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## **The Antislavery Unconscious: Mesmerism, Vodun, and "Equality"**

THIS ESSAY FOCUSES ON THE DEPOLITICIZING OVERLAP between abolition and the occult, between liberal concern for black bodies and popular interest in white souls.<sup>1</sup> From the mixture of religion, research in "animal magnetism," pseudoscience, and the occult that produces mesmerism and spiritualism, reformers discovered a new psychopolitical territory—the white unconscious. As abolitionists denounced the slaveholder's tyrannical power, another group of reformers denounced the mesmerist's magnetic control over his somnambulant subject as a type of psychological slavery. As antislavery meetings generated calls for universal liberation so did spiritual seances receive ghostly messages about a "higher law" of human equality. Finally, as blacks suffered the "social death" of slavery, white liberals participated in the popular sentimental discourse of spiritualism that glorified biological death as the soul's emancipation from the body.<sup>2</sup> Each of these convergences uncovers the contradictions of a culturally specific white interiority that makes compulsive reference to the institutional conditions of black embodiment. The white unconscious is a discovery that plays a constitutive role in constructions of the black body, legitimating disembodiment and generic personhood as the ideal parameters of civic identity.

In the popular, faddish activities of animal magnetism, spirit-rapping, trance mediumship, and séances that make up an occult public sphere, antislavery men and women discovered confirmation of liberal tactics that privileged psychological analysis over systemic critique and preferred equalization to equality by universalizing bondage as

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<sup>1</sup>This article is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the 1999 meeting of the American Studies Association in Montreal. Portions are drawn from my forthcoming book, *Necro-America: Death and Citizenship in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

symptomatic of white interiority. The esoteric rhetoric of this occult public sphere is politically charged with the crisis of the here-and-now: mesmerists, mediums, and ghosts speak repeatedly of souls freed of the physical body, of a postmortem identity emancipated from terrestrial existence. While mesmerism was primarily used to treat toothaches and headaches suffered by New England women and while spiritualism originated with mysterious noises in a New York farmhouse, parapsychological investigations conducted in both the North and the South explained white spirituality and unconsciousness with references to black servitude.

Linked by a fascination with psychic interiority, mesmerism and spiritualism also shared widespread popularity in reform circles of the antebellum public sphere. Westervelt's tawdry exhibition of Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) alludes to the public orchestration of occult phenomena as spectacle. Hawthorne's fictional representation dovetails with reports in New England newspapers of the 1830s-1840s of young women who found their "nervous" anxiety and agitation eased by the influence of animal magnetism or hypnosis. His novel also coincides with an era of spirit-rapping, which after an 1848 episode of purportedly otherworldly knockings outside Rochester, New York, erupted into the formation of séance circles, public exhibitions by trance-mediums and clairvoyants, and the publication of spiritualist newspapers and tracts. Historians describe the spread of psychic investigation as "intimately bound up with the life of popular culture" to the extent that its effects cannot be underestimated since "scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected as many people or stimulated as much interest as did spiritualism in the ten years before the Civil War."<sup>3</sup>

But this popularity also overshadows a less well-known history of white interiority that begins in alienated black labor. Occult investigations of the unconscious, clairvoyance, and séances sought to liberate the soul by making contradictory use of enslaved bodies. Abolition, mesmerism, and spiritualism converged in an insistence that entities regarded as

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<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 15; R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 4.

objects—such as tipping tables or black chattel—were invested with personhood. From the Veiled Lady in *The Blithedale Romance* to W. E. B. Du Bois's prophetic invocation of the Negro as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" stretches a murky trajectory linking the paranormal to thoughts on African-American destiny.<sup>4</sup> In popular discourses of the white unconscious, elements of African mysticism retained by diasporic black populations materialized in obscure forms. Wrapped up in communication with the dead, as Joseph Roach argues, are questions about the relation of the present to the past, specifically ones involving a politics of memory that incorporates and represses New World racial encounters. These politics range from intimations of vodun in New Orleans funeral rites to echoes of "black" voice in Elvis Presley's singing, all of which Roach identifies as the "circum-Atlantic performance" of African diasporic histories.<sup>5</sup>

Abolition staged a circum-Atlantic performance that triangulated the idea of a white unconscious amid enslaved black bodies and African necromantic traditions of clairvoyance and second-sight. While the role of Christianity in antislavery activism was plain enough, conservative clergymen and educators feared that nonwhite syncretism was also behind utopian declarations about the radical equality of all human souls. What concerned many onlookers of abolition's collision with mesmerism and spiritualism was that "black arts" might be framing expressions of liberal

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<sup>4</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 214. In addition to Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins in *Hagar's Daughter* (1901-1902) and *Of One Blood* (1902-1903) associated the mysterious symbolism of the veil, a garment literally worn by Priscilla during her psychic exhibitions, with West African religious customs that survived in the New World. My focus here treats a period earlier than the one represented by these turn-of-the-century African-American novels, which are ably discussed by Cynthia D. Schrager, "Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W. E. B. Du Bois," *American Quarterly*, 48 (December 1996), 551-586; Thomas J. Otten, "Pauline Hopkins and the Hidden Self of Race," *ELH*, 59 (1992), 227-256; Susan Gillman, "Pauline Hopkins and the Occult: African-American Revisions of Nineteenth-Century Sciences," *American Literary History*, 8 (1996), 57-82.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 34. On the adoption of West African religious beliefs by white reformers, see Lynn Wardley, "Relic, Fetish, Femmage: The Aesthetics of Sentiment in the Work of Stowe" in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

sympathy. Early investigators of the unconscious in the Americas openly discussed the links between white middle-class psyches and black bodies. Charles Poyen, a French expatriate who popularized mesmerism in New England in the 1830s, affirmed that a visit to his parents' plantation in the West Indies presented ample opportunity to observe trances among slaves. Reflecting on his sojourn in Guadeloupe and Martinique, he credits sugar planters for developing the techniques of animal magnetism, and yet his evident satisfaction in "witnessing several cases of somnambulism, produced by my friends on their colored servants" invites speculation about the role of vodun in creating the effects of spirit-possession and trance.<sup>6</sup> In its ability to make the subject quiescent, mesmerism no doubt appealed to Poyen's creole hosts in Guadeloupe and Martinique as a humane technology of slave management though, as Joan Dayan has argued, the ability of those possessed by human masters to claim a deeper spirit-possession made vodun in the minds of the enslaved much more than a parlor game to entertain guests from the metropole.<sup>7</sup> Vodun's oppositional potential as well as the use of trance as a disciplinary innovation were submerged when Poyen exported somnambulism to the United States as a treatment for white mental agitation. As a consequence of this transoceanic traffic in the soul, syncretic debts to African populations in the New World disappeared beneath the reformist consciousness of Northern liberalism.

In the migration of Africanist practices to white psychology, liberal reform became a matter of spiritual awareness; the privilege of disembodiment derives from slaves whose encumbered bodies silently justified the universalism of mesmerists, spiritualists, and antislavery men and women. Poyen returned from the Caribbean with an understanding of animal magnetism, not as inspired carceral science as it was for his creole hosts, but as psychological justification for abolition. Evidence of possession in "colored servants" leads him "to form the opinion that the human soul was gifted with the same primitive and essential faculties, under every clime, among every nation, and under whatever skin, black,

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<sup>6</sup>Charles Poyen, *Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England. Being a Collection of Experiments, Reports and Certificates, from the Most Respectable Sources. Preceded by a Dissertation on the Proofs of Animal Magnetism* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan & Co., 1837), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup>Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 54-74.

red, or white, it may be concealed” (Poyen, p. 41). The unconscious—or at least Poyen’s map of it—eradicates difference with a utopian gesture to egalitarian spiritual relations. By declaring irrelevant all particulars that bear upon bodies—weather, political systems, the cultural meanings of skin color—so as to pursue essence, he formulates an emancipatory agenda. With the help of animal magnetism, Poyen sheds light on eternal commonalities that argue for the soul’s capacity to liberate the body.

For many liberal activists, parapsychology seemed an advance over political commitment in the crusade for universal liberty. Many would-be emancipators believed that mesmerism and spiritualism addressed the origins of inequality in contrast to antislavery activity, which treated only its symptoms. Disembodied freedom took center stage over black emancipation. As one reformer concluded after witnessing a public séance led by teenage mediums, “The slavery of the soul is worse than that of the body.”<sup>8</sup> His statement reveals how liberatory as well as liberal agendas inscribe hierarchy: the soul is elevated at the body’s expense in ways that ignore the onerous physicality of slave labor. In order for the soul to trump the body, and, more specifically, in order for white psychology to take precedence over black servitude, a fragile American consciousness has to be invented. This discovery of interiority comes, not in an arena of rational exchange as in Jürgen Habermas’s account of the *public* sphere, but in an *occult* sphere of force and exploitation.<sup>9</sup> This area includes psychic territory as well as the slave economies that Poyen visited in the Caribbean.

What Poyen saw at his parents’ West Indian plantation—not simply evidence that slaves had souls but also tortuous practices of sugar production—caused him to return to the United States as an antislavery activist. Before he gained notoriety as a psychic researcher, Poyen tried his hand at abolitionist tracts. Yet his writing on the subject of African slavery barely addresses oppression in connection to either the body or race; in “Slavery and Abolition,” for instance, Poyen describes emancipation in

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<sup>8</sup>*Proceedings of the Free Convention Held at Rutland, Vt., June 25, 26th, 27th 1858* (Boston: J. B. Yerrington & Son, 1858), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup>Habermas speaks of “the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere” of publicness (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger [Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989], p. 29).

ways that privileged disordered white minds over enslaved black bodies.<sup>10</sup> His political-reform writing diagnoses slavery as a symptom of cultural nervousness and excitability, in fine, as a psychosocial echo of the mental agitation that mesmerism calms. Despite the brutal conditions that Poyen no doubt saw in French colonial possessions he visited, slavery figured for him as a noncorporeal distress, an imbalance within New England minds. Rather than acting as the emancipators of blacks, abolitionists enslave white citizens by exerting an influence that echoes the relation between master and mesmerist on the one side and slave and somnambulist on the other by clamoring “to enlist the passions of their followers, exact implicit obedience from them, and rule them with the utmost intolerance and authority” (“Slavery,” p. 55). In this light, Poyen invents abolitionist fanaticism in order to discover the symptoms of nervousness and mental agitation that mesmerism would allay.

After this psychosocial description of slavery, Poyen’s argument takes a not altogether uncommon turn for liberals with antislavery leanings: slavery is criminal not because of its effects on Africans but because it precipitates mental unrest and loss of equilibrium among otherwise complacent white citizens. With only a single passing condemnation of racial bondage, the thrust of Poyen’s argument is not to denounce African servitude but to critique Northern political fervor and indignation. Abolitionism, not slavery, poses the real danger to the body politic; overzealous devotion to black freedom unhinges the normally balanced mental processes of whites who desire to do good. Poyen warns of the excesses of radical politics:

Witness their [the abolitionists’] incessant appeals to the worst passions of the excitable, the restless, the ignorant, the deluded and reckless portions of the community . . . their incendiary attempts to excite the feelings and mould the

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<sup>10</sup>Though “Slavery and Abolition” appears two years after *Animal Magnetism in New England*, Poyen claims its composition precedes his published work on animal magnetism. The full title of his antislavery treatise is *Philosophical and Historical Essay on Slavery, followed by the exposition of a new system of measures for civilization of Africa, and the abolition of Slavery in the United States*. Poyen refers readers to this work in *Animal Magnetism* as an example of his efforts “to assimilate myself to the American society” while teaching French in Lowell (p. 42). I have not been able to locate this work in full but have tracked down published excerpts in *Literary and Theological Review*, a journal whose title Poyen confuses as *Theological and Literary Review* (Charles Poyen, “Slavery and Abolitionism,” *Literary and Theological Review*, 6 [March 1839], 55).

sentiments of their followers in opposition to the authority of every kind of government, and of those sacred and social institutions by which licentiousness and depravity are restrained . . . their disgusting egotism and odious adulation of each other; their boasts of persecution and martyrdom; and their blustering claims of an onward progress—namely a progress in deluding the imaginations, exciting the passions, and collecting the money of new recruits. (p. 42)

Characterized as an irrational threat to the rationality of the public sphere, antislavery agitation unsettles white psychology. Black bodily oppression leads to white mental derangement. Despite the fact that Poyen sees that Caribbean possession (both as the influence of spirits and as slaveholding interest in property) attests to the equality of blacks and whites in terms of “primitive and essential faculties,” the unconscious tells a far less egalitarian story. Spirit-possession mutes the facts of colonial possession: the connections between “the spirit work of voodoo” and “voodoo economics perpetuated by the West” that Houston Baker, Jr., notes take a back seat to the unhistorical ills of white psychology.<sup>11</sup> Unlike an analysis of the interconnections between race and economics, psychology allows for a study of the subject in isolation. White interiority thus grounds an unequal representational slide in which the universal sensibilities shared by “whatever skin, black, red, or white” are significant, not for beings whose skin suffers violation and outrage, but for the minds of citizens who think too passionately about those bodies. Black bodies, in effect, have perilous impact on white minds.

Animal magnetism and abolition tap into a liberal universalism that ordains harmony at the level of interracial unconsciousness. What made mesmerism possible was revolutionary awareness of an invisible force—described variously as a magnetic principle, the soul’s immortal energy, and telepathic fluid—flowing among human beings regardless of race. This commonality represses particularity and specificity, which is precisely where the facts of black oppression might come into focus. Within the unifying force of popular occult discourses on the human soul, then, exclusionary universalism is at work as a counterforce: Poyen discovers psychospiritual affinities uniting humanity at the site of brutal inequality—Caribbean sugar production. In its promise of disembodied

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<sup>11</sup>Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 53.

citizenship, the nexus of spiritualism, mesmerism, and abolition betrays how psychosocial discourse sustains and, moreover, actively engenders inequality.

The occult genealogy that links liberal abolition to the production of white unconsciousness returns obsessively to bodies under Caribbean slavery. Poyen discovers evidence of the soul's existence along the geography of the Middle Passage. His investigations are one foundation for a genealogy that suggests how interiority engenders hierarchy. Another foundation was laid as mesmerism evolved into spiritualism, when disembodied voices revealed that the soul's inner knowledge corresponded to perfect equality in the celestial spheres. But the more utopian that psychospiritual discourse became the more its implied social effects became starkly repressive. The young female medium who channels *Dealings with the Dead* overcomes social and psychic barriers to embark on a spiritual progression that allows a deep intimate connection with other races as Poyen envisioned. Her transmigration reverses the direction of the Middle Passage and returns her—in spirit—to African tribes and other nonWestern peoples. Crude individualism gives way to an intersubjective blending that liquefies corporeal and national boundaries. Describing the soul's transmigration in terms that bear remarkable similarity to racialist theories of creation that had gained credence at mid-century among ethnologists and anthropologists, the clairvoyant writes:

I ascended from the pre-human, the very human. . . . The list is therefore as follows: the first approach to the man was, when I found myself successively animating as central life-point, the forms of Simae, Satyrii, Troglodyte, the Gibbons . . . the Orangs, Chimpanzee, Gorilla, Nschiego, Troglodyte, Kooloo, Kamba, Beabeta, Aiteromba, Hamaka, Hottentot,\* Negro, Malay, Kanaka, Digger, Indian, Tartar, Chinese, Hindoos, Persians, Arabian, Greek, Turk, German, Britain, American! . . . I awoke to a consciousness of self, and man, the immortal stood revealed!<sup>12</sup>

The white subject is magnetically aligned with other races (here figured as separate and unequally evolved species) only under conditions of disembodiment. The transmigration of kindred souls insists on a racialized chain of being: *Dealings with the Dead* projects a free-flowing

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<sup>12</sup>Paschal Beverly Randolph, *Dealings with the Dead: The Human Soul, Its Migrations and Its Transmigrations* (Utica, New York: M. J. Randolph, 1861-62), pp. 47-48.



*unconscious* that depends on acute racial *consciousness*. The permeable borders of the universal lead to hard and fast hierarchical divisions. Spiritual ecstasy permits privileged white subjects to exist beyond the normal stasis of the body even as it returns others to inescapable embodiment.

The asterisk after “Hottentot” in this passage leads to a note from the publisher (in this case, the medium’s father) that intensifies the regulatory logic of the opposition body and spirit. The publisher’s gloss on the medium’s intuitive anthropology avers,

This theory *must* be true. . . . It is but a few years ago that a negro woman of Charleston, South Carolina, was delivered, not only of what look like a monkey—but which *was* a monkey out and out. This woman had never seen a monkey in her life, so that this was not a case of mere mother-marking, but gestation was interrupted in some respects in some way at about the nineteenth day after conception while it went on normally in other respects. (pp. 47-48).

Metempsychosis liberates the “imprisoned spirit” while bioracially pinioning souls who cannot divest themselves of corporeal substance (p. 42). The soul’s transcendence, like the process of animal evolution to which it is paradoxically compared, always advances, progressing beyond the body and its racial history. But just as repetition of “Troglydote” in the medium’s list implies a recursive, degraded materiality, so too the black body revisits the white spirit. Slave motherhood serves as negative evidence of the progression from animal to human, and from human to spirit. Black “labor” continues to finance the privileged disembodiment of white citizens; overdetermined black materiality is indispensable to the production of white social transparency. In the asymmetries of this relationship, the black body is invoked and hierarchized by the claims of universal consciousness. Foucault’s wonderful dictum that “the soul is the prison of the body” is thus made more exact: the white soul is the prison of the black body.<sup>13</sup>

The political significance of the persistent antinomies as well as overlaps between white disembodiment and black embodiment can be

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<sup>13</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 30.

demonstrated by a series of brief case studies of white antislavery fiction, postbellum African-American literature, reports of clairvoyance, and transcripts of séances. In each, a dematerialized white subject position—an identity crucial to the citizen's disembodied privilege—remains uncannily tethered to unfree labor and blackness. When in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) the sympathetic white Southerner, Mr. Wilson, sees through George Harris's disguise as a Spanish gentleman and recognizes him as a fugitive slave, Harriet Beecher Stowe foregrounds the psychic effects that disguised blackness has upon white psychology.<sup>14</sup> Harris, in fact, seems to exert a magnetic power associated with mesmerism over the white man, fixing his eyes on Wilson, inducing a sort of hypnosis so that he becomes "like one speaking in a dream" (p. 181). Captivated by the uncanny performance of miscegenated identity staged by the racially cross-dressed Harris, Wilson "followed him, as one who walks in his sleep" (p. 182). The echo to the somnambulist's unconscious state first popularized by the use of hypnosis in mesmerism and then by the use of trance in spiritualism betrays how white interiority depends on displays of racial in/visibility. Julia Stern is quite right to draw out the dream-like qualities of this encounter in ways that are emblematic of abolitionist politics at mid-century: "Well-intentioned white America has not assumed the lead in the battle for abolition of slavery and is indeed sleepwalking through a crisis that threatens to rend the nation."<sup>15</sup>

*Bond and Free*, an 1886 African-American novel by James Howard, also reveals the racial displacements that suture white unconsciousness to enslaved embodiment. But unlike Stowe who is more concerned in exploring expressions of white amazement at the mulatto's fugitive blackness, Howard foregrounds the consequences that this overdetermined relation has on black freedom. Within the racial origins of parapsychological discourse, the activist bent of black spiritual beliefs is rendered as an effect of white unconsciousness. The plantation owner in

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<sup>14</sup>George Harris's "blackness" is already "naturally" disguised by patriarchal investments of "whiteness" stemming from miscegenation. George explains how a "little walnut bark has made my yellow skin a genteel brown." Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 182.

<sup>15</sup>Julia Stern, "Spanish Masquerade and the Drama of Racial Identity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 117.

*Bond and Free* misunderstands the report that a slave is “safe on de other side” as tidings of her death and not as news of her successful escape to the free states.<sup>16</sup> Unable to imagine black freedom as an actuality, he makes recourse to a phantasmagoria that dematerializes a liberated African presence. His mystification abides by the contractual logic that underwrites white disembodiment with black materiality. A slave named Elva explains, “Massa Johnnie, she’s not dead, but free, free!” to disabuse the planter of his belief that passage to “de other side” signifies a deathly release from sociopolitical striving in this world (p. 214). But a few pages later when Elva herself dies, the message is, “Massa Johnnie, Elva’s—free—free at last” (p. 219). At one moment the reclaiming of alienated corporeality and at the next the extinguishing of embodiment, freedom both exceeds and depends on death. Political life is contradictorily indebted to morbid notions of spiritual citizenship hostile to the particularity and specificity of corporeal identity but enraptured with the lifeless aspect of generic personhood. On the one hand, spiritual disembodiment is often the only freedom possible under the stigmatization of blackness. But, on the other, noncorporeal freedom lacks the substantive force to impact sociopolitical reality. This tension between spiritual liberation and corporeal freedom is central to America’s deathly political culture.

The figuration of death as the moment when identity “is emancipated from the bondages, cares, and sorrows, of the mortal state,” as a publication put out by Boston’s Office of Practical Spiritualists defined matters in 1857, marks a collapse between social and biological death that was fairly common among Northern liberals.<sup>17</sup> This rhetorical formula also appeared in spiritualist demonstrations in regions where reformist rhetoric might not have been so welcome: at an 1855 Nashville séance where one woman developed her powers as a poetic medium, a

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<sup>16</sup>James Howard, *Bond and Free; a True Tale of Slave Times* (1886; rpt. Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969), p. 213.

<sup>17</sup>A. E. Newton, ed., *The Educator: Being Suggestions, Theoretical and Practical Designed to Promote Man-Culture and Integral Reform, with a View to the Ultimate Establishment of a Divine Social State on Earth. Comprised in a series of Revelments from Organized Associations in the Spirit-Life, through John Murray Spear* (Boston: Office of Practical Spiritualists, 1857), I, 158. On the significance of confusions between social death and biological death, especially for definitions of freedom, see Castronovo, “Political Necrophilia,” *boundary 2* (Summer 2000).

departed soul rhymed:

The galling chain is riven,  
The imprisoned world is free,  
All men that bowed in darkness,  
Now worship—worship Thee.<sup>18</sup>

The spirit freed by death recalls the life of the unfree body. The innermost revelation of the white identity paradoxically conjures up the circumstances of a repressive socius. Clairvoyance and mystic insight are not the only things that contribute to the medium's fluency with the occult: knowledge of the white soul also depends upon a familiarity with black labor.

Six years later during the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Mary Boykin Chesnut recorded her bafflement that her "Negro servants" seemed uninterested in the momentous event: "Lawrence sits at our door, as sleepy and as respectful and as profoundly indifferent. So are they all. . . . You could not tell that they even hear the awful noise that is going on in the bay, though it is dinning in their ears night and day. Any people talk before them as if they were chairs and tables, and they make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid, or wiser than we are, silent and strong, biding their time?"<sup>19</sup> Like the participants of a séance who interpret various manifestations—a levitating table, jingling tambourine, or rapping door—as signs of spiritual presence, Chesnut awaits for her domestic objects to make similar communication. In Chesnut's world, such objects included both furniture and chattels personal. "Evidence" produced by the phenomena of spirit-rapping and table-tipping suggested "chairs and tables" were often animated by invisible beings who sought to speak via ghostly knockings on household artifacts. Could a similar sensate existence also reside within another form of property, her household slaves? Chesnut's inward agitation and psychological doubts are uncomfortably linked to the insistently real presence of black labor. To

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<sup>18</sup>J. B. Ferguson, *Spirit Communion: A Record of Communications from the Spirit-Spheres with Incontestable Evidence of Personal Identity. Presented to the Public, with Explanatory Observations* (Nashville, Tennessee: Union and American Steam Press, 1855), p. 177.

<sup>19</sup>Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. Ben Ames Williams (1905; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 3.

the extent that her self-examination in this passage is linked to the obscure knowledge of slaves—what do they really know about the emancipatory portent of civil war and what does Chesnut really know about their secret thoughts—Chesnut's question is emblematic of the racial contingency of white interiority.

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It would be misleading to represent nineteenth-century African Americans as unaware of the psychic investments of mesmerism and spiritualism in black corporeality. Frederick Douglass, for one, was quite conscious of the depoliticizing effects of white unconsciousness upon black freedom. The transmutation of slave corporeality into privileged disembodiment complicates liberatory hopes in his 1853 novella, *The Heroic Slave*. Because he lived in Rochester, both a capital of spiritualism and a hotbed of abolitionism, Douglass was in an ideal position to witness how liberal reform could glom onto black bodies as a means of producing white social transparency. Douglass attended clairvoyant seances, dubbed the “Rochester Knockings,” orchestrated by the famous Fox sisters in whose farmhouse the mysterious noises first occurred, ushering in the so-called era of modern spiritualism. Books about second-sight and the occult, such as an 1850 explanation of the “Mysterious Noises in western New-York, Generally Received as Spiritual Communications,” cited Douglass as an authority who could testify to the truthfulness of the ghostly rappings.<sup>20</sup> In a twist that hints at the overlap between abolition and parapsychology, Douglass, who once needed authentication from white antislavery editors in order to communicate with an antebellum public, was called on to play “Garrison,” as it were, by verifying the wonders of spirit-communication. And although Douglass did not see anything wondrous in the public stagings of the paranormal, the structure of spiritualism underpins his presentation of an abstract liberal agenda in *The Heroic Slave*. In order to narrate a slave revolt, Douglass makes use of

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<sup>20</sup>See Eliab W. Capron and Henry D. Barron, *Singular Revelations. Explanation and History of the Mysterious Communion with Spirits, Comprehending the Rise and Progress of the Mysterious Noises in Western New-York, Generally Received as Spiritual Communications*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Auburn, New York: Capron and Barron, 1850), p. 96.

clairvoyance to represent, dematerialize, and ultimately privilege African-American presence.

Mediums like the Fox sisters presented themselves as passive conduits for otherworldly communication; they staged not omniscience but unconsciousness as the point of access to messages from the dead. Douglass uses this strategy in *The Heroic Slave*, in which a slave revolt is recounted by a white sailor who is unconscious when the enslaved strike for freedom. Felled to the deck by a black revolutionary, this blacked-out sailor serves as an ideal medium to (under)represent the spectacle of violent black rebellion to a white audience. Just as mesmerized girls transcended worldly stimuli, this member of the slaver's crew admits that the revolt "knocked him senseless," forcefully inducing a version of the somnambulist's trance so that he, too, is immune to the jarring of the historical world.<sup>21</sup> In psychic/psychological demonstrations, clairvoyants and hypnotized mediums remained deaf to loud voices, clapping hands, and pistol shots; in emulation of this sublime posture, the sailor is unmoved by the sights and sounds that occasion the shedding of white blood by black hands. His unconsciousness spares Douglass's audience alarming details of a revolt perpetrated by black masculinity. Because he recounts events that transpired during his insensibility, the sailor, Tom Grant, narrates a text that, like a clairvoyant episode, is divorced from the body, especially black bodies stained with white blood.

Grant's gap-ridden story locates white unconsciousness as a necessary antecedent to black liberation. In order to imagine freedom for slaves, whites have to be rendered unconscious of the black body and its all too historical propensity to resist servitude by violent means. Once the bloody materiality of slave rebellion is sublimated the sailor serves as a

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<sup>21</sup>Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, in *Three Classic African-American Novels*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Mentor, 1990), p. 66. The sailor is not the only "medium" who conveys Madison Washington's story of social death back to the realm of the politically living. Antislavery readers were first introduced to Washington by reading about Listwell hearing, but not seeing, the hounded slave express his desire for freedom. The fact that Madison remains visually, but not aurally, obscured to Listwell contributes to his disembodiment. He appears only as voice but not as body. Screened by the forest, Madison occupies not simply the position of the black lecturer on the abolitionist circuit, as critics have noted, but also the identity of a spirit who makes his nonpresence known by a medium's proxy.

medium of revelation, imparting an abstract political “truth” in place of a spiritual one. Leaping over social meanings of racial embodiment, Grant declares, “Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior” (p. 68). He acknowledges the black right to revolution by disavowing the black body’s specificity: his is a contradictory recognition that accepts black citizenship in the transnationality of the Caribbean and “in the abstract,” everywhere but in the precise here-and-now of a slaveholding republic from where he later recounts the insurrection aboard the *Creole*. It proves far easier for him to recognize the legitimacy of black freedom in a psychological space than in a political one. Historical unconsciousness presides over Grant’s narrative: like Poyen, who is led to disregard the social significance of race as he watches the somnambulism of West Indian slaves, the American sailor in his performance of storytelling as a sort of sleepwalking makes light of the “difference of color.” He instead pursues the universalism of liberal reform, *granting* slaves access to radical democratic politics only on the condition that such politics be reconceived beyond the body’s physicality.

Unconsciousness—as a storytelling strategy crucial to *The Heroic Slave*’s conflicted universalism—owes one last debt to spiritualism’s narratival influence: hierarchy. While on an abstract plane the slave rebel Madison Washington receives the sailor’s approbation, black materiality garners his scorn, immuring self-emancipated bondsmen in a minstrel-like buffoonery that returns liberated contraband to familiar “darky” antics. Grant desublimates his awe of black revolutionaries in his description of the Bahamian soldiers who unload the “property” from the slave ship:

by order of the authorities a company of *black* soldiers came on board, for the purpose, as they said, of protecting the property. These impudent rascals, when I called on them to assist me in keeping the slaves on board, sheltered themselves adroitly under their instructions only to protect property,—and said they did not recognize *persons as property*. I told them that by the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States, the slaves on board were as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold. At this the stupid blockheads showed their *wary*, rolled up their white eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity. (pp. 68-69)

Douglass draws attention to the ironic juxtaposition of Grant’s fleeting

humanitarian largesse and his abiding use of racial stereotype. Within white insensibility, black embodiment is a liability that marks the breakdown of a "universal" framework in which white and black men understand one another. Because black mental capacities (in Grant's mind) are blunted by excessive bodies, the magnetic connection that galvanized Grant to Madison Washington's purpose is broken. At one level, the soldiers exploit white stereotypes of blackness to the political advantage of Madison and his comrades. But, at another, *The Heroic Slave* reveals interracial alliance as a fragile phenomenon built on suspensions of white consciousness.

The various textual positions orchestrated in Douglass's only work of fiction reveal that theories of psychic and psychological equality engage in a representational field laden with power. His narrator intervenes in the treacherous sphere of the psychopolitical when black bodies are most vulnerable; in the section preceding Grant's unconscious account, Douglass negotiates problematic black embodiment by refusing representation: "We pass over the hurry and bustle, the brutal vociferations of the slavedrivers in getting their unhappy gang in motion for Richmond; and we need *not narrate* every application of the lash to those who faltered in the journey" (p. 58, emphasis added). Douglass's narrator may be omniscient but he is certainly not unconscious. Because he is attentive to the immunity that disembodiment secures, Douglass understands that to represent the body is to abject the subject. His language here strives to *not narrate*, he disembodies blacks when they most suffer the injustice of unequal representation. The privilege not to have a body shelters the victims of discursive voyeurism. But as Grant's abstract political equation also shows, unconsciousness establishes a hierarchy in which the white imaginary too often trumps black democracy. What's at stake in these antebellum discursive relations between politics and psychology, then, is a predisposition among reformers and social critics to misrecognize democracy as a purely spiritual aspiration best deferred for some future day. With their eyes fixed on this horizon, citizens run the risk of never seeing democracy as a project necessarily built on the untranscendent and resolutely historical conditions of racial bodies.