Introduction

In New York City in 1839, refined, alabaster women glided across crowded dance floors in the arms of apelike, jet-black men. Or soon would, according to artist Edward W. Clay’s alarmist predictions about the end results of the growing abolitionist movement. Dancing was not the worst that Clay envisioned in the series of prints he entitled *Practical Amalgamation* (Figure I.1). In the new society brought on by abolitionism, Clay warned, white women and black men would openly court, marry, and produce interracial children. The mixing of the races that resulted would inevitably lead to the end of white female purity and white male supremacy in the United States. Such was the future that Clay and others portended as they sought to discredit abolitionists, whose calls for immediate emancipation and racial equality were growing louder and more insistent by the late 1830s.

In visual and written texts, antebellum artists and authors on all sides of the slavery issue, from abolitionists to proslavery advocates, regularly placed white women alongside enslaved men, occupying the same physical space. Yet unlike Clay’s prints, which unambiguously represented this proximity as romantic intimacy, most antebellum texts eschewed any overtly sexual element when they portrayed white girls and women in the company of African American men. The creators of these texts also eliminated the negative connotations that Clay had invoked in his engravings. Rather than depicting associations between black men and white women as taboo and scandalous, most antebellum authors portrayed them as nontthreatening, or even desirable. The frequency with which antebellum authors and artists juxtaposed dark-skinned males with light-skinned females, and the positive tone of these scenes, indicate a popular
fascination with this particular pairing of figures on the part of white northerners in the decades prior to the Civil War.¹

A momentous shift in cultural conceptions of gender and race occurred in the United States between 1831 and 1865. The figure of the black male rebel that had dominated narratives focusing on slavery in the 1830s was replaced by the black martyr as the principal depiction of African American masculinity in the 1850s. At the same time, portrayals of white women in slavery-related narratives also shifted, becoming stronger as images of black men became weaker. White female figures in narratives had been transformed from helpless victims in the 1830s to assertive heroines by the eve of the Civil War.

These changes in the ways black men and white women were presented occurred because of a fundamental shift in both the audience and the authorship of antebellum narratives between the 1830s and the 1850s. At the start of the antebellum period, popular novels were written almost exclusively by men, and their focus on themes like war and adventure was designed to appeal primarily to a male readership. By the 1850s, however, novels had become largely the purview of women. The popular “domestic” novel centered on the home and on the family, romance, and religion supposed to be contained therein. Writers of slavery-related novels and narratives, in company with authors of other types of fiction and autobiography, began catering to a readership that was assumed to be predominantly female. In doing so, these writers, an increasing number of whom were white women, began to enhance the status and authority of their white female characters. Increasingly, they did so by demasculinizing black men.

*Rebels and Martyrs* tells the story of the ways that white women depicted black men in the antebellum and Civil War eras – sometimes as wild beasts, sometimes as docile martyrs, always with the dual purpose of defining who black men were and, by contrast, who white women were. This is the story of how white women and black men appeared together in that fiction. As they defined themselves and black men in their fiction, white female authors tried to improve their own political and social positions.

A comparison of two prints, published slightly more than thirty years apart, exemplifies the transformation of racial imagery during the antebellum period, from rebel to martyr for African American men and from victim to heroine for white women. The first image was the woodcut “Horrid Massacre in Virginia,” which appeared in an antislavery pamphlet published in the immediate aftermath of Nat Turner’s revolt in 1831 (Figure I.2). This print showed four strong, young-looking black men taking up axes and knives against whites. The first scene depicted

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2 As Ann Douglas put it, “[M]iddle-class Protestant women ... were becoming the prime consumers of American culture” by the 1850s, and “as such they exerted an enormous influence on the chief male purveyors of that culture.” Douglas argued that “in very real ways, authors and clergymen were on the market; they could hardly afford to ignore their feminine customers and competitors.” Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998; orig. pub. 1977), 8.

one of these black men raising an ax against a white woman and her four small daughters. On her knees and pleading for the lives of her children, the woman was utterly helpless to prevent the violent attack of the merciless black man who held her life entirely in his hands. The seemingly dispassionate attitude of the slave rebel and the feminine helplessness of his victims identified this man, in the eyes of antebellum Americans, as a heartless savage. In the scene, white women's lack of power underscored black men's savagery, while black men's savagery likewise accentuated white women's powerlessness.

The second print appeared in 1863, at the height of the Civil War, as the last of a set of trading cards depicting the life and death of a young slave-turned-soldier (Figure I.3). Entitled “He Died for Me,” the card inverted the power relations found in the 1831 image. The black man lay prostrate in the most impotent state, death, while the white female figure of Liberty, or perhaps the American nation, exuded supremacy. The superiority of this white female symbol over the African American soldier was unmistakably demonstrated by a number of visual cues: the woman’s upright posture, her red headdress, the musculature of her arm, her gaze directed downward onto the lifeless body of the black soldier, and

**Figure I.2. “Horrid Massacre in Virginia,” 1831. Courtesy of Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, JWZan T856 831Cb.**
her lofty bestowal of honors upon him. The bright colors of the woman’s dress and her active stance made the motionless form of the dead soldier, with his nearly colorless uniform, seem to fade insignificantly into the background.

Besides appearing more authoritative and more imposing than the white woman from the 1831 print, the female figure in the later image embraced values and concerns that lay outside the domestic sphere. Whereas the pitiable female victim in the “Horrid Massacre” woodcut had been dwarfed by the skirts and children surrounding her, the white woman in the trading card stood alone, completely enveloped not in billowing skirts, but in the flag of her country. The concerns of the latter woman were not with private, domestic space, but with the public, typically masculine arenas of war and nationhood. This woman’s authority, her independence, and her success, however, derived from the
circumstance of a black man being rendered prostrate and deprived of his life. Viewing the scene from this perspective, the white woman’s assertion, “He Died for Me!” seems a declaration of her own importance rather than an expression of her awed gratitude.  

While contemporary scholarship has opened up valuable new avenues for studying the ways nineteenth-century Americans thought about and utilized concepts of blackness and whiteness, the literature on this subject has heretofore focused on male perspectives. Numerous historians in recent decades have employed gender analysis to uncover the role that race played in the formation of white masculinity in antebellum decades.  

White women, however, have not been viewed as a factor in the development of nineteenth-century views on race. By the same token, almost none of the extensive scholarly work that has centered on antebellum women has engaged questions of race, particularly when northern white women are the subject of inquiry. To judge by current historiography, it seems that race never entered into the consciousness of white women living beyond the South and played no role in shaping who these women were or how they saw themselves.

Yet slavery-related narratives published in the 1850s reveal that by the end of the antebellum period, white women in the free states were beginning to forge a powerful new identity for themselves that was based on their race as much as their gender. Narratives – defined simply as texts that tell a story – served as white women’s version of the polemical tracts, newspaper editorials, minstrel shows, and political speeches through which white men collectively developed their views on race and slavery. The narratives white women most often created and consumed included fiction – short stories, novels, stage dramas, and even visual images that follow a plotline – as well as more factual writings like autobiographies and collective biographies. Such texts increasingly began to stress the supposed superiority of white women over black men – and on much rarer occasions, over black women. These narratives encouraged white women to expand their roles in society by claiming the power and status

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that antebellum culture afforded to those classified as white. When white female characters stood up for themselves, took charge in dangerous situations, and threatened violence against male villains, they provided an alternative to the antebellum ideal of docile, demure white womanhood. And when black men worshipfully deferred to white women in this literature, revering their goodness and their strength, white female readers gained a greater sense of the importance they should perhaps hold within the hierarchy of American culture and society.6

White women’s drive to elevate their own cultural status helped deal a devastating blow to black masculinity in popular white racial thought. Because of the feminization of fiction in the late antebellum period, the figure of the aggressive or the assertive black man who had routinely appeared in literature during the 1830s and 1840s disappeared from commercial fiction in the 1850s. In its stead emerged the far less threatening image of the humble black martyr who paid homage to admirable, authoritative white females.

Narratives crafted during the Civil War reveal the persistence of this emasculating representation of African American manhood.7 Even when

6 In her highly influential work Sentimental Designs, literary scholar Jane Tompkins proposed that women in the mid-nineteenth century used fiction to gain power for themselves in a society where they “could neither own property, nor vote, nor speak at a public meeting if both sexes were present.” In such a restrictive environment, Tompkins argued, “women had to have a way of defining themselves which gave them power and status nevertheless, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world.” They did so, Tompkins suggested, through domestic fiction. Tompkins, however, did not address the important function that race often played in these endeavors. Jane Tompkins, Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 160–161.

7 Though scholars have identified a number of definitions of manliness in nineteenth-century America, James and Lois Horton have pointed out that “aggression, and sometimes sanctioned violence, was a common thread in American ideals of manhood” during that period. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “Violence, Protest, and Identify: Black Manhood in Antebellum America,” in Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 382. Many antebellum schools of thought on masculinity agree with this assessment. Violent episodes also appeared frequently in slavery-related literature. Therefore, much of my assessment of different characters’ manliness centers on the relationship those characters had to violence. If a man did not fight back when his life, his freedom, or his family was in jeopardy, his failure to act signified a deficiency in manliness in antebellum terms. At the same time, vengeful acts of violence, or aggression against women or children, would be read as unmanly. Real men in the antebellum period took up arms openly and confidently, and only for noble causes, like protecting white womanhood, preserving one’s liberty, or defending one’s country. For discussions of the various nineteenth-century conceptions of “true manhood,” see also E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from
black military participation created space in American fiction for black male characters who fought on the battlefield, authors ultimately rendered these men impotent by killing them off at the end of their narratives. By martyring all potentially militant black male protagonists, wartime writers allayed any fears whites might have had that African American soldiers would claim equal rights as men after the war. Even when Congress granted black men the vote later in the 1860s, it was not because most white Americans had come to view them as worthy men. The passage of the Fifteenth Amendment had much more to do with Republicans’ desire to hold onto political power through the votes they received from African American men in the South. The continued appeal of the Uncle Tom figure for whites well into the postwar period – reinforced by the introduction of Joel Chandler Harris’s beloved “Uncle Remus” in the 1880s – demonstrates the enduring impact that the deferential black male slave had on the white imagination.

The white female authors who created and published popular narratives about slavery thus shaped white Americans’ views about race and gender profoundly during the nineteenth century. In doing so, these women did more than work to enhance their own cultural authority. They also exerted an influence on the most significant political issue of the nineteenth century. Narratives about slavery did not simply function as a vehicle for white women to work out their own place in American society, as, for example, the minstrel show did for working-class white men. Nor were texts that focused on slaves and slavery, even those that were fictional, written principally to entertain or to teach a moral lesson about private behavior. Instead, most authors who wrote narratives about slavery were deliberately forwarding a particular political agenda regarding one of the most hotly debated topics of their day.\(^8\) At a time when the very definition of womanhood was apolitical, slavery-related

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\(^8\) Jeannine Marie DeLombard has noted that print culture in the antebellum period served as “an alternative tribunal,” a medium through which the American reading public passed judgment on the slave system. This “typographical tribunal,” DeLombard suggests, was in many ways at least as powerful as the official court system in shaping public opinion on the slavery issue, and perhaps more so. Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill, NY: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 48, 35.
fiction and autobiography provided a vital foray into the political system for white women. Through their production of literary works about slavery, white female authors stretched the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior and contributed in meaningful ways to the direction the republic would take in the nineteenth century.

It has fallen out of fashion among current-day historians to use fiction or other types of narrative literature as vehicles to delve into the mindsets of past societies. But literature mattered to antebellum women, and, as a result, it should matter to the historians who study them. Published narratives were the main venue that white, middle-class women used for articulating their political beliefs and their views on race. The analysis of slavery-focused narratives thus affords a unique opportunity to determine how race functioned within the imaginations of the white women who read and wrote such narratives in the antebellum and Civil War periods.

It is also important to note that narrative texts differ in important respects from more traditional sources of political discourse dealing with the slavery question. Unlike speeches, pamphlets, or editorial commentary, narratives generally do not offer a straightforward articulation of a logically constructed system of racial thought. Because of their greater subtlety, the stories left behind by a past culture can sometimes more profoundly reveal the deepest anxieties, the loftiest hopes, and the most sacred values of the people who lived within that culture, in a way that other types of sources cannot. They can suggest to us how a group of people, like antebellum women, viewed the world and how the various components of those worldviews fit together and interacted with each other.9

In this case, though, literature did not merely reflect the racial attitudes and beliefs of antebellum authors and readers. It also played a central role in actually creating the status of African American men and white women in the minds of white readers and in making sure that status was upheld. Whether based in fact or entirely imaginative, storytelling tends to work on readers in a less conscious manner than polemical

arguments do. The emotional impact is often greater; in the antebellum period, this proved especially true, as readers of slavery-related narratives were introduced to individual slaves in more personal ways. As a result, the characters and plots that antebellum readers came across in slavery-related narratives would have had a subtler and possibly a more indelible effect on the way those readers understood what it meant to be a black man or a white woman. As they tugged at readers’ heartstrings or shocked their sensibilities with the horrors of slavery or of emancipation, authors of slavery-centered narratives etched into the minds of white Americans powerful visions of how black manhood interacted with white femininity.

The shift in representations of black manhood and white womanhood in antebellum culture occurred as a result of a multi-sided conversation within American literature among authors from widely divergent backgrounds. Americans black and white, male and female, southern, northern, and even western participated in the dialogue that brought the transformation of racial and gendered images in the three decades before the Civil War. Politically, they were a diverse group. Abolitionist authors who despised slavery for moral reasons engaged in heated literary dialogue with proslavery advocates who deemed slavery a positive good for all concerned. More moderate than abolitionists was an antislavery contingent who disliked slavery but likewise disdained African Americans and thus opposed racial equality. Less extreme than proslavery authors, anti-abolitionist writers felt no great attachment to the slave system. But they feared that emancipation would bring economic and social chaos for white northerners suddenly facing freed slaves as competitors for their jobs and suitors for their daughters.

Between 1831 and 1865, authors with differing views on the slave system read, responded to, argued with, and borrowed elements of each other’s narratives to make their own statements about the slave experience. Of these groups, antislavery authors played the most active role in the transformation of dominant images of black men and white women by the 1850s. Two decades earlier, it had been proslavery authors and abolitionists who popularized the conceptualization of black men as dangerous savages, bent on the destruction of whites. Proslavery novelists had suggested that men of African descent were inherently vicious and untrustworthy. Enslavement, they argued, constituted the safest way of containing that naturally violent potential. Abolitionist writers, by contrast, concluded that slavery itself provoked brutal behavior in black men. Only the termination of the slave system, they reasoned, could prevent
a murderous rampage by slaves that would inevitably culminate in the wholesale butchery of whites.

During the early 1850s, however, writers who approached the slavery issue from an antislavery perspective softened this harrowing portrayal of African American men in the narratives they published. Antislavery authors turned to an image of male slaves as humble servants, cruelly oppressed by an unjust system. They did so in an attempt to depict slavery in a negative light while reassuring white northerners of the nonthreatening nature of black men. Instead of alienating the mainstream white public, as many abolitionist narratives did, these less extreme antislavery texts enjoyed increasing popularity as the antebellum period went on.

Proslavery advocates recognized the manipulation of slave imagery as a conscious strategy in which both abolitionist and antislavery authors engaged. As Albert Taylor Bledsoe pointed out in 1856, “The truth is, the abolitionist can make the slave a brute or a saint, just as it may happen to suit the exigency of his argument.... If the object be to excite indignation against slavery, then it always transforms its subjects into brutes; but if it be to excite indignation against the slaveholder, then he holds, not brutes, but a George Harris – or an Eliza – or an Uncle Tom – in bondage.” Proslavery authors realized that writers opposed to slavery, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, increasingly chose to emphasize the suffering that the system inflicted on enslaved “saints” like Uncle Tom. In response, proslavery authors began shifting their own renderings of black men from the beast to the martyr. Antislavery authors prompted proslavery authors to populate their fiction with male slaves who showed unwavering devotion to their masters and who often suffered for that devotion. The fact that such images appeared in narratives written from opposing positions on the slavery issue suggests that these were the representations of black men that most appealed to white Americans during the 1850s.

The manner in which African American men were portrayed in popular antislavery texts of the 1850s also provoked a literary response from radical abolitionists. In the narratives they created during the decade before the Civil War, radical abolitionists strove to counter the unmanly portrayals of male slaves that antislavery authors had presented to such popular acclaim. Having offered cautious versions of black manliness in the fugitive slave narratives they published in the 1840s, black and white men who embraced the immediatist cause put forward aggressive

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illustrations of African American manhood in the 1850s. At a time when many abolitionists, angered by injustices such as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, had begun to adopt a more militant stance, radical authors celebrated the leaders of slave revolts and their bold attempts at freedom for their people.

The utter failure of these texts in the marketplace showed that white Americans continued to feel uneasy about aggressive black male figures. They preferred African American men who were less forceful and showed greater respect for white power. The heroic rebels of the 1850s, however, did lay the groundwork for weapon-wielding black soldiers in stories and novels published during the Civil War. Still, to be palatable to white readers, the assertive action in which black revolutionaries engaged had to be offset with servile loyalty and self-sacrificial behavior. The black male protagonists in slavery-related fiction released during the war thus owed their diminished masculinity to the popularity of antislavery martyrs of the 1850s.

To make sense of changing cultural definitions of black manhood and white femininity between 1831 and 1865, this book traces the full literary debate about slavery that took place over the course of the antebellum and Civil War periods. It moves decade by decade, identifying and analyzing the particular group of slavery-related texts that dominated the American marketplace during each time period. The main story begins with Nat Turner’s revolt and the publicity it afforded to the Garrisonian abolitionist movement in 1831, and it ends with the official abolition of American slavery in 1865. Table 1.1 summarizes the changes that occurred in the racial imagery that appeared in various texts over the course of this ongoing debate.

Antebellum authors sometimes employed characters of mixed race to help them fashion new incarnations of black manhood and white femininity. Though their African ancestry doomed them to slavery, quadroon or octoroon figures appearing in antebellum literature typically embodied white American ideals of manliness or womanliness. The physical features of men and women with mixed racial heritage stressed their right to claim whiteness as the central aspect of their identity, with light skin, thin lips, and smooth, flowing hair prominently displayed. Other traits also announced their European heritage, especially speech patterns that rejected black dialect. Authors sometimes pointed out in these texts that light-complexioned women had been schooled in the same subjects rei ned white women of the time were required to master, like embroidery, music, and French. When describing light-skinned men of mixed
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<td><strong>Dominant image of light-skinned women</strong></td>
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racial heritage, writers often emphasized their intelligence, ingenuity, and independent spirit, qualities associated in antebellum America with admirable white men. Antebellum and Civil War–era readers were meant to read these men and women as predominantly white rather than to focus on their African ancestry.

The close resemblance of quadroon or octoroon males to whites gave African American activists and their allies an important tool with which to contest cultural dictates about what constituted appropriate behavior for African American men. In particular, light-skinned male characters with African ancestry challenged white beliefs in black male savagery or childlike deference. Antislavery authors permitted their light-skinned male protagonists to contemplate or commit violent acts against slave masters, and they portrayed those acts as forthright and honorable. In doing so, these authors introduced white readers to the idea that there was little difference between admirable white men and at least some African American men. And, if there were manly African American slaves, those slaves should have the right to defend their freedom, their families, and their lives even against threats that came from white men. Such reasoning, however, often left attitudes about dark-skinned men unchanged, as light-complexioned heroes seemed to whites merely an exception to the general rule about African American male savagery or docility.

While male characters of mixed race called into question racial stereotypes in antebellum culture, quadroon and octoroon women in antislavery narratives defied prevailing assumptions about gender. Antislavery authors contrasted light-skinned slave women with dark-skinned black men to the advantage of the mixed-race heroine. As humble male slaves put octoroon women on a pedestal or sacrificed their lives to help them, black men became demeaned, and women with all the outward markers of whiteness were exalted. As these female characters’ whiteness stood in stark relief against passive, submissive male blackness, the racial component of their identity came to the fore. As honorable representatives of the white race, surrounded only by evil white slaveholders and weak black men, quadroon and octoroon women seized the opportunity to assume more assertive roles in determining their destiny. Antislavery authors allowed their light-skinned female characters to threaten or even follow through with acts of aggression. In the process, they stretched the limits of what was deemed acceptable womanly behavior.

The narratives that helped transform cultural attitudes about white womanhood and black masculinity in the antebellum period had a much greater impact in the free states than in the South. In part, this was because
many of the texts explored here were written from an antislavery or an abolitionist point of view, which would have given them limited appeal among white southerners. White southerners are not altogether absent from this story, but they emerge as minor players in comparison with authors and readers who lived in the North. A few proslavery southerners did pen stories and novels in reaction to the newly emerging abolitionist movement in the 1830s. And numerous southern white women, as well as a few southern men, also published “anti–Uncle Tom” novels in the 1850s in response to Stowe’s runaway bestseller.

Yet even when it came to proslavery and anti-abolitionist texts, northern authors contributed more narratives to the discussion than southern authors did. In fact, some of the most derogatory images of black men were not “hurled northward” from the South, as some scholars still would have it, but originated from the pens of northern white authors. Anti-abolitionist narratives, like antislavery and abolitionist texts, were also directed specifically at a northern audience, as proponents of different political views sought to win over the hearts and minds of white northerners to their particular position on the slavery issue. Thus, it was most often readers from the free states who experienced changes in racial imagery in antebellum and Civil War literature, and it was overwhelmingly authors from these same states who drove those changes.

This study not only confirms that some of the most offensive racial imagery of the antebellum period had its origins in the northern states; it also reveals that anti-black racism lay behind the efforts of white women to achieve greater power and recognition in American society. Historians today tend to be much more comfortable spotlighting antebellum white women who identified with slaves and who, out of their empathy and deep compassion for them, did everything in their regrettably limited power to achieve freedom and equality for both groups. But even white women who were committed abolitionists introduced less than manly portrayals of African American men to bolster their own position in society during the antebellum and Civil War periods. Referring to narratives authored by female abolitionists in the antebellum era, Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes that “although the identifications of woman and

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slave, marriage and slavery, that characterize these texts may occasionally prove mutually empowering, such pairings generally tend toward asymmetry and exploitation.”

In other words, even some of the most racially progressive white female activists of their day had difficulty putting black men on the same level with white women.

As Vron Ware has noted about Great Britain, it is important to remember that “feminism … developed as a political movement within a racist society.” In an era during which black men and white women enjoyed almost no formal authority and held essentially no power, even unofficially, it is perhaps hardly surprising that members of one disfranchised group would try to lower the other even further in an attempt to elevate their own position. This was true of white women reformers as well as of women with no ties to either the women’s rights cause or the abolitionist movement. Seismic shifts in representations of black masculinity as American fiction became more feminized reveal the crucial role that race played in the development of white, female identity, regardless of an author’s particular political leanings. As white women tried to promote those of their own sex and race as relevant, valuable participants in American life, African American men in popular fiction took on increasingly humbler roles. Since black men fought back against this feminization, this book chronicles the persistent debate in the world of fiction as white women and black men tried to establish their own claim to be viewed as worthy members of a republic that marginalized and dismissed them both.


Vron Ware, Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History (London: Verso, 1992), xiii.