

## Introduction

### *Representing the Body Politic*

In antebellum America, as in all states and all times, the "body politic" was inhabited by an immense variety of distinct bodies, well-fed or hungry, smooth-skinned or callused, strong or exhausted, old, young, or middle-aged, male or female, dark-skinned or light or somewhere between. The relation of the social and political structures of the "body politic" to the fleshy specificity of embodied identities has generally been masked behind the constitutional language of abstracted and implicitly bodiless "persons," so that, for example, it did not seem absurd for the founding fathers to reckon slaves as "three-fifths of a person." To fraction an abstract "person" does not require amputations. Such abstractions have not, however, gone uncontested. This book investigates a crack in the hegemonic rhetoric of political disembodiment. I argue that from the early 1830s through the Civil War, these assumptions of a metaphorical and fleshless political identity were disrupted and unmasked through the convergence of two rhetorics of social protest: the abolitionist concern with claiming personhood for the racially distinct and physically owned slave body, and the feminist concern with claiming personhood for the sexually distinct and domestically circumscribed female body. Moreover, just as the notion of the universal, and so incorporeal, "person" has had cultural ramifications that far exceed its appearance in constitutional rhetoric, the development of a political discourse and a concept of personhood that attests to the centrality of the body erupts throughout antebellum culture. The extent to which the condition of the human body designates

identity is a question of American culture and consciousness as well as politics, and so it is a question whose answers can be sought not only in political speeches but also in a variety of more ostensibly aesthetic forms, from sentimental fiction and personal narratives to those conventionally most ahistorical of texts, lyric poems. In the chapters that follow I trace the implications of a bodily definition of identity through the polemical fictions of feminist-abolitionists, Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, and the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. The apparent heterogeneity of this cultural domain foregrounds the issues of difference—generic, social, bodily—at stake in my study.

In an effort to justify political activism to “the Christian Women of the South,” Angelina Grimké resorts to a conventionally religious and yet shockingly lurid metaphor. She compares the scandalously public work of antislavery women to the pious and familial act of Martha pushing the stone from her brother Lazarus's closed grave:

*Our business is to take away the stone which has covered up the dead body of our brother, to expose the putrid carcass, to show how that body has been bound with the grave-clothes of heathen ignorance, and his face with the napkin of prejudice, and having done all it was our duty to do, to stand by the negro's grave in humble faith and holy hope, waiting to hear the life giving command of “Lazarus, come forth.” This is just what Anti-Slavery Societies are doing; they are taking away the stone from the mouth of the tomb of slavery, where lies the putrid carcass of our brother.*

Her insistence on “uncovering the loathsome body to popular sight” seems an excessive, necroscopic metaphor for abolitionist concern.<sup>1</sup> To describe the slave as a putrid carcass evinces the very recoil of racial prejudice against which Grimké writes. It registers, as well, a horror of embodiment, since Grimké epitomizes the body in the loathsome fact of its decay. By exemplifying the body in this way Grimké raises the stakes of her rhetoric, but—testifying to her ambivalence—she also decomposes the body she claims to reveal. In the pages that follow I explore the causes and ramifications of

this ambivalence. For now, I want to suggest that the hyperbolic insistence on embodiment in Grimké's rhetoric is not only essential for both abolitionist and feminist discourses but indeed functions more generally to reconfigure cultural conceptions of the corporeality of identity. By equating slavery with the lump of flesh and liberty with the act of animating that flesh, Grimké calls the lie on the incorporeal national ideal of a free and equal American citizenry. As she writes, the putrid corpse, the abused black body of the slave, and the abstract "body" of the state constantly replace each other until it becomes impossible to keep them apart. Forcing attention not on some vague conception of freedom but on the details of bodily corruption, the political point of this passage lies precisely in the demand that so excessive a metaphor be understood as literal.

The human body has always served as an emblem for conceptions of the body politic.<sup>2</sup> The bodily biases of the state are evident in the white male privilege that has pertained within American society. Feminist political theorists are reappraising the constitutional rhetoric of disembodied, naturally equal and interchangeable "persons" to reveal its complicity in maintaining just such privilege. Their arguments suggest not only that this juridical "person" has always implicitly occupied a white male body, but, more important, that success in masking this fact has secured and legitimized the power that accrues to that body.<sup>3</sup> Authority derives from simulating the impossible position of the universal and hence bodiless subject. All the "men" who, Thomas Jefferson declared, "are created equal" shed their gender and their race; in obtaining the right to freedom and equality they discard bodily specificity. The problem, as feminists and abolitionists surely suspected, was that women and blacks could never shed their bodies to become incorporeal "men".<sup>4</sup> The feminist and abolitionist interest in presenting "the loathsome body to public sight" thus engages a double agenda: it reveals the bodily basis of women's and blacks' exclusion from political power and uncovers the physical attributes of whiteness and maleness implicit in such power.

Although in terms of national history feminism and abolition may have served to unmask traditional abstract definitions of political identity, the organizational unity of the American Anti-Slavery Society was itself among the victims of this definitional flux. The society's 1833 charter, or "Declaration of Sentiments," followed constitutional norms in opening its membership to "persons." Because no women signed the charter, though a number were present and some even spoke at these founding meetings, it seems fair to assume that in 1833 the society understood "persons" to connote "men." By 1840, however, Abby Kelley was prepared to insist that the charter's reference to "persons" included female persons like herself and therefore sanctioned her election to the governing business committee. Kelley's election precipitated the fracturing of the American Anti-Slavery Society, although historians disagree on the ideological importance of feminism in this division. I am less concerned here with the causes and ramifications of this schism than with what it illustrates about the instability of political identity in this period, even among the ranks of the radical left.<sup>5</sup> The debates over Kelley's election reveal how volatile the concept of the juridical "person" had become in antebellum America, for the story of this election is in part the story of the contentious development of a newly physical understanding of political identity and so of a new sense of what different bodies such "persons" might have.

The eventual success of feminist-abolitionist rhetoric in redefining political identity to acknowledge bodily specificity is apparent in the language of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. The Fourteenth Amendment protects the franchise of the nation's "male inhabitants." Because it was unclear that such language would necessarily include black men, the Fifteenth Amendment supplemented this rhetoric of sexual specificity with additional bodily criteria: "the right . . . to vote shall not be denied or abridged . . . on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." These amendments introduce the notion of a corporeal political identity and a racially

and sexually distinct citizenry into constitutional language. The Constitution had previously contained no mention of race or sex and had not specifically barred black or female suffrage.<sup>6</sup>

This "success" contains multiple ironies. In acknowledging that political identity cannot be distinguished from an embodied identity, the amendments simultaneously include and ignore or exclude different bodies, so that in practice the constitutional turn to a terminology of embodied citizenry actually provides a defense against feminist incursions. The problems raised by the Fourteenth Amendment accentuated the split between feminist and abolitionist concerns, exacerbating divisions and asymmetries that had been inherent in the movements all along. The greater irony, however, lies in the way that this shift in constitutional rhetoric was matched by a shift in political demands. With the end of the Civil War, the campaigns for the rights of women and blacks turned from the question and symbol of the body to address not their corporeal oppression but their juridical exclusion. For postwar feminists and freemen the right to vote replaced the status of the human body as a sign of membership in the body politic. Thus this political and cultural concern with the corporeality of identity effectively increased the centrality of the demand for suffrage. The irony is that in focusing on suffrage, these movements of social protest came to reiterate the rhetoric of abstract personhood that had traditionally erased and silenced their distinct flesh.

This shift from embodiment to suffrage delimits my project. Though rhetorical and ideological trends can rarely be contained between precise dates, I locate this siege on the political abstraction of personhood between the rise of abolitionist politics in the early 1830s and the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, and I confine my investigation to that period.<sup>7</sup> More significant, this shift serves to demarcate the theoretical impetus of my project, since the historical relation between embodiment and suffrage exemplifies what may be at stake in representation as both a political and a semiotic or literary system.<sup>8</sup> An elected representative

government presumes that one's ideas, thoughts, needs, and desires can be adequately embodied by someone else. The representative's job is to mark the constituents' presence at the scene of power, negotiation, and debate. Political representation enacts the fiction of a bodiless body politic. Literary representation depends, of course, on a similar though not identical system of proxies: words stand in for an absent physical world.

An account focused on the representation of a corporeally based identity in nineteenth-century American writings inadequately describes the experiences of any actual bodies. My cover photograph, for example, records the structures of dominance that adhere not only to abolitionist altruism, but also to its depiction. The photograph portrays Harriet W. Murray, a Northern teacher at the Penn School on St. Helena island, reading to her recently freed pupils "Elsie and Puss." The pose itself is quite conventional: similar tableaux of a demurely dressed white woman seated in right profile and reading to a group of standing black children can be found among the collections of many early freedmen's schools. Such pictures are clearly designed as testaments to the efficacious but benign potential of these fledgling schools to civilize the black population of the South. Props for Northern fund-raising, these images promise that black literacy contains no threat, and that learning to read will only increase the childlike docility and affection thought characteristic of the African race. Mailing a similar photograph to her Northern family, Laura M. Towne, director of the Penn School, commented fondly, "I send the enclosed picture of me with three of my pets."<sup>9</sup>

Although the Penn school operated into this century, black interest in Northern-run schools waned, with many ex-slaves preferring to organize their own schools. Northern teachers complained of this ingratitude for "the charity which northern friends are so graciously bestowing," but they remained largely blind to the ease with which their humanitarian concern could produce patterns of authority and subordination, dominance and dependence not wholly dissimilar from those

associated with the ministrations of the plantation mistress. Suggesting such proprietorship, Laura Towne explains, "We have got to calling them *our* people and loving them really—not so much individually as the collective whole—the people and *our* people."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the very conventionality of this photograph betrays the subordination entailed in such beneficent poses. The woman's arm around one little girl's waist compels her participation as much as it embraces. While the scene intends to represent the girls as already enjoying the benefits of compliance with the civilizing generosity of her teachers, and her teachers' culture, the child behind the chair disrupts these nice arrangements. Staring straight at the camera, she challenges the naturalizing illusion of benevolence; her gaze makes us aware of how the act of photographing structures this scene. Her face expresses both fascination with and fear of the technology that would frame and preserve her, choreographed into the subject position of the slave Reconstructed—not the slave emancipated for self-determination.

Like this caught yet resistant little girl, the whipped, worked, auctioned, sexually violated, and sexually desiring bodies that figure in my discussions are both rhetorical and real. Michel Foucault's distinction between the "intelligible body" represented through discourse and the "docile-useful body" disciplined by social control best articulates the double relation between bodies and their representations at issue here. These are not Foucault's concerns, but the laboring body of the slave and the sexually productive body of the woman are among our culture's most obvious examples of such "useful" flesh. Foucault's assertion that what we take to be a "natural body" proves instead a socially constructed "political anatomy" suggests the limits to the liberal ideal of freeing the body through discourse.<sup>11</sup> I situate my efforts to describe this historically localized rhetoric of embodiment within recent debates over the relation between the human body and the discourses that name it.

Emily Martin has examined the differences in language and imagery used by the medical profession and a diverse

group of interviewed women to describe the processes of female reproduction. Her findings demonstrate how attitudes toward the body are culturally ordered and offer a detailed example of the social and linguistic construction of the body. Elaine Scarry's work virtually inverts this argument, suggesting instead that the inexpressible and undeniable nature of bodily experience, especially pain, enables the construction of the social world. For her it is the body's desperate resistance to the enclosure of its experience that drives language. In analyzing how the bodies of women and slaves are figured in contemporaneous political and literary texts, my work draws upon the contradictions between these two ways of understanding the relation between bodies and rhetorics. It charts a circle in which the physical oppression and the juridical exclusion of black and female bodies give rise to a political movement and a literature that strive (as Scarry suggests) to speak the body, but that in so representing the body (as Martin suggests) exploit and limit it.<sup>12</sup>

To acknowledge the rhetorical limits of antislavery writing is not to discount these efforts to represent an embodied personhood. The language of the Constitution and of later suffrage campaigns evades the bodies of those they would enfranchise. The writers with whom I am concerned practice no such evasions, but the act of representing the body does not ensure the integrity of the thing represented. Angelina Grimké's depiction of slavery as a putrid corpse insists on the physical aspects of this political problem; but the stink and mold that emphasize the bodiliness of slavery also mark the gradual degeneration of that body. Such instability is in the simplest sense inevitable, since language can never *be* but can only inadequately represent the things it describes. In the texts I discuss, however, the effacement of the body must be understood in more explicitly political and violent terms. The bodies depicted in these texts reveal not only the limits of representation but also the threatening possibilities of radical difference. I am concerned precisely with the ways in which rhetoric effaces and contains the real, not only with the physical and juridical violence directed against



women and slaves, but also with the violence of representation and the anxieties about difference inherent in the appropriation of their flesh for the purposes of political and literary discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Those purposes have traditionally been considered distinct. In calling attention to the double meaning of representation, I am suggesting that political and literary discourses share a homologous—though not identical—relation to the problem of embodiment. As I trace the implications of a corporeal identity through feminist and abolitionist writings, Jacobs's narrative, and Whitman's and Dickinson's poems, I do not, however, intend simply to collapse distinctions of meaning or genre. Rather I am concerned with the dynamics of intersecting rhetorics: how the figures generated by one discourse may be altered or subsumed through contact with another.<sup>14</sup> By *discourse* I mean any historically specific structure of assertions, vocabularies, categories, and beliefs; thus, though I rely predominantly on the linguistic manifestations of such structures, *discourse* can refer to a variety of institutional or social practices. For example, there exist both slavery (the fact of bondage) and the discourse of slavery (the pattern of statements, definitions, and beliefs that both enables the fact of bondage and mediates subsequent accounts of it). The term *intersection* is a purposely fluid one, and refers not only to intentionally forged connections (feminists drawing upon the imagery of slavery to depict "the bonds of womanhood," or Whitman conjoining lyric and narrative formal conventions) but also to thematic and imagistic coincidences that textual analysis reveals in contemporary writers like Jacobs and Dickinson, who could not have known about each other's work. These unintentional connections ultimately prove the most significant for my purposes, as they appear indicative not only of individual patterns of influence but of more pervasive cultural concerns. Although feminism, abolition, and the resulting emphasis on the corporeality of identity can be seen to permeate American consciousness and cultural expression, they do not necessarily produce a homogenous "spirit of the age." Indeed my focus on rhetorical

intersections suggests how the problems of a corporeal identity change with the differently embodied perspective of each speaker.

In chapter 1 I explore the intersections of feminist and abolitionist rhetoric to expose the contradictions and asymmetries inherent in the identification of free woman with slave woman. My analysis uncovers the exploitation inherent in this also empowering political alliance. Chapter 1 focuses primarily on politically motivated sentimental fiction. Chapter 2 moves from Walt Whitman's foray into this reformist genre in his temperance novel *Franklin Evans* to the poetry of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*; this trajectory raises questions about the interrelation of narrative and lyric modes. More directly relevant to my thesis, the discussion relates his poetics of merger and embodiment to contemporary political divisions over the body of the slave. Such a reading does not simply mark the union of politics and poetry, though it does attest to their connectedness; instead it assesses both the political and the poetic force generated by such an alliance and the concomitant dangers of literary appropriation. Whitman's project of poetic embodiment, which would permit his multiple migratory "I" to inhabit the body of the other in all its difference, and his project of poetic merger, which would encompass and negate all differences within his single swelling "I," contradict each other, yet both locate the possibility of social reconciliation within the speaking self.

What it means to absorb the issues of the social world into the person and flesh of the writer changes radically with the writer's position. The progression of these chapters is chronological, but it also traces a movement toward increasingly privatized utterance. Thus, while my discussion of Whitman describes his attempts to unite personal and social concerns, my discussion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in chapter 3 instances Harriet Jacobs's efforts to disentangle her autobiographical desire to write down the self from her political desire to write an abolitionist polemic. The very connections that Whitman celebrates become for her a source of pain. In particular, for Jacobs the act of writing often seems to recapit-

ulate the sexual violations at stake in the scenes she narrates. Linda Brent escapes from slavery by hiding herself in distinctly domestic and confining spaces; that such spaces should serve as a method of escape—however ambivalent—provokes a reevaluation of the relation between the structures of domesticity and the structures of slavery described in my first chapter.

The contradictory links among domesticity, embodiment, and freedom also ground my discussion of Emily Dickinson's poetry in chapter 4, where, however, the project of affirming freedom and identity have been internalized and so appear disjoined from any political or social program. In contrast to Whitman's strategies of inclusion and Jacobs's failed attempts at separation, Dickinson's writing locates within her own identity, her own words, and her own flesh the divisions these other texts have described as social. Yet this relocation within the self ought not to be understood as a complete disjunction from antebellum political activism, since the most radical and polemical of abolitionists would have been the first to aver that ultimately all reform must take place "within the human heart." In the earlier chapters I find that the identifications forged between women and slaves, between politics and poetry, between personal and social meanings, and between a variety of generic forms, rather than equitably reconciling these different subjects and mediums of discourse, frequently served to subordinate one discourse to another. The questions raised by Dickinson's work corroborate this pattern, but by inverting it, for her poems enforce not a union but a splitting, not only of discourse but even of the self that would say it.

The case of Dickinson is extreme. Her poetry flamboyantly insists on its radical privacy, on its internalization of social concerns. This sort of historical detachment has generally been ascribed to lyric utterance; in this, as in so much else, Dickinson's poetry presses lyric conventions to their limits. Dickinson criticism has frequently analyzed the mechanisms by which her poetry resists referentiality; I suggest that in this resistance her poems not only make evident the fragmented

nature of lyric utterance but also lay bare the contradictory connections between embodiment and representation. Dickinson's poetry reveals how for the self, as much as for the state, the physical aspect of personhood simultaneously informs and inhibits all acts of representation—political as well as semiotic. Thus the shift to a focus on suffrage, that is, to representational politics, can never get rid of the challenges posed by bodily differences; it can only mask them within the formless and representative body of the state.

In the last few years critics have shown an increasing interest in the impact of slavery on the literary imagination of antebellum America.<sup>15</sup> My decision to trace feminist and abolitionist discourse through the lyric, rather than the novel, distinguishes mine from the majority of these efforts. But this decision is also strategic in more important ways, since claims have often been made for the depoliticized and atemporal status of lyric utterance. My purpose is not to deny the aesthetic value of lyric form, but rather to record some of the ways in which these aesthetic maneuvers interact with more explicitly social or political discourses. Ultimately, such a project demonstrates the ideological relevance and potency not just of the lyric but of all formal structures. In novels, where the task of depiction often envelops a great deal of the social world, and so makes issues like slavery or woman's rights thematically visible, the ideological impact of the novelistic structure itself is more easily discounted. Analyzing lyric poetry, and especially such referentially resistant lyrics as Dickinson's, disables an emphasis on thematic political content and instead reveals how aesthetic, stylistic, and formal mechanisms come to accrue ideological significance.

The variety of rhetorical intersections I have sketched above is not merely heuristic. Rather, these intersections exemplify and confront debates within contemporary literary and cultural studies—debates that themselves have more general social and political import. For example, the challenges that racial difference poses for feminism have been—belatedly and still inadequately—acknowledged within fem-

inist discourses both inside and outside the academy. The asymmetries I have found in the feminist-abolitionist practices of nineteenth-century America remain only too relevant now. Similarly, the question of the relations between literature and history, between form and ideology, and between canonical and noncanonical texts underlies critical arguments over the political efficacy and critical validity of "New Historicism."<sup>16</sup> My own practice here rests on the double assumption that all expression is necessarily embedded in politics and that all politics is necessarily rhetorically structured. Furthermore, in any given instance the social and literary implications of these interweavings are never fully under authorial control and may well prove multiple or even contradictory. Thus I do not find rhetorical structures either inherently subversive or inevitably conservative: from the sentimental to the lyric they do cultural work, but the ideological valence of that work does not remain fixed.

In the end I come to the allegory of my own authorship. I began this project out of the desire to articulate connections between social action and literary expression and therefore to define my own critical work as, at least potentially, politically productive. I hoped that the structure of political alliance that linked feminists and abolitionists would provide an appropriate and empowering model for an alliance between poetry and politics. I had intended, that is, to tell a happier story about the insight and strength to be found in strategies of coalition, both political and rhetorical. Instead, as I worked, the relation between feminism and abolition increasingly seemed to be characterized by patterns of exploitation, appropriation, and displacement; similarly the potential for aesthetic erasures and absorptions marred any simply positive reading of the links between poetry and politics. This does not mean, however, that the chapters that follow merely trace a bleak story of disillusionment. Neither narratives of inevitable failure nor stories of easy cohesion or success, they are useful cautionary tales, important precisely because they articulate some of the obstacles to embracing and heeding difference.