints* 6). These comments illustrate the self-consciousness of that “*reading* age,” the overwhelming sense that a momentous change was underway. And a momentous change *was* underway. As scholars like Ronald J. Zboray note, the antebellum period witnessed significant changes to the print industry, which were occasioned by factors such as increases in literacy, the development of national transportation networks, and advances in printing technology.<sup>4</sup> Those changes can be measured quantitatively, as the sheer number of novels published and sold in this period increased dramatically. James D. Hart notes that book production in the United States quintupled between 1820 and 1850 and that the number of fictional works produced by American authors increased from 109 in the 1820s to almost a thousand in the 1840s; Frank Luther Mott’s list of better- and best-sellers for the antebellum period is dominated by novels of both British and American origin (Hart 90; Mott 306-08, 317-20).<sup>5</sup> In her study of the materiality of antebellum print culture, Isabelle Lehuu therefore draws attention to “the ephemeral in-betweenness of the antebellum period” and characterizes this time as “a historical moment when the world of print was betwixt and between order and chaos” (4).

More important to my inquiry here is how these antebellum commentators both perceived and assigned significance to these changes, how they responded to “the rising flood” of print and to what they understood as a new and inescapable fact of antebellum

life (Reed 25). According to this discourse, books now moved through the nation via distribution networks that “almost annihilate time and space” and were literally everywhere – “present in every hotel, offered in every car, penetrating the most retired villages” (*Confessions* viii; Harris 27). Confronted at every turn with this deluge of novels and forced to consider the potential and the dangers of a new “*reading age*,” antebellum commentators believed that both individual readers and the nation they constituted had arrived at a historical tipping-point. That belief is what concerns me here. Though the population of the United States had been reading novels for decades before this antebellum prescriptive discourse organized, the self-consciousness of this self-titled “book-consuming age” and “nation of readers” makes clear that the sense of both the dangers and the potential of the expanding print marketplace had grown ever more pressing in the minds of these writers (Fry 171; Dana *Importance* 9). As novels became more available and more popular in the antebellum period, the discourse that articulated the dangers of reading novels became more anxious, more vehement, and also more precise.

At the same time, the print marketplace offered unprecedented opportunities. For example, even as more “bad” novels were being published and read than ever before, religious presses were expanding, and the American Tract Society was distributing tracts and Bibles across the nation, as scholars like Candy Gunther Brown and David Paul Nord have noted.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, advice literature itself was a participant in this print culture, and its writers sought to exploit the new possibilities that an expanding print marketplace afforded.<sup>7</sup> As Lehuu has argued, this reading advice appeared in print and even, at times, adopted the idioms of popular, sensational literature to warn against the dangers of

novels. This discourse was therefore informed by, even as it sought to distance itself from, popular literature. To impose order on an increasingly anarchic and chaotic print marketplace, this discourse adopted print to manage readers.

More precisely, it attempted to manage a “nation of readers.” As this prescriptive discourse sought to direct readers away from “pernicious fiction” by defining its inevitable outcomes, it put reading in service of a nationalist agenda by positing strong links between the consequences of individuals’ reading and the fate of the nation. For example, in *Letters to Country Girls* (New York, 1853), Jane G. Swisshelm warned, “It is reading, more than any thing else, that makes one woman or man superior to another – that makes one nation superior to another” (149). In 1855, another commentator adopted a more hysterical tone as he figured novel-reading as an explicit threat to freedom. Performing calculations to estimate how many novels circulate through the United States, and faced with what he feels is a staggering number, this commentator exclaimed, “And this in a land of freemen!” – and then proceeded to warn that novel-reading, given its particular tendencies, jeopardizes both freedom and a nation built on its promise, that it threatens “to root out and destroy our very nationality” (*Confessions* 32, 62). In moments like these, antebellum anti-novel discourse carefully constructed and then self-consciously disseminated a particular imagination of novel-reading, one that forges a chain of causation from powerful novels to emotive reading to disabled readers and, finally, to a nation in peril.

Whether novel-reading endangered the antebellum nation by restraining readers’ freedom is a provocative question: after all, the nation really was in peril in this period, as slavery’s abrogation of individual freedom and its very real threat to national unity

became ever more pressing. Determining whether novel-reading did, in fact, similarly imperil the nation does not motivate my inquiry here: I am interested instead in why and how commentators thought that it could, in the conceptualization of novel-reading that saw individual readers posing a national threat. In turning to prescriptive accounts that comment on the dangers of novel reading, this chapter therefore privileges the *imagined* readers and modes of reading that are found in the pages of conduct books and other antebellum materials. I am more interested, then, in the discourse that rose up around reading than in real, historical novel-readers and their reading practices. What I am sacrificing by turning here to the general, self-conscious, and distanced accounts of reading offered in advice literature is what Leon Jackson calls “the phenomenological immediacy of the reading experience” (90). Later chapters of this project will take up evidence of reading that seems to bring us closer to that experience; however, descriptions of reading offered within the pages of sentimental narratives and even fan letters written to Susan Warner just after readers put down *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) yet operate at some distance from the act of reading itself. Even the act of reading examined in this dissertation that perhaps brings us closest to its historical experience – Mary Webb’s dramatic readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Christian Slave* (1855), taken up in my final chapter – is yet distanced from us by the evidence through which we approach it – published reviews of Webb’s performances and the text of *The Christian Slave* itself.

Given its scarcity and its richness, evidence like marginalia that can capture the private, individual experience of reading in real-time is particularly prized by book history scholars. The ascription of value to this specific form of evidence depends both

on its scarcity and on the particular story about reading that it allows scholars to tell, a story in which active readers appropriate texts and willfully and nonchalantly make those texts serve readerly ends.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, such conclusions about the creative, individual nature of reading are essential to our valuation of it.<sup>9</sup> Historians of reading do also turn to evidence that has survived in greater volume – materials like published book reviews, institutional records of libraries, and conduct books like those I will be considering here.<sup>10</sup> However, critics often express regret that such accounts are necessarily distanced from the moments of reading and lament that that distance necessarily undercuts the descriptive powers of this evidence.

In contrast, this public, prescriptive discourse explicitly rejected the autonomy of novel-readers in sweeping public pronouncements, aiming instead to restrain readers and to deny reading's essential freedom in order to direct reading towards particular ends. Given the generic thrust of advice literature, this is not particularly surprising. However, because this particular evidence of reading can provide a different, supplementary perspective on reading and response and our valorized model of reading as appropriation, it calls out for inclusion in our histories of reading. Considering the problems of using such public evidence to reconstruct historical experience, Mary P. Ryan acknowledges that basing her study of domesticity on the "normative pronouncements" found within advice literature and popular fiction means that she cannot "pretend to the verisimilitude claimed by historians of the female experience"; however, she also rightly argues that "[a]s ideology, popular literature is an object of historical inquiry as important, and in some ways more complete and resonant, than raw individual experience" (10, 11). As



Ryan notes, such evidence provides a “panoramic” view and avoids “the possibly misleading idiosyncrasies of the individual subject” (10, 11).

The public, prescriptive accounts of reading under consideration here operate at a deliberate, productive distance from actual acts of reading and from individual readers. Imposing that distance allowed commentators to take a larger, and even national, view, to capture what they understood as an ephemeral, powerful, and slippery act in narrative, and to put that narrative in service of their own ends. By subjecting their desire to contain reading and the ways in which they elected to do so to scrutiny, we can gain some purchase on the history of reading in the antebellum United States, on how readers then actually read novels: after all, these commentators’ ideas and anxieties about reading have some source, and they are responding to, if perhaps amplifying, practices that they witness around them.<sup>11</sup> More largely, these attempted interventions into reading are a product of antebellum culture and, as such, mark the convergence of a number of factors that produced this particular discourse with these particular features at this particular time. We can therefore gain a sense of antebellum culture through studying the nature of these interventions into reading, by looking through what Lehuu calls the “filtered perspective” that this prescriptive discourse provides (131).

Antebellum anti-novel discourse articulated the stakes of reading across multiple cultural registers, and the terms through which it both defined novel-reading and staged its objections to it arose from pressing concerns about how fiction reflected and shaped the culture that produced it, how leisure time was spent and redeemed, and how cultural authority was retained and dispersed. Not only were novels selling at an unprecedented rate in the antebellum literary marketplace, but new kinds of fiction were also gaining

ground. Sensation literature and the urban Gothic, exemplified by novels like Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842) and George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1849), promised, or threatened, to expose the seedy underbelly of the burgeoning urban scene; to titillate readers with scenes of violated virtue, grotesque crime, and even pornographic excess; and to produce gratuitous, but vehement emotions in readers. At the same time, reform movements, and especially crusaders for abolition and temperance, increasingly turned to fiction to gain converts to their respective causes. In 1836, the American Temperance Union formally endorsed the use of fiction to advance its aims, thereby institutionalizing and legitimating the ability of fiction to serve a reformist agenda.<sup>12</sup> This reform literature incorporated both sensational and sentimental elements; R. Laurence Moore's and David S. Reynolds's respective accounts of "moral sensationalism" and "immoral didacticism" draw attention to the short distance between sensation and reform, and, as Glenn Hendler points out, temperance fiction was often sentimental, depending on the invocation of emotion to transform drunkards into respectable, reformed citizens.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Jonathan Arac has traced the emergence of literary narrative to the 1850s, arguing that our modern conception of the literary as "an independent realm, answerable only to the requirements of its own coherent fantasy rather than engaged in concerned dialogue with the life of the times," had its origin in the very period that produced fiction with an explicit social agenda (12). As these simultaneous but divergent interpretations of the use of fiction indicate, the ways in which fiction could and should engage with its immediate surroundings constituted a pressing concern in the antebellum period. Anti-novel discourse assumed its particular stance to unite and exploit the competing perceptions of reading as a form of social

engagement, as a kind of reformist action and as an act that produced emotional stimulation but little else.

What we might understand as extra-literary concerns also inflected anti-novel discourse. Commentators often deployed the language of depravity to characterize novel-reading, lumping it in with other depraved practices like licentiousness and drunkenness that would eventually produce a condition of dissipation so severe as to leave one helpless but, crucially, originated in a volitional set of actions – in taking that first drink or reading that first novel.<sup>14</sup> By calling novel-readers “*literary inebriate[s]*” or comparing reading novels to “eating opium, or drinking brandy,” commentators warned that “the mind, like the body, may be diseased” by what it consumes.<sup>15</sup> This attention to depravity in anti-novel discourse and antebellum culture also demonstrates a deeper concern with what one Methodist clergyman called “self-induced character” (qtd. Rosenberg 59). As this term indicates, commentators were responding to the dispersal of authority – and of the agency of character formation – away from traditional arbiters like clergy members and into the hands of individuals, and individual readers. Commentators’ warnings about novels therefore were one manifestation of a larger cultural imperative towards self-government, an imperative that sought to counter the increasing absence of traditional, external restraints found in small, tight-knit communities and religious authority by relocating those constraints to the interior of individual subjects. That imperative towards self-government inflected a wide range of antebellum life. For example, the antebellum period saw an increasing attention to the use of leisure, and commentators’ desire to coordinate reading functioned as part of a

larger movement to police leisure time and activities, and so to make even leisure serve as a form of labor, as a means to intellectual improvement and self-culture.<sup>16</sup>

Anti-novel discourse also undertook a larger critique of the organization of private and public life in the antebellum United States, an organization that has long been represented as “separate spheres.” Consider, for example, Samuel Harris’s account of what the “unhealthy stimulus” of novel-reading produces: “Under this fascination, mothers consume in novel-reading the hours due to their families, youths spend the hours of the night, kitchen-maids neglect their business, students slight their studies, and, in scores of instances, the writer, while in college, saw novels secretly read in the house of God, during the hours of public worship” (10). In this statement, Harris precisely catalogs the threats of novel-reading – that it distracts women from their domestic duties, servants from their work, students from their studies, and, worst of all, worshippers from their God. In Harris’s account, novel-reading isolates a variety of populations and keeps them from participating in their immediate surroundings, be it a domestic setting or a place of “public worship.” Harris’s objection is therefore to the diverse but dangerous forms of privatization that novel-reading produces. Anti-novel discourse in the antebellum United States therefore propounded a critique of the private sphere by evincing a deep skepticism about the ability of the emotional, sympathetic capital accrued in private to achieve public circulation, arguing instead that the novel wasted that capital by returning it to the self. That critique attached to the novel in this period because it had come to particularly represent the ability of print to bridge the divide between the private and the public, to bring published narratives in ever-increasing numbers into domestic

spaces and to recast the private sphere as a locus of reform that worked in tandem with the public sphere.

To mount their critique of novel-reading and all that it was thought to represent, these reading advisors strove to standardize a process that they recognized tends toward anarchy and emotion rather than control and rationality. To do so, they implicitly turned to the sentimentality that they explicitly argued against. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon defines sentimentality as “a putting to use of emotion” (“Sentimental” 515); these commentators did precisely that by capitalizing on the unifying power of sentimentality, on its particular packaging of emotion and its ability to coordinate readers through its affective power. As this anti-novel discourse neutralized the threat of emotion by turning that emotion to its own ends, it constructed a vision of sentimental reading, a vision assembled from readers’ limited agency and desire, from predictable emotional responses to novels, and from a mode of emotive reading that could therefore be at once solitary and social.

Today, we easily dismiss these nineteenth-century warnings about novel-reading. We may credit the emotional power of novels and thrill from our entanglement in them, but we seldom regard that power as dangerous or as out of our control.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, it may seem difficult to take such claims about the dangers of novel-reading seriously. However, anti-novel discourse emerged from the same cultural milieu that produced and popularized sentimental fiction; indeed, these were two sides of the same coin. Though anti-novel discourse has often been understood as an impediment to the development of a national literary culture, as an obstacle that had to be overcome, this chapter argues that anti-novel discourse was instrumental in forming that culture and informed it in deep, far-

reaching ways. We can measure that influence today through the anxieties that we yet share with anti-novel discourse. Nineteenth-century arguments about the power of novels and the passivity of their readers mask a deeper, more fundamental fear – of possibly infinite responses to texts, of individual readers who make their own meanings, of readers not responding in kind to novels and fracturing the nation. The affinities between this antebellum discourse and reader-response theory – and their shared fears – make clear that we yet inhabit its logic.

Reader-response theory arose from a quarrel with formalism, and particularly from formalism's identification of the affective fallacy, defined by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley as "a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)" that makes "the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment...disappear" and inevitably "ends in impressionism and relativism" (31).

Reader-response theory did direct attention away from the text and towards the reader by arguing "that what [the text] does is what it means," and by looking to readers' responses to discern the text's action and its meaning (Fish "Literature" 77). Taking meaning out of the text and finding it instead in the responses of individual readers, as reader-response theory aimed to do, raised the anxiety-producing objection that, with an endless supply of readers, there is no limit to the ways that a text may radiate outward from its pages, no end-point for interpretation to reach.

Reader-response theorists therefore needed to address how we can make sense of a given text when multiple readers respond to it differently, when disparate interpretations abound and creative processes diverge; they also needed to explain how individual readers could independently arrive at the same interpretation of a text. To

meet this challenge, reader-response theorists grappled with and then tempered the agency of individual readers, with theorists offering conflicting accounts of how effects are accomplished in the reader and, consequently, different estimations of the balance of power between a text and its readers. For example, Wolfgang Iser defined the activity of the reader as “shad[ing] in the many outlines” and filling in the gaps provided by the text, so that “the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications” (51, 51-52). Fish ostensibly granted the reader more agency than Iser did, arguing that “the active and activating consciousness of the reader” is “where the action is” (“Literature” 83). However, as he would later admit, Fish yet restricted the activity of the reader by recourse to a disguised formalism.<sup>18</sup> In “Literature and the Reader: Affective Stylistics” (1970), Fish denied the possibility of variability among readers and their responses by collapsing all readers into “a construct, an ideal or idealized reader,” which, as he admitted, was really a stand-in for him (83). The formal features of the text therefore remained dominant, though now they were understood through their production of predictable responses in “the reader.”

Later, in “Interpreting the *Variorum*” (1976), Fish restricted the agency of readers by a different method: he advanced the notion of the “interpretive community,” including in the membership of these communities “those who share interpretive strategies” and arguing that “these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read...” (182). A text therefore does not determine how it is read, but neither does “the reader.” Instead, any reader’s membership in a particular community directs his or her response before the text is even opened. The fact that multiple readers arrive at the same meaning for a given text is therefore explained by their membership in

the same interpretive community; moreover, differing interpretations by a single reader signals his or her membership in multiple communities (“Interpreting” 182). Fish’s multiple explanations of how reader-response theory might still allow for common interpretations neatly defuse “[t]he fear...of interpretive anarchy,” which “would only be realized if interpretation (text making) were completely random” (“Interpreting” 182). Dismissing that fear, Fish reassures his readers with his account of “the fragile but real consolidation of interpretive communities that allows us to talk to one another, but with no hope or fear of ever being able to stop” (“Interpreting” 182).

The affinity between antebellum anti-novel discourse and reader-response theory lies in the shared desire to coordinate reading, in the tempering of readerly agency to accomplish that coordination, and in the drive to produce and maintain “fragile but real” communities through reading. Anti-novel discourse did so by empowering novels at the expense of readers. In contrast, reader-response theory ostensibly empowered readers at the expense of texts, but then restricted individual readers’ power and creativity by allowing the formal qualities of texts to produce predictable results, by abstracting individual readers into “ideal” or “informed” readers, and by embedding readers in interpretive communities. What these antebellum and late twentieth-century theorizations of reading also share is a prescriptive intent. In reconsidering his early work, Fish came to the realization that he was, in fact, arguing for a particular mode of reading rather than discovering “the *real* reading experience” that had always already existed, that his theoretical work was in fact engaged in destabilizing the very project of reading (*Is* 15-16).



The antebellum commentators I have been discussing would obviously shy away from such a project, which finally accepted multiplicity and divergence at the expense of stability and uniformity. The terms of their engagement with reading are, however, similar to those of Iser, Fish, and others. In reader-response theory and this anti-novel discourse, we can discern both the desire to know reading and the worry that reading, because it is undertaken by individual readers, will always resist knowledge. We can see how both discourses grapple with reader agency to accomplish the standardization of reading and to gain some measure of knowledge about reading and its uses. We can also see how foundational affect is to the imagination of reading in both discourses, and how the very power of reading is understood through its ability to coordinate individuals into a reading public. What these discourses ultimately share, then, is a desire to make reading the foundation and signal of community.

### I. Sentimental Reading

In 1855, a book titled *Confessions and Experience of a Novel Reader, By a Physician* was published anonymously in Chicago. Its author mounts a vehement attack on novel-reading, marshalling a wide range of objections to the novel that are all couched in hyperbolic, vivid, and entertaining language. For example, the third chapter of these confessions begins, “*Aranea diadema*. Reader, did you ever watch the motions of a spider?” (18). The author goes on to make a prolonged, detailed comparison between a novel-reader and a fly caught in a spider’s (or author’s) web. He first describes how the “[w]atchful, venomous, skillful, artful, persevering, and cowardly” spider sets his trap and then makes his comparison explicit:

The novelist's threads are made up of the amazing, the wonderful, the dumbfounding and the mysterious....They are finally hatched for the occasion, spun out, and are radiated in all directions, whithersoever the public taste directs, or the deluded multitudes invite, baited with the appellation of "The thrilling romance," "The new novel," "The last tale." (18, 19-20)

And the reader, like the "poor, simple, foolish fly," is invariably "caught and immolated...and poor morality is sacrificed upon the shrine of human gullibility" (20).

Forsaking such violent, over-blown comparisons, at least for a moment, the author devotes his fifth chapter to providing concrete evidence in support of his objections. He argues that, to prove incontestably that novel-reading results in all the evils he has detailed, "the conscientious testimony of some confirmed novel reader" must be obtained (35). In the absence of other witnesses, the author elects to provide that testimony himself, while asking readers to excuse him as "he departs a little from strict legal etiquette and brings himself upon the stand" – "turn[ing] state's evidence," he calls it (35). He begins his testimony by taking an oath of sorts: "Now I candidly affirm that I never read a novel or romance in my life, that I did not arise from its perusal, either under the immediate influence of some one specific passion particularly called forth, because most excited, or the whole catalogue of legitimate effects" (36). This "whole catalogue" includes seven effects that novel-reading had on this author, and, by extension, would have on all novel readers. Those effects are: "1st. Inflamed passions and irritable temper"; "2d. Often disgust of the world"; "3d. Sordid desires"; "4th. Absolute hatred of study, or calm mental investigation"; "5th. Disrelish for the most ordinary duties of life";

“6th. Visionary schemes of the future”; “7th, and lastly. A fevered and excited state of the body” (36-39). The author provides brief explanations as he lists these universal effects, writing that his “irritable temper” arose from being pulled away from his reading; that his “disgust of the world” stemmed from seeing the world “inverted” “through the camera obscura of a novelist’s brain”; that the “sordid desires” to which he alludes included an envy for the riches of characters (36). After concluding his list, the author argues that his is not “an extreme case” but “the general rule,” and even that he has heard of many cases “infinitely, transcendently worse” (40-41).

Novels are the cause here, and the author of *Confessions and Experience of a Novel Reader* stages himself as the effect. In doing so, he pays particular attention to the emotional consequences of novel-reading – “inflamed passions,” “sordid desires,” “absolute hatred of...calm mental investigation,” and “a fevered and excited state of the body.” By arguing that he is representative, this author also contends that these effects are irresistible and therefore universal. The prescriptive discourse surrounding novel-reading largely adhered to this argument, in which novels are understood to produce universal and predictable consequences by virtue of the often debilitating affective power they wield over their largely powerless readers. Anti-novel discourse mapped the wide parameters of this power, from arguing that novels condition how readers read and what they will read next to warning that novels will also shape how readers behave in their non-literary lives and may even determine their destination in the after-life. Conduct books, lectures, and essays on reading used such effects to retrospectively locate “inherent tendencies” in novel-reading (Harris 9). As Samuel Harris wrote in *Pernicious Fiction: or, The Tendencies and Results of Indiscriminate Novel Reading* (New York,

1853), “Whoever heard of a person enslaved by an inveterate habit of reading parables, allegories, or epic poems?” (14). This discourse argued that novels can be best understood – and must be understood – through their peculiar ability to enslave their readers.

Anti-novel discourse argued that novels enthrall their readers particularly by way of the passionate emotions they produce: it therefore offered precise articulations of the dangers of a passion for, and the passions of, novel-reading. As commentators like the physician argued, those passions limit the agency of readers; moreover, as novels orchestrate readers’ bodily responses, the visible emotions moving across the surface of readers’ bodies provide physical evidence of that limited agency. Antebellum commentators understood novel-reading through its dependence on and production of a passionate but *passive* form of feeling, a form of feeling that was associated then and now with sentimentality. This anti-novel discourse used the sentimental reading provoked by novels to deny the agency of individual readers and to coordinate them into a single feeling body, and to standardize and then argue against all novel-reading.

The ascription of limited agency to the emotive reading of novels also allowed commentators to negotiate a disturbing problem that lay beneath and at times surfaced within this discourse – the problem of reader desire and its threat to individuate readers. Commentators both acknowledged and disavowed that novel-reading was tempting precisely because it offered the experience of vulnerability, passivity, and overwhelming emotions, and that readers might therefore *choose* to read for pleasure rather than profit. Nancy Armstrong has argued that nineteenth-century domestic fiction constructed a particular, historical form of desire that was simultaneously depoliticized and naturalized

– and that therefore made the experience of desire an experience of both subjectivity and universality. Armstrong argues that desire was therefore experienced as a form of subjective agency in the mid-nineteenth century, though she retrospectively exposes the mechanisms by which desire was and is constructed by cultural discourse. In this antebellum anti-novel discourse, desire was also perceived as a threatening form of agency. Commentators countered that threat by warning that the desire for novels in fact led to the forfeit of agency, to an initially pleasurable but ultimately harmful emotional subjection. In constructing this standardized vision of emotive reading, limited agency, and readerly desire, antebellum anti-novel discourse imagined novel-reading as sentimental reading.

Sentimental reading functions as the link connecting this antebellum discourse about the reading of *all* novels (even those we would not call “sentimental” today) and current critical debates over the politics of sentimental literature. Even before Harriet Beecher Stowe voiced her famous injunction to “*feel right*” in the concluding pages of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), readers have debated whether the conventionalized forms of feeling prompted by reading novels produce an active sympathy or a privatizing passivity, whether those feelings spur or foreclose action in the real world (385). This discourse, in fact, rehearsed debates that continue to animate the study of sentimental literature, making clear that those debates were operative during what we understand as the hey-day of sentimental fiction.

More pointedly, though, the longevity of this debate over the effects of sentimental reading emphasizes just how long we have approached sentiment through our resistance to it. That resistance, I believe, stems precisely from a deep-seated suspicion

of the agency offered to readers by novels – or, in our current understanding, by *sentimental* novels – an agency that is funneled through the experience of reading and of emotional extremity, itself an object of long-standing distrust. This antebellum discourse – and some current criticism – argue that the excessive feeling of sentimentality, and the concomitant sense of being sympathetically and tangibly involved through reading in the plight of someone else, promote the mere illusion of agency and of action. However, our continuing failure to resolve this debate finally in favor of the inaction of sentimental reading signals our hesitance to relinquish the promise of sentimental literature and of the emotive reading it has long represented, a promise that Lauren Berlant has resonantly defined as “[t]he possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same,” as “the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic” (“Poor” 303).

Our attention to this anti-novel discourse promises to unmoor these debates over the possibilities and dangers of sentimental reading from sentimental texts, casting that potential into the larger world of reading fiction. In this discourse, all novels were understood to provoke pernicious excitement and the spurious, false extension of sympathy. The prevalence and popularity of sentimental fiction in the antebellum United States may account for this capacious imagination of which fictions provoke this passive, emotive reading; however, we should also consider that sentimental fiction achieved its representative power because the dynamics, politics, and emotions of reading that it makes particularly visible actually do pertain to *all* fiction reading. These antebellum articulations of the sentimental valences of novel-reading offer to re-locate our understanding of the politics of sentimental fiction from what was read to the experience

of sentimental reading, from a particular literary and cultural formation to a portable mode of emotional response. According to these commentators, it is the standardized, sentimental experience of reading fiction that drives both its politics and its potential, and therefore merits their – and our – attention.

Advice literature's desire to shape individual character to fit societal norms, its attendant negotiation of its own readers' agency, and its wide circulation combined to create a rich site in which to construct and expound this particular vision of novel-reading.<sup>19</sup> Advice literature participated in the explosion of print in the antebellum United States and in the "*reading age*" it instantiated, offering a range of precepts on how to dress, behave, talk, and, as I focus on here, read. Not surprisingly, this prolific genre appears in numerous critical studies that seek to reconstruct the culture that this discourse both reflected and helped to form. In particular, critics have focused on the ways that advice literature sought to coordinate individual behavior by advancing forms of social performance, and particularly gender roles. Karen Halttunen uses antebellum advice books to trace a cultural imperative that, as it raised the specter of both "confidence men and painted women," extended across gender lines: she excavates "the powerful middle-class impulse to shape all social forms into sincere expressions of inner feeling" and the ensuing cultural tension between hypocrisy and sincerity (*Confidence* xvii). Lori Merish, Karen L. Kilcup, and Jane E. Rose instead emphasize the role that conduct literature played in simultaneously consolidating and challenging ideals of true womanhood. In her attention to ideologies of femininity in the new republic, Merish argues that advice literature "illuminate[s] a complex interaction between surface and depth" operating in those ideologies, offering to expose a tension instantiated by "instructing women in the

proper performance of femininity” and thereby “rais[ing] the specter of female duplicity” (66, 61).<sup>20</sup> Sarah Newton offers a deeper account of conduct books as she pays particular attention to their generic properties. In individual essays devoted to conduct books for men, women, and children, Newton also calls particular attention to the role conduct literature played in constructing and perpetuating gender roles: she defines the conduct book as “a text that is intended for an inexperienced young adult or other youthful reader, that defines an ethical, Christian-based code of behavior, and that normally includes gender role definitions” (*Learning* 4). As Newton notes, the desire to shape and standardize various forms of individual behavior drives conduct literature: “Ignoring the often regrettable way real people behave in their daily lives, conduct writers argue that an absolute, virtually unchanging and unchallengeable standard of ideal behavior does exist and may – indeed must – be achieved” (*Learning* 4).

The multi-valent, wide-ranging “standard of ideal behavior” advanced within the pages of conduct books encompassed reading practices, aiming to authorize certain modes of reading and prohibit others, as scholars like Barbara Sicherman, Candy Gunther Brown, and Isabelle Lehuu have noted.<sup>21</sup> This impulse towards standardization surfaces as the same pieces of advice recur in this body of literature, but it also manifests itself in the version of reading that antebellum advice literature offers (and to which it ostensibly responds). This prescriptive discourse’s singular but shared vision of novel-reading was intended to function as a lens through which individual readers would re-view – and then revise – their own reading practices. Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s attention to the metaphors attached to reading by late nineteenth-century librarians, Janice Radway’s articulation of the effects of equating reading with consumption, and Steven Mailloux’s



inquiry into the cultural rhetoric surrounding reading in the second half of the nineteenth century all make clear that descriptions of reading not only reflect but also condition its understanding.<sup>22</sup> In his study, Mailloux argues that such descriptions both “presented and orchestrated the effects of reading fiction,” both “enabled and constrained the interpretation and use of fiction” (129). Writers of antebellum conduct books also sought to promulgate their particular imagination of reading, to tell readers what happened in the moments of reading, and to mediate and thereby transform reading.

Because of their intention to direct how readers read, conduct books and other prescriptive literature function as a rich site for the study of readerly agency, which some scholars have noticed. For example, by juxtaposing Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) with advice literature on reading, Suzanne M. Ashworth argues that both domestic fiction and conduct books aimed to contain women’s reading within the strictures they advanced, to “temper the autonomy of the woman reader with idyllic images of female reading – images that enclose her activity in social spaces, moral imperatives, and domestic ties” (142). In contrast, Scott Casper contends that “much of the advice to readers presumed...that individuals possessed the freedom and the responsibility to make their own moral choices, no less than their own literary ones,” though he does note that “this new sense of agency” was coupled with “a sense of awesome responsibility: of accountability for one’s own morality or immorality, success or failure, character or degradation” (155).

As the disagreement between these examples demonstrates, scholarship on antebellum reading and the advice offered about it has yet to resolve the question of readerly agency. That lack of resolution depends, I think, on the essential complexity of

that question, a complexity that derives from the battle over cultural authority that was fought during this period, but also on the assumption that reading advice, and advice literature more largely, served primarily to consolidate gender roles. It is notable that Casper's account of how reading advice granted agency to readers does not mention gender and therefore implicitly encompasses *all* readers, while Ashworth argues that conduct books refute readerly agency by directing her attention specifically to female readers. Indeed, critical attention to protocols of women's reading and to the ways that reading was co-opted by the cultural imperative to reify true womanhood has missed the larger thrust of this discourse – that reading novels was imagined as an act of susceptibility for *all* readers, that it made both men and women vulnerable to pernicious textual influences.<sup>23</sup> In other words, advice literature democratized the danger of novel-reading.

That is not to say that the susceptibility that conduct book writers assigned to men, women, and children alike was not gendered: it certainly was. Elizabeth Barnes has convincingly argued that, in the revolutionary period, the female body particularly symbolized “the dangers of psychological penetration” and “serve[d] as a synecdoche for...*emotional susceptibility*” (8). In a parallel move, Glenn Hendler notes that “sympathetic absorption in narrative was by the 1840s already seen as a – perhaps *the* – quintessentially feminine characteristic”; Hendler makes this point, though, in the midst of an argument concerning the sentimental valences of temperance fiction, a genre associated predominantly with men (36). This feminized susceptibility to narrative therefore did not characterize only female readers but extended across numerous populations. For example, Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that children were also seen as

particularly vulnerable readers in antebellum culture; consequently, “[t]he child stands as a kind of model reader, the strongest exemplar of how reading might shape identity and character, precisely because children are viewed as least able to evaluate or resist fiction’s allures” (*Dependent* 10). Sánchez-Eppler makes clear that children served as an extreme, though still representative, case of fiction’s ability to work on all readers. The same holds for female readers: their purported vulnerability to novels was no doubt informed by the gender role to which they were assigned, but that vulnerability was not solely a consequence of their gender. Indeed, by arguing that no one was safe from the power of novels, by positing the susceptibility of *all* readers, conduct book writers extended the threat of novel-reading across the nation.

As they offered voluble and precisely-detailed delineations of the dangers of reading novels, antebellum commentators sought to counter those dangers with their textual advice. In other words, anti-novel discourse tried to *limit reading through reading*. The incorporation of sentimentality into this discourse, into its methods and its version of novel-reading, advanced that aim. This prescriptive discourse depended on and propounded the utility of reading, its ability to accomplish both good and bad ends; that knowledge of reading’s instrumentality was in turn predicated on a particular, standardized imagination of reader agency, in which acquiescent readers gain and then take textual direction. With a perverse logic, then, the success of antebellum reading advice depended on the sentimental reading it argued against – on the partial suspension of agency in the act of reading, on the standardization of response, on readers consenting to and acting in accord with the direction offered in a text. Of course, conduct books wore their didactic intent on their sleeve: readers knew what they were getting into when

they opened a conduct book or attended a lecture titled “The Importance of a Purified Literature.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, this discourse argued that readers did *not* know the dangers to which they exposed themselves in opening a novel, and commentators saw one of their tasks as demonstrating the depravity of novel-reading and startling readers out of their complacency, as the physician’s painstaking comparison of a novel-reader to a fly that is about to be immolated by a spider makes quite clear. While the effects of reading a conduct book and those of reading a novel would designedly be very different, those effects still exploit the same potential, in which readers take direction from texts that prompt certain modes of acquiescent, standardized – or sentimental – reading. Theorizing sentimental reading therefore licensed the imagination of the utility of reading conduct books *and* the danger of reading novels.

Even as commentators propounded the overwhelming power of novels through arguments that themselves threatened to overwhelm readers, they could not deny the agency of readers altogether: advice literature is premised, if not on the perfectibility of its audience, at least on individual readers’ ability and willingness to improve their conduct by adopting the behavioral models advanced. The version of reading constructed within the pages of conduct books therefore grants some agency to readers so that they may effect their improvement, even if it is a form of negative agency that is exercised in *not* reading novels, or a kind of power claimed by following other people’s rules. Critics argue that a similar form of limited agency, which is claimed through adopting standardized, idealized, and naturalized forms of behavior and by identifying with others who behave in the same way, is offered by sentimental discourse. For example, in anatomizing sentimentality’s complicity in the rise of consumer culture, critics from Ann

Douglas to Lori Merish have argued that women's participation in mass consumption offered them a partial, compensatory agency that obscured their lack of political power. In this discourse, readers were urged to be suspicious of the many ways in which novels tried to manipulate them and to limit reader agency; however, anti-novel discourse itself exercised explicit forms of manipulation. This internal contradiction undergirds the version of sentimental reading and the conception of reader agency advanced within this reading advice: readers read texts that advised them to be wary of textual influence.

Perhaps the greatest expression of the overweening power of novels comes in the attribution of a reader's destruction to the reading of a single novel, or one bad book. As Joel Hawes warned in 1828 in lectures intended for young men, "A person may be ruined by reading a single volume" (144); in 1857, A. B. Muzzey intoned, "A bad book cannot be read without making one worse" (5). William G. Eliot admitted his own novel-reading as he advised readers against it, bemoaning that he ever read any portion of a novel: "I have not read, if it were all told, a hundred pages of such literature in my life; yet I feel that even in that a serious mistake was committed, and it would have been far better not to have seen it" (76).

Though these commentators directed their attention to "a single volume," one "bad book," or even a mere hundred pages, their attention to the far-reaching effects of even a small measure of novel-reading made even that measure seem excessive. This discourse understood novel-reading through excess – through excessive reading, excessive feeling, and excessive sales. Part of the rationale for this argument lay in commentators' conviction that it was highly difficult to read just one novel, that a debilitating taste for novels could be instantiated by reading a single piece of fiction, that

this was a very slippery slope indeed.<sup>25</sup> Commentators also located excess in both the events depicted in novels and the style they employed: one of the recurring objections to novels voiced in this discourse was their being “overwrought” or “highly-wrought.” For example, Samuel Harris wrote, “Novels present over-wrought pictures of life; so that passing from them to reality is like passing from the brilliant panorama of a painted city into the dark and muddy streets of a real one” (18-19). Thomas Clark expanded on this description:

The book is not saleable, unless every thing be made as *intense* as possible; every character, good or bad, must be exaggerated into an angel or a devil; every pathetic scene must be heart-rending; every escape from peril, miraculous; every storm, a hurricane; every sunrise, the harbinger of something transcending human experience; and every nightfall, draws the curtain of darkness around transactions, harrowing beyond description.

(67)

Whether the novel depicts virtue rewarded, vice punished, or both, the descriptions it offers do not reflect but amplify what happens outside of the novel’s pages. The problem here, as voiced by Harris, is that “[n]ovel-reading unfits for actual life” (18).

That novels are so “highly wrought” and traffic in hyperbole and romance prompted one of the greatest objections to reading novels, and the one that predominantly concerns me here – that doing so invokes excessive, passionately-felt emotions, or what one commentator referred to as “rivers of sentimental tears” and “many a blacksmith’s bellows sigh” (*Confessions* 20). As novels invoke these feminized tears or masculinized sighs (or, more probably, both), they “proverbially involve deep emotions,” as the author

of *Confessions and Experience of a Novel Reader* noted; he even argued that “this is their cohesive power, and all the more dangerous” (33). This author objected not to some reasonable level of emotional involvement in reading, but to the emotional intensity that novels prompted – “deep emotions,” he called them. The physician further anatomized those emotions by calling them not “the finer sensibilities of our nature – love, charity, friendship” but mere “abstract feeling,” “not love; gentle, sweet, winning love; but *burning, animal ‘passion’*” (55, 57). For the physician, these emotions were simultaneously “abstract” and all too present in the bodies of novel-readers. Though the physician does characterize these emotions as “deep” to signal both their intensity and their immediacy, he also understands the emotions prompted by novel-reading as superficial, as touching neither the core of the reader nor the world in which he or she lives.

Antebellum commentators therefore sought to expose how novels cultivated a false sense of engagement and activity through the passionate, but ultimately passive form of feeling in which they trafficked. To do so, this discourse often directed its attention to what David Stewart evocatively terms “the material life of reading” (“Consuming” 238). Stewart argues that the materiality of reading, and the significant role that it played in shaping the embodied experience of antebellum Americans, often evaporates within our scholarly discussions; he also contends that the critical neglect of the bodily, affective experience of reading is a mistake particularly when studying the antebellum period, a time “when reading assumed unprecedented influence over the bodily lives of Americans” (“Consuming” 242).

In line with Stewart's argument, antebellum advice literature claimed that the embodied experience of reading is essential to its understanding. It therefore incorporated reading, feeling, moving bodies into its discussions of reading, using those bodies as evidence that novel-reading and the emotions it provoked proscribed the agency of readers. For instance, Samuel Harris offered this description of what we might call the *affective* life of reading:

Under the touch of [the novelist's] genius the reader weeps and laughs; he rejoices in hope, he trembles with apprehension; he experiences the most violent alternations of feeling; his own heart quivers in all the vicissitudes of his hero's history; with interest too feverish to pause, and curiosity strained to its highest tension, he follows him to the happy consummation. And that is all. Nothing is effected by all this commotion – nothing to be learned, nothing to be purposed, nothing to be done. The excitement has burned itself out, and nothing remains of the great illumination but smoking wicks, the drippings of tallow candles, and a pervading offensive odor. (13)

Harris's description of novel-reading calls particular attention to the emotional extremes to which the novel takes the reader, to "the most violent alternations of feeling" that the novel produces as the reader is moved from tears to laughter, from hope to apprehension. Despite "all this commotion," though, Harris ultimately discounts "the material life of reading" because, he argues, it is unproductive.<sup>26</sup> The problem here is not necessarily that novels produce emotions, but that those emotions, in turn, produce nothing – or, more precisely, nothing positive. The reader here reacts emotionally throughout the



moments of reading, “[a]nd that is all” – or, we might say, that is not enough. Harris’s description of the superficial, emotive reading of novels derives from and points to this discourse’s particular understanding of what the effects of sentimental reading both can and cannot be.

One effect that sentimental reading can achieve is a “happy consummation”: as Harris and other commentators recognized – much to their dismay – readers took a great deal of pleasure from the passionate emotions, the partial agency, and the superficial reading that novels prompted. In short, commentators recognized readers’ desire both for novels and for sentimental reading. That recognition is particularly apparent when commentators distinguish between reading for profit and reading (novels) for amusement or pleasure. As they drew these distinctions, commentators explicitly acknowledged that readers approach texts with different purposes in mind and therefore exercise some form of power over their reading. As it recognized the presence and the power of reader desire, this anti-novel discourse therefore granted intentionality and a measure of agency to readers.

Some commentators therefore defined the problem of novel-reading as a problem of how readers approach texts, of what readers foolishly wish to gain from their reading. For instance, in *On Reading: A Lecture Delivered Before the Mechanics’ Library Association in New York* (Cambridge, MA, 1839), Orville Dewey characterized reading for profit as “reading ...where the book is not leaned upon as a mere support, much less as a mere cushion for repose, but is handled as an instrument, used as a material; where the book, in other words, is not master, but a mere servant” (4-5). Dewey made clear that

readers do not take up novels with the intention to be their master; instead, novels are read for entertainment, and “with no other view or thought” (4).

Advice literature often drew distinctions between reading for profit and reading (novels) for amusement through their respective engagement of an active intellect or passive feelings. For instance, Jason Whitman wrote that novels “are the most difficult books to read profitably” and defined “the most profitable way of reading” as “to read slowly and pause often, and reflect long upon what you read” (134). Whitman and other commentators identified profitable reading as what reading historians term “intensive” reading – reading a small number of texts deeply, studiously, and repeatedly.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, novels prompt “highly excited interest” and “anxiety” in their readers, making them eager to know what happens next; that interest and anxiety serve to “carry [readers] forward with great rapidity” and to produce an extensive mode of reading defined by “only skipping along from place to place, reading just enough to catch the story” (Whitman 134).<sup>28</sup> In reading for amusement, then, the mind is largely disengaged while the body thrills with emotion. Pleasure reading therefore evokes passionate emotions, involves a superficial and brief engagement with the text, and renders readers passive. In short, pleasure reading was sentimental reading, and novels were its primary material.

Though commentators did grant agency to readers in how they approached a given text, they also explicitly associated reading for pleasure with the eventual surrender of agency and the surfeit of readerly desire. In summarizing his many objections to novel-reading, Whitman wrote, “I have thus enumerated some of the more prominent objections against novel reading indiscriminate and excessive novel reading” (138). This easy slide into excess – from “novel reading” to “indiscriminate and excessive novel

reading” – mirrors the mode of excessive reading that novels were understood to produce in ultimately passive and depraved readers. According to anti-novel discourse, readers’ desire for novels, coupled with an overblown sense of their own agency, precipitates that slide. Anti-novel discourse therefore warned that readers would mis-use and overestimate their agency, that initially choosing a passive, pleasurable, emotional mode of reading would eventually leave readers debilitated by making them slaves to an overwhelming desire for novels. Commentators therefore cautioned that reading is a contest between novel and reader that novels would eventually win.

In making this argument, anti-novel discourse imparted a temporality to reader agency, charting how readers may initially claim but unknowingly relinquish agency. Commentators particularly warned of the dangers of self-alienation posed by novel-reading, arguing that readers would look up from their novels one day to find themselves transformed and unrecognizable. In *The Daughter at School* (Northampton, 1854), John Todd spoke of the “chords in the human soul, and fibres of the human heart, that are destroyed by the subtle poison drawn from novels and romances” (119); Joel Hawes warned, “Bad books contain a secret and deadly poison...” (156); and in *The Young Lady’s Guide*, Newcomb argued that novels’ “subtle poison is so diffused as not to be seen by its victims till it is too late to apply a remedy” (205). In describing novels as a subtle and slow-acting poison, commentators emphasized that novel-readers are often unaware of the havoc that their reading is wreaking on them. In *Lectures to Young Men*, William G. Eliot wrote, “The young person who becomes a confirmed novel-reader, with a work of fiction always on hand, undergoes a process of mental deterioration more rapidly than he is aware” (75).<sup>29</sup> These accounts of the unintended consequences of

reading sought to finally dispel any illusion of agency or control – and even safety – that readers may feel they have. In a pronouncement that he obviously intended to be startling, the physician measured the degree of self-alienation that novels effect by arguing that readers are “capable of a participation in the same crimes” that they read about (*Confessions* 22).<sup>30</sup> In this attention to the delayed effects of novel-reading, commentators offered a different account of what happens in the moments of sentimental reading, of the novel’s insidious and irresistible effects. The best course of action with regard to novels, according to Joel Hawes in 1828, John Todd in 1854, and A. B. Muzzey in 1857, is therefore to “touch not, taste not, handle not.”<sup>31</sup>

This particular injunction, which describes reading books in the language of physical encounter, gains a different resonance in light of another vein of advice running through advice literature, which concerns not the reading but the care of books. In *The Young Man’s Guide*, published in Boston in 1833, William Alcott advanced a number of guidelines to govern how books should and should not be handled. He advised, “Let books be covered as soon as bought. Never use them without clean hands”; called the habit of licking fingers to turn pages “a vulgar, dirty” habit and also looked askance at “dog’s ears”; warned that books should not be left face down, spine up, as “[i]t loosens the leaves, and also exposes the book to be soiled”; and concluded by stating that books should be used only for reading, not for a pillow or to prop a window or to elevate a child’s seat at the table (207-209). In effect, readers were told not to leave material reminders that these books were ever, in fact, read, to divorce the act of reading from the book itself and to leave no trace (much to the chagrin of book history scholars). In this advice that ostensibly attends more to the object of the book than its reading, it is striking

how readers are advised to protect books from themselves, and even from the mode of active, intensive reading that is recommended elsewhere in this discourse. In essence, writers like Alcott encouraged their readers to embed books in their lives but not to embed themselves in their books.

This advice both emphasized and then curtailed the prerogatives of book ownership and of reading itself. It therefore extended the partial agency of readers from the act of sentimental reading to the act of what Lori Merish calls “sentimental ownership” (4). Merish argues that sentimental narratives promoted “the emergence of [an] individualist conception of consumption,” in which the act of sentimental consumption became an experience of subjectivity because of its “passional investment in property” and its sense of “intimate ownership” (4). This advice on the preservation of books aimed both to celebrate and to limit this sense of individuality, intimacy, and personal investment by arguing that it should not be expressed within the pages of the book itself. This advice on the care of books therefore instantiated a tension between the book’s vulnerability to its owner/reader and that book’s status outside of the self, between its ability to record the intimate marks of ownership and its physical distance from the reader, its very integrity as an object. Through this advice, antebellum commentators positioned books as the mediators between the private and public spheres while arguing that they fully inhabit neither.

## II. The Public Sphere and Private Readers

In the chapter of *Walden* (1854) devoted to reading, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

No wonder that Alexander carried the Iliad with him on his expeditions in a precious casket. A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something

at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips; not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself.

(355)

Thoreau premises his celebration of the written word on the paradoxes it contains – its status as both intimate and universal, its simultaneous rarity as “the choicest of relics” and its replicability, its isolation from the world in “a precious casket” and its movement through that world in “every language.” Thoreau’s image of the written word being “breathed from *all* human lips” particularly articulates his sense of the immediacy and universality of the written word, of its essential ability to achieve and represent a universal intimacy or an intimate universality. Though we might understand these qualities as undercutting one another, or even as mutually exclusive, Thoreau’s pairing of them captures the rich tension that derives from the ability of the written word to exist simultaneously in both the private and public spheres, to circulate through the world in a precious casket or to take shape in human breath.

Though Thoreau illustrated that tension by casting back to antiquity and using the *Iliad* as his exemplar, the same concerns guide the anti-novel discourse and the popular novels I am discussing here.<sup>32</sup> One year before *Walden* was published, Samuel Harris argued that the seemingly expansive experience of intimacy and universality that Thoreau celebrates is relegated, in fact, to the novel’s fictional world. Harris wrote that “[n]ovel-reading hardens the heart” and that it does so by “produc[ing] a mere sentimentality, instead of a well-balanced and practical benevolence”; that sentimentality, which

ostensibly navigates between the poles of intimacy and universality, is “like an irised bubble, beautiful as it floats in air, but dissolved at the first contact with reality” (24). Novel-reading therefore effects “a consummate hardness of heart, which weeps with the heroine of a tale, but neglects to pay her hard-earned pittance to the needy washerwoman, or insults the solicitor of charity who asks a dollar for the poor, or refuses to enter the room of sickness...” (24-25). According to Harris, sentimentality isolates the reader in a world of mere feeling, feeling that derives from a sense of intimacy, is predicated on the felt conviction of universality, but remains ultimately solitary.

Thus far, I have argued that antebellum anti-novel discourse imagined novel-reading as sentimental, defining it through its invocation of an excessive, conventionalized emotion that delimited readerly agency and both expressed and fulfilled readerly desire. That imagination of sentimental reading was balanced on a knife’s edge between the solitary and the social, between Thoreau’s intimacy and universality, between Harris’s “mere sentimentality” and reality. Indeed, these are the oppositions through which anti-novel discourse articulated the participation of reading in what we understand as the private and public spheres of the antebellum United States. The representative experience of reading that this discourse imagined and circulated inhabited these oppositions: sentimental reading gained its resonance because, as it existed in the interstices of the not-quite-separated private and public spheres, it was at once both public and private, both social and solitary, *and neither*. The resulting tension accounts for the promise and the danger that this discourse locates in novel-reading and in the emotion it produced, for its imagination of sentimental reading both as a threat to national community and as the adhesive that might bind it together. In this antebellum

prescriptive discourse, sentimental reading simultaneously threatened to destroy the nation by separating readers from one another *and* offered a circuitous way, albeit a negative one, to imagine the cohesion of the nation.

In the last fifteen years, increasing pressure has been brought to bear on the rubric of separate spheres, with scholars revisiting and revising what was long accepted as a sharp division between the male public sphere and the female private sphere. Indeed, scholars have questioned how historically descriptive this division is, disputing it as “a fact of social life” but attending to how it yet functioned as “an organizing pressure” in the nineteenth-century United States (Howard 256).<sup>33</sup> The impulse to divide historical experience into the private and the public has been particularly operative in critical work on sentimental literature, with critiques often claiming to see through the obfuscations of sentimental discourse to consign emotive reading and the literature that aimed to produce it to one sphere or the other. In an early example, Ann Douglas defined sentimentality as “a cluster of ostensibly private feelings which always attains public and conspicuous expression”; she argued that sentimentality is, in fact, *only* public and that it uses “the distraction of sheer publicity” to hide the fact that it “has no content but its own exposure” (254). In contrast, Lauren Berlant situates sentimentality finally in the private sphere: she argues that sentimentality privileges the private and the personal at the expense of the political, that it substitutes “a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures” for “acts oriented toward publicness” and, in “us[ing] personal stories to tell of structural effects,” regrettably sacrifices its political utility (“Poor” 297). These arguments share a skepticism concerning the ability of sentimental literature to have both a private and public existence and, therefore, to intervene effectively in the public sphere.



In Douglas's case, that skepticism derives from her argument that sentimentality has none of the ballast that "private feelings" would lend it, that it remains superficial and unmoored from subjectivity, while Berlant argues that sentimentality is instead all *too* personal. These accounts also share an unremarked elision between the political and the public, or the assumption that the only way to operate effectively in the public sphere is through political action.<sup>34</sup>

By locating its imagination of sentimental reading and novel-readers simultaneously in these two spheres, this anti-novel discourse instead articulates a different, more complex way of being public. Sentimental reading – and the sentimental narratives most often associated with it – depend on recognizing and celebrating the universality and sociality of even the most immediate, local, solitary acts and emotions; conversely, sentimental reading also hinges on conceiving those acts and emotions as not relegated to the private sphere alone but as having a significance, a utility, and a life out in public. In sentimental discourse, then, a commodity can be seen as a keepsake, a universal sentiment can be experienced through the physical sensation of a tear sliding down one's own cheek, and a unified community of response can be assembled from individual, discrete, physically distant readers. Such deep, potent contradictions were lived in the antebellum United States, as the critical concepts of republican motherhood, intimate nationalities, and domestic commodities through which we have come to understand this period make clear.<sup>35</sup> As these terms suggest, critics have moved to an understanding of how the private and public spheres were not so much separate as interpenetrating and, in the terms of Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "mutually articulating" (*Gender* 4). Antebellum commentators reflect that understanding as they imagine the

utility of a mode of emotive reading that precariously balanced between the solitary and the social, a utility that was not limited to consolidating gender roles or to combating slavery. Instead, this imagination of reading had at once a more diffuse and more fundamental role to play – that of imagining a national public.

That act of imagination depended particularly on what I have defined as sentimental reading and on the vision it afforded of a nation not only reading, but also feeling in concert. Since Benedict Anderson's foundational argument that print-capitalism helped to produce the modern nation – an “imagined community” of novel- and newspaper-readers – the idea that reading can engender national unity has been taken up by a variety of scholars.<sup>36</sup> Of particular relevance here is the work of Michael Warner, who further theorizes the foundational role that discourse plays in the construction of publics. Warner argues that publics are self-organized through the participation of strangers in a common discourse, that it is the “*reflexive circulation*” of discourse that unites strangers into a single social entity (90). Warner argues that “discourse publics” thereby engender “stranger-relationality,” in which strangers who cannot be known personally are nonetheless understood to belong to a common public (69, 75). Essential to that imagination is understanding “[*t*]he address of public speech as both personal and impersonal,” so that “public speech is not just heard; it is heard (or read) *as* heard, not just by oneself but by others” (76, 81). In Warner's understanding, discourse creates a powerful, if largely unconscious sense of public belonging because it contains the imagination of others who are addressed by that discourse and participate in it through reception.

Antebellum anti-novel discourse also made the imagination of discrete readers and their participation in print culture constitutive of the imagination of a national public. However, it built its “imagined community,” its “discourse public” not merely from the abstracted fact of simultaneous reading or mutual address, but from tangible, conventionalized, affective responses to novels. This discourse did so because it believed that the mere act of reading novels could atomize, not organize a public; it located cohesive power instead in shared, synchronized responses to novel-reading. This discourse constructed its singular, detailed imagination of novel-reading in order to unite discrete readers through standardization and to enable “that remarkable confidence of unity in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (Anderson 36). Anti-novel discourse therefore aimed to concretize an abstract public through sentimental reading. In doing so, it considered and then exploited affect’s multivalent role in producing national communities, a role that has been explored by Americanists like Glenn Hendler, Lauren Berlant, Peter Coviello, and Julia Stern. For example, Stern’s argument that early American novels “elaborate, in fictive form, a collective mourning over the violence of the Revolution” emphasizes the ability of affective reading not to privatize individuals but to locate them bodily in national communities through a particular experience of reading (*Plight* 2). This critical work shares a common interest in articulating the nation as what Coviello terms “a quality of *relation*...an affect or attachment, a feeling of mutual belonging that somehow transpires between strangers” (4).

Antebellum anti-novel discourse sought to create that “feeling of mutual belonging” through sentimental reading, but it also contended with the perils of trying to imagine a nation through a form of reading that might both dissociate readers and bring

them together. Commentators therefore posited that sentimental reading produces a kind of synchronous disjunction in the nation's readers, who respond in kind to novels but in ways that threaten to disjoin them. To produce a nation that coheres, not atomizes through sentimental reading, commentators aimed to bring the passive, standardized reading of novels into public view and also to take the public into individual readers' discrete worlds of solitary feeling. Print was the mechanism that allowed them to do so. Hendler has argued that, "at least when presented in a commodified cultural form like a popular novel, the apparently 'private' is articulated as something 'social.' It is in that articulation...that we can locate sentimental culture's politics of affect" (11-12). In arguing, both implicitly and explicitly, for the social utility of seemingly private responses in their printed lectures and advice, commentators exploited that same "politics of affect." Like sentimental discourse, then, anti-novel discourse confronted the deep contradiction of imagining reading as both private and social, but also exploited its promise.

In their advice on reading, commentators ostensibly imagined the experience of novel-reading as solely privatizing, as constructing what seems like an unbreakable emotional circuit between reader and novel that severs the connection between the reader and the real world. At their bleakest, these commentators argued that the emotions that novels produce in solitary readers serve no social utility. For example, in making his case against "pernicious fiction," Samuel Harris objected to novels because they produce "excitement which...is in its very nature morbid and pernicious" (12). He argued:

[T]he novelist addresses the heart, exciting the feelings without imposing any obligation to effort; and the reader enjoys the exhilaration of hope

without the necessity of endeavor, the voluptuousness of sorrow without the reality of misery, the excitement of terror without the existence of danger, the luxury of sympathy without the necessity of giving assistance, the tenderness of pity without contact with the squalidness of want, and the sublimity of heroism without the reality of self-denial. Excitement of this kind is necessarily hurtful. (11)

In cataloging the tendencies of novel-reading, Harris argued that novel-reading threatened to disjoin feeling from action because feeling mired readers in an experience of subjectivity, not sociability. Consider the oppositions that Harris constructs here between excitement and imposition, feeling and effort, luxury and necessity, sublimity and reality – between private and public. According to this argument, novels isolate the reader from contact with reality, which exists neither in the pages of the novel nor in the feelings of the reader, but in the public sphere alone.

In this description, Harris embeds a particular understanding of the public sphere as a place of misery, danger, and squalidness – and, consequently, as the proper arena for effort, endeavor, assistance, and self-denial. These commentators worry that, by translating the harsh realities of the public sphere to the pages of a fictional text, novels relocate the encounter with those realities to the solitary experience of reading. Because of that relocation, novels allow feeling to become an end in itself rather than a spur to public action. In other words, novels disrupt the move from reality to remedy that feeling should facilitate, and, because of the circumstances of their reading, rob feeling of its utility. This antebellum anti-novel discourse therefore argues that novels both expose readers to the public sphere and sequester them from it.

Anti-novel discourse evinced a deep skepticism concerning whether feelings of sympathy would travel from a solitary encounter with a novel to improve and enrich the social interactions between a reader and a real person. Commentators did believe that responding emotionally to novels would condition how readers responded to their world, but not in a good way. In 1856, Charles Andrews wrote, “[N]one are found so insensible to the real miseries of life as those who weep over the miseries painted in fiction. None are so shut up to their own indulgence, or lead a life so isolated and selfish as the confirmed novel-reader” (19). Andrews here defined the privatizing effect of novel-reading by focusing on the indulgence, isolation, and self-involvement it effected. As Andrews makes clear, commentators understood the fictional worlds of novels as self-limiting, as engulfing readers through the invocation of deep, pleasurable passions in highly-wrought fictional worlds that sequester them from real problems and real sympathy. In 1828, Joel Hawes argued that the “habitual reader of novels...dwells in a region of imagination,” that fiction “calls us away from the scenes of real life, to dwell in a region of chimeras” (150, 151). In a similar vein, Daniel Dana wrote in 1834 that “no small portion of the reading community continually dwell in an *ideal* world of their own” (*Importance* 14-15). These commentators worried that, when the imagination is engaged by works of fiction, it can act as an individualizing agent and can relocate readers from a shared reality to “an *ideal* world of their own.”

Because the emotions provoked by novel-reading remain disconnected from action, from expression in the public sphere, these commentators characterize them as unreal. As Newcomb wrote, “That sensibility which weeps over imaginary woes of imaginary beings calls forth but imaginary sympathy” (*Young* 201). Real sympathy, in

contrast, is felt in response to real people; more importantly, though, it results in public action. The anonymous author of *My Son's Manual*, published in 1837, explicitly argued that an overindulgence in works of fiction threatens “a disruption of the harmony which ought to exist between the moral emotions and the conduct” (27). More explicitly, he maintained that, in the act of reading, “the emotion is produced without the corresponding conduct,” and that a habit of novel-reading produces “a cold and barren sentimentalism...instead of the habit of active benevolence” (28). These commentators posited a link between emotion and action, but they argued that novels disrupt that link by producing only imaginary, self-indulgent, passive sentimentality.

These arguments about the inauthenticity of readerly emotions and the essential inaction of novel-reading have not wholly left us. Instead, we have cordoned them off in the realm of sentimental literature, which we have made to represent all that is at once most promising and most objectionable about emotive reading. Such antebellum pronouncements about “imaginary sympathy” and “a cold and barren sentimentalism” therefore resonate with the suspicion towards sentimentality that echoes through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, of which James Baldwin’s scathing critique of sentimentality as “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion” is perhaps the best example (495).

There are deep connections among these temporally-distant estimations of sentimentality. Most basically, this particular form of feeling is produced by reading fiction, an experience that constructs a simulacrum of social engagement but is imagined as fundamentally privatizing. The sympathy produced by reading novels is false, this discourse would argue, because it does not circulate – it is experienced in private and

achieves no expression aside from ephemeral tears cried in solitude. In their critiques, commentators imagined sentimental reading as an experience of subjectivity, as an indolent engagement with the self that is routed through an ephemeral, illusory identification with a fictional other. This discourse therefore anticipates Saidiya V. Hartman's incisive critique of the mechanics of empathy and "the violence of identification" it engenders as it replaces the object of empathy with the feeling subject (20). In objecting to novels' production of imaginary sympathy and passive emotions, commentators warned that emotive reading would atomize the public, exhausting sympathy rather than producing community, attenuating or even destroying the affective bonds operating among citizens by transporting readers to a solitary world of luxuriant, non-productive feeling.<sup>37</sup>

In mounting this argument, anti-novel discourse invokes an economy of the emotions, in which an individual has only so much sympathy and might squander his or her allotted portion in solitary encounters with novels, wasting that feeling in private rather than putting it to use in public. Anti-novel discourse therefore points to a larger conceptualization of how the antebellum private and public spheres should interact and of how the novel might participate in and foreclose that interaction. This discourse makes clear that what happened in the private, domestic realm was redeemed and legitimated by its contribution to and ultimate circulation within the public sphere. Republican motherhood is perhaps the best illustration of the desired dynamics of exchange between the private and public, as mothers relegated to the private sphere would rear sons who would then be sent out to participate in public life and there validate the domestic labor of their mothers. Both domestic advice literature and sentimental literature, as Franny



Nudelman and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon respectively note, particularly endorse that dynamic of exchange by emphasizing the “importance of maternal influence to collective life” and defining “[p]rivate, familial identity...as the grounds of moral action in public” (Nudelman ““Emblem”” 202; Dillon *Gender* 207).

It is fitting, then, that in the final chapter of *Confessions and Experience of a Novel Reader* the author offers republican motherhood as the solution to the problem of the dangers of novel-reading. He writes:

Oh! could the future destiny of our beloved country be daguerrotyped, and held up to the anxious gaze of every mother, with the part distinctly traced therein, to be enacted individually or influentially by the prattler now upon her knee, how would she rejoice, or stand aghast, at the result of principles nourished by her own fostering care, or suffered to grow through her neglect.

And now, mothers, are you ready for the work? if so, commence at once; discard from your parlors, and banish from your houses, and studiously withhold from your children, every work such as I have been describing. (69-70)

If novels threaten to disrupt the system of exchange between private and public, then, republican motherhood, as a tried and true mechanism of exchange, can restore that system to its desired workings. Anti-novel discourse argues that the private, domestic sphere is redeemed only through what it produces for public circulation, and it makes that argument through its attention to the deluge of novels circulating through antebellum culture and to the emotions those novels engender. Right feeling may well originate

within the domestic sphere, but it ultimately earns that designation because of the effects that feeling produces in public.

To counter the privatizing tendency of novel-reading, the writers of these prescriptive discourses therefore aimed to bring reading and its emotions into public and into line. They did so most obviously by offering their advice and their version of novel-reading in public lectures and published books. Commentators thereby aimed to increase the social nature of reading, to make sure that readers were physically accompanied when they tried to withdraw into a fictional world. Alonzo Potter stated succinctly in 1848, “It is to be feared that too much of the reading of the present day is solitary,” and noted that “[t]he abundance and cheapness of books doubtless contributes to this practice...” (xxviii). To counter the growing tendency towards solitary reading that the explosion of print made possible, commentators advocated reading aloud or in a family circle, and they also sought to insert themselves into readers’ textual interactions. In 1852, in *Letters to a Young Christian*, Sarah Jackson wrote, “Perhaps you will say, ‘I desire to be directed by the Spirit *what* to read, *how* to read, and *when* to read, but I am not always sure I understand the intimations of his will’” (71). Jackson neatly positions herself between the Spirit and her young readers, writing, “I can at least tell you when you may be sure that you are *not* following it” (71). In a similar move, Harvey Newcomb and many other reading advisors urged readers to consult others about their reading material, offering a way not only to impose a stringent selection over the ever-increasing availability of print but also to counter the solitary nature of reading. He advised, “Make it a rule never to read any book, pamphlet, or periodical, till you have first ascertained from your parents, teachers, or minister, that it is safe, and worth reading” (*How to Be a Lady* 159-60).

Commentators assuaged their fear of atomized power and individual authority through this vein of advice, trying to take back the power that solitary reading threatened to engender in readers. As Barbara Sicherman and Candy Gunther Brown have noted, the contest over reading in the nineteenth-century United States was often a contest over cultural authority, in which traditional arbiters of culture like clergy members resisted the dispersal of their authority that was made possible by the ever-increasing availability of print.<sup>38</sup> In her discussion of the early American novel, Cathy N. Davidson particularly argues that readers' affective responses posed a threat to traditional power structures: "Psychologically, the early novel embraced a new relationship between art and audience, writer and reader, a relationship that replaced the authority of the sermon or Bible with the enthusiasms of sentiment, horror, or adventure, all of which relocate authority in the individual response of the reading self" (*Revolution* 72). According to Davidson, the "[s]ustained misgivings as to the social and moral effects of fiction" voiced within anti-novel discourse therefore constituted an effort to centralize the authority that fiction threatened to disperse to readers via their affective responses (*Revolution* 105).

In other words, then, the antebellum nation and this discourse in particular asked who could and should tell individuals how to feel and located cultural authority in whoever wielded that particular form of power. Daniel Lord Smail offers an at once longer and deeper view of a historical shift in the locus of cultural authority through his argument that "[c]ulture is...coded in human physiology" and in his particular attention to "psychotropic mechanisms," which "have neurochemical effects that are not all that dissimilar from those produced by the drugs normally called psychotropic or psychoactive" (159, 161). Smail offers a "taxonomy of psychotropy," arguing that

psychotropic mechanisms can be both teletropic, in which one induces neurochemical effects and consequent mood changes in others, and autotropic, in which one induces those changes in oneself through a variety of means, including drinking alcohol and reading novels (170). Smail argues that the shift from the predominance of teletropic to autotropic mechanisms can be located in the eighteenth century, as more and more autotropic mechanisms (coffee, sugar, chocolate, tobacco, alcohol, novels) were becoming more widely available and more commonly used (179). Smail's argument allows us to discern these commentators' anxiety about how novel readers seized control of their physiology by reading novels and how they managed their anxiety by relocating power to novels from novel readers.

Therefore, the effort to regain and centralize authority depended not only on advising readers to stop reading altogether or to forego the self-stimulation offered by novels. Instead, antebellum commentators also strategically advanced a conception of passive, standardized, affective reading, a kind of reading that re-centralized authority by using the feelings prompted by reading as evidence of participation in a community of normalized readers. Anti-novel discourse therefore worked to locate power not in the individual subjectivity or solitary feelings of the reader, but in the social realm and in the printed commodity. In descriptions of novel-reading that showed readers emotionally engaged with fictional characters but denying sympathy to those they encountered in everyday life, this discourse constructed the private realm as a space of individuation, of subjectivity, and even of difference. However, in flattening individual readers into a standard passivity, in asserting that they knew what happened as readers read in the privacy of their homes in solitary scenes of reading, commentators turned even the

solitary reading of bad novels into an occasion for similarity and passivity, not authority. It was emotion in particular that offered commentators a way to locate accord, not dissent, in reading.

Anti-novel discourse therefore recuperated readerly affect by standardizing it. This was a fundamentally sentimental move, as it used emotion to produce an equivalence among readers that overcame individual difference and enabled identification and unity. Critical accounts of sentimental literature often aim to map the ways that it negotiates difference and produces sympathy, and critics overwhelmingly argue that the perception of some form of similarity in a fictional or real other is necessary to the extension of sympathy.<sup>39</sup> As Glenn Hendler succinctly argues, “Sentimentalism’s reliance on [the] fantasy of experiential equivalence is at the root of its affective and political power...”(7).<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the greatest challenge to sentimentality’s preconditions for producing identification and sympathy, to its “fantasy of experiential equivalence,” comes in Harriet Jacobs’s repeated assertions in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) that her northern, white, middle-class, female audience cannot sympathize with her because her experiences as a slave exist at too great a distance from the lives they lead. Franny Nudelman argues that, in her particular attention to her “sexual suffering,” Jacobs identifies a form of pain that cannot prompt common feeling; Jacobs therefore refutes the “sentimental preoccupation with the revelation of individual suffering as a means of constituting continuity between individual and communal experience” (“Harriet” 952, 946-47). Antebellum commentators did not often direct their attention to the particular grounds on which sympathy was actuated, on whether the individual experience of sentimental reading resulted from a common, and even

universal, way of being in the world. Instead, this discourse argued that novel-reading produced a common reading experience and thereby *effected* a form of “experiential equivalence,” an equivalence that in turn licensed the imagination of a nation reading and feeling in concert.

By putting private emotion into public circulation, this prescriptive discourse exploited the excesses of sentimental reading that they simultaneously bemoaned. Indeed, it was the excess of sentimentality that allowed novel-reading to mediate between the solitary and the social, to conjoin individual and communal experience. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon accounts for what is understood as “[t]he excessive nature of sentimentalism” by arguing that sentiment generates “both an affective immediacy (subjective autonomy) and a formal heteronomy – the connection of emotion to political and cultural ideals and aims” (“Sentimental” 515). According to Dillon, it is this ostentatious “putting to use of emotion” that accounts for the deep suspicion that attaches to sentimentality (“Sentimental” 515). In a similar vein, June Howard acknowledges “the view that sentimental feelings are simultaneously unreal and overdone” and explains that perception by noting that “*sentiment* and its derivatives indicate a moment when emotion is *recognized* as socially constructed” (219, 243). These accounts make clear that, for emotion, what ostensibly gets lost in translation from the private to the public is authenticity.

Paradoxically, then, the circulation of emotion in the public sphere and its insistence on notice there is what makes it at once suspect and useful. The effort of imagining how emotion might be both private and public, solitary and social can be witnessed both in this antebellum anti-novel discourse and in our critical work on

sentimental literature. In recent years, scholars have begun to relinquish their suspicion of sentimentality and to put more weight on the utility of public emotion. Dillon, for example, has suggested that we can identify “modes of possibility” in the excesses of sentimentality (“Sentimental” 517). That argument has been borne out by Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s recent work on the replication and commercialization of the figure of the dead child in the nineteenth century; she writes, “I see the sentimental, and in particular its ways of wielding the trauma of children’s deaths, as a means of mediating between the private mourner and a commercial world that proves not without feeling, but actually capable of circulating emotion” (*Dependent* 148). In a similar move, Dillon has argued that “doing violence to the mother-child bond is the catalyst for the plot of the sentimental novel,” as it opens “[t]he closed domestic space of privacy” to the public and allows the “familial bonds within sentimentalism” to be “recharge[d]...with affective value and recirculate[d]...as social currency” (*Gender* 207). Sánchez-Eppler and Dillon together argue that a kind of violence or trauma is necessary to put emotion into circulation in the public sphere. More importantly, though, they emphasize that public circulation does not necessarily undercut the authenticity of emotion, but instead offers the opportunity to experience emotion as both particular and universal, solitary and social.

By calling attention to the kind of synchronized emotive reading that novels produce, antebellum commentators twisted the utility of sentimental reading, forging a link between individual readers and their feelings and the fate of the nation. To circulate emotion and to put it to work, this anti-novel discourse also committed a kind of violence against readers. As I have mentioned, these commentators sometimes killed off novel-

readers for effect, having them drive carriages off cliffs or describing their “immolation” by a deadly spider/author. In *The Daughter at School*, John Todd employed a more genteel means to off his novel-reader by comparing the workings of novels and romances to an unseen contagion that infects young women. He wrote, “Many a young lady has stood out in the soft moonlight, under cool dews, bright heavens and fairy visions around her, and felt confident that it was all in safety, while from the cool and beautiful evening she was silently inhaling an unseen, unfelt something, which ended in consumption and her early death” (119). More subtly, though, the denial of individual agency in the act of reading was itself a form of violence against readers, a form that was not as spectacular or overt as these means but nonetheless worked to disable readers. That violence, I think, particularly records the struggle of these commentators to imagine a feeling, reading subject who could be both located in his or her body through the experience of emotion but also tied through that same emotion to the world outside. The networks of exchange to which I turn in the chapters that follow also take up the dilemma of how sentimental reading simultaneously requires individual, discrete readers and unified communities of response. The problem of holding these competing tendencies in balance causes sentimental narratives and sentimental readers themselves to return to the problem of reception, to map both the atomizing danger and the cohesive power of emotive reading.

### III. Shame, Sympathy, and Reading

As this advice literature advanced its directives, it also evinced a genuine, if complex, desire to know and to name what sentimental reading did to and for its readers. As antebellum commentators aimed to pull novel-reading into the public, to standardize it, to use it to imagine a national community, and ostensibly to stop it, they also



demonstrated a desire to know it, and to allow their audiences to know it as well. Their impulse towards standardization, towards representative readers and a paradigmatic form of emotive reading, demonstrated a desire both to push reading away and to pull it closer. To fulfill that contradictory desire, antebellum commentators turned to affect, using the production of emotion in passive readers by powerful novels to understand and to direct what happens in the moments of novel-reading. This conjunction between reading and affect proved useful and rich, allowing commentators to discern how the simultaneous experience of self and of community may be routed through the sentimental reading of a fictional text. That conjunction, and its utility, are still operative today.

In a brief aside in an essay about the mid-twentieth-century psychologist and affect theorist Silvan Tomkins, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank draw a parallel between the posture of shame, as described by Tomkins, and the posture of reading – both of which are characterized by “the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head” (Sedgwick and Frank 114). That posture physically expresses Tomkins’s particular theorization of shame. Tomkins describes shame, most basically, as “an experience of the self by the self” and, more particularly, as “the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation,” “as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul” (136, 133). What predicates this experience of the self, Tomkins argues, is an engagement with or interest in something outside of the self that is then blocked or rejected; that rejection forces that interest back into the self, effecting this “experience of the self by the self.” For example, he describes one trigger of shame as when one looks into the face of someone whom one expects to be familiar but is then unexpectedly confronted with the face of a stranger. Only by opening oneself up in this way through

engagement or interest does the subject risk the experience of shame, of being thrown back into the self. However, what distinguishes shame from an affect like contempt is its incomplete renunciation of the object that rejects interest and thereby produces shame. The posture of shame that Tomkins describes – lowering the eyes and head – therefore results from the subject’s impulse to turn away from the object of shame and also from his or her inability to do so fully. Shame therefore signals that the subject has not fully dissociated from whatever or whoever is provoking this affect and its attendant experience of self. Tomkins consequently describes shame as “an act which is deeply ambivalent” (137).

By comparing the posture of shame to the posture of reading, Sedgwick and Frank define reading both as an experience of the self and as an engagement with something that exists outside of the self. In doing so, they acknowledge the way that attention to a text seemingly sequesters the reading body from its immediate surroundings: “We (those of us for whom reading was or is a crucial form of interaction with the world) know the force-field creating power of this attitude, the kind of skin that sheer textual attention can weave around a reading body...” (114). However, Sedgwick and Frank aver that this vision of reading is not “wholly compassed by a certain pernicious understanding of reading as escape” (114); instead, “this reading posture registers as extroversion at least as much as introversion, as public as it does as private” (115). They argue that readers may easily make the essential extroversion of reading clear by starting to read aloud. More subtly, though, Sedgwick and Frank contend that the posture of reading “mak[es] figural not escape or detachment but attention, interest” (115).

This contested, ambivalent movement from interest to shame, from extroversion to introversion, from world to book is foundational to the past and present understanding of reading fiction, occupying antebellum commentators, reader-response theorists, critics of sentimental literature, and affect theorists alike. The promise and the danger of reading rest in this dynamic movement between the solitary self and social existence, in the ability of reading to shuttle between these poles and its threat to stall somewhere between them. Anti-novel commentators discerned that reading's potential rested precisely in that movement, and even their desire to produce shame in novel-readers constituted an effort to harness that movement, to make reading a site of both shame and interest that encompassed both self and other. Antebellum anti-novel discourse therefore did not aim ultimately to stabilize reading, but to mobilize it by exposing the deep contradictions it always already contained.

Our understanding of past, present, and future practices of literary reading depends on our acknowledgement of those contradictions and on our resisting the impulse to resolve them, on allowing them instead to continue to exist in productive tension. In 1839, in a chapter in *Means and Ends, or Self-Training* titled "What to Read, and How to Read," Catharine M. Sedgwick wrote, "It is a good practice to talk about a book you have just read; not to display your knowledge, for this is pedantry or something worse; but to make your reading a social blessing..." (250). Suzanne Ashworth reads this advice suspiciously, arguing that Sedgwick's version of reading is "[a] 'social blessing' because reading aloud takes the activity of reading out of the individual psyche, renders it a public performance, and pre-empts any privacy or autonomy the woman reader might claim" (153). More generously, I think that what Sedgwick's advice

registers is that the value of reading lies not only in the experience of autonomy, but also in the experience of commonality, of connection. Those experiences need not undercut one another; indeed, the richness of sentimental reading, its intimacy and universality, instead lies in how the self is suspended between the solitary and the social.

Those few antebellum commentators who do admit the benefits of reading fiction took notice of this particular potential of sentimental reading. In 1839, Henry Reed argued that “[w]e live too much in ignorance of the hidden feelings which connect us together” but that even “[s]trangers, with the ocean between, [may] discover in some sympathy of literature the elements of friendship...” (22). Though he did not advise the indiscriminate reading of novels and cataloged the threats of such reading, T. S. Arthur, himself a prolific novelist and cultural commentator, also noted the benefits that novel-reading may afford. He argued:

In history, travels, and biography, we see man on the outside...but in fiction, we perceive that he is fashioned in all things as we are; that he has like hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, and like aspirations after the good and the true, and we are gradually led to feel with and for him as a brother, – we hold him by the hand, we look him in the face, we see the very pulsations of his heart. All this is good... (62)

Arthur’s utopian vision of a physical brotherhood accomplished through reading undoubtedly has its problems and its unrealities. However, his description of reading as a way to experience the synchronicity of affect, as producing familiarity, as providing a basis for sympathy and even for physical connection, resonates with Sedgwick and Frank’s description of the physical attitude of reading. This anti-novel discourse

ultimately challenges us to see a reader with her nose in a book and tears on her face not as neglecting social interaction or as engaged only in a deep experience of interiority, but as socially engaged, as constituting a nation, as participating in a community through her textual attention and emotional response. The chapters that follow take up this challenge by expanding on this discourse's particular imagination of sentimental reading as a deeply contradictory and deeply powerful act.

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<sup>1</sup> I am therefore arguing not for a democratization of print but for one of the experience of reading, a democratization that depended less on access to print and more on orchestrating how printed matter was read. I therefore remain sympathetic to the argument that, though printed materials were saturating antebellum culture, access to those materials remained uneven, and even to Isabelle Lehuu's argument that "print itself acted as a catalyst in the antebellum cultural divide....Behind the powerful rhetoric that boasted of a democratic participation in a unified print culture, nineteenth-century Americans used the printed word to draw distinctions of class and gender" (18).

<sup>2</sup> See Newton *Learning* 63.

<sup>3</sup> Though novel-reading is not cited as a cause of Eliza Wharton's eventual seduction and death within *The Coquette*, the fall of Wharton's real-life counterpart, Elizabeth Whitman, was explicitly attributed to her novel-reading both in newspaper accounts of her death and in William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). See Davidson Introduction ix-x. In "Wise and Foolish Virgins: 'Usable Fiction' and the Early American Conduct Tradition" (1990), Sarah E. Newton uses the writings of Hannah Foster and Susanna Rowson to posit a link "between the dry female behavioral models found in the didactic book of advice and the more lively portrayal of female characters in early American fiction" and therefore draws attention to what she terms "conduct-fiction," which "combined behavioral advice with fiction" (140). Both Lori Merish and Karen L. Kilcup propose a similar confluence in nineteenth-century women's writing that is premised on, as Merish says, "[t]he perceived pedagogical value of narrative" (119).

<sup>4</sup> See Zboray *Fictive People*.

<sup>5</sup> For further analysis of Mott's lists, see Austin 462-64.

<sup>6</sup> Even religious novels were being published and read, though commentators generally did not approve because they saw the goals of fiction and those of religion as diametrically opposed. See C. Andrews.

<sup>7</sup> Lehuu writes, "What was different about the antebellum advice on reading was the extraordinary use of printed matter by those who denounced the excesses of popular reading. If they forcefully attacked the new media and advocated proper uses of print, they also offered equally sensational and lurid descriptions of dangerous reading" (128). See also Nichols 2.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in her study of women's reading, Mary Kelley writes, "The world of reading reconstructed from women's letters, commonplace books, diaries, autograph albums, and journals challenges the still familiar idea of female reading as passive consumption of textually determined meanings" ("Reading Women" 56). Kelley therefore uses this private evidence to identify the agency that women exercised in reading. See also L. Jackson and Sicherman "Sense and Sensibility."

<sup>9</sup> Consider the laudatory terms with which Roger Chartier describes reading: "Whatever it may be, reading is a creative practice, which invents singular meanings and significations that are not reducible to the intentions of authors of texts or producers of books" ("Culture" 156).

<sup>10</sup> See Baym *Novels* and Augst 158-206.

<sup>11</sup> On the utility of using prescriptive discourse to reconstruct reading, see also Lehuu 131 and Stevenson 31.

<sup>12</sup> See Hendler 49; Sánchez-Eppler *Dependent* fn. 2, 70; H. Brown 201-02.

<sup>13</sup> See Moore 225; Reynolds; Hendler 29-52.

<sup>14</sup> In his analysis of the trial of Charles J. Guiteau, the assassin of President James Garfield, Charles A. Rosenberg offers an account of the concept of depravity and its connection to late nineteenth-century ideas about mental illness and criminal responsibility; see especially 58-59, 96, 99. Karen Halttunen's study of how murder was represented in print through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the Puritan execution sermon through published transcripts of murder trials, offers a perspective on how the concept of depravity changed as Enlightenment liberalism took hold. See *Murder Most Foul*.

<sup>15</sup> See Newcomb *Young* 200; Swisshelm 151; Dewey 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Augst argues, "Punctuated by the rhythms of sociability and intimacy, the exercise of literary leisure transformed middle-class leisure into moral work: the shaping of a literary ethos demanded diligent application, practice, and tireless improvement" (63). For two incisive accounts of this imperative and of the changes to leisure underway in the antebellum United States, see D. Stewart "Cultural" and Weinstein *Literature of Labor* 13-52.

<sup>17</sup> That reaction persists in our culture, but it has been displaced onto other cultural forms like video games, pornography, and the Internet.

<sup>18</sup> See *Is There a Text?* 7.

<sup>19</sup> The popularity of conduct literature during this period has been cataloged by both Karen Halttunen and Arthur Schlesinger, who note that single conduct books ran to multiple editions, that single authors published multiple books for multiple audiences, and that, as a genre, this literature sold quite well. See Halttunen *Confidence* 1 and Schlesinger 19. In contrast, Lehuu has recently argued that, when compared with the sales of popular novels, advice literature was not as popular as we have previously assumed (129).

<sup>20</sup> See also Nudelman "'Emblem.'"

<sup>21</sup> For example, Sicherman has argued that prescriptive accounts of reading advanced "frameworks of meaning" in which individual reading practices could be placed and hence legitimated ("Ideologies" 283). Lehuu offers both an overview of this literature's particular representation of reading as well as a nuanced consideration of the way in which prescriptions about reading challenge our understanding of a distinction between private and public forms of leisure.

<sup>22</sup> See Ross; Radway "Reading Is Not Eating"; and Mailloux.

<sup>23</sup> A survey of antebellum conduct books, such as that conducted by Sarah Newton, does indicate that many of these texts were explicitly directed towards either men or women, though others were directed towards both. In interrogating whether the gender of the intended audience inflected the forms of reading advice offered, Lehuu concludes that it often did not, that writers instead offered similar advice on reading but that that advice was inflected by the context in which it was offered (140). For example, a chapter on reading in a conduct book addressed to women might be surrounded by advice on domestic duties; in a text directed to men, advice on reading might appear alongside counsel about social and business interactions.

<sup>24</sup> A lecture by Daniel Dana, which, as its subtitle indicates, was "*Delivered at the Anniversary of the Associated Alumni of Dartmouth College, August, 1833.*" Dana's lecture was then published in Boston in 1834.

<sup>25</sup> In this vein, in *The Mother's Book* (Boston, 1831), Lydia Maria Child even warned mothers against "children's forming the habit of reading nothing but *stories*, which are, in fact, *little novels*" (87).

<sup>26</sup> David Stewart argues that the nonproductivity of reading was essential to its enjoyment in the antebellum United States. See "Cultural" 677-78.

<sup>27</sup> For a useful account of the differences between intensive and extensive reading, see Hall 36-78, 169-87.

<sup>28</sup> In 1840, in his third annual report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann also noted that novels "are run through with almost incredible velocity" and then derided that quick, and necessarily superficial, reading by comparing reading novels to engaging with other, more serious works. Mann wrote, "Take a work on morals, of the same size with a novel; the reading of the former will occupy a month, the latter will be despatched without intervening sleep" (63).

<sup>29</sup> See also McIlvaine, who in 1849 compared "aimless and desultory reading" to "licentiousness or gluttony or drunkenness" by comparing how the effects of these forms of dissipation are slow to reveal themselves (7). McIlvaine warned, "[T]he deadly influence of this mental dissipation is so veiled and far-reaching that often it escapes the notice of its victims until all taste and capacity for such reading as demands thought and reflection are destroyed" (7).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Clark, in lectures addressed to both young men and women, also explicitly warned, "You may imagine that you remain uncontaminated by the vicious principles which are inculcated or insinuated in these evil works, because you do not deliberately assent to them: but it is not necessary for you to do this,

in order to your moral ruin” (66). According to Clark, reading “evil works” grants a tacit consent to their “vicious principles,” and he warned that “passive familiarity with vice...does the great mischief; for the soul will take the hue of those colors which it habitually reflects” (66).

<sup>31</sup> See Hawes 149; Todd *Daughter* 118-19; Muzzey 10.

<sup>32</sup> Thoreau did not have kind words for the popular novels circulating through the antebellum United States, bemoaning that the public would choose “the nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sephronia” over works like the *Iliad* (357).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, G. Brown.

<sup>34</sup> In her introduction to *The Female Complaint*, Berlant somewhat revises this stance as she critiques the notion of the counterpublic and its myopic privileging of the political. At the same time, Berlant demonstrates a palpable regret that sentimentality and the intimate publics it instantiates are only “juxtapolitical”; her admission about the pessimism of her book seems to rest on the positioning of national sentimentality parallel to, but seldom intersecting with, the political.

<sup>35</sup> For examples of how these terms have inflected the study of the literature and culture of the United States, see G. Brown and Coviello.

<sup>36</sup> Localized inquiries into nineteenth-century reading practices have elucidated how reading predicated a sense of belonging and of participation in a collective social entity. For example, Lauren Berlant has argued that “sentimental ideology served as a structure of consent in which domestically atomized women found in the consumption of popular texts the experience of intimate collective identity, a feminine counterpublic sphere whose values remained fundamentally private” (“Female” 270). Thomas Augst’s study of the literary lives of clerks and of literary institutions such as the New York Mercantile Library in the nineteenth-century United States also argues that these clerks experienced reading as both “subjective, a developmental experience of imagination and discipline, and social, a form of community and collective identity forged out of the dislocations of market culture” (164).

<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Janice Radway has argued that twentieth-century conceptualizations of reading privatize it in order to deny its radical potential as an intersubjective act. She writes, “[The] image of reading, which insists on its abnormality, on its distance from life, and on its association with solitude, is not simply the consequence of deep-seated American anti-intellectualism, although it is undoubtedly that. It is also, I think, a deliberate move to deny the nagging suspicion that reading as the intersubjective participation in another’s fantasy might produce social connection and communion that could itself be profoundly threatening” (“Beyond” 277-78).

<sup>38</sup> In “Ideologies and Practices of Reading,” Sichertman writes, “Clergymen, educators, and other cultural authorities voiced alarm at the dangerous conjunction of suspect new forms of print with mass consumption. The commercialization of what had once been a sacred activity and the loosening of reading from its earlier patriarchal and institutional moorings raised the specter of reading as an uncontrolled – and uncontrollable – activity” (283). Candy Gunther Brown locates this contest specifically in the history of evangelicalism, where she argues that the “tension between a lay priesthood and clerical regulation has constituted an enduring theme” (3). Brown particularly locates that tension in the context of the rapidly-expanding print marketplace in the nineteenth-century United States (3).

<sup>39</sup> For examples of this argument, see Barnes and Hendler. Barnes argues, “By contrast to critics who view sentimentality as distinctly democratic in nature and practice, I suggest that sentimental literature teaches a particular way of reading both texts and people that relies on likeness and thereby reinforces homogeneity. In the sentimental scene of sympathy, others are made real – and thus cared for – to the extent that they can be shown in *relation* to the reader” (4).

<sup>40</sup> Lauren Berlant has argued that that fantasy also drives the formation of “intimate publics,” which both derive from and then perpetuate a sense that its participants “*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge” (*Female* viii).

## Chapter 2: Directed Reading and Directed Feeling in the Sentimental Novel:

The Case of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*

In *The Feminine Fifties* (1940), Fred Lewis Pattee counted the number of times that Ellen Montgomery cries in Susan Warner's bestselling novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). He arrived at the impressive number of 245 – so Ellen cries about once every two-and-a-half pages all the way through a 570-page novel (57). This chapter's consideration of how the sentimental novel directs both feeling and reading begins with just one of those instances, which occurs near the end of the novel during Ellen's sojourn in Scotland. In this scene, Ellen's uncle Lindsay asks her to sing to him; Ellen consents and sings a hymn "with great spirit" (546). Upon finishing, she asks her uncle, "Does that sound sad, sir?" (546). He replies that it does and in turn asks her, "Does it make you feel merry?" (546). Ellen avers, "Not *merry*, sir, – it isn't *merry*; but I like it very much" (546). Ellen explains that she particularly likes the hymn's emphasis on heaven, and she offers a description of heaven in largely affective terms. She calls it "a bright and happy place...where there is no darkness, nor sorrow, nor death, neither pain nor crying; – and my mother is there, and my dear Alice, and my Saviour is there; and I hope I shall be there too" (546). Her uncle then observes, "You are shedding tears now, Ellen" (546). She is thus moved to clarify what feelings produce these particular tears: "And if I am, sir, it is not because I am unhappy. It doesn't make me unhappy to think of these things – it makes me glad" (546).

This short scene seems to be a straightforward encapsulation of the well-known, and well-worn, dynamics of sentimental literature: it propounds Christian values, records the pain of loss and separation, counters that pain with the hope of a heavenly reunion,



revolves around a virtuous and acquiescent young heroine, and includes a focus on her intense feelings. Appropriately enough, the scene culminates with Ellen's tears, that paradigmatic marker of sentimentality. However, neither those tears nor the feelings they materialize are as easy to read as they might initially seem; indeed, the novel's very description of Ellen's tears challenges their transparency. We do not actually see her tears in this scene: there is no description of them coursing down her face or slowly dropping from her eyes. Instead, they are conjured by dialogue alone, by her uncle Lindsay's notice of them and Ellen's consequent attempt to explain them. This scene therefore makes clear that our relationship to Ellen's tears is thoroughly mediated by text, language, and observation, and it therefore emphasizes our dependence as readers on the ability of text to relay emotion to us. However, this scene also calls that ability into question because these sentimental tears resist easy explanation. Ellen nonetheless attempts to provide one. In her description of heaven as place without darkness, sorrow, death, pain and crying, Ellen advances the conjunction of tears and suffering only then to revoke it by firmly stating that she is not crying because she is sad. Ellen ends up formulating her tears as the expression of some deep feeling that is "[n]ot *merry*" and "not...unhappy."

Though Ellen's tears undoubtedly materialize what she is feeling, they do not function here as straightforward or stable signifiers. Slippery and mobile, they instead resist Ellen's – and the novel's – attempts to explain their cause. Ellen's tears therefore signal the sentimental novel's imperative to capture emotion and to communicate even the vagaries of feeling, but, in this scene, her tears also register the novel's inability to do so fully. In this description of Ellen's tears, *The Wide, Wide World* probes the legibility

of emotion. In its ultimately failed attempt to tell us how to read them, it also sounds the limits of readerly direction.

This chapter argues that the sentimental novel confronts both halves of the narrative problem arising from the combination of text and emotion: how first to translate emotion into text and how then to translate that text into readerly emotion. To manage this potentially volatile, but potentially productive combination, the sentimental novel directs its own reading, instructing its readers in both how and how not to feel and how and how not to read.<sup>1</sup> To pursue these claims, I turn to *The Wide, Wide World*, for not only is Warner's novel one of the tradition's paradigmatic texts, but it also particularly demonstrates how the sentimental novel takes up, turns over, and interrogates the paired dynamics of reading and feeling.<sup>2</sup> As a paradigmatic sentimental novel, *The Wide, Wide World* tells a familiar story.<sup>3</sup> It follows its young heroine, Ellen Montgomery, through a series of trials and tribulations that begins with Ellen's painful separation from her mother, which casts Ellen out into the titular wide, wide world – or, more precisely, into the home of her unsympathetic aunt, Miss Fortune Emerson. As the novel progresses, Ellen undertakes a continuing and constant quest to subdue her own desires and to submit to God's often inscrutable will. Along the way, she must contend with a variety of troubles, including the death of her mother; the death of her best friend, Alice Humphreys; her separation from her adoptive family and removal to Scotland; and, more mundanely, her persistently unruly passions. Ellen withstands these trials, and the conclusion of the novel implies that Ellen will be rewarded, as sentimental heroines usually are, with a desirable marriage.

In telling this story, Warner's sentimental novel manages our reading of it through two primary modes of direction. The first is the novel's construction and deployment of sentimentality, a form of directed feeling that tells readers how to feel. Relying on discourse and convention to produce this particular form of familiar feeling, the sentimental novel first organizes and then communicates emotion to its readers. *The Wide, Wide World's* second mode of direction lies in its rhetorical staging of scenes of reading and, more particularly, in its focus on its exemplary reader, Ellen Montgomery. By modeling and recommending Ellen's mode of directed reading to its readers, Warner's novel argues for both the productivity and the pleasure of adhering to readerly direction. However, in its drive towards directed feeling and directed reading, Warner's novel measures not only the promise, but also the danger of the emotive reading it seeks to produce. *The Wide, Wide World* therefore unexpectedly performs a deeply held and ultimately unresolved ambivalence about its particular conjunction of text and emotion, about how that conjunction may produce both directed and undirected reading.

Mapping how *The Wide, Wide World* translates emotion into text and text back into emotion requires precise definitions of the terminology – affect, emotion, feeling, passion – that I have already begun to employ. Charles Altieri, Jonathan Flatley, and Sianne Ngai have offered useful, if sometimes contradictory rubrics for understanding the distinctions and interactions among these terms, and their definitional work informs the discussion that follows.<sup>4</sup> For example, Ngai's description of the difference between emotion and affect as, respectively, the difference between “first-person [and] third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by an identity [and] feeling that is not” is operative in this chapter (27). To understand how sentimentality

narrativizes and deploys emotion, though, I primarily rely on the distinction that Brian Massumi draws between affect and emotion. Massumi defines affect as “intensity,” as “temporal and narrative noise,” and emotion as the narrativization of affect, or affect given “function and meaning” (28). Massumi understands emotion, though, as registering both the capture of affect and its escape, an escape that “*cannot but be perceived, alongside...its capture*” (36). I take up these generative distinctions at more length in the following section, in which I consider how sentimentality exploits both emotion’s capture of affect and its register of affective escape. I also at times use the term “feeling” to connote the sensory, immediate experience of emotion by a subject, as I do at the opening of this chapter when I discuss the intense, if vague feelings that produce Ellen’s “[n]ot *merry*” and “not...unhappy” tears. I employ the words “passion” and “temper” to indicate the excessive, unmanageable, and hence material emotions of Ellen and other sentimental heroines – intense emotions that, I will argue, are simultaneously undesirable and highly useful within the pages of the sentimental novel.

As it interrogates its translation of affect, emotion, feeling, and passion into text, *The Wide, Wide World* self-reflexively embeds the story of reading a sentimental novel within its very pages, telling this story with an eye to its own reading. This story is not only about the success of directed reading, but also about its failure. The didacticism of the sentimental novel has largely been taken for granted, questioned only tangentially when critics disagree over what message – subversive or hegemonic – the novel imparts. Even those critics who identify an ambivalence within sentimental novels, who contend that these novels contain both subversive and hegemonic elements, argue that sentimental novels communicate that ambivalence and therefore succeed in a different kind of

teaching. For example, Susan K. Harris describes novels like those of Warner as “Janus-faced texts accessible to Janus-faced readers,” and Joanne Dobson identifies the sentimental novel’s “narrative strategies which serve at one and the same time to screen and reveal rebellious insights” (Harris 20; Dobson “Hidden” 224).<sup>5</sup> More recently, Susan S. Williams has questioned the didacticism of Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854) by explicating its construction of authorship. She argues that Cummins’s novel complicates the lessons it would teach by “anatomiz[ing] reading as both open-ended and cumulative,” a strategy that makes this sentimental novel “a remarkably open text” (*Reclaiming* 95, 90).

These accounts of the sentimental novel’s message and the means by which it is communicated depend on the assumption that the sentimental novel’s didactic project works, that the novel successfully teaches its readers. Accordingly, the sentimental novel might disguise, but still deliver subversive content, or it might advance a particular construction of reading in a self-conscious effort to complicate its teaching. Like Williams, I argue that the sentimental novel interrogates the effects of its own reading and how those effects rebound onto it. Unlike these critics, though, I contend that *The Wide, Wide World*’s inclusion of a self-reflexive story about how it should be read indicates that its particular combination of emotion and text threatens to escape direction, that the sentimental novel’s didactic ends may well be undercut by the means that it employs. In this chapter, I am therefore not arguing that Warner’s novel advances a particularly subversive or hegemonic message or that it occupies some didactic middle-ground. Instead, I locate doubt and unease within this sentimental novel, qualities that

arise from a concern with how any message can be advanced through the combination of reading and feeling, a combination that can and does escape direction.

This chapter maps how *The Wide, Wide World* consistently returns to the problem of its reception, and I argue that the attempts at readerly direction that pervade Warner's novel reveal an ambivalent concern with reception, with the risks and rewards of reading with feeling. In the pages that follow, I turn first to *The Wide, Wide World's* deployment of sentimentality. By explicating scenes in which Ellen's passionate emotions break from her body and become material, I offer an account of the ways in which emotion inevitably escapes both from Ellen's body and from the novel's direction. However, I also trace how the novel works to make even that wayward emotion useful by situating it within the generic conventions of sentimentality. In the second section, I focus on the potential that the novel locates in Ellen's marked books – books given to her that are inscribed and annotated for her benefit. The novel identifies these marked books as particularly fruitful and stable combinations of text and emotion that may productively direct Ellen's reading; her marked books therefore work to indicate the benefits of directed reading. I conclude by considering moments in which Ellen's tears escape her control, her reading becomes all too passionate, and she becomes lost within her books – moments when Ellen's feelings and her reading explicitly escape direction.

As *The Wide, Wide World* translates emotion into text and directs its readers how to translate that text back into emotion, it makes clear that this project of translation does not always succeed. Though the sentimental novel has been often understood as false and inauthentic, there is a raw truth in recording the collapse of its fantasy of direction. The at times spectacular failure of the sentimental novel's attempts at direction

orchestrate a different kind of pedagogy that operates through the sentimental novel. The pedagogy of directed reading and directed feeling paradoxically – and unexpectedly – licenses an active reader. By narrating its ambivalence about feeling and reading and the breakdown of its direction, the sentimental novel makes its doubt didactic, using it to make readers aware of their autonomy, of their ability both to capitulate to and resist the designs of even the most sentimental text. We may therefore understand the failure of directed reading as a kind of productive mismanagement that licenses the pleasures of both adhering to and flaunting direction, of responsive and rebellious feeling. The rhetorical self-doubt and the acute generic self-consciousness that circulate through *The Wide, Wide World* therefore prove crucial to the very project of reading sentimental fiction, making this genre compelling, vital, and, ultimately, true.

#### I. Constructing Sentiment and Directing Feeling

In brief asides within their narratives, which initially seem to be forgettable stallings of narrative progression, sentimental authors often question the ability of language to communicate emotion. Caroline Lee Hentz's *Ernest Linwood* (1856) differs from its generic compatriots in that its asides are paragraph-long meditations on this inability and the frustration it occasions. Hentz's novel is narrated by its protagonist, Gabriella Lynn, who from time to time interrupts the narrative to reflect upon – and call attention to – the fact of her authorship. At one point, she registers incredulity at her act of writing a book, denying that she is doing so and asserting instead that “[t]his is only a record of my heart’s life, written at random and carelessly thrown aside, sheet after sheet, sibylline leaves from the great book of fate” (64).<sup>6</sup> Despite this protestation, Gabriella

later reflects on the problems of authorship and particularly on the trials of an author writing “a record of my heart’s life”:

What am I writing? Sometimes I throw down the pen, saying to myself, “it is all folly, all verbiage. There is a history within worth perusing, but I cannot bring it forth to light. I turn over page after page with the fingers of thought. I see characters glowing or darkened with passion, – lines alternately bright and shadowy, distinct and obscure, and it seems an easy thing to make a transcript of these for the outward world. Easy! It requires the recording angel’s pen to register the history of the human heart. ‘The thoughts that breathe, the thoughts that burn,’ how can they be expressed? The mere act of clothing them in words makes them grow cold and dull. The molten gold, the fused iron hardens and chills in the forming mould. Easy!” (156)

The difficulty of capturing her experience, of what the subtitle of Hentz’s novel calls “The Inner Life of the Author,” here becomes a problem of capturing emotion or, more particularly, emotional extremities.<sup>7</sup> As Gabriella avers, “characters glowing or darkened with passion,” “the history of the human heart,” “the thoughts that breathe, the thoughts that burn” somehow become reified and cold in “[t]he mere act of clothing them in words,” in fitting them within “the forming mould” of language.

Gabriella Lynn is not the only character to observe the difficulty, if not impossibility, of fully communicating the vital, thrilling experience of emotion within the pages of even a sentimental text. As Harrington pointedly observes in William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), “Expression is feeble when emotions are



exquisite” (31). The prevalence of similar observations in sentimental novels suggests that they constitute a trope of this genre, and, as such, they surface in *The Wide, Wide World*. In describing the last meeting between Ellen Montgomery and her mother, one of the most affecting scenes in her novel, Warner writes that Ellen utters “a cry of indescribable expression” as she enters her mother’s bedroom for the last time (63). As she and her mother commence their leave-taking, neither of them speak: “What could words say? Heart met heart in that agony, for each knew all that was in the other” (63). Here, Ellen and her mother exist in perfect, and perfectly silent, sympathy: mere speech is superfluous to their shared experience of extreme love and extreme agony.<sup>8</sup> In two registers, then, that of the author describing her heroine from outside of the novel and that of her heroine encountering her mother within the novel, words are either unequal to or unnecessary for the task of communicating emotion. Speaking of the relation of emotion to language in Warner’s novel, Patricia Crain argues, “The famous tears of *The Wide, Wide World* flow into the inevitable gaps in language; they are the syntax of the unsayable” (153). In their narration of tears and other expressions of intense feeling, sentimental novels nonetheless demonstrate a desire to say the “unsayable,” to fit emotion into the “forming mould” of sentimental conventions and to enable it to be communicated. In doing so, though, the sentimental novel confronts the limits of its ability to communicate and circulate emotion.

The project of the sentimental novel, then, is to fashion text into a medium for emotion, to capture emotion in narrative and deliver it to readers. To do so, the sentimental novel exploits sentimentality’s particular brand of emotion, a mobile, material, discursive formation that can be communicated through text. Describing how

sentimentality creates that emotion first requires a precise definition of sentimentality, a capacious term too often emptied of meaning by its scattershot deployment. In posing and answering the question “What is sentimentality,” June Howard suggests, “Most broadly, when we call an artifact or gesture sentimental, we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible” (245). According to Howard, though, it is precisely the visibility of those “discursive processes” that undermines “the spontaneity, the sincerity, and the legitimacy” of the emotion that sentimentality produces (219). However, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon convincingly argues that the construction of emotion by discourse advances its ability to be communicated and its utility. Dillon argues that sentimentality has a dual nature, which includes “both an affective immediacy (subjective autonomy) and a formal heteronomy – the connection of emotion to political and cultural ideals and aims” (“Sentimental” 515). In Dillon’s formulation, the “formal heteronomy” of sentimentality– its “putting to use of emotion” – makes it suspect: “The excessive nature of sentimentalism might be seen to lie in the way in which emotion is placed in the service of other ends” (“Sentimental” 515).

As Howard and Dillon argue, sentimentality’s overt use of convention and discourse to construct and relay emotion drives the perception of sentimentality as false or contrived, but it also enables emotion to be communicated. Tompkins argues that the stereotypes that figure so prominently in sentimental literature function in the same way: stereotypes “operate as a cultural shorthand” and serve as “the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value” (*Sensational* xvi). As such, stereotypes increase the accessibility of sentimental fiction and enhance its ability to communicate, and even

transfer, emotion. Dobson convincingly links these formal characteristics of the genre with its content: “An emphasis on accessible language, a clear prose style, and familiar lyric and narrative patterns defines an aesthetic whose primary quality of transparency is generated by a valorization of connection, an impulse toward communication with as wide an audience as possible” (“Reclaiming” 268). Sentimentality is therefore a particular discourse of emotion that signals its mediation by culture, is characterized by excess, demonstrates a belief in its instrumentality, and reaches out, in highly formalized ways, to touch its audience. Sentimentality therefore undertakes a particular narrativization of emotion, one that becomes textual within the sentimental novel.

Brian Massumi’s distinction between affect and emotion parallels the distinction that Howard advances between emotion and sentiment. Massumi essentially contends that emotion is the narrativization of affect, a fitting of affect into narrative that renders it transmissible. He argues that affect, which he also calls intensity, is “temporal and narrative noise” that “is in excess of any narrative or functional line” (26). In contrast, he identifies emotion as the “*capture*” of affect, “qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning” (35, 28). In Massumi’s understanding, then, affect becomes functional and meaningful only when it is narrativized into emotion, and he describes emotion as “the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture*” of affect (35). We can better understand sentimentality through the model that Massumi presents, for sentimentality fits emotion into narrative, into discourse, and therefore endows it with “function and meaning.” Sentimentality therefore represents a distilled, intense, narrative capture of emotion, a

capture that is advanced by the turn to discourse to which Howard, Dillon, Tompkins, and Dobson rightly point us.

However, the perception of sentimentality as inauthentic or excessive indicates a certain skepticism about its ability to capture emotion fully or convincingly. When understood as a particular narrative of emotion, then, sentimentality often carries a tinge of failure. Massumi similarly locates a kind of failure in emotion, as he argues that emotion cannot capture all of the “narrative noise” that is affect. In his thinking, the presence of emotion therefore registers both the capture of affect and “the fact that something has always and again escaped” (35). Though emotion necessarily signals both affective capture *and* affective escape, both success and failure, Massumi locates possibility in that failure, for he argues that affective escape, if it can be “put into words,” signals “nothing less than the *perception of one’s own vitality*, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability” (36).<sup>9</sup> Massumi thereby advances an understanding of affect as highly protean, mobile, and vital, and he argues that those qualities attend even the capture of affect – emotion. By linking Massumi’s concepts of affective capture and escape to her theorization of tone, Sianne Ngai offers one way to understand how “the autonomy of affect” – its resistance to capture – might function in literary texts (Massumi 35). Ngai advances the concept of tone as “a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world” and argues that this “affective-aesthetic idea of tone...is reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story” (43, 41). Ngai’s conceptualization of tone therefore suggests that texts are able both to register “affective escape” and exploit it as a formal characteristic (56).

Massumi's theorization of the autonomy of affect is an argument, then, for affect's mobility. By extension, Massumi also offers us a way to conceptualize emotion and its residual mobility, to understand emotion as "qualified intensity" but to remind ourselves that emotion, as the signal of affect's capture *and* escape, is still intense, still noisy. Lauren Berlant characterizes the "conventions, stereotypes, and forms" employed within sentimental texts as "the diacritics of congealed feeling that characterize the cultural scene of sentimentality" ("Poor" 301). Her use of the word "congealed" indicates her skepticism about the ability of emotion to retain any measure of mobility once it has been translated by and fixed in the conventions of sentimentality. In contrast, it is precisely through their turn to sentimentality that novels like *The Wide, Wide World* demonstrate their investment in the mobility of emotion, in its ability to move through and out of the pages of a text and into the bodies of its readers. The sentimental tradition's construction of and reliance on codes, "cultural shorthand," and formulaic conventions therefore represent an attempt to narrativize emotion so as to harness its mobility, to tether emotion to narrative in such a way that it may be released into the body of the reader. However, another trope of sentimental literature – the puzzling commonplace that emotional experience can never be fully communicated through language, that something always eludes representation – registers another truth: even when the sentimental novel successfully captures emotion, it necessarily registers affective escape. That escape entails a certain frustration, but it also holds a certain promise. Affect's mobility – its noise and its resonance – endows emotion, as the signal of affect's capture and its escape, with mobility and resonance, with the ability to move in and across bodies.

Attending to both the success and the failure of sentimentality's particular translation of emotion into text recasts our understanding of sentimentality and how it adopts and adapts feeling. Critics often identify sentimentality's operative, but mistaken assumption that feeling can be communicated and transferred with ease through the pages of a text. In this vein, Franny Nudelman articulates the "sentimental investment in the perfect communicability of intense feeling," the "assum[ption] that emotional experience can be directly embodied, and thus perfectly communicated, in written language" ("Harriet" 944). Glenn Hendler renames this assumption as a "fantasy" – a "fantasy that affective intensity...can enable communication across...[difference]," a "fantasy of transparent communicability" that is endemic to sentimental texts (144-45, 145). However, *The Wide, Wide World* narrates the collapse of that fantasy and relinquishes the assumption of perfect communication, demonstrating that the ways that emotion functions in sentimental texts did not go unexamined or unchallenged.

In the repetitious descriptions of Ellen's feelings and her tears, of her almost constantly moved and therefore moving body, lies a perception of emotion as highly mobile, protean, and amorphous, as simultaneously able to be translated into text and resistant to that translation. Even as the emotions of sentimentality are constructed by discourse and language, then, they can yet exceed text and textual direction. The sentimental project is therefore one of momentarily stabilizing emotion through sentimental discourse so that it may be communicated. To do so, *The Wide, Wide World* constructs Ellen as a locus of feeling, and it makes her emotions both expressive and legible by making them material – by translating them into her famous, omnipresent tears. While the novel persistently narrates emotional display and even argues for its

utility by showing the attention and sympathy that Ellen's tears attract, it yet nominally advises Ellen to exercise a perfect control over her feelings and her body. Again and again, then, the novel pits Ellen and her self-control against the tears that it both desires and needs, but it rigs the contest in favor of communication, in favor of those wayward tears. As the novel rightly repeats in regard to its heroine, "Poor Ellen" (157).

This indecision regarding whether feelings should be expressed or stifled, noticed or ignored, reflects an ambivalence about the promise and danger of sentimentality, about the emotion it captures and the affect that escapes it. Novels like *The Wide, Wide World* use sentimentality to narrativize emotion, to signal both its translation into text and its ability to resonate beyond it. The mobility of emotion may advance the sentimental project to direct readers, but that mobility also undercuts this project, for the mobile emotions of sentimentality can take on a life, and an agency, of their own. In pursuing the communicability of emotion by deploying the conventions of sentimentality, novels like *The Wide, Wide World* confront the limits of that communication, and, in using sentimentality to direct the feelings of its readers, sentimental texts are brought up against the limits of that direction. Within the sentimental novel lies the realization that sentimentality may counter, perhaps harness, but never obviate the potential for emotion's escape from language, from narrative, and from direction; therein lies the ambivalence about the turn to sentimentality.

From the outset of the novel, Ellen's feelings are passionately experienced, strongly expressed, and therefore, within the economy of the sentimental novel, "very imperfectly controlled" (Warner 11). In contrast, Warner's descriptions of Ellen's emotions are quite controlled and rather meticulous. Tompkins calls "Warner's

registration of psychic turmoil...excruciatingly precise,” and Dobson argues that Warner provides “a minutely detailed and intensely felt sense of [Ellen’s] emotional landscape...” (Afterword 585; “Hidden” 229). These “excruciatingly precise” and “minutely detailed” accounts of Ellen’s feelings are an important component of the novel’s drive to communicate emotion; they therefore preoccupy the novel from its inception. For example, only a few pages into the novel, when Ellen first suspects that her father and mother’s trip to Europe will not include her, she casts an “imploring look of mingled astonishment, terror, and sorrow” on her mother (11). When her fear of an impending separation is confirmed, Ellen succumbs to her feelings: “With a wild cry she flung her arms round her mother, and hiding her face in her lap, gave way to a violent burst of grief that seemed for a few moments as if it would rend soul and body in twain” (11). This description of the violence of Ellen’s reaction and its threat to split her in half demonstrates just how undesirable Ellen’s extreme emotions and imperfect self-control are within this sentimental novel. Mrs. Montgomery’s response to Ellen’s affective outburst frames that undesirability in a memorable dictum: she famously warns her passionate daughter, “[T]hough we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel” (12).<sup>10</sup> In other words, though Ellen must and will feel, she must not express those feelings in “wild cr[ies]” or “violent bursts of grief” – or even, I suspect, at all.

The narrative commitment to the precise detailing of what Ellen is feeling and how her body displays those feelings necessarily undermines Ellen’s drive towards emotional self-control. Indeed, Ellen’s emotions must break free of her control so that the novel might capture and deliver them to the reader, and Ellen’s body is conscripted into this narrative project. This dynamic both literalizes and twists Massumi’s theoretical



argument that affective escape is the necessary corollary to affective capture, to emotion. *The Wide, Wide World*, in its attention to Ellen's persistently unruly emotions, demonstrates that her emotions must – and will – escape her, but the novel then packages those fugitive emotions in Ellen's tears, the most resonant signal of sentimentality's highly legible, directable, textual emotion. Even in its attention to those tears, though, the novel signals that something yet eludes narrative capture, that something frustrates representation. The escape of Ellen's emotions from her body therefore parallels and calls attention to affect's escape from its capture in emotion, and the acknowledged mobility of both emotion and affect advances and undermines the direction of feeling.

The attention to Ellen's body within *The Wide, Wide World* demonstrates just how much this heroine feels and just how easily her body registers her feelings. References to Ellen's "flushed cheek, quivering lip, and heaving bosom," to her "sparkling eye, and a brow grave with unusual care" recur throughout the novel, offering us physical evidence of and textual access to the feelings that occupy her (25, 30). *The Wide, Wide World* therefore makes Ellen's intense feelings legible for its readers by registering, and even reveling in, their display. Other sentimental heroines in this era receive similar treatment. Gerty Flint in Cummins's *The Lamplighter* is initially described as possessing an "ungoverned and easily roused nature" (34). After some initial hiccups, the novel charts Gerty's progressive subduing of her temper, which inevitably surfaces later. When it does, *The Lamplighter* records Gerty's passionate emotions and dwells over her solitary, physical struggle to subdue her temper before anyone notices its outbreak. Only *after* doing so does the novel applaud Gerty's bringing her temper into submission, her achievement of what the novel calls "the greatest of

earth's victories, a victory over herself" (117). Though that "victory" entails Gerty's silence about the wrongs that prompted her temper's revival, the novel does not maintain that silence, and the illusion of it is broken even within the narrative, as other characters later learn of the wrong Gerty has suffered and applaud her self-mastery.

In *Ruth Hall* (1855), Fanny Fern also lingers over the description of her heroine's suffering in her new husband's family home. Ruth endeavors to remain silent about the frustrations she faces in the home of her hostile in-laws, moving through their home "as if she were deaf, dumb, and blind" (23). Despite her efforts, her husband notes her "inward struggles, marked only by fits of feverish gaiety...the tell-tale blush, or starting tear," and "bend[s] the silent knee of homage to that youthful self-control" (23). Fern herself takes this opportunity to lament "the secret history of many a wife's heart," calling these silent wives "martyrs...over whose uncomplaining lips the grave sets its unbroken seal of silence" (23). However, she attenuates the weight of Ruth's silence by her husband's, and the narrator's, attentive sympathy. Another tempestuous sentimental heroine, Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), also receives narrative sympathy as she tries to quell her temper, with the narrator noting her "hard times trying to curb the fiery spirit which was continually getting her into trouble" (74). After a particularly virulent outbreak, Jo discusses her temper with her mother, leading Marmee to admit her own constant battle with that particular demon. In a surprising confession for this mild-mannered woman, Marmee says, "I am angry nearly every day of my life...but I have learned not to show it" (79). Jo's future attempts to conceal her temper escape neither her mother nor the narrator, as the subsequent inclusion of a letter from her mother applauding Jo's continued efforts makes clear.<sup>11</sup>

In these instances, the sentimental novel demonstrates a commitment to narrating emotional display even as its heroines are encouraged to swallow their feelings. However, as these novels suggest the undesirability of uncontrolled feeling, they also persistently describe the utility of wayward emotion both in interactions within the novel – between Ruth and her husband, Jo and Marmee – and in those that the novel envisions between itself and its readers. In drawing our attention to the autonomy of affect, its ability to resist capture, Massumi argues that “[a]ffect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (35). The unruly emotions of these sentimental heroines similarly contain the “potential for interaction”: they secure notice and sympathy and are therefore quite useful. That utility is the reason that sentimental novels guarantee the exposure of their heroines’ feelings, even if doing so requires undirected feeling.

The utility of undirected feeling is particularly clear in an episode in *The Wide, Wide World* that occurs on the steamboat transporting Ellen away from her mother and to her Aunt Fortune Emerson, an episode in which the reader’s attention outside the text is matched by a sympathetic spectator within it. Ellen overhears her travel companions, Mrs. Dunscombe and her daughter Margaret, talking derisively about her bonnet. Sensing an imminent outburst, Ellen seeks a place free from observation: “One wild wish for a hiding-place was the most pressing thought, – to be where tears could burst and her heart could break unseen” (67). While Ellen wishes for a “hiding-place” where she might be “unseen,” such a space does not exist within the sentimental novel. The narrative instead follows her to her hiding-place and revels in her exposure, delineating the violence of her outburst and perversely recording that the desire “to stifle every sound

of it” merely contributes to its vehemence (67). When Ellen does eventually emerge from her purported hiding-place, the novel catalogs the lingering effects of her outburst at length:

[H]er little face had a deep sadness of expression it was sorrowful to see. She was perfectly calm; her violent excitement had all left her; her lip quivered a very little sometimes, but that was all; and one or two tears rolled slowly down the side of face. Her eyes were fixed upon the dancing water, but it was very plain her thoughts were not, nor on any thing else before her; and there was a forlorn look of hopeless sorrow on her lip and cheek and brow, enough to move any body whose heart was not very hard. (68)

The novel bears witness to Ellen’s “deep sadness of expression,” her quivering lip, the escape of single tears, and that “forlorn look of hopeless sorrow on her lip and cheek and brow.” As Ellen’s emotions escape her and become material, the novel indicates that they also become contagious by describing her sorrowful face as “sorrowful to see” and as “enough to move any body whose heart was not very hard.” The novel supports this assertion by compounding her exposure and noting the attention she garners within the text. An old gentleman, who has noticed these marks of feeling, approaches Ellen and asks, “What is the matter with you, my little friend?” (68). Despite showing Ellen’s attempts to exert control and to conceal any evidence of her emotions, the novel zeroes in on even the minutest signals that all is not right and so frustrates her efforts.

Even as the novel seeks to inculcate an understanding of undirected emotion as undesirable and even harmful, it persistently describes the utility of that wayward

emotion, of Ellen's "rebel tears," by making them call attention to her and then work to her benefit (48). The instrumentality of sentimentality therefore derives from a certain inherent paradox. Sentimentality entails the capture and direction of emotion: the precise narrative descriptions of emotion and its packaging within literary forms and conventions enable it to be communicated to readers and reconstituted in their bodies. However, as these instances of Ellen's imperfect control attest, sentimentality also depends on a certain lack of control, on the escape of affect and the persistent mobility of emotion. That escape and that mobility, however, prove useful, allowing the novel to establish a link between its exposure of Ellen's vehement feelings and the invocation of sympathy both within the text and outside of it. The novel incorporates Ellen's undirected, wayward emotion by using it to direct the emotional responses of its readers, modeling sympathetic responses for them in the text. In these moments, the novel seeks to harness affective escape in order to circulate emotion, relying on readerly direction to do so.

In repeatedly calling attention to Ellen's inability to control her emotional expressions and the ability of her body to tell stories on her, the novel aims to collapse the distance between inward feeling and outward show.<sup>12</sup> Because, as we are repeatedly told, Ellen's body lies outside of her direction and frustrates any desire that she might have for concealment, the story that it helps the novel to tell should be straightforward. The novel therefore aims to convince its readers that tears and other expressions of emotion are the easily-readable manifestation of Ellen's deepest feelings and, as such, provide access to her heart. At times, this connection becomes literal. In one instance, "it seemed as if she would pour out her very heart in tears" (64); the novel later describes Ellen's tears as "that softened out-pouring of the heart that leaves it eased," and refers, in

a telling conflation, to “[a]ll the floodgates of Ellen’s heart” (429, 69). However, even in these descriptions that fuse emotion to emotional expression lies a concession to mobility. As Ellen’s heart pours out of her body, it creates a flood of text and tears, both slippery and mobile. The tears captured within Warner’s novel therefore possess a certain physical mobility that parallels what I understand as their interpretive mobility.

If Ellen’s feelings achieve a material presence through her body’s register of them, tears constitute a particular type of emotional materiality. As tears express Ellen’s emotions and make them legible for readers inside and outside of the text, they become a particularly important way that the sentimental novel narrates emotion and demonstrates its utility. Indeed, the materiality of Ellen’s tears is essential to their potential to direct action, as it allows them to circulate physically, to bridge the gap between characters’ bodies, and to prompt the reciprocal display of sympathy. Their instrumentality receives its greatest expression in the role they play in converting Mr. Van Brunt.<sup>13</sup> After he spends an afternoon reading hymns to Ellen as she lies sick in bed, she expresses her wish for his conversion and accompanies that spoken wish by bursting into tears. As he leaves, she kisses his hand. The novel then notes, “[W]hen he got out he stopped and looked at a little tear she had left on the back of it. And he looked till one of his own fell there to keep it company” (216). The impression that Ellen quite literally leaves forces an immediate reaction from Mr. Van Brunt and maintains its resonance in the novel by becoming figurative. The final page of the novel returns to this incident as a letter from Mr. Humphreys relates Mr. Van Brunt’s conversion. Mr. Humphreys writes, “[He] says his first thoughts (earnest ones) on the subject of religion were on the occasion of a tear that fell from Ellen’s eye upon his hand one day when she was talking to him about the

matter. He never got over the impression” (569). The novel here engineers the transfer of tears between bodies to accomplish a didactic end. *The Wide, Wide World* both witnesses, and teaches, the utility of tears, of their initially material presence and the lasting impression that they can make.

Just as tears often overpower Ellen, so do they overwhelm the perception of sentimental literature, with its detractors’ collapsing the intricacies of the sentimental text into the seemingly straightforward and therefore easily dismissed tears depicted within it. Pattee, after all, counted the novel’s instances of crying in order to lampoon the text that contains them; Herbert Ross Brown derisively described *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* as “tearful classics” (322); and Frank Luther Mott identified Warner’s novel as “this lachrymose and edifying masterpiece of its kind” (123).<sup>14</sup> These mid-twentieth-century critics continued the backlash against sentimentality that was present in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In an 1892 letter to the editor of *The Critic* titled “Tears, Idle Tears,” a reader signed F. S. D. objects, on the basis of its tears alone, to the placement of *The Wide, Wide World* near the top of a list of the hundred best novels in English. The reader calls Warner’s novel, with more than a hint of irony, “an extraordinary book, based upon an analytical synopsis of lamentations,” and then quotes from Warner’s novel to assemble an alphabetical list of “the variety of [Ellen’s] lachrymations” (236). To F. S. D.’s credit, the list is too exhaustive to quote here.

The tears of sentimentality are not as easy to read and then dismiss as the genre’s detractors would like to believe. Indeed, in response to critics like Pattee and this initialed reader, feminist critics have capitalized on this accepted link between tears and sentimental literature to complicate and deepen our understanding of both. Nancy

Schnog, Nina Baym, and Jane Tompkins read Ellen's tears as what Schnog terms "a valid and authentic response to traumas well known to a large segment of Warner's nineteenth-century readership, although no longer visible or familiar to us today" (12). For Baym, Ellen's tears function as an outlet for and expression of her rage and frustration, and Tompkins argues that Ellen's tears perversely result from emotional suppression and therefore record the pain and rage that suppression occasions (*Woman's* 144; *Sensational* 172-73). Catherine O'Connell calls for an even more precise approach to Ellen's tears, arguing that the novel provides, and critics should unearth, "an exacting narrative titration [of] how and why Ellen is suffering each time she cries" (25-26). However, there are numerous instances, including that which begins this chapter, in which Ellen's tears do not signify suffering, a fact that promises to complicate further the "exacting narrative titration" to which O'Connell alludes.

I agree with these critics that tears are the telltale sign of a sentimental text, but I argue that *their* tale remains largely untold. Within the pages of sentimental texts, tears signal the presence of excessive emotion, communicate the deep feelings of those who cry them, and lubricate sympathy. They are therefore essential to the dynamics of the sentimental novel, and not only insofar as they perform their intended duty and stay within the bounds that the sentimental text sets for them. In delineating those bounds, Jonathan Elmer argues that tears signal "the very inextricability of text and body, reading and affect, that sentimentalism both needs and *needs to regulate*" (103, my emphasis). In his discussion of the confluences and divergences between sentimentality and sensationalism, Elmer argues that sentimentality exploits materiality and then expels it: "Entailed by sentimentalism's move from affect to meaning, from word to idea, from



narrative to norm, is a kind of ceaseless dropping-out of the materiality of discourse” (107).<sup>16</sup> In Elmer’s thinking, sensationalism takes advantage of that expulsion, using the uncanny return of materiality to spur an affective reaction. However, the progressions that he details are not as easy to accomplish as Elmer implies. Instead, there is a palpable unease in the sentimental novel about the ability of sentimentality’s particular conjunction of emotion and narrative, tears and text, to accomplish this “move from affect to meaning, from word to idea.” The sentimental novel therefore does not expel materiality but stalls over it, as the almost constant attention to Ellen’s tears, quivering lip, and pale face demonstrates.

Sentimentality narrates emotion to communicate it, to relay it to its readers. The materiality of emotion is an integral component of the sentimental project, for it promises to move the precisely detailed and meticulously described emotion circulating within the text outside of it and into the bodies of its readers. As I have argued, Ellen’s mobile, material feelings persistently cross, and even collapse, the novel’s stated bounds of propriety and thereby undercut the novel’s advocacy of emotional restraint. In doing so, they may also collapse other boundaries, such as the one that exists between reader and text. Critics link the palpable presence of emotion and the performance of sympathy within the text to the novel’s ability to conjure both sympathy and emotion in its readers. For example, Elizabeth Barnes argues that sentimental literature “attempt[s] to both represent and *reproduce* sympathetic attachments between readers and characters” (5); Glenn Hendler agrees, stating that “sympathy in sentimental fiction is essentially mimetic” (128). Karen Sánchez-Eppler maintains that the emotion in sentimental literature shares this orientation; she contends that “the palpability of the character’s

emotional experience is precisely what allows it to be shared” and therefore argues, “Reading sentimental fiction is...a bodily act...” (*Touching* 27, 26). In connecting the bodily display of emotion within the novel to affective production outside of it, Sánchez-Eppler particularly emphasizes the utility of tears: “[T]ears designate a border realm between the story and its reading, since the tears shed by characters initiate an answering moistness in the reader’s eye. The assurance in this fiction that emotion can be attested and measured by physical response makes this conflation possible...” (*Touching* 27). These arguments that emotion can be transferred from text to reader, that tears within the text can become tears outside of it, imply the potential of sentimentality’s particular brand of mobile, material, textual emotion.

These critical views about the seemingly easy transition from representation to reproduction credit the convergence of directed feeling and directed reading that is the project of sentimental literature. As I have argued, though, there is doubt within the sentimental text as to whether it can accomplish the transition from representation to reproduction, from affective materiality to meaning. In the sentimental novel, then, tears indicate the inability of emotion to be fully communicated and directed, to be written and read. Sentimentality’s particular translation of emotion into text therefore foregrounds the failure of that translation by calling attention to the way in which affect escapes emotion, emotion escapes Ellen, and tears escape narration. In translating emotion, sentimental novels ultimately remain true to it, for the material expression of emotion in Ellen’s and sentimentality’s famous tears preserves the quality of that emotion by reminding us of intensity and noise and escape. Although sentimental novels are premised on the desire for and the knowledge of the impossibility of a stable linkage

between text and emotion, they self-consciously remain the product of the protean, affective interactions, directed or otherwise, between text and reader. Even as sentimental novels seek to direct their readers in the project of reading with feeling, they imply that even the sentimental novel may escape disciplinary bounds. This is the invigorating potential and enervating frustration of the sentimental novel.

## II. Marked Books and Directed Reading

Reading sentiment comprises both directed feeling and directed reading, but, as I have argued, the sentimental novel demonstrates an ambivalence about the textual tears and the mobile emotions that both escape from and are captured within its pages. Despite the novel's attempts to translate emotion into text and to direct feeling, an undercurrent of doubt attends its efforts. The novel therefore turns to another mode of direction and focuses its attention on a second mechanism of translation – the reader. *The Wide, Wide World* funnels its attempts at directed reading through its model reader, Ellen Montgomery, and her marked books. Three marked books circulate through *The Wide, Wide World* – an inscribed Bible given to Ellen by her mother, a hymnbook that George Marshman marks for her benefit, and a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that John Humphreys inundates with annotations.<sup>17</sup> While Ellen's reading is directed by diverse methods and by a variety of people, her marked books function as particularly potent symbols of directed, or mediated, reading, ones that resonate readily with the novel's own discourse and the avenues of direction open to it.<sup>18</sup> Ellen's marked books therefore allow the novel to make a compelling argument for the ability of emotion and text to combine in highly productive ways. However, as they seek to circumscribe both text and reader, these marked books also signal the interpretive mobility and potentially

unbridled power of text. In two rich scenes in which Ellen's emotional investment in texts becomes extreme, the novel acknowledges that its reading direction may not always hold, and even that it may not hold because it works all too well. As *The Wide, Wide World* lingers over these moments when its exemplary reader and her emotions become unruly, it registers the insufficiency of its direction. Ellen therefore not only serves as the novel's model reader, but also functions as the embodiment of both the success and the failure of directed reading.

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in Ellen's reading, using it to extend earlier critical arguments regarding the nature of power and its availability to women in Warner's novel. Critics like Gillian Silverman and Kevin Ball therefore argue that Ellen's reading is both a bid for and a relinquishment of power, that it produces what Elizabeth Fekete Trubey calls "imagined acts of rebellion" but also acts as an agent of self-subordination (57). This debate over whether Ellen's reading ultimately empowers or disempowers her effects a return to the Douglas-Tompkins debate over the cultural value of sentimental fiction.<sup>19</sup> Taken together, these studies recognize, both implicitly and explicitly, that Warner's novel reflected and could shape current practices of reading and, on a more obvious yet critical note, that reading was a matter of importance to the novel's author, its protagonist, and its readers. Even in their disagreements, then, critics who consider Ellen's reading fundamentally argue that reading had power both in Warner's novel and in the culture in which it circulated. The sentimental novel's frank appraisal of the failure of its efforts at direction, of the ultimate undirectability of emotive reading, offers a different perspective on how the novel negotiates, narrates, and licenses both the power of reading and its pleasures.

*The Wide, Wide World* most explicitly registers its project of directed reading in Ellen's marked books, which materialize her direction as a reader. Each of Ellen's marked books represents the ability of text to forge affective connections by standing in for its giver. In recording the direction of Ellen's reading through the tangible, textual presences of Mrs. Montgomery, Marshman, and Humphreys, her marked books may then mediate Ellen's relationships with their givers. They thereby give a textual slant to the "self-in-relation" that Dobson rightly argues lies at the heart of the sentimental genre ("Reclaiming" 267).<sup>20</sup> Indeed, texts function as metonymic substitutes for people within the novel and so possess the ability to counter the pain of separation.<sup>21</sup> As they sustain affective connections, Ellen's marked books also impart reading direction. In fact, these two functions are interdependent: her marked books mediate Ellen's reading by the inclusion of introjected textual presences, which in turn enable these books to mediate Ellen's relationships. Ellen's books promise to advance discipline and the direction of reading; they also offer to record and stabilize affect. However, in aiming to discipline Ellen's reading and to organize affect, Ellen's marked books perversely signal the interpretive mobility of text and its potentially unbridled affective power.<sup>22</sup>

Ellen's Bible is both the first book she is given and the first to be marked for her benefit, establishing the pattern of marked books that circulates through Warner's novel.<sup>23</sup> Through its physical appearance and her mother's inscription of it, this Bible serves to connect Ellen to her mother and thereby serves as a symbol of the connective power not only of religion but also of text.<sup>24</sup> Ellen selects her Bible on a shopping expedition with her mother; with her mother's guidance, Ellen eventually settles on an appropriate volume that looks very much like the one owned by her mother. As Ellen

pages through her Bible, she is pleased by the similarity between what the Bible and her mother say, in the shared content of their religious speech: “The words that caught her eye as she turned over the leaves seemed to echo what her mother had been saying to her. It began to grow dear already” (41). However, Ellen desires something more tangible and more lasting than this echo and therefore invites her mother “to write my name in this precious book – my name, and any thing else you please, mother” (41). Her mother accedes to Ellen’s request, writing two quotations from the Bible as an inscription to her daughter: “I love them that love Me; and they that seek Me early shall find Me” and “I will be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee” (42). Though these words are not her own, Mrs. Montgomery reinscribes and therefore reauthorizes them, ascribing a kind of divine maternity to herself in the process.<sup>25</sup> At the threshold of her daughter’s book, Mrs. Montgomery conditions Ellen’s entry into and travel through it.

Of course, Mrs. Montgomery’s written directives for reading the Bible are hardly unorthodox. However, her act of inscribing Ellen’s Bible initiates a significant pattern that will continue to shape Warner’s novel and Ellen’s reading. Importantly, Ellen both invites and is delighted by the transformative incursion of her mother’s textual presence into her new Bible, a presence that makes this possession all the more dear to her. Slight though it may be here, Ellen welcomes reading direction, and she will continue to do so throughout the novel.

Mrs. Montgomery’s writing is located on a single page in Ellen’s Bible, and the novel signals the evolution of Ellen’s textual management by the progressive incursion of markings through two more marked books given to Ellen. On her journey by steamboat to her Aunt Fortune’s home, Ellen meets a stranger who gives her a second marked book.

The stranger, who is later revealed to be George Marshman, engages Ellen in conversation about her need for conversion before giving Ellen the hymnbook they have perused together. He remarks that he does so “that it may serve to remind you of what we have talked of to-day, and of your resolution” to seek out that conversion (78). Marshman also directs Ellen’s reading by the marks he inscribes, doing so to further instruct and thereby increase the already specified utility of this aid. Keying Ellen in to the use of these marks, Marshman says, “I have put this mark...in a few places of this book, for you; wherever you find it, you may know there is something I want you to take special notice of” (79). Silverman notes that Marshman thus “turns the hymn-book into a medium of communication, capable of creating intimacy but also of supervising Ellen’s behavior” (19). As “a medium of communication,” however, this hymnbook operates in only one direction, communicating Marshman’s directives to Ellen while fixing her as a recipient of text.<sup>26</sup> As with her Bible, Ellen welcomes textual direction even though it circumscribes her reading. In the contest over what Ball terms the “commodities of reading power,” Ellen forfeits, and the novel encourages us to read her as welcoming and benefiting from this seeming loss (13).

The third marked text, and the one that most stridently manages Ellen’s reading and comes to stand most surely for its giver, is a copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* given to Ellen by John Humphreys. Ellen first encounters this text with John: he reads it aloud to her and explains as they go. Warner describes Ellen’s unmistakable engagement with the text: “Her attention was nailed; the listless, careless mood in which she sat down was changed for one of rapt delight; she devoured every word that fell from the reader’s lips...” (351). The initial passive constructions that characterize Ellen’s attentiveness in

this quotation – “her attention was nailed,” her “mood...was changed” – demonstrate the degree to which Ellen is acted upon by the text, or, in a particularly violent metaphor, “nailed.” Even when Warner switches into the active voice – writing that Ellen “devoured every word that fell from the reader’s lips” – the novel continues to position John between Ellen and the text: his lips deliver the words that she devours.

John not only delivers the text through his reading aloud to Ellen but also interprets it for her. His interpretive comments repeatedly interrupt Bunyan’s narrative, but *The Wide, Wide World* applauds what it construes as John’s enabling presence by noting that he drives home any “lesson” that the text offers (351). Additionally, John does not allow Ellen to read the text out of his presence, though he eventually concedes that she may reread passages he has already delivered and glossed. Despite being compelled to engage with this text only under John’s literal or figurative supervision, Ellen embraces both *Pilgrim’s Progress* and John’s reading direction. The novel triumphantly concludes of this instance of directed reading: “[N]ever was a child more comforted and contented with a book than Ellen was with the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’” (353).

In a genre in which the threat of separation is omnipresent and never idle, these idyllic scenes of reading must come to an end. The novel circumvents this problem by its use of a marked book, assuring John’s continued textual presence despite his physical absence. Before Ellen finishes hearing the book, she must return home to care for her ailing aunt, so John sends her a copy of the book for her very own. John yet seeks to replicate the practice of directed reading by his inclusion of additional texts in Ellen’s copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Ellen finds “all through the book, on the margin or at the bottom of the leaves, in John’s beautiful handwriting, a great many notes – simple, short,



plain, exactly what was needed to open the whole book to her and make of it the greatest possible use and pleasure” (370). These notes both record previous readings (“Many things she remembered hearing from his lips when they were reading it together”) and determine future ones (370).

These annotations, and their introjection of John’s textual presence into the book, increase Ellen’s love for both the book and John, causing her to “[count] it as her greatest treasure next to her little red Bible,” another of her marked texts (370).<sup>27</sup> Ellen prizes her marked books for the relationships they record and sustain and for the direction they impart. In this example, as well as in Ellen’s encounters with her other marked books, *The Wide, Wide World* unconditionally recommends the practice of directed reading that these marked books instantiate. The novel locates the potential for text and affect to combine in highly productive, because predetermined, ways in the kind of reading direction it both stages within its pages and offers to its readers, in the networks that directed reading creates. However, this strenuous advocacy of directed reading perversely indicates that undirected reading is also a possibility. Indeed, the need for these books to be marked suggests the contingency of text and the multiplicity of interpretations any given book contains; the novel therefore registers the interpretive mobility of any text and its ability to be inflected by readers, annotators, and owners. In describing Ellen’s embrace of directed reading and delineating the affective rewards she gains through it, *The Wide, Wide World* nevertheless recommends its own directed reading.

As Warner’s novel progresses, Ellen’s marked books become increasingly dear to her. Indeed, they function as what Gillian Brown calls “sentimental possessions.” In

explaining what makes a possession sentimental, Brown describes what she calls “a phenomenology of sympathetic ownership” that instantiates a kind of “reciprocity” and a “sense of empathy between the object and its owner” (42, 52, 51). In her conception, “[p]ossession makes what is owned a different kind of thing” through the “familiarizing spirit of proprietorship” (42, 52). However, Brown’s account of the ability of possessing an object to transfigure it does not stress the necessity of sentiment to that process. Instead, Brown emphasizes that the process by which a possession becomes sentimentalized depends primarily on its “usefulness or service” and its long-term placement in a domestic space (52). The continued utility of household objects, for instance, means that they will remain in the hands of their possessors, and their removal from circulation allows them to serve as “mediums of human history” (51).

Brown’s conceptualization of sentimental possessions can be deepened by combining it with Silvan Tomkins’s theorization of affect-object reciprocity. Throughout Tomkins’s theorizing of affect, he speaks of the freedom of the affect system, which he links to the individual’s “essential freedom”: “[T]he capacity of the individual to feel strongly or weakly, for a moment, or for all his life, about anything under the sun and to govern himself by such motives constitutes his essential freedom” (45-46). In counting the freedoms of the affect system, which include the flexibility of intensity, duration, and object, Tomkins argues, “The first freedom between affects and objects is their reciprocal interdependency” (54). In other words, “[t]he object may evoke the affect, or the affect find the object” (55). Tomkins explains, “If an imputed characteristic of an object is capable of evoking a particular affect, the evocation of the affect is also capable of producing a subjective restructuring of the object so that it possesses the imputed

characteristic which is capable of evoking that effect” (54-55). While Brown suggests that possession acts as “a personalization of things which supplements and transmutes the thing’s objecthood,” Tomkins proposes that affect plays a role in that transmutation by “producing a subjective restructuring of the object” (Brown 42). In arguing for the “reciprocal interdependency” between affect and object, Tomkins recognizes the flexibility of affective investments in objects, and he goes on to indicate how that reciprocity might be stabilized.

Noting the freedom inherent in affect-object reciprocity, or what he elsewhere calls the “somewhat fluid relationship between affects and their objects,” Tomkins also accounts for how that fluidity might be stabilized (55). To do so, Tomkins advances the concept of redundancy, which he defines as “the restriction of freedom of choice” (62). Tomkins acknowledges, “Any affect investment in an object or activity somewhat external to the self necessarily commits the affect life to agencies either not entirely dedicated to his purpose or quite indifferent to them” (66). In other words, investing affect in an object gives it a certain kind of power over the self, creating an agent external to the self with affective power over it. As he continues to argue for the plasticity of the affect system, Tomkins does note the subject’s ability to disengage from such an object: “[I]f the cost of affect investment becomes excessive it is always possible to liquidate such investment” (66).

Ellen’s marked books largely illustrate a stable affective investment, and they demonstrate how affect works both in and through sentimental possessions. In doing so, these texts, their givers, and the novel itself first exploit and then revoke the “reciprocal interdependency” of affect and object that Tomkins delineates: once affect and object

combine to create sentimental possessions, these marked books do not lose that status. As such, these signifiers attain a measure of stability that denies the interpretive mobility of the text they contain. The ensuing ability of texts to tell a different, more personal story, to become a kind of private signifier, prompts the language of possession with which texts are often described in *The Wide, Wide World*. George Marshman describes some markings in the hymnbook as “mine” and directs Ellen to others intended for her. Alice, on giving Ellen her first tour of the Humphreys’ home, directs Ellen’s attention to her books, which she describes as “my greatest treasure – my precious books” before adding, “All these are mine” (164). When her Uncle Lindsay confiscates her copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Ellen’s most strident objection is also couched in the language of personal ownership: “But it is mine!” (553). The mere fact of ownership, of possessing the textual object, does not fully account for these vehement reactions: books, as a commodity form, are easily replaceable.<sup>28</sup> However, these texts are made irreplaceable by their embeddedness in the affective lives of their owners and by their ability, through their markings, to record the intimacy of possession.<sup>29</sup>

Though we may read Ellen’s marked books as *her* sentimental possessions, those books in fact often possess *her* through the affect they contain and transmit, as they work both to comfort and discipline her. For example, the night after she leaves her mother’s home, Ellen sleeps with her hand touching the hymnbook marked and given to her; later in the novel, Ellen is ill and bedridden, but is reassured by the proximity of her Bible. Indeed, the sheer material presence of her marked books can accomplish affective work, directing Ellen not in her reading but in her extratextual, non-literary behavior. Following one of her clashes with her Aunt Fortune, thoughts of her Bible and hymnbook

and of the people who gave them to her help to transform Ellen's passionate anger into humility and sadness and spur her prayers to be made a good child. Her marked books wield affective power, capable of both keeping Ellen right and providing comfort to her.

As the novel applauds and exploits Ellen's stable affective investments in her marked books, it also intermittently acknowledges the persistent fluidity of the affect system by recording two emotional outbursts that occur later in the text. *The Wide, Wide World* largely encourages us to read Ellen's textual encounters as highly disciplined and therefore productive, but this perception of Ellen's reading becomes more complex as the novel records the ability of text to invoke excessive emotion. Though mediated, and mediating, texts are shown to both produce emotion and then circumscribe or channel it, Ellen at times resists this circumscription by taking her affective investment in texts to its logical conclusion. The fantasy of highly controlled and always useful emotional reactions to texts is therefore exposed as such within the very pages of the novel, for Ellen's uncontrolled, and perhaps uncontrollable, passions return when she is separated from two highly-valued texts – a letter written by her mother and her annotated copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Interestingly, Ellen's outbursts follow not from experiences of reading but from the interference of others with books that are hers, thereby evincing the proprietary sense she has about the texts that belong to her and exploring the unintended effects of sentimental possession. The novel presents these occasions to interrogate the conjunction of excessive affect and incendiary text; in doing so, *The Wide, Wide World* again indicates its ambivalence over its own conjunction of emotion and text and what that conjunction might yield.

Early in the novel, the first letter that Ellen receives from her mother prompts an emotional outburst and so establishes the link between text and passion. When Aunt Fortune hands Ellen the letter, Ellen sees that, though addressed to her, it has already been opened; Ellen says, “This is *my* letter...who opened it?” (146). Despite Ellen’s protestation of ownership, Aunt Fortune declares that she may open her niece’s letters if she pleases and that she will continue to do so. By way of response, Ellen becomes so infuriated that she cannot even cry, her tears being “absolutely burnt up by passion” (146). Though passion momentarily dries Ellen’s tears and imparts a measure of illegibility to Ellen, the text speedily corrects this problem. Ellen flees the house, thinking that she will breathe, and cry, more easily outside of the confines of her aunt’s home. In her precipitous exit, Ellen forsakes her letter.

When Ellen has put sufficient distance between her aunt and herself, the inevitable outburst comes. The minutely-detailed description of that outburst, which is full of both passion and tears, deserves full quotation:

When once fairly excited, Ellen’s passions were always extreme. During the former peaceful and happy part of her life the occasions of such excitement had been very rare. Of late unhappily they had occurred much oftener. Many were the bitter fits of tears she had known within a few weeks. But now it seemed as if all the scattered causes of sorrow that had wrought those tears were gathered together and pressing upon her at once; and that the burden would crush her to the earth. To the earth it brought her literally. She slid from her seat at first, and embracing the stone on which she had sat, she leaned her head there; but presently in her agony

quitting her hold of that, she cast herself down upon the moss, lying at full length upon the cold ground, which seemed to her childish fancy the best friend she had left. But Ellen was wrought up to the last pitch of grief and passion. Tears brought no relief. Convulsive weeping only exhausted her. In the extremity of her distress and despair, and in that lonely place, out of hearing of every one, she sobbed aloud, and even screamed, for almost the first time in her life; and these fits of violence were succeeded by exhaustion, during which she ceased to shed tears and lay quite still, drawing only long sobbing sighs now and then. (148)

In this scene, the novel first recalls Ellen's extreme passions and her inability to control them. It then maps Ellen's turbulent interior as she simultaneously experiences sorrow, agony, grief, passion, distress, and despair, which are expressed in tears, "convulsive weeping," screaming, exhaustion, and finally "long sobbing sighs." Despite this highly-detailed description, the novel notes that "[t]ears brought no relief" to Ellen. By describing those tears so meticulously, though, *The Wide, Wide World* again demonstrates a commitment to highly-legible emotional display and imparts a material presence to emotion. This emphasis on materiality further conditions the description of this scene: Ellen's contact with the earth, stone, moss, and finally the "cold ground" enrich the sensory experience delineated here. If the level of narrative detail employed to describe Ellen's overwhelming emotions implies a certain indulgence on the part of the novel, Ellen is yet punished by her continued separation from her mother's letter.

Ellen does not receive her letter for some time, and the novel explains this state of affairs by its attention to Ellen's persistently unruly emotions. In an attempt to regain her

letter, Ellen apologizes to Aunt Fortune, but, because Ellen refuses to admit that her aunt did no wrong, Aunt Fortune rejects her apology. Ruminating over Ellen's refusal to condone her aunt's conduct, the novel attributes Ellen's continued separation from her letter to "[s]trong passion – strong pride – both long unbroken" (181). Ellen echoes the novel's sentiments, commenting, "It serves me right; I oughtn't to have got in a passion; oh, I have got a lesson this time!" (181). Ellen apparently does not learn this lesson, however, as her reunion with the yet-unread letter unleashes a new wave of emotion. Alice, who interferes on Ellen's behalf to gain the letter, then gives it to Ellen and is "startled at the half frantic way in which the child clasped and kissed it, weeping bitterly at the same time. Her transport was almost hysterical. She had opened the letter, but she was not able to read a word; and quitting Alice's arms she threw herself upon the bed, sobbing in a mixture of joy and sorrow that seemed to take away her reason" (223). This overpowering "mixture of joy and sorrow" renders Ellen physically unable to read, allowing passion once again to disrupt reading. Even without being read, the sheer physicality of this text prompts an immediate reaction. It does so as an explicit amalgamation of affect and text, coming "from her mother's heart" and "written by her mother's hand" (223). When Ellen calms herself and takes up the letter, the novel records that "the reading of it served to throw her back into fresh fits of tears" (223).

In this extended and meticulously detailed episode, writing produces multiple undisciplined emotional reactions. Yet, somewhat ironically, the novel tries to retrieve a disciplinary function for the letter: in it, her mother encourages Ellen to view prayer "as a cure for all the sorrows of life" and advises Ellen to "keep this letter, that if ever you are like to forget it, your mother's testimony may come to mind again" (226). At the



conclusion of this episode, the novel attempts to advance the ability of text ultimately to discipline Ellen's emotions, but the scene haunts the novel in its indication that text has the ability to produce unmanageable, passionate emotions.

Years pass after this incident, but Ellen's uncontrolled passions return when she is separated from her annotated copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Her uncle Lindsay confiscates Ellen's book and, seeing that the book is inscribed "To my little sister" by John, calmly puts it in his pocket and refuses to return it despite Ellen's pleas (551). When Ellen voices her greatest objection, that "it is mine," Mr. Lindsay dismisses it and her by asserting his own ownership of Ellen, telling her "and you are mine, you must understand" (553). A short struggle ensues within Ellen on which the novel zeroes in. Though Ellen maintains her silence, the novel nonetheless depicts her "struggling, between the alternate surgings of passion and checks of prudence and conscience" (553). Ellen's conscience proves unfit for this battle, and passion's initial victory is signaled by her breaking her silence with the exclamation "Oh, it's not right! – it's not right!" (553). The novel continues to delineate her struggle:

Ellen was wretched. Not from grief at her loss merely; that she could have borne; that had not even the greatest share in her distress; she was at war with herself. She had been a passionate child in earlier days; under religion's happy reign that had long ceased to be true of her; it was only very rarely that she or those around her were led to remember or suspect that it had once been the case. She was surprised and half frightened at herself now, to find the strength of the old temper suddenly roused....In vain she would try to reason and school herself into right feeling; at one

thought of her lost treasure passion would come flooding up and drown all her reasonings and endeavours. (553)

Here, emotion builds on emotion, suggesting Tomkins's "principle of contagion": Ellen's passionately-felt "grief at her loss" revives "the old temper" and so compounds her initial reaction with surprise and fear (64). Despite her efforts "to reason and school herself into right feeling," merely "one thought of her lost treasure" occasions the return of Ellen's passions. What makes *Pilgrim's Progress* such a "treasure" is Ellen's emotional investment in it, which is in turn produced by its status as a textual substitute for John. The transformation of this text into a sentimental possession is precisely what the novel constructed and recommended, but Ellen's attachment to the text exceeds the novel's explicit prescriptions. Ellen's investment in her marked book becomes extreme in this moment and breaks out of disciplinary bounds; though the text sought to direct her, she now slips its reins. With a perverse logic, she does so because of her desire for the text, the very desire that it was meant to produce in her.

As these scenes delineate Ellen's emotional investment in texts and detail the consequences of her separation from them, the novel complicates its proposed linkage between directed reading, mediated texts, and properly-disciplined emotions. *The Wide, Wide World* has elsewhere indicated that the potential of texts to instruct, delight, and direct their readers is enhanced by the affective connections that material texts inevitably come to record, through the networks of relation that operate through them. At the same time, the novel paradoxically demonstrates a fascination with the possibility of being "lost" in books. After John gives Ellen a copy of Weems's *Life of Washington*, the novel then describes her readerly absorption: "Whatever she had found within the leaves of the

book, she had certainly lost herself. An hour passed. Ellen had not spoken or moved except to turn over leaves” (329). When Ellen is called away from her book to attend to various household matters, the novel records that “[t]hese were attended to, and faithfully and cheerfully, but *the book* was in her head all the while” (330). Whether Ellen is within the book or the book is within her, this description of her “los[ing] herself” in a textual world represents a particular construction of reading, of being encompassed by the text and so taken out of the real world. Later, Ellen reads “two or three new English periodicals,” a gift from John, “[a]t all times of the day and night, in her intervals of business” (464). As she reads, “[s]orrowful remembrances were then flown, all things present were out of view, and Ellen’s face was dreamingly happy” (464). Although reading happens in the interstices of her daily life, Ellen’s reading enables her escape from both past and present and, with a telling adverb, makes her “dreamingly happy.” Ellen again uses a book to pass the time as she waits for John to return from his weekly Sunday preaching and becomes “lost in her book, perhaps hunting the elephant in India or fighting Nelson’s battles over again” (468).

In this instance, the imaginative world, the world of books, easily resumes its proper place when Ellen is called back to her domestic setting by the household noises – “the click of the door-lock or a tap on the glass” – of John’s return: “Back then she came, from India or the Nile; down went the book; Ellen had no more thought but for what was before her” (468). Though the novel repeatedly describes Ellen as “lost” in books, it simultaneously establishes the contingency of the imaginative worlds that books create, which necessarily vanish when Ellen is called away from her reading. Even her reading of the Bible is subordinated to the demands of her daily life. The novel describes her

intense feelings while she reads with her mother; those feelings reach such a high pitch that “Ellen felt that she could not read another word” (28). However, the entrance of Dr. Green easily and absolutely diverts her from her reading and the effects it was just producing: “His appearance changed the whole course of her thoughts. All that was grave or painful fled quickly away; Ellen’s head was immediately full again of what had filled it before she began to read” (28). The novel here describes Ellen’s investment in her reading only to refute it.

Despite descriptions of Ellen as “lost” in books, the novel has detailed a series of restrictions on and conditions under which Ellen reads that carefully guard against precisely that. The persistent direction of Ellen’s reading throughout the novel suggests that this idea of being lost in books is a tenuous fantasy: indeed, her marked books, their introjection with affect, and other disciplinary measures designed to direct Ellen’s reading together make clear that Ellen is always accompanied when she tries to withdraw into a textually-created world.<sup>30</sup> Why, then, does the novel include this attention to Ellen’s being lost in books and to her passionate, undisciplined reactions to texts? The failure of direction in these crucial, resonant moments serves as a evidence of – and even a fascination with – the ability of emotion and text to combine in explosive and excessive ways that finally exceed direction. The descriptions of Ellen’s reading that put her outside the bounds of direction constitute the novel’s concession to the overwhelming contingency of text and to the pleasure that even a model reader can take in that contingency, in the protean nature of text and in affective escape. While many of Ellen’s staged scenes of reading advance the novel’s drive towards directed reading, the novel here offers a conception of sentimental reading as a vital, amorphous process, one whose

practice and outcomes cannot necessarily be directed. As it records the failure of its direction, the novel also disseminates this conceptualization of sentimental reading. *The Wide, Wide World* thus not only invites its readers to participate in its project of directed reading, but also affords them the pleasures of passionate emotions and undirected reading, of the exposure of the novel's mechanics and the collapse of the fantasy it built.

#### IV. "Read no novels"

In identifying the prevalence of "disciplinary intimacy" in the antebellum United States, Richard Brodhead offers a compelling account of the ability of novels to assume the role of "monitory intimates" (18, 47). Brodhead particularly argues that novels "inscribe authority by way of the feeling they invite" and therefore become an "agent of discipline through love" (47). In inviting feeling, though, the sentimental novel registers the potential danger of that invitation, for feeling may not only advance but also undermine the novel's direction. As it mobilizes emotion, then, the sentimental novel demonstrates an ambivalence about the sentimental reading it both narrates and produces.

In its published ending, *The Wide, Wide World* therefore leaves Ellen, as well as its own readers, with additional reminders about the necessity of adhering to reading direction and the productivity of doing so. Before departing for the United States, John makes two textual demands of Ellen, to "keep up a regular and full correspondence with me" and to "[r]ead no novels" (563, 564). Ellen, of course, immediately acquiesces, and this moment receives no further mention. Critics, in contrast, have paid a great deal of attention to John's second demand, reaching a tacit consensus that John's injunction against novel-reading does not apply to the novel that contains it. To make this argument, Edward Halsey Foster and Jane Tompkins rely on author intentionality,

providing evidence that Warner did not view *The Wide, Wide World* as a novel. Instead, her first novel's didacticism and pursuit of "theological, not aesthetic or literary ends" made it different from what Warner would have considered to comprise a novel and made *The Wide, Wide World*, in the words of Kevin Ball, "an exception to John Humphrey's rule" (E. Foster 33; Ball 25).<sup>31</sup> Of course, the term "novel" was notoriously slippery in the antebellum period, and the distinctions between what did and did not constitute a novel – as opposed to a romance or a story – were not absolute.<sup>32</sup> However, Warner was not the only agent who drew those distinctions: her readers did as well, and they were not bound by her intentions. A review published in *Godey's Lady's Book* in September 1851 therefore speaks with incredulity of John's advice, calling it a "species of disingenuousness" and retorting that "'The Wide, Wide World' is essentially a novel."

In interpreting John's demand, more recent critics focus on why John in particular voices this objection, concluding that he objects to novel-reading because of the potentially dangerous ideas that novels contain, ideas that would promote Ellen's independence and undermine his authority.<sup>33</sup> In Elizabeth Fekete Trubey's thinking, it is not the content of novels to which John objects but the mode of reading that some novels prompt. She argues, then, that John does not intend to prohibit all novels but to recommend "a method of approaching texts which favors moral instruction rather than readerly pleasure" (72). With Nina Baym and these other critics, then, we may read John's advice to "[r]ead no novels" as "read no novels that are not like this one..." ("Women's Novels" 331).

If we accept that John's advice is not, then, a blanket prohibition of novels nor of *The Wide, Wide World* in particular, the question remains as to what exactly John, and

presumably Warner, were prohibiting. Variations of this advice do recur in sentimental fiction. Chapter XXXIII of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) narrates the highly sentimentalized death of its titular heroine; its title simply, though provocatively, designates it as a chapter "Which People Void of Feeling Need Not Read" (112).<sup>34</sup> In this chapter title, Rowson does not merely suggest that her readers should feel sympathetic toward her heroine's plight; instead, she figures the presence of feeling as so necessary to the mode of reading her novel requires that, without it, this chapter should simply not be read. In a self-reflexive intrusion into her narrative, Gabriella Lynn in Hentz's *Ernest Linwood* goes one step further, threatening to destroy her text and its potential to be read. In staging her disregard for the pages she is writing, she records her temptation to destroy them: "The wind may blow them away, a spark consume them. I may myself commit them to the flames. I am tempted to do so at this moment" (64). Her motives for this temptation become clear as she continues, for Gabriella worries over the reception of her writing and how reception might escape her intentions. She writes, "I once thought it a glorious thing to be an author, – to touch the electric wire of sentiment, and know that thousands would thrill at the shock"; a wiser, disillusioned Gabriella corrects these visions of glory with the realities of being an author, which she describes with images of waste, "ruins and desolation," and loneliness (64). Here, both Rowson and Hentz consider the problem of undirected reading. Eschewing mere readerly direction, their novels intimate that the solution to that problem lies in not reading or writing at all.

This is also the problem that John is addressing: by prohibiting novel-reading, he, in effect, bans undirected reading. His advice resonates within a novel that narrates,

teaches, and ultimately licenses undirected reading. What, then, are the ramifications of John's parting demand for *The Wide, Wide World* itself? In this chapter, I have argued that, through its turn to directed feeling and directed reading, the sentimental novel, and this sentimental novel in particular, demonstrates an ambivalence about its combination of emotion and text. In the failure of that direction, though, exists the opportunity for a different kind of pedagogy, one that allows for excessive, passionate feeling and undirected, participatory reading. In this context, we may read John's instruction to "[r]ead no novels" as simply providing another illustration of the distrust that the combination of feeling and reading produces. However, there is significance to the placement of this directive so close to the end of the novel, to the way that it functions as a parting shot. Warner's novel, or story, continues only a few pages after John's prohibition of novel-reading, speedily obviating its own potential to be read and, more pointedly, to produce undirected reading. Near the novel's end, in this instruction offered by John to the novel's textual reader, *The Wide, Wide World* therefore intimates the abandonment of its own project.

As the publication and sales of *The Wide, Wide World* demonstrate, this intimation remains just that. Another text, though, remains lost within the pages of *The Wide, Wide World*. After Ellen relinquishes her copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, she steels herself for a temporary separation from it, making peace with her uncle and patiently waiting for its promised return. But this marked book does not return; instead, it vanishes from the narrative, and Ellen's discipline gains no reward. In ultimately withholding this book from Ellen, *The Wide, Wide World* concludes by exercising its greatest discipline yet over its textual reader, meting out a resonant punishment for undirected reading and



taking the extreme action that Gabriella Lynn threatens. However, its own publication and widespread reading suggest that it could not do the same for those readers that existed outside of its pages – that directed reading in the text finally did not parallel directed reading outside of it. At the very moment when the novel precludes the potential for undirected reading within its pages by separating Ellen from her book, it therefore also licenses the autonomous readers who exist outside of its pages, who may well react as passionately to Warner’s novel as Ellen did to the loss of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Despite the failure of its direction and the seductive appeal of John’s injunction against undirected reading, *The Wide, Wide World* advanced to meet its readers.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton also makes an argument about directed reading in his consideration of Rousseau, arguing that Rousseau described in order to prescribe a new mode of reading. Darnton argues, “He directed the reading of his readers. He showed them how to approach his books. He guided them into the texts, oriented them by his rhetoric, and made them play a certain role. Rousseau even attempted to teach his readers how to read and, through reading, tried to touch their inner lives” (*Great* 228).

<sup>2</sup> *The Wide, Wide World* has been interpreted through a variety of generic affiliations. Some critics identify an early version of regionalism in Warner’s descriptions of Ellen’s life in Thirlwall; see, for example, E. Foster. Critics have also devised new generic designations for Warner’s novel: reading *The Wide, Wide World* alongside *Robinson Crusoe*, Sharon Kim argues that Warner’s novel is an example of what she terms “Puritan realism.” Elizabeth Barnes discusses it as a “domestic bildungsroman,” while Jane Tompkins designates it as “a kind of bildungsroman in reverse” (105; Afterword 598). Patricia Crain argues that *The Wide, Wide World* is “a novel of alphabetization, a special and somewhat compressed *Bildung*” that “takes as its hero a smaller, younger, less formed protagonist, who must struggle not to map and navigate the world, but rather to read and write herself into existence” (149). *The Wide, Wide World* is also often designated as domestic fiction; see Ashworth for one consideration of the novel that utilizes this designation. Responding to the unacknowledged conflation of domestic and sentimental fiction, June Howard offers a necessary argument for the need to dissociate these genres (231).

<sup>3</sup> Nina Baym provides an account of the single story that “woman’s fiction” like *The Wide, Wide World* tells: “In essence, it is the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world” (*Woman’s* 11).

<sup>4</sup> Altieri, in contrast to my usage here, employs affect as an “umbrella term,” “a means of referring to the entire range of states that are bounded on one side by pure sensation and on the other by thoughts that have no visible or tangible impact on our bodies” (2). Under affect, then, lie feelings, moods, emotions, and passions, which Altieri situates at particular points along a continuum that stretches from sensation to cognition, from body to mind. Flatley offers a helpful glossary of the terms he uses; see 11-27 and especially 11-19 for his distinction between affect and emotion. See also Ngai 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> For arguments that relate specifically to the ambivalence of *The Wide, Wide World*’s message, see V. Stewart and O’Connell.

<sup>6</sup> In indicating the supposed lack of craft that goes into her writing by emphasizing its “random and [careless] nature,” Gabriella obscures the act of public authorship that her writing does constitute. This disavowal of writing a book within the pages of that very book conjures the ambivalence that Mary Kelley attributes to “literary domestics,” whose published writing occasioned their entrance onto the public stage

and produced anxiety about their role as domestic women. See Kelley *Private Woman*. For Kelley's discussion of *Ernest Linwood*, see *Private Woman* 217-19, 222-28.

<sup>7</sup> Kelley notes that this subtitle was appended to the novel in 1869, thirteen years after the novel was first published and thirteen years after Hentz's death (*Private* 232). Its addition suggests the conflation of Hentz and her protagonist, which would encourage readers to view Gabriella as ruminating over Hentz's role of sentimental novelist.

<sup>8</sup> As Ellen and her mother are about to be separated, Ellen does call on her mother to speak. Of this request, Marianne Noble argues that Ellen and her mother are initially silent because "[w]ords cannot constitute the affectional bond...but they can represent connection and mutuality and approximate the undivided union of profound heart-to-heart communication..." (107). I am suggesting that the distinction Noble makes between the ability of language to "constitute" and to "represent" affective ties within Warner's novel is one very much on the minds of sentimental novelists.

<sup>9</sup> Massumi indicates that his project is "based on the hope that movement, sensations, and qualities of experience couched in matter in its most literal sense (and sensing) might be culturally-theoretically thinkable" (4). He argues, "[T]o think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of the body. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct" (5). He links the difficulty of theorizing affect, movement, and sensation to the perception that "A thing is when it isn't doing. A thing is concretely where and what it is – for example a successfully shot arrow sticking in a target – when it is in a state of arrest. Concrete is as concrete doesn't" (6).

<sup>10</sup> Critics have often noted the affective restraint that the novel here recommends. See, for example, Chantell, who rightly argues that "this narrative clearly marks the unrestrained indulgence of intense feeling as undesirable and potentially dangerous" (135). In a highly influential argument, Tompkins notes the implications of what she calls the novel's "ethic of submission," contending that Ellen paradoxically gains access to power by refusing to rebel and calling Ellen's submission "a self-willed act of conquest of one's own passions" (*Sensational* 161, 162). As such, Ellen's submission becomes "the mastery of herself, and therefore, paradoxically, an assertion of autonomy" (*Sensational* 162).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed comparison of Jo and Ellen, see Campbell.

<sup>12</sup> Brandy Parris rightly argues that the novel advocates a deeper kind of self-discipline: "Ellen's emotional labor entails not merely masking unacceptable emotions, but ceasing to feel them and seeking instead to 'feel right'" (33). However, I would argue that Ellen does not achieve this type of discipline, and her vehement passions, both right and wrong, therefore continue to surface on her body.

<sup>13</sup> There are additional instances of the mobility and efficacy of tears in the novel. For example, Ellen's tears wet the cheek of her Uncle Lindsay, and prompt him to consider her request for an hour to herself for morning prayer more generously; those of Alice drop on Ellen's forehead and encourage Ellen "to speak her sympathy only by silently stroking Alice's cheek" (224); and, feeling John's tears on her cheek as she dies, Alice "put up her hands to his face to wipe them away" (440).

<sup>14</sup> Pattee's derision of sentimental literature and its equation with tears are registered more overtly in his description of Fanny Fern as "the most tearful and convulsingly female moralizer of the whole modern blue-stocking school" and *Ruth Hall* as "a tear-drenched section of goody-goody inanity, carved alive from the feminine fifties" (110, 118).

<sup>15</sup> Henry James, for example, derides what he terms the "lachrymose sentimentalism" of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Waiting for the Verdict* (1867), but his description of sentimentalism makes the descriptor he attaches to it largely redundant. For James, sentimentalism is "that intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in the melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition" (qtd. Howard 242).

<sup>16</sup> Barnes seconds this point: "In effect, domestic fiction aims to perfect sentimental strategies of affective representation through the successful conversion of the material body into the immaterial soul" (12).

<sup>17</sup> While Ellen reads other books in the course of the novel, the amount of narrative attention given to these three greatly exceeds the notice other books receive: the novel dwells not only on the initial appearance of each marked book, but also on their reappearances. *The Wide, Wide World* records only one more book being given to Ellen – a copy of Mason Weems's *Life of Washington* given by John. For arguments that stress the importance of Ellen's reading of this book, see Trubey "Imagined" and Kaplan. I largely exclude this book from my discussion here because it remains unmarked and, after its initial appearance, unremarked within *The Wide, Wide World*.

<sup>18</sup> Ellen's textual direction is not always embedded in the texts that she encounters. For example, Alice's library is said to be "a well-picked one" where "Ellen could not light upon many books that would do her mischief" (335). Should Ellen choose such a book, though, "Alice's wish was enough; – [Ellen] never opened them" (335). Alice's direction of Ellen's reading also charges Ellen with finishing every book that she has begun and with reading a single book at a time (335). On another occasion, John admonishes Ellen that it is too late to be reading; Ellen replies with a promise to stop in two minutes, but her engaged reading makes her forget her intention: "But in a quarter of that time she had lost every thought of stopping, and knew no longer that it was growing dusk. Somebody else, however, had not forgotten it. The two minutes were not ended, when a hand came between her and the page and quietly drew the book away" (476). Though Ellen here welcomes John's discipline to supplement her own imperfect self-discipline, his admonishments are not always so welcome. For example, when John tells Ellen that a book she is currently reading "is not a good book for you," Warner records her reaction as not one of instant or unthinking acquiescence: "Ellen did not for a moment question that he was right, nor wish to disobey but she had become very much interested, and was a good deal annoyed at having such a sudden stop put to her pleasure" (414). Similarly, John finds that Ellen has stumbled upon some piles of *Blackwood's Magazine* in the house; he asks her what her response would be should he ask her to cease and desist. Ellen replies, though "with a little smothered sigh of regret," "Why, I will say that I will do it, of course...if you wish it" (477). John's discipline suffices to modify Ellen's reading behavior, and his disciplining of her reading, while causing some indications of regret, brooks no real dissent.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins set the initial terms of the critical debate over the value of nineteenth-century sentimentality with their opposing viewpoints on whether it is useless and pernicious (Douglas) or efficacious and redemptive (Tompkins). See my Introduction for an extended discussion of this debate (10-11).

<sup>20</sup> Nina Baym uses Ellen's role as a reader and a scholar to identify an anti-sentimental motif in *The Wide, Wide World*, a motif that she argues may be found in "the protagonist's drive to extricate herself from the meshes of human connection, especially by developing her mind and performing herself to others as an intellectual, even a scholarly, being" ("Women's Novels" 336). In contrast, I argue that Ellen's encounters with text are often, if not always, mediated by others, making her textual endeavors a site for "human connection" and thereby increasing their sentimentality.

<sup>21</sup> Crain notes the ability of "certain objects, often related to writing, [to] become full surrogates for people," thereby extending the dynamic I trace above (155). See also Quay 40; Silverman 9; and Barnes 104.

<sup>22</sup> Warner continues to advance Ellen as a reading model even outside of this novel's pages. She does so in a series of books called *Ellen Montgomery's Bookshelf*, authored by Susan and Anna Warner and purporting to be those that Ellen reads within *The Wide, Wide World*. The last paragraph of "The Story of Ellen Montgomery's Bookshelf," which is reprinted at the beginning of each of the novels in the series, states, "It is possible, I suppose, that other children might like what Ellen liked. But these books of hers cannot be found now at any of the book-shops; so we will give out the first volume of 'Mr. Rutherford's Children' (there are several volumes) by way of trial; and if that is liked well enough, 'The Christmas Stocking;' and in time, maybe, the whole bookshelf. I hope they will be liked, because else the 'Bookshelf' will never be finished; and unfinished things are disagreeable" (iv). Here, the direction of readers includes a directive to like – and buy – these books, as "unfinished things are disagreeable."

<sup>23</sup> A marked Bible also circulates through Warner's second novel, *Queechy* (1852), where it again serves as a substitute for its owners. The Bible was left to the novel's heroine, Fleda Ringgan, by her now-deceased father; as his personal copy, the Bible contains his marks and notes and, as the novel makes clear, even a portion of himself. Surprised by the sudden departure of her friend Guy Carleton, whom she has been endeavoring to convert, Fleda gives him this Bible to continue the work that she has begun. This impulsive decision causes Fleda some regret, as the novel notes: "It had been her father's own – it was filled with his marks – it was precious to her above price – and Elfie cried with all her heart for the loss of it" (173). Fleda, or Elfie as she is called here, is satisfied that she has done right but still notes that the loss of her Bible "was as bad as the parting with Mr. Carleton" (173). The Bible and Mr. Carleton do return later in the novel, and, on giving the Bible back to her, Mr. Carleton admits, "At first...I had a strong association of you with it; but the time came when I lost that entirely, and itself quite swallowed up the thought of the giver" (558). He then says that the association of the Bible with Fleda has revived, and he so resolves to return the Bible to her. In the novel's most resonant conflation of text and owner, he says that he will "not

receive it again, unless the giver go with the gift" (558). Warner so notes the ability of this textual substitute to incorporate, and then carry, some aspect of those who have owned it, continuing the dynamic she began in her first novel.

<sup>24</sup> Barnes places this scene within a larger tradition in the domestic novel; she contends, "The mother often dies early in the domestic novel, and in her place is left a text – a Bible, a letter, a 'history' – that functions as a substitute for the mother and her wisdom" (104). Crain also notes the link between mother and text; see especially 145, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Tompkins discusses the import of these quotations in *Sensational Designs*, arguing that, in the second quotation, Mrs. Montgomery positions herself as a god to her daughter (164-65).

<sup>26</sup> Critics go so far as to suggest that Marshman's annotations are an act of authorship. Silverman writes, "Through his marks, George Marshman thus reauthorizes the hymn-book," and Ball contends that Marshman "crosses the line from a reader of text to a writer of text, co-authoring the hymn book while guiding Ellen as his reader to his desired conclusions" (Silverman 19; Ball 12). These descriptions serve to widen the distance between Marshman's and Ellen's interaction with the hymnbook: they make explicit that Ellen cannot "[cross] the line from a reader of text to a writer of text" and instead becomes "his reader" "guid[ed] to his desired conclusions." In "'While Our Souls Together Blend': Narrating a Romantic Readership in the Early Republic," Lucia McMahon uses a historical couple to explicate the ways in which marked books may produce a more equal communion and instantiate what she calls "romantic readership" (67).

<sup>27</sup> Trubey argues John's reading and annotations of *Pilgrim's Progress* form part of his larger project "to reshape Ellen's passionate behavior into more womanly, submissive conduct" (66). According to Trubey, Ellen resists John's shaping through the pleasure she takes in the text: "[H]er emotional state is one of rapturous joy that nearly defeats John's intentions," but "ultimately Warner suggests that this unsanctioned pleasure enables John's tutelary purposes" because it advances Ellen's personal connection to him (66). It is unclear why John, seemingly caught between advancing the discourses of Christianity and true womanhood, would not want Ellen to take pleasure in this account of Christian conversion; the novel does not record his censure of Ellen's joy over the reading of Bunyan.

<sup>28</sup> Reading Stowe's household advice literature, Brown writes, "Stowe's narrative of sentimental possession is a Christian purification of market economy in which commodities are transubstantiated into possessions" (47). Brown's distinction here is useful, as this "transubstantiation" of Ellen's commodities into possessions accounts for their value to her. Both Silverman and Crain have convincingly argued for the distance that Warner inserts between Ellen's possessions and the marketplace. Silverman contends that Ellen "must learn to associate her love of books not with their material pleasure but with their ability to subordinate the self and forge communion with others" (17); Crain argues that the ability of objects to stand in for people "transforms the alienating potential of the marketplace" (155).

<sup>29</sup> Quay also notes the dynamic by which Ellen's objects become keepsakes. In her view, Ellen's keepsakes mitigate the nostalgia and homesickness that Quay identifies as the controlling affect of Warner's novel (39-40).

<sup>30</sup> In placing Ellen's reading within the imperialist discourses of antebellum domesticity, Kaplan offers another slant as to why Ellen cannot be lost in a book: "The imperial reach of domesticity extended not only to racially foreign subjects inside and outside the home, but also the interiority of female subjectivity" (43).

<sup>31</sup> See Tompkins *Sensational* 149.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Baym's discussion of the ways in which the terms "novel" and "romance" were used interchangeably in periodical book reviews (*Novels* 225-35).

<sup>33</sup> See Crain 165 and O'Connell 135.

<sup>34</sup> Rowson's novel admittedly precedes the period at hand. However, it serves as both an early and pervasive example of American sentimentality, as it became America's first best-selling novel and remained deeply popular throughout the nineteenth century. For an account of the publication and widespread readership of *Charlotte Temple*, see Davidson "Life and Times."

## Chapter 3: Readers Write Back:

## Susan Warner's Readers and the Dynamics of Sentimental Reading

In a letter dated 1 March 1852, a man signing himself “Alice’s Admirer” wrote to Susan Warner about her novel *The Wide, Wide World*, published two years earlier in 1850. This reader’s written reactions to Warner’s novel cover some fourteen pages – or in antebellum parlance, three sheets – and are as wide-ranging as they are long-winded: he takes exception to her descriptions of Ellen’s Scottish relatives, for he himself is a “Scotchman”; refers by page and volume to some of his favorite scenes; confesses that he could not read the narration of Alice’s death for the tears that interrupted his sight; and jokingly describes his frustrated matrimonial intentions for Alice, who is not only dead, but also, alas, fictional. In opening his letter, Alice’s Admirer states, “After having received, as this work has, the approbation of critics & competent judges it is of little consequence what the views of a more ordinary reader may be – & yet – (I don’t know that I can give you a very good reason why) – but I must ask you to hear them.” In this chapter, I take the request of Alice’s Admirer seriously, turning from “the approbation of critics & competent judges” to find consequence both in these “views of a more ordinary reader” and in the act of asking a sentimental author to hear them.

The fan letters these “ordinary” readers left behind offer us a view on the dynamics of reading sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century and, more particularly, into what this body of corresponding readers imagined to be at stake in their encounters with sentimental novels. Scholars working in the history of the book often describe reading as a contest between the text’s impositions and the reader’s liberty: in this model, reading itself emerges as a “dialectic between imposition and appropriation, between

constraints transgressed and freedoms bridled” (Chartier *Order* viii). The acts of reading recorded in Warner’s fan letters challenge this dialectical, contestatory model. These readers instead locate both the power and the pleasure of reading sentimental fiction in imagined networks that connect author and audience through and around the sentimental text, networks that are constructed and sustained by accord, not dissent. At the same time, these letters narrate a fluid, participatory structure of direction through which a sentimental author, her novel, and her readers are understood to engage and direct one another, a structure of direction in which these readers claim a role and a voice.

Imagining those networks, the connections they afford, and the direction that moves through them is a surprisingly complex act, as it necessitates theorizing consensus among an unknown author, her sentimental fictions, and the idiosyncratic claims of responding readers. These fan letters record the labor of that intricate act of imagination as well as its rewards and its prerogatives. In their letters, Warner’s readers claim, value, and work to maintain the sense of relation that, they argue, reading sentimental fiction can engender. For these readers, that sense produces good behavior, religious conversions, the fan letters themselves, and, more foundationally, an intimate, imagined community that enfolds both Warner and her readers. As they position themselves in that community, readers also work to shape it, doing so most strikingly in their requests for both more of Warner – for autographs and replies to their letters – and more of her writing – namely, sequels.

David M. Stewart has rightly warned of the “problems of accessibility” pertaining to past acts of affective reading, as “[e]motional stimulation produced by reading is not easily documented” (“Cultural” 676). Indeed, many acts of affective reading leave only

ephemeral evidence on reading bodies – wet eyes, flushed cheeks, fleeting moments of excessive feeling. These readers not only offer a textual record of the dynamic, emotional relays that operated among author, text, and reader, but also preserve the particular imagination of reading that produced and privileged those responses. In turning to this textual evidence, my argument and methodology lie at the intersection of two critical trajectories, one that illuminates historical practices of reading and another that explicates the sentimental text. The unprecedented popularity of sentimental fiction, as well as its explicit and well-documented drive to produce emotion in its readers, together indicate this genre's self-conscious and particular orientation towards its contemporary readers. Making those readers an integral component of its study therefore makes sense. From Jane Tompkins's focus on the white, female, nineteenth-century, Christian reader of that century's popular literature to Laura Wexler's consideration of sentimentality's non-white, non-middle-class "unintended reader," the critical imagination of how sentimental fiction worked on its audience has served a foundational, and continuing, role in its scholarly study (Wexler 101).<sup>1</sup>

When nineteenth-century readers enter the study of sentimental fiction, as in these examples, they often do so as implied readers, constructions (or exclusions) of the sentimental text who, as such, respond to it in predictable ways. Even those critics who find ambivalence within sentimental novels, positing a disjunction between the novels' cover stories and their subversive undertones, argue that readers merely extract and then embody that ambivalence. For example, as Susan K. Harris argues that sentimental novels "embed radical possibilities within their thematic and rhetorical frameworks," offer "multiple hermeneutic possibilities" to their readers, and are therefore best

understood as “Janus-faced texts accessible to Janus-faced readers,” her account of the reception of sentimental novels yet primarily depends on unearthing the possibilities those novels extended to their readers (13, 30). This pattern continues in critical studies of *The Wide, Wide World*, where the historical reception of this novel is largely read through the novel itself, where actual readers of Warner’s novel and their potentially diverse responses are abstracted into a homogenous female respondent, a solely textual construction – *the* reader. Scholars like Elizabeth Fekete Trubey, Nancy Schnog, and Catharine O’Connell make this critical move in order to argue for the value of Warner’s novel. In their estimations, *The Wide, Wide World* encourages female readers to imagine rebellion, teaches them how they might deal with emotional crises, and provides a reciprocal sympathy that validates their own seemingly “petty grievances” (O’Connell 27). As these studies trace the easy travel of sympathy, ideology, and even rebellion from text to reader, they offer relatively uncomplicated, if celebratory, accounts of reading sentimental fiction.

The impulse to understand the reception of sentimental fiction by looking to the fiction itself and largely homogenizing its historical audience makes a certain kind of sense. In doing so, we read along with the vision of sentimentality, putting our trust in its promise to embed individual experience in a universal framework and to build relationships mediated by sympathy on a bedrock of shared humanity. Critics like Wexler have made important challenges to that vision by cataloging the populations that sentimentality excluded from its promise. However, critical accounts of reading sentimental fiction, such as those I have cited above, emphasize how important the imagined homogeneity of sentimental reading was both in the nineteenth century and,



within certain boundaries, today: they locate the potential value of sentimental reading in its ability to produce consensus, synchronicity, agreement, or, as it has most often been called, sympathy.

What these accounts obscure, however, is the work of theorizing accord that happened not inside but outside of the sentimental novel – the labor required by readers to imagine themselves into a community, their desire for that community, and the strategic steps they took to accomplish that aim. Warner's fan letters show that readers, author, and text were coordinated into consensus by readers' disavowal of both their freedom and their appropriative reading practices, by their attribution of extraordinary power to the sentimental novel, and by their construction of an imagined author from her novels. By recovering readers' labor and the purposes that it served, these fan letters offer a way out of the current critical understanding of the reception of sentimental literature, which assumes that the conventions and formulas of sentimental writing, however we understand them, easily produced conventional and highly predictable readerly responses.

The particular, historical readers who exist outside of the pages of sentimental novels therefore offer a different, more complex account of reading sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century. More than sixty fan letters written by strangers and sent to Susan Warner and her sister Anna are held by the Constitution Island Association and housed at the United States Military Academy.<sup>2</sup> The letters span the second half of the nineteenth century, with approximately half of the dated letters coming between 1850 and 1869 and the remainder between 1871 and 1904. Who were these readers who wrote to Warner? They were men and women, both young and old, who wrote from Boston, Detroit, and

San Francisco, from England, Germany, and Austria.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, they were Gertrude M. Holt, self-described as a “poor woman,” writing from Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1881; Joseph Molyneux Hunter, an Irish man who wrote his fan letter over the summer of 1862 on sea voyages between Ireland and Canada; Amelia Norris Frink, age twelve, and Mazie Wheeler, age thirteen, writing to Warner together in 1884 about her novel *The Letter of Credit* (1881); and Charles B. Taylor, an English author writing from Ipswich in 1852 who chastened Warner for her use of “vulgarisms” like “budge” in her work.<sup>4</sup>

As these examples only begin to indicate, the letters that readers sent back to Warner are anything but homogenous, varying in length, tone, sentiments expressed, and practices of reading described. As these letters move from gratitude to castigation, from expressions of thanks to requests for something in return, they record a variety of idiosyncratic reactions. Moreover, Warner’s corresponding readers obviously form a small, self-selecting subset of her readership, so there is surely even more variation and multiplicity in the historical acts of sentimental reading that are not narrated in fan letters. I am admittedly interested in identifying patterns of response within these fan letters, in understanding what connects the varied and multiple acts of reading that these letters record and perform. In doing so, I am particularly attentive to how these readers imagined their reactions to Warner’s writing as both common and communal and why they imagined themselves, as Alice’s Admirer did, to be “ordinary” readers. Warner’s readers made a powerful choice to align themselves with sentimentality’s vision of the universality of response and reading’s connective power.

Susan S. Williams offered the first overview of Warner's fan letters by folding them into a consideration of Warner's authorship. Williams helpfully elucidates the material circumstances that made Warner dependent on the financial support of her readers and therefore responsive to their desires, and she particularly argues that readers' epistolary responses "appeared to suppress [Warner's] literary will toward increased worldliness" and limited Warner's authorial agency by fixing her in the domestic, sentimental mode ("Widening" 575). What remains largely unexplored in Williams's account is why these readers responded as they did to Warner's writing – what motivated them to write to her, why they encouraged her to continue writing sentimental novels, why they complained about her deviations from the sentimental mode. In other words, Warner's fan letters have more to tell us about what was at stake for Warner's readers in reading her sentimental fictions, about why they picked up their pens.<sup>5</sup>

In his letter, Alice's Admirer confessed that he felt compelled to write to Warner. However, he also acknowledged, "I don't know that I can give you a very good reason why." Stepping into this silence, this chapter offers "reason[s] why" these readers turned writers, why their encounters with a sentimental novel expanded to include an epistolary connection with its author. In many of these letters, Warner's readers assured her that they were reading in accord with the direction that they believed her novels offered – that they were modeling themselves on Ellen Montgomery, taking Warner's religious instruction to heart, and writing their fan letters because of the intimacy that her novels prompted among author, text, and reader. As readers repeatedly spoke to the extratextual work – the religious conversions, the good behavior – that reading Warner's sentimental novels was accomplishing in their lives, they attributed great power to those novels.

However, these readers not only asserted their place as respondents to or consumers of Warner's powerful narratives but also claimed a role in their production. In other words, these letters record attempts by readers to direct Warner and her writing. Through the mechanism of the fan letter, Warner's readers transformed her sentimental fictions into a vital territory in which readers might, and did, seize a certain legislative prerogative. However, even as they seized that prerogative, they often used it to direct Warner to direct them, to demand that she continue to serve as the epicenter of their reading community and that she maintain the affective networks that her sentimental novels instantiated and in which these readers fervently believed. What we find in these letters, then, is readers' careful but thrilling negotiation of authority and community, of writing and reading, of directing and being directed, that took place over the sentimental text.

As these readers wrote back to Warner, they gave concrete expression to the networks they believed to be operating through and around sentimental fiction. Joanne Dobson argues that "[s]entimentalism envisions the self-in-relation," that it is "focused around relational experience and the consequences of its rupture" ("Reclaiming" 267, 268). What threatens that rupture within sentimental fiction, Dobson argues, is "the death of a child, lost love, failed or disrupted family connections, distorted or unsympathetic community, or the loss of the hope of reunion and/or reconciliation in the hereafter" ("Reclaiming" 267). The idea of the self-in-relation as it operates *within* texts like *The Wide, Wide World* has long informed our understanding of sentimental fiction; however, we have missed the ways in which the self-in-relation was actually a creation of the experience of reading sentimental fiction – and how it could be threatened and even dismantled by that same experience. Because the networks that operated through

sentimental novels were premised on agreement and similarity, the experience of connection they afforded was jeopardized by discrete readers, their potentially divergent responses, and an ultimately unknown author. These networks had to be both flexible and strong enough to enfold those readers and that author and to assemble a unified community of response. They could therefore only incorporate actors – texts, author, readers – with limited agency. As Warner’s fan letters argue that the value, the vitality, and the very power of Warner’s sentimental novels were premised on their potential for connection, they record both readers’ desire for that connection and the action they took – the agency they exercised, sacrificed, and assigned – to accomplish it. Warner’s fan letters therefore promise not only to recapture the place of sentimental fiction in its contemporary readers’ lives, but also to recover readers’ transformative place within sentimental fiction.

### I. Reading for Relation

The question of how to access the history of reading drives an important critical conversation in history of the book scholarship and reception studies. To place readers in history, scholars have turned to the variety of public and private records that readers sometimes leave, relying on family papers, published reviews, diaries, autobiographies, and correspondence.<sup>6</sup> Each of these sources, however, has its limitations, offering only a partial view of a complicated, amorphous process; moreover, even this partial evidence is rather sparse. James L. Machor argues that the scarcity of archival evidence of reading reflects the fact that historical practices of reading are notoriously difficult to capture. He argues that reading in the nineteenth century, like reading today, is “an extremely private activity that can never be fully recorded in performance because such a ‘recording’ is

always selective, always a reconstruction, and hence always a reconstitution” (“Introduction” xxi-xxii). While important challenges have been made to the seemingly indissoluble link between reading and privacy on which Machor’s argument partly depends, his cautions as to what insight even the small amount of evidence available to researchers can ultimately deliver are valid: there are limits to any record of reading, as it entails narrativizing an act that resists such capture.<sup>7</sup> Even when such evidence is available, critics must, and often do, qualify their findings by questioning the representativeness of the evidence from which they draw their conclusions. After all, the majority of ordinary readers do not leave records of their reading experiences, so the question remains how to extrapolate the experience of ordinary readers from evidence that is itself extraordinary.<sup>8</sup> Left with limited and limiting archival evidence, critics have developed a take-what-you-can approach to the evidence that does exist, an approach that Barbara Sicherman aptly describes as “[e]xtrapolating from a welter of fugitive comments” (“Reading and Ambition” 74).

Warner’s fan letters have limitations as evidence of reading, but they can tell us much about the designs that readers had on Warner, her sentimental novels, and their own reading. As her readers told Warner compelling stories about their encounters with her novels, their letters gained a particular force by straddling the divide between public and private.<sup>9</sup> In her study of fan mail written to Sinclair Lewis about his novel *Main Street* (1920), Amy Blair notes “the bifurcated nature of all fan mail,” as its “content is both a signal of ‘private’ response and a moment of ‘public’ disclosure” (154). Blair’s comment encourages us to read these letters to Warner as a conscious performance, and one with certain aims. Those aims, most basically, stemmed from readers’ desire to connect the

private to the public and the solitary to the social, both to construct and to participate in networks that could organize individual readers and a sentimental author into a unified community. As it operates between the private and the public, the fan letter serves as a particularly appropriate mechanism by which to accomplish that aim.

Blair notes that the fan letter had, in the early years of the twentieth century, attained generic status; she therefore cautions that “even the most self-revelatory fan letter was, at least partially, a performance of reader reception” (146). At the time when readers were writing to Susan Warner, the fan letter had become a possibility if not yet a genre. Readers wrote to Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and corresponding readers were also represented within novels contemporary to *The Wide, Wide World*.<sup>10</sup> Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1855) includes both humorous and sincere letters written by Ruth’s readers, while Herman Melville sharply satirizes the requests of readers for autographs in *Pierre* (1852). As Sicherman notes, letters written to Louisa May Alcott following the publication of *Little Women* (1868) were featured in advertisements for the book, and Alcott’s decision to marry Jo March in the novel’s second volume was influenced by the epistolary responses of her readers.<sup>11</sup> In their letters, some of Warner’s readers indicated their awareness that other readers also sought to correspond with this beloved author. For example, Eugenia Sadler, writing from Kentucky in 1864, said, “Though an entire stranger to you, I write to you upon the presumption that you, in common with all authors, receive a great many letters from strangers.” This burgeoning, public tradition of responding readers in the nineteenth century encourages us to read these letters as performing response, and doing so with a purpose in mind.

As readers pursued a textual dialogue with Warner, they challenged the conception of reading as a privatizing, solitary, individual activity. As I will demonstrate, their letters depict groups of readers clamoring for sequels and claim that reading produces intimacy with at least one other person – Warner herself. As Warner’s readers both seek and claim an intimate relationship with Warner, her characters, her novels, and even with other readers, their letters demonstrate that the connected self was not only the subject but also the desired effect of Warner’s sentimental writing.

Catharine O’Connell and Gillian Silverman have persuasively argued that *The Wide, Wide World* encourages this intimacy between text and reader, using that intimacy to fit readers into “the assigned role of intense sympathizer” for Ellen or to compensate for “the subordination of the self” that Warner argues should attend the practice of reading (O’Connell 27; Silverman 19).<sup>12</sup> We might therefore read the intimacy advanced by this sentimental text and then claimed by its readers as a simple transaction. I contend, though, that these fan letters offer a conception of sentimental reading more complicated and more fluid than that of a conditioned response to the designs of a reified text. The networks connecting text, author, and reader that drove this sense of intimacy were instead partially imaginary and quite unstable. They required a continuous effort of the imagination and the will to produce a reading community – one that largely existed in the minds of individual readers and was therefore at once more atomized and more tightly-bound than actual reading communities that met in literary societies or convened reading groups.<sup>13</sup> According to Warner’s corresponding readers, it was those imagined, unsteady networks that endowed the act of reading and responding to sentimental fiction with



agency and value, that allowed author and audience alike to imagine how reading works in the world.

The desire for relation evident in Warner's fan letters drives a structure of direction that simultaneously moves two ways, from author to reader and from reader to author. Janice Radway has recently warned that reception studies needs to find a way out of its structuring paradigm, which preserves "the theoretical distinction between writer and reader" and a seemingly unbridgeable divide between the production and reception of cultural materials ("What's" 339). For Radway, this constructed divide is temporal, as reading must follow an earlier act of creation ("What's" 329). In criticism of sentimental fiction, *feeling* is understood to follow this act of creation, and affective responses to sentimental fiction are often interpreted as submission to the text's designs. Accordingly, both Elizabeth Barnes and Richard Brodhead have explicitly linked the sentimental novel's invocation of feeling to its ability to discipline readers. Affect therefore becomes an instrumental component of the reception of the sentimental novel, the signal on the body's surface that readers have capitulated to the novel and taken its discipline "deep inside" (Brodhead 47). Other accounts of affective reading in the nineteenth century theorize its pleasures, but they remain the pleasures of submission, of masochism, of capitulation to a power greater than oneself. Jonathan Elmer, for example, argues that sensation reading produces "a masochistic pleasure arising ultimately from the reading body's own submission to invasion," or, more concisely, "the pleasure...of being mastered by affect" (125). On a similar note, Marianne Noble's account of "sentimental masochism" conjoins pleasure and suffering in explicating "the erotics of domination" depicted in, and wielded by, *The Wide, Wide World* (25).

Since the 1980s, the work of feminist critics and history of the book scholars on audiences' interactions with popular texts has challenged the conception of reading as submission by arguing that readers appropriate popular texts and make them serve their own ends.<sup>14</sup> This reader-centered criticism and its theoretical contributions have not yet helped us to reimagine the experience of reading nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Instead, critical work on sentimental fiction essentially understands these texts as producing their readers and specific, predictable modes of reading. This methodology moves consistently out from the text instead of letting its readers and their reading practices rebound onto it, disallowing reflexivity in the ways that readers may produce fiction and manipulate its effects. Seeing the way that direction moved across and through Warner's sentimental novels, from author to reader and reader to author, is necessary to understanding the relational dynamics of affective reading and sentimental fiction in the nineteenth century.

For the readers who wrote to Warner, their most powerful and memorable reading moments do seem to come when they submit to her writing and allow it to direct them – to conjure feelings, effect religious conversions, and pick up their pens to write to her. However, these letters also describe a different kind of relationship operating among the sentimental novel, its readers, and its author: they record a dynamic in which readers not only capitulate to textual direction but also wield their own. These fan letters therefore narrate more complicated pleasures than just those of submission. They make clear that the pleasures of being directed are inseparable from the pleasures of exercising direction, of resisting textual direction, of pushing (and writing) back. The pleasures of reading sentimental fiction therefore lie both in suffering and in triumph, in the complex

negotiation of the novel's direction that derives from the readerly prerogative to sometimes succumb and sometimes resist; they lie, most basically, in the kinds of participatory reading that these fan letters record and in the networks that these readers imagined. As they recorded both the tears and the conversion experiences produced by *The Wide, Wide World*, readers undoubtedly attributed power to Warner's novel, but that attribution was instrumental to readers' designs, to their desire for community, for consensus, and for relation. Attributing power to Warner's sentimental novels was therefore a powerful act of definition of the potential and the utility of reading those novels. In these readers' estimations, reading Warner's sentimental novels provided the opportunity to realize and validate the readerly desire for relation, to experience the pleasurable tension created by the simultaneous urge to be directed and to direct – to read and then to write.

## II. The Implied Author

In an undated letter written to Susan Warner, A. W. Salter richly expressed her gratitude to the author of *The Wide, Wide World* on behalf of herself and her family, asking, "Can I thank you enough? Can I love you too much?" She continued, "[W]ith a wondrous sympathy you have drawn the hearts of all, young & old, to your own, & to the sweet circle into which you have with a magic influence introduced us – You must have received many such assurances – but I am sure you will not take amiss the warm echo that comes back to you from our household." Salter here positions herself in an imagined, affective community of readers, united and centered by Warner's own heart. In describing her letter as "the warm echo that comes back to you from our household,"

Salter constructs it as a conditioned and inevitable response to the novel that Warner sent forth. Her letter becomes the novel's textual echo.

Salter and other corresponding readers often imagined Warner's novels as eliciting their epistolary responses, as prompting them to seek her out through their correspondence.<sup>15</sup> Warner's contemporary John S. Hart imputed a related, and also inevitable, effect to Warner's writing. In *The Female Prose Writers of America* (1852), his notice of Warner observes, "No one could read [*The Wide, Wide World*] without a desire to know something of the author" (387).<sup>16</sup> These letters not only bear witness to that desire, but also demonstrate these readers' conviction that they *already* "know something" of Warner. In their letters, readers transmuted profound knowledge of Warner's texts into profound knowledge of Warner herself, suggesting that the concept of an "implied author," whom readers construct from a text, is the necessary counterpart to the "implied reader" postulated by most reader-response criticism. Though these readers imagined themselves to be in dialogue with Warner, in many respects they created her, basing their conception of her on their own tellings of the text she wrote. In these letters, Warner therefore becomes the audience of her readers – and a fiction created by them.

"Discovering" Warner within her writing allowed these readers both to claim an intimate relationship with her and to attribute a potent form of agency to the ensuing amalgamation of writer and text. According to these readers, that agency worked on them in multiple ways. In their letters, these readers evinced their belief in the ability of reading *The Wide, Wide World* to change their non-literary lives in ways both big and small, to convert them to Christianity after reading a single passage or to help them resist more mundane temptations over the course of several years. These corresponding

readers also argued that Warner's writing shaped their literary encounters by making them feel the novel's irresistible effects; particularly compelling are readers' descriptions of emotional responses that undermined their self-control. When we consider these readers' claims about the power of the sentimental novel within the critical paradigm of active, appropriative reading, however, a more complicated picture emerges. Warner's fan letters demonstrate that her readers helped to construct the text's direction: though they described themselves as being directed by the text, they, in effect, directed their own reading and directed it towards particular ends. By fictionalizing Warner, empowering her novels, and limiting their own agency, these readers imagined a textual community who responded in kind to sentimental fiction, and they gathered to themselves the pleasures of being enfolded by that community.

In their letters, readers often claimed an intimate relationship with Warner founded solely upon reading her novels. Alice's Admirer, for example, wrote, "I have just finished the perusal of the 'Wide, Wide World', and feel, as if already, its author is a friend." Another reader, a friend of Alice's Admirer styling himself "Ellen's Ardent Admirer," began his letter by stating, "I have just read 'the Wide Wide World'"; he then asserted unequivocally, "There is a sympathy between us." These readers demonstrate the conviction that Warner could be known through her writing and, more generally, that a close, personal relationship between reader and writer could be produced through the mediation of a novel. Richard Brodhead argues that the novel produces this "peculiar intimacy" in order to discipline its readers through love and "to transpose its orderings into its reader's felt understanding through an invisible persuasion" (47, 46).

In line with Brodhead's argument, these corresponding readers explained to Warner that their letters emerged from the potent conjunction of intimacy and compulsion that her novels produced. The persuasive power of Warner's novels, though, was far from invisible to her readers. Instead, Warner's corresponding readers painstakingly cataloged the concrete effects of the novel's intimate discipline, one of which was their epistolary intrusions. Writing from Derbyshire, Mary Barnes began her undated letter by describing her compulsion to write: "I am afraid you will think me *very* presumptuous in addressing you, but I have so often longed to thank you for all the pleasure you have given me, that at last the impulse has overcome all prudence, – I *must* write! Pray forgive me!" Barnes then wrote that she considers Warner "a very dear friend" since reading *The Wide, Wide World* "some ten years ago." Like Barnes, Nellie S. Mitchell, who wrote to Warner in 1877, cited "a strong desire to write you, a desire which has been held in check by the feeling that perhaps it would seem odd in one who is an entire stranger, to intrude upon your notice." Mitchell may have admitted here that she was "an entire stranger" to Warner, but she claimed that Warner was not "an entire stranger" to her: "Yet although I have never seen you 'face to face,' it seems to me that I have seen you at least in some degree soul to soul....I feel as if I knew you." This purported relationship with Warner became less figurative as Mitchell's letter progresses: "[Y]our books have made me feel a real friendship for the one who has made them instinct with her own life." In Mitchell's evolving conception of authorial presence, not only can Warner be seen through the lens of her books, but she is also immanent within them. The perceived contiguity between Warner and her writing allowed readers like

Mitchell to imagine they were both being directed and acting in accord with that direction.

These readers did understand themselves as being disciplined by Warner's novels through the "peculiar intimacy" they produced. However, the writers of these fan letters both assumed a role in the production of that "peculiar intimacy" and turned it to their own ends and back on Warner herself. Most basically, they used the novel's disciplinary power to license their epistolary intrusions. Moreover, in claiming that their fan letters were written in response to the intimacy that her novels advanced, these readers excused the "peculiar intimacy" of their fan letters, which lay in the disjunction between readers' conviction that they knew Warner and their recognition that they, as readers and correspondents, were unknown. These readers claimed the pleasures of textual connection by picking up their pens and narrating a particular kind of novelistic discipline that conveniently produced their epistolary impulse.

As they largely collapsed the distinction between Warner and her literary productions and claimed intimacy with both, these readers imputed a high level of agency to the ensuing amalgamation of writer and text. Perhaps the most striking evidence of that agency lies in readers' claims that *The Wide, Wide World* and other novels written by Warner guided and improved their extratextual behavior, producing both mundane and dramatic change. Joseph Molyneux Hunter, writing nine years after he first read *The Wide, Wide World*, recounted the lasting, dramatic change that the novel worked in him. He stated, "In the summer of 1853 I was brought to the Saviour by reading a very few lines of the 'Wide Wide World.'" He continued:

One evening I was going out to take a walk and while overhauling a drawer for something I wanted, I came upon a story book, as I supposed, and being very fond of novel reading I thought I had got a prize and forgetting my intended walk, shut myself up, and sat down to enjoy the book, but thanks be to God, the time was come when my poor mother's heart was to be gladdened and her prayers answered for one in whom her life, almost, was and is bound up. The book was the 'Wide Wide World.' By what the world would call chance I opened at that part when the death bed scene of the Irish boy – my little countryman – is described. I read to that line where he lifts his poor little arm and says 'Jesus.' Words cannot describe the instantaneous effect produced on me. I fell on my knees and tears and prayers and strong crying to God for pardon and salvation testified of the nature of the effect produced; it was the being born again, the beginning of life everlasting.

The scene Hunter describes is "a very few lines" indeed; it occupies less than a full page in Jane Tompkins's edition of *The Wide, Wide World* (277-78). As he communicated his conviction that Warner's sentimental novel could produce this kind of "instantaneous" change, that it had that much power, Hunter tellingly claimed intimacy with Warner. He wrote, "Yet although you know me not and I have never seen you, I love you very dearly and for years have been anxious to communicate with you." Hunter admits the distance that separates him from Warner – she does not know him, he has never seen her and does not even have her address – and then quickly collapses it into the love he nonetheless feels for her, a love produced simply by his reading of her writing and by what that



writing did to him. Hunter's conceptualization of the novel's peculiar, but powerful intimacy drove his imagination of its agency, of its ability to produce real-world actions. And he was not alone: as the writer of an anonymous letter, sent from Yonkers in February 1863, said, "I owe my change of heart and life to the influence of the *Wide Wide World*. My first convictions of sin were the result of reading the conversations of John and Ellen."

It is undeniably striking that these readers would trace a "change of heart and life to the influence" of reading a sentimental novel, or, in Hunter's case, only "a very few lines" of a sentimental novel. Its readers – especially its female readers – argued that *The Wide, Wide World* also prompted more subtle changes. For example, in 1880 Louise Brine wrote, "When I feel angry or out of temper I read in the book and find out how Ellen fought against temptations, and I am instantly put right in tune again and feel good desires." Ellen White attested in 1859 that *The Wide, Wide World* "has cheered me in many hours of pain and weariness during two long years and often has the thought of little 'Ellen's' perseverance checked me when yielding to temptation." In describing the good that reading Warner's novel had produced, readers demonstrated both the ability of sentimental fiction to discipline them and their desire for that discipline: after all, they offered thanks for it, described repeated encounters with the text because of it, and felt gratified by the novel's production of "good desires." In their letters, these readers evinced their belief in the ability of reading *The Wide, Wide World* to change lives in ways both big and small, in a single moment or over the course of "two long years."

That belief had its foundation in these readers' experiences of reading, in what they felt as they read *The Wide, Wide World*. Many readers stated that Warner's novel

shaped their literary encounters through the affect it produced. As noted, Alice's Admirer wrote that he could not read Alice's death scene because of the tears that clouded his sight. In the first lines of her letter, A. W. Salter described her daughter Mary's tears coursing down her face and dropping into her lap. Mary appended her own letter to that written by her mother and spent most of it explaining those tears, focusing specifically on the scene of Alice's death:

I never could get tired of it. I think I could read it over and over again; and over and over again weep with Ellie at Alice's deathbed, at *the* stone which she came to in her walk that morning, and as the solemn tolls of the bell came through the still air. The death makes such an impression on my mind, that for one or two days after I feel very sad.

Both of these letter writers unified the fictional and the real – and an implied author and her embodied readers – precisely through the affective. Karen Sánchez-Eppler has argued that “[r]eading sentimental fiction is...a bodily act...,” and these readers spin out the implications of their embodied reading (*Touching* 26). By describing the physicality of their affective reading, these fan letters imagined the networks constructed through and around the sentimental novel as simultaneously embodied and abstract, tangible and imagined. The lingering impression and the lingering tears produced by *The Wide, Wide World* allowed those networks to resonate within and beyond these finite textual encounters.

Particularly compelling are descriptions of disruptive affective reactions that deliciously undermined readers' self-control. Alice's Admirer could not read for the tears that obscured his vision, and Mary Salter figured Alice's death as “an impression on

my mind” that lingered for “one or two days more.” Indeed, readers attributed extraordinary affective power, and even a universal ability to call forth tears, to Warner’s novel. In an undated letter, Gertrude Stanwood told Warner that her mother scolds her and her sister for “weeping over fictitious sorrows”; Stanwood then related with triumph that she caught her mother crying over *The Wide, Wide World*. In 1852, Sara T. Bingham explicitly connected Warner’s achievement as a writer to the feelings she universally calls forth. After heaping praise on *The Wide, Wide World* in a letter addressed to Warner’s publisher, Bingham wrote:

Do not think I have spoken extravagantly. We feel it all and more. And not only *we* but every one that has seen or read the volumes. There certainly is an indescribable something about Miss W. writings that affects the sympathies and feelings of all, calling them forth just enough, causing the cords to vibrate without breaking.

Bingham here depicts herself, as well as every other reader, as being at the mercy of this sentimental novel. She argues that the novel’s affective power synchronizes the bodies of its readers and thereby coordinates them into a sympathetic community united by their shared reactions to Warner’s novels. In a particularly striking image, Bingham invokes the text’s ability to “caus[e] the cords to vibrate without breaking,” conjuring the felt presence of the resonant affective ties binding readers together and to *The Wide, Wide World*. This finely-tuned readerly subjection produces a curious pleasure, a pleasure that depends in part on the imagined universality of that subjection.

In their letters to Warner, these readers figured themselves as directed by her writing and, in the case of Gertrude Stanwood’s mother, as compelled to emotional

expression despite resistance to “fictitious sorrows.” They constructed Warner’s novel as working upon them – producing intimacy with her, compelling them to turn writers, and making them *feel* the novel’s irresistible effects. In line with the “sentimental masochism” that Noble describes, Warner’s corresponding readers also recorded their pleasure in the text’s impositions and in the unifying power of the suffering it produced by narrating their returns to the text, their choice to re-read specific scenes to experience again their affective charge. For example, in a June 1852 letter, Cordelia E. Darrach again unified the fictional and the real when she compared the fictional Alice to her own deceased daughter. Darrach confessed, “I have more than once wept myself into a hysterical state of nervousness over your closing scenes of Alice...”<sup>17</sup> In the description of this reaction, Darrach’s language indicates her own activity as a reader: she re-reads Warner’s affecting scenes and *weeps herself* into that “hysterical state of nervousness.” This letter particularly indicates that the affective charge of Warner’s sentimental writing depended on the collusion of its readers – and that her readers were at least somewhat aware of the role they played in reception, of their own power as readers.

As book history scholarship, reception studies, and reader-response theory have taught us, reading is not a passive activity that proceeds in lock-step to the rhythms established by the text; instead, readers produce texts in the act of consuming them. Mary Kelley and Barbara Sicherman have argued that the desire for connection functioned as a particularly strong motivation shaping readerly appropriations, especially for nineteenth-century women.<sup>18</sup> As these readers, both male and female, described their reactions to Warner’s novels, they disavowed their creative power, limited their agency as readers, and turned Warner into a figment of their readerly imaginations. They did so

out of a desire for connection: imagining themselves to be directed by Warner and her novels licensed the imagination of a community of readers reading and feeling in concert. If they understood the novel as directing them and wielding an irresistible power, they could also imagine other readers writing, crying, converting, and acting on Ellen Montgomery's good example. In their letters, these corresponding readers worked to achieve and maintain that imagination. And they wanted more.

### III. Sequels and the Desire for Community

Thus far, I have argued that Warner's corresponding readers disavowed their own agency as they figured themselves as bodies compelled to feel emotion and minds made to receive impressions by Warner's writing, as they attributed power to her sentimental novels and argued that those novels directed them both in their encounters with the text and their lives beyond it. At the same time, these readers took pleasure from what their limited agency afforded, from what it helped them to imagine. As that felt emotion and those received impressions made readers feel as if they were possessed by the sentimental text, they also allowed readers to feel, and claim, that they were simultaneously in possession of it, not only to situate themselves in the networks that operated through the sentimental text but also to claim an active, participatory role in them. These readers therefore took a proprietary interest in Warner's writing and in her and made claims on both. From focusing on the number of times they re-read her novels, to positioning her books within the private spaces of their homes, to claiming intimacy with the author herself through profound knowledge of her writing, these readers made clear that her novels, in many ways, were also theirs. The sense that reading advances ownership particularly expressed itself as readers persistently asked Warner for more: requests for

autographs, pictures, and replies to their letters appear again and again in this body of correspondence, as do requests for sequels and for information about sequels that may be in progress. Indeed, the very action of writing to Warner implies the request for more: the letter as discourse invites reply, or at least contains its possibility.

In their letters to Warner, readers often expressed a desire for communication with her that was not sated by reading her novels or by yielding to the impulse to write to her. Instead, these corresponding readers wanted something in return, something from Warner that would indicate that she participated in the networks that these readers valued, that would make tangible the sense of relation on which these readers acted, that would make her actual rather than implied. Many readers therefore asked for replies to their letters and for autographs, expressed a desire to see Warner, and even invited her to their homes. Amelia Norris Frink, age twelve, and Mazie Wheeler, age thirteen, succinctly stated their desire for further communication when they wrote to Warner in 1884 from Michigan; they ended their letter by asking, “Will you write us each a letter, send us your autograph, or dedicate a book to us?” Other readers, from Northern Ireland to Virginia, invited Warner to their homes, and still others sought professional advice.<sup>19</sup> In 1864, Eugenia Sadler addressed both Susan and Anna as she asked for their “advice and candid opinion” on her becoming an author – and their judgment of whether she had “the requisite amount of brains” – while Charles Warren Stoddard, who wrote from San Francisco in 1867, asked Susan, “Will you tell me if my rhymes are fair, for one who is already three-and-twenty – and is daily getting older?” Stoddard’s letter also had a more personal slant. He signed his letter, “I am your true friend,” and expressed his willingness to accept an autograph as a substitute for Warner, as “the next best thing to knowing

you.” These readers asked for something more of Warner herself, material objects that would serve as reassuring proof of their relationship with her.

Others sought something still deeper. Clara M. Gamwell wrote to Warner from Massachusetts in June 1862, and she began her letter by noting her “trepidation” in writing but then noted, “Love moves my pen.” Like other readers, Gamwell expressed her great desire to see Warner and to know her: “Your face I have never seen, but waking & sleeping have pictured it to myself, & have longed, oh! so much! to know you.” Gamwell wrote, then, “to beg a few words now & then to cheer & make me better.” Her reasons for doing so become clear as her letter progresses:

Especially have I desired this, since the long loving letters fr. a far absent mother have been cut off by this strange war. She who gave me your books, who told me their beauties before I read them, who with her lips during her brief northern visits, & by her smoothly flowing pen during her long sojourns in a southern clime, has led me on toward that same goal to wh. yr. books aspire, passes daily to her labor beneath a rebel flag & her four children scattered to the four winds of heaven, cry in vain for her sweet words.

In her letter, Gamwell most strongly expresses her desire for her absent mother, but her strong association between Warner and her mother allows her to triangulate a connection with her mother through Warner and Warner’s books. Though Gamwell did not mention any of Warner’s novels by name, the ability of books to serve as textual substitutes for those who gave them is a prominent theme in *The Wide, Wide World*, as I note in my second chapter. Unlike Ellen Montgomery, Gamwell was not content to allow books to

take the place of human connection, but transferred her desire for her mother onto Warner and asked for a letter, and more, in return. Gamwell wrote, “[N]ow I can no longer refrain, fr. telling you *I love you*, fr. begging you to let me see your hand writing, & asking if you are willing, God granting favoring circumstances, I may seek your acquaintance & friendship?” While the degree of passion with which Gamwell wrote may make her letter seem like an aberration, her desire for contact, and even communion, with Warner throws into sharp relief the imagined connections that Warner’s corresponding readers identified as operating through the sentimental novel.

A particularly emphatic request that recurs throughout these letters asked Warner to write more, to extend an already-published narrative in a sequel. In these requests, readers most vehemently and self-consciously demonstrated their desire to direct Warner and her writing. More subtly, though, in making these requests, readers asked her for further proof of the connections among writer, text, and readers that they believed to be operating through her novels. Readers understood those connections to entail certain obligations, and they asked Warner in these letters to take her obligations to them quite seriously. These requests therefore not only establish the readerly impulse to participate in the production of text but also demonstrate the desire for and sense of connection that drove – and licensed – that impulse. In the following pages, I will focus particularly on the requests relating to *The Wide, Wide World*, Warner’s best-known novel and the one with the most tantalizing ending.<sup>20</sup> Consider, for example, Mrs. O.J. Hollister’s letter written to Susan’s sister Anna in 1891, some six years after Susan’s death and forty-one years after *The Wide, Wide World*’s initial publication. In it, Hollister asked Anna to



supply a sequel to Susan's first novel; as she said, "Your sister, I know wrote the book, but you have written many books together!"

In entreating Warner to continue the narrative begun in *The Wide, Wide World*, readers seemingly issued a straightforward call for direction. However, they could not help but imagine, and communicate, what shape a sequel might take, what new stories it might tell about beloved characters. For example, the writer of an anonymous letter dated from Philadelphia in May 1851, only months after the novel's initial publication, said that Warner was

*earnestly solicited* to extend her beautiful and refreshing story, so as to conduct her youthful Heroine once again to the Home of which she retained so tender a memory in the Old World. And to give some intelligence of her meeting with 'Van Brunt,' 'The Brownie' & 'last but not least' of her re-establishment (in her new character) in the Parsonage. ("One of many")

In her letter, Gertrude Stanwood depicted her family gathered around the fire at Christmas and listening to someone read *The Wide, Wide World*. She noted, "When the voice of the reader ceased, we refused to believe the history ended, and like children (which many of us were) cried for *more*." She assured Warner, "*There is* so much more to be told of Ellen," and then explained the reasons that a sequel was required:

Pure beautiful, sinless child, we've traced you through unsullied childhood, till the dawning-light shadows of womanhood were breaking upon you, and we cling to you still. We need to learn from you how to preserve the purity of the child, in the worldly life of the woman. Cant

Miss Wetherell tell us more of those ‘years of Scottish discipline’ – those years, the most important in a woman’s life, from sixteen to twenty –? To us it seems so pathless now, oh guide us by the light of Ellen’s example through them.

Couched in the overwrought language of need, this is an explicit, and highly-detailed, call for direction. However, even as she implored Warner to “guide us by the light of Ellen’s example,” Stanwood simultaneously imparted a measure of direction, delineating the lessons that she would like to gain from *The Wide, Wide World’s* sequel.

In requesting that Warner advance the story she authored, readers, in effect, asked her to supersede the readerly imagination of what might come next and to codify the extension of her narrative in print. These readers constructed an opposition between readerly imagination and authorial direction while indicating their preference for, and directing Warner toward, the latter. Requests in these fan letters for sequels and for authorial direction might seem to return us to the old model of reading as submission, but the very act of making these requests, of writing fan letters, offers a critical revision to this model. In voicing a desire for direction and choosing to relinquish control, these readers nonetheless asserted their voices and their prerogative to choose as they manipulated the connection among Warner, her novels, and themselves. These requests suggest that readers had some greater stake in being directed by the sentimental novel and by its author, that readers had some reason to invest both with authority over narrative that they, as readers, would rather not wield. In 1852, Sara Bingham wrote, “I should not have thought myself any thing about a *sequel*, being all the better pleased for a time at least to allow imagination to have full sway, had I not everywhere been asked, Did you

know there was a sequel to *The Wide Wide World* being published in New York?"

Bingham here indicates her willingness to relinquish her individual imagination in exchange for her continuing participation in the community of readers that cohered around Warner's first novel. Requests like that of Bingham suggest that the pleasure of reading sentimental fiction and a large measure of its potential lie in the desire for authorial direction and in the community that direction could make possible.

Bingham's admitted reluctance to let her imagination "have full sway" parallels two requests preserved in this trove of letters for a clarification of *The Wide, Wide World's* published ending. In that ending, Warner intimates that Ellen and John will eventually marry, but withholds the satisfaction of certainty. Instead, John makes two requests of Ellen – "keep up a regular and full correspondence with me" and "[r]ead no novels" – but explicitly leaves his third request unspoken, telling her "you shall know by and by – the time is not yet" (Warner 563, 564, 565). When the novel ends a few pages later, Warner tantalizes her readers by reminding them of this loose end, inviting them to share Ellen's continuing puzzlement over "the third thing John wanted of her" (Warner 569). While Ellen is content to wait for John to clear up this mystery "by and by," Warner seems to recognize that her readers might be impatient to learn of her heroine's romantic future. She signals this recognition in her introduction to the novel's final paragraph, writing, "For the gratification of those who are never satisfied, one word shall be added..." (Warner 569). However, that final paragraph offers very little readerly gratification, speaking only generally and metaphorically of Ellen's development into womanhood. Even when Warner announces a shift in its language by writing, "In other words, to speak intelligibly," all she offers is that Ellen "went back to spend her life with

the friends and guardians she best loved, and to be to them, still more than she had been to her Scottish relations, ‘the light of the eyes’” (Warner 569). Some readers were dissatisfied with Warner’s playful withholding. Indeed, Mary Barnes borrowed Warner’s description of her readers in *The Wide, Wide World*’s final lines to designate herself as “one of those people ‘who are never satisfied’ that you mention at the end of ‘Wide Wide World’, for I so often wish for a further peep into the future.”

In 1855, Edward L. Campbell wrote to Warner to express his enjoyment of *The Wide, Wide World* and to ask explicitly for that “peep into the future.” He said, “I...hope you will not think my mental perceptions remarkably dull when I say that the ‘latter end’ of ‘The Wide Wide World’ was not exactly plain to me, perhaps you meant it to be so and intended the *final* ‘denouement’ to take place in the imaginations of your readers.” Even if that were Warner’s intention, Campbell pressed on, asking Warner to “condescend to inform me whether you wished the [inferred] ‘finale’ to be the *union of Mr John and Miss Ellen...*” Eschewing his imagination and requesting Warner to make her intentions clear, this reader explicitly stated his desire for authorial direction. Indeed, this desire was so great that he described himself as “afflicted with *curiosity*.” Such a request implies Campbell’s desire for Warner’s authority, which lay in her ability to give the final word on her story and the fates of her characters.

In requesting a sequel, Campbell seemed to place Warner on an authorial pedestal, asking her to “condescend” to him and to “deign to answer” his question. The second request for a clarification of *The Wide, Wide World*’s ending, however, complicates the ways in which readers invested authority in Warner. Writing to Warner’s publishers in 1852, H. G. Fenimore requested that they “urge her to write more of [*The*

*Wide, Wide World*].” In asking George Putnam to direct Warner to write a sequel, Fenimore exercised some direction of his own. Positioning himself with other readers disappointed in what he describes as the novel’s “sudden termination,” Fenimore wrote:

[W]e want to see more of little Ellen amongst her Scotch relations. We want to see her once more established in the home of the Humphreys. We want to know when, how & why she goes back again. We want to see her sweet piety expand into womanhood, & we want to see more of the noble, generous John Humphreys.

The strident repetition of “We want” in this letter makes clear how this reader, and those others for whom he purportedly spoke, attempted to direct Warner’s writing.

Simultaneously, and paradoxically, Fenimore requested Warner to direct his reading more forcefully by narrating the particulars of Ellen’s continuing story. Like Bingham and Campbell, he did not want to rely on his imagination to conjure these scenes, preferring instead to see them codified, stabilized, and disseminated in print. In demanding a sequel to *The Wide, Wide World*, this reader both wanted, and wanted to exercise, direction.

Why did readers like Fenimore want a sequel? The answer lies in their imagination of those networks that operate through sentimental texts, in how they saw reading those texts as an opportunity to experience connection. As they asked for sequels, these correspondents tellingly positioned themselves in communities of readers united by the desire to know what happens next. Fenimore so expressed not what he wants, but what “we want”; Campbell described himself as “afflicted with *curiosity*” but also included that “the awakened interest and *peace of mind* of several ladies of my

acquaintance is concerned”; and Bingham’s request for information about a sequel was prompted by the “many reports” she heard about it. Even the anonymous reader from Philadelphia who requested further information on Ellen, Van Brunt, and Little Brownie tellingly signed him- or herself “One of many.” We might read these writers’ assertions that they speak on behalf of many like-minded readers merely as a rhetorical tool designed to aid them in persuading Warner to write a sequel: they aim to position the authorial one against the clamoring, reading many and to carry the point on numbers alone. In doing so, they also slyly remind Warner that a market already exists for such a sequel.

In the opposition between readerly imagination and authorial direction, the numbers again matter. Campbell also opposed the singular and the multiple when he suggested that Warner “intended the *final* ‘denouement’ to take place in the imaginations of your readers,” implicitly posing the question if a single denouement is possible when it depends on multiple imaginations acting in concert. For the readers who wrote to Warner, the unifying force of sentimental fiction and the possibility of the reading-self-in-relation depend on a kind of synchronized reading, which can only be achieved by having a common text that produces a common interpretation – in this case, a sequel – at its center. These readers indicated that they would rather receive a single text than produce multiple, and possibly divergent, “texts” through their interpretations. At the same time, they indicate their awareness that multiple interpretations and various denouements are possible, especially, *but not only*, when a story’s conclusion resides in readers’ imaginations instead of on the printed page. That reception remakes texts is a basic argument of our theories and histories of reading – and that argument was operative

within these nineteenth-century fan letters. In asking Warner to clarify the ending or publish a sequel to *The Wide, Wide World*, these readers therefore asked her to perpetuate the fiction of a unified community of readers responding in kind to a sentimental novel. According to Warner's fan letters, that fiction was the driving force behind readers' love for reading the sentimental novel. In their call for sequels, in the directions they offer as to their completion, and in their very letters, Warner's corresponding readers asserted the proprietary prerogatives of reading. However, even as they asserted their place in the networks that operated through sentimental texts, these readers circumscribed their role: in effect, they directed Warner to direct them. Warner's fan letters both instantiate and exploit a participatory dynamic that included both reader and writer in the production of sentimental fiction and negotiated their sometimes competing, sometimes confluent claims.

Readers also sought other means – or other modes of discipline – by which to assert their role in Warner's future writing, as Williams has noted.<sup>21</sup> Despite the presence of letters that compare Warner's writing favorably to “the vicious trash which has [drugged?] the book marts of our country,” other letter writers scolded Warner for deviating from the unmitigated goodness they had been led to expect from her previous works, for not conforming to their readerly expectations (Dix). In an undated letter, L. Guning first established herself as a dedicated reader and admirer of Warner's books before castigating Warner for her latest, *Wych Hazel* (1876): “Having from childhood been accustomed to read your books, and admiring several of them, I commenced to read *Wych Hazel* and was very much disappointed to find such a work coming from the pen of one who, I presume, professes to be a Christian.”<sup>22</sup> Guning warned Warner that her

works would outlive her and that, on her death bed, she would experience “much more solid satisfaction” if she would turn from the path on which *Wych Hazel* had started her. Mrs. C.J. Pickford, who wrote in 1884, began her letter by asserting, “I almost feel acquainted with you through your books.” She then objected to the use of slang and the word “deuced” in *Nobody* (1882), writing, “I could not have been more grieved had some friend used those words to me.” She asked Warner to discontinue the use of slang and mild curses in her works and declared, “I am very jealous of their reputation.”

In arguing that this “bad” writing is out of character for Warner, Guning and Pickford assert their knowledge of her, which they gained only through reading her works. They argue that she is subject to the expectations she herself has constructed and indicate their displeasure that she has ignored those expectations – and, by extension, her loyal readers. These letters also intimate that Warner’s apparent disregard for readerly expectations threatens to overthrow the system of readerly enjoyment on which readers like Guning and Pickford depend. In that system, readers exert a level of control over their reading pleasure by choosing to read novels that they know they will admire, of whose reputation they feel assured, whose writer they have come to know. In scolding Warner into supplying the demand she has created, these writers claim past, present, and future ownership of Warner and her writing.

While at least one of these writers is female, gender dynamics condition another attempted discipline of Warner. Ellen’s Ardent Admirer tried to take advantage of Warner’s position as a woman author in order to make certain claims upon her. Indeed, this reader invoked the different possibilities available to men and women from his letter’s inception. He began by stating that he had just finished reading *The Wide, Wide*



*World* and then asserted, “There is a sympathy between us.” He continued, “Ellen, I know would not upon such a basis be so bold as you see I am, but then Ellen is a girl. I am not.” The license that his gender affords him continues to shape the letter and the claims it makes on Warner. This reader offered two specific criticisms of Warner’s novel: “That going to Scotland was a bad move, still it may turn out for the best” and “The first volume is generally the best but then you became a little tired at last, and we cant work well without the heart is in it (for having written a book or so myself I speak from experience).” In comparing the second volume unfavorably to the first, Ellen’s Ardent Admirer set himself up as a fellow author and thus bolstered his position as a (male) critic of Warner’s writing. Immediately after offering this appraisal, he invoked the gender hierarchy that operates in Warner’s text and turned it to his own advantage: “You see I am playing Master John, and you must be, for the time, as I strongly suspect in reality you are – Ellen.” Ellen’s Ardent Admirer then went on to express his love for Ellen, declaring that she is precisely the kind of girl he would like for a wife and confessing that “I cannot get Ellen out of my mind, I dont try *very* hard.” In this second clause, this reader implies that he could resist the effect of the novel if he did try; this subtle claim to reading power becomes more overt as he turns to criticizing Warner’s novel. He complained about Warner’s pairing of Ellen with John, asking “what *could* bewitch the child so for him, he is *far* too old.” This reader then turned from criticizing Warner’s past work to directing her future writing, correcting her grammar in advance of a sequel: “[B]y the way, dont say in the sequel – of course we are to have a sequel – ‘the *far* corner’ – ‘the *far* end’, etc anymore will you?” In what veers toward an epistolary courtship, this reader attempted to discipline Warner by taking advantage of the gender

hierarchy she narrated, positioning her as Ellen and himself as “Master John.” In her discussion of this letter, Noble writes, “Domination is the language of his romantic fantasy” (118); moreover, it is the language of this reader’s particular fantasy *of reading*. While in the novel John eventually refuses to respond to Ellen under the names of Mr. Humphreys and Master John, this reader resurrects John’s temporary appellation to position himself as a powerful male reader criticizing and directing a female author.

This reader’s arrogation of the role of Master John constitutes a particularly blatant example of the dynamic I am tracing here, in which readers aim to direct Warner by laying claim to the characters she creates and the stories she tells. Readers more subtly evinced this proprietary interest as they detailed other, more literal acts of possession. For example, Mary Barnes described her copy of *Queechy* for Warner as well as her reading of it: “[E]very spare moment I had, I crept up into a cold room where the treasure lay hidden; old and worn it was & minus a finale, but I never felt the cold as I sat curled up on the bed devouring my book.” She also wrote of the placement of Warner’s books in her home, depicting them “smiling side by side in a cosy corner of my book shelf” and making sure to mention that the shelf contained plenty of room for forthcoming sequels. Ella K. Blake told Warner that she literally read her copy of *The Wide, Wide World* to pieces; she then had it rebound and passed it on to her daughter, who read it to pieces a second time. Blake calls this battered book “my ‘Wide World.’” Barnes placed her copy of *Queechy* in the intimate space of a bedroom, and Blake described her copy of *The Wide, Wide World* as a treasured, if often used, family heirloom. By describing the embeddedness of Warner’s books in their lives, these

readers asserted their intimate ownership of them. They extended that ownership over Warner's characters, Warner herself, and the physical capture of her writing, her books.

In some letters, this sense of intimate possession was linked to the ownership of books; elsewhere, that sense of ownership persisted even when owning books was not possible. At least some readers borrowed Warner's novels from a friend or from the library, as Gertrude M. Holt did. In an 1881 letter to Warner, Holt described herself as a "poor woman" who does not own a copy of *The Wide, Wide World*, but recalled that, as a child, a friend had lent her a copy –and that she "did not return it until [she] had read it through six times & could repeat large portions of the book." Holt assured Warner that she now borrows the book from the library and continues to "re-read it with much pleasure & profit." Letters like that of Holt, then, delineate the readerly sense of intimate possession that simultaneously depends on and transcends the physical object of the book.

Even as they detailed literal and figurative acts of possession, Warner's readers indicated that they felt possessed by Warner's books: they were compelled to write to her, turned to her books for guidance, and had affective responses to them. These letters therefore demonstrate a certain reciprocity in the acts of possessing, and being possessed by, Warner's novels. As readers simultaneously figured themselves as owned and owners, they instantiated an understanding of reading as exchange and, at times, employed a discourse of debt to evoke the relational dynamics of reading sentimental fiction.<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Holt explicitly used her fan letter to pay her debt to the author of *The Wide, Wide World*: she wrote, "[I]t is contrary to my feelings to receive favours without at least giving the poor return of 'Thanks'. I am a poor woman, and it is all that I can

give...” Henry Augustus Boardman, a friend of the Warner family, wrote to Susan to tell her that he felt indebted to her as an author; he sent her a book as “not simply a token of my respect for you, but a business transaction. I never like to be in debt, & I have felt myself in debt to the author of the ‘Wide, Wide, World’, ever since I read the work at Newport last summer. I wish the book you have received, as far as it will go, to be an offset to this claim.” Nellie S. Mitchell also tried to express to Warner “how much I owe you,” as did William Tebb, who concluded in a letter dated 1 November 1853, “I know not how to express a sense of gratitude I owe, for the pleasure I have received in [*The Wide, Wide World*’s] perusal & this is slight compared to the profit, which I trust I have derived.” These readers describe a textual transaction of which they are the beneficiary, the recipients of untold, and even inexpressible, “profit.” In their insistence that they cannot repay Warner fully for what her writing has done for them, these readers position themselves at one pole of a textual exchange and make sure that Warner is occupying her position at the other, as the reader of these fan letters and participant in these networks.

Despite this figurative discourse of debt and readers’ sense of possession, these readers did not understand their relationship with Warner to be financial: no hint of her status as the producer of a commodity that they consume, as the recipient of some portion of the money they paid for her books, enters these letters. Instead, the relationship that these letters figure, and even help to produce, was marked by intimacy and the desire for personal connection, for correspondence, for love. As she defines “the main function of sentimentality to be collaboration,” Mary Louise Kete emphasizes that “sentimental collaborations” were produced “through an exchange of tokens of affection in an economy not of capital but of emotions” (21, 37). Studies of the antebellum book

market, however, stress the ways in which the financial side of the literary marketplace strongly conditioned the reader-author relationship, and especially did so when reader and author met over a sentimental novel.

With this emphasis on the print marketplace in play, readers are often abstracted and reduced into mere, anonymous purchasers of texts rather than individual makers of textual meaning. For example, Michael T. Gilmore indicates that both Fanny Fern and her fictional counterpart, Ruth Hall, primarily wrote to make money and therefore embraced the book marketplace. In his words, “Ruth wants her pieces to affect and inspire others, but she thinks of herself above all as ‘a regular business woman’ whose writings secure the wherewithal to cover ‘shoeless feet’ and buy ‘a little medicine, or a warmer shawl’” (63). The implication here is that Ruth – and the real sentimental novelists whom Gilmore understands her to represent – primarily conceived of their readers as purchasers of their books, with reading itself becoming an afterthought to an initial exchange of cash. In a well-known and well-worn opposition, Gilmore argues that male writers defined their professional, artistic identity against the commercial model presented by female novelists: “Literary professionalism as a distancing from the market, as an elevation of calling and competence over profitability, was the creation of white male fiction writers reacting against the commercial triumphs of the feminine novel” (70). The marketplace undoubtedly conditioned literary production in the antebellum United States, and readers did possess financial power, of which writers were well aware. Indeed, as Williams rightly argues, Warner took up the position of sentimental novelist in order to make money, and her readers kept her in that position, at least in part, by virtue of their purchasing power (“Widening” 568). However, for at least this subset of

corresponding readers, readers' power as such derived not from buying books but from reading them – and from *how* they read them. In a similar vein, it was not the act of buying a book – or selling it – that transferred ownership of it or gave readers and writer certain prerogatives. Instead, it was a particular imagination of reading that did so.

These letters record that the sentimental text itself as well as the pleasures of reading it emerged from a fluid, participatory structure of direction in which readers played a significant role. That structure of direction and its concomitant sense of relation both framed and negotiated the competing claims of Warner and her fans. Warner's corresponding readers did assert the prerogatives of textual ownership and tried to manipulate the connection between Warner and her writing. However, even as they asserted their place in the networks that operated through sentimental texts, they also recognized Warner's place in those networks and her own stake in her writing. For these readers, then, the complex negotiation of authority and agency, individual and community attended the deceptively simple act of reading a sentimental novel. These letters narrate a version of reading that can construct a community from readers' idiosyncratic responses, that can forge connections between a reader and a novel, among readers eager for a sequel, and between a reader and an author who is immanent within her work. The desire for this community helps to account for why these readers turned writers, for why they felt doing so was both possible and necessary.

#### IV. The Anxious Pleasures of the Fan Letter

Nancy Glazener argues, “[I]n this process of production-reception through which texts are made meaningful, the component of reception is at least as important as that of authorial production, narrowly defined, since reception gets the last word” (3). A

century-and-a-half earlier, William Tebb also made this clear: in his second letter to Warner, written in response to her reply to his first, he wrote, in the letter's final line, "Please excuse my desire to have the last word." Tebb, albeit politely, asserts this prerogative of reception, and he does so to the author of the book that he has just read. As I have argued, that prerogative took a variety of forms in this body of correspondence. But did Warner credit that prerogative and the claims of her readers? Did her readers, indeed, have the last word? Or did she write back?

As Tebb's second letter makes clear, we know that Warner responded to some of these letters and complied with some of their requests.<sup>24</sup> We also know that her publisher, George Putnam, encouraged her to do so. In a letter dated 8 June 1852, he wrote that he had "enclose[d] another of those enquiring letters" and suggested that Warner "gratify the young lady by an autographic acknowledgement," as "[i]t seems to me she deserves one." Even if Warner were disinclined to do so, Putnam wrote that he had "very mischievously giv[en] your name & address" to that young woman. Anna Warner's biography of her sister, published in 1909 after Susan's death and assembled primarily from direct quotations from Susan's journal, offers more insight into Susan's responses to her fan letters. For example, on 29 September 1852, Susan described receiving "a note from a Southern gentleman enclosing a notice of Queechy written for the next Southern Literary Messenger, and desiring my acknowledgment of the receipt of the same!": Susan wryly called this "a civil way of getting an autograph" (364). That letter, written by Jonathan Esten Cooke, remains in the Warner correspondence, but there is no reply from Cooke to indicate if Warner replied to his request. In a journal entry dated 17 October 1862, Warner described the letter from Joseph Molyneux Hunter, who

was brought to Christ by reading those “very few lines of the ‘Wide Wide World,’” as “a very remarkable letter—and one to give me great pleasure....Blessed be the name of the Lord!” (444). Anna Warner described her own decision to write Susan’s biography as arising from a sense of obligation to her sister’s readers, and to her sister. In a note preceding the text, Anna wrote, “My love, they want me to tell about you; and if I can, I must. They write me from England and America that back of such books as yours there must be faith worth hearing about, a life that should be told....I must try” (ix).

We know, then, that at least some of Warner’s readers received responses from her (or from her sister) and that Warner was gratified by some of their fan letters. However, a resounding silence greeted readers’ concerted requests for a sequel to, or even a clarification of the ending of, *The Wide, Wide World*. In making those requests, these readers acted on their belief that they had some say in the production of the sentimental text. Perhaps, though, they really did not. After all, Warner never penned a sequel, and the novel’s existing final chapter – in which Ellen does return to America as John Humphreys’s wife and Fenimore’s question of “where, how & why she goes back again” is answered – was never published in Warner’s lifetime.<sup>25</sup> Why that final chapter went unpublished for so long remains unclear. We do know that Warner’s publishers were concerned with the novel’s length and made other cuts to her manuscript, so the final chapter may simply have ended up on the cutting-room floor.<sup>26</sup> Williams has suggested that Warner’s decision not to publish the final chapter, with its worldly emphasis on Ellen’s relatively opulent material surroundings, was a self-conscious one that serves as “evidence of Warner’s desire to strengthen the sentimental mode of the novel” (“Widening” 578). More provocatively, Warner may not have ignored but



actively flaunted these requests, keeping production in her own hands and out of those of her interfering readers. Jana Argersinger makes this argument as she unearths a “subtextual *Künstlerroman*” in *The Wide, Wide World*, with Ellen playing the role of “the seductive little girl, a girlish Madonna-Magdalen” and standing in for Warner and as the novel’s “most compelling figure of authorship” (256, 277). Argersinger argues that, in withholding a sequel to her bestselling novel, Warner shifted “this posture of invitation and denial...beyond the text into the more immediate marketplace intercourse between author and audience” (278).

As I have argued, Warner’s fan letters demonstrate that, for at least the readers who wrote them, the experience of reading sentimental fiction was a passionate, dynamic, and self-conscious interrelation among text, author, and reader that was marked by the fluid interplay of intimacy, agency, and direction. Readers negotiated the contradictions of the partially imagined networks operating through and around the sentimental text that were simultaneously embodied and abstract, tangible and imagined, and their fan letters were an essential part of that negotiation. The fan letter therefore had its own particular, anxious pleasure, which derived from reaching out to an unknown author, from trying to please her and oneself, from voicing demands and wondering if they would be answered. Despite readers’ hard look at what was required to maintain this highly-valued sense of relation, their imagination of a community that could be created out of thin air and a mass-produced novel was also somewhat utopian. Warner herself, in her response or lack thereof to these fan letters, brings that imagination down to earth. In writing to Warner, in seizing an epistolary prerogative, readers evinced their desire to concretize and perpetuate these networks; in doing so, they simultaneously endangered them.

By drawing attention to what seems like Warner's silence, I mean to illustrate the final instability of these networks but also, and more importantly, to call attention to the thrill that the fan letter afforded. For this body of correspondents, reading sentimental fiction operated as a technology of community in diffuse but foundational ways. Considerations of the kinds of community that sentimental fiction can engender often direct our attention to the cataclysmic, if all too common, ruptures that threatened it – to death and suffering and slavery. In this vein, the work of Mary Louise Kete and Marianne Noble emphasizes, respectively, the essentially reparative work of mourning and of “sentimental collaboration” and the masochistic pleasure of sentimental fiction that “promotes...unity through pain” (106). That is not to say that there is not pain or masochism circulating through these letters: there certainly is. What these fan letters push us to consider, though, is that reading sentimental fiction afforded more complex pleasures than just these – pleasures that were rooted in fellowship and community, in the exercise and sacrifice of agency, and in shared affective responses. Our critical impulse has been to locate the value of Warner's writing in the kinds of muted rebellion it allowed its female readers to imagine, in its depiction of heroines like Ellen Montgomery as embattled but as ultimately strong enough to withstand suffering. In contrast, these historical readers located a kind of anxious pleasure in the thought of rebellion and put their fan letters, their qualified exercise of agency, in the service of accord. These letters also ask not to discount the playfulness that attended readers' deep, essential need for connection with Warner and with each other.

I have argued in this chapter that Warner's corresponding readers wanted more and that that desire accounts for their fan letters. The pleasure of these letters was an

anxious one, and that anxious pleasure lay in the act of reaching out, of seeing reading not as solitary but as social, as providing the opportunity, perhaps, for community and for fellowship. A kind of danger also attends these letters: it was certainly safer to imagine Warner than to seek her out, to write a fan letter. Finally, though, the power of these fan letters lay not in how Warner did or did not respond to them, but in what they allowed their readers to imagine, in how these readers opened up a space for themselves within Warner's sentimental fictions. In that respect, then, readers like Tebb did have the last word, even if they asked Warner to excuse them for doing so.

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<sup>1</sup> See Tompkins *Sensational* and Wexler 94-126.

<sup>2</sup> The Warners moved from New York City to Constitution Island following financial reverses suffered in the Panic of 1837, and Susan and Anna lived there for the remainder of their lives. Constitution Island is located on the Hudson River and is directly across from West Point.

<sup>3</sup> The number of men who read, cried, and wrote to Warner supports Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler's call for "a theoretical and historical revision of the now canonical association of sentimentality with femininity" (2-3).

<sup>4</sup> Though Taylor seems to be a stranger when he wrote to Warner in 1852, he would later write the introduction to the English edition of *The Wide, Wide World*.

<sup>5</sup> Since Williams's initial comments, these letters have appeared briefly in other critical studies of *The Wide, Wide World*. For example, in her argument that Warner's novel "eroticizes domination" within its pages, Marianne Noble uses three letters from this collection of fan mail to suggest that the novel disseminates its masochistic ideology to its readers (118). See also Kim 791-92 and Quay 53.

<sup>6</sup> For a compelling consideration of using these different forms of evidence to reconstruct reading, see L. Jackson. For critics who use these forms of evidence to reconstruct historical reading practices, see my Introduction (fn. 7, 13).

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, critics have argued against what Elizabeth Long terms "the cultural hegemony of the solitary reader" (8). For historical accounts of reading as a social practice, see Henkin; Kelley *Learning*; and Zboray and Zboray, "Have You Read.?" On the debate whether sentimental discourse is privatizing or public, see Berlant "Poor Eliza" and Hendler.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Nord 242-43.

<sup>9</sup> Additional studies also concentrate on fan mail to reconstruct the reception of certain texts. See, for example, Satterwhite.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Darnton's study of Rousseauistic reading depends, in part, on fan letters written to Rousseau following the publication of *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, which was published almost a hundred years before *The Wide, Wide World*. See *The Great Cat Massacre* 215-56.

<sup>11</sup> See Sichertman "Reading *Little Women*" 250-51, 253.

<sup>12</sup> In Silverman's argument, which draws heavily on Warner's biography, Warner's writing presents a "fantasy of community [that] is always allied with a more punitive vision in which reading aids in the subordination of the self" (19). While I am also interested here in how readers imagined themselves to be connecting with others through the experience of reading sentimental fiction, my emphasis is not on what Silverman terms "punitive literary practices," or the ways that Warner imagined the experiences of authorship and reading to be synonymous with a kind of masochistic suffering (4). Instead, by looking to Warner's historical readers, my argument discerns more complex pleasures in the experience of reading her novels.

<sup>13</sup> For a study of nineteenth-century African American literary societies and reading communities, see McHenry.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Radway *Reading the Romance* and Chartier “Culture as Appropriation.”

<sup>15</sup> Evidence suggests that many readers sought Warner out through her publishers. Anna Warner’s 1909 biography of her sister often depicts instances in which their father returned home from New York with letters to Susan given to him by George Putnam, and some letters are explicitly addressed to Putnam as well. Additionally, the Warner Collection includes a letter from Putnam, dated 8 June 1852, in which he refers to a fan letter he has enclosed, encourages Warner to reply to it, and confesses that he has “mischievously” given her address to this fan. As Susan became ever more popular, her residence at Constitution Island may also have become well-known, allowing readers to contact her directly.

<sup>16</sup> Hart’s volume, which includes portraits, brief biographies, and excerpts from the writings of popular female authors, is predicated on the belief that all readers want “to know something” of the (female) authors they read. The Warner Collection contains four letters written from Hart to the Warner sisters in 1851 and 1852.

<sup>17</sup> Presumably the same Cordelia E. Darrach appears in the Zborays’ research on reading in antebellum Boston. They cite letters from Darrach to Caroline A. (Briggs) Mason in which she discusses Maria Susanna Cummins’s *Mabel Vaughan* (1858) and offers more general descriptions of her reading. See Zboray and Zboray “Have You Read” 152, 161, 164.

<sup>18</sup> See Sichertman “Reading and Ambition” and Kelley *Learning*.

<sup>19</sup> For letters that invited Warner to readers’ homes, see Kirkpatrick and Stanwood.

<sup>20</sup> Not all requests for sequels in these fan letters pertained to *The Wide, Wide World*. In 1883, Mollie B. Coulson wrote that her thoughts concerning a continuation of *Trading* (1873) had occupied her each time she finished the novel, so that, “after thinking about it for a good many years,” she finally addressed Warner to ask her to “comply with this great longing of mine.” Coulson designated who should marry whom in the sequel and asked Warner to leave the heroine at her current level of goodness, as “she would not be natural to me if she were any nearer perfect.” Coulson’s request is particularly bold, as *Trading* is the fourth in a series of books and designates itself as “completing the story” on its very title page. Laura C. Hoyle asked Warner to write a sequel to *Melbourne House* (1864) in which Daisy marries Dr. Sandford; not only did she make this request, but Hoyle also concluded her letter by writing that, should Warner choose a different husband for her heroine, she should not write a sequel at all, as “[u]ncertainty is better than that painful truth.” Eliza Sophie Morgan suggested both plot points and a title for a sequel to *Queechy* (1852), a novel that follows its young heroine Fleda Ringgan through many trials and tribulations before rewarding her with a marriage to an English nobleman, Guy Carleton. Morgan argued that there were “many lessons [that] might be learned in studying Fleda as wife daughter mother and mistress” and indicated that she would like to learn them in a sequel titled after Fleda’s new husband, “Carleton.”

<sup>21</sup> See Williams “Widening” 574-75.

<sup>22</sup> Though *Wych Hazel* was written by Anna and Susan, Guning’s letter addresses Susan alone.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Louise Kete’s work on *Harriet Gould’s Book*, a commonplace book given to a New England woman in which she and her friends inscribed poems and quotations, offers a different perspective on the reciprocity I trace here, on how the exchange of books functioned as an occasion for “sentimental collaborations.” See Kete 19-30.

<sup>24</sup> I have located only two extant letters written by Warner in reply to her fan letters. There is a draft reply to one of Paula Bodewig’s letters included in the Warner Collection. In addition, Kelley quotes a letter written in response to Dorothea Dix (*Private* 293). Other letters that provide evidence that Warner replied to them are Dwight; Holt; Taylor, 1 Oct. 1862; and Tebb, 17 Nov. 1853.

<sup>25</sup> The edition of *The Wide, Wide World* edited by Jane Tompkins includes this unpublished chapter (571-83).

<sup>26</sup> For example, in Anna Warner’s biography of Susan, a journal entry by Susan recounts a dialogue with Putnam’s daughter Minny and his wife over the deletion of an episode in which Ellen meets an African American girl named Rebecca Richardson. Mrs. Putnam, according to Susan, says “she had heard Mr. Putnam say – that the size of a book had so much to do with its success” (296). For more on this expunged episode, see Roberson and Weinstein *Family* 154.

Chapter 4: Writing Race, Reading Sentiment: William G. Allen's *The American Prejudice Against Color* and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*

In London in the 1850s, two narratives appeared in print that were written by African American men and made the condemnation of racial prejudice in the northeast United States their primary subject. William G. Allen's autobiographical narrative *The American Prejudice Against Color* (1853) and Frank J. Webb's novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) challenge prejudice through their depictions of mob violence, interracial marriage, and, more surprisingly, daily acts of writing and reading. Indeed, Webb and Allen are particularly concerned with delineating and contesting how race functions in writing, how it is written and read. For example, Allen spends much of his narrative correcting – and lampooning – newspaper accounts of the mob that assembled in upstate New York to prevent him from marrying his white fiancée, Mary King. In criticizing one such account, Allen notes that its author, though he had never seen Allen, nonetheless offered a physical description of him. Allen writes, “I appeared in print as ‘a stout, lusty, fellow, six feet and three inches tall, and as black as a pot of charcoal’” (66). Allen, who describes himself as a quadroon at numerous points in his narrative, blandly comments, “Reader, you would laugh to see me after such a description – of my height, at least” (66).<sup>1</sup> In choosing to challenge this writer's measure of his height, Allen yet invites his readers to take note of all the qualities that together produce a stereotypical, threatening black masculinity – a towering physical presence, a pronounced sexual appetite, and “charcoal”-black skin. By assuring his readers that the distance between print and reality would make them laugh, Allen disrupts the entire description and all it

would seem to intimate. He therefore uses print – or, to be more precise, *The American Prejudice Against Color* – to correct his “appear[ance] in print.”

Webb also links race and writing in a momentous scene in *The Garies*, in which the guardians of the recently orphaned Clarence Garie, Mr. Balch and Mr. Walters, discuss whether Clarence should utilize his light complexion to pass for white. Walters initially argues against Balch’s proposal that Clarence pass by comparing passing to forgery: “An undetected forger, who is in constant fear of being apprehended, is happy in comparison with that coloured man who attempts, in this country, to hold a place in the society of whites by concealing his origin” (306). According to Walters, the forger and the passer both fear detection, but the analogy between them has even greater resonance.<sup>2</sup> By hiding his origin through passing and forging a new racial identity, Clarence would arrogate the power of authorship, produce an inauthentic text, and disrupt the public’s ability to read race. Walters argues, though, that that disruption and the power it affords are precarious and ephemeral, for the bodily text must yet contend with the inevitability of reception and its potential to challenge representation. Balch and Walters nonetheless decide to recommend to Clarence that he pass, and Clarence acquiesces. When his passing is eventually revealed, his white fiancée’s father re-invokes the correspondence between forgery and passing: he calls Clarence, among other things, “a counterfeit” and accuses him of “palming yourself upon us” (381, 382). Clarence here becomes both the forger and the forgery, the writer and the text.

As Allen and Clarence try to represent their race through writing and to direct how their bodies will be read, they emphasize that race *is* a matter of reception, of reading. That emphasis is made possible – and pressing – by amalgamation. Allen and

Clarence are simultaneously the products of amalgamation and, as African American men pursuing interracial marriages, its potential producers. In these narratives and in the culture in which they circulated, interracial marriage and amalgamation raise the possibility of blurring racial boundaries and threaten the reassuring visibility of race. It is particularly telling, then, that the editor who protests against Allen's planned interracial marriage darkens Allen's skin color in the process, trying to make Allen's race, and that of his future children, more legible, to locate it more firmly on his and their bodies. *The Garies* and *The American Prejudice Against Color* call attention to the necessity and the difficulty of reading race through the miscegenated bodies of Clarence and Allen, and, as I argue in this chapter, throughout their narratives.

Allen and Webb contend that race is a matter of both representation and reception, of writing and reading bodies. As these authors construct an implicit, and at times explicit, correspondence between race and text, raced identity becomes intimately joined to the acts of writing and reading that pervade their narratives. Importantly, both raced identity and the production and reception of text are hotly contested within *The American Prejudice Against Color* and *The Garies*: Allen and Webb stage recurring conflicts over who writes and reads and who gets written and read, whether the text at the center of that conflict is Clarence's forged body or an editorial that offers a laughable physical description of Allen. As these authors locate both raced bodies and literal texts at the fluid intersection of representation and reception, they negotiate the ability of both race and text to be destabilized and remade by writers and readers alike. Allen and Webb locate possibility in that instability, for it opens up a space for their narratives, an avenue by which these authors may advance their representations of race.

The politics of representation, race, and resistance in African American literature and culture has long been a topic of critical conversation, and writing has rightly been understood as a highly useful means of resistance. For example, in their first issue, published on 16 March 1827, the editors of *Freedom's Journal* stated, "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly" (qtd. Foster "African Americans" 31). The editors here articulate their desire to seize the power of writing, the power "to plead our own cause" and to communicate with and undeceive the public about "things which concern us dearly." However, *Freedom's Journal* was but one publication, one representation of raced identity among many: it did not replace "misrepresentations" but existed alongside them. Like the editors of *Freedom's Journal*, then, Webb and Allen are aware of the misrepresentations of African Americans that circulated through antebellum culture, and they are particularly cognizant of the ability of those misrepresentations to compete with and destabilize the representations advanced in *The American Prejudice Against Color* and *The Garies*. These authors therefore not only strive to make their representations and the texts that contain them appear authentic, stable, and inevitable, but also to direct how they will be received by their readers.

Because race gets not only written but also read within the context of Allen's and Webb's narratives, these writers must manage both representation and reception. They strive to direct reception by narrating acts of reading. Within both narratives, texts abound. In *The Garies*, love letters are written, pored over, and reluctantly returned; a newspaper article makes Clarence Garie doubt the love of his fiancée; and a long-lost will is eventually recovered and used to reveal a murderer. Allen's narrative is also densely



populated with smaller, constitutive texts: his approximately fifty-page narrative includes nine newspaper accounts and thirteen letters. The proliferation of these texts affords Allen and Webb numerous opportunities to model reception, and the particular model they offer establishes the text as a site of contest between authors and suspicious, even antagonistic, readers. Within their narratives, readers often win those contests: texts ranging from newspaper articles to hand-written notes are strategically and purposefully misread, intercepted, amended, excerpted, and otherwise co-opted by their readers. Because race also functions as a kind of text, because it is both written and read, Allen and Webb suggest that race is also open to co-optation by interfering readers. As these writers construct an analogy between writing and race by emphasizing that both may be read and re-made, they locate both possibility and danger in the vulnerability imparted to writing and race by reception.

As they construct reading and writing as contestatory practices, Allen and Webb cannot help but consider their own authorship and the contradiction inherent in an author's advocacy of suspicious reading. Both writers want their readers to be suspicious of some texts, but to trust theirs. Aware of the difficulty of striking such a balance, Allen and Webb anticipate the contests that, according to their model, will inevitably occur over their texts. These authors therefore revisit an old problem, that of the tug-of-war of readers and writers over texts, but they take up that problem and try to solve it in a very specific context, one that includes the free North and its communities of middle-class African Americans, the transatlantic abolitionist community, and the antebellum literary marketplace.

Allen positions himself firmly in that context when he designates racial prejudice as “this American feeling” and thereby opposes it to the benevolence and sympathy afforded to him in Great Britain (55). He expands on the *American* prejudice against color in a letter written to William Lloyd Garrison and published in the *Liberator* on 22 July 1853, a mere three months after his emigration. Referring to the lack of prejudice he and his wife have experienced since their arrival in England, Allen writes, “This state of things, of course, evinces that prejudice against color is entirely a local feeling, generated by slavery, and which must disappear, not only as colored men rise higher and higher in the light of intelligence and virtue, but as the dominant race in American becomes wiser and more liberalized by the spirit of a true Christianity” (qtd. Ripley 356). While Glenn Hendler describes sympathy as “a paradigmatically public sentiment,” Allen’s designation of prejudice as an “American feeling” makes clear that the refusal of sympathy may also assume a public, and even national, form (12). In calling attention to racial prejudice as a national and specifically American problem, Allen yet sought to convince his British audience that they could help solve it through their sympathy and financial support for himself and his cause.<sup>3</sup>

In order to combat prejudice and invoke sympathy, Webb and Allen use the cultural discourse of sentimentality to tell their stories and to direct reception. As participants in the abolitionist and literary antebellum community, both writers were well-acquainted with the potential of sentimental writing. Indeed, both men had personal contact with Harriet Beecher Stowe and were familiar with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Webb’s novel is prefaced by Stowe, and, as I discuss at more length in the conclusion of this chapter, Stowe converted her bestselling novel into a play titled *The Christian Slave*

(1855) “Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb” – Frank Webb’s wife. Allen includes in his narrative a letter of support from Stowe, and he also wrote a glowing review of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in a letter to *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in the spring of 1852. In that review, Allen called *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “the wonder of wonders” and applauded “[h]ow its descriptions stir the blood, indeed almost make it leap out of the heart!” Allen is also pleased to see that “[i]t contains some happy hits at prejudice against color,” which he calls “this soul-narrowing and heart-belittling feeling.”<sup>4</sup>

In the challenge to racial prejudice advanced within their narratives, Allen and Webb seek to expand the soul and elevate the heart by deploying the conventions of sentimentality. Domestic settings play an important formal and thematic role in both narratives; Allen and Webb place emphasis on the “self-in-relation” and extol the benefits of family and community (Dobson “Reclaiming” 267); and feeling bodies within these narratives display intense emotion as they assert and maintain a correspondence between surface and depth, appearance and essence. More pointedly, Allen and Webb turn to sentimental discourse’s promise to coordinate writing and reading through feeling. In my second chapter, I argue that sentimental fiction confronts both halves of the narrative problem arising from the conjunction of text and emotion: how to translate emotion into text and then to translate that text into readerly emotion. As Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) demonstrates, sentimentality offers to circumscribe unruly readers and wayward emotion within its directed discourse, but provides an ultimately imperfect solution to the problem of reading and writing emotion. In this chapter, I explicate a particular story that sentimentality helps Allen and Webb to tell, a story of vulnerable texts and right reading, of slippery and stable identity. These authors adopt the cultural

discourse of sentimentality – the particular system of representation it offers and its promise to manage reception – to try to solve the problem of representing and reading racial identity in the antebellum North. Robert Reid-Pharr has called attention to the “black body’s limitless nature” in early nineteenth-century America, arguing that early African American literature sought to produce a stable, normalized black body and “to define a modern racial identity that is distinct and peculiar” through the production of a stable black domesticity (*Conjugal* 5, 72).<sup>5</sup> In line with Reid-Pharr’s argument, Allen and Webb seek to produce stable representations of raced identity in their texts, but they also consider how those representations will be received, how reception can remake race once again.

Allen and Webb therefore acknowledge that representation and reading together open up a space between appearance and essence, signifier and signified, and they use sentimental discourse to close that distance both within their narratives and for their readers. Joanne Dobson and Jane Tompkins have noted the utility of stereotype in sentimental literature, arguing that stereotypes advance the genre’s drive toward transparency while their “familiarity and typicality” serve as “the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation” (Tompkins *Sensational* xvi).<sup>6</sup> In her work on the bodily nature of the sentimental genre, Karen Sánchez-Eppler contends that appearance and essence are also conflated in the bodies that populate sentimental texts: in “sentimental fiction’s stable matrix of bodily signs,” “the self is externally displayed, and the body provides a reliable sign of who one is” (*Touching* 30, 27). However, the slippery racial identities that exist at the intersection of representation and reception threaten to disrupt the easy correspondence between appearance and essence on which

sentimentality partly depends. Indeed, as the examples that began this chapter demonstrate, both writers recognize that appearances can be manipulated and essential identity misrepresented.

To combat this problem, Allen and Webb interpolate their readers into the networks that operate in and through their sentimental texts, using those networks to construct relationships among author, reader, and characters and, consequently, to direct reading. In *The American Prejudice Against Color*, Allen does so by making an explicit turn to feeling, asking his readers at crucial points in his narrative to imagine and even embody his feelings and thereby fashioning them into sympathetic, rather than suspicious, readers. Though Allen narrates recurring contests between representation and reception, writers and readers, he also uses feeling to circumvent that contest, to connect through the text and to bring readers over to his side. Webb is concerned both with depicting the networks that operate among and connect his characters and with enfolding readers into those networks, constructing relationships between characters and readers that will direct how they read his text and the bodies that populate it. Though Webb depicts and even plays with the fluidity of identity by demonstrating how appearances change and bodies get misread, he also situates those raced bodies among those who will read them correctly and sympathetically both inside the text and, hopefully, outside of it.

Though with different emphases, both Allen and Webb use feeling to transport their readers beyond the flux of racial identity and into the sentimental networks that their narratives construct. For both writers, the self gains its stability precisely through relation and through feeling, through its ability to be well-known to friends and family – and even readers – despite its transformations in print or through various disguises.

Though Allen and Webb understand race as a matter of representation and as subject to reception, each also posits a deeper, untouchable form of private identity, formed in relationships of a romantic, familial, and even textual nature. In a deeply sentimental move, characters within the narratives find themselves, and happiness, when they are in relation to (the right kind of) people. Both writers invite their readers to stand in that relation to the characters who populate their texts, and they use sentimental conventions to extend that invitation. For Allen and Webb, then, the sentimental narrative offers a discursive space where racial identity can finally be stabilized because feeling can be invoked and reading can be modeled.

Though I have thus far characterized both *The American Prejudice Against Color* and *The Garies* as sentimental, neither fits easily into the dominant critical conception of sentimental literature. Despite work on “sentimental men” and the recurring invocation of sentimentality across the spectrum of nineteenth-century literature, the default version of sentimentality is still conditioned by our early understanding of it as a genre “written by, for, and about [white] women” (Tompkins *Sensational* 124-25).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, when African American men or women did write sentimentally, their productions have often been understood as, at worst, imitation, or, at best, appropriation. The range of criticism on *The Garies* provides an apt illustration of how scholars of African American literature have overlooked its deployment of sentimentality. Mid-twentieth-century criticism of Webb’s novel dismissed it as “badly overwritten,” too melodramatic, and horribly imitative (S. Brown 40).<sup>8</sup> Some critics who wanted to find value in Webb’s novel pointedly read past its sentimentality, trying to unearth its realism and find grounds for its redemption, a way to claim it for a masculinist, realist African American literary tradition

that valorized slave narratives and little else in antebellum African American literary production.<sup>9</sup> Recent criticism of *The Garies* that does note its use of sentimental conventions yet seeks to qualify Webb's reliance on those conventions and to distance his novel from the work of white female sentimentalists. For example, Anna Mae Duane and Robert Reid-Pharr argue that Webb engages and then refutes the conventions of sentimentality and domesticity, replicating a critical move that has also been applied to Harriet Jacobs, Harriet E. Wilson, and Frances E. W. Harper.<sup>10</sup> This critical trend has made important contributions to our understanding of African American literature, but its persistent replication can teach us little about sentimentality – and may even impose limits on our understanding of it.

To argue that African American writers uniformly dismissed or refuted sentimentality and all that it encompassed, sentimentality must be understood as a discourse belonging to a particular class, gender, and race – one with rigid conventions, a limited view, and great replicability within but little portability outside of white middle-class femininity. However, understanding sentimentality as a flexible formation that offered discrete individuals different points of access and was then made to serve various purposes allows us to position it within a larger literary field, to see it as a discourse that suggested solutions to narrative problems faced by a variety of authors. Using the writing of African Americans to review and revise our knowledge of sentimentality has already proven productive. For example, Cindy Weinstein identifies how both slave narratives and sentimental novels understand the marriage contract as presenting an opportunity to exercise power and achieve self-determination, while Julia Stern uses *Our*

*Nig* to unearth the Gothic undertones and female anger that pervade sentimental narratives written by both white and African American women.<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter, I not only use sentimentality as a lens through which to view Webb's and Allen's narratives, but also use their narratives as a lens through which to view, and re-view, sentimentality. Understanding *The Garies* and *The American Prejudice Against Color* as sentimental encourages a different conception of what I call "sentimental cross-encounters," or how sentimentality is understood always to engage across boundaries of race, class, or gender. For example, Shirley Samuels premises her definition of sentimentality, which she advances in her introduction to the influential anthology *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992), on these cross-encounters. In defining sentimentality, Samuels calls it "an operation or a set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification that effect connections *across gender, race, and class boundaries*"; she then states that the production of the sentimental subject "crucially involves a movement of sympathy, in all its anxious appeals, *across race, class, and gender lines*" (6, my emphasis). That "movement of sympathy" is rarely understood as a two-way venture; instead, it is assumed that these "anxious appeals" are most often initiated by the powerful on behalf of the disempowered. The assumption of these one-way cross-encounters and of sentimentality's constant traversing of race, class, and gender lines is foundational to the critical imagination of sentimentality, painting it as a failed, asymmetrical, and exploitative literary mode that may promise to create sympathy and change but, because of its structural limitations, rarely achieves that aim.



In her recent invocation of these cross-encounters, Naomi Greyser offers a more generous view of what they can accomplish. She articulates sentimentality's ability to "[construct] shared feeling out of social distance, so that the resulting formations become *affective geographies*: palpable emotional connections among subjects that often engage across boundaries of race, class, and gender" (277). As she outlines sentimentality's ability to "engage across" difference, Greyser describes "the location of sentiment within and between subjects that allows sentimentalism to do its work of making connections" (280). This description, though, invites us to question who those subjects are and if "boundaries of race, class, and gender" always do separate them. The sentimental texts under consideration here were written by African American men about African American people. While both narratives were published in Great Britain and had a primarily white audience in mind, we should not ignore the probability that Allen and Webb also imagined an African American audience for their work.<sup>12</sup> The narratives of Webb and Allen therefore challenge the model of sentimental cross-encounters by asking us to reconsider who wrote and read sentimental literature; whether boundaries of class, race, and gender always separated writers, readers, and characters; who initiated these cross-encounters; and across what differences, exactly, writers and readers engaged. In doing so, these narratives push us to undertake a more precise consideration of the dynamics of sentimental reading and of the historical circumstances surrounding the production and reception of sentimental narrative.

Allen and Webb, powerful writers though they are, finally demonstrate to us the power and the action of reading. As they direct our attention to the role that reading and reception play in constructing race, Allen and Webb make clear to us that sentimentality

is a mode of reading as well as writing. Within sentimental narrative, there is a right way to read – one that privileges sympathy, accesses universal experience by way of emotion, produces and sustains readerly engagement, and falls in line with the evident intentions of the author. To generate this kind of reading and to curtail the potential volatility of reception, the sentimental narrative provides reading direction, working to produce consensus through the conjoined, interpenetrating acts of reading and feeling and to bring about a community of readers who read and feel together. Recognizing that sentimental narrative anticipates its own reception allows us to relocate the potential of sentimentality and of the writing it informs to the act of sentimental reading. By turning to the kind of reading staged and advocated within the pages of Allen's and Webb's narratives, we can discern how sentimentality has always been attentive to difference, but that it has located difference primarily in the act of reading, in the various, divergent ways that readers read. Sentimentality, in producing networks that connect authors, readers, and texts, therefore counteracts difference first and foremost in the ways that texts are read. Both Allen and Webb identify the potential of sentimental reading to account for and then obviate difference, and their narratives aim to produce sentimental reading – synchronized, right reading – and put it in the service of a stable, racial identity. As they both write and model how to read racial identity in the antebellum North, Allen and Webb consider, and then exploit, the instrumentality of reading with feeling. Though we have little evidence of how these works were received when they were first published, of whether or not they produced sentimental reading, *The American Prejudice Against Color* and *The Garies* offer to illuminate a different imagination of sentimentality by directing us towards the

dynamic actions of writing and reading race and the real political and material stakes of doing so.

#### I. Suspicious and Sentimental Reading in *The American Prejudice Against Color*

In *The American Prejudice Against Color*, Allen tells the story of his interracial marriage in order to depict the incursion of racial prejudice into private lives in the antebellum United States.<sup>13</sup> Allen was a professor at New York Central College in McGrawville and a well-known figure in the abolitionist cause, but his narrative focuses almost exclusively on his planned interracial marriage and the mob that tried to prevent it. Allen literalizes the violence of misrepresentation and its threat to displace the agency of those who are misrepresented by placing the mob as well as its impetus at the center of his narrative's action. *The American Prejudice Against Color* moves from relating the events leading up to the mob, to showing Allen and his intended under siege, to examining and discrediting false newspaper accounts of the mob, and finally to the wedding itself. Along the way, Allen tells of meeting his fiancée, Mary King, and of the development of their love; relates her abolitionist family's disapproval of the match; prints letters from King during their forced separation, as well as letters of support from friends; and recounts his eventual marriage and emigration to England.

In the full title of his narrative – *The American Prejudice Against Color. An Authentic Narrative, Showing How Easily the Nation Got Into an Uproar. By William G. Allen, a Refugee from American Despotism* – Allen sets into motion many of the concerns that guide him through it. Writing from Britain as “a Refugee from American Despotism,” Allen is particularly concerned with establishing the authenticity of *his* story at the expense of many others. In narrating how his marriage prompted a national

“uproar,” Allen also interrogates the connection that racial prejudice establishes between ostensibly private acts and a public, civilized, orderly society. Allen protests the way that prejudice licenses a disregard for his privacy and pulls him onto the public stage, but his protest, voiced within his published autobiographical narrative, depends on his making his private affairs public once again. As he directs this version of transition of his life from private to public, Allen deploys sympathy and sentiment to construct a different correspondence between private lives and public affairs.

In writing his narrative, Allen again and again positions himself as a reader, one who alternately pores over letters from his fiancée and is outraged by false accounts of his life. Allen also persistently calls attention to his authorship as he narrates his reading, thereby forging a connection between these narrative acts. As both author and reader, Allen models varied modes of textual rebellion that contest the representation of race and the authenticity of text in antebellum print culture. He does so by demonstrating the power of reading to detect false representations, to remake texts both physically and figuratively, and to impart contingency to what is read. Indeed, his narrative partly aims to train rebellious readers who are suspicious of what they read. The question becomes, then, whether Allen tempers the force of his account by producing suspicious readers, who may turn some measure of their suspicion on Allen himself.

In this attention to reception within a text that he emphatically authors, Allen places himself in a paradoxical position: he warns his readers that writing might dissemble even as he implicitly, and at times explicitly, asks his readers to trust a particular piece of writing – his own. Allen must therefore undertake a narrative balancing act, convincing his readers to credit his version of events while training them to

be skeptical of other texts. To strike and hold this balance, Allen turns to sentimental discourse, invoking feeling to short-circuit suspicion and create sympathy. In key moments, Allen refuses to narrate what he reads and how it makes him feel; he instead invites his readers to imagine both text and feeling. In doing so, Allen engineers textual absences that allow for the entrance of sympathetic readers into his narrative, readers who feel for him. Allen's explicit invitation in these moments to read with feeling initiates a sentimental exchange of reading direction and fellow feeling between Allen and his readers, one that creates a network connecting author and readers in and through his text. Allen therefore exploits the utility of sentiment to direct how his narrative will be read.

Allen's account of his authorship and his reading foregrounds a different kind of literacy than that most often discussed in accounts of antebellum African American history and culture, which take the (il)literacy of slaves as their primary topic. It is important to note, as Dana Nelson Salvino and E. Jennifer Monaghan do, the ways in which slaves were "legislated into illiteracy" and how literacy was used as "a very real enslaving weapon against blacks" (Salvino 147).<sup>14</sup> It is also important to note the converse: just as the denial of literacy functioned as a crucial means of perpetuating enslavement, so was the attainment of literacy potentially liberating. Slave narratives in particular often focus on the liberatory power of literacy as they help to construct what Ben Schiller calls "the literacy-as-resistance paradigm" (13). In consciously constructing the attainment of literacy, and the ability to write in particular, as a defining moment in the lives of slaves who would be free, writers like Frederick Douglass present a notably defiant model of black literacy: slaves like Douglass stole literacy and then

used it as a means to freedom and self-expression. However, this picture of antebellum African American literacy is incomplete.

Most importantly, despite laws restricting teaching slaves how to read and/or write, not all African Americans in the antebellum United States were either illiterate or enslaved, as Frances Smith Foster reminds us.<sup>15</sup> Writing in 1853, Allen does the same. In *The American Prejudice Against Color*, Allen does not narrate how he learned to read and write. Instead, he almost immediately – in the second sentence of his second chapter – offers the following summary of his advanced education:

I graduated at Oneida Institute, in Whitesboro', New York, in 1844; subsequently studied Law with Ellis Gray Loring, Esq., of Boston, Massachusetts; and was thence called to the Professorship of the Greek and German languages, and of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres of New York Central College, situated in Mc. Grawville, Cortland County... (42)

Allen here narrates his higher education rather than his acquisition of basic literacy skills; moreover, he models advanced modes of literacy – suspicious reading, textual meddling, antagonistic writing – throughout his narrative.<sup>16</sup>

Elizabeth McHenry notes additional limitations of what she calls “the Douglass ‘model’ of black literacy,” which views “reading as a solitary or individual activity with an explicit directive to write as its ultimate goal” (12-13). McHenry argues that allowing that model of literacy to define our knowledge of African American literacy has led to “the historical invisibility of black readers,” especially free blacks in the antebellum North and the postbellum United States (4). McHenry corrects this misconception through her historical work on the “forgotten readers” of nineteenth-century African

American literary societies.<sup>17</sup> However, reading can be forgotten in other, more implicit ways. For example, in his introduction to Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that, for free African Americans, "the will to power – the will to be truly free – was, of all things, the will to write, the will to testify that they endured, despite the odds" (ix). Gates's conflation of writing, freedom, and power occludes the role *reading* played in the willful resistance of antebellum African Americans.

The equation of literacy and literature is operative here, too: literacy has its most forceful and durable presence in texts authored by literate people. However, those texts often capture elusive, ephemeral past acts of reading, and even make them instrumental to the authored work. Texts written by African Americans may therefore allow us to find traces of historical acts of reading, so long as we are looking for them. Steven Mailloux identifies one such trace in his account of Douglass's famous reading of *The Columbian Orator* in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which Mailloux argues is in fact a strategic *misreading*. Douglass presents the master's release of the slave as the result of the rhetorical power of the slave's speech; however, *The Columbian Orator* tells a different tale. The escaped and returned slave warns his master of reprisals from angry slaves, and the master grants the slave his freedom because of "practical exigency [and] narrow self-interest" (Mailloux 87-88). Douglass's account of *The Columbian Orator* and *The Columbian Orator* itself are not the same, and his reading intervenes to make this difference. In *Clotel*, William Wells Brown also interpolates texts into his narrative to advance his own ends, embedding texts ranging from the Declaration of Independence to newspaper notices advertising the "hunting services" of slave-catchers in his narrative.<sup>18</sup> In acting as what John Ernest calls "a cultural editor" by decontextualizing

and re-contextualizing these texts, Brown enables both himself and his readers to read them subversively (23).<sup>19</sup> As with Douglass's *Narrative* and Brown's *Clotel, The American Prejudice Against Color* promises to rescue particular reading practices of antebellum African Americans from invisibility. By drawing attention to the interrelated modes of reading and writing that pervade and even constitute his narrative, Allen narrates a particular, historical model of reading and resistance.

The model of authorship and reading that Allen presents is predicated on understanding text as a medium of power and therefore as a site of contest between writers and readers. Allen makes clear that writers may be exposed and even endangered by the texts they write, while readers may gain control over a text and its author through the simple act of reading. Text is therefore simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, and those qualities promise – or threaten – to rebound onto the readers and writers positioned on either side of a given text. As he tells his story, Allen is particularly aware of how easily text mediates not only between readers and writers but also between the seemingly separate spheres of nineteenth-century private and public life. In *The American Prejudice Against Color*, both printed and handwritten documents easily traverse that purported divide.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in Allen's narrative private writing repeatedly functions like print, which is often characterized by its durability, portability, and replicability. The private letters written to Allen, and even to others, are reproduced, made public, and circulated.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Allen seeks to authorize the transmutation of the private into the public even as he depicts the incursion of the public into the private. Text and feeling function as the fulcrum of that purported divide.



As Allen weaves numerous texts into the fabric of *The American Prejudice Against Color*, he positions himself as a mediator between these texts and his readers. Allen contests many of the claims made by any writing that is not his own while excerpting, re-arranging, and emending texts in ways that empower him while disempowering their writers. His stance towards published accounts of the mob and of his intended marriage to Mary King is particularly antagonistic, but Allen's power as a reader and writer extends over *every* text he incorporates into his own, even those that are sympathetic to him. In two instances, Allen interferes within the body of an incorporated text, adding italics and parenthetical comments and thereby visually disrupting its integrity. One of the texts which Allen emends is a letter from John Porter; Allen elsewhere identifies the Porter family as “[o]f all the families of Fulton and Phillipsville, ... the only one which *publicly* spoke approval of our course” (51). In making public this private letter of support from Porter, Allen adds his own emphasis, italicizing sentences that speak of the vehemence of the public reaction against Allen and King and that delineate how King was forbidden to communicate with people outside of her immediate family. By conditioning the reception of this letter, Allen subtly usurps authority from its writer.

Allen does acknowledge his editing at the end of Porter's letter, writing, “The italics and parentheses of the above letter are mine. I shall add no comment” (70). However, this acknowledgment simultaneously admits and denies Allen's textual meddling. Allen does avoid making any explicit comment, but he uses textual signs to indicate what that comment would be and, more importantly, to strongly suggest what the reader should take from this letter. Furthermore, the placement of this qualified

recognition at the end of the letter, in brackets, further limits the scope of Allen's self-exposure as a textual meddler: after all, the reader's interpretation has already been shaped by Allen's editorializing. As Allen transforms a private letter into a public text, he arrogates the authority of authorship. In modeling his power as a reader over these texts, his ability to make them serve his own ends, Allen also trains savvy, powerful readers.

Moreover, the passages to which Allen calls attention demonstrate his knowledge of the power of language and promise to transmit that knowledge to his readers. In Porter's letter, Allen places emphasis on the restriction of Mary King's speech: Porter writes (and Allen italicizes), "I wanted to say some things to her not in the presence of these strangers – so to speak – in the family; *but she told me that she was permitted to say no word to any one but in the presence of such companions as were appointed for her*" (68). Ironically, Allen emphasizes the restriction on King's speech in order to condemn that restriction, but he exercises a related power over Porter's letter. Allen distributes that letter, but he also directs its interpretation. Though Allen silences neither Porter nor King, he does take, in some measure, the power of speech from them by making their words serve his ends.

Allen's textual manipulation of Porter's letter serves to direct reception, to synchronize reading by encouraging readers of his narrative to read this letter as he does. Other instances in *The American Prejudice Against Color* feature Allen advocating skepticism towards what the printed word in particular has to say. While Allen does include some authenticating documents within his narrative – prefacing it with letters from notable abolitionists Gerrit Smith and George Thompson, for example – Allen also

repeatedly undercuts the truth of *public* communication in his narrative. Allen instead locates the source of authenticity in himself, constructing and claiming a potent form of authorship that can include and challenge false representations without endangering its own credibility and force. He particularly focuses on the numerous articles that report the mob incident, carefully including the names of the newspapers where they were published and often the names of those who wrote them. Of one such account, Allen scathingly writes, “[A] most remarkable document it was – remarkable, however, only for its intense vulgarity, its absurd contradictions, and its ridiculous attempts at piety and poetry” (62). Allen also lists the variations among the “truthful” accounts that each newspaper puts forward for the public gaze, while noting that “[s]ome of the versions of the affair were extremely amusing” (66). He reprints in full the erroneous and anonymously published editorial “The Fulton Rescue Case” in order to lampoon it – and exposes his wife’s brother William S. King as its author (75-76). Allen’s editing and editorializing – his cuts and comments – are so endemic that he calls attention when he does not modify one letter, writing as he introduces it that “[t]he reader shall have it without alteration” (85).

Surrounded and offended by these numerous false accounts, Allen becomes so disturbed that he feels compelled to offer his own narrative, which he first does in a letter to the *Syracuse Standard* titled “TO THE PUBLIC. – FROM PROFESSOR ALLEN” (71).<sup>22</sup> Allen’s title evinces his desire for a closed circuit of communication, one that enables the writer to contact the public directly through the medium of print and to correct their misconceptions. Allen explicitly notes in his article that he has been forced into authorship, compelled to make his private affairs public: “I make this statement with

regard to this matter of marriage, not because I regard myself as amenable to the public to state to them *whom* or *when* I shall marry, but that since so much has been said upon the subject, I am quite willing they should know the truth as it is” (72). He writes, “Here then is the story. Read it” (72). Allen clearly wishes his own writing to be read as authentic, despite its public nature and the noted proliferation of other accounts. Allen does possess the authority of the first-hand account: he is, after all, telling his own story, and he is careful to note that it “belongs” to him (72).

However, in this article, Allen explicitly places “*the* story” – his story – in the midst of competing accounts (my emphasis). He begins his article by noting that “[s]o much has been said and written on the subject of the late affair at Fulton, that the Public by this time must have had nearly *quantum sufficit*; yet I deem it not improper on my own behalf to add a remark or two” (71). Allen then offers his account of the mob in a single paragraph. He next turns to an article published about the mob in the *Oswego Daily Times*, which he spends five paragraphs rebutting point by point. As he systematically dismantles this false account, Allen demonstrates both the vulnerability of the written text to reception and the consequent transfer of power from writer to antagonistic reader. Indeed, his article parasitically gains force by undercutting this opposing account. However, the pains that Allen takes as he stages his protest against print, in print, evince his sense of the vulnerability of his own writing. In the title of his article, Allen records his desire to use the printed word to contact the public directly, and the dash in the title performs the distance between “PROFESSOR ALLEN” and “THE PUBLIC” even as it seeks to collapse it. As Allen advances his own version of events, he cannot help but

note the tenuous nature of any connection forged through print, through writing and reading, and the ability of suspicion to disrupt and even sever that connection.

*The American Prejudice Against Color* is clearly motivated by the need to respond to false information that circulates through print and enables the unwanted incursion of the public into private lives. The intrusion of the public reaches a climax when an unruly mob threatens violence, but print more insidiously brings the public crashing into Allen's life. Allen recognizes that interracial marriage permits that incursion; accordingly, he protests repeatedly against the ways in which his marriage is co-opted by the public, how his story becomes their own. He writes with distaste that "[c]rowds of men could be seen in the streets, at every point, discussing the subject of our marriage..." and that "similar discussions...had been held during the live-long night preceding, in all the grog shops and taverns of the village" (54). These conversations are not merely local: Allen writes of "the great publicity which the newspapers had given to our affairs" and notes that "the telegraphic wires and newspapers spread the news throughout the length and breadth of the land..." (111, 109). Allen chafes against being talked about in public and misrepresented in print. In his letter "TO THE PUBLIC," Allen even conflates the actions of the mob and those of the editors who write about him. He writes, "Now, as the several hundred armed men strong who came down upon me on Sunday night, and some newspaper Editors...and the public very nearly in general, have taken the matter of judging what this 'course we were pursuing' was, out of our own hands. I propose to leave it still further with them. They can guess at it, and fight it out to their heart's content" (73). Here positioning himself as the object of representation, Allen diverts attention away from his status as an authorial subject. Of course, in writing

this very letter, as well as the narrative that reprints it, Allen does take his own affairs back into his authorial hands. Why, then, does Allen divert attention from his authorship even in the act of writing?

There are additional moments in *The American Prejudice Against Color* in which Allen refuses to play the author, this time by declining to narrate private events or feelings. In recounting the start of his relationship with King, Allen writes, “It is of no consequence what we said; and if it were, the reader, judging in the light of the results, will perhaps as correctly imagine that, as I can possibly describe it. I pass on at once, therefore, simply stating that at the close of the year and a half, my interest in the young lady had become fully reciprocated . . .” (43). Allen also remains silent about his own readerly reactions, refusing to write what feelings he had upon reading a letter from his absent fiancée:

What vows I uttered in the secret chambers of my heart as I read the above and similar passages of that letter, let the reader imagine who may be disposed to credit me with the least aptitude of appreciating whatsoever in human nature is grand and noble, or in the human spirit, which is lovely, and true, and beautiful, and of good report. (48)

In a brief but pointed example of Allen’s willful silence, he writes, “I should be glad to describe my feelings on first meeting Miss King after she had passed through that fiery furnace of affliction. But I desist” (79). In the context of this narrative, in which Allen dwells so insistently on his authorship and his reading, this reader cannot help but feel herself to be at the mercy of this self-silencing writer.

However, it is precisely through refusing to put his feelings into words that Allen makes them palpable for his readers; it is the absences in Allen's sentimental narrative that create feeling and put it into circulation. As he disavows his authorship and plainly refuses to write, Allen makes a remarkable attempt to momentarily separate feeling from reading, and so to redirect reception solely through sentiment. By identifying absences in his text, Allen carves out space for the greater presence of feeling. In his estimation, feeling, not reading, provides a promising opportunity for collaboration and simultaneity between author and reader. While ostensibly "desist[ing]" from narrating his emotions, Allen in fact uses conventional, sentimental language to transfer the burden of feeling to his readers, to fire their imaginations and so to construct a bridge between his feelings and their own, between his emotional "aptitude," his humanity, and theirs. Allen's resonant authorial silences therefore explicitly interpolate his readers and their feelings into the scenes he only partially narrates, encouraging his readers to draw on their own reservoirs of feeling that, he pointedly argues, are commensurate with his own. *Feeling*, rather than reading, acts as an opportunity for communion in these moments. More precisely, these silences demonstrate that sentimental reading does not ultimately depend on text but on how that text is read. Allen relies on a private commensurability of emotion that is effected and invoked by a public, published text – and that produces sympathetic rather than suspicious readers. In other words, Allen relies on the conventions of sentimental discourse.

Allen elsewhere demonstrates the violence that racial prejudice does to feeling. Allen argues that, just as prejudice makes his intended marriage a public affair, so does it make the private feelings wrapped up in that marriage public. Allen asks again and again

why both his feelings and his marriage need enter onto the public stage. In protesting against the enforced publicity of his marriage, he describes his intended marriage as “a matter which was of sacred right our own” (67). However, Allen recognizes that the color of his skin, for some, justifies access to his most private, innermost feelings and makes them and him the object of ridicule.<sup>23</sup> He writes, “I judge not mortal man or woman, but leave...all those who thought it no harm because of my complexion, to abuse the most sacred feelings of my heart, to their conscience and their God” (47). In another instance, Allen characterizes “the prejudice against color of the Northern states” as “cruel and contemptuous of the rights and feelings of colored people” (46). That cruelty surfaces in both the mob and the texts that Allen includes in his narrative.

Though Allen makes his resentment of racial prejudice a focal point of his narrative, he also recognizes the utility of public feelings. Within his published narrative, Allen argues that his ability to feel stands as a challenge to prejudice. He therefore identifies emotion as both the site of and a means to counter the American prejudice against color. In the introduction to his narrative, Allen compares the “social and political bondage” of prejudice to slavery (41). Though he was never a slave himself, Allen argues that the “bondage” of prejudice “is, in many of its aspects, far more dreadful than that of the *bona fide* Southern slavery, since its victims – many of them having emerged out of, and some of them never having been into, the darkness of personal slavery – have acquired a development of mind, heart, and character, not at all inferior to the foremost of their oppressors” (41). Allen’s narrative engages in the project of narrating the “development of mind, heart, and character” that intensifies the experience



of racial prejudice, drawing on sympathy and emotion to forge a bond between potential oppressor and oppressed, between reader and writer.

Interracial marriage functions as the highly-appropriate grounds on which Allen stages his challenge: in making a private love public, marriage publicly signals and legally legitimates the emotion supporting it. In sentimental narratives, marriage often provides the happy ending, serving as the fitting, compensatory reward for a heroine's struggles and privations and providing the final narrative guarantee of the thriving self-in-relation. Though many critics interpret the privileging of marriage in sentimental novels as a hegemonic move that curtails women's freedom, Cindy Weinstein argues that slave narratives and sentimental novels alike rest on a "belief that contract is the most enduring expression of one's freedom" (*Family* 158). In other words, by *choosing* to enter into marriages, characters in both sentimental novels and slave narratives exercise their freedom rather than perform their subjugation. The proscription of interracial marriage suggests that marriage will function differently in *The American Prejudice Against Color* than it does in *The Lamplighter*; however, though Allen's marriage does initially serve as a site of conflict, it then provides a means of narrative resolution, of triumph. As he employs the conventions of sentimental narrative, Allen also exploits marriage's publication of feeling to stage his protest against that other "American feeling."

Allen's narrative is obviously public, and its depiction of the porous divide between private matters and public sentiment, between public and private text, also describes its own workings. Sentiment exists precisely at the divide between public and private, between published text and private feeling. Karen Sánchez-Eppler describes sentimentality as "an aesthetic grounded simultaneously in the emotional and the

commercial,” but she disrupts the equation of commercialism with “alienation and inauthenticity,” arguing instead that commercialism provided a valuable means of “circulating emotion” in the nineteenth-century United States (*Dependent* 147-48). Sentimentality’s dependence on published narratives to narrate and invoke not-quite-private emotions establishes sentiment as a mediator between public and private, and sentimental reading in particular allows sentiment and readers to exist simultaneously in both spheres. Allen’s attention to reading also allows him to stage his intervention into the representation of his marriage, his feelings, and his race. His antagonistic readings of false accounts of the mob are one instance of that reading; another lies in Allen’s abbreviated descriptions of his affective reading of his fiancée’s love letters. In two registers, both within the text and outside of it, Allen turns to sentimental reading to redirect reception away from suspicion and towards feeling, to embrace the imposed, qualified publicity of his feelings to challenge racial prejudice. In his narrative, Allen aims to exploit sentimentality’s foundation in the commercial and the emotional, to direct the essentially public dimension of sentiment to his own ends by directing reading.

However, Allen recognizes the imperfect conjunction that sentimentality constructs between private and public, and acknowledges those instances when sentimentality stalls in the personal rather than diffusing into the national. In other words, Allen recognizes both the power and the limits of feeling and of reading. When Mary King’s father, Elder King, shows that he is not ready to convert his abolitionist principles into practice by permitting racial equality to enter his own household, Allen cogently writes:

It is easier still to *feel* – this is humanity’s instinct – for the wrongs and outrages inflicted upon our kind. But to plant one’s feet rough-shod upon the neck and heels of a corrupt and controlling public sentiment, to cherish living faith in God, and, above all to crush the demon in one’s own soul, – ah! this it is which only the *great* can do, who, only of men, can help the world onward up to heaven. (51-52)

Allen challenges his readers to be “*great*,” but, like modern critics of sentimentality’s imperative to “feel right,” he also measures the distance between feeling and action even as he seeks to conjoin them.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Allen acknowledges that the boundary between private feeling and public sentiment, like that between love and marriage and between suspicion and sympathy, can be simultaneously porous and rigid, permeable and impermeable. What Allen emphasizes here is that whether those boundaries are traversed depends, ultimately, on who is reading and feeling along with him and his narrative. Unfortunately, we know little about Allen’s readers, of what they made of his appeals and his call to sentimental reading.<sup>25</sup> The challenge he poses is left, to our knowledge, unanswered.

## II. Lost and Found Bodies in *The Garies and Their Friends*

Like Allen’s narrative, *The Garies and Their Friends* narrates the lives of free blacks in the urban North, depicting interracial marriage, a murderous mob, and a proliferation of texts. Webb’s novel begins in the South with “a Family of peculiar Construction” (31): Clarence Garie is married in spirit, if not by law, to his slave Emily, and they have two children, another Clarence and Emily, together. With a third child on the way, the family relocates to the urban North, a place where Emily and her children

will not be owned by their husband and father. The novel follows them to Philadelphia, where the reader is introduced to the wealthy African American entrepreneur Mr. Walters as well as the Ellises, a stolid middle-class African American family. At the center of the novel is a race riot based on historical riots in Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s, in which African American homes and businesses were targeted and destroyed by whites.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Garies*, the riots are orchestrated by George Stevens, a stock villain who lives next-door to the Garies, for financial gain: he plans on driving African Americans from their homes, buying those homes cheaply, and then reselling them at a substantial profit. In the course of the rioting, Walters, with the help of the Ellises, successfully defends his home; Mr. Ellis leaves the safety of that home to warn the Garies and is set upon by the rioters, who badly injure him both physically and psychologically; the home of the Garies is invaded; and Mr. Garie and his wife are killed. After Garie's death, Stevens reveals himself to be his long-lost cousin and inherits his estate, thereby disinheriting the Garie children. With his parents dead, Clarence undertakes a life of passing. When the novel skips ahead several years, Clarence's passing is exposed, and he wastes away to an early death; in contrast, his sister Emily remains a member of the thriving African American community. The novel fittingly concludes with the marriage of Emily Garie and Charlie Ellis and with the death of Stevens, who kills himself after his role in the riot and the death of Mr. Garie is discovered. In narrating these events, Webb offers both a profound critique of the racism that impinges on his characters' lives and a celebration of domestic happiness and community resilience, adopting a mode that M. Giulia Fabi calls "celebratory protest" (29).<sup>27</sup>

Webb's concern with the ways in which race is written and read manifests itself in the slippery identities and mobile texts that circulate through his novel. In *The American Prejudice Against Color*, Allen stridently narrates his own identity and strategically denies its fluidity to make both his identity and his autobiographical text achieve stability. As he represents himself as a professor, a husband, a reader, and a writer, Allen conscientiously rejects any vagaries of identity that newspaper editors or unsympathetic readers might attach to him, and he uses sentimental conventions to produce fellow feeling in his readers and to direct their reading of him and his narrative. In contrast, Webb uses the fictional form of the novel to depict, and even play with, the potential fluidity of identity.<sup>28</sup> In episodes where the stakes are quite high or hilariously low, Webb piles representations onto raced bodies, but he also helps his readers to read through those representations and to locate the essential identities of his characters. Though bodies may get lost in representation or constantly remade by reception, Webb makes clear that those bodies and the identities they hold may always be found and read correctly by directed readers within and outside of the text.

Sentimentality, through its particular system of representation and its promise to direct reception, plays a key role in helping to create directed readers. Webb narrates fluid identities to demonstrate the *potential* distance between appearance and essence, representation and reception, but he uses the conventions of sentimental discourse to close that distance. At times, Webb makes bodily appearance a trusted guide to essence, utilizing a foundational tenet of sentimental narrative to construct a form of easily legible, embodied, stable identity. However, appearances do change in *The Garies*: characters assume disguises, change their clothes, and undergo other physical transformations. In

these instances, Webb both depicts and defuses the ensuing shifts and gambols of identity by arguing that relationships, of many kinds, enable right reading: friends, family, and community can discern a true, stable identity through shifting representations. Webb endeavors to create such a relationship between readers and his sentimental novel, to enfold his readers into a network that connects them to him and to his characters, and to produce this kind of directed reading. Webb therefore affords his readers a privileged viewpoint from which to see and know his characters, from which to read the identities circulating through his novel.

Webb aims to direct the reading of bodies and texts within *The Garies* as well as the novel's own reception. Webb's novel, like Allen's narrative, is full of texts. As letters and hand-written notes in *The Garies* easily traverse the divide between private and public, Webb calls particular attention to these texts' revelatory power, which empowers their readers while imperiling their writers. In depicting the movement of texts from writing to reading, from representation to reception, Webb, like Allen, argues that text functions as a medium of power, and he delineates the transfer of power from writer to reader via text. However, also like Allen, Webb must manage that transfer when it pertains to the reception of *his* novel and the power of *his* readers. To do so, Webb makes the raced identities and the texts that move through *The Garies* both slippery and sticky, setting them in motion but engineering their movement and directing their (and his) readers.

In *The Garies*, the potential of bodies to be misread is omnipresent, and cases of mistaken identity abound. Webb mentions in passing that, on the Garies' first night in Philadelphia, the children's nightclothes cannot be found, so little Emily Garie borrows a

calico gown from Caddy and uses a Madras handkerchief instead of a nightcap.

Glimpsed from behind, Emily momentarily possesses “the air of an old Creole who had been by some mysterious means deprived of her due growth” (147). For comic relief, Webb relates that Caddy Ellis finds a young beggar drawing on her recently-cleaned steps with a piece of charcoal, and, in righteous indignation, she shouts at him from the window to desist immediately and then grabs a broom to effect his removal. In the time it takes her to get downstairs and creep up behind the beggar, the boy has been replaced by the unaware Mr. Winston. Not registering the change, Caddy brings her broom down on Mr. Winston’s head. Other cases of mistaken identity illustrate the painful workings of racial prejudice. Mrs. Stevens first meets Emily Garie in a dimly lit room and assumes, from having seen her children and her husband, that she is white. Operating on that assumption, Mrs. Stevens makes numerous prejudiced statements concerning African Americans; Emily Garie then turns the light on herself and reveals Mrs. Stevens’s mistake.<sup>29</sup> In each of these cases, and in even more that occur throughout *The Garies*, identity gets misread, whether because of dim light, an incomplete view, or the expectation of another. Though identity is misread and momentarily lost in these moments, it is also quickly recovered.

The paradigmatic example of the slipperiness and stickiness of identity in *The Garies* comes at the very center of the novel in an episode involving Mr. Stevens, aptly known as “Slippery George.” Stevens deliberately disguises himself and his class status in second-hand clothing so that he may move undetected through a crowd of working-class rioters and instigate more rioting. On his way home, while still dressed in clothes that are not his own, Stevens is mistaken because of the peculiar cut and color of his coat

for a member of a rival fire-fighting faction. Because of this misidentification, Stevens is attacked. While Stevens tries to save himself by declaring, “I assure you I am not the man,” one of his assailants retorts, “I know you by your coat” (216). Despite his protestations that the coat is not his own, his attackers credit it rather than Stevens’s “likely tale,” and they resolve to “give [him] a walloping, if it’s only to teach [him] to wear [his] own clothes” (216). Stevens is unable to direct his own reception here; instead, he is misread because of the false representation that his clothes construct. Amy Schragger Lang therefore rightly notes that Stevens is “imperiled by the masquerade he thinks he controls” and becomes “the victim of his disguise” (60).

Stevens is soundly beaten by his assailants. In the course of that beating, he receives a blow to the mouth, he is gagged to prevent his cries, and his face is “coated...completely” with tar (217). After thus “embellishing their victim,” his assailants note that Stevens has come to look like a black man, and they finish the job by rubbing tar on his hands as well (217). They then ungag him and let him go. At this point, the narrator pauses to paint a picture of Stevens for the novel’s reader. The narrator comments, “He was, indeed, a pitiable object to look upon,” and then catalogs the particularities of Stevens’s transformation: his hat is ruined, “[h]is lips were swelled to a size that would have been regarded as large even on the face of a Congo negro,” one eye is also swollen, and “the coating of tar...rendered him such an object as the reader can but faintly picture to himself” (217, 218). In this “pitiable” state, Stevens encounters a group of rich, young, white men who believe him, as a result of the tar and his unkempt appearance, to be black. They greet him with the call, “Hallo! here’s a darkey!” and then proceed to have fun at his expense, with one young man picking up a piece of lime and



seeking to whiten Stevens's face (218). Recognizing an associate among them, Stevens finally manages to establish his identity and extricate himself from this situation. Mr. Morton then accompanies Stevens home, where even Mrs. Stevens does not initially recognize her husband.

Using this episode in particular, Anna Engle, Amy Schragger Lang, and Robert Nowatzki have argued that Webb's novel exposes the precariousness of racial categorization and its unremarked conflation with class identity. Their arguments depend both on the evident success of Stevens's blackening and on "[t]he ease with which Stevens can be made black" (Lang 61). The improbability of this chain of events and of Stevens's transformation goes unremarked as critics credit Webb's seeming intentions for the scene – to argue that the facility with which the color line is crossed calls into question the line itself and all it represents. Taking this episode at face-value allows these critics to emphasize that categories of race in Webb's novel are quite fluid and therefore easily disrupted. However, when considered in a different way, this episode demonstrates that racial categories can also be – literally – quite sticky.

I find it odd that Webb would have us believe that, through his tarring and his beating, Stevens comes to look like a black man instead of a tarred, beaten white man. As the circumstances of Stevens's tarring indicate, tarring was usually about punishment, not performance. Though Stevens's assailants are delighted that he happens to look like a black man after they have coated his face with tar, they tar him primarily to punish him, ostensibly knowing the pain and difficulty of removing tar from skin.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, when blackness was performed in minstrel shows, white men used burnt cork and greasepaint, not tar, to blacken their faces. Moreover, their transformation from white into black –

even with these materials – was purposefully incomplete: the thrilling tension of the performance derived in part from the obvious artificiality of blackface.<sup>31</sup>

Webb allows for some incredulity here regarding Stevens's all-too-easy crossing of the color line. Webb does write that the first group coats Stevens's face "completely" and also tars his hands. This incident does take place at night, and the second group of men who encounter Stevens are drunk. However, the first drunk man to see Stevens and to take him for black does so with the light spilling from an open doorway: it is not completely dark. Additionally, when another young man draws on Stevens's face with lime in an attempt to make him white, it seems reasonable that that man, though drunk, would notice the stickiness of Stevens's purportedly black face, that he would feel the tar. When Stevens does convince Morton of his true identity, he does so by using his voice and saying Morton's name, but also by standing under a lamp and having Morton touch his face and feel the tar's stickiness.

The remarkable success of Stevens's racial transformation through tarring is puzzling, but there is some use in reading this scene as being at least somewhat unbelievable. Racial identity both is and is not fluid in Webb's novel, and its alternation between slipperiness and stickiness derives from its being subject to both representation and reception, from who writes and reads it. Stevens's body becomes a text that is written and read in this episode. The first group of men who tar him author that text, while the second group reads him in line with the intentions and through the direction of that first group. With that direction in place, there is a perfect correspondence between representation and reception until Stevens, the text, speaks and invites his current reader to literally press on him. At the center of this contest between readers and writers,

Stevens's body and his race shift according to who is authoring and reading them. Webb therefore demonstrates that race is a matter of both representation and reception, a matter of writing and and of reading.

Stevens's ability to navigate identities is not limited to this episode, as the nickname "Slippery George" attests. Lang counts these identities – "[a] vigilante wearing the mantle of the law, a thief and a murderer disguised as an innocent heir, a debtor hiding behind the scrim of a false prosperity, a ruthless opportunist masked by a thin veneer of respectability" – in order to argue that "Stevens exemplifies the 'slipperiness' of social identities..." (58). Within the novel, "Slippery George" may well be able to move through multiple "social identities"; however, from the first time that readers encounter him, they know that he is the novel's villain because Webb tells them that he is. When Stevens makes his first appearance in the novel, Webb is careful to define who and what he is through a painstaking description of how he looks:

His appearance was not by any means prepossessing; he was rather above than below the middle height, with round shoulders, and long, thin arms, finished off by disagreeable-looking hands. His head was bald on top, and the thin grayish-red hair, that grew more thickly about his ears, was coaxed up to that quarter, where an attempt had been made to effect such a union between the cords of the hair from each side as should cover the place in question.

The object, however, remained unaccomplished; as the hair was either very obstinate and would not be induced to lie as desired, or from extreme modesty objected to such an elevated position, and, in

consequence, stopped half-way, as if undecided whether to lie flat or remain erect, producing the effect that would have been presented had he been decorated with a pair of horns. His baldness might have given an air of benevolence to his face, but for the shaggy eyebrows that overshadowed his cunning-looking gray eyes. His cheekbones were high, and the cadaverous skin was so tightly drawn across them, as to give it a very parchment-like appearance. Around his thin compressed lips there was a continual nervous twitching, that added greatly to the sinister aspect of his face. (153-54)

In case the reader somehow misunderstands how to interpret the details amassed here, Webb concludes this initial description by writing, “On the whole, he was a person from whom you would instinctively shrink...” (154). Switching briefly into the second-person and reaching out to the reader, Webb overtly conditions Stevens’s reception by linking his shifty appearance to a stable essence. Moreover, a level of distrust attaches to Stevens precisely because of his obvious, yet failed manipulation of his appearance. A comb-over has never appeared more dire than in Webb’s description, where it assumes the appearance of a pair of horns and correctly indicates Stevens’s devilish essence. While George may slip through numerous identities in the novel as his appearance changes, his identity is firmly fixed in this initial description’s sentimental conflation of appearance and essence.

Within *The Garies*, assigning identity, as in Stevens’s cross-racial episode, often becomes the prerogative of those who encounter a particular character, who may choose to read past or read into a particular coat or a seemingly black face. Identity is therefore a

matter of reception in Webb's novel, and Stevens's identity, which demonstrably and spectacularly shifts based on who is currently reading him, is repeatedly remade and rendered fluid by its readers. However, Webb circumvents that prerogative of reception by telling his readers precisely how to read Stevens. While characters within the novel easily credit Stevens's outward appearance, the reader is directed to see through both his self-willed and externally-imposed transformations. In *The Garies*, then, sentimental discourse serves as an antidote to the fluidity of identity. Webb turns to sentimentality, to its investment in highly-legible bodies and in directed reading, to stabilize identity, to make it sticky.

Webb's attention to clothing and its ability to condition the reception of bodies also allows him to illustrate the slipperiness of identity. By making clothing function as a particularly powerful system of representation within his novel, Webb intimates that identity may be divested or assumed with a simple change of clothes. There is a tension in *The Garies* between the ability of clothes to define identity by directing a body's reception and the ease with which those clothes may be divested or assumed. Webb both depicts and circumvents the instability of identity by stabilizing reception, by directing readers through the use of sentimental conventions and according them a privileged viewpoint from which to see essential identity truly. While Allen uses an explicit turn to feeling to direct his readers, Webb takes a more circuitous route to accomplish the same. Webb identifies in sentimentality's offer to synchronize reading a way to demonstrate how to read embodied identities even as bodies are revised by what is put on them, a way to stabilize identity while narrating its apparent shifts.

Charlie Ellis is the best illustration of how representation might impart a protean quality to identity while that identity yet retains a sentimental stability through directed reading. In other words, Charlie offers an apt example of how clothes both can and cannot (re-)make a man in Webb's sentimental novel.<sup>32</sup> In one instance, *The Garies* pauses over a domestic scene with Charlie and some new clothes. His mother, we are told, "adhered with wonderful tenacity to the idea that a boy's clothes could never be made too large, and, therefore, when Charlie had a new suit, it always appeared as if it had been made for some portly gentleman and sent home to Charlie by mistake" (135). This time is no exception: Charlie is dismayed by the "ample dimensions of the new suit" and tells his mother, "you'll have to get out a search-warrant to find me in that jacket" (135). Charlie's prediction is right: he does get lost in his new clothes. The narrator tells us that "[h]is hands were almost completely lost in the excessively long sleeves" of the jacket (135-36); when he puts on the trousers, it looks like he is "sinking into oblivion" (137). Ever ready for a joke, Kinch ties a string round Charlie's neck, guaranteeing that he may recover Charlie should he indeed disappear into this engulfing suit. Once Charlie is arrayed in his gargantuan clothes, Kinch hatches a new plan and stuffs a pillow into Charlie's pants: Charlie now assumes the "the appearance of a London alderman" (137). Both Charlie and Kinch decide that he "look[s] like Squire Baker," "as big as old Daddy Downhill," and "a regular Daniel Lambert!" – the novel helpfully tells us that these are "the 'fat men' of their acquaintance" (137). Both Kinch and Charlie are greatly amused. When Mr. Ellis returns home, he comes to Charlie's aid, and it is decided that the clothes will be returned to the tailor for "the evidently necessary alterations" (137). Charlie is

duly rescued from being lost in his clothes, from disappearing into them or a new identity.

Just a few chapters before his adventures with the too-large suit, Charlie is put out to service at the home of Mrs. Thomas and is made to wear the distinctive Thomas livery – a sky-blue coat with silver buttons. Charlie chafes in his role as servant and in the livery itself, rebelling against the particular, and particularly public, representation it offers of him. Charlie voices his objection to the livery when he is running an errand for Mrs. Thomas and sees Kinch; he confesses, “Oh, I do hate to wear this confounded livery...the boys scream ‘Johnny Coat-tail’ after me in the streets, and call me ‘blue jay,’ and ‘blue nigger,’ and lots of other names. I feel that all that’s wanting to make a complete monkey of me, is for some one to carry me about on an organ” (98). Kinch agrees with Charlie’s assessment. Charlie is on his way back to Mrs. Thomas’s home to resume his duties when he yields to the temptation of a game of marbles. Mrs. Thomas discovers her missing servant on a carriage ride through the city, and, while she is initially unsure if it is “our Charlie” whom she glimpses among the crowd of boys, she knows that “that is certainly our livery” (99). However, Charlie’s distinctive livery has become dirty in the course of play and through contact with “a crowd of dirty boys”; moreover, Kinch has been drawing in chalk on Charlie’s back, making the skull and cross-bones that is the boys’ private signal to one another (98-99). As Allen’s skin was made “black as a pot of charcoal” in a printed editorial and as tar and lime write and revise Stevens’s race, so does Kinch’s chalk inflect Charlie’s identity as a servant and as a friend. In these instances, identity is located at the surface of the body, at the contested, visible site where representation and reception intersect.

Though Charlie is collected from the game and scolded for his inattentiveness to his job and his livery, he is not yet released from service. After further capers, which include his contriving to remove Mrs. Thomas's wig in the middle of a dinner party, she yet proves unwilling to let him go. The narrator explains her unwillingness through her particular attachment to Charlie's appearance: "[M]ore than all, he was a very good-looking boy, and when dressed in the Thomas livery, presented a highly-respectable appearance" (110). Despite his hijinks, then, Mrs. Thomas promises not only to forgive him and allow him to continue his employment but also to "buy [him] a handsome new suit of livery" (111). This proves too much for Charlie: Webb writes that "the promise of another suit of the detested livery quite overcame him, and he burst into tears" (111). Mrs. Thomas then pronounces him "the most incomprehensible child [she] ever saw," Charlie refuses to wear what he calls "[her] old button-covered uniform," and he is released from service (111). As he tries to rescue himself from the livery, Charlie demonstrates an awareness that it makes him all too comprehensible, but not in a way that he desires. Charlie is afraid of being lost in clothes here, of being refashioned into a servant.

Charlie grows up during the course of the novel, and with his increasing maturity comes a greater attention to and care for his appearance. He not only is "much more particular respecting his personal appearance" and "more careful of his clothes," but he also abstains from playing marbles, as it "makes one such a fright – covers one with chalk-marks and dirt from head to foot" (325). With his increased attention to his own appearance, Charlie also advises Kinch to "try and look more like a gentleman" (325). Kinch jokingly asks him, "Hadn't I better get an eye-glass and pair of light kid gloves?"



(325). Charlie replies “gravely”: “I’m not joking – I mean what I say. You don’t how far rough looks and an untidy person go against one. I do wish you would try and keep yourself decent” (325). Kinch promises to do so but also replies, “Charlie, I’m afraid, with your traveling and one thing or other, you will forget your old playmate by-and-by, and get above him” (325). Charlie, with “eyes moistened,” offers the necessary reassurances to his good friend (325).

In depicting this relationship between Charlie and Kinch, Webb demonstrates that networks within his novel are also sustained by directed, right reading. What continues from the Thomas livery to Charlie’s choice of neater, cleaner clothes is the friendship between Charlie and Kinch and the stability that imparts to Charlie’s identity. Notably, Kinch tries to interfere with the livery’s representation of Charlie, making a private mark of friendship on the livery that may well eclipse the public mark of servitude. The string that Kinch ties to Charlie, admittedly in jest, yet serves as an apt illustration of the tie that binds them together and rescues Charlie from disappearing. Charlie, in turn, tries to remake Kinch, advising him that “I find that any one who wants to get on must be particular in little things as well as great...” (325). In these examples, Charlie and Kinch rescue each other from bad representations, from the ways that clothing might mis-identify the person wearing it. Indeed, Charlie advocates greater control over one’s appearance and the representation it offers: in effect, he advises Kinch to direct his own reception. Kinch takes Charlie’s advice and that control to laughable extremes: by the end of the novel, he is a full-blown dandy, concerned with wearing the latest cut of clothes and comically fastidious about his appearance.

As Charlie's adventures in clothing indicate, clothes and representations may well change, but relationships offer to stabilize reception, to direct reading, and to neutralize the flux of identity. We saw such a relationship operating through *The American Prejudice Against Color*, as Allen used shared feeling to knit the reader into a network of sympathy that Allen and his text already inhabited. By constructing such a relationship, by fashioning networks that operate among author, text, and reader, sentimentality aims to direct reception. In a sentimental move, then, Webb argues that, like Kinch, the reader knows Charlie and, consequently, knows how to read him. Though Webb explicitly locates Charlie's body at the both slippery and sticky intersection of representation and reception, he calls attention not only to the multiple ways that body is fashioned but also to how it should be read. At times, Webb makes the analogy between texts and bodies overt: Clarence forges his passing body; George Stevens's hands get coated in and tar; and Charlie's livery gets drawn on by Kinch.<sup>33</sup> When that analogy is more implicit, Webb yet positions his novel and its bodies within a sentimental novel, within what Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues is "an intensely bodily genre" that grants the body a particular stability and legibility (*Touching* 26). Webb argues that the modes of representation and reception that characterize sentimental discourse work together to stabilize bodies and to allow them to be read correctly.

Charlie's gambols allow Webb to flirt with and then obviate the fluidity of identity, but Webb also makes clear that losing one's identity may pose a more serious threat. Like Allen, then, Webb uses a mob to raise the stakes of right reading and to demonstrate the violence of misrepresentation. In a scene that haunts the novel, Mr. Ellis leaves the safety of Walters's barricaded home during the riot to warn the Garies that the

mob has its sights set on them. Mr. Ellis tries but fails to elude the rioters' notice, and they pursue him through the streets of Philadelphia, finally cornering him on the roof of a building and forcing him over its edge. While he hangs there, holding on to the edge of the roof, they use a hatchet to break his hold, severing some fingers and mangling his hands. Mr. Ellis falls from the building and is badly injured. Some sympathetic bystanders collect him and send for a doctor, who fears that he will not live but recommends that they take him to a hospital. They search his pockets for "the least clue to his name and residence," but find nothing (248). In the hospital, where they "[n]ever know names" but "go by numbers," Mr. Ellis is accorded a number, and a chance notice in the newspaper allows his family finally to find him (269). Mr. Ellis does survive the attack, but his physical and psychological injuries prove debilitating. He cannot always remember his family's names or his own; loud noises frighten him and psychologically relocate him from the safety of his home to the scene of his injuries; and his physical injuries prevent him from practicing his trade as a carpenter and providing for his family.

Charlie's body was repeatedly lost but also repeatedly found; in contrast, Mr. Ellis largely remains lost to his family. When he left Walters's home in the midst of the riots and temporarily separated from his family and his community, Mr. Ellis's body lost a measure of its legibility. His body was read by the rioters, but it was read hostilely and through its race alone. After he is injured, Mr. Ellis's pockets yield no markers of identity, no means by which to know him. In the hospital, the nameless Mr. Ellis gets lost again, this time within their numerical system of representation. In this brief but resonant episode, Mr. Ellis's identity proves too slippery: he gets lost both without representation and in representation, because he cannot be read at all or cannot be read

correctly. Through Mr. Ellis, Webb argues that a body that is not made legible through the conventions of sentimentality, that goes out of network, is in danger. Allen's fear of being lost in misrepresentation, of being mistaken for the man he is said to be within those antagonistic newspaper editorials, becomes all the more legible, as does his desire to use the conventions of sentimentality to construct a powerful and redemptive relationship with his readers. In the course of the rioting, Mr. Ellis moves from being a self-in-relation to merely a self, and he is lost. This is the specter that haunts both Allen's and Webb's narratives, that drives them to pick up their pens and write sentimental narratives.

Like Mr. Ellis, Clarence Garie is also irretrievably lost in *The Garies*. Clarence's passing provides Webb with the opportunity to demonstrate the fluidity of racial identity and to direct attention towards the simultaneous necessity and difficulty of reading race. Though Clarence's passing allows Webb to advance the argument that race is a matter of reading, Webb does not celebrate the fluidity of Clarence's racial identity. He instead painstakingly measures the cost of passing, of authorship, to Clarence. For example, Clarence confesses that he lives in "constant fear of detection," bearing out as he echoes Walters's earlier warning about the shared consequences of forging and passing (354). With a black sister and a white fiancée, Clarence is caught between two worlds and exists fully in neither. He agonizes, "I can't be white and coloured at the same time; the two don't mingle, and I must consequently be one or the other. My education, habits, and ideas, all unfit me for associating with the latter; and I live in constant dread that something may occur to bring me out with the former" (352).

Clarence's passing body operates as the explicit site of this conflict. His secret exacts a physical toll: [I]t gnaws, gnaws, gnaws, until it has almost eaten my heart away....it has kept me awake night after night, it haunts me at all hours; it is breaking down my health and strength – wearing my very life out of me..." (354). Once his passing is exposed and his engagement terminated, Clarence cannot resume his place in the black community, nor can he continue to live in the white world. Indeed, his very body cannot recover from its simultaneous existence in two worlds and in neither. Because Clarence is no longer able to author his body or to direct its reception, his body spirals out of control and threatens to disappear altogether. Described as "bent and emaciated to a frightful extent," Clarence's body both threatens to break free from its skin and to sink into itself: "The veins on his temples were clearly discernible; the muscles of his throat seemed like great cords; his cheeks were hollow, his sunken eyes were glassy bright and surrounded with a dark rim..." (411). Clarence's body is caught in a netherworld between representation and reception, and it can neither be rescued from that netherworld nor sustain its existence there. Clarence wastes away to an early death.

Clarence's passing obviously resists being read positively, but, as Stephen Knadler and M. Giulia Fabi argue, it also serves as an important means to measure the cost of prejudice *and* the value of the black community. Knadler argues that Clarence is traumatized through his early experiences of racial prejudice and that trauma leads to his decision to pass, while Fabi writes that "Clarence's passing is an externally imposed lifelong necessity that emerges as one more form of racial oppression" (39). Fabi also notes that Clarence, in his estrangement from the black community, offers Webb a way to valorize belonging to that community. Reid-Pharr agrees: in arguing that Webb's novel

strives to produce and celebrate a black distinctiveness, Clarence's combination of racial identities and partial exodus from the black community produces a "deformed, overly desirous, disloyal body" that must be expelled from the novel (*Conjugal* 71-72). These critics demonstrate a desire to read (and rescue) Clarence's passing body, to situate it within narratives of trauma or valorizations of the black community.

Like Mr. Ellis, though, Clarence is in danger precisely because his body resists legibility and is situated among hostile readers. Within *The Garies*, and within antebellum culture more largely, amalgamation and passing contest the legibility of race by suggesting that racial identity may well disappear into a body. To obviate the threat of that disappearance, nineteenth-century racial taxonomies and terminology sought to fix mixed-race bodies in discourse and so make them legible. As Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes, identifying African Americans through the terms "quadroon" and "octoroon" "attest[ed] to society's desire to keep track of an ever less visible black ancestry even at the cost of counting the generations of institutionalized sexual exploitation" (*Touching* 33). If race is visibly absent, the terms "quadroon" and "octoroon" track the ancestry of mixed race people and make it linguistically available to the public, capturing in language what is disappearing from the body. However, as Valerie Smith and Sánchez-Eppler note, the light-skinned black body, precisely through concealing its African American ancestry, can reveal the institutionalized sexual exploitation that made that concealment possible. Even bodies that challenge the legibility of race may therefore be read, albeit to different effect. Indeed, the light-skinned black body calls attention to the necessity of *reading* race, as P. Gabrielle Foreman points out. In her estimation, "perceived racial indeterminacy points to issues of reading rather than of being..." ("Who's" 531).

Gayle Wald argues more largely that “racial passing can ‘work’...only because race is more liquid and dynamic, more variable and random, than it is conventionally represented to be within hegemonic discourse” (6). In the context of this “liquid and dynamic” understanding of race, passing therefore “entails...struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances” (Wald 6). In his novel, Webb foregrounds that struggle, but he also seeks to refute “the radical unreliability of embodied appearances.” He does so by situating Clarence within a sentimental novel and directing how he is read; Webb strives to direct the reception of Clarence’s body by readers of *The Garies*, and thereby to endow that body with a certain stability. Though Clarence passes within the novel, the reader knows his racial identity from the first chapter of *The Garies*. In the scene that introduces Clarence and Emily to the reader, Webb writes that they “showed no trace whatever of African origin” (32). However, Webb then identifies those traces for the reader:

The girl had the chestnut hair and blue eyes of her father; but the boy had inherited the black hair and dark eyes of his mother. The critically learned in such matters, knowing his parentage, might have imagined they could detect the evidence of his mother’s race, by the slightly mezzo-tinto expression of his eyes, and the rather African fulness of his lips; but the casual observer would have passed him by without dreaming that a drop of negro blood coursed through his veins. (32)

Webb positions his readers as “[t]he critically learned” here, not as “the casual observer.” His novel intervenes to make that difference, as Webb tells readers how to read and makes Clarence’s raced body legible once and for all. Clarence consequently fails to

pass for the reader. Within the novel, though, Clarence does pass, and his body comes to serve as an explicit site of the clash between representation and reception, as additional evidence of the danger of being misrepresented and misread. Suspended between these narrative practices, Clarence's body is annihilated.

The frequency with which bodies get lost and found, written and read in *The Garies* draws attention to systems of representation, to the ways in which raced bodies appear in print and disappear into second-hand clothes. Representation paradoxically becomes an avenue to disappearance, a way for bodies to vanish into discourse. Sentimental reading, however, offers a chance for those bodies to be retrieved, and, like Allen, Webb aims to use sentimentality to direct the reading, and rescue, of bodies within his narrative. The spectacle of identity in *The Garies* therefore depends ultimately on how bodies are constituted by representation and reception.

Webb pays more explicit attention to the power of writing and reading through his attention to the mobile texts circulating through his novel. In *The Garies*, Webb includes a variety of documents – private letters, handwritten notes, and newspaper notices – that all easily traverse the boundary between private and public. Indeed, the potential power of writing in Webb's narrative derives from its easy movement across that boundary: he depicts how private texts may be used publicly as well as the ways in which public writing might achieve private resonance. In both Allen's and Webb's narratives, the durability and portability of both private and public documents make the knowledge they contain easily transferable, and the ensuing mobility of text may be threatening to writers but promising for readers. For example, after Clarence's passing is revealed, his fiancée's letters are so important to her father, Mr. Bates, that he threatens bodily harm to



Clarence if he does not return them. When Mr. Bates demands his daughter's letters, he indicates their power by insisting that they be returned immediately and in their entirety: he says, "I want my daughter's letters – every line she ever wrote to you; get them at once – I want them now" (383). He does so knowing that the letters could make this private, and in his eyes mortifying, love affair public.

In another instance, George Stevens obtains a cache of private letters from a recently-deceased aunt that once sought to reconcile her with her father after she married a man of a lower class. These letters did not accomplish their original purpose, but they do inform Stevens of his relation to Mr. Garie and therefore inspire his ultimately successful murder plot. He also later submits these letters as proof of his relationship to Mr. Garie: they establish Stevens as Mr. Garie's legitimate heir and so procure Stevens his ill-gotten gain. Robert Nowatzki calls attention to the fact that "Stevens's claim that he is Garie's first cousin is nowhere contested in the novel, even though he acknowledges Garie as his relative only after killing him" (48). By leaving that claim uncontested, Webb establishes the revelatory power and ensuing instrumentality of writing, and these letters in particular.

Though Stevens reads and then exploits these letters, another text written by him renders Stevens vulnerable. On his way to incite and direct the assembled rioters, Stevens accidentally drops a handwritten list aptly titled "Places to be attacked." That list, when conveniently recovered by Kinch, given to Walters, and then rightly attached to Stevens, reveals Stevens's orchestration of the riots. Later, after the deaths of the Garies and the revelation of Stevens's relation to them, Walters and Mr. Balch confront Stevens with their suspicion about his role in the murders. In heavy-handed but revealing

symbolism, Stevens's hands become covered not with Garie's blood, but with red ink.

Webb writes:

...Mr. Stevens, unnoticed by himself, had overturned a bottle of red ink, and its contents had slightly stained his hands. When Walters charged him with having Mr. Garie's blood upon them, he involuntarily looked down and saw his hands stained with red. An expression of intense horror flitted over his face when he observed it; but quickly regaining his composure, he replied, 'It's only a little ink.' (285)

The conflation, however momentary, between blood and ink is telling: writing does have the power of life and death within this novel, spurring Stevens to murder Garie and, through the timely revelation of Garie's lost will, exposing Stevens as Garie's probable murderer and leading to his suicide. Given the rhetorical bombast of Webb's writing here, it is unsurprising that critics of *The Garies* point to this scene as evidence of the novel's distasteful melodrama.<sup>34</sup> However, underlying this scene is an argument about and a demonstration of the power of writing and reading: Webb plainly sensationalizes this scene, but he does so in order to heighten the legibility of the contest over writing in it. He therefore constricts representation and reception –we have no doubt as to what the letters mean – in order to make the thrill within the text match that outside of it.

In his attention to the documents that circulate within his narrative, Webb, like Allen, delineates how writing might empower its readers, and even benefit them by its possession. That same potential of writing has a parallel in the circumstances surrounding the publication and early reception of Webb's novel. *The Garies* includes two prefaces, one written by Stowe and another by Lord Brougham, though originally

only one preface was planned. Brougham relates within his preface the circumstances that led him to provide an endorsement of Webb's novel: he did so when what he calls "a severe domestic affliction" threatened to prevent Stowe from supplying her preface (27). Lord Brougham circumvents Stowe's silence by using the opinion she has expressed in private letters, directly quoting her words and adumbrating them to his own. He writes, "I am...able to state her opinion of the book, expressed in a letter to one of her friends. She says: – [and he quotes –] 'There are points in the book of which I think very highly. The style is simple and unambitious – the characters, most of them faithfully drawn from real life, are quite fresh, and the incident, which is also much of it fact, is often deeply interesting'" (27). Lord Brougham's quotation of Stowe does not stop here; instead, it continues for another paragraph. Of course, Stowe's preface did appear in time to be printed, and her opinion is readily available should the reader only turn back a page to *her* preface. However, this example establishes, even before the novel begins, the way in which private writing might easily become public and powerful, how its ability to be read and reproduced might be turned to the benefit of its readers.

This example, and Stowe's preface more largely, demonstrate the prerogatives of reception. In her preface, Stowe defines the question that Webb's novel is supposed to answer. She writes, "The book which now appears before the public may be of interest in relation to a question which the late agitation of the subject of slavery has raised in many thoughtful minds; viz. – Are the race at present held as slaves capable of freedom, self-government, and progress?" (25). The answer to this question is yes, though it is unclear whether Stowe believes that answer lies in the fact of Webb's authorship or in his novel's depiction of African American middle-class life in Philadelphia. In a review of *The*

*Garies* published in the *National Review* and later reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, the reviewer takes up Stowe's question only to sniff that it "is one which we have never thought of asking" – also assuming its answer to be, of course, yes (2). Just before turning to Stowe's defining question, the reviewer does call particular attention to the author of *The Garies*: the reviewer writes that Webb's novel "would be...good and pleasant reading, coming from any one. How much greater, then, must be its merit, as the production of one whose father would perhaps have been tarred and feathered if he had dared to take a pen in his hand, or even to learn his alphabet" (2). Webb's advanced literacy therefore seems to authorize the reviewer's dismissal of Stowe's question and a return to non-utilitarian grounds of "good and pleasant reading." However, the political import of Stowe's question is not lost on the reviewer of Webb's novel for the *Athenaeum*. This reviewer writes that Stowe's question "is not fairly stated": "There is no doubt that the mixture of race gives to the original slave stock capacities for civilization and moral qualities of self-control which render them capable of achieving freedom and undertaking all its responsibilities, which in their original state they were *not...*" (1320). In this reviewer's mind, the race is therefore not capable of freedom and progress, and may only attain such progress if mixed with whites.

The ways in which an African American author's text represents race, and how that representation may be undercut by reception, become the focal point of these public accounts of reading, just as it is within both *The American Prejudice Against Color* and *The Garies*. However, this point of contention concerning what questions *The Garies* should answer and how it should and does answer them illustrates the larger freedom of reception – the ability of readers, whether they publish their responses or not, to flaunt or

follow direction, to read with sympathy or hostility. Indeed, these readerly responses are as much about reading and its politics as they are about Webb's novel. Stowe's preface, these published reviews, and *The Garies* itself raise the question of how well directed reading succeeds, but they give us only limited evidence through which to answer that question.

#### IV. "[A] reader beyond cavil"

In many respects, this chapter turns on a question of audience. Both Allen and Webb consider the problems of representing and reading race in the antebellum United States and turn to sentimental discourse to solve those problems and manage reception. How far sentimentality went towards doing so might be discerned by accessing the historical reception of *The Garies* and *The American Prejudice Against Color*. Allen's and Webb's historical readers, through correspondence, marginalia, and other forms of response, might have told us what they made of Allen's strident challenges to printed texts and his ultimate appeal to readerly sentiment; they might have registered their disbelief in Stevens's cross-racial episode or their pleasure in the enduring friendship of Charlie and Kinch. However, the historical audiences of these narratives left us little evidence. Webb and Allen self-consciously placed their narratives in the space between representation and reception, between authorship and reading, creating networks that connected author, reader, and text in an attempt to organize and manage that space. Without a sense of the reception of these narratives in their own time, though, we cannot locate where representation ends and reception begins, nor evaluate how they overlap and diverge.

Some glimmers of that historical audience do remain. Webb's novel was published in England where it was reviewed in the *Sunday Times*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *National Review*, and these reviews anticipated the popularity of Webb's novel. For example, the reviewer for the *Sunday Times* wrote, "*The Garies* having for its sponsors Lord Brougham and Mrs Beecher Stowe, needs little further recommendation to ensure it a world-wide popularity," and the review in *The Athenaeum* begins, "This is a book which will be read with much interest and curiosity..." (2). On its own or its sponsors' merits, these reviews took for granted the "world-wide popularity" of *The Garies*, but Webb's novel did not live up to those expectations. *The Garies* was not published by an American publisher until 1997, and the only review of Webb's novel that appears in the antebellum African American press was a reprint of the review from the *National Review*, which appeared on the front page of the 4 December 1857 edition of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.<sup>35</sup> An October 1857 advertisement for Routledge's publications and its "Cheap Series" in particular does list *The Garies* as having sold 14,000 copies – far more than Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which sold about 1700 copies in its first fifteen years of publication, but far less than both *The Wide, Wide World*, which sold 40,000 copies the year that it was published, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which sold 20,000 copies within the first three weeks of its book publication and 200,000 within a year – and that was in the United States alone (Mott 132; Hart 85, 110, 112).<sup>36</sup> Two later novellas by Webb, which were published in the *New Era* in 1870, were introduced in that publication as being written by the author of *The Garies*, and Phillip S. Lapsansky suggests that, based on this evidence, *The Garies* did find its way into at least some African American readers' hands (28).<sup>37</sup>

Our knowledge of the reception of Allen's narrative is even spottier. Of *The American Prejudice Against Color*, Benjamin Quarles writes, "Priced at one shilling, the book moved quickly from the stalls" (86). However, it did not move quickly enough to support the Allens and their growing family, nor did Allen earn enough on the lecture circuit to make ends meet. In fact, the lack of revenue from sales of his first narrative may well have resulted in Allen's publication of a second text in 1860, *A Short Personal Narrative*. At the close of this later publication, Allen explicitly addresses his desire for financial stability and records his hope that sales of his second narrative might provide it: "I desire a more permanent settlement for myself and my family, and hope that the sale of this little narrative may help to create means to that end" (114). The little we can glean from this evidence suggests that these narratives were read in their time, but not *how* they were read or to what effect.

We are left, then, with the imagination of sentimental reading that survives within the pages of these narratives, with Allen's and Webb's arguments about and demonstrations of its real political efficacy, and with their persistent concern with how reading might and does matter as they both write and model how to read racial identity in the antebellum North. There is value in retrieving that imagination, and there is nothing to suggest that it remained untapped within the pages of their narratives. However, in the absence of Webb's and Allen's readers, I turn to another reader of sentimental narrative to gain a different perspective on the intersection of reading and writing, sentimentality and race in the antebellum United States, to illuminate the networks instantiated by reading sentimental fiction and to demonstrate how those networks license the imagination of how sentiment and reading might work in the world. Harriet Beecher

Stowe's dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Christian Slave*, was first published and performed in 1855, three years after the novel itself was published. As the title page of *The Christian Slave* notes, it was "Dramatized...Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb" – Frank Webb's wife.<sup>38</sup> At numerous venues in the United States and England, Mary Webb delivered solo dramatic readings of Stowe's play, and she met with marked success.

Mary Webb's dramatic readings, in their publicity and their explicit performance for an audience, do not fit our ordinary conception of reading, which we often imagine to be a private, solitary, and silent act. However, the version of sentimental reading that I have presented throughout this project challenges that limited imagination by encompassing readers who write fan letters, commentators who publish reading advice, and, in this chapter, two authors who argue that reading is best accomplished when it functions as a sentimental exchange of reading direction and fellow feeling. Mary Webb obviously was a reader of sentimental narrative, and the scenes of her performed reading resonate with this structure of sentimental reading and make explicit the dynamics of even silent, solitary acts of sentimental reading. Indeed, she serves as a crescendo of sorts to this project's discussion of reading because she makes the dynamics, the anxieties, and the stakes of sentimental reading, both its possibilities and its limitations, particularly legible. She did so by dramatizing not just Stowe's play but reception itself, by inviting her audience to linger over and consider the act of reading.

Mary Webb's readings and the text of *The Christian Slave* materially illustrate the kinds of relays among authors, readers, and texts that sentimental narrative aims to produce. We can see the evidence of those relays in the physical, textual presence that



Mary Webb gained within the very pages of Stowe's play. Two editions of *The Christian Slave* were published, one in Boston and the other in London, and both note on their title pages that the play was, as I noted, "[d]ramatized Expressly" for Mary Webb. In the London edition, published a year after the Boston edition, Mary Webb's presence extends beyond this initial page. A four-page biographical sketch of her authored by her husband immediately precedes Stowe's play. Additionally, a note at the bottom of that sketch's final page indicates that a symbol comprised of three asterisks identifies the scenes that Mary Webb "generally omitted" in her readings (iv). Those asterisks appear at the start and close of each of the six scenes that Webb excised – six scenes that total fifteen pages in a sixty-three-page play – so those marks are literally scattered throughout the text that Stowe authored but Mary Webb performed.<sup>39</sup> These symbols serve a practical purpose in indicating which scenes the audience might skip over as they followed along during Mary Webb's readings, and they are therefore a material signal of the readerly direction that I have discussed throughout this dissertation. More provocatively, those asterisks signal Mary Webb's readerly, interpretive presence within the pages of Stowe's play, allowing her not only to direct the auditory reception of that play in the moment of its performance, but also to condition its more durable textual reception – and even how we read it today.

There was, of course, great significance in the act of an African American woman reading Stowe's work, especially at a time when debates over slavery and racial prejudice were raging in the United States and when Stowe continued to be castigated for the problematic colonization plot that ended her novel. In the biographical sketch of his wife, Frank Webb offered his take on the stakes of Mary Webb's readings. He

emphasizes what he calls her “genius for dramatic reading,” a genius that he says “has been universally conceded” in the United States (ii). In recounting her successful debut as a dramatic reader, Frank Webb writes, “[T]he audience lost the mulatto in the artist; genius had become the conqueror of prejudice” (ii-iii). Frank Webb celebrates that Mary Webb’s audience was able to look beyond her race to her artistry, but he also aims not to lose but to emphasize “the mulatto in the artiste,” to locate genius in a black body, and to use that location strategically for political effect. He continues:

Mrs. Webb’s success in this country will not only establish her reputation as a reader beyond cavil, but it will serve a nobler end, will contribute to a higher purpose, in the presence of which mere personal considerations sink into utter insignificance. It will prove that the right which has been claimed for us, by the friends of our race, to stand side by side with our fair-skinned oppressors, that our claim for the right to compete with them in the world of art for the prizes it offers, is not made without strong foundation for its support. (iii)

In giving this kind of resonance to his wife’s readings, Frank Webb makes Stowe’s play serve as the vehicle for Mary Webb; he subordinates that play to Mary Webb’s reputation and then to the “nobler end” of challenging racial prejudice. Frank Webb therefore tells us how to read his wife’s reading, and, in doing so, he elevates the reader over her text.

We are necessarily, and admittedly, operating at a remove from these readings, from the ephemeral, performative rendering of Stowe’s play by Mary Webb. Surviving reviews of her performances, though, indicate that Mary Webb did prove to be a great success. Those reviews also indicate that she did not wear costumes, made no expressive

gestures, and stood behind a reading desk.<sup>40</sup> Her success depended on her reading voice, and particularly on her ability to make her voice serve as a vehicle of feeling, as a grounds for sympathy with herself and with the characters she represented. Accordingly, reviews repeatedly emphasize the permutations and the affective power of Mary Webb's reading voice. One review spoke of the "touching feeling" of her delivery, and another described the range of her voice – "varying from the strong and rough to the soft and gentle, from the rushing and boisterous wind to the sighing and musical breeze" – and noted that it was "deeply affecting" ("Mrs. Webb's Success"; qtd. in Clark 346). Given this range and Mary Webb's success in voicing a variety of characters, one reviewer even suggests that "with the eyes closed one would have been sure that different readers were engaged upon the parts" ("Mrs. Webb's Reading").

However, Webb's reviewers, and presumably her audience, did not close their eyes while watching her read. Instead, as Sarah Meer and Eric Gardner agree, her performance also turned on the visibility of her race, on the peculiar insertion of a black reading body between Stowe and her audience.<sup>41</sup> Mary Webb's body was itself read in the act of reading, as the reviews of her performance also demonstrate. For example, a review published in *The Illustrated London News* is titled "Dramatic Reading by a Coloured Native of Philadelphia," and other reviews anatomize her physical appearance – her skin color, her features, her countenance and how they gave, as one reviewer said, "a characteristic tone to the performance" ("Mrs. M. E. Webb's Readings").

A tension exists between Mary Webb's noted ability to voice a range of characters and the way in which she was fixed in her own raced, reading body. Consider, for example, the opening scene of *The Christian Slave*, which is set in Uncle Tom's cabin

as George Shelby teaches Tom how to write. In this scene, Mary Webb voiced Uncle Tom, George Shelby, Aunt Chloe, and Tom and Chloe's sons Mose and Pete – an older African American man, a young white boy, an older African American woman, and two African American boys. In the first scene of the third act, Mary Webb would have voiced an antagonistic exchange between Simon Legree and Cassy – an evil, white Southern planter and his mulatto slave and mistress. As she alternated between performing characters of different races, genders, ages throughout the play, Mary Webb's readings depended on the slipperiness of identity, but also on its stickiness, on her ability to bridge difference through her reading voice even as she presented it through her reading body. Mary Webb's dramatic readings and the force of her performance depended on her ability to signal difference even as she used the flexible sympathy of her reading voice to bring a diverse range of characters from page to audience.

Mary Webb's readings bring into sharp relief the networks that were constructed through reading a sentimental text – between reader and author, reader and text, and, explicitly in this case, between reader and audience or world. Those networks structure Mary Webb's performances, licensing her transformation through feeling and reading but also constraining it. The connection her readings instantiated and represented between Stowe and Mary Webb, author and reader, was particularly important to the possibilities and limitations of her readings. Mary Webb gained a platform, a public presence, and a voice as a result of that connection. Her readings also made her money, enough to support herself and her husband while he wrote *The Garies and Their Friends* (Clark 343). As Meer and Gardner note, though, Mary Webb and Harriet Beecher Stowe entered into a *mutually* beneficial relationship.<sup>42</sup> Mary Webb's performances proved

useful to Stowe, as having an African American reader perform *The Christian Slave* provided a level of authenticity to Stowe's play and her novel. Moreover, Mary Webb served as the vehicle through which Stowe staked her claim and asserted her voice in the myriad stage productions that had arisen out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, many of which were unsympathetic to Stowe's mission in writing the novel. Mary Webb, in other words, was the means through which Stowe attempted to wrest control of her novel from its other readers, reproducers, and performers.

There were therefore limitations to Mary Webb's readings – most basically, she read Stowe's words, not her own. From the circumstances of its deployment, Mary Webb's reading voice became audible and even successful, but it ran the risk of being lost in Stowe's words. However, historical circumstances would indicate that it was Stowe's words that were lost with Mary Webb, not vice versa. Evidence suggests that Mary Webb was the only performer of *The Christian Slave*, and, following her death in 1859, it seems that there were no more performances. Of course, Stowe's name lived on through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and few of us know Mary Webb's name today. Mary Webb's readings yet point to the possibilities of sentimental reading: they created a space where an African American woman could be recognized as a genius and where the kind of cultural work that Frank Webb desired could be imagined and perhaps accomplished.

As Mary Webb staged Stowe's play, she dramatized the act of reading itself and the larger dynamics of sentimental reading. In her repeated performances of reading, Mary Webb again and again asked her audience to confront the potential meaning of that act and called attention to the kinds of transitions, or transformations that sentimental reading might facilitate – the transition from depicting to transcending difference, from a

particular reader to a universal experience, from mulatto to artiste. Essential to the dynamic of Mary Webb's readings is the way in which these transitions do not quite succeed, the way in which her performances produced tension and anxiety by allowing cause and potential effect to exist together in suspension. Her readings therefore dramatize how contested and unknown the transition from reading to world was in antebellum culture.

In Mary Webb's repetitions of reading, she therefore presented and represented the problems and potential of reception. In calling attention to the act of reading and in performing that act again and again, she demonstrated a stall over reading, a stall that reflects an uncertainty about how reading affects the world in which readers live. Indeed, even the printed version of *The Christian Slave* invited its readers to pause over its reading, to consider how it was read by this reader through those asterisks that indicate omitted scenes. *The Christian Slave* even encouraged its audience to read Mary Webb herself through that biographical sketch, and more largely to imagine her performance of reading and the spectacle of this African American woman voicing a range of characters. We can imagine the anxieties that Mary Webb's readings produced as her audience witnessed the representation of a white woman's words by an African American reader, as her audience was invited to see difference but hear similarity. In her reading performances, Mary Webb therefore pointed to the essential drama at the heart of reading sentimental narrative, as she both revealed and capitalized on the emotional networks that connected reader, text, author, and world and asked her audience to consider what purpose her readings, and those networks, might serve. That question continues to resonate today.

<sup>1</sup> Allen advertised this narrative when he was on the abolitionist speaking circuit in Great Britain. For example, a newspaper account of a speech delivered by Allen at the Stock Exchange in Leeds, England, on 29 November 1853, says that Allen mentioned his marriage but then says, “The whole story about this was written in a book, and he could not tell it to them then” (qtd. Ripley 369). It is possible, then, that his readers would have, or already had, the opportunity to see him, making their laughter a real possibility.

<sup>2</sup> Michael O’Malley helpfully articulates how the language of essentialism was deployed in discussions of both money and race, specie and species in the nineteenth-century United States to stabilize “the slippery, shifting, mutable quality of value and identity in a free market society” (374). In his argument, “The shared language of race and money suggests that the freer market society became, the farther its promises extended, the more it demanded racial categories that resisted exchange or renegotiation” (373).

<sup>3</sup> Performing national difference to the benefit of the British was a popular tactic of abolitionists trying to enlist support for American abolition. For example, in the *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*, which was printed with his novel *Clotel*, William Wells Brown writes, “No person of my complexion can visit [England] without being struck with the marked difference between the English and the Americans. The prejudice which I have experienced on all and every occasion in the United States, and to some degree on board the *Canada*, vanished as soon as I set foot on the soil of Britain....no sooner was I on British soil than I was recognised as a man and an equal. The very dogs in the streets appeared conscious of my manhood....For the first time in my life, I can say ‘I am truly free’....England is, indeed, the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’” (32). However, England was not entirely free of prejudice, as Peter C. Ripley notes: “Blacks who stayed in Britain for a protracted period usually tempered their enthusiasm for British race relations. They came to understand that Victorian race conventions found expression in different and more subtle ways than in America. Yet most black abolitionists were cheered by what they found in Britain and returned to America with a revitalized understanding of the possibilities for improved relations between blacks and whites” (33). For general accounts of the abolition movement in Great Britain and the role that African Americans such as William and Ellen Craft, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass played in it, see also Blackett *Building*; Fisch; Tamarkin.

<sup>4</sup> In this vein, the only objection voiced by Allen in regards to Stowe’s novel was concerning “the chapter favoring colonization”: “I have one regret, with regard to the book, and that is, that the chapter favoring colonization was ever written. I do not, however, apprehend so much harm from it, as some others seem to anticipate. Many of the bad features of that chapter, are somewhat modified by the admission, on the 302d page, of the right of the colored people to meet and mingle in this country – to rise by their individual worth, and without distinction of caste or color; and that they have not only the rights of common men here, but more than these, the rights of an injured race for reparation; and still further, that those who deny this right to rise without distinction of caste or color, and in particular to rise *here*, are false to their own professed principles of human equality.” Martin Delany also objected to that chapter within the pages of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, approximately one year after Allen’s letter on 6 May 1853 (Levine “*Uncle*” 81). For an account of the reception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, see Levine “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” For another account of the antebellum black response to Stowe’s novel, see Banks.

<sup>5</sup> In his discussion of *The Garies* in *Conjugal Union*, Reid-Pharr provocatively argues that Webb is engaged in a project of cleaning house, expelling characters who are tainted by southern connections or by interracial ties through the violence of the riot and through Clarence’s eventual exposure. See 65-88.

<sup>6</sup> See also Dobson “Reclaiming” 268.

<sup>7</sup> For work on “sentimental men,” see Chapman and Hendler *Sentimental Men*.

<sup>8</sup> That line of criticism is largely located in the mid-twentieth century, but it extends in isolated examples even into the 1980s. See, for example, Bell, Davis, and Elder.

<sup>9</sup> See Bogardus in particular for an example of early criticism that seeks to redeem *The Garies* through its realism. Robert S. Levine offers a recent example of this trend. He writes, “I find Webb’s novel to be deeply sympathetic in its portrayal of the contradictions and vulnerabilities of black middle-class life in Philadelphia, and often more realistic in its portrayals, and bracingly so, than sentimental or melodramatic, as some critics have complained” (“Disturbing” 351). Robert Reid-Pharr’s characterization of previous scholarship on *The Garies* is particularly apt; see Introduction xi. Augusta Rohrbach argues that we might locate the origins of realism in slave narratives from the mid-nineteenth century, though she does not consider if novels like *The Garies* or *Clotel*, in being influenced by those narratives, may also contain traces of a nascent realism.

<sup>10</sup> See Duane 202 and Reid-Pharr *Conjugal* 65-88. P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that sentimental “conventions combined with narrative workings that simultaneously criticize them...constitute the characteristics of Black sentimentality as a genre” (“Reading” 331). See also Gates Introduction; Nudelman “Harriet”; and Peterson *Doers*.

<sup>11</sup> See Weinstein “Slave Narrative” and Stern “Excavating Genre.” See also duCille 6. In a parallel move, Jennifer Rae Greeson has used the figure of the fallen woman in urban gothic discourse to offer a new interpretation of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

<sup>12</sup> Frances Smith Foster has recently reminded us that not only white people read texts authored by African Americans. More largely, Foster argues that African American authors were engaged in forging community through their writing, as well as in challenging false and prejudiced representations. See “A Narrative.”

<sup>13</sup> Allen’s narrative has received little critical attention, but Karen Woods Weierman’s *One Nation, One Blood: Interracial Marriage in American Fiction, Scandal, and Law, 1820-1870* provides a notable exception. Weierman takes up both Allen’s narrative and Webb’s novel in providing an account of the perception of interracial marriage in the nineteenth century. For details on Allen’s biography, see Blackett “William.” For valuable context for Allen’s narrative, see Elbert.

<sup>14</sup> In studying laws restricting the reading and writing of slaves, Monaghan concludes that, until approximately 1820, the ability to write “was almost invariably perceived by southern slaveholders as intrinsically dangerous,” while “reading was usually viewed as a tool that was entirely compatible with the institution of slavery” (309). While a “gulf between the two literacy skills” existed in the pre-revolutionary United States and the early republic, both skills eventually came to be associated with sedition in the slaveholding South (Monaghan 316, 309).

<sup>15</sup> In her introduction to the novels of Frances E.W. Harper, Foster argues against the stereotype of all African Americans as illiterate slaves; instead, “literacy was neither unknown nor unmanifest in African American culture,” as their literary production and vibrant print culture make clear (xxi).

<sup>16</sup> In *A Short Personal Narrative*, published in 1860, Allen does offer a deeper account of his early schooling as a free black in Virginia. Following Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, the colored school that Allen attended was closed, and Allen could not gain entrance to any other schools. He therefore constructed his own education, receiving lessons from the soldiers in the garrison near where he lived, borrowing the books of a willing slaveholder, and studying a small library given to him by another slaveholder. Even though he pays narrative attention here to his early education, Allen places greater emphasis throughout both narratives on his ability to manipulate language.

<sup>17</sup> For additional accounts of African American literacy and print culture, see Foster “A Narrative” and DeLombard.

<sup>18</sup> A brief quotation from the Declaration of Independence appears on the title page of the narrative; for the notices, see 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman calls attention to the focus in *Iola Leroy* on right reading; see “Reading” 332-33. See also Monaghan’s account of David Walker’s *Appeal*: “Perhaps Walker’s most striking contribution, in relation to our discussion of reading and subversion, was his ability to ‘deconstruct,’ as we would call it today, the texts he had read and to draw his own conclusions from them” (330).

<sup>20</sup> The separate spheres model has been amply challenged; see especially Davidson and Hatcher’s anthology *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature, 1830-1930*.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of how these qualities came to be associated with print in the eighteenth century, see M. Warner *Letters*.

<sup>22</sup> Allen’s lecturing in Great Britain may well have offered another opportunity for the personal contact and the closed circuit of communication that he desired.

<sup>23</sup> Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of “the violence of identification” makes clear that the conviction of shared humanity may yet act as a vehicle of oppression by turning the object of empathy into “an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (20, 21). Hartman argues that that violence is made possible by “the fungibility of the commodity,” the interchangeability of the “captive body” (21). Allen’s turn to feeling, however, locates possibility and not violence in empathy, for he invites not the projection of others’ feelings but a meeting on the common ground of humanity. Moreover, he invites readers to identify with positive feelings – with the love he has for King, for example – and does not use only suffering as the means to identification with his readers.



<sup>24</sup> This phrase comes from the concluding chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which Stowe writes, "There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*" (385). For one important delineation of the limitations of merely "feel[ing] right," see Berlant "Poor."

<sup>25</sup> I have not been able to locate any reviews of Allen's narrative or other accounts of its reception besides a brief mention by Benjamin Quarles about the sales of Allen's narrative, which I take up in the conclusion to this chapter.

<sup>26</sup> For historical background on these riots, see E. Lapsansky and Runcie.

<sup>27</sup> Webb's novel, and Webb himself, have recently begun to receive more critical attention after years of neglect. For example, Robert S. Levine focuses on the ideologies of temperance and racial uplift in the novel, and Carla L. Peterson argues that Webb's novel straddles the divide between the collective and individual, "seek[ing] a middle ground between ideologies of capitalist individualism and those of collectivity, depicting strong individual characters who work within, and for, the black community of Philadelphia" ("Disturbing"; "Capitalism" 577). Critics such as Anna Engle and Robert Nowatzki have focused on the novel's exposure of the precariousness of racial categorization and its relationship to class and political ideology. Critics also ascribe plenty of "firsts" to this novel: Rosemary F. Crockett argues that "*The Garies and Their Friends* was the first African American novel to explore the problem of color discrimination" (112); James H. DeVries states that it is "the first to consider the problems of free blacks in a Northern city" (241); Eric Gardner writes that it is "the first [novel] to treat the question of passing in great depth and the first to show white mob violence against Blacks in the North" ("A Gentleman" 297). For additional critical accounts of *The Garies*, see Duane, Golemba, and Otter. For work on Webb's biography, see Crockett; Gardner "A Gentleman"; and P. Lapsansky.

<sup>28</sup> For two accounts of the transition from autobiographical to fictional writing in African American literature and the possibilities that shift afforded, see W. Andrews and Peterson "Capitalism."

<sup>29</sup> In another rich example, a group of African American servants mistake the freed slave George Winston for a wealthy southern white man. In a ploy to raise money to fund the underground railroad, they represent themselves as fugitive slaves wistful for a return to the South and in need of money to make that return. Disgusted by their behavior, Winston refuses to give them money. As these African American men who are sympathetic to the same cause talk at cross-purposes, a case of double misrecognition occurs.

<sup>30</sup> Through the combined efforts of Mr. Morton and his wife, Stevens is eventually able to remove the tar, but the process is quite painful: the chapter concludes by depicting Stevens "with the skin half scraped off from his swollen face" (221).

<sup>31</sup> For accounts of minstrelsy, see Lott and Roediger.

<sup>32</sup> My reference to men here is purposeful: men are the primary actors in this novel, and women generally assume a supporting role. For an argument for the power of female characters in *The Garies*, see Duane. M. Giulia Fabi, in contrast, argues that Webb's focus on black masculinity displaces the concerns of women and allows the domestic sphere to be masculinized (30, 34). Nowatzki argues that Webb uses the riot scene in particular to disrupt notions of gender difference (42).

<sup>33</sup> In another instance, on her mission to have the Garie children expelled from the school her own children attend, Mrs. Stevens dismisses the teacher's argument that the children at least appear to be white. Mrs. Stevens argues, "[T]hey have nigger blood in them, notwithstanding; and they are, therefore, as much niggers as the blackest, and have no more right to associate with white children than if they were black as ink. I have no more liking for white niggers than for black ones" (187). In Mrs. Stevens's estimation, race is clearly a matter of blood and ancestry, not of complexion. Though noting that the Garie children are not literally as "black as ink," her representation of them strives to make them so. Race here, "black as ink," gets written on the children's bodies, and Mrs. Stevens is holding the pen.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, B. Jackson 340.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth McHenry argues that a crucial aim of the three papers published by Frederick Douglass – the *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and *Douglass' Monthly* – was the promotion of an African American literary culture and the works of black authors. McHenry notes that original reviews of literary works by Frances E.W. Harper and Henry Bibb did appear in Douglass's paper (117-21). It is unclear why *The Garies* did not.

<sup>36</sup> Werner Sollors notes that Webb's novel "sold 2,000 copies of the regular edition as well as 12,000 copies in Routledge's 'cheap series'" in England (2). See also Crockett 115.

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<sup>37</sup> The “Prospectus of the New Era,” in which the coming novellas by Webb were advertised, described “‘*The Garries* [sic]’” as “extensively read in England and this country” (Martin 3). However, the adverb “extensively” may well be a nod to encouraging new readers instead of a statement of fact.

<sup>38</sup> For critical accounts of Mary Webb’s readings, see Gardner, “Nobler” and “Stowe”; Clark; Meer 185-93; and Nyong’o.

<sup>39</sup> According to the London edition of *The Christian Slave*, Mary Webb omitted six scenes from her performances: scenes 2, 4, and 7 were omitted from the first act, which takes place on the Shelby plantation, and scenes 2, 12, and 13 were excluded from the second act, which is set in the St. Clare household in New Orleans. Mary Webb did not omit any scenes from the third act, which narrates the events on the Legree plantation. In total, her omissions excised fifteen pages from a sixty-three page play. No pattern unites her excisions.

<sup>40</sup> When Mary Webb did dramatic readings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, she did perform in full Indian dress. See Nyong’o 93-94.

<sup>41</sup> See Meer 188; Gardner “Stowe” 80.

<sup>42</sup> See Meer 190-91; Gardner “Stowe” 111.

Conclusion: How to Read and Why: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective

In 1839, Harvey Newcomb spoke of “the deluge of productions emanating from the exuberant imaginations of novel writers” (*Young Lady* 194-95). In 1838, Henry Reed cautioned, “At a period when there are hundreds of authors, and thousands of critics, there is danger of being bewildered in the crowd” (24-25). In 1832, as he designated the United States as “a reading community” and noted that books are “scattered abroad through every city, town, and village in our extensive country, in great profusion,” Samuel L. Knapp advised that readers need “a guide in this wilderness of sweets...” (7). More recently, John Sutherland relocated that same problem to the twenty-first century in his advice book *How to Read a Novel: A User’s Guide* (2006). His book fittingly begins with a chapter titled “So Many Novels, So Little Time,” in which Sutherland describes the current supply of novels as “ha[ving] swollen from trickle to deluge, with the prospect of a veritable tsunami to come,” as a “condition of surplusage,” an avalanche, an “ocean of print,” and a jungle (1, 2, 6, 7). Faced with this mutating mass of books, novel readers, who have but little time for reading, must in turn become navigators or intrepid “explorer[s] cutting [their] way through the jungle with a machete,” not consumers who have novels “rammed down their throats, as Strasbourg geese are stuffed with liver-splitting fodder” or who are “crushed by [the] sheer commercial and cultural weight” of all these novels (7, 12). Sutherland ominously warns, “It is possible to have too much of every good thing. Novels are no exception” (6).

Despite this warning, and as Knapp’s reference to “poisonous” books indicates, there are significant differences between the dangers of reading articulated by antebellum commentators and the situation that, Sutherland argues, we are faced with today.

However, what connects this antebellum age of print and our own is more than a shared vocabulary and vivid imagery. We also share a pervasive and self-conscious sense that the world of books and reading is changing – for the worse – and that some remedy is therefore needed.

Here, I examine two distinct, and somewhat contradictory, diagnoses of what is wrong with reading today. The first is articulated in the pages of twenty-first-century advice literature on reading. In this dissertation, I have argued that we can measure how reading and its stakes were imagined in the antebellum United States by turning to instances in which authors, texts, and readers try to direct both the practice and the outcomes – the how and the why – of reading. That impulse towards reading direction persists in our culture today in a variety of locations, and perhaps most obviously in the high-school and college literature classroom. I am interested here in advice about reading literature that does originate within the college classroom but extends outside of it to a popular readership – in short, in books like that by Sutherland that tell us *How to Read a Novel*.

Such twenty-first-century reading advice suggests that our current problem is not knowing how to read; however, a series of reports by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) argues that the problem is more basic – that people are simply not reading. In provocatively-titled reports like *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (2007), the NEA has quantified and publicized the decline of literary reading, and the findings of these reports, that about half of the people in the United States have not read a novel, short story, poem, or play for fun throughout an entire year, have rightly provoked widespread concern. I turn to these two

articulations of our current crisis in reading to gain a twenty-first-century perspective on why we read – or, more precisely, to query why we do not. In doing so, I aim not only to map the terms through which that crisis is understood, but also to propose that looking back to the nineteenth century, and to sentimental reading in particular, can suggest both the root of and a remedy for our current predicament.

Sutherland, who is named on the back cover of his book as Emeritus Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London and a visiting professor at the California Institute of Technology, uses his first sentence to suggest two alternative titles for his book – “*Reading in an Age of Plenty* or, more eye-catchingly, *Reading through the Avalanche*” (1). He chose instead to designate his book as a how-to manual, a user’s guide. So did Thomas C. Foster, a professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint who titled his advice books *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (2003) and *How to Read Novels Like a Professor: A Jaunty Exploration of the World’s Favorite Literary Form* (2008). Harold Bloom, whose titles include Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, Berg Professor of English at New York University, and former Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard, did the same, succinctly naming his book *How to Read and Why* (2000).

I turn to these books with a question that only Bloom ostensibly set out to answer: Why read? Given how straightforward these books are in designating, in their very titles, that they will be addressing not why to read but how to read, this is perhaps an unfair question posed by a resisting reader. After all, the genre of books that tells us “how to” rarely sets out to address why one would want to; the necessary precondition,

one would think, for reading a book on how to garden or use PowerPoint is that the reader has his or her reasons for wanting to garden or use PowerPoint already in hand. In some respects, that generic convention holds in the how-to manual that takes reading literature or novels as its topic: surely those who choose to read books like those of Bloom, Foster, and Sutherland already have some sense of why they read novels – and why they are reading advice on how to read novels. However, my immersion in antebellum anti-novel discourse has taught me to see these questions of how and why as intimately and not incidentally related, to discern the ways in which the how often brings us to or even contains the why. To some extent, these twenty-first-century reading manuals bear out that belief, and I turn to them for a perspective on how and why we read novels today.

The titular question of Sutherland's book asks how to read a novel, but his book actually poses a more particular question: "How can we get to the point where we can use fiction for whichever of the infinitely many uses we have for it and not be crushed by its sheer commercial and cultural weight?" (12). According to Sutherland, the answer to this question lies not in how we read but in how we *choose* what we read, so the more pressing concern of his book is with the selection of novels rather than with how to read them once they are selected. His user's guide devotes many of its individual chapters to the apparatus that surrounds a given novel and that generally precedes actually reading it – to "preliminaries" like the book cover and title; to publication dates and copyright; to pseudonyms, and, most tangentially, author photographs. When Chapter 12 finally brings us to "Famous First Words," it is something of a relief, but we are not long in the

novel before we are back out of it and on to chapters on bestseller lists, book reviews, book prizes, and film adaptations.

Despite Sutherland's great concern with paratextual matter, he does offer some insight as to why one would invest time in reading (and the process of selecting) a novel, mentioning at the outset that the assumption that "novels are things to be enjoyed" drives his advice (12). More particularly, in his twenty-second chapter titled "Fiction – Where the Unspeakable Can Be Spoken," Sutherland writes, "There are any number of possible answers to the question 'Why read novels'? – a question which all dedicated novel readers will face from time to time. The one-word answer which is most likely to slap down facile objections of the 'what a waste of time' variety is, in some novels at least, 'race'" (192). Sutherland argues that "fiction...alas, is the only place nowadays where you are likely to find any grown-up discussion of race" (192) – a bold and rather myopic statement. Sutherland goes on to broaden his justification for reading novels by arguing for their "socio-historical relevance" and "socio-educational value," for the ability of novels to "make us better, or at least, better informed citizens" (198, 240).

More pervasively, though, Sutherland argues that novel-reading sets us apart from others by allowing us to experience and know our own individuality, that "reading, done well, is...an act of self-definition" that allows us to mark off our differences from the rest of the population: "In reading a good novel well we can discover something about ourselves – more specifically, how different we, as individuals, are from each of the other five-and-a-half billion individuals on the planet" (15). In defining the value of novel-reading in this way, Sutherland argues that "[t]he solitariness of the reading act is its defining feature" and links this solitude to "something intrinsically unchained, humanly

‘free’ in the reading act” (37). This freedom means that “there is no consensus; no right way to read, no ‘correct’ reading of any good novel” – a puzzling assertion in a book that names its project as telling us how to read a novel (26). Of course, faced with an avalanche of novels – not to mention bestseller lists and book reviews and film adaptations – Sutherland defines “[t]he trick” as “finding which [novel], among the millions now accessible, fits [the] bill. For you, that is” (243). Caught between celebrating the essential freedom of solitary reading and its social value and faced with negotiating all the accoutrements that shape our choice of reading material, Sutherland finally offers a limited view on what purpose novel-reading actually serves, on why we remain so fascinated with the novel despite the little time we have for reading.

Thomas Foster sets himself a slightly different task, explicitly promising to teach his readers how to read literature and novels “like a professor.” In doing so, he celebrates the proliferation of novels that so worries Sutherland; in fact, Foster titles the conclusion of his second advice book “The Never-Ending Journey” and writes that “the good news” is that “[b]ooks lead to books, ideas to ideas,” that “[y]ou can wear out a hundred hammocks and never reach the end” (307). In starting his readers on this journey, Foster frames his books as a playful conversation between a professor and his students, anticipating questions, objections, and frustrations from incredulous readers and teaching them “a certain ‘language of reading,’” “a grammar of literature” (*Literature* xiii). In many respects, Foster’s books are the literature class writ large – across the pages of a *New York Times* bestseller, in fact.

Foster reveals the tricks of our trade in pithy chapters with clever titles, offering such reading advice (delivered in bold type) as “[t]he real reason for a quest is always



self-knowledge,” “flight is freedom,” “irony trumps everything,” and “when writers send characters south, it’s so they can run amok” (*Literature* 3, 128, 129, 171). In his advice on how to read novels in particular, Foster catalogs the “laws” that govern, among other concerns, narrative voice, sentence construction, the function of chapters, and novelistic production more generally, like “[t]he Law of Universal Connectedness” that states that “[e]very novel grows out of other novels” (218). Foster therefore gives his readers many questions to ask of a given text and calls their attention to the tropes that will reveal that text’s meaning, and he imparts an at once larger and deeper understanding of the mechanics of poems, short stories, plays, and novels, of how they work their magic.

This is certainly one version of how one reads like a professor. However, as a reader, what I wanted from this book was a different articulation of how professors read, one that encompassed why one should or would want to. One place Foster does articulate an argument for valuing a professor’s kind of reading comes in his introduction to *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. He writes, “[Lay] readers respond first of all, and sometimes only, to their reading on an emotional level; the work affects them, producing joy or revulsion, laughter or tears, anxiety or elation. In other words, they are emotionally and instinctively involved in the work” (xv). According to Foster, English professors “accept the affective response level of the story” but then ask questions about how literature produces these responses (xv). He describes this professorial way of reading as imposing a kind of distance between oneself and the text, as “look[ing] beyond [its] purely affective level” (xvi). This pattern continues through both of Foster’s advice books. He locates the “first pleasure” of reading a poem in “just enjoy[ing] the experience” and “one of the additional pleasures [in] seeing *how* the poet worked that

magic on you” (*Literature* 24). When he argues that “[m]uch of what we think about literature, we feel first,” Foster yet locates the value of reading like a professor not in feeling first, but in thinking second (*Novels* 107). Foster writes, “We feel that there’s something more going on in the story – a richness, a resonance, a depth – than we picked up at first, so we return to it to find those elements that account for that sensation” (*Novels* 204). That return to the text sums up the professorial way of reading. Foster promises, “If you learn...to see literary texts through these glasses, you will read and understand literature in a new light, and it’ll become more rewarding and fun” (*Literature* xv).

Foster is right: there is both value and pleasure in reading like a professor. However, the opposition between emotional and intellectual response through which Foster articulates that value and that pleasure seems both false and problematic. For Foster, responding emotionally, or even passionately, to a text is separate from, and even less important than, plumbing its intellectual depths, than discerning intertextuality and accessing a different play of meaning for the text at hand. However, the value that Foster elsewhere attributes to reading depends precisely on that emotional level. For example, as Foster catalogs the laws governing novels, he is careful to emphasize both the essential fluidity of the form – the ability of individual novels to achieve internal coherence by at turns adhering to and flaunting these directives – and the active role that readers play in “the creation of meaning” (*Novels* xiv). Indeed, at the start of his treatise on how to read novels like a professor, Foster argues, “Much of the continuing appeal of the novel lies in its collaborative nature; readers invest themselves in the characters’ stories, becoming actively involved in the creation of meaning” (xiii). At the close of this book, Foster

circles back to this point that “[t]he novel is *interactive* in the fullest sense” (302). He writes:

Good reading, and by this I mean not professorial or professional but merely the kind of reading that novelists hope for and deserve, actively enters into conversation with the created narrative, bringing out nuances, developing or resisting sympathies, exploring meanings. We meet the writer on her turf, but it’s also our turf. Meaning and significance happen in that place where writer and reader confer. (302)

The language that Foster uses here describes “good reading,” whether professorial or not, as an active conversation, an encounter between reader and writer that creates meaning and significance. The “collaborative nature” of reading is, in many ways, at the heart of both Foster’s advice on how to read novels and this dissertation’s articulation of sentimental reading. However, Foster neglects the role that emotion plays in that collaboration and in the creation of meaning: surely the encounter between reader and text is at once emotional *and* rational, intimate *and* distant. That Foster implicitly devalues one at the expense of the other gives an incomplete view, finally, of why we read literature.

Harold Bloom’s *New York Times* bestseller *How to Read and Why* explicitly takes up the question that I am posing here because, as we both argue, “the question of how to read always leads on to the motives and uses of reading...” to the reasons why we read (20). Bloom offers local insights into these over-arching questions by funneling his answers through particular works: by answering how and why we read *Hamlet* or *Moby-Dick*, we will learn how and why we read all literature. It is difficult not to appreciate the

sheer boldness of many of Bloom's pronouncements, of statements like "[t]here are parts of yourself you will not know fully until you know, as well as you can, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza" (150).

As this declaration makes clear, Bloom locates the value of reading in how it constructs and enriches the self. He writes, "The ultimate answer to the question 'Why read?' is that only deep, constant reading fully establishes and augments an autonomous self" (195). As he argues, then, that "[t]he pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social," he is careful to note that "[y]ou cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply" and that he is "wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good" (22). He offers this general principle: "*Do not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read*" (24). This is clearly not the nineteenth-century vision of the use of reading. However, Bloom does circle back to a version of reading that is closer to what I have articulated in this dissertation. Even as he elevates the development of the self over all other concerns and benefits of reading, he yet argues that we read because "we cannot know enough people profoundly enough" (29). Reading well therefore "returns you to otherness," and "[i]maginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness" (19). Bloom's description of reading as an encounter with otherness that drives one back into the self locates the value of reading in the development of self that encounter allows; however, the autonomous self, in Bloom's description, seems less autonomous and more connected than he might admit.

As anyone familiar with Bloom's defense of the literary canon will guess, Bloom's argument concerning *How to Read and Why* is more precisely an argument

concerning how and why to read “great” literature. He does not discuss, then, any of the nineteenth-century sentimental novels that populate this dissertation. Nor do Sutherland and Foster. Sutherland does briefly allude to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) when he discusses novels’ “power to form received historical and social thinking,” relating the apocryphal story in which Abraham Lincoln met Stowe and gave her credit for starting the Civil War (191). Foster points to the emotional identification that reading novels affords, using the example of the popular reaction and the copious tears cried in response to the death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1841. In answering the question of why we become so involved with fictional characters like Little Nell, with figures we know to be mere “linguistic construction[s],” Foster argues, “The novel’s long suit has always been emotional identification” (*Novels* 96). However, he again moves us past that level of response to argue that “[t]he novel has always proved itself capable of multiple uses, one of which is analysis or intellection. It can be a vehicle for sympathy or dread, but also for rational understanding” (*Novels* 96-97). In fact, Foster provides a chart to visually demonstrate the differing “hierarch[ies] of desired reader responses” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*Novels* 235). Foster argues that nineteenth-century novels privileged emotional response over intellectual and aesthetic response, while the twentieth (and, I would assume, the twenty-first) century elevates both intellectual response and aesthetic response over emotional response. According to Foster, emotion in reading is just less important today.

In Sutherland’s, Foster’s, and Bloom’s advice on how to read, then, articulations of why we read surface intermittently, giving us brief glimpses of the richness of the reading experience and glancing explanations of what brings readers to literature and

what they take from it. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts published *Reading at Risk*, a report that did not ask how or why readers read, but *whether* they do. This report traced the decline of what it terms “literary reading” – reading novels, short stories, plays, or poetry as a leisure activity. According to the report, in 2002 only 46.7% of the adult American population read literature for fun; additionally, literary reading declined among all age groups and education levels, among men and women, among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics (ix-xiii). A follow-up report issued in 2007 and titled *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence* dilated on these findings and painted an even bleaker picture of the place of reading in our national culture. To carve out a prominent place for reading in our time, the NEA instituted the Big Read in 2006, a national program designed to unite communities around reading a single book and the nation around literary reading. In 2009, a new study trumpeted “a significant turning point in recent American cultural history” (Gioia 1). “Reading on the Rise” showed an upward trend in literary reading for the first time in two decades, though the percentage of people engaging in literary reading in 2008 – 50.2% – had not quite reached the levels pre-decline. Despite the celebratory nature of this later report, what *Reading at Risk* calls “[t]he pleasure of literature participation” still seems threatened, a point made by countless articles about the decline of book reading, publishing, and the humanities in general (29).

That threat produces a measurable affective response in the pages of *Reading at Risk*. In the opening sentence of his preface, Dana Gioia warns, “*Reading at Risk* is not a report that the National Endowment for the Arts is happy to issue” (vii). He writes that the findings of the report will be met with “grave concern,” and the information

assembled in this report is later characterized as “distressing but objective” (Gioia vii; xiii). It seems, then, that we do (or should have) strong feelings about this report and the data it assembles. Despite this attention to our emotional responses to the decline of literary reading, the feelings we have about literature and in the act of reading itself receive little mention. Even the pleasure we take in reading literature is noted only twice, and then only briefly, in *Reading at Risk*, and it is telling that the activity discussed in this report – reading that is done not for school or for work – is called “literary reading” or “leisure reading” only (19, 29). In *To Read or Not To Read*, that activity is finally named “reading for pleasure” or “reading for fun.”

As this terminology demonstrates, these reports most often articulate the value of reading purely through an attention to its intellectual, social, cultural, and national pay-off.<sup>1</sup> We are told that “[r]eading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement”; in contrast, “most electronic media...often require no more than passive participation” and “foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification” (Gioia vii). Gioia concedes:

While oral culture has a rich immediacy that is not to be dismissed...print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability – and the many sorts of human continuity it allows – would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment. (vii)

Reading literature therefore involves “focused attention and contemplation” and endows individuals with “intellectual capability”; however, it is seemingly devoid of the “rich immediacy” of oral culture. In this report’s call to arms, this is how reading is described

and, more importantly, how it is valued. While *Reading at Risk* characterizes itself as offering “an invaluable snapshot of the role of literature in the lives of Americans,” this comment in particular indicates that that snapshot is not a close-up but a panorama (ix). Another lens would have allowed us to see this experience differently – to recover the “rich immediacy” of the experience of reading through an attention to the emotions that reading evokes, that draw readers into a text, that sustain their textual engagement, and that help to account for a love of reading. That lens is sentimental reading.

In the preface to *Reading at Risk*, Gioia warns, “Reading is not a timeless, universal capability” (vii). He echoes a foundational argument of history of the book scholars – that reading has a history. However, the history of reading is not only a history of changing skill or declining capability, but also of the ebbs and flows of the readerly passion that brings readers to particular texts. Unsurprisingly, no nineteenth-century sentimental novels are to be found on the Big Read’s list of “good book[s],” nor, as I have noted, do they find their way into the pages of Sutherland’s, Foster’s, and Bloom’s advice books (“The Big Read”). I am not surprised to see that the nineteenth-century sentimental novels that populate this project are missing from these twenty-first-century discussions of reading. What I am surprised to find is that the experience of reading is so rarely articulated, much less valued, through the emotion it involves, through the feelings, the entanglements, the tears that reading can and does prompt. The history of reading is clearly not only about how, why, what, and whether we read, but also about how we *articulate* the experience and the value of reading, its how and why. In this respect, we need to know what we have left behind – not necessarily sentimental novels, but certainly the practice of sentimental reading. Today, we intellectualize our



responses – we read “like professors” – and we locate the creativity and the value of reading in difference and individuality, not in emotional identification or even fellowship. According to this advice, we read books to feel different, solitary, and smart, not unified, connected, and emotional – and that is when we read books at all

The networks operating through the sentimental text that I unearth in this project offer a different, valuable perspective on the experience and the value of reading. As I have argued in this dissertation, those networks drove the passions of and for reading; they accounted not only for the direction that moved across the sentimental text from author to reader and reader to author, but also for the dynamic, emotional relays that made reading a thrilling, connective, rich experience. Admittedly, the thrills of reading were due, in part, to the anxieties that attached to them. Sentimental novels and antebellum culture demonstrated a suspicion about the pleasures of reading, about the embodied, passionate emotions that reading prompted. Antebellum culture therefore stalled over emotive reading, hesitating over the imagination of how emotion and text combine and then radiate out into the world through readers. That stall, that hesitancy, and the underlying conviction that emotive reading does something yet recognized the emotional pleasures of reading, making them an instrumental component of the conversation about reading. As antebellum culture demonstrated a desire to know and to name what reading does for and to us, it looked to the passions provoked by reading to do so.

That same desire persists today, but the passions of reading are not where we locate our inquiry into the question of how and why we read. Indeed, they are rarely even part of our conversation. Without an attention to our emotional entanglement in the

novels that occupy us, we fail, and will continue to fail, to understand the how and the why of reading. In order to give literary reading a future, then, we must look to its past, to a time when the passions *of* reading were understood to drive the passion *for* reading. We must give our attention to both the mechanics and the magic of reading.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception comes near the end of *To Read or Not To Read* in a section titled “Reading as an Act of Empathy.” Even this section, though, moves all too quickly past the affective rhythms of reading to argue that readers “contribute in measurable ways to civic and social improvements” (90).

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