Senses of Belonging: The Synaesthetics of Citizenship in American Literature, 1862 – 1903

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

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Abstract

In American letters, the Civil War represented a decisive break in literary form, a shift from interiority to exteriority. Sentimentalism harnessed the transformative effects of aesthetic feeling to galvanize political opinion in antebellum America, whereas realist and regionalist writing’s empiricist attention to surface and appearance represented a reaction against sentimentalism. Yet postbellum literature is nothing if not a sustained meditation on how the feeling, sensate body negotiates the abstraction of citizenship and political life.

The paradoxes presented by black emancipation, immigration, and women’s suffrage forced what today we consider the period’s most canonical authors, from Emily Dickinson to W.E.B. Du Bois, to confront the contradictory feelings provoked by a democratic nation that excluded most of its citizens from their fundamental rights. The taste of Ellis Island, Henry James warned in *The American Scene*, “will be forever in [the] mouth” of the citizen, who must share “the intimacy of his American patriotism with the inconceivable alien.” James’s literal distaste for immigrants raises the stakes of what it means to locate the experience of belonging neither inside nor outside the body, but at its sensory orifices, its porous thresholds. The issue of corporeal intimacy manifested in aesthetic forms that made the senses legible across linked areas of nineteenth-century literary production: from the cookbook (Russell’s *Domestic Cookbook*) and local color fiction (Chopin’s *The Awakening*), to utopian novels (Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*), autobiographies (Keller’s *The Story of My Life*) and the apparently tasteless lyric poems about spiritual hunger (Dickinson’s poetry). *Senses of*
Belonging seeks to show how postbellum American literature, in all its forms, transformed civic abstraction into a sensate experience.

Senses of Belonging builds on and seeks to advance work on embodied citizenship in the broad area of cultural studies by showing how taste, touch, smell, sight and sound articulate otherwise intangible feelings of national belonging. To do so, each chapter is devoted to a single sensation, thereby placing literary treatment of each sensation in the context of political, scientific, and philosophical debates about citizenship. This structure helps draw attention to how each sense perception uniquely registered the multi-faceted experience of belonging in the wake of the Civil War, the bloodiest event Americans had yet experienced. The project’s focus on literary form and sense experience is also historical, as it traces modes of national affiliation from the problem of black emancipation during the Civil War, to the “Negro Problem” during Reconstruction, to what W.E.B. Du Bois famously called the “problem of the color line” at the turn of the twentieth century. This chronological arrangement both reframes existing periodizations of nineteenth-century American literature and adds dimension to what is often referred to as the “Gilded Age.”

What emerges from this methodology is a literary analysis of how seemingly disparate and unconnected nineteenth-century American writers shared a central preoccupation with sensory experiences of, and the emotional effects on, everyday civic life. This study crosses disciplinary boundaries in order to chart connections among nineteenth-century writers and thinkers: anthropology, philosophy, and physiology among others. Yet the questions that organize this dissertation are fundamentally literary, for Senses of Belonging demonstrates that the senses do not exist prior to or outside of language, but rather are constituted through literature’s rich imaginings.
In loving memory of Steven L. Fretwell
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Introduction. Sensitive Citizenship

Citizenship has a history of sensual embodiment. More than a claim to political representation, it connotes a fantasy of a common relation among strangers that is based on shared legal, cultural, and familial connections. With its insistence on divorcing political bodies from sensate corporeality, United States law historically has rendered citizenship a disembodied identity. Although often conceived of as operating independent of material conditions such as race, gender and class, citizenship constantly provokes and requires people’s visceral attachment to the nation. My interest lies in considering the sensual materiality of everyday livelihood within and against the political abstraction that citizenship commonly betokens. To invoke and rephrase Foucault’s elegant formulation: bodies constantly escape.

William Faulkner’s American South illustrates the perpetual escape of the sensory. “Do you mark how the wisteria…penetrates this room?” Rosa Coldfield asks Quentin Compson. “That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell” [115]. Rosa’s conviction that attention to the senses can resurrect buried memories marks Absalom, Absalom! (1936) as an instance of a particular mode of affiliation, one that deploys the sensorium as the index of national memory. The floral odors that penetrate the site of the Sutpens’ ignominious past induce amnesia; they erase the stench of enslavement from the plantation. Yet the fleshy smell of black labor at the novel’s end opens up the possibility of a sense memory apart from official histories of the Civil War as a fight over states’ rights, not slavery. Clytie, the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Sutpen and his unnamed slave, sets fire
to Sutpen’s Hundred, which reeks “of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it were built were flesh” (293). Following the condition of her mother well after emancipation, Clytie rejects the southern pastoral; she sets fire to the wisteria that perfumes racial violence. Although she does not escape the conflagration, what does escape is the fleshy smell of a burning plantation house. *That* is the uncanny substance that marks black life’s disruption of sanitized and deodorized histories, of the roses and Rosas that populate the pastoral American South.

The olfactory environment in which *Absalom* does its work has a storied lineage, which involves decisive transformations in the status of both the raced and gendered body, as well as the construction of the senses. By the nineteenth century, the familiar Aristotelian taxonomy of the five senses—which deems vision and hearing intellectual, and touch, taste and smell primitive—legitimated popular and scholarly thinking about human difference. For instance, nineteenth-century German naturalist Lorenz Oken postulated a sensory hierarchy of the races that equated the “lower” senses with “lower” people: the European “eye-man” was at the top, followed by the Asian “ear-man,” the Native American “nose-man,” the Australian “tongue-man,” and the African “skin-man” [Gould 204 – 205]. As theories of Darwinian evolution gained popularity, Oken’s formulation reinforced biological determinations of race—perhaps most famously the one-drop rule, which labeled any person with one drop of African blood “black.” In the wake of the Civil War and ensuing social movements that sought to expand rights, the fact that race was no longer visually self-evident fueled anxiety about how to ascertain evidence of racial difference. This pronounced preoccupation with the sentient body, I contend, responds to a historically specific crisis of the senses: the relocation of race from the skin to the blood demanded new forms of
relation within the nation. The sensate body, then, appeared as crucial in the face of an increasingly culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse national population, precisely because its seemingly unmediated senses could be experienced as natural expressions of social hierarchies.

The sensory corporeality of citizenship is the pivot around which *Senses of Belonging* turns: the modes of affiliation to which the sensorium—touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing—both promised and denied access. Contrary to most accounts of American literary history, American literature never decisively broke from sensibility and sentimentalism after the Civil War. If anything, postbellum literature is nothing if not a sustained meditation on how the feeling, sensate body negotiates the abstraction of political life. The cultural plotting of the senses in postbellum American literature furnishes a distinctive insight into the nineteenth-century sensory imaginary, because the senses at once underwrote the social arrangements that supported the postwar consolidation of national identity and offered ways for people to belong outside that sphere. Accordingly, this dissertation examines the regulatory structures (scientific, legal, familial) that leveraged sense perception to biologize human difference. Yet it emphasizes the tensions that permitted the senses to sketch out variations to those structures—tensions that, I show, constellated around the new science of perception and the consequent designation of the body as a nervous organism.

Indeed, the expanding cultural significance of perception in nineteenth-century America grew out of a fundamental historical shift announcing the arrival of modern sensibility: the eighteenth-century dismissal of Cartesian dualism in favor of a physiology of perception, which located the brain and the nerves at the center of human consciousness. In 1689 John Locke famously declared, “All ideas come from sensation and reflection.” The
mind transforms sense data into thought, which is the common sense of the subject. The advent of anatomy in the late-eighteenth century opened up the body to natural and medical scientists, who explored the physiology of the sensorium. As a result, the individuation of the senses shifted from the sense organs to the sense impressions of the nervous system. Throughout the nineteenth century many understood these impressions—hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch—to be “the primitive source of all conscious relation with the rest of creation,” Dr. John Girdner wrote in the *North American Review*. “Physical man,” he declared, “might properly be defined as five senses mounted on stilts” [296].

![Figure 1: C.P. Cranch, Transparent Eyeball](image)

Figure 1: C.P. Cranch, *Transparent Eyeball*

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1 In his 1836 essay “Nature,” the ur-text of Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson describes nature as the closest a person can come to experiencing the presence of God. He invokes the “transparent eyeball” to describe the loss of individuation in the experience of nature, such that there is no seer, only seeing. C.P. Cranch’s satiric cartoon pokes fun at Emerson’s idealist formulation of the eyeball as a grandiose extension of the self as sight and soul. See *Figure 1*.
Evoking an image akin to C.P. Cranch’s playful caricature of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a transparent eyeball, Girdner’s assertion articulates a conception of human experience according to the foundational truth of physiological perception. Such a conception alters the body’s status as a self-enclosed life form, thereby rendering it a porous and social organism, a zone of contact.

In this way, the bodily experience of being at once smellier and smelled, viewer and viewed, toucher and touched, taster and tasted, listener and heard, dismantles facile binaries between inside and outside, material and immaterial, self and other. My engagement with the sensorium moves through and against citizenship, a legal status long tethered to such binaries. I want to historicize the interarticulation of the senses with notions of difference, and show how this interarticulation opens onto embodied modes of civic affiliation. As Karl Marx avowed in 1844, “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” [109]. Only when societies transcend private property can there be a “complete emancipation of the human senses” [107]. My argument begins with the reality of the senses as a form of knowing, in order to free or emancipate them from their place below thought and reason. But at heart I am interested in arguing that the literary both gives us insight into sensation and shapes its very nature. Although perceptions are considered extra-linguistic, in fact, I argue, they are constituted through language. The emergence of a literature that is not symptomatic, but procreative, of a visceral imaginary makes possible a critique of the privileging of the cognitive over the corporeal (as though they were not the same thing), as well as the reduction of the sensory to the realm of the natural and pre-social.

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2 In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx offers a historicist formulation of the senses that addresses how workers become estranged from their labor and their sense under the regime of industrial capitalism.
This disruption recasts affiliation as a confluence of olfactory, tactile, aural, gustatory, and visual experiences that speak against abstract citizenship. The sensorium makes legible the embodied feelings of belonging that lay just beyond articulation.

**Anomalous Binding: A Case Study**

Sensual modes of citizenship grew out of and challenged eugenics, the science of racial improvement that saturated late-nineteenth century American culture. The equation of social undesirables with bodily impurities, as Daylanne English has shown in her study of eugenics and modernism, can be traced back to English social philosopher Herbert Spencer, who likened the nation to a biological organism. At the same time, Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871) detailed a hierarchy of racial difference and extended his original theory of natural selection to human beings. Over ten years later, in 1883, Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” in his study of hereditary genius, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*. In it, Galton defines eugenics as the “science of improving stock,” which takes into account “all influences that tend…to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable races than otherwise would have had” [17]. What is at stake in this objective to breed better human beings is nothing short of the future of the nation itself: “The moral and intellectual worth of a nation largely consists in the multifarious variety of the gifts of the men who compose it” [2]. Assimilation, Galton states, will weaken the superior race; segregation, which yields “pure-blooded” races, will improve the inborn qualities of Anglo-Americans and thus strengthen the “quality” of the nation. In the late-nineteenth century, eugenics was a “social and
scientific project of bio-national improvement,” in English’s words, as well as a way of “imagining and propagating [an] ideal citizen-self” [20; 24]. Eugenics thus grounded ideal citizenship in the raced body.

As part of his research on heredity, Galton sent out a questionnaire, “Questions on the Faculty of Visualizing,” that was designed to test the visual acuity of the mind’s eye. The most bizarre examples of visual imagery came from people who reported that specific numbers, letters, or words prompted vivid sensations of color. When he reported on this phenomenon in *Nature*, and then three years later as a chapter in *Inquiries*, Galton conveyed his frustration at the incapacity of these people to quantify their curious experiences. “Most of those who associate colors with numerals do so in a vague way, impossible to convey with truth in a painting,” he wrote in *Inquiries*. “Of the few who see them with more objectivity, many are…unwilling to take the trouble required to match the precise colors of their fancies” [103]. Insofar as a “delicate power of sense discrimination is an attribute of high race,” these people’s inability to discern adequately between sensations suggests a kind of hereditary abnormality [23]. Galton invented eugenics at the same time that he did synesthesia, although the term for this condition was not coined until a decade later, by French psychologist Jules Millet. Literally meaning “joined senses,” synesthesia is the involuntary experience of two seemingly disparate perceptions (such as smell and sight) occupying the same experiential field. A yellow smell, for example, is what neuroscientist Richard Cytowic, in his study of synesthesia, would call “anomalous binding” [253]. *Inquiries* anomalously bound synesthesia, the experience of sensory interpenetration, to eugenics, which prohibited interracial sex.
The binding of synesthesia to eugenics, I argue, was anything but anomalous. Once it was established that, in the words of the *Atlantic Monthly*, “color, taste, smell, and sound are not inherent qualities of the objects themselves, but are cerebral sensations” that are the property of physics and psychology, it became possible for an article in *Science* to argue that anthropometrical tests “will enable us to determine accurately racial characteristics, [and]…to lay the foundation for a rational education of the senses and muscles” [Cranch 740; “Tests” 376]. National affiliation entailed learning to discriminate among racial categories by discriminating among “cerebral sensations.” The simultaneous emergence of synesthesia and eugenics suggests a history of human difference rooted as much in the body’s nervous, sensory tissue as in its bloodstream. Turn-of-the-century psychologists explored the “existence of cerebral peculiarities” by determining whether synesthesia was an effect of “intertwined nerve fibers” or “stimulation by drugs” [Downey 497; Calkins 90].3 More than a national project, eugenics was a white supremacist logic that located social problems at the site of biological reproduction, that is, interracial sex. This logic required the separation of human differences into fixed categories, such as race, intellect, and physical ability. Although the senses are not analogous to racial categories, synesthesia nonetheless revealed the fictive status of these categories. Whiteness, for example, was no more separate from blackness than smell from touch, or sight from taste. Given that the ability to discriminate among different sense stimulations—to mark them as experientially unique and different—

3 Scientific curiosity about synesthesia peaked in the decades that followed *Inquiries*. One turn-of-the-century study tested a synesthete’s tactile perception of taste by separating “tactual [sic] and gustatory properties—a separation, which, indeed we attempted but without success” [Downey 530 – 531]. Not surprisingly, separating the senses did not illuminate the mutual construction thereof.
registered evolution and a “rational education,” synesthesia troubled traditional narratives of progress.

Mixing “primitive” senses with “intellectual” senses, synesthesia troubled social and sensory distinctions. All the while, the five senses were instrumentalized to secure racial hierarchies. In 1892, the same year that Millet coined the term synaesthesia, a neurasthenic woman furiously wrote:

But there is something else about this paper—the smell! …[Whether] the windows are open or not, the smell is here.
It creeps all over the house.
I find it hovering in the dining room, sulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.
It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise—there is that smell!
Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.
…I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.
But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that is like the color of the paper! A yellow smell. [54]

Many readers of American literature will recognize this primal scene of synesthesia from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s canonical “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The short story is a fictional account of a young wife and mother whose physician husband takes her to a country estate so that she can recuperate from a “temporary nervous depression” [42]. Cast as a series of diary entries, the story portrays the narrator’s obsession with the ugly wallpaper in her sickroom. The narrator and the narrative become increasingly unhinged, and the story ends with the woman crawling over the body of her swooning husband. For Gilman’s narrator, the yellow wallpaper is a sensuous, skin-like organism: a paper that can be worn, scored, torn; a design that induces nausea; a papered-over female figure that shifts and creeps; a
color, a “smoldering unclean yellow” that is “repellant, almost revolting” [43]. As the narrator descends into madness, she becomes more enthralled with the color.

In the 1890s, otherwise known as the “Yellow Decade,” yellow served as a metonym for a number of cultural anxieties: the unprincipled use of scandal and sensationalism to sell newspapers (Yellow Press); the malarial epidemic that wiped out Gulf Coast populations (Yellow Fever); the short-lived British literary periodical associated with Aestheticism and Decadence (The Yellow Book). And the color served as shorthand for explicitly racial and racist concerns about the potential degeneracy of the Anglo-Saxon nation in the face of immigration and black emancipation. “Yellow” referenced the light-skinned African Americans who were the offspring of illicit interracial sex, as well as the “Yellow Peril,” the economic and cultural threat Chinese immigrants posed, which led to the 1892 Chinese Exclusion Act. Yellow is something like a contagion that contaminates the air and spreads disease, an analogy often used to describe the hyper-reproductive capacities of nonwhite immigrants. What rendered the 1890s “yellow” was a noticeable attention to the way that undesirable bodies potentially could undermine the health of the nation.

In 1906 prominent sexologist Havelock Ellis explored the question of why people in the West have such an aversion to the color yellow in Popular Science Monthly. His article, “The Psychology of Yellow,” contends, “among primitive peoples the delight in yellow seems almost universal” [456]. Similarly, “young children, who are at one with savages at so many points, share their love of yellow” [456]. For Anglo-Americans, “the affective tone of yellow” is “either negatively indifferent or positively unpleasant,” whereas throughout “Asia, ancient and modern, yellow is usually the…most sacred color” [461; 458]. In this view, yellow registers degeneracy: the process of evolution diminishes a person’s attraction to the
color, which in Ellis’s estimation connotes envy, indolence and sexual decadence. Importantly, the degeneracy that the narrator’s femininity and mental instability index is precisely what allows her to smell the color. In the nineteenth century, yellow resided at the bottom of a chromatic hierarchy, and smell resided at the bottom of a sensory hierarchy. The same year he wrote about the psychology of yellow, Ellis also published a study of human sexuality, *Sexual Selection in Man* (1906), in which he argued that unlike vision, odors do not “give us information that is very intellectual” [82]. In describing the primitiveness of smell, Ellis avows that as man evolved, smell became vestigial. As part of his ontogenetic theory, smell remains keen in children, “savages,” and those with nervous dispositions. “It is certain,” Ellis maintains, “that a great many neurasthenic people are peculiarly susceptible to olfactory influences” [72]. Indeed, his remark that the “Chinese have a musky odor” crystallizes the “yellow smell” that shadows and permeates Gilman’s narrator [60].

The transformation of the narrator from an upper class woman into a lower form of humanity, Dana Seiter argues, challenges the efficacy of the common “cure” for nervous women propounded by Gilman’s former physician S. Weir Mitchell, which was to “practice balancing…on all fours, and then eventually to practice walking again in a literal drama of evolution” [185]. If, as Darwin, Ellis and Freud believed, bipedalism rendered olfactory perception useless, the narrator’s keen sense of smell reinforces her return to a primitive state. It also indexes Gilman’s eugenic fears about national degeneracy brought about by mixed-race Americans and Asian Americans; to smell is to become more infantile and less white. In 1908, Gilman addressed the “Negro Problem” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, and argued that African Americans needed to be trained into becoming self-supporting citizens: “A man would rather lose…both feet than his eyes and ears. Our special senses are
far ‘superior’ to our meat and bones; yet it is quite essential to the body’s life that even its least important parts by healthy” [80]. In this analogy, the intellectually superior senses of sight and hearing require the corporeal mechanics of the meat and bones, in the same way that Anglo-American industrial capitalism depends on African Americans for physical labor. In Gilman’s estimation, the nation is constituted of cerebral organs and corporeal muscles that occupy a particular hierarchy for the betterment of the bodily whole. The “yellow smell” thus naturalizes Gilman’s nativist and eugenic agenda, even as it offers a critique of the construction of womanhood as a pathological condition. Not in spite, but because, of Gilman’s eugenic feminism, the yellow smell materializes the inextricability of sensory and social “disorders” in the nineteenth century.

But perhaps more importantly, the yellow smell is an overdetermined instance of synesthesia, a moment of textual excess that—regardless of authorial intention—reveals how unnatural such distinctions are: the yellow can no more be separated from the smell than the special senses can be distinguished from the meat. Thus, synesthesia is not merely a symptom of cultural anxiety, but a strategy for understanding national affiliation as a contest over the meaning of hereditary and sensory intermixture. Accordingly, I treat synesthesia in three ways: as a neurological condition invented at the turn of the century to designate abnormal forms of perception; as a historical category that emerged to reproduce and negotiate social hierarchies; and as a conceptual apparatus that understands the senses as always working in concert with each other. Synesthesia serves as an analytic that encourages us to explore the question of national belonging at five different sites, with each sense directed toward a particular experience of affiliation, all the while making room for the necessary categorical mixing (which is to say, dissolution of categories) that such a
framework demands and makes possible. Read in this particular light, for instance, “The Yellow Wallpaper” registered the influence of scientific explanations of and concerns about the national body, and in turn influenced the social values assigned to particular perceptions. Synesthesia crystallized the intimate relationship between ideas of civic fitness and new theories of the sensorium. At heart, national belonging was synesthetic: citizenship, for better or worse, was an ensemble of sensations that was constituted by their commingling.

Sensorial Designs

The United States has, since its inception, mobilized the sensory in the project of national subject formation. In a recent study of sensibility, Sarah Knott proposes that the American Revolution required a citizen sensitive to the needs of others as much as to herself. The “sensible self,” she asserts, is an important alternative to the Lockean liberal individual. Eighteenth-century sensibility “was based, not in strict oppositions of head and heart, reason and passion, but rather in a naturally sensitive, briskly responsive, and thoroughly holistic self” [5]. The easy slippage between sensibility and sentimentality, for instance, denotes a complex field of meanings regarding cognition and emotion in the late eighteenth century. In contrast to a history of emotions, Knott’s study of revolutionary sensibility entails a larger sense of self that encompasses both reason and feeling through sensation and perception. This phenomenon underscores the fact that sensibility emerged not as an “ephemeral, amorphous, and fictional language,” but, rather, as a narrative form that promised to make responsive and receptive citizenship the foundation for republican democracy [20].
What I would call sensitive citizenship—the material and emotional vulnerability that national affiliation demands—provides a certain resonant insight not only into the history of belonging, but also into the corporeal dispositions of aesthetic experience in the nineteenth century. As I earlier observed, Locke’s effort to place the individual’s sensibility at the heart of the self meant that the progress of history required a cultivation of sensibility, the regulation of the senses. Sensibility, the capacity to perceive, was thus tied to the careful self-monitoring needed to assure one’s civic fitness. What emerged out of and alongside the eighteenth-century invention of sensibility was aesthetics. Because aesthetic is the Greek term for “sense faculty,” it shares with sense the dual meaning of physical perception and cognitive apprehension. Conceived of by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in Aesthetica (1750), aesthetics names the philosophy of sensuous knowledge in which artistic beauty depends on the comprehensive organization of all sensory powers. Decades later, Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) intellectualized the senses by relegating smell, taste and touch to the level of the brute, and casting vision and hearing as aesthetic sensations. Anthropologist Paul Stoller remarks, “The influence of Kant removed Western observers from the arena of sensuality, consequently expunging the so-called lower senses from our discourse” (8). From the eighteenth century onwards, both sensible citizenship and aesthetics were narrated as an evolutionary story of the triumph of disinterested reason, in which people learned to control their somatic bodies by detaching themselves from their feelings.

Consequently, these philosophers solidified what Aristotle had sketched out in De Anima: they displaced the hierarchy between the sensuous and the cognitive into a hierarchy between the senses. This hierarchy was based on the body’s apparent degree of involvement in the operation of the senses. The distanced and disinterested senses (sight, hearting) were
signs of cultivation, because, as philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer notes, “there is no evident contact between the perceived object and the organs of perception” [12]. On the other hand, the senses that required intimate contact (touch, taste, smell) indexed weakness. “In virtually all analyses of the senses in western philosophy,” Korsmeyer avers, “the distance between object and perceiver has been seen as a cognitive, moral and aesthetic advantage” [12]. Philosophers assigned sight and hearing a masculine character “on account of their contributions to the development of rational nature” [33]. The value structure embedded in the sensory hierarchy designated white men as capable of sensing their senses—of recognizing and reflecting on their perceptions—while women and nonwhite persons tasted, touched, heard, smelled and saw unthinkingly. However, what undercuts this facile binary is a simple fact: for all people, there is no citizenship without sensory embodiment. Contrary to assessments of citizenship that discount sensuous knowledge, I maintain that an examination of the senses can reinstate in and against the myth of universal selfhood the resistance of the embodied particular to historical abstraction.

My concern here is to propose that the body escapes from official, abstract forms of citizenship through both normative and fugitive sensory experiences. An intellectual and scientific history of the senses provides insight into the complex functioning of national affiliation by underscoring the way that the senses both animated and exceeded corporeal discipline. Despite what Michael Taussig calls “the radical displacement of the self in sentience” that aesthetic judgment and political life required, there remained in literature a preoccupation with the radical emplacement of the self in sentience [39]. The sensuous excess that escapes the grid of the normative, the yellow smell that permeates and takes over the narrator’s body, prompts critics to consider the senses an agentive force in literature.
This mode of engagement is exemplified in Sianne Ngai’s brilliant reading of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), a novel that traces “mulatta” Helga Crane’s quest for full selfhood, despite her identification with the disgust that white society levies against her dark bodily presence. Ngai’s reading connects the negative affect of irritation in the novel to Helga as a source of irritation for readers, who cannot get “inside her” and access her subjectivity. She posits, “Instead of remaining an unbroken surface for pleasurable aesthetic contemplation and the racial affinities this would seem to foster, ‘skin,’ as a trope might be described as a discomforting scab which Larsen obsessively picks at and which the novel never allows to heal” [206]. My study extends this framework in another direction: it considers how engagements with corporeal sociality might produce alternative perspectives on racial affinities and national affiliations—perspectives that challenge the content of official histories, and all the while reimagine the sensory encounters that construct and reproduce those histories. Such an approach renders the senses as always excessive, even in their most normative manifestations.

Sensuous excess, of course, often conjures the anti- and ante-cognitive realm of the emotions. If emotions historically have been a way to represent women, the lower classes and people of color as “closer” to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment,” as Sara Ahmed charges, the inextricability of the emotions and the senses nonetheless presents an opportunity to refigure the very terrain of this mode of domination [3]. This dissertation draws upon and deviates from a recent intensification of affect in American literary and cultural studies, a turn that highlights the role of bodies and passions in both consolidating and troubling identity. That development is evident, for example, in Lauren Berlant’s study of “national sentimentality,” which
meditates on the use of sentimentality in American literature from *The Scarlet Letter* to *The Intuitionist* in order to expand the definition of the political from legal abstraction to include bodily affect. With its close attention to the affective labor of citizenship, such studies show how emotional identification with the nation delimits the kinds of social relations we imagine across time and space. As Peter Coviello contends, nationalism is centrally concerned with relation “as an affect or attachment, a feeling of belonging that somehow transpires among strangers” [4]. The tendency to show how affect generates meaning and knowledge, however, often reproduces the political disembodiment this scholarship seeks to dismantle. Although Berlant, Castronovo, Coviello and others persuasively demonstrate how affect structures the public sphere, affect is itself a term subject to a variety of philosophical, psychological and neuroscientific abstractions. This inclination toward abstraction troubles the possibility of rooting “fellow feeling” in the body.

My focus on the senses aims to develop an understanding of how the sensory life of citizenship might transfigure forms of relation by rooting emotion in what Dana Luciano calls “the feeling body.” Sensation signals a mode of intensified emotional embodiment, a condition in which perception and emotion, in Ahmed’s words, “slide from one to another” [25]. As Ann Cvetkovich posits, sensation performs the cultural work of confirming the importance of emotional experience to private life. Most critical work on affective citizenship neglects to question configurations of the corporeal, to think through the physical sensations of belonging by interrogating how race and gender structure the national imaginary. As a potential site of cultural intervention, the sensorium underscores the connections between the way the humanities thinks about social constructs and the way it evaluates the perceptive capacities of particular life forms. What is more, it reorients
phenomenology towards an understanding of lived experience that vibrates along a continuum of immanence and transcendence. Thus, Senses of Belonging does not reduce sensation to the outward expression of internal emotions. Rather, it focuses on how the senses situate emotional knowledge, intuitive feelings of affiliation and alienation, at the body’s porous thresholds.

This project is equally indebted to a “sensory turn” in cultural anthropology and history that emerged out of a desire to dismantle the illusion that sense experiences are strictly biological phenomena. Over the past fifteen years, scholars in these disciplines have shown how the senses are cultural, and demonstrated that the notion of there being five senses is itself a historical construction. This dissertation contributes to and builds from this foundational scholarship in its emphasis on how, in the words of cultural anthropologists Thomas Porcello and Louise Meintjes, “aesthetic practices…mobilize both language and expressive-sensorial practices” [52]. My aim here is to emphasize that art is not reflective of, but actually animates, perceptual experiences. In its aim to underscore the connections among language, culture and perception, Senses of Belonging seeks to address literary treatment of all the senses in their individual and synesthetic complexity. Such an approach is a departure from traditional literary and cultural studies, which oftentimes focus on one or two senses. In this way, my general approach to the sensory life of national belonging offers a

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5 Representative works on each sense include: Denise Gigante, Taste: A Literary History (2005) explores the relationship between aesthetic taste and metaphors of eating in British Romanticism; Janice Carlisle, Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction (2004) argues that odor is a primary site of class anxiety in the Victorian novel; Elizabeth Harvey’s edited collection Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture (2003), addresses the association of tactility with spirituality, eroticism, and knowledge; Richard Cullen Rath’s How
thick cultural history of each sense that gives equal weight and importance to all the senses, a methodology that undoes the Aristotelian sensory hierarchy. This contribution to literary, anthropological, and historical scholarship on perception recasts language as not an inadequate expression, but in fact a realization, of sense experience. Only by exploring literature’s articulation of our seemingly ante- and anti-linguistic senses can we begin to understand the social, aesthetic practices that form, de-form and re-form citizenship.

Scenes of Sensation

This dissertation draws upon an archive of writings circulated in the United States from the 1860s through the 1900s, a period that saw both an increased preoccupation with sense perception and significant transformations in national consciousness, natural science, and social reform. I examine a range of sources, including popular science and medical writing, novels and short fiction, poetry, recipes, and memoirs, in order to pursue a mode of close reading that is at once historically and formally attentive. The tendency of certain texts to linger in a particular sensation requires consideration of their distinct formal features as they organize and challenge the dominant political dispositions of their historical moment. My attention to form is intended to dissolve distinctions between mediation and immediacy, language and perception, without flattening distinctions among the senses. Such an approach is crucial because these texts dwell on the “affectively charged sensuousness” of language by

taking a particular form (Altieri 82). What I seek in these readings is to demonstrate how close attention to the active role of literature in the formation of the senses might help to move cultural criticism not only to a more precise understanding of the historical specificity of the senses, but also toward ways that literary history might be retold.

*Senses of Belonging* is a critical examination of both the sensorium’s historicity and its ongoing potential to alter notions about, and experiences of, citizenship. It lets loose the intellectual and physiological feelings that manifest not only as overt deviations from social norms, but also as subtler amendments to the fantasy of national affiliation. In structure and method, this dissertation is a synesthetic accretion. It explores the overarching question of national belonging in the late-nineteenth century, and each chapter takes one of the five senses as a unique point of entry into that question. The separate histories of yellow and smell that make possible the synesthetic complexity of a “yellow smell” is representative of this framework. Balancing breadth and depth, *Senses of Belonging* is an additive experience in which the examination of the individual philosophical, scientific, and cultural history of each sense amounts to a wide-ranging sensory experience of citizenship at a specific historical moment. Hence, the synesthetics of citizenship inhabits the gap between each chapter: the sugary taste of Dickinson’s poetry is also an olfactory pleasure; the sweet smell of Chopin’s Jessamine invites harmonious sociality; the euphonic sounds of Bellamy’s musical telephone induce tactile vibrations; the moving touches between Helen Keller and W.E.B. Du Bois are constitutive of a fetal sonogram’s bodily address.

This dissertation is divided into two interdependent sections: the first focuses on the relationship connections among sensory immediacy, literary mediation and racial corporeality; the second is concerned with how vibratory perceptions trouble the civic
construction of the rational self as a stable locus of experience. Finally, I conclude by examining the implicit extension of nineteenth-century visual epistemologies to the social and political terrain of the American present around the question of “unborn citizenship” that fetal sonograms prompt. In my first chapter, “Taste,” I examine the writings of persons who were both authors and cooks: Emily Dickinson and free woman of color Malinda Russell. Dickinson’s poems, letters and recipes, as well as Russell’s cookbook, were written when taste buds were first identified. This chapter attends closely to the history of sugar production in order to open up Dickinson’s imaginative renderings of sensory taste, which harness the symbolic and savory force of rum and brown sugar. Black personhood became dangerously sweet at the very moment that scientists maintained that gustatory perception was bound up with the unruly flesh, and was a marker of less evolved human beings. Articulated through each other, both black personhood and sensory taste were excluded from the realm of aesthetic taste. Yet the circulation of blackness in Dickinson’s recipe for “swarthy black cake,” her lyrical references to rum, and her designation of the family’s kitchen as “Domingo” suggests that gustatory taste is aesthetic, that lawlessness is its own form of knowing.

If taste unsettled newly formed ideas about black personhood, smell characteristically conjured memories of slavery. My second chapter, “Smell,” shows how floral smells obscured black citizenship by evoking memories of African American enslavement. The Civil War memoir of Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson—Dickinson’s mentor and editor—marshals the “oppressive,” yet sweet odors of southern flora to induce amnesia about slavery. In Army Life in a Black Regiment (1869), Higginson’s descriptions of these smells anticipate the genre of local color, a literary form that emerged alongside lynching. In the second half of the
chapter I consider how Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin’s stories about the Old South commemorate antebellum life, when southern flowers were cultivated by, and smelled of, slave labor. Charles Chesnutt’s stories, however, deodorize local color’s flowery race relations by attending to the smells of black social life. From the Civil War to the turn of the century, stories of the antebellum South served to perfume both the past and the present.

As local color’s odors revived old racial hierarchies, utopian literature transposed the white supremacist politics of the exotic Old South onto a technologically exotic future. In chapter 3, “Hear,” I examine Edward Bellamy’s influential utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888), which spawned a number of utopian communities throughout America. Drawing from nineteenth-century medical writings on the deleterious effects of noise, I show that amidst mass immigration, cacophonous sounds registered multiethnic urban spaces, which threatened white, bourgeois privacy and propriety. Bellamy’s novel imagined sound technologies to remedy this reality: the musical telephone, for instance, invites spiritual harmonizing while keeping bodies isolated from each other. Written alongside the emergence of acoustical science and eugenics, *Looking Backward* literalizes the idea of social harmony by conflating euphonic sounds with raceless universalism. The novel’s aural imaginary reveals the intersections among eugenics, euphonia, and (e)utopian literature in the last half of the nineteenth century.

While the ear was subject to the noise of immigrant tongues, the skin was equally vulnerable to its environment. With laws banning miscegenation, the United States became an increasingly non-contact culture. In chapter 4, “Touch,” I argue that double consciousness emerged at the turn-of-the-century as a tactile sensation. W.E.B. Du Bois famously defined double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as the experience of seeing oneself
through the eyes of another. That same year, Helen Keller published *The Story of My Life*, in which she described her world as a “tangible white darkness.” I show how the tangible nature of Keller’s dark world was tethered to her ability to mark softness as white and roughness as black. Alongside William James’s notion of a hidden, tactile self, Du Bois and Keller’s respective autobiographies suggest that race, gender, and disability are haptic constructions. In relation to the tactile underpinnings of Du Boisian double consciousness, *The Story of My Life* shows how the sense of touch at a particular historical moment troubled the autobiographical form’s linear tracking of the singular spiritual self.

I culminate my dissertation in chapter 5, “*See,*” by considering the popularity of fetal sonograms today. I shift to the present moment in order to show that the assimilation of ultrasounds into family photograph albums is an outgrowth of nineteenth-century sensory values. Whereas many scholars have privileged the relationship between race and visuality, I demonstrate that the sonogram makes visible our own desire to see race, and our desire to constitute ourselves as legible subjects. Central to ongoing debates about “unborn citizenship,” sonograms reveal that current ways of seeing overlook the role that the other senses play in promising, and disavowing, personhood. Tracing the senses, and the stories that bring them to light, is central to my study of the connections among race, perception and personhood. From the Civil War to today, stories of national belonging are as dynamic as the tastes, smells, sounds, touches and sights that embody them.
Chapter One. Taste

Like most nineteenth-century women, Emily Dickinson spent a lot of time in the kitchen. Like the garden and the small writing table in her bedroom, the kitchen was for her a site of domestic and textual labor. Its aromas and tastes provided the conditions of possibility for her poems, which she sometimes wrote on the backs of recipes and food wrappers. The unlikely confluence of the culinary and the literary did not go unnoticed by Dickinson’s friends and family. In 1906, the twentieth anniversary of her cousin’s death, Helen Knight Wyman published an article in *The Boston Cooking School Magazine* on the topic of “Emily Dickinson as Cook and Poetess.” Wyman noted that although Dickinson’s “mind might be occupied with ‘all mysteries and all knowledge’…her hands were often busy in the most humble household ways” [14 – 15]. Dickinson wielded the pen and stirring spoon with equal force. To affirm this claim, Wyman included recipes that she had found in her family’s cookbook: “Emily Dickinson’s Rice Cake” and “Emily Dickinson’s Corn Cake” call for little more than eggs, flour, sugar, and milk—and rice and cornmeal, respectively.¹ The plain

¹ Wyman found in her family’s cookbook the following recipes signed “Cousin Emily”:

Emily Dickinson’s Corn-Cake
Wheat flour, two tablespoonfuls.
Brown sugar, two tablespoonfuls.
Cream (or melted butter), four tablespoonfuls.
Salt.
Eggs, one.
Milk, one-half pint.
Indian meal, to make a thick batter.

Emily Dickinson’s Rice-Cake.
One cup of ground rice.
One cup of powdered sugar.
Two eggs
One-half a cup of butter.
One spoonful of milk with a very little soda [14 – 15]
ingredients in these recipes hint at a poet who, in spite of her unconventional poetry, knew well the conventions of simple, artless cooking.

Whether wittingly or not, Wyman binds the poetic to the culinary, thereby troubling the conventional idea that taste (aesthetic judgment) operates independently of taste (somatic experience). From Aristotle to Kant, philosophers have deemed sensory taste an irrational perception because of its inseparability from “the chemical physiology of the body” and its mediation by the “unruly flesh” [Gigante 3]. One of the first thinkers to take taste seriously, Frenchman Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin published his widely popular philosophical treatise *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), which drew from chemistry, geography and philosophy to explore the intellectual and bodily pleasures of the gustatory. Yet he nonetheless conceded, “taste is simple in its action,” and therefore “not as richly endowed as hearing” and the other senses [41]. The debasement of gustatory was, and is, far-reaching. So “closely are taste and eating tied to the necessities of existence,” Carolyn Korsmeyer writes, “that taste is frequently catalogued as one of the lower functions of sense perception operating on a primitive, near instinctual level” [1]. Gustatory perception proves that human beings are propelled not by a desire for virtue, but by carnal appetites that are indistinguishable from those of beasts. If aesthetic taste is a universal experience that separates us from the animal world, then sensory taste is a highly subjective experience that connects us to it. Self-interested, sensory taste will not submit to aesthetic taste. Unruly, ungovernable, and primitive, it bodies forth the impropriety of corporeal knowing.

Both a “cook and poetess,” Dickinson troubles the facile separation of sensory and aesthetic taste. For her, taste was both subject and object: she wrote poems on scraps of paper from the kitchen, which included the backs of bills, chocolate bar wrappers, and
recipes. Her oeuvre thus dissolves formal distinctions between poems and recipes, thereby confronting us with the gustatory life of language and the textual politics of food. As cultural historians Janet Theophano and Doris Witt have argued, recipes and cookbooks are “complex rhetorical structures that can be decoded using the sorts of tools literary critics typically bring to…a novel” (Witt 104). Fascicles and cookbooks, lyric poems and recipes alike, are not self-contained domestic documents, but socially prescient texts that make legible the mechanisms of social distinction that, Pierre Bourdieu famously has shown, taste otherwise solidifies. Attending to the overlap of the literary and the culinary in Dickinson’s writings further illuminates her poetry’s elusive racial politics. Traditionally interpreted as meditations on spiritual communion or as evidence of the fluid materiality of her writing practices, Dickinson’s poetry is a gustatory encounter that stages the co-implication of racial and sensory embodiment in nineteenth-century America.\(^2\) Attuned to the politics and poetics of bodies, her archive illustrates how notions of taste as an un-aesthetic, disorderly sensation instantiated notions of racial difference in ways that buttressed the consolidation of national.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, many Americans knew blackness when they tasted it. This chapter pairs Dickinson’s poems, letters and recipes with the cookbook of free woman of color Malinda Russell, in order to offer a critical examination of the entwined histories of aesthetic and sensory taste, of racial embodiment, and of women’s writing. Drawing on popular conceptions about the Haitian Revolution and characterizations of blackness as a site of sensory excess, Dickinson’s writings during the Civil War imagine black

\(^2\) C.f. Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005); Martha Nell Smith’s extensive publications on Dickinson as well as the *Dickinson Electronic Archives*; and Marta Werner’s *Radica Scatters: Emily Dickinson’s Late Fragments and Related Texts, 1870 – 1886*, which is operated by the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.
emancipation to be bittersweet. All the while, Russell’s self-published forty-page *A Domestic Cook Book* (1866) departs from the postwar politics of black respectability by rendering black emancipation an excessively sweet pleasure. Russell’s reclamation of racialized, gustatory excess is apparent in the recipes that Dickinson circulated twenty years later, recipes that embrace blackness as an unrepentant sweetness that refuses respectability. Although Dickinson and Russell wrote and baked from vastly different places and positions, their writings propose that recipes are a creole form that synthesizes racial, sensory and poetic encounters. This interarticulation of aesthetic and gustatory taste in turn helps us to understand how turn-of-the-century literary critics figured Dickinson as an unconventional, “tasteless” poet through longstanding associations of blackness with sensory pleasure and thus “bad taste.” The deeply sensual poetics that tethered Dickinson to Russell thus represents a lacuna in the literary archive: it foregrounds both the genealogy of aesthetic taste from which women and African Americans were excluded and literary criticism’s own gustatory investment in aesthetic distinction.

*Sugar and Spice*

In 1870 Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend and mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “You speak of ‘tameless tastes’—a Beggar came last week—I gave him Food and Fire and as he went, ‘Where do you go,’ / ‘In all directions’—” [L 353]. As a vagabond’s life is an improvisational existence forged solely in the present, so too the ineffable sense of taste refuses stasis. Taste is what happens when soluble substances disintegrate in the mouth. Saliva moistens. Teeth masticate. The tongue churns. Taste receptor cells send messages to
the brain. In turn, the brain produces a sensation that feels as though it occurs in the mouth. No one knew about this process until 1867, when two German scientists identified overlapping mounds of receptor cells and called them “taste buds.” A few months later botanist C.J. Sprague asked the readers of *The Atlantic Monthly* a simple enough question: Is sugar sweet? The answer is not uncomplicated. Problematically, sweetness “is not measurable in the chemist’s scales…Sugar has certain chemical constituents which go to make up a saccharine compound,” he notes, “But what evidence have we of its sweetness, except that the nerves of taste are peculiarly affected when brought in contact with it?” [742]. A sense initiated by biochemical dissolution, taste dissolves the very evidence science requires of it. Sweetness is a quantifiable object but a subjective “idea” that results from the “nice nervous connection between the tongue and the brain” [742]. Taste abides equally in the organ of intellectual judgment and in the organ of self-indulgence. Nineteenth-century science proved what Latin etymology already had established: sapore *is* sapere, that is, flavor *is* knowledge. Thus, if for Sprague taste is an idea that runs from the scales of empirical science, then for Dickinson taste is a tramp, a fugitive that runs in all directions. In the mid-nineteenth century, I show, taste represented a sensuous tamelessness coded as racially black.

One day a fugitive slave set foot in Ohio with a desire for literacy, a need for freedom, and a knack for commerce. He had journeyed from the South to the North, and along the way had received shelter from a Quaker named Wells Brown, after whom he took his name. In Cleveland, along the banks of Lake Erie, a family hired him to work in their mill. He spent his first shillings on a spelling book and sugar candy. As he labored one afternoon, his employers’ son Johnny, carrying his schoolbooks, passed by him. The fugitive held out a stick of barley sugar, which prompted Johnny to ask for a taste. “If you come to
me in my room, and teach me my A, B, C, I will give you a whole stick,” the fugitive replied.
The boy bit. But instead of getting a taste of the sugar, Johnny grabbed half of the sugar stick and ran off laughing. Fortunately, his younger brother, David, was not as mischievous.
Inquiring about the barley sugar, David demanded, “Just let me taste it…Let me touch my tongue against it.” The fugitive explains:

I thought then that I had better give him a taste…so I called him to me, and got his head under my arm, and took him by the chin, and told him to hold out his tongue; and as he did so, I drew the barley sugar over very lightly. He said, ‘That’s very nice; just draw it over again.’ ‘I could stand here and let you draw it across my tongue all day.’ [23]

That night both boys commenced teaching him “the letters of the alphabet” [23].

So begins the education of abolitionist and escape artist William Wells Brown, as described in his autobiographical sketch “Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown.” Invented by the French in the seventeenth century, barley sugar is comprised of barley water, cream of tartar, and cane sugar. Wholly wrapped up with New World slavery and sugar production, the irresistible candy makes possible an act of sedition: Brown exploits the American sweet tooth by trading sugar for literacy, an exchange that eventually would lead to the publication of his story. The scene’s homoerotic encounter between fugitive and citizens embodies the sensual, reciprocal flow of linguistic transmission, a transmission that occurs between the tongue and the hand, a double practice of intussusception and dissemination. Language operates as a kind of gustatory inscription; as Brown draws the barley stick across the boys’ tongues, they in turn draw syntax and sounds across his.

Although it may be a means of idle gratification for Johnny and David, in Brown’s account

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3 Brown published this as a preface to his 1853 novel Clotel. He did not include this anecdote in his monograph Narrative of William Wells Brown, An American Slave (1849) and in subsequent republications of Clotel.
the taste of barley sugar cannot be extricated from their solidarity with a runaway slave. The moment of gustatory delight suggests a visceral detachment from, and a simultaneous reinscription of, legal distinctions between the citizen, who tastes sugar, and the fugitive, who tastes literacy.

As this curious scene suggests, the pleasure of taste underwrote narratives of fugitivity, pedagogy and freedom in the mid-nineteenth century. Taste both directs attention inward to the self and gestures outwards by integrating black humanity into the concept, and the body, of a national people. In Brown’s account, sweetness does not simply facilitate intellectual development and (homo)sociality, but is their precondition. Insofar as knowledge and flavor, sapere and sapore, are mutually constitutive, taste operates as a sensation of embodied knowledge, a sensation that is itself fugitive because it flees from the Cartesian bifurcation of the mind and the body. Thus, it is because, rather than despite, its reputation as an unstructured, unthinking sensation that taste adequately conveys the lawlessness of Brown’s endeavor to learn the rules of the written language. For the fugitive, the sense of taste redoubles and muddles antebellum America’s racial and civic distinctions. The scene, after all, turns on a perception whose primary purpose is to distinguish between things. By appealing to the boys’ gustatory desires, Brown uses a discriminatory perception to evade, or at least assuage, racial discrimination, and thereby foster interracial sociality.

Yet for all the utopian promise of this gustatory exchange, the Civil War represented a crucial shift in the way Americans experienced sweetness. No longer the material of solidarity between slaves and citizens, sugar—and its byproducts molasses and rum—took on a weightier meaning for many Americans. Most of the sweeteners that citizens found so irresistible originated in the West Indies; if sugar became less appetizing, it was because of
the region’s histories of slave rebellion and revolution. Sugar thus tasted less of sweet black freedom, as it did for Brown, and more of the potential violence that many feared black emancipation would engender. At the beginning of the Civil War, these fears were not far from Emily Dickinson’s mind—nor her kitchen, which was stocked with sugar and molasses. Wendy Martin confirms, “Like others of her era, Dickinson experienced the Civil War as the central event of her life that colored everything that followed” [36]. Not only did the period of Dickinson’s productivity overlap with the Civil War, but also three of the ten poems she published anonymously in her lifetime were submitted to Drum Beat, a Brooklyn newspaper that raised funds for the Union effort. Additionally, her older brother Austin avoided conscription by paying five hundred dollars for an Irish laborer to join the Union army in his stead. That the Dickinson family supported the war in principle but not in practice opens onto the gustatory experiences of blackness that convey Dickinson’s ambivalence about the prospect of black emancipation. In 1864 she wrote:

As the Starved Maelstrom laps the Navies
As the Vulture teased
Forces the Broods in lonely Valleys
As the Tiger eased

By but a crumb of Blood, fasts Scarlet
Till he meet a Man
Dainty adorned with Veins and Tissues
And partakes—his Tongue

Cooled by the Morsel for a moment
Grows a fiercer thing
Till he esteem his Dates and Cocoa
A Nutritious mean

I, of a finer Famine
Deem my Supper dry
For but a Berry of Domingo
And a Torrid Eye.
A long single sentence produces the very anticipation the poem describes; it whets the reader’s appetite for grammatical completion. Narrated from an unspecified vantage point, the poem posits that once an animal has adapted its taste to a new food, such as human flesh, that taste will demand fulfillment again and again. The maelstrom, vulture and broods are all images of predatory desire, and the starved tiger is the most ravenous of all. Indeed, the caesura between “partakes” and “his Tongue” pauses the speaker’s voice, and in that silence is the untranscribable moment of tasting, the dissolution of the dainty man’s veins and tissues on the tiger’s tongue. The poem is as much about such newly acquired tastes as it is about hunger or the symbolic consumption of otherness. In addition, its odd form—the nine- and five-syllable meter—intensifies as the tiger acquires a taste for the human: what begins with a third-person, singsong a/b/a/b rhyme scheme turns into first-person, dissonant off-rhymes. It is as though the pleasure of taste de-forms the very laws of the lyric, as though the poem is itself a descent into lawlessness. Even the speaker’s utterance, the only line written in tetrameter, fails to flesh out the relationship between famine and fulfillment, animal and human, meat and blood—and slavery and freedom.

At heart, Dickinson’s poem is about slave revolution. Kenneth Price and Ed Folsom have pointed out that “Berry of Domingo” references the Haiti, the most profitable slave colony in the world until its independence in 1804. In his history of the Haitian Revolution, historian Laurent Dubois explains that most nineteenth-century writers “emphasized the barbarity of the salve insurgents and saw the main result of the emancipation as a descent into laziness and lawlessness,” and therefore a reason to defend slavery where it existed [305]. Like Haitians, enslaved African Americans will fight for their liberties once they have acquired a taste for the fruits of democracy. However, by way of paradox, the taste of that
berry of Domingo stemmed from the American South. In January 1863, *The Springfield Republican* published long items about Higginson, who had left for South Carolina’s Sea Islands to train a regiment of former slaves on a defunct plantation. The following month Dickinson wrote to convey her regrets that she did not meet him before he left:

> I should have liked to see you, before you became improbable. War feels to me an oblique place...I trust you may pass the limit of War, and though not reared to prayer—when service is had in church, for Our Arms, I include yourself—I, too, have an “Island”—whose “Rose and Magnolia” are in the Egg, and it’s “Black Berry” but a spicy prospective, yet as you say, “fascination” is absolute of Clime. [L 280]

Here, Dickinson recasts her domestic life in terms of Higginson’s wartime experiences. Her coy reference to the Sea Islands—I, too, have an “Island”—figures her garden as a refuge that grows foods as exotic as the berries that Higginson martially “cultivates” on his. An allusion to his black soldiers, “Black Berry” transforms the human into the botanical, and the botanical into the gustatory. Both figurative and literal, the tart blackberries figure blackness, especially armed black men, as an acidic, sharp, biting flavor. The cultivation of a barren garden in February is not as difficult, she tells him, as growing soldiers from slaves.

Of course, by the time she wrote to Higginson, the titillating flavors of dark fruits had long been wrapped up with dark bodies. In particular, many Anglo-Americans conflated New World products, such as sugarcane, with the black laborers forced to cultivate them. In 1853, for instance, writer T.B. Thorpe published an essay in *Harper’s Monthly* on Louisiana sugar plantations. Conflating sugar and black bodies, he remarks that both the region’s sugar cane and “negroes” originate from Haiti; both are berries of Domingo, as it were [747]. Thorpe goes on to argue that the intrinsic sweetness of brown sugar causes African American slaves to “devour” it—as a Tiger might a fleshy Man—“until they are literally loaded inside and out,” despite the fact that it “produces unwonted health, and consequently
the highest flow of animal spirits” [763; 761]. The taste of brown sugar crystallizes notions that black people are biologically incapable of curbing their bodily impulses. Ten years later, in light of its “bearing upon questions connected to the emancipation of slaves,” writer John Weiss chronicled Haiti’s history in a series of essays entitled “The Horrors of Domingo,” which ran for a year in the Atlantic Monthly [743]. Fifty years after its sovereignty, Haiti indexed two kinds of excess: the cloying sweetness that slaves found irresistible, and the overwhelming violence that sugar plantations produced. Sweetness, Weiss asserts, is inextricably tethered to the horrors of sugar production: “Every rising sun did not rekindle there [France] the dreadful paradox that sugar and sweetness were incompatible, and she could not taste the stinging lash as the crystals melted on her tongue” [303]. In his study of the “blood sugar topos” in British Romanticism, Timothy Morton posits, “sweetness is a mode of enjoyment predicated on the repression of production” [93]. The sugar crystals that melt on the Anglo tongue in turn dissolve the stinging lash that produced them.

In contrast to Thorpe, “The Horrors of Domingo” proposes that sugar and sweetness are not synonymous. Sweetness is not an idea, but a social effect of colonialism. Thus, the fruits of Dickinson’s and Higginson’s respective islands are spicy not despite, but because of, their blackness. Flavor is predicated on, as it inculcates, racial difference. In the context of the war and the future of the national body, the lure of the “Black Berry” lies in the combination of pleasure and animality, sweetness and tartness, that dark fruits betoken. In this way, the spiciness of the American blackberries is implicated with the sweetness of the Haitian berries. The former sugar capital of the world, Haiti was not far from

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4 Morton traces how abolitionists crafted a “metonymic chain” in which sugar for the blood of slaves [88]. The idea that drinks such as tea and coffee contained African blood “generated revulsion (and revolution)” [102].
Dickinson’s mind when, in 1862, she invoked Domingo in order to assure Higginson that he did not offend her:

Your letter gave no Drunkenness, because I tasted Rum before—Domingo comes but once—yet I have had few pleasures so deep as your opinion, and if I were to thank you, my tears would block my tongue— [L 265]

By associating the figurative taste of rum with Domingo, Dickinson implicitly references the triangular trade, in which sugar and human beings flowed freely among continents and across oceans. Yet the invocation of Domingo alchemically converts the metaphorical into the material, in its gesture towards the island’s history of excessive sweetness and excessive violence. Akin to the “Torrid Eye” that passionately overflows with tears, Dickinson’s tongue is violently stopped up by her body’s salty water drops, the highly personal savory fluids that accentuate and bleed into—and embitter—the transatlantic sweetness of rum.

Much like Weiss, Dickinson distinguishes between the sensation of sweetness and the substance that produces it. The dash that enjoins “I tasted Rum before” to “Domingo comes but once” crystallizes the gap between the pleasure of tasting rum and the violence of sugar production. Here, inebriation is less about a figurative taste of rum than it is about a real aftertaste of the island’s history, which most Americans characterized as something akin to a drunken letter—unruly, unthinking and unrestrained. In addition to pausing and punctuating the distance between New England rum and Haitian sugar, the dash is a middle passage that redoubles the historical flow of animate and inanimate commodities between slaveholding nations and colonies. Luke a blackberry, rum is spicy because of the stinging

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3 The triangular trade refers to the complex circulation of commodities: the West Indies shipped molasses to New England to be converted into rum, New England traded rum to purchase slaves in Africa, where slaves were shipped from to sugar plantations in the West Indies. In his well-known study of sugar, *Sweetness and Power*, cultural historian Sidney Mintz remarks, “By [Africans’] labor power, wealth was created in the Americas” [43]. That slavery was deemed essential to the production of sugar, molasses and rum reinforced the violence that enriched both the wallets and the palates of many Americans.
taste of violence to which it was tethered. But even as the disjuncture between “Rum” and “Domingo” foregrounds the mutual constitution of sugar and slavery, the fact that Domingo “comes but once” suggests a nostalgic glance backwards to the once-fluid movements of sugars and peoples, a time before the knowledge that sugar is neither universally sweet, nor rum universally pleasing, but is always drunken, distasteful.

The connections among sweetness, sugar and blackness were anything but felicitous in the nineteenth century. During the war, Domingo could only ever be a berry, a spicy and sweet fruit, because the island’s history was loaded inside and out with violence and sugar. The war, then, is the bitter yet saccharine residue of the Haitian Revolution, an event that might be called the Black Berry of Domingo. Dickinson’s letters thus remind us that, in the poem, the speaker’s dry supper yields not a communion with God, but the sobering reality of civic commonality with former slaves. Even though the tiger feels a hunger for spiritual communion more satisfying than food, that hunger nonetheless engenders sounds and feelings that are coded as primitive. Whether spiritual or material, hunger produces a surfeit, not an absence, of bodily experience. Like the barley sugar Brown drew across tongues in order to learn the alphabet, Dickinson’s poem is racialized communion steeped in discussions about the taste of, and hunger for, freedom. Perhaps more importantly, the poem performs this communion through its balance of flavors and textures—the salty Blood, Veins, and Tissues mix with the sweet Dates, the dry Cocoa, the sweet Berry, and the salty Torrid Eye. Inflected by the sweet rum and the tart blackberries in her letters to Higginson, Dickinson’s poem is a recipe that transforms blackness from a legal and historical abstraction into a capacity to be tasted.
Black Cakes

Although Brown’s narrative render antebellum black fugitivity literally sweet, whereas Dickinson’s wartime writings imagine black emancipation as a bittersweet event, both writers offer a sustained meditation on the racial values assigned to taste just prior to and during the Civil War, a volatile period when civic rights were explicitly at stake. Shortly thereafter, freewoman Malinda Russell offered an account of sweetness as the material of citizenship in the years immediately following the war. Russell’s self-published 1866 Domestic Cook Book picks up where Brown leaves off, as her recipes are stories of real and imagined tastes that move between the fugitive and the citizen, the black author and her white female readers (and the lower classes who cooked for them). As Theophano argues, cookbooks are not merely recipe collections, but collaborative endeavors that enable connections among people over time and across space. Written when Russell was an aging widow, Domestic Cook Book is meant to recuperate the autonomy and property that she once, albeit precariously, had. In “A Short History of the Author” she recounts her life: born in Tennessee to a free woman, by the age of nineteen she worked as a cook and kept a wash house in Virginia, where she married a free man and birthed a son. After her husband died, she returned to Tennessee and kept a pastry shop. Through “hard labor and economy” she “saved a considerable sum of money” to support herself and her son (4). In 1864 a “guerilla party, who threatened my life if I revealed who they were,” ran her out of town on account of her Union principles [4]. “Obliged to leave following a flag of truce out of the Southern borders, being attacked several times by the enemy,” she and her son fled to Michigan, where she pines to “recover at least part of [her] property” through the sale of the cookbook [4].
The same year Dickinson savored rum and blackberries, Malinda Russell was forced to leave behind her sweet confections. The “Short History of the Author” that begins *Domestic Cook Book* is meant to recuperate the autonomy and property that she once had, albeit precariously. An important act of postwar black self-authorization, *Domestic Cook Book* (1866)—the earliest extant cookbook authored by an African American woman—is, like other cookbooks, a collaborative endeavor that enables connections among readers over time and across space. By way of anthropology, the term “commensality” denotes the ritual of eating together. More broadly, it refers to individuals or groups who have different values, but who live together non-competitively, without injury to each other. As a genre, Russell’s cookbook is a commensal organism: it is a body that, through its language and materiality, puts the black female author in dialogue with her white middle class female readers. Self-published when African Americans were neither slaves nor citizens, *Domestic Cook Book* imagines black emancipation not as a spicy prospective, but as a sweet pastry. This section places Russell and Dickinson—two women writing from different social categories, with different culinary habits and aesthetic practices—at the same table in order to show the historical shift from the spicy prospective of black emancipation to the unwholesome, burdensomely sweet problem of black citizenship.

Even though it is an aftertaste of the pastry shop, Russell’s cookbook does not sugar coat: it describes a freewoman who was no freer after the Civil War than before it, who did not flee from a plantation before the war, but was made to flee from her pastries after it. Comprised of recipes that are neither distinctly southern nor black, the cookbook performs its author’s constitutional precarity. Unlike Mary Randolph’s popular cookbook *Virginia Housewife* (1824), after which Russell openly modeled her cookbook, *Domestic Cook Book* does
not feature typically southern dishes. As culinary historian Janice Longone notes in her preface to the cookbook, except for “Sweet Potato Baked Pudding,” “Sweet Potato Slice Pie,” and “Fricassed [sic] Catfish,” Russell’s recipes could come from any part of the eastern United States. The author does not present herself to her white audience according to stereotypes about southern black female cooks. She is neither happy kitchen slave, nor mammy, but a self-reliant woman trying to recover her rightful property, and in so doing legitimate her labor and secure her freedom.

Apart from the autobiographical preface, Domestic Cook Book is a literary narrative that instantiates aesthetic connections among women through class rather than explicit racial or regional connections. Nonetheless, her recipe for rich black cake negotiates the cookbook’s racial and gender politics by constituting black freedom (however nominal) through sweetness. In a succinct, depersonalized style, the recipe reads:

Rich Black Cake.  
Two cups sugar, one and a half cup molasses, two cups butter, one cup sour cream, four cups unsifted flour, eight eggs, one and a half lb raisins, one lb citron, one lb currants, one tablespoon mace, one do. cloves, one do. cinnamon, one wine-glass brandy, one do. rose water, extract of lemon. [8]

Also known as West Indian Fruitcake, black cake hails from the Caribbean, where the English fruitcake was made to accommodate the local rum. As a result, black cake tends to be darker, deeper, and richer than English or American fruitcake. While many often assume that the “black” in black cake refers to chocolate, its name comes from the chopped raisins, currants, and prunes that are soaked in dark rum. This misrecognition of blackness allows Russell to opt out of an epistemological script that would otherwise reduce “black” to the taste of chocolate—another exotic, erotic New World foodstuff. Blackness expresses itself through a variety of materials, such as the rum-soaked fruits that give the cake its intensely
dark color, sweet flavor, and profound Caribbean character. The late novelist and food writer Laurie Colwin once stated that black cake “has taste and aftertaste. It demands to be eaten in a slow, meditative way. The texture is complicated, too—dense and light at the same time” [180]. Yet for all its material richness and complexity, the cake most likely was not as flavorful as Russell’s recipe implies: mace and cloves not only were expensive, but also would have been wasted, devoid of their flavor, by the time they arrived in Tennessee. The sugar and molasses, however, counteract the dulled warm, sweet, aromatic flavors of mace and cloves, such that Russell’s black cake is far sweeter than it is spicy.

Consisting only of title, ingredients and amounts, the recipe is less a narrative than a catalog that assumes the reader’s extensive culinary knowledge. The sparseness of the prose, written and read more for utility than pleasure, belies the richness and complexity of “Rich Black Cake.” Instead of rum, for instance, Russell’s recipe calls for brandy, a distilled sweet wine that is a signature of British cakes. The use of brandy reflects a shift in early- to mid-nineteenth century America, when, in light of Scotch-Irish farmers pushing into Tennessee and Kentucky, whiskey and brandy became much easier and cheaper than rum to produce. Although the recipe does not specify white or brown sugar, the other sweetener, molasses, carries a gustatory and visual reminder of the slave labor that harvested the sugar plantations. Perhaps more importantly, the depth of the cake’s color, texture and flavor appears in the only real luxury item in Russell’s concise recipe: “Rich.” On a material level, the adjective signifies the sumptuous, choice ingredients (butter, sugar, eggs) that constitute the cake, and the heaviness that unsifted flour, which is lumpier and denser than its sifted counterpart, yields. A taste that exists in between the formal properties of density and flavor, “rich” yokes blackness to a calorific heft that over time bodies forth the solidity of sweetness.
As the material and metaphorical richness of her recipe suggests, Russell’s cookbook was not overtly interest in the postwar politics of black respectability. In light of the unruly, hypersensual characteristics attributed to sweetness, a cookbook consisting solely of desserts did little to allay Anglo-American fears about the capacity of African Americans for self-discipline. Following the war, sensory taste became a primary site where racial distinctions and social hierarchies were solidified. Indeed war, becoming “American” required the cultivation not simply of aesthetic taste, but of the taste buds. The art of eating, gastronomy “civilizes and refines man,” as French émigré Pierre Blot—who in 1865 opened the first French cooking school in the United States, the New York Cooking Academy—wrote in 1868 [173]. To appreciate food in a methodical, disinterested way was to distinguish oneself from the “savage” American, who thoughtlessly “proceeds to gorge himself” on “whatever is set before him” [174]. Cuisine is an expression of evolution and civility because its fixed laws ostensibly give order to the primitive sense of taste, and in so doing give order to the unthinking citizen. Before the war, it seemed possible for freedom to be sweet, and for black people to be “refined” like brown sugar. After the war the “Negro Problem” proved that the sweetness of black freedom was not pleasurable, but dangerous. Blot is thus representative of a general attitude about the relationship between taste perception and nonwhite people: whereas white men taste food according to fixed rules, nonwhite men and women do not taste food at all, insofar as they do not discriminate between flavors.  

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6 Phillis Wheatley’s well known poem “On Being Brought From Africa to America” (1773), for instance, reminds her white readers that “Negroes, black as Cain/ May be refin’d” [825]. Such a pun on sugar cane and the biblical Cain exposes the conflation of skin color with spiritual—and saccharine—purity. As raw and unrefined as brown sugar, African Americans ostensibly can be cultivated to achieve a spiritually refined “white” state.
In the decades following the Civil War, the notion that flavor, especially sweetness, posed a danger to the general public ossified. Almost twenty years after she waxed lyrical about the Civil War, Dickinson harnessed the changing meaning of sweetness in order to embrace, rather than condemn, the “problem” that blackness betokened. One summer day in 1883 she sent flowers, black cake, a recipe, and the following note to her friend, appropriately named Nellie Sweetster:

Dear Nellie,
Your sweet beneficence of Bulbs I return as Flowers, with a bit of the swarthy Cake baked only in Domingo.
Lovingly, Emily [L 835]

While Dickinson’s prior writings hinted at a desire to taste blackness, twenty years later, well after Reconstruction’s failure, this letter explicitly links the color of food to the color of skin. “Swarthy” transforms a chromatically black cake into a racially black cake. “Baked only in Domingo” likens the hot climes of the kitchen—a space of labor for her, as well as the family’s “black” Irish housekeeper, Margaret Maher—to that of the West Indies. As Sandra Gilbert points out, Dickinson turns her kitchen into a synonym for the island from “which emerged a darkly nutritive sweetness” [2].

By way of Domingo’s association with chromatically, racially and rhetorically dark sweetness, a pleasing taste that smacks of violence, Dickinson transforms the racially exotic, and erotic, into a domesticated pleasure. In 1884, for instance, the Chicago Tribune conflated savagery with Haiti’s fallen sugar industry when it remarked that “black, dirty” sugar imported from San Domingo has “dirt, mud, sticks, niggers’ shoes, old hats, pipes, [and] bones” in it, which is why it must be refined into a “white and immaculate” state for consumption [698; “Sugar-Refining” 7]. In a similar article on “Sweets,” the Tribune asserted that the color of West India molasses, used to make rum in New England, “always suggested
an affinity for black snakes and negro-labor” [2]. Given that, as journalist Eugene Smalley declared a few years later, “We Americans are the greatest sugar-eating people in the world,” what was once a natural sweetener imported from exotic lands was by the late nineteenth century a grotesque threat to public health [102]. The salutary threat that unrefined sugar posed to the sweet-toothed nation had as much to do with the “horrors of Domingo” as it did with corporate interest. Improvements in sugar refinement increased after the war, and sugar took on a whiter hue and a purer, more refined taste. To beat down competition from the one sweet product that exceeded its control—raw brown sugar—sugar refiners created an oligarchy called the American Sugar Refining Company. The Sugar Trust mounted a successful campaign against brown sugar and molasses by exploiting the association of blackness with unhealthy, sensual excess. Named because sugar cubes look like dominoes, the national brand and its logo crystallized the axiom that whiteness needs blackness in order to define itself: Domin(g)o.

An island that was once a figure for the bitter-sweetness of slave revolution is, by 1883, a metonym for a sensory pleasure coded as racial. The sheer overdetermination of the document is palpable: the addressee’s surname, Sweetster, materializes the inherence of the gustatory in the linguistic and evokes sugar’s thick history. Likewise, Dickinson’s cake could be baked “only” in Domingo because, as her wartime writings suggests, black emancipation was constituted through sweet and spicy flavors. Whereas during the war Dickinson subtly gestured towards the recipe form—with its complex play of tastes and textures—in the

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7 The advertising campaign exploited fears about public hygiene by reproducing blown-up photographs of horrible-looking but harmless microbes, accompanied by a warning about the dangers of eating brown sugar. Between 1880 and 1915, food historian Harvey Levenstein notes, “per capita consumption of white granulated sugar doubled” [33].
poem, after the war Dickinson explicitly used the recipe in order to return to and reshape the
taste of blackness. Given the racial values assigned to raw and refined sugar during the late-
nineteenth century (from which Domino, the national brand of sugar, profited) Dickinson’s
note supplicates a reading of the attached recipe that attends to the connections among
language, taste, and blackness:

Black Cake—
2 pounds Flour—
2 Sugar—
2 Butter—
19 Eggs—
5 pounds Raisins—
1 ½ Currants—
1 ½ Citron—
½ pint Brandy—
½—Molasses—
2 Nutmegs—
5 teaspoons
  Cloves—Mace—Cinnamon—
2 teaspoons Soda—

Beat Butter and Sugar together—
Add eggs without beating—and beat the mixture again—
Bake 2 ½ or three hours, in Cake pans, or 5 to 6 hours in Milk pan,
if full—

[L 835a]

Like Russell, Dickinson’s call for brandy bridges the English and Caribbean versions of
fruitcake, thereby evoking a very complex racial and imperial history. And an aesthetic one,
no less: while the form of Russell’s recipe resembles prose, the form of Dickinson’s
resembles verse. Russell’s authorial persona melts into her recipes in order to lay claim to
black respectability, a kind of unremarkability associated with whiteness. An index of her
racial and economic privilege, Dickinson’s presence in this recipe is unmistakable. Its
capitalized nouns and myriad dashes resemble the cook’s poems. Her recipe is verse. Even
though its concise language is no different from Russell’s, each pause breaks up the seamless
alchemical flow of food preparation. The dash that ends the recipe leaves the story open, as if asking for reinterpretation, if not an encore.

The open-endedness of Dickinson’s black cake recipe dramatizes the proliferation of meanings that her poems for so long have engendered. But perhaps more importantly, the assumption that all recipes are meant to be read as utilitarian documents forecloses the possibility of reading the recipe not literally. The hyperbolic amounts of the ingredients propose as much. Quantities counted in pounds and dozens indicate a cake, as Gilbert asserts, “so massive one imagines that the citizens of Amherst may well have all gathered to consume it as part of some lyrical ceremony on the village green” [2, emphasis mine]. If taste is an unruly sensual perception, and if Domingo was a sugar colony thrown into chaos by black lawlessness, then this recipe redoubles the metaphorical and material excess of blackness. The raisins and currants do not simply incarnate the tart Berries of Domingo. Sugar and molasses recontextualize them, so that the darkened, sweetened fruits redouble the overdetermination of blackness as that which, like the recipe, exceeds itself. All the while, Dickinson’s use of “Cake pans” implies a far more literal interpretation: the recipe yielded multiple black cakes to be given as holiday gifts for friends and family. Read as both a literal and lyrical text, the “Black Cake” baked in “Domingo” nevertheless materializes how an ephemeral, immaterial sensation was used to construct black hyper-embodiment.

Moreover, Russell and Dickinson’s black cake recipes reveal not only that blackness operates on a gustatory register, but also that taste, like race, is a historically contingent, ever-shifting idea. As a genre that makes manifest the embodied work of women, recipes can

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8 The superfluity of sugar, fruits and molasses gives the recipe an exaggerated nature indicative of a kind of gustatory minstrelsy. c.f. Sandra Gilbert’s poem “Emily Dickinson’s Black Cake Walk” in her essay “Dickinson in the Kitchen.”
revalue racial difference precisely because they—like Russell’s and Dickinson’s culinary labor—are relegated to the domestic sphere, a sphere traditionally deemed neither radical nor aesthetic. In other words, the invisibility of the recipe is the condition of its potential to be a radical and aesthetic form. Written within different contexts, Russell and Dickinson’s recipes transform black personhood in different ways. As much despite as because of her personal travails, Russell’s “Rich Black Cake” renders freedom for blacks literally sweet. For Dickinson, twenty years later, black personhood is no longer a spicy prospective, but an unrepentant sweetness that refuses aesthetic abstraction. In both the “rich” and “swarthy” tastes of black cake, the two recipes are a creole form, a sustained parataxis that gleans foodstuffs with thick histories of their own from all over the globe. A recipe is a mélange, a creative synthesis of social, linguistic, and gustatory encounters. “Rich Black Cake” and “Black Cake” affirm that taste yokes the lyrical to the sensual.

Aftertaste

On the surface, Dickinson’s swarthy black cake bears little resemblance to the recipes for rice cake and corn cake that Wyman published in 1906. Symptomatic of the professionalization of the kitchen, these recipes imply that Dickinson was an advocate of plain and simple cooking. During the late nineteenth century, the period that historian Donna Gabaccia calls “the era that made American cooking American,” a national cuisine that emphasized nutrition over gustatory pleasure was instrumentalized to assimilate non-white persons. Echoing Blot, the New York Times argued in 1879 that a cuisine “divides the civilized being from the savage, who eats, without thought of or care for relish, only to
support life” [6]. In addition to the rise of national food corporations at the end of the nineteenth century, the call for a national cuisine manifested a desire to transform eating into a regulated means to refuel the body. Chock full of expensive ingredients, a delight to the senses, and anything but nutritious, Dickinson’s black cake not only tasted of unrefined blackness but also indexed her lack of refinement. In the 1890s, when the posthumous poet’s writings first circulated, literary critics deemed her poems “primitive” and therefore tasteless. For instance, Andrew Lang asked if Dickinson’s verse “is poetry at all? For poetry, too, has its laws, and if they are absolutely neglected, poetry will die…[One] must urge that lawless poetry is skimble-skamble stuff, with no right to exist” [Buckingham 102]. Like her black cake, Dickinson’s poetry failed to manifest proper domesticity. Critics, relatives, and friends of Dickinson constructed her authorship through her cookery, that is, her literary (in)capacity and her gustatory proclivities were mutually constitutive. At a time when plain food served as a marker of good taste—and therefore civic fitness—Dickinson’s sweet tooth literalized the bad taste for which her poetry stood.

It is far from felicitous that “Emily Dickinson as Cook and Poetess” appeared in The Boston Cooking School Magazine. A social reform movement that aimed to “Americanize” immigrants by teaching them to eat plain, nutritional foods, domestic science established cooking schools, such as the Boston Cooking School, that taught women not to “consult their instincts, their sense of taste, or their imaginations,” but to depend on rules that “existed on a lofty plane far above the pleasure of appetite” [Shapiro 85]. As many readers know, the transformation of the kitchen from a space of creative experimentation to one of scientific precision began with Lydia Maria Child’s The American Frugal Housewife (1829), which, in addition to the Bible, was a book consulted frequently in the Dickinson household.
Followed in 1841 by Catherine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* and in 1869 by her and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe’s co-authored *The American Woman’s Home*, these popular handbooks emphasized economical cooking and housekeeping, and influenced the domestic science movement that emerged after the Civil War. At the end of the nineteenth century, domestic science emphasized every aspect of food *except* taste.⁹ Fannie Farmer, better known as the “Mother of Level Measurements,” urged readers of her famous *The Original Boston Cooking School Cook Book* (1896) to select food based not on freshness or taste, but on chemical composition for maximum nutritional value. Gabaccia affirms, “Indulgence and pleasure had no place in domestic scientists’ recipes for workers [and] immigrants” [126]. In the same way that “good” cooking meant unimaginative cooking, “good taste” meant having no taste: flavorless foods embodied the moderation for which the national cuisine called.

The initial circulation of Dickinson’s writings precisely chronicles the cultural ascendance of domestic science, which had no place for the primitive, racialized pleasure of taste. At the turn of the century, to have flavor was to be barbaric, and to be barbaric was to be cast in terms of flavor. In the 1890s, the decade during which Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd edited and published three series of her poems, Emily Dickinson acquired a reputation for being a “literary freak” whose writings had a “piquant flavor,” a “savor of something new,” and could tickle “a jaded palate but [could] have no permanent influence over a sane mind” [Buckingham 484]. Here, Dickinson is the primitive sense of taste—a fleeting, flavorful novelty and means of idle gratification. Prior to modernism’s recovery of

⁹ About this time W.O. Atwater published *The Chemical Composition of American Food Materials*, which argued that chemical analysis showed no nutritional difference between expensive and cheap food. The important thing was to ingest just enough protein, fats and carbohydrates necessary to be productive. Atkinson believed that finding economical ways to eat more proteins and fats would improve Americans’ labor productivity.
her in the 1920s, critics dismissed Dickinson’s poetry on the same basis that Western philosophers dismissed gustatory perception: it was too personal, too subjective, to be universally appreciated. Dickinson’s poetry had flavor (piquant, like a blackberry) but did not have taste, in the aesthetic sense of the term. Without the notion that taste was the most savage of the noble senses, Emily Dickinson could not have circulated as poetry’s noble savage. By tasting Domingo, Dickinson posited in her writings that the sensory and the aesthetic are coterminous; by tasting Dickinson, critics argued that the sensory is not aesthetic. However ironically, the material conditions—the kitchen, Domingo—that made Dickinson’s gustatory archive possible also made possible the metaphors of taste that critics used to devalue her verse. The barbaric flavor of Dickinson’s poetry is far more literal than her critics ever knew.

In short, the gustatory experiences that shaped Dickinson’s poetry also informed the reception thereof. Dickinson had “some vague feeling for metre and rhythm, yet she was apparently unconscious that her own lines…violated the canons of both,” Boston Sunday Courier editor Arlo Bates declared in a review. Her poems “show the insight of the civilized adult combined with the simplicity of the savage child. There is a barbaric flavor often discernible” [Buckingham 29]. Dickinson’s poetry tasted novel because taste was itself a sensation as primitive and childlike as the poet herself. Stories about the poet did little to curb her characterization as a naïf whose poems were “wrong in their excess,” as Literary World put it [Buckingham 40]. In 1891, Higginson published in the Atlantic Monthly a few of Dickinson’s letters, interlaced with his recollections of the poet. He describes their first encounter in 1870, in which Dickinson informed him, “shyly, ‘And people must have
puddings,’ this very timidly and suggestively, as if they were meteors or comets” [453].

In Higginson’s recollection, Dickinson believes that desserts are not a privilege, but a necessity, if not a right. For her, sweetness is a pleasure that needs no justification. As notions of who did and did not constitute “people” shifted after the Civil War, Dickinson’s avowal implies the democratic possibilities of gustatory pleasure. Sweetness is an equalizer, a sensation that people of all races, genders and classes should be able to enjoy. Higginson’s anecdote figures the unruly poet as one unrepentant about the pleasures of the unruly sense of taste, even if her posthumous reputation as an inept poet was bound up with the “wrong” excess of her bodily impulses.

In the same way that critics figured Dickinson as a poet who wrote not with precise knowledge of her art, but intuition, “some vague feeling,” in Bates’s words, echoes the terms in which many writers cast African American cooks. In his 1887 Harper’s published “A Louisiana Sugar Plantation of the Old Regime,” an essay by Charles Gayarre about antebellum sugar making. Under the guidance of the “superior intelligence of his Caucasian master,” Gayarre argues, the “African brute” turned his “natural impulses and affinities, without any conscious analysis of principles” into “an art of cooking” (620). Gayarre asserts that these Creole cooks had nothing in common with the “much vaunted culinary science of France” that Brillat-Savarin popularized [620]. Rather, the slave cook “could neither read nor write and therefore he could not learn from books. He was simply inspired; the god of the spit and the saucepan had breathed into him; that was enough” [620]. After asserting that cooking is something blacks do instinctively, Gayarre then bemoans the “vapidity of taste”

10 Upon meeting Dickinson in Amherst, Higginson wrote to his wife that she “makes all the bread for her father only likes hers & says ‘& people must have puddings’ this very dreamily, as if they were comets—so she makes them” [L 342a].
in today’s dishes, in contrast to the “delicious dishes [that] have vanished forever” along with the slave system. [621]. Written a few years after Lafcadio Hearn’s popular cookbook La Cuisine Creole, Gayarre’s remembrance registers how particular tastes stood in for ways of life that supposedly no longer existed. Gayarre proposes that the slave’s tameless taste made antebellum cooking flavorful. Improvisation, intuition and illiteracy were all the spice southern cooking required.

The idea that illiteracy and intuition fueled African Americans’ creative culinary prowess parallels the characterizations of Dickinson’s artistic capacities. Deemed “ungovernable in form” by the New York Commercial Advertiser, Dickinson’s poetry “is an improvisation; it is, though not void, without form,” due to her “incomplete knowledge of the language,” and the fact that she “never realized that poetry is an art, which must be studied” [Buckingham 493]. Similarly, the Philadelphia Evening Telegraph noted a “savor of something new in these verses,” and claimed that her “keen intellectual insight seems, too, rather intuitive than the result of studied analysis” [Buckingham 472]. Dickinson’s poetry has a savor not despite, but because of its intuitive, unstudied nature, in the same way that antebellum Creole cooks prepared delicious food because, rather than despite the fact that, they were illiterate slaves. At the same moment that domestic science applied scientific principles to cooking in order to redefine national cuisine not in terms of pleasure but of utility, Dickinson was cast as a primitive, unscientific poet whose verse was flavorful, and therefore not properly aesthetic, of no use to the literary world.

Dickinson’s reputation as an artless poet, a purveyor of ungovernable verse, was in dialogue with a number of anecdotes that highlighted her unsavory behaviors. In 1914, Martha Dickinson Bianchi wrote the forward to a collection of her aunt’s poems entitled The
Single Hound. In it, Bianchi recalls her childhood in the 1870s, when she would visit her aunt every Sunday while the family went to church. Dickinson would escort the young girl to the hoarding cellar in the basement, where:

she dealt me such lawless cake and other goodies, that even a child of four knew it for excess, sure to be followed by disaster later in the day. There was an unreal abandon about it all such as thrills the prodigality of dreaming. [viii]

Dickinson is quite the indulgent, doting aunt. The cellar, a subterranean space of “excess” and “unreal abandon,” proves that the kitchen was not the only Domingo in the house. But the kind of hedonism that Bianchi describes has as much to do with the site of indulgence as it does with the object of pleasure. The cake is “lawless” because it breaks with Sabbath law, exceeds typical prescriptions for Yankee thrift, and challenges longstanding assumptions about Dickinson’s asceticism. But perhaps more importantly, it is lawless because it redoubles the black cake that put Dickinson in dialogue with Domingo. Bianchi’s story affirms what the black cake recipe gestures towards: Dickinson’s confections place sugary excess in the service of deviant sociality, such as encouraging a child lawlessly to eat cake, or placing an island ruled by lawless former slaves in one’s New England home. Whether or not Bianchi knew it, Aunt Emily’s lawless cake is an aftertaste of the black cake she once baked only in Domingo for Nellie Sweetster.

But as much as Dickinson’s cake exceeds the laws of gustatory taste, it also exceeds the laws of aesthetic taste. To construct Dickinson as poetry’s outlier was not a difficult task, considering her sex. In 1896, poet and librarian Harry Lyman Koopman supported his poor review of Dickinson’s poem with the assertion, “Woman is…more lawless than man” [Buckingham 560]. Such lawlessness applied both to poetry and to cookery. Twenty years earlier, Albert Rhodes informed the readers of Galaxy there “is a sweet tooth running
through her sex which affects her taste and renders her less trustworthy” [671]. In his estimation, women, like savages, fall on whatever sweet things are set before them, with no thought of the digestive consequences that will follow. The sex in charge of food preparation is unable to discipline their sweet tooth, so naturally inclined are they towards fleeting, immediate pleasures. Heightened by her queerness—her penchant to disseminate sweet cakes instead of children—the lawlessness of Dickinson’s cake, and verse, is overdetermined by her gender. In light of Koopman’s and Rhodes’s remarks, the lawlessness of the cake has as much to do with the sensory pleasure it betokened for Bianchi, as it does with the queer female cook who exceeded the laws of aesthetic writing.

Fifteen years later, in Emily Dickinson Face to Face (1929), Bianchi reminisced about a similar event that occurred in the hoarding-cellar, “where [Dickinson] kept the rich, dark gingerbread that Aunt Lavinia, with compunctions for our digestion, said was ‘too rich for children’”; she concludes, “Aunt Emily stood for indulgence” [6]. An indulgence, of course, that is lawless because it subverts calls for bodily restraint. As opposed to Lavinia, who fears the disastrous consequences of eating dark sweets, Dickinson is unconcerned with the indigestion that punishes such pleasure. After all, this is the gingerbread that, Bianchi recalls, Dickinson once lowered in a basket from her bedroom window to she and her childhood friends below. Whether stored in the cellar, or dropped from a window, the rich gingerbread has its own poetics, for like black cake it substantiates the commensality inherent in Dickinson’s radical domesticity. In order for Dickinson to stand for indulgence a reader must transform her poetic lawlessness from a solitary act—the spinster writing ungovernable verse—into a form of sensory subversion.
Bianchi’s forwards and introductions, which framed her aunt’s letters and poems, allowed Emily Dickinson to embody the luxurious tastes that so many scorned. Posthumously, she stood for bad taste, in both senses of the term, because she stood for indulgence, the failure or refusal to discipline her body. But Dickinson also stood for regulation and restraint. As it turns out, lawful practices produced her lawless goodies. In *Face to Face*, Bianchi recalls:

She was rather *precieuse* about it [cooking]—using silver to stir with and glass to measure by. Her utensils were private... An imaginary line was drawn about her ‘properties’ which seemed to protect them against alien fingers—lent a difference in taste to results... She never trusted her own imagination there—never gave herself a chance to get a quart of a teaspoonful of Eternity in by mistake. [15]

Lang once stated that Dickinson was a reclusive woman so “intensely Puritan” that “she could make a pudding though she had little sympathy with the luxurious taste which calls for such dainties” [Buckingham 203]. In light of Bianchi’s account of Dickinson’s cooking practices, Lang was not as far off the mark as the stories about lawless cake and rich gingerbread would suggest. Aunt Emily may have had a lot of sympathy with the luxurious tastes of a pudding, but Emily Dickinson had little sympathy with the improvisation and imagination—any amount of Eternity—that assumedly would go into making such dainties.

Drawing from the language of domestic science, Bianchi assimilates Dickinson, an alien poet, into a narrative of American good taste. These accounts cast Dickinson as an exemplary cook: she used standardized measurements, and her “private” utensils ensured that her food would carry no hints of ethnicity. Like the *Tribune*’s assertion that black laborers in the West Indies contaminate the sugar they cultivate, Dickinson affirms the notion that touch threatens taste. Such culinary habits speak to the terms through which domestic science emphasized unimaginative cooking: the transmutation of the foreign into
the domestic. The alien hands that farm and cook destabilize an already disorderly perception. If Dickinson’s black cake from “Domingo” embodies a zone of contact that produces interracial sociality where there was none prior, then her cooking utensils mitigate the potential danger of that contact.

By way of paradox, the lawfulness of Dickinson’s culinary practices made possible the lawlessness of the final product. Although lawful in her cooking, Dickinson was nonetheless lawless in her refusal to follow the rules of serving food and publishing poems: she doled out rich, sweet foods to children and published anonymously in a handful of newspapers. About the same time she indulged her young niece with lawless cake, Dickinson wrote on the back of a chocolate bar wrapper, “necessitates/ celerity/ were better/ nay were/ im memorial/ may/ to duller/ by duller/ things.” With food and fascicles, time and preservation are of the essence: both have deteriorated, or “gone bad” as it were, the former because of its short shelf life and the latter because she (and we) waited too long to disseminate the bulk of her work. The wrapper—once holding an expensive, imported chocolate bar that was made by the first industrial chocolate manufacturer and exporter in France, first available in New England in the 1870s—is a palimpsest overlaid with a cryptic inscription that runs into as it runs away from interpretation. The disjuncture between the stories the words tell and the story the wrapper tells dramatizes the disjuncture between language and flavor. Whether or not she wielded her pen as lawfully as she did her stirring spoon, the sweet, dark aftertaste of Dickinson’s confections arise in part from the piecemeal archive she left behind.
Thus, lawless poetry and lawless cake are not the same. Rather, they are individual sensory experiences that vibrate along a continuum of mediation. Dickinson suggests as much. In 1862, the same year she tasted sweet rum and spicy blackberries, she wrote:

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Undo significance a starving man attaches
To Food—
Far off—He sighs—and therefore—Hopeless—
And therefore—Good—
Partaken—it relieves—indeed—
But proves us—
That Spices fly—
In the Receipt—It was the Distance—
Was Savory—  [J 349]
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The starving man may very well be the famished slave, who hungers for freedom, or the reader, who turns the substantive (“Food”) into the symbolic (“Undue significance”). But, Dickinson points out, taste thrives as much in the Spices as it does in the Receipt. A term that denoted medical preparations in the mid-eighteenth century, “receipt” by the mid- to late-nineteenth century referred exclusively to food preparation. A particularly female form of writing, “receipts” and “recipes” remind us that such narratives are in a perpetual state of exchange and reciprocity. The poem disintegrates genres, thereby rendering the boundaries between verse and victuals, poems and palimpsests, salvation and salivation, utterly soluble.

“Savory” exists neither in tastes nor in words, but in the Distance between the two. Taste and language are incommensurable: descriptions of taste are not the same as the taste itself. Language can never translate the sense of taste; it can only mistranslate it. But in language’s ability to mistranslate taste, to transform an unmediated perception into a visceral experience of mediation, lay the interenactment of the sensory and the social. Taste is not the transcendence of sensual experience. Rather, it is an embrace thereof. Refusing to distance style from sensation, sapere from sapore, the sweet flavor of a “rich” or “swarthy”
or “lawless” cake from the recipes that imagine it, makes possible the impossibility of disembodied aesthetic forms. Unlike fiction, recipes do not imagine what might have happened, but imagine what could have happened. As a genre that tethers lyrical poems to lawless puddings, recipes demonstrate the extent to which sensuality constitutes sociality. But more broadly, they show that by tasting together, people taste each other. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, taste explicitly foregrounded the problems and pleasures of black emancipation. In broader, less historically defined terms, both aesthetic taste and gustatory taste naturalize and are shaped by social distinctions. Likewise, gustatory taste is formed by the aesthetic form that it takes. Whether as a poem, an epistle, or a recipe, words are an aftertaste that lingers in the body long after digestion. Hence, the story we can tell is necessarily disjointed from the poems themselves. Sweetly, darkly nutritive, black cake goes down easy. But the language for it bites back.
Chapter Two. Smell

Well after he had fled slavery and tasted literacy, William Wells Brown still smelled the American South. From his home in Massachusetts he imagined the viscous air of a lovely summer night in Louisiana, “with its fresh, soft breeze, bearing such sweet scents from the odoriferous trees and plants, that a poet might have fancied angelic spirits were abroad, making the atmosphere luminous with their pure presence, and every breeze fragrant with their luscious breath” [166]. With its belletristic description of the scented southern air, Brown’s description of the southern landscape represents a foray into the pastoral tradition, a genre that seeks to resolve the tension between memories of a simpler past—associated with nature and rural lifestyles—and present experiences of modernity. Yet this aromatic preoccupation is not part of a southern pastoral story, but rather comes in the midst of a description of a Civil War battle led by Captain Andre Callioux, a noncommissioned black officer who was killed in the Union’s poorly planned attack at Port Hudson, Louisiana in 1863. Published in 1867, Brown’s The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity is a history of the Civil War intended “to preserve for future reference an account of the part which the negro took in suppressing the Slaveholders’ Rebellion” [v]. For every whiff of fragrant breezes in American Rebellion there is an image of black sacrifice, such as the Louisiana ground “slippery with the gore of the slaughtered” [171]. The “sweet scents” of the south evoke black sacrifice and self-determination at a period when the fitness of African Americans for citizenship was of central concern to the U.S. government. During the same
period that writers addressed the racial politics of taste, literary descriptions of the American South’s unique smells revealed the violence upon which race relations were predicated.

A mere two years after the Civil War, Brown took it upon himself to ensure that national history would remember African American participation in the Union effort. Hence, Brown is careful to associate floral smells not with the southern landscape, but with black agency. No doubt, of course, most Americans smelled nature, not black bodies, when they inhaled a flower. Known as much for peonies as her poesy, Emily Dickinson studied botany and assembled a collection of pressed plants in a leather-bound herbarium. An avid gardener, Dickinson cultivated exotic flowers that she often pressed and included in the letters she sent to her friends, including her mentor, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson. From 1862 to 1864 Higginson served as colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers of African Descent, a regiment of former slaves from the Sea Islands. In contrast to Brown’s history of the Civil War, Higginson’s first-hand account *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869) marshals the American South’s floral scents to paper over, if not sublimate, the violence of slavery. The “picturesque plantation houses” that he and his regiment stumble upon present to Higginson “the loveliest tropical garden, though tangled and desolate…filled with hyacinthine odors” [51]. For both Brown and Higginson, the south smells sweet. But whereas for Higginson that sweetness reinforces, for Brown it dismantles, the southern pastoral.¹ Brown frees slavery from the floral odors that otherwise subjugate its presence.

¹ Brown did not hide his admiration for Higginson as both a soldier and a writer; in the chapter on Capt. Callioux Brown lauds “that brave, generous, and highly cultivated scholar, gentleman and Christian, Thomas Wentworth Higginson” for making “an excursion into the heart of slavery, [meeting] the rebels and [defeating] them with his negro soldiers” [299]. He even credits Higginson’s “able article” on Denmark Vesey in his own chapter on Vesey (18).
It is well known that the Civil War generated a profusion of narratives that sought to commemorate the Old South, but the years directly following the war proved especially crucial to the solidification of national memory. Interventions in biology, technology, and natural history, among other areas of knowledge, all testified to the fact that to many Americans the sense of smell constituted memory at the level of both the personal and the collective. In the decades following the war the link between smell and memory was widely discussed. In 1882, for example, a New York Times article addressed the mnemonic registers of smell, stating, “a familiar odor will at once conjure up scenes, thoughts, and feelings long forgotten far more readily and constantly than any…sound, or taste or visible object” [12]. In contrast to the other senses, smell is intimately tied to memory and the emotions those memories produce. During the same period that smell’s hold on memory entered into public discussion, literary descriptions of smells, historian Alain Corbin observes, “concentrated on their power to engender reminiscence itself” [82]. Indeed, Higginson’s depiction of South Carolina as a space of racial and floral exoticism anticipates, if not inaugurates, the rise of southern local color, a literary genre that commemorated the antebellum South by depicting African Americans as part of the natural landscape. Turning to Higginson’s Army Life, an early incarnation of this literary tradition, sheds light not only on the cultural work of olfactory memory, but also on its legacy in later, more canonical instantiations, which include the works of Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Charles Chesnutt.

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2 Recent scientific research has revealed that millennia ago the brain grew from a small lump of olfactory tissue atop the human nerve cord. Diane Ackerman explains, “Our cerebral hemispheres were originally buds from olfactory stalks. We think because we smelled” [20]. The brain’s locus of emotion, the amygdala, is the key neural structure to interact with our olfactory center. Without it, we cannot process our own emotions, nor can we process smells and the memories they disinter.
Although the term *local color* designates regional writing generally, southern local color is unique in its thematic fascination with the Lost Cause. Published in journals, written by Southerners and Northerners alike, local color stories peaked in popularity in the postbellum period because they offered a quant, exotic, pastoral escape from the chaos of modern development. Part of the genre’s function, in Richard Brodhead’s words, was to help its middle-class readers “work through the emotional difficulties of a shared contemporary history,” that is, cope with the fact of black emancipation and the subsequent “Negro problem” [121]. Importantly, the rise of local color directly chronicles the emergence of the sharecropping system, a spectacular rise in lynching, and what Corbin calls the “era of high perfumery.” The relocation of perfumery from the botanical garden to the chemistry lab made perfumes, newly synthetic, available to the masses. In *Harper’s Monthly*, a journal known for its advocacy of local color, citrus-grower John Snively wrote on “The Art of Perfumery” (1874). An extended description on the modern-day production of perfumes, the article asserts that “civilized people” are distinguished for their preference of “the gentle breathings of the fragrant flower” over the “pungent exhalations of musk” [579]. Botanical scents index evolutionary development, whereas animalistic scents signify primitiveness. The “civilized” floral perfumes that Snively lauds were consumed by the reading public both alongside and through local color’s depictions of ruined plantations, oozing with “hyacinthine odors.” Perfumes made sure that the musky smells of black labor and anti-black violence did not linger any longer than necessary.

In other words, I will be arguing that southern local color *is* perfume. A means to manage the disruptive aftermath of the war, these stories harnessed the mnemonic power of floral scents to sanitize American history: sweet scents produced the plantation as a site of
stable, peaceful race relations. In addition to sentimentalist war fiction, southern local color embraced narratives of reconciliation between North and South in order to diminish the racial and sectional strife that slavery had engendered. The memories of the Old South that southern local color enshrined promoted stories of healing by way of white racial solidarity. The consolidation of such memories, historian David Blight argues, turned on a collective forgetting of the peculiar institution that led to the Civil War, as well as of the role that African Americans played in their own emancipation. The sense of smell—its relationship to memory, as well as the politics of who had the capacity to smell, and whose body smelled, and what it smelled like—thus reflects and refracts the symbolic force of the overlooked flowers that pepper local color’s southern pastoral. Scholarly focus on the transnational contexts, phonic preoccupations and anthropological origins of local color has not yet accounted for the floral perfumes that instantiate, and the musky odors that disturb, the social hierarchies that local served to formalize.

Literary criticism has failed to stop and smell the roses. Tracing the smell of southern local color, from Higginson’s Civil War memoir to Chopin’s *The Awakening*, encourages us to reconfigure our views of the genre, and of national memory as means of perfuming, quite literally, presently-existing undesirable bodies. When read with and against African American writers’ accounts of the south, such as Charles Chesnutt’s *Conjure Woman* tales, local color smells equally of flowers and of black life. As with Brown’s redolent history of black sovereignty, Chesnutt reveals the sense of smell to be not merely an instrument of national amnesia, but an active force that simultaneously disrupts that amnesia with musky memories of a recent past and ongoing violence. Whereas victuals and verse articulated black citizenship *through* gustatory pleasure, local color leveraged olfactory pleasure to transform
racial violence into pastoral peace. In the end, though, the sense of smell troubled local
color: if amnesia about the Civil War sustained national reconciliation, then memory itself
depended on olfactory ruptures.

**Oppressive Flowers**

Published in 1869, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* is a memoir of Thomas Wentworth
Higginson’s service leading the first regiment of black soldiers in the Union Army. Before
the war Higginson had been a Unitarian minister in Massachusetts, and was well known as
an antislavery disunionist. (He had led a small group that stormed a Boston courthouse in
order to prevent fugitive slave Anthony Burns from being extradited.) In addition, he was a
popular horticultural writer, and published numerous essays in *The Atlantic Monthly*, including
“Water-lilies” (1858), “April Days” (1861) and “Procession of the Flowers” (1862). Although
the Civil War is often characterized in American literary history as the event that decisively
ended American romance and began American realism, *Army Life* reads less as a realist
depiction of war, in the vein of Crane’s often-cited *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and more
as romantic nature writing, akin to Thoreau’s *Walden*. Many scholars have addressed
Higginson’s “romance of race,” his treatment of African Americans as horticultural objects
of study and fascination. In his essay “Flowers of Manhood,” Christopher Looby surveys the
conjunction of floral beauty and black masculinity, arguing that Higginson “anticipated with
startling precision the same specular association of tropical flora and gorgeous nude black
men” that African American artists later criticized [109]. Jennifer James has underscored
Higginson’s romantic racialism even more specifically: “Whether infantilizing, dissecting,
eroticizing, or romanticizing the black male body, Higginson’s objectification is a sure sign
that he does not place them on a plane equal to whites” [123]. Although *Army Life* does
conflate racial and floral bodies, I want to suggest that the tension between the *smells* of the
two translates into a formal tension: the South’s redolent environment keeps disrupting the
temporal distance that the memoir—a genre of reminiscence—requires.

The sanitized antebellum race relations that southern local color depicted can be
traced back to *Army Life*, which describes the war not as an historical rupture, but rather as
an opportunity for ethnographic and floricultural research. Higginson’s memoir evacuates
human presence from the southern landscape, and thereby papers over the *smells* of slavery
and of black social life with the *smells* of botanical life. Published in the early years of
Reconstruction, *Army Life* puts floral fragrances in the service of selective memory.

Beginning with Higginson’s horticultural essays is instructive, because they illuminate his
tendency to smell war in a field of flowers, and to smell flowers in the midst war. In 1861,
the first year of the Civil War, *The Atlantic* published his essay “April Days,” a pseudo-
transcendentalist musing on nature and time. In it, Higginson likens picking a New England
mayflower to “following in the footsteps of some spendthrift army which has scattered the
contents of its treasure-chest among beds of scented moss…The hands go wandering over
the moss as over the keys of a piano, and bring forth odors for melodies” [38]. Comparing
the plucking of a flower to a wasteful regiment, and scented moss to a treasure chest,
Higginson figures inhalation as an act of disorderly conduct. His analogy paradoxically weds
the pastoral scent of a flower to a kind of wartime proprietary destruction. Moreover, the
shift in metaphor from the first sentence to the next—the touch of moss is the touch of the
piano keys is the sound of the piano is the smell of the moss—implies that ceding control of
one’s own sensorium involves the opposite of “following in the footsteps of a spendthrift army”; it is a gleaning, rather than a scattering, of the treasured senses. Thus, the joy that tethers the flower’s smell to the spendthrift army puts the nationalistic jingoism associated with the military in the service of an individual sensory enthusiasm.

The martial smell of the New England mayflower augured events to come. Months after his regiment had undergone training, Higginson and his soldiers were dispatched to the coastal Florida town of Fernandina. The Union army already had fought successfully there, and it was the regiment’s job to carry the proclamation of freedom, to call freed slaves to service, and to occupy the ransacked town. Little had been left behind in tact. But one “valuable article” remained in a plantation house, “a piano-forte, for which a regular packing-box lay invitingly ready outside” [59]. In according with military policy, Higginson intends to burn the piano, but he cannot bring himself to do so:

I should have left the piano in it, but for the seduction of that box. With such a receptacle all ready, even to the cover, it would have seemed like flying in the face of Providence not to put the piano in. I ordered it removed, therefore, and afterwards presented it to the school for colored children at Fernandina. This I mention because it was the only article of property I ever took, or knowingly suffered to be taken, in the enemy’s country. [60]

Here, the piano metonymically invokes the ineffable scent of the piano-like New England moss. Depicting the act of theft as a seduction, Higginson distinguishes his regiment from the spendthrift army that disregards all propriety by laying treasures to waste. The smell of the “spendthrift” mayflower seeps into the piano, as its melodies are the traces of the moss’s odors, which Higginson’s playful touch coaxes out. A symbolic and sensory object, the piano is the point of contact upon which the nebulous forms of smell and sound condensate. Packing up the piano can be traced back to the metaphorical playing of the piano keys, a performance that conjures fragrant mayflowers.
The temporal confusion in the paragraph, I would suggest, is rooted in the olfactory reverberations of “April Days.” The conditional structure of Higginson’s encounter with the piano—he \textit{should have} burned it, although doing so \textit{would have} been regretful—details events that did not occur in the past, but for which years later he can still imagine the consequences. Higginson quickly disrupts his speculative musings to recount what did take place: he “removed” it and gave it to the town’s black schoolchildren. He then returns to the present moment of writing to “mention” that it was the only piece of property he ever took. The spendthrift scents that bleed into Higginson’s memoir make a past event viscerally present: the scene’s temporal slippage highlights the disjuncture between the event and its narration. By way of prolepsis, the odoriferous moss into which Higginson sunk his fingers in 1861 emits scents that open onto the regiment that, two years later, saved a slave owner’s piano in order to donate it to those who, like the piano, were “contraband” set free by northern goodwill. Such an act of proprietary transference and recontextualization enables a musical instrument to overwrite the history of objectification that it represents. Thus, the intertextual commingling of pastoral “odors for melodies” with \textit{Army Life}'s traces of antebellum racial violence represents a double movement between the olfactory pleasures of flowers and the residue of oppression sounded by the odorous piano.

What becomes clear in the miasmic relay between “April Days” and \textit{Army Life} is that past smells constantly interrupt, disrupt, and erupt into the present: the otherwise inodorate moment when Higginson’s regiment finds the piano will always carry with it the martial whiff of a New England mayflower. The memoir’s many olfactory ruptures occur when the depiction of war is explicitly at stake. In one memorable scene, Higginson and his troops enter Jacksonville in order to barricade the city’s streets with felled trees. He recollects the
pain of having to sacrifice his “beautiful lindens; but it was no time for aesthetics. As the giants lay on the ground, still scenting the air with abundant bloom, I used to rein up my horse and watching the children playing hide-and-seek among their branches” [82]. In their resurrection of the past, the arboreal scents prompt a temporal confusion reflected in the syntactical slippage: the blooms “still scenting” the air shade into an ongoing, past action of having “used to” rein up his horse and watch children “playing.” Like the “pine woods, whose resinous smell” Higginson “can still remember,” botanical fragrances organize the memoir’s aesthetic of interwoven time, even though Higginson avows there is “no time” for such an aesthetic (55). As the metaphorical substitution of Jacksonville’s fallen linden trees for its fallen soldiers suggests, *Army Life* uses botanical smells to remember war as an aesthetic, rather than odious, experience.

This aesthetic experience, however, has its limits. Shortly after lingering in the scent of the trees, Higginson notes the “good behavior” of his soldiers, which he attributes to the fact that they had “too much pride in their character…to tarnish it by any misdeeds” (83). Yet, he remarks, “the spot was pointed out to me where two of our leading men had seen their brothers hanged by Lynch law; many of them had private wrongs to avenge” (83). Deeming these wrongs private defers national responsibility for lynching and forecloses the possibility of public remediation. Nonetheless, that this spot still scents the air with linden trees and rotting flesh memorializes past, and augurs future, racial violence. The lindens that for Higginson smell of a pastoral aesthetic for the soldiers reek of murder. For if inhaling the sweet fragrance of the linden places the carefree, playing children in an ongoing, eternal present, so too does it place in an eternal present those who were hung on its limbs. In short, the soldiers’ explicit connection between linden and lynching trees—between the
smell of botanical life and the smell of maimed black flesh—underscores the everyday violence that the memoir’s olfactory preoccupations and temporal slippages sublimate into the South’s landscape. The soldiers that point out the lynching tree also point out the memoir’s deodorization of death, not to mention the present-day smells of black labor and social life that are otherwise unrepresented.

Nonetheless, the beautiful lindens that conjure the smell of burning black flesh allow Higginson to make a clear distinction between the North and the South, a distinction based on the fragrances of their respective environments. Northern trees would never smell like lynching trees:

> It seemed to me also that the woods had not those pure, clean *innocent* odors which so abound in the New England forest in early spring; but there was something luscious, voluptuous, almost oppressively fragrant about the magnolias, as if they belonged not to Hebe, but to Magdalen. [111]

Higginson equates the “pure, clean *innocent*” odors of New England with an Edenic existence, akin to Greek mythology’s goddess of youth. Conversely, he associates the magnolias, southern pastoral icon that they are, with the archetypal Christian prostitute. In her anthropology of smell, Constance Classen posits, “Victorian writers associated floral odors with virtue and traditional values, and ascribed to them the therapeutic powers of the unspoiled countryside” [*Worlds of Sense* 30]. Gendering these regional fragrances recasts the North in terms of sweet-smelling, ethereal “true” womanhood. Conversely, musky strong odors registered prostitutes and other women who “were considered traitors to the ideal of femininity and objects of disgust” [Classen et. al. 164]. Smelling of aberrant female sexuality, the South is a fallen woman. The effect of Higginson’s metaphor however, is to turn “oppressive” from an adjective often ascribed to the slave system he was fighting against to a
description of stifling, soupy air. In *Army Life*, the musky smells of the magnolia are as physically oppressive as the enslavement against which the regiment fought.

Thus, to gender regional aromas is to transform oppression from an institutionalized (in)human condition into a symptom of tropical botany. Yet in Higginson’s memoir, the south oscillates between being a Magdalen-like temptress or a Hebe-like flower girl: “How can I ever describe the charm and picturesqueness of our summer life? …[The] camp was a little way off on one side, the negro-quarters of the plantation on the other…Visitors riding upon horseback, their hands full of jasmine and wild roses; and the sweet sunny air all perfumed with magnolias and the Southern pine” [104]. Sandwiched between a rhetorical question and a pastoral reverie, the shifty transformation of the plantation into a military camp, and slave-quarters into “negro quarters,” almost gets forgotten. The sweet sunny air performs the work of Magdalen, who seduces the nose into amnesia; by the end of the paragraph, the reader smells jasmine, roses, magnolias and pine, rather than the odor of the soldiers’ living quarters. In reality, military camp was not hospitable to an idyllic existence, let alone sustaining life: Higginson’s regiment was “decimated by pleurisy and pneumonia,” and “black troops did not receive sufficient medical attention” [Wineapple 139]. To rub salt in an untreated wound, the regiment’s salary had been cut from thirteen to ten dollars per month. The mere gesture towards these conditions that the “negro-quarters of the plantation” make get lost and forgotten both in Higginson’s emphasis on the picturesque and amidst the disorienting syntactical construction. The camps exist in the definite past in the same paragraph in which visitors presently are “riding” upon horseback, bearing flowers that perfumed a freedom so limited that it seemed not to have been proclaimed at all.
Rather than detailing the discordance between camp life and *Army Life*’s rosy recollections thereof, I want to note the way in which feminized floral fragrances, such as that of the jasmine and magnolias, were deployed to paper over that discordance. This is perhaps most clear in a later episode when an officer’s wife visits, with their baby daughter Annie in tow. Preparations are made to accommodate her, including the installation of “a very respectable” wife of one of the black sergeants as nursery maid [141]. “During the day,” Higginson writes, “[Annie] might be seen in her nurse’s arms…her scarlet costume looking very pretty amidst the shining black cheeks and neat blue uniforms of the soldiers” [141]. The contrast between the baby’s glowing whiteness with the soldiers’ shining blackness is apparent when Higginson sees that “one of the hostlers had something black and round…It proved to be his baby, a plump, shiny thing…This was Baby Number Two” [144]. The African American baby’s nickname tacitly hails Annie as Baby Number One. “I can see [Annie] now,” Higginson reminisces, “the fresh little rose thing, in her scarlet wrappings, with one round and dimpled arm thrust forth through the netting, and the other grasping an armful of blushing roses and fragrant magnolias” [146]. Dressed to look like a rose, Annie remediates the South’s oppressive lusciousness. Yet, given her Magdalen-like magnolia, she simultaneously is soiled by that lusciousness; the magnolia punctures the virginal femininity of the “rose thing.” The sweet yet oversweet smells of southern flora conflate northern innocence and southern oppression. Annie, the rose thing holding roses, induces a rupture of the sensory that reveals Higginson’s desire to smell flowers instead of black life. More broadly, the narrative rupture that Higginson’s disorienting syntax and temporal sliding effect shows how *Army Life*’s oppressively pastoral fragrances—delivered in their most raced and gendered form—inaugurate the new slippery, olfactory terrain of the Civil War memory.
Perfume

A peculiar incident befell Higginson in South Carolina. Enjoying a nighttime swim in a river, he suddenly apprehended that the river had shifted its current, pulling him in the wrong direction. Higginson was lost in unknown territory. He recalls his fear that dogs will sniff him out: “I knew that, although water baffled their scent, they yet could recognize…the approach of any person across water as readily as by land; of the vigilance of all dogs by night every traveler among Southern plantations has ample demonstration” [120 – 121]. As any reader of nineteenth-century literature would know, canine noses are slavery’s forensic officers. For African Americans fleeing enslavement, the body’s scent was a traceable curse. A white officer to a regiment of recently emancipated slaves, Higginson identifies as a fugitive through his olfactory vulnerability to the dogs. Held in watery abeyance, like the fractured nation itself, he transforms fugitivity from a fleeing from ownership to a fleeing from one’s own odorous body.

By expressing fear that his body odor will give him away to Confederates, Higginson equates himself with his black regiment. This fear suggests that to be black is to have a body that others can smell. Informed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific racialism, Higginson believed not only that African Americans had bodies that smelled, but also that they had a stronger capacity to smell things. Of his soldiers, he remarks, “[Oppression] simply crushes the upper faculties of the head, and crowds everything into the perceptive organs” [10]. African Americans, he posits, have a stronger sense of smell because slavery has reduced them to a savage state. Whereas Higginson’s statement posits that the capacity to smell is an effect of social conditions, such as slavery, many maintained that one’s capacity
to smell was biologically determined. Nineteenth-century evolutionary scientists set forth a racial hierarchy based on the assumption that whites had evolved more quickly than the nonwhite races. Higginson anticipates by two years Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, which professed that “Negroes and Indians,” like less-evolved mammals, like dogs even, can “recognize persons in the dark by their odor” because of their keen sense of smell [18]. The sense of smell does not simply mark, but biologizes racial difference. Higginson’s figuration of blackness as the ability to smell and to be smelled manifests the same logic. The South Carolina shifting river is an apt metaphor for the retrogression or “backwards” time that smelly and smell-driven nonwhite people embodied.

My concern is not to levy criticism against Higginson for subscribing to scientific racism, even as he worked earnestly to abolish slavery. It is rather to suggest that nineteenth-century science’s naturalization of racial difference made it possible to transform the sense of smell into a metonym for African Americans. What is clear is that Higginson was not exceptional in his association of smell with blackness. For instance, William Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel* (1853) suspends the narrative halfway through in order to remark on the phenomenon of white men in the Free States being mistaken for black men. The narrator quotes an Ohio newspaper article stating that the only way to determine whether a man who “might be taken for white by sight” is of “voting color” is to invest the court “with smelling powers,” so that “if a man don’t exhale the constitutional smell, he shall not vote” [150]. By way of paradox, the “constitutional smell” that a voter must emit is no smell at all: to vote, one must be a Caucasian, and science had established that Caucasians are inodorate. To

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3 Like Darwin, Freud believed that bipedalism placed a distance between the nose and the ground, thereby rendering odor perception vestigial. Freud believed that the repression of smell was a vital precondition for the emergence of civilization. C.F. Avery Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life* (2008).
smell of the Constitution is *not* to smell. In short, democratic participation required a person to be a disembodied citizen.

Such a notion of legal institutions being able to sniff out a person’s race resonated well after the Civil War, when race science determined that blood, not skin color, indicated racial origin. But it was not that smell disclosed race: smell *was* race. The same year that *Army Life* was published, poet, painter, and transcendentalist C.P. Cranch made an unusual appeal to the readers of *Putnam’s Monthly*. In his “Plea for the Sense of Smell,” he argued that the arts and sciences fail to take smell as a serious object of study:

> While Seeing, Hearing, Tasting, Feeling are honored and privileged and educated, poor Smelling must forsooth have an equivocal position, and stand out in the cold oftentimes, like the servant of the others, when he is fairly entitled to equal suffrage, and equal rights, privileged education… [The nose] is in some respects treated as the descendants of Ham are treated by the Caucasian. And in spite of any declaration of independence, which declares him the equal of his brothers, he is laughed at or treated in silent contempt as inferior. [315]

Amidst debates about citizenship, which had been granted to African Americans just one year earlier, the comparison of a neglected sense to an oppressed population was far from coincidental. The people most associated with the primitive sense of smell, the “descendants of Ham,” are themselves made to stand in for that perception. All the while, the people most associated with “Seeing” and “Hearing” are figures for those nobler perceptions. By extension, if black people were themselves incapable of aesthetic judgment, then so too the sense of smell existed outside the realm of art and science. Cranch posits that the savagery of the sense of smell and the savagery of non-white people are two mutually sustaining myths. With its overtly nationalist vocabulary, “Plea” advocates for civic equality across the sensorium, something like a politics of olfactory respectability. The sense of smell needs to be uplifted so as to secure the “equal rights” to which it is entitled.
Cranch was not alone in his mission to achieve sensory equality. In 1879, music critic Henry Finck published an essay in *Harper's Monthly* on “The Aesthetic Value of the Sense of Smell,” in which he argued that smell, like sound and color, should become the basis of an art.⁴ He maintains, “Psychologists and physiologists have so persistently and universally undervalued and misrepresented the sense of smell that men have come to feel almost ashamed of having it” [794]. Like Cranch, Finck argues that making smell an art—through gardens, perfumery, and an imagined “smell piano” that produces “harmonies and contrasts of odors”—will effect racial and social uplift [798]. Although in “savages” and the lower classes “the physical acuteness of the sense is very high, the aesthetic sensibility is at the minimum” [794]. Thus, to transform smell into a refined art will help racial and social others to train and refine their noses, and more broadly, will help to civilize them. Together, their pleas represented an attempt to de-stigmatize the capacity to smell. To give smell aesthetic value would make it socially acceptable for upper- and middle-class Anglo-Americans to use their noses, without fear of seeming uncivilized, and simultaneously it would facilitate the assimilation of the “descendants of Ham.”

For Cranch, Finck and others, the project of aestheticizing smell entailed the refinement of nonwhite American and lower class noses to appreciate certain scents, as well as to render them sensitive to their own bodily odors, in the hopes that they would learn to deodorize themselves. Because they smelled bad, many Americans were forced to stand out in the cold oftentimes. In 1870, Brooklyn’s Reverend T. De Witt Talmage wrote a newspaper article arguing that foul-smelling people had no place in his church. Mark Twain responded

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⁴ In response to Finck, experimental psychologist Joseph Jastrow—who worked alongside Charles Saunders Peirce—also made a “Plea for the Sense of Smell” in *Science* magazine. He lamented, “division of the five senses into higher and lower has carried with it both a moral and an aesthetic implication” [520]. Jastrow claims that because smell inhabits the bottom of the sensory hierarchy, it is not taken seriously in the sciences and arts.
in *The Galaxy* with a satirical essay, “About Smells,” that imagines Talmage as an apostle who will not preach to “people of villainous odor” [722]. Twain wryly states that if heaven were home to “a number of negroes, and Esquimaux, and Terra del Fuegans, and Arabs, and a few Indians,” Talmage would absent himself [721]. What Talmage calls olfactory sensitivity Twain calls racism and classism. During this period, the idea that nonwhite people smelled bad was a commonplace. For instance, British sexologist Havelock Ellis asserted, “It is certainly true that the white races smell less strongly than most of the dark races, odor seeming to be correlated to some extent with intensity of pigmentation” [61]. Fortunately, if smell was as immutable as melanin, then mass-marketed perfumes arrived on the market to mask that biological determination. In the nineteenth century, to smell of “odoriferous spirits” extracted from flowers was to mark oneself as feminine, upper class and/or white (Hebe), whereas to smell of musk was to mark oneself as hypersexual, lower class, and/or nonwhite (Magdalen). In light of the widespread internalization of smell as an iteration of race, class and gender, body odor became something to suppress. Consequently, synthetic perfumes and underarm deodorant (invented in 1881) became central to the manipulation of biological identity: one could either strip the body of its natural olfactory markers with deodorant, or infuse it with an “ideal olfactory identity” with perfume [Classen et. al. 180].

My concern here is to show that perfumery was a means to whitewash blackness and, further, a way to whitewash national history, specifically African American contributions to the Civil War. In his advocacy for social reform and uplift through the aestheticization of

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5 In his study of smells in nineteenth-century France, Alain Corbin remarks, “Delicate scents set the seal on the image of a diaphanous body that, it was hoped, simply reflected the soul” [186]. By the 1890s, etiquette books counseled women in the judicious use of floral perfumes, which were considered as delicate, ethereal and fragile as white womanhood itself. Flowery soaps, perfumes, and colognes were marketed solely for women, many whom during this time period were named after flowers; literature gives us Daisy Miller, Lily Bart, and later Rosa Coldfield.
smell, Cranch praised the floral fragrances of white womanhood—the olfactory ideal—in terms of the southern pastoral. The “faint perfume” of a lady “will carry one’s thoughts…to the flower-garden and the conservatory,” he avows. “She will move about among those of the coarser sex like the sweet south” [317]. Cranch implies that immigrants, African Americans, and the lower classes should aspire to smell like the American South, a region that in 1869 smelled more like ruined, defunct plantations and war memorials. A short *New York Times* travel piece announced that Charleston “is a city of roses, and the beautiful blossoms fairly run riot, the air is loaded with their odors” [“Paris and Athens” 12]. The flowery fragrances both honor and perfume the corpses of the Confederate dead, and thereby transform the city into an olfactory escape or “retreat from the glare of these leveling and obtrusive times” [12]. Because flowers indexed true womanhood and the cult of domesticity, their fragrances served to stabilize the chaos of postbellum, modern life by aestheticizing a gruesome past—as Higginson did—and anesthetizing a sorrowful present.

When juxtaposed, Cranch’s faintly perfumed lady and the *Times*’s odoriferous south show how flowers sanitized national memory of the war. “How can there be wrath and harsh words and brutal deeds,” Cranch asks, “where flowers are breathing out the perfumes which seem so naturally absorbed by the woman that they may be called feminine?” [317]. An echo of Higginson’s equation of Hebe with “innocent odors,” here white womanhood becomes both a figurative and embodied repository of amnesia. Smelling like the south because they smell like flowers, white female bodies erase “brutal deeds” from national memory. Indeed, Cranch’s need to pose the matter as a question implies the indeterminacy of the new nationalism forged out of the war, a nationalism predicated on forgetting the “wrath” between the North and South that slavery incited. The use of feminine, floral
fragrances to honor the Civil War dead first occurred in Charleston in 1865, when the city’s black population held a May Day ceremony. David Blight remarks, “Flowers were blooming everywhere amidst the ruins of Charleston; for so many, remembrance…was but a fragrance full of warring emotions” [68]. What was called the “festival of flowers”—the annual ritual of dropping spring flowers on war graves—took hold in the North as Decoration Day, and then in 1869, Memorial Day. But the ceremony quickly became a tradition that excluded black participation. Across the nation white men and women from the North and South reunited, reconciled, and remembered only that each side had fought nobly, downplaying “the demonstrations by blacks of their public duties as citizens” [Blight 110]. Every Memorial Day the nation smelled of flowers and of forgetting. The South’s many flower gardens and memorials made every day a Decoration Day. The heavy odor of the roses in Charleston that the Times remarked upon, then, implicitly lays claim to the role of white, feminized floral scents in the project of willed amnesia.

The American South became a botanically scented white woman writ large, whose perfumed body obfuscated the smell of black labor, both past and present. Part of the threat to these rhetorical and material perfuming practices was the smell of violent warfare that African Americans continued to exude. In 1903 the city of Atlanta intended to pass an ordinance that would ban foul-smelling people from streetcars. The New York Times ran a brief article about it entitled “An Olfactory Crusade,” stating:

By ‘odors’ the Council means those scents which emanate from persons who work in factories, especially those devoted to the manufacture of guano. But the ordinance is so broadly framed that the car conductor will have power to eject any person from whom emanates a smell offensive to any other passenger. [1]
Guano is manure whose high nitrate levels make it ideal as fertilizer and for use in
gunpowder and other explosives. So important was guano that in 1856 the United States
passed the Guano Islands Act, which allowed American citizens to possess any “unclaimed”
Pacific island where guano was found. Once the guano was extracted, the island could then
be dispossessed. Although by the turn-of-the-century artificial fertilizers had replaced guano,
the abhorrence of its smell produced a form of social power that cut two ways. Like the
uncanny return of the repressed, the valuable manure, pillaged abroad, “reeked” havoc at
home, all the while displacing the odor and odium of imperialism’s dirty work onto the
bodies of its alienated citizens. The disagreeability of these class and racial odors had more to
do with those who made an issue of it. What the ordinance presupposes is that the persons
offended by the workers’ bodily smell do not themselves smell offensive, as though they
have inodorate bodies. Moreover, the ordinance locates the danger of odor in the fact that
people carry the smell of their work beyond the parameters of the factory: the city itself is a
guano factory, and all of Atlanta industrial labor. Revolving around a streetcar, the ordinance
echoes the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which Homer Plessy argued that
being labeled “black” devalued his reputation. The ability of a discernable odor to body-
swap, as it were, is a breach of privacy and a threat to individual reputation. All of a sudden,
odors have melanin.

Jim Crow’s conductors are now slavery’s dogs. This social policy is a kind of
olfactory profiling, in which the streetcar conductor’s ability to discriminate among particular
bodily odors is enough to warrant racial segregation. As with the *Clotel’s* inclusion of a
newspaper article on “constitutional smells,” the Atlanta ordinance uses olfactory perception
to ensure that a passenger’s skin color will not fool the eyes. Classen observes, “It is not only
the strong emotional appeal of smell which makes odors useful for classifying others, but also the fact that it can be perceived at a distance and does not require intimate contact to be experienced” [103]. The smell of lower class, racialized bodies trumps the individual’s skin color precisely because it exists prior to a physical encounter. Hence, smell’s ability to produce intimacy by way of miasma performatively creates personal intercourse where there was none prior. One need only smell a person to know the company that he/she keeps. And yet the very act of smelling someone already produces a dangerously close interracial liaison.

Accompanying racial segregation, the ordinance was a strategy by which to control particular communities and individuals through the control of odors. Yet the ordinance makes clear that the foul and the fragrant, to riff on Corbin, are fictional categories: the foul already has irrupted into the fragrant, and the fragrant has already absorbed the foul into itself. Classen notes, for instance, that odors come “to symbolize not only the qualities of the other, but also the ability of the other to disrupt one’s own order” [103]. In the case of the guano factory, the uncanny irruption of imperialism into the homeland is embodied by the eruption of guano throughout the city by way of the nation’s marginalized “carriers.” Because familiarity and extended exposure dull particular odors, the workers probably found the odor inoffensive, or did not smell it at all. But perhaps more importantly, the indexical relationship between guano’s excremental smell and the smell of its product, gunpowder, summons the specter of civil warfare. That the carriers would be Atlanta’s black population, that they would be the ones to disseminate the smell that evoked and literally fueled the Civil War, registers smell as a powerful force for integrating the indiscriminate casualties of national memory—such as Capt. Andre Callioux and the First South Carolina Volunteers of African Descent—with the indiscriminate casualties of imperialism. Like the direction of a
South Carolina river shifting its current, fragrant flowers lead right back to the odorous bodies that disrupt the nation’s perfumed race relations.

**Local Odor**

In closing this chapter, I turn toward a consideration of the olfactory representations that southern local color used to coerce readers into reflecting nostalgically upon the American South. In doing so it is useful to recall *Army Life in a Black Regiment*’s own status as a quaint depiction of the natural world—a world that included black life. The memoir was published in 1869 to little notice. It, and Higginson’s writings more generally, likewise has received scant critical attention. William Dean Howells instructs as to why *Army Life* fell through the cracks of American literary production. Published in 1869, the memoir provided a Yankee’s triumphant account of the Civil War at a time when the nation was far more preoccupied with the arduous task of regional reconciliation than in reopening old wounds. In *The Atlantic Monthly*, which had published chapters from *Army Life* between 1864 and 1867, Howells began his review of Higginson’s “charming” story by noting that the “lively national mind is dwelling upon the Chinese rather than the negro at present” and was “jaded by the thought of a race with which it was really occupied a long time” [644; 643]. The nation’s focus had shifted from the problem of black emancipation to that of Asian immigration. But if the topic of the Union army’s black soldiers bored the reading public, an account of a traveler’s excursions into a picturesque tropical region certainly would pique their interest. Howells accordingly characterized *Army Life* as a “series of carefully wrought studies of negro character as a phase of humanity, and of graphically recounted episodes of
regimented or personal adventure, all full of the peculiar life of the Southern scenery” [644]. In describing the memoir not as a war story, but as a kind of ethnographic romance, a “charming picture,” Howells interpellates *Army Life* into the emergent genre of local color, also known as regional writing, a genre that he championed as a matter of national importance. Local color and regionalism, not accounts of war, served the cause of unifying national identity.

First appearing in *The Atlantic* in 1864 to describe George Eliot’s *Romola*, “local color” generally names short fiction, written between the 1870s and early 1900s, that produces nostalgia by documenting regionally specific lifestyles lost to modernization. “Its ubiquitous appearance in late-nineteenth-century periodicals and its extraordinary popularity with the upper-middle-class reading public testify to the cultural and literary ground it covered,” Stephanie Foote asserts [12]. Arguing that local color helped to justify occupation of the southern states during Reconstruction, Jennifer Greeson shows how the genre “created narratives that explained the underdevelopment of a region as the product of the inferiority of its native inhabitants” by providing “exuberant detail of southern natural resources, coupled with copious evidence of degeneracy in southern people, white and black” (503). Given the political uses to which regional writing and local color were put—to reinforce social hierarchies—I want to make explicit what Howells’s review of *Army Life* leaves implicit: in postwar literature, “negro character” is “southern scenery.” However unwittingly, Howells indicates that national identity requires the transformation of black citizenship into botanical scenery. Local color’s redolent smells of ruined plantations, I argue, effect this transformation. Specifically, Sara Orne Jewett’s “A War Debt,” Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and Charles Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine” are indicators
that “natural” fragrances represented a means to reinforce the nation’s social order. What the
descriptive smells offer, in other words, is a political and aesthetic evaluation of black
citizenship as fundamentally unnatural.

Like Army Life in a Black Regiment, Sarah Orne Jewett’s Civil War stories have largely
fallen out of critical favor, perhaps because they represent, in Sandra Zagarell’s words, “a
racialized historical narrative to promote post-Civil War national reunion” [359] Jewett’s
1895 “A War Debt,” which originally appeared in Harper’s, asserts that national reunion
requires the reconstitution of a racially superior, Anglo-Saxon elite in the Northeast and the
reinstitutionalization of racial feudalism in the American South. The story focuses on two
war-damaged families, the New England Burtons and the Virginian Bellamys, whose shared
English heritage and close antebellum ties figure the war as a near-destruction of America’s
natural racial aristocracy. One day the young Tom Burton—parentless because of the war—
receives from his grandmother a cup, which his late father, a Union soldier, had stolen from
the Bellamy plantation house. The grandmother remarks that it was “a beautiful old house
sacked and burnt, and everything scattered that was saved” [228]. The scattered treasures
evoke the mayflowers and moss, the scattered treasures of “April Days.” Tom mourns the
plantation house, whose objects—including its objectified human labor—were “scattered”
about by the Union army. As the New England mayflower’s scent miasmically and
intertextually seeps into the Fernandina plantation house’s piano, so too does it scent the
Bellamy family’s heirloom. Like Higginson, Tom’s father stole the cup in order to save it
from destruction. Casting Northern expiation of guilt in terms of economic obligation in its
title and plot, “A War Debt” turns on Tom’s pilgrimage to the South, his goal to return the
heirloom to the Bellamys. There he meets the family’s sole surviving members, which
include a former Confederate colonel and his wife, and their granddaughter, who predictably marries Tom.

The reunion of North and South that the marriage symbolizes counteracts the threat posed by black emancipation, a threat that is always defused by the ruined plantation’s olfactory address. For instance, the morning that Tom awakens in the ruined plantation house, he smells the “fragrance of ripe grapes and the autumn air” [236]. This inhalation coincides with the sound of old Col. Bellamy’s footsteps and his “imperious voice” addressing the old servant, Milton, who “was alternately upbraided and spoken with most intimately and with friendly approval” [236]. The wavering sound of black subjugation—both critical and approving—establishes Col. Bellamy as benevolently paternalistic. But focalized through the smell of ripe, uncultivated plants, the oscillating verbal address is the residue of shifting olfactory orientations. The fragrance is that of a plant not being harvested, not being attended to, by slave labor. What Tom smells is, in short, the shift from slave to wage labor, a shift as surreptitious as the shift from racist censure to fatherly approval. This moment opens onto an ensuing scene, wherein Tom strolls through the plantation’s old garden. The narrator describes “that antique fragrance—the faint pungent odor which wakes the utmost memories of the past…There was a fine fragrance of grapes through the undergrowth, but the whole place was completely ruined” [236]. The smell of the old garden cannot be divorced from the ruination of the plantation. The uncultivated garden reeks of social leveling. The fragrance of grapes is “fine” not despite the plantation’s ruination, but because of it. Later, when “a group of negroes” comes with “bags and baskets” to Col. Bellamy’s door, “with their requests and complaints,” Tom describes them as “worse
than children” [236]. The antique smells and pungent odors reawaken fond memories of antebellum life and memorialize racial hierarchies.

The grapes, however, accrue a more complicated smell when read with and against Charles Chesnutt’s 1899 local color plantation story “The Goophered Grapevine.” Like his other Conjure Woman tales, “The Goophered Grapevine” is a story within a story. The framework consists of a husband and wife from northern Ohio who are “engaged in grape-culture” and move to North Carolina for a change in climate [31]. They hope to carry on the business there, since “conditions in the South” had “somewhat settled” since the war, and “in conjunction with the soil, ideal for grape-culture,” the “labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song” [31]. At the McAdoo grapevine plantation, the couple encounters Uncle Julius (Milton reincarnated as a trickster), an old former slave who informs them that the grapevines are “goophered,” or bewitched. The story, in Uncle Julius’s account, involves Mr. McAdoo getting a conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, to goopher the grapevines, so that his slaves will stop eating his crop. Aunt Peggy assures him that anyone who eats the grapes will die within one year. Shortly thereafter, a newly purchased slave named Henry, who is unaware of the curse, is brought to work on the plantation. As Uncle Julius says, “[He] smell de grapes en see de vimes, an atter dahk de fus’ thing he done wuz ter slip off ter de grapevimes ‘dout sayin’ nuffin ter nobody” [38]. As a result, Henry comes to embody the grapevines: when they thrive in the spring, he thrives, and when they wither in the winter, he becomes frail. All the while, McAdoo takes advice from a quack in an attempt to increase his vineyard’s productivity. The bad agricultural advice ends up killing the grapes and, therefore, Henry.
Whereas the “antique” fragrance of grapes that Tom smells offers a sense of safe
detachment from the past, the smell of the grapes that Henry encounters cannot be
extricated from the scene of the story’s telling, the exchange between Uncle Julius and the
Midwestern couple, an exchange upon which the future of the New South hinges. For the
point of Uncle Julius’s story is to deter the couple from buying the vineyard, since Uncle
Julius lives in a cabin on the plantation and made a good income off the vineyard’s products.
As Brodhead notes, Uncle Julius’s goophered grapevine is about the commodification and
objectification of humanity. (McAdoo profited equally off his grapes and his slaves; slavery
turned humans into grapes long before Aunt Peggy did.) However, when read in conjunction
with “A War Debt,” the smell of grapes in “The Goophered Grapevine” allows for an
olfactory pleasure that, while momentary, compels one to “slip off” and defy the law of the
plantation system, and, at the time of the story’s telling, the sharecropping system. For
Henry, grapes smell of quotidian resistance; for Uncle Julius, economic independence; for
Tom Burton, social and racial ruination.

The contrast, then, between the subversive smell of grapes for Henry and the antique
fragrance of grapes for Tom figures local color’s backward glance as a looking forward. The
future to which Jewett casts her eye is a commitment to the future of Anglo-American
supremacy, which is crystallized by the gun that Tom gives Colonel Bellamy at the story’s
end. Although the gun is for hunting wildlife, the gift is an approving nod to Southern white
armament, the violent enforcement of Jim Crow, which “A War Debt” couches in the
language of chivalry. Published one year prior to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, “A War Debt” takes the
railroad as an emblem of Jim Crow policies. When Tom rides the train into Virginia, he finds
that his reveries—"the lonely look of the fields, the trees shattered by war, which had not yet had time enough to muffle their broken tops with green"—are disrupted by negroes, who crowded on board the train, lawless, and unequal to holding their liberty with steady hands, [who] looked poor and less respectable than in the old plantation days—it was as if the long discipline of their former state had counted for nothing. [230]

Tom experiences black citizenship as a disruption of the natural world, which the shattered trees and lonely fields embody. Yet his experience contrasts with that of former Confederate soldier and local color writer George Washington Cable. Published in The Century in 1885, his essay “The Freedman’s Case in Equity” describes racial segregation as “rank,” and condemns the white southerners who condone apartheid with their silence. Cable recalls a train ride he took through Alabama, during which an African American mother and her daughter, “neatly and tastefully dressed,” sit in the car designated for people of color [411]. At the next station, nine penitentiary convicts get aboard, a “revolting company” that is “in filthy rags, with vile odors and clanking shackles and chains” [412]. Cable moves to another car because “it stank insufferably,” but the mother and child have to sit on in silence “in that foul hole” because of their skin color [412]. This anecdote yokes the South’s silence to the forceful, involuntary oppression that smell exerts upon the body. For the “vile odors” and insufferable stinking that Cable is privileged enough to escape, to not smell, is the odor of a criminalized citizenry. The olfactory offense of segregation that Cable encounters invests Tom’s experience on the train with the stench of disenfranchisement.

In short, Cable’s essay strips away the antebellum “antique” fragrances and “pungent” floral scent of “A War Debt” to reveal the “vile odors” of postwar apartheid that it perfumes. The fetid smells that accompany segregation and continued forms of enslavement—namely, sharecropping and chain gangs—are what local color seeks to
perfume. The floral smells that titillate Tom’s nose erase the history of violence attached to
the plantation, no longer a space of slavery but of botanical beauty. Here I turn to Kate
Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), a novel that also expresses its nostalgia for antebellum
plantation life by perfuming present-day race relations. Centering on Edna Pontellier and her
struggle to reconcile her increasingly unorthodox views of femininity and motherhood with
the prevailing social attitudes of the South, *The Awakening* begins, tellingly, at the Pontelliers’
summer retreat, a former sugar plantation; the vacation resort, after all, consists of a “main
house” with “cottages” that surround it. Later in New Orleans, Edna stands on the veranda
of the “big house,” which is decorated with “flowers and plants of every description” [69].
Absently picking “a few sprays of Jessamine that grew upon a trellis nearby,” Edna inhales
“the odor of the blossoms and thrusts them into the bosom of her white morning gown”
[73]. As she does this, her domestic servant, pejoratively named “the quadroon”

was following [Edna’s boys] with little quick steps, having assumed a
fictitious animation and alacrity for the occasion. Edna looked straight before
her with a self-absorbed expression on her face. She felt no interest in
anything about her. The street, the children, the flowers growing under her
eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become
antagonistic. [73]

There is a gaping hole in Edna’s inventory: the narrator has elided “the quadroon” from the
list of items.⁶ Although it has become axiomatic that whiteness relies on blackness to define
itself, nonetheless the quadroon’s “fictitious” alacrity for her thankless job calls attention to
the fictive status of blackness, it being a constructed background that all the better
foregrounds Edna’s whiteness. More importantly, Edna’s visual erasure of the quadroon

⁶ For the way in which Chopin’s feminism pitted race against gender, see Michele Birnbaum, ““Alien Hands”:
Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race” in *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oronooko to
Anita Hill*. Eds. Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson.
accompanies her perception of the flowers as visual, rather than olfactory, objects. Her inhalation of the flowery scents precedes the moment when her eyes both overlook the quadroon and look at, without smelling, the flowers. Both the quadroon and Edna’s nose disappear at the same time. Smelling the Jessamine evacuates blackness from the social mechanisms that buttress the “great house.” Jessamine is, however, a flower with a “heavy odor” [109]. As such, it attracts many a pollinator: nineteenth-century discourses about flowers, smells and sex cast Jessamine as a highly erotic, and therefore morally suspect, flower. A few years earlier, for instance, an article on perfumery in the New York Times asserted that girls who sold flowers on the street were soiled by those flowers: “She is constantly under the influence of the perfume of the flowers in which she trades. The scent of violets and rose, not to speak of still more demoralizing flowers, is with her from early dawn till night, and the result is that she rapidly acquires the brazen impudence which is the characteristic of her tribe” [“Perfumery” 4]. Thus, the Jessamine harnesses the invisible, olfactory constructions of racialized sexuality associated with the quadroon’s literary inheritance, interracial sex.

I am suggesting that the novel’s botanical preoccupations, its interest in floral aromas, confirms that the powers and pleasures of the olfactory that Edna enjoys invites the reader to forget the quadroon’s presence in the face of the Jessamine. Much like Higginson, who smelled “rose things” instead of “black things,” for Edna the flower folds the quadroon’s symbolic force into its hypersexualized smell, making her presence moot. As a result, Edna absorbs the promiscuity associated with nonwhite women who fall outside the bounds of normative womanhood. Smell is the sense that facilitates this absorption. The intersection between floral fragrances and visual erasure suggests that blackness is most
visible when it is smelled. Which is to say, *The Awakening* does not erase blackness, but depicts it in olfactory registers. In an echo of Cranch, blackness *is* smell. This is perhaps most evident at the novel’s end when, having awakened to the social inscriptions that metaphorically enslave her, Edna decides to end her life. Attracted to “the seductive odor of the sea,” she goes for a last swim in the ocean, a sensuous site of bodily freedom (30). As she swims, she thinks of the blue-grass meadow she traversed as a child:

> Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s…The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. [137]

The ending refers back to an earlier point in the novel, when Edna remarks on how the hot wind beating in her face reminds her of her native Kentucky, specifically “of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean” (30). The return to the ocean is a return to childhood, and therefore implicitly a return to a much more stringent racial order than the one in Louisiana. Edna’s father was a colonel in the Confederate army who, like Colonel Bellamy, decades later still enjoys telling “amusing plantation stories, experiences, and recollections of old Iberville and his youth, when he hunted ‘possum with some friendly darky,” and who occasionally “related a somber episode of those dark and bitter days” of the Civil War [90]. Clanging spurs, which echo Colonel Bellamy’s footsteps and the simultaneous censure of “old Milton,” mark Edna’s memory of her father. Her recollection thus rests on a militaristic sound that shades into a pastoral sound, which in turn takes on an olfactory form.

> But perhaps more importantly, Edna’s memory of Kentucky’s sounds and smells hinges on the pink. Like most flowers, the pink was introduced to North America’s grasslands by way of human travel from Europe and western Asia. As she casts off her gendered oppression, Edna recalls the pinks’ smell, which allows her to disavow the smells
of her suffocation: for instance, the smell of privileged white masculinity that Robert
Lebrun’s and Mr. Pontellier’s cigars effuse, and the smell of suffocated white motherhood
that the chloroform at Mme. Ragnolle’s deathbed represents. As Edna’s own life ends, the
pinks’ musky odor lingers in her nostrils, a return to a more primitive, infantile state. Indeed,
because the racial sciences associated smell with savagery, and “proved” that African
Americans were savages, the pinks’ musky—Higginson might say “oppressive”—odor
racializes Edna. Musk’s animalistic associations reaffirm the alignment of strong smells with
non-white bodies and aberrant female sexuality; Edna is something of a Magdalen.
Simultaneously, the flower, also called a “Maiden Pink,” at least nominally expresses
diaphanous white womanhood, a transcendence of the corporeal that contrasts with the
muskiness of racial and ethnic hyperembodiment. Infused with the musky odor of pinks as
she returns to an infant-like state, Edna is an incarnation of baby Annie, simultaneously the
“shiny black thing” and the “rose thing.”

To smell the effaced Baby Number Two and the quadroon in this climactic scene is
to smell the black femininity upon which Edna and baby Annie’s white womanhood is
predicated. Yet for Edna, musk is not a bad smell, but a pleasurable sensual and sensory
experience. It is a palliative of the social death that accompanies conforming to ideals of
flower-scented, southern white womanhood. The paradoxically musky pink—the animalistic
flower—reveals how pastoral smells have been constituted through the alienation of “black”
smells. For Chopin blackness is most pleasurable when flowers are smelled because their
aroma naturalizes their presence. To invoke Cranch, the natural fragrances that Edna’s body
is supposed to exude, and in turn paper over the “wrath and harsh words and brutal deeds”
that secure her privilege, constitutes the American South’s, and the nation’s, perfumed
history. But the musky pink, the hypersexual, savage flower, cuts against amnesia about plantation life before and after the war. As Jewett’s story makes clear, local color was a technology by which to perfume race relations after the war, a perfume that both Chesnutt and Cable find rank. Although *The Awakening* is as interested in perfuming everyday life as “A War Debt,” the novel nonetheless leaves a most disruptive odor in the reader’s nose: the last thing that both we and Edna smell is a musky pink, a rupture in and of national memory.

The sense of smell adequately conveys the postbellum project of falsely remembering the Civil War because like history, it is a phenomenologically transactive, unfolding process. In particular, literature draws attention to how smell troubles language, and in turn, troubles histories and stories that hinge on mis-remembering the past; one person’s antique smell or innocent fragrance is another person’s oppressive, fetid odor. *Atlantic Monthly* writer C.J. Sprague addressed the inadequacy of language to describe smell in an essay on “What we Feel” (1867). He noted that we “have no words to express the sensation of smell. We say sweet, sour, bitter; but we have no terms to express the differing sensations produced on us by the rose, lily, violet, and pink” [742]. Sprague implies that olfactory experience exists apart from, outside of, language. Yet, what southern local color’s olfactory preoccupations show is that the sense of smell has very specific literary effects. Higginson’s nature essay “Procession of the Flowers” (1860) ruminates on the fitful relationship between language and smell: “If in the simple process of writing one could physically impart to this page the fragrance of this spray of Azalea beside me, what a wonder it would seem…There is no conceivable beauty of blossom so beautiful as words—none so graceful, none so perfumed” [29 – 30]. Higginson gestures towards the possibility that smell and language are deeply implicated: words are always perfumed. The scent of Azalea vibrates along a continuum of mediation, a vibration
that mirrors the position of the reader, who moves within and against the smells that literature forces her to imagine. In the same way that Dickinson’s multifarious archive prompts a reconsideration of the relationship between sensory ephemera and literary production, similarly Higginson provides a way of thinking about language as an experience that is continuous with, and *constitutive of*, sense perceptions. For Higginson and Dickinson—who sent flowers and food, respectively, with their letters—literature is less about mediating between language and perception, than it is an engagement that sets the two in motion.
Chapter Three. Hear

Flowers infuse Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000 – 1887* (1888) with the smell of national amnesia: the utopian novel begins on Decoration Day, when the protagonist Julian West and his fiancée Edith Bartlett lay “wreaths of flowers” upon the graves of “the soldiers of the north who took part in the war for the preservation of the union of the States” [54 – 55]. In addition to erasing slavery from civil warfare, the dismantling of Reconstruction in 1877—and the subsequent reinvigoration of racial hierarchies—helped to consolidate national identity. During this time, regionalist writing perfumed the past in order to forge a cultural political union from the war’s sectional shards. Simultaneously, utopian fiction attuned its ears to the futuristic sound of social harmony in order to quell concerns about urbanization, mass immigration, and labor unrest. Published during the Gilded Age, Edward Bellamy’s forward-looking novel promised a distraught reading public a safe journey to a clean, orderly and egalitarian future. The novel centers on Julian West, a wealthy Bostonian who, after falling into an impressively deep sleep one night in 1887, wakes up in 2000 to a nation transformed by collectivism. The nineteenth-century “society of cut-throat economic competition has been replaced by a world of harmonious cooperation and abundance for all” [11]. A first-person narrative, *Looking Backward* details Julian’s assimilation into the utopian nation, which has eliminated the “roar and rattle” of class difference [238]. The confluence of utopianism, sound reproduction, and eugenics, I argue, literalized the idea of “social harmony.” In short, Bellamy’s national fantasy in *Looking Backward* narrates the advent of a future nation constituted through racial and sonic purity.
A period marked largely by realist and regionalist literature, late nineteenth-century America also witnessed a profusion of utopian fiction. In her study of utopian novels, Jean Pfaelzer draws attention to the fact that “more than one hundred works of utopian fiction” appeared in the United States “between 1886, the year of the Haymarket Riot, and 1896, when…President William McKinley reestablished conservative hegemony over a badly faltering economy” [3]. *Looking Backward* inspired most, if not all, of these novels. Upon its publication, the novel sold over one million copies, and was second in popularity only to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Many nineteenth-century readers and critics understood *Looking Backward* to advance the cause of socialism in the same way that Stowe’s novel advanced abolitionism. In 1889, urban planner Sylvester Baxter wrote that the novel is “intended as the ‘vehicle of a definite scheme of industrial reorganization.’ The service rendered by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in accelerating the anti-slavery movement should also not be forgotten” [95]. Indeed, *Looking Backward* spurred a plethora of socialist societies and organizations, as well as experimental utopian communities that aimed to realize the organizational schemata the novel proscribed. Baxter’s language, which characterizes the novel as a “vehicle” that “accelerates” a worthy cause, adequately expresses how utopian literature assuaged present-day ills with a vision of the nation as progressively moving forward in time, towards perfection and prosperity.

This perfection, however, was not simply economic, but racial. What coincided with the post-1886 flourish of utopian literature is the emergence of eugenics, the “science” of human engineering used to improve the Anglo-European race. General attitudes about evolution dictated that a person was born with his or her race predetermined by ancestors, so that to be identified as a member of a certain race or ethnicity designated one as an
inheritor of specific cultural practices. A political movement and an ideology, eugenics synthesized the pessimistic economics of Thomas Malthus with Darwin’s explanation of natural selection, to conclude that immigrants, the lower classes, and “primitives” were undeveloped groups, and therefore unfit for citizenship. Social evolutionary thinking led many people to advocate for immigration restriction laws, anti-miscegenation laws, and birth control practices in the hopes of thwarting Anglo-Saxon racial degeneration that interracial sex invariably would produce. The leveling of class hierarchies that utopian fiction sought to effect, in reaction against the economic violence of consumer capitalism, coincided with a social movement that aimed to fortify the racial hierarchies that black citizenship and immigration threatened to destabilize. Although socialism and eugenics seem to oppose each other, in fact they both were utopian projects that endeavored to produce a nation of future citizens who were equal in their social and racial fitness.

*Looking Backward* is a vision of and from the future. Its title, after all, positions Julian as the distanced observer who, from his futuristic vantage point, can speak objectively about the failings of nineteenth-century America. However, even though visuality provides an apt metaphor for utopian literature, what I want to suggest is that the auditory is the material that comprises the novel’s racially, socially fit future nation. In addition to eugenics and utopian fiction, late-nineteenth century innovations in sound technology sparked fantasies about the kind of future that acoustical science would yield. Addressing the public’s “speculative imaginations” in light of the inception of phonography in 1878, Thomas Edison detailed “The Phonograph and Its Future” in the *North American Review* [527]. “From the very abundance of conjectural and prophetic opinions which have been disseminated to the press, the public is liable to become confused” about the phonograph and its potential uses,
which include reproducing music, preserving oral histories, and teaching elocution [527]. He confesses, “[The] possibilities are so illimitable and the probabilities so numerous” that he is “in a somewhat chaotic condition of mind” [527]. Ten years later, in “The Phonograph Perfected” Edison declared, “The future of which I then spoke has now arrived, and the predictions which I made at the time are now verified” [641]. What Edison’s realized predictions demonstrate is that auditory technologies were central to the rhetoric of futurity that eugenics and utopian literature espoused. A technology that, in the words of media historian Lisa Gitelman, “removed the keenly felt representation of the performer’s race” from musical performance, phonographs separated sound from racially marked bodies [279]. New listening technologies thus hinted at an equally utopian—and eugenic—future for the nation.

This chapter argues that national belonging, in addition to being a gustatory and an olfactory experience, was an auditory one as well. *Looking Backward* procreates the sonic dimensions of national belonging: euphonic sounds are the basis of an egalitarian nation composed of raceless citizens. The novel generates its fantasy of social harmony in three ways. First, it presents nineteenth-century America as discordant, and therefore a dystopian environment. The nightmarish world of 1887 Boston is replete with the babble of foreign tongues, the noise of ethnic street music, and the physical assault that the clanging of metal and machinery exacts on the sensitive bourgeois ear. Second, Bellamy constructs America as an acoustically ideal—and hence utopian—space, in which recorded, disembodied music engenders an ideal civic bodilessness. Specifically, the musical telephone and the idea of acoustic harmony hail citizens by effacing individual human difference. Third, *Looking Backward*’s necessary marriage plot conflates sound reproduction and biological
reproduction. Edith Leete’s promise of social and sonic harmony naturalizes Julian West into a citizen of utopia, and thereby fulfills the eugenic imperative of Anglo-Saxon biological reproduction. Whereas *Looking Backwards* is perhaps best known for its dry, dogmatic descriptions of socialist living, it is the novel’s peripheral moments—those that resound with auditory distortion, bodily uncertainty, romantic intimacy—that interest me most. Never wholly silenced by the novel’s heavy-handed rationalism, *Looking Backward*’s sounds help us to rethink *eutopia* as *autopia*, a no-place a sound-space.

**Unsound Silence**

Socialism undoubtedly represents a cure for societal ills in *Looking Backward*, but it is sound, not political dogma, that emerges as the means of its triumph: the auditory is the novel’s most recurrent—and, as I will show, disruptive—theme. Breaking through its most turgid and programmatic moments, *Looking Backward*’s explicit descriptions of sound are nonetheless often muted by the novel’s tendentious socialist agenda. Likewise, much literary scholarship has read these sensory moments as little more than “relief” from the dry, expository dialogue between Julian and his host and guide, Dr. Leete.¹ Nick Yablon, however, has exposed these overdetermined sonic moments. In his estimation, *Looking Backward* is a work of both social and sound reform; it denounces noise as a “barbaric hindrance” to the utopian “efficiency and progress” that socialism promises [631]. The novel’s reconfiguration of urban space through sound technology, he shows, is evidence of

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the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with “aural pollution” ([32]. Thus, the horizon of change and political alternatives to capitalism that Looking Backward imagines is predicated on figuring nineteenth-century life as damaging to the ears, and by extension the psyche. When read alongside contemporaneous scientific and journalistic accounts of noise, sonic dissonance situates the nineteenth-century nation as a space of social discord.

In 1887 Boston, Julian’s psychic stability requires an auditory bulwark against the cacophony symptomatic of immigration and industrial progress. He constructs a sleeping chamber underneath his “large ancient mansion,” which was “situated in a quarter that had long since become undesirable for residence, from its invasion by tenement houses and manufactories” [56]. The contrast between the mansion’s antiquity and its new environs highlights the spatial upheaval that Gilded Age Boston underwent during an unprecedented real estate boom. The tenement houses and factories indicate that the “never ceasing nightly noises” that drive Julian underground do not index urban sounds generally, but instead a certain class of people [56]. Specifically, they index the lower classes that recently have transgressed the boundaries of the city’s once exclusive neighborhoods. Immigration introduced unwelcome sounds into the urban landscape, such as that of street music. Indeed, Yablon points out that the practice of performing music in exchange for alms aggravated genteel residents, who heard not the “innocent songs of Italian street urchins” and “mendicant musicians,” but rather “the opening notes heralding an approaching slum” [632]. Like many upper- and middle-class Bostonians, Julian understands ethnic Americans and the working classes to be an aural disturbance, an augur of lower real estate value.

Yet, to read these “nightly noises” merely as displaced anxiety about demographic change elides genuine contemporaneous concerns about noise and its effect on the body.
From the late nineteenth- to the early twentieth-century, sound was a privileged object of study. In his cultural history of sound reproduction, Jonathan Sterne avers that as “advances in anatomy yielded new knowledge about the morphology of the ear, and physiology advanced theories of the function of hearing and the distinctness of the senses,” people came to abstract the ear and treat it as a discrete set of forms, functions, and mechanisms [51]. For instance, Harper’s Monthly published an article on “The Preservation of Hearing” (1880), in which Dr. Samuel Saxton described the sense of hearing. “The aerial vibrations of which sound is composed enter into the ear,” moves the tympanic membrane; the “membrane movements are transmitted to the small bones of the ear which extend across the drum cavity”; the membrane’s vibrations, as a result, “are conveyed to the auditory nerve in the inner ear, whose function it is to impart to the brain whatever impressions of the sound it receives” [614 – 615]. The ear transmits atomic vibrations that oscillate among the flesh, the nerves, and the brain. With this definition of hearing in mind, a variety of disciplines sought to draw a definitive line between good sound and bad sound. Otology, the science of hearing, defined noise in terms of a disturbance of the eardrums; psychology, its adverse effects on the nerves; physics, as the irregularity of sound waves; aesthetics, its affront on one’s musical harmony. All of these separate disciplinary investigations defined noise in negative terms, that is, in opposition to positive, beneficial or “sound” sounds. In his study of the political economy of music, Jacques Attali confirms, “A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message…[It is] experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, and aggression against the code-structuring messages” [26; 27]. Noise thus names a broad yet imprecise category of excessive, incoherent, and degenerate sounds.
To characterize the tenement houses in 1887 as “unsound” is not a pun. Immigrants were considered socially excessive, incoherent in their speech and biologically degenerate. They were more than noisy; they were noise. Despite the alliterative musicality of the phrase “never ceasing nightly noises,” Julian needed to guard himself against such noise. Silence rings forth from his impenetrable underground shelter, an edifice that Poe might have dreamed up. The “very thick” walls and the floor are laid in hydraulic cement “to prevent the dampness of the subsoil from penetrating the chamber”; the roof is constructed of “hermetically sealed” stone slabs and the door of “iron with a thick coating of asbestos,” so that the room might serve as a vault “equally proof against violence and flames, and for the storage of valuables”; a small pipe “communicates” with a windmill on top of the house to ensure fresh air. This is the architecture of silence, a “subterranean room no murmur from the upper world ever penetrated.” As opposed to noise, which obfuscates the spoken voice or musical instruments, murmurs humbly and happily recede into the background. They express barely audible speech among a crowd, something muttered, mumbled or grumbled in downcast tones. These extra-linguistic sounds manifest themselves as subtle tension rather than overt antagonism. However, the potential for the subdued collective speech of the “upper world” to penetrate, or violently force itself into, Julian’s private space resonates with the noises of ethnicity that surround his property. The incendiary possibilities of the collective murmur register both social and sonic anarchy. Divorced from the vocal cords, tongues, and mouths that shape their sounds, murmurs are, at heart, disruptive: they cross borders, trespass property and propriety, and create alternative social orders in ways no body can. Julian’s chamber is thus not an antidote to the city’s murmurs and noises, but rather an escape from them.
Fortified against the deleterious noises of the outside world, Julian falls asleep in the
chamber on Decoration Day, only to wake up over a century later. Characterized by Bellamy
and subsequent readers as a mere plot device to propel Julian into utopian Boston, Julian’s
aural sensitivity bears “the traces of an emergent medical and reformist discourse linking
noise-induced insomnia to the disease of ‘neurasthenia’” [Yablon 633]. After all, the “silence
of the tomb” is what guards Julian, a “confirmed sufferer of insomnia,” against the noise and
murmurs of the ethnic proletariat, as well as the psychic fragility that those noises engender
[56]. As early as 1870, many people understood that noise taxed the body and the nerves.
One year after Cranch made a “Plea for Smell,” writer, critic, and essayist HT Tuckerman
made a “Plea for Silence” (1870) in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He maintained that silence is not
simply an “aesthetic resource,” but rather a “physiological refreshment” from the “confusion
of many tongues” that comprises daily urban life [699; 70]). Silence cleanses the palate, as it
were. Over the course of the next few decades, noise pejoratively denoted inchoate, alien
speech. It was this persistent noise that Dr. John H. Girdner—former presidential physician
for James Garfield—considered physically harmful:

[When] a Babel of discordant sounds and noises of every degree of harshness
and force is poured into the auditory canals, an effort, indeed, is required to
catch the sounds we wish to interpret, and to eliminate those which are not
only of no consequence, but positively painful. This sustained effort of
selection and elimination is an incalculable strain and source of exhaustion to
our nervous energy. [270]

In “The Plague of City Noises” (1896), Girdner alludes to the Tower of Babel—the Genesis
story in which God casts human beings into a confusion of languages as punishment for
trying to build a tower to the sky—in order to figure foreign speech as Babel’s homophone,
“babble.” Inarticulate and imperfect, babble is the speech of everydayness. Like a murmur, it
is unofficial speech that wanders, shifts, and falls away from proper language. According to
legal historian Piyel Haldar, babble is akin to idle chat and hearsay in its interruption of the
evidential and representational schema” of language [132]. Babel and babble give the biblical
“plague” of city noises a distinctly ethnic texture.

If noise consisted of the indeterminate sounds of foreign babble, the origins of noise
sensitivity resided in the psychic strain of distinguishing between noise and sound. It was not
the noises themselves that proved deleterious. Rather, it was the “sustained effort” required
to detect and isolate sounds “we wish to interpret,” and to eliminate those that are
“positively painful.” Tuckerman too suspected a “connection between the integrity of the
nervous system and the use and abuse of speech” [705]. Insofar as “the act of hearing should
not require attention,” Girdner posits, the strain on the auditory nerves from having to pay
attention invariably results in psychic disorders [270]. Such is the onus of selective hearing:

There can be no question but that a vast amount of nerve energy is expended
on the sense of hearing and discriminating noises…Add to this the wear and
tear, the jarring and actual pain produced on the sensorium by the endless
roar in which we live, and you have a most potent factor in the production of
that bane of modern city life, neurasthenia. [271]

A neurotic disorder coined by American physician George Beard in 1869, neurasthenia was
endemic to the refined and civilized upper classes, and was characterized by feelings of
fatigue, muscle pain and sensory disturbances. Symptomatic of urbanization, neurasthenia
revealed a strained sensorium. An advocate of noise reform, Girdner demanded that
“constituted authority” step in to “protect these delicate organs [the ears] from unnecessary
irritation” and to counteract the “painful and injurious effect of city noises on the whole
nervous system” [296]. Although Girdner eschews class-specific etiologies of neurasthenia,
his focus on foreign tongues figures immigrants as “healthy carriers” who babble and are
immune to babble. Indeed, noise reform was an especially upper-class movement. Foreign-sounding, indeterminate noises prompted many prominent Americans—most famously, Mark Twain and William Dean Howells—to push for reforms that would control who and what made sounds when and where. In light of the “vast influence” that the senses were understood to have on “our mental, moral, and physical wellbeing,” many civic elites constructed soundproof mansions similar to Julian’s fortress of solitude [296].

Noise reformers such as Girdner thus aimed to demonstrate the material, palpable effect that intangible, ephemeral sounds had on the body. In a follow-up essay on how “To Abate the Plague of City Noises,” he figured the physical and psychical toll that noise, murmurs, babble and “other discordant sounds…poured into the auditory apparatus” exacted on the listener as physical assault [464]. The noises that the “auditory apparatus” passively receives underscore the construction of hearing as a passive sense. In 1888, for instance, journalist HC Merwin placed the passive ear in opposition to agentive sounds: “The to-and-fro, or vibratory, motion of the air” that yoked listener and speaker “impinges upon the drum of the listener’s ear” [114]. Sound is vibration. It requires agitation. To hear is to interact with and against volatile materials, to take movement beyond and into the self. At its very core, the sense of hearing is unstable, with its chaotic vibrations and motions. Vulnerable to its sonic milieu, the ear has no way to protect itself against the “to-and-fro” of air molecules, let alone the hectic to-and-fro of modern life. Sound molecules “impinged” on the ear in the same way that immigrants allegedly invaded and encroached on genteel urban neighborhoods. The New York Times avowed that Italian street music “attacks the sensitive

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2 See Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), on how medical expertise shaped the idea of the “healthy carrier,” a person who spreads contagion without being infected herself. In particular, Wald traces the medical and journalistic process that transformed turn-of-the-century Irish cook Mary Mallon into “Typhoid Mary,” a figure who stood for immigrant filth and sexual promiscuity.
ears with approaches from which there is no escape but in flight” [“Wandering Minstrel” 8]. Ultimately, by arguing that noise is physical violence, Girdner decries the lack of legal and social protection against aural assault. One can seek legal retribution for being maimed, but not for being exposed to deleterious noises. “This remarkable inconsistency—the prompt protection of one of our senses from assault, and utter disregard of another” reveals modernity’s “sensism,” as it were [272]. The analogy also positions hearing as a sensation as intimate and contagious as touching: the ear and the skin are equally vulnerable to penetration. That noise was considered injurious to sleep and psychic stability suggests that even the slightest sonic disturbance unruffles the brain’s unconscious mechanisms.

It is clear that in late-nineteenth-century America sonic anxiety expressed underlying anxieties about dramatic social and demographic changes. But more importantly, many harbored genuine concerns about the effect of unwanted sound—of noise, murmurs, and babble—on the individual, and more broadly, the nation. Unfortunately, however, silence cannot cure Julian’s insomnia and neurasthenic disposition. On the evening of Decoration Day, after a heated debate on trade unionism, he hires a mesmerist to put him in a sleep-trance. The plan is for Julian’s “faithful colored man by the name of Sawyer [who] lived with me and attended to my few wants,” to wake him the next morning “by a reversal of the mesmerizing process” [57]. As bad luck would have it, that night the house burns down (presumably, Sawyer with it), which leaves Julian, buried in his subterranean womb, intact until Dr. Leete excavates him one hundred thirteen years later. Thoroughly disoriented upon his reawakening, Julian initially thinks a practical joke is being played on him. Finally he concludes this cannot be, because “Sawyer would never have betrayed me” [59].
Insofar as the babble and murmurs of Boston’s immigrants give voice to potentially incendiary class discontent, the unthinkability of Sawyer’s infidelity results from his race, that is, the stereotype of the faithful house slave that local color and sentimentalist fiction popularized. Sawyer is both the only individual person of color and the only individual person who does not speak in the novel. A silent, silenced, and often-overlooked character, Sawyer crucially bridges dystopian, dissonant Boston and euphonic, (e)utopian Boston. The necessity of the silent African American servant for Julian’s time travel suggests that silence is something other than a salubrious lack of sound. In Looking Backward, silence censors other forms of human noises. It is an extra-verbal and extra-musical articulation, an inhabitable break, that is both a denial of and an escape from the tumultuous world of indeterminate ethnic bodies and sounds. Forceful and agentive, silence materializes the immigrants and household servants that Julian’s quest for inner silence and sleep effaces. The sleeping chamber cannot help but resound with murmurs, babble, and noises of those who are never silenced, only muted.

_Autopia_

The ubiquitous discordant sounds of 1887 Boston that prompt Julian’s insomnia and neurasthenia dissolve in 2000 Boston. “I had left my tendency to insomnia behind me with the other discomforts of existence in the nineteenth century” [125]. No longer having any “anxiety about sleeping,” Julian awakens the next morning “with the feeling of an old citizen” [71]. His newfound ability to sleep attests that the nation has become as utopian in its lack of continuous noise as in its egalitarian social organization. In this rationalist utopia,
citizens cheerfully accept top-down regimentation. People are organized into guilds, which combine into a single organization known as the industrial army; rank and job specialization are assigned according to qualification mechanisms. Everyone works for the state and receives the same wage, paid by a credit card, against which the worker buys price-controlled items. Excluded from the industrial army because of his alien status, the sleep that Boston’s peaceful soundscape provides is what gives Julian the sense of being an “old citizen.” Ideal sound is the condition of possibility for Julian’s submergence of his individual differences into a collective, harmonious civic whole. The socialist nation is euphonic to the ear because its acoustically ideal soundscape allows listeners to distinguish individual sounds—sounds that, by way of paradox, invite listeners to dissolve their individuality and melt utopianically into a polyphonic social community. Engaged with emergent modes of recording, preserving, and transmitting sound, *Looking Backward* renders national identity euphonic.

A time traveler and therefore something of a foreigner, Julian struggles to feel a sense of belonging. His neurasthenic tendencies, once spurred by the clamor of nineteenth-century city life, manifest as anxiety about his outsider status. Although he awakens feeling refreshed, he nonetheless is unable “to distinguish [him]self from pure being,” as though he lacks “the individualizing touches which make [him] a person” [88]. This “momentary obscurcation of the sense of one’s identity” provokes in Julian a “helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void” [88 – 89]. In 2000, Julian’s identity is perceptually and ontologically unstable. Rebirth as an “old citizen” requires Julian to exist in “pure being,” to inhabit an infantile state of “eyeless groping” that subsequently enhances auditory and tactile encounters. Thus, Julian’s sensory distress signifies as something like the “birth pangs” of the process of legal naturalization. According to Thomas Peyser, Julian’s “lack of certainty
regarding his body should be welcome as the onset of wisdom, not treated as a crisis” [38].

His initial anxiety about the integrity of his ego, his identity crisis, is symptomatic of the
onset of a kind of indeterminate selfhood, a floating self that inhabits an idealist world, in
which citizens are bodiless. For Julian to become naturalized requires the retraining of his
perceptual apparatus: he must learn to be at home in a generic, non-particular, collective
body. Corporeal uncertainty, or civic bodilessness, is what guarantees this socialist utopia.

Julian’s disorientation—his “mental confusion…so intense as to produce actual
nausea”—thus registers as the sensory underbelly of the ostensibly disembodied process of
naturalization. But more importantly, the loss of individuality that he undergoes is a
necessarily euphonic experience. At the time, both utopia and music required the melting of
individual differences into a large, collective whole. In 1870, for instance, music journalist
John Dwight defined music as a universal “art and language of the feelings […], tending to
unite and blend and harmonize all who may come within its sphere” [329]. Something of a
utopianist himself, Dwight was a Unitarian minister who had taught music at, as well as
organized musical and theatrical events for, the Brook Farm commune.3 After its collapse in
1847, he established in Boston a cooperative house and became one of the most influential
classical music critics in the United States. Dwight begins his Atlantic Monthly essay on
“Music as a Means of Culture” with the proclamation, “We, as a democratic people, a great
mixed people of all races, overrunning the vast continent, need music even more than
others” [326]. Music, he avows, “tones down” the individual’s “asserting and aggressive
manners,” as well as “subdue[s] and harmonize[s] the free and ceaseless conflict of opinions”

3 Made famous by founding member Nathaniel Hawthorne in The Blithedale Romance (1852), Brook Farm was
established in 1841 as a utopian experiment in communal living. Located in Massachusetts, it adopted a societal
model based on the socialist concepts of Charles Fourier.
Therefore, without the “gentler, harmonizing, humanizing culture” and “harmonic mood” that music encourages, Americans will never unite. Because of its “civilizing agency” and “refining influence,” music is means of educating society at large. Like Bellamy’s socialist utopia, euphonic sounds engender what Dwight calls the “forgetting [of the] self in the harmonious whole.” Music, then, is itself utopian in the unitary national identity and civility that it ostensibly engenders.

Insofar as, according to Dwight, “we blend in fellowship…when we can listen together,” the shift in the late nineteenth century from amateur to professional music playing positioned listening as a source and form of collectivism. Dr. Leete’s daughter Edith informs Julian, “We all sing nowadays as a matter of course in the training of the voice… The professional music is so much grander and more perfect than any performance of ours, and so easily commanded when we wish to hear it,” that few women partake in parlor singing. In the late nineteenth century listening transformed into an aesthetic and intellectual activity. In 1869 The Atlantic Monthly published an article on “Parlor Singing” that argued that music conveys emotions in ways that words simply cannot. “Language conveys ideas, exact images, and forms of thought to the mind; music addresses itself to the mind through sensibility. It is therefore in its highest exercise, an intellectual art.” The “perfect” unmediated music to which its educated citizens listen demonstrates that the utopian nation’s musical arrangements adequately convey the perfection of its economic arrangements. Its standardized and regulated social arrangements realize human life’s passion “for losing ourselves in others or for absorbing them into ourselves,” as Bellamy wrote in 1874 (“The Religion of Solidarity” 31). In contrast to the assault that background noise exacts on an unsuspecting public, listening to music is an active, intellectual skill. Indeed, in a
follow-up essay on “The Intellectual Influence of Music,” Dwight defined music as logical motion: “All free, undisturbed motion is vibratory, undulating, measured, proportionate, rhythmical. Physically, then, music is motion, and it is nothing else” [621]. Therefore, even though the “emotional and sensuous qualities” of music are “seemingly” opposed to the “calmer temper” of thought, “good music has a logic of its own” [614; 621]. With “no rallying point,” “nothing left stable,” and all “habits of feeling” broken loose, Julian experiences assimilation into utopian Boston as a musical encounter [189]. The undulating motions that attune his nerves towards a collective identity mirror the undulating motions of professional music that unifies Edith with the rest of the nation’s citizens.

Utopian citizenship, then, is an auditory experience of vibration in and beyond one’s body and others’ bodies. “If I sing to you, a vibration of my soul, my feeling, imparts itself to the atmospheric medium, travelling on until it becomes vibration in your soul, your feeling,” Dwight insists. “Vibrations beget vibrations” [621]. If music is the infinite reproduction of vibrations, then it is by extension the infinite reproduction of loosed “habits of feeling” that connect citizens to each other. And it is perhaps this infinite reproduction that makes Julian feel “decidedly queer” at moments when his “personal identity seems an open question” [146]. Twenty-first century sound technologies affirm this infinitely reproducible, queer loss of identity on a daily basis. For example, Edith introduces Julian to the musical telephone, a device that transmits music and speeches into every citizen’s home. She explains that musical performances are “delivered in acoustically prepared chambers, connected by wire with subscribers’ houses” [205]. The telephone then fills a room with music; Julian qualifies, “filled, not flooded, for, by some means, the volume of melody had been perfectly graduated to the size of the apartment” [109]. Played in acoustically perfect spaces and delivered to the
listener in a way perfectly attuned to his/her ear, the musical telephone embodies utopian euphony, for it delivers music that harmonizes citizens even as citizens listen apart from each other, in their own private abodes. The aural pleasure of telephonic transmission is tethered as much to the technology itself as to the space in which it is both produced and heard. The musical telephone produces a network in which each listener has a solitary relation to an auditory object; the consumption of music is individualized. It therefore makes social harmony possible because it evades the messiness of physical interaction, which, 1887 Boston shows, is always discordant.

The disembodied relationship that the musical telephone allows citizens to have with each other is inherent to the technology itself, which separates the voice from the body. When Edith turns on the musical telephone, Julian asks, “Bach must be at the keys of that organ; but where is the organ”? [109]. Later, he hears “the tinkle of a bell,” and a few moments later “the voice of a man, at the pitch of ordinary conversation” addresses Julian and Edith “with an effect of proceeding from an invisible person in the room” [205]. These moments allude to the otherworldliness and spatio-acoustic confusion that attended the early years of the telephone and the phonograph. “Users apparently struggled to determine whether the voices were emanating from the material instrument or from some other place or body,” Yablon observes [641]. The musical telephone brings into uncannily intimate proximity that which exceeds the locating eye. Dematerialized, disembodied, and disconnected from its physical provenance, the organ and “the voice” are no longer attached to an individual human body. Early sound technologies thus dissolved spatial circuits as they thickened the voice. Perfected by Edison in 1888, the phonograph served to reproduce sound at the very moment *Looking Backward* imagined a perfected world in which citizens
who physically detached from each other could unify through the reproducible, disembodied music of the musical telephone.

In many ways, disembodiment is central to the civilizing agency of music that Dwight extolled, and which *Looking Backwards* imagines. The musical telephone served to assimilate bodies newly in contact with the nation through invisible sounds rather than through face-to-face interaction. Julian is in awe of a nation that is materially and metaphorically an openly tuned musical instrument, that is, an instrument tuned so that a chord (accord) is achieved without fretting. The musical telephone thus serves to maintain this “open tuning” at all times. With the simple turn of a screw, “the volume of music could be made to fill the room, or die away to an echo,” so that if “of two persons side by side, one desired to listen to music and the other to sleep, it could be made audible to one and inaudible to another” [125]. This is the definition of good sound: controlled, nonreverberant, and denying the space in which it was produced, the bodies that produced it, and the bodies that listen to it. The music is as disembodied as the social relations that the telephone enacts. This salubrious sound technology lubricates social relations by rendering them non-existent; social harmony exists apart from sociality. Music invites citizens to lose themselves in a universal whole, and the musical telephone allows that loss of self to occur as an individualized, separate experience.

This paradox—the individualized act of listening that births a loss of individuality—is perhaps most clear in the carnivalesque dream that Julian has, which occurs after falling asleep to the government-mandated lullabies that the musical telephone plays:

I dreamed that I sat on the throne of the Abencerrages in the banqueting hall of the Alhambra, feasting my lords and generals, who next day were to follow the crescent against the Christian dogs of Spain. The air, cooled by the spray of foundations, was heavy with the scent of flowers. A band of Nautch
girls, round-limbed and luscious-lipped, danced with voluptuous grace to the music of brazen and stringed instruments...Louder and louder clashed the cymbals, wilder and wilder grew the strain, till the blood of the desert race could no longer resist the martial delirium and the swart nobles leaped to their feet; a thousand scimitars were bared, and the cry, “Allah il Allah!” shook the hall and awoke me, found it broad daylight, and the room tingling with the electric music of the “Turkish Reveille.” [125 – 126]

Traditionally, scholarship has treated Julian’s telephone-induced sensual dream as a disruption of the platonic harmony of Bellamy’s utopia, and a refreshing break from the dogmatic lectures that parade as conversations between Julian and Dr. Leete. Peyser observes that the musical telephone “encourages a connoisseurship of the alien and the fulfillment even of those desires for unlimited political, martial, and sexual potency that the regime will not allow to be acted out” [48]. In this reading, the musical telephone is an opiate for the masses; it allows them to indulge in ethnic and sensory alterity even as that indulgence reaffirms state power. Thomas Michaelis’s well-known marching ballad “Turkish Reveille,” after all, is what awakens Julian and reconnects him to the waking, ordered and highly regimented world. By way of the imperialistic anthem that he hears, Julian inhabits a collective identity that thrives on Orientalist adventures, if only through the dreams that musical technologies invite.

However, such a reading reduces the sensuous dream to a sonic interference of the rational and ordered utopian soundscape. Critics tend to read “Turkish Reveille” as music and Julian’s dream as noise, thereby figuring his dream, his loosed habits of feelings and spatio-acoustic confusion, as meaningless, peripheral and incidental to the narrative. Insofar as it disorders the otherwise ordered nation and narrative, Julian’s dream is noise. My aim here is not to invert and reify the music/noise binary, but to suggest that the dream has and creates meaning other than that which exists in the standard code and language of music.
Noise does not equate harmony with order. If anything, it reveals that harmonic order is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a man-made representation of the world. “The harmonic system functions through rules and prohibitions,” Attali asserts. “In particular, what is prohibited are repeated dissonances, in other words, critiques of differences” [62]. By bringing those differences and dissonances to the fore, the noise of Julian’s dream calls into question the individualized, non-social means by which social harmony is achieved. The strains of ethnic street music (the clashing cymbals) that ring through the dream do not simply echo 1887 Boston’s tenement slums or interfere with the transmission of state power. Rather, the noise in the dream redoubles the dream as noise. Channeled through the modern apparatus of the telephone, the sound of bodies in contact with each other—nineteenth-century Boston’s auditory uproar—can never be muted, but only toned down by the utopian nation’s socialist composition, technological innovations, and euphonic orchestrations.

**Naturally Selective Hearing**

Something more than the fulfillment of late nineteenth-century wishes, Bellamy’s utopian novel does not place present noise and future harmony in opposition to each other, but rather positions them along a continuum of social arrangements. Julian is as susceptible to the echo of 1887 Boston’s deleterious noises as he is to the musical telephone’s soporific lullabies. What the nineteenth century’s capitalist uproar and the twenty-first century’s socialist harmony share is the centrality of Protestant whiteness to the stability of their social arrangements, capitalism and socialism respectively. Bellamy was far from alone in his vision of a raceless nation. In 1887 journalist William Ballou asked the readers of the *North*
American Review what the American of the future would like. In “The Future American,” he speculated that racial and linguistic amalgamation would facilitate the nation’s march towards progress. “Negroes are becoming so white skinned as to lose apparently their African origin,” he declared. “If we were to cast the horoscope of a thousand years hence, we might say that the whites of that period will be the reds of today, and the blacks and southern races of today the whites of tomorrow” [289]. Placing himself and his readers in the year 2187 allows Ballou to look backward on the nineteenth-century, to reflect on the present as though it were the past of an imagined future. But whereas Ballou believes that interracial sex facilitates genealogical whitewashing, Bellamy maintains that it will lead to white racial degeneration. In particular, the often-overlooked marriage plot that subtends Looking Backward affirms the importance of what Dr. Leete calls “racial purification” [202]. Although Dr. Leete introduces the time traveler to the political and organizational mechanics of socialist utopia, it his daughter Edith who transforms Julian into a (re)productive citizen. The continued Anglo-Protestant supremacy that Julian’s eventual betrothal to Edith Leete promises, I argue, turns on the intersection eugenics and euphony—that is, biological and sonic reproduction—at the site of white womanhood.

The racial purity for which eugenics called was a means to preserve social hierarchies. In many ways, Julian’s entry into utopian America entails not an historical break with the past, but rather historical continuity—the preservation of nineteenth-century bloodlines into the twenty-first century. This preservation is what Julian bodies forth when, in the year two thousand, Dr. Leete unearths him. Kept in an “extraordinary state of preservation” due to the fireproof and soundproof sleeping chamber, Julian first appears to be a mummified corpse [64]. “That the art of such embalming as this had ever been known” Dr. Leete would
not have believed, “yet here seemed conclusive testimony that our immediate ancestors had possessed it” [64]. Unsure if Julian’s bodily integrity results from the “craft of the embalmer,” Dr. Leete attempts to resuscitate Julian, and does so successfully. As the “only living representative” of his family, Julian is a corporeal time capsule. He brings with him Boston’s aristocratic bloodlines, thereby ensuring ancestral continuity and racial supremacy from past to present (56). Such continuity is also what the phonograph initially promised. Recent scholarship has underscored that its primary function was not reproduction, but preservation. Sterne shows that Victorians understood the phonograph’s preservative properties “as a cultural analogue of chemical embalming,” because “sound recording preserved the exteriority of the voice while completely transforming its interiority, its insides” [302]. Indeed, when Edison invented the phonograph in 1878, its original purpose was for the preservation of live sound. Ten years later, he told the readers of the *North American Review* that the phonograph would bear the sounds of the dead into the distant future, to be experienced as they had been heard when those sounds first were captured. If, as Sterne notes, the phonograph was an auditory analogue to chemical embalming, then Julian’s seemingly embalmed body is an analogue for phonographic preservation: both are time-traveling organisms that integrate an “authentic” past into the future.

As his initial perceptual disorientation suggests, Julian’s exteriority was indeed preserved, while his insides—his sense of “pure being”—were completely transformed. Characterizing himself as “neither dead nor properly alive,” Julian thus embodies the otherworldliness of sonic preservation [219]. Like the phonograph’s uncanny sounds, he seems to have “emerged from somewhere beyond the realm of the human” [Yablon 641]. But perhaps equally as important, in his existence between life and death, Julian is a figure
for both the phonograph and its buried history. In 1874, Alexander Graham Bell invented the phonograph to integrate the deaf community into mainstream American culture. At the center of the device was a human cadaver’s middle ear, the tympanum, which was attached to a stalk of hay. Speaking into a tube attached to the tympanum vibrated its bones, which in turn vibrated the tip of the hay stalk, which then traced the vibrations onto smoked glass. In this way the device visualized sounds that the deaf made with their voices, and thus taught them to match the tracings of the sounds spoken by a hearing person. Supplied by Harvard Medical School, the middle ear of the cadaver—most likely a pauper who could not afford burial—inspired Bell to simplify the phonautograph into a machine that allowed a simple membrane to vibrate a relatively heavy peace of iron. In 1876 he presented this machine, the telephone, to great acclaim at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Two years later, Thomas Edison, himself hard of hearing, invented the phonograph, which was based on Bell’s telephone. The Frankensteinian origins of sound preservation render Julian’s corpse-like body, excavated and unearthed in situ by Dr. Leete, not simply an archaeological artifact, but a living, auditory relic.

The shadowy, uncanny history of sound preservation that Julian embodies thus recontextualizes the story of his assimilation into utopian Boston. It is not simply an awakening or an enlightenment, but a shift from being an embalmed body for whom “there was no place” in utopia, to being a reproductive citizen [219]. In order to become a

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5 A device that treated the ear as the source and object of sound reproduction, the phonautograph reified the auditory apparatus. Sterne observes, “The use of human ears in experiments was, thus, intimately tied to a mechanical understanding of the ear and hearing. The ear could get attached to machines in part because ears were already being treated as mechanisms” [57].

6 For more on the gothic elements attendant to early sound production, especially the phonograph, see John Picker’s “The Victorian Aura of the Recorded Voice” in *New Literary History*. 
productive citizen of the socially harmonious nation, Julian must biologically reproduce, and thus ensure the continued preservation of genealogical inheritance. Whereas Dr. Leete’s function is to guide Juliana and the reader through the quotidian mechanics of a socialist nation, his daughter Edith serves to naturalize him as a citizen through its acoustics, its sonic mechanics. She, after all, is the one who introduces Julian to the musical telephone. With a mere touch of “one or two screws” Edith fills the room with “the music of a grand organ anthem…I listened, scarcely breathing, to the close. Such music, so perfectly rendered, I had never expected to hear” [109]. If music as an intellectual and emotional experience blends Julian’s individuality into a larger collective whole, then white womanhood is the precondition for that blending. At this time, of course, both women and music shared a close association with emotion. In 1894, music critic and noise reformer Edith Brower asked, “Is the Musical Idea Masculine?” Her answer was, simply, yes. Although woman “can master the exact science of harmony,” she, “as a lesser man, is comparatively deficient in active emotional force” and therefore cannot produce music, which is “the highest and strongest of all modes of emotional expression” [335; 334]. Women are not emotional, but merely nervous, excitable, and easily moved. Men, on the other hand, are well equipped to handle the stronger emotional nature of music. “Music,” Brower contends, demands “concentration not of the intellect alone, but of the very forces of the soul. Woman cannot endure this double strain” [335 – 336]. Too fragile to withstand the emotional force of music making, women can, however, disseminate music or expose others to it.

Having introduced Julian to the musical telephone’s “exact science of harmony,” Edith is an ideal conduit of ideal music. Something of a musical telephone herself, she makes “intellectual” music accessible to others without herself producing it. In this instance, Edith’s
capacity for sonic reproduction mirrors her capacity for biological reproduction. Yet whereas throughout the novel the two simply mirror each other, by its end sonic and biological reproduction are mutually constitutive. Having been assimilated through music and the musical telephone, Julian attempts to propose to Edith, who uses the musical telephone to avoid his advances. At “a touch of her finger she set the air swaying to the rhythm of an adagio. After that she took good care that the music should leave no opportunity for conversation” [190]. Using the musical telephone as a kind of sonic interference, Edith attempts to silence Julian with the adagio. Finally, though, she discloses her reason for avoiding the marriage proposal: she is the great-granddaughter of Edith Bartlett, Julian’s 1887 fiancée. After fourteen years of mourning Julian’s presumed death, Edith Bartlett married and birthed a son; that son was Mrs. Leete’s father, Edith Leete’s grandfather. Undeterred by this quasi-incestuous fact, Julian pursues his courtship, and Edith accepts his proposal. He expounds:

My love [Edith Bartlett], whom I had dreamed lost, had been re-embodied for my consolation. When at last, in an ecstasy of gratitude and tenderness, I folded the lovely girl [Edith Leete] into my arms, the two Ediths were blended in my thought, nor have they ever since been clearly distinguished. I was not long in finding that on Edith’s part there was a corresponding confusion of identities…She seemed more anxious to have me speak of Edith Bartlett than of herself. [223]

One might say that the two Ediths have melted into each other, by way of a kind of trans-temporal utopian harmonizing. In this respect, Edith Leete is the musical telephone to which she had introduced Julian. Because the phonograph entailed, in Edison’s words, the “infinite reproduction” of sounds “without the presence or consent of the original source,” its effect was that “captive sound waves,” lacking an “original source,” took on a life of their own [530]. Edith Leete is a mimetic machine that both replicates and papers over the presence of
the original source, Edith Bartlett. In short, utopian womanhood both preserves and reproduces true womanhood. What is at stake in Julian’s marriage to Edith Leete/Edith Bartlett is the possibility of the infinite reproduction of social and sonic harmony, and by extension, racial purity.

To be sure, the successful marriage plot—which flirts with, without consummating, incest—secures the fantasy of white purity. Dr. Leete triumphantly informs Julian that for “the first time in human history the principle of sexual selection, with its tendency to preserve and transmit the better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, has unhindered operation” [201 – 202]. In utopia, white men and women’s “natural selection” of each other guarantees “not only a physical, but a mental and moral improvement” within “two or three successive generations” of citizens [202]. The prevalence of eugenics in Bellamy’s utopia was not lost on his readers. In 1891 a letter-to-the-editor in Bellamy’s Nationalist newspaper The New Nation criticized Looking Backward for not including African Americans in its utopia. Seven years later, Bellamy published Equality (1898), in part to address the issue of race. In the sequel, Julian asks Dr. Leete how nineteenth-century anti-black racism ended. Without giving a precise answer, he responds that the new system involves “no more commingling of races than the old had done,” and it is perfectly consistent “with any degree of race separation in an industry which the most bigoted local prejudices might demand” [274]. Borrowing much from Booker T. Washington’s industrial-school model of black education and racial uplift, Equality destines African Americans for an industrial army that teaches them how to elevate themselves to the level of civilization already achieved by whites.
Thus, the industrial army in which all (white) citizens participate in Looking Backward is in Equality composed solely of African Americans. Charlotte Perkins Gilman echoed Bellamy’s answer to the problem of black citizenship in her 1908 essay on how to solve the “Negro Problem.” She proposed to the readers of The American Journal of Sociology the establishment of “an enlisted body of all negroes below a certain grade of citizenship” [80]. “Not enslavement, but enlistment,” this “new army” would teach African Americans to be self-supporting and thus ensure “the higher efficiency of the next generation” [81]. The widespread idea, then, of systematically forcing African Americans into manual labor in order to achieve racial uplift and ensure white supremacy was central to how many envisioned future national progress. Literary critic Sylvia Strauss points out that the expectation that blacks would “be as servile and submissive as they were under slavery” and that they “had no future in what purported to be an egalitarian state,” suggests that if “Bellamy truly believed in racial equality, his utopia is fatally flawed” [82].

Although Strauss casts Bellamy’s racism as a contradiction to his socialism, in fact the two were coterminous ideologies. The prohibition of interracial sex that eugenics advocated was not simply compatible with Bellamy’s socialist agenda. In fact, the two were mutually constitutive.7 Many of Bellamy’s followers, after all, were Southern farmers who felt victimized by capitalism and Reconstruction. Perhaps mindful of this sector of his followers, Bellamy transferred the industrial army’s demographic composition from implicitly white in Looking Backward to explicitly black in Equality, an affirmation of the Supreme Court’s recently adjudicated “separate but equal” ruling. Indeed, many Americans influenced by

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Bellamy’s writings started racially exclusive utopian communes. W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s history of nineteenth-century utopian communities emphasizes that after Reconstruction the New South emerged as a site for realizing utopian aspirations.\(^8\) He notes, “[The] communitarian revival of the late nineteenth century nonetheless articulated a sustained critique of industrial capitalism and powerfully influenced contemporary debates about the nation’s future” [7]. In one colony in Tennessee, the weekly performance of blackface minstrelsy, the performance and spectacle of racial difference, served to consolidate the socialist separate and unequal utopia. Indeed, many community leaders advocated assisting African Americans in organizing separate utopian colonies of their own.

Thus, the racial exclusion that buttressed socialist enterprises in United States history reflects and refracts utopian fiction’s preoccupation with the American of the future. In short, the future American was not black. In this way, Julian’s perceptual confusion about his betrothed certifies that she is a genealogically “pure” progenitor of his bourgeois Boston stock. The marriage between the nineteenth-century time traveler and the telephonic twenty-first-century female—who loses her individual identity in the mimetic replication of her great-grandmother—reproduces utopia by securing the biological reproduction of racial purity. In the same way that the phonograph was a technology of sonic preservation and reproduction, so too eugenics sought to preserve social hierarchies through biological reproduction. Julian becomes a citizen of utopia not through Dr. Leete’s lessons in socialism, but through the eugenic womanhood that bodies forth collectivist euphony. \textit{Looking}

\(^8\) By 1898, there was a Christian socialist colony in Georgia, a Shaker community in Florida, a cooperative colony in Mississippi, a single-tax colony in Alabama, and a Ruskinite colony in the Tennessee piedmont [13].
“Looking Backwards” thus leverages eugenics for a socialist agenda articulated through the gendering of music, sound reproduction, and harmonic acoustics.

In light of the sonic harmony and biological reproduction through which the novel constitutes its utopia, the often-discussed “nightmare” scene that closes the novel (and follows his betrothal to Edith Leete) can be reinterpreted as a condensation of all the accumulated sounds Julian has experienced. In this nightmare, Julian dreams that he is in 1887 Boston. During his ramble through the city he hears “the roar and rattle of wheels and hammers resounding from every side,” which “was not the hum of a peaceful industry, but the clanging of swords wielded by foemen” [232]. Unlike the utopian hum of peaceful industry, 1887 Boston’s urban noise is psychically and socially unnerving. He confesses, the “festering mass of human wretchedness about me offended not my senses merely, but pierced my heart like a knife, so that I could not repress sighs and groans. I not only saw but felt in my body all that I saw” [236]. An echo of the clashing cymbals and clanging scimitars from his Orientalist dream, the deleterious noises induce a sensory disorientation akin to Julian’s initial encounter with utopia. The nightmare ends with Julian pleading to Boston’s elite on behalf of the lower classes to “Listen! [...] If you hush your laughter, you will hear their grievous voices...With what you stopped your years that you do not hear these doleful sounds? For me, I can hear nothing else” [238]. The noisy pandemonium of Julian’s unconscious voices the never ceasing nightly noises of the tenements and slums. In utopia Julian dreams of noise. “Looking Backwards” leaves us with the possibility that sonic interference is a necessary condition for social harmony, that the constitutive sonic outside called “noise”—as with the constitutive gustatory outside called “bad taste” and the constitutive olfactory outside called “musky pinks”—is a meaningful intervention that is always aesthetic.
Chapter Four. Touch

The same year that Bellamy’s social harmony sounded forth, the American press found itself consumed with the awe-inspiring life of a person “destined” to become a “great wonder” [9]. This the Chicago Tribune declared of Helen Keller, who “although blind, deaf, and dumb” found “the world a pleasant one” [9]. In a similar article entitled “Little Helen Keller, the Blind-Deaf Mute,” the New York Times described the eight-year-old’s surprising sensitivity to others. “She has learned so well what movements people make under the influence of different feelings that at times she seems to read our thoughts” [11]. Keller’s near-telepathic capacity for fellow feeling in part resulted from the physical feel of her world:

Some of you already know that sound is produced by the vibrations of the air striking against our organs of hearing; and deaf people, even though they can hear absolutely nothing, are still conscious of these vibrations. Thus they can “feel” loud music, probably because it shakes the floor; and Helen’s sense of feeling is so wonderfully acute that she no doubt learns many things from these vibrations of the air which to us are imperceptible. [11]

When offering a definition of feel, a typical dictionary asks a person to choose between “to perceive through touch” and “to be affected by.” This semantic bifurcation illuminates how feel tethers the tactile to the affective. The word’s double meaning is an effect of its “oscillation between insides and outsides,” Sianne Ngai observes [201]. More than the body’s epidermal surface and its psychic depths, feeling is an effect of contact with people, sound, and other lively matter. Fifteen years into her celebrity, Keller declared in her autobiography The Story of My Life, “Literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out” [97]. In addition to the tastes and smells that constituted her world,
Keller (a socialist since 1909) would have felt her citizenship through the tactile and emotional vibrations of *Looking Backward*’s euphonic social arrangements.

From the beginning, the American public characterized Helen Keller as a person who could only feel. Limited to her skin because of deafness and blindness, Keller was a spectacle of tactility. The organizers of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, for instance, permitted her to run her fingers over exhibits that no one else could touch. Keller’s transgressive touch became the exhibition. Where others were required to “look, but not touch,” she *had to touch*. Although lauded for her perspicacity and intellectual curiosity, she oftentimes was reduced to her feeling skin and her feeling soul. Such views of Keller and other disabled persons grew out of sentimentalist literature, with its focus on the helpless female body. “Blindness was the paragon of disabled difference for female characters,” Sarah Chinn writes. “Their blindness is the source of their emotional excess, which stands in contrast to the emotional control of their nondisabled counterparts” [242]. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has pointed out, nineteenth-century attitudes cast the female and the disabled body “as deviant and inferior” [19]. Physically feeble because of her condition and mentally feeble because of her gender, Keller spent most of her life negotiating the sentimental narratives into which many inscribed her. The popular image of the wild child tamed by female devotion that the American press disseminated was all but inescapable. It is not surprising, then, that Keller’s 1903 autobiography *The Story of My Life*, with its upbeat tone of self-reliance, enjoyed immediate critical acclaim and popular success.

A history of a life only twenty-three years in the making, *The Story of My Life* gave readers a glimpse into the “darkness that veils my eyes” [51]. It also challenged those who doubted the author’s acuity, in the words of her editor John Macy, with “final proof of her
independent power” [11]. As Mary Klages proposes, the history of disabled people “shows a continual struggle to understand the meaning of disabled bodies and their differences from ‘normal’ bodies. That history has striking parallels to the Victorian histories of people defined by their ‘abnormal’ bodies, including women, people of color, and invalids” [4 – 5]. What tethered these seemingly disparate people together, I propose, was their close association with the ostensibly emotional, irrational, primitive sense of touch. Jammed between her intellectual abilities and her sensory incapacities, an international celebrity who was both an exceptional and an exemplary disabled person, Keller no doubt understood what W.E.B. Du Bois in 1897 called the “peculiar sensation” of being estranged from one’s self [5]. “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro,” he wrote (5, emphasis mine). Inhabiting two bodies at once is indeed a feeling because feeling, I have shown, is emotional and physical. Keller aimed to lift “the veil that clings about my childhood” in the same way that Du Bois set out to lift the veil between the two Americas [12]. Here, the temptation may be, against our better judgment, to conflate race and disability. Instead, this chapter reassesses Keller according to her literary innovations, to show that it is no coincidence that The Story of My Life and The Souls of Black Folk were published in the same year. The moments in Story that exceed testimony are of aesthetic interest to me because they narrate the autobiographical form as a Du Boisian felt twoness. Thus, The Story of My Life illuminates a crucial moment in the history of touch: it explains why, at the turn of the century, the pairing of disability and race emerged to establish autobiography as the literary form that double consciousness takes.

More broadly, what I am proposing is that touch cannot have an author, only authors. Physiologically, touch results from the combined information of the skin’s myriad
receptors and nerves, which communicate pressure, temperature, and movement. Dispersed throughout the body, it is far-reaching and all encompassing. Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz observes that touch has been one of “the most difficult and complex of all the senses to analyze because it is composed of so many interacting dimensions of sensitivity, involving a number of different functions” [98]. Debased because of its immediacy or sublimated in association with emotion and spirituality, tactile perception has had a variegated status in western philosophy. In De Anima, Aristotle ranked touch fifth in order of merit, but described it as the most fundamental of all the sense perceptions. Although tactility is located primarily in the skin and the hand, “the conflation of touch with sensation, feeling and emotion leads to a western understanding of touch as a ubiquitous sense” [Porcello et. al. 55]. Ostensibly emotional rather than cognitive, touch is a sense of direct, unexamined knowledge, and the skin a mere instrument to convey information to the brain. Susan Stewart confirms, “Of all the senses, touch is the most linked to emotion and feeling,” and therefore the background against which all other sensory and affective experiences occur [162]. As such scholarship suggests, Aristotle initiated a philosophical tradition that, up through to today, cannot decide if tactility is an individual sense or the foundation of all the senses. Akin to the slippage of feel between emotional intensity and material quality, tactile sensations inculcate a fundamental phenomenological ambiguity that, I want to suggest, troubles autobiography’s linear tracking of the singular self.

Such a claim is based on three interrelated arguments. First I focus on tactility as a metaphor in The Story of My Life in order to show how the story of Keller’s entry into the world of literacy rendered racial difference a haptic construction. Nineteenth-century attitudes about African Americans limited them to their skin, because of black flesh’s
ostensible hyper-corporeality. Especially in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the potential for physical transgression required that touch be disciplined, lest it assert its erotics through tegument, texture, and tissue. Against the background of segregation, Keller employs finger spelling as a metaphor for illicit contact. I then turn from metaphor to material, by reading Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* alongside contemporaneous philosophical and psychological inquiry about the sense of touch. At the time, race abided not in phenotypic expression, but in the folds of the skin. Historian Mark M. Smith asserts, “blackness was not simply a color but also a tactile condition” [109]. Thus, Du Boisian double consciousness emerged at a moment of wide speculation about the relationship between touch, selfhood, and race.

Having established the different purposes of sensory touches at the turn of the century, I leverage the tactility of double consciousness to reconsider *The Story of My Life*, and the form of the autobiography itself, which is traditionally used to craft a story of the liberal individual self. Yet Keller’s collaboratively authored story is a contact zone that produces multiple selves. The double consciousness that autobiographies—the self as object and subject—reify becomes submerged in the always-doubled act of touching. During a period when the United States was a non-contact culture, the sense of touch was the hinge upon which double consciousness and autobiography, a felt twoness and a constructed singularity, pivoted.
Most Americans did not have to read Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* in order to know the story of her life. Since her entry into public life in 1888, nearly every major newspaper and periodical that reported on her advancements—her learning to read, write, and speak—recapitulated the story of her triumph over adversity: “Helen Keller was born in Alabama June 27, 1880. When not yet two years old she was attacked with an illness that left her without sight and hearing,” *The Atlanta Constitution* wrote in 1903. “When nearly 7 years of age a teacher was obtained for her from Boston, Miss Annie Sullivan. Three months and a half later she began to write and in other ways to come into larger communion with the outside world” [D 8]. The rest is proverbial history. Although larger communion with the outside world was central to her triumphant story, the press often focused on student and teacher’s exclusive, insular relationship. “Interesting as has been Miss Keller’s story,” the *Constitution* continued, “we have been touched even more by the letters of Mrs. Sullivan, in which she has described her slow progress” [D 8]. Sullivan’s “touching” account of her and Keller’s intertwined lives in *The Story of My Life* reinscribes the sensuous, erotic and paradoxical quality of the civilizing process that Keller underwent. In her textual study of Keller’s memoirs, Marta Werner contends that even though Sullivan taught Keller to keep her hands to herself, Sullivan’s “habits of spelling to her hour after hour encouraged the transgression of limits, eliding at last the boundary between them” (7). Perhaps equally as important, the transgressive intimacy that touching engendered between the woman and child, so central to Keller’s *Story*, papered over the even more transgressive touches between the girl and her family’s African American servants.
In *The Story of My Life* touch becomes shorthand for the interracial contact that made Keller’s literacy possible. The autobiography addresses this interracial illicit contact by reworking it into a story about language, describing the illiteracy as problem of boundlessness, an incapacity to discriminate between surfaces and skins. Her reported problem with boundaries was even more problematic in her segregated hometown of Tuscumbia, where the black community (over half the town’s population) lived in dilapidated shacks out of sight of the town’s shops and its oppressively fragrant magnolia-lined streets. In addition, Keller’s father—a self-styled gentleman farmer—had been a captain in the Confederate Army, and her maternal grandfather a “copperhead” from Massachusetts who had fought as a brigadier-general. Before Sullivan’s intervention, the unbounded Keller often played with the black children of her family’s servants. She describes these carefree afternoons:

A little colored girl, Martha Washington, the child of our cook, and Belle, an old setter and a great hunter in her day, were my constant companions. Martha Washington understood my signs, and I seldom had any difficulty in making her do just as I wished. It pleased me to domineer over her, and she generally submitted to my tyranny rather than risk a hand-to-hand encounter. [18]

Martha Washington, a young black girl named after the United States’ first First Lady, makes it possible for the blind, deaf young white girl to feel her privilege. A companion as faithful and submissive as an old hunting dog, Martha ostensibly could access Keller’s signs in ways that adults, namely her parents, could not. Associated with children and primitive people, gestures and pantomime constituted an allegedly atavistic, inferior language that more evolved and civilized persons had outgrown. An evocation of “an instance in which nothing is absolutely maintained,” in philosopher Erin Manning’s words, gestures slip outside the grids of organized structures [8]. Writing into the air, meaning is not guaranteed. On a
surface level, then, the playful hand gestures between the two girls, whose bodies were deemed inferior in different ways, flatten social hierarchies.

Yet the pleasure of mastering Martha cannot be divorced from Keller’s inability to master the signs of the civilized world. The bond between the cook’s daughter and the ex-Confederate’s daughter does not equalize them as racial and sensory outliers, respectively. As they played and lived near Keller’s Landing, “an old tumble-down wharf on the Tennessee River, used during the Civil War to land soldiers,” the two girls were never far from the white supremacist logic that prompted Martha to submit to Helen’s tyranny [36]. Whether or not Martha understood Keller’s gestures, and whether or not Keller understood Martha’s signs, both girls understood the power dynamics that the other’s skin signified in relation to their own. Insofar as “the little darkies,” Sullivan recounts in Story, were Keller’s “constant companions before I came,” blindness and deafness did not prohibit Keller from believing in her superiority, which she felt based on the ease with which dogs and “darkies” submitted to her temperamental whims and obeyed her gesticulatory commands [149]. That Martha would do anything to avoid a “hand to hand encounter” with Keller registers that Martha knew she would have to submit to the violent physical contact the girl might exact upon her. Keller’s and Sullivan’s recollections demonstrate that sensory impoverishment and racial privilege were identities that Keller inhabited simultaneously.

The effort to read Martha’s shying away from physical contact as symbolic of unequal social relations is buttressed by Sullivan’s account of how she trained Keller’s promiscuous hands. As Jim Swan observes, the girl’s propensity to touch everything made “it difficult for her to sustain a sense of the boundaries routinely respected by people with hearing and sight” [59]. Whereas sight and hearing are often associated with compositional
order and distance, touch is irreducibly proximate. In order to appreciate differences in
texture, tactile propriety must replace tactile promiscuity. When Sullivan first arrived in
Tusculumbia in 1888, the first thing she taught Keller was how to glean meaning from
different tactile sensations. Teacher and pupil lived together in a little garden house a quarter
of a mile away from the family’s main house. There, in Sullivan’s words, a “servant, a little
negro boy” named Percy “[took] care of the fire when we need[ed] one” so that she could
give her “whole attention to Helen” [143]. By freeing up her teacher’s hands, black labor
made Keller’s tactile education possible. At the same time, however, black labor potentially
undermined the control Sullivan could exert over her student. For instance, she convinced
Mrs. Keller not to get a nurse for Helen because “I’d rather be her nurse than look after a
stupid, lazy negress. Besides, I like to have Helen depend on me for everything” [149].
Perhaps because she found Percy less threatening than a nursemaid, the white female labor
of supervising black female labor becomes an excuse to place distance between the genteel
girl and the domestic servants.\footnote{As many readers of nineteenth-century literature will know, being pro-Union and racist was not mutually exclusive. Before her arrival, Sullivan’s friends had cautioned her against talking about the Civil War, and told her to avoid racial issues. See Joseph Lash’s biography of Keller, \textit{Helen and Teacher}. Many arguments about the war that occurred between Sullivan and the Keller family, especially Capt. Keller’s brother, who was “bitter, argumentative and vindictive, and never lost a chance at meals to bait [Sullivan] with slurring remarks about Sumner, Grant, even Lincoln” [68].}
Having replaced Martha and Belle as Keller’s companion, Sullivan leveraged her status as a privileged domestic worker to instill in the girl a physical
sensitivity to touch through a symbolic sensitivity to race and class.

Oscillating between Sullivan’s racist denunciations and Keller’s rose-tinted nostalgia
for her “primitive” playmates, \textit{The Story of My Life} elucidates how a formal education in tactile
literacy was predicated on proper contact between social unequals. Trained to avoid
promiscuous touching so that she could touch things more consciously and conscientiously,
Keller considered African American children like Martha no longer playmates, but rather, like Percy, workers. The aim of her education was to transform language, and by extension race and class, into a material touch. But as language became more tactile, interracial contact became more abstract, more metaphorical. Sullivan taught Keller the deaf-blind manual alphabet, better known as finger spelling, a tactile mode of linguistic notation that entails using the hands to represent alphabetic letters. Whereas the deaf comprehend finger spelling visually, by watching the shape of the letters traced in the air, the deaf-blind comprehend it tactually, by feeling the letters drawn out on the hand. Keller recounts how one day, while playing with a doll, Sullivan “slowly spelled into my hand the word d-o-l-l. I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it…I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed” [26]. This new idea, that objects have names that can be communicated, opened up a new relationship to the world. With an emotional exchange of syllables that inserted the story of two women’s bodies into The Story of My Life, finger spelling dissolved distinctions between the inter- and intra-personal. “When the blind finger-spell,” Werner posits, “words rush into them or into their interlocutors. They drive downward, into flesh-memory. The only text is an embodied one” [4]. Pressing their fingers into the other’s palm, the women became each other’s dolls. This erotic dialogue between Sullivan and Keller kept insiders (hearing and seeing persons) outside the two-person circle.

The manual alphabet also kept outsiders out of the circle; the d-o-l-l at the center of Keller’s “finger play” replaced the gesticulatory touches of her former playmates. The unequal touches that signified race and class for Keller faded into the background, as the equal, reciprocal flow of dialogue between Keller and Sullivan came to the fore. In narrating the process of tactile communication, The Story of My Life reveals the formation of a literary
self: the need to write oneself into existence in order to “speak” suggests that finger spelling marked Keller as an autobiographer at the very moment it marked her as abnormal. Yet African Americans served to give Keller the sensation of a normal body and mind. In addition to performing domestic chores that allowed Sullivan to devote herself to the girl, Percy played the foil to Keller’s intellectually precocious self. *Story* includes one of Sullivan’s letters, which attests that Keller learned to finger spell by teaching Percy how to finger spell:

> Yesterday I had the little negro boy come in when Helen was learning her lesson, and learn the letters, too. This pleased her very much and stimulated her ambition to excel Percy. She was delighted if he made a mistake, and made him form the letter over several times. [146]

For all its intimacy and promise of reciprocity, finger spelling is by no means egalitarian in its ends. An echo of the illiterate child’s dominance of her playmate, in this episode Keller demonstrates her mastery of language by mastering Percy. Even as they stroked each other’s hands with letters, Keller knew that Percy’s skin was both a texture and a symbol, a figure for social inferiority. Indeed, as recounted in another of Sullivan’s letters, when she told Keller that happy thoughts are “bright,” the girl quipped, “‘My think is white, Viny’s [the black domestic] is black,’” a statement that revealed the girl’s belief that “the color of our thoughts matched that of our skin” [170]. White skin glows—light from within the body shines outward—whereas black skin shines—light reflects off, cannot penetrate, the opaque flesh. That Keller equates cognitive brightness with epidermal whiteness articulates her internalization of the notion that the primitive minds of non-white people are “mirrored in the stultifying quality of [their] dominant sense, touch” [Sander Gilman 216]. Ostensibly, coarse skin signifies a lack of both intellectual acuity and aesthetic sensibility. Percy’s hands, forming imperfect words, materialized his thick-skinned “black” mind.
This anecdote suggests that Keller’s experience of language transformed touch from pure sensation into a figurative “sense” of racialized sociality. “On being told that she was white and that one of the servants was black,” Sullivan wrote in *Story*, Keller “concluded that all who occupied a similar menial position were of the same hue; and whenever I asked her the color of a servant she would say ‘black.’ When asked the color of some one whose occupation she did not know she…finally said, ‘blue.’” [174]. Keller knew race through the tactile effects of hard labor upon African Americans. Mark Smith asserts that throughout the nineteenth century many white Americans contended that black skin “was at once thicker and tougher than white skin and, ergo, much better suited to hard manual labor” [109]. In this tautological equation, African Americans are suited to manual labor because of their coarse skin, which itself is an effect of manual labor. Keller encountered blackness through the touch of the rough hands that demurred to her, and the tactile contrast of another’s rough skin against her soft flesh. Yet the absurdity (for the sighted) of a “blue” person reveals that “color” is itself a metaphor for racial difference. Keller’s literal interpretation of Sullivan’s question assigns servants a color, not a race. What *The Story of My Life* makes clear, however, is that although blind to color, Keller was not blind to race.

As overdetermined as these scenes may be, they perform an important function within the autobiography’s formal scheme, one directly related to the phenomenology of finger spelling. Keller refined her touch in order to discriminate among people and things, a discrimination or separation that finger spelling performed. Werner maintains, “In finger-spelling…there is a closing of the ‘spacetime’ forced open by the act of abstraction…whereby each letter, each word, each thought is marked as separate” [7]. Yet *The Story of My Life* suggests that finger spelling is more than a separation of linguistic sign; it also, perhaps
paradoxically, provokes attachment. The narrative voice that structures *The Story of My Life* makes this oscillation particularly clear. Keller writes:

> Martha Washington had as great a love of mischief as I. Two little children were seated on the veranda steps one hot afternoon. One was black as ebony, with little bunches of fuzzy hair tied with shoestrings sticking out all over her head like corkscrews. The other was white, with long golden curls. One child was six years old, the other two or three years older. The younger child was blind—that was I—and the other was Martha Washington. [19]

The scene redoubles the many perspectives that finger spelling forced Keller to internalize: it starts in the first person, slides into the third person, then returns to the first person. Object and subject—“Martha Washington and I” and “two little children”—are not easily marked. A scene recounted long after she had mastered the manual alphabet, this perspectival slippage makes manifest the ontological effects of finger spelling, its capacity to transgress the limits of the self. After all, when writing with skin, wholeness emerges over time, from the act of marking the other’s hand with one’s fingers. The hands of others signed into hers a mixture of discursive fragments, which Keller’s memory had to stitch together. By way of paradox, finger spelling’s “spacetime” (the individualization of each letter of each word) prohibited Keller from marking herself as separate. In finger spelling, another’s touch becomes a prosthetic extension of one’s body, and one’s touch becomes incorporated into another’s body. It is not that the loss of sight and hearing produced an unbridgeable gap between the objective and subjective spheres of Keller’s thought. Rather, finger spelling allowed Keller to occupy both positions simultaneously.

A lived moment of perspectival misapprehension amplified through retrospective narration, the scene between Martha and Keller crystallizes the absorption of identities and differences upon which tactile language is predicated. “When the right hand spells into the left it is a way of being self and other at the same time. This double practice of transmission
and reception,” Werner acknowledges, “was also a temptation to solipsism. Enough to make her write in the third person” [5]. Tactile language is an experience of simultaneously inhabiting one’s self in the first person and the third person. Keller’s narrative voice, her authorial hand, thus operates as “the surface on which someone else’s fingers imprint a sequence of tactile signs, a sequence that is not spatial but temporal, with letters, words, and sentences all spelled one after the other into the same surface” [Swan 58]. To think aloud was to spell to oneself, and hence an act of self-authorization that veered toward autoeroticism. A structured touch that gave her a figurative “feel” for racial difference, finger spelling blurred Keller’s subjective and objective enunciations. Touching thick, racialized skin informed Keller of her privilege at the very moment that the act of touching required Keller to depend upon, and to identify with, that contact for her own sense of being in the world. Through its perspectival boundlessness, The Story of My Life transforms racial touches into a figurative zone of contact; the text allows Keller to inhabit the bodies she was taught not to touch. Shadowed by finger spelling, the autobiography’s formal entanglement of first- and third-person runs into as it runs away from the bounded self the genre treasures.

The Hidden Skin

Given the racism that structured Keller’s tactile education, it might be surprising that Keller became an advocate for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1916, W.E.B. Du Bois printed in the NAACP newsletter The Crisis a letter she had

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2 Once she mastered the language, Keller was taught that it was sinful for her to spell to herself. To help her overcome the habit, Sullivan would tie up the girl’s fingers. Decades later, “in moments of excitement,” Keller would wake from a deep sleep to find herself spelling to herself [Lash 235].
sent to the organization (along with a one-hundred dollar check) denouncing the “economic
degradation” of her “colored fellow countrymen”:

The United States stands shamed before the world whilst ten millions of the
people remain victims of a most blind, stupid, inhuman prejudice…I feel
with those suffering, toiling millions…My spirit groans with all the deaf and
blind of the world. I feel their chains chafing my limbs. I am disenfranchised
with every wage-slave. [305]

Here Keller transforms blindness from a lived condition to a metaphor for ignorance and
racist inhumanity. Her language suggests that her capacity to empathize with, “to feel with,”
the oppressed largely derives from her physical disability.³ Yet Keller overcomes her
disability by abstracting it. The “deaf and blind of the world” for whom her spirit groans
refers not to those who share her sensory world, her blind-deaf compatriots, but rather the
white supremacists whose limbs are chained by prejudice. Metaphorically handicapped by
their ignorance, the United States legally handicaps—disenfranchises—its African American
citizenry. If in her childhood finger spelling both taught Keller racial discrimination and
encouraged identification with the Other, then by the time she was in her thirties, her tactile
sensibilities had made possible a cross-racial fellow-feeling that overturned traditional ideas
about who was and was not disabled. Keller’s letter serves as a fitting corollary to the
perspectival intercourse that crystallized her identification with Martha.

Insofar as her disability and gender rendered her unfit for political life, Keller’s letter
created solidarity between a racially privileged woman and African Americans through
metaphorical blindness. It is all too easy to dismiss Keller’s problematic identification, when
in fact it points to how disability and race were theorized as tactile conditions at a particularly

³ For a thorough account of Keller’s active political life, as well as her vexed relationship with the blind-deaf
vexed moment in American history. Du Bois himself harnessed her perceptual “disability” to reflect on the felt experience of the color line. Both had known each other since 1892, when Du Bois traveled with his mentor William James to visit Keller and Sullivan, both celebrities, at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. Du Bois wrote, “Perhaps because she was blind to color differences in this world, I became intensely interested in her, and all through my life I have followed her career” [64]. Du Bois’s interest in Keller lay in her sensory adaptations, which had the potential to disprove the ideology of racial prejudice. Certainly aware of Keller’s tactile experience of the world, Du Bois formulated double consciousness as a conflation of self and other—a conflation that finger spelling initiated and inculcated. This is not to argue that double consciousness is analogous to finger spelling. Rather, it is to suggest that Du Bois’s phenomenology of racial difference in The Souls of Black Folk arose out of, and partook in, a specific historical moment when a variety of fields (physiology, philosophy, psychology) were speculating on the tactile notion of selfhood that Keller made famous.

Indeed, Du Bois’s conception of the color line directly chronicles shifting attitudes about tactility at the turn of the century. Laid out originally in his 1897 Atlantic Monthly article “Strivings of the Negro People,” double consciousness names the perceptual experience of estrangement, of being I and You simultaneously. Reprinted in his quasi-autobiographical The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois famously wrote:

[The] Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense

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of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others…One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro…two warring ideals in one dark body. [5]

For Du Bois, double consciousness is the abnormal sensation of seeing oneself through the eyes of another. By extension, a (black) person’s body always emerges through and alongside other (white) people’s bodies. On the surface, Du Bois defines double consciousness as a kind of visual impairment that is in fact a gift. The language of blindness suggests an extrasensory awareness on the part of African Americans: “the second-sight” with which the black community is gifted echoes the “spiritual insight” that has been attributed to blind people, going back to the Greeks. “There is not in this country, perhaps not in the world, another whose mental faculties and capabilities have developed so rapidly and so completely,” the New York Times declared of Keller as early as 1890 [3]. Like The Story of My Life, The Souls of Black Folk attempts to convert a perceived lack into a strong capability.5

Although many scholars have highlighted the optics of double consciousness, its involvement with scientific accounts of tactile dimension has been overlooked. Indeed, Du Boisian second sight did not simply coincide with, but emerged out of, the revelation that human beings have a second skin. Contemporaneous scientific research on the skin and the nervous system disclosed that touch was not a surface-level perception, but a sensation that lived in the flesh. In 1883, an article in The Manufacturer and Builder on “The Skin” proposed that skin was more than “simply a covering for the rest of the body” [163]. Tactile sensitivity had nothing to do with the thickness of skin, and everything to do with the “number of nerves which are there accumulated” [181]. Touch resides in the skin’s nerves, not atop its

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coarsened exterior. A three-dimensional organ, it comprises “two general portions” [163]. The surface-level epidermis consists of “separate roundish elements called cells” that are “piled upon each other in layers,” whereas the deeper layer of skin, called the corium, is composed of “firm and elastic connective tissue fibers” [163]. As it turns out, the skin has two selves. Revealed to be a doubled organ that has an inside and an outside, a surface and a depth, the skin envelopes the doubled self: “In the negro, the dark hue of the skin is due to the presence of a pigment [in] …the epidermis. The corium, or true skin…does not share this pigmentation” [163]. Skin color is no longer a skin in itself, but rather a mere surface effect that hides a body’s “true” skin, like the veil that forecloses the possibility of African Americans accessing their “true self-consciousness.” Scientific research suggested that race lay somewhere in between the blood cells and the top layers of the skin cells. This interstitial space is the true skin, where one finds nerves that “are called tactile corpuscles, because the sense of touch is supposed to reside in them” [164]. Touch is where melanin is not. The epidermis has pigment; the true skin touches. A deep cut into the feel of estrangement rather than a surface-level glimpse of it, double consciousness is subcutaneous.

Yet to read the emergence of double skin merely as a trope for double consciousness effaces how the “Negro Problem” was articulated through the problem that touched posed to psychology and philosophy. It was not coincidental that Du Bois depicted the “Negro Problems” in terms of a problematic sensation. As he famously recounts it in *Souls*, Du Bois could not avoid the question that the half-hesitant glances of his white acquaintances asked him: What does it feel like to be a problem? Long labeled a problematic community, African Americans at the turn of the century daily lived a citizenship that guaranteed no rights. That being a problem would have a “feel” to it was more than metaphorical. In philosophy touch
had long been considered a problem: inferior to sight and hearing, it nonetheless was “the most important of all our senses,” because without it man “would not be able truly and fully to commune with the outer world,” as a writer for *Harper’s Monthly* phrased it [“Touch” 180]. Yet oftentimes discussions about touch addressed, if not impugned, the accuracy of the information the skin gleaned. In 1885, physicist John Le Conte questioned the “Evidence of the Senses.” He declared in the *North American Review*, “Metaphysicians and physiologists have differed widely in relation to the services that ought to be attributed to the sense of touch” [85]. Contrary to scientists and philosophers who contended that touch is “the least subject to error,” Le Conte argued that tactility is the most inferior sensation because the “sensory apparatus constituting touch is far less specialized than the other organs of sense” [92]. Twenty years later in *Sexual Selection in Man* Havelock Ellis affirmed that because of the “imprecision of the messages it sends to the brain,” touch is “the least intellectual and the least aesthetic” [6]. Problematically, touch was the most primitive sensation and the one sensation that human beings could not do without. To read *Souls’s* famous question literally rather than colloquially reveals a chiastic relationship between blackness and tactility: the “Negro Problem” was tactile (had a feel) to the extent that tactility was a racialized problem.

The emergence of skin as a scientifically complex, doubled organ and the denigration of touch as a primitive, emotional sensation could not have been lost on Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk* certainly suggests as much. After all, Du Bois’s education in psychology and philosophy under James in the 1890s made it possible for him to recognize the ways in which not simply the color, but the feel, of skin underscored fundamental conceptions of human difference. His preface to *Souls*, “Herein lie buried many things which…show the strange meaning of being black,” echoes the language James used to describe various
psychological defects in an 1890 article he published in *Scribner’s* [1]. In “The Hidden Self”—a review of then-current research undertaken by French psychologists Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet on the unconscious mental life—James proposed that tactile sensibility was symptomatic of a buried self. James was not exceptional in believing that children, African Americans, and white women were shut out of the realm of the aesthetic and capable only of accessing the world through touch, the least aesthetic of the senses. A pioneer of psychical research and scientific investigation into trances, clairvoyance and telepathy, James associated, rather controversially, the medical diagnosis of dual personality in hysterical women with the occult dimensions of consciousness revealed in trance-states. During consciousness, hysterics think “in visual terms exclusively.” However, in trances their “thoughts and memories [seem] largely composed of images of movement and of touch” [364]. Trances abolish “past sensations” of the visual, out of which emerge recollections rooted in “things touched and handled” and “bodily movements” [365]. The sense of touch, James proposed, restores sensory memories that the modern mind had effaced.

In short, “The Hidden Self” argues that trances unearth previously submerged tactile experiences, as well as the memories associated with them. “Tactile ideas” are “forgotten and practically nonexistent” until trances restore these uncanny “touch sensibilities” by forcing the irrational patient to re-experience her primitive childhood:

> If touch be the dominant sense in childhood, it would thus be explained why hysterical anaesthetics, whose tactile sensibilities and memories are brought back again by trance, so often assume a childlike deportment, and even call themselves by baby-names. [365]

Hysteria transports a person back to childhood, a period marked by acute tactile perception. Just as Le Conte had argued five years earlier that “the eagerness with which the infant examines by touch every attractive object within its reach” proves the correlation between
the sense of touch and primitiveness, so too James affirms that childhood is the period in one’s life when the tactile “condition” prevails [94; 365]. The civilizing process thus entails a shift away from tactile knowledge production and towards visual and aural ways of knowing. For example, one patient’s hysteria originated from things of which “she recollects nothing when awake, because they were records of experiences mainly of motion and of touch, and when awake her feelings of touch and movement disappeared” [366]. In this formulation, modern subjectivity is predicated on the repression of tactile sensibilities. The touch-self and the visual-self coexist, but consciousness submerges the former. The coexistence of these two selves suggests that the body has a dual personality; there exists a fundamental split between visual and tactile sensibilities, a split that only trances can suture [367]. What James’s essay proposes is that the self is a perceptual construct. The hidden self is tactile.

Du Bois’s innovation was to extend James’s hidden self to the realm of the racial by way of the tactile. For James, tactility made manifest the hidden self; for Du Bois, it redoubled the drama of being the nation’s hidden self—its true skin, as it were. Six years after James illuminated the hidden self, art historian Bernard Berenson offered a way for Du Bois to think about how African Americans might claim the aesthetic potential of the tactile. In his influential *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), Berenson theorized what might be called a tactile aesthetics. He proposed that a painting’s surface textures, its “tactile imagination,” evoke a connection between touch and reality that is forgotten after infancy. Texture appeals to our imagination, Berenson explains, because:

In our infancy, before we are conscious of the process, the sense of touch, helped on by muscular sensations of movement, teaches us to appreciate depth…Later, we entirely forget the connection, although it remains true, every time our eyes recognize reality, we are…giving tactile values to retinal impressions. [4]
Insofar as her purpose is to give an “abiding impression of artistic reality,” the artist must “rouse the tactile sense” in order to provide the viewer with the “illusion of being able to touch a figure,” which means having the “illusion of various muscular sensations inside my palm and fingers” [4 – 5]. Berenson contends that visual realism is predicated on the simulation and stimulation of tactile values through the play of surface texture. What is at stake, then, is the possibility that art might arouse “consciousness of the importance of the tactile sense in our physical and mental functioning” [10]. Thus, Berenson’s argument for the crucial role of tactility in visual art speaks against dominant notions that the aesthetic cannot be tactile. At a time when touching art—like getting in touch with one’s hidden self—was considered inappropriate, the tactile qualities of the aesthetic beckoned all the more. By inhabiting the space between vision and touch, the aesthetic intervenes to resurrect that buried tactile sensibility, so finely tuned in infants, hysterics and primitives, but lost once the civilizing process has begun. In its capacity to forge a “true connection” between artistic illusion and lived reality, the tactile is necessarily aesthetic.

As a student who lived in fin-de-siècle Germany during the aesthetic movement, Du Bois would have been attuned to art’s “tactile imagination.” The variegated textures that comprise The Souls of Black Folk suggest that tactility is not simply a mode of racial difference, but an aesthetic experience thereof. The aesthetic capacities of touch is perhaps most clear in the penultimate story in Souls, “The Coming of John,” which centers on an African American, John Jones, who leaves the south for higher education, only to return “to feel

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6 Berenson was theorizing a tactile imagination at the very moment when museums were teaching visitors to appreciate art with their eyes, not their hands. According to Classen, visitors internalized the idea that they “were less important than the exhibits on display,” that “to touch museum pieces was disrespectful, dirty, and damaging,” and that “touch had no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum” [282]. See Constance Classen, “Touch in the Museum” in The Book of Touch. Ed. Constance Classen (Berg 2005).
almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world” [191]. A classic study in double consciousness, John is alienated in one world and not accepted by the other. An educated man who no longer fits in with his natal community, John refuses to accept the servility that is the condition of life behind the veil. In New York City he attends an opera, and in a moment of aesthetic ecstasy, “closed his eyes and grasped the elbows of the chair, touching unwittingly the [white] lady’s arm. And the lady drew away” [193]. Apparently, art can never be transcendent for African Americans. The one moment that music takes John beyond himself also reinforces the limits of his body, the intimacy that melanin makes taboo. (Skin might beget unwanted kin.) This moment of failed transcendence indexes the longstanding idea that black skin was thickened or doubled. “The fixation upon the skin result[ed] in a view of black [people],” Stephen Connor writes, “as restricted to their skins” [161]. The epidermal layer thwarts out of body experiences.

Yet this is not quite the case. When John returns to Georgia and speaks to the community’s Baptist church about the “spread of wealth and work,” the importance of industrial schools, and the pettiness of “religious and denominational bickering,” the audience, unaccustomed to these new ideas, sits in stunned silence [196]. During this painful hush, a man, “wrinkled and black, with scant gray and tufted hair,” climbs to the pulpit with the “intense rapt look of the religious fanatic”:

He seized the Bible with his rough, huge hands; twice he raised it inarticulate, and then fairly burst into the words, with rude and awful eloquence…John never knew clearly what the old man said; he only felt himself held up to scorn and scathing denunciation for trampling on the true Religion, and he realized with amazement that all unknowingly he had put rough, rude hands on something this little world held sacred. [196 – 197]

An elder’s coarse, oversized hands, toughened by decades of manual labor during and after enslavement, mobilize a moment of aesthetic transport for John, the intellectual whose
hands are as “rough” and “rude” as the wizened laborer. As the moans, wails, and shrieks of the audience suggest, the “ignorant” black folk are capable of aesthetic ecstasy, of bodily transcendence, precisely because they are unburdened by knowledge of what it feels like to have one’s skin pierce the surface of the veil. In contrast to traditional readings of “The Coming of John,” the story of two Johns lies not in the relationship between the black John and the white John, but between John and the nameless elder. John is a college graduate who lacks the artist’s touch. The old man, John’s hidden self and true skin, has that touch.

Many scholars have read John Jones as a figure for Du Bois. During his 1892 fellowship in Germany, Du Bois, much like John in New York City, “surrendered to surfaces and appearances, feeling no obligation to leave the sensuous materiality of form and color in search of content or moral,” Ross Posnock posits in his study of the tensions between race and cosmopolitanism [135]. There, he adopted a uniform—gloves, cane, and occasionally a top hat—that denoted cleanliness, masculinity and order. For over fifty years, Du Bois dressed his skin in order to move beyond the restrictions of the color line. Gloves blurred social status, perhaps as much for his onlookers as for himself, and transported him beyond the thick skin that his melanin supposedly signified. The gloves may have even chafed at his skin, a constant reminder of “the vague, uncomfortable feeling of the stranger” in one’s homeland [148]. The same year that Du Bois was asked what it felt like to be a problem, Keller asked her readers, “Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in?” [25]. Although the question underscores the difference between Keller’s world and her audience’s world, it nonetheless asks us to consider the tactile instantiation of double consciousness that tethers The Story of My Life to The Souls of Black Folk. Sporting a layer of skin that masked tactile sensations, the gloved Du Bois knew
well the feeling of living in a tangible white darkness. That two-tiered white darkness could only ever be tangible because at the turn of the century the sense of touch articulated the simultaneously third- and first-person perspective (hidden selves, true skins, nations within nations) called “double consciousness.”

*Personal Touches*

When Du Bois and James visited Keller at the Perkins School for the Blind, they undoubtedly knew of the scandal that plagued her. A year prior, in 1891, she and Sullivan were accused of plagiarizing Margaret Canby’s “Birdie and His Fairie Friends” in a short story called “The Frost King,” which she had written for Michael Anagnos, Alexander Graham Bell’s brother-in-law and the head of Perkins. The plagiarism trial that ensued dogged Keller for most of her life. In fact, part of the impetus for publishing *The Story of My Life* was to combat charges that Keller adopted other people’s sensations as her own. “All of her knowledge is hearsay knowledge, her very sensations are for the most part vicarious, and yet she writes of things beyond her power of perception,” scoffed a reviewer in *The New York Nation* [Lash 293]. Critics charged that her perceptions must have come from others. Yet Du Bois’s conception of double consciousness shows us that selfhood depends on the incorporation of other people’s perceptions. In many ways Keller’s memoir produced double consciousness as a tactile, double sensation. Named by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, double sensation is when a body has the sensation of being both the toucher and the

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7 Unaware of its similarity to Canby’s story, Anagnos printed “The Frost King” in the Perkins alumni magazine, which *The Goodson Gazette*, a Virginia weekly for the deaf and blind, reprinted. Within a week, the Gazette’s editor published Keller’s story alongside Canby’s, matching phrases and paragraphs from the two stories. Accusations of plagiarism were levied against Sullivan as the one who tried to “palm off” the story as Helen’s.
touched. Double sensation names the slipping of subject positions that the sense of touch makes possible—a tactile slippage, a pushing at the limits of liberal individualism, that *The Story of My Life* narrates in detail. Yet even as Keller aimed to prove that a singular life could not be plagiarized, the story of the composition of *The Story of My Life* suggests that authorship is always a plagiarized, “touched up” version of other people’s experiences.

In the context of Keller’s racialized touch and Du Bois’s tactile double self, *The Story of My Life* reveals that autobiography (self-life-writing) is a double sensation. Typed by Anne Sullivan, edited by John Macy, and including both persons’ commentaries on Keller’s education, *The Story of My Life* redoubles the enmeshed identities that comprised the young woman’s life. Indeed, the story of Keller’s life is a thrice-told story. Keller’s story begins not with her words, but with those of John Macy. In the preface he sketches the multi-faceted structure of the text (and by extension, of the life): Part I is comprised of Keller’s story and letters from her own account of her life; Part II consists of Keller’s letters, which are introduced and annotated by Macy; Part III includes Sullivan’s and Macy’s letters, and their commentary on Keller’s education. Keller was thus caught between a genre that aimed to affirm her individuality and a text that rendered her story—and life—dependent on others. Reviews of *The Story of My Life* mirrored this authorial enjambment. Whereas the *Los Angeles Times* underscored that Keller’s “friends attest that the work is entirely her own,” the *New York Times* posited that Parts I and II give a “complete account of her life as far as she can know it. But much of her education she cannot explain, and therefore the autobiography has been supplemented with the reports and letters of her teacher, Miss Sullivan” [A 7; BR 3]. Perceptually incomplete, Keller can only give an incomplete account of her life. Always
qualified by the supposed limitations of touch—she knows as much about herself “as far as she can know it”—Keller was incapable of any true first-hand experiences.

Although most critical accounts read *The Story of My Life* as an exercise in collaborative writing, I want to consider how such collaboration inheres not only in Sullivan and Macy’s overt involvement, but also in Keller’s descriptions of her relationship to language. In other words, had Keller’s memoir been written without Sullivan and Macy, its language—which emphasizes the double sensation of touch—would have kept it a multiply authored text, for the author contained in her self multiple selves. If the phenomenological experience of finger spelling structured Keller’s relationship to racial difference, so that writing was always an extension of the self into another’s body, then the process of reading Braille (also known as touch-reading) equally encouraged a kind of bodily border-crossing that served to trouble the autobiographical genre. Describing her avid reading habits, she declares in *Story*, “I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind” [61]. Werner explains the process of touch reading of which Keller speaks: “Braille is read dynamically, from left to read, and the different patterns of dots create variable intensities, render the page a force-field of energy, a constellation of vitalized geometries” [12 – 13]. Braille inculcates double sensation: it requires the fingers to be marked by the texture of the page as the fingers mark the page. Hence, touch reading is a kind of writing; the two are virtually indistinguishable. What Keller read was a texture; poetry, ideas, novels, all emerged from the tactile differences between the heavy paper and the fragile, raised dots. Keller even confesses that in her over-zealous reading words become “so worn and pressed I could scarcely make them out” [89]. Much like finger spelling, touch reading required Keller to attune her hands to tactile
differences between paper and dot even as it dissolved the material differences between the 
two. By extension, what Keller rubbed out when she read was not only the embossed dots, 
but also the differences between what she thought and what she read.

The collapsing of distance that finger spelling and touch reading initiated and 
instantiated amplified the collapsing of identities. What *The Story of My Life* makes clear is that 
story of Keller’s life is the story of a tactile sensibility that engenders a doubled self. “My 
teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her,” Keller confesses. “I 
feel that her being is inseparable from my own” [39]. Keller’s conception of herself and 
Sullivan as a symbiotic being resonates with the brailled page that her reading body becomes. 
Her autobiography’s performance of overcoming her disability yielded a self-reliant 
individual and a person whose interiority required outside—namely Sullivan’s—intervention. 
Describing her life as coextensive with Sullivan’s, Keller elucidates the fact that deafness and 
blindness is, in the words of historian Douglas Baynton, “a relationship not a state” [24]. 
Keller’s deaf-blind existence was relational because her tactile sensibility was inherently 
relative. Touch, after all, is activated by a contrast in temperature, texture and pressure: hot 
and cold, rough and smooth, light and heavy. That Keller declares, “to know an author” is 
“to recognize his style as I recognize the clasp of a friend’s hands,” reveals the extent to 
which human relations and language stand in for each other [68]. Because it must be felt in 
the flesh, language is for Keller an experiential relationship and a tactile relationality.

But if Keller’s multiply constituted selfhood troubled autobiographical singularity, it 
also affirmed to her readers that she was anything but isolated from the national community. 
Her (tactile) literacy in the great western philosophers and writers affirmed that she had 
assimilated into mainstream American culture, at a time when many Americans considered
the deaf and blind “aliens.” Strongly influenced by Darwin and ideas of racial science, Alexander Graham Bell believed that the foreignness of sign language—the fact that hearing Americans could not understand it—undermined national unity. Because “foreign languages and foreign peoples threaten the health of the Republic,” historian Jill Lepore points out, the foreignness of sign language meant that it ought to be extinguished, just as the languages of immigrants to the United States ought to be abandoned [183]. Bell sought to create national unity and social order through homogeneity in language and culture. At the end of the nineteenth century, he was among a number of people who believed that sign language was to blame for making deaf people seem alien, peculiar, and isolated from the nation. In a speech he gave in 1884 to the National Academy of Sciences, Bell attributed the segregation of deaf-mutes to sign language, because it taught them “to think in a different language from that of the people at large” [42]. He argued:

The deaf-mutes think in the gesture language, and English is apt to remain a foreign tongue…The constant practice of the sign language interferes with the mastery of the English language…They are thus in a great measure cut off from our literature. [42]

In this zero-sum logic, sign language is practiced at the expense of the English language. The more one signs with one’s hands, the less one speaks English with one’s tongue. Gestures do not enhance linguistic communication; they cut against it. As Baynton’s history of sign language shows, evolutionary theorists considered sign language a throwback to savagery, which was evident in the gesticulatory signs of American Indians, African Americans, and ethnic immigrants. With the help of the phonautograph, Bell proposed, the deaf could learn to speak and thereby avoid the use of sign language. In turn, learning to speak would enable their integration into the society from which they were excluded. In contrast to those, such
as Edward Gallaudet, who advocated for deaf-specific institutions and culture, Bell sought to efface any trace of deafness, so that the deaf would be indistinguishable from the hearing.

A student of Bell’s, Keller abandoned finger spelling when she was eleven years old. Her biographer Joseph Lash states that she learned to speak by placing her “hand lightly on the lower part of [the speaker’s] face and the fingers of her other hand in [the speaker’s] mouth so that she could sense the position of the tongue,” as well as the articulatory movements and vibrations that accompany particular sounds, which she would learn to imitate [114 – 115]. Speaking entailed an entanglement of body parts, with hands on throats, fingers in mouths, touching tongues and lips. For all its taboo touches, its aim was to engender a liberal self-reliant citizen. In “Speech and Speech Reading for the Deaf” (1897), John Wright posited that the deaf and blind person “is not only in a foreign land the language of which he does not understand, but, to begin with, he has no conception of what language is” [337]. He thus would have to undergo a “tactile training” that would give him the power to recognize “tones by the sense of touch” and to tell “by the feeling of his own head and chest, not only whether he is speaking loudly, but also whether his voice is high or deep” [336]. Lip reading yields self-awareness and self-consciousness. Language thus lay at the heart of turn-of-the-century concerns about assimilating disabled people into the nation.

Speaking, of course, was not the only form of communication that produced equality by eradicating difference. Werner argues that Keller would not have become an author without the typewriter, which she learned to use at the age of eleven. “It might be argued

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8 Keller embodied the confluence of the two chief interests of his life, eugenics and deaf education. His enduring interest in eugenics led him to advocate the full assimilation of deaf people into mainstream American culture. Indeed, Lash reports that the first word Bell spelled into Keller’s hand was the name of Charles Darwin. When she asked what Darwin did, Bell replied that he wrought the miracle of the nineteenth century, and then told her about The Origin of Species [171].
that in typing Keller discovered the singular self,” she posits. “Typing makes possible autobiography,” because it instantiates distance between the self and Sullivan, the self and the page, the self and the world [7]. The typewriter also papered over Keller’s difference even as the occasion for her typing was her difference. The distance that typing placed between Keller and language was a means of assimilation into a national community that shared a common public, written language. Simultaneously, it estranged her from herself: she could not read what she had typed, and had to remember what she had written, had to recall the memories that constituted the story of her life. Although Werner suggests that typing made Keller “lose touch” with herself, it seems more the case that her tactile self was no longer “hidden,” as it were, but remained ever present. In his preface to The Story of My Life, Macy confirms:

> When we write, we can go back over our work, shuffle through the pages, interline, rearrange, see how the paragraphs look in proof, and so construct the whole work before the eye…When Miss Keller puts her work in typewritten form, she cannot refer to it again unless some one reads it to her by means of the manual alphabet. [10]

As limiting as this method of life writing may seem, it nonetheless afforded Keller a more expansive sense of self. “One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness,” she laments in Story [52]. Such narrowness meant that in the composition of The Story of My Life, dictator and amanuensis become hopelessly entangled, as Sullivan wrote into Keller’s flesh the words Keller had typed, and Keller wrote back into Sullivan’s hand corrections to be made. For all the restraint and narrowness of the interaction, it continued to extend the women’s identities, writing styles, and life stories into each other—and then John Macy edited them both. To this extent, The Story of My Life and the story of The Story of My Life reveal Keller’s life to be a story perpetually subject to
revision. As Werner points out, Macy and Sullivan’s voices are “not only ‘supplements’ but new stories, possibly with the new referents for ‘my life’” [26]. Written out of an impossible longing for originality, The Story of My Life, in its language and textual production, propose that an autobiography can only ever be a plagiarized version of an “original” story.

An autobiography with a title that fails to disclose who “My” is, The Story of My Life initiated a lifetime of self-life-writing for Keller, a perpetual performance of her triumph over adversity. Reduced to her disability, Keller felt compelled to return to autobiography—she wrote nine in total—as though each prior instance of self-authorization were somehow incomplete or inadequate. Only five years after she wrote her first autobiography, she published The World I Live In (1908), a title that articulates her audience’s desire for a description not of “our” world, but of “her” separate, foreign world. Written to explain how taste, touch, and smell create a rich sensory world that constitutes intelligent perception, The World I Live In aimed to demonstrate that Keller was an autonomous being, capable of her own impressions, opinions, and experiences. But try as she might, Keller could not escape the tactile sensibility that defined her public image and role. By her mid-twenties she already had exhausted herself as a subject. In the preface to The World I Live In, she complains:

> Every book is in a sense autobiographical. But while other self-recording creatures are permitted at least to seem to change the subject, apparently nobody cares what I think of the tariff, the conservation of our national resources, or the conflicts which revolve about the name of Dreyfus. [10]

Readers were interested only in autobiography, particularly her dramatic childhood experiences. With its essayistic sketches of tactile sensations rather than a unitary account of her life, The World I Live In, writer Georgina Kleege notes, “chafes at the shortcomings of the genre she helped to invent,” and thereby offers a new approach to self-representation [325]. In fact, it seems to affirm William James’s pronouncement in 1904 that “the relations among
things, fare more than the things themselves, are what is intellectually interesting, and that it makes little difference what terms we think in, so long as the relations maintain their character” [98]. This he wrote in an essay that compared Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller. He wrote, “Since Galton first drew attention to the subject, everyone knows that in some of us the material of thought is mainly optical, auditory, etc., and the classification of human beings into the eye-minded, the ear-minded, and the motor-minded familiar” [98]. Keller is “exclusively motor-minded” and thus the “least crippled by the loss of her other senses” [98]. Leveraging Keller to position perception relationally, as an expression of shifting subject positions, James challenges the idea that bodies are a stable locus of enunciation. In fact, what he asserts is what Keller had been doing all along: writing her self into existence by writing other perceptions into the skin of her body and onto the skin of the page.

To write into the flesh, to read with the lips, to make art with rough hands, is to become sensitive to how bodies are defined, composed, and compartmentalized—and how bodies touch at language’s sensory limits. Signification is sensual. Always deferred, always leading toward another touch, tactile sensations are traces that play on and beyond surfaces and skins. Tactually and affectively feeling themselves and feeling other, touching the world in order to see it and to see themselves, Keller and Du Bois knew well the art of palpation, the pressure, texture, and vibrations that made them feel double, both foreign and at home, deep in their true skins. They were, after all, citizens of somewhere else. “What a joy to talk with other children in my own language!” Keller exclaims in *The Story of My Life* when recounting her arrival at the Perkins School for the Blind. “Until then I had been like a foreigner speaking through an interpreter…[Now] I was in my own country” [42]. Keller was at home at Perkins, where she no longer felt like an alien. Du Bois, as many biographers
have made clear, never quite felt at home. Nonetheless, at the turn of the century their tactile imaginations negotiated their untouchability, that is, the nation’s misunderstanding of their subject positions—the misrecognition of language as abstract, of black skin as rough skin, of disability as plagiarized personhood.

Through the finger spelling that transformed language into a tactile sensation, through the theorization of a buried, hidden self that gave double consciousness a texture, and through the double sensations that troubled autobiographical forms, touch emerged as a juxtapositional sensation that located the simultaneous feeling of national belonging and national un-belonging below epidermal surfaces. The entire body its instrument, touch is mediation; the flesh is language. From the bittersweet taste of emancipation in poetry to the perfumed memories of local color, and from the sound of social harmony in utopian fiction to the texture of race in autobiographies, literature’s gustatory, olfactory, aural, and tactile encounters—individually, collectively, and synaesthetically—constitute affective relations among marginalized bodies, national fantasies, and inadequate democracies. Articulated through nineteenth-century literary imagining, the senses made legible the intangible, barely articulable promise of belonging.
Chapter Five. See

One of the “supplements” to The Story of My Life includes a letter Helen Keller sent in 1892 to her friend Caroline Derby, whom she thanked “very much for [her] photograph. I like to have my friends’ pictures even though I cannot see them” [210]. Keller’s remark suggests that a photograph’s value is not limited to the person it depicts, that is, not limited to the realm of the visible. A three-dimensional object, a photograph renders intimacy a material fact. Sentimental value derives in part from what might be called photographic feeling—the physical and affective touches that constellate around the photograph’s social exchange. Nineteenth-century cultural and popular practices harnessed this photographic feeling to keep people near: encased in earrings, a loved one’s portrait swayed to and fro with the turn of a head; printed as cartes-de-visite, a friend’s picture moved from hand to hand; framed in a locket, a relative’s photograph absorbed, then exuded, the be/holder’s body heat. These photographic objects, historian of photography Geoffrey Batchen notes, “continuously [collapse] sight and touch, inside and outside, into the same perceptual experience” [Forget Me Not 14]. Photographic images are objects that require, beget, and make accessible the intimate movements and feelings within and between bodies. An object animated by Keller’s searching fingers, the still image bears the capacity to move.

The personal connection that Caroline Derby’s photograph materialized for Keller demonstrates the extent to which photography, since its inception 1839, has made possible new forms of affiliation. Today, ultrasound technology has birthed a new kind of social being: it has transformed the fetus, held in watery abeyance, into a body newly in contact
with the family and the nation. In 2004, for instance, a brief article in the New York Times on “The Womb as Photo Studio” reported on companies that offer ultrasounds for those who want “to see their baby and have an emotional experience with their baby” [1]. Such ultrasounds “are generally performed later, when the fetus is more developed and more photogenic” [1]. On the surface, “photogenic” might appear a simple misnomer. A photograph, the act of “writing with light,” involves an image being focused onto sensitive material and then made visible and permanent by chemical treatment. A sonogram is the graphic representation of the distribution of ultrasonic energy among different frequencies. In hues of gray, a fetal sonogram makes visible a barely discernable, rather ghostly, object that popularly signifies as a baby. This “often-obscure image,” Lesley Larkin notes, assumes authenticity based upon “the popular legacy of photographic objectivity and verisimilitude,” as well as “the additional authority of the medical expertise that translates what is often too blurry for a layperson to ‘read’” [279]. The frequent conflation of sonography and photography expresses a desire to have an otherwise fleeting vision of nascent life make itself recognizable according to photographic conventions, as though a womb were a studio that could be staged and lit to reproduce the unique likeness of a fetus.

What I would propose here is that because, rather than in spite of, its being “obscure,” the sonogram makes palpable an emotional, intangible connection. The complex debates among nineteenth-century Americans—about the senses, citizenship, and race and gender—can illuminate controversies about perception and personhood in our current moment, in which sonograms serve to protect the civil rights that “unborn citizens”
This chapter examines how nineteenth-century sentimental photographic practices, from family albums to specially made frames, have converged with fetal sonography to unsettle traditional notions of citizenship. Over the course of the past thirty years, feminist scholars have shown how fetal images have changed legal, medical, and popular cultural practices. Rosalind Petchesky has addressed the impact of fetal imaging technology both on abortion politics and on women’s experience of pregnancy. In her seminal essay “Fetal Images,” she maintains that many people accept the ultrasound image “as an accurate representation of a real fetus,” rather than as a cultural object with historical meaning [268]. Karen Newman confirms, “The media and new visual technologies have endowed the fetus with a public persona, a notoriety, a star status” [25]. Perhaps most famously, Lauren Berlant has extended these arguments to posit that the fetus’s iconicity is symptomatic of the convergence of the public and private sphere. The popular and official discourses that address the unborn fetus as the ideal civic subject begets “infantile citizenship,” a term that designates the abstract, seemingly ahistorical person on whose behalf the nation’s value has become figured. Suspended between medical science and sentimentality, fetal sonograms have become so ubiquitous—in advertisements, movies, and television shows—that an entire culture has “come to identity with, and as, a fetus” [86].

In short, the fetus (as we now know it) did not exist prior to its sonographic visual mediation. Ultrasound technology did not discover, but rather invented, the fetus, and by extension the idea of fetal personhood. In light of recent political statements that equate abortion with slavery, and antiabortion propaganda that juxtaposes lynching photography

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1 Texas, Oklahoma and other states recently have adjudicated that a pregnant woman must view a sonogram of her fetus before deciding whether or not to have an abortion.
and fetal images, it behooves us to attend to the political engagements, cultural transformations, and emotional impressions that visual technologies solicit. To demonstrate this requires beginning in the nineteenth century, when photographic portraiture and family albums allowed citizens to produce themselves as middle-class, normative subjects, and simultaneously served as a means to exclude particular people from citizenship. The convergence of photographic self-making and the reinforcement of racial hierarchies occurred at the site of the family album, which Francis Galton reconfigured according to his eugenicist agenda. That today “the sonogram ‘photograph,’” in Marianne Hirsch’s words, “is now the requisite first image” in a family album requires us to place fetal sonograms in a long history of vernacular photographic practices. By understanding how nineteenth-century photography framed national belonging as a matter of visual immediacy, we can then understand how fetal sonograms currently reframe belonging as a matter of visual indeterminacy that solicits the body’s full participation in the act of beholding. The sonogram’s close association with, and its simultaneous departure from, photographic technology expands vision into the realm of the kinetic: seemingly ante- and anti-race, fetal sonograms invite viewers to inhabit, for themselves, a kind of personhood that is kin(a)esthetic—a visceral, muscular, and perceptual movement between family and nation, filiation and affiliation, belonging and un-belonging.

2 Most recently, former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum compared abortion to slavery. Many anti-abortion activists have described both fetuses and slaves as a “class of Americans” who were denied the right to exist. See Te-Nihisi Coates’s article in The Atlantic “The Unbearable Whiteness of Pro-Lifers and Pundits” [January 24 2011]. In addition, the group Justice For All presents lynching photographs alongside images of aborted fetuses to argue that abortion is genocide [http://jfaweb.org/exhibit.html].

3 Consider the often-illustrated example of the J.T. Zealy daguerreotypes, photographs of partially nude plantation slaves, commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850. The images served as visual evidence of Agassiz’s theory of polygenesis, the idea that human races had separate origins and were thus fundamentally different.
This chapter tells the story of how photographs gave way to sonograms and sonograms turned into photographs, in order to trace the intimate dialogue between the making of so-called “unborn citizens” and the fully embodied experience of seeing at the turn of the twenty-first century. In turn, this connection offers a way to reconsider visual perception not as an act that places distance between subject and object, but one that collapses the two. The sensual dimensions of civic experience thus entail an indissoluble, synesthetic connection among all the senses. As it turns out, visual images of ultrasonic waves are no farther afield from notions of personhood than taste buds were from Emily Dickinson’s writing table, than perfumes were from Higginson’s war memories, than acoustical science was from Bellamy’s socialist agenda, than finger spelling was from Keller’s many acts of self-authorization.

From My Photograph to Composite Photography

In 1867 a writer named only as RHE published an essay entitled “My Photograph” in the immensely popular periodical Godey’s Lady’s Book. An exegesis on her relationship to family portraiture, the essay begins with the assertion, “The humblest chambermaid can today send to her lover as true a likeness as a duchess can have at her building… Photographs are the portraits of common life. Common life has little to do with ideality” [341]. RHE posits that mechanically reproduced photographs give the lower and middle classes access to a visual construction in the same way the upper classes once had marshaled painting to do. If the duchess’s painterly family portrait indexed a class of individuals reproducing itself as a class, then the chambermaid’s photographic self-portrait now registers
an aspirational medium, a means to produce, document and normalize herself as a visually “real” bourgeois subject. Even though predicated on, in Batchen’s words, “the manipulation of light levels, exposure times, chemical concentrations, tonal ranges, and so on,” photography makes “claims to some sort of objectivity” that continue to hold fast [Burning with Desire 213; 211]. The years after the Civil War witnessed the relative affordability of photography and the reconfiguration and rise of the middle class. In her history of nineteenth-century visual culture, Shawn Michelle Smith asserts that the bourgeois family became “a social unit increasingly imagined through the process of photographic representation,” which grounded the family in a seemingly objective, stable visual construction [American Archives 118]. Thus, nineteenth-century photography may have documented “common life,” but it also depicted “ideality.”

With its eponymous insistence on possession and particularity, “My Photograph” attests to a conception of photography not only as a means of documentation, but also as a deeply private affair, an archive intended for interested viewership. Just as the pictures of RHE’s “pure and tried” friends “are tenderly kept, and it irks me to seem them turned over by indifferent hands,” so too baby pictures are precious only to relatives [341]. “A baby’s photograph, to all save doting parents and relations, is a stupid thing,” RHE declares [341]. When she looks at a baby picture, RHE does not see “ideality,” that is, the promise of futurity. Rather, she sees the “plethora of flesh and… general aspect of milk-sappiness” of a creature that has not been yet “redeemed” from “a state of lower animalism into the rear ranks of thinking humanity” [341]. One person’s angelic offspring is another’s irrational devil. Disinterested beholders devalue a photograph, which is an object that generates meaning only through genealogical, or near-genealogical, relations. Yet the very fact that
RHE is writing against a popular practice suggests that baby’s picture fast was becoming an object that no longer required, but now solicited, familial belonging. What “My Photograph” illuminates is that baby’s picture was not always treasured; it was not always an image with which a beholder could identify. The family photo album had to intervene to transform baby’s picture from a stupid to a beloved object. Baby’s picture, let alone fetal sonograms, would not have been possible without the photo album.

What allowed “common life” to converge with “ideality” was the family photo album, which, Smith posits, “remains the most enduring colloquial register developed during [this] period of photographic expansion” [Archives 118]. As Hirsch has argued, family photography is a “traditional medium bound up in a fixed set of meanings,” a medium of cultural transmission that blends public and private stories, and thereby extends personal identity space into the public sphere [47]. To recognize “an image as familial elicits,” she states, “a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative” [93]. In short, RHE had not yet internalized this new way of looking, this affiliative gaze that hailed as it was hailed by familial images. The increasing popularity of the photo album during the late-nineteenth century offered individuals a way to adopt images into their own familial narrative, to see baby’s picture not as an image of a senseless creature, but a recognizable human. With the invention of the affordable snapshot camera in 1880, which emphasized domestic memories and underscored the “increasing importance of the nuclear family in American culture,” family albums made it possible to melt distinctions between the public and the private, the national and the domestic, the filiative and the affiliative [West 13].
Apart from inventing eugenics and calling attention to synaesthesia, Francis Galton also crafted the modern-day photo album. So popular were these albums that in 1896 a *Godey’s* article declared it “the most sacred of all household gods,” as it was “paraded before every visitor with ostentatious reverence” [318]. In this and other women’s journals, such articles were presented alongside ads for photo albums, some “bound in fine leather” with “beveled edges” and “ornamented in black and gold,” as one advertisement declares [2]. If the journals’ female audience did not wish to purchase this specific album, they had another option: the *Life History Album*, manufactured by Francis Galton in 1884, a user-friendly compendium of blank table and charts for mothers to record their children’s physical, mental and moral fitness. Designed as a “scientific baby book,” *Album* served to “standardize the haphazard collection of sentimental family mementos, and thereby to open up a vast colloquial archive to scientific research,” Smith posits [*Color Line* 51 – 52]. The first pages detail its “Directions for Use:

1. Anthropometric Observations. Hearing and sight should be tested at frequent intervals, for it not uncommonly happens that children are blamed for carelessness and inattention when they are really suffering from loss of sight or hearing; the color of the hair and eyes is liable to change, and should be recorded.

2. Photographs. Two pages are left in the portion of the album devoted to each successive five years to receive photographs of the owner that have been taken during the period. They should be obtained from the photographer “unmounted,” and be pasted in the book, and the date at which each was taken should be written below it. If the photographs are especially taken for this purpose, they should be reductions to one-seventh the size of the original face. The vertical distance in an ordinary adult face between the line of the pupils and of the eyes and the passing between the lips would then be four-tenths of an inch. An exact full-face and a profile should be obtained. It is desirable that these portraits should be printed by some “permanent” process.

3. Marriage and Children. At the end of the book a few pages are left, on the first of which the name of the wife or husband of the owner and the date of marriage may be inscribed. [5]
Sandwiched between pseudo-scientific measurements and reproductive data, photographs taken for sentimental purposes now served equally as a scientific means of documenting a child’s genealogical and medical history. Galton’s appropriation of the domestic family album materializes the co-implication of controlled biological reproduction and mechanical visual reproduction. In the context of *Family Life Album*, both photography and eugenics leverage the language of scientific objectivity to render race a biological characteristic rooted in heritable physical, moral and intellectual capacities. Eugenics transformed the family album from a uniquely crafted domestic document into a standardized, organized, evidentiary archive.

As if perhaps the blueprint he had laid out for users were inadequate, that same year Galton published *Record of Family Faculty*, a similar album that chronicled the health of individual family members, and allowed one to trace inherited traits from family members going back generations. In the introduction to *Record* he writes:

> I found when making photographic composites of persons of the same race, that the change of one component in a group of eight different portraits rarely made any appreciable difference in the compound result. But when an alien element of race or disease has been introduced into the family, its influence lasts longer… [and it] has often been found to exercise a notable and valuable influence on numerous descendents. [1 – 2]

Here, racial and ethnic mixture is not only a pathological disease, but also a visual fact that can be traced over generations. For this reason, Galton encourages parents to use the blank pages “interleaved” in the book to “introduce photographs which add much to the interest and value of family records” [4]. Photographs clarify any “question…as to the ‘origin’ of each of the great-grandparents,” should there be “any known peculiarity in their race, or any infusion of alien blood” [6]. At the same time, they serve to supplement any other.
“evidences concerning race” [8]. If in *Family Life Album* anthropometric and photographic data are equalized, rendered the same, then in *Record*, anthropometric and photographic data are mutually sustaining myths: the idea that bodily measurements and visual technology can reveal and record racial heritage is a scientific fiction. A document of a family’s “common life,” the photo album now also indexed the nation’s racial composition, with women—as mothers and curators of albums—in charge of repelling any “alien elements” from the family’s biological and visual reproduction.

But Galton did not simply adapt anthropometric statistics to the genre or form of the album. That he instructed parents to photograph their children in both “an exact full-face and a profile” transformed the family album into something altogether different [5]. In contrast to the three-quarter poses that often comprise photo albums, full-face and profile pictures give the album a far more institutional, clinical connotation. As Alan Sekula and other scholars have noted, Galton borrowed these poses from Alphonse Bertillon, who used full-face and profile shots to catalogue the Paris police force’s archive of criminals. Galton, who visited Bertillon, used full-face shots for the composite photographs he invented. In his exegesis of eugenics, *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), Galton argued that composite photography was a means to visualize statistical similarities among members of the same family or race. “It was while endeavoring to elicit the principal criminal types by methods of optical superimposition of the portraits,” Galton recounts, “that the idea of composite figures first occurred to me” [224]. By superimposing images of different persons on top of each other, what resulted was an imaginary figure possessing the average features of any given group of people. Composite photography was the best “method of discovering the central physiognomical type of any race or group” [10]. At heart,
the “common life” that photography was thought to capture now had morphed into pure ideality. “It is far from being a blur,” Galton said of composite photography. “It has altogether the look of an ideal composition” [7]. Photography was not simply a colloquial practice incorporated into the familial unit. It was, for Galton, a means to imagine the family as a racially self-evident object.

During a period of dramatic demographic change, *Family Life Album* and *Record of Family Faculty* affirmed the centrality of photography to the scientific production of race. Smith argues that the period’s “growing interest in ‘baby’s picture’” was not simply the result of a commercial fad or a sentimental ritual, but made manifest “a desire to delineate the future of racial bloodlines through photographic artifacts” [Archive 132]. As late as 1928, a woman by the name of A.S.E. Ackerman wrote a letter to the editor of *Nature* stating that since the second edition of Galton’s *Family Life Album* (1902), “I have kept (and am continuing) such records of my two daughters from 0 to 22 in one case, and 0 to 15 in the other” [610]. Whether or not the letter-writer’s conscious aim was visually to delineate her family’s racial bloodlines, whether or not her family photo album instantiated eugenicist imperatives, those pictures of her children already were racialized. After all, not all citizens were ascribed a domestic life, not to mention an intellectual and emotional capacity, that family photography made manifest. Lower classes and people of color, as many scholars have shown, long have been excluded from the realm of the domestic. In 1903, for instance, the Children’s Portrait Department of *Ladies Home Journal* promoted a baby picture contest: “Each photograph must be of a…boy or girl” who lives “in the United States, “but not in Alaska, nor in the new American possessions of Hawaii, Porto Rico or the Philippines” [1]. As this contest suggests, even as the lower classes and nonwhite persons were relegated to a
perpetual state of childlike primitiveness, family photography excluded new subjects and citizens from the subset of personhood called “childhood.” In short, family photography was part of a national project to define baby as a future white, middle-class subject.

What transformed baby’s picture from a stupid to a treasured object was its archival framework. Galton positioned the photograph to signify potentiality, and specifically, the potential of white regeneration. Family portraiture and photo albums thus served the purpose of tracing and controlling biological reproduction through photography’s ostensibly scientific, visually immediate presentation of reality. Yet, photographs do not always submit to either the narrative logic or the intended purpose of the photo album. Those who used either of Galton’s albums would have known this when they pasted their photographs on the leaves of the album pages. In contrast to the two-dimensional graphs and charts inscribed on the pages of Life History Album, baby’s picture literally would have popped out. It would have accrued a tactile dimension not unlike Braille. A three-dimensional object pasted onto a blank leaf, the photograph would have stood apart from, added depth and texture to, the rest of the album’s two-dimensional, clinical descriptions. Amidst and against anthropometric quantification, the family photograph materialized race science’s unquantifiable residue, an excess that the album itself could not contain. At the same time that turn-of-the-century photography figured Anglo-American babies as ideal citizens, racially and socially privileged subjects, baby’s picture had the potential to exceed the eugenic framework of photo albums in its tactile quality and sensual address. Today, the inclusion of fetal sonograms in photo albums pushes this sensual excess further, all the while returning an image of a once “stupid,” now recognizably human, subject back to its visually alien form.
It is not difficult to argue that photography has been a tool to objectify, commodify, and denigrate women and racial minorities. But as Anne Cheng points out, vilification of visual technology fails to address the “phenomenological, social, and psychical contradictions inhering in what it means to be visible, especially for a subject at once all-too-seen and not seen at all” [99]. For my own purposes, this subject is the fetus, which is an icon, a representative of incipient humanity, and an otherwise invisible particular body floating inside a particular woman’s body. By grasping the material production and social circulation of ultrasound images, we can then consider the seductions and tangible effects of the sonogram’s display of ante- and anti-racial skin.

In the nineteenth century, a woman was not pregnant, but with child. Quickening, when a woman can feel the child moving inside her, was the moment when a child entered the community. Today, visual technology brings about that quickening. In her anthropology of pregnancy, Lisa Mitchell argues that for many women “the fetus encountered during the ritualized, technological, and public quickening of the ultrasound transformed both the lived sensation of pregnancy and its social reality” [175]. However, it seems in fact that sonography is a crucial part of the quickening, the lived sensation of pregnancy. Although ultrasound technology was first used for medical purposes after World War II, it was decades before it became a common way to monitor pregnancy. Unlike an X-ray,

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4 In the 1950s Scottish doctor Ian Donald first adapted industrial ultrasound equipment for use in detecting intrauterine tumors. But as Janelle Taylor points out, the very idea of using ultrasound to visualize the fetus may “be credited to Marjorie Marr, a staff nurse in his employ” who used the equipment “to measure the diameter of the fetal head before Donald conducted his daily rounds” [32]. It wasn’t until the 1970s that ultrasound screening of pregnancy shifted from an experimental to a standard medical procedure.
ultrasonography images soft tissue, rather than bone. Gray-scale images provide information about the density and the texture, as well as the shape and location, of these tissues. In her history of fetal sonography, Janelle Taylor writes, “The views thus obtained are cross sectional” and therefore require that “one know enough cross-sectional anatomy and physiology” to know what one is looking at [39]. As a result, sonography requires an intimate interaction. In a medical setting, a technician slides a transducer over a person’s pregnant belly. The transducer sends ultrasonic waves into the flesh. The waves bounce off the fetal body inside and vibrate the transducer, which in turn transforms the vibrations into electrical pulses. An ultrasonic scanner translates these pulses into a moving digital image. Throughout the procedure, the technician holds the transducer in physical contact with the person’s body, and moves it around to obtain different views of the fetal body in motion. At some point during the procedure, the technician freezes the moving image in order to print it out and then give it to the pregnant person to take home. Circulating as photograph, the fetal sonogram prosthetically extends the experience of pregnancy, the quickening, to onlookers.

When a technician freezes a moving ultrasound image and prints it out, the sonogram is, for all intents and purposes, a photograph, and the fetus a baby. The image-object that the parent(s) take home might be framed, posted on a refrigerator, placed in a photo album, or scanned and emailed to friends and family. In 2004, the New York Times noted the non-medical use of sonography in the emergence of the “entertainment” ultrasound industry. For a hefty sum, companies will provide expectant parents with “sepia-toned prints to give to…families and friends, a CD-ROM with the pictures so they can be emailed…and a DVD with a 20-minute video of the fetus squirming in the amniotic sac” [5].
Of course, Taylor points out, medical sonography too appropriated sentimental viewing practices:

Nothing about the physics of high-velocity sound waves...requires that a diagnostic ultrasound procedure be performed in just the way it has come to be in this country. Nothing about the device itself dictates, for example, that women undergoing ultrasound examinations should want and be encouraged to bring along...family; that they should be shown the fetus on the screen; that seeing it should be understood as a means of effecting maternal “bonding”; that the sonographer should provide a narrative of the baby’s anatomy and activities and offer to determine its sex, or give the pregnant woman a videotape or “snapshot” image to take home. [29]

In short, the ultrasound examination is a hybrid practice, insofar as affective meanings that accrete around fetal sonograms are incorporated into the practice of medical science. Taylor points out that, in response to the mass sentimentalization both of sonographic images and the procedure itself, many American manufacturers of ultrasound technology have built into their equipment a swivel monitor that facilitates turning the screen so that the pregnant woman and her family can see the moving image. In addition to including a “special printer for producing ‘souvenir photos’ to give to patients,” current 3D and 4D devices are equipped to “impart to fetal image a warm sepia tone reminiscent of old-fashioned photos” [66]. Medical sonography now resembles the “entertainment” ultrasound industry that it initially spawned.

To imbue a sonogram with the appearance of an old-fashioned photograph, stamped with the sepia-tinted imprint of nostalgia for a not-yet-borned person, displays a profound humanist desire for the realist image. It is, after all, difficult to discern what one is looking at here:
What we encounter is a diaphanous, alien-looking mass of tissue floating in blackness. The fetus’s visual transparency literalizes the ostensible transparency—that is, value-neutral innocence—of medical technology. Mitchell asserts that most practitioners, pregnant women, and the general public “perceive ultrasound as a neutral and passive technology, as a ‘window’ through which the viewer can observe the fetus,” when in fact “most expectant couples have difficult recognizing fetal shape, anatomy, and movement in the ultrasound image without the sonographer’s assistance” [5]. The myth of neutral, passive technology papers over the dense semantic artifice of sonographic representation. Unlike the photograph, the sonogram has no lens; there is no eye of the camera, no eye of the photographer. The sonogram and the photograph, Karen Newman points out, “are not analog media dependent.” A sonogram is an array of integers, wholly separate from “all
those older modes of seeing that rely on perspective, a fixed or mobile point of view” [107 – 108]. Thus, the idea that somehow sonograms are “truer” than other visual documents allows us to envision the fetus as the embodiment of innocence, as though it exists outside of history, “knowledge, agency, and accountability” [Berlant 6]. The ontological transparency of ultrasound technology is a powerful rhetorical device for reflecting and producing the fetus as a “transparent” and therefore ideal subject. At heart, the technology is as much on display as the body it represents: the sonogram bespeaks fetal innocence, while the fetus certifies the sonogram’s innocence. Both the innocence of the medium and of the message are mutually sustaining myths.

Yet, rather than be befuddled by the mass of gray tissue that sonograms semaphore, we know what we’re seeing—a fetus—because we already know what to look for. The transformation of a blurry conglomeration of soft tissue into a baby picture requires a set of representational strategies: the fetus must be small enough so that the image can capture a significant part of its body; it must be developed enough so that its form is easily recognizable as at least vaguely human; it must exhibit the right levels and kinds of movement to visually resemble those of a newborn. Take, for instance, the specially made sonogram frames being sold:
Here, Raphael’s canonical angels canonize the fetus by instructing viewers to read the ultrasonic subject as an ethereal, universal body. In many ways the frame reveals the extent to which the sonogram is already framed at the moment of its production: a medical technician positioned the anonymous fetus in such a way as to allow for a profile view—a position, no less, that conforms to Galton’s prescriptions for scientific family photography.

The framed image stages a critical pause. It imagines a future that has yet to be seen; it is a repository of possibility that remains. But what does not get communicated, what cannot get across, is a deep history of racialized photographic perception. Precisely because ultrasonic waves, not light waves, render the fetus, the image troubles assumptions about seeing and, specifically, seeing race. Sonograms cannot index race the way that photographs are thought to do. Sound refuses melanin: chromatic whiteness does not correlate to
epidermal whiteness. Without the instructive frame, the fetus looks alien because it is stripped of its skin. Part of its iconicity, then, lies in its representation as an ahistorical, non-racial, wholly unremarkable and anonymous being—the very kind of disembodied subject that, Berlant and others have argued, is American citizenship’s ideal. But to push beyond this surface-level reading, sound in fact foregrounds the desire for a raced and gendered presence within the photographic frame. By staging the absence of light, and therefore of skin, the sonogram suspends the facile relationship between race and visibility. Piercing the grainy surface of racialized corporeality, the ultrasonic waves that constitute the fetus reflect and refract our desire to see human difference, a desire that lies always just beyond the grasp of our eyes. Perhaps even more than the photograph, the sonogram promises an unhindered immediacy of representation, a promise that manifests a desire for pure opticality, for a visibility unburdened by mediation. Yet, this ultrasonic representation of a naked body shows that naked bodies do not exist. The sonogram is an image of an amorphous body surrendering to the possibility of, as it agitates ideas about, the visual.

This paradox—the refusal of race that makes race visible, the disappearance into appearance, the ontological opacity of visual transparency—is the means by which the sonogram draws us into its game of hide and seek. Visually, the fetus appears on the verge of fading away, receding into its placental abode. As a result, beholders become sensitive to the fetus’s felt sensitivity, vulnerable to its perceived vulnerability, on the cusp as the thing is of invisibility, as though it were threatening to disappear itself into the blankness that surrounds it. Indeed, by now it is axiomatic that the fetus, as a national icon, has become a privileged subject to the denigration of other sexually, ethnically and racially marked persons. Narratives of affiliation, such as the one these images evince, often suspend histories of
racial and sexual exclusion. Hence, the reproductive politics that subtend a fetal sonogram’s production dissolve into the background when this framed image is beheld. Simultaneously, however, the image’s ghostliness disrupts the knowledge that vision implies. Like Galton’s albums, the unsettled, semiotic excess of the sonogram dramatizes the continuum from background to foreground, transparency to opacity, absence to presence, along which all subjects vibrate. Unmarked by light, illuminated by sound, the fetus has a grainy quality that dissolves the visual modality so as to become more creaturely, so close that it absorbs the onlooker—a visceral movement, a quickening, as it were.

**A Kinaesthetics of Citizenship**

The issue, then, is not how to incorporate fetal sonograms into a history of visual technology and its constitutive shadow archives. Rather, it is to determine how histories of visual technology have fallen short of fetal sonograms. These images of grainy, blurry, ghostly bodies invite fantasies about unmarked personhood precisely because of the way that ultrasound technology evades visibility and forces us to linger on its surface. By definition, sound is the transference of energy, of air molecules that are moved and unsettled. A writing with sound, sonography makes disruption legible. Heeding WJT Mitchell’s call to submit to the “wildness” and “obduracy” of images, we might do well to surrender to the inscrutable image, to allow the specular fetal body to remain obscure [9]. One way to do this would be consider the sonogram not a visual document, but a set of relations. Rather than ask what the sonogram hides (the maternal body, its production, material living conditions) ask what it shows us about or practice of separating human from inhuman, person from pre-person,
citizen from alien—and image and object. The haptic qualities of the sonogram facilitate this shift towards questions of process and relationality, as they call attention to the role of our own bodies in the act of looking. Coined by German art historian Alois Riegl at the turn of the century, “haptic” names the shift from visuality to tactility: when we look at images we move from pure opticality to the optical-tactile, as our attention moves from the thing being represented to an awareness of the texture of that thing. Resonating with Berenson’s notion of “tactile imagination,” the haptic does not oppose vision and tactility. What Mark Paterson argues in his study of haptics and technologies, the haptic “does not oppose the eyes with the hands, but acknowledges the sensory interdependence of the whole haptic (hand-eye-motion) system…[The] haptic and visual are implicated in one another” [86 – 87].

To designate the fetal sonogram as haptic is to emphasize the symbolic and sensory entwinement of the skin of the image, the skin of the fetus, and the skins of the viewer’s eyes and hands. So tightly related are these skins, we cannot read them separately. We must always move within and between them.
Figure 4: “Winter 1985”
Behold a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional object. Occupying the space between adhesive shellacked to the page and a clear plastic cover, three images unfold before the viewer: a mother plays with her child in the snow; an ultrasound image dated March 30, 1985; and a girl playing with toys. What follows on the next page, entitled “May 13, 1985/Andrew,” are photographs of a newborn. By way of prolepsis, the sonogram printout suggests that the fetus was a few months away from its birth, its boyhood and its being “Andrew.” Within the album’s diegetic narrative, the fetal image reveals the pregnant belly that the woman’s winter coat hides in the picture above. A parallel yet intersecting story is told: while mother and daughter romp in the snow, the fetus inside her nears birth.

Discursively and literally, the ultrasound is the locus around which the family narrative forms. The touches within the images redouble that relationality: the touch between child and doll mimics a filial touch. All the while, the sonogram stands in for the future person around which generational and gestational touches constellate. The photo album births a son and a sibling before his mother births him.

Like the “Image of an Angel,” the family photo album solicits a kind of familial looking that negotiates broader extra-familial—and in particular, national—affiliations. The inclusion of a sonogram in this album suggests that a specific kind of relationality needs to be invoked when we behold fetal images. Emplaced in the center of the page, the ultrasound of my brother hides in plain sight. To put the image in the foreground is the best way to background it; the sonogram is so central, literally, that it obviates the beholder’s need to question what an ultrasonic image of a face-less, skin-less body is doing in an album of family photographs. By disappearing the fetus into the family members who surround it, this
structure fosters a sense of mutual recognition between the beheld and the beholder. Framed or unframed, a sonogram is already framed by the knowledge of what it represents.

This album makes manifest the impossibility of separating a haptic image from its circulation as a social object. Albums exist in relationship to human bodies, tactile in experienced time, objects functioning within everyday practice. In many ways, the material life of my brother’s sonogram contains or performs the image itself. In her call for an examination of photography that moves beyond sight to include “touch and even smell,” Elizabeth Edwards argues that albums construct a narrative both through the arrangement of separate images, and in “the physical action of holding the object and turning the page” that it requires of the reader [421; 423]. Frozen in time, the still sonogram printout is a trace of, and altogether different from, the real-time, moving sonographic image of a shifting, floating fetus. But when we touch the album in order to turn its pages, or when we hold the image-object in our hands, we put the sonogram “back into motion,” Batchen posits, “both literally in an arc through space and in a more abstract, cinematic sense as well” [Each Wild Idea 265]. In its intimate, tactile address, the haptic qualities of the fetal sonogram embody a tension between filiation and movement that is the torsion around which affiliation is generated.

Placed in a family photo album, the sonogram is entrenched in a narrative of kinship. The English word “kin” refers to race or blood relations; equally, though, the Greek prefix “kin” refers to bodily movement. The sonogram sutures the semiotic cuts between “kin” as a kind of rootedness to which family aspires, and “kin” as a dynamic, individual movement that disrupts national formations. If photo albums encourage beholders to become family, then we bear witness to a relationship between fetus and viewer that is kin(a)esthetic.
because—with the exception of the biological mother—our only access to fetal life is through a technology of representation that dissolves distinctions between kin-as-family and kin-as-movement. Like the sliding of the transducer over the pregnant flesh, it is the slippage, the sliding movement, when family shifts from describing kinship to describing nation, when “kin” shifts from signifying blood to signifying proprioception, vision shifts from the eyes to the hands, that makes possible a kind of personhood that is both tied to community and on the move.

Kinesthesia names the process through which the transduction of energy into another medium, the translation of sound into a visual image, is always a mistranslation, an intervening space between sound waves and light waves, between energetic and genetic material, between the beheld and the beholder, between the holding of the object and the object’s withholding of itself. A visualization of ultrasonic waves, the sonogram is a synesthetic object. It is also a kinesthetic encounter both for the subject, whose body and ontic position placentally squirm between and against personhood, and for us, the beholder, whose eyes fitfully squirm between a focused gazing and a floating attention. Both a syn-aesthetics and a kin-aesthetics of national belonging, fetal sonography fosters a reading practice that invites such playful, willful squirming, an agentive movement that allows holding, beholding, and withholding to linger in the same moment. Here is a being between, a being in-between the deconstruction of scientific knowledge, race, and nation on the one hand, and on the other, the construction of a narrative of belonging attendant to the sensory registers that both debunk and remystify those fictions, that, like a magnetic force, attracts as it repels the vibrations, the pulsations, the skins, the kins, of our sensuous affiliations.
The kin/aesthetics of fetal sonography underscores the changing terms of citizenship that occurred after the Civil War. Fetal sonograms are thought to make visible an unborn citizen who is neither the abstract, rational citizen of “common sense,” nor the citizen of “sensibility” or fellow feeling. This ideal being is a citizen of sensitivity: it has a relationship to, and oftentimes in tension with, the nation that is predicated on physical and emotional susceptibility. A national icon, the sonographic fetus draws attention to an alternative model of civic affiliation that arose in the wake of the postwar attempts to consolidate national identity during a period when the nation was itself deemed susceptible to inferior and contaminated bodies. This model of affiliation is based on the human body and the body politic as a permeable, rather than self-contained, organism. Embodied citizenship is thus more than the extension of private sentimental wounding into the public sphere. It is, above all, the incorporation of individual particularity into the abstract, collective whole.

Of course, narratives of embodied citizenship are far from new. Over the course of the past few decades, critical scholarship has theorized the body as a social text, a material performance of a contested cultural grammar of identity. Yet there remains a sensory excess that has not yet been accounted for. What postbellum literature shows us is that citizenship can be reduced neither to the disembodied abstraction of legal citizenship, nor to the passionate and embodied presence of the intimate public sphere. Because perception is a threshold experience—existing at the site of the body’s oral, porous, nasal, auditory, and optic perforations—the senses disarticulate facile binaries that place the mind and the body, inside and outside, in opposition to each other. A mode of knowledge predicated on the not-
so anomalous binding of mind and matter, the senses offer a way of thinking about citizenship as a fundamentally synesthetic experience: reason and emotion, transcendence and imminence, interiority and exteriority, cannot be differentiated from one another. Because the senses are threshold phenomena and because “sensitive” denotes perceptual acuity and emotional fragility, *sensitive citizenship* properly expresses the fragile experience of inhabiting a political body that one is neither wholly inside nor outside of. Rather than seek fixity and stability—place oneself firmly in line with or in opposition to—the nation and political abstraction, *sensitive citizenship* leans into the experiential indeterminacy attendant to, indeed constitutive of, national belonging. Such syneshtetic indeterminacy, of being both an abstract political body and a particular individual, is the pivot upon which sensitive citizenship turns.

This approach to the sensory corporeality of citizenship builds from and extends two recent “turns” in the humanities that unfolded simultaneously, but not, to the extent that I can tell, in conversation with each other: the sensory turn and the affective turn. As previously mentioned, the sensory turn in the humanities served to show that the sensorium is as much a cultural construction as it is a biological phenomenon; it took seriously the idea that seeing, smelling, touching, hearing and tasting are historically specific acts as freighted with meaning as any utterance. Having emerged out of British cultural studies, most anthropological scholarship treats the senses as a cultural “text” that can be decoded; the sensorium becomes another instantiation of Foucauldian power dynamics. At the very moment that “sense studies” socialized biological perceptions, “affect studies” cognitivized social bodies, that is, read a person’s cultural particularity through her body’s “immediate” affective intensities. The affective turn grew out of queer theory’s interest in emotions—
mainly, shame and other negative affects—and feminist revisions of phenomenology and embodied presence, a desire to undo political abstraction by foregrounding racial and sexual bodily particularity. Yet scholarly emphasis on the neurological provenance of affect—as well as its difference from emotion and feeling—has resulted in a body that is merely a container for a network of ostensibly pre-social cognitive and passionate forces. Both approaches to the issue of embodiment craft a body that is little more than a repository of cultural inscriptions—a passive object that can only ever inculcate agency in small acts of affective resistance. The object of study called “the body” itself becomes an abstraction, a metonym for the discursive assemblage of modern selfhood.

In placing the story of how the senses came to be racialized and gendered at the center of national life, sensitive citizenship grounds embodiment in the body. As opposed to using embodiment as shorthand for material social life or reduce “the body” to a language of affiliation, postbellum literature shows that embodiment is a set of material and metaphorical relations. Dickinson’s conflation of aesthetic and sensory taste in order to account for black emancipation, local color’s deployment of physical perfumes to perfume American history, Bellamy’s understanding of social harmony as both auditory and allegorical means of furthering national progress, Keller’s interest in feeling Other as a sensation and a sentiment, and finally the interdigitation of visual and ontological transparency in the fetal sonogram, forcefully demonstrate that national belonging is a synesthetic, intersubjective, always open-ended field of experience. More than a claim to civic embodiment, sensitive citizenship names the unnamable, innumerable physical sensations and emotional intensities that precede and exceed life as a susceptible and agential person in, within, and beyond the nation.
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Biography

Erica Fretwell was born in 1982 in Durham, North Carolina to Steven Fretwell and Robin Goldstein. She graduated from Randolph High School in Randolph, New Jersey (2000), and then earned a B.A. in English and Anthropology from New York University in New York City (2004). She completed her doctorate in English at Duke University in 2011. Her areas of specialization include nineteenth-century American literature, textual studies, and critical race and gender studies.