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Fall 2015

# Tapping wires and touching nerves: telegraphy and embodiment in antebellum narratives

Lacey Worth Askeland

*University of Iowa*

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TAPPING WIRES AND TOUCHING NERVES:  
TELEGRAPHY AND EMBODIMENT IN ANTEBELLUM NARRATIVES

by  
Lacey Worth Askeland

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in English  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

December 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Kathleen Diffley

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PH.D. THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

As the American telegraph network began webbing across the nation in the 1840s and 1850s, many first users turned to telegraphy as a way of understanding the complexity of the body, categories of identity, and the communities that constituted the nation. My dissertation traces these shifting responses to the technology during the late 1840s and early 1850s, a period often overlooked by historians of the telegraph and one marked by sectional polarization. The four cornerstone texts of my dissertation—Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854), and John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854)—demonstrate how writers and readers engaged with the discourse surrounding telegraphy as a means of interrogating some of the more conservative gender or racial identities endorsed in other contemporary fields of scientific inquiry, including phrenology, mesmerism, and electromagnetism. My project contextualizes these literary texts within popular print cultures of the period, arguing that the coding of identity in narrative encouraged readers to extend such semiotics to the bodies around them, and that the metaphors surrounding telegraphy informed constructions of race, gender, and nationality throughout the 1850s. Examining this connection between technology and embodiment provides insight into early-nineteenth-century conceptions of the relationship among scientific classification systems, machines, and bodies, and also reveals the constructed quality of these three categories. Historicizing the concept of disembodiment seems essential given our own tendency today to metaphorize digital media in ways that challenge and uphold traditional notions of embodied identities.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

As the American telegraph network began webbing across the nation in the 1840s and 1850s, many first users turned to telegraphy as a way of understanding race, gender, and national identity. In order to explore the shifting responses to telegraphy during the late 1840s and early 1850s, a period often overlooked by historians of the telegraph, my dissertation focuses on four fictional texts from the 1850s: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), William Wells Brown's *Clootel* (1853), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854), and John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854). These narratives, along with popular newspapers and magazines of the period, encouraged readers to associate the telegraph with electric sympathy, the occult, bodily possession, and the power of language. In my exploration of these metaphorical associations, I demonstrate how writers began to use the concepts surrounding telegraphy to undermine some of the more conservative gender or racial identities endorsed in other contemporary fields of scientific inquiry, including phrenology, mesmerism, and electromagnetism. Examining the connection between technology and embodiment provides insight into early-nineteenth-century conceptions of the relationship among scientific classification systems, machines, and bodies, and also reveals that these three categories are social constructions. It seems essential to recognize the historical background of telegraphy given our own tendency today to use the metaphors surrounding digital media in ways that challenge and uphold traditional notions of race, gender, and class.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nearly two centuries after Samuel Morse patented a device that seemed to render all information instantaneously transmissible, popular scientific magazines are now asserting that body can be stripped from brain, human thought expressed directly through raw electrical synapses. In September 2014, *Popular Science* published an article with the tantalizing title “Scientists Send Messages Directly from One Brain to Another.” Just as the magazine, under the title *Popular Science Monthly*, published diagrams of telegraphic relay years before, it now features illustrations of an “emitter subject” gazing at a black laptop screen and sending a simple message in binary code to a “receiver subject” strapped into a transcranial magnetic simulation machine. Other magazines have picked up the story, adapting the title into even more preposterous claims. Above the image of a radiation-green brain hovering in deep space, the *Telegraph* reports that “‘telepathic’ communication” has been achieved. The *Tech Times*, dropping the scare quotes, ran the story with the subtitle “Telepathy is Mastered.”

At first glance, these contemporary articles about brain-to-brain communication might seem far afield from the discourse surrounding telegraphy in the nineteenth century; but the electro-magnetic telegraph, which divorced body from message in the transmission of information, was similarly framed as a “telepathic” medium. In 1859, the English physician Richard Fowler asked, “What is the bridge which affords communication from mind to mind for thousands of miles but the Electro-Magnetic Telegraph [...]” (3). Later in the century, in a November 1899 article published in the aforementioned *Popular Science Monthly*, Harvard physicist John Trowbridge claimed, “Wireless telegraphy is the nearest approach to telepathy that has been vouchsafed to our intelligence” (72). Even the roots of these two words reveal their deep entwinement: from the Greek *tele-* (“at a distance”) and *-graphein* (“to write”) or *-patheia* (“feeling, perception”). Framing wireless communication as “bodiless” telepathy highlights an enduring desire for purer expression, deeper spiritual unions with others, and perhaps

even immortality, since it seems to suggest that some essence of the self can defy spatial, temporal, and corporeal constraints.

A recurring yearning for spiritual communication also highlights how the discourse surrounding new media can reveal a culture's deep-seated conceptions of the human body. My dissertation, which focuses on the earliest responses to the telegraph in the 1840s and 1850s, examines the endless feedback loop among communication technologies, imaginative fiction, and social constructions of space and personhood in antebellum America. Each chapter centers on the work of one author—*The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Clotel* (1853) by William Wells Brown, *Ruth Hall* (1854) by Fanny Fern, and *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854) by John Rollin Ridge—to explore the evolving relationships among narratives, mediums of communication, and notions of embodiment. My project's central claim is that antebellum writers and readers alighted on the metaphorical possibilities of the telegraph as a means of interrogating some of the more restrictive gender or racial identities promoted in nineteenth-century fields of scientific inquiry, including phrenology, mesmerism, and electromagnetism. Sounding these texts for telegraphic and bodily codings, spatial and temporal disjunctions, and an undergirding imperialism reveals how communication technologies do exert a political force in their ability to limit information access and uphold or challenge social norms. As I argue, these mid-century novels are “telegraphic” not because they dwell at length on depictions of the machine, but rather because they use the metaphorical resonance of the device to explore developing notions of identity, authority, and authorship.

This project focuses on the early 1850s, a historical moment often overlooked by historians of the telegraph, to explore how the discourses arising from the advent of America's first telegraph line in 1844 became enmeshed with developing notions of disembodiment. This decade, marked by the Compromise of 1850, the Indian Appropriations Act of 1851, the National Women's Rights Conventions from 1850 to

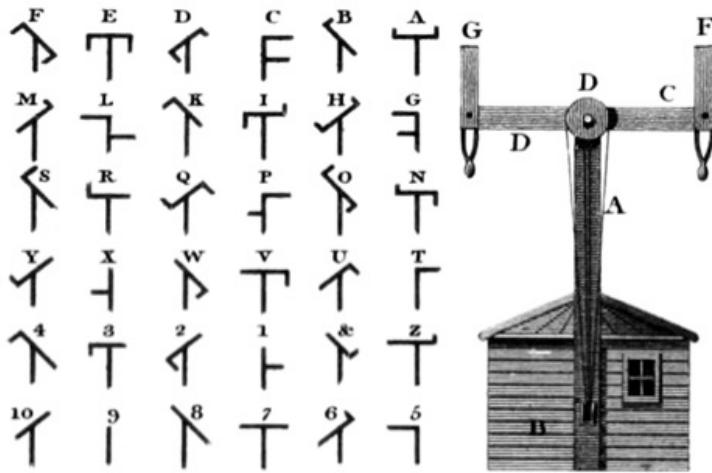
1859, and the Dred Scott decision in 1857, seems an appropriately narrow historical focus to analyze how this new technology shaped—and was shaped by—prevailing notions of embodied identity as Americans in multiplying forums debated which bodies counted as citizens.

While scholars like James Carey, Tom Standage, and Richard Menke all trace a similar trajectory in their overviews of the exuberant sense of techno-utopian promise during the 1840s and 1850s (*Communication* 159, Standage 161, Menke 92-3), there is also evidence that the telegraph's first users offered more critical responses to the new medium as well, particularly as they explored how telegraphy was altering notions of embodied identity. Since the telegraph marked a shift away from the exchange of hand-written letters or face-to-face conversation and towards more disembodied forms of communication in which messages were converted into electric pulses, it makes sense that mid-century narratives oftentimes coalesced around the meanings of identity categories which seemed dependent on visual difference, including racial or gender identities. An examination of canonical and popular American literature of the 1840s and 1850s reveals that imaginative writers, readers, and users invested the technological artifact of the telegraph with the capacity to reinforce or deconstruct pre-existing hierarchies of power which were dependent on particular notions of embodied identity. The four principal authors of my dissertation—Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Wells Brown, Fanny Fern, and John Rollin Ridge—all gesture towards a moment when bodily difference will become increasingly insignificant. For Brown and Ridge, this is a liberatory notion, whereas Fern and Hawthorne emphasize the attendant risks of destabilizing bodily identity. Since many scholars have considered how new technologies have been used to dominate or subjugate others, my dissertation delineates some of the more egalitarian notions and liberating subjectivities engendered by this new communication network.

A reading which attends to the discursive effects of telegraphy in narrative opens new possibilities for seeing how literature is engaged with other media, and how narratives refract meanings of bodily identity through technological information systems. In this way, my work is indebted to the concepts developed by Friedrich Kittler in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), which argues that the new machines of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century began to assume the functions associated with the central nervous system rather than the muscles of man (as did steam engines and railroads), thus forging a new division between “matter and information,” between the material and the symbolic (16). Like Kittler’s volume, my dissertation focuses on how a communication technology created new systems for circulating discourse, and novel ways of understanding the connection among bodies, minds, and machines. My work extends Kittler’s analysis from the gramophone to the telegraph, suggesting that a cultural remapping of technology onto the nerves was beginning to take shape as early as the 1850s. While exploring the literature of this decade, I also argue that the coding of bodies in narrative encourages readers to extend such semiotics to the bodies around them.

Of course, the development of coding to facilitate telegraphic communication at a distance was not unique to mid-century America. Samuel Finley Breese Morse, most often credited with the invention of the telegraph, first became interested in the possibilities of more rapid cross-country communication during a trip to France, where he learned of the famous semaphore telegraph designed and built by the Chappe brothers in the eighteenth century (Coe 26-7). By 1794, Claude Chappe and his brothers had established a visual telegraph between Paris and Lille in order to relay military dispatches; in their system, stations were positioned about ten to twenty miles apart, and the angles of the large rods mounted on the top of a pole enabled one station to communicate with another (Hochfelder 181). The positions of the arms corresponded to

numbers, which then indicated words in a codebook (Figure 1). Chappe revised his codebook over the years, and by 1830 he had included over 45,050 words and phrases,



**Figure 1.** Rees, Abraham. “Telegraph, Figure 4.” *The cyclopaedia; or, Universal dictionary of arts, sciences, and literature*. Plates (1820): 326.

an astonishing number considering the simplicity of the arm’s design (Headrick 195-6). Other systems relying on coded “instantaneous” communication at a distance—including semaphoric fires and flags, smoke signals, and sun-flash signaling—were in existence long before the Chappe system and concurrently with Morse’s electromagnetic telegraph, but the Chappe system sparked Morse’s interest in establishing a similar communication network in America.

As the story goes, the Chappe model continued to preoccupy Morse’s thoughts and discussions upon his return to New York aboard the *Sully* in 1832. Morse, a respected portrait painter at the time, had no formal education in the sciences aside from the lectures on electricity he had attended as a Yale undergraduate; he discussed his interest in telegraphy with a handful of fellow passengers, however, and one, Dr. Charles Jackson, explained that an electric current could travel across a great distance of wire and

thus provide the means of communication from afar (Silverman 151-6). At the time, Morse and his fellow passengers were under the impression that they had stumbled upon an entirely new concept, even though many others were in the process of developing electric telegraphs. The increased global interest in the possibility of an electromagnetic telegraph was fueled by two recent innovations: Italian physicist Alessandro Volta's invention of the "Voltaic Pile" in 1800, later renamed a "battery," which offered a continuous and controllable electric current; and Danish physicist Hans Christian Oersted's demonstration of a direct relationship between magnetism and electricity by using an electric current in 1820 to deflect a magnetic needle (Beauchamp 22, 51). In Germany, Wilhelm Weber and Karl Friedrich Gauss collaborated on the first electromagnetic telegraph in 1833, constructing a line between their observatory and physics lab in Göttingen (Otis 125). In England, William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone began experimenting with electromagnetism and batteries as they developed an electrical telegraph system, which they first patented in 1837, a decade before Morse received a patent for his device. The patented Cooke and Wheatstone device had five needles positioned on a grid of letters, and the needles would indicate each letter by pointing clockwise or counterclockwise depending on the direction of the current in the wires (Figure 2). After England's first commercial telegraph line was established between London and Birmingham in 1837, the country's network rapidly grew alongside the railroad thanks to private investors, as it did in the United States. Unlike the telegraph network in America, though, the British system was quickly nationalized.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Anton Huurdeman notes, the Telegraph Act of 1869 in Britain attempted to combine the British telegraph service with the national postal organization; and as of January 1870, the Postmaster General controlled the national telegraph network (106). In contrast, the American government decided not to nationalize the telegraph industry under the National Telegraph Act of 1866 or during the resurgence of the postal telegraph movement in the 1880s (Hochfelder 71). As I discuss in more detail later, this refusal to nationalize the telegraph left the door open for Western Union's monopoly of the telegraph industry from the late 1860s to the 1930s.

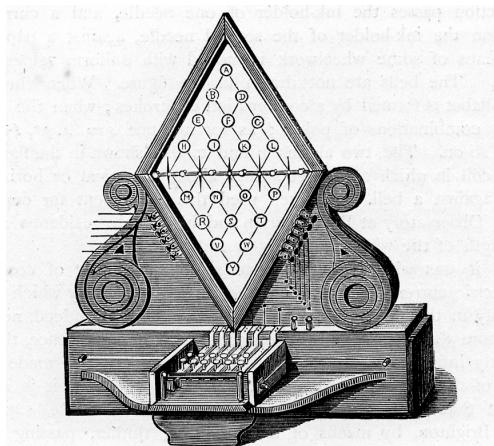


Fig. 750.—Cooke and Wheatstone's Five-Needle Telegraph.

**Figure 2.** Urbanitzky, A. R. *Electricity in the Service of Man: A Popular and Practical Treatise on the Applications of Electricity in Modern Life*. New York: Cassell and Company, 1886: 760.

Back in America, Morse obtained a position as a professor of art at the New University of the City of New York—later known as New York University—to support himself as he continued to work on his plans for an electric telegraph. There he met Leonard Gale, a professor of chemistry, and Alfred Vail, a recent graduate interested in mechanics, both of whom were instrumental in helping him develop and market his device (Hunt 83). By 1836, Morse had completed his first telegraph apparatus. Two years later, Morse and Vail had developed the semiotic system known as Morse code, which relied on a series of dots (short marks) and dashes (long marks) corresponding to a number or letter in the alphabet (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> The “American Morse code” gained

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<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that Vail played a much larger role in developing the code than Morse acknowledged (Pope 924-45, Coe 67). According to Jonathan Sterne, Vail revised Morse’s code so that the series of dots and dashes would correspond to an individual letter rather than a word (145). Regardless of which one was most instrumental in creating the final version, neither was first on the scene in developing a code for telegraphic transmission. Bishop John Wilkins outlined binary and ternary coding in *Mercury; Or, the Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641), using dots, lines, and triangles to represent the letters of the alphabet (Kahn 155). As Lewis Coe notes, Pawel Lwowitsch Schilling developed a code for use with the needle telegraph and offered public demonstrations at St. Petersburg in 1832, and Carl August von Steinheil had created a dot-dash alphabet in 1836 for his own telegraph, described in London’s *The Annals of*

popularity throughout the 1840s, and by 1844 was used on all telegraph lines in North America (Coe 67). Unlike the first Cooke and Wheatstone model, Morse's telegraph was also a recording medium, capable of both transmitting dots and dashes as well as

POST-OFFICE TELEGRAPHHS.			
<i>The Morse Alphabet.</i>			
A - - -	H - - - -	O - - - -	U - - -
B - - - -	I - - -	P - - - -	V - - -
C - - - - -	J - - - - -	Q - - - -	W - - -
D - - - - - -	K - - - - -	R - - -	X - - -
E - - - - - - -	L - - - - -	S - - -	Y - - -
F - - - - - - - -	M - - - -	T - - -	Z - - -
G - - - - - - - - -	N - - - -		
NOTE.—On the Needle instrument, the dot of the above alphabet is represented by a beat to the left and a dash by a beat to the right.			
<hr/>			
<i>Numerals.</i>			
1 - - - - -	4 - - - -	7 - - - -	0 - - - -
2 - - - - -	5 - - - -	8 - - - -	
3 - - - - -	6 - - - -	9 - - - -	
Bar of Division, for fractions (as in $\frac{1}{2}$ ), — - - - - - -			
Do. for shillings (as in $\frac{2}{3}$ ), - - - - - - -			
<hr/>			
<i>Punctuation, &amp;c.</i>			
Comma (,) - - - - -	*(Parenthesis) - - - - -		
Full stop (.) - - - - -	*“Inverted commas” } - - - - -		
Break signal (between) the address “To” - - - - -	Understand - - - - -		
and the text } - - - - -	Rub out - - - - -		
Interrogation (?) - - - - -	Go on - - - - -		
Hyphen (-) - - - - -	Wait - - - - -		
Apostrophe (' ) - - - - -	Right - - - - -		
Fresh line - - - - - - -	Cleared out - - - - -		
*Underlined - - - - - - -			
* NOTE.—The signals marked * are sent before and after words so treated, and are counted as two additional words.			

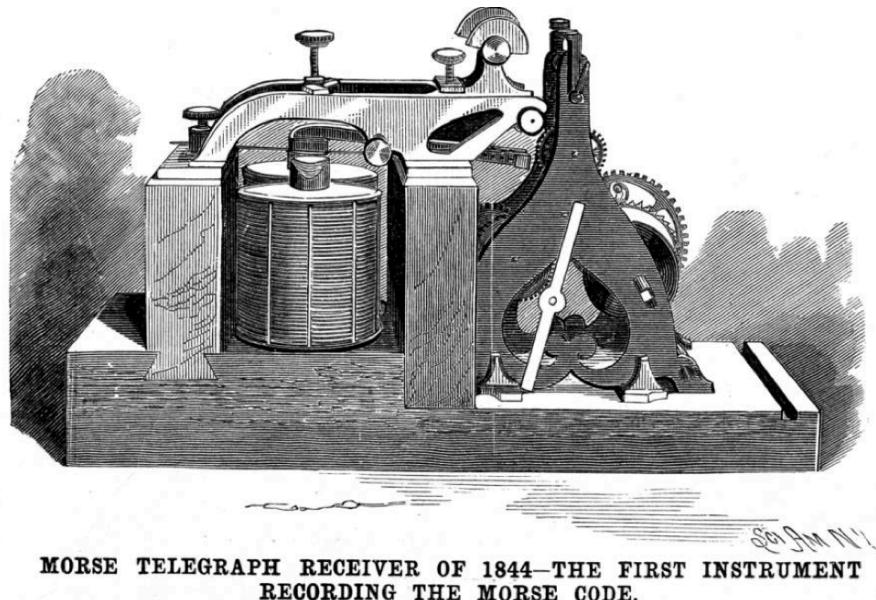
**Figure 3.** Lynd, William. "Post-Office Telegraphs. The Morse Alphabet." *The Practical Telegraphist, and Guide to the Telegraphy Service*. London: Wyman and Sons, 1884: 12.

imprinting this information on a strip of paper. Authors naturally turned to the device, one of the first “writing machines,” as a means of interrogating the process and meaning of their own “communication at a distance” by means of print. Unlike periodicals and

*Electricity* in 1839 (67). Nonetheless, given the popularity of Morse's device, his was the code that took root in America and abroad, although it was later revised for international use.

novels, however, the telegraph seemed to de-materialize words by rendering them electric, severing the longstanding link between communication and material transportation. For these reasons, telegraphy renewed authors' interest in the process of communicative relay, disembodied presence, and encipherment.

Although rival instruments and codes were in use throughout the 1850s, Morse's design remained the most popular for its ease of use, simplicity, and lower cost (Thompson 240).<sup>3</sup> The receiving instrument, known as a "Morse sounder" (Figure 4), had an electromagnet that would vibrate a pole piece mounted on a sounding lever when energized (Coe 71). This motion of the electromagnet produced a fast or slow click



**MORSE TELEGRAPH RECEIVER OF 1844—THE FIRST INSTRUMENT RECORDING THE MORSE CODE.**

**Figure 4.** "The Telegraph: Morse Telegraph Receiver of 1844." *Scientific American* (25 July 1896): 58.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Thompson, more than 18,000 miles of telegraph wire were connected to Morse machines by 1852, whereas competing devices invented by House and Bain connected only 2,400 and 2,012 miles, respectively (240). Such numbers demonstrate the predominance of Morse's device even amidst his patent disputes and the welter of competing telegraph companies in the early 1850s.

which corresponded to the dots and dashes that operators originally translated from the imprints on the moving paper tape but eventually began deciphering by sound alone. While it was initially challenging to learn the code—and then translate instantaneously by ear alone—the instrument and accompanying apparatus were minimal. As Lewis Coe explains, “For the basic circuit, the only additional equipment needed was a sending key for opening and closing the circuit” (71). Many way stations also had a mainline relay, which the operator could shut off until the relay’s subdued clicking indicated that the station was being called (Coe 72). This trajectory of the telegraph, from a writing machine to a speaking one, now encourages scholars to consider how texts, too, began engaging with the replication of sound in the telegraphic era.

Even in the late 1830s and 1840s, newspapers in America were abuzz with talk of the telegraph. Morse and Vail had given their first public demonstration of the device in 1838, and throughout the end of the decade they traveled to Washington and Europe in hopes of securing funding and patents. In 1842, Vail and Morse finally received a \$30,000 appropriation from the U.S. Congress to establish an experimental line connecting Washington and Baltimore (Silverman 169). The next year, on May 24, 1844, Morse sent the famous first message by telegraph in America—“What hath God wrought!”—from Washington to Vail in Baltimore. While Morse had hoped that the government would assume control of the telegraph lines in the same way it had assumed control of the postal system, Congress preferred to let the telegraph fall into the hands of private telegraph organizations (Thompson 30). Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, numerous commercial ventures began hastily extending the reach of the wires: the Magnetic Telegraph Company completed the first line between Washington and New York in 1846; the New York and Boston Magnetic Telegraph Association opened a line to Boston shortly thereafter; and Henry O'Reilly's Atlantic, Lake and Mississippi Telegraph spread westward to Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, and St. Louis in 1847, and then southward to New Orleans by 1848. As Robert Luther Thompson writes, by the

end of the 1840s “the telegraphic outlines of empire had taken shape” (92). Even if the American telegraph was not under government control, its routing system was similar to that of the post office and the country’s many railroads, with telegrams sent through larger relay offices which served as the central location for several branch lines expanding into other regions. Small offices could communicate directly with each other, but more often a message was sent to the relay office, which then passed along the telegram to the next station (Coe 73). This process of relay between operators and offices, an advantage for stock market traders, became a source of anxiety for many message senders and receivers, who feared that their private missives were becoming increasingly public. In this way, the telegraph began participating as well in the restructuring of public and private spheres in the mid-century.

By January 1850, there were 12,000 miles of telegraph lines in operation in the United States, and the number had doubled only two years later, with over fifty telegraph companies in America alone (Thompson 241). In an effort to construct new lines as rapidly as possible, some companies even dispensed with poles entirely and simply strung their wires from brackets nailed to trees (Hunt 84). Throughout the 1850s, the spread of the telegraph was tied even more directly to the growth of the railroad, as the technology’s utility in communicating delays, managing the rails, and ensuring passenger safety was increasingly recognized. Telegraph companies also benefited from this alliance, using the railroads as a means of defeating other rival telegraph enterprises (Thompson 212). Just as the railroads in the late nineteenth century assumed monopolistic practices as they expanded westward, telegraph companies in the 1850s also began to consolidate as they spread their tendrils beyond the Mississippi. Their monopolistic practices were most apparent in the Western Union Telegraph Company, which was formed in 1856 through the merger of several competing telegraph companies in the western-most sections of the American telegraph system. During the next decade, Western Union’s aggressive policy of purchasing patents, consolidating with rival

companies, and signing exclusive contracts with the railroads allowed the company to eliminate almost all competition (Czitrom 23). As James Carey argues, one of the telegraph's most enduring impacts was the industrial monopoly of Western Union, "the first communications empire and the prototype of the many industrial empires that were to follow" (201). Although my dissertation focuses largely on the era that precedes Western Union's predominance, it is clear that telegraph users in the 1850s were already aware of the frightening and exhilarating potentials of a nation-wide network. Indeed, as early as 1852, authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne were wary of the telegraph's potential to destroy individuality in its broad reproduction of endless sameness.

Since the telegraph network webbed across the nation during an era of ever-proliferating print cultures, I supplement the fictional narratives discussed in my dissertation with newspaper and magazine articles as well as medical and scientific texts in order to contextualize responses to the telegraph within the broader culture of mass media. After all, the increase in telegraphic networks intersected with the growing market for printed materials in the 1850s, a market created in part by the rotary printing press and the industrialization of the printing process, the birth of the Associated Press, the development of transportation and distribution networks, the emergence of a literate middle class, and the expansion of cities as sites of production. For this reason, the fictional narratives discussed in each chapter of my project are placed into dialogue with newspaper and magazine articles as well as medical and scientific texts.

As early as the 1840s, these print sources were already demonstrating a deep and abiding interest in telegraphy. In particular, the nation's periodicals reveal an increasing interest in cryptography at the very moment when Morse was beginning to disseminate his own enciphered language. Perhaps the most famous examples of cryptography can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's work, especially his series of essays on "secret writing" published in *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* (1837-48) and *Graham's Magazine* (1841-58) in the same years when Morse began publicly exhibiting his device and developing

the nation's first commercial line.<sup>4</sup> As scholars like Shawn James Rosenheim, David Kahn, and Matthew Tiews have persuasively argued, Poe's cryptographic puzzles published throughout the early 1840s were an outgrowth, in part, of popular interest in the emerging field of telegraphic coding (Rosenheim 92-3, Kahn 191-2, Tiews 151-2).<sup>5</sup> Poe, as co-editor of the Philadelphia-based *Alexander's*, issued a challenge to readers in "Enigmatical and Conundrum-ical" (18 December 1839), inviting them to submit coded messages with non-alphabetic symbols: "Let any one address us a letter in this way, and we pledge ourselves to read it forthwith—however unusual or arbitrary may be the characters employed" (4). Poe boasted that he could solve any simple substitution cipher (in which one sign corresponds to one alphabetic letter), as long as it also had spaces separating words (4). As Poe explains in a later *Alexander's* article, "Puzzle's Again" (25 March 1840), he set this limitation not because other types of codes were beyond his

<sup>4</sup> These articles include the following: "Enigmatical and Conundrum-ical," *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* 3.50 (18 December 1839): 4; "Enigmatical," *Alexander's* 4.3 (15 January 1840): 2; "Our Puzzles Once More," *Alexander's* (26 February 1840): 2; "A Few Words on Secret Writing," *Graham's Magazine* (July 1841): 33-8; "Secret Writing (Addendum I)," *Graham's* (August 1841): 96; and "Secret Writing (Addendum II)," *Graham's* (October 1841): 192; "Secret Writing (Addendum III)," *Graham's* (December 1841): 306-8. Poe's frequent return to the subject in the pages of these two magazines is further evidence of the popularity of such puzzles at the time.

<sup>5</sup> Kahn considers the increasing importance of cryptology in the nineteenth century, writing, "The telegraph launched this evolution of cryptology. [...] The telegraph thus stimulated the invention of many new ciphers and, by reaction, many new methods of cryptanalysis, and compelled their arrangement in a scale of complexity" (192). This isn't to suggest that the cryptographic impulse should be ascribed only to the telegraph, of course. After all, Leon Battista Alberti invented the polyalphabetic cipher and wrote an exposition of cryptanalysis in his 1467 text *De Cifris*, written at the request of the Pope's secretary, Leonardo Dato (Kahn 125-128). Rosenheim, however, connects Poe's work to the telegraph even more directly: "Because the telegraph depends on Morse's code for its utility, there exists a natural affinity between telegraphy and cryptography [...]; it is not surprising that much of Poe's cryptographic writing was driven by the intellectual and cultural consequences of this invention, which required the immediate development of commercial telegraphic codes and of ciphers to protect the diplomatic and military traffic of nations. As the telegraph worked its way into the texture of daily life, it became far easier for Poe to conceive of a world structured around the concept of information, where knowledge itself was a form of decoding" (88-9). Both Kahn and Rosenheim emphasize the growth of encrypted military information, but the mere coding of information for telegraphic relay surely contributed to the increased interest of authors in cryptography.

grasp, but as a way of keeping the number of submissions manageable: “Were we to engage in the solution of *every kind of puzzle* sent us, we should have our hands full” (2). Poe *did* have his hands full as puzzles began pouring in, first from Philadelphia and then from across the nation. The response was so strong that Poe, in “Our Late Puzzles” (12 February 1840), asked his readers incredulously, “Do people really think that we have nothing in the world to do but read hieroglyphics?” (2). According to the Boston minister Warren Cudworth, writing for the *Lowell Weekly Journal*, Poe was apparently able to solve all but one of the puzzles, which was later “*demonstrated to be an imposition*” (19 April 1850). The ciphers were comprised of combinations of asterisks, parentheses, crosses, and other typographical marks, and were often simply excerpts from well-known texts.

Poe published a handful of the nearly one hundred ciphers he received along with their solutions from January to May 1840, and he also published the solutions to sixteen puzzles without reproducing the cipher itself in *Alexander’s* (Kahn 784). Beyond this small selection of solutions, Poe refused to share his methods for decipherment, preferring to entice readers with the mystery of the process. He also encouraged them to join him in the ranks of decipherers in *Graham’s* “Secret Writing” (August 1841), publishing a cryptogram sent to him by F. W. Thomas and promising “a year’s subscription to the Magazine, and also a year’s subscription to the Saturday Evening Post, to any person, or rather to the first person who shall read us this riddle” (96). Poe further popularized the deciphering impulse in periodicals by publishing two cryptograms from a reader named W.B. Tyler. Poe never solved these cryptograms for his readers, but instead invited them to attempt to do so, arousing suspicions that perhaps “W.B. Tyler” was in fact Poe himself.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the true identity of W.B. Tyler, the publication

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Renza and Shawn Rosenheim, relying primarily on the similarity between Tyler’s syntax and Poe’s own, have both proposed this interpretation of the mysterious puzzle meister. Terrence Whalen further endorses this argument, decoding the Tyler cryptogram and analyzing its social function as an unsolved secret text. John Hodgson, in contrast, argues that the

of these challenging puzzles began to revitalize mid-century interest in substitution ciphers, including the Morse code.

As David Kahn notes, Poe's pieces on cryptography were some of the most popular of any of his journalistic writings (789). Poe capitalized on this success with his prize-winning story, "The Gold-Bug," which was originally sold to *Graham's Magazine* but then pulled for submission to a writing contest sponsored by *Dollar Magazine*. A year later, after Poe won the magazine's \$100 grand prize in 1843, he told James Russell Lowell that it was his "most successful tale" with more than 300,000 copies in circulation (Whalen 37). "The Gold-Bug" tells the story of William Legrand (an early prototype of Poe's famous detective figure Dupin), who discovers a gold beetle beside an invisible-code-laden parchment paper which eventually leads him to the pirate Captain William Kidd's buried treasure. The story begins with the unnamed narrator's chance visit with Legrand following the discovery of the bug; soon afterwards, Legrand's servant Jupiter fears that Legrand has gone insane, and asks the narrator to visit again. Like Jupiter, the narrator presumes that Legrand has gone mad, and both are astonished when Legrand unearths a massive chest overflowing with ancient coins, jewels, and gold ornaments estimated at over a million and a half dollars. For the remainder of the story, the narrator retraces Legrand's steps, reinterpreting his earliest interactions at the story's opening as well as Legrand's intricate methods for untangling the enciphered clues on the parchment paper.

Unlike Poe's earlier reluctance to explain his methods in *Alexander's* and *Graham's*, he finally sells the goods in "The Gold-Bug," meticulously explaining, point by point, how to solve a simple substitution cipher. Unsurprisingly, the text is often

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anonymous W.B. Tyler most certainly was not Poe; Tyler's cipher is an encrypted excerpt from Joseph Addison's *Cato*, which Hodgson believes Poe would not have deigned to copy. This renewed interest in the "secret" identity of W.B. Tyler is not so dissimilar from readers' own interest in the original cryptograms in the 1840s.

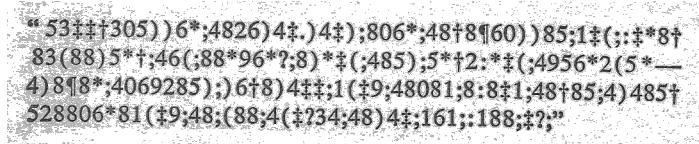
discussed for its cryptographic instruction and analysis; however, it is much less frequently discussed for the ways in which the black male subjectivity of Jupiter becomes conscripted into code in the service of Legrand's economic conquest.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as early as the 1840s, racially marked bodies became positioned as objectified code that the reader, given appropriate cryptographic training and innate hermeneutical acumen, could presumably decipher. This tendency became even more marked in the 1850s as the nation's telegraph network expanded and embodied identities become even more fervently debated.

"The Gold-Bug" follows a structure similar to many of Poe's later detective fictions, with mysterious behaviors and puzzling clues eventually explained through the amazing feats of a detective figure's "ratiocination." The reader is offered "clues"—the narrator was seated by a fire, for example, and Legrand was very much astonished when his drawing of a bug looked like a skull—presumably so the reader might realize that the heat of the fire had the effect of altering the parchment paper to reveal a skull drawn in invisible ink. After all, the Newfoundland dog, which enters the room and jumps on the narrator at the very moment he is handed the drawing of the beetle, seems like an odd and, in retrospect, obvious distraction from the parchment's heat-induced revelations. Nonetheless, Poe *doesn't* reveal quite enough for a reader to make sense of the events until the narrator has trodden over the same path again, revealing all. Poe relies on this same method of disclosure, on a microscopic scale, as he decodes Captain Kidd's cipher

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<sup>7</sup> Some articles which address the role of cryptography in the story include Michael Williams's "'The Language of the Cipher': Interpretation in 'The Gold-Bug,'" Terence Whalen's "The Code for Gold: Edgar Allan Poe and Cryptography," and Shawn Rosenheim's "'The King of Secret Readers': Edgar Poe, Cryptography, and the Origins of the Detective Story." Surprisingly, few scholars consider how the story's African Americans—both Jupiter and the old woman at the plantation Legrand visits—are themselves "codes" that Legrand must crack. In the case of the black woman, Legrand realizes that he must "pay her well" to overcome her initial refusal to accompany him. In the case of Jupiter, as I discuss later, Legrand must anticipate his ignorance. In short, Legrand apparently conceives of these characters as not so dissimilar from the initially troublesome code which soon cedes to his linguistic command.

for readers. After Legrand explains to the narrator how the heat from the fire revealed long-hidden characters in the parchment paper, Poe reproduces the cryptograph in its entirety (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Gold-Bug,” *Dollar Newspaper* (28 June 1843): 1.

Legrand subsequently trains the reader to decode the baffling signs, explaining that he operated under the first assumption that this was a “simple species” of code since it was created by a sailor. His second assumption, that the cipher was in English, was based on the fortuitous inclusion of a drawing of a young goat beside the skull, a pun on the name “Kidd,” which would work in no other language. This assumption prompted him to make another, that the most frequently used letter in the English alphabet would correspond to the most frequently appearing sign in the code. (Significantly, Morse and Vail applied a similar strategy when creating the code for the telegraph, giving the most frequently used letters the dots that could be most quickly conveyed over the wires.) In this way, Poe offers a delayed explanation for his resolution of the many simple substitution codes published in *Alexander's* a few years earlier. Legrand continues to explain his method for cracking the code, and the narrator diligently records this for readers, essentially instructing them to become themselves capable of deciphering similar codes. The inclusion of Kidd’s cipher and the extensive explanation of Legrand’s cryptography suggest that Poe’s narrative, like Legrand, can train readers both to encipher and to decipher the mysterious texts around them.

In addition, the insatiable desire to solve the code becomes the driving force behind the narrative. Just as Legrand is motivated by the desire to unveil the clandestine meaning of the parchment paper, the narrator is motivated first by the desire to understand Legrand's mysterious behavior and then by the desire to comprehend his enigmatic methods. As the story continues, the narrator fills in the gaps of Legrand's explanations or prompts him eagerly to resolve the puzzle, prodding with, "When you left the 'Bishop's Hotel,' what then?" (258) or "And why did you insist upon letting fall the bug, instead of bullet, from the skull?" (259). In positioning the narrator as the spectator of Legrand, storytelling itself becomes a form of code, a set of impenetrable events that mystifies until provided with the appropriate "key" to unlock all riddles. In this way, Poe implies that the acts of reading and writing, like all social interaction, are a form of cryptography, even when the story's language itself—or a person's behavior—might at first glance seem entirely without mystery.

This subtle injunction to extend hermeneutical scrutiny to events beyond the realm of fiction becomes particularly problematic, however, as Legrand drafts black bodies into this code, implying that black subjectivity is merely one component of a puzzling riddle that must be anticipated and conquered in order to achieve a due reward. Even more troublesome, the central component of Jupiter's subjectivity, which Legrand must predict in order to touch his treasure, is the servant's bungling ignorance. Jupiter's primary role in the narrative—aside from his vital responsibility to secure a spectator and reporter, the narrator—is performing the more dangerous physical feats during Legrand's search. After realizing that a skull nailed on a particular tree limb would indicate the position beneath which the treasure was buried, Legrand sends Jupiter scrambling up said tree to drop a string as a plumb line through the left eye of the skull. After Legrand tells Jupiter to drop the string, the three men diligently set themselves to digging, with nothing to show for it after two hours but frustration and an empty pit. However, Legrand eventually realizes that Jupiter has confused his right with his left, and asks him to

“answer me this instant, without prevarication!—which—which is your left eye?” (238). Jupiter says, “Aint dis here my lef’ eye for sartain?” while “placing his hand upon his *right* organ of vision” (238). In pointing to Jupiter’s ignorance and bodily confusion, the story not only perpetuates racist stereotypes but also implies that the right hand and left eye of Jupiter’s black body are akin to the perplexing textual signs that Legrand will later explain in great detail to the reader.

In the same way that Legrand must substitute the letters in the code to understand the placement of the treasure, he also must substitute Jupiter’s various body parts to arrive at the buried fortune. Just as he must extend his hermeneutics to transcribed symbols, he must also extend them to his assumptions about the behavior and intelligence of Jupiter. As if this weren’t obvious enough as the narrator initially relates Legrand’s fury at Jupiter’s error, the narrator later points out to Legrand, “I suppose [...] you missed the spot in the first attempt at digging, through Jupiter’s stupidity in letting the bug fall through the right instead of through the left eye of the skull” (258). Even the reader’s own initial wariness of Legrand—who is presumed to be as confused the narrator and Jupiter believe him to be—further argues that the reader is in need of additional instruction in order to properly “decode” the behaviors and thoughts of others.

Ironically, however, although Poe implies that the reader *should* be able to resolve the story’s puzzles—the puzzle of Legrand’s behavior, the puzzle of the cryptograph, and the puzzle of the skeletons buried alongside the treasure—there really *isn’t* enough information for the reader to solve these mysteries without Legrand’s helping hand. The story seems to hover between the enticing premise that you, the reader, *can* achieve the code-cracking ingenuity of a Legrand, and the impossibility of cracking any of the story’s codes without his aid. Surely this is the mark of any good detective fiction, which gives readers the impression that hyperawareness and intuitive perception might enable them to solve the mystery before the detective—but ultimately withholds just enough information that readers *can’t* find resolution until new information arises later to clarify.

Yet “The Gold-Bug,” like much of Poe’s detective fiction, does seem to argue that the most perceptive and astute readers can be trained to interpret the encoded bodies of others. For John Kasson, Poe’s impulse to categorize and encode bodies can be ascribed to evolving modes of urban spectatorship at the mid-century. In his analysis of Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” (1840), Kasson claims that the narrator’s instant ability to profile the social types of passersby based solely on their physical appearance resonates with the etiquette manuals which appeared later in the century, training city inhabitants to become careful readers of the physiognomies that surrounded them on a bustling street. Kasson writes, “[T]he modern city afforded new possibilities both for cloaking one’s own identity and scrutinizing [...] strangers met by chance. The dual arts of detection and concealment came to be regarded as necessary skills for urban living” (96). I would add that this dual interest in coding the self and decoding others, an outgrowth of Poe’s initial interest in the cryptographic puzzles of *Alexander’s* and *Graham’s*, can also be attributed to the era’s developing notions about telegraphic coding. Concomitant with the growth of telegraphic coding was the development of other types of corporeal coding, including phrenology in the 1840s and 1850s, the categorization of animal types in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and the eventual growth of eugenics and composite portraiture devised by Francis Galton later in the nineteenth century.

This coding of bodies, perhaps even more markedly than other forms of semiotics, is a way of maintaining or establishing power through the control of information. As Katherine Ellison notes, “The purpose of cryptography is to help those already in power remain in power or those without power attain it. For the unintended reader, messages should seem unsuspicious and impossible to break. For intended readers, messages should reveal their true meanings” (284). Categorizing and coding bodies thus became one more way of reinforcing structures of dominance, implying that all humans are unwittingly revealing “hidden truths” about their inherited character through physical appearance alone.

This feedback loop among telegraphic coding, bodily categories, and conceptions of identity evidences telegraphy's much deeper impact on literature than the merely stylistic. In May 1848, Conrad Swackhamer argued in *The United States Democratic Review* that the telegraph's effects upon literature could already be felt in writers' increasingly sparse and streamlined prose: "The Telegraphic style, as we shall denominate it, for the benefit of all future writers upon rhetoric is also terse, condensed, expressive, sparing of expletives and utterly ignorant of synonyms" (412). While many scholars have focused upon the enduring impact of the telegraph on journalism and style—even going so far as to attribute the taut and minimalist sentences of Hemingway to the device—the greater literary significance of the telegraph seems to be the increasing encipherment of bodies in texts, the charged metaphors of electric unification, and the argument for equality through notions of disembodiment. In the case of "The Gold-Bug," the text encourages readers to consider all bodies—and especially the body of Jupiter—as telegrams, coded missives whose taps must be deciphered by knowledgeable "operators."

Just as today's "brain-to-brain" communication prompts the general public to conceptualize a time when identity can be nothing but pure thought, telegraphy marked a realization that bodies and information can be separated. For the first time, information could be sent reliably across great distances without the embodied delivery of a material, imprinted message. For many, the link between transportation and communication seemed abbreviated in a way that it never had been before. Part of this shift—evident as early as Poe and continuing more markedly in the 1850s in such works as William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*—included a remarkably modern conception of identity and subjectivity as a form of information processing rather than embodiment. For this reason, all four chapters in my project attempt to elucidate the evolving relationship between traditional notions of identity, embodiment, and narrative authority.

My first chapter, “Mesmerized Bodies and Telegraphic Communication in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*,” explores the intersections between the performance of scientific spectacle and the telegraph. In order to contextualize Hawthorne’s portrayal of mesmerism in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) as well as demonstrate its connection to the telegraph, I turn to descriptions of mesmerist performances in *The Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism, and their Applications to Human Welfare* (1843-1856). Frequently, descriptions of mesmerist exhibits in this monthly magazine stage the entranced body as a replication of the mechanical processes of contemporary communication technology, specifically the electric telegraph. Reading the Veiled Lady’s performance on Hawthorne’s stage (and Coverdale’s own performance on Hawthorne’s page) as engagements with the telegraphic process of communicative relay suggests that the narrative is invested in shaping readers to identify the contours of the body in disembodied sound. Coverdale as narrator works to reassure readers that disembodied sound can be moored to individually identifiable bodies, reasserting the importance of bodily difference in a period when disembodied communication threatened to render such differences immaterial. Just as Poe’s telegraphic cryptograms trained readers to identify bodily contours from code, Hawthorne’s text trains readers to identify bodily contours in sound.

My second chapter, “Information Networks and Embodied Identities in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*,” considers how Brown’s text shifts the discourse surrounding black subjectivity away from material embodiment and towards information processing. In this chapter, I argue that *Clotel* (1853) engages with the concept of telegraphy as Brown constructs black subjectivities centered on the mobility of information. Through the narrative’s rhetoric of electric sympathy, the interspersing of items from newspaper articles, and the destabilization of traditional markers of authority, Brown uses the notion of a technology which presumes to transcend space as he claims space for black subjects—either in the United States or in Haiti. The illustrations in Brown’s text, which

serve as static features in an otherwise changing manuscript, invite an analysis of how the telegraph shaped auditory *and* visual performances of embodied identity. Finally, research into the role of the telegraph in African American periodicals of the 1850s also helps to contextualize how the mobility of information—even more than mobility of bodies—is central to Brown’s text.

My third chapter, “Electric Hair and Camo Crinoline: The Performance of Body Phrenology in Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*,” explores the connections between telegraphic coding, commerce, and phrenology. Although phrenology has received much scholarly attention in the last few decades, the role that telegraphy played in buttressing and challenging this pseudoscience in the early 1840s and 1850s has remained relatively unexamined. While phrenology implies that character traits are made manifest by the body, innate and legible, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* troubles this nature or nurture binary in its discussions of phrenological performance. Ultimately, Fern’s narrative undermines phrenological assumptions by alighting on a metaphysics of feminine communication networks that highlight the disembodied quality of female authorial identity. In this way, both *Ruth Hall* and *Clotel* seem to prefigure “posthuman” subjectivities centered upon information processing rather than material embodiment.

In the final chapter, I argue that one of the most celebrated Native American writers at the mid-century, John Rollin Ridge or Yellow Bird, applied attributes of the telegraph to native peoples in order to suggest that indigenous communication networks rivaled the semiotic and technological systems of Euroamericans. Although Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854) does not explicitly mention telegraphy, I argue that it offers a counternarrative to newspapers and periodicals of the period, which often described Native Americans as linguistically recalcitrant and incapable of forming their own systems of legal control and governance. In the same way that *Clotel* and *Ruth Hall* turn to metaphors of electricity in order to establish a network of sympathy, Ridge’s novel similarly suggests that the bond of the bandits is an electric web. Furthermore,

periodical research revels how the telegraph became increasingly framed as a promoter and proof of Manifest Destiny, a harbinger of the subjugation of Native American peoples and the eventual homogeneity of the nation-state. The dismemberment and beheading of Joaquín in the text's conclusion offer an opposing narrative of severance and fracture within the nation at the very moment when others were highlighting the promise of unification in metaphors of a singular electric body.

My conclusion turns to the enduring impact of telegraphic coding on notions of disembodied identity during and immediately after the Civil War. Although the complex role of the telegraph during the Civil War is beyond the scope of my project, an analysis of three *Scientific American* articles on cryptography from the 1860s demonstrates how the discourse surrounding telegraphy, embodiment, and encryption began to shift in the postwar era. Additionally, the conclusion considers how the mid-century desire for disembodiment continues to persist in the digital age.

Examining this relationship among technology, print culture, and embodiment is useful to scholars in a number of ways. First, this project posits a history of continuity with our own digital media, extending the genealogy of the intersection of human bodies and information systems into the first half of the nineteenth century. Second, my chapters provide insight into early-nineteenth-century conceptions of the relationship among semiotic coding, machines, and bodies that reveals the constructed quality of these three categories. Third, "Tapping Wires and Touching Nerves: Telegraphy and Embodiment in Antebellum Narratives" demonstrates the potential for novels to script alternate—and perhaps more emancipatory—subjectivities alongside the development of emerging communication systems. In our own historical moment, so marked by claims that digital media are erasing the body, it seems especially pressing to consider how utopian and dystopian discourses surrounding digital media are not so dissimilar from those first heard in the 1840s and 1850s. Indeed, historicizing this concept of disembodiment seems essential given the telegraph's proximity to our own present-day

digital media, and our own tendency to metaphorize this media in ways that challenge and uphold traditional notions of embodied identities.

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## CHAPTER 1

“ANNIHILATING SPACE AND RUNNING IN ADVANCE OF TIME”:  
 MESMERIZED BODIES AND TELEGRAPHIC COMMUNICATION  
 IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S *BLITHEDALE ROMANCE* (1852)

“It is now almost certain that within a few months the Magnetic Telegraph, which is literally thought, and flies as swift, absolutely annihilating space and running in advance of time, will extend to all the great cities in the Union—so that a net-work of nerves of iron wire, strung lightning, will ramify from the brain, New York, to the distant limbs and members—to the Atlantic seaboard towns, to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Nashville, St. Louis and New Orleans—and that every commercial, political or social event transpiring at either of these points will be at the very instant it happens, in all!” (104)

—“Magnetic Telegraph” (26 July 1845), *Harbinger*<sup>8</sup>

In 1845, one year after Samuel Morse’s single-wire electric telegraph established a direct connection between Washington and Baltimore, the Brook Farm *Harbinger* published the exhilarating description that serves as this chapter’s epigraph and title. Many Americans in the 1840s and early 1850s were similarly heady with the promise that the electric telegraph augured not only the annihilation of space through instantaneous communication but also a coherent body politic unified through the synaptic nerves of the telegraph wire. After all, the *Harbinger*’s celebration of the telegraph demonstrates how the human body—and the national body politic—were increasingly figured as the interface between the era’s “new machines” and the period’s rapidly expanding commercial, political, and social networks. It is perhaps unsurprising that the organ of a

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Luther Mott offers an overview of the history of the *Harbinger*, noting that the monthly *Brook Farm Phalanx* was established by Albert Brisbane in New York in October 1843. According to Mott, the magazine was quickly turned into a weekly and in the beginning of 1845 was moved to Brook Farm. The *Phalanx* was discontinued in May 1845 and replaced by the *Harbinger*, which was under the editorial direction of George Ripley, the chief director in Brook Farm (I: 763-4). The article also appears in *Littell’s Living Age*, 6.63 (26 July 1845): 194. *Littell’s* attributes the story to the *New York Tribune*.

mid-nineteenth-century experimental socialist community like Brook Farm cast this utopian vision of the telegraph's unifying reach; at the same time, however, Brook Farm may seem an unexpected source of enthusiasm for a technical innovation like the telegraph given the community's emphasis on self-sufficiency through communal rural labor.

This tension between the telegraph as a vehicle for the instantaneous merging of spirits and as a mechanical apparatus which threatened romantic individualistic ideals is central to one of the less frequently discussed works of one of the most frequently studied members of Brook Farm: *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Although many critics have contextualized *Blithedale* through Hawthorne's six-month stint in 1841 at the farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, few critics have sounded the novel for its engagements with the period's expanding telegraphic networks. It is true that *Blithedale* contains no explicit references to the telegraph; however, like the *Harbinger* article, the novel certainly reflects and animates contemporary discourse that conflates the telegraph, the body, the body politic, and commercial networks. After all, the novel's narrator dares to hope that new communication mediums will promote intimacy without entirely annihilating privacy (a central concern for Hawthorne in all of his novels), but also fears that new networks of communication will merely promote mechanized sameness.

By 1852, when *Blithedale* was first published, over seventeen thousand miles of telegraph wires were in operation, and the telegraph had already connected all of the nation's major cities except San Francisco (Ratner and Teeter 16). This ever-expanding network is all the more reason to believe that one of the novel's most polyvalent and frequently discussed figures—the mesmerized medium of the Veiled Lady—serves in some ways as a representative of the telegraphic process of communication. Many critics have discussed the imagistic qualities of the Veiled Lady, but I would argue that interpreting the Veiled Lady's performance on the stage (and the performance of the

narrator, Coverdale, on the page) as engagements with the telegraphic process of communicative relay suggests that the narrative is “acousmatic,” invested in shaping readers to identify the contours of the body in disembodied sound. As I will argue, the telegraph was already becoming a sonic machine in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Coverdale as narrator works to reassure readers that disembodied sound can be moored to individually identifiable bodies, reasserting the importance of bodily difference in a period when disembodied communication threatened to render such differences (and, more significantly, the social hierarchies constructed around such differences) immaterial. In addition, Coverdale as narrator seeks to protect his own privacy, to foreground his own control over the dispensation of information, which can perhaps be read as a response to the telegraph’s threat to render the “disembodied” sound of coded and private correspondence more persistently public.

*The Blithedale Romance*, frequently neglected by critics after initial efforts to match the novel’s characters to their Brook Farm counterparts, has been the source of renewed scholarly attention in the past twenty years or so, and many of these critics have been held in the thralls of the Veiled Lady. Jennifer Greiman, Theresa Goddu, Richard Brodhead, and Russ Castronovo have all offered fascinating interpretations of the Veiled Lady’s role in the novel and together they have traced her hydra-headed genealogy in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Jennifer Greiman, for example, describes how the Veiled Lady, as a “blindfold[ed] prisoner” (201), is reminiscent of Laura Bridgman, a blind woman at Boston’s Perkin’s Institute for the Blind who performed ordinary tasks for visitors (like sewing, knitting, and reading Braille) while wearing a green silk blindfold (162-3). Greiman focuses heavily on the shared visual tropes of both performances, noting that the spectators are primarily captivated by the materiality of both performances’ stage-effects (the veil and the silk blindfold) (190). Theresa Goddu also focuses on the visual qualities of the Veiled Lady performance as she connects Hawthorne’s “long veil of silvery whiteness” (200) to Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* and

Chauncey Ives's *Undine Receiving Her Soul*. As Goddu suggests, both Undine and the Greek Slave, like the Veiled Lady, provocatively pose in a way that at once masks and highlights the feminine body's status as a commodity, though Hawthorne leaves some of these contours hidden and thus mysterious (102). Finally, Richard Brodhead and Russ Castronovo both identify spiritualists of the 1840s like the Fox Sisters—as well as popular entertainers like Jenny Lind and Fanny Elssler—as antecedents for the Veiled Lady, and for Castronovo in particular the novel stages the masculine bourgeois desire for the “depoliticized specter of democracy” that the veiled body of Priscilla seems to represent (Castronovo 255). Yet, for Brodhead, too, the Veiled Lady performance is preeminently a visual one; he notes, for example, that popular entertainers of the period “reinforce[d] the habit of motionlessly seeing,” and that the spectator of these performances ceaselessly “scans the space” between the self and spectacle for “something for [the] eye to inhabit” (47). Each of these interpretations implies that Hawthorne's Veiled Lady is positioned primarily as an object for the gaze, which is perhaps expected given the preeminently visual quality of a “veil.”

This focus on the visual aspects of the Veiled Lady performance also makes sense given the supposed reign of the optic over other senses in the first half of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that Jonathan Crary has described as the “autonomization of sight” (19) and “a new valuation of visual experience” (14).<sup>9</sup> As Crary explains, the proliferation of optical devices which divorced the sense of sight from tactility—like the stereoscope and phenakistoscope—converted human vision into “something measurable and thus exchangeable” and prepared observers “for the tasks of ‘spectacular’

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<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have challenged the presumed primacy of the visual. For example, in *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, Leigh Eric Schmidt notes that “[t]he early republic resounded with prophets and trance-speakers, with inspired guides to scripture and fortunetellers [...], hormonialists, mediums, and mystics” (10). Although Schmidt's work focuses on spiritual acts of listening, his scholarship offers a reminder that the sounds of early-nineteenth-century technologies are often overlooked simply because it's more difficult to recover them in the era before sound recordings.

consumption,” which were similarly almost always visual (19). This primacy of the visual in performance was also certainly shaped by the way that so many technologies of the period—including, most notably, the railroad—prioritized sight over the other senses as a means of orienting the self in space. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued, the railroad played an integral role in shaping mid-nineteenth-century travelers to perceive landscape as panoramic spectacle (55). Whereas travelers on horseback or in carriages exercised all senses as they oriented themselves to changes in geographic space—registering, for example, the configuration of the terrain, the material consistency of the pavement, the damp quality of the atmosphere, the smells and sounds distinctive to a certain location—travelers encapsulated in train compartments primarily became aware of spatial dislocation through optics (Schivelbusch 54-55).<sup>10</sup> Eventually, Schivelbusch notes, passengers turned their attention away from the panoramic blur of the landscape and towards the “surrogate landscape” of railway literature (64). Schivelbusch’s research suggests that new technologies not only alter human sensory perception but also the process of reading and the relationship between author and text.

Hawthorne’s novel dramatizes the ways in which the “new machine” of the railroad was training travelers both to see spectacle and to transfer this new perceptive mode to the reading process. For example, the chapter “The Hotel” collapses Coverdale’s three roles as a railway passenger, a theater spectator, and a voyeur as it conflates the window of Coverdale’s hotel room with the window of a train and then

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<sup>10</sup> Although Schivelbusch emphasizes the role of the railroad in promoting the visual, there are also many accounts of early train travel as a sonic event. For example, the British weekly *Penny Magazine* (1832-1845) published a supplement on railway travel (“Railway Trips,” 31 August 1838) which notes that the train’s “noise is tremendous; and should a counter train pass, the crashing, shattering kind of sound is most appalling” (331). And, of course, the train’s famous intrusion into Thoreau’s woods in *Walden* (1854) is marked by sound, the train’s whistle cutting through the solitude like the “scream of a hawk” (75). Just as it would be reductive to argue that the telegraph only impacts users’ relationship to sound, the railroad surely shaped all sensory experiences of passengers; nonetheless, the railroad’s impact on visual culture has been emphasized most frequently by twentieth-century scholars.

conflates the curtains of the window with the curtains of the village-hall theater. In this chapter, Coverdale shuttles between the “surrogate landscape” of the novel he purchased from a railway stall and the scenery of the back view of the residences across the garden landscape. Coverdale’s predatory gaze at the window is an inheritance of railroad travel not only because he is propelled to the window by his railway book but also because Coverdale himself observes that the opportunity for such voyeuristic scenes was created when railways “unexpectedly [...] opened” behind farmhouses and thus offered vistas of posteriors that had never been seen before from “the immemorial highway” (149). Not only did the railroad provide passengers momentary visual access to spaces that had previously been concealed, but this scene suggests that narrative has a similar capacity to offer the broader public access to privacies formerly veiled.

This narrative promise for clandestine glimpses—or for the detached gaze of mechanistic surveillance—resonates with the narrator’s sensibility in several of Hawthorne’s earlier texts as well. The first-person narrative mode of “Sights from a Steeple,” published in *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837, seven years after the first locomotive in the United States steamed down a Baltimore and Ohio track, asks readers to assume a disembodied panoramic gaze as the narrator’s own voice melds with the projected voice of a steeple. The story opens with “So! I have climbed high, and my reward is small” (219), and the reader may presume that this “I” persona is merely a metaphorical projection, the fantastical perspective of a steeple if given voice. This is not an unfair assumption since the story appears only pages after *Twice-Told Tales*’s “A Rill from the Town Pump,” whose epigraph matter-of-factly informs the reader that the text that follows is “*The TOWN-PUMP talking through its nose*” (165). In “Sights from a Steeple,” the narrator offers views of the cityscape and townspeople evacuated of subjectivity, as if he were himself the steeple, anticipating the position of the panoramic steeple view that became so popular with engravers in the 1840s and daguerreotypists in

the ensuing decades.<sup>11</sup> If these daguerreotypes trained viewers to see the city as a coherent and visually graspable whole, Hawthorne's story similarly trained readers to level an objectified and detached gaze which was not so dissimilar from the one engendered by railroad travel or the daguerreotype.

This preoccupation with the detached gaze continues in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), where the narrator remarkably describes Judge Pyncheon's corpse from the perspective of a deductive but disembodied intruder granted access to the privacy of his death chamber, an intrusive gesture akin to Theodore's desire to lift the veil in Zenobia's story in *The Blithedale Romance*. Before affixing this gaze on the Judge's body, the narrator positions himself—as well as the reader—as curious owl-eyed onlookers of inexplicable immobility, rushing to return to a space of domestic privacy, just as Clifford and Hepzibah are similarly retreating after their railroad trip to nowhere: "To him [the Judge], and to the venerable House of the Seven Gables, does our story now betake itself, like an owl, bewildered in the daylight, and hastening back to his hollow tree" (269). In the same way that the reader is invited to assume the narrator's gaze through the first-person mode of "Sights From a Steeple," the narrative mode shifts from the second-person "you" to the first-person plural "we" as the narrator progresses through the description of the Judge, from "You hear the ticking of his watch; his breath you do not hear" (268) to "We discern his figure, as plainly as the flickering moonbeams can show us anything, still seated in the oaken chair!" (280-1). In this narrative shift, the

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<sup>11</sup>Several scholars have put forth this argument that panoramic steeple views sanitized and totalized cityscapes. For example, both John Kasson and Billie Melman emphasize the tendency for bird's-eye panoramic visions to control our cityscapes. John Kasson describes the bird's-eye view as a form of "concrete abstraction" which "displac[es] the profusion of sensory experience by the cold, distant grasp of the eye" (73). Billie Melman writes that the panoramic image of the city from a distance "expressed notions of grandeur, expansion, and metropolitan pride. It also hid, or cut out from view, poverty and social distress and the endemic problems of urbanization like congestion, pollution and disease, and violence" (75). In these scholars' interpretations, such visual imaginings train the viewer's eye to control the varied and expansive geographies depicted as well as the diminutive and barely visible people who inhabit those depicted spaces.

reader is first supplied the sensory position of the narrator with that dictatorial “you” and is then presumed to merge as one with the narrator in that inclusive “we.” The reader subtly assumes the position of an all-seeing (and all-hearing) but entirely uncomprehending observer puzzled by the Judge’s refusal to move even when, “Heaven help us,” an inquisitive fly scales his face and approaches calamitously near his “wide-open eyes” (283). As in *Blithedale* and “Sights from a Steeple,” the narrator of *Seven Gables* is clearly invested in shaping readers’ apperception, reinforcing the idea that narratives and the act of reading offer the same incursion of the mechanized public eye into the private realm as those train tracks wending through spaces previously unseen.

Even as these narrators are shaping readers’ ocular perception just as the train has shaped their own, I argue that Coverdale as narrator seems equally invested in shaping readers’ auditory perception in response to telegraphy’s potential to disavow bodily difference through its transmission of disembodied sound. Although the first telegraph operators relied on vision to read the punctured dots and dashes on the ribbon paper as it was drawn through the machine’s rollers, by the 1850s telegraph operators relied almost wholly on the sound of the machine to transmit messages.<sup>12</sup> Taliaferro Preston Shaffner,

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<sup>12</sup> Although transmission by sound gained popularity primarily because it increased the speed and efficiency of telegraph offices, there is also some evidence that sound transmission was first adopted as a means of evading the Morse patent laws. Disputes over the specific method of message transmission—whether by sound or some other writing apparatus—were at the center of the *O'Reilly v. Morse* case, also known as the Great Telegraph Case. As Shaffner explains, when Morse initially filed suit in 1848 against Henry O'Reilly (the owner of the People's Telegraph Company, which used a Barnes-Zook Columbian telegraph similar to the House printing telegraph), the court determined that “the use of the Roman letter or any other or even a sound [was] capable of being interpreted as an infringement” of Morse’s patents (*Shaffner's Telegraph Companion* 219). However, O'Reilly appealed this decision, and in December 1852 the *O'Reilly v. Morse* case went before the Supreme Court. The Court ultimately ruled in O'Reilly’s favor, objecting that Morse’s eighth claim (which attempted to protect “electromagnetism, however developed for marking or printing intelligible characters, signs, or letters, at any distance”) was too broad and would prevent future innovators from attempting to modify the apparatus (*Shaffner's Telegraph Companion* 138). Such a patent, the Court noted, would cover any “mode of writing or printing at a distance by means of the electric or galvanic current” (*Shaffner's Telegraph Companion* 138). Of course, by the time the Supreme Court decided against Morse’s claim to any electronic communication—regardless of medium—sound had already become the primary mode of transmission in telegraph offices across the country. Kenneth Silverman’s

one of Morse's contractors in the 1850s and a Louisville lawyer, describes in *The Telegraph Manual* (1859) that many American telegraph offices in the 1850s dispensed with the recording apparatus entirely in favor of a "sounder":

The register with all its clock-work marking on paper and accompaniments has been laid aside at the leading stations and this simple apparatus [the sounder] has taken its place. The coils are the same as those used in the register; the lever is made substantial and the local current causes the magnet cores to attract armature with great strength, and thus a good clear sound is made, by which the operator in any part of the room can hear and understand what is communicated by any other station on the whole line (455).

Telegraphic transmission by sound alone was faster and more efficient, boosting the capacity for operators to match the ever-increasing demand for transmissions, but it also had the unintended effect of anthropomorphizing the machine, endowing the inert mechanical device with the power to speak.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1850s, writers attempted to render this sound audible to readers, hoping to emulate the telegraph's own ability to reproduce sound across great distances. For example, a newspaper article titled "Scene in a Telegraph Office" (14 March 1850), published in the *Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette*, includes a speaking role for "Instrument" in its dialogue between journalist and a telegraph operator. The "Instrument" speaks a foreboding "Cr-r-r-r-r-bang!" and "Phit-phit-tr-r-r-r-tist-st-st-st-bang!" as a storm passes overhead (1). Similarly, "Song of the Telegraph" (April 1851) in *Dollar Magazine* describes the wires "humming," "clicking and chattering" (146); and

*Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F.B. Morse* (2003) offers a thorough overview of the O'Reilly cases and Morse's many other patent disputes.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on the shift from message transmission by sight to sound, see Gabler's *American Telegrapher*, pp. 214-215, and Jonathan Sterne's *Audible Past*, pp. 147-154. As Sterne explains, "The germinal forces of bureaucratic capitalism and the values of efficiency and accuracy would belong in telegraphy, not to the eye, as might be supposed by conventional critical wisdom, but to the ear" (147). Transmission by sound certainly added to the "mystery" of telegraphic transmission, for patrons were often surprised to learn that a telegraph operator was simultaneously talking to the person at the counter and an operator hundreds of miles away. For an example of this, see "An Evening with the Telegraph," *The Friend* (3 April 1852): 227.

“Something More Wonderful than the Telegraph” (14 August 1847) in *The Episcopal Recorder* attempts to record the “*dot, dot, dot, click, click, click*” of the “little pointer” as a message is transmitted (88).<sup>14</sup> These descriptions of the telegraph imply that the *sound* of the machine became a primary preoccupation of operators and users alike, and the repeated onomatopoeic attempts of newspaper and magazine writers to convey the voice of the telegraph demonstrates a pervasive desire to render the telegraph’s immaterial clattering and clicking material through the power of print.

Coverdale, more than any other personage at Blithedale, exhibits a similar desire to make the immateriality of sound legible to readers; more precisely, Coverdale decodes disembodied sound in order to attach it to bodies. This becomes quite apparent in chapter 23, “A Village-Hall,” which stages the Veiled Lady at the lyceum-hall and opens with an allusion to the railroad’s annihilation of space. Coverdale notes, “As it was already the epoch of annihilated space, I might, in the time I was away from Blithedale, have snatched a glimpse at England, and been back again” (195). This same potential to “annihilate” space is scripted onto Priscilla’s body during her performance as the Veiled Lady later in the chapter; however, this “annihilation” interestingly takes place not through sight, as would be expected with the train, but through sound, as might be more frequently associated with the telegraph. Westervelt boasts: “[S]itting in this very hall, she could hear the desert-wind sweeping over the sands, as far off as Arabia; the ice-

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<sup>14</sup> For other descriptions of the sound of the telegraph machine, see “An Evening with the Telegraph” (8 March 1851) in *The North American Miscellany*, pp. 254-258, which describes the rattle of the telegraph machine, or “Lessons in a Telegraph Office” (24 January 1854) in the *J.R.M. Circular*, which applies an extended description of the spiritual man attuned to the voice of the invisible world in the same way that operators are able to recognize the meaning of “the clatter of the telegraph” (87). There are also numerous descriptions of the sound of a telegraph keeping synchronized time, as in the *New York Observer and Chronicle*’s “Keeping Time with the Telegraph” (12 February 1852), which describes the process of creating an electrical connection between a clock in New York and a telegraph in Buffalo so that a “clock ticking at one place [can be] heard in another, between two and three thousand miles away” (56). In this way, the telegraph not only focused users’ attention on the sounds of a meaningful though coded message but also the noises that were a mechanical byproduct of message transmission.

bergs grinding one against the other, in the polar seas; the rustle of a leaf in an East Indian forest; the lowest whispered breath of the bashfullest maiden in the world, uttering the first confession of her love!" (202).<sup>15</sup> Priscilla's body in this performative moment serves as a transmission device and medium since she apparently has the capacity to channel these sounds from afar and relay them to the audience.

Although the telegraph could not, of course, transmit non-linguistic sounds like the icebergs grinding or whistling desert winds, Westervelt's description of Priscilla as a channel and transmitter of sound certainly echoes descriptions of the telegraph's apparently magical potential to communicate by direct sound across vast distances. For example, in the *Telegraph Manual* (1859), Shaffner seems to be borrowing Westervelt's own exuberance as he touts the remarkable abilities of telegraph operators: "An operator sits in his room, perhaps some ten feet from his apparatus, and he hears a conversation held between two others, hundreds of miles distant, and perhaps the parties conversing are equally as far apart. He hears every word; he laughs with them in the merriment [...]. The lightning speaks, and holds converse with man! What can be more sublime!" (457). Significantly, however, while Shaffner celebrates the operator as an active participant in this otherworldly converse, Priscilla herself remains mute throughout the performance, an inert repository of sounds from exotic locales that remain controlled by and mediated and projected solely through Westervelt.

This annihilation of space through sound seems all the more striking since clairvoyant travels by sight—in which the mesmerized offered descriptions of the visual qualities of the geographic spaces “visited”—were in fact a common feature of mesmeric

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<sup>15</sup> Hawthorne's description of ethereal travel here is reminiscent of Poe's "The Power of Words" (1845), as Oinos and Agathos "sweep slowly through" the "multitudinous vistas of the stars," with the "loud harmony of the Pleiades" on the left and the "starry meadows beyond Orion, where, for pansies and violets, and heart's-ease, are the beds of the triplicate and triple-tinted suns" (603). Despite the inclusion of Pleiades's "loud harmony," Poe's rendering of spiritual travel remains focused exclusively on vision rather than sound, however.

trances, perhaps because the mesmerized person could identify the visual minutia of a particular locale and thus provide “objective” proof of the voyage.<sup>16</sup> In addition, prying an image or a material object from an exotic locale—like the monogrammed chinaware from Canton or the punchbowl from Calcutta that Hawthorne’s own father brought back after his sailing exploits (Wineapple 20)—seems more amenable to commercial and performative exchange than these snippets of sound. Why, then, this turn to *sound* in Priscilla’s performance, especially if sound—as Crary implies—seemed less beholden to the dictates of commodity exchange. After all, this period predates sound recording technologies like the phonograph of 1857 or the phonograph of the 1870s (Holmes 275). In conflating Priscilla’s body with the telegraphic process of exchange, it seems that Hawthorne’s narrator inscribes onto the telegraph both an anxiety about—and a desire for—the disembodiment that the Veiled Lady seems to represent.

While critics have traced the Veiled Lady’s genealogy to public entertainers, “scribbling women,” marble white statues of enslavement, and cataleptic specters of democracy, Priscilla’s telegraphic capacities in her performance align her with another type of performer in the late 1830s and 1840s: the mesmerized patient-performers who

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<sup>16</sup> Several written accounts from the period offer a glimpse into the ways that mesmerists performed clairvoyance both on stage and in more private settings. For example, *A Practical Investigation into the Truth of Clairvoyance* (1854) enumerates countless examples of “somnambules” exhibiting powers of clairvoyance. One mesmerized performer identifies “the number of ladies, their personal appearance, and style of dress” at a dinner party, and the anonymous author immediately rushes to verify these visual details with a friend in attendance at the dinner (80). For similar accounts, see James Esdaile’s *Natural and Mesmeric Clairvoyance* (1852), which describes a “young, pale, sickly looking girl” (90-91) named Ellen who accurately describes the Hôtel de l’Europe in Le Havre although she had never been to France (90-96). See also a letter from Mr. Wood, “a diligent and able investigator of mesmerism,” published in *The Monthly Magazine* in December 1840, which describes the patient E. A. who could read cards and a French book with his eyes bandaged (614-5); and William Gregory’s *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism* (1851), which describes the clairvoyance of mesmerized men and women who could identify the furniture, drapery, and carpeting in the other rooms of his home—or guests in other rooms—even though the mesmerized subjects were unfamiliar with the home and guests (122-124). These sources suggest that the mesmerized performers frequently emphasized the visual over the sonic in attempting to prove the legitimacy of their mesmerized mediums.

appear both onstage and within the pages of the era's periodicals. Mesmerism, which reached its height of popularity in Britain and the United States during these antebellum decades, owes its name to an eighteenth-century Viennese physician practicing in France, Franz Anton Mesmer. Throughout the period of the French Revolution, Mesmer argued that the body was comprised of a magnetic system and that all bodily ailments could be cured through manipulations of one's "animal magnetism" (Podmore 1-27). One of Mesmer's pupils, the French Baron Du Potet, came to London in 1837 and offered free magnetic lectures and treatments, eventually attracting the interest of the mainstream medical establishment at University College Hospital.<sup>17</sup> Around this same time, in 1834, Charles Poyen St. Sauveur came to America to establish a mesmerist practice in Boston, and he continued to offer lectures throughout New England in the 1830s (Schlun 64-5). By the time Poyen returned to France in the 1840s, Americans had already begun to embrace the new science, with nearly two hundred mesmerists practicing in Boston alone (Birnes and Martin 148). Hawthorne's future wife, Sophia Peabody, was among those treated by New England mesmerists throughout the 1830s, first by an admirer of Dr. Poyen, Dr. Joseph Fisk, during her courtship with Hawthorne and then by an old friend, Mrs. Cornelia Park, when Hawthorne was at Brook Farm (Stoehr 39-42). Hawthorne was so disturbed by Sophia's treatments for her headaches that he wrote a lengthy letter imploring her to "take no part in them," noting that the mesmeric power might arise "from the transfusion of one spirit into another," thus violating "the sacredness of an

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<sup>17</sup> Du Potet wasn't the first French physician to offer lectures on mesmerism in Britain. For example, as early as 1785, John Boniot de Mainauduc arrived in London to spread mesmerist practices but aroused little interest. Richard Chenevix, in 1829, also offered a mesmerist demonstration at St. Thomas Hospital in London, but again attracted little lasting attention. Since Du Potet's work sparked the enduring interest of Dr. John Elliotson, he is most frequently credited with popularizing the pseudoscience across the Channel (Schlun 49-50). The belated spark of interest in mesmerism in Britain and America perhaps adds further evidence that the general public used the concept of magnetism to understand the new communication technologies which were just then becoming prominent.

individual” (qtd. in Stoehr 42).<sup>18</sup> Certainly Hawthorne’s concerns about mesmerism’s violation of privacy and individuality reverberate with Coverdale’s similar concerns about the Veiled Lady as well as the novel’s distrust of the imperialistic reach made possible by mechanical innovations like the railway and telegraph.

Mesmerism might seem a far cry from these technological innovations, but historians of media history have explained how electrical communication became conflated with trances of animal magnetism in the mid-century. Even in Morse’s initial attempt to obtain a government appropriation in 1842, congressmen jokingly likened the instrument to mesmerism. Senator Thomas Benton, in his *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress*, described the discussion surrounding the bill to authorize spending \$30,000 on a series of experiments to test the electro-magnetic telegraph. Cave Johnson of Tennessee, the future administrator of the United States Telegraph, ironically enough, objected to the bill, implying that he “did not wish to see the science of Mesmerism neglected and overlooked” and requesting that one-half of the appropriation be given to Dr. Fisk, the mesmerist who had been treating Sophia Peabody but who was also conducting experiments in Washington (Benton 706). The Chair noted that “it would require a scientific analysis to determine how far the magnetism of mesmerism was analogous to that to be employed in telegraphs” (Benton 706). Although both Johnson and the Chair made the comparison between telegraphy and mesmerism in jest, the very laughter of the House demonstrates how quickly the public recognized their own ignorance of the telegraph’s electrical and mechanical inner workings. In short, mesmeric

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<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne became increasingly insistent that Sophia stop her treatments as their marriage approached. On June 30, 1842, nine days before their wedding, Hawthorne once again entreated Sophia, writing: “Dearest, I cannot oppose thy submitting to so much of this influence as will relieve thy headache; but, as thou lovest me, do not suffer thyself to be put to sleep. My feeling on this point is so strong that it would be wronging us both to conceal it from thee” (qtd. in Stoehr 44). Sophia did stop the treatments after their marriage, but the exchange between them reveals Hawthorne’s distrust of spiritual co-mingling as well as his desire to control his wife’s treatments even while opposing them on the grounds that they gave others too much control over her body.

and telegraphic communication quickly became metaphors for each other in the early 1840s.

For this reason, the connection between mesmerism and electricity seems less surprising to scholars of media history like John Durham Peters. As Peters argues, “Both mesmerism and telegraphy draw on a common cultural project: electrical connection between distant individuals” (94). In addition, medical treatment through magnetic forces is particularly striking as a corollary to the telegraph because it presumes communication and material change in the subject’s body through immaterial forces and nonverbal expressions, like a fixed gaze, a particular movement of the hands accompanied by the operator’s intentionality, or the placement of magnetically charged objects near the subject’s body. A telegraph message first rendered thought material in the initial written dispatch, then “immaterial” as it hastened over the wires, and finally material as the operator decoded the message. Mesmerists argued that they could enact similar communication feats with a subject’s ailing body as they rendered magnetic forces and their own wills material and perceptible.

By the 1840s, most Victorians would have been familiar with the popularized version of Mesmer’s “manipulations” of animal magnetism: the mesmeric séance. In such scenes, a mesmerist (typically a male physician) would seat his patient (usually a young female) in front of him, skimming his hands just above her entire body in “magnetic passes” (Braude 23; Winter 2). *Blithedale*’s mesmerized Priscilla, true to this paradigm of the séance, is “pliant to [the magician’s] gesture” as he tells her to sit “in the great chair” in front of him (201). Eventually, the female subject would drop into a detached or somnambulist state known as a “mesmeric trance,” a “magnetic sleep,” or a “coma,” and would frequently remain without speech or hearing unless directly addressed by the physician (Bush vi, 59; Staite 12). As *Blithedale*’s mesmerist puts it, “The roar of a battery of cannon would be inaudible to the Veiled Lady” (202). Some séances included those earlier-mentioned cases of clairvoyance, in which the subject would predict future

events or describe exotic locales; others more clearly positioned the subject as a medium, offering tantalizing otherworldly communiqés or channeling information and words that only a deceased relative would know; in others, the subject “regressed” into childish states or acted out socially prohibited behaviors.

As Ann Braude explains, the ritual of the séance, in which men and women gathered around parlor tables in the homes of friends and neighbors, relocated religious practice in the sphere of domesticity and femininity (23-24). Although many séances were performed in private parlors with few audience members, Robert Laurence Moore notes that Spiritualists also took advantage of the “stage possibilities” of mesmerism by performing trances in medical institutions or crowded halls open to the general public (125). As séances gained popularity through public displays, the process of mysterious and instantaneous communication by invisible means became increasingly associated with the mesmerized female body.

Such displays of physical intimacy between a masculine representative of medical authority and a wholly passive entranced woman reveal the intrigue in attending a séance as well as the social anxieties surrounding feminine sexuality that the séance apparently attempted to dispel. Although Hawthorne’s Veiled Lady is rumored to be “of family and fortune” (6), the performative exhibits of mesmeric medical experiments most frequently took place on young working-class women, females who were perceived to be more receptive to magnetic forces because of their presumed proximity to animalistic thought patterns and behaviors (Sconce 51-52; Winter 67). Such a dynamic, as Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne note, certainly reinforced traditional power structures, although class and gender prescriptions were also occasionally challenged by disobedient mesmerized females or working-class mesmerists (7-8). Nonetheless, this tendency to use young working-class women in mesmeric performances manifests the nexus of eroticism, class structures, and gender power dynamics at work as public interest in mesmerism grew during the mid-century. As Alison Winter explains in her landmark study *Mesmerized*:

*Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, the mesmeric séance “supplied a language for describing cultural change” (16), a means of exploring the period’s shifting social relationships between classes and genders.<sup>19</sup>

If the tendency to use young women as the subjects for mesmeric experiments initially contributed to the popularity of mesmeric medical performances, this tendency was also responsible for its eventual discrediting, as some argued that mesmerists were simply using young women for their own sexual gratification. Thomas Wakley, one of the strongest critics of mesmerism and the founding editor of the British medical journal *The Lancet*, explained in “Virtues of Animal Magnetism” (8 December 1838) that mesmerist “passes” are nothing but “indecent assaults” which “not only injure the body but frequently lead to a loss of virtue” (413).<sup>20</sup> After noting that such scandals were becoming commonplace, Wakley reported that the daughter of a French banker “was thrown into a profound sleep,” during which the disreputable mesmerist “stole her

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Sconce offers a similar argument in *Haunted Media* as he explains that telegraphy “provided a conceptual model” to ground abstract theories about sexual and gender difference (48), though for Sconce this tendency marked “an important opportunity for empowering women” since it placed them in a position of spiritual authority over men (48-9). Within *The Blithedale Romance*, Priscilla’s mesmerist trances most often seem examples of control over the female body rather than examples of empowerment since she, as the Veiled Lady, so rarely has the power to undermine her mesmerizer until Hollingsworth intervenes or off-stage relationships (rather than her own personal agency) render her authority figures inert.

<sup>20</sup> *The Lancet*, a general medical weekly established in London in 1823, had the largest circulation of any medical periodical in Britain until the 1870s, and Wakley frequently used the journal to press for medical reform, as he clearly does in his treatment of mesmerism (Brake and Demoor 343-4). Although this article suggests that Wakley aligns “honour” with class, one biographer argues that Wakley implicitly distrusted the famous mesmerized O’Key sisters not because of their class but because they had been diagnosed with epilepsy and hysteria (Sprigge 447); given the notoriety of their case, Wakley insisted on a scientific “test” of their powers. When Wakley substituted a piece of lead for a piece of nickel “charged with magnetism” and the young women still had the same response even without the presence of the mesmerizing nickel, he exposed the fraudulent nature of these experiments (Sprigge 445-449). Wakley’s relatively objective reportage of the experiments does imply that his primary interest was, as the preface to the *Lancet*’s first edition promises, to “detect and expose the impositions of ignorant practitioners” (qtd. in Sprigge 76). However, to the physician conducting these experiments, Dr. Elliotson, the criticism was preeminently personal, and became the source of Elliotson’s vehement attacks against Wakley when he established his own periodical, the *Zoist*, years later.

honour,” perhaps implying that the working-class women who were typically mesmerized had no “honour” to steal (413). Even more alarming to many readers, Wakley suggested that the young woman might have been faking her trance in order to take advantage of the opportunity for sexual promiscuity. The power dynamic between mesmerist and mesmerized, as Hawthorne well recognizes throughout *Blithedale*, is itself in constant flux as the mesmerist gains authority from the mesmerized female and the female ultimately holds the power of undermining this authority in the course of the performance.

Of course, it also seems clear that mesmeric performances addressed a different social anxiety in addition to those surrounding feminine sexuality and gendered power dynamics: the almost spiritual communicative capacity of the telegraph. Telegraphy’s potential for disembodied and instantaneous communication suggested both that gender difference might collapse in the mingling of disembodied spirits and also that direct communion with an otherworldly realm was a scientific possibility. Interest in paranormal phenomena like the Ouija board, telepathy, automatic writing, and séances flourished alongside the growth of scientific interest in similarly “immaterial” phenomena like electricity, nerves, and magnetic forces. Many scholars have traced the mid-century feedback loop among the popularization of American Spiritualism, the occult, and the telegraph. Jeffrey Sconce originates the overlap of the electromagnetic telegraph and spiritual telegraph with the famous Fox sisters who convinced their family in Hydesville, New York, and then a spellbound national public, that they could communicate with spirits through rappings which corresponded to a particular letter. Given the similarity between spirit rapping and Morse code tapping, the sisters’ performance was likened to a “telegraph line” to another realm (Sconce 22), and one reporter noted that “God’s telegraph has outdone Morse’s altogether” (qtd. in Brown 110). American Spiritualists themselves endorsed this connection, perhaps because the telegraph seemed to offer a clear example of the possibility of detaching the mind from

the body. Indeed, Sam Halliday claims that “spiritualism as a whole seems to have derived much of its inspiration” from the technology of the telegraph (106).<sup>21</sup> The telegraphic process—communication channeled through the “medium” of operators and wires—provided a concrete and scientific basis for Spiritualism’s guiding philosophy that the dead could communicate with the living through sensitive mediums.

In addition, an increasing public awareness of discoveries in electricity similarly promoted a conflation of Spiritualist communication with telegraphy. As Jerusha Hull McCormack explains, the popular tendency to imagine electricity originating in the heavens and connecting voices to “a virtual ‘no-where’” encouraged the public to associate electrical scientific inquiry with the new religious craze (584). Just as the “Rochester knockings” prompted connections between mesmerized female bodies and the electromagnetic telegraph, other Spiritualist rituals associated the religion with electricity more generally. For example, in one type of séance, called a “spirit battery,” alternating men and women (perceived as positively and negatively charged, respectively) sat in a circle that they called a “circuit” or a “battery” around a vessel sometimes known as a “baquet” (Carroll 135; Sconce 29). One early spiritualist, Andrew Jackson Davis, describes this type of electrical séance at length in *The Present Age and Inner Life* (1853), noting that he gave his sitters a “magnetic cord” to hold for the first hour of the séance and that the sitters were situated “as so many zinc and copper plates in the construction of magnetic batteries” (101). In the accompanying illustration of this “spirit battery” (Figure 6), the magnetic rope clearly aligns the séance with the wires of a telegraph and also attempts visually to concretize the immaterial process of electric communication.

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<sup>21</sup> Jill Galvan, in *Sympathetic Medium*, similarly notes that the American Spiritualist community sometimes offered demonstrations on electricity and magnetism in order to bolster claims of communication with spirits.



**Figure 6.** “The Magnetic Rope.” *The Present Age and Inner Life*. New York: Partridge and Brittan, 1853: 98.

Others, too, described the séance as a re-creation of a “spiritual battery.” For example, Joel Tiffany, in *Lectures on Spiritualism* (1851), writes that “religious excitement” requires “a strong mental battery” comprised of “many minds [...] brought into a state of spiritual harmony with each other (145). Similarly, in *Modern Spiritualism* (1855), E. W. Capron writes that communication with the spirit world requires “a half hour’s quiet sitting in a circle of eight or a dozen persons who form a battery by uniting their hands” until “the medium is magnetized” and “taken possession of by the spirits, who use her organs of speech in talking to the company” (308). In short, American Spiritualists and the broader public alike found the electricity of a Volta battery to be an apt metaphor in explaining the function of mediumship as well as in understanding how something as apparently immaterial as electricity could rapidly transport messages across such a vast expanse of space.

By the 1840s, such public performances of mesmerist trances were already beginning to shift away from theatrical spectacle and toward scientific inquiry, a fact

Hawthorne draws to the reader's attention in the novel's opening. Coverdale explains, "Now-a-days, in the management of his 'subject,' 'clairvoyant,' or 'medium,' the exhibitor affects the simplicity and openness of scientific experiment" (5). According to Coverdale, the Veiled Lady was the first and most famous of a "sisterhood" of performers who have become so numerous that none "attract much individual notice" (5), implying a nostalgia for the female performer as an original and individualized celebrity rather than a reproducible character type. The narrator's wistful tone suggests, too, a longing for the Veiled Lady as a nearly spiritual stage presence in the 1840s rather than an object for dispassionate scientific study, a longing which offers all the more reason to investigate the entranced performances of the decade just before the novel's publication.

While it may be difficult to re-create mesmerist performances in the crowded halls of American cities throughout the 1830s and 1840s, there is a wealth of examples of patient-performers occupying this uneasy space between mesmerism as theater and science in one of the most prominent mesmerist magazines of the period: *The Zoist: A Quarterly Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism, and their Applications to Human Welfare* (1843-1856). Dr. John Elliotson, the founder of the *Zoist*, had achieved a national reputation by the 1830s as a gifted medical lecturer, diagnostician, and clinical teacher. In 1832, he was named the first Professor of the Principles and Practices of Medicine at the University of London (now University College), and that same year he was appointed President of the Royal Society of Medicine, solidifying his position as one of the era's preeminent medical experts (Ridgway 192). His clinical lectures were regularly published in major medical journals, including the revolutionary *Lancet*, throughout the early 1830s.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Elliotson's *Human Physiology* (1835), drawn

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<sup>22</sup> In its earliest years, *The Lancet* was in frequent legal difficulties for piracy and libel (Desmond 15). The magazine's editor, Thomas Wakley, frequently published attacks on Tory and Whig aristocrats, corporation leaders, and Anglican universities. Its readers were primarily comprised of medical students, London democrats, and radical GPs, and it touted a circulation of four thousand by 1830 (Desmond 15). Given the caustic tenor of the *Lancet* and Wakley's personal "unveiling" of Elliotson's experiments with the O'Key sisters, it is perhaps unsurprising

from a translation of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *Elements of Physiology* (1786), became one of the foremost medical textbooks of the day and reached a fourth edition by 1855 (Ridgway 192). By the late 1830s, however, as orthodox medical opinion began to waver on the legitimacy of mesmerism as a medical treatment and as Elliotson became more entrenched in mesmeric research, it became increasingly difficult for him to find a venue willing to publish his medical and surgical reports.

Since *The Lancet* and other medical journals would no longer accept accounts of mesmeric experiments, Elliotson founded the *Zoist* and became a prolific contributor to the magazine throughout the next decade, submitting hundreds of articles not only on mesmerism but also on sanitation, education, phrenology, and the fallacies of various members of the mainstream medical establishment who criticized his work (Kaplan 696; Ridgway 3). As Jennifer Ruth explains, “The *Zoist* is as much a chronicle of Elliotson’s bitterness and outrage at the medical profession that humiliated him as it is a forum for the discussion of mesmerism and phrenology” (307). Although publishers and mesmerists frequently encouraged him to collect his articles in a book, Elliotson claimed that he never felt sufficiently versed in mesmerist practices to write an authoritative work on the subject even though the *Zoist* is an expansive collection with thirteen volumes of five hundred pages each (Ridgway 2).<sup>23</sup> Despite Elliotson’s own sense of inadequacy, the detailed medical studies published in his periodical offer valuable insight into the cultural role of mesmerism at the mid-century.

that Elliotson soon became mired in the fray and later launched scathing accounts of Wakley in his own publication. As Jennifer Ruth writes, “Pages and pages [of the *Zoist*] are devoted to Wakley’s ‘folly,’ ‘his extreme folly,’ ‘his violence,’ etc.” (307). Such personal attacks imply that Elliotson hoped the *Zoist* would one day become a legitimate competitor to Wakley’s *Lancet*.

<sup>23</sup> Another periodical, also founded in 1843, similarly focused on spreading the gospel of mesmerism. However, the *Phreno-Magnet*, founded by Spencer Hall, only lasted for eleven months (compared to the 13 years of the *Zoist*). While the *Zoist* considered itself a serious medical journal, the *Phreno-Magnet* was intended to appeal to more popular audiences of factory workers and tradesmen (Byrne 36). Given this difference in audience, Elliotson never contributed to the *Phreno-Magnet*.

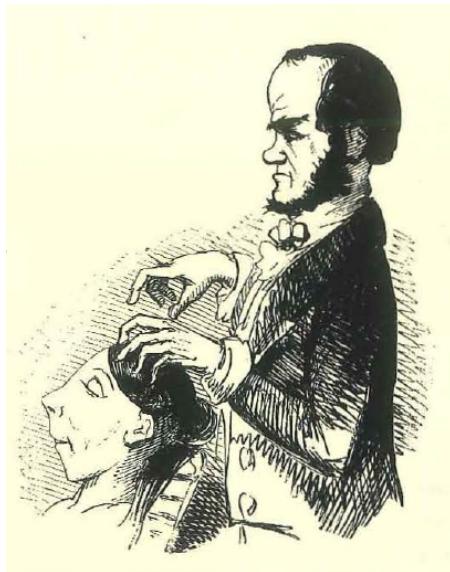
*The Zoist* was published in London but, like almost all publications in the nineteenth century, its readership spanned the Atlantic; indeed, the Boston-published *Littell's Living Age* declared in “Mesmerism” (April-June 1848) that “[r]eaders who wish to obtain a knowledge of the actual position and progress of mesmeric research, cannot do better than consult the pages of the *Zoist*” (31).<sup>24</sup> In addition, Elliotson was one of the first mesmerist practitioners to hold public exhibits. His mesmerist performances with Elizabeth and Jane O’Key were so popular that by the summer of 1838, as Robin Waterfield has noted, “the O’Keys had become celebrities equal to Elliotson himself” (175). This is especially notable because John Elliotson is perhaps the person most responsible for the popularity of magnetism in England in the 1830s and 1840s (Kaplan 696). In the summer of 1837, Elliotson began conducting mesmeric experiments on ward patients, and in May 1838 he held his first public exhibition of animal magnetism’s powers over one of his patients, a sixteen-year-old Irish immigrant named Elizabeth O’Key. O’Key was a housemaid admitted to the hospital with a diagnosis of epilepsy and hysteria, two illnesses which served as shorthand for a variety of “feminine” nervous disorders in the mid-century (Lehman 39-40; Waterfield 174-176).<sup>25</sup> The nationally publicized event held in the famous hospital theater was attended by London’s

<sup>24</sup> As Frank Luther Mott notes, Eliakim Littell founded *Littell's Living Age* in 1844 and maintained editorial control of the weekly magazine until 1896. The magazine, according to Mott, “appears never to have attained a large circulation, keeping well below ten thousand until 1880.” Much of the material in *Littell's Living Age*—which included fiction, poetry, and other “serious” material—was taken from other British and American periodicals (Mott I: 748).

<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, O’Key didn’t write any accounts of these mesmeric performances from her own perspective, so any information about O’Key’s experiences becomes filtered through the lens of Elliotson’s lecture notes or the observations of those in attendance at the demonstrations. However, according to Amy Lehman, two facts are known about Elizabeth O’Key which might undermine an interpretation of her as a passive instrument of Elliotson’s will: she personally requested to be admitted to the University College Hospital because she hoped to be treated by mesmerism; and she had been known in the 1830s to participate in the large public meetings of an evangelical preacher named Edward Irving, whose female congregants were famous for speaking in tongues and prophesying during these meetings (42). Such facts imply that O’Key did have agency in choosing to participate in these more theatrical displays of altered consciousness.

intellectual, medical, and political elite, including Charles Dickens, members of the Parliament, and members of the University College Hospital Board (Winter 73; Kaplan 698). During this and subsequent exhibits, Elliotson stood near a seated Elizabeth O'Key and, with extended concentration, attempted to "manipulate" her through the animal forces emanating from the tips of his outstretched fingers.

The 1843 parody of this dynamic in *Punch* (Figure 7) portrays Elliotson as an erect musician "playing" his "finger organ" on the phrenological bumps of his "new instrument" (168). Although the caricature is clearly ridiculing Elliotson, it also reinforces an iconography of masculine dominance since the physician towers with furrowed brow over the plebian woman and the rhetoric of musicianship positions her as nothing but a passive instrument. This ambiguous power dynamic became increasingly



**Figure 7.** "A New Musical Instrument." *Punch* (1843): 168.

apparent to Elliotson's contemporaries as his mesmerist performances continued. In the earliest exhibits, Elizabeth and her sister, Jane (who had also been admitted to University

College Hospital with a diagnosis of hysteria), were entirely subservient to Elliotson's will, transforming in an instant from a typical "servant girl" to one endowed with unusual powers of telepathy and second sight (Lehman 43-46). As the public became more skeptical, however, medical professionals insisted on more private experiments which, they claimed, revealed that the two women (or Elliotson, or all three) were frauds. As Fred Kaplan explains, the extended controversy surrounding the O'Keys "involved public scandal, allegations of sexual impropriety, newspaper sensationalism, [and] bitter internecine warfare within the faculty of the University and on its board of trustees" (698). Amidst the scandal, Elliotson resigned from University College Hospital and continued his mesmeric experiments outside of the established medical field.

The *Zoist* offered a forum not only for Elliotson's experiments in mesmerism but also for countless protracted descriptions of mesmerist entrancements from physicians and laymen in Europe and America. Frequently, descriptions of the mesmerist trance in the *Zoist*—like Priscilla's own mesmerist performance as the Veiled Lady—stage the female body as a replication of the mechanical processes of contemporary communication technology. This turn to spiritualist transmission and possession as an analogue for the electric telegraph's communication process is perhaps unsurprising since the telegraph marked a shift away from the bodily exchange of letters and towards more disembodied forms of communication in which messages were converted into "electric impulses," sent over wire, coded as extra-linguistic taps, and then decoded by operators.

In the *Zoist*, the mesmerized body frequently dramatizes this telegraphic process of communicative relay for audiences. For example, "Mesmeric Cure of a Case" (January 1848) by Joseph Hands describes a mesmerized woman, Frances Gorman, who was able to decipher words scribbled on a sheet of paper and then placed into box (336). A similar feat is described in the performance of Alexis Didier, one of the more famous clairvoyants of the 1840s. In "Reports on the Clairvoyance of Alexis" (January 1845), Dr. Elliotson describes how Alexis, in one performance, invited a skeptical woman to

write down a question on a scrap of paper (489). The woman is astounded when Alexis responds verbally to the question before she has even finished writing it. Such a performance suggests not only telegraphy's potential for communication at a distance but also the increased speed of telegraphic transmission.

In "Facts in Clairvoyance" (April 1848), Dr. John Ashburner similarly describes the telecommunicative capacities of female patients E.L. and A.B., who were able to decipher and relay printed messages at a distance when placed in a mesmerist trance by Major Buckley, who is "well known as an ardent and powerful mesmeriser" (99). After Major Buckley placed the two girls into a trance, Ashburner arranged store-bought hazel nut-shells (stuffed with comfits and printed mottos) on the chimney piece above each girl's head. The girls each "read" the words printed on the mottos and Ashburner, after jotting down their words, cracked open the hazel nuts. As Ashburner avers, "The shell was broken open, and the words printed in the little slip of folded paper found among the sweetmeats within, were word for word with those written down by me" (101). This accurate relay of information—from printed motto (even encased in a hazel nut!) to the girls' "reading" at a distance to their vocalization and finally to Ashburner's handwritten transcription—seems to reenact telegraphy's own increasingly disembodied process of relaying information. Although these two girls were not performing "in public" (since, after all, Ashburner notes that "no one but Major Buckley and myself" were present), these performances stage the privacy of the experiment in the public of periodicals in the same way that Hawthorne's Veiled Lady performed privacy in the village lyceum-hall.

An anxiety about the place for bodies in an age of increasingly disembodied communication is even more apparent in the *Zoist* in those moments when the mesmerized body itself assumes the functions of the machine which enables hearing and seeing from afar. Indeed, at times the *Zoist*'s descriptions of the remapping of the senses seem to suggest that the fragmented mesmerized body serves as an analogy not simply for the telegraphic *process* but for the telegraphic system itself, as Priscilla's own body

does in her performance at the lyceum-hall. For example, in a letter to Dr. Elliotson titled “Testimony to the Reality of Clairvoyance” (October 1849), James Esdaile includes a translated account of Dr. Pététin’s description of mesmerized patients who experience “transference of the senses to different parts of the body” (218). One of Pététin’s patients, rendered temporarily deaf during the experiment, “hears” with her stomach, suggesting that the stomach relays Pététin’s voice to the ears and the mind. Esdaile recounts: “She begged him [Pététin] to question her by the ear, but she made no reply, even when he spoke through a funnel to increase his voice. He returned to the stomach, and asked with a low voice, if she had heard him” (219). In rendering the female body a communicative conduit, the body itself becomes fragmented and reassembled in the mesmerist’s imagination.

Like Pététin’s patient, Elliotson’s most famous public exhibits of mesmerist powers involved the same phenomenon, known by French mesmerists as “transposition of the senses.” In many of Elliotson’s exhibits, Elizabeth O’Key was apparently able to see or hear with the back of her hand or her stomach (Winter 75). O’Key also spoke with inanimate objects (like boots, a wooden board) or her own body parts (like the back of her hand), and when Jane O’Key joined in the performances both sisters were able to see through solid objects like doors or the surface of the body (Winter 75-77). This transposition of the senses, in which the medium begins to assume preternatural capabilities, implies that the female body was configured both as a communication device *and* as a communicative medium in these performative displays.

Just as the senses of Pététin’s and Elliotson’s patients are remapped and transferred in their mesmerist trances, Priscilla similarly “remaps” her senses during her performance as the Veiled Lady. Not only can she hear across vast distances, but she remains impervious to the auditory assault of audience members who breach the proscenium: “[S]everal deep-lunged country-fellows [...] ascended the platform. Mutually encouraging one another, they shouted so close to her ear that the veil stirred

like a vanishing mist” (202). The Veiled Lady, however, can close her ears as others close their eyes, and thus she remains insensible to her “rude persecutors” (202). For the Veiled Lady, this capacity to close her sense of hearing enables bodily abuse whereas presumably the O’Keys and Pététin’s patient were believed to be endowed with exceptional bodies.

Even as these portrayals of mesmerist performance suggest that the telegraph was remapping bodily sensations—or, at least, that this remapping of the senses at times assumed telegraphic qualities—the telegraph itself threatened to break down bodily distinctions altogether. Just as the Brook Farm *Harbinger* envisioned the telegraph as an externalization of the nation’s nervous system in 1845, *The Philadelphia North American* similarly conflates the body politic with the telegraph in 1846; however, as Paul Gilmore notes, this conflation conjures not a national network of disparate parts but instead a homogenizing dissolution of bodily difference (Gilmore, *Aesthetic* 55).<sup>26</sup> According to “The Nerve of the Continent” (15 January 1846) in *The Philadelphia North American*, “[The telegraph] leaves, in our country, no elsewhere—it is all *here*: it makes the pulse at the extremity beat—throb for throb and in the instant—with that at the heart [...]. In short, it will make the whole land one being—a touch upon any part will—like the wires—vibrate over all” (qtd. in Gilmore, *Aesthetic* 55). The telegraph is thus figured as an erotic body politic, a single female body that throbs and vibrates as it replicates itself endlessly. Such boundless self-reproduction threatens to annihilate the particularity of place, endlessly duplicating the same space until there is no *there*—all is *here*. This same singularity of experience is also evident in the *Harbinger* article cited in this chapter’s epigraph, “Magnetic Telegraph,” which notes that any event in any major city will be shared by all “at the very instant it happens” (26 July 1845; 104). This vision of the

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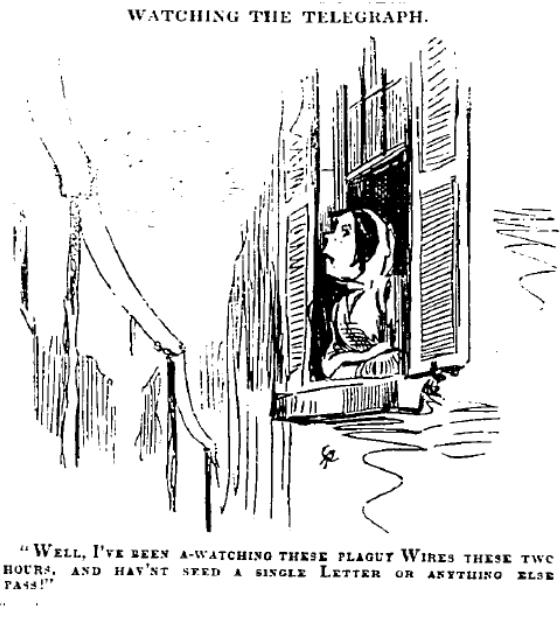
<sup>26</sup> As Frank Luther Mott notes, the *Philadelphia North American* (1876-1925) was “a famous daily newspaper.” The former editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, Morton McMichael, was editor of the *Philadelphia North American* for twenty-five years (IV: 674).

telegraph as instrument for dissolving difference also demonstrates how the impulse for egalitarianism is frequently imbricated in a more totalitarian tendency to obliterate all that is *not* “here,” all that is *not* me. In other words, equality comes through the erasure—rather than the affirmation—of difference.<sup>27</sup>

James Carey’s *Communication as Culture* similarly offers several examples of the telegraph’s first users careening from thoughts of universal brotherhood to imperialistic plunder. For example, Charles Briggs and Augustus Maverick, in 1858, predicted that “old prejudices and hostilities should no longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth” while Sir William Andrews, in 1857, predicted that a telegraph line would be the most efficient means “to develop the resources of India, and to consolidate British power and strengthen British rule in that country” (qtd. in Carey 209). Thus, in the same way that the mesmerized female body at once held the potential for a perfect spiritual co-mingling or a reassertion of masculine control over an inert female, the popular imagination similarly lent the telegraph the potential both to promote an unending similitude that would render all differences immaterial and the potential to reassert the period’s prevailing power structures.

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<sup>27</sup> Morse himself, in the earliest years of the telegraph, envisioned the “global village” ushered in by the technology. In 1838, he wrote that soon “the whole surface of this country would be channeled for those nerves which are to diffuse with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land; making in fact one neighborhood of the whole country” (qtd. in Czitrom 11-12 and Carey 207). Of course, contemporary studies of globalization and media similarly note the tendency for today’s communication technologies to promote homogenization, heterogenization, or both (see, for example, Terhi Rantanen’s *The Media and Globalization* or Colin Spark’s *Globalization, Development and the Mass Media*).



**Figure 8.** “Watching the Telegraph,” *Yankee Doodle* (19 Dec 1846): 158.

More humorous portrayals of the telegraph’s potential to dematerialize communication networks can be seen in a cartoon from *Yankee Doodle* in which a woman looks out her window at a telegraph wire above the caption: “Well, I’ve been a-watching these plaguy wires these two hours, and hav’nt seed a single letter or anything else pass!” (Figure 8);<sup>28</sup> here, the slips in language and the woman’s gap-mouthed wonder are presumably objects of the savvy reader’s ridicule. As Carolyn Marvin has explained, electricians and the cultural elite frequently established a professional persona in burgeoning electrical trade journals through portrayals of women and minorities as unwitting literalists struggling to grasp the theoretical complexities of wireless communication so abundantly obvious to male experts (17-32).<sup>29</sup> The cartoon also

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<sup>28</sup> *Yankee Doodle*, according to Mott, was a short-lived affair, lasting only one year (1846-7) despite the talents of contributors like Willis and Greeley. The New York-based magazine attempted to imitate *Punch* in America and was edited by the satirist Cornelius Mathews (I: 425).

<sup>29</sup> There is some evidence, too, that the humor of these illustrations is not wholly removed from lived experience. Andrew Wheen in *Dot-Dash to Dot.com: How Modern*

foregrounds the shift in communicative process from the visual to the auditory; after all, the humor of the cartoon's title ("Watching the Telegraph") hinges on the transition from the visual quality of letters and the auditory quality of the new communication medium. In this way, communication itself was increasingly perceived to be divested of its materiality.

Such humorous portrayals also demonstrate that this shift towards the dematerialization of commercial and social communication networks elicited anxiety, particularly from those invested in maintaining hierarchies of power that depended upon clear demarcations of bodily difference. Discussions surrounding the telegraph in the 1840s and 1850s invariably revealed an anxiety about the place for bodies in an age of increasingly disembodied communication, an anxiety that is also certainly apparent in Hawthorne's depiction of the mesmerized female body. As Paul Gilmore explains, the telegraph's capacity to "rematerializ[e] thought in the form of electricity" undermined the two predominant ideologies of racial difference in the antebellum period: biological difference based on geographic distinction of North and South as well as cultural difference based on myths of civilized progress. Gilmore writes, "Because the two reigning paradigms of race posited it in terms of either space (geographical determinism as biological essentialism) or time (cultural difference in terms of progressive, civilizationalist history), the telegraph's annihilation of space and time threatened to annihilate the very determinants of racial difference" (Gilmore "Telegraph" 822). The telegraph's disruption of racialized distinctions founded on geographic difference—its disruption of the power of the North and the South to shape black bodies differently, for

*Telecommunications Evolved* tells the story of one woman who "refused to accept a telegram from her son because she was sure that it was not his handwriting on the form" (17). He also notes that "wiring" money by telegraph prompted some to believe that coins and paper bills were physically transferred and that some people "started turning up at telegraph office with other small objects that they wished to send by telegraph" (17). Apparently, then, there is some evidence of this more literal response to the telegraph, but also evidence that humorous depictions served to reassert social and gender hierarchies that the telegraph might render obsolete.

example—is apparent in *The American Telegraph Magazine*'s commentary on Ithiel Richardson's latest telegraphic innovation.<sup>30</sup> As noted in the Senate Reports of Richardson's proposed "atmospheric telegraph," the device transmitted letters through cylinders by means of atmospheric pressure (1), but it was also somewhat misleadingly described in "The Atmospheric Telegraph" (April 1855) as "a means of conveying substances between distant points by the force of air" (145). The *American Telegraph Magazine*, resonating with this more spiritualist conception of the "atmospheric telegraph" in "Atmospheric (Subterranean) Telegraph vs. the 'Underground Railroad'" (July 1853), noted, "Were one of these 'Atmospheric Telegraphs' in operation any where near Mason and Dixon's Line, it would doubtless prove a powerful competitor with the 'Underground Railroad' in facilitating the flight of 'colored gemmen' on their way to Canada" (277). In conceiving of the telegraph as a means of tele-transportation, the telegraph itself is posited as a device that might undermine racial identities and racial hierarchies dependent on the body's location in geographic space.

Although Hawthorne's novel does not explicitly deal with questions of racial identity, the dynamic between Hollingsworth and Priscilla perhaps offers insight into the narrative's binary structures of black and white, male and female. After all, Hollingsworth's "dark" (28, 42, 71) and "swarthy" features (167) seem all the more so beside Priscilla's "wan" (27, 34, 59) and "pale" appearance (50, 85, 214). Indeed, the grand gusty arrival of Hollingsworth and Priscilla at Blithedale is a study in contrasts: Coverdale obscures Priscilla in whiteness, envisioning her as a "creature doomed to wander about in snowstorms" with "icicles in her hair," her skin a "wan, almost sickly hue, betokening habitual seclusion from the sun" (27); the blacksmith Hollingsworth, on

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<sup>30</sup> According to Mott, *The American Telegraph Magazine* (1852-53) was published out of New York (II: 92). As Menahem Blondheim explains, the magazine was edited by Donald Mann but primarily an organ of Mann's father-in-law, Henry O'Rielly. Blondheim writes, "[M]ost of the journal was written by O'Rielly himself, as patently indicated by annotations in his hand on the copy in the O'Rielly Telegraph Collection, New York Historical Society" (228).

the other hand, is a creature of black metal forged by sun-like heat, and he enters with a “dark complexion” and “massive and brawny” self-assurance which throws into relief Priscilla’s “slim and unsubstantial” form (28). Here, and throughout the novel, Coverdale contrasts the pallor and weakness of Priscilla’s womanhood with the dark masculine strength of Hollingsworth. These contrastive descriptions imply that each person’s singular identity is reliant upon the absolute contrast made evident by their joining, and that Coverdale relies upon such contrasts to recognize the individuality of the two. Surely this same method for arriving at a recognition of gender difference in the novel can also be applied more generally to the methods for arriving at a racial distinction of blackness and whiteness, even if Hollingsworth is not more explicitly racialized in the narrative. Such insistence to create stark categories suggests, perhaps, an uneasiness at the possibility of these categorical differences collapsing, and a deeper recognition that whiteness requires blackness in order for it to be recognized it as such.

Mesmerist performances, too, dramatized the potential for distinct identity categories to collapse during the mesmerist trance. For example, in the *Zoist*’s “Cure of Hysterical Epilepsy, Somnambulism, etc., with Mesmerism” (April 1845), Elliotson describes Eliot Warburton’s mesmerism of an unnamed black slave with a “gigantic frame” who, in the course of his trance, “seized a large vase of water, and dashed it into fragments,” then “tore up the divan” and “smashed a lantern into a thousand bits” (65).<sup>31</sup> The article continues, “All this was done by a slave in the presence of his master! When awakened, [the slave] was quite unconscious of all that he had done, but described his sensations as having been delightful—that of perfect freedom—of a man with all his rights, such as he had never felt before in his life” (65). The mesmerist performance thus

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<sup>31</sup> The performance was later described in other publications of the period, including George Sandby, *Mesmerism and Its Opponents: With a Narrative of Cases*. New York: Benjamin & Young, 1844: 342; “The Various Stages of the Mesmeric Condition,” *The American Phrenological Journal*, Vol. X: 386; and “The Various Stages of the Mesmeric Condition,” *The Literary World* (1847-1853), 3.83 (2 Sept 1848): 608.

staged the black slave in the process of mutinously assuming the freedom of a white body; significantly, though, the performance works at once to deconstruct corporeal limitations (suggesting that the body of a black slave *can* perform the destructive “freedom” of a white body) and reassert these limitations (since, after all, the slave is mesmerized by his master—and thus sanctioned by a white body—to perform such “mutinous” freedom).

Another mesmerist performance, in which a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old slave named “Charley” was “manipulated for about twenty minutes,” is described in the *Baltimore Patriot* and Washington’s *Daily National Intelligencer*. In this “investigation” of mesmerism, Charley’s mesmerist trance assumes the qualities of a minstrel show; as described by the *Intelligencer* in “Investigation on Mesmerism at Baltimore” (29 May 1843), when Charley’s “bumps of phrenology [are] touched” he sings the “exquisite negro melody, ‘Miss Lucy Long,’” then “wiggle[s] about as if he [were] dancing,” then “strut[s], button[s] his jacket, and proudly stretch[es] up his shirt-collar” (2). This performance of the mesmerized black body also affords the mesmerizer an opportunity to brutalize the mesmerized body since other physicians attending the performance “test” whether Charley is really “asleep” by bringing a candle close to his eye and applying ammonia to one nostril. The brutality of this “investigation” is apparent in the description of the physicians struggling to apply the ammonia: “Professor Harris secured his mouth and one nostril, and Professor Bond applied the ammonia. [Charley’s] head struggled hard for extrication from the grasp of Professor Harris, and he breathed or caught his breath through the Professor’s fingers” (2). The reporter notes that this “investigation” was staged “in the Assembly Rooms in the presence of a large audience” (2). Such performances implied that mesmerist science sanctioned—or even dictated—the abuse of black bodies in its attempt to reinforce identity difference. Despite this abuse, these mesmerized bodies were as elusive as those of young women, who were at once “empowered” to question the mesmerist’s authority and under the mesmerist’s spell.

Just as telegraphic and spiritual disembodiment staged both the liberatory potential and totalitarian control of black bodies, such performances similarly staged the liberation and control of the young white female bodies who were most frequently mesmerized for the public. As Jeffrey Sconce notes, women were able to “use the idea of the spiritual telegraph to imagine social and political possibilities beyond the immediate material restrictions placed on their bodies” (240). At the same time, however, the gendered dynamic of many mesmerist performances—with the older male physician mesmerizing the young female—also staged the continued imprisonment of the female body in the same way that Priscilla’s performance invites “country-fellows” to brutalize the white female body with their “hideous [...] clamor” (202). Such an invitation is not so dissimilar from the experiment conducted on “Charley,” or the activities of the examining committee in Cynthia Ann Gleason’s mesmerist performance, who “shook her, pricked her with pins, and even discharged revolvers by her ears” (Castronovo 240). These performances enabled audience members to act out fantasies of violence on docile bodies who were believed to be momentarily inhabiting the outer limits of the human realm.

At the same time, however, the mesmerized female similarly exerted control over the mesmerist, as is apparent in Elliotson’s “Note by Dr. Elliotson, on the Disturbances of Mesmeric Sleep-Waking” (October 1849). In this article, Elliotson describes a string of young women who refuse to respond to anyone but the mesmerist, which at first seems evidence of the mesmerist’s complete control over the female body. As Elliotson describes this phenomenon in more detail, however, it becomes clear that this refusal is a means of controlling the mesmerist as much as he believes himself to be controlling the patient. Elliotson writes that one patient “appeared not to hear any noise, however loud, sudden, or disagreeable, made by others, unless she mistook it for a noise made by me” (238), a selective deafness not so dissimilar from the one conjured by Priscilla’s mesmerist. In Elliotson’s description, the young woman’s finicky behavior does not

allow him to “mention any other person, nor even a living brute” in her presence. “Jealousy,” Dr. Elliotson notes, “could not be carried to a higher pitch,” and the patient habitually refused to awaken from her trance (238). Even in such descriptions, told from the perspective of the medical mesmerist, the reader can discern how the mesmerized young woman is in fact exerting her control over the physician-patient dynamic, using her trance to dictate who enters or leaves the room or even whether the mesmerist is capable of bringing her out of the trance. Yet, since these mesmerized performers so infrequently spoke candidly of their own performances, it is difficult to know if this upending of authority was deliberate.

Hawthorne, throughout his work, is sensitive to both possibilities inherent in the mesmeric performance: the opportunity of solidifying gendered power dynamics through the reenactment of female enslavement as well as the opportunity of acting out a more liberatory refusal to perform prescribed gender roles. In Hawthorne’s famous scene of mesmerism in *The House of the Seven Gables*, Alice—described as a “clear, crystal medium of a pure and virgin intelligence” (200)—is entranced by Matthew Maule. In her spell, Alice is “wholly impassive,” and even when her daze is broken, her steadfast submission to Maule’s will remains intact until her death. The narrator explains that a “power [...] had laid its grasp upon her maiden soul” and this momentary spiritual entrancement rendered her “Maule’s slave, in a bondage more humiliating, a thousand-fold, than that which binds its chain around the body” (208). In *Blithedale*, this spellbound obedience is revealed to be unstable, as Priscilla rises to greet Hollingsworth only seconds after her mesmerist announces that there does not “exist the moral inducement, apart from my own behest, that could persuade her to lift the silvery veil, or arise out of that chair!” (202). Although *Blithedale* does include this possibility for warring obediences, significantly Priscilla still remains in the thralls of masculine authority since she lifts her silvery veil in obedience to Hollingsworth; in short, she simply has a different “master.” Ultimately, then, it seems that both Alice and Priscilla

mark the extent to which the female body harbors the threatening power inherent in the act of mediumship but a power that is firmly under the masculine control of a Maule or a Hollingsworth.

Even as the mesmerist performance staged the anxieties surrounding female sexuality, it seems safe to say that such performances also reflected concerns surrounding the role of women in the public sphere, especially since new technologies like the telegraph and railroad promoted a restructuring of the public and private domain and new opportunities for women to participate in the public realm. On the rails, the lady traveler occupied a contradictory position, for she was at once perceived as a means of normalizing railway travel and as a threat to bourgeois property and consumer culture. In *Home on the Rails*, Amy Richter traces the changes made by Pullman in the elaborate decor of railroad compartments, arguing that these changes assured travelers that the feminized morality of the domestic space had a place on board the train and that business travel for men could become leisure travel for women. Similarly, female telegraph operators were at times portrayed as offering domestic comfort to the otherwise bleak public space of the telegraph depot. For example, in “Women as Telegraph Operators” published in *Electrical World* (26 June 1886), the author describes the “pretty lace of muslin curtain at the window,” the “flowering plants,” or the “vine trained up over the red door” as “signs of the feminine presence” in lonely frontier telegraph outposts (296). Although this article was published much later than the mid-century, there is evidence that public spaces of communication exchange and transportation were becoming increasingly marked by a “feminine” presence much earlier and that this presence was not, of course, only apparent in decorative flourishes like plants and curtains.

As early as the 1850s, the British Electric and International Telegraph Company hired women and declared them “more teachable, more attentive, and quicker-eyed” than male clerks and, unsurprisingly, “sooner satisfied with low wages” (156), according to an article by Maria Susan Rye published in 1859 in the *English Woman’s Journal*. In

America, women were similarly employed in the 1850s, especially as clerks subservient to the first-class operator jobs, like “counterwomen” or “check-girls” who provided stamps, distributed telegram forms, and so on (Jepsen 25). As Edwin Gabler explains in his seminal social history of telegraph workers, the female telegrapher in America was usually in her late teens or early twenties and was typically stationed at a smaller facility, like “isolated railroad junctions or one-woman branch offices in hotels and other public places” (108). Given the lack of census data on female workers, it is difficult to establish the numbers or percentages of women employed in telegraph offices in the 1850s, but it appears that as early as 1846 Sarah Bagley was appointed superintendent of the New York and Boston Magnetic Telegraph Company office in Lowell, Massachusetts (Jepsen 3).<sup>32</sup> In the early 1850s, Emma Hunter managed a wire near Philadelphia, and a fourteen-year-old girl, Ellen Laughton, managed an office at Dover, New Hampshire (Gabler 107). Young women in America began to pursue these careers with more frequency during the Civil War, as the need for telegraphic transmission increased and as male telegraphers left the operating room for the battlefield.<sup>33</sup> After all, for women, telegraphy still paid better than almost any other job available, and it was also a more prestigious position than factory work or domestic service (Beauchamp 77; Lubrano

<sup>32</sup> Similarly, David Henkin notes in his study on the mid-century postal system that counters and lobbies were segregated in post offices and “had the (presumably deliberate) effect of marginalizing women’s participation in this arena of postal life and reaffirming the masculinity of the larger space” (75). Segregated counters in telegraph offices surely served a similar purpose in limiting the extent of female involvement in the public realm.

<sup>33</sup> As Katherine Stubbs argues, “By the 1860s, Western Union’s preference for female operators was unmistakable” (96). Western Union offered an 8-month telegraphy course in 1869 at the Cooper Union Institute in New York with the explicit goal of training female operators. In 1863, a Western Union superintendent declared that “ultimately a large proportion of telegraphists [...] would be females” (Stubbs 96). This prediction was accurate, although it took several decades for women to assume a larger percentage of the telegraph labor force. While women comprised 4% of the total number of telegraph employees in an 1870 Census, they made up 12% of the total in the 1900 Census (Gabler 109). For this reason, almost all scholarly research on female operators is focused on the 1860s onwards despite the presence of a limited number of operators in stations as early as the 1840s.

135). To some extent, then, women were already becoming included in a more public realm merely through their presence in telegraph offices, even if they weren't drawing attention to this presence by prettifying these bureaucratic spaces with domestic flourishes.

Although it seems that some “lady operators” *were* quite comfortable drawing attention to their presence at telegraph stations, more often these operators were hidden behind a screen and segregated from male operators, a fact which implies some anxiety surrounding their inclusion in the workforce (Jepsen 27). For example, women had their own operating room in Chicago (Gabler 111); their own department, under a matron, in 1854 at The British Electric Telegraph Company (“Interesting to Ladies”; “Female Telegraph Operators”); and, as Lewis Smith, the editor of the *Telegrapher*,<sup>34</sup> explained in 1865, a woman telegrapher was typically “cooped up by herself or with others of her sex” (Gabler 115). Anxiety surrounding the incursion of women into the telegraph workforce—even under segregated circumstances—is also apparent by the increasing effort to limit their numbers in the labor pool. The National Telegraphic Union, the first professional organization founded for telegraphers, included women in its ranks, but as early as the 1860s some members tacked a “No Girls Allowed” sign to the organization’s front door, and one member wrote in 1864 that his fellow operators must “keep the ladies out of the National Telegraphic Union, and also as much as possible off the lines” (Gabler 131). In short, even though telegraphy was offering women an opportunity of working in a semi-public place, their public presence was both circumscribed and objectionable to some.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Telegrapher* was the official publication of the first organization for telegraphers, the National Telegraphic Union, founded in 1863. It was read widely across the United States, with an initial circulation of twelve hundred readers at its first publication in September 1864. As Thomas Jepsen explains, arguments about female operators frequently flared up in its pages throughout the 1860s. For an overview of these discussions, see Jepsen pp. 82-90. Although there isn’t a single publication which collects these debates in the 1850s, scattered remarks in other periodicals do suggest that female operators were already becoming a concern to many telegraphers.

Telegraphy not only aroused anxieties about female operators working in public, but also, even more basically, about female patrons sending messages without the approval of the masculine authority figures in their lives. For example, the article “Marriage by the Telegraph” (15 October 1846), published in the weekly abolitionist newspaper *The New York Evangelist*, describes a “young lady, a daughter to one of the wealthiest merchants in Boston,” who formed an attachment to her father’s clerk (168). The father was aware of this attachment but had plans to marry the daughter to a gentleman, and thus attempted to thwart the budding affections of the two by shipping the clerk off to England and setting a date for the daughter’s marriage to the gentleman. The daughter discovered her father’s plan just as the clerk arrived in New York on the first leg of his journey, and the two lovers (along with a magistrate) made their separate ways to a telegraphic office in Boston and New York: “[W]ith the aid of the lightning, they were made bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh” (168). To the father’s chagrin, the article continues, such a marriage was entirely valid and binding. In the same way that anxiety about female mobility became expressed through stories of escape via the railway, anxiety about feminine empowerment through the telegraph seems apparent in the banker’s anguish at the fate of his unruly daughter.<sup>35</sup> The article portrays the telegraph as an instrument that will undermine the dictates of masculine authority and upend the social order by supplanting gentlemen with clerks.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), which tells the story of Lady Isabel Vane, who yields to the advances of a dissolute former lover and abandons her husband and infant children. Shortly thereafter, a train accident leaves her disfigured beyond recognition, as if the railway were an instrument of justice for her impropriety. Other stories similarly use the train as a mechanism for restraining the “hypersexual,” transgressive feminine body through portrayals of feminine injury and disfigurement. See the portrayal of Mrs. Rayner in George W.M. Reynold’s *Mysteries of the Court of London* (1855), Etta in the *Frank Leslie’s* short story “Norman Elwyn’s First Wife” (April 1876), *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877), or the adventuress in Colonel Richard Henry Savage’s romance *The Masked Venus* (1893).

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Marvin demonstrates that such anxieties adhered to the telegraph later in the century. She cites the example of a couple—Sarah Orten and Thomas Welch—marrying in a telegraphic ceremony in 1883 before ever meeting face-to-face. When Orten realized that Welch was “a colored man,” she quickly sought to annul the marriage (93-4). Public interest in the case

On a broader scale, too, the telegraph instituted other restructurings of the conception of privacy since communication by electric telegraph exposed the potential for surreptitious surveillance by those intended to be passive transmitters of private information (Welsh 58). Whereas a closed letter implied privacy, the multiple transmissions from patron to clerk to operator to clerk to patron implied that one's private message would be heard by several others before reaching its intended recipient. The "telegraphic romances" of the 1870s, which typically center on female telegraphers who develop relationships with male operators "over the wires," surely stemmed from a continuing anxiety about the telegraph promoting clandestine conversations between men and women.<sup>37</sup> Even later in the century, Henry James's "In the Cage" (1898) reflects the concern that female telegraphists might be more than passive transmitters of code; an unnamed female telegraph operator in London deduces personal information about patrons based on the cryptic messages they ask her to submit in her "cage." Although most literary scholars have focused on how the telegraph restructured notions of private and public spheres later in the decade, it is clear that authors like Hawthorne were already engaging with such notions in the early 1850s.

Hawthorne's consideration of these shifting conceptions of commercial and domestic space is perhaps most apparent in his much more frequently discussed treatment of the telegraph in *The House of the Seven Gables*. While most critics have focused on Clifford's explicit references to the telegraph and the railroad,<sup>38</sup> more subtle

reveals that the telegraph continued to elicit fears that race could be concealed over the wires or that the "sanctity" of white womanhood could be corrupted through telegraphic unions.

<sup>37</sup> See Katherine Stubbs's "Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions" in *New Media, 1740-1915*, pp. 91-111, for an overview of these telegraphic romances in the 1870s.

<sup>38</sup> To name only a few scholars who have considered this famous dialogue between Clifford Pyncheon and a fellow passenger onboard the train: Stuart Burrows, in *A Familiar Strangeness*, interestingly notes that this scene is significant less as a rumination on telegraphic potential and more as a consideration of narrative structure. As Burrows explains, "to describe is to enact in Hawthorne's novel" (69); after all, Clifford's story about a criminal caught by telegraph arouses the suspicion of his interlocutor and threatens to expose Clifford in the same

engagements with the telegraph, sound, and embodiment take place in the narrative's opening scenes with Hepzibah Pyncheon. The reader is first introduced to Miss Hepzibah not through extended visual portraiture, but through the "heavy sighs that labored from her bosom, with little restraint as to their lugubrious depth and volume of sound, inasmuch as they could be audible to nobody, save a disembodied listener like *ourselves*" (30). The reader, like the operator on the receiving end of a telegraphic transmission, is immediately established as a disembodied auditor eavesdropping on another through nonverbal sounds. Similarly, this moment suggests that the act of reading, like the telegraphic relay of private missives coded over public wires, grants disembodied access to another's most private moment.

The telegraph is further linked to the co-mingling of public and private space when the first guest enters the store that Hepzibah has been reduced to establishing in her home. Sound again significantly marks this intrusion into the domestic: the shop bell, which disrupts the sanctity of the home at its every "ugly and spiteful" tinkling (42), functions as a noise which mechanizes the body and taints the home with the habitus of the marketplace but also places Hepzibah into closer contact with the democratic hustle and bustle of the street. The narrator's descriptions of the shop bell's sound and its

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way as the man in the story he has told. This interpretation seems particularly notable since Hawthorne does frequently use the telegraph in his narratives as a way of exploring the process of narration itself. Paul Gilmore provides a closer reading of attitudes towards telegraphy in this scene, arguing that Clifford initially envisions the telegraph as a promoter of "one vast interconnected realm of private intimacy" but the realizes how discordant the telegraph's public and social uses are with this dream (*Aesthetic Materialism* 80). Such lapsed idealism certainly resonates with the portrayal of the telegraph and communal living in *The Blithedale Romance*. Peter West similarly argues that the scene reveals telegraphy's position as a "highly unstable symbol in the popular imagination," capable of both preventing and facilitating criminal behavior (88). Finally, Sam Halliday notes that this dialogue reveals the broader overlap between technology, the occult, science, and human sociality (97). While many scholars have considered how this explicit reference to the telegraph conforms to Hawthorne's attitudes towards the technology and his aesthetic, few have considered how the novel's opening scenes set the stage for this set piece.

associations with nerves and vibration certainly seem to imply a connection to electrical communicative pulsations over telegraph wires:

This little bell [...] was so contrived as to vibrate by means of a steel-spring, and thus convey notice to the inner regions of the house, when any customer should cross the threshold. Its ugly and spiteful little din [...] at once set every nerve of her [Hepzibah's] body in tumultuous vibration. The crisis was upon her! Her first customer was at the door! (42)

Like the telegraph, the shop bell's soundings communicate a clearly coded message to Hepzibah ("a customer is at the door!") and Hepzibah's body occupies the same position as those mesmerized mediums and the telegraph wire itself, channeling the invisible vibrations of the shop bell within "every nerve." As the first guest crosses the threshold of the home and (as the narrator notes) the reader similarly "loiter[s] faintheartedly on the threshold of our story" (31), Hepzibah is transformed into both a telegraph operator and a telegraphic medium in her new position as shop clerk, just like the mesmerized mediums of the *Zoist*. Further support that Hawthorne associates this shop bell with the telegraph can be found in the identity of this first guest: it is not, as Hepzibah so anxiously anticipates, her first customer, but the daguerreotypist, who is merely ensuring that all is well at the grand opening. The daguerreotypist, a descendant of the mesmerizing Maule and himself a plier of the mesmerist trade before he turned his hand to daguerreotypy, makes for a fitting first transmitter of telegraphic communiqués through bodily nerves and vibrations.

Commerce is again linked to the electrical exchange of telegraphy later in this chapter, when the first customer does arrive and officially renders the domestic space a place of market exchange. When he turns over his money, the narrator notes, "That little circlet of the schoolboy's copper-coin [...] had proved a talisman, fragrant with good, and deserving to be sent in gold and worn next to her [Hepzibah's] heart. It was as potent, and perhaps endowed with the same kind of efficacy, as a galvanic ring!" (52).

Coins and commerce thus supply Hepzibah, as medium, with an electrically charged current that restores the body earlier wracked by sighs. In this opening chapter, the narrator of *House of the Seven Gables* conflates commerce, electricity, the nerves of the body, and the reading process, implying that telegraphic communication has become associated with an ever-widening realm of both commercial and narrative exchange.

*Blithedale's* Priscilla, like Hepzibah, demonstrates how the female body became increasingly figured as the interface between telegraphic mediumship and the period's rapidly expanding commercial and social networks. When Coverdale first meets Priscilla, the magnetic and maternal "passes" of Zenobia usher her into the community. Coverdale explains that Zenobia "went towards Priscilla, took her hand, and passed her own rosy finger-tips, with a pretty, caressing movement, over the girl's hair. The touch had a magical effect. So vivid a look of joy flushed up beneath those fingers, that it seemed as if the sad and wan Priscilla had been snatched away, and another kind of creature substituted in her place" (34-5). Although Zenobia is figured as the mesmerist in this scene, it seems significant to note that Coverdale most frequently effects the "substitutions" typically ascribed to the mesmerist performer, as he does here.

Coverdale as narrator is in a constant process of substitution as he describes Priscilla, who is at first the Veiled Lady he has himself seen, then a "wan" mysterious intruder, then a spritely and beloved member of Blithedale Farm, then the Veiled Lady of Zenobia's Legend, and then a ghostly Margaret Fuller as she delivers Fuller's letter to Coverdale. Such a conflation of bodies is especially striking since scholars most frequently consider Zenobia to represent Margaret Fuller in the novel, implying that Priscilla in this moment is also serving as a double for her half-sister.<sup>39</sup> Coverdale's

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Louise Cary's *American Transcendental Quarterly* 4 (1990): 31-48; Thomas Mitchell's *Hawthorne's Fuller Mystery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); and Bell Gale Chevigny's *The Woman and the Myth* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1976).

process of substitution is especially shocking when the narrator describes a coin purse as a proxy for Priscilla's body at the very moment that she assumes a working role in the commune. Coverdale offers a poetic parallel between Priscilla's handiwork and the metaphorical qualities of her spirit as well as a coarser connection between a coin purse symbolic of economic exchange and Priscilla's genitalia:

She now produced, out of a work-bag that she had with her, some little wooden instruments, (what they are called, I never knew,) and proceeded to knit, or net, an article which ultimately took the shape of a silk purse. As the work went on, I remembered to have seen just such purses, before. Indeed, I was the possessor of one. Their peculiar excellence, besides the great delicacy and beauty of the manufacture, lay in the almost impossibility that any uninitiated person should discover the aperture; although, to a practiced touch, they would open as wide as charity or prodigality might wish. I wondered if it were not a symbol of Priscilla's own mystery (35).

Although Coverdale certainly does not equate Priscilla's body—or, for that matter, the coin purse—with the telegraph here, the portrayal of Priscilla throughout the narrative as a telegraphic medium implies that the female body in *Blithedale*, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*, is associated with the market exchange symbolized by telegraphic commerce. Indeed, Priscilla and Zenobia are the two women most frequently participating in mesmerist trances—either as the mesmerizer or the mesmerized—perhaps because they have begun to circulate in public.

Connecting Priscilla's “mystery” and sexual allure to commerce and telegraphy reflects a broader cultural nervousness about the period’s rapidly expanding information networks. Both women—the purse-sewing Priscilla and the shop-opening Hepzibah—mark the incursion of commerce into the private space through the telegraphic metaphors of mesmerism and the shop bell. This conflation of the marketplace, feminine bodies, and telegraphy isn’t surprising since the telegraph began restructuring domestic and local markets in the 1850s in the same way that the railroad began rerouting conceptions of space and time in the same period. As Gary Fields explains, the 1850s marked a shift away from water transports in interregional commerce and towards land transports

dominated by the railroad and telegraph. Just as Schivelbusch notes that the railroad slowly obliterated notions of the local through the standardization of time (though North America didn't officially adopt standard railway time until 1883), the localized market structure which predominated before the 1850s was increasingly opening to a more geographically extensive network as a result of the telegraph's rapid circulation of information despite geographic barriers (Fields 67). After all, while early railroad lines tended to be short and comparatively regional, funded by local business interests, investors in early telegraph lines quickly began to string up interregional wires.<sup>40</sup>

As the Irish scientific writer Dionysius Lardner noted in *The Electric Telegraph Popularized* (1855), it was “a fact well known that the electric telegraph is much more extensively used for all purposes, political, commercial, and domestic, in the United States” than in any part of Europe (89). By 1850, the directors of Bain’s New York lines reported that the telegraph was used by commercial men almost as much as the mail, and, as Lardner explains, “If there are ‘ups and downs’ in the market, money is lavished upon the telegraph freely” (90). This restructuring of markets was discernible as well in the process of conducting business transactions instantaneously between parties separated by hundreds of miles. These types of transactions were presumably less familiar to Lardner’s British audience since he dwells at length on the process: “An hour is

<sup>40</sup> Although Morse told the Secretary of the Treasury that he would “prefer that the Government should possess the invention,” Congress ultimately refused to fund any telegraph lines after the development of the first line from Washington to Baltimore (Thompson 30-34). Morse then hired Amos Kendall, a journalist and former Postmaster General, to recruit private enterprises to develop the telegraph network (Thompson 39-40). Kendall patched together enough modest subscriptions from prominent financiers and friends of the patentees to build a second line between New York and Philadelphia as well as establish the Magnetic Telegraph Company, America’s first telegraph company, in 1845. Hundreds of telegraph companies comprised of private investors cropped up throughout the 1850s, expanding their reach far beyond the local. For example, business executive Hiram Sibley, based in Rochester, New York, formed the new York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company in 1854. This company, which was later consolidated with several other companies to form the Western Union Telegraph Company, arranged the construction of lines to Detroit and Chicago, and eventually the Pacific. As Thompson writes, Sibley’s telegraph companies “embarked upon a career of conquest which has seldom been equaled in corporate history” (276). In short, from the earliest days of the telegraph, promoters of the technology pushed private investors and the public to consider the importance of expanding a communication network beyond the local or even regional.

appointed to meet in the respective offices, and they [American businessmen] converse through the operator. Cases may be mentioned of steamboats being sold over the wires—the one party being in Pittsburgh, the other in Cincinnati. Each party wrote down what they had to say, higgled awhile, and finally concluded the sale” (90). In sum, it seems clear that Hawthorne’s contemporaries would already be well aware of the telegraph’s potential both to facilitate advantageous market exchanges and to render local identities less salient. The telegraph, like Blithedale Farm, served at once as a symbol of the community at its most fruitful and yet in decline.

In *Blithedale*, the tension between the promise of instantaneously connected markets and the dissolution of local markets applies as well to the narrative’s social politics. Descriptions of spiritualism and telegraphy’s shared potential for both liberal egalitarianism (through the dissolution of bodily difference) and totalitarian control (through the creation of a homogenized citizenry) suggests that egalitarian praxis can collapse at once into dictatorial control, a collapse which is clearly evidenced for Coverdale at Blithedale. The creation of homogeneity through shared experience is frequently presented as a threat in the novel; for example, as Coverdale gazes on the “general sameness” of the fashionable dwellings across from hotel room, he notes that he can “only conceive of the inhabitants as cut out on one identical pattern, like little wooden toy-people of German manufacture,” so similar that “[i]t seemed hardly worth while for more than one of those families to be in existence” (149-50). The “sameness” that Coverdale remarks in the families across the way from his hotel reverberates not only with his experience at Blithedale but also with the Veiled Lady’s own mesmerist performance. After all, the spiritualism exemplified by the Veiled Lady exhibit promises to herald “a new era that would link soul to soul” and create “one great, mutually conscious brotherhood,” a promise which isn’t so dissimilar from Coverdale’s description of shared sympathy at Blithedale, where “[i]f one of us happened to give his neighbor a box on the ear, the tingle was immediately felt on the same side of everybody’s head”

(139). This metaphor of communicative “tingles” conjures the image of the spirit battery, where men and women are linked as one body by a magnetized rope.

This unending similitude, heralded by the telegraph and initially sought after by Coverdale as he departs for Blithedale, propels him to seek out exoticized difference in the same way that the “surrogate landscape” of his railway novel pushes him to his hotel window. As Coverdale himself notes, this homogenized citizenry inspires an imperial desire, with all of its trappings of adventure and conquest. After Coverdale describes the shared sympathy and sameness of Blithedale, he notes, “I felt an inexpressible longing for at least a temporary novelty. I thought of going across the Rocky Mountains, or to Europe, or up the Nile; of offering myself a volunteer on the Exploring Expedition” (140). In other words, the homogeneity of the *here* (which “new machines” like the train and the telegraph were presumed to be manufacturing) propels a Coverdale to seek out the same type of spatial annihilation that Priscilla offers in her performance. And yet, this shared impulse to escape the *here* suggests that eventually there will be no *there* there—that all will be “here,” endless replication and similitude, the “no place” from which “utopia” derives its name. Perhaps, then, the similitude presumably caused in part by telegraphic communication creates a desire in someone like Coverdale to reassert embodied difference—to seek out spaces as yet untouched by the synapses of the telegraph, where individual and differentiated identity can ostensibly flourish.

While Russ Castronovo reads Coverdale’s final confession as a desire to *be* the inert but powerful body of Priscilla, the moments of disembodied sound in the narrative reveal Coverdale’s countervailing desire to attach disembodied sound to individualized, historically contingent bodies. Coverdale’s desire to moor disembodied sound to specific bodies is a response in part to the two different but related threats posed by telegraphy: first, the dissolution of social hierarchies constructed on bodily difference; and second, the homogenization of spirit through instantaneously shared experience. The telegraphic qualities of Priscilla’s performance, along with the mesmerized bodies in the *Zoist*, ask

readers to consider the role of nonverbal and extra-linguistic sound—so essential to telegraphic communication, which converts text to encoded taps—in the novel’s treatment of spiritualism. Both Russ Castronovo and Samuel Coale mention the rappings of the Fox sisters as inspiration for *Blithedale*’s spiritualism (Castronovo 241; Coale 106-7), and given the telegraphic quality of the *Zoist*’s mesmerized bodies it seems important to be more attentive to the novel’s own knocks and rappings as conflations of telegraphic and spiritualist communication.

Priscilla, who is clearly positioned as a medium throughout the novel, frequently pauses as if an auditor of spirits. Priscilla clutches Zenobia’s robe “with precisely the air of one who hears her own name spoken, at a distance, but is unutterably reluctant to obey the call” (36); she again, after an exciting frolic that leaves her acting in “the custom of young girls, when their electricity overcharges them,” pauses and “appear[s] to listen, as if she had heard some one calling her name, and knew not precisely in what direction” (60); in recalling a “dismal” memory, she makes an “unintelligible gesture” and “seemed to be listening to a distant voice” (75); when Coverdale encounters her again in the drawing room, she sits “with her head thrown back” and “seemed to be listening to an imperfectly distinguished sound” (158), just as Alice Pyncheon appears to listen to Matthew Maule’s distant commands in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Even outside of the role of the Veiled Lady, Priscilla’s electrical sensitivity renders her an appropriate metaphor for telegraphic transmissions and soundings.

Perhaps the most notable example of Priscilla’s alignment with the telegraph takes place as she participates in a type of communication exchange predating the technology: the embodied delivery of letters. As Priscilla visits Coverdale with letters, she seems to be directly channeling the spirit of the person transmitting the message, as so many first believed the telegraph could do. In this way, Priscilla seems a representative of an “updated” mode of communication that offers more immediate and material access to those at a distance. As Coverdale describes, when Priscilla delivers

Margaret Fuller's letter to him, Fuller's spirit appears to inhabit her body: "[H]er air, though not her figure, and the expression on her face, but not its features, had a resemblance to what I had often seen in a friend of mine, one of the most gifted women of the age [...]. It was a singular anomaly of likeness coexisting with perfect dissimilitude" (52). Coverdale implies that Priscilla is at once wholly herself and wholly Margaret Fuller. To Coverdale's shock, the letter Priscilla has come to deliver is in fact from the woman whose very "air" and "expression" Priscilla had assumed before handing him the letter. Coverdale asks Priscilla, "[D]id you ever see Miss Margaret Fuller? [...] [Y]ou reminded me of her just now,—and it happens, strangely enough, that this very letter is from her" (42). Hawthorne, in selecting Fuller as the channeled spirit, alludes to yet another mesmerized female reverberating in popular culture of the period: Frederica Hauffe, also known as the Seeress of Prevort, and described extensively in Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1843). As Fuller describes, Frederica Hauffe, acutely sensible to "magnetic and ghostly influences" (83), falls into "magnetic sleep" which renders her both a receptor and transmitter of "nerve communications of others" (90). Like Hawthorne, Fuller associates this feminine magnetic medium with the telegraph, endowing her with the power of discerning electricity and linguistic codes through her extraordinary perceptive faculties: "The electric fluid was visible and sensible to her when it was not to us. Yea! what is incredible! Even the written words of men she could discriminate by touch" (91). Like Coverdale, Hawthorne recognizes that his Veiled Lady comes from a multifarious "sisterhood" that counts in its ranks women like Frederica Hauffe, Alice Pyncheon, the O'Key sisters, and apparently Margaret Fuller herself.<sup>41</sup>

Yet Priscilla's rappings before she enters Coverdale's room also interestingly seem to position *her* as the communicative spirit and Coverdale, in his debilitated state,

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<sup>41</sup> The trope of the mesmerized female continues well into the end of the century with such texts as Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1885-1886) and George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1895).

as the frail and effeminate medium. Coverdale notes, “One forenoon, during my convalescence, there came a gentle tap at my chamber-door. I immediately said—‘Come in, Priscilla!’—with an acute sense of the applicant’s identity” (50). In fact, during this period of illness, Coverdale repeatedly positions himself as the telegraphic medium. Just as Zenobia mesmerizes Priscilla in her initiation into the commune, Coverdale notes that “Zenobia’s sphere [...] impressed itself powerfully on mine, and transformed me, during this period of my weakness, into something like a mesmerical clairvoyant” (47). Coverdale scripts mesmeric powers as feminine illness, but the narrator’s ability to read spirit in sound continues throughout the narrative. His attempt to feminize his clairvoyance—or dismiss it as merely a product of an illness that weakens and therefore, by his own categorical notions, feminizes him—only marks the extent to which he is uncomfortable by the dissolution of these categories of gender identities.

More interesting, perhaps, is how the novel’s rappings also place Hollingsworth—the “swarthy” man of iron, “black brows,” and implacable purpose—in the spirit realm. After all, the reader is first introduced to Hollingsworth through his insistent rappings at Simon Foster’s farmhouse door: “The first had been moderately loud; the second was smitten so forcibly that the knuckles of the applicant must have left their mark in the door-panel” (26). Zenobia, who has never “personally” met Hollingsworth, but knows him only by his entrancing voice at lectures, exclaims, “It must be Mr. Hollingsworth!” (21, 26). A similar impulse to identify the contours of bodily identity in disembodied sound occurs at the end of the novel, when Coverdale identifies Zenobia’s body in a strain of music that she plays on the piano: “I heard a rich, and, as it were, triumphant burst of music from a piano, in which I felt Zenobia’s character, although heretofore I had known nothing of her skill upon the instrument” (162). Westervelt, too, is first identified by Coverdale in the woods through his “peculiar laugh” (101). Through these moments, the narrative argues that perceptive auditors can identify the bodily and spiritual contours of personhood in apparently disembodied sound, perhaps implying as

well that the mechanical sounds of telegraphic relay could reveal critical information identifying the bodies of the patrons submitting them.

In this way, both the *Zoist* and *Blithedale* dramatize a desire to embody an increasingly disembodied communication network—or, at least, a desire to position extra-linguistic sound (knocks, raps, music notes, laughs)—in individually identifiable, historically contingent, gendered and racialized bodies. Of course, the disembodied sounds in the novel—bursts of piano music, laughter, knocks on doors—are all sounds which are contingent on bodies. Yet, although a knock on a door seems in no way contingent on physiological difference—*any* body would make the same knock on a door—for Coverdale physiology *does* intrude and *must* intrude on actions as simple as door rapping. The disembodied sound of Hollingsworth’s knock can be anchored to his body because it is delivered manfully, with a forcefulness that demonstrates “he had a right to come in” (26), while Priscilla’s “gentle tap” functions as an apologetic feminine supplication to be permitted to enter (50). Even the apparently disembodied knocks, then, are scripted by an embodied conception of gender difference. What does it mean that Coverdale must reassert the body in this novel which threatens so frequently to dissolve bodily distinctions in disembodied sound? Perhaps that Coverdale’s persistent desire to access that seat of privacy behind the veil—his desire to know the unique personhood which sits beneath the iterations of a single homogenized spirit—must come at the expense of the maintenance of a gender hierarchy. For Coverdale, “knowing” Priscilla requires the unveiling of her multiple identities (as Old Moodie’s daughter and Zenobia’s half-sister, as a mesmerist performer controlled by Professor Westervelt, as the love interest of first Hollingsworth and then Coverdale himself), but this very unveiling requires that she continue to occupy roles wholly defined by her feminine identity. Priscilla’s ultimate privacy is a feminine one, and Coverdale’s insistence on maintaining gender difference ensures that he cannot access it.

Perhaps most interestingly, Coverdale does not exclude his own body from this narrative impulse to attach disembodied sound to embodied presence. Even as Coverdale's confession at the end of the novel assumes disembodied vocal qualities in its telegraphic faltering dashes ("I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!"), his own body is at once absented and intruded into this final confession. To mark the passage of time between the events described and the present moment of the confession, Coverdale offers his aging body up for the reader's contemplation, conjuring "a man of the world [...] with these three white hairs in his brown mustache and that deepening track of a crow's-foot on each temple" (247). Such embodied presence seems to serve at first to emphasize the intimacy of Coverdale's confession, an intimacy suggested as well by the vocal quality of his disclosure: the secret, Coverdale says, "rises to my throat; so let it come" (247). The reader, Coverdale continues, is "entitled to one word more," a phrasing which subtly evacuates the sensory perception of the reader (after all, the reader might be entitled "to hear" one word more or "to see" one word more). Coverdale, in the final moments of the novel, further intrudes his body since he prefaces his halting telegraphic confession thus: "As I write it, he [the reader] will charitably suppose me to blush, and turn away my face" (247). Even the telegraphic dashes of Coverdale's last sentence ask the reader to *hear* Coverdale's body relaying this message—to hear him pausing dramatically for breath as he performs his struggle to disclose his last secret.<sup>42</sup>

It seems, then, that in this final near telegraphic communiqué Coverdale asks the reader to "pretend" to see his own blushing body and to hear his own vocalization in those telegraphic dashes. Coverdale, in other words, asks the reader in these final moments to assume the role which he himself has taken on as a narrator throughout the

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<sup>42</sup> Jerusha Hull McCormack connects the punctuation mark of the dash explicitly to telegraphic discourse, noting that telegrams were "informal (yet written), sudden, urgent, preemptive, breathless, intensely personal" (574)—all qualities evoked by the dash and all qualities descriptive of Coverdale's final communiqué to the reader.

novel, identifying embodied presence in disembodied sound. In this moment, which so completely collapses the distinction between the intimate equality established through shared secrets and the dictatorial control of a narrator who has the power to withhold information, Coverdale asks the reader to endow his disembodied words with corporeality even as he acknowledges that his body has already been erased. Coverdale can only ask the reader to *suppose* him to blush, to *imagine* a body which blushes even as it writes. Russ Castronovo's reading of the Veiled Lady suggests that the masculine bourgeois spectator wants to *be* Priscilla—wants to *be* the passive and disembodied subject on display.<sup>43</sup> However, a reading which sounds the novel for its telegraphic influences highlights the ways in which Coverdale as narrator, insistently voyeuristic and on display, already *is* that disembodied voice, even in—and perhaps especially in—the moment when he attempts to perform the embodied communication that the telegraph threatened to obliterate.

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<sup>43</sup> Russ Castronovo writes, “Such male passion should not be confused with sexual desire *for* passive disempowered subjects; instead, their desire was *to be like* these girls, protected from labor and alienated from heterogeneous participating in community” (243). Despite Coverdale’s own insistence of passion *for* Priscilla, it seems clear that he already is a surrogate for Priscilla, that the very act of narrating his story has been an attempt at a form of “resurrection” (of both his own body and Priscilla’s), an act which isn’t so dissimilar from Elliotson’s claim that he could breathe new life into an inert female body.

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**CHAPTER 2**

“LINKING HEART UNTO HEART”:  
ELECTRIFYING RHETORIC AND (DIS)EMBODIED IDENTITIES IN  
WILLIAM WELLS BROWN’S *CLOTEL* (1853)

In 1847, only three years after Morse transmitted his first telegraphic message from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, the telegraph had already begun to orient fugitive slaves as a surrogate North Star. William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* (1831-1865), the leading abolitionist newspaper in America, describes this unexpected repurposing of the telegraph in “The Telegraph and the Slave” (20 August 1847). The article first explains that a slave listened surreptitiously as his master conversed with a neighbor about “the telegraph and its wonderful operation” (136). After eavesdropping, the slave decides to “avail himself of the guidance of the telegraph on his way North” (136), staking his freedom on the modern machine rather than the divine assistance of the firmament. The slave traveled “with no other guide in the darkest night but the wires and posts of the telegraph, and finally effected his escape into the free States” (136). The metaphorical and moral resonances of the North Star are thus bestowed on wires and posts, and the story implicitly suggests that all telegraph poles lead north, associating the progressive politics of the North with the technological advancements of the telegraph. In addition, the article traces a transformation from the oral conveyance of information via the “grapevine telegraph” of plantation gossip to the actual telegraph’s delivery of black bodies out of slavery. In this way, *The Liberator* suggests that the telegraph as a material object itself—and not merely as a symbol of unfettered communication—became an instrument for liberty. While the Boston minister Ezra Gannett noted in 1858 that telegraphy rendered electricity a “slave” to man (7), abolitionists and the African American presses repeatedly sought to align the telegraph with freedom rather than enslavement throughout the mid-century.

While some slaves clearly did avail themselves of the telegraph wires in their escapes, the technology was most frequently deployed in abolitionist discourse to serve two apparently contradictory purposes: the telegraph was positioned both as an emblem of the ethereal promise of eventual freedom and as a representative of the fallibility of information networks. In short, abolitionist writers relied on telegraphic metaphors to highlight the power of their own message and the deceptions of the pro-slavery presses. Even if telegraph poles and wires could not actually serve as a “North Star” for many escaping slaves, antislavery newspapers argued that the more complete exchange of information resulting from the spread of the telegraph surely would contribute—if less concretely and perhaps less immediately—to the abolitionist cause. Nearly six years after the publication of “The Telegraph and the Slave,” *The Liberator* again waxed poetic about the possibilities of the telegraph, printing a techno-utopian ode to the device which later appeared as well in *The Provincial Freeman* (1853-1859?).<sup>44</sup> In “Song of the Telegraph” (28 January 1853), the poet assumes the voice of the telegraph itself and claims that the technology will eradicate not only slavery but all strife and war; if only we could communicate directly and instantaneously over the telegraph wires, the poet argues, our differences would dissolve:

Harbinger of peace and union,  
Messenger no more of wrath,  
To establish sweet communion  
Down to earth I take my path.  
With the olive branch extended,  
Swift I go to every shore;

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<sup>44</sup> Although digital and paper copies of the weekly *Provincial Freeman* are sadly in short supply today, the poem appears in the extant 24 March 1854 issue available through the African-American Newspapers Collection of Accessible Archives. Since the *Provincial Freeman* was one of the two most popular African American newspapers published in Canada before the Civil War (the other was Henry Bibb’s *Voice of the Fugitive*), it had a significant impact in its time on both American and Canadian antislavery supporters. The nominal editor of *The Provincial Freeman* was the well-known African American orator Samuel Ringgold Ward, although it seems the actual editorial work of the newspaper was carried out by the “Publishing Agent,” a young black woman named Mary Shadd (Murray 123-125).

Soon all nations shall be blended  
 They shall learn of war no more [...]. (16)

Though the biblical rhetoric of “blending” all nations strikes a rather dystopian chord today, the poet clearly intends this elimination of difference to be an index of progress and a catalyst for peace. The poet next considers the shame that slavery still exists in such an enlightened age, asking, “Now that Progress leads the van, / Is it not a strange injustice, / To enslave a fellow man?” (16). While phrenologists of the period were turning to the telegraph as inarguable proof of Western “progress” over other nations (as I discuss in Chapter 3), antislavery newspapers also positioned the telegraph as a clear indicator of progress, but one which would throw the retrogressive quality of slavery into relief.

Indeed, the first black newspaper published in Canada, *Voice of the Fugitive* (1851-1853), similarly found the telegraph to be an apt metaphor for freedom.<sup>45</sup> In the letter “Voice from the Fugitive’s Friend” (26 February 1851), Hiram Wilson, an abolitionist working among the fugitive colonies in Canada, writes that the antislavery cause is best supported by “communicating facts and narratives, such as are reliable and will tell with power upon intelligent minds” (3). The telegraph is both a means of conveying this information reliably and a metaphor for the indomitability of truth as Wilson writes that fugitives should have use of “telegraph wires [...] upon which to communicate the horrors of slavery and the wrongs of the colored race” and that any attempt to suppress this communication would be as futile as trying to “cap Vesuvius—to spill out Lake Ontario up-stream over Niagara Falls, or chain electricity and annihilate the telegraph” (3). Wilson alighted on the telegraph as a metaphor for the sublime power of emerging information networks, equating the continued enslavement of black bodies to

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<sup>45</sup> The *Voice of the Fugitive* was a biweekly paper founded by the former slave Henry Bibb (Rhodes 35). Like *The Provincial Freeman*, the Canadian newspaper had readers in both Canada and the United States.

the impossibility of shackling electrical phenomena. The spewing volcano, the torrent of a waterfall, the electrical charges buzzing across telegraph wires—all become images for an irrepressible surge of narrative and antislavery sentiment. In this way, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, *The Provincial Freeman*, and *The Liberator* all conflate abolitionism with the emerging electrical networks of the telegraph.

William Wells Brown, one of the most prolific black writers at the mid-century, was certainly exposed to such discourse given his ties to *The Liberator* throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Brown was a frequent contributor to the newspaper after his escape from slavery in 1834, and he even concludes the first edition of his *Narrative* (1847) with his decision to subscribe to *The Liberator*, plotting a trajectory from enslavement to activism which culminates in the newspaper “edited by that champion of freedom, William Lloyd Garrison” (110). In addition, there is some evidence that the inspiration for Brown’s novel *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853) can be traced in part to a poem that appeared in the pages of *The Liberator*, “Jefferson’s Daughter” (26 May 1848, 84), as well as a *Liberator* article (21 September 1838) detailing rumors surrounding the sale of Sally Hemings’s daughter (Lewis 45). Brown has an even closer connection to the doggerel lauding telegraphy’s utopian promise in *The Liberator* since he heard the choral performance of a different ode to the telegraph at a farewell event for George Thompson, a British Member of Parliament departing for the United States to denounce the recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. Brown, who had fled to Europe in 1849, was an invited speaker at the event in October 1850. The evening concluded with the chorus singing E. L. Blanchard’s “Song of the Electric Telegraph,” later reprinted in *The Liberator* on 15 November 1850. As in “Song of the Telegraph,” the new machine becomes a metaphor for universal brotherhood and absolute shared sympathy. The song begins:

Ere the voice of the echo had spoken—

Ere the thought could recoil from its birth—  
 If the links of my path were unbroken,  
 My flight would encompass the earth;  
 From the bright star that gleams far above us,  
 Flashed onward through measureless space  
 A welcome from voices that love us,  
 My own in a second would trace.  
 Oh, would that some kindred communion  
 To man we could hope to impart,  
 That a bond of such magical union  
 Might link every heart unto heart. (183)

These euphoric lyrics propose a deep and almost bodiless connection, a “bond of such magical union” between the voice of the heavens and human sentiment across the globe. As the concluding spectacle of the farewell soirée, the work of George Thompson and other antislavery orators like William Wells Brown becomes conflated with the operations of the telegraph, transforming the men into envoys of freedom flashing “onward through measureless space” just as telegraph messages buzzed over cables.

While Brown himself makes no such explicit analogies in his oeuvre between magical disembodied unions and telegraphic communiqués, I argue that his narrative *Clotel* participates in this more liberatory discourse of telegraphic potential as it implies that electrically charged sympathy and the recirculation of information and identities are central to eradicating slavery. At the same time, however, Brown and other abolitionists encourage readers to be wary of the telegraph’s potential to perpetuate the misinformation of the proslavery cause. Brown’s narrative shifts the discourse surrounding black subjectivity away from material embodiment and towards information processing, thus demonstrating the constructed nature of a racial identity predicated on bodily difference. In this chapter, I argue that *Clotel* engages with the discourse surrounding telegraphy’s potential to divest identity of the body and establish new networks of shared sympathy as Brown deconstructs the legibility of black bodies. Through the narrative’s repeated destabilization of traditional markers of authority and identity categories as well as the paradoxical portrayal of the fugitive slave body, Brown

relies on the notion of a technology capable of transcending space and bodily difference as he claims a place for black subjects around the world.

The publication history of *Clotel* is itself a testament to Brown's emphasis on revision, mobility, and shape shifting since the narrative appeared in three book-form editions published in the span of two decades (1853, 1864, and 1867). The novel's 1853 version, the focus of this chapter, was first published in London and thus was primarily directed at a British audience. The second book-form edition of the novel was published in 1864 under the title *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States* as part of James Redpath's series of "Books for the Camp Fires," after appearing in a serialized version in the *Weekly Anglo-African* from 1860 to 1861 under the title *Miralda; Or, the Beautiful Quadroon. A Romance of American Slavery, Founded on Fact* (Fabi 648).<sup>46</sup> The novel's final version, published in 1867, was titled *Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine*. This edition remained closely faithful to the 1864 edition except for the final four chapters, in which Clotelle and her husband return from Europe to participate in the Civil War—he fighting valiantly on the side of the Union and she ministering to fallen soldiers as a nurse.<sup>47</sup> Although

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<sup>46</sup> The most significant changes between the first and second edition responded to altered national and personal circumstances, as Brown was back in the United States and tempered his criticism of Northern prejudices given his target readership. While Clotel is the daughter of Thomas Jefferson in the 1853 edition, in the 1864 edition Clotelle is the daughter of a southern slaveholder named Henry Linwood. In addition, Brown removed the more shocking descriptions of Southern brutality like the description of a slave burned alive at the stake and details of dogs hunting escaped slaves, perhaps in an attempt to alleviate anxiety about the fate of Union soldiers. He ended the novel with Linwood repenting, freeing his slaves, and returning to France to live in bliss with his daughter and her black husband. As Ann duCille notes, this "black-and-white-together conclusion made the novel appropriate reading for Union soldiers, since it carried the message that the South, like the southerner Linwood, would see the error of its ways and be returned to the fold in peace, harmony, and brotherhood" (27). Brown's openness to revise his narrative offers further support that he considered the "self" constructed in his narratives to be a mutable force.

<sup>47</sup> Jerome heroically loses his life in battle and Clotelle not only nurses wounded soldiers in the hospitals of New Orleans but aids in the escape of several Union prisoners from Andersonville. After the war, Clotelle purchases the land on which she used to be a slave and establishes a freedmen's school. As M. Giulia Fabi explains, this ending of *Clotelle* renders the title character a "tool for solidarity-building, primarily within the black community," particularly in her relinquishment of "passing" and her voluntary decision to belong to the black community

much more can be said of the differences between these three editions and their reflections of the era's shifting political climate, even this cursory review demonstrates Brown's commitment to adaptation and revision rather than a strict adherence to the ostensible fixity of historical fact.

If utopian responses to the telegraph undergird the more theoretical arguments about identity construction in the 1853 edition of *Clotel*, the technology also serves as a direct impetus for the narrative's publication, as Brown notes in his preface. He explains that his British audience should "feel a lively interest" (47) in slavery not only because it was first introduced when American colonies were under British control but also because advancements in communication and transportation have prompted a new level of information exchange across the Atlantic: "[N]ow that the genius of mechanical invention has brought the two countries so near together, and both having one language and one literature, the influence of the British public opinion is very great on the people of the New World" (47).<sup>48</sup> Mechanical innovations like the telegraph, the railroad, and the printing press thus serve as a justification for British interest in Brown's narrative, an argument which resonates with *The Liberator*'s claim that all nations, provided equal access to telegraphic pulses, would share common goals.

Although *Clotel* did contribute to British interest in the antislavery movement as Brown had hoped, its success was especially tepid when compared to the British reception of the blockbuster abolitionist novel published a year before, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>49</sup> The success of Stowe's novel surely prompted Brown to

(651). In this way, both later editions project a more conciliatory relationship between blacks and whites in America.

<sup>48</sup> All citations from *Clotel* (1853) will be taken from the following edition: William Wells Brown. *Clotel; or the President's Daughter*. Ed. by Robert S. Levine. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, released in England only a few months after its March 1852 publication in America, actually sold more copies in its first year in Great Britain than in America: one million copies in Britain compared to 300,000 in the U.S. within the first year

consider publishing his own more fictionalized portrayal of slavery, an account which is frequently heralded as the first novel by an African American.<sup>50</sup> As Peter Dorsey explains, “What intertwines the texts of Stowe and Brown most profoundly is their mutual need to carve out a cultural place for fiction in the antislavery cause. Before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* most antislavery literature was biographical or auto-biographical” (263). Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to describe *Clotel* as purely fictional since its narrative mode careens between the fictive flourishes of the sentimental novel larded with romance and the fact-inflected grit of documentary realism.

The sentimental plot strand of *Clotel* focuses on the invented fate of Thomas Jefferson’s mistress, Currer (loosely based on Sally Hemings), and their two daughters, Clotel and Althesa, as all three are sold into slavery. Given the romantic and idealized portrayal of Clotel, some readers consider the entire novel to be a sentimental romance. Though the eponymous heroine certainly hails from this tradition, the mode is often stalled in this novel by historical supplementation, including newspaper articles and advertisements, poems from periodicals, personal letters, and government documents. For William Andrews, Brown intersperses this documentation in order “to buttress the fictive claims he subsequently advances” (27). In contrast, R. J. Ellis argues that the “quasi-documentary” quotations in the narrative “constantly shrug[] off the impetus of the plot line” (103). Given these two conflicting perceptions, perhaps it is more accurate

(Leer 66). To place some perspective on these numbers, Brown’s 1847 *Narrative* was considered a best-seller with 3,000 copies sold in less than six months; the fictionalized *Clotel* did not do as well as Brown’s “fact-based” *Narrative* in the popular or antislavery markets (duCille 157). This difference in sales could be ascribed to Britain’s more fervent antislavery sentiment or to the significantly lower price of the book in Britain.

<sup>50</sup> Most scholars do reserve this distinction for *Clotel*, although William Andrews questions whether Douglass’s *Heroic Slave* (1852) should actually receive this designation since it is a fictional rendering of the life of Madison Washington, an enslaved cook who led a revolt onboard a ship bound for the New Orleans market. Andrews speculates that *Clotel* is designated as the first novel because the central characters are fictional (24-25). The difficulty of placing *Clotel* in a particular genre again highlights the extent to which Brown deconstructs the categories of fiction and nonfiction.

to say that the narrative's busy bricolage attempts to deconstruct artificial divisions between historical fact and literary fiction. As Mary Getchell writes, “[A]n important part of Brown’s project involves questioning both the impermeability of the categories of fact and fiction, and the claim to authority that white authors and historians have for their versions of truth” (86). As Brown maneuvers between newspaper articles and fictional material, he frequently attempts to render the universal particular and individuated, the distant pressingly relevant and close; at other times, however, he relies on historical documentation to lend credence and weight to the fictional moment.

The story of Salome Miller in Chapter 14 is one moment when historical documentation at first glance seems subservient to fictive material.<sup>51</sup> Miller’s story is based on the actual case of Salomé Müller (also known in the papers as Sally Miller), a German who was kidnapped at the age of three as her boat from Holland arrived in the United States. Müller was sold as a slave to John Miller and then to John Belmonti at a public auction in New Orleans; like the Salome Miller of Brown’s story, Müller knew nothing of her past until she was recognized at a café by a fellow German who had been on the same boat from Holland (Wilson 3-4). In 1844, Müller sued her owner, and the *Miller v. Belmonti* case (or series of cases, since Müller’s fate was determined after five lawsuits in all) was followed so closely in New Orleans that the newspapers referred to it simply as “Sally Miller’s case” or “the celebrated Miller case” (Gross 60). As Ariela Gross explains, the litigation aroused this interest in large part because it revealed the

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<sup>51</sup> The primacy of the sentimental strand of the plot is also apparent in those moments when Brown alters historical documentation to more completely echo a fabricated moment, as when Brown adds a final stanza to the poem included after Clotel has jumped to her death in the Potomac. The poem, “The Leap from the Long Bridge,” was published in 1851 in a collection of Grace Greenwood’s work titled *Poems*, although Brown does not attribute the poem and says only that it “appeared in one of the newspapers” shortly after Clotel’s death (208). Brown’s willingness to contribute a final stanza which highlights American hypocrisy and to claim that Clotel was the direct inspiration for the verses suggest that Greenwood’s “Leap” is included less for documentary corroboration and more for clarifying Brown’s political purpose; after all, the heightened emotion aroused by plaintive rhetorical flourishes like “And she leaps! O God, she leaps” or “On, fugitive, on!” (209) align the reader’s internal monologue with the fugitive slave.

inherent contradictions in antebellum America's notions of racial identity. Throughout the trial, the "proof" of Miller's whiteness repeatedly relied on moral rather than biological evidence, as Miller's attorney argued that her innate integrity—including her "uniform good conduct" and "constant industry"—was enough to "prove her white nature" (Gross 60). In addition, witnesses on both sides found themselves unable to prove Müller's racial identity definitively (Wilson 66-68), a troubling realization for those supporting a slave system requiring that race be an easily and immediately visible bodily trait.

Brown's version of Miller's story remains largely faithful to newspaper accounts except for the fact that Miller crosses paths with Althesa as a servant for Henry Morton. One day Miller recounts her tale to Althesa, who immediately expresses sympathy and implores Mr. Morton to rescue her. When Mr. Morton confronts Miller's current owner, however, she is abruptly removed from his service. Three months after Mr. Morton's bungling attempt to liberate Salome, a German expat recognizes her as she sweeps the stoop of a new family's house, and Miller's story continues much as it does in the New Orleans papers, with a long trial and eventual freedom. Significantly, however, Brown makes no explicit effort to confirm the verifiable details of this story for the reader, and gives the reader no indication that it is steeped in historical "fact" until the final sentence of the chapter. The chapter concludes, simply, "This, reader, is no fiction; if you think so, look over the files of the New Orleans newspapers of the years 1845-6, and you will there see reports of the trial" (148). Of course, these newspapers cannot lend support to the fictional story of Althesa and Henry Morton interwoven with Miller's story; nor can they corroborate all of the details of Brown's version (after all, Sally Miller remembered nothing of her past in Germany, unlike Brown's Salome Miller, who is her own most passionate advocate). Even the refusal to include direct historical documentation—

excerpts from those newspaper articles, for example—demonstrates the extent to which Brown renders historical fact subsidiary to the fictive moment in this chapter.<sup>52</sup>

At other moments in the narrative, however, the romantic and sentimental plot seems subordinate to historical documentation; this occurs most notably in Chapter 3, as the narrator sidesteps Currer's story to focus on the atrocities committed against slaves in Natchez. The chapter consists almost entirely of Brown's pastiche, his careful arrangement of source materials and his alterations to this borrowed material—acts which Robert Levine refers to as “kidnappings” (6). In this chapter, Brown includes reproductions of fugitive slave advertisements signed by William Gambrel and James W. Hall; he quotes a lengthy description of a recaptured slave burned alive at the stake from the *Natchez Free Trader*; and he concludes the chapter by duplicating an article about a captured slave from the *Vicksburg Sentinel*. Whereas Salome Miller's chapter concludes with a crisp allusion to historical documentation, Chapter 3 concludes with a similar compression: “Currer was one of those who witnessed the execution of the slave at the stake, and it gave her no very exalted opinion of the people of the cotton growing district” (99). Such a perfunctory inclusion of Currer's perspective—and such a restrained description of her emotional response to witnessing a slave burned alive—implies that Currer's subjectivity is less significant in this moment than disseminating the “truth” of slave life in Natchez. This narrative swerve also implies the singular *can't* stand in for the whole—that Currer's story cannot fully expose the horrors other slaves

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<sup>52</sup> As Mary Grettell notes, too, the refusal to include historical corroboration is itself another mode of self-authorization. In discussing Brown's decision not to include evidence authenticating the Sally Hemings story—but instead to present the “word of mouth” history as undoubtedly true—Brown “is able to authorize (rather than authenticate) such unofficial accounts of national events” (88). Such an argument implies that Brown, in either case (authenticating with quotations or refusing to authenticate), is primarily concerned with establishing his own authoritative voice. This perpetual self-authorization, as I discuss later in this chapter, draws the reader's attention to the process of representation and the constructed quality of narration, which immediately destabilizes the very notion that any event or voice can be “authentic” or “authorized.”

have experienced, and that one slave's experience cannot serve as a metonymy for the multiplicity of slave experiences. Ultimately, then, the narrative shifts between granting primacy to the historical or fictive moment, and seems primarily concerned with destabilizing both. After all, the narrator's nods to the historical basis of Salome Miller's story or Currer's experience in Natchez have the perhaps unintended effect of forcing the reader to acknowledge uncertainty about which aspects of the narrative *are* true.

This deconstruction of the fact/fiction binary lays the groundwork for *Clootel*'s larger destabilization of racial identities and monolithic "authentic" narratives of history. Even as abolitionists turned to the telegraph as a symbol of freedom, the device also became associated with unreliability and a questioning of official narratives in antislavery writings of the 1840s and 1850s. Brown's novel, which so relentlessly reinforces epistemological uncertainty, does not explicitly invoke the telegraph as it deconstructs the master narratives of America's national history; nonetheless, the novel participates in the same project as so many abolitionist newspapers, instilling a wariness of the objectifying and verifiable truth that the telegraph seemed to represent in broader culture. Abolitionists recognized that although a more immediate dissemination of information carried the potential for a broader sympathy to their cause, the technology could also be used to similar effect by pro-slavery proponents. For this reason, many abolitionists like Brown considered narratives promoting the telegraph as an infallible instrument of truth—and not a manipulated and manipulating medium—to be particularly menacing.

Several scholars have argued that the telegraph at the mid-century, like so many new technologies, was frequently a metaphor for objectivity and reliability in the mainstream press. In the same way that photography or daguerreotypy was initially hailed as an impartial visual testimony of an event, many first users of telegraphy believed it offered access to unvarnished documentation.<sup>53</sup> As Peter West argues,

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<sup>53</sup> Of course, the very first users of the telegraph were quite skeptical of its ability to transmit messages accurately; this wariness, however, was quickly put to rest for much of the

“Because the electromagnetic telegraph could be understood in the objective terms of science, American commentators attributed to Morse’s invention an authority that was not only objective but infallible” (106). At times, this faith extended even to the fantasy of a self-controlled technology, capable of sending and receiving messages without the aid of an operator. West cites an example of the device acquiring human characteristics in an article from the *Baltimore Patriot* (1838-1859),<sup>54</sup> “A Game of Drafts” (29 November 1844), which describes a game of checkers played via telegraph. After one player set his checker piece in a different square than the one indicated, the writer of the article remarks, “The mistake, however, was promptly corrected by the telegraph. It said, ‘you have neglected to place your man where you have mentioned’” (1). The author not only excises the human presence behind the telegraph with the object pronoun “it” but also implies (with “by the telegraph”) that the instrument itself offered the correction, rather than the human subjectivity communicating through the medium. The writer further claims that “not a single mistake occurred on account of the telegraph” (1). Similarly, a writer in *Mechanics’ Magazine*, reflecting on this game of checkers in the article “Professor Morse’s Electric Telegraph” (11 October 1845), notes that almost an entire column from the *Baltimore Patriot* was “transmitted in thirty minutes—faster than

public a few days after Morse’s famous first message (“What hath God wrought?”) was sent from Washington to Baltimore on 24 May 1844. At the Democratic Convention held in Baltimore four days later, the first “real” and verifiable piece of news was sent from Alfred Vail in Baltimore to Morse in Washington. Vail, frequently updating Morse at the convention, informed him that the New York Senator Silas Wright had been nominated for vice president, a surprising choice. Wright, upon learning of his nomination from Morse, declined the honor by telegraph. Those in Washington were initially skeptical of the nomination and those in Baltimore were equally skeptical of Wright’s refusal until both were later verified. Donald Ritchie, describing this watershed event, notes, “This exchange demonstrated the telegraph’s validity and demolished forever the Washington papers’ monopoly on Washington reporting” (30). Although telegraph users still occasionally expressed doubt about the accuracy of information received by telegraph, this spectacle of the new machine’s validity on such a large national stage nudged public sentiment away from that very early distrust which attends so many technological innovations.

<sup>54</sup> The *Baltimore Patriot* was the leading evening newspaper of the city, and the first ever to publish news obtained over the telegraph wires (Blondheim 43). As such, it seems a suitable representative for the “mainstream” press’s take on the telegraph.

the reporter in Baltimore could transcribe" (251). In this way, both writers reflect a broader tendency to endow the telegraph with superhuman speed, infallibility, and self-regulation. Given Brown's wariness of monolithic national narratives and "objective" reportage, it is unsurprising that he would grasp the telegraph's equally likely potential to disseminate falsehoods which then become accepted as undeniable truth.

Nonetheless, the technology continues to be portrayed as an instrument of reliability and objectivity in histories of telegraphy's impact on the news gathering process in the mid-century. Irving Fang writes in his history of mass communications that the telegraph was "the beginning of the efforts by news wire services to produce objective reporting" (81). In the same way that the *Baltimore Patriot* writer purged the operator from his description of the checkerboard transmission, Fang renders the tapping keys the subject of his sentence: "Sent by the clicking keys, reports of events became standardized, less opinionated, and of more interest to the broader political spectrum of readers" (81). Certainly news did become increasingly standardized with the growth of the telegraph, as Menahem Blondheim explains at length in his history of the telegraph's impact on the press, *News over the Wires*. Given the desire for Mexican War news at the end of the 1840s as well as the expanding telegraph lines, the dominant dailies in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore began forming associations with the Magnetic Telegraph Company to share the cost of telegraphic transmission and receive the most current news simultaneously (Blondheim 50-51). The standardization of news stories and the Magnetic Telegraph Company's monopoly on news both imply that telegraphic transmissions had begun to assume a more authoritative and monolithic role by the beginning of the 1850s.

However, there is also much evidence, especially when considering the telegraph's treatment in abolitionist newspapers, that the machine occupied a more evocative space in the American presses. In the same way that the public became increasingly aware of photography's capacity to dissemble—through the manipulation of

color saturation or the density of light, through careful posing, through the limitations of the frame, and so on—even the earliest users of the telegraph were well aware that the technology was as fallible as the humans who operated it. This is especially apparent in African American newspapers of the mid-century, perhaps because black editors and readers were so well acquainted with the mainstream press's tendency to muddle and manipulate news.

This awareness of the telegraph's distortion or sensationalizing of news is particularly evident in antislavery articles detailing slave insurrections or fugitive slaves. In an article titled "The Fugitive Law—Resistance and Bloodshed" (18 September 1851), the weekly abolitionist newspaper *The National Era* (1847-1860)<sup>55</sup> portrayed the telegraph as a source of blatant inaccuracies. The newspaper describes the conflicting accounts of a "bloody transaction" in Christiana, Pennsylvania, where two fugitive slaves were allegedly seeking refuge. The confusion surrounding this event is at the fore from the article's opening, which reads, "The statements [about this event] are all highly colored, and very contradictory, and it is difficult to ascertain the exact truth" (151). The writer does eventually present the "exact truth," explaining that a group of white men from Baltimore county attempted to corner the two fugitive slaves before local townspeople—both black and white—rose to the slaves' defense. The confrontation between the slave hunters and defenders left several dead; even these facts, however, are hedged by parenthetical asides acknowledging uncertainty, like: "A billet of wood (some say) was thrown from an upper story window" (151). Confusion is further introduced in the lack of verifiable information about the number of men killed, underscoring that some facts are evidently not worth confirming in the white-operated presses: "Several colored

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<sup>55</sup> Issued weekly in Washington, D.C., *The National Era* was edited by Dr. Gamaliel Bailey, Jr., and is perhaps most famous for being the paper that serialized *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to *The Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*, *The National Era* had a larger audience than any other antislavery paper with 25,000 subscribers by 1850 (80).

persons, it was reported, were killed, but the report is not confirmed” (151). Even before explicitly mentioning the telegraph’s role in disseminating false information, the author seems primarily concerned with emphasizing the press’s inability to recreate the “truth” of the event.

The most remarkable admission of unverifiable information, though, comes in the article’s treatment of the telegraph, which stands in stark contrast to the *Baltimore Patriot*’s depiction of the machine as a source of infallible truth. After demonstrating the impossibility of verifying all aspects of the “bloody transaction,” the *National Era* article argues that the telegraph might adequately report one version of the truth, but other accounts of the event remain unconfirmed:

The telegraph, as usual, lied about the affair, magnifying it into a horrible battle in which several citizens of Maryland were murdered and mutilated; the blacks being instigated by the Abolitionists, and countenances [sic] by white spectators, who not only refused to aid the marshal, but encouraged the butchery of the assailing party. It seems now that only one white man was killed; whether any of the blacks were killed or not, is not known. As to the report about Abolitionists, there is not a shred of evidence to sustain it—although our neighbor of the *Republic*, with characteristic zeal and judgment, has an article three columns long on the subject, taking for granted the falsehoods of the telegraphic wires. (151)

The author does endorse the idea that the “truth” and “facts” of the story will eventually be known, but the article twice highlights the unreliability of the telegraph as a source of information, and further adds an “as usual” to imply that such distortions were commonplace. For every *Republic* that championed the information of the telegraph wires—as wholly reliable and independent of human error—there was a *National Era* undermining telegraphic authority of news from afar. Even as the telegraph could be used to stir abolitionist sentiments, it could also be used to spread pro-slavery falsehoods ever more quickly and broadly.

If slave insurrections were fodder for inaccurate telegraphic communiqués, so too were the cases of fugitive slaves. *The National Era* again questions the reliability of the

telegraph as the newspaper details the outcome of a Fugitive Slave Law case. In “The Boston Slave Case” (17 April 1851), the author explains that an escaped slave from Georgia, Sims, was captured in Boston and put on trial. During the trial, the article reports, “The telegraph, as usual, played the alarmist, bringing word of threatened violence and blood-shed, but its exaggerated statements were not confirmed by the detailed accounts received subsequently” (62). Again the telegraphic missives are positioned as a source of sensationalist news, their brevity and speed a liability compared to the more methodical fact checking of later accounts.

Lest this distrust of the telegraph seem limited only to *The National Era* or only to the earliest years of the 1850s, Frederick Douglass echoes this wariness of news disseminated over the wires in a letter submitted to the *Rochester Democrat and American*. When John Cook, one of the men captured during John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, criticized Douglass for not participating in the expedition after he promised to do so, Douglass accuses the telegraph (rather than Cook) of bearing false witness. Douglass writes that the telegraph “makes Mr. Cook” denounce him as a liar, thus locating agency in the telegraphic object rather than the human subject. Douglass explains that “[h]aving no acquaintance, whatever, with Mr. Cook, and never having exchanged a word with him about the Harper’s Ferry insurrection, I am disposed to doubt that he could have used the language concerning me, which the wires attribute to him” (*Life and Times* 223). Douglass is, in part, diplomatically using the machine as an excuse to avoid a more personal attack on Mr. Cook. However, he takes his critique a step further in his letter when he notes that news from the telegraph reflects the racist sentiments of its dispatchers: “The lightning, when speaking for itself, is among the most direct, reliable and truthful of things; but when speaking for the terror stricken slaveholders at Harper’s Ferry, it has been made the swiftest of liars” (223). In the hands of slaveholders, the seventeen men at Harper’s Ferry became seven hundred and they “filled the columns of the *New York Herald* for days with interminable contradictions”

(223). On the subject of slave insurrections, Douglass and *The National Era* argue, the telegraph was the most unreliable of sources, conveying prejudices and inaccuracies as frequently as any other news medium.

This repeated questioning of the telegraph as a source of reliable news suggests that abolitionist papers sought to uncover the biases of apparently impartial reporting and to challenge the tendency to cast the telegraph as a metaphorical representation of objective truth. The recurrence of such comments about the telegraph's typical unreliability suggest as well that abolitionist newspapers worked to establish a competing connotation: whereas the technology represented self-legitimizing truth divorced from human intervention to so many Americans, abolitionists also began to associate the telegraph with prejudice-preying inaccuracies propagated by unreliable dispatchers.

In the same way that abolitionists instilled a distrust of the objectifying and verifiable truth that the telegraph seemed to represent in broader culture, *Clotel* also trains readers to question traditional processes of authentication in narrative. If the electrically charged word of the telegraph is a metaphor for unassailable Truth in broader culture, within the confines of *Clotel* the complex system of information exchange is foregrounded to undermine the notion that "Truth" exists outside of these human constructs and networks. After all, one of the primary and frequently recurring preoccupations of *Clotel* is the destabilization of conventionally authenticating documents, noticeable from the first pages of the narrative as Brown eschews letters from white abolitionists vouching for his narrative. As Robert Stepto notes in his seminal study on authenticating strategies in slave autobiographies, "Brown's narrative is not so much a tale of personal history as it is a conceit upon the authorial mode of the white guarantor" (27), a conceit made apparent from the obvious absence of any guarantor except Brown himself in the preface to the 1853 edition. Although Stepto argues that this strategy prevents Brown from portraying his past with intimacy (28), this absence can

also be read as Brown's assertive refusal to legitimate his personal story through a prefatory nod to a sponsoring white abolitionist.

However, the shift from first- to third-person narration in the opening lines of Brown's personal narratives in 1847 and 1853 does indeed dilute the narrative's personal appeal and Brown's opening indictment of his master. In the 1847 *Narrative*, Brown writes, "I was born in Lexington, Ky. The man who stole me as soon as I was born, recorded the births of all the infants which he claimed to be born his property [...] (13; qtd. in Stepto 28). The opening of the narrative which precedes *Clotel* avoids such confrontation through the flat pronouncement of factual information in the third person: "William Wells Brown, the subject of this narrative, was born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky, not far from the residence of the late Hon. Henry Clay" (49). While the third-person narrative mode does render this moment less emotionally immediate (as Stepto argues), Brown's refusal to adhere to the "I"-centric genre convention of the slave autobiography asks readers to recognize the constructed quality of the genre, its reliance on the first-person narrator as a means of engrossing readers on a primarily emotional level and its attempt to limit the black narrator's field of expertise to his or her own unique experience of slavery.

Brown's refusal to adhere to the convention of prefatory authenticating documents and first-person impassioned pleas asks readers to grapple with their ultimate position of epistemological uncertainty, the inability to *know* if a tale is true or not. Since there is no outside abolitionist "legitimating" the tale and since the third-person immediately calls into question *who* is doing the narrating, Brown's strategy prompts the reader to recognize the insufficiency of both modes of legitimating a tale; after all, a story is no more true because a white abolitionist claims it is or because a narrator uses the first-person mode. In addition, Brown establishes himself as an explicit curator of his own tale—"the editor of his résumé," in Stepto's words (29)—through the inclusion of

excerpts from his previous speeches and publications, thus demonstrating the extent to which *every* story is always a highly edited and constructed version of an event.

Of course, these destabilizing strategies (the absence of authenticating documents, Brown's self-positioning as an editor of his narrative, and the third-person mode) not only disorient the reader's expectations for "truth" and authority but also grant more power to the black author as solely responsible for establishing the veracity of the ensuing narrative. In the same way that the romantic and realist modes seem to vie for ascendancy in *Clotel*, the authenticating documents and Brown's narrative voice form contrasting versions of the truth in the material that prefaces the novel. For example, after describing an enslaved mother who is separated from her blind child, Brown includes an extensive excerpt from a poem published shortly after the separation. This severance of family ties occurred when Brown was a slave and thus before his escape in 1834, but the poem that appeared "[a] few days after [...] in one of the newspapers, from the pen of the lady who had seen the blind child" (53) was actually published in 1845 by Margaret Baily (Levine 54). The publication history of the poem is elided in the narrative itself, but such retracing suggests that Brown retroactively included a blind child separated from his mother after reading Baily's poem, that Brown happened across a poem perfectly fitted to a circumstance which did indeed take place in the 1830s, or that the poem appeared before 1834 but in a non-extant source.

Yet, the historical verification of the specific anecdote seems much less significant (for such separations surely did occur, whether or not Brown was a direct witness to this particular one and whether or not Baily based her poem on this specific mother and child) than the fact that the narrative itself draws attention to the veils of representation and mediation—the mediation of the poem, of the narrator, and of the narrator mediating the poem. Directly after the poem, the narrator writes, "The thought that man can so debase himself as to treat a fellow-creature as here represented, is enough to cause one to blush at the idea that such men are members of a civilized and Christian

nation” (54). The “as here represented” immediately draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the story *is* represented, and with some variations, in both the narrative and poem. In this way, Brown’s authenticating documents not only destabilize the traditional notions of verification but focus the reader’s attention on the inherent fallacy of the desire for unmediated “Truth” about the slave experience.

Brown further argues that language itself—even before it is transmitted over telegraph wires or in print or through some other medium—is corrupted by market exchange. In the same way that “bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen” (88) are commodified on the auction block, literacy becomes a commodity for Brown as a fugitive slave. In his description of learning to read and write, he demonstrates the extent to which all social relationships between blacks and whites were mediated through the market as well as his own ingenuity at manipulating the laws of supply and demand in this market. In order to persuade two white boys to teach him to read, he promises each one a taste of barley sugar. He refers to this sugar as his “stock in trade” (64), and details his shrewd business acumen in guarding his stock (distributing only a “quarter of a stick at a time” (65)) to avoid devaluing the product. Whereas Frederick Douglass, in his own *Narrative* (1845), frames literacy as a ticket to freedom and explains that he was taught by an initially altruistic Mrs. Auld, with her “heavenly smiles” and “voice of tranquil music” (35), Brown writes that his desire for literacy stems from not knowing what to do with his first shilling as a free man: “[T]hat shilling made me feel, indeed, as if I had a considerable stock in hand. What to do with my shilling I did not know. [...] I would not lend it out, because I was afraid I should not get it back again. I carried the shilling in my pocket for some time, and finally resolved to lay it out” (64). The incitement for literacy thus stems from the profit desire, and Brown chooses reading as the safest of all possible investments.<sup>56</sup> While Brown’s changes to the form

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<sup>56</sup> Peter West, in his brilliant reading of this scene, argues that Brown parallels his “economic manipulation of whites” with “his manipulation of the (i.e., his) textual ‘life’” (166).

of the slave narrative highlight the constructed quality of the genre, he takes this argument a step further by implying that language itself is wholly contaminated by market exchange.

Brown's entrée into the realm of letters, like his first financial venture, is marked by the process of counterfeiting, an act which similarly destabilizes the notion of singular identity since it implies that one object can usurp the place of another by approximating its appearance. After all, Brown first learns to write his signature by scrawling illegibly on a board fence until he can eventually trick enough young boys into showing him the "correct" way to print. As Brown explains, "I marked up the fence for nearly a quarter of a mile, trying to copy, till I got so that I could write my own name" (65). The oral claiming of Brown's new identity as a free man is similarly accomplished in an instantaneous performative utterance as the Quaker Wells Brown tells him, "I shall call thee Wells Brown, like myself" to which Brown replies, "So be it" (63). Just as this christening marks Brown as an iteration of another ("like myself"), the handwritten claiming of his new name requires repeated conformity to an original, an endless reiteration of the self until that illegible scrawl approximates the signature dictated to Brown by the white boys he stops beside the fence.

Brown's ever-evolving fence-board signature becomes a metaphor for the identity he constructs in the narrative itself, an identity negotiated by a savvy awareness of the abolitionist market and the conventional standards of the genre he "copies." The emblem of selfhood—Brown's signature—is crafted through the careful counterfeiting of another's letters until a passably "authentic" signature is produced, and in this way the very notion of a stable narrating (or narrated) self is also subverted. Brown thus argues that identity and communication—whether handwritten missives, telegraph codes,

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Producing the self as text thus becomes a form not only of social mastery but also an economic mastery of a system which had formerly reduced Brown himself to a commodity.

newspaper reports, or autobiographical narratives—are created *through* the manipulation of markets and imitation rather than despite these influences.

Framing Brown's signature as a “counterfeit” of many “original” signatures prompts a connection between Brown’s strategy for obtaining literacy and his description of achieving financial viability later in the narrative as he produces counterfeit money in the form of promissory notes. These “Shinplasters,” valueless paper un-backed by silver, supplant the “authentic” coin; yet, as Brown explains, their constant recirculation enables him to set up and decorate his barber shop. Brown thus converts the Shinplaster (worth only the promise of money if redeemed) into concrete profit. When Brown’s patrons conspire to redeem all of their Shinplasters at once in an attempt to ruin him, he realizes that he can return his “bank once more [to] a sound basis” if he only sells more worthless Shinplasters. The solution to the counterfeit money being identified as such is simply to circulate *more* money: “I immediately commenced putting in circulation the notes which I had just redeemed, and my efforts were crowned with such success, that [...], before I slept that night, my Shinplasters were again in circulation” (69). As *Clotel* demonstrates, identity and information for Brown—like those Shinplasters flooding the market—become viable and sustainable, if not wholly “real” and “truthful,” through constant recirculation.

In the same way that Brown’s bank could stay afloat by issuing more counterfeit money, his own stock as a narrator remains profitable in *Clotel* by the constant recirculation of his identity in print. Just as Brown gains authority by refusing to rely on authenticating documents, he also offers the print equivalent of the banker’s recirculation of money by reprinting excerpts from his previous works—and reviews of these works—within *Clotel*. Brown reprinted laudatory reviews of his *Narrative* (1847) at the end of the “Narrative” that precedes *Clotel*, and he also references and transcribes selections from *Three Years in Europe* (66) as well as his “speech at a public meeting in Exeter Hall” (63) in the “Narrative.” What are the reprints of Brown’s previous works within

the pages of his new one if not the print equivalent of Brown the banker's tireless effort to re-circulate Shinplasters in an attempt to increase its value?

Derrida's extended consideration of counterfeit money explains how these "false signs" loosen the connection between sign and signification, eventually undermining the very notion of the authentic. Derrida notes that counterfeit money "is not a thing like any other [...]; it is 'something' like a sign, and even a false sign, or rather a true sign with a false value, a sign whose signified seems [...] finally not to correspond or be equivalent to anything, a fictive sign without *secure* signification" (93). Brown's signature, as a counterfeit of the signatures offered by others, directs the reader's attention to the fact that identity in a memoir is constructed, a sign which blurs the boundaries between the "true" identity existing outside of the realm of the text and the representation of that identity in print.

Just as Brown produces something (the implements and décor of his barber business) out of the nothing of Shinplaster promises, the narrative of his life extrudes an identity that some believed did not exist.<sup>57</sup> As Christopher Hager notes, "Because African Americans' inner lives were, like all people's, unknowable, they were also—expeditely, for those who wished to rationalize slavery—ignorable" (68). Though Brown recognizes the slippage between the representation and actuality of his inner life, he also recognizes that antebellum America, as Hager explains, "tended to regard private writings as the most reliable indexes of autonomous selfhood" (69). For this reason,

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<sup>57</sup> The counterfeit signatures and Shinplasters in the preface to *Clothesline* prepare the reader for the novel's own consideration of counterfeit identity in Chapter 2, as Pompey grooms slaves for the market and declares himself to be authentically black. As the narrator explains, Pompey "was of real Negro blood, and would often say, when alluding to himself, 'Dis nigger is no countefit; he is de genewine artekil'" (90). This self-declaration of authenticity, of course, draws the reader's attention to how "authenticity" is dictated by the market; after all, Pompey refers to himself in the denigrating terms of the slave market and the terminology of a "genuine" or "counterfeit" article similarly stems from the lexical field of commerce. Through this remark by Pompey, Brown reveals that "authentic" and "genuine" identity is constructed by market dictates.

Brown performs an identity of his inner life in print while also recognizing that this performance may or may not accurately correspond to his “authentic” inner life.

Such notions of “counterfeit” and “authentic” racial identity reflect the popular notion in antebellum America that the black body was legible, capable of disclosing information about the moral quality and personal history of a slave—and that the black body could be a more reliable source of the “truth” about slave life than the words of abolitionists or slaves themselves.<sup>58</sup> For this reason, perhaps, Douglass so famously conjoined the act of writing with bodily mutilation in his arresting comparison of pen and scars in his *Narrative*: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (30). The proof of bodily suffering, in this moment, becomes as intelligible as the written word. In the slave marketplace, too, the African American body was frequently perceived to be more reliable than the word of white traders who attempted to disguise the age or history of slaves, prompting potential buyers to examine the scars on the back as an index of the slave’s level of submissiveness.

Brown depicts this process in *Clothes*, but he undercuts the notion that the black body is legible in the way that both slaveholders and abolitionists hope; after all, it is not the black body that reveals a trader’s deception but the words of one of the slaves himself. As Brown describes, Pompey prepares the bodies of the slaves to project an artificial youth, the “grey hair plucked out” and “face shaved clean” (103). One slave, Aaron, is submitted to an extensive bodily examination while a potential buyer peppers him with questions about his experience at various plantations. Aaron has been instructed to shave off several years of his age along with his whiskers, and as the planter begins to calculate the time spent at various estates, he exclaims, “Why, this makes you

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<sup>58</sup> As Dwight McBride explains, in the antislavery movement the testimony of the black body was frequently portrayed as “more truthful than the word of white abolitionists” (4-5). Certainly it was considered more truthful than the word of white slave traders.

thirty-three, I thought you told me you was only twenty five?" (104). Brown writes, "Aaron now looked first at the planter, then at the trader, and seemed perfectly bewildered. He had forgotten the lesson given him by Pompey as to his age, and the planter's circuitous talk (doubtless to find out the slave's real age) had the Negro off his guard" (104). Although Aaron is enacting a rather naïve deception here, the narrator nonetheless argues that the body is not an accurate indicator of character or personal history. Not only does Brown suggest that the body *can* lie through the careful alterations of the trader and Pompey, he also more radically implies that there is no real "truth" for Aaron's body to disclose: Aaron, like most slaves, was never given a birth date, and thus cannot share his "real" age with the planter or the trader or the reader.

Throughout *Clotel*, Brown argues as well that the differences between black and white bodies are artificial constructions. This is most apparent in the repeated allusions throughout the text to "white" black slaves. For example, his descriptions of biracial female characters frequently emphasize the women's whiteness. Althesa has such a "pale countenance" (103) that James Crawford, her eventual purchaser, is "unprepared to behold with composure a beautiful young white girl of fifteen in the degraded position of a chattel slave" (124); Clotel on the auction block has "a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchaser," with "features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon" (87); and the daughter of Clotel and Horatio, Mary, is described as a "white slave-girl" (156) who is "not darker than other white children" (101). In his descriptions of all three women, Brown accentuates the whiteness of their features at the precise moment of their enslavement, perhaps because he doubted a British readership's capacity to feel sympathy for a black slave or perhaps because he wanted to trouble the false notion of discrete and immediately identifiable racial categories.<sup>59</sup> After all, not only are black bodies white, but white bodies are black

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Mulvey argues the former, noting that the description of Clotel at auction poises her "in as vulnerable a position as Hester Prynne or Tess of the D'Urbervilles," which

in Brown's narrative. In Chapter 19, Brown describes an innkeeper who mistakes Senator Daniel Webster for a black man. The innkeeper "seemed woefully to mistake the dark features of the traveller as he sat back in the corner of the carriage, and to suppose him a coloured man, particularly as there were two coloured servants of Mr. W. outside" (173). Back-of-the-carriage shadows, an unexpected arrival, black company—details as small as these threaten to upend the reader's privileged racial identity and social status.

Brown takes this anti-essentialist argument a step further in those moments when he writes that a "black" slave *is* white, and not simply that he or she *appears* to be so. In describing the black mechanic George, for example, Brown first writes that he is "as white as most white persons" (210); however, when Mary and George exchange clothing to facilitate his escape from prison, the narrator writes that the two could swap attire without detection because "both were white" (213). Brown's decision to drop hedging qualifiers like "appear to be" or "resembled" suggests that identity classifications based on bodily appearance would in fact render the two white. Similarly, Salome Miller is described as "perfectly white" (146), but such a description does not alert even the most attentive reader to her "true" identity as a white German since "perfectly" white characters like Althesa and Clotel have already been sold on the auction block.

Even Clotel, at auction, is described by the auctioneer as a "real Albino" (87), a term which conjures the contradictory nature of categories of racial identity. As Katie Frye notes, the term "albino" was first applied to tribe members off the coast of West Africa without skin pigmentation, and early Western anthropologists long insisted that the skin condition occurred only in "non-white" populations (530). This fascination with the "albino"—understood as a "white negro" who is at once white skinned but black

"enables Brown to confront his white Anglo-Saxon and Protestant readers with the fact that, like the purchasers at the auction, they are dealing with one of their own kind as well as one of Brown's kind" (104). Even this description of how sympathy would be evoked requires the contemporary reader to simultaneously recognize Clotel as "one of their own kind" and "one of Brown's kind," a recognition that challenges the oppositional duality of these two categories.

identified—continued throughout the mid-nineteenth century as albino African Americans became common features in sideshows and dime museums (Frye 530). In this way, the term in itself attempts to reestablish firm racial distinctions between “pure whiteness” and “pure blackness” since it implies that a “white negro” is a biological aberration; at the same time, however, the appellation unveils the central contradiction of attempting to classify identity based on skin color.



**Figure 9.** Thew, R. “The Greek Slave.” *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* 2 (1858). Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Stories and representations of “white slavery” were abundant in the mid-century, not only in the infamous case of Salome Miller, but also in one of the most renowned works of the era, Hiram Powers’s statue “The Greek Slave” (1844). R. Thew’s wood engraving of the statue highlights the lambent whiteness of the marble and contrasts the Greek slave’s eroticism with the heavily draped fabric on the crowd of women milling

about the Düsseldorf Gallery in New York City in 1847 (Figure 9). This life-sized marble statue of a nude woman in chains was exhibited extensively in America and Britain, and it inspired an outpouring of commentary and artistic responses wherever it traveled (Brody 85). As Maurie McInnis notes, however, few American commentators associated this depiction of “white slavery” with American slavery (183-4). In contrast, once on display in London at the Crystal Palace in 1851, British commentators immediately drew parallels between the statue and the sale of black and biracial women in America (McInnis 184-5). Perhaps the most famous response to the statue is a sharp critique from *Punch* magazine, a wood engraving by John Tenniel titled “The Virginian Slave” (1851), which features a similarly posed black slave with eyes supplicating heavenward (Figure 10). Gone is the idealized, universalized image of white slavery and



**Figure 10.** Tenniel, John. “The Virginian Slave.” *Punch* (1851): 236.

in its stead is a shameful image of the degradation of black female sexuality in America. As Kimberly Manganelli explains, “Whereas Powers’s celebrated statue transmutes slavery into a classical form, *Punch*’s image of slavery is one of grotesque realism” (71). The refusal of American spectators to acknowledge the proximity between the marble-white Greek slave and present-day slavery suggests that Brown is not relying on the “tragic mulatta” as a conservative gesture to stir the sympathy of those who would not be roused by the realities of an enslaved black body. This inability to register the Greek slave as commentary on American slavery marks as well the extent to which Americans were unprepared to recognize that “white” and “black” were fluid classification systems of racial identity.<sup>60</sup>

Although Brown’s narrative relies on the concept of an idealized “white slavery” in order to deconstruct these identity categories, he was himself critical of Powers’s romanticized portrayal. When Brown toured the Crystal Palace in 1851 along with William and Ellen Craft and several abolitionists, he placed a copy of the *Punch* cartoon beside the statue and stated, “As an American fugitive slave, I place this ‘Virginia Slave’ by the side of the ‘Greek Slave,’ as its most fitting companion” (Manganelli 71). Brown rejects the aestheticizing of the white female slave, but his own narrative does establish a parallel between the idealized womanhood of the white slave owner Georgiana and Clotel. The description of Georgiana—the noble Southern belle—is almost identical to the description of Clotel—the noble but degraded slave. Brown writes of Georgiana: “Her form was tall and graceful; her features regular and well defined; and her complexion was illuminated by the freshness of youth, beauty, and health” (109).

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<sup>60</sup> As Giulia Fabi contends, Brown converts the “tragic mulatta” figure into a “passer” not to blunt his political critique but to sharpen it. Fabi writes, “As the potentially undetectable link between the enslaving and the enslaved, the passer constitutes a threat both to white property and to the ‘whiteness’ that legitimates the ownership of human chattel” (644). This reading of the multiple examples of “passing” in the novel—black women passing as white, white men passing as black, fugitive slaves passing as free slaves, women passing as men—certainly supports a more radical critique of mid-century identity categories.

Although Clotel's own complexion clearly is not "illuminated" while she's sold as a piece of flesh, her physical descriptors are otherwise quite similar to those of Georgiana: she has "features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon," her "form [is] tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicat[es] one superior to her position" (87). Such descriptions flatten both women into the stereotypical heroines of "woman's fiction"<sup>61</sup>—with their "regular features" and "tall and graceful" form—but supersede racial identification with gender identification.

Despite this adherence to rather idealized portrayals of his two heroines, Brown implies that gender is also a performance later in the novel, as Clotel, Mary, and George all cross-dress for their freedom. Clotel first disguises herself as "Mr. Johnson," a wealthy invalid from Vicksburgh with dark green glasses and a handkerchief around the chin; and Mary and George exchange apparel in George's jail cell. While Richard Lewis argues that *Clotel*'s drag is simply a device to expeditiously resolve the plot (133), Marjorie Garber notes that authors frequently deploy transvestism in order "to disrupt, expose, and challenge, putting in question the very notion of the 'original' and of stable identity" (16). Such disruptions reveal, in Garber's words, a "category crisis," a "failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). Clotel's change of costume certainly implies that an alternative gender identity can be performed through mimicry. While masculine garb would presumably grant a female greater mobility in the public sphere, both Clotel and Mary assume positions of isolation and captivity as they cross-dress: on the steamboat Clotel, as Mr. Johnson, "remained in his room, to avoid, as

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<sup>61</sup> According to Nina Baym's influential taxonomy of "woman's fiction" from the 1820s to 1870s, the genre centered on "a young girl who is deprived of the support she has right or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout her life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world" (1). Of course, the heroines and authors that Baym considers are typically white, as Ann duCille notes (150). Baym's definition of a heroine applies both to Georgiana when her father dies and Clotel when put up for sale, and offers further evidence of the narrative's insistence on Clotel's "whiteness" while "black."

far as possible, conversation with others" (168), and Mary's masculine attire leaves her literally imprisoned in a jail cell. The appropriation of white masculine identity—like the assumption of "white" identity—is not in itself a guarantor of liberty and mobility.<sup>62</sup> In this way, Brown again troubles the notion of bodily legibility—that a body can be read as male or female, white or black—as well as the fixity of gender roles—the notion that white masculinity in itself grants mobility and visibility in public space.

Clotel's drag not only engages with a telegraphic potential to divest identity of perceptible bodily traits, it also collapses the boundaries between the fictional and the "real." By the time Brown published *Clotel* in 1853, his readers would have been well aware of the story of William and Ellen Craft, who escaped slavery through a ruse identical to the one used by Mary and George. In December 1848, Ellen posed as a prosperous but chronically ill gentleman named William Johnson, donning the same suit and glasses described by Brown as well as an arm sling. Although their own narrative of the escape was not published until 1860 in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, their story was widely circulated in newspapers like the *Liberator* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* as well as in the antislavery lecture circuit (Manganelli 69-70). Whereas Brown explicitly substantiates the historical accuracy of other components of his narrative, he conspicuously avoids drawing a connection between Ellen Craft and Clotel, perhaps assuming that the details between the two were so similar and the Crafts so well known that the contemporary reader could have had little doubt that Clotel's escape was based on theirs.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, Clotel's drag marks a collapse of genre

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<sup>62</sup> Scholars have offered conflicting interpretations of the political significance of Brown's biracial females assuming masculine identities in their escapes. Giulia Fabi, for example, claims this decision sharpens Brown's critique of the "limited mobility of white women" and offers a commentary on the "paranoid preoccupation with the 'purity' of white womanhood" (645) while Michael Berthold argues this decision mitigates the transgression of passing (26-27). Both agree, however, that cross-dressing is another example of boundary dissolution in the novel.

<sup>63</sup> There are, of course, other ways of reading this lacuna. Michael Berthold, for example, argues that Brown, in neglecting to cite the Crafts as the source of Clotel's escape plot,

distinctions—between the “true” and the fictional, the historical and the romantic—as clearly as it marks a momentary collapse of gender categories. While many writers and thinkers attempted to solidify the social and gender hierarchies that the telegraph threatened to render obsolete (as discussed in Chapter 1), Brown alights on telegraphic notions of identity fluidity and the separation of text from body to deconstruct constrictive categories of gender and race.

In another scene of cross-dressing in *Clotel*—this time not from feminine to masculine costume but from enslaved to free—a fugitive slave dons the clothing of his captors in order to effect his escape to Canada. After rifling through the slave-catcher’s pockets for a padlock key while the two captors sleep in a drunken stupor, the slave pauses and says to himself, “These men are villains, they are enemies to all who like me are trying to be free. Then why not I teach them a lesson?” (166). Brown writes, “He then undressed himself, took the clothes of one of the men, dressed himself in them, and escaped through the window, and, a moment more, he was on the high road to Canada” (166). Presumably, this “lesson” is taught not simply through the slave’s escape but rather through the exchange of clothing since this is the act which gives the fugitive pause. In this anecdote, Brown suggests that wearing the clothing of a white man renders the slave a white man, setting him immediately on the path to freedom and humiliating the slave-catcher by denuding him of his status. If racial identity resides in the body, these scenes of cross-dressing repeatedly emphasize, how can these slaves so easily slip

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attempts to maintain his own narrative authority and primacy in his “rivalry of authorship” with the couple (21). However, since the Crafts had not yet published a book-form version of their escape and Brown was actively promoting the couple on the antislavery lecture circuit in Britain, this seems a less likely possibility. Berthold also proposes that Brown is attempting to contain the heroine’s “liminality and agency” in refusing to cite the Craft story; Clotel, so defined by her role as a mother, is a less radical interrogation of gender shape-shifting than Ellen Craft, a single woman who was therefore capable of a “less restricted transvestism” after the couple’s escape (22-23). Brown may well be attempting to render *Clotel*’s racial critique more palatable by avoiding less extreme claims for the mutability of gender categories.

into new racial and gender categories in others' perceptions through simple accoutrements of the body like green glasses, handkerchiefs, and new suits?

Brown's argument that identity alters in different contexts, transforming Daniel Webster into a black man when situated in the shadows or Clotel into a white gentleman when reserving a private room on a steamer, is particularly trenchant given the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law only a few years before the publication of *Clotel*. As Trish Loughran explains, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 enacted a critical restructuring of the conception of American identity, increasingly attempting to locate identity in "bodies rather than in or at sites of origin" (411). While a slave crossing the boundary from slave to free state before the law was passed would assume the identity of a free person, American jurisdiction after the law claimed the fugitive remained a slave regardless of geographic location. Although the law attempted to render free or slave identity innate to the body, Brown's narrative argues that such identity is an extrinsic projection, and that mobile bodies render such categories meaningless. As Loughran asserts, "It is not so much the content of any one kind of identity that ensures survival as the willingness to circulate freely through and across many kinds of identities" (420). Brown's characters certainly recognize that survival is ensured by shape shifting; and, like Brown's Shinplasters and kidnapped speeches or like messages sent in an instant across a vast network, they tirelessly circulate in and out of gender and racial identities.

Even as Brown demonstrates that identity is not an immutable corporeal essence, he also argues that information gains meaning from its intersecting network. Brown's techniques of bricolage and pastiche focus the reader's attention on the importance of framing and context in the dissemination of information, lending a double valence to the original source material in its new context. For example, an epigraph excerpted from the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident...") precedes Chapter 18, "The Liberator," and implicitly contrasts the high-sounding ideals of "liberators" like Thomas Jefferson with the woman who eventually does liberate her

slaves, Georgiana. Foundational religious texts similarly take on a second meaning in Hontz Snyder's sermon to the slaves in Chapter 6. Snyder quotes the Golden Rule in the midst of his sermon and then clarifies, "Now, to suit this rule to your particular circumstances, suppose you were masters and mistresses, and had servants under you, would you not desire that your servants should do their business faithfully and honestly, as well when your back was turned as while you were looking over them?" (111).

Interpreted within the framework of southern slavery, doing unto others means serving your master well; within a different framework, of course, doing unto others means not having slaves at all. Since the control of information networks is so central to the control of others, Brown's extensive interspersing of excerpts performs his own mastery of these information networks. Telegraphy, like Brown's text, revealed to its earliest users that another's perception of one's identity is, to a large extent, determined by context rather than essence.

Yet Brown takes this argument a step further, not only insisting that the recirculation of information and identities is critical to survival, but insisting as well that the body itself can be divested as a person assumes these various and apparently contradictory identities. Even as the telegraph served as a latent but guiding metaphor for the questioning of absolute authority and the recirculation of information across divergent networks, the telegraph seems to undergird the narrative's aspiration for disembodiment. Telegraphy, especially in its earliest years, seemed to offer the utopian promise of escaping bodily difference, perhaps because the technology was believed to portend instantaneous communication across the ether. This assumption might seem a retroactive projection of modern desires given the discourse surrounding "bodiless" digital communication today, but there is much evidence that the first users of the telegraph similarly saw the technology shifting possibilities of communication towards disembodiment. If communication could be achieved through electrical impulses—and if our bodies are similarly composed of these electrical synapses, as scientists of the mid-

century were discovering—the human body seemed capable of merging, even with the suspicious wires of developing telegraphic networks.

As Friedrich Kittler argues in *Discourse Networks*, communication media (including the telegraph, the typewriter, and the telephone) deeply impact how people conceive of their bodies and minds as organic structures. In the mid-nineteenth century, prevailing notions of communication through electro-magnetism of course reverberated with studies on the electricity of the human body. Indeed, interest in the electrical capacity of organic matter extends back into the eighteenth century, as natural scientists offered public exhibitions of their electrical experiments. The most famous demonstrations of animal electricity were performed by Luigi Galvani, a medical practitioner and obstetrician at the University of Bologna who began experimenting on muscle contractions in the early 1780s.<sup>64</sup> Galvani famously stimulated dissected frogs' legs—and then human corpses—with electricity in an attempt to prove that “animal electricity” was not so dissimilar from the artificially generated electricity one might find in a Leiden jar (Otis “Metaphoric” 107). Since the frogs’ legs twitched in the presence of electrical stimulus, Galvani argued in *De Viribus Electricitatis in Motu Musculari* (1791) that all animals stored a distinct type of electricity in their tissue (McComas 16). The human body came to be seen as a type of battery, a machine capable of accumulating and transmitting electrical impulses.

Alessandro Volta questioned this interpretation of Galvani’s experiments, arguing that the electricity was not inherent to the muscle tissue itself, but that the two metal nodes of the stimulating probe were themselves the conductors of the electrical current they were purportedly only measuring (McComas 18). In response to this challenge,

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<sup>64</sup> Overviews of the experiments and debates of Luigi Galvani, Alessandro Volta, and Giovanni Aldini can be found in Linda Simon’s *Dark Light* (12-20); Alan McComas’s *Galvani’s Spark* (11-23); Laura Otis’s *Networking* (16-22); and Iwan Rhys Morus’s *Frankenstein’s Children* (126-129).

Galvani and his supporters renewed their efforts at demonstrating that electricity was inherent to the animal and human body. The experiments of one supporter, Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini, caused a sensation when they apparently proved electricity's power to reanimate the human corpse (Simon 13-14). In "Professor Aldini" (1 February 1803), *The London Medical and Physical Journal* (1815-1833) describes Aldini's electrical dissection of an executed criminal named George Forster for the Royal College of Surgeons: "On the first application of the process to the face, the jaw of the deceased criminal began to quiver, the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process, the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion" (195). To the experiment's bystanders, the article continues, it appeared "as if the wretched man was on the eve of being restored to life" (195).<sup>65</sup> Although Galvani's central tenet—that the body itself is a sort of battery, capable of storing and distributing electricity—was eventually refuted (Otis "Metaphoric" 112), this grisly "re-animation" of frog legs and human flesh continued to resonate in the public imagination in the early 1800s. Such spectacles implied not only that organic flesh was uniquely responsive to electricity, but also that the human body and mind could be split, ceding complete control of the flesh to electrical impulse. If the body were nothing but an aggregate of electrical impulses, corporeal control was within the power of anyone dispensing the appropriate signals and shocks.

This early experimentation in electrically charged human flesh and exogenous electricity prompted scientists of the mid-century to argue that the universe itself was constituted of nothing but electrical fluids and electricity (Morus 134-139). Such theories bolstered the idea that humans could be uniquely connected—*of one*—with the cosmos, dissolving spiritually into the ether. It is not difficult to see how such ideas became

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<sup>65</sup> Given these descriptions of Galvani's experiments, it isn't difficult to see how they eventually inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

conflated with the telegraphic potential for instantaneous and immediate human connection around the globe, as evidenced by the odes which opened this chapter. In 1844, James Olcott argued in *Animal Electricity* that electrical fluids connected sentiment and affect amongst humans: “The electric circulation brought in play through these organs [of mind, heart, and spirit], invigorates and enlarges the organs themselves; and we emerge from the low, plodding, selfish, worldly, mercenary spirit, into a higher and nobler sphere of existence” (126). Human sentiment is thus imagined as electrical circulation between organs. The promise of magnetic connection amongst humans further prompted Edward Hitchcock, a Professor of Chemistry and Natural History at Amherst College, to proclaim that electricity might enable humans to banish the body entirely through a form of mental telepathy. Hitchcock writes in *The Religion of Geology* (1854), “Now, if we admit that mind does operate upon other minds while we are in the body, independent of the body, can we tell how far the influence extends? If electricity, or some other subtle agent, be essential to this action, it would indeed transfer this example to electric reaction, but it would still be real” (436). In this way, electricity, so tightly associated with the telegraph, also conjured a split between the mind and body, either through rejuvenated corpses or through the utopian fantasy of a pure transmission of thoughts between humans.

This rhetoric of perfect communication—a perfect joining of human and natural forces—resonates with another branch of scientific inquiry closely associated with the telegraph: animal magnetism. Mesmer’s argument that the universe is comprised of fluids which exist both internally and externally—and the attempt to align internal fluids with external fluids—similarly supported a unified field theory of the natural and human universe. As John Durham Peters notes, animal magnetism “created an arresting image of the total fusion of two or more souls that would, in conjunction with romantic and occult currents, reverberate through European and American literature in the nineteenth century. The mesmeric condition of being *en rapport* or, as it was often translated, ‘in

communication' was another term borrowed from electricity" (91). Both animal magnetism and animal electricity evoked the possibility of a deep joining of spirits capable of transcending the human body. This, I argue, is precisely the type of emotional connection—deep, immediate, and disembodied—that was celebrated by abolitionist newspapers in their adulation of the telegraph when they weren't prompting readers to be wary of the telegraph's potential to disseminate proslavery falsehoods. For example, *Frederick Douglass's Paper* (1851-1863)<sup>66</sup> considers the telegraph a fitting harbinger of news on the side of liberty in "Triumph for Freedom" (16 March 1855). The article shares the telegraphic announcement that the first fugitive slave case tried in Columbus, Ohio, was decided in favor of the slave: "How *apropos* that *such* tidings should be given to the lightning's [sic]! They send an electric thrill through every fiber of the *human* heart [...] " (1). The electro-magnetic telegraph thus offers a direct line of communication with the electrical impulses of the human heart; as an emblem of freedom, mobility, and power, the telegraph is apparently more uniquely capable of broadcasting the height of human emotions. Although abolitionists—and especially Frederick Douglass, as evidenced by his indictment of Mr. Cook—recognized the potential for telegraphy to become "enslaved" to the purposes of proslavery dispatchers, the telegraph as an object divorced from human influence is endowed with the power of conjoining human emotions with the vibrations of the wires.

This conflation in the discourse surrounding electricity, the telegraph, and human emotion is especially relevant to *Clotel*—and many other antislavery texts—given the connection between abolitionism and the sentimental novel. Formally, *Clotel* certainly has the hallmark elements of a sentimental novel: the clear delineation between "good"

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<sup>66</sup> The name of Frederick Douglass's weekly *North Star* was changed to *Frederick Douglass's Paper* in 1851 "in order to distinguish it from the many papers with 'Stars' in their titles" (*Douglass Life* 187). Shortly before the name change, Douglass placed the circulation of the paper at 4,000 copies (*Douglass Life* 187).

and “evil” characters, the freely flowing tears, the exclamatory addresses of injustice, the improbable plot twists, and the injunctions, as Joanne Dobson points out, to bond with characters “on the plane of emotion, sympathy, nurturance, or similar moral or spiritual inclinations” (267). Many scholars have traced the fundamental connection between antislavery texts and the sentimental genre, demonstrating that sentimental rhetoric was particularly suited for abolitionist narratives since both genres were intended to evoke a bodily response tinged with moral or social obligation. Philip Fisher, for example, argues that sentimentality became a critical tactic of politically radical texts from the end of the eighteenth century to the 1860s—and central to the growth of the novel as a cultural form (92). Markman Ellis similarly traces the growth of antislavery narratives and the sentimental novel at the end of the eighteenth century, noting that sentimental fiction was conceived as a way of actively participating in social reform (48). Finally, for Karen Sánchez-Eppler, the rhetoric of sentimentalism has seemed uniquely capable of enacting antislavery reform because both abolitionist and sentimental discourse relied so heavily on shared bodily experiences between readers and slaves (99). Even as sentimental antislavery texts—*Clotel* included—attempted to deny categorical identity difference by erasing characters’ bodies, they paradoxically attempted to evoke embodied responses of sympathy in readers—tears, blushes, and palpitating hearts.

If *Clotel*’s recurring attempts to destabilize textual authority and discrete categories of identity are in some ways indebted to the telegraph, the narrative’s emphasis on sentiment similarly seems imbricated with a burgeoning interest in electricity. Although few critics have considered the relationship between abolitionism, sentimentalism, and electricity, scholars like D. A. Miller and Nicholas Daly have argued that technological innovations like the railroad had a dramatic impact on a sister genre of sentimental fiction: the sensation novels for sale in railway bookstalls. Miller notes that the sensation novel was one of the first occurrences of modern literature addressing itself “primarily to the sympathetic nervous system,” attempting to provoke a “characteristic

adrenalin effect” on readers’ bodies through “accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure,” and so on (146). This bodily effect, as Daly argues, is not so dissimilar from the railroad’s own effects on the body: the shocking jolts of stopping at each station and the jangling of passengers’ nerves, for example (470). While the nineteenth-century sensation novel—with its “shocking” plot twists, its over-stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system, and its sale in railway bookstalls—seems intricately tied to the railroad, I argue that the sentimental novel—with its own emotional “shocks” and apparently paradoxical reliance on both disembodied notions of identity and embodied sympathy—is intricately tied to the metaphorics of electricity and the telegraph.

Laura Rigal, considering the conflation of emotion and electricity in Benjamin Franklin’s writings, notes that “the ideology of affect and the emergence of sensationalism” are typically considered outgrowths of the Gothic genre or eighteenth-century psychological theories and oratory (28); however, as evidenced by Franklin’s infusion of emotive rhetoric and electrical currents in his *New Experiments*, the “texts of eighteenth-century electrical science” should also be “included in the history of the emergence of affective and physiological ‘feeling’” (Rigal 28). Exhibitions of electrical experiments, like Franklin’s publications, encouraged the public to conceive of sympathy and sentiment as primarily electrical responses.

In 1818, a half-decade after the publication of Franklin’s writings on electricity and fifteen years after Aldini’s experiment on the corpse of an executed criminal, an equally grisly and infamous experiment was performed on the cadaver of an executed criminal at the University of Glasgow by Dr. James Jeffray. Dr. Andrew Ure, who attended the experiment, read an account of the event later that year to the Glasgow Literary Society and emphasized the capacity of electricity to evoke emotional responses even in the absence of life. This report was published a few months later in *The Journal of Science and the Arts* (1817-1830) as “An Account of Some Experiments made on the

Body of a Criminal" (1819).<sup>67</sup> When Dr. Jeffray applied a conducting rod to the "supra-orbital nerve" of the convict's forehead, Ure writes, "every muscle in his countenance was simultaneously thrown into fearful action; rage, horror, despair, anguish, and ghastly smiles, united their hideous expression in the murderer's face, surpassing far the wildest representations of a Fuseli or a Kean" (290). Jason Rudy, in his analysis of Ure's description, notes that electricity begins to assume complete control over the human expression of emotions, and provokes an emotional response far more intense and genuine than one can find in the aesthetic representation of emotions in Henry Fuseli's paintings or Edmund Kean's acting (23-4). Electricity, Rudy writes, "thus seems to function as a vehicle for feeling itself, not simply the muscular representation of feeling" (24).

Even as descriptions of early-nineteenth-century experiments mapped electrical impulses onto the human body, Rigal and Rudy suggest that electricity was conceived as a conduit for imparting deep and genuine sentiment. Indeed, Jaffrey's experiments—in which a conducting rod applied to the appropriate nerve elicited facial contortions of disgust and outrage—seem an apt metaphor for the desired effect of sentimental literature, in which descriptions of the horrors of slavery serve as the electrically charged rod shocking readers' deepest sympathies and propelling them to take action. This spectacle was so stunning that years later—in 1867—an engraving depicted the moment when the convict's face grimaced under the application of electrical stimulus (Figure 11).

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<sup>67</sup> The *Journal of Sciences and the Arts*, edited in Great Britain, was an American reprint of London's *Quarterly Journal of Science*. Its primary contributors were members of the Royal Institution or others of "scientific and literary eminence," and its articles addressed all fields of science ("Journal"). Ure's account of this event was widely republished in various medical journals and books throughout the early 1800s, including (to name only a few): "Galvanism," *A Dictionary of Chemistry and Mineralogy* (London: Thomas Tegg & Son, 1835): 481; "The Effects of Galvanism on the Human Body after Death," *The Magazine of Science* VII (London: W. Brittain, 1846): 38-40; and "Galvanism," *The Family Physician, or Every Man his own Doctor*. Ed. by Daniel Whitney and Frank Branson Petrie (New York: N. & J. White, 1835): 494-505. The public, clearly, was enthralled by the story.

The engraving, published in Louis Figuier's *Merveilles de la Science*, illustrates the very sequence of effects intended to be elicited by the sentimental novel: the direct application of electricity to the corpse prompts an even more severe and emotional response on the part of the audience.<sup>68</sup> Just as the participants in the foreground of Figuier's engraving recoil from the same shock administered to Clydsdale, Brown intended his readers to register the shocks of slavery through their own bodies as they read his narrative.



**Figure 11.** Figuier, Louis. "Le docteur Ure galvanisant le corps de l'assassin Clydsdale." *Les merveilles de la Science* (Paris: Furne, Jouvet & CW).

The text which most frequently serves as the exemplar of conjoined sentimentalism and abolitionism—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—frequently relies on the rhetoric of electricity in its attempt to elicit sympathetic responses

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<sup>68</sup> The composition of Figuier's engraving is reminiscent of Rembrandt's famous *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). However, while Rembrandt's painting creates a clear contrast between the lifeless body of the dissected criminal and the inquisitive onlookers, the corpse in Figuier's work seems as expressive as the observers.

in readers. As Paul Gilmore notes, sentimental novelists like Stowe often associate electricity with the potential for writing to induce a sympathetic union between the reader and the suffering protagonist (120). For Stowe, the concept of “electricity” conjures the speed and depth of emotional attachment, but the result is also an ideology of affect which requires political action. In describing escaped slaves George and Eliza, just before their own cross-dressing onboard a boat to Canada, Stowe writes: “Their night was now far spent, and the morning star of liberty rose fair before them!—electric word! What is it? Is there anything more in it than a name—a rhetorical flourish? Why, men and women of America, does your heart’s blood thrill at that word, for which your fathers bled, and your braver mothers were willing that their noblest and best should die?” (303). In contrast to empty rhetoric, Stowe believes, words should have an electric power to impart a “thrill” in the hearts of readers, a responding vibration of sympathy joining the cause of the slave to the cause of revolutionaries. In this way, Stowe conjoins the power of the word and the power of electricity to provoke a visceral and politically charged response in readers.

Although Brown relies less heavily on the rhetoric of electricity in his own antislavery fiction, he does use this lexical field to describe the deep affective power of religious and abolitionist oratory. For example, in Brown’s *The Rising Son* (1873), he writes that Bishop Singleton Jones clinches an argument “by a quotation from Scripture, and a thrilling and pointed appeal which moves his audience like a shock from an electric battery” (531) and Bishop William Quinn, “[a]s a speaker, [...] was earnest and eloquent, possessing an inward enthusiasm that sent a magnetic current through his entire congregation” (433). When Brown does use the rhetoric of “shock” in *Clotel*, it is likewise to evoke human sympathy and emotional connection. In describing the inspection of slaves at the auction, Brown writes, “The examination commenced, and was carried on in a manner calculated to shock the feelings of any one not devoid of the milk of human kindness” (103). For Brown, electrical impulses—like those dispensed across

the wires of the telegraph—are akin to the same tremors of feeling which might dissuade readers from their support of slavery.

This didactic sentimentalism continues later in the novel, as “good” characters train readers to respond appropriately to the enslaved. Georgiana, the Southern belle who frees her slaves upon her father’s death, returns from her education in the North not with an increased ability to think more deeply but with a capacity for acute compassion: “She had just returned from Connecticut, where she had finished her education. She had had the opportunity of contrasting the spirit of Christianity and liberty in New England with that of slavery in her native state, and had learned to feel deeply for the injured Negro” (109). Georgiana, unsurprisingly, serves as the female counterpart to the character of George, who is similarly prompted to free a slave given his endless wellspring of sentiment: “His was a heart that felt for others, and he had again and again wiped the tears from his eyes as he heard the story of Clotel as related by herself. ‘If she can get free with a little money, why not give her what I have?’ thought he, and then he resolved to do it” (167). As in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other antislavery texts which emphasize the “electrical” stimulation of sympathy, characters susceptible to sentiment serve as proxies for Brown’s ideal readership.

The novel’s sentimentalism, of course, relies more subtly on the imparting of electric shocks registered in bodily effects on the reader—appeals which paradoxically exhibit a corporeal response and prompt readers to “surpass” the body in a comingling of spiritual similitude. As in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other sentimental abolitionist texts, *Clotel* projects antislavery sentiment onto the reader’s body through references to the reader’s tears, blushes, or heart; however, this projection subtly blends embodied response with disembodied communicative connection. For example, after describing Clotel on the auction block, the narrator summons the embodied Christian reader to “blush” but also adopts a more figurative merging of the reader and a disembodied poet’s “heart-string”:

O God! my every heart-string cries,  
 Dost thou these scenes behold  
 In this our boasted Christian land,  
 And must the truth be told?

Blush, Christian, blush! for e'en the dark,  
 Untutored heathen see  
 Thy inconsistency; and, lo!  
 They scorn thy God, and thee! (88)

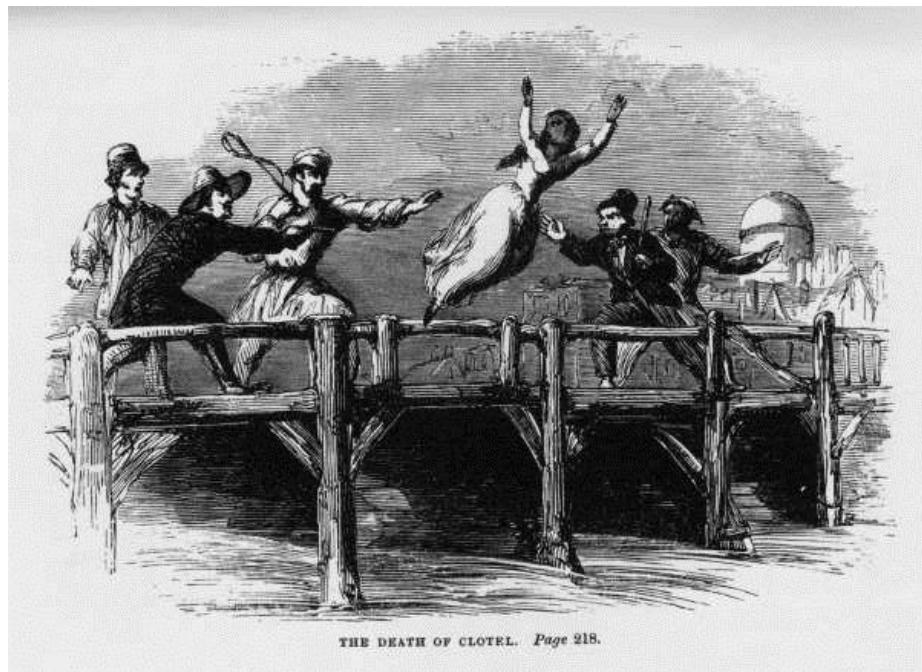
While Stowe hopes the “electric” word of Liberty will inflame the “heart’s blood,” the poet’s “every heart-string” substitutes for the reader’s own indignation at the sale of Clotel. The notion of the “heart-string” itself encapsulates the central tension of embodied response and a spiritual comingling of identity. After all, the “heart” or “heart’s blood” does ask for a palpitation of the organ which matches the poet’s own; “heart-string,” on the other hand, transitions the reader into a more figurative and disembodied realm, since it was well recognized in the 1850s that the phrase derived from an older, incorrect supposition that the heart was braced by a singular nerve or tendon.<sup>69</sup> At once, then, the spectacle of Clotel on the auction block transports the reader from a blush of shame to a spiritual union with the poet’s own disembodied voice.

Just as Brown prepares the reader to recognize that the narrator’s identity is a construction in the prefatory material, the novel itself undermines the connection between identity and the body, emphasizing that communication at a distance renders the body a textual product. The belief that the body can be accurately represented by text prevails at the slave auction, where the auctioneer emphasizes how the qualities of Clotel’s body can presumably be confirmed through text: “ ‘Here, gentlemen, I hold in my hand a paper certifying that she has a good moral character.’ ‘Seven hundred.’ ‘Ah; gentlemen, that is

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<sup>69</sup> For example, *The Dictionary of the English Language* (1852)—edited by Noah Webster, Chauncey Allen Goodrich, and John Walker—cites the definition of heart-string as “n. a hypothetical nerve or tendon, supposed to brace the heart—*Taylor*” and most dictionaries of the early nineteenth century similar cite Taylor’s definition of a heart-string as a tendon or nerve “supposed to brace and sustain the heart” [my emphasis].

something like. This paper also states that she is very intelligent.' ‘Eight hundred’” (87). Slavery thus reduces identity to an itemized valuation of component parts, a point made even more strongly as Brown closes the chapter with the exact amount raised for Clotel’s body (“bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves” [88]), moral character, intellect, Christianity, and chastity. Brown thus marks the extent to which black identity—and the identity of the slave—is determined by the text—the certifying paper—which vouches for the valuation of each component part of the body.



**Figure 12.** “The Death of Clotel.” *Clotel* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000): 206.

The narrative’s own appraisal of Clotel’s body poises her forever in a state conjoining body and soul, black and white, embodied enslavement and disembodied “freedom” in heaven. Clotel’s leap from the Long Bridge is one of the most frequently discussed scenes in the novel, and the accompanying illustration from the first edition

further holds her body in abeyance in the reader's mind (Figure 12).<sup>70</sup> The illustrator, Henry Anelay, and engraver, James Johnston, were the same pair who created the illustrations for the first London edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and their names received top billing on the title page alongside Harriet Beecher Stowe's (Senchyne 151-152). The story of the leap from Long Bridge is offered in three competing narratives in *Clotel*: in the engraving, in the narrator's description, and in the elegiac poetic response which follows both portrayals. This constant replaying of Clotel's death in various artistic forms—visual, narrative, and poetic—heightens the reader's emotional response at the same time that it foregrounds Clotel's body as a construction of these representations. In other words, Brown again focuses the reader's attention on the mediated quality of Clotel's body. In addition, the engraving stills Clotel's body uneasily between life and death. As Ivy Wilson notes, the sketch depicts this moment "less as a jump into the Potomac River than a hovering above it, making her presence as much ethereal as material, as much spectral as social" (55).

Not only does the illustration hover Clotel magically between embodiment and disembodiment, it also highlights how the medium of representation over-determines an artist's options for portraying the body. As Jonathan Senchyne demonstrates, "technologies of racialization emerge in conjunction with technologies of printed words and images" (142). Wood engraving itself, Senchyne argues, which relies on binaries of black ink and white paper in its representations, forces Clotel's body into categories which Brown has so thoroughly deconstructed throughout his text, and further solidifies the association between whiteness as normalized absence and blackness as racialized

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<sup>70</sup> Russ Castronovo offers perhaps the strongest argument that Clotel remains forever suspended and spectral in this image, explaining, "Although the engraving freezes an episode from Brown's narrative, importantly, it acts less as narrative itself and more as a timeless moment, insulated from change and continuation. Clotel never falls in this image [...]" (42). The refusal to depict Clotel as described—in men's clothing, and white—offers further evidence of the true radicalism of Brown's arguments in the period.

presence (151-156). Even attempts to represent racial ambiguity through the tonal and shading effects of hatching or cross-hatching still rely on the opposition of black and white—and still imply that “mixed race” identities could be instantly recognized. In this way, the engraving both reflects and perpetuates the period’s predominant ideology that race is visually accessible and immediately legible.

Similar fissures exist as well in the narrative and poetic versions of Clotel’s leap. While the narrative concludes with the sharp realism of Clotel’s corpse, reducing her final moment to the summary disposal of a body, the narrator transitions immediately into the poetic dirge inspired by her death. The body, disposed of without ceremony in the narrative itself, thus inspires the everlasting admiration of this poetic profusion. Whereas the narrative concludes with a body tossed into the “hole dug in the sand” (207), the poem is busy with symbol-making, converting Clotel’s body into an emblem of the nation’s hypocrisy: “That bond woman’s corpse—let Potomac’s proud wave / Go bear it along *by our Washington’s grave*, / And heave it high up on that hallowed strand, / *To tell of the freedom he won for our land*” (209). The body in Clotel’s grave—and Washington’s grave—is thus etherealized, misting into the realm of the disembodied symbol. In these various retellings of the leap from Long Bridge, Clotel’s body is perennially drowned and resurrected, buried and then held aloft visually and poetically.

*Clotel* ultimately focuses the reader’s attention on how technologies of artistic and communicative representation—including wood engravings, poetic structure, the genre of the slave autobiography, and the telegraph—exist in an endless feedback loop with constructions of the body and identity. While Ezra Gannett and phrenologists of the 1840s conceived of the telegraph as a symbol of enslavement or proof of Western superiority, antislavery writers like Brown lit on electricity and the telegraph to chart out the possibilities for both material freedom and a more theoretical escape from racial identities centered on bodily difference. If visual technologies like wood engraving seemed to force the body into the binaries of black and white, the electricity of the

telegraph—invisible in presence but capable of producing enduring and discernible effects—seemed to promise, for some, the possibility of an escape from the visual, the body, even enslavement itself.

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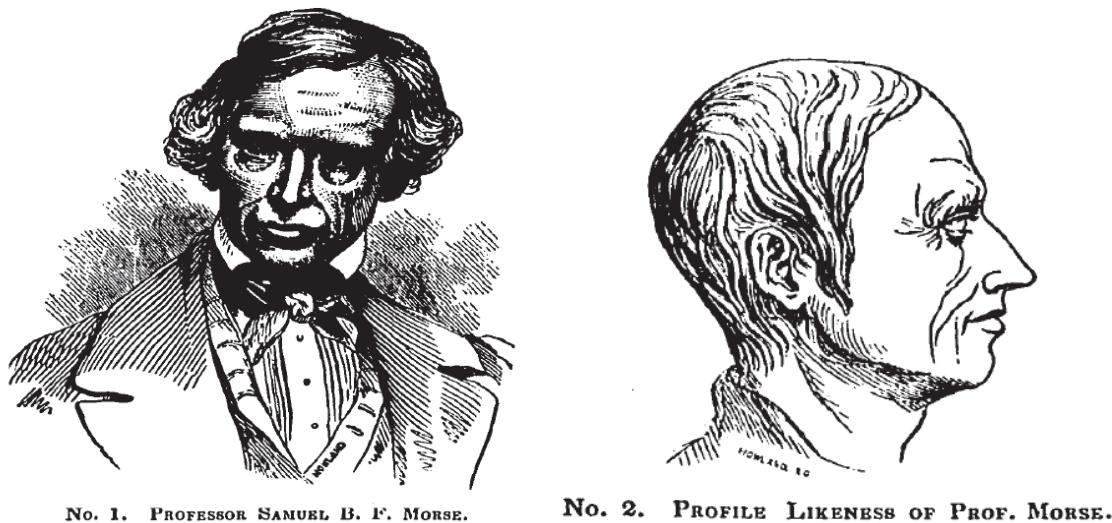
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**CHAPTER 3**  
**ELECTRIC HAIR AND CAMO CRINOLINE:**  
**BODY PHRENOLOGY AND DISEMBODIED AUTHORSHIP IN**  
**FANNY FERN'S *RUTH HALL* (1854)**

In January 1848, the *American Phrenological Journal* published the findings of Samuel Morse's phrenological examination, attempting to decode his cranial "bumps" as so many telegraph operators were by then decoding the tapped "dit-dit-dah" across the wires. Before itemizing how Morse's cranium presaged his genius, however, the phrenologist offers a rapturous appreciation of Morse's invention: "See what [the telegraph] has already done in connection with the press. See how many new papers it has given birth to all along its lines, every one of which go forth to rouse and develop mind. In short, it has literally electrified the civilized world" (10). The article continues to explain, unsurprisingly, that Morse's profile reveals "exactly such an organization as is required" (10) to invent a technology as exceptional as the telegraph.



**Figure 13.** "No. 1. Professor Samuel B. F. Morse" and "No. 2. Profile Likeness of Prof. Morse." *American Phrenological Journal* (1 January 1848): 10.

In submitting his bust and profile to the scrutiny of the Fowler brothers and Samuel Wells (Figure 13), the most famous American phrenologists of the period, Morse joined the ranks of many notable figures of his day, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Samuel Colt, and Abraham Lincoln, as well as the ranks of obscure criminals and the mentally ill.<sup>71</sup> These phrenology examinations were so popular in the 1840s and 1850s that one of the best-selling novels of the period—Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1854)—features a “phrenoanalysis” of the eponymous character.

While Morse certainly refined the mechanical and electrical components of the electric telegraph, his name perhaps endures most strongly for developing—along with Alfred Vail—the coded system that simplified the transmission of information over telegraph wires. The first Morse code, which used shorter and longer pulses and the silence between them to transmit the letters of the English alphabet, was compiled in 1838, the same year that the first volume of the *American Phrenological Journal* was published. By 1844, the “American Morse code” was used on all land telegraph lines in North America (Coe 67). Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that the *American Phrenological Journal* claims in a January 1848 article that the telegraph “far outstrips rail-roads, steamboats, and all those other modern inventions and improvements which are so rapidly and effectually revolutionizing business, society, and the entire order of the things that were” (10). Surely phrenologists recognized the proximity between their own “scientific” semiotic system of character reading, Morse’s semiotic system for the telegraph, and the dissemination of “new papers” like the *American Phrenological Journal* itself.

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<sup>71</sup> A convenient compilation of these “phrenoanalyses” can be found in Madeleine B. Stern’s *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1982).

Although many scholars have considered the ways in which the growth of newspapers and periodicals were indebted to the telegraph,<sup>72</sup> few have considered the connection between the telegraph and the semiotics of phrenology, which promoted the idea that human character could be read from anatomical codes. In this chapter, I will argue that phrenologists in the United States frequently relied on metaphors of the telegraph to bolster the credibility of their own scientific claims from the 1830s to the 1850s. More specifically, I will argue that the phrenology exam in *Ruth Hall* can be read not only as a commentary on the tendency of publishing culture to disembody authorial identity in the 1850s, but also as an engagement with this conflation of phrenology and telegraphy. Ultimately, Fern's narrative disengages phrenological discourse from its reliance on the telegraph by deploying a metaphorics of feminine communication networks. Fern uses these electrified networks to highlight the disembodied quality of female authorial identity. In place of an authorial body, Fern offers the materiality of a reproduced banknote, implying that authority resides not in the physical identity of a writer but in the proof of her work's success in the marketplace.

Since the role that telegraphy played in buttressing phrenology in the early 1840s and 1850s has remained relatively unexamined, this chapter will place a reading of *Ruth Hall* alongside periodicals of the period—most notably the *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*<sup>73</sup> (1838-1911) and *Godey's Lady's Book*<sup>74</sup> (1830-1878)—in

<sup>72</sup> Menahem Blondheim offers an extensive engagement with the relationship between the telegraph industry and the press in *News Over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1994). Tom Standage also offers a useful overview of the telegraph's cataclysmic impact on the newspaper business in *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth-Century's On-Line Pioneers* (New York: Walker Publishing Co., 1998).

<sup>73</sup> *The American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, established in 1838 in Philadelphia by Nathan Allen, a medical student, and then sold to Orson and Lorenzo Fowler in 1841, has one of the longer histories of nineteenth-century magazines (Mott I: 448). The journal enjoyed broad circulation before the Civil War, with over 50,000 readers (McGlamery 24). According to the “Introductory Statement” (1 October 1838), the journal targeted a “popular” audience and intended to render “science for the people” by “acquaint[ing] them with principles” which are then “expounded and illustrated” (4).

order to contextualize the overlapping discourses surrounding the electric telegraph and phrenology. While Fern rarely mentions the telegraph directly in *Ruth Hall* or in her various other publications, this pairing suggests that her extended staging of the phrenological exam in *Ruth Hall* is only one moment in which the narrative endorses an impulse for the more disembodied communication networks which the telegraph seemed to auger. It also highlights how Fern positions women as self-authors of their identity, particularly in their ability to transform clothing and rooms into texts which disclose information about their intrinsic spiritual attributes. Fern uses the concept of phrenology to de-materialize and re-materialize the female body in the same way that telegraphy—and periodical culture—apparently de-materialized the body of the author by separating the text from the body.

Throughout Chapter LXXVI of *Ruth Hall*, which features the “phrenoanalysis,” the masculine performance of disembodied scientific inquiry and editorial knowledge is pitted against feminine embodiment: the narrator transforms the male scientific investigator into the study subject, dislocates the encrypted text from the female body and relocates it onto the masculine scientific body, and implies that feminine subjectivity transcends embodiment altogether. Even as Fern endorses a “telegraphic” female identity of authorship which escapes the classificatory gestures of phrenology, however, her early narrative remains entrenched in the notion that the body reveals the “truth” of a person’s character. In this way, her narrative expresses a desire for transcendent disembodied communication between a network of women but a realization that such transcendence comes at the expense of another’s continued embodiment in conventional domesticity or in the publicity of the marketplace.

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<sup>74</sup> *Godey's Lady's Book*, edited by Sarah Josepha Hale from 1837 to 1877 and also published monthly in Philadelphia, had the highest circulation of any American women's magazine in the early 1850s; the circulation peaked at 150,000 subscriptions just before the Civil War (Mott I:581-4), at which point the lady's magazine *Peterson's* had “undoubtedly overtaken *Godey's* in the circulation race” (Mott II: 309).

*Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern—the pseudonym of Sara Willis Parton—is heavily based on Parton’s real life, and much of its mounting popularity in the 1850s stemmed from readers attempting to identify which of Parton’s friends and relatives were depicted in the novel. In the first weeks of its release in December 1854, Fern’s publishers, the Mason Brothers, frothed public interest by advertising that the novel was autobiographical and that copies were flying off of the shelves (Warren 123). Once the true identity of the author was revealed at the end of December by Fern’s former editor at the *True Flag*, William Moulton, who resented Fern’s portrayal of him in the novel, sales increased even more. In the first two months of its publication, the Mason Brothers claimed that *Ruth Hall* had sold more copies than any other American book in a two-month period, even *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Warren 124). Over 70,000 copies were sold in the first year (Warren 123). The novel opens with the happy marriage of Ruth Ellet and Harry Hall, whose connubial delight is marred only by Harry’s meddling and disapproving parents. When Harry dies from typhoid fever only a few years later, however, he leaves Ruth with no means of support for their two daughters. During her widowhood, Ruth seeks the financial and social support of her in-laws as well as her father and her brother, but each supplication is rejected in turn by her well-heeled but apparently parsimonious family. Abandoned by friends and family alike, Ruth moves into a boarding house just up the street from a brothel and searches for work as a seamstress and a schoolteacher, but she is again denied in her applications, this time because her entirely suitable training is deemed inadequate.

Ruth finally resorts to submitting articles to her brother Hyacinth Ellet, a character modeled after Parton’s brother N. P. Willis, an editor of a thriving periodical.<sup>75</sup> In the novel, as in real life, her brother not only rejects the articles but also discourages

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<sup>75</sup> Sara Willis Parton never had a phrenology exam published, but her brother N.P. Willis did have his organ of “Constructiveness” praised in a letter to Mr. Fowler published in the “Miscellany” section of the *American Phrenological Journal*’s October 1845 issue.

her from attempting to have them published elsewhere. In the novel, Hyacinth tells Ruth that she has “no talent” and should “seek some *unobtrusive* employment” (116).<sup>76</sup> Just as Parton adopted the pseudonym of Fanny Fern, Ruth adopts the pseudonym of “Floy” and continues to send her articles to other publishers until she finally finds an editor, Mr. Lescom, and begins to write for *The Standard*. Her articles are such a success that Mr. Tibbetts, the editor of *The Pilgrim*, also agrees to publish her work, but the remuneration for these articles is so scant that Ruth continues to live in poverty.<sup>77</sup> When Mr. Walter, the editor for *The Household Messenger*, approaches her with the possibility of writing exclusively for his magazine, Ruth promptly agrees. The final chapters of the narrative trace Floy’s burgeoning success and her financial independence as well as her budding friendship with Mr. Walter.

Shortly after Floy’s meteoric rise to fame, Mr. Walter insists that she submit to a phrenological exam, an injunction that may surprise modern readers. The inclusion of this chapter becomes less puzzling, however, when considering the role of phrenology at the mid-century. Merely sitting for a phrenology exam and then publishing it for a broader readership was a mark of distinction, as indicated by the many luminaries of the period whose exams were published in *The American Phrenological Journal* and other periodicals. Floy’s inclusion of her own examination thus signals the extent of her fame in the same way that a montage of an autograph signing or a paparazzi blitz might signal a public figure’s fame today. However, this chapter has a deeper significance than merely indicating Ruth’s success in the publishing field, as is apparent from the broader role that phrenology played in shaping constructions of identity—particularly gendered and racial identity—during this period.

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<sup>76</sup> The page number for this and all following *Ruth Hall* citations are taken from *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*. Ed. by Joyce W. Warren. New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1986.

<sup>77</sup> This unfavorable portrayal of Mr. Tibbetts, based on William Moulton, prompted Moulton to reveal Fern’s true identity shortly after the novel appeared in December.

Phrenology, derived from two Greek words meaning “discourse on the mind,” reached its height of popularity in America in the 1830s (Young 121). Phrenologists claimed that the contours of the cranium indicated the relative size of the mind’s organs, the number of which varied from thirty-five to forty-three over the years; these organs (including “Benevolence,” “Self-Esteem,” Conjugality,” and “Combativeness,” to name a few) were believed to determine human intellect and morality as well as human behavior (Young 121). Phrenology, like physiognomy, accordingly argued that the internal qualities of character and spirit were legible in the external and material realm; unlike physiognomy, it implied that anatomy and physiology directly determined and shaped behavior and spirit (Davies 3). Even though phrenologists did believe that character and behavior could be altered through prolonged effort, or even by reshaping the prominence of some physiological features through constrictive clothing,<sup>78</sup> phrenology has a much more deterministic cast in its implication that character is inborn and largely a result of a person’s physiology. This concept, of course, was not new to the nineteenth-century; as Sharrona Pearl notes, the art of physiognomy and the belief that the body indicated internal truths of spirit has been evidenced for centuries in the fine arts, the mark of the cursed, and multiple religious traditions (11). Phrenology itself, however, had a shorter shelf life than physiognomy, though it borrowed many of the physiognomic concepts first popularized in eighteenth-century Europe by Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater.

While the main tenets of phrenology are traced to the early-nineteenth-century writings of two students of Lavater—Franz Joseph Gall, who developed “cranioscopy,”

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<sup>78</sup> For example, the “Patent Hat” was marketed in 1855 as a way to re-shape the cranium. The advertisement which precedes Ellis Ballou’s *Patent Hat* (1855) explains that the hat “is so constructed as to *rub* the thick, unsound protrusions of the cranium, and infuse them into a matter that will cause the swelling to subside” (7). More evidence that phrenology did not wholly endorse anatomical determinism can be found in Travis Foster’s “Grotesque Sympathy” (2010), which argues that phrenology was frequently used to support charity projects of class uplift (3).

and Johann Spurzheim, who adapted Gall's work into "phrenology"<sup>79</sup>—the science became widespread in the 1830s largely as a result of the efforts of a Scottish lawyer named George Combe, who formed a phrenological society in Edinburgh and began publishing the quarterly *Phrenological Journal* in 1823. By the 1830s in Britain, there were twelve such phrenological societies, and sixty-six books or pamphlets on the topic (Davies 10-11, 84-5; Colbert 8). The response to the earliest incursion of these texts to the United States in the 1820s was hostile and dismissive, but the tide shifted at the end of the 1830s during George Combe's lecture tour in the major eastern cities (Davies 10-11). According to John Davies, this was the "high water-mark in phrenology, at least among the upper classes of the United States" (20). Combe offered 158 two-hour lectures, many of which included individualized classes and large-group conferences. In addition, newspapers and magazines published the transcripts of these lectures for an even broader dissemination.<sup>80</sup>

By 1838, over a decade before the publication of *Ruth Hall*, there were two American periodicals devoted solely to the study of the pseudoscience—the *Annals of Phrenology* and *The American Phrenological Journal*—and it had taken on a central role in movements for social reform (Riegel 77). Most phrenology readings were offered by itinerant lecturers, but Orson and Lorenzo Fowler (along with their brother-in-law Samuel Wells and sister Charlotte) established an office in New York in 1842 called the Phrenological Cabinet. Here, visitors could attend lectures, receive private instruction in phrenology, examine an extensive collection of busts and skulls, or sit for a phrenological

<sup>79</sup> A concise overview of the work of Gall and Spurzheim can be found in Michael Shortland's "Courting the Cerebellum: Early Organological and Phrenological Views of Sexuality" *The British Journal for the History of Science* 20.2 (April 1987): 173-199.

<sup>80</sup> According to Davies, Combe's audiences were large, usually between 300 and 500, and this number of course increased when newspapers and magazines reprinted transcriptions of his New York lectures. Davies estimates the total circulation of these papers at 25,000 (25). Given these numbers, it seems a safe bet that many of the readers of *Ruth Hall* would have been familiar with the precepts of phrenology.

examination (Young 122). Walt Whitman famously frequented the Phrenological Cabinet,<sup>81</sup> and other writers—including Edgar Allan Poe and Harriet Beecher Stowe—relied on descriptions of “organs” as a means of delineating characters in their fiction. In 1836, Poe noted in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, “Phrenology is no longer to be laughed at. It is no longer laughed at by men of common understanding. It has assumed the majesty of a science; and as a science ranks among the most important which can engage the attention of thinking beings” (286). By including an extended description of a phrenology exam in *Ruth Hall*, Fern implies that her heroine’s genius was recognized by this flourishing discipline.

It is especially surprising that few scholars have considered the relationship between telegraphy and phrenology during this period since phrenology was explained to laymen as a “natural telegraph” as early as the 1830s.<sup>82</sup> In the earliest days of phrenology’s introduction to America, advocates frequently turned to the telegraph as a means of legitimating their theories. The *American Phrenological Journal* clearly relies on telegraphic metaphors in an attempt to bolster the scientific claims of phrenology. For example, in “Article I: Philosophy of Life,” published in January 1845, the phrenological reading of facial expressions is not so dissimilar from the telegraphic coding of messages. The author asks readers to contemplate how their communication of internal state by tone or physical appearance is achieved, a conundrum of “Causality” which the author leaves to the better scientific understanding of future generations. The article suggests, however, that such communication is similar to the mechanics of a new technology,

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<sup>81</sup> An overview of phrenology’s importance to Whitman can be found in Nathaniel Mackey’s “Phrenological Whitman,” *Conjunctions* 29 (1998): 231-251.

<sup>82</sup> In the *New-England Galaxy* article “Phrenology” (23 August 1834), the author writes, “If the external signs upon which these theorists [of phrenology] have their doctrines, are indeed indexes of the talent or disposition of the possessor, those acquainted with this natural telegraph have a decided advantage over the unenlightened” (17). The body itself thus becomes a “natural telegraph” of a person’s internal traits.

asking if internal emotion has “a magnetic telegraph by which, with lightning speed and mathematical precision, it communicates its slightest promptings to the thorax, and there gives them those thrilling accents that melt the hearts of all who hear?” (7). Although the author clearly presents the telegraph as a metaphor, the metaphor is apparently apt: the process of communicating emotion through tone or appearance is as instantaneous and as mysterious to the layman as the process of communicating messages via encoded taps.

The journal’s initial refusal to establish “Causality” in 1845 transitions in the next decade to a wider acceptance of telegraphy as the appropriate metaphor for the process by which the mind or spirit communicates with the sense organ and thus becomes legible to phrenologists. In “A Condensed View of the Intellectual Processes” (March 1859), Reuben Levi argues that communication between the “organ of sense” and the mind travels upon a “special nerve” (29). Levi asks, “Is the nerve a railway along which mind comes out to grasp the monition of presence made by the object on the sense-organ? [...]—or is it a telegraph wire, along which the sensation flies inward, to be read and realized at the central seat of the mind? The last is the view generally accepted” (29). The hesitant connection of phrenology and telegraphy in the 1840s thus shifts in the 1850s into a more robust certainty, implying by extension that phrenology unlocked hidden truths of identity just as operators unlocked the Morse code of electrical impulses. Significantly, in Levi’s metaphorical comparison, the railroad and the telegraph are irrelevant to the reader’s understanding of the process, since the railroad could just as easily concretize how the nerve impulse travels from the “sense-organ” to the “central seat of the mind.” Levi likely believed the telegraph to be the better suited technology to represent neural transmission because of its rapidity and apparent immateriality.

This tendency to conceptualize neural communication within the body as a type of telegraphic transmission continues throughout the end of the century, not only in the pseudoscience of phrenology but also among more reputable and enduring fields of scientific inquiry. As Laura Otis has proven at great length in *Networking*:

*Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (2011), scientists and artists alike turned to the telegraph as a means of explaining and discerning the process by which nerves disseminated information within the body. While Otis's work focuses much more heavily on late-nineteenth-century neurologists and writers, the *American Phrenological Journal* exhibits this same desire to read the nervous system as a telegraphic network in the mid-century.<sup>83</sup> The tendency to metaphorize the body through the telegraph and the telegraph through the body suggests that communication by nerves and communication by telegraph were equally befuddling to many readers, and suggests that readers were encouraged to conflate the two processes when attempting to understand both how electrical currents conveyed information from one city to another and how nerve impulses converted internal states to external corporeal signs.

Since the telegraph rendered the invisible language of the wires legible in the same way that phrenology was believed to render any “true” verifiable and unchanging identity visible in the shape of the cranium, phrenologists used the rhetoric of the telegraph to promote a science of essentialism. Ruth undermines such distinctions before the phrenology exam, arguing that “much more is to be told by the expression of people’s faces than by the bumps upon their heads” (167). Whereas physiognomy empowers the subject, who can change his or her facial expression to match an evolving internal state, phrenology often maintained a more static relationship between the sign and its corresponding revelation of a person’s identity. Fern’s novel, I will argue, attempts to disrupt phrenology’s insistence on essential and permanent traits as well as its associations with telegraphic coding. Instead, she demonstrates how the accoutrements

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<sup>83</sup> The journal further extends the metaphor to include the communal network in “The Municipal Electric Telegraph” (March 1852), which notes, “According to Dr. Channing, the telegraph is to constitute the nervous system of living communities” (15). While Levi’s article argues that internal bodily communication is an analogue for telegraphic transmission (implying that the process of bodily communication is a mystery which the telegraph resolves), here telegraphic transmission is explicated through a bodily metaphor (implying that the telegraphic transmission is the mystery which bodily communication resolves).

of feminine identity—clothing, hair, and domestic space—could be modified to reflect a more disembodied notion of personhood and authorship.

It is precisely phrenology's essentialist, racist, and sexist underpinnings that continue to make modern readers of the *Phrenological Journal* bristle. One of the most frequent strategies used as phrenologists attempted to bolster their credibility was an appeal to the mechanical and electrical superiority of Anglos. As discussed in Chapter 4, this strategy wasn't exclusive to phrenologists, since scholars and journalists throughout the mid-century linked the telegraph to Manifest Destiny. Articles in the *American Phrenological Journal* repeatedly point to the telegraph along with other mechanical inventions (like the railroad, the daguerreotype, and the press) as a sign of steady advances in human ingenuity, a linear plotting which of course positions phrenology and Americans as the pinnacles of human enlightenment.<sup>84</sup> In this way, the phrenologist not only placed his own field of inquiry among the ranks of the most recent scientific advancements, he also insisted on its primacy above such achievements. Thus, the phrenologist's approval of Floy's own cranium in *Ruth Hall* would have implicitly served as a mark of approval from an apparently reputable and established scientific discipline for the novel's earliest readers.

The March 1851 issue of the *American Phrenological Journal* provides a clear example of how the confluence of discourse surrounding the telegraph, phrenological

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<sup>84</sup> Just to name one example, “Phrenology of Nations” (April 1858) claims, “It is the phrenology, and the spiritual type which organizes and fixes that phrenology, that determines beforehand the history, the activity, and achievements of a nation or man” (27). The author then turns to the various achievements of “nations,” arguing in turn that each achievement was dictated by a “national” phrenological character: “And so Egyptians excelled in the arts of which we have spoken [pyramids, tombs, obelisks, and sphinxes], simply because the preponderating brain-force lay in those regions” (27). By contrast, the author continues, the craniums and technologies of modern-day Americans and Europeans indicate “a different and really more complete and elevated standard of man”; as evidence, the author turns to the phrenology of the French, which “gives us the wonderful gastronomic achievements of a Soyer and the ‘*Mecanique Celeste*’ of a Laplace” (27), and the phrenology of Americans which “gives us the reaper of a McCormick and telegraph of a Morse” (27). In short, not only did phrenologists turn to the telegraph as a metaphor for the process of phrenological communication between internal essence and external appearance, they also argued that the telegraph was indisputable proof of a level of scientific advancement which validated their own scientific theories and reinforced a deeply ingrained sense of national and racial superiority.

science, and racial hierarchies of human advancement became enmeshed in the nexus of articles within a single issue. The March 1851 issue opens with “The Progress of Civilization,” which notes the innate inferiorities of “savages and barbarians,” whose “moral, social, and perceptive faculties—including Constructiveness, Acquisitiveness, and Ideality—are feebly developed in head, and uninfluential in character” (50). According to the author, the phrenologist can instantly identify the skull of a “savage,” “by the shape alone” (50).<sup>85</sup> This rhetoric implies that physical limitations both create and disclose character traits, and thus posits that fatalistic essentialism: a “savage” will be unable to develop the moral or social “perceptive faculties” found in more civilized skulls.

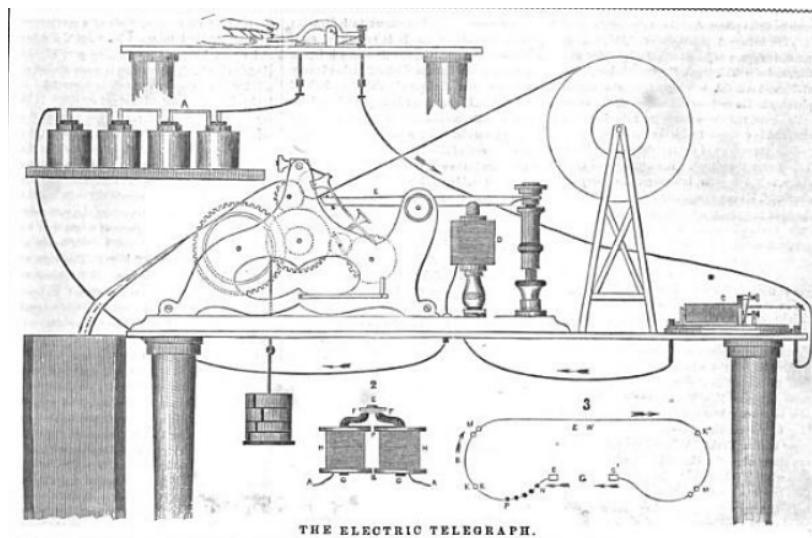
According to this issue, not only are character traits fixed in humans and animals, but they can be made legible to viewers with the proper training. After establishing a firm racial hierarchy and a clear association between scientific achievements and a civilization’s “progress,” the issue proceeds to explain that the shape of an animal’s skull indicates its “character” in an article titled “Animal Phrenology.” According to the author, this animal character is evident not only between species but also within a species. Below the profile of a stag, the author notes, “In the head of the stag above, which is the protector and most courageous of the flock, we see a vast difference in the width of the head, compared with the most amiable of the carnivorous races” (55).<sup>86</sup> By

<sup>85</sup> “The Progress of Civilization” also conflates human and animal phrenology, noting: “Even the domesticated dog, horse, ox, cat and hog, show unmistakable difference in cranial development from those which are wild, corresponding precisely with the differences existing between savage and civilized man” (50-51). While there is an element of truth to this recognition of the gracilization of domesticated skulls, the description implies a “natural law,” as if phrenology can be indiscriminately applied across species, even as it enacts a racial hierarchy that associates “savages” with baser animals.

<sup>86</sup> It is interesting to compare this rhetoric with the classificatory systems of our own scientific age. After all, the search for genetic difference in the DNA sequence perhaps promotes an essentialist view of human nature, whereas the recent growth of the epigenetics field reinforces that identity is not constructed from the genetic sequence alone. Similarly, current research has explored whether alpha primates share intrinsic attributes before assuming their alpha roles or rather these attributes surface afterwards, as a result of the alpha role. This research, like

including an illustration of an animal's profile within this article, the issue first theorizes that skulls indicate character difference even among animals and then claims to train readers in the art of interpreting such skulls in "Animal Phrenology."

Only a few pages later is the "Mechanical Department," which leads with the byline: "THE RANGE OF MECHNICAL INVENTION IS A TRUE INDEX OF HUMAN PROGRESS," recalling the arguments from the opening article, "The Progress of Civilization." The electric telegraph is positioned as proof of the theoretical distinctions drawn earlier in the issue; and just as illustrations teach readers to "decode" the cranial shapes of tigers, leopards, stags, and deer, an elaborate illustration is meticulously annotated within the column to train readers to identify the inner workings of the electrical telegraph (Figure 14). Even as the code of a stag's cranial shape is



**Figure 14.** "The Electric Telegraph." *American Phrenological Journal* (March 1851): 61.

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phrenology, attempts to address the enduring question of how deeply our destinies and character traits are ingrained in biological markers.

explicated in “Animal Phrenology,” the code of the telegraph is similarly explicated in “The Electric Telegraph,” which prints the dots and dashes for each letter and number of the alphabet and explains how the markings are etched on a strip of paper. In this issue, the Fowler brothers quite explicitly use the electric telegraph and Morse code as “proof” of Anglo-Saxon superiority and more implicitly connect the act of reading the telegraphic alphabet to the act of reading character traits from skulls.

Not only is the racial hierarchy conflated with the electric telegraph in this issue, but the gender division is as well. In the same way that “Animal Phrenology” argues the “long, sharp claws” of the tiger are “perfectly adapted” for “seizing prey” (55), “The Electric Telegraph” argues that the slender feminine hand is perfectly adapted for work as a telegraph operator: “The gentle hands of females appear to be well adapted for striking the electric lyre. The labor appears to be suitable and light, and in many cases it would be well to employ them” (64). Such arguments interwoven between articles are subtle but striking when the issue is considered in its entirety, as the journal’s earliest readers would have. Surely the phrenology exam of Morse which opens this chapter participates in this type of argumentation since the Fowler brothers, as Morse’s examiners, position themselves as authorities on his cranium. The phrenology exam itself implies that the examinee submits to the authority and knowledge of the phrenologist, and thus phrenology exams of world-renowned scientists and inventors like Morse implicitly lent support to the authority of the phrenologist.

Fanny Fern clearly upends this established examiner-examinee power dynamic in Chapter LXXVI of *Ruth Hall*, which opens with Mr. Walter attempting to persuade a reluctant Ruth to submit her head to Professor Finman’s medical exam. Despite Ruth’s preference for physiognomy over phrenology, Mr. Walter continues to insist that Ruth have the exam, telling her that he “should like to know what Prof. Finman would say of you, before I leave town” (167). Ruth agrees but notes that she has “not the slightest faith in the science” (167). Mr. Walter is clearly intended to be a sympathetic character

in the narrative—perhaps even, as Ann Douglas Wood suggests, to be a “devoted lackey” (22)—but his insistence on this point frames the phrenology exam as a form of masculine control over the female body: *he* wants to have a scientific assessment of Floy, he would prefer to have it on his own timetable, and he would prefer to base his own opinion of Floy on the scientific evaluation of Professor “Finman” (surely an allegory of nomenclature for masculine identity). Merely submitting to the exam—like submitting articles to editors or the broader public—is submitting to an authority scripted as masculine and classificatory.

Although Floy disparages the phrenology exam, and the reader is encouraged to align his or her judgment with Floy throughout the narrative, this dismissal of phrenology allows Fern to present her own best qualities while simultaneously performing the conventional feminine role of self-effacement. After Professor Finman indulges in an extended monologue of puffery, extolling the “great warmth and ardor” of Floy’s mind, her “fond[ness] of poetry and beauty,” and her “extraordinary degree of perseverance,” she tells Mr. Walter, “I think we have received our \$2 worth in flattery” (168-9, 171). Mr. Walter assures Floy that every last commendation is accurate, thus implying that the masculine figures representative of the authoritative fields of science and publishing vouch for this positive portrayal. Even as Fern appeals to these masculine authority figures for legitimization, however, she also more subtly suggests that she—as an author—maintains ultimate control over the dissemination of her identity. As the author crafting the praise of the physician, Fern perhaps winkingly claims the power of self-identification through authorship. Such claims are permissible, presumably, because they are masquerading as a physician’s reductive classificatory attempt at essentialization.

This simultaneous deference to—and refusal of—masculine authority is also apparent in the way in which Ruth’s body is abstracted throughout the phrenology reading. Unsurprisingly, a typical phrenology exam published in the *American Phrenological Journal* includes extensive descriptions of the sitter’s physical features.

For example, Samuel Morse's phrenology exam includes illustrations of his profile and bust as well as character assessments imbricated with physical descriptions of his facial features. Morse's profile, the phrenologist writes, "shows predominant perceptive[ness] in the great projection seen over the eyes and at the root of the nose—which is also seen in his front view, in the long and arched form of his eyebrows" (1). Similarly, the phrenologist identifies "Constructiveness and Ideality in that great widening seen in his front likeness, at the temples, where the hair unites with the head" (1). Morse's facial contours are illustrated both textually and visually as "data" and proof of the phrenologist's assessments; the reader, presumably, could deduce similar character traits through the illustrations of Morse's profile alone.

In Ruth's phrenology exam, however, such supporting data are excised and the reader is left only with an extended monologue from the physician; rather than specific descriptions of her facial features, the physician repeatedly refers more vaguely to her "phrenology," as in: "Your phrenology indicates an unusual degree of respect" (166), or "your physiology indicates a predominance of the nervous temperament" (167). It's true that reputable physicians rarely discussed "bumps" and "cavities" during a phrenological exam (Stern xviii), but such vague references to "phrenology" imply that Mr. Finman is either unversed in the finer points of the science or believes it unnecessary to explain these finer points to Ruth; or, perhaps, that Fern finds the supporting data unworthy of inclusion. More frequently, however, Professor Finman trundles down a meandering list of short, declarative statements so vague and broadly applicable that they seem the predecessors of psychologist Bertram Forer's personality analysis: "You are usually kind and affable, but are capable of strong feelings of resentment [...]. You are uniform in the manifestation of your sentiments [...]. You are strongly attached to place [...]. You are not content without a home of your own" (168-9). The excessive repetition of "you are" with no supporting evidence deflates the professor's presumed scientific inquiry even without further commentary from Fern, converting his "science" into charlatanism.

In addition, since Ruth's physical features are not included—either in the physician's monologue or in a descriptive moment of the physician “feeling her bumps”—the reader is not asked to participate in the scientist's own assessment, as the reader is clearly asked to do in Morse's phrenology exam. Just as Floy's own newspaper articles are not included within the narrative—so the reader is unable to judge the accuracy of those who criticize or praise her talents—the body of Ruth Hall is absented during the phrenology reading.

For this reason, while the examinee is typically the scrutinized body in a phrenoanalysis, the physician becomes the sitter for the reader's scrutiny during Ruth's exam, especially since the chapter is bookended with Ruth's arguments against phrenology. The encrypted text thus becomes the physician himself, not Ruth, and readers are asked to determine for themselves whether or not the physician is offering a reliable assessment of Ruth's character—and whether or not this assessment is “scientifically” derived. While we have access to many descriptions of Ruth's body early on in the narrative—including an extended description of her “lithe form,” her “light and elastic” step, her bright eyes, her winning smile, and her melodious voice (15)—the removal of these descriptions from this particular chapter subtly implies that authorship for Floy enables disembodiment despite the attempts of the publishing and scientific worlds to re-focus attention on her body.

In addition, the parallel between Floy's absent body and the absent excerpts from Floy's articles marks Fern's narrative control (*she* will be the one to grant or restrict our access to these public and private personas) and also implies that the act of writing itself gains Fern this access to disembodiment. Fern clearly exploits phrenology as a performance in which she remains in power—as a means of communicating coded information about her disembodied authorial persona—rather than as a passive exam in which her body is decoded by an expert to determine how her anatomy shapes and reveals her persona. Ruth Hall's submissive body is thus divided from the controlling

mind of “Floy” in the same way that it is divided from “Fanny Fern.” Nonetheless, readers attempted to force an exact correspondence between the embodied sign and the representation, between Floy’s brother Hyacinth and Fern’s brother N. P. Willis, between Ruth Hall and Sara Willis Parton.

It seems most accurate, then, to consider the phrenology reading as an oblique response to Fern’s critics, especially since the chapter is also bookended by descriptions of the critical reception to Floy’s work. The chapter is preceded by an extended monologue from Mr. Gates (the “true” editor of the *Irving Magazine* for which Ruth’s brother, Hyacinth, is the nominal editor), in which he rails against the “mutual admiration-society” (160) which dominates literary criticism, and a letter from an “honest friend” named Stearns who argues that “the *female* mind is incapable of producing anything which may be strictly termed *literature*” (166). The chapter also concludes with Floy’s own diatribe against what she calls unfair criticism: “I quarrel with no one who denies to my writings literary merit [...] but to have one’s book reviewed on hearsay, by persons who never looked between the covers [...]—that is what I call unfair play, Mr. Walter” (172). For this reason, the chapter seems much more concerned with self-promotion than self-erasure, although it is surely a promotion of a disembodied female authorship.<sup>87</sup> As Robert Gunn argues in “Strategy of Pseudonymity,” the “writerly play of veiling and unveiling is central to Fern’s negotiation of her own publicity, a practice that links the evasive possibilities of her pseudonymity in the literary marketplace to a counterpolitics of expression within the spheres of domestic containment wherein Fern imagines her female readers to reside” (3). Gunn suggests that Fern, despite her

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<sup>87</sup> Nancy Walker makes a similar argument in *Fanny Fern*. Walker doesn’t connect the purpose of the phrenology chapter directly to Fern’s response to critics, but she does note that the initial critical reception to *Ruth Hall* is foreshadowed several times in the novel: in the letter from a “pompous college professor,” her monologue against unfair criticism to John Walter, and her heated exchange with the character based on William Moulton (Mr. Tibbets). Two of these moments, I would add, cluster around the phrenology exam.

pseudonymous persona, attempts to perform publicity in *Fern Leaves* and other texts—both by presenting her private life in public texts and by writing the self into public spaces like the opera.

In his own reading of the phrenology scene, Gunn suggests that Fern is primarily concerned with combating gender essentialism and anatomical determinism. If head bumps contributed to an inaccurate assessment, the disembodied (and pseudonymous) persona ironically becomes a more substantial, truer version of the self. Lara Langer Cohen, like Gunn, argues in “Mediums of Exchange” that Fanny Fern attempted to erase the self as a public figure through the endless and “exuberant recirculation of her work and her persona” in print (84). Similarly, Brodhead argues in *Cultures of Letters* that female publicity in the 1850s frequently relied on a tantalizing rhetoric of rendering the private public (53). In his discussion of *Ruth Hall* more specifically, Brodhead suggests that this promise of experiencing a public figure’s “private” life drove much of the novel’s commercial success among female readers (“Veiled Ladies” 280). Richard Brodhead has analyzed this publicity of privacy at great length in *Cultures of Letters* (1995), and persuasively demonstrated its connection to the publishing culture of the 1850s.

While Fanny Fern’s engagement with phrenology certainly reflects on the role of the author in the age of print as these scholars imply, I would add that it is also an engagement with the changing gender roles in an age when anonymous or pseudonymous communication was increasingly possible through such mechanical innovations as the telegraph. After all, as Chapter 1 explains in more detail, the public performance of an abstracted body—and an abstracted identity—also accompanied the advent of telegraphic communication. While Mary Kelley claims that Fern’s “perspective on [a] woman’s role nevertheless remained fundamentally the same” after her literary career was launched (155), I would argue that the narrative’s strategy of revealing and developing character does indeed change after Floy becomes a public figure in *Ruth Hall*.

In her novel, Fern explores the possibilities for feminine performance that became available as a result of the dislocation of the body through periodicals *and* the telegraph. While male authors like Hawthorne might be able to retain the authorial body represented by *Blithedale's* Coverdale, Fern turns to the concept of disembodiment in order to propose a type of feminine authorship which escaped the constraints placed on it by masculine scientific and publishing establishments. In *Ruth Hall*, as Ruth becomes an increasingly successful author and begins to assume the identity of "Floy," I argue that she gradually abstracts her own body until the material success of the self is emblematized not by accoutrements of the body and home but by a reproduced bank stock certificate made out to Ruth for \$10,000. In detailing the history of "Floy," Fern at once promises access to an embodied author who seems to stand in for her own identity and denies the equivalency between the sign and the object that the sign supposedly represents. In creating a pseudonym ("Floy") for her pseudonym ("Fern"), the "real" author behind the fake-named authors seems at once more accessible and entirely unknown; the reader recognizes that the authorial body *is* a construct, and that it holds no guaranteed correspondence to the "essence" underneath.

In order to make sense of this transition from embodiment to disembodiment, the phrenology exam must be placed in conversation with the rest of the narrative, which at times endorses phrenology as a means of revealing character traits—and without the gleam of irony evident in Floy's attitude toward the science in Chapter LXXVI. Considering the phrenological exam in this light, it becomes clearer that the narrative traces the trajectory of embodied communication to a more disembodied notion of authorship which more closely aligns with the telegraph and less closely aligns with the embodied readings of phrenology. For example, the narrator at times relies on phrenological terminology early on in the narrative. When Ruth implores Harry to rouse Pat, one of the laborers, in order to request that Doctor Hall aid their ill child, the narrator describes the development of Pat's "bumps": "It was a venturous undertaking to rouse

Pat suddenly, as his bump of destructiveness generally woke first; and a fight seemed always with him a necessary preliminary to a better understanding of things" (41). This exchange is intended to be humorous—the laborer who awakes by throwing punches—but the narrator nonetheless relies offhandedly on the constitution of bumps to describe character traits.

Elsewhere, the narrator quite more seriously uses phrenological "bumps" to assess character. Mr. Develin, the bookstore owner whom Doctor Hall approaches to confiscate Harry's clothes and other personal items of value from Ruth, is similarly described by his most prominent bump: "Mr. Develin had fostered his bump of caution with a truly praise-worthy care" (76). These direct references to "bumps" might be dismissed as humorous irony, but other moments in the early portions of the narrative are similarly supportive of character-reading principles which seem indebted to phrenology.

In order to make sense of these moments, it is necessary to contextualize *Ruth Hall* within the broader discourse surrounding feminine identity, telegraphic coding, and phrenology. In the scientific literature of the period, phrenology is most frequently presented as a means of discovering truths about strangers that they might prefer to keep hidden, of uncovering the secret truth of another's interiority legible from his or her anatomy. However, as I have suggested, *Ruth Hall* offers an alternative argument, one which grants more control to the female as a dispatcher of anatomical messages rather than a passive conduit of her anatomical truths.

Fern was not alone in claiming a greater role for females as dispatchers of coded physiological information about the self. Despite Sarah Hale's rather tepid endorsement of *Ruth Hall* in her "Literary Notices" column of *Godey's Lady's Book*,<sup>88</sup> the magazine's

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<sup>88</sup> As Nicole Tonkovich notes in *Domesticity with a Difference*, Hale's literary notices of texts she liked were "glowing and lengthy" (26). *Ruth Hall* receives only two sentences from Hale, a fact which Tonkovich ascribes in part to the rather "racy" content of the novel, content which conflicted with *Godey's* reputation as a magazine suitable for ladies and families. Hale wrote of *Ruth Hall* in "Literary Notices" (Aug 1855): "As a writer, the author of this volume has been very successful and very popular. Her success and popularity may be increased by this

portrayal of feminine phrenological control is surprisingly similar to the perspective found in *Ruth Hall*. Even though *Godey's Lady's Book* also considers the ability of men to manipulate their “phrenology” in order to disguise one trait or promote another, the magazine most frequently attributes this faculty to women. One article, “A Series of Papers on the Hair: Modes of Wearing the Hair” (May 1855), states quite explicitly that women are the superiors to men on this point since they can shape their coiffure to camouflage or promote their “bumps”:

Woman has very much the advantage over man in this respect. She can make her head show, phrenologically, for pretty much what she pleases. The prominent propensities may be made un conspicuous by counterbalancing even where the bumps themselves cannot be concealed. But, upon most of the betraying prominences, complete disguise may be put, and those which are creditable and beautiful may be greatly thrown into relief, heightened and made to tell upon the expression. An inch forward or backward in the placing of the knot of the hair, gives the head (the most common observer sees, without knowing why) a very different character. (435)

Whereas female physiology and grooming habits were frequently taken as proof of a delicacy or a vanity which would indispose women to participation in the public realm, the author here argues that female grooming is a distinct advantage for women in public, granting them *more* control than men in the way that their bodies and character traits are perceived. In this way, the apparently frivolous descriptions of the season’s most popular hairstyles which one finds in *Godey's Lady's Book* can take on a more political edge, implying that women have at least the advantage of disguising and revealing their physical and moral strengths or weaknesses.

*Godey's Lady's Book* takes this argument a step further by implying that hairstyles and dresses are a language, a semiotic system that can be manipulated by women to their own advantage; in fact, *Godey's* argues that national character can be

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‘domestic tale;’ but, as we never interfere in family affairs, we must leave readers to judge for themselves” (179).

identified by hair alone. In the same article, “A Series of Papers on the Hair: Modes of Wearing the Hair” (May 1855), the author opens by observing, “Certain modes of wearing the hair distinguished particular nations,” and then proceeds to elaborate on the ways in which hairstyle designates national identity: hair “twisted in the form of a mitre” designated Armenians while “long, floating, and curled” hair signaled Persian identity (435). In *Ruth Hall*, Fern mocks Ruth’s mother-in-law for adhering to similar distinctions, but also uses the semiotics of the hair to communicate information about a character’s essential traits. Shortly after Ruth’s marriage, Mrs. Hall criticizes her daughter-in-law for her disheveled appearance, especially for greeting the minister “jest as easy as if her hair wasn’t all flying round her face like a wild Arab’s” (39). In contrast to Ruth’s “wild” hair, Mrs. Hall keeps her hair “smooth behind her ears” (39). At one point, she tells Ruth directly that her naturally curling hair makes her “look frivolous,” and that she should “try and pomatum it down” (20). Even as Fern pokes fun of Mrs. Hall’s provincialism and pettiness in these scenes, the hair *does* seem to convey an essential truth about the two women’s innate character traits. After all, Ruth’s unruly hair signals her free-spirited energy whereas the meticulous styling of Mrs. Hall’s hair reinforces her controlling and severe nature.

Similarly, the duplicitous and parsimonious natures of the doctor and Mrs. Hall are signaled by their wigs, again implying that hair reveals crucial character traits. When the doctor approaches the home of Harry and Ruth, one of the servants decodes the red wig for readers: “Bless my eyes! So it is [a wig]; and a red one, too! Bad symptoms; red wigs are the cheapest; no extra fees to be got out of *that* customer, for blacking boots and bringing hot beefsteaks” (55). The reader learns that Mrs. Hall’s hair, too, is artificial, as the doctor fires back to Mrs. Hall, “But your hair is false” (39) after she has critiqued Ruth’s hair. If false wigs underscore the artificiality of the Halls, coloring the hair also suggests that a character is hiding his or her true traits. After all, Mrs. Leon’s husband, who “dyed his hair and whiskers every Saturday” (50), was believed to be “a very fine

man” (110), but left his wife to die in an insane asylum while he traipsed around Europe. If the natural curls of Ruth’s hair impart her free and easygoing spirit, the attempt to disguise or alter the hair in and of itself seems to indicate the deceitful nature of characters like Dr. Hall, Mrs. Hall, and Mr. Leon.

According to *Godey’s*, such “reading” of character can even be extended to the hair on a woman’s face. “A Series of Papers on the Hair” (May 1855) continues, “The ancient Romans considered it indispensable for a beauty to have her eyebrows meet, and, in Scotland, persons whose eyebrows are so formed are considered lucky [...]” (435). Grooming habits, in *Ruth Hall* as well as *Godey’s*, are revelatory of intrinsic personal qualities as well as shared national traits. The article continues, “In Circassia, Georgia, Persia, and India, one of the mother’s earliest cares is to promote the growth of her children’s eyelashes, by tipping and removing the fine gossamer-like points, with a pair of scissors [...]” (435). Just as articles in the *American Phrenological Journal* argue that national character can be read from the cranium, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* implies that national character is evident in the arrangement of hair, which itself serves as a semiotic code equivalent to language in its ability to distinguish character traits.

In *Godey’s* and *Ruth Hall*, the female body is connected more explicitly to electricity in those articles and scenes which emphasize not only the hair’s ability to communicate coded information about identity but also the electrical qualities of the hair and body. Just as the concept of “magnetism” is most frequently scripted as a feminine trait (as demonstrated in Chapter 1), hair with electrical conductivity is also most frequently scripted as feminine. For example, in “The Hair” (November 1853), which focuses most extensively on a history of women’s hairstyles, the author notes, “Hair is highly susceptible of electricity; [...] many have doubtless, while brushing their hair, observed the peculiar manner in which [...] each individual hair will fly apart and avoid the contact of its neighbor. This will also occasionally occur in certain states of the body, and in persons of nervous and sensitive temperament” (437). In this way, *Godey’s*

*Lady's Book* participates in a broader discourse surrounding the electric properties of female hair, the potential to harness this electricity for power, and the electricity of the female body.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps this conflation of the female body with “nervousness” and “sensitivity” could further explain the mid-century’s more frequent tendency to ascribe telegraphic mediumship to females than males, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The “electrified” female body reverberated through popular and professional print sources throughout the 1830s and 1840s, particularly in the story of a Swiss woman who dramatically assumes an electrical charge. This story, sometimes attributed to Dr. Willard Hosford, appeared with minor changes in various publications, including *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (1837), *The Annals of Electricity, Magnetism, and Chemistry* (1838), *The London Medical Gazette* (1838), and *The British and Foreign Medical Review* (1838).<sup>90</sup> In this story, electrical conductivity is sited on the female body and female hair more specifically. As the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* describes, on the evening of January 25, 1837, “a lady of great respectability [...] became suddenly and unconsciously charged with electricity, and she gave the first exhibition of this power in passing her hand over the face of her brother, when, to the astonishment of both, vivid electrical sparks passed to it from the end of each finger”

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<sup>89</sup> Another example of Godey’s touting the electrical quality of female hair should suffice. In “Letter from a Lady of a ‘Certain Age’” (July 1857), several tips are offered for retaining lustrous, thick hair, a skill deemed “the very mystery of mysteries” (52). After suggesting various natural remedies to purify and rejuvenate the hair (including a “decoction of rosemary,” egg whites, and almond-oil), the lady offers her most carefully guarded tip: “But the grand arcane of which I spoke is the combing the hair for a few minutes every day with a common galvanized gutta-percha comb. The electricity therefrom, communicated to the hair, has a wonderful effect in case of hair falling off or becoming discolored” (52). Gutta percha was often used to insulate telegraph wires, and the article’s metaphorical comparison of a comb “communicating” electricity further endorses a comparison to the device.

<sup>90</sup> The various reprintings of this story can be found in the following: “Animal Electricity,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, Volume 21 (1838): 533-535; “Extraordinary Case of Electrical Excitement,” *The Annals of Electricity, Magnetism, and Chemistry*, Volume 2 (1838): 350-354; “An Electrical Lady,” *The London Medical Gazette*, Volume 22 (1838): 351-352; Hosford, Willard. “Extraordinary Case of Electric Excitement,” *British and Foreign Medical Review* 6.11 (1838): 249.

(533). The electricity of the lady's body ebbs and flows along with atmospheric changes, and, as Dr. Hosford claims, "The most prominent circumstance which appeared to add to her electrical power, were an atmosphere of about 80° Fah." (533). Various experiments of the rate and strength of her electric forces are described at length in the article, until those witnessing the exhibitions were as satisfied with the results "as if they had been produced by an electrical machine, and the electricity accumulated in a battery" (534).<sup>91</sup> The female body thus becomes not only the center of electrical conduction but also a mechanical storage device of electricity. Such feminization both renders the mechanical domestic and imbues the female form with a measure of power.

This empowerment of the female body through descriptions of mesmeric electrical mediumship further conjures associations with the telegraph. At times, this electrification of the hair becomes a sign that the galvanized body is a mesmeric medium. Elias Loomis, a mathematics professor at the University of the City of New York, connects hair, body, and telegraph lines in a paper presented at the British Association of Mechanics and republished in *The Mechanics' Magazine* in 1857. While Loomis does not script his medium as feminine—describing, indeed, his own body—he writes the

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<sup>91</sup> Other publications—including *Travels in Sicily and Malta* (1848) by Patrick Brydone and *The Life and Travels* (1842) by Mungo Park—tell a similar tale of a "Swiss lady" whose body is uncommonly galvanized. *Travels in Sicily and Malta* includes a letter from Patrick Brydone which mentions the lore surrounding a "Swiss lady" whose body was "possessed of too great a share of electric fire" (87). Brydone offers the solution of wearing a special cap to prevent electrical transmission during thunderstorms, a cap worn by "a very amiable lady of my acquaintance, Mrs. Douglas of Kelso" (88). Although this cap—and other attempts to prevent females' electrical conduction—are presented as mere speculative solutions in his letter, Brydone adds a footnote explaining that he conducted actual experiments which supported these hypotheses. The experiment he details again returns to the electrified female body: After a lady told Brydone that "sparks of fire" issued from her hair, he decided to attempt to "collect the electrical fire from hair alone, without the assistance of any other electrical apparatus." In order to achieve this, he had the woman stand on bees' wax and comb her sister's hair: Brydone writes, "Soon after she began to comb, the young lady on the wax was greatly astonished to find her whole body electrified, darting out sparks of fire against every object that approached her" (89). Brydone "charged a metal conductor from [an electrometer] with great ease; and in the space of a few minutes collected as much fire from her hair as to kindle common spirits" (89). The frequency with which these stories of "electric ladies" are retold in print during the 1840s and 1850s implies that "electric" hair and electrified bodies were most frequently scripted as feminine, and that both popular and specialized readerships were interested in such reports.

body into the circuit of the telegraph, implying that the electrified body serves as a medium: “I have often stood at such times [during a thunderstorm] in a telegraph office, and introduced my own body into the electric circuit, by taking hold of a telegraph wire with one hand, and with the other hand grasping a wire which communicated with the earth. A frequent twinge is felt in the arms, and sometimes through the breast” (269). Loomis’s body, hooked into the telegraphic network, registers the current in a “twinge” of the arm which would otherwise have been registered as a “twinge” on paper.

Bodily electricity, in and of itself, thus signals the similitude between the human form and the telegraph. Loomis, like the “Swiss lady,” remains uncommonly attentive to atmospheric changes and registers these changes as a perfect medium and transmitter, even when plugged into the telegraphic network. Like so many others, Loomis also turns to hair’s static electricity as an illustration of the body’s conductivity, converting the human into an electrical machine.<sup>92</sup> Although these bodies are not always scripted as feminine, the electrified hair of the magnetic body quite frequently transforms that body into a mesmeric medium. Given the associations between electricity and telegraphic communication, the electrified hair of the female body in this way seems to be placed in close proximity with the electric telegraph and the mesmerized mediums described in Chapter 1.

Like the “Swiss lady” and Loomis, Ruth Hall serves as an electrical conduit, and her bodily magnetism implies an instantaneous communication with another by mere touch. While Ruth’s embodied magnetism is prominent in the beginning portion of the narrative, this magnetism dissipates as Floy’s writings become more widely

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<sup>92</sup> For example, Loomis writes, “During the cold months of winter, the human hair is commonly electrical, and especially when it is brushed with a fine comb [...]. If you present your fingers to those electrified hairs, they fly to meet you, like a lock of dry hair attached to the prime conductor of an electric machine” (269). In the same way that broader municipal networks were being compared to the human body, the solitary strands of hair seemed emblematic of a single machine.

disseminated—or, perhaps more accurately, it becomes replaced by a deep and metaphorical magnetism independent of embodied connection. Early in the narrative, Ruth's magnetism signals her success in the traditional feminine roles of mother, nurse, and confidante. For example, Ruth's maternal instinct is immediately evident as she massages Mrs. Skiddy's baby: "Ruth took the poor worried baby tenderly, laid it on its stomach across her lap, then loosening its frock strings, began rubbing its little fat shoulders with her velvet palm. There was a maternal magnetism in that touch; baby knew it!" (93). Ruth's body thus communicates love and comfort as instantaneously and magically as the telegraph.

A similarly magnetic touch enables Ruth to nurse Mary Leon, the woman at the Dover Cliff Hotel whose hair-dyeing husband eventually placed her in an asylum: "Mrs. Leon was often subject to severe and prostrating attacks of nervous headache. On these occasions, Ruth's magnetic touch seemed to woo coy slumber, like a spell; and the fair sufferer would lie peacefully for hours, while Ruth's fingers strayed over her temples, or her musical voice, like David's harp, exorcised the demon Pain" (51). Ruth's restorative effect positions her friendship with Mary as an extension of her deep-seated maternal affections. This magnetism is not only an effect of the first female friendship that Ruth has ever experienced, it is also a source of that connection: "Ruth, although shunning society, found herself drawn to Mrs. Leon by an unaccountable magnetism" (50). This mesmeric connection is surely intended to highlight Ruth's innate sensitivity and connection to a feminine community—in other words, her adherence to a more conventional role of femininity. It also, however, implies that Ruth, as a woman, is attuned to an "electrical" language that allows for a more immediate and complete comingling of spirits than standard channels of communication.

Such an argument is also implicit—though made humorously—in Fern's few writings that make a direct reference to the telegraph. For example, a decade after the publication of *Ruth Hall*, when Lincoln assumed control of the telegraph for national

security in 1862, Fern commented that “one could not say that women were the only ones who couldn’t keep a secret” (Warren 246), which humorously scripts the “official” channels of telegraphic communication as masculine in contradistinction to the unofficial channels of female gossip. The telegraph again stands in for “official” channels of communication in Fern’s one direct reference to the telegraph in *Ruth Hall*. The narrator notes that soldiers returning from war are welcomed by shouts of “bravo!” as “[t]elegraph wires and printing-presses are put in requisition to do him honor” (199). Yet, the narrator asks, “who turned twice to look at brave Johnny Galt,” the firefighter who saves Ruth’s life, “as, with pallid face, and smoky, discolored garments, he crawled home?” (199). If telegraph wires and printing presses do not acknowledge his deeds, Fern implies, *she* will rectify such an oversight.

In this way, her text serves as a corrective to such official channels of communication, especially since she concludes the chapter, “God bless our gallant, noble, but *unhonored* firemen” (199). In *Little Ferns for Fanny’s Little Friends* (1854), Fern again establishes a contrast between gossip and official channels of communication in the article “Mr. ‘They Say’”: “Mr. ‘They Say’ is a very great traveler. It is astonishing how much ground he can get over without the help of steamboats, cars, stages, or telegraph wires” (67). From these admittedly limited references to telegraph wires throughout Fern’s work, it seems clear that telegraph wires frequently contrast with the unofficial channels of “gossip” and, more significantly, Fern’s own work. In other words, Fern presents her work as a corrective to those official channels of communication which snub the honor of someone like Johnny Galt—and Fanny Fern.

In *The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* (1855), the telegraph serves a slightly different purpose, indicating an alacrity of thought and movement. Fern writes, in response to the injunction to “take three breaths” before speaking when angry, “I’m telegraphic wire; if I had to stop to reflect, I should never be saucy” (303). Similarly, she notes that the “days of stage coaches have gone by,” replaced by “comets, locomotives,

and telegraph wires" (304). In this way, the telegraph also serves as a sign of the increasingly frenetic pace of life, which enables instantaneous and immediate communication.

Fern attempts to establish an alternate network of communication in *Ruth Hall*, one which she scripts as feminine but disembodied. The narrative re-frames communication networks not as official channels of masculine authority and control but as a feminine network of deep connections which exclude petty gossip. Descriptions of Ruth's "magnetic" touch wane as the narrative continues, but this magnetism becomes channeled into her stories, implying that Fern envisions authorship as a network of electric communication between females, but one that does not involve a literally magnetic touch. As Betsy Klimasmith notes, the inclusion of letters from readers within the narrative is a means of incorporating these readers as participants in the construction of the novel, reflecting and animating the network of a "new urban public" (47). Fern constructs another network as well, a network of immediate though disembodied connection that aligns not only with an urban environment but also with the electric possibilities of telegraphic communication.

This disembodied magnetism is especially evident in the letter from Mary R.—, whose opening allusion to Floy's body only underscores the disembodied connection between these two women: "Dear 'Floy,' For you *are* 'dear' to me, dear as a sister on whose loving breast I have leaned, though I never saw your face. I know not whether you are young and fair, or old and wrinkled, but I know that your heart is fresh, and guileless, and warm as childhood's" (136). Interestingly, this moment in which a reader explains that she is unable to envision the author as embodied is prefaced by the narrator's own attempt to embody Mary—and an ur-reader of *Ruth Hall*. The narrator writes of Mary's letter, "Ruth broke the seal of the second letter. It was in a delicate, beautiful, female hand; just such a one as you, dear Reader, might trace, whose sweet, soft eyes, and long, drooping tresses, are now bending over this page" (136). Just as

Mary R.—resorts to embodied metaphors which highlight the disembodied quality of her relationship with Floy, the narrator's attempt to embody the reader within the narrative similarly makes the reader immediately aware of the disembodied quality of the author-reader relationship—especially if the reader does not, in fact, have sweet and soft eyes or long and drooping tresses.

Here, the magnetic connection of embodiment is used as a metaphor which highlights the very disembodied process of communication through print and letters—a disembodiment which becomes even more marked in telegraphic communication, where the writing itself can no longer indicate a “female hand” and flowing tresses. Rather than describe Floy’s—or Fern’s—own bodily connection to her readers, the narrator attempts to delineate the reader’s bodily connection to the text, a portrait which must, of course, fail to represent with accuracy the multiplicity of her readership. Hair, hand, and magnetic body—so crucial early in the narrative to the establishment of Ruth’s identity as a sensitive mother, nurse, and female friend—cede in this moment to Floy’s disembodied but fully absorbing connection with what she can only imagine to be composite parts of a generalized and abstracted female body.

This double synecdoche, in which a single body part like “soft eyes” stands in for the rest of the reader’s body and in which a singular reader stands in for all readers, further scripts Floy’s work as an abstracted type of motherhood. After all, this same technique is most frequently used when Ruth considers the loss of her own daughter, Daisy. Throughout the narrative, Daisy’s identity becomes reduced to those recurring allusions to “little Daisy’s golden ringlet” (49). In Daisy’s life, her most notable feature was her “long hair floating like a veil” (37), and in her death Ruth turns to the boxed-up ringlet of Daisy’s hair in moments of grief. Just as Floy envisions the reader’s “soft eyes,” Ruth’s memories of Daisy center on “the soft, golden hair” and “the sweet, earnest eyes” (49). Daisy’s name itself, conjuring a vivid spot of yellow, further prompts readers to associate her golden ringlet with the entirety of the person who evoked Ruth’s

deep and abiding maternal devotion. In drawing the portrait of an ur-reader and Daisy through this shared synecdochal technique, Fern suggests that the same enduring emotion between mother and daughter is extended between feminine networks of authors and readers.

Just as women's hair and magnetic touch is more likely than men's to serve as a coded language and a metaphor for communal networks in *Ruth Hall* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, women's clothing is frequently connected even more explicitly to semiotics in the magazine during the 1840s. For example, a November 1847 article titled "Old and New Fashions: Art of Dress" notes that women's "habitual delicacy of mind and reserve of manner" ensures that their "dress becomes a sort of symbolical language—a kind of personal glossary—a species of body phrenology, the study of which it would be madness to neglect" (244). The author goes further to say that, for those "proficient in the science" of reading body phrenology, "every woman walks around with a placard on which her leading qualities are advertised" (244). Even though the article implies that women should take care of their dress primarily for the pleasure of communicating particular character traits to men, noting, for example, that a wife "dresses for two" (244), the implication that women can offer more complex revelations of their character through their dress posits a heightened sense of control over their "body phrenology." Of course, the article also suggests that the study of this body phrenology would be inordinately useful for men as well, since they must train themselves to be accurate and careful "readers." Even as such articles reinforce standard gender roles—the female body as an object of admiration and the male as consumer valuing the "goods"—they also attempt to reclaim control in the phrenological movement in their insistence that women are not merely passive transmitters of anatomical information but are actively encoding the anatomical character traits that they prefer to disclose.

Similarly, domestic objects operate as a semiotic system very early in *Ruth Hall*. The reality of marriage strikes Ruth not after the performative utterance of "I do," but

when Ruth notices how her grooming implements—representative of the intimacy of the self and gendered toilette conventions—are now placed alongside Harry's: "How odd to see that shaving-brush and those razors lying on *her* toilet table! Then that saucy looking smoking-cap, those slippers and that dressing-gown, those fancy neckties, too, and vests and coats, in unrebuked proximity to her muslins, laces, silks and delaines! Ruth liked it" (19). The objects of Ruth's domestic space become coded indications of the mingling of spirits after marriage and, indeed, become the first clear sign to Ruth that she *is* married.

Significantly, too, the public-private personas so evident in the distinction between the silks and laces of the bedroom and the walking costumes of the street break down once Ruth begins to experience success in the publishing field. For example, at one moment the narrator notes that Floy is so absorbed in her business that she has forgotten to change out of her bonnet in private—a fact that Ruth notes only because she is now rushing back into public: "She rose to go to the post-office, and then became conscious that she had not removed her bonnet and shawl, but had sat all this while in walking costume!" (145). Such a remark implies, of course, that Floy typically *does* mark the distinction between public and private dress, but that such codes are increasingly inconvenient for women shuttling between domesticity and commerce.

As women increasingly entered the marketplace, according to *Godey's*, they did well not only to learn how to encode their own identities but also read those of others. After all, the magazine not only trains women to disseminate information about the self through clothing, *Godey's* also trains them, like men, to read the character of the opposite sex in clothing. In a March 1845 article, "Costume," Henry Theodore Tuckerman first bemoans the paucity of the male costume when one considers the many accoutrements at the disposal of women: "It is a pity we are so limited in costume [...]. As regards the dress of our own sex, I do not remember to have met a single exception to the feeling of its almost entire deficiency [...]. The vest, cloak and *robe de chambre*, are the only articles of male toilet that have any pretension to grace" (139). Nonetheless, the male

toilette does have a few articles which allow them to promote or disguise character traits, and the article goes on to offer a hat decoding manual so that women might identify a man's "true" character:

There is something very indicative of character in a hat and the manner in which it is worn. A demurely-shaped crown and flat brim give an air of respectability to many a 'landless resolute,' while a slight lateral inclination imparts a look of daredevilism even to a clerical physiognomy. Broad-brims seem to chasten the temper, or, at least, its expression—as in the Quakers; and very narrow, curling ones, denote pertness. (139)

Just as the magazine trained women how to wear their hair to best advantage, it also trains women to read male fashion as an indicator of character. Interestingly, in *Ruth Hall*, such descriptions of Harry's carriage and clothing are conspicuously absent before their marriage. The reader is introduced to Ruth and her brother Hyacinth on her wedding night, but Harry himself doesn't speak a word of dialogue until Chapter 6, implying that Ruth had no real power of selection in her matrimony. Women can be trained to read the character traits of men, the novel seems to retort, but this skill is hardly useful when others do the picking.

Nonetheless, in *Ruth Hall*, the most elaborate descriptions of costume most frequently point to the character's superficiality and excess. For example, one of the novel's most extended descriptions of clothing comes in a chapter featuring two unnamed ladies who decry Ruth's current state. As the two women express their pity for Ruth and glut themselves on an unending list of sugary treats ("brandy-drops, Roman punch, Charlotte Russe, pies, cakes, and ices"), Fern notes one woman's "six flounces," "delicately gloved" hand, and "plumed head" (81-82). After expressing their sympathy for Ruth, one woman compliments the attire of the other: "What a love of a collar you have one; it is handsomer than mine, which I gave fifty dollars for, but what is fifty dollars, when one fancies a thing?" (82). Such details quite clearly argue that anyone wearing an expensive collar can well afford to help those in need. The two women ultimately decide that they need not help Ruth if her own family has abandoned her, and

thus the women's clothing, like the tireless consumptions of confections, codes their self-indulgent egoism.

Indeed, an excess concern over the appearance of one's clothing is almost always a damnable offense in *Ruth Hall*. For example, as the novel opens, Hyacinth tells his young sister, "Kiss me if you insist on it, Ruth, but for heaven's sake, don't tumble my dickey" (16). While Ruth prioritizes familial affection, Hyacinth tolerates kisses only if they leave his clothing unrumpled. Similarly, some of the most elaborate descriptions of dress come from those who deny Ruth assistance, as in the two ladies described above or Ruth's cousin, Mrs. Millet. When Ruth first approaches Mrs. Millet to request a loan to start a small private school, Mrs. Millet is preoccupied with the latest handiwork of her dressmaker. Ruth appears when "Mrs. Millet was just putting the finishing touches to the sleeves of a rich silk dress of Leila's," and Leila takes the opportunity to buy Ruth's treasured coral pin (a gift from Harry) for a steal (97). Once again, the Millets' excesses signal their greed and the frivolity of their concerns.

Ruth, in contrast, is less concerned with her toilette because she is apparently focused more intently on human connection. While Hyacinth prefers unwrinkled clothing to kisses, Ruth rushes to see him in an apron "slightly askew" (16). As Ruth mourns Harry, indifferent to her physical appearance amid her grief, Hyacinth finds it "dreadful" that "her hair is parted unevenly and needs brushing" (58). Even when Ruth does indulge in trivialities like "ruffles on her under-clothes," the narrator is quick to clarify that they were wedding gifts (18). Whereas Ruth is impotent to act on these character assessments drawn from clothing, Fern's excoriating descriptions imply that publication offers an outlet for women like Floy to pass along these coded judgments.

In explicitly condemning Mrs. Millet, Leila, and the two unnamed ladies, *Ruth Hall* launches a stronger critique of feminine fashion than *Godey's* dared to make. Even when the magazine was endorsing self-expression through clothing—rather than mere conformity to the latest fashions—it continued to reinforce the notion that attire was

simply a code by which to reveal a woman's true nature to potential suitors. For example, after discussing the finer points of hats, Tuckerman continues to elaborate on female costume, explaining that the many fashionable components of a lady's dress only create an impediment to knowing her character—that the conventions of costume, far from revealing character and the woman's internal state, actually swaddle it more completely from view: "To a man who has a genuine appreciation of the sex, [...] all the tricks and detailed splendour of costume are a positive annoyance. The reason clearly is, that they are so many barriers and ceremonious obstacles between him and the mind and heart with which he would commune" (139). Such descriptions do seem to empower women, granting them the possibility of re-framing their own narratives of the self, but they still position ladies as texts for the interested suitor to decode.

Instead of following the latest fashion as a means of displaying character, Tuckerman implores female readers to prove that her "true nature" has not been "perverted," that she is not "in some degree moulded by conventional influences," by a simplicity of garb and the inclusion of a few choice accessories which demonstrate her individuality, like "a simple embroidered handkerchief of white muslin, worn loosely upon the head," or a veil—any "personal ornaments" with "associations distinct from fashion" (139). Even as Tuckerman eschews convention as a means of expressing personal truth and grants primacy to the role of women as objects of masculine desire, he also argues that personal character can be expressed through a type of body phrenology; he simply instructs women to create their own language rather than manipulate the conventional language to their own advantage.

*Ruth Hall* also presents clothing as an extension of the self early in the narrative, and again this wanes as Floy becomes a literary celebrity. Shortly after Harry's death, when Mr. Develin comes to collect his clothes, Ruth struggles to part with items that still bear the impress of his body:

Harry's clothes were collected from the drawers, one by one [...]; neck-ties were there, shaped by his full round throat, with the creases still in the silken folds, and there was a crimson smoking cap, Ruth's gift—the gilt tassel slightly tarnished where it had touched the moist dark locks; then his dressing-gown, which Ruth herself had often playfully thrown on, while combing her hair—each had its little history, each its tender home associations, daguerreotyping, on tortured memory, sunny pictures of the past. (78)

The clothing, like any object Harry used, is valuable for the associated memories, but so many of the clothing items also carry the imprint of Harry's body—the neck-ties which retain the shape of his throat, or the tassel which retains the mark of his hair. Even as clothing is expressive of internal character in *Godey's Lady's Book*, clothing in this moment is similarly endowed with Harry's spirit and physicality as well as fair memories of their time together.

Just as the early portion of the narrative endorses the rather phrenological idea that clothing and domestic objects are revelatory of interiority, much of the early narrative mode similarly relies upon the deeper philosophical argument that internal quality can be read—or decoded—from external space. As Sharrona Pearl notes, “The development and awareness of physiognomy during the nineteenth century had an interesting by-product, namely, the rising emphasis on interior space. Any understanding of physiognomy entails a commitment to the idea that exterior signs signify a less visible interior correlate” (9). Very early on in the narrative, shortly after Ruth has moved in with Harry, this external sign of internal essence is apparent in the décor of their home, every aspect of which flourishes under Ruth's hand. Since the chapter describing Ruth's home is prefaced by the remarks of Harry's mother—who cranes into every nook in the hopes of identifying housekeeping blunders—the reader, too, is encouraged to read the interior of the home as a code which reveals a woman's innate skills at motherhood and domestic duties.

Even though there are small lapses of convention in the home décor of the Halls, the reader is exhorted to read the domestic space as a sign of Ruth's domestic and artistic

skill as well as her prioritizing of romps with her daughter in the freedom of the natural landscape. So it is worth quoting at length a passage that demonstrates how completely the space of the home becomes a code for the interiority and affections of Ruth:

[T]he room has the fragrance of a green-house, to be sure; but if you examine the flowers, which are scattered so profusely round, you will find they are *wild* flowers, which Ruth, basket in hand, climbs many a stone fence every morning to gather; and not a country boy in the village knows their hiding-places as well as she. See how skillfully they are arranged! with what an eye to the blending of colors! How dainty is that little tulip-shaped vase, with those half opened wild-rose buds! See that little gilt saucer, containing only a few tiny green leaves; yet, mark their exquisite shape and finish. And there are some wood anemones; some white, with a faint blush of pink at the petals; and others blue as little Daisy's eyes; and see that velvet moss, with its gold-star blossoms! (34)

The domestic space—from its fragrance to its visual arrangements which require equal attention to the natural world and aesthetic composition—serves as a clear signal of Ruth’s care for her family as well as her own artistic eye. Her love of nature and the “wild” is conscripted into the domestic realm since she spends her jaunts in this undomesticated space looking for items that will beautify the home. Finally, her maternal instincts are emphasized by the nod to those anemones as blue as her daughter’s eyes.

In this way, readers are encouraged to run their eyes—along with the in-law’s eyes and fingers which search for the least “particle of dust” (34)—around the internal space of the home and decode the ornamentation just as the phrenologist will later run his eyes—and fingers—over Ruth’s skull. Here, however, such examination is considered fruitful and accurate: a reader, a visitor, *can* gather accurate information about character from a drawing room, this scene implies, with its injunction to look and see for oneself. The interior is detailed, from the beginning to end, so that the reader can gather the relevant data and make an accurate assessment of character for himself or herself. The material *is* proof, in other words, of Ruth’s immaterial interior, in the same way that Ruth’s naturally curling hair serves as proof of her natural beauty while the false hair of

her mother-in-law serves as a sign of her artificiality. Similarly, the material, embodied Ruth is proof of the intrinsic goodness of the disembodied Floy—and, by extension, the immaterial Fanny Fern.

As the narrative progresses, however, and Ruth loses control over her material conditions, the spaces in which she lives no longer serve as external signs of internal being, a trajectory which implies that only certain women of privilege can properly encode themselves and their domestic spaces. For example, when Mr. Walter visits Ruth for the first time, the narrator writes: “Mr. Walter’s keen eye glanced about the room, noting its general comfortless appearance, and the little bowl of bread and milk that stood waiting for their supper. Ruth observed this, and blushed deeply” (162). Whereas the domestic space that she shares with Harry is speckled with colorful blossoms and infused with fragrant flowers, the domestic space of her urban and professional life is punctuated by a Morse code of sorts: that recurring “whir—whir—whir” (162) which Mr. Walter also notes the moment he steps into Ruth’s apartment, and the source of which is never really explained to the reader. Fern thus implies that newspaper and magazine writing—like the mechanics of telegraphy—is beginning to abolish space as a defining characteristic of personhood.

After all, as Fern suggests, writing requires such prolific production that it begins to take on mechanical characteristics; Ruth’s landlady notes that Ruth and Mr. Bond almost communicate in a coded dot-dash dialogue: “They are as much alike as two peas. *She* goes scratch—scratch—scratch; *he* goes whir—whir—whir” (174). Fern herself encourages readers to make a similar comparison by the parallel structure apparent in the frequent “whir—whir—whir” and “scratch—scratch—scratch” that cycle throughout the end of the narrative (114, 115, 125, 127, 162, 173, 174). Similarly, when Ruth approaches the office door of *The Daily Type*, a “whir of machinery” greets her before any human does (120). In this way, the “whir” becomes a synecdoche for the mechanics

of print and foregrounds the incursion of the machine into human relationships and communication.

While so many decried the ways in which the growth of the telegraph and railroad seemed to threaten the particularity of place and personhood, Fern's narrative offers a slightly more optimistic reading, especially for women who were so frequently considered mere accessories of place. Mrs. Leon makes this objectification quite clear when she tells Ruth, "Yes, I have all those pretty toys [dress, equipage, and ornament] to satisfy my heart cravings; they, equally with myself, are necessary appendages to Mr. Leon's establishment" (51), and Ruth's father-in-law tells his wife that Ruth is "fit for nothing but a parlor ornament," with no more business sense than an "image [...] on the mantle-tree" (130). Though Fern is in no way glamorizing the work she does as a newspaper and magazine writer in her mechanical metaphor, it at least implies that her profession allows the self to detach telegraphically from place, to be no longer a mere appendage and ornamentation on another's mantle. Significantly, Ruth first develops her relationship with Mr. Walter through communication at a distance, by the exchange of letters, and Ruth and Mr. Walter find some amusement in the fact that they are so unknown and yet so deeply known to each other at their first physical meeting.<sup>93</sup>

This same displacement is evident in the chapters that quickly intercut between locations, a narrative strategy which some scholars have ascribed in later works to the cinematic impulse. Samuel Otter argues that the quick movements between locations in each chapter with nothing but blank spaces to mark the transition exemplify

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<sup>93</sup> Throughout this scene, Fern emphasizes the strange quality of their interaction, which is at once intimate and distant. For example, Nellie tells Ruth, "It is a strange gentleman, mamma" (161) and objects to Mr. Walter's affections with a plaintive "I don't know you" (162). When Mr. Walter first enters the room, he's at once a stranger and friend, as Ruth says, "I don't recollect you," and Mr. Walter replies, "And yet you and I have been writing to each other, for a week or more" (162). This first in-person exchange between Mr. Walter and Ruth highlights how personal and work relationships alter with communication at a distance; it also seems an apt corollary to the relationship that a reader might have with an author, who is at once intimately known and a complete stranger.

communication in authorial absence: “The intervals between words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters—Fern points to these and fills them with meaning. They become spaces of implied authorial comment and understood exchange between writer and reader” (231). This rapid transfer between scenes and locations also, however, points to the possibility of telegraphic communication, which allows for instantaneous movement between disparate locations. In Chapter LXI, for example, Ruth’s father sits down to a sumptuous dinner of salmon, oysters, green peas, and boiled fowl with the country clergyman and the two discuss their sanctity. Just before the end of the chapter, Fern leaves a paragraph break and inserts the impoverished plea of Ruth’s daughter, Nellie: “Some more supper, please, Mamma” (125). Certainly the blank space between these two scenes, and the absence of any other authorial commentary, serves as its own commentary on the hypocrisy of Mr. Ellet and the clergyman. The narrative strategy of cutting between scenes within a single chapter, as Richard Menke has demonstrated in *Telegraphic Realism* (2007), also remains indebted to the technologies which promised such instantaneous transport of bodies and ideas, including the railroad and the telegraph.<sup>94</sup>

*Ruth Hall*, then, makes a more complicated argument about the shifts taking place in print culture as well as in the technological sphere as feminine identity moves from the realm of the private—where a woman is evaluated on the domestic arrangement of her living room—to the realm of the public. Once Floy transitions into a public figure, she assumes the same role as Ruth in the phrenology exam: her body of work, like her own body, is absent, and the reader can only make secondary assessments of her talent based on the response of Floy’s readers. While the internal space of the drawing room is

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<sup>94</sup> For example, Menke reads *A Tale of Two Cities*—and Dickens’s tendency to alternate between “contrasted settings and groups of people that come together” (90)—as indebted to the aspiration for the telegraph to bring such contrasted settings and groups of people into communication with one another.

presented as evidence of her maternal and domestic success—and the reader is presented with the injunction to “look” at it in a particular way—the reader is increasingly presented with *other* material proof to support Floy’s public success as her fame increases. This self-erasure is especially notable compared to the strategy deployed by Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*, as described in Chapter 1. Whereas Hawthorne’s narrator, Coverdale, interjects the authorial body in the text’s final moments, Floy removes it at every turn. While Floy herself becomes disembodied through the process of publication, the bodies of the women around her form a substitution for that displaced authorial body. While the narrative endorses a feminine identity bereft of the body, gesturing to the oft-touted hope that the telegraph would render bodily difference inconsequential, Fern replaces the authorial body with the female body of her readership.

Such a substitution reinforces the bodily and material component of communication despite the narrative’s ultimate attempt to render the female author “telegraphic.” Not only does Fern draw a generic portrait of her female reader before sharing the letter from Mary R.—, but the letter from another reader implies that readers themselves are similarly substituting their own bodies for that of the author. A young reader who calls herself “Your affectionate little Kitty” writes to Floy: “Mama has read me some of your stories. I like them very much [...]. I wish I could see you. How do you look? I guess you look like mamma; mamma has got blue eyes, and soft brown hair, and her mouth looks very pleasant when she smiles. Mamma’s voice is as sweet as a robin’s, so papa says” (189). After explaining that every member of the family (Mamma, Papa, and even Kitty’s uncle) wants to know how Floy “looks,” ultimately Kitty performs the same act that Fern asks the readers of *Ruth Hall* to perform: Floy’s body is supplanted by the body of another reader, her mother, who becomes fully embodied for all other readers with her blue eyes and brown hair and soothing voice.

If Hawthorne pushes the body of a surrogate narrator into the text in *Blithedale*, Fern pushes the body of a surrogate reader into the text. Like Hawthorne, Fern

recognizes the risks of disembodiment; she can escape feminine embodiment as an author, but her readers—still judged primarily on their ability to arrange their domestic space, to sculpt their coiffure, to dress to best advantage—cannot. Thus, while she can end her narrative with something as ethereal as the promissory omen of a trilling bird’s sweet song, she recognizes that her readers cannot similarly escape into such promises of disembodied identity.

Floy’s feminine readers aren’t the only material bodies that replace the self-erasing female author, and her narrative implies that this ethereal escape through disembodied authorial identity is not altogether a reality yet for female authors. Fern offers one explanation in a satirical review of her own book published in the *New York Ledger* on October 10, 1857. In the voice of a presumably male reviewer, Fern writes, “We have never seen Fanny Fern, nor do we desire to do so. We imagine her, from her writings, to be a muscular, black-browed, grenadier-looking female, who would be more at home in a boxing gallery than a parlor [...],—a woman only by virtue of her dress” (290). Although the first sentence initially implies that a bodiless state might be possible for a female author, the review quickly pivots in search of a new gender category, suggesting that a female writer is nothing more than a male author in drag.<sup>95</sup> If a female author like Floy is given a body, Fern suggests here, it will be a masculine one.

In addition, *Ruth Hall* uses the question of embodiment and abstraction to interrogate the notion of the market economy and the way that the human body is becoming increasingly abstracted in this economy, be it a male or female body. Mr. Bond, Floy’s upstairs neighbor who produces that inexplicable “whir—whir—whir” and whose name immediately conjures market forces, is so infrequently mentioned that this

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<sup>95</sup> In the sly review, Fern continues to highlight the ways in which the assessment of her work is ultimately a critique of her womanhood—or lack thereof. In the voice of the male critic, she writes, “Thank heaven! There are still women who *are* women” and later describes Fern as “unwomanly” (*Ruth Hall* 290-1). In short, if Fern occupies an “unwomanly” space, the conventions of the period dictated that she be masculinized rather than disembodied.

repetitious sound begins to substitute for his actual identity in the narrative. In addition, the reproduction of Floy's Seton Bank Stock Certificate operates within the narrative as Floy's body *should* operate in the phrenological exam. The bank note serves as proof of Ruth's success and genius, a success so patently apparent from this concrete and material evidence that no commentary is necessary from Ruth. She is quietly absented from the chapter after the bank note is produced in the same way that she is quietly absented from the phrenology reading: after showing the bank note, Mr. Walter says, "Now confess that you are proud of yourself" (209). However, *Nettie* jumps in: "We are proud of her," said the talkative Nettie, "if she is not proud of herself." (209). Nettie then goes on to explain that "Floy" has forbidden her from telling friends that she is Floy's daughter, and Mr. Walter ends the chapter with a hearty laugh.

Here again is the performance of female modesty, and the publicity of privacy which so many scholars have discussed; however, the mere inclusion of this bank stock note also implies that the commercial market does not allow for a complete immateriality of feminine performance—that one *must* be materially and bodily present in some capacity if the "bond" is to be redeemed. Not only is the authorial body substituted by readers' bodies, then, it is also substituted by that bank note. Significantly, much of the success of *Ruth Hall* came from its conversion into a roman à clef and the attempt to match a body to that disembodied pseudonym. As Linda Grasso and Susan Geary argue, one of the primary strategies of Fern's publishers was to "titillate the sensibilities of the public" (Geary 387) by implying that the novel was autobiographical and that the portrait of Ruth's brother was drawn from a well-known editor in New York publishing circles<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> As Grasso notes, Warren presents a slightly different interpretation of the Mason Brothers' advertising strategy in *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*. According to Warren, Fern's publishers "responded to critics who had insisted on reading the books as autobiography" (123) rather than initiating advertisements of the novel as autobiography. In other words, Warren places less emphasis on the Mason Brothers for disclosing Fern's identity, but still contends that critics and readers were eager to read the narrative as autobiographical.

(Grasso 253). Ironically, a pseudonym so often prompts a more impassioned interest in the “real” identity behind the name.

If the publication history of *Ruth Hall* undermines Fern’s hopeful gesture for disembodied female authorial identity, a refusal to be classified by her body in phrenological terms, perhaps an article in the *American Phrenological Journal* indicates at least that she had the last word in this argument against phrenological classification. While Samuel Morse’s phrenoanalysis and his profile were reproduced in the *American Phrenological Journal*, Fanny Fern kept her visage so carefully guarded that the journal was forced to publish an article “in memoriam” after her death with a significant lacuna. The article states, “It was our intention to publish a portrait of this lady, but having learned from Mr. Parton that there was no likeness of any kind in possession of the family, we were obliged with much regret to omit it” (402). So it seems that even in death, Fern managed to keep her body as Floy’s during her own phrenology exam: discussed but omitted, absent but present.

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**CHAPTER 4**  
NATIVE NETWORKS AND NODES IN JOHN ROLLIN RIDGE'S  
*LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JOAQUÍN MURIETA, THE  
CELEBRATED CALIFORNIA BANDIT* (1854)



**Figure 15.** Gast, John. *American Progress*. Chromolithograph. 1872. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. Web. 1 July 2014.

John Gast's *American Progress* (1872) is perhaps one of the best-known visual representations of the conflation of technology and Manifest Destiny from the nineteenth century (Figure 15). In the painting, a yellow-haired female Columbia floats westward in the foreground with her luminous white robe undulating behind her in the wind. She

carries a schoolbook in one arm, an emblem of literacy and education, and behind her are the sun-dappled mechanisms of “progress”: trains, carriages, bridges, and a hand plow. Ahead of her are the darker skies of the “uncivilized,” including a small group of Indians and herds of buffalo. The wild animals flee at her approach and the bare-chested Indian women run to make way for dawdling prospectors and settlers forging ahead in a covered wagon. A telegraph wire, strung around America’s arm, visually divides the painting, with the implements of “civilization” on the right side and the “uncivilized” cowering in the edges on the left. The thin telegraph wire, wound alongside the railroad up to the heavens, connects earthly labor to the ethereal ideal at the same time that it demarcates white Euroamericans from brown Natives. In Gast’s vision, the telegraph wire serves as an instrument to enforce Indian removal, and the painting’s contrastive binaries (East-West, light-dark, progress-wilderness) situate the telegraph as the antithesis to Native American identity.

*American Progress* was widely reproduced and distributed as a commercial color print, quickly becoming an iconic representation of westward expansion. The popularity of this image reveals the pervasiveness of the stereotype in nineteenth-century America that Indian cultures were fundamentally non-modern. In the same way that letters to Spain and France after first contact frequently disparaged Native Americans’ naïve preoccupation with trinkets and manufactured goods, the depiction of Native peoples’ superstitious dread of the telegraph reinforced hierarchies of power even in the moment when indigenous populations did confront the technologies of the “civilized.” In this chapter, I argue that one of the most celebrated Native American writers at the mid-century, John Rollin Ridge, well aware of this stereotypical portrayal, applied attributes of the telegraph to Natives in order to suggest that indigenous communication networks rivaled the semiotic and technological systems of Euroamericans. Ridge, a Cherokee Indian educated in Massachusetts, was a poet and newspaperman who wrote the first novel in English by a person of Native American ancestry, *The Life and Adventures of*

*Joaquín Murieta* (1854). Although Ridge's novel contains no explicit reference to the telegraph, I argue that *Joaquín Murieta* offers a counternarrative to newspapers and periodicals of the period, which often described Native Americans as linguistically recalcitrant and incapable of forming their own networks of legal control and governance. The telegraph, increasingly framed as a promoter and proof of Manifest Destiny, seemed a harbinger of the eventual homogeneity of the nation-state. The dismemberment and beheading of Joaquín in the text's conclusion offers an opposing narrative of severance and fracture within the nation at the very moment when others were highlighting the promise of unification in metaphors of a singular electric body.

Ridge's novel, written in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, tells the story of an honorable young Mexican man victimized by Anglo miners until he formed a legendary band of bloodthirsty criminals to exact revenge. Although some elements of the novel are based on historical events, Ridge's fictionalization of Murieta's story was instrumental in transforming Joaquín into an enduring folk legend. The novel opens with the horrific sequence of events in 1851 that turned Joaquín from a respectable miner trying his luck in California to a hardened criminal: first, Joaquín is driven from his home and branded "an infernal Mexican intruder" (10); then, a group of men calling themselves "Americans" beat Murieta and rape his companion, Rosita, in front of him; finally, he is wrongly accused of stealing a horse given to him by his half-brother, and a mob ties and whips him before murdering his sibling. As Ridge writes, "He had contracted a hatred to the whole American race, and was determined to shed their blood, whenever and wherever an opportunity occurred" (14). For two and a half years, Murieta and his gang of outlaws, including Mexican criminals named Three-Fingered Jack and Joaquín Valenzuela, wreak havoc on the California countryside by robbing and murdering hundreds of people.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Roger D. McGrath's "A Violent Birth: Disorder, Crime, and Law Enforcement, 1849-1890" provides an overview of the "real" Joaquín Murieta and notes that Ridge's Joaquín became

After two particularly widespread sprees in Calaveras and Mariposa Counties, a group of twenty men led by a former Texas Ranger, Captain Harry Love, is commissioned by the state to capture and kill Joaquín. Meanwhile, Joaquín makes plans to gather enough men and resources to take over California for Mexico. Captain Love is hot on the bandit's trail, but Joaquín manages to make several hair's-breadth escapes until he is eventually captured near the Tulare Valley after a long gun battle in July 1853. To prove that the great Joaquín has been killed and to demonstrate mastery over former objects of terror, Love cuts off Joaquín's head and Jack's three-fingered hand and both are preserved under glass.

Given Ridge's background, it might at first seem surprising that his novel focuses on colonialism in the Southwest rather than the Southeast. Ridge's father and grandfather, John Ridge and Major Ridge, were both leaders in the Cherokee Nation in Georgia during the late 1820s and 1830s, a period marked by upheaval and conflict. In May 1830, the United States Congress passed Jackson's Indian Removal Bill, authorizing the president to negotiate individual treaties of removal with the southeastern tribes, including the Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokees. John Ridge and Elias Boudinot, John Rollin Ridge's cousin, were two of the delegates sent to Washington for the negotiations of this treaty, which would force the entire Cherokee tribe to relocate to "Indian territory" west of the Mississippi, in present-day Oklahoma (Parins 21). In the midst of these negotiations, the Georgia state legislature attempted to undermine

so famous that much of his "wildly fictional tale" is still taken as historical truth (28-9). Joseph Henry Jackson, in his "Introduction" to the University of Oklahoma edition, also traces the evolution of the Joaquín Murieta myth after Ridge's publication. Jackson notes that the two men who wrote the first histories of California in the 1880s, Hubert Howe Bancroft and Theodore Hittell, relied heavily on Ridge's portrayal of Joaquín in their own re-telling of this figure (xxxviii). The differences between Ridge's Joaquín and the historical Joaquín are significant in revealing some of Ridge's political or poetic purposes. For example, according to McGrath, there is no evidence that the historical Murieta experienced the tragic sequence of events that led to his criminal behavior (30). Ridge's decision to add a motive for Joaquín might provide further evidence that the Americans' treatment of Joaquín can be read as a critique of Cherokee removal and genocide.

Cherokee land claims and prohibit self-governance, denying the authority of Cherokee laws within the confiscated land (Woodward 158-9; Sandell 36; Calloway 133).<sup>98</sup> In the same way that Joaquín's prosperity mining in the foothills of California prompted Americans to drive him from his home in Ridge's novel, these laws also forbade Cherokees from mining the newly discovered gold fields on their land.

In response to this external threat of violence from federal and state governments, the Cherokee Nation began to face internal fractures as tribal leaders held opposing positions on treaty negotiations. The Treaty party, including John Ridge, Major Ridge, and Elias Boudinot, perhaps believing that removal was inevitable, signed in December 1835 the Treaty of New Echota, which ceded all Cherokee lands to Georgia and accepted the dictate to migrate westward (Moulton 72-3). Signing the treaty was a capital offense under Cherokee laws, which required the approval of the tribal majority before selling Cherokee land (Woodward 179). Major Ridge, well aware of this dictate, reportedly said, "I have signed my death warrant" after adding his signature to the treaty (Parins 21; Calloway 145). Those who opposed the treaty, led by John Ross, the principal chief of the nation, accused the Ridges of signing the treaty for their own personal gain.

Despite John Ross's attempts to dispute the New Echota Treaty, the Cherokee Nation began to emigrate westward, and the Ridge family was among the first to leave. In late November 1837, they relocated in present-day eastern Oklahoma, then referred to by the Cherokees as "Arkansas" (Parins 25). Between 1836 and 1838, nearly 2,000 Cherokees joined the Ridges in "Cherokee West," but over 13,000 remained in Georgia with Chief John Ross, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the government's claim to their land (Woodward 208). In June 1838, the government began its removal of the

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<sup>98</sup> Other severe laws passed by the Georgia legislature at this time included a prohibition of all Cherokee assemblies and the imprisonment of Cherokees who rejected westward emigration (Woodward 158-9). Such laws surely contributed to the Treaty Party's impression that removal was not negotiable.

remaining Cherokee people, supervising a forced march in appalling conditions along the route now known as the Trail of Tears. The forced emigration continued throughout the winter of 1838 and the early months of 1839. According to historian Grant Foreman, a total of 18,000 Cherokees went west after the Treaty of 1835, and 4,000 died during the forced relocation or in stockades before removal (Foreman 312n). By the time the remaining tribal members arrived in Indian Territory, many had become deeply embittered after watching loved ones die and suffer along the way. A missionary who accompanied one of the groups on their trek wrote, “*All* the suffering and *all* the difficulties of the Cherokee people [were] charge[d] to the account of Messrs. Ridge and Boudinot” (qtd. in Parins 29). In John Rollin Ridge’s words, “The removal West had fomented discontents of the darkest and deadliest nature” (*Poems* 7). This resentment, directed at both the Ridge family and the United States government, is surely akin to the festering rage Joaquín experiences in response to the injustices committed against him in California.

In June 1839, three execution squads set out in an attempt to avenge these losses. A group of men forced their way into the Ridge home, dragged John Ridge from his bed, and stabbed him to death in front of his family. John Rollin Ridge describes the scene in ghastly detail in a letter to a friend, later republished in the “Preface” to *Poems* (1868), and then notes that the event “has darkened my mind with an eternal shadow” (*Poems* 7). Ridge was only twelve years old when he witnessed his father’s death. The Ridge family later learned that Major Ridge had also been killed as he traveled down Line Road, a military road on the border of the Arkansas-Cherokee border. The third group of men ambushed Boudinot as he was working on his home, stabbing him before splitting his skull with a tomahawk (Parins 30-31; Cushman 133). In this way, the prominent leaders of the Treaty party were killed in one day, presumably by men of John Ross’s faction. Within a week, the Ridge family fled their farm and moved to Fayetteville, Arkansas,

where John Rollin Ridge received his formal education until he was sent to the Great Barrington Academy in Massachusetts from 1843-45 (Parins 36).

This intratribal violence did not end with the death of the prominent members of the Treaty party, however. As Thurman Wilkins writes, “[S]omething like a Corsican vendetta [was] raging between the Ross and Ridge adherents” (343), with frequent raids and killings by both parties. According to James Parins, even the novel’s earliest readers noted the connection between the violence within the Cherokee Nation and the violence experienced and perpetuated by Joaquín. Shortly after Ridge returned to his family in Fayetteville, he became directly involved in an altercation that eventually prompted him to seek his fortune in California. In 1849, Ridge killed a neighbor, David Kell, during an argument over a stolen horse. Ridge fled into Missouri and, fearing that a fair trial would be impossible in the Cherokee Nation under Ross’s leadership, he set out for California (Parins 58-60). Ridge arrived in California in 1850, the same year that Joaquín began to mine in the Golden State.

Only one year after Joaquín Murieta’s supposed death in 1853, Ridge’s novel was published as a book with yellow paper covers under the name of “Yellow Bird,” perhaps because Ridge had already published pieces in California newspapers under his Cherokee name and preferred to use it or perhaps because the publishers wanted to highlight his Native American background as a source of intrigue for readers.<sup>99</sup> Ridge’s publishers, W. B. Cooke and Company in San Francisco, prefaced the novel with some of the parallels between the experiences of Joaquín and those of Ridge. This “Publishers’

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<sup>99</sup> A revised version of Ridge’s novel, first published in 1871, is available to modern readers in the reprint published by the *Evening Free Lance* in 1927. This version was known as the third edition of the novel, presumably because the second edition was published in 1859 by the *California Police Gazette* without Ridge’s approval (Walker 256-7). According to David Sandell, the *Police Gazette* editors published the tale of Joaquín in ten installments in their “weekly chronicle of crime,” attempting to entice readers with the “true” story of Joaquín Murieta but largely recycling Ridge’s prose without attribution (22). All of my citations from *The Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* are to the edition printed by the University of Oklahoma in 1955, which follows Ridge’s initial 1854 version of the novel.

Preface” for the first edition relies on hyperbolic melodrama and romanticism as it recounts Ridge’s early life “in the midst of the wildest scenery” as well as the murder of Ridge’s father “surrounded by his weeping family” and his mother’s decision to flee the “bloody precincts” of the Cherokee Nation (2-3). The “Publishers’ Preface” also positions intratribal violence in the context of Native American removal, alluding to “stormy controversies with the whites, the fall of distinguished chiefs, family feuds, individual retaliation and revenge, and all the consequences of that terrible civil commotion which followed the removal of the Cherokee Nation [...]” (2). As Franklin Walker notes, the preface “openly states that the half-savage author with his early taste of persecution and violence is particularly suited to tell the story of *Murrieta*” (258). The “Publishers’ Preface” thus primes readers to interpret the violent tale that follows not only as an engagement with the complicated history of Mexicans and Euroamericans but also as a reflection of the violence between Cherokee factions and between Cherokees and whites.

Many scholars have traced the novel’s engagement with these overlapping histories, most frequently reading the narrative as an allegory for the government’s murder and displacement of Cherokees. Louis Owens argues that, in writing a fictionalized history of Joaquín, “Ridge could have it both ways: he could write his romantic potboiler in the language of monocentric, Euramerican consciousness while simultaneously including a not-very-veiled protest against America’s treatment of Native American people” (Owens 33). Timothy Powell similarly argues that the novel reveals “conflicting feelings of a deep-seated racial rage at white society and an equally powerful desire to be included into ‘America’” figured in *Three-Fingered Jack* (196). Other scholars have emphasized the novel’s critique of American expansionism and conquest. Mark Rifkin, for example, writes that the novel deploys extensive scenes of violence to “suggest that the Mexican-American War continues in an ongoing armed struggle in California” (29). David Sandell, too, focuses his analysis on the Mexican-

American War rather than Cherokee removal, arguing that the novel reveals the “frontier mythologies” informing the shifting identities of settlers, miners, Mexicans, Californios, and Indians in California (22).<sup>100</sup> This conflation of expansionist violence as experienced by Mexicans in California and Native Americans in Georgia frequently hinges on the shared experiences of racism and chaos by these populations.<sup>101</sup>

Since the novel is essentially structured around episodes of murder, such scholarly focus on the role of violence in *Joaquín Murieta* is understandable. Although Joaquín guards his honor in many scenes, he is still brutally aggressive, even if he never reaches the passionate ferocity of his henchman, Manuel “Three-Fingered Jack” Garcia. If Joaquín is originally the embodiment of gentility and sincerity with his “silvery voice full of generous utterance” and his “large black eyes kindling with the enthusiasm of his earnest nature,” Three-Fingered Jack is a demon in the flesh (8). Garcia, upon his “hell-born” horse, has eyes “like caverned demons” under “shaggy brows,” “wild orbs” which “would aptly remind one of old Satan himself” (84). In portraying Three-Fingered Jack as evil incarnate, Ridge perhaps renders Joaquín less so. After all, Joaquín’s “clear and brilliant” complexion seems boyish and pure alongside Three-Fingered Jack’s “face and forehead scarred with bullets and grooved with wrinkles of grim thoughts” (84). The

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<sup>100</sup> Other scholars maintain a more consistent convergence of these concerns. For example, Maria Mondragon concludes that *Joaquín Murieta* “cannot be reduced to a novel about ‘the Indian experience,’ ‘the Mexican experience,’ or ‘the American experience’” (185). Peter Christensen similarly focuses on the “cultural intersection” of Ridge’s Cherokee background and the Mexican community of California after the Mexican-American War (61).

<sup>101</sup> Peter Christensen argues that Joaquín is presented as a full-blooded descendant of Spain and not part Indian like many Mexicans, but Cox points out that a Native identity was implicit in portrayals of Mexicans during this period (Cox 26). Mark Rifkin similarly argues that Murieta is repeatedly coded as Indian: he is referred to as “chief” or “chieftain,” and they frequently release a “loud whoop” or a “whoop of defiance” to signal to each other or Anglos (Rifkin 37). Such analyses provide further support for the interpretation that Joaquín’s victimization in California serves as a surrogate for the indignities committed against the Cherokees in Georgia.

ruthless Three-Fingered Jack thus taps more deeply into a pervasive fear of the brute power and rage of “foreigners” in California.

Indeed, the novel most often centers its scenes of violence on the character of Three-Fingered Jack. In the altercation with a party of Americans near San Luis Obispo, Three-Fingered Jack exults over the line of men he has killed before beheading a final victim “with a shout of delight” (59). In a moment presaging Joaquín’s own death, Garcia tosses the American’s severed head over the rocks. Ridge writes, “He was crazy with the sight of blood and searched eagerly for another victim” (59). In addition, Three-Fingered Jack is the primary agent in some of the novel’s most gruesome depictions of murder, killing two different groups of Chinese men, first in opposition to Joaquín’s wishes and then in fulfillment of his direct order (48, 133). For this reason, his character lingers as a reminder of the fractured rage and violence of the marginalized and dispossessed, long after his dismembered hand is mutilated once more by Captain Love.

Yet, in focusing on the physical brutality of the bandits and their pursuers, some scholars overlook a significant undercurrent of the novel: its treatment of oral and written communication as a means of securing power. Whereas Garcia gains power through physical force, his three fingers “work[ing] far better than many other whole hands” (90), Joaquín most often gains control through his manipulation of communication. Such negotiations of language are apparent in Maria Mondragon’s analysis, which argues that the function of language throughout the novel is “both violent and dangerous,” particularly in the notices offering rewards for Joaquín’s capture “dead or alive.” As Mondragon explains, Joaquín “appropriates the writing of himself” by offering even more money for his capture and signing the notice, actively inscribing himself into the written evidence of his subversive criminality (182). James Cox also argues that Joaquín’s power comes in part from his manipulation of textual documents (27); for example, after one of Joaquín’s compatriots, Luis Vulvia, is arrested and sentenced to death, Joaquín provides stolen letters from an Anglo merchant to secure

Vulvia's freedom. After the trial, Joaquín notes, "I make it a practice to preserve documents of this kind, and I find that they come in pretty good play" (96). Joaquín, by recognizing the esteem lent to both textual documentation and a higher social class, is able to sway the white jury members when verbal proof alone would not have sufficed.

Given the tendency for written documents to determine the fate of Native American tribes, it makes sense that scholars have primarily focused on the written texts that appear within the novel as a commentary on print culture and government treaties. However, at times the transmission of these written texts—and the novel's portrayal of oral communication—also point to another communication medium: the telegraph. Although the telegraph did not connect the two coasts until 1861, the novel was written and published in the years when wires were rapidly spreading across the cities of California. As Annteresa Lubrano notes, the outbreak of the Mexican-American War in 1846 spurred the growth of the telegraph system in America, just as the Civil War would do on an even greater scale in the 1860s, as journalists sought ways to disseminate battle reports ever more rapidly (41-2). By 1852, newspapers were announcing the California Telegraph Company's plans to build a line between the city of Marysville (where Ridge lived throughout much of the 1850s and at the time of the novel's publication) and San Francisco (where the novel was published); this line was completed just one year later.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> This telegraphic expansion was frequently discussed in the California newspapers. For example, the *Sacramento Union* published "Telegraph Bill" (15 April 1852), which explained that "an immediate line of telegraphic communication" would soon be established between the major cities of California (1). On November 1, 1853, *The Alta California* in San Francisco announced in "The Magnetic Telegraph" that "The Magnetic communication is now complete between this city and Marysville [...]. [I]n a few days more we shall receive our news through the medium of the lightnings of heaven" (1). In 1854, plans were already being made for a transcontinental line. An editorial in *The Alta California* (16 August 1854) claimed that San Francisco "live[d] upon rumors" but would soon have "the fullest and most accurate information" (1).

James Gamble, who helped string the Marysville to San Francisco line, described the experience in *The Californian* article “Early Reminiscences of the Telegraph on the Pacific Coast” (April 1881). This telegraph line, in Gamble’s words, “placed all the large cities of California in direct communication,” including San Francisco, San José, Stockton, Sacramento, and Marysville (326). The next year, a second company, the Alta Telegraph Company, built a line connecting Nevada City and Sacramento by way of Auburn and Placerville, and the line also connected Marysville to Sacramento (Bates 183). Despite the high tariffs, the line quickly became used, so frequently that Gamble thought “no line in the world, of the same length, [had] ever done so large and profitable a business” (326). Clearly, by the time Ridge began writing *Joaquín Murieta*, the newly formed state of California was already setting the foundation for a wide-ranging communication network.

As a newspaper man in California, Ridge was certainly aware of the telegraph’s communicative potential. Before the publication of *Joaquín Murieta*, Ridge’s work appeared in multiple California newspapers and magazines, including the San Francisco-based *Golden Era*, a weekly newspaper; *Hutching’s California Magazine*, which published essays on the natural beauty of the West; *Hesperian*, a women’s magazine; and the popular newspaper *Alta California* (Parins 76-77).<sup>103</sup> The *Alta California* reported the opening of the line between Marysville and San Francisco in “The Magnetic Telegraph” (1 November 1853), giddily announcing, “The most wonderful discovery of the age has been practically applied in California, and in a few days more we shall receive our news through the medium of the lightnings of heaven” (1). Afterwards,

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<sup>103</sup> During Ridge’s nearly two decades in California, from 1850 to 1867, he was also active as an editor or manager for several California-based publications, including the *Sacramento Bee*, the *Marysville Democrat*, *The Daily National Democrat*, the *San Francisco Herald*, and *The California Express* (Dale and Litton 86, n. 65). Given Ridge’s newspaper work as well as his interest in print and technology, he surely would have been apprised of the latest developments of the telegraph network in California.

articles in the newspaper were frequently preceded with the byline “By Magnetic Telegraph” as stories were increasingly sent over the wires.

Even before Ridge arrived in California, it is a safe assumption that he was well aware of the telegraph’s spread given its frequent appearance in the *Cherokee Advocate* (1844-1906), published in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. The *Cherokee Advocate* was the successor of *The Cherokee Phoenix* (1828-1834), the first American Indian newspaper, which was edited by Ridge’s cousin, Elias Boudinot. William Boudinot, Elias’s brother, would later become one of the editors of the *Advocate*. Both the *Cherokee Advocate* and the *Cherokee Phoenix* printed the official documents of the Cherokee Nation, religious tracts, and news, and both included stories in English and Cherokee. At the time of their publication, they were the only tribally owned and published newspapers in the country (Cushman 140). In addition, as Meta Carstarphen explains, “[b]oth newspapers actively sought audiences outside their own national borders and directly appealed to the sympathies of white audiences for political, financial, and social support” (67). The *Cherokee Phoenix*, which was published in the period just before Cherokee removal, finally endorsed a more assimilationist agenda; in contrast, the *Cherokee Advocate*, published after forced relocation, often focused more on promoting Cherokee sovereignty among its various audiences (Carstarphen 67). Although the circulation of the *Advocate* in the 1850s is unknown, it had 1,300 subscribers in 1877 (Hutton and Straus 147), and *Pettengill’s Newspaper Directory* claimed in the 1870s that the paper had “a large circulation” as “the only medium by which the majority of the inhabitants of the Territory can be reached” (185). For these reasons, it seems likely that Ridge, even if he were not a habitual reader of the *Advocate*, would have been exposed to information culled from its pages.

Throughout the late 1840s, the *Cherokee Advocate* included several stories touting the construction of new lines connecting eastern and southern cities and anticipating a period of simultaneous access to information. As early as 1849, the

*Cherokee Advocate* announced in “Rapid Telegraphing” (17 December 1849) that the latest news from the steamer Europa was published on the same morning in “Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Columbia, Augusta, Savannah, Montgomery, and New Orleans. The southern telegraph line is now working admirably throughout the whole line” (1). In “Bridging the Atlantic” (4 February 1850), the *Cherokee Advocate* reported the Hudson Gutta Percha Manufacturing Company’s “magnificent” plan to “lay a path for the lightning on the bottom of the ocean bed and thus form a bridge for thought” (3). The article continues, “At midday a message might be transmitted across the ocean to New York, and it would be at seven in the morning when the person in the latter city received it” (3). The *Cherokee Advocate*’s extensive coverage of completed and planned telegraph projects suggests that Ridge would have been well exposed to the heady potential of the telegraph in “Cherokee West” even though a telegraph wire hadn’t yet reached Tahlequah before he departed for California.<sup>104</sup>

Ridge explicitly addressed the capacity of the telegraph later in the decade, when the city of Marysville celebrated the laying of the transatlantic cable in September 1858.<sup>105</sup> Ridge, well known in Marysville by that time for his writing, was frequently

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<sup>104</sup> Several other articles published in the late 1840s highlighted the dizzying possibilities of the telegraph. For example, “Kissing by Telegraph” (8 May 1848) in the *Cherokee Advocate* is a comedic story of a young man attempting to kiss his sweetheart by hugging a telegraph pole (3), and a story reprinted from the *Arkansas Democrat* reported that “Mr. O'Reilly expects to send the lightning to Fort Leavenworth, beyond the bounds of organized government, by the Fourth of July next, and speedily to New Orleans” (27 March 1848: 2). Another article, “A New Telegraph” (17 July 1848), claims that “Mr. L. G. Curtiss, editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*” has invented “a new system of magnetic telegraphing” that will enable transmission “at the rate of two columns of a large-sized paper per hour,” nearly six times as fast as the lines then in operation in America (3). In the *Cherokee Advocate*, other articles discussing the telegraph include: “The Telegraph Lawsuit” (2 October 1848: 3), “Astronomical-Telegraphic” (15 January 1849: 2), “Mysteries of the Telegraph” (22 October 1850: 4), and “Telegraphic” (26 November 1850: 4). Again, such articles suggest that although the telegraph network was still in its infancy as Ridge was composing *Joaquín*, it had already gripped the imagination of the nation.

<sup>105</sup> As Parins explains, Ridge arrived in Sacramento in August 1850, where he approached a local agent for the New Orleans *True Delta* in search of employment. Ridge’s article on the plains impressed the agent so much that he quickly hired Ridge as a correspondent

asked to present poems for public celebrations, like the Fourth of July or the anniversary of California's statehood (Whitley 132). At the 1858 celebration, after several local musical associations performed patriotic songs, Ridge was introduced by Mayor Peter Decker and read his "Poem on the Atlantic Cable."<sup>106</sup> As the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported in "Atlantic Cable Celebrations" (30 September 1858), Ridge's performance was "received with much applause" (1). The poem, published in its entirety in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, slowly swells into a crescendo celebrating modern technology's utopian potential. It concludes:

For nation unto nation soon shall be  
Together brought in knitted unity.  
And man be bound to man by that strong chain,  
Which, linking land to land, and main to main,  
Shall vibrate to the voice of Peace,  
And be a throbbing heart-string of humanity. (1)

As Ridge's biographer James Parins writes, the poem and performance "underscored his audience's sense that they were celebrating an auspicious event, further proof that the march of progress was leading to human perfection" (142). Edward Whitley similarly argues that Ridge was asked to read at the event because he served as "an embodiment of the success of the American mission, Manifest Destiny in the flesh" (132). As an educated Native American in professional business attire, Ridge's appearance in itself seemed to offer his audience proof of the virtues of American institutions and their capacity to "civilize."

Ridge's performance aligned his own work on the side of modern technological progress, not only because his was the face and the voice commemorating the event for

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and "traveling agent" for the *True Delta*. As a traveling agent, Ridge often worked in the Yuba City-Marysville area and soon joined the "stampede" to Marysville (Parins 73-4).

<sup>106</sup> The poem was later republished as "The Atlantic Cable" in *Poems* (1868).

the city of Marysville, but also because one of his telegrams was read after the speeches and songs and poetry had ended. An onstage telegraph was used to send telegrams to the other connected cities in California, and Ridge communicated with the Sacramento *Union* on behalf of “the Press Gang of Marysville.” The telegram read: “Lightning is our best and fastest reporter and is sure to have a permanent situation. The Press should keep the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph enterprise before the people” (qtd. in Parins 143). In this way, the event foregrounded Ridge’s sentiments on the telegraph’s poetic reach as well as its practical serviceability for journalism.

Ridge’s inclusion in the Marysville Atlantic Cable Celebration and his homage to progress is particularly striking given the tendency throughout the nineteenth century to promote the stereotype of Native Americans as antithetical to technological progress. James Gamble, in his recollection of the first telegraph line in California, highlights the presence of Native American onlookers, superstitious and apprehensive as they approached the wires for the first time:

The telegraph at that time was a source of great curiosity to [...] the native population, who looked upon the construction of the line with the greatest wonder. Many of them in ignorance of its real purpose and not understanding the use of the poles erected along the road at regular intervals, strung with wire a cross-arm on each pole, conceived the idea and expressed it as their belief that the Yankees were fencing in the country with crosses to keep the devil out. (322)<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Apparently other racial groups were similarly portrayed as imbuing religious fervor to the crosses of the telegraph poles and wires. According to Thompson, a Mexican woman from San José saw the wires and exclaimed, “Well, I believe those Americans are becoming good Catholics!” (346). Tropes like this perhaps retained their popularity because they framed Mexicans or Native Americans as ignorant and superstitious in the face of technological change.

Given the Native population's history with Yankees, it is unsurprising that the telegraph's first onlookers quickly assumed the lines were a means of designating property and claiming land as a space for Christianity.

The celebration of technological progress over nature is often a key feature of John Rollin Ridge's work, which frequently champions technology's potential to empower—especially the potential of print technologies to further American Indian revitalization. In a letter to his mother, Sarah Bird Northrup Ridge, dated October 5, 1855, Ridge gives voice to his desire to establish a “newspaper devoted to the advocacy of the Indian rights and interests” on “the white side of the line” (qtd. in Dale and Litton 86). Ridge continues, “I can bring into its columns not only the fire of my own pen [...] but the contribution of the leading minds of the different Indian nations [...]. Men, governments, will be *afraid* to trample upon the rights of the defenseless Indian tribes when there is a power to hold up their deeds to the execration of mankind” (qtd. in Dale and Litton 86). While some might argue that Ridge's celebration of technological progress aligns him with “assimilationists” who supported the elimination of the traditional lifeways of Native peoples,<sup>108</sup> Ridge's letter provides evidence that he believed print technology held the power to combat and control such destruction.

As several scholars have noted, nineteenth-century Native American writers engaged in a particularly complex relationship with their contrasting publics and with print technology itself. In *Removable Type* (2010), Phillip Round argues that it is impossible to appreciate “the material meaning of even the most canonical nineteenth-century American Indian texts without considering their resonances within [...] emerging

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<sup>108</sup> Some scholars who make this argument include James Parins and Andrew Wiget, whose introduction to Ridge's work in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* edited by Paul Lauter claims that Ridge encourages Native Americans to assimilate (1772-73); Karl Kroeber, who cites Ridge as an example of how American Indians “resist not merely by clinging to the past but by changing, accepting, even welcoming at least part of the present” (11); and Mark Rifkin, who similarly argues that Ridge endorses assimilation as a means of maintaining sovereignty (29).

revitalizationist Indian publics, in which books were at once the cause of and the solution for many a community's despair" (117). Similarly, Michael Harkin's *Reassessing Revitalization Movements* (2004) explains how Native Americans used "missionary-brought literacy" to cope with the very disruptions caused by a missionary presence (xxiv). As Round points out in the context of American Indians in the Great Basin, "[T]he very paper and books that presage the Paiutes' doom may be marshaled to help control it" (118). If book technologies were taken as both a sign of doom and an instrument for avoiding it, I would argue that the telegraph began to occupy a similar space in the 1850s, as the rhetoric surrounding telegraphy implied a requisite destruction of Native peoples but could also be inverted, as in *Joaquín Murieta*, to relocate power within the network of an indigenous people.

The rhetoric framing the relationship between American Indian tribes and the telegraph is, of course, a complicated one. As James Gamble's observation and John Gast's painting suggest, Native people were frequently positioned as counters to telegraphic progress, and not only in a metaphorical way. Samuel Morse was so worried about Native Americans attacking telegraph wires that he instructed the general contractor of the Washington-Baltimore line, Congressman Francis Smith, to bury the wires underground. As Richard John writes in *Network Nation* (2010), Morse was "terrified of sabotage" and "unwilling to risk the possibility that the wires might be disrupted if he strung them overhead" (36).<sup>109</sup> This fear of American Indian sabotage

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<sup>109</sup> In early 1844, Morse decided to string the wires above ground, but not because he and his associates eventually trusted Native Americans to leave them unharmed; rather, they were strung overhead but because Morse couldn't find a suitable method of insulation underground (John 36). As Lewis Coe explains, "[I]nitially there had been considerable apprehension about how the Indians would react to the encroachment of the telegraph on their tribal lands," and demonstrations were given of the telegraph's "magical powers" in an attempt to discourage Native Americans from approaching them (40-1). According to Coe, however, attacks became increasingly frequent at the end of the 1850s and early 1860s. Coe writes, "In 1864, St. Mary's stage and telegraph station in Wyoming was attacked by a band of 150 Indians [...]. Severe damage to the line was occurring as late as 1865. After that, the increased presence of the U.S. Army pretty well ended Indian attacks on the telegraph" (41). Again, the portrayals of Native American responses to the telegraph alternate between their presumed violence or infantilizing

became even more marked as the telegraph moved westward, into the territory under the control of Indian tribes (John 98-9). In “Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph” (23 December 1847), an engineer writing for the *St. Louis Reveille* acknowledged the threat of Indian sabotage to the telegraph lines to California, writing that the “depredations upon the line” committed by “the savages of the plain” required “a few lessons in the way of punishment” (22).<sup>110</sup> These concerns continued to linger during the laying of the transcontinental line in 1861. According to James Reid’s *The Telegraph in America* (1879), the contract between Hiram Sibley, an executive of the San Francisco Overland Telegraph Company, and Edward Creighton, a well-known contractor, presumed “that the Indians would not allow the wire to remain up, and that they could not be watched or overawed” (494). Reid continues, “This fear was not realized until the hostile tribes learned of its connection with army operations, when, for a time, much trouble ensued” (494).<sup>111</sup> It seems, then, that the telegraph was often a source of anxiety for Native

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superstition, both positing the Native American subject as an impediment to technological progress.

<sup>110</sup> According to James Dunkerley’s *Americana*, such worries were not entirely unfounded. Dunkerley writes, “Telegraph lines were, though, very vulnerable to destruction by hostile Indians. In 1851 Fillmore was informed by his secretary of war of the escalating costs of maintaining the south-west garrisons” (362). As explained below, however, other sources suggest that these worries about Native American sabotage were often out of proportion to the actual threat.

<sup>111</sup> Other examples abound of the perceived threat of Indian attacks on the wires. In *Historical Sketch of the Electric Telegraph* (1852), Alexander Jones writes, “It is certain that, as soon as the Indians are brought into peaceable subjection, and a good highway is established from Missouri to California, Electrical Telegraph lines will be built over the entire route. In the present rapid growth of the country, it is probable that within ten years New-York will be in telegraphic communication with San Francisco” (84). Similarly, “Railroads to the Pacific” (25 March 1854), published in *American Railroad Journal*, expressed the need to protect all “telegraph lines and persons employed thereon and all emigrants, travelers, settlers and traders along the line and in its vicinity from all hostilities and depredations by the Indians” (187). Despite these concerns, attacks on the wire were apparently less frequent than expected. A travel guide to the West, Henry Williams’s *The Pacific Tourist* (1878), claimed that “the Indians have rarely ever molested the telegraph wires which spanned the continent” (64). *The Pacific Tourist* attributes this to superstitious dread, citing one incident in which a young Sioux Indian was struck by lightning while cutting a wire and another in which Indian chiefs were invited to use the telegraph across 100 miles to communicate to other members of their tribes. According to the guide, such events “in the minds of the Indians, seemed to settle forever the opinion that that the telegraph belonged

Americans not because of its presumed magical properties but for its connection to military control.

Newspapers and periodicals of the period similarly positioned Indians as impediments to telegraphic progress. In *Scientific American*, the author of “Progress of America” (6 November 1847) yoked the spread of the telegraph to the destruction of Native peoples: “A few years ago and the majestic forest spread its wing far and wide, and the Indian was monarch of all he surveyed, traversing its wilds with his spear [...]. But mark the change! [...] Our [...] telegraph proclaims the ingenuity of the American mind” (54). Just like John Gast’s painting, this article implies that the wild natural world of Native Americans is now entirely over-run by the telegraph, whose mere presence is believed to bespeak the superiority of the American mind. Similarly, William Brent’s “Commerce of the Prairies” (January 1853), published in *The Knickerbocker*, concludes with a nostalgic farewell to “the red man and the buffalo”: “The telegraph-wire will soon stretch from the Missouri river to the Rocky Mountains, bearing the lightning messenger quicker than thought [...]. Adieu, then, to the poetry and romance of the prairies! Adieu, then, to the strange characters that now make them their home” (41). Although Brent wistfully laments this departure, his pronouncement again places technological progress in opposition to the presence of Native peoples who now inhabit the plains. In this way, the telegraph seemed to promote the eradication of American Indians in both Native fears and white projections.

Even when Native Americans were envisioned beside the telegraph in nineteenth-century America, it was frequently *as* a vision. According to Werner Sollors, American Indian appearances are ubiquitous in the visions of Spiritualist séances, in which Indians

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to the Great Spirit” (64). These portrayals reveal a belief that Native Americans were in need of discipline to avoid the telegraph wires even though attacks were infrequent, and that violence or superstitious dread were considered to be the best means of maintaining control over their movements.

often take “the place of the transcendent, the holy, and the absolute” (480). For Sollors, Native Americans were the “only conceivable, truly spiritual outsider” (480), and thus served as figures representing the unique mysticism of the Spiritualist experience. When spirit rapping became conflated with the telegraph (as discussed in Chapter 1), Native American spirits appeared to lend an inherent spiritualism to the machine. For example, in Josiah Brigham’s *Twelve Messages*, written between 1854 and 1857, one Spiritualist vision includes an American Indian floating beside a machine which resembles a galvanic battery and is used by “angels [...] to impart their tide of inspiring intelligence” (53).<sup>112</sup> Of course, this coupling of the telegraph and Native Americans in Spiritualist visions did little to offset the era’s representations of Natives as fundamentally opposed to technological progress; on the contrary, the visions cast Native Americans wholly into the spirit world, implying that American Indian culture would soon cease to exist outside of the ether. In the same way that John Gast’s painting strings the telegraph wire from the plume of a train into the tufts of clouds, these associations attempted to reinforce the otherworldly quality of the machine rather than the progressive quality of Native American culture.

Indeed, the Spiritualist visions described by Brigham and others continue to participate in a broader cultural tendency to place Native peoples, in the words of Amy Ware, “outside the confines of industrial progress” (64). Portraying Native Americans as a threat to telegraphic progress had larger implications still since the communication

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<sup>112</sup> Sollors cites several other sources which associate Spiritualism and Indians, including Emma Hardinge Britten’s *Modern American Spiritualism* (1869). In this history of Spiritualism, Britten writes, “Indian sprits play a prominent and most noble part in the Spiritualism of America. Nearly every medium is attended by one of these beneficent beings, guiding, counselling, protecting them, and using their peculiar knowledge of herbs, plants, and earthly productions, to suggest rare and invaluable medicaments for the cure of disease” (31). Sollors also cites sources from much later decades, including J. M. Peebles’ *Immortality and our Employments Hereafter* (1880), 103, 106 and George Lawton’s *The Drama of Life After Death* (1932), 338, 341, 416n. Such sources trace the enduring stereotype of the Native American as a mystical and spiritual being who exists outside earth’s temporal confines.

device frequently became a metonymy for Manifest Destiny. In both “Annexation” (1845) and “The Great Nation of Futurity” (1839), the two essays by John O’Sullivan that first popularized the concept of Manifest Destiny, the telegraph serves as an emblem of American superiority and an instrument for subjugating the untamed Indians. As William Huntzicker writes, “[T]he telegraph figured heavily in the essay that introduced the nation to the term ‘Manifest Destiny,’ a concept that combined political, ideological, and technological progress in the context of global competition for control over the North American continent” (97). In “Annexation,” O’Sullivan claimed it was “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (5), and a crucial component of this endless expansion westwards was a coastal simultaneity enabled by advances in communication technologies. O’Sullivan continues, “[T]he magnetic telegraph will enable the editors of the ‘San Francisco Union,’ the ‘Astoria Evening Post,’ or the ‘Nootka Morning News,’ to set up in type the first half of the President’s Inaugural before the echoes of the latter half shall have died away beneath the lofty porch of the Capitol, as spoken from his lips” (9). Thus, in the earliest appearances of the term and concept of Manifest Destiny, the telegraph and print technologies were already prominently featured as a means of instantly transmitting authoritative directives across the nation. This trend continued in descriptions of telegraphic progress, as Native Americans were frequently framed as literal and metaphorical impediments, either sabotaging the lines or occupying a “wild” existence in inherent opposition to American progress.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> There are countless examples from the mid-century and beyond of telegraphy’s imbrication with Manifest Destiny and the decimation of Native peoples. In a *Unitarian Review* article titled “The Indian Question” (February 1880), the editor insists that Indians will no longer be able to pursue their “wild ways of life” and that “every acre of our domain [must] be accessible by the steam train, the emigrant wagon, the pack horse, and the lonely foot stroller. And the telegraph wires must interlace the land as they penetrate and cross oceans” (184). Laurence Turnbull, in *Electro-Magnetic Telegraph* (1853), similarly writes that the elimination of Native Americans was a requirement for westward progress and the spread of the telegraph. Turnbull notes, “The vast plains which not many months ago were only inhabited by wild Indians who would be no respecters of telegraph wire are now the highways over which thousands of emigrants are constantly passing and repassing towards the great regions which border upon the Pacific” (148). As Michael Adas notes in *Dominance by Design* (2006), “When the Indians were included at all in

As one component of Native Americans' innate "wildness," portrayals in the mid-century frequently rendered Native peoples without a capacity for complex linguistic expression. One article, "Indian Speech" (29 January 1848) in the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, continuously interjects "Eh, oh, ah" into the speech of the Menominee Chief Oshkosh (4). Similarly, James Haines McCulloh's *Researches, Philosophical and Antiquarian, Concerning the Aboriginal History of America* (1829), offers a simplistic treatment of indigenous languages. First, he presumes a shared language across countless tribes, writing "we shall assume" that the language of the "Massachusetts Indians" is "the representative of all others in America" (42). Then, after attempting to detail the intricacies of this language in a handful of pages, he notes that nouns in American Indian languages are "peculiar" compared to "learned languages," likely because Native Americans are not accustomed to think in an "abstract manner" (44-5). In both their native languages and English, these portrayals imply, American Indians are linguistically retrograde.

In addition to these stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans speaking in broken English and a reductionist explanation of the grammatical properties of their languages, there is also a tendency to oversimplify Native peoples' responses to language in print. As Philip Round notes, Native Americans were frequently depicted as awe-struck by the "magical qualities" of print's ability to communicate across a great distance (11). Interestingly, this communication at a distance is precisely the quality later described as "magical" by so many Euroamericans at the advent of the electromagnetic telegraph. John Rollin Ridge, writing in the 1850s, surely recognized this tendency to frame Native peoples as "unlettered"<sup>114</sup> and without complex semiotic systems.

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this hegemonic narrative of pioneers taming the 'Wild West,' they were almost invariably treated as obstacles to the fulfillment of America's national destiny" (73).

<sup>114</sup> Of course, the Cherokees were the first to have a comprehensive set of written symbols not derived from the Roman alphabet to represent their language, as Sequoyah crafted his syllabary between

In his novel, Ridge offers a corrective to the portrayal of Native Americans as linguistically recalcitrant and antithetical to technological progress by contrasting the inadequate communication of Anglos with the preternatural communication networks of the bandits. Ridge, in his “Editor’s Preface” to the novel, positions his narrative as a corrective to California history, a way of demonstrating that “a people who have so far degenerated as to have been called by man ‘A Nation of Cowards’” in fact had “nerves [of] iron in the face of danger and death” (4). His humble aim, he notes, is to “do a service [...] by preserving, in however rude a shape, a record” of the early history of the state, and he assures the reader that his assertions “will be found to be strictly true” (4). Ridge thus identifies the inaccuracy of many historical accounts of early settlements—including, of course, the histories which were then being written (and spoken) of the Ridge family’s “cowardice” in signing over Cherokee lands—as well as his own ability to serve as an official mouthpiece of a revised history. As Lori Merish notes, Ridge’s “Editor’s Preface” attempts to unsettle “Euroamerican ownership of print as a technology of memory and means through which national culture is defined” (49). Paradoxically, this unsettling continues to grant primacy to print, however, since it becomes the means of “preserving” a new national culture.

While Ridge claims for himself only the role of a modest historian and recorder of facts, the “Publishers’ Preface” both undermines and reinforces the stereotype of the linguistically unsophisticated Native voice in its final lines: “The perusal of this work will give those who are disposed to be curious an opportunity to estimate the character of Indian talent. The aboriginal race has produced great warriors, and powerful orators, but literary men—only a few” (3). Ridge is presented at once as an exemplar of literary

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1809 and 1821. However, as Phillip Round notes, a form of written language existed across Indian Country long before the 1800s in the tattoos, graphic markings, paintings, and picture writings of various tribes (11-3). Nonetheless, Sequoyah’s syllabary was frequently taken as a sign of the Cherokees’ advancement over other Native Indians (Ware 83-4, Cushman 42). Given the general belief that literacy was a mark of “civilization,” Sequoyah’s syllabary was surely partially responsible for the frequent designation of the Cherokee as “the most civilized tribe in America.”

talent and, because he is exemplary, a rarity amongst other Native peoples. Nonetheless, the “Publishers’ Preface” does recognize Ridge’s talent, if backhandedly, belying the traditional representation of Native peoples as unlettered and artless.

In short order, Ridge claims this artful poetic space for himself by weaving one of his poems, “Mount Shasta, Seen From a Distance,” into the narrative itself, accompanied by a footnote identifying the poem as “written by ‘Yellow Bird,’ in 1852” (23). Not only does his narrative argue implicitly for his own artistic merit by including his poems, his opening lines also devalue the written and oral expression of the Euroamericans who seek Joaquín’s capture. As Tracey Jordan explains, Ridge’s “outlaw hero” upstages Americans “not only by outsmarting and out-fighting them, but by speaking and writing a proper English of which they are incapable and by behaving in a far more ‘civilized’ and humane fashion than did the Californians themselves at the time” (16). Such a critique maintains the connection between literacy and refinement, but inverts the hierarchy of Anglos and Natives.

This inversion occurs most transparently when Ridge transcribes a letter written by two Euroamericans in search of Joaquín. While the Native American semiotic system was often described at the mid-century as hieroglyphs that were puzzling to English speakers,<sup>115</sup> in Ridge’s novel, the written communication of Alexander Bidenger and G.

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<sup>115</sup> James Montgomery, in “A Retrospect of Literature,” published in London’s *The Metropolitan: A Monthly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* in 1831 argues that “the use of the wampum-symbols among the Red Indians” is a form of “hieroglyphics” (345); James Wimer, in *Events in Indian History* (1841), writes that Indians, though entirely unskilled in astronomy and most methods of counting time, do “make use of very significant hieroglyphics” to express their traditions (552); Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, in *The Indian in His Wigwam: Or, Characteristics of the Red Race of America* (1848), established a binary between the literacy of “civilization” and the hieroglyphics of “barbarism”: “If, therefore, the Red Race declined, and the white increased, it was because civilization had more of the principles of endurance and progress than barbarism; because Christianity was superior to paganism; industry to idleness; agriculture to hunting; letters to hieroglyphics; truth to error” (369). These passages suggest that “hieroglyphics” was a term frequently applied to Native American languages as a means of denigrating their intelligence as well as contrasting their semiotic systems with European ones. As John Irwin has argued in *American Hieroglyphics*, many other writers of the mid-century attempted to claim the power of Egyptian hieroglyphics for their own purposes, including

J. Mansfield is riddled with errors and esoteric glyphs. Whereas Joaquín spoke “very good English”—indeed, so well that strangers “could scarcely make out whether he was a Mexican or American” (85)—his would-be captors can’t string together a sentence in their own native language without lapses in verb tense, syntax, and orthography. The letter from Bidenger and Mansfield reads:

I hereby gave notice that there is a thief and robber In this Capulope by the name of wakeen he slep here last night and he Is xpected to sleap heare tonight thar is not men enough here that will Assist in taking him he has horses tide back hear in the hills and six more men.

I think it my duty to make it known. (131)

As if this illiteracy weren’t obvious enough, Ridge includes a description of the Justice’s perplexity after reading the letter: “The Justice, having deciphered the hieroglyphical characters of this letter as satisfactorily as he could, sent a messenger to the keepers of the ferry [...]” (131). Ridge earlier mocks the literacy of American politicians and respectable citizens, including the advertisements posted alongside the one for Joaquín’s capture: “FOR SAIL. The surscribur ophfers for sail a yaul-bote hicht at the hed of the Slew terms cash or kabbige turnips and sich like will bea tayken” (67). This notice, which Ridge calls a “fine specimen of polite literature,” is followed by several other error-riddled samples. Joaquín is thus seen negotiating between cultures and languages with a facility that Americans could not achieve in their own native language.

Such a disruption in communication is not merely a source of mockery for Ridge’s more educated readers, however, because the Justice misunderstands the letter’s directive and therefore the errors actually prevent the capture of Joaquín. Ridge sets apart the letter’s central mistake in quotation marks and the correction in italics, bringing to the fore the author’s own linguistic prowess relative to the letter writers’ clumsy

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Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. Ridge, again, troubles the binary of “civilized,” Western literacy and “uncivilized,” Eastern hieroglyphics.

literacy or the readers' potential confusion: The Justice "hurried off the constable with a posse to rescue the six unfortunate men whom Joaquín had 'tide' out in the hills. Arriving at Capulope in great heat, the constable ascertained that there were no six men tied out at all, but that the letter had designed to inform the Justice that Joaquín's party *numbered* six men" (132). The italicized corrective reads like a schoolmarm's amendment to a child's ignorant misuse of a word, and immediately draws the reader's attention to the disparity between Ridge's own linguistic clarity and the linguistic confusion of these Americans. In short, Ridge uses the botched missive of Anglos to throw the eloquence of both Joaquín and the narrator into relief for his primarily middle-class readership.<sup>116</sup>

The letter is crucial not only for unveiling the linguistic clumsiness of Bidenger and Mansfield, but also for positioning Native Americans as integral to the diffusion of information. One of the novel's most extended portrayals of Native Americans occurs in this scene, as Bidenger and Mansfield dispatch their letter to the Justice by the "Digger Express," a mocking appellation adapted from the "pony express." As Ridge explains, it was "common in the mountains and mining districts to employ Digger Indians as bearers of letters, or runners upon errands, from one point to another, they being very expeditious on foot and willing to travel considerable distance for a small piece of bread, fresh meat, or a ragged shirt" (130). At the same time that Ridge implies American Indians, far from being disruptors of communication, are crucial to the conveyance of information and communication, he also recycles a stereotype of the "magic powers" of print as he

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<sup>116</sup> Rifkin and Goeke both present an overview of Ridge's first audience, arguing that the novel was aimed at middle-class and working-class Anglo Americans in California. As Goeke notes, the novel was available to readers in larger cities like San Francisco, but it primarily circulated in the northern mining districts of California, which were ethnically mixed (466). For Rifkin, these mining districts were predominantly comprised of the working class, but Goeke argues that many migrants digging for gold in California came from middle-class backgrounds in the East. In addition, occupations in the mining district were not limited to digging alone; Ridge's first readers likely worked as well in "the general stores, newspaper and legal offices, hotels, and casinos" (Goeke 467). The difficulty of establishing whether Ridge's first readers were "middle class" or "working class" reveals the extent to which class distinctions were much more fluid in California at this time than they were in the East.

continues to describe the Digger Indian for the reader: “They are exceedingly faithful in this business, having a superstitious dread of that mysterious power which makes *a paper talk without a mouth*” (130). In the same way that Native Americans were portrayed as unwitting literalists struggling to grasp the theoretical complexities of telegraphic communication, such remarks imply that some American Indians considered the mere act of writing itself to be enchanted.

This magical response to the written word is reminiscent of the “almost totemic reverence” that ethnohistorian James Axtell describes as a key feature of Native peoples’ first encounters with the books of European missionaries (103). This “totemic reverence” perhaps implies a deference to the written word—a recognition of the inferiority of orality, which cannot, to use Ridge’s word, “preserve.” However, this tendency to ascribe magic to the written word has also been identified by Henry Louis Gates in the wholly different context of early African American slave narratives. As Gates explains, the trope of the talking book typically occurs when an illiterate slave sees a literate white person reading a book. Since the slave cannot make the book “talk” to him, he experiences a feeling of impotency and inadequacy. For Gates, the recurrence of this trope reveals the difficulty of reconciling verbal and written semiotic systems in African American literature (Gates 137-138). Although the appearance of the “talking” text trope in African American and Native American texts should not be conflated, Gates does reveal a useful way of thinking about this moment in Ridge’s novel: the “talking” letter might also point to the power of the spoken word and the difficulty of reconciling the oral with the written. After all, had this letter “talked,” Joaquín would have surely been captured and the miscommunication averted.

Such an interpretation of the “talking” letter might further support the arguments of Lori Merish, who claims that Ridge merely invokes negative racial stereotypes in order to unsettle them. After all, as Merish notes, the California Indians are quickly able to capture Joaquín after he has managed to elude so many of the Anglos tracking him (60).

Ridge explicitly makes this comparison, noting that the “poor, miserable, cowardly Tejons had achieved a greater triumph over them than all the Americans put together!” (38). Tracey Jordan similarly argues that Ridge’s initial criticism of the Tejons and Digger Indians is ironic, another moment in the novel where Ridge undermines the civility of the “civilized.” Jordan writes, “The racist stereotypes mimicked in Yellow Bird’s text [...] have been deployed in the service of an ironic strategy designed, in its vision of the ‘primitive’ Diggers triumphing over the ‘civilized’ Americans, to debunk the cultural arrogance underlying them” (22). Within the context of the novel, such a reading might at first seem compelling.

However, reading the novel’s portrayal of the Tejons and Diggers in light of Ridge’s other commentaries on California tribes discourages these more liberal interpretations. *A Trumpet of Our Own* (1981), a collection of Ridge’s seven previously published essays about American Indian affairs, denounces the murder of Digger Indians by whites, but also racially distances himself from them.<sup>117</sup> In an essay originally published on November 1, 1851, in the New Orleans *True Delta*, which had hired Ridge as a traveling agent and correspondent, he writes, “Were these Indians like the genuine North American red man in the times of the bloody frontier wars of the United States, brave, subtle, and terrible in their destruction, it would be a different matter. But they are a poor, humble, degraded, and cowardly race” (*Trumpet* 62). In a later article, published in Ridge’s own *Sacramento Bee* on July 12, 1857, he writes that the Digger Indian “has none of the romance which gathers around the nobler savage of the western prairies—he

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<sup>117</sup> Ridge writes in the *Daily Bee*’s “Oppression of Digger Indians” (12 July 1857), “I know not how to account for such inhuman acts unless I lay it to what may be called civilized ignorance, for I have remarked that these deeds of cruelty have always been committed, in this country by ignorant men. This civilized ignorance seems to destroy the finest feelings of nature, while it denies those delicate sensibilities which belong to cultivated minds. There is just sufficient civilization in such ignorance to destroy all that is worth anything in untutored nature” (*Trumpet* 62). Ridge’s comments on civilized ignorance and cruelty would well apply to the American mob in his novel.

cannot defend himself or his rights" (*Trumpet* 62).<sup>118</sup> Although the "nobler savage" might also be ironic here, Ridge's explicit hierarchy in nonfictional material is more difficult to challenge.<sup>119</sup>

Reading the scenes of the Digger Indian and Tejon Nation in this particular context, it seems clear that Ridge does attempt to establish a hierarchy of communicative power. At the apex is the narrator, administering his corrective and mocking both the illiterate Americans and the superstitious Digger Indians alike.<sup>120</sup> Yet, in this hierarchy the unlettered California Indians are at least more capable than the Anglos of facilitating connections within the network, for they are essential to the rapid delivery of letters—more reliable, even, than the pony express—and are able to use these networks of information exchange to coordinate a clandestine capture. After all, the Tejon Nation is able to capture Joaquín thanks to their well-orchestrated exchanges: as soon as the chief,

<sup>118</sup> Peter Christiansen cites several more examples from Ridge's newspaper writing which demonstrate an admiration for the ancestors of the Digger Indians (the Aztecs and Incas) but a disparagement of the present-day tribes in California (68). Although it is possible that Ridge, in his newspaper writings, was also recycling stereotypes to unsettle them, it seems more likely that he did genuinely endorse the tribal hierarchies that he lays out in his newspaper writings and novel.

<sup>119</sup> The *Cherokee Advocate* similarly denigrates California Indians. "The Indians of California" (17 September 1850) claims the "aborigines of California are perhaps the most feeble, and incapable of carrying on a formidable system of warfare, of any of the North American Indians [...]. They are called "Digger Indians," from the nature of their habitations" (1). In "The Border Indians" (11 February 1850), the *Advocate* also reprinted a report to the Secretary of the Interior from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, which contrasted the "semi-civilized tribes of Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickawsaws" with the uncivilized Northwestern tribes who require "laws for the trial and punishment of" those who have provoked "quarrels, attended with bloodshed and loss of life" (2). These articles suggest that other Cherokees similarly endorsed a hierarchy which placed Digger Indians beneath them—or, at the very least, that many were well aware that such distinctions were made by others.

<sup>120</sup> Joe Goeke also argues that Ridge replaces a racial hierarchy with a hierarchy implicitly based on class distinctions. According to Goeke, "By attributing American oppression to illiteracy and lack of education and by portraying Joaquín as an educated man whose noble qualities are never completely extinguished by his thirst for vengeance, Ridge sought to establish Murieta as a social peer of literate Anglo-Americans" (456-7). I would argue that Ridge takes this a step further, establishing Joaquín (and, by extension, himself) as socially superior to literate Anglos.

Sapatarra, “was informed that a party of Mexican horse-thieves had sought shelter in his boundaries,” he “held a council of state, which resulted in sending spies over his dominions to discover the traces of the marauding band” (36-7). Ridge continues: “Information was returned in a day or two that seven Mexicanos, superbly dressed, and covered with splendid jewelry, and having a large number of fine horses, were camped on a little stream about fifteen miles from the capital” (37). Such an efficient and reliable dissemination of information certainly surpasses the hieroglyphic missive from Bridenger and Mansfield—if not the telegraph itself. This instantaneous, almost mystical coordination continues in the attack on Joaquín’s band, as Joaquín’s whole party is seized by a single “sudden and concerted movement” (37). While Native Americans facilitate the reliable passage of information through the Digger Express and Tejon spy networks, Anglos are thwarted by their bungling illiteracy.<sup>121</sup>

If the Tejon Nation has an uncanny ability to communicate quickly across vast open spaces, the bandits display even greater mythical powers of communication, establishing a relay network of exchange evocative of the telegraph. Like the telegraph, the network of bandits is notable for its wide breadth and rapidity, seeming to be everywhere in the state at once. Ridge describes the initial distribution of men who serve as communication nodes in the bandit network, explaining that “Joaquín scattered his party in different directions,” placing some under Luis Vulvia or Reis and “employ[ing] the remainder as spies and bearers of news from one point of action to another” (83). Ridge writes that the depredations of the bandits spread so far that, “before one would

<sup>121</sup> As a final example of how Ridge reclaims linguistic power over Euroamericans, the novel’s frequent inclusion of Spanish—and Spanish place names—reminds readers that they are inhabiting a land that was settled by Mexicans long before it belonged to Americans. As Tracey Jordan writes, “Joaquín moves through a linguistic environment that is emphatically Spanish: from Joaquín’s headquarters at Arroyo Cantoova, to Los Angeles, to Calaveras County, to Oanetas, the place names testify to the fact that this is his hero’s ‘native’ land, not the Americans” (13). The frequent appearance of Spanish underscores the irony of the Foreign Miners’ Tax Law of 1850, which required “foreigners” like Joaquín to pay a fee every thirty days to continue mining on the land.

have imagined it possible, the east and the west, and every point of the compass would be in trouble" (15). In this way, the bandits, spies, and messengers mythically extend throughout the state, interlacing the land with a density that the editor of the *Unitarian Messenger* had not even dared to envision the telegraph achieving.

In addition, Joaquín's powers are most frequently described in the same terms as the magnetic telegraph, which was often known simply as "the lightning." While the three-fingered hand of Manuel Garcia might seem emblematic of a disruption in telegraphic tapping, which is after all so reliant on the dexterity of the fingers, Joaquín's own body often assumes the attributes of the wire. In portraying Joaquín's movements, Ridge writes that "the lightning was not quicker and surer in the execution of a deadly errand" than Joaquín (34), and Joaquín's exploits throughout the novel are as rapid and extensive as the lightning of both the sky and the telegraph. Ridge writes, "The scenes of murder and robbery shifted with the rapidity of lightning. At one time, the northern countries would be suffering slaughters and depredations, at another the southern..." (15). After Joaquín seeks out the members of the mob who murdered his half-brother, Ridge notes, "It was fearful and it was strange to see how swiftly and mysteriously those men disappeared" (13). Again, Ridge compares the rapidity of destruction and Joaquín's movements to the "lightning": "[R]obberies here, thefts there, and destruction, lightening-footed, treading everywhere, invisible in its approach and revealed only in the death-trail which it left behind [...]" (109). Ridge's subtle allusions to lightening conjure Joaquín's natural power and speed at the same time that they prompt a comparison to the contemporary electric network currently webbing its way across the state.

The true sprawl of this network, with tendrils reaching everywhere, is apparent in Ridge's descriptions of the countless men who gather and distribute information on Joaquín's behalf. Just as the telegraph was beginning to infiltrate the major cities of California, Ridge writes that there "was not a town of any importance in that whole region in which he had not a spy, one or more, located; not one in which he had not his

agent and secret friends" (110). For Joaquín, a messenger is always at hand, ready to warn of an imminent assault after sharing "the secret sign by which any member of the organization might recognize another," or share the news of Reis's attack on one hundred and fifty Chinese men on the Stanislaus River, or coordinate an attack with Valenzuela at the Arroyo Cantoova (55, 97, 61). Significantly, Joaquín establishes his own codes and semiotic systems, such as "the secret sign" and the "well-known whoop by which [strangers] could be recognized as friends" (71), which again subtly align his communication methods with the telegraph and its codings. In this way, the rendezvous of Joaquin's men at Arroyo Cantoova renders the gully less nature's pocket than the network's depot.

In addition, Joaquín's power in this ever-creeping territory is primarily gained through the manipulation of both network and nodes. When Joaquín reveals his location to one of his last remaining American friends, Joe Lake, and asks Lake not to betray him, a spy is perfectly placed to hear Lake tell "a few Americans quite privately" that he had seen "the bloody cut-throat Murieta" (51). As Ridge writes, "A Mexican was standing by, wrapped in his *serape*, who bent his head on his bosom and smiled" (51). This "apparently harmless Mexican," the reader later discovers, "was none other than a paid member of [Joaquín's] band," and Joaquín swiftly exacts revenge on Lake for breaking his promise (52). As John Carlos Rowe writes, Joaquín has the "uncanny ability to be everywhere at once" (118), either physically present himself or by proxy through his many spies and messengers. The novel's method of disclosure, which first describes Lake's betrayal and Joaquín's vengeance without explicitly identifying the *serape*-wearing Mexican as a member of Joaquín's band, provides the illusion of a mystical omniscience and an extensive grid providing instantaneous access to information shared even in the most private of moments. Such mythical pervasiveness perhaps serves to reflect the anxieties of the novel's first readers, whom Rifkin describes as "a mass audience among the imperially dominant population, disproportionately comprised of

[the] working-class" (28). In shaping a Mexican bandit capable of outwitting the authorities, Ridge plays into the fears of a readership wary of "foreign" miners but eager for the triumph of the socially and economically marginalized.

Just as William Wells Brown found the telegraph to be an apt metaphor for the mobility of information in *Clotel* (as argued in Chapter 2), Ridge emphasizes Joaquín's magical lightning-footed mobility as a defining trait of his hero. The novel abounds with descriptions of the tireless movement of Joaquín and his band: they rove on horseback through the vast wild range west of Mount Shasta (25-7); they pick through the woods and mountains from Mariposa to Stockton (64); they row skiffs down the San Joaquin River (69-70); and they scatter across the "fertile valleys" and gold-veined mountains of Calaveras County until Joaquín's band is finally captured in the Tulare Plains (82-83, 149). Ridge carefully orients the outlaws in this vast terrain of California, meticulously describing the prominent features of each new location. As John Carlos Rowe writes, the "unfettered movements of the banditti" and the "differing locales" for their various exploits "indicate the sweep of Joaquín's network across the state" (119). For Rowe, Joaquín's power is primarily vested in his "celerity" and his "mastery of space" (111). Lori Merish also highlights mobility as the characteristic trait which lends Joaquín his power, writing, "Joaquín uses the dispossession and dislocation of the Mexicanos and Californios against the whites: mobility becomes his greatest weapon" (58). Even as Joaquín moves through the vast expanse of the country, he remains eternally aware of the movements of others.

If mobility is one of Joaquín's sources of power, another is his ability to manipulate both written and oral communication networks. When Joaquín arrives in court only one day after his compatriot Luis Vulvia has been arrested for murder and robbery, he dons the disguise of a San José merchant named Samuel Harrington and claims Vulvia as one of his reliable hired hands. Ridge writes: "He [Joaquín] here presented to the Justice, who was already favorably impressed, five or six letters

addressed in different hands to ‘Mr. Samuel Harrington, San José,’ and bearing the marks of various post offices in the State” (95). The Justice and the crowd, upon seeing the letters, immediately liberate Vulvia and apologize to “Mr. H. for detaining his hired man so long” (95). When Vulvia asks in astonishment how Joaquín arrived so quickly, he responds that it was “some of our spies who guided me to it” (95). Joaquín’s rescue is notable both for its expediency and, as mentioned earlier, for its savvy awareness of the intersection of class structures and the process of information exchange. As Ridge elaborates on this mythic power which reflects his readers’ fears of “foreign” control, he implies that technological mastery is not exclusive to his Anglo American readers. If “lightning” can be used to subjugate Natives, it can also be used to subjugate his white readers.

Similarly, double agents demonstrate the strength of Joaquín’s network, as evidenced by the case of a Mexican merchant named Atanacio Moreno. When Moreno is approached to lead Captain Ellas to Joaquín, he complies, but Ridge notes, “Unsuspected by Ellas, this man secretly belonged to the band of Joaquín Murieta, or, I should rather say, to the tremendous organization which that bold chieftain had established throughout the country” (112). This passage implies that Joaquín, the man of lightning, gains his power from the vast “organization” and expansive sprawl of agents spread across the country like isolated telegraph outposts. Moreno, a spy for Murieta, claims instead to be a spy for Ellas, telling the Captain that he had been “watching through his spies the movements of the depredators” (113). Moreno leads Ellas’s party across the countryside on a fruitless search until his connection with Joaquín is finally exposed. Here again, the power of the bandits derives from their increased access to information and communication; because Joaquín has a denser network, more willing spies, and a faster mode of dispatch, he continually manages to evade law enforcement officials.

Of course, once this organization fails—once there are gaps in Joaquín’s network—his fate is sealed, just as Morse feared would be the case with wires strung

overhead. In describing the sprawl of Joaquín's "organization," its members quickly become amorphous, irrelevant except in those crucial moments when they rise from the mass as individuals responsible for Joaquín's safety. After profiling some early members of Joaquín's group, Ridge writes, "There were many others belonging to this organization whom it is not necessary to describe [...]. Their number, at this early period, is not accurately known, but a fair estimate would not place it at a lower figure than fifty, with the advantage of a continual and steady increase" (18). Within short order, this number has increased to "seventy or eighty men" in only one of Joaquín's bands, and Joaquín announces to one hundred of his "fighting men" that he is "at the head of an organization of two thousand men whose ramifications are in Sonora, Lower California, and in this State" (74). Joaquín plans to increase his number of fighting men still more, arming and equipping "fifteen hundred or two thousand men [to] make a clean sweep of the southern counties" (75). These swelling enumerations that appear periodically throughout the novel give the impression of an ever-growing and limitless supply of informants, as if "lines" could be extended endlessly and anywhere.

That Joaquín's power comes from this extensive network is evident in the novel's conclusion: only when Joaquín is separated from the other members of his band is Love finally able to capture him. Whereas Morse's extreme caution prompted him to consider underground lines to avoid sabotage, Joaquín's disruptions are attributed to his negligence. Ridge writes that Fate "fell upon him, if we may call it Fate when it was born from his own extreme carelessness in separating himself from the main body of his men" (153). Ascribing Joaquín's capture to his own error ironically reinforces his power in this moment of arrest: only Joaquín was capable of taking out Joaquín. Following Ridge's moralistic conclusion, he pauses to note that "after the death of the chief, the mighty organization which he had established was broken up" (158). In this conclusion, Ridge explains that Joaquín's success and power existed in endless feedback loops with the other members of his band; neither could exist without the other. In this way, the

organizational structure of the outlaws resonates not only with the telegraph but also gestures towards more rhizomatic and symbiotic structures of power.

However, Joaquín's power does not solely reside in his ability to control a vast organization of outlaws. Joaquín's predilection for shape-shifting and disguise, too, are a form of bodily coding, an ability to manipulate the rhetoric of the self as easily as he can manipulate the rhetoric of letters and notices or messengers and spies. Time and time again, Joaquín appears to other characters within the novel—or even to the reader—as an unknown stranger, implying again a mastery in his sophisticated ability to self-codify. Joaquín's talent on that score is starkly contrasted with that of Captain Ellas, the deputy sheriff of Calaveras County; at their initial meeting, Ellas unwittingly glances at Joaquín while the bandit takes down the Captain's every feature. Significantly, the reader is first introduced to Joaquín as a stranger in this scene, implying that we, like Ellas, would have been unable to recognize him without some prompting. Ridge writes that Ellas "perceived a young, black-eyed, fine-looking fellow, standing with his cloak wrapped around him" (114). When their eyes meet, the "young fellow" draws back his cloak to expose his hand near the butt of his pistol. Ridge writes, "The Captain did not, this time, even know Joaquín was in the country, although the renowned robber's name was familiar to his ears by the report of his depredations" (114). Joaquín, on the other hand, recognizes Ellas immediately and "thus took [Ellas's] daguerreotype upon memory and found it afterwards of much avail in aiding him to escape danger, and to keep out of the way when he saw the original at the head of an armed party [...]" (114). Ridge again frames Joaquín as a master of technologies by comparing his own visual acuity to a daguerreotype. In addition, whereas Joaquín's spies report to him in an instant, Ellas's spies return "after the lapse of several days" to tell Ellas that the robbers are in the vicinity, long after such information is useful to him (114). If Joaquín's messengers seem to communicate with the lightning speed of telegraphy, Ellas's spies are as sluggish as letters on the backs of slow-clopping horses.

Within Joaquín's ability to manipulate communication is his preeminent ability to code the rhetoric of the self. When Joaquín first sets out on his raids, for example, Ridge writes: "In the various outbreaks in which he had been personally engaged, he had worn different disguises, and was actually disguised the most when he showed his real features [...]. He frequently stood very unconcernedly in a crowd, and listened to long and earnest conversation in relation to himself" (30-1). Similarly, when Joaquín arrives in Stockton and adds his name to the bottom of the dead-or-alive notice, Ridge writes, "Joaquín appeared on this occasion in his real features. He went frequently afterwards, however, into that city completely disguised and learned many things important for him to hear" (68). If Joaquín can pass seamlessly between Mexican and American identities, his performances also reveal the fluidity of class identities. Joaquín often disguises himself as a "respectable" citizen of the higher class, as when he appears in court to free Vulvia or when he wears the disguise of "an elegant and successful gambler, being amply provided with means from his night excursions" (30). Joaquín's disguises throughout the narrative reveal the fluidity of racial and class identities, and the hypocrisy of a class system which imbues wealth with integrity. Disguise also affords Joaquín the mobility that associates him most strongly to the telegraph, as he can move openly in both city and countryside thanks to the shifting way that he communicates his own identity.<sup>122</sup>

For Maria Mondragon and John Carlos Rowe, this frequent use of disguises positions both Joaquín and Ridge as postursors of the early modern subject. As Mondragon writes, Ridge, like Joaquín, is able to shift between racial identities:

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<sup>122</sup> Philip Joseph Deloria, in *Playing Indian*, writes of the double-pronged function of disguise: "Disguise readily calls the notion of a fixed identity into question. At the same time, however, wearing a mask also makes one self-conscious of a *real* 'me' underneath. This simultaneous experience is both precarious and creative, and it can play a critical role in the way people construct new identities" (7). This certainly holds true in Ridge's novel, where the multiple disguises undermine the fixity of the self at the same time that they reinforce the strength of Joaquín's singular identity and his self-revelations, as discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

“[B]ecause he [Ridge] knows that race is a masquerade, a rhetorical device which functions to violently construct dividing lines, he has the ability to masquerade for his audience, presenting not only a disguised appearance, but a disguised subtext in his language” (184). Although Mondragon is discussing Ridge here, the analysis applies as well to Joaquín, who also uses disguise as a way of evading dichotomies or dividing lines of identity. According to Rowe, Joaquín’s abilities to disguise himself “indicate how well he understands the social construction of the self by way of fashion, rhetoric, and general deportment” (168). Joaquín’s ability to shift between these identities further deconstructs binaries of innate difference that would separate “uncivilized” Natives from “civilized” Anglos.

Ultimately, Joaquín’s recurring self-identification (“I am Joaquín”)<sup>123</sup> reveals a power to cloak and to reveal, the ultimate power of codification. Whereas other masters of disguise might at some times be identified, Joaquín maintains the power to disclose his “true” identity to his audiences. Before Joaquín enacts his revenge on Joe Lake, Ridge writes, “About sun-down of the next day, a solitary horseman, whose head was covered with a profusion of *red hair*, rode up very leisurely to the front of a trading-post, at which Lake and some other gentlemen were standing [...]” (51). As in the description of the Mexican in his *serape*, Ridge positions the reader to suspect but remain uncertain of the horseman’s identity. A “solitary horseman” certainly points to Joaquín; however, while “red hair” alone might not arouse suspicions, the italicized “*red hair*” makes the reader wonder why this is a significant detail: either because it indicates that this is not the

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<sup>123</sup> In addition to the altercation with Joe Lake cited above, Joaquín releases this cry of self-identification several other times throughout the novel. For example, when a group of Americans mention in passing that they hope to come across Joaquín so they might kill him, Joaquín shouts, “I am Joaquín! If there is any shooting to do, I am in” (31). In the company of miners near the boundary of Calaveras and El Dorado Counties, Joaquín again reveals himself after a man named Jim Boyce happens to recognize him, saying, “I am Joaquín! Kill me if you can!” (87). Finally, when Captain Wilson arrives at the sham Indian fight set up by Three-Fingered Jack, Joaquín hisses in his ear, “I am Joaquin” (46). This performative utterance establishes Joaquín’s heroic courage and positions the bandit as his own author and creator.

dark-haired Joaquín or because it indicates that the reader should be suspicious of such hair. Ridge reveals the latter to be true, as Joaquín unmasks himself by saying, “Well, sir, I am Joaquín!” (51). Ridge unsettles the reader’s own assessment of Joaquín, underscoring that Joaquín has the power to reveal or withhold his true identity in the same way that Ridge has the power to share or hide information as a narrator.

This strategy promotes a hermeneutics of suspicion, prompting readers to believe that all is not as it seems, at the same time that it implies such hermeneutics are futile since the reader is entirely at the mercy of the information another chooses to disclose. In this way, the text again grants ultimate power and agency to those who are able to control narrative and the communication networks that disseminate information. Even in death, Joaquín’s body begins to signify in ways unintended by those who attempted to script a narrative of dominance over his unruly criminality. As Rowe writes, “The spatial confinement of the robbers’ bodily parts backfires, for as their subsequent display across the state portrays, they are rather considered icons, retaining tremendous power” (108). Joaquín’s own evolution after the publication of the novel attests to his irrepressible narrative power, as the story was resurrected in pirated Spanish, French, and Chilean editions as well as in a play, *Joaquín Murieta de Castillo* by Charles Howe, and countless other editions in English.<sup>124</sup>

By endowing the Native bandits with superior methods of communication rivaling those of the telegraph, Ridge’s novel inverts the assumptions of authority which surrounded the telegraph; namely, that the device was a symbol of the linguistic and technological superiority of “civilized” Anglos over “uncivilized” Natives. Not only

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<sup>124</sup> Joseph Henry Jackson’s “Introduction” contains an extensive overview of these other iterations of Joaquín, including *El Caballero Chileno*, by “Professor” Acigar; Cincinnatus Hiner Miller’s *California and Joaquín, et al.*; Badger’s *Joaquín, the Saddle King*; *Joaquín: The Claude Duval of California* from DeWitt; *Joaquín: Or The Marauder of the Mines* from the Echo Series; and Marcus Stewart’s *Rosita: A California Tale* (xxxv-xxxviii). Jackson’s dizzying array of spinoffs attests to the enduring appeal of Joaquín’s story.

does Ridge's novel use telegraphic qualities of communication to reverse the binaries of linguistic and mechanical superiority, but his reversal of the binary of "lawfulness" and "lawlessness" also engages with a similar tendency to associate the spread of the telegraph with the reach of the law. In other words, qualities associated with the telegraph become instrumental in another facet of Ridge's critique: the binary between lawfulness and lawlessness. As Loris Merish argues, "Ridge's text focuses on the law as a primary discursive vehicle of Euroamerican racial authority and power, an instrument of what Alfredo Mirande has termed 'gringo justice,' as well as a site of political contest" (50). In the binary of lawful and lawless behavior, Native Americans were most frequently pitted on the side of the lawless, motivated by "uncivilized" animal instincts rather than a higher power of legal or religious goodness.

Throughout the 1850s, newspapers were rife with reports of "Indian depredations" not so dissimilar from the descriptions of violence enacted by Joaquín's outlaws. Even the *Cherokee Advocate* included stories of American Indian raids on innocents, surely as a means of contrasting Cherokee lawfulness with the lawlessness of other Indian tribes for their white subscribers. In "Indian Outrages in Texas" (25 March 1850), the number of murders and stolen animals in the past year rivals that of Joaquín's band. The article claims that "two hundred and four persons were killed, wounded, or carried away into captivity by the Indians" and that "the horses and other domestic animals stolen from the Texans during that time [...] amounted in value to \$103,277" (3). Another report from San Francisco that was republished in the *Advocate*, "Murdered by Indians" (6 August 1850), described an attack on thirty people by four hundred Apache Indians, who stripped the members of the party before they were "mutilated in the most horrible manner" (3). A brief survey of other titles from the *Cherokee Advocate* should suffice as evidence of the extent of these portrayals: "Murder of California Emigrants by Indians" (5 November 1849), "Indian Depredations" (26 May 1852), and "The Indians in Texas—More Depredations—Pursuit—Rangers, &c.—" (3 June 1850). The

condensation of the headlines alone would prompt readers to associate Native Americans with violence and little else.

The description of these crimes in “Indian Depredations” (26 May 1852) sounds strikingly similar to Ridge’s descriptions of Joaquín’s bands, for the article notes that the “numerous bold acts of robbery and murder” have “created a state of alarm throughout the southern half of the territory” (3). The spread of the “marauders” is similarly expansive, stretching along “the whole line of the Rio Grande del Norte, and from near Albuquerque to El Paso” (3). While specific tribes are sometimes designated in these articles, the bandits are frequently described only as “Indians,” and the headlines certainly encouraged a conflation of Native Indian identity with murder and plunder.

There is evidence, too, that the telegraph contributed to these negative portrayals, flattening Native Americans into stereotypes as newspapers spread word of Indian violence. As John Coward writes, “Typically, a short telegraphic report from the frontier described ‘hostile’ Indians maiming, mutilating, kidnapping, and killing white men, women, and children as they traveled south and west across the continent” (Coward 5). Although such reports became more common as the telegraph increased its spread across the nation during the Civil War, they were already appearing with increasing frequency in the late 1840s and early 1850s. For example, the *St. Albans Messenger* printed “Magnetic Telegraph Report to New York—From the West—News from Santa Fe—Indian Depredations” on September 16, 1846. The article reports that a Massachusetts man “was attacked and murdered by the Indians on the prairies,” and further elaborates that the Indians “were becoming extremely troublesome, and were committing repeated and grievous depredations on the persons and property of travelers” (2). Similarly, the *Commercial Advertiser* reported “By Telegraph” on July 28, 1849, that two parties of emigrants had been surrounded by Cheyenne and Sioux Indians, “who robbed them of their teams, provisions, and every thing they had” (3). By 1866, the New Orleans *Picayune* reported, “We cannot open a paper from any of our exposed States or

Territories, without reading frightful accounts of Indian massacres and Indian maraudings” (qtd. in Coward 5).<sup>125</sup> These brief reports stripped the “massacres” and “maraudings” of the complex histories informing the interactions between Native Americans and Anglos, positioning American Indians as the inherently brutal aggressors.

Ridge implicitly addresses these lingering representations of Indian depredations in *Joaquín Murieta*. First, he offers the backstory of Joaquín’s violence, arguing that it is a direct result of Joaquín’s own victimization at the hands of Americans. Ridge writes that Joaquín’s “sky seemed clear and his prospects bright, but Fate was weaving her mysterious web around him, and fitting him to be by the force of circumstances what nature never intended to make him” (12). The distinction between “nature” and “circumstance” excises an element of choice, suggesting that Fate webbed Joaquín in the same way that the Americans tied him and rendered him powerless in the attack on his half-brother. Such a critique implies, by extension, that Indian depredations were a direct response to the injustices that had been committed against them.

Second, Ridge argues that the laws of “civilization” are insufficient to address the “wanton cruelty and the tyranny of prejudice” experienced by Joaquín and, implicitly, the Cherokees. *Joaquín Murieta*, like the members of the Cherokee Nation, experiences political and economic dispossession by the Anglos, and Ridge carefully highlights the role of racial prejudice as the central impetus to the violence that Joaquín experiences. Absent a criminal justice system capable of redressing the crimes of the Anglos, Joaquín establishes his own “laws,” implying that American society is more lawless than a band

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<sup>125</sup> Both James Carey and John Coward make a similar argument about the telegraph’s impact on reporting. As Carey explains, “[T]he telegraph eliminated the correspondent who provided letters that announced an event, described it in detail, and analyzed its substance, and replaced him with a stringer who supplied the bare facts” (qtd. in Coward 16). Coward discusses this specifically in the context of Native Americans, noting, “By reducing the amount and variety of routine western news, the telegraph contributed to the one-dimensional nature of Indian war reporting” (Coward 16-17). Interestingly, similar arguments are made today about the detrimental effects of our own communication media’s potential to render news and information in an environment stripped of context.

of criminals. Ridge writes that Joaquín “could conceive of nothing grander than to throw himself back upon the strictly natural rights of man and hurl defiance at society and its laws” (17). As Lori Merish writes, “Ridge’s critique is doubly resonant,” protesting both the injustice of laws attempting to “disenfranchise Mexican residents of California” as well as “the ongoing process, in law and custom, that undermined Cherokee land claims and civil rights” (57). In such unjust circumstances, the bandits become an instrument of justice and reverse the binary which positions white society as lawful and natives as lawless.

Third, Ridge repeatedly relocates the violence committed by Native Americans in the novel onto the shoulders of others, demonstrating that the “lawless” American Indians are in fact more lawful than their white or Mexican counterparts. When describing the desolate region near Mount Shasta, Ridge writes that “human skeletons were found bleaching in the sun,” many plainly showing “by the perforated skull that the leaden ball had suddenly and secretly done its work” (27). Afterwards, Ridge twice notes that Native Americans are typically held responsible for these killings: “The ignorant Indians suffered for many a deed which had been perpetrated by civilized hands” (27) and “how many were found dead, supposed to have been killed by the Indians, and yet bearing upon their bodies the marks of knives and bullets quite as frequently as arrows” (27). Indeed, the bandits themselves are referred to as “the depredators” (113), framing the source of this violence as Mexican rather than Native American.

Similarly, when American Indians do commit violence in the novel, it is always on behalf of others. In Joaquín’s own band, the Native Americans are subservient to Mexican leaders, and are considered mere pawns in the schemes hatched by their leaders. Ridge, after describing the death of a Mexican man and a group of Indians who committed “depredations upon locomotive property” (26), notes that “[t]his tall Mexican was, without doubt, a member of Joaquín’s band” and “had led the Indians in that very successful thieving expedition” (27). In fact, American Indians were so frequently

persuaded by Joaquín's band to commit these robberies that the citizens of California began to hold them wholly responsible for the acts. Ridge writes that the outlaws "induced the Indians to aid them in this *laudable* purpose, and so efficiently did these simple people render their assistance that the rancheros of that region loaded the very air with their curses of the 'naked devils,' who tormented them to such an intolerable degree!" (26). In the same way that newspapers headlined "Indian Depredations," the Native Americans are perceived as the sole perpetrators of actions plotted by others.

Later in the novel, Ridge again highlights that California Indians are mere pawns for Joaquín's band when two Indians are persuaded to fight in the street as a means of enticing Captain Wilson to the scene. After Joaquín calmly places a pistol-ball in Wilson's skull, Ridge writes, "The fight between the Indians was a sham affair gotten up by Three-Fingered Jack to effect the very purpose which was consummated" (46). Such moments explicitly encourage readers to hold Joaquín's Mexican leaders accountable for American Indian marauders.

Even when the bandits are not involved in Indian violence, Ridge traces the action back to a different source, as in the case of the Tejons, who capture Joaquín and steal the outlaws' horses for the benefit of the white owners of the Oris Timbers Ranchero. After committing this act of "robbery," the Tejon Chief Sapatarra attempts to restore justice by turning to the county judge of Los Angeles. However, when the judge hears that the Tejons have Mexican bandits, he assumes that "the capture was the result of a little feud between some 'greasers' and the Tejons," and advises them to release the Mexicans (39). Here, as elsewhere, the incompetence of the representatives of the American justice system contrasts with the efficient expediency of the outlaws, implying that the official channels of justice are so tainted by racial prejudice that they cannot be trusted. As Mark Rifkin writes, "The text suggests that U.S. law oscillates between apathy and assault, alternatively turning a blind eye toward Anglo reigns of terror and serving, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, as a vehicle of 'state coercive power' [...]" (36). In such

circumstances, Ridge argues, Indian and Mexican “lawlessness” is a better servant of justice than an American courtroom.

Even when the wheels of justice are not rusted by racism in the novel, they are stalled by other means. For example, Ridge explains that Captain Ellas was “most naturally looked to as a leader and intrusted with a large amount of discretionary power, so necessary to be used in perilous times when the slow forms of law, with their snail-like processes, are altogether useless and inefficient” (111). Once again, the speed of the bandits is contrasted with the official channels of the law. While the “lawless and desperate men who bore the name of Americans” (9) would be sheltered under the system’s ineptitude, racism, and “snail-like processes,” Joaquín’s justice is swift. After Joaquín’s half-brother is hung, Ridge writes, “It was not long after this unfortunate affair that an American was found dead in the vicinity of Murphy’s Diggings [...]” (13). The retribution is so pointed and immediate, in fact, that it stirs a panic among all who composed the mob. According to Ridge, “Whenever any one of them strayed out of sight of his camp or ventured to travel on the highway, he was shot down suddenly and mysteriously [...]. It was fearful and it was strange to see how swiftly and mysteriously those men disappeared” (13). Just as Joaquín’s men communicate across vast tracts of land almost instantaneously, Joaquín briskly doles out punishment in Murphy’s Diggings, carefully tracking the movements of each mob member until he can strike at the most opportune moment.

This coupling of rapid communication and movement in the tracking of criminals subtly aligns with another touted component of a more expansive telegraphic system. Faster communication, it was presumed, would facilitate the capture of criminals and rectify other failings of the legal system. As Joel Tarr explains, by the early 1850s the telegraph was so frequently used to transmit information about criminal activity between cities that municipalities began to allocate funds to establish a telegraph linking police stations with the central headquarters (10). By 1855, police forces in Boston,

Philadelphia, and New York had telegraph lines connecting precinct offices with headquarters, and other cities quickly followed suit (Tarr 10). In 1855, Mayor Robert Conrad of Philadelphia declared, “Now the police force has but one soul, and that soul is the telegraph” (qtd. in Tarr 11). Such remarks suggest that the telegraph, from its earliest days, was also envisioned as a form of social control and an instrument of law enforcement.

This use for the telegraph was apparent as early as the 1840s, when high profile criminals were captured thanks to information sent over the wires. Perhaps the most famous case of the telegraph operating as an arm of justice is that of John Tawell, who became known as “The Man Hanged by Electric Telegraph.”<sup>126</sup> Although Tawell’s capture took place in Britain, it became famous on both sides of the Atlantic, perhaps as a result of the story’s salacious details or the novelty of the telegraph’s role in apprehending an accused murderer. As the story goes, in January 1845, a neighbor heard screams coming from the home of Sarah Hart in Bath Place, near Slough; when the neighbor rushed to the window, she saw a man in the garb of a Quaker, later identified as John Tawell, fleeing from the home of his mistress and heading in the direction of the train station at Slough. The neighbor discovered Hart dying in her home and sent a messenger on foot to the Slough station to apprehend Tawell. By the time the messenger arrived, however, Tawell had already boarded the train for London Paddington. The story would have ended there if not for the electric telegraphs at Slough and Paddington.

The superintendent at Slough station, who remembered seeing a man matching the description given by the messenger, quickly sent off a telegram to Paddington

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<sup>126</sup> Tawell’s story is as popular today in histories of the telegraph as it was in the 1840s. This chapter’s overview of Tawell’s murder and capture was drawn from the following sources: Chapter 12 of Hubbard’s *Cooke and Wheatstone*; Wenzelhuemer, 32-4; Standage 50-1; Woodall 162-204; and “John Tawell: The Man Hanged by Electric Telegraph,” University of Salford Website. Carol Baxter’s *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable*, a “true-crime thriller” based on the events of John Tawell’s murder and capture, was published in 2013.

detailing Tawell's clothing and the carriage where he had boarded. Within a few minutes, Paddington station replied that an officer had seen Tawell disembark from the train and was following him. As Charles Maybury Archer writes in *Guide to the Electric Telegraph* (1852), "Thus, while the suspected man was on his way to the metropolis at a fast rate, the telegraph, with still greater rapidity, sent along the wire which skirted the path of the carriage in which he sat, the startling instructions for his capture!" (45-6). *The Times* of London took it a step further, crediting the entire capture to the telegraph: "[H]ad it not been for the efficient aid of the electric telegraph, both at Slough and Paddington, the greatest difficulty, as well as delay, would have occurred in the apprehension" (qtd. in Standage 50). Tawell was hanged for Hart's death in March 1845. Interestingly, in the same way that the body parts of Joaquín and Three-Fingered Jack became objects of display, the two telegraph instruments from Paddington and Slough were donated to the Science Museum in London in 1876 ("John Tawell" par. 12). Both the head of Joaquín and the Slough and Paddington telegraphs apparently attempt to serve as symbols of an increasing ability to control and master criminal behavior.

Although John Tawell was one of the most famous cases of capture by telegraph, it certainly was not unique. According to *Railway Adventures and Anecdotes* (1884) by Richard Pike, the "electric constable" was on duty as early as 1844 on Britain's Great Western Railway, when two thieves named Oliver Martin and Fiddler Dick were arrested thanks to the same telegraph connection between Paddington and Slough (92). On the other side of the Atlantic, the telegraph was also being used for such purposes. In "Arrested by Telegraph" (28 March 1848), the *New York Herald* reported that two men traveling in "cars from the West" were arrested "per directions received by telegraph from Cincinnati" (1). Similarly, in San Francisco's *Daily Evening Bulletin*, the author of "Beauties of the Telegraph" (11 October 1856) notes that a man who had stolen a watch

in Sacramento was captured that afternoon in San Francisco thanks to a telegraphic dispatch.<sup>127</sup>

Ridge himself credits much of the outlaws' success to the vast isolation in the West, suggesting that he, too, believed the infiltration of a communication system like the telegraph would tamp down on illegal activities. Ridge writes: "[S]o distant and isolated were the different mining regions, so lonely and uninhabited the sections through which the roads and trails were cut, and so numerous the friends and acquaintances of the bandits themselves that these lawless men carried on their operations with almost absolute impunity" (19). Joaquín's band again takes on attributes of a communication network, countering the depth of isolation with their own "numerous friends and acquaintances" stationed throughout the countryside.

In this way, Ridge again uses the character of Joaquín and his bandits to invert the qualities commonly applied to the "uncivilized" and the "civilized," relocating the Native body as a site of rhetorical force, technological acumen, and a higher order of lawfulness. In doing so, Ridge implicitly applied qualities associated with the nation's expanding telegraphic network to his band of outlaws, and thus used this modern machine to argue for the intrinsic power of Native peoples. Of course, neither Joaquín nor an American counterpart like Henry Love serve as the ultimate emblem of supreme justice and lawfulness in the novel. Instead, Ridge turns to metaphor, sublimating the human in a

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<sup>127</sup> Other examples abound. *The New York Herald* reported, in a title which reveals all relevant detail, "A man named George Aregood, who obtained \$1,350 under false pretences [sic], from Jacob Hersey, of Dayton, O., was arrested last Saturday night in Baltimore, upon information communicated the day before by telegraph, from the police of Wheeling" (29 March 1848). The *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* reported on May 11, 1858, that "William C. Thompson, an old resident of Shalerville, Ohio, who eloped with young Mary McDonald and \$6000, leaving a wife and four children, and a circle of excited creditors, was arrested in Philadelphia by means of the telegraph" (1). In an untitled article published on February 6, 1857, the *Daily National Intelligencer* claimed that money was found in Washington, D.C., under the floor of a stateroom onboard the steamer Cahawba after "intelligence [was] received by telegraph from New Orleans" that an "absconding porter of the Bank of New Orleans" had "secreted forty-nine thousand dollars of his booty" onboard the ship (1).

transcendent vision of Mount Shasta, which becomes the natural obverse to the bustling depot of the Arroyo Cantoova. In his poem, Ridge writes:

And well this Golden State shall thrive, if, like  
Its own Mount Shasta, sovereign law shall lift  
Itself in purer atmosphere—so high  
That human feeling, human passion, at its base  
Shall lie subdued; e'en pity's tears shall on  
Its summit freeze; to warm it, e'en the sunlight  
Of deep sympathy shall fail—  
Its pure administration shall be like  
The snow, immaculate upon that mountain's brow! (25)

“Sovereign law” and the administration of justice are thus personified as the sublime mountain peak stoically surveying from the clouds, far removed from the emotions of hatred and revenge that initially consumed Joaquín, and from the sprawl of various networks as well.

This cold and distant mountaintop is the closest the reader comes to a vision of singular unification, a symbol that might rival the oversized, luminous body of Gast’s painting and the promise of a singular identity that the allegorical personification seems to imply. As I argue in Chapter 1, this singular personification of the body was often tied to electricity, particularly as metaphors of the national body coalesced around telegraphic networks of communication. For example, as Boston considered developing a more extensive municipal telegraph in the 1850s, one citizen wrote that the purpose of the telegraph is “to multiply points of communication, to cover the surface of the municipal body as thickly [...] with telegraphic signalizing points as the surface of the human body is covered with nervous extremities or papillae [...]” (qtd. in Tarr). Perhaps the best-known example of this unified electric national body is Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric,” originally published without a title in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The poem’s sensual celebration of bodies, and the joining of disparate identities into a single body politic through the interchange of “mad filaments” and “ungovernable

shoots" (Whitman 96), stands in stark contrast to John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*. While Whitman, in 1855, dared to envision a nation on the verge of cohesive joining, Ridge's novel stares steadfastly at its peoples' continual fracture and dislocation. Such telegraphic tappings, well worth listening to on the eve of the Civil War, reminded readers of the violence involved in nation-building and westward colonization. Surely Ridge had hoped that the bodies of his network of California bandits, dismembered and placed on gory display, would serve as better emblems of an expanding nation than a blond-haired and buxom Lady Liberty placidly displacing native tribes.

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## CONCLUSION

The disrupted network and dismemberment in *Joaquín Murieta*'s conclusion offer a prescient intimation of the violence that would divide the nation during the Civil War as well as the continuing tendency to use telegraphy's electric transcendence as a metaphor for bodily presence or absence. The Civil War's telegraphic expansion and cipher-codes certainly contributed to an enduring impulse to map notions of disembodied identity onto electrical communication. For example, *Scientific American*, founded in 1845 as a four-page weekly newspaper (Mott 317), published a series of articles on telegraph codes in 1866, fueled in large part by public interest in the role of ciphers during the war. The *Scientific American* articles suggest that the cryptographic impulse ascribed to telegraphy continued to explore the relationship between the human and the mechanical, the fleshly body and ethereal consciousness. Whereas William Wells Brown used metaphors associated with the telegraph to endorse the possibility of identity beyond the body, the *Scientific American* articles use telegraphic cryptography to celebrate the possibility of discarding human intentionality in favor of the mechanical. Both impulses return to an underlying desire for disembodiment, particularly in their suggestion that communication technologies have the capacity to separate the mind from body. In contrast, Hawthorne, Ridge, and Fern all similarly yearn for disembodied communion or spiritual equality in their engagements with telegraphic metaphors, but remain attentive to the ways that the body's disappearance might signal self-annihilation rather than immortality.

*Joaquín Murieta*'s disrupted bandit network also offers a prophetic suggestion of the difficulties that would plague global telegraphic expansion as the 1850s drew to a close. In 1858, the Atlantic Telegraph Company opened the first transatlantic line to

much fanfare, including the celebratory verses of Ridge's own poetry, as described in Chapter 4. The line's service was spotty, however, and within three short weeks the cable was entirely inoperable due to faulty insulation and excess voltages (Rens 17, Henderson 12). A more durable cable wasn't established until after the Civil War, in July 1866, thus allowing for reliable transmission of information between England and North America throughout the end of the nineteenth century.

Shortly after connecting the two continents, the telegraph also united the two coasts. Although telegraph wires largely spooled alongside railroad tracks in America, the transcontinental telegraph connected East and West nearly a decade before the railroad's "Last Spike" was driven into the ground with a silver hammer at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869. The telegraph's transcontinental line was completed in October 1861, and the occasion was marked by California Chief Justice Stephen Field's first transcontinental message to Washington. Field's telegram predicted that the network would be vital to the mounting war efforts as he expressed his hope that the freshly forged link between coasts would be "the means of strengthening the attachment which binds both the East and West to the Union" (Coe 46). The telegraph did indeed play an important role in continuing to cultivate newly national identities and alliances throughout the 1860s, and some historians even credit the Union's success to its superior telegraphic infrastructure.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> For example, in *The Military Telegraph During the Civil War in the United States* (1882), William Rattle Plum writes, "The idea is too generally accepted that *all* the credit for crushing the Rebellion belongs to the army. If any one shall read these volumes without realizing that Congress in conferring upon the army [...] all the honors and rewards due for military gallantry and usefulness, did gross injustice to the members of the Telegraph Corps, then I have injured with 'faint praise' a cause deserving better representation" (v). Similarly, Richard John writes in *Network Nation* (2010), "[T]he military telegraph did play a major, if rarely noted, part in helping the Union win the war" (101). General Sherman himself wrote that "the value of the magnetic telegraph in the war cannot be exaggerated"

The Civil War was, of course, a further catalyst for telegraph expansion. As Robert Luther Thompson writes, “The immediate effect of the war was to swamp all of the lines with business” (373). Bankers and businessmen purchased government bonds by telegraph to help finance the war; Lincoln used the wires to issue his Proclamation of April 15, which called for 75,000 militia troops (Thompson 373); the latest battlefield bulletins were flashed to reporters and then broadly disseminated in the newspapers; Secretary of War Simon Cameron ordered civilian telegraph operators to screen messages that might be harmful to the Union cause (Mountjoy 37-38); commanders coordinated movements and supplies by telegraph; and both sides tapped the wires in hopes of uncovering the tactical plans of the opposition. By the conclusion of the war in 1865, the North had constructed nearly 15,000 additional miles of military telegraph lines and sent over 6 million messages compared to the Confederate army’s only 1,000 miles of telegraph for military purposes (Coe 61). The war not only increased the general usage and sprawl of the telegraph network, it also increased military and private interest in cryptography, and again the Northern superiority on this score seemed a significant part of the Union’s success.

According to Lewis Coe, “Federal wiretappers were usually more successful than their southern counterparts because many Confederate messages were sent in plain English. In the Union service, almost all dispatches of any importance were coded” (60). The North formed the U.S. Military Telegraph Corps in 1861, which eventually employed roughly 1,200 civilian operators who transmitted messages in the battlefield,

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(Sherman 398). The Civil War demonstrated that the spread of the electric telegraph—and bureaucratic organizations to administer its usage—was crucial for maintaining military control, a fact also evidenced by the important role the telegraph played in imperial expansion across the globe at the end of the nineteenth century.

strung up temporary lines in the midst of combat, and invented cipher-codes for the secure transmission of intelligence (“United States” 161). The Union’s Telegraph Corps coordinated with the United States Signal Corps, which oversaw a visual communications system called “wig-wag” flag signaling, or aerial telegraphy, and eventually replaced the Telegraph Corps as the central agency responsible for telegraphic coding (Rains 5, 30-31). While the South established similar organizations to oversee the coding of messages by telegraph or otherwise, the records of their activities were burned after the fall of Richmond (Raines 30). Nonetheless, traces remain of the South’s coding methods in the periodicals published during and shortly after the war.

Just as Edgar Allan Poe’s ciphers had captivated the audiences of *Graham’s* and *Alexander’s* in the 1840s, postwar readers were apparently intrigued by the types of ciphers that managed to foil rebel troops. Whereas Poe shared monoalphabetic substitution ciphers in “The Gold-Bug” and his other periodical publications, the series of *Scientific American* articles from the 1860s reproduced polyalphabetic ciphers, which use multiple substitution alphabets within a single message. In a polyalphabetic cipher, the correspondence between one letter and its sign is constantly changing, whereas a monoalphabetic cipher consistently maintains a correspondence between one letter and one sign. For example, the letter “A” in a monoalphabetic cipher would always be encrypted with the same sign (the letter “T,” perhaps), whereas a polyalphabetic cipher might encode the “A” as a “T” in its first appearance, as a “V” in its next appearance, and so on. Polyalphabetic ciphers are also more challenging to solve because they often rely on outside keys and “shared texts”—like a Vigenère table (Figure 16) or dictionary or cipher disk—to establish the logic behind the shifting alphabetic substitution throughout

the cipher. In the case of the Vigenère table, the decipherer must have access to a “keyword,” which is used in tandem with the table to establish which row of the alphabet will be used at each letter’s appearance. In Poe’s story, Legrand could easily determine which symbol represented the letter “E,” for it appeared with more frequency than all other symbols; no such deductive logic could be applied to a polyalphabetic cipher.

TABLE:  
TO BE USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH A KEV.

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a
b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	b	
c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	c	
d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	d	
e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	e	
f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	f	
g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	g	
h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	h	
i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	i	
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	j	
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	k	
l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	l	
m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	m	
n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	n	
o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	o	
p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	p	
q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	q	
r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	r	
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	s	
t	u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	t	
u	v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	u	
v	w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	v	
w	x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	w	
x	y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	x	
y	z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	y	
z	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	

Figure 16. Freeman, T. J. A. “Scientific Chronicle: Cipher,” *The American Quarterly Review* (October 1893): 858.

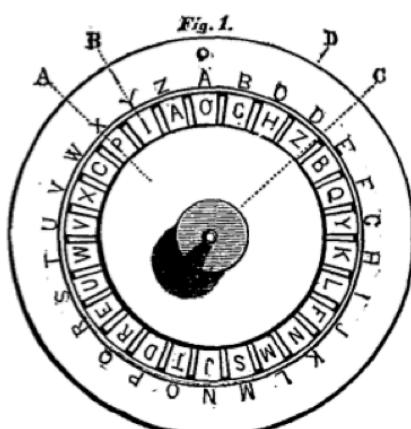
One postwar cipher that relies on a secondary source for the code’s resolution can be found in *Scientific American*’s “Cryptography” (5 May 1866). In this article, the author explicitly foregrounds the connection between telegraphy and ciphers, noting, “Dispatches in cipher are often sent by telegraph, and much trouble they are to the operators” (295). The author pays homage to Legrand’s cryptographic aptitude in “The Gold-Bug” but undermines Poe’s claim that “human ingenuity” is capable of solving any cipher, explaining that Poe’s “remarks can hardly apply to cases where the signs used

[are] purely arbitrary, [since] their solution requires a knowledge of the arranged plan” (295). In order to illustrate this assertion, the author shares a cipher that does not “contain within itself the means by which it might be read,” a cipher that requires the discovery of “the very book used in its construction, and the mode of using that book” (295). Ultimately, the author *is* able to crack the polyalphabetic code, but the cryptographer’s methods strain the reader’s credulity, for he is able to intuit not only that the source key is a dictionary, but also the specific edition of the Paternoster Row pocket dictionary whose page numbers are referenced in the cipher. Although the article’s conclusion ultimately does endorse Poe’s optimistic assertion that human ingenuity can solve any code, the narrative also implicitly refutes this claim. After all, the narrator’s solution relies on a series of chance events that belie the power of human perceptiveness alone: if the decipherer had gone to a different bookstore to locate the key dictionary, or if the code’s creator had lived in Budapest instead of London, the most inspired investigator would have been befuddled.

This deflation of human enterprise in the coding process is even more apparent in “Cipher Writing” (16 June 1866), in which a Union lieutenant and signal officer, George C. Round, explains how a Vigenère cipher works. With the letters of the alphabet arranged on a grid, “the only secret [is] an understanding between the two parties as to the key word or words, which may be changed indefinitely [...]” (410). In the article, Round translates a “rebel message in cipher,” published in the previous month’s issue, and boasts that Confederate codes can be quite easily decrypted whereas those of the Union remain largely impenetrable. Round concludes his letter with another encrypted message, claiming that no one could read the cipher unless he had also “been connected

with the Signal Corps" (410). Although Round was the only reader capable of cracking the rebel code, the challenge to decipher the rebels' outdated war missives garnered much interest, suggesting that *Scientific American's* postwar readers were still intent on attempting to match their own skills against those of the defeated South.

While "Cipher Writing" does not train readers to crack the Vigenère code themselves, "Cryptography" (9 June 1866) does, but still implies that these types of polyalphabetic codes eliminate human intentionality in the process of creation. In this article, the engineer J. Wyatt Reid explains an instrument he invented during the war (Figure 17), which could produce "unlimited numbers of cipher alphabets" (395). Reid's



The instrument consists of a brass disk, D, about the size of the illustration (Fig. 1), upon which an alphabet was indelibly stamped in a circle. Within this circle of fixed letters there was another circle of movable ones, B, fitting into little recesses opposite each fixed letter. The movable letters are represented separate from the disk in Fig. 2.

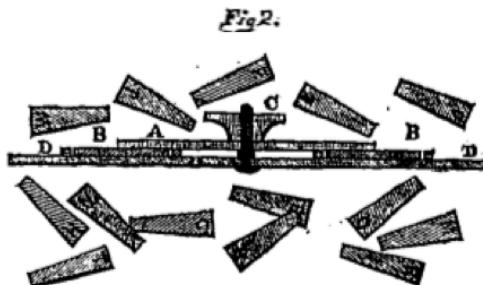
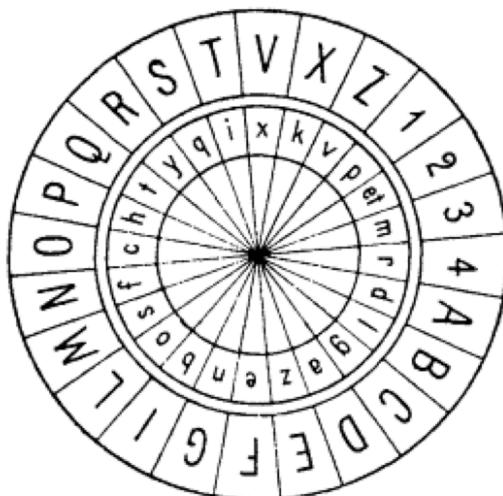


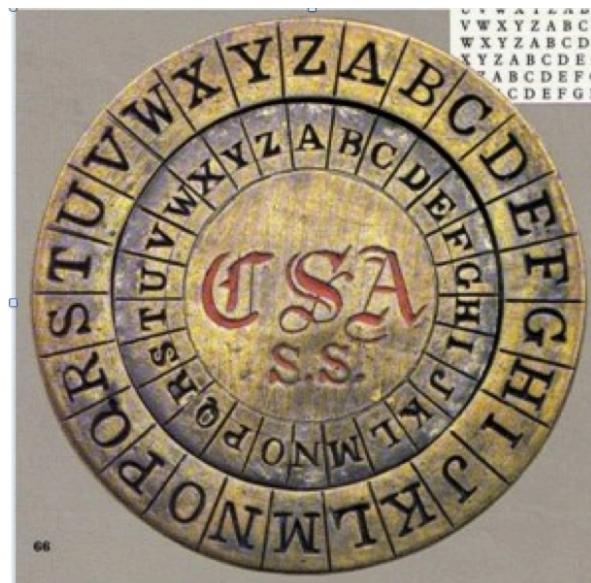
Fig. 2 represents also a section of the disk, in which D D is the disk, B B the movable letters in their recesses, held in place by the circular plate, A, and the nut, C.

**Figure 17.** Reid, J. Wyatt. "Cryptography, Fig. 1 and Fig. 2," *Scientific American* (9 June 1866): 395.

invention bears a striking resemblance to the cipher disk first described by Leon Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century (Figure 18) as well as the brass cipher disks in use by the Confederacy (Figure 19). Reid claims that the Chief of the Union Signal Corps also



*Leon Battista Alberti's cipher disk*



**Figure 18.** Kahn, David. "Leon Battista Alberti's Cipher Disk." *The Codebreakers*. New York: Scriber, 1997: 128.

**Figure 19.** "Cipher Wheel." Stafford Museum and Cultural Center Archives. Stafford, Virginia. *Stafford Museum*. Web. 29 Dec. 2014.

ordered fifty of the pocket disks, which produced codes "on chance" (395) and thus were capable of eluding the code cracking of rebel forces. Like Alberti's cipher disk, Reid's device had an outer ring of printed letters and a replaceable assortment of letters for the inner circle; by placing the movable letters randomly in the disk, cryptographers were able to create messages without bias or even human thought. This, for Reid, is the beauty of the device: "[A] cipher cannot be produced without the effort of thought, *except*

*mechanically*, and it is safe to conclude that what one mind can conceive another mind is capable of tracing out" (395). Reid concludes his article by again championing the lack of human deliberation involved in using his instrument: "[T]he mind has no part in it; therefore, if not used too often, it will be impossible, by any rule, to find out the cipher in time to make use of it" (395). Reid's repeated emphasis on the mechanical component of the device—and superiority of the rote over reason—marks a significant shift away from Poe's celebration of Legrand's ratiocination, and even the periodical's earlier "Cryptography" (5 May 1866).

Whereas those texts underscored some elements of human ingenuity in creating and cracking codes, Reid more firmly praises code as a means of evading human fallibility and consciousness. In fact, all three 1866 articles in *Scientific American* evidence a movement towards coding that is more reliant on randomness, whether in the selection of a shared dictionary key or in the adoption of a key word for a Vigenère grid or in the ever-changing relationship between the inner and outer alphabets of a cipher disk. In this way, postwar coding as described in *Scientific American* encouraged readers to discard the human ingenuity demonstrated by the monoalphabetic ciphers of Poe in favor of the more mechanical polyalphabetic ciphers which seemed to evacuate human consciousness from the creation process, even in those rare occasions when human detectives *are* able to solve randomly generated codes.

As in Hawthorne's and Fern's narrative, the codes associated with telegraphy offered an occasion to ruminate more deeply on the connection between the body and the mind, and the possibility of escaping embodiment altogether. According to Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), disembodiment endorses the possibility

that human identity and consciousness can be abstracted and converted into an information pattern (11-12). For Hayles, as for William Wells Brown, disembodiment has obvious advantages, including the potential “to travel across time and space, [...] free from the material constraints that govern the mortal world” (13). Of course, ciphers became increasingly divorced from the human mind throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, until they were eventually created entirely by algorithms or devices like the Enigma machine, and then solved by algorithms and machines, evacuating both the human body *and* the human mind from the process. Thanks in large part to the growth of analog and digital media, perhaps, the concept of disembodiment has become even more pervasive.

This desire for electricity to render the body unnecessary, fueled by advancements in communication and information technologies, remains a central feature of today’s cyberspace. As Deborah Lupton writes, “In computer culture, embodiment is often represented as an unfortunate barrier to interaction with the pleasures of computing” (479). In her analysis, Lupton alludes to the famous short story by Terry Bisson, “They’re Made Out of Meat” (1991), in which two highly intelligent beings disparage carbon-based life, describing human creatures as nothing but “thinking meat” (2). Lupton writes, “The dream of cyberspace is to leave the ‘meat’ behind and to become distilled in a clean, pure, uncontaminated relationship with computer technology” (479). Authors like Brown and Fern similarly envisioned a disembodied escape from the “meat” of their identities, believing that authorship, like the telegraph, offered the possibility of spiritual communication.

For Brown, coding became a means of deconstructing the notion of a stable self, especially a singular identity based on bodily difference. When the body of Clotel is coded with “a complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchaser” (87), or when Brown describes his counterfeited Shinplasters, or when Mary and George escape through the same cross-dressing ruse as William and Ellen Craft, Brown undermines the notion that the signifier reliably corresponds to the signified. Brown’s narrative loosens the relationship between the coded identity and the “true” identity represented by the code, thus subverting the very notion of an authentic identity beyond the text. Brown’s narrative argues that the transmission of information—the recirculation of his previously published works or the bricolage of other source material within *Clotel*—is constitutive of his authorial identity, rather than a particular body. In this way, Brown’s text uses telegraphic associations with coding and information transmission to endorse a more disembodied notion of identity.

Fanny Fern also uses coding to deconstruct traditional notions of gender identity in *Ruth Hall*. In the text’s allusions to phrenology and self-coding through the accouterments of dress and domestic space, Fern challenges the belief that identity is constituted by innate bodily difference and instead focuses on how the advantages of class and authorship offer the power to determine how to code the self for others. For Fern, as for Brown, authorship becomes a means of escaping constraints placed on the body: she writes networks of spiritual communication with female readers into her own narrative. The abiding connection evident in letters from Mary R.—and her “affectionate little Kitty” (189) imply that female authorship can foster a bodiless maternal magnetism across vast distances. However, despite Fern’s celebration of a

telegraphic connection with readers, she does recognize that this escape into disembodiment is a mere fantasy for most women. In fact, the very letters which seem to support the belief that female authors can exist in disembodied communication with readers also reveal that readers harbor a deep desire for embodied presence. After all, even as Kitty expresses her fondness, she envisions Floy's body as a duplicate of her own mother's features.

Hawthorne's conclusion to *The Blithedale Romance* similarly suspends the reader between disembodied telegraphic discourse and the embodied presence of a blushing and aging narrator. Like Fern's *Ruth Hall*, Hawthorne's novel simultaneously endorses two contrastive desires: the utopian dissolution of the self through deep spiritual community and the reassertion of embodied singularity. Ultimately, Hawthorne's novel validates the latter, encouraging readers to intuit gender differences in the sounds of door raps and laughs and piano music. Whereas Fern argues that disembodied fantasies are the domain of the privileged, and that deep human connection requires some type of surrogate physical presence, Hawthorne's novel contends that physical difference enables individuation even as it perpetuates constrictive social hierarchies.

Perhaps more than the other narratives discussed in my project, John Rollin Ridge's *Joaquín Murieta* emphasizes that bodies are at stake in the development of new communication networks. The novel is littered with gory descriptions of humans reduced to nothing but corpses: the hanging body of Joaquín's half-brother, the Chinese men with throats slit by bandits, Captain Wilson's skull shattered by Joaquín's pistol-ball, the disfigured hand of Three-Fingered Jack, and the final decapitation of Joaquín. Even as Joaquín and his network assume the more disembodied qualities associated with the

telegraph, the novel continues to foreground the body, with one bandit's physical feature (a three-fingered hand) serving as a metonymy for his entire identity. For Ridge, well aware of the power of rhetoric to trigger violence, it would surely seemed dangerous to imply that telegraphic communication could transcend bodies or erase them entirely. At best, his narrative implies, lightening communicative speed can balance power and attempt to restore justice, if only temporarily.

Just as some of the earliest users of the telegraph remained aware of the risks attending the concept of disembodiment, many scholars and artists today also seek to reinforce the importance of the body in a digital age. In *Bodies in Code*, for example, Mark Hansen considers “the vital and indispensable role played by embodiment in any human experience, even that of ‘virtual reality’” (ix). Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss, two contemporary artists whose exhibits extend sensory input into virtual reality simulations, attempt to overturn the theory that “man is losing his body to technology”; instead, their work suggests that “interactive media are supporting the multisensory mechanisms of the body and are thus extending man’s space for play and action” (qtd. in Grau 219). Finally, Jeffrey Sconce notes, “The miraculous ‘disembodying’ presence evoked by Morse’s technology suggested the tantalizing possibility of a realm where intelligence and consciousness existed independent of the physical body and its material limitations, be they social, sexual, political, mortal or otherwise” (44). Yet, as Sconce also argues, the “discorporative fantasies” engendered by telegraphy and the communication technologies of our own era are “ultimately impossible” (20). It would be a broad generalization to remap all of the discourse surrounding telegraphy onto digital media today, but there is certainly overlap in users’

conflicting responses to developing communication innovations and the potential of these devices to reinvigorate a persistent desire for immortality beyond the flesh.

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