Grotesque Sympathy: Lydia Maria Child, White Reform, and the Embodiment of Urban Space

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The story quickly became famous in abolitionist circles: On 7 July 1841 Lydia Maria Child walked into the Nassau Street office of well-known phrenologist Lorenzo Fowler, who (or so he claimed) hadn’t the least idea who she was—this despite her celebrity status as a writer, reformer, and editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Child expressed a desire to be examined and then remained silent until Fowler had finished probing her skull and recorded his findings. The phrenologist ascertained, most notably, that reform comprised Child’s lifework and passion; he described a woman “not satisfied with the world as it is,” possessing “more than an ordinary degree of ambition to turn over a new leaf, and bring about moral, social, and intellectual reforms.”1 “The hit,” William Lloyd Garrison later wrote in the *Liberator*, “is very remarkable, and serves to demonstrate the truth of phrenology as an accurate and valuable science.”2 And so it was that Child’s head reading quickly became a milestone for antebellum reform culture, making its way prominently into her writings and into the *American Phrenological Journal*, along with Garrison’s *Liberator*, helping reformers to support their belief in phrenology’s value as a truth-telling science and giving them a vocabulary for understanding their psychology and motivations.3

All this emphasis on the reading of skulls, it seems to me, makes quite an odd bedfellow to the list of causes championed
by white reformers and abolitionists in the antebellum United States. Temperance, abolition of slavery and the death penalty, alleviation of poverty, improvement of conditions for prisoners and the insane, women’s rights—a near limitless array of social ills remained ripe for muscular reformist efforts. Yet even if we consider Herman Melville’s famous and favorable comparison between the skulls of Queequeg and George Washington, phrenology seems to mark a limit to reform: How, for instance, does one go about reforming a man with oversized Acquisitiveness or Destructiveness? What about a city full of them? Does one even try? And, more to the point, given abolition’s role as the touchstone for all other antebellum reform efforts and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s vilification of phrenologists as “theoretic kidnappers and slave-drivers”, how does one square efforts to liberate African Americans with the era’s rampant phrenological justification for scientific racism? How does a movement reconcile its limitless ambition for reform with its belief in humans’ biologically finite capacity to be reformed?

This essay’s short answer is, quite simply, it doesn’t; or rather, biological finitude wins out. But it’s the long answer that gives us deeper insight into white antebellum reform movements; into sympathy, one of reformist literature’s most significant strategies; and into the reasons that a number of prominent white reformers were inclined to rely upon, rather than do battle with, scientific racism. This essay gives the long answer by looking at the corporealization of sympathy as it manifests within densely urban spaces and as it relates to genre and ethics.

Sympathy names an emotional, psychological, and learned response to the suffering of others and an urgent feeling that such suffering makes life less bearable for all; it creates a tightly managed circuitry of connection between witness and victim rooted in primal spectacles of violence and pain. Through sympathy, white reformers safely engaged the objects of their attention, balancing relation to them with simultaneous nearness and distance, all the while reaffirming, rather than jarring, the familiar sociopolitical order in which they labored. These patterns and norms of white sympathy (sympathy’s manageability) shifted within the nation’s newly dense urban environments:
heretofore-existent boundaries crumbled, emotion folding into experience and theory into praxis, such that white sympathy became uncontrollable and unpredictable. More specifically, urban space led white reformers into grotesque scenes that denied the necessary decorum for both white manhood and white womanhood by collapsing the distance between bodies and exposing them to the transformative force of the anarchic, unruly, heterogeneous throng. For recourse, many reformers turned to phrenology and, more broadly, ethnology, which provided a set of strategies, as well as generic tools, to rescue sympathy from the grotesque, enabling the white sympathizing public to put itself into the shoes of another without quite entering the skin of the other. Scientific racism’s emphasis on the autonomous, distinct body as an index to moral and intellectual capacity thus made it possible for white reformers to sympathize with others while still retaining their sense of decorum and bourgeois personhood. By examining antebellum sympathy within urban space, however, we can isolate a somewhat surprising antiracist ethics, one based precisely on embracing the grotesque rather than fleeing from its potential.

Lydia Maria Child’s strong interest in phrenology and the fame of her skull examination are far from the only reasons she makes a prime candidate for such an analysis. More than any of her fellow abolitionists, Child takes risks with sympathy; she both experiences and asks her readers to experience sympathy outside of a strictly theatrical or spectatorial scene. Her texts take sympathy into settings, frequently urban ones, where the borders between separate races and between self and other cannot be neatly maintained, and she praises states of being in which racial subjectivity breaks down. Moreover, as witnessed by her radical tract, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833), and her postbellum novel, A Romance of the Republic (1867), Child does not reflexively resist the bodily, even sexual, intermingling of white and nonwhite races.

In no text, however, does Child more enthusiastically experiment with sympathy than in series 1 of her Letters from New-York (1843). Written during what we might call the most embodied period in New York City’s history—a period with a population density of around 58,000 human bodies per square
mile, in which even the wealthy could not help but interact with their fellow city dwellers’ shit, swine, and stench—Letters alternately models, celebrates, and retreats from a sympathy experienced in the body and by each of the body’s five senses. It is a radical, exuberant, and, as I will argue, productively grotesque form of sympathy: one that threatened not only the white sympathizer’s racial exceptionalism and the autonomous liberal individual on which such exceptionalism relies but also, in a Foucauldian sense, the normative sexuality through which an emerging U.S. bourgeoisie defined itself. This essay first traces Child’s theorization of an ethics of radical sympathy, then follows such sympathy into its practical realization in the crowded streets of New York, and finally details Child’s recourse to phrenology during a visit to Barnum’s American Museum—a recourse that calls upon scientific racist accounts of essential difference in order to, as it were, tame the unmanageable, grotesque sympathy experienced elsewhere in the text.

My foremost purpose, then, is to demonstrate how and why white sympathy and scientific racism collaborated in the efforts of many white antebellum reformers. But this process also allows me to revisit critical accounts that interrelate sympathy with discipline and the production of racial normativity, as well as those that describe sympathy as inherently private or self-involved. While recent scholarship has enriched our understanding of sympathy by demonstrating its ability to narrow the scope of acceptable behavior on both ends of a circuit of feeling, it treats sympathy as always already predictable and tame. Yet sympathy’s ability to strengthen norms relies upon an adherence to three forms of bodily and affective integrity that themselves were produced and reproduced in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America: the capacity of the white sympathizer to manage and control sympathetic affect; the restriction on contact that kept white and nonwhite bodies from establishing anything more than nominal connection; and the consequent partition between affect and corporeality that allowed sympathy to figure mutual feeling but never permanently disrupt racial autonomy. Letters from New-York records sympathy in an urban space that troubled such safeguards and
the efforts, willing and otherwise, to confine sympathy’s potentially disruptive effects.

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### INFINITE RELATION: THEORIZING AN ETHICS OF SYMPATHY

Each entry in Child’s *Letters from New-York* follows a similar pattern, first taking her readers to various points in and around the nation’s most bustling urban area and then using reflection on the particular setting in order to advance an argument for moral and social reform. Her opening letter, originally dated 19 August 1841, epitomizes the strategy, directing readers’ attention to “the blind negro beggar” who sits “amid the splendour of Broadway . . . with horny hand and tattered garments, while opposite to him stands the stately mansion of the slave trader, still plying his bloody trade, and laughing to scorn the cobweb laws, through which the strong can break so easily” (*L*, 9). Child thus offers a condensed travel narrative, one that enables her to extend materially through the city and strategically into a political critique of New York’s prevailing economic and social conditions, synecdochically figuring national problems and gesturing toward the relief promised by national reform efforts. Challenging what she sees as the cruelty of “Wall-street,” “Mammon,” and “Commerce,” she provides her readers with a spatial guide to the city’s capitalist power structures and issues an affective call not only to sympathize with the abject but also to turn sympathy into real, material reform (*L*, 9). To this end, *Letters* catalogs a veritable who’s who of nineteenth-century reform attentions. Among other figures, Child describes a vanishing tribe of American Indians in Hoboken; Manhattan’s Five Points neighborhood with its desperate penury, public drunkenness, and overtly licentious sexuality; the criminals and insane locked up on Blackwell’s Island; and, of course, New York’s ex-slaves and free African Americans.

The letters in Child’s volume were initially written between August 1841 and May 1843 for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, of which she was editor. In early 1843, Child began taking her letters through extensive revisions, both to ready them for a
wide, non-abolitionist, Northern audience and to adjust them from the emerging form of a weekly newspaper column. These paper-to-book revisions attended to such standard concerns as the elimination of redundancies, while also seeking to make Child’s descriptions and analyses of New York life popular and successful in its reformatory efforts. She hoped, as she put it to Ellis Loring, who assisted the revision process, to "get well-established in business connexions . . . and make publishers and printers desirous to be in connection with [her]." Her letters work for marketplace success by taking full advantage of the epistolary form’s singular intimacy, its ability to entreat kindness from readers with a gently hailed “you”: “You know,” she remarks in one characteristic instance, “that religion has always come to me in stillness. . . . You are likewise aware of my tendency to generalize” (L, 50). The remark simultaneously assumes and produces warmth and fellowship, enabling Child to construct a normative, self-aware, and friendly voice with which the reader can readily sympathize. More importantly, the strategy fosters a sense of affiliation and encourages readers to treat Child as a guide, someone they know intimately and trust implicitly—and, hence, someone whose very familiarity enables her to lead them outside of the familiar.

Normalized voice and form advance not only Child’s reformist agenda but also her commercial one: to reestablish a literary reputation that had been damaged after readers, including Catharine Maria Sedgwick, were repulsed by the radicalism of her Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans. That text had broken with conventions of female authorship by stepping into the masculine discourse of political controversy, referring directly to the sexual humiliations of slave women, attacking anti-miscegenation laws, and daring to place a critique of racism against free blacks in the North alongside a scathing rebuke of slavery in the South. Newly and acutely aware of the limits to her readers’ political and social belief systems, Child’s revisions adjusted not only the letters’ form but also their content. She eliminated some of the material dealing most directly with slavery while keeping letters she deemed to be more acceptable, including one opposing the death penalty and one addressing women’s rights. Most crucial for this essay, Child revised
a letter on her trip to Barnum’s American Museum, adding a prolonged description of the ways in which, purportedly, phrenology and craniometry underscore essential racial difference, as though such difference would make the volume’s other content—and specifically other race-related content that she retained—more digestible to her mid-nineteenth-century audience. In the end, Child’s efforts to popularize her work brought a twofold payoff. *Letters from New-York* connected her to a large abolitionist and non-abolitionist audience and quickly became what throughout Child’s life would remain her best-selling publication.

Despite these revisions for a mainstream audience, *Letters from New-York* hardly refrains from presenting a radical model for sympathy and reform. Having attained their trust, Child leads her readers into a mode of sympathy that disrupts bodily integrity and stable personhood, figuring interconnectivity between selves and others as productively jarring, uncontrollable experiences in which individuals relate through an infinity of contingencies and an unfathomable confusion of connections. She forges this model by infusing sympathy’s more typical mode of witness and vicarious identification with a nuanced form of Emersonian transcendentalism and, particularly, with her belief that “every thing seems . . . to come from the Infinite, to be filled with the Infinite, to be tending toward the Infinite.” This “Infinite,” she adds, making the connection to affect-centered reform explicit, allows the “mind” to be “filled with human sympathy” (*L*, 10). Child thereby invites her readers not only to place themselves into the position of a suffering other but also to imagine themselves simultaneously occupying infinite space in which it becomes impossible to control or delineate the relations between one’s self and one’s race and class others. “No fact stands alone,” she elaborates; “each has infinite relations” (*L*, 107): “human sympathy,” in this view, does not establish a new relationship but rather helps readers sense an already existing series of interconnections, even if that sense remains limited by the finite range of human perception.

Child thereby engages a concern that emerges time and again in antebellum engagement with reform ethics: if, as Ishmael claims in *Moby-Dick*, “nothing exists in itself,” then how do
we gauge the nature of relation between seemingly unrelated objects? For Ishmael, the answer is opposition (“there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast”), a logic that interferes with sympathetic projects seeking not simply to oppose but to establish relationships between different sets of realities and experiences. Child, on the other hand, attempts a solution less reliant on either binary opposition or the singularity of “this world.” Facts, objects, and people, for her, exist in an infinite relation so complex and unfathomable that it can neither be grasped by such notions as simple contrast nor contained in the immediacy of material existence. She instead figures object relation through the image of a vast intermingling of souls that exceeds the attempt of any binary logic to differentiate matter from spirit. Creating a purpose-driven dialectic between a reformer’s geographic and material comprehension of the city’s existing social relations and a conceptual, spiritual “Infinite,” Child intends to show her readers two parallel worlds: the world that is “ours,” with all the divisions and categorizations of Ishmael’s contrastive logic, and the world that belongs to “our” souls, in which such separations cannot exist. Her hope is that contemplating the world of souls will produce in her readers a collapsed form of sympathy (one independent of the distance created through spectacle) for their fellow inhabitants in the “real” world of beings and an accompanying feeling of urgency to reform that world’s social ills.

In her letters, transcendentalist sympathy thus offers the promise of a reform strategy more far reaching than even Child’s compatriots would imagine, let alone desire—a strategy relying upon a white reformist public whose radicalism exceeds even its own comprehension and intent:

Brave spirits are everywhere at work for freedom, peace, temperance, and education. Everywhere the walls of caste and sect are melting before them; everywhere dawns the golden twilight of universal love! Many are working for all these things, who have the dimmest insight into the infinity of their relations, and the eternity of
their results; some, perchance, could they perceive the relation that each bears to all, would eagerly strive to undo what they are now doing; but luckily, heart and hand often work for better things than the head wots of. (L, 82)

Demonstrating the ample resonance between Child’s transcendentalism and her reform efforts, the passage noticeably does not advocate immaterial reform of epistemological presuppositions over material reform of substantial conditions. Child rather argues that reformist battles must be waged through an interaction of the material and the immaterial, of the “work for freedom, peace, temperance, and education” and the “infinity of . . . relations” in which she locates a utopian future based in “universal love.” Doing so initiates a series of tremors within the sociopolitical sphere, the effects of which (“the eternity of their results”) are impossible to determine in advance. Anticipating Judith Butler’s call for political “efforts that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present,” or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s call for a “politics of the open end,” Lydia Maria Child turns to the endlessly intricate contingencies of her present world (for Butler, the “democratizing contestations”) in order to fashion a reformist politics leading necessarily to the unknowable, unforeseeable, and unfamiliar future—to a future in which she and her readers may find their very selves unrecognizable.

But the imaginative and the immaterial do not only act to make possible some fantastic version of the future; they also act in the present to connect white reformers through an “infinity of . . . relations” with an alterity they might otherwise think of as utterly alien. By explaining this infinity of relations as something involuntary (reformers cannot opt out of their relations with others), Child presents sympathy as both forceful and penetrating: white reformers and black slaves connect, for instance, not at the will of a sympathetic affect the white reformer can turn on and off, but through the undeniable and a priori fact of an infinite relation that extends geographically, culturally, and temporally. She sums up such relatedness with an admonition: “Thou mayest deem thyself without influence, and altogether
unimportant. Believe it not. Thy simplest act, thy most casual word, is cast into 'the great seed-field of human thought, and will re-appear, as poisonous weed, or herb-medicinal after a thousand years’” (L, 59). Enacting universal intimacy through a letter from one to many rather than from one to another, Child’s form allows her to address readers directly, dispatching advice that is simultaneously friendly and radical: you are not what you think you are; you do not exist unto yourself, but as one piece in a spatial and temporal field neither of us will ever comprehend. She thereby expands Emerson’s argument in ”The Uses of Great Men” that ”we must extend the area of life, and multiply our relations,”15 articulating an ambition to explode her readers’ sense of their own incomprehensible interconnectivity until it encompasses the entire globe.

Yet such universalism departs from that we find in humanist notions of foundational sameness, resting instead on foundational difference, on contingent and infinitely complex interrelationships, and on the reverberating interactions of deeds and words across the immensity and heterogeneity of human experience. Child demonstrates the ethical potential in her model when, as she turns a street scene into the impressionistic image of ”uncouth garbs” and ”fantastic, flickering lights, of lurid hue,” her mind ”fill[s] with thoughts about mutual helpfulness, human sympathy, the common bond of brotherhood, and the mysteriously deep foundations on which society rests; or rather, on which it now reels and totters” (L, 10). Child’s ”Infinite” allows her strategically to combine universality with contingency, sameness with difference. Doing so, her letters frame a reformist model capacious enough to anticipate the anti-colonial reformers who will follow her over a century later: tying a notion of reciprocity (“mutual,” “common,” “human”) to her infinity of relations (“mysteriously deep foundations”), Child approaches what Frantz Fanon will put forward as the foremost basis for an ethics of cross-racial relation—”a world of reciprocal recognitions.”16 She explicitly connects her ”Infinite” to an ethical and, in her case, Christian principle when she later prays ”to be bound only by [her] own conscience, in that circle of duties, which widens ever, till it enfolds all being, and touches the throne of God” (L, 135).
Of course, as this resonance with Fanon underscores, such an ethics threatens more than status quo social relations; it also threatens the very core of normative whiteness and, hence, the constitution of Child’s white readers’ subjectivity. As Diana Fuss argues, in her reading of Fanon’s critical race theory, "‘white’ defines itself through a powerful and illusory fantasy of escaping the exclusionary practices of psychical identity formation.”¹⁷ Whiteness, that is, defines itself by refusing the need for definition. It is not enough for “white” to be relegated to adjectival status, recognized as one of many attributes of difference; for whiteness to remain whiteness, it must also remain the exception to race itself, cultivated as distinct among the races precisely by asserting its lack of distinct, recognizable presence. Yet, by inviting her white readers into widening “circle[s] of duties,” circles that ostensibly include a variety of racialized subjects, Child encourages them to acknowledge difference precisely by refusing white exceptionalism, radically denying whiteness its most essential defining characteristic—the ability to define without, in turn, being defined.¹⁸ In so doing, Child idealizes a model of sympathy that disrupts more than it coheres, destabilizes more than it underscores, and threatens more than it protects. White sympathy, in her formulation, demands nothing less than the forfeiture of whiteness’s exception as the unmarked race—the ne plus ultra of transcendentalist sympathy’s ethical potential and the precondition for Fanon’s “reciprocal recognitions.”

Child therefore provides a version of reform and sympathy that fails to fit within recent critical models describing sympathy as self-centered and normative. Heather Roberts, for instance, in one of few critical essays on Letters from New-York, claims that Child grounds “the nature of political activism . . . in the private sphere of the individual soul.” In a more general discussion of abolitionist discourse, Kristin Boudreau argues that “abolitionist use of sympathy was tantamount to the erasure of all differences between spectator and spectacle.” And Elizabeth Barnes further asserts that sympathy places the sympathizer in touch with nothing more than him or herself, creating a mise en abyme of narcissistic self-interest.¹⁹ Child’s model for sympathetic reform differs widely from these accounts: even
if the individual soul remains a starting place for her widening “circles of duty,” the force and efficaciousness of her project lie in the recognition of the other, in underscoring differences rather than erasing them, while also acknowledging the “infinity of relations” connecting each individual to another. Child’s sympathy, that is, not only engages but requires a public sphere, a space in which self and other coexist—rendering the hermetic “private sphere of the individual soul” an impossibility. Of course, Child’s model may seem allied to self-enclosed forms of sympathy because it appears, at first consideration, to be withdrawn from the immediate materiality of her world: while she calls upon her readers to recognize difference and connectedness, the encounter with otherness would seem to remain for her an intellectual, imaginative, and affective exercise rather than a physical one. Bruce Mills comes to a version of this conclusion when he claims that Child’s political activism requires withdrawal from the streets “to a more meditative realm where social reality rid[s] itself of the false shadows of the material.”

But to deny materiality—and, hence, praxis—to Child’s model for sympathy is to remove her text from the inescapable phenomenology of its intensely urban setting. Almost every one of the letters in *Letters from New-York* describes a specific walk through the streets of New York and into its varied settings; it is, then, a text preoccupied with materiality, with sensation, with the unavoidable crowds of bodies one confronts in ante-bellum New York’s urban space. Indeed, Child’s sympathy acquires its greatest potential (and becomes, for her, its most terrifying) not as she theorizes it but as she physically practices it—when the “infinity of relations” moves from the immaterial to the material, from the meditative to the bodily, from the impressionistic “flickering lights” of a street lamp to the streets themselves. In the city, Child’s transcendentalist sympathy becomes a grotesque sympathy, which I argue is in fact an ideal realization of her model for sympathetic ethics and reform. Her two parallel worlds collapse: her body becomes porous, like her soul, and infinitely related with the bodies around her.
GROTESQUE SYMPATHY AND THE HORROR OF RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his now-monumental volume *Rabelais and His World*, traces a shift in Western representation of bodies from the grotesque to the modern. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, he argues, a “new bodily canon” began to emerge, one that was closed rather than open, singular rather than double, smooth rather than porous, individuated from the world rather than “cosmic and universal.” Whereas the new, modern body is an “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual,” the grotesque body is one of “excrescences . . . and orifices,” a body that “swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.” Bakhtin’s distinction offers a rich tool with which to analyze white abolitionist sympathy, for critical accounts that focus on sympathy as disciplinary, normative, and private assume an epistemology of the body in which skin and phenotype mark the distinct boundaries of autonomous individuals. In order for sympathy to enforce and strengthen borders between the sympathizer and the sympathized, the two must remain separate at the quite literal level of the skin. In contrast, the grotesque body refuses easy differentiation by collapsing the separateness between itself and the world, thus confounding the neatness required for any tame and predictable model of sympathy or sympathetic reform.

Entering crowded New York streets, Child experiences her own body and the bodies of those around her, not as bounded entities, but rather as lived forms of the Bakhtinian grotesque. Throughout, *Letters from New-York* incorporates gothic generic conventions in order to represent such grotesquerie, describing urban space as a horrific medium that dissolves bodily autonomy, threatens self-reliance, and hence erodes the foundations of liberal subjectivity. Like a dimly lit scene in one of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, Child’s descriptions of New York life relentlessly zero in on the phenomenology of penetrating sensations—its scents, sounds, and touches—that remain utterly impossible for her to screen out. She writes, for example, of
an initial stroll into the city’s public spaces that “the din of crowded life, and the eager chase for gain, still run through its streets, like the perpetual murmur of a hive” (L, 9). And later, regretting the “errand of kindness” that has brought her to the Five Points neighborhood, Child complains that, “morally and physically, the breathing air [is] like an open tomb” (L, 17). In both instances, the city enters into Child, her hive metaphor depicting not only the city’s swarming and its sounds but also the porous and penetrated bodies that inhabit it. Rendered undifferentiated from the space and the bodies around her, Child takes in the stench of the city’s poor and its open sewers through her mouth and her nose. She swallows the city, and the city swallows her.

Moreover, by combining the moral with the physical, Child demonstrates that white bourgeois sympathy (her Five Points “errand of kindness”) cannot coexist with white bourgeois morality so long as that sympathy works in bodily and actual ways. By sharing air with the abject poor with whom she means to sympathize, Child goes beyond feeling for the other: she embodies and is embodied by the other. Sympathy, in this way, becomes a grotesque act of personal transformation, something like Walt Whitman’s in “To a Stranger”—“your body has become not yours only nor left my body mine only”—and in Song of Myself’s opening stanza—“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”23 Manhattan, which Whitman frequently lauds as the U.S. capital of grotesquerie, touches intimately upon its inhabitants; it is for him the “city of orgies, walks and joys,” “continual lovers,” and “numberless crowded streets.”24 Whitman celebrates a city penetrating its inhabitants and turning them grotesquely, beautifully, inside out.

Given Child’s model for sympathetic reform, the grotesque, orgiastic city would seem to create for her, as it does for Whitman, an almost utopian ideal—a space that interconnects souls and bodies and that works toward racial egalitarianism by eroding whites’ abilities to retain distinctive selves set apart from the crowd. Yet Child’s descriptions treat the city instead as a sublime horror and psychic burden. “It is sad walking in the city,” she writes. “The streets shut out the sky, even as commerce comes between the soul and heaven. The busy throng, passing
and repassing, fetter freedom, while they offer no sympathy. The loneliness of the soul is deeper, and far more restless, than in the solitude of the mighty forest” (L, 59). The failure of the throng to offer sympathy—or, more accurately, Child’s failure to perceive the sympathy actually being offered—signals the practical failure of her sympathetic reform strategy, for it is precisely the space of a throng, the space of an infinity of relations, in which she locates sympathy’s best potential. The throng, that is, opens the opportunity to experience the other within a space of infinite relation, recognition, and difference, not from a distance. Child’s language hints at this potential by referring to the singular “throng” as “they,” suggesting an implicit awareness of the many differentiated bodies that collectively constitute urban space. Yet, for Child, this throng does not enable or constitute sympathy, does not embody some acceptance of the infinity connecting her to the “they” of those many others. The throng instead creates a scene of horror from which she longs to escape; it forecloses sympathy as she seeks to remove herself from the “they” rather than embrace the ethical opportunity “they” hold out as a physical, “real-world” manifestation of transcendentalist sympathy’s ideal.

We can better understand the political, reformist potential within this scene of horror by looking at the closing sections of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, volume 1, which, although sometimes magnificently blind to race even within their own discourse on racialization, nevertheless provide a compelling lens through which to historicize Child’s project. Foucault’s thesis holds that, toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie started to define its legitimacy and normalcy—the preconditions for its very existence as a recognizable class—through preoccupation with the rigorous health of its own blood and a consequent regulation of bourgeois bodies and sexuality, processes that enabled the constant assertion and reassertion of white strength and supremacy. To carry through the many implications of this argument we must modify one of Foucault’s most widely cited conclusions to say that it is not only “through sex . . . that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his [sic] own intelligibility” but also through race. For what Foucault makes apparent, if not explicit, is that
during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both race and sex became key visual and external indicators to a fixed, inner moral essence.25

Sexuality itself thus came to be racialized, and the (self-) regulation of sex became crucial to the survival of distinctive whiteness. When Child enters the streets of New York, she joins a grotesque intermingling of penetrating and penetrated bodies, and she loses the ability to organize herself and the others around her into what she views as secure, stable identities. Simultaneously, she loses the ability to regulate her own sexuality according to the standards of what is at once a bourgeois and a white morality, organized around the performance and reproduction of heteronormativity. Or, to restate this triangulation in somewhat different terms: she loses herself in an urban space ungoverned by either bourgeois or heterosexual norms, both of which, in Foucault’s formulation, operate as the most significant foundations for distinctive whiteness. The grotesque sympathy manifested in New York’s streets therefore places Child into an infinitely varied mixture of bodies that threatens white exceptionalism by, in her words, situating “commerce”—in the nineteenth century, used to denote social and sexual as well as economic exchange—between her “soul” and “heaven” (L, 59), and thus impeding if not entirely preventing the self-regulation of sexuality.26

But it is not just urban space that interferes with Child’s adherence to white normativity; it is also the gothic sensibility she requires in order to describe that space. In her renderings of New York’s streets (“the breathing air was like an open tomb,” to name just one example), Child participates in a genre that critics and writers have long linked to African American presence. Witness, for instance, Richard Wright’s remarkable observation linking racial horror to the brooding darkness in Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe: “We have in the oppression of the Negro a shadow athwart our national life dense and heavy enough to satisfy even the gloomy broodings of a Hawthorne. And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.” Or the second sentence of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, which, even in the negative—“I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe”—reinforces a
synergy between the gothic and an American history of intense racialization and racial violence. Or even Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark and its charged argument that what Melville terms “the power of blackness” remains foundational to American cultural representations. Indeed, Child herself advances a similar argument in the antislavery sketch “Stand from Under!” (1832), which turns to gothic conventions in order to figure slavery as an evil spirit that haunts the physical world.27

Not only, then, do crowded New York streets erode white exceptionalism through a grotesque intermingling of bodies; the generic conventions required to describe these streets evoke an indelible African American presence, one that opens political, reformist potential by disturbing the white bourgeois boundaries that foreclose a world of “reciprocal recognitions.” Moreover, as horror, gothic conventions instill fear by threatening to undo the status quo—a threat that only works by holding out at least the potential for its own success. Julia Kristeva claims that horror’s revolutionary possibilities stem from its unique ability to produce an unstable temporality that situates us at the very cusp of rupture, “a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.”28 In this sense, the gothic inserts into Child’s text a promise or a vision, however terrifying for her and her white readers, of a new future that arises only out of radical rupture with the present; it promises, that is, the potential to break profoundly from the sociopolitical norms white reformers ostensibly rallied against. Like New York streets, grotesque bodies and gothic horror would therefore seem to create ideal political effects, leading white readers toward Child’s “infinity of relations.”

Yet just as Child retreats from New York’s urban space, she retreats from the gothic and grotesque elements of her own text, from the model of sympathetic collapse for which Whitman celebrates Manhattan, and from the ethical potential of her own project in practice. Child insists instead, in a move that recalls the end of Emerson’s “Experience,” upon quarantining sympathy from the contagious, chaotic potential of the grotesque. “All private sympathy is partial,” Emerson writes. “Two human beings are like globes, which can touch
only in a point.” Both Child and Emerson resist anything that encroaches upon this smooth and unified presentation of the self (in Bakhtin’s words, this “new bodily canon”) because, for them, such encroachment can result only in “chaos.”

Child signals the full extent of her desire to flee the practice of her own sympathetic model explicitly, vilifying chaotic urban space precisely because it dissolves identity and produces horror:

> There is something impressive, even to painfulness, in this dense crowding of human existence, this mercantile familiarity with death. It has sometimes forced upon me, for a few moments, an appalling night-mare sensation of vanishing identity; as if I were but an unknown, unnoticed, and unseparated drop in the great ocean of human existence; as if the uncomfortable old theory were true, and we were but portions of a Great Mundane Soul, to which we ultimately return, to be swallowed up in its infinity. But such ideas I expel at once, like phantasms of evil, which indeed they are. Unprofitable to all, they have a peculiarly bewildering and oppressive power over a mind constituted like my own; so prone to eager questioning of the infinite, and curious search into the invisible. I find it wiser to forbear inflating this balloon of thought, lest it roll me away through unlimited space, until I become like the absent man, who put his clothes in bed, and hung himself over the chair; or like his twin-brother, who laid his candle on the pillow and blew himself out. (L, 44)

Where Child begins her series of strolls through New York by linking the “Infinite” with “human sympathy” and the “common bond of brotherhood,” nine letters later she withdraws from the now “oppressive” Infinite and its corresponding denial of white exceptionalism, presenting herself not as infi-
nitely related but as the separate and autonomous individual that characterizes bourgeois, liberal subjectivity. Whereas her theory of sympathy hints at precisely the value that comes of white self-eradication as a precondition for reformist ethics (a value she continues to hint at when she writes that there is “something impressive . . . in this dense crowding of human existence”), her practice of sympathy retreats to decorum and familiarity and thus refuses the radical potential contained in both her challenge to disciplinary modes of sympathy and her embodied experience of urban space.

Admitting that her shift in tone is both “unexpected and incoherent” (L, 44), Child in her self-professed un-premeditatedness reveals that she herself is not unlike those reformers who, she claims, “would eagerly strive to undo what they are now doing.” Precisely, she “undoes”—or, at least, works to undo—her own radical project by calling upon her era’s most trenchant set of tools for inscribing distance between humans and human bodies: racialization and scientific racism. Through recourse to craniometry and phrenology she grounds racialization in both biology and deep history. In so doing, she shifts her representation of bodies from the grotesque to the modern, a shift that allows her to invest a fixed moral and intellectual essence in discrete, modern, racialized bodies.

SCIENTIFIC RACISM AS WHITE EXCEPTIONALISM

Compiled of materials Child originally published toward the end of the Letters from New-York chronology, between January and March of 1843, Letter 36 describes a visit to Barnum’s American Museum, where Child witnesses a display of “fifteen Indians, fresh from the western forest”: “Sacs, Fox, and Iowas; really important people in their respective tribes” (L, 161). As Benjamin Reiss notes in The Showman and the Slave, this particular exhibit would have comprised merely one of many like it that Barnum used to sell tickets. The museum retained its tremendous popularity largely through frequent display of living humans, many of them African Americans with various forms of bodily and skin deformations, whom Barnum would
The orang-outang has more forehead than any other animal, both perceptive and reflective, with some moral sentiments, and accordingly is called the "half-reasoning man," its Phrenology corresponding perfectly with its character.

**Perceptives Larger Than Reflectives.**

The various races also accord with phrenological science. Thus, Africans generally have full perceptives, and large Tune and Language, but retiring Causality, and accordingly are deficient in reasoning capacity, yet have excellent memories and lingual and musical powers.

**No. 38. African Head.**

Indians possess extraordinary strength of the propensities and perceptives, yet have no great moral or inventive power; and, hence, have very wide, round, conical, and rather low heads.

Indian skulls can always be selected from Caucasian, just by these developments; while the Caucasian race is superior in reasoning power and moral elevation to all the other races, and, accordingly, have higher and bolder foreheads, and more elevated and elongated top heads.

**No. 39. Indian Chief.**

Finally, contrast the massive foreheads of all giant-minded men—Bacon, Franklin, Milton, etc., with idiotic heads.

In short, every human, every brutal head, is constructed throughout strictly on phrenological principles. Ransack air, earth, and water and set one palpable exception ever has been, ever can be added.
widely advertise as the “missing links” in evolutionary chains connecting monkeys to whites. Heeding her reformist belief system, Child initially resists this interpretation of the spectacle of Native American bodies before her. She uses the exhibit instead as an opportunity to critique white bodies, especially white bourgeois bodies, describing the Indians as “a keen satire on our civilized customs, which produce such feeble forms and pallid faces” (L, 161). Moreover, Child regrets to see the “really important people in their respective tribes” on such cheap display, “set up for a two-shilling show, with monkeys, flamingoes, dancers, and buffoons!” (L, 164). Yet when she refers to one of the chiefs as a “noble . . . specimen of manhood,” her praise quickly begins to replicate Barnum’s presentation of the “Sacs, Fox, and Iowas” as objects for some sort of popular and entertaining scientific study (L, 161). Such simultaneous resistance to and replication of the exhibit’s ethnological work continues when she includes on the same page, first, the complaint that “we who have robbed the Indians of their lands, and worse still, of themselves, are very fond of proving their inferiority,” and, second, a table that works to prove their inferiority, ordering the races by “facial angle”: Caucasian, 85 degrees; Asiatic, 78; American Indian, 73; Ethiopian, 70; and Orang Outang, 67 (L, 162). Movement between an affirmation of nonwhite intelligence, on one hand, and an assertion of essential differences between the races, on the other, characterizes Child’s extended explanation for the craniometric differences ostensibly displayed both in her table and in Barnum’s display. She uses this tension to construct an explanation for nonwhite inferiority that does not foreclose reform possibilities, while simultaneously insisting on the separateness (non-grotesqueness) of bodies and the differentiated nature of racial identities.

Specifically, Child attributes her table’s racialist hierarchy to a set of historical forces and cultural influences so deeply ingrained that they have forged the very shape of the skull. Culture, in Child’s formulation, precedes and determines biology, even as biology then places hard limits on the rate of cultural change. Describing, for instance, a heritage that forms the “physical organization” of the “Caucasian race” and provides
For our [white, European, Western] Past, we have the oriental fervour, gorgeous imagery, and deep reverence of the Jews, flowing from that high fountain, the perception of the one-ness and invisibility of God. From the Greeks we receive the very Spirit of Beauty, flowing into all forms of Philosophy and Art, enriched by a golden halo of Platonism. . . . These have been transmitted to us in their own forms, and again reproduced through the classic strength and high cultivation of Rome, and the romantic minstrelsy and rich architecture of the middle ages. (L, 162)

"But," she then asks by means of contrast, "what have the African savage, and the wandering Indian for their Past?" (L, 162). She explains the lesser angle of the African and Indian skulls as the failure of imperialism and slavery to transmit Western culture and values properly; in a word, she faults a deficit of white paternalism: "The Past reproduced in them, mostly belongs to the animal part of our mixed nature. They have indeed come in contact with the race on which dawned higher ideas; but how have they come in contact? As victims, not as pupils" (L, 162). Skull type for Child signifies a biological precondition, while biology itself is determined through forces simultaneously cultural and deeply historical. Biology becomes the signifier for civilization itself.

Not only does Child retreat from grotesque sympathy to her era’s scientific “proofs” of racial difference; she also elevates whiteness as distinct among the races by combining such geographically and culturally disparate groups as American Indians and Africans into the singular category “them.” Whereas in her infinity of relations whiteness was stripped of its most defining attribute, here Child reinstates both the exceptionalism of whiteness and the whiteness of exceptionalism. Fully inscribing racial difference into a binary belied by the
very table she presents, Child writes of all nonwhite races that “the same influences cannot be brought to bear upon them; for their Past is not our Past; and of course never can be” (L, 163). As evidence, Child argues that white children who have been entirely raised within Indian cultures retain some aspect of their white exceptionalism, which is also to say, for her, their white supremacy: “white children brought up among Indians, though they strongly imbibe the habits of the race, are generally prone to be the geniuses and prophets of their tribe” (L, 163).

With this set of arguments, Child does not replace a biological with a cultural or historical explanation for racial difference; she instead “naturalizes” history, writing it as a field of biology, as that which becomes embedded and transmitted genetically and intra-racially from generation to generation. Moreover, by shifting from the form of intimate letter to that of expertise-based ethnography, from heart to reason, Child indicates generically that there are limits to her model for sympathetic reform; ethnography and a table quantifying racial difference act with the supposedly insurmountable authority of “fact” and “nature.” Once a confidante, Child now becomes an expert, a reporter bearing unimpeachable information. She weaves empiricism into her text such that Letter 36 participates in a genre distinct from that in her other entries, one that announces, with absolute certainty, its own preeminent claim to the truth.

Critics Samuel Otter, Bruce Mills, and Carolyn Karcher note that Child stops short of casting hierarchical racial difference as perpetual or strictly essential, and they argue that she exhibits a rare degree of skepticism about the period’s increasingly industrious and efficient scientific racism.31 Indeed, Child does use her discussion of phrenological and craniometric racial differences to argue that whites and nonwhites will one day achieve some variety of equality; she even gestures toward the ethics of her infinity of relations when she writes, “let ours [whites’ collective past] mingle with theirs, and you will find the result variety, without inferiority” (L, 163). Yet Child also defers the moment of non-hierarchical interrelationship so far into the future that it not only becomes unforeseeable, as with a “politics of the open end,” but also steps outside the
scope of human action, conscious or not. Moreover, she argues that the force of a cyclically reinforcing status quo (occurring as biology and culture mutually determine one another) will make any lessening of hierarchical difference all but impossible. In our more recent parlance, Child announces herself both “social constructionist” and “essentialist” by working through a philosophy of history in which the oppositional cause-and-effect relationship of the two belief systems collapses: “The facial angle and shape of the head, is various in races and nations; but these are the effects of spiritual influences, long operating on character, and in their turn becoming causes; thus intertwining, as Past and Future ever do” (L, 163). Entrenching racial difference in both a past and a long-term future—a future that doubtless reaches beyond her lifetime and the lifetimes of her antebellum readers—Child fails to upset the essentialized epistemology of the body by which scientific racism naturalizes prevailing social hierarchy and vindicates paternalistic proslavery claims. As Frederick Douglass notes, such “scientific moonshine” therefore turns any reformist or abolitionist project against itself: “For, let it be once granted that the human race are of multitudinous origin, naturally different in their moral, physical, and intellectual capacities, and at once you make plausible a demand for classes, grades and conditions, for different methods of culture, different moral, political, and religious institutions, and a chance is left for slavery, as a necessary institution.”

Put differently, while Child develops a deeply historical explanation for biological, embodied racial difference, she does so without upsetting what Robyn Wiegman describes as the nineteenth century’s newly invented logic of white supremacy, one founded primarily on bodily rather than social or cultural difference. The table of racial difference participates in and enacts this logic by claiming its own authority as uncontestable knowledge and thereby acting as a guide that enables Child’s readers to make sense not only of their worlds but of *Letters from New-York* itself. As the only diagram in Child’s text, the table does not merely act as—but in fact is—a dramatis personae: it decodes subjects to tell readers who they shall see before them and what sort of role each character will play. The table
encourages Child’s white readers to stand apart from the nonwhite people with whom they share space, measuring these subjects and evaluating the unfortunate, though undeniable, deprivation of nonwhite civilization.

Letter 36 attempts a spatial transformation as well. Despite the American Museum’s relatively affordable 25-cent admission fee, which guaranteed an economically diverse clientele, Barnum insisted that museumgoers comport themselves according to, in Reiss’s words, the same “strictures of middle-class respectability” that governed behavioral norms in more elite museums. The museum space thereby allows Child to attach the empiricist discourse of scientific racism (the ethnographic display) to the decorous performance of bourgeois whiteness (the museum’s disciplinary force), which collaborate to establish and reproduce the order, comfort, and familiarity of rac(ial)ist hierarchy. When even the white working classes perform middle-class norms and when scientific racism establishes morality and intelligence as racialized qualities, then whiteness and white supremacy intensify through cross-class allegiances. The performance of bourgeois whiteness (which is to say the performance of whiteness itself) thereby couples with the empiricist discourse of scientific racism in order to rescue white exceptionalism from the threats posed by grotesque and heterogeneous urban space.

Toward the close of her text, then, Child supplants the closeness and unpredictability of a grotesque sympathy with the distance and predictability of a contained sympathy that transforms subjects into objects, spectacles, and specimens. Retroactively revising the text that has come before her trip to the American Museum, Child now encourages her readers to put the bodies they encounter onto a stage, quite literally measuring the shapes of their skulls and the capacities of their intellects. Only then is she able to present sympathetic reform as normative, disciplinary, and tame. Arguing that nonwhite races will achieve something approaching non-inferiority only when exposed to white cultural heritage (when “ours mingle with theirs”), she adopts a reform strategy dependent upon, first, disciplining white reformers into upholding an esteemed version of white cultural values and, second, exposing nonwhite people to this heterosexual
and bourgeois model of white normativity.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet even as Letter 36 seeks to rewrite the text’s previous entries, and even as it tries to use biological determinism to contain the effects of sympathy and reform, the fact that those earlier letters precede Child’s reactionary turn and claim the bulk of her content is meaningful. Moreover, even as Child’s turn to scientific racism neatly organizes bodies within an empiricist genre and a tightly managed museum space, she tellingly neglects to describe her walk home through New York’s dense and unmanaged streets. Child’s is a text at odds with itself, a text that we can say is first and foremost about its own contradictions. If, therefore, Letters ultimately fails to be more than symptomatic of the contradictions that stunted white reform efforts—notably between antiracist impulses and scientific racist orders of knowledge—its symptoms nevertheless afford sustained access to a set of crucial ideas that have remained largely buried in the existent archive. In this way, the contradictions that define Letters from New–York provide an invaluable touchstone by which to theorize, measure, and interpret white antebellum reformers’ moments of flirtation with and retreat from a radicalism that threatened the underpinnings of nineteenth-century white bourgeois domination—a project critical to the history of both antiracist and racist praxis.

POSTSCRIPT

To get at what I mean here—to unfold some of the wider critical potential in Child’s understudied text—I close by bringing Letters into an admittedly glancing and speculative relationship with that preeminently famous scene in the history of antebellum abolition and reform: John Brown’s courtroom speech. On 2 November 1859, a day after being found guilty of treason, first-degree murder, and conspiracy to incite a slave insurrection, Brown stood to address his sentence. Then, in a speech widely reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic, Brown refused to repudiate any of his actions at Harpers Ferry and insisted that all his labors had been morally right. He concluded, however, by moving beyond the immediate circumstances of his
actions, calling upon an image of grotesque intermingling in order to refashion and radicalize the ideal effects of black and white abolitionist labors: “Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.”36

Through the word “further,” a temporal mark compacting past, present, and future, Brown recasts his entire abolitionist career and, even more grandly, abolitionism itself in the spirit of the grotesque—in the mingling of blood, the porousness of bodies, and the unmanageability of corporeality. He embraces Child’s configurations of grotesque sympathy, staging abolitionist reform as the horror of radical transformation, and he encourages his white audience to follow his example by accepting rather than fleeing the gothic violence that defines their experience of lost racial exceptionalism.37 Child’s text thus permits us to rethink the stakes of Brown’s famous speech, allowing us to see how he expands the logic of violence circulating around him as a militant reformer, abolitionist martyr, and cultural signifier, broadening it to include not only the violent overthrow of slavery but also the violent unsettling of white exceptionalism and the liberal, individuated subjectivity upon which it rests. Letters from New-York, in a sense, sets up Brown’s speech such that it makes explicit a conclusion that Child, in the space of one volume, both advocates and flees: that to succeed, white abolitionists and reformers would need to break with the social and political orders that accommodated their very existence; that their success and their survival in any recognizable form therefore worked at cross purposes; and that radical change would come only through alliance with those figures and possibilities otherwise allied with death, those constructed as horrific, violent, and grotesque. If Child ultimately failed to heed her own convictions, her own form of sympathetic politics, it was because she, like most white abolitionists, wanted to change the world without changing life as she knew it.

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3. In *Letters from New-York*, for instance, Child explains that the sight of prisoners drives her into a state of high arousal due to her “organ of justice (which phrenologists say is unusually developed in [her] head),” and she roots her destiny as a reformer in the “inconvenient size” of her “Conscientiousness” (*L*, 126, 25).


505–42. As a point of comparison, the 2000 census found a density of 26,402 bodies per square mile, despite the fact that bodies in New York are now much more vertically distributed than they were during the 1830s.

7. Foucault writes: "Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, 'biologizing,' statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property . . . received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race" (Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol. 1 of The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1978], 149).

8. For a critique similar to mine, see Cindy Weinstein, Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 3.

9. Lydia Maria Child to Ellis Loring, 11 April 1843, in The Collected Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, 1817–1880, ed. Patricia G. Holland, Milton Meltzer, and Francine Krasno (Milwood, NY: Kraus Microform, 1980), microfiche 17, letter 481; cited in Karcher, First Woman, 309. Throughout, emphases that appear in quotations are in the original. For descriptions of Child’s editing process, see Karcher, First Woman, 301–2; and Mills’s introduction to Letters, xx–xxiii.

10. For more on the negative reaction to Child’s Appeal, which included denunciation from several of Child’s friends, family members, and fellow writers, see Karcher, First Woman, 190–94; and Patricia B. Heaman, review of An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans, ed. Carolyn L. Karcher, MELUS 24 (Autumn 1999): 175–79.

11. As Mills observes in his notes to the 1998 edition, the Barnum letter published in Letters from New-York integrates three items originally published in the National Anti-Slavery Standard in the first three months of 1843, two of the original New York letters, and an article titled "The Different Races of Men" (254 n. 1).

12. "Transcendentalist," while accurately describing many of Child’s beliefs, is not a term she would apply to herself. Deriding the term for its uselessness, Child writes, "Perchance, you will even call me 'transcendental;' that being a word of most elastic signification, used to denote
every thing that has no name in particular, and that does not especially relate to pigs and poultry” (L, 17). For historical context surrounding Child’s and other abolitionists’ relation to transcendentalism, see Bruce Mills, *Cultural Reformations: Lydia Maria Child and the Literature of Reform* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1994), 78–87.


25. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 155. This is, of course, not to say that race
and sex operated solely by means of the visual. Rather, in the words of Ann Laura Stoler, one of Foucault’s most acute critics, especially on the subject of race, “Cultural competencies and sexual practices signaled the lines of descent that secured racial identities and partitioned individuals among them” (Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s ’History of Sexuality’ and the Colonial Order of Things [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1995], 45).

One might reasonably object here that the greatest threat facing Child is not the removal of white distinctiveness but sexual violence—or, in our contemporary term, harassment. Yet the two frameworks are anything but exclusive; grotesquerie of the crowd in Child’s text exposes the mutual construction of white, heterosexual, and bourgeois propriety, on the one hand, and the customs through which certain physical interactions come to be coded as objectionable, sexual, or violent, on the other. Seemliness, refinement, courtesy, grace, delicacy, and appropriateness—all these markers fail to register within any space characterized by the grotesque, and all thus are in part constructed in opposition to its bodily and affective characteristics.


Emerson, “Experience,” 44.

Benjamin Reiss, The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 42.


34. Reiss, *Showman and the Slave*, 188.

