Maternal Bodies

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Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America.

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At the same time that the vision of the transcendent mother was developing in sentimental print culture, the figure of the enslaved mother was also being imagined in antislavery literature and visual culture. As the antislavery movement gained momentum in the 1830s, giftbooks such as *The Liberty Bell* and *Autographs for Freedom* were sold to raise money for the antislavery cause, while newspapers such as the *North Star*, the *Liberator*, and the *National Anti-slavery Standard* circulated information and inspiration to supporters throughout the northern states and even abroad. These publications included letters and essays by prominent activists as well as stories, poems, and pictures that helped draw readers in and engage their emotions on behalf of the cause. At the same time, pamphlets, antislavery almanacs, novels, volumes of poetry, and slave narratives also circulated among sympathetic readers, and antislavery literature appeared regularly in many religious and literary periodicals, contributing to a vibrant realm of literary and visual culture focused on depicting the experience of enslavement and presenting moral and emotional arguments in favor of abolition.

Much of this antislavery print culture followed broader cultural trends by drawing on sentimentalism. Whereas early abolitionist writings emerging in the eighteenth century had focused primarily on moral and religious argumentation, by the late eighteenth century some writers were already beginning to appeal to readers on an emotional rather than an intellectual level, and this strategy became particularly important in the nineteenth century. As one eighteenth-century writer commanded, “Awake! Ye whole hearts are attuned to sympathy!” The role of antislavery literature was to stir readers’ emotions in the hopes of generating action, and writers increasingly sought to generate sympathy and outrage on behalf of enslaved people. By the 1830s antislavery literature and visual culture drew on a variety of familiar sentimental themes intended to arouse the emotions of readers and make them viscerally aware of the injustices of slavery. In this way they were able to speak to many middle-class readers who were already
immersed in popular sentimental print culture, speaking to them with language, imagery, and themes that were already familiar. Although by this time many middle-class northern readers had little direct experience with slavery, their moral sensibilities might be stirred by depictions of attacks on the sanctity of family bonds and feminine virtue. Placing antislavery arguments within the cultural framework of sentimentalism made antislavery rhetoric both appealing and functional for white middle-class readers. Such appeals became an essential part of what Julie Husband has called the “family protection campaign,” which was pioneered by activists, particularly middle-class women, beginning in the mid-1830s. This campaign marked a shift away from arguments based on the Bible or rooted in the vision of natural rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Highlighting the destruction of family life under slavery and the sexual vulnerability of enslaved women, the family protection campaign especially sought to appeal to white women and was responsible for increasing support among white northerners for the antislavery cause.

These direct appeals to the sympathies of a predominantly white population of northern readers ostensibly brought forth a universal vision of human emotion intended to forge a sympathetic connection between the victim of slavery and the reader, with particular emphasis on the bonds of womanhood and motherhood. Antislavery print culture, particularly sentimental poems and images, seemed to suggest that if an enslaved woman could feel the anguish of a true mother at the loss of her child, then she must share an essential emotional connection with white mothers. Because sentiment and sensibility were qualities that defined feminine virtue, the emotions of the enslaved mother allowed her to claim the mantle of virtuous womanhood. In turn, the feeling of sympathy on the part of the white female reader provided a way for her to demonstrate her feminine virtue. The experience of feeling allowed individuals, in theory at least, to reach across the racial divide. Thus sentiment seemingly transcended differences of race or class, making way for a common identity based in sentimental womanhood and motherhood.

Drawing on these expressions of shared feeling, scholars have emphasized that one of the essential functions of sentimental culture was to create a universal vision of humanity based on shared emotion. Michael Chaney has suggested that sentimentalism particularly appealed to antislavery writers because it “always implied a universal application.” In this way sentimentalism facilitated antislavery arguments by calling on Americans to
recognize the common humanity of the enslaved. Celeste-Marie Bernier has explained that in antislavery writing, “it is man’s capacity to exhibit feeling towards his fellow man that justifies his rights to be considered within the realms of universal humanity and which make it possible for him to award subjectivity to the otherwise objectified and shackled status of the slave.”6 Thus sentimentalism reaffirmed the humanity of both free and enslaved through the process of feeling. For writers who sought to forge a connection across social boundaries, the universalizing potential of sentimentalism was a powerful tool that seemed to efface, or render negligible, the specificities of social hierarchies. In this way, dynamics of power and oppression could be erased in favor of an idealized realm of human emotion in which questions of equality or difference became moot. For instance, Lauren Berlant has explored the ways in which sentimentalism worked to create a vision of universal womanhood, for “the sentimental abstraction of the values of ‘woman’ from the realm of material relations meant that interactions among classes, races, and different ethnic groups also appear to dissolve in their translation into sentimental semiosis.”7 Sentimentalism appeared to offer a universal realm of language and feeling to which anyone could belong simply by marshaling the correct emotions and modes of expression. In doing so, the sentimental subject defined his or her humanity in terms of feeling.

Few scholars have challenged this vision of sentimental culture, permitting nineteenth-century sentimentalism to stand as a cultural form that both intended to and succeeded in transcending social power structures and markers of social difference. Yet a close analysis of representations of enslaved mothers in antislavery poetry and visual culture reveals significant problems with this vision. I do not wish to diminish the importance of the ways in which antislavery print culture incorporated enslaved women into the sentimental realm, a strategy that took the important step of creating a sense of shared humanity and subjectivity across socially constructed boundaries of race. But I would argue that the ways in which antislavery print culture developed sentimental depictions of enslaved women ultimately served to reproduce rather than transcend racial hierarchies.

The persistence of a racial hierarchy appeared most clearly in the different ways in which the bodies of the white mother and the enslaved mother were represented in verse and visual culture. Unlike the transcendent mother of mainstream print culture, whose body disappeared, thus freeing her spiritual influence, in antislavery texts the enslaved mother was firmly bound to her corporeality. Antislavery poems drew on sentimental
language and imagery to define enslaved women as good mothers, yet these verses also emphasized the ways in which the physical and emotional violence wrought by the slave system thwarted their claims to sentimental motherhood. Visual culture was more extreme in its emphasis on embodiment, tending to present the enslaved mother as an anguished body suffering under the lash or futilely resisting the physical control of the slaveholder. Moreover, her body was often exposed in ways that would have been unimaginable for depictions of white mothers; instead of being shrouded in filmy fabric, the enslaved mother might be stripped to the waist, her bare flesh exposing the realities of exploitation and sexual vulnerability.

Thus in poetry and visual culture scenes of force and violence highlighted the corporeality of the enslaved mother, threatening to overwhelm her claims to sentimental subjectivity. It may be true, as Julie Husband writes, that at the center of antislavery literature was “sentimental identification, when bodily suffering, tears, or the loss of a loved one provide transcendent moments of understanding across dramatically different race, gender, and class experiences.” But fleeting moments of sympathy explored in verse or picture could hardly obliterate the entrenched racial boundaries that permeated both social relations and cultural worlds of imagination in antebellum America. In short, the universalizing tendencies of sentimental culture broke down over the issue of black embodiment. In American society and culture, enslaved women were so profoundly defined by their bodies—sexual bodies, productive bodies, reproductive bodies—that even in the realm of antislavery print culture they were denied the same spiritual and emotional transcendence as the white mother in sentimental print culture.

Antislavery visual culture and verse combined to create a broadly coherent vision of the enslaved mother that was intended to convey to northern readers the depredations of the slave system. Rhetorically, then, antislavery texts needed the sentimental vision of enslaved mothers to be incomplete in order to make their point about the horrors of slavery and the need for reform. The gaps and failures of sentimentalism demonstrated for readers the evils at the heart of slavery. Antislavery print culture deployed the enslaved mother as a symbol of disorder. Her frantic emotions and her tortured body expressed to readers the ways in which slavery destroyed all that middle-class sentimental culture held most dear—feminine virtue and spirituality, maternal influence, and the sanctity of the domestic sphere. The enslaved mother in antislavery print culture was not meant to be revered
for her ethereal influence; she was meant to elicit sympathy, moral outrage, and action.

The sentimental mode in antislavery writings emerged particularly clearly in poems, which sought to express “the subjective experience of slavery.”

Between the 1830s and the 1860s a substantial body of sentimental poetry was published by both black and white authors who sought to evoke the crimes of slavery, highlight the subjectivity of the enslaved, and appeal to the moral and emotional sensibilities of readers. Antislavery poetry reached fewer readers than the sentimental poems featured in more mainstream publications such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, but antislavery writers were able to use the widespread popularity of sentimental verse to launch an effective appeal to northern readers. In spite of the frequency with which antislavery verse appeared in American print culture, poetry has generally fallen by the wayside in scholarly analyses of antislavery literature. More attention has been paid to slave narratives and antislavery novels, sermons, essays, and pamphlets. Yet poems were an integral part of the antislavery movement’s print culture, and they were particularly important for appealing to a female readership. Black female literary societies, for instance, often encouraged their members to write and publish poetry and prose to further the work of antislavery in a way that was deemed appropriately feminine. Women made up a significant portion of antislavery supporters, and so it was essential for the movement to appeal to women’s concerns and to present antislavery arguments in ways that would speak to them. Women created an extensive network throughout the towns and rural communities of the North, where they formed antislavery societies, engaged in fund-raising activities, organized sewing circles to equip escaped slaves, and even spoke in public against slavery. Antislavery poetry helped to create a community of shared feeling among supporters when it was read aloud at meetings and in family parlors and when it was collected and shared in letters, diaries, and scrapbooks.

Antislavery poems frequently relied on the figure of the mother to expose the horror and degradation of slavery and to appeal explicitly to mothers in the North. A poem published in the *Liberator* in 1835, for instance, described the plight of enslaved mothers and exhorted women to intervene:

Mothers! for mothers interceded.  
Tell me not your voice is weak—  
Speak! ’tis all I ask you, Speak!15
Another poem, set to a popular melody and published in a volume of other antislavery songs, called on mothers specifically to contemplate the loss of a child to sale:

Ah! Mother! hast thou ever known
The pain of parting ties?
Was ever infant from thee torn
And sold before thine eyes?16

Drawing on sentimental tropes of maternal affection and moral and religious feeling, poems featuring the enslaved mother highlighted the violence inherent in the system of slavery and sought to elicit sympathy and outrage by evoking such horrors as the severing of the sacred bond between mother and child.

Poems about enslaved mothers did not demonstrate the same uniformity of message and imagery found in verses about white mothers, making them more difficult to categorize. The majority of poems about enslaved mothers featured the separation of mother and child, either by death or by sale, but this moment of trauma was articulated through a variety of images and emotions. One common feature among these poems, however, was the pairing of sentimental language and imagery, which placed the enslaved mother in a familiar emotional space that appealed to the reader’s sympathies, alongside deeply unsettling depictions of physical and emotional violence. What is particularly striking about many of these poems is that they often expressed a degree of raw emotion and frantic action never seen in mainstream motherhood poems, which featured tranquil resignation, effaced the rawness of grief, and disallowed despair.

By placing enslaved women within sentimental discourse, antislavery poems redefined them as legitimate sentimental subjects and connected them to a shared vision of womanhood. A poem in the religious publication *Zion’s Herald* in 1837, for instance, articulated an emotional appeal from the enslaved mother to the white mother:

O! bid the streams of feeling flow;
To darker sisters yield a part;
And let the golden law of love,
Guide the decisions of thy heart
Believe, that in our torn hearts rise
The mother’s tenderest sympathies.17
Allowing the enslaved mother literally to speak in sentimental language as she appealed to the white woman’s “streams of feeling” served to bring her into the same affective realm as white mothers and permitted her to demand a corresponding emotional response from them. This was a significant rhetorical strategy because it asserted the humanity of the enslaved, demanded that other women step forward to acknowledge a shared sisterhood, and challenged enslaved women’s commodification as human chattel by insisting on the power of their emotions rather than the value of their bodies. The enslaved mother in this poem insisted that the “mother’s tenderest sympathies” were not solely the purview of privileged white women. Enslaved women were not simply (re)productive bodies; they also had feeling hearts. Another poem began by acknowledging the enslaved mother’s status as property, for “crushed by rude slavery’s iron hoof, / She stood, a branded thing, aloof,” but went on to show that a powerful emotional tie “twined round her soul,” for “she had a son, / A pretty playful boy.” Her love for her son contested her thingness. In case readers were not yet convinced of her humanity, the author went on to emphasize her maternal love and the terrors that slavery forced upon her as a mother. Poems emphasizing the love enslaved women bore their children and the sacrifices they made as mothers placed them firmly in the realm of the sentimental mother: they were tender, dedicated, and self-sacrificing. By locating the enslaved mother within sentimental discourse, antislavery writers created a common ground of language and feeling that justified and enhanced their appeals to white Americans on behalf of the enslaved. The slave mother, too, could be a sentimental subject. This was an important move in a culture that habitually defined nonwhite women and men as less intellectual, less spiritual, more embodied, and therefore less sentimental than white Americans.

In spite of the important ways in which enslaved mothers were welcomed into the sentimental fold, much of the emotional power of antislavery poems came from thwarted sentimental tropes that underscored the ways in which slavery destroyed the sentimental order. A number of poems gestured to the enslaved mother’s capacity for proper emotion, but then twisted the imagery to show how those emotions were defeated or distorted by slavery. One poem in The Anti-slavery Harp, published by the activist and former slave William Wells Brown, highlighted the enslaved mother’s infinite capacity for emotion, which was a common theme in motherhood poems in mainstream sentimental print culture:
O who can imagine her heart’s deep emotion,
As she thinks of her children about to be sold;
You may picture the bounds of the rock-girdled ocean,
But the grief of that mother can never be known.

Yet instead of evoking the more usual image of infinite maternal love—the “soul’s rich tenderness and depth of feeling”—here the author substituted grief to emphasize the perverse consequences of slavery. For readers steeped in sentimental imagery, these verses would have felt simultaneously familiar and unsettling. Similarly, grief was the only possible emotion in “The Slave Mother’s Lament for Her Children,” for the mother was left with “a heart that spurn’d all human relief, / For its cords had been sunder’d for ever.” In the sentimental realm in which it was essential for the cords of one’s heart to vibrate with emotion, slavery rendered this mother, in essence, heartless, though through no fault of her own. Thus the central emotion of sentimental culture—maternal love—could be twisted into grief or fear for greater emotional impact on the reader.

Other poems drew on treasured images of the intimate bond between mothers and children to reveal the ways in which slavery thwarted the sanctity and power of this relationship. One poet gestured to the connection experienced by a mother and child when the infant’s “little arms steal upward, and then upon her breast / She feels the brown and velvet hands that never are at rest.” Here the author gave a charming view of the intimate connection between a mother and her beloved child. But the next lines destroyed the image, for in spite of the charm of the child’s soft hands, “no sense of joy they waken, but thrills of bitter pain,— / She thinks of him who counteth o’er the gold those hands shall gain.” The poet built a picture of the fond relationship between mother and child and then ruthlessly destroyed it, just as maternal affection was thwarted by the greed of the slave owner. The sentimental image of the mother-child bond made the reference to greed and cruelty all the more shocking. Similarly, a poem published in the Liberator in 1835 lulled the reader with a tender description of mother and baby:

As a tendril to a vine,
Lo, a prattling babe is thine;
turn thy mourning into joy,
Smile upon thy lovely boy.

Yet the next verse turned this pleasing picture on its head. “Smile?” the poet asked bitterly, “tis but the smile of wo; / Ah, the tears begin to flow.” This
mother knew that her child was not her own; this tendril that twined about her heart brought despair instead of hope. Unlike poems that evoked the infinite tenderness in the white mother’s heart, antislavery poems highlighted the emotional devastation inflicted on enslaved mothers in order to make their moral argument. To reveal the full consequences of the slave system, the emotions of the enslaved mother had to be warped by her circumstances.

Antislavery poems also drew on the same natural metaphors that populated mainstream sentimental poetry, but used them to underscore how slavery blighted even the purest and most natural of affections. The beloved poet Lydia Sigourney made the transcendence of “a mother’s love” her refrain when she inquired:

What was it? Ask a mother’s breast
Through which a fountain flows
Perennial, fathomless and blest,
By winter never froze.25

While the transcendent mother’s love was infinite and everlasting, antislavery writers set out to show that the fountain of maternal love flowing from the enslaved mother’s heart was doomed. One poem begged pity for the enslaved mother specifically because of the emotional devastation wrought by slavery:

The mildew of slavery has blighted each blossom,
That ever has bloomed in her path-way below;
It has froze every fountain that gushed in her bosom,
And chilled her heart’s verdure with pitiless woe.26

The botanic imagery and recurring trope of the fountain of maternal love wrapped the enslaved mother in the mantle of sentimental motherhood, but by emphasizing the destruction of these sentimental tendencies the poem exposed the maternal prerogatives that were denied the enslaved mother. Thus the literary enslaved mother was brought into the realm of sentimentalism, but was ultimately defined both within the institution of slavery and within sentimental culture by her status as a slave rather than by her affective life as a mother. Contrary to the real-life examples of many loving enslaved mothers, in this literary context the fountain of maternal affection simply could not continue to flow under the brutality of slavery. Such sentimental imagery worked powerfully on the emotions of the reader who was already familiar with the ideals of sentimental motherhood, but they
did not communicate the same fantasy of emotional and spiritual transcendence used to imagine white mothers.

The ultimate betrayal of sentimental motherhood was revealed in the many antislavery poems that depicted an enslaved mother praying for the death of her child. Whereas mainstream poems often featured the grieving mother, mourning the illness or death of an infant, in the case of antislavery poetry the refrain of the tormented mother was “God grant my little helpless one in helplessness may die!”27 The white mother worked toward pious resignation when faced with the death of a beloved child; the enslaved mother wished for death as a safe haven for her child. Whereas poems about white mothers suggested that maternal love was powerful enough to conquer all evils, this was not the case for the enslaved mother. Maternal tenderness, these poems suggested, was not powerful enough to protect a child or to combat the horrors of slavery; only by ascending to heaven could the enslaved mother or child find peace. As one poem intimated, in death the slave child could maintain its sentimental virtues, for “never will thy heart be blighted, / In its op’ning bloom.”28 Numerous poems played with this notion that a mother might prefer to see her child dead rather than enslaved. As the imagined voice of one enslaved mother intoned in a poem published in the Ladies’ Literary Portfolio in 1829:

Then, ere the nursling at my breast
Shall feel the tyrant’s rod;
O, lay his little form at rest
Below the quiet sod!29

The pairing of the “nursling” and the “tyrant’s rod” would have been shocking to the reader more accustomed to descriptions of an infant cuddled at its mother’s breast. Under slavery, the truly loving mother could do nothing but wish that death would offer her child the protection that she could not. Such jolting images and seemingly monstrous sentiments sought to disrupt the complacency of the reader by demonstrating that even maternal love was necessarily diverted in perverse directions by the institution of slavery.

In addition to the images of maternal love that was warped by slavery, the mother herself presented a very different figure in antislavery poetry. Depictions of the wild and raving enslaved mother provided a striking foil to the passive white mother of mainstream poetry. Indeed, the word “wild” appeared with frequency in antislavery poems, but almost never in poems
about white mothers. Numerous antislavery poems deployed the figure of
the frantic and raving mother in order to underscore the horrors of the sale
of human chattel. Juxtaposing the cold rationality of the white spectators
and the frenetic despair of the enslaved mother at an auction, one poem
that was published in the *Philanthropist* in 1841 offered a terrible picture
of the abuses of slavery:

'Twas there was seen a woman sold,
A mother parted from her child;
All hearts around were hard and cold,
While she was raving, frantic, wild.30

This poem set the mother apart from the cold-hearted spectators, for un-
like them she demonstrated her humanity through her feelings. Yet the
wildness of her emotions made her seem crazed or even animal-like, set-
ting her apart from the pure and tranquil emotions privileged by sentimen-
tal culture. The poem also sought to draw the reader’s sympathy through a
visceral awareness of the mother’s anguish, translated as it was through
the dramatic movements of her body when “she threw herself upon the
ground, / In agony and keen despair.”31 Another poem, published in the *Lib-
erator* in 1835, began with a similar image of frantic emotion manifesting
itself on the body:

Close she hugs him to her breast,
Sighs and moans like one distrest,
And lifting high her streaming eyes
To the God of mercy cries.32

The image of agony and fierce emotion in this poem was powerfully evoked
by the mother’s body itself—the way she clung to her child, the tears that
covered her cheeks, and the audible cries torn out of her by grief and fear.
The poem told of her oppression under the institution of slavery, but in spite
of her lack of power she was not a passive figure. Unlike the literary white
mother whose emotions were strung somewhere on a continuum between
maternal tenderness and gentle grief, the literary slave mother cried out
with anguish and strained her body against the impossible cruelties of slav-
ery. Thus while her emotions helped to make the enslaved mother part of
the sentimental realm, they also set her apart as wilder, more unpredict-
able, and less spiritual than the tranquil and piously resigned white mother
in sentimental poems.

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Just as the voice of the transcendent mother was an important feature in mainstream poems, the voice of the enslaved mother was also heard in verse; but her tones were anything but gentle or passive. In one poem published in the *Boston Recorder* in 1834, the narrator bore witness to an enslaved mother’s troubles, writing,

I saw the burning tear  
Run down her dark brown cheek;  
It told of wo and care.

But the poem quickly moved from the voice of the narrator to the voice of the mother herself, who frantically cried out her tale of loss.\(^{33}\) While the voice of the transcendent mother was a gentle echo or memory that guided listeners toward greater piety, the voice of the enslaved mother was a shriek that reverberated with horror. One poem used the echoes of these cries to evoke the depredations of the slave auction:

The harsh auctioneer, to sympathy cold,  
Tears the babe from its mother and sells it for gold;  
While the infant and mother, loud shriek for each other,  
In sorrow and woe.

. . . .

At last came the parting of mother and child,  
Her brain reeled with madness, that mother was wild;  
Then the lash could not smother the shrieks of that mother  
Of sorrow and woe.

Although the refrain of “sorrow and woe” that ended each stanza in this poem partially restored a sense of sentimental order, what stood out in these verses were the images of frantic struggle and violence inflict ed in a vain attempt to control the shrieking mother. The poet sought a visceral response from readers who could feel in their own bodies the shrieks of horror, the sense of madness, and the futile straining of the mother. The poem ended with the mother raving, bereft of reason, and finally dead. But instead of evoking her spiritual ascension, the poem kept its focus on the land of the living, imploring, “O, list ye kind mothers to the cries of the slave.”\(^{34}\) The mother’s shrieks were not a distant memory or echo, but a vivid and terrible reality meant to rattle the complacency of the white reader.

Perhaps even more unsettling to readers than the ravings of the mother who was driven to despair by the crimes of slavery was the fact that even death failed to bring a proper sentimental resolution. As we have seen, popu-
lar print culture taught white mothers that they could console themselves with the thought that even in death their influence as mothers would never dim—in fact, their power would only grow. One of the central narratives in mainstream poems about motherhood was the death of the mother and her transformation into an everlasting and infinite spiritual influence. The essence of the transcendent mother was in her ability to rise above her materiality to obtain greater virtue and influence. Maternal death was also featured in antislavery poems, yet these poems did not underscore the enslaved mother's spiritual influence after death. Even in death, she remained bound to earthly matters. One particularly gruesome poem published in the *Liberator* in 1833 described the murder of an enslaved child by his owner, “who angrily had caught the boy / And dashed him to the ground.” The child's mother “wildly raised to heaven her eye, / And shrieked aloud and fell,” a powerful image of despair that was located in the reactions of the body. The poem concluded with the death of the mother:

Her spirit took its flight—
And mother and child together lay,
For beasts to eat at night.35

A reader accustomed to the conventions of sentimental poetry might have reasonably expected a tender and uplifting description of the mother and child's spiritual reunion in heaven. Instead, the reader was left with the image of desecrated corpses, a spectacle intended to reinforce the inhumanity of the slave system. But the image of these corpses simultaneously reinforced the corporeality of the enslaved mother and child—in the end they were nothing but bodies. This mother, it seems, could not transcend the horrors of slavery even in death.

A few antislavery poems did draw on references to the spiritual realm, though these poems were less common, and their spiritual messages tended to be incomplete. One poem in the *Liberty Bell* created a dichotomy between the corrupt world of the “coiling whip, / Whose cruel lashes drip / With gore,” and the world above, “where all is joy, and peace, / And love that cannot cease.” The dying mother in this poem received a vision of heaven and cried out in the last verse, “My Boy, I fly to thee!”36 The reader can imagine that she was welcomed into the spiritual realm by her lost loved ones, but her spiritual journey remained incomplete. The reader cannot know of her transformation from flesh to spirit. Thus she arrived at the threshold of immortality, but unlike the white mothers of mainstream poetry, her transcendence of the material world and the triumph of her spiritual influence

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remained outside the scope of the poem. Instead, these verses conveyed the enslaved mother’s longing for transcendence while leaving its achievement in question. The literary slave mother could never arrive at complete spiritual transcendence because she was so profoundly defined by her corporeality. In order to make fully visible the depredations of slavery to potential allies in the antislavery movement, the enslaved mother could not be allowed to escape to the spiritual realm, for her body and its sufferings needed to remain in focus. It was her body that signified the moral disorder wrought by slavery; her inability to transcend her corporeality reminded Americans of their failure to root out a system that seemed to prey most tragically on female virtue and maternal influence.

Antislavery poems further highlighted the inability of the enslaved mother to transcend her material circumstances by combining images of maternal love and forced labor, underscoring the conflict between proper maternal feeling and the physical demands of slavery. One poem, published in the *National Era* in 1855, began with the shocking image of a mother forced to labor at digging a grave for her own child:

> And thou, a woman, scooping out its grave!
> The heart of mercy bleeds to see thee fling
> The broken earth o’er one thou’dst die to save.

The author emphasized the power of the scene to generate sympathy in the viewer—to make hearts bleed—but the shock of the image also served to question her maternity. The very idea of a mother flinging clods of earth over the corpse of her child represented the height of impossibility: “Yet not thine own!” the poet exclaimed; “no mother could be here, / Interring her own dead.”37 The work the mother was forced to do wrought such violence on notions of maternal tenderness and female sensibility that the witness could scarcely believe the scene: surely she could not be the mother of the deceased child. Her labors threw her maternity into question. The narrator did not consider that there might be some consolation for the bereaved mother in the knowledge that her child would never be forced to labor in such a way. Instead, the poem focused on displaying the shocked emotions of the narrator and contrasting them with the physical and emotional labor demanded of the woman.

Other poems emphasized the ways in which the work demanded of enslaved women prevented them from being good mothers. They were not allowed to perform the sacred work of motherhood, for their emotional power as mothers was deemed by the slave system to be less useful than
the power of their working bodies. One poem, published in the *Liberator* in 1844, drew out to an excruciating degree the tension between the needs of a dying infant and the demands of field labor. “God gave me babe—a precious boon,” the weary mother recounted, “But massa called to work too soon, / And I must needs depart.” From morning to night the mother experienced the horror of working in the fields while imagining the sufferings of her dying child:

I work’d upon plantation ground,
Though faint with woe and dread,
Then ran, or flew, and here I found—
See, massa, almost dead.38

In each stanza the mother evinced proper maternal feeling and devotion, yet each moment the demands of her owner drove her away from her maternal role and reasserted her status as human chattel. Expressions of sentiment, such poems suggested, had no power against the immediate demands of slavery. Thus the enslaved mother’s claims to sentimental motherhood were rendered impossible. Though she might be capable of proper maternal emotion, she would never be defined by her affective ties as long as she remained a slave.

Even more shocking to sentimental sensibility than depictions of forced labor were the scenes of physical violence that antislavery writers used to underscore the immorality of slavery. As Elizabeth B. Clark has shown in her analysis of the rhetoric of pain and suffering in antebellum American culture, “The gruesome tribulations of the body became a staple of antislavery literature.”39 For many writers, violence was the most potent way to express the inhumanity of the slave system, and they dwelled on narratives of punishment and torture. These kinds of spectacles formed part of what Karen Halttunen has called the “pornography of pain.” She has argued that it was not until the eighteenth century that the culture of sensibility redefined pain as unacceptable and repulsive, and this new understanding led to views of pain as “obscenely titillating” because of the very fact that it was taboo.40 Descriptions of slavery used physical pain and punishment to make readers viscerally aware of the injustices of the institution. But at the same time these portrayals could become obscene and potentially titillating by exposing the body of the slave and depicting the very moment of violence.

The lash was ubiquitous in antislavery poetry as the most potent symbol of the violence inherent in the institution. It represented the horrors of
slavery—the violation of individual bodily integrity and the corrupting influence of absolute power—but it also highlighted the corporeality of the enslaved, presenting the mother as a battered body rather than a vessel of emotion and maternal virtue. One poem made violence the direct result of maternal nurture by describing how a mother was punished for breastfeeding her child:

At noon—O, how I ran! And took
My baby to my breast!
I linger’d—and the long lash broke
My sleeping infant’s rest.\(^{41}\)

This poem told a frenzied tale of labor and abuse interspersed with a few stolen moments of maternal tenderness. Defining the enslaved mother’s body in terms of both its maternal capacity to nourish and its victimhood, this narrative of violence and loss emphasized the physicality of the mother and the corporeal nature of her suffering. Her maternal virtue was displayed in her desire to suckle her infant, while her oppression was underscored by the lash. In another poem, a mother was sold at auction and separated from her child:

The cruel whip soon made her rise;
And on the table take her place;
While from her wild and blood-shot eyes,
The scalding tears streamed down apace.\(^{42}\)

The whip turned this mother into a spectacle, a physical specimen whose worth was shaped by market values and finalized on the auction block. The whip, more than anything else, provided a clear symbol for the desecration of motherhood.

These images of violence highlighted both the corporeality of the slave mother and the vulnerability of her body. Representations of violence inflicted on the mother provided powerful fuel for antislavery arguments, for the maternal body offered a perfect site for underscoring the immorality and social disorder wrought by slavery. In a culture that revered the influence of the transcendent mother, the exploitation of enslaved women and the destruction of the sacred bonds of motherhood provided uniquely powerful arguments against slavery. But antislavery print culture also offered up the enslaved maternal body as a spectacle for the consumption of white Americans, creating what Carolyn Sorisio has called, “a public exhibition of
the female slave’s embodied wrongs.” By envisioning the physical anguish of the enslaved, such images appropriated pain experienced by the individual and repackaged it as a shocking yet enticing form of argumentation.

Antislavery poetry contained myriad contradictions when it came to redefining the enslaved mother. On the one hand, these poems used sentimental language and imagery to evoke the love of the enslaved mother for her child and to connect her to the values associated with the sentimental mother. They sought to create a realm of shared emotion that would draw women together, regardless of social status. By redefining the enslaved mother as a sentimental subject, these texts made an important statement about universal humanity. On the other hand, by dwelling on the physical and emotional violence wrought by slavery, antislavery poems reopened the divide between the enslaved mother and the idealized white mother. The enslaved mother was raving and wild, evoking disorder with her body; she was physically controlled and violated by slave owners and traders; and when she died, she was unable to achieve spiritual transcendence. In the end, antislavery poems failed to grant the enslaved mother the same kind of moral and spiritual transcendence granted to the white mother, and in doing so they created a gulf that could potentially prevent white northern readers from fully identifying with the enslaved.

Alongside literary efforts, the visual depiction of slavery was an essential part of the broader antislavery movement. Visual artifacts were seen by antislavery activists as a particularly effective means of reaching the public, for the eye was understood to provide a direct route to the heart. Moreover, as Teresa Goddu writes, “The image’s immediacy, along with its perceptual capacities and emotive power, successfully turns its viewer into an ‘eye-witness’ to slavery’s cruelties as well as a ‘partaker’ of the slave’s woes.” Thus antislavery images were understood to create an imaginary connection between the viewer and the viewed, while also giving the viewer an uncomfortable sense of complicity in the system of slavery. The American Anti-slavery Society alone circulated thousands of visual depictions of slavery each year throughout the 1830s, taking advantage of the rise of new technologies for the mass reproduction of images and of the new enthusiasm Americans demonstrated for the vividness of what they understood to be visual truths. High-quality images were expensive to produce, so antislavery print culture tended to take advantage of cheaper
forms of print. Much of antislavery visual culture was made up of relatively rough woodcuts that lacked the same elegance or intimate detail as the fine engravings in more expensive mainstream publications.\textsuperscript{46} The \textit{American Anti-slavery Almanac}, for instance, was first published by the American Anti-slavery Society in 1836 and provided a popular and cheap (at around six cents) platform for disseminating images and texts depicting the evils of slavery as well as the crimes of slaveholders against antislavery activists.\textsuperscript{47} Rough woodcuts, engravings, the occasional fine portrait, and expansive panoramas all worked together to stimulate the eye and the emotions of the viewer.

Even more than antislavery poetry, the images generated by antislavery proponents underscored the corporeality of the enslaved mother. Indeed, in these images the body of the enslaved mother seemed to supersede her subjectivity. In scenes of slavery the roughly sketched bodies and gestures of each character grabbed the viewer’s attention and told the story, sometimes with the assistance of a brief text that provided an anecdote illustrating the moral evils of slavery. But the lack of detail and personal expression in depictions of individuals made it difficult to access the subjectivity of the enslaved mother. Whereas fine images of white mothers in expensive gift-books and magazines presented highly detailed and intimate portraits of women and children, the coarser and more indistinct images in antislavery publications represented figures as types rather than individuals. This was true of course for both slaveholder and slave in these images—different types were indicated by their respective clothing, skin color, and role in the scene rather than by unique individual features—but this lack of individualization necessarily fell more heavily on the enslaved figures, who were already assumed by the institution of chattel slavery to be lacking individuality and subjectivity. The enslaved mother’s body represented a type intended to elicit sympathy for the collectivity of slave mothers; the specifics of her own personal history and sense of self, however, remained obscure unless they were articulated by an accompanying text. Thus, as Michael Chaney has written, these depersonalized images ultimately “replicated and amplified the process by which the slave was reduced to an object of commodification.”\textsuperscript{48} The indistinctness of visual depictions of enslaved people cast a veil between the potentially sympathetic viewer and the subjectivity of the enslaved mother; the only thing left to view, then, was her body.

Furthermore, while images of white mothers were frequently paired with sentimental poems or stories that showed viewers how to understand the image and guided their emotions, it was less common for images of enslaved
mothers to be paired with sentimental verse. The texts that did accompany images were more likely to be factual anecdotes about the workings of the slave system or about particular instances of abuse. As a result, viewers had less emotional instruction and greater flexibility in their interpretation of images. Without a poem or story to further explore the subjectivity of the enslaved mother and to elicit sympathy and a sense of shared humanity, the viewer might instead fixate on the power of the slave owner or trader who forcibly sought to separate a mother from her child. Thus, while antislavery images dealt with many of the same issues that appeared in poems—the separation of mother and child, the perpetration of physical violence—they did not create the same kind of direct link between the (white) viewer and the subjectivity of the enslaved mother. Instead, the viewer’s indignation might be roused by the use of violence against the female body, but this indignation might not be paired with a corresponding sense of sympathy and identification on the part of the viewer. Thus in visual culture the enslaved mother became more closely identified with her body than with her emotions; she was rooted visually in the grim physicality wrought by her status as human chattel.

Because antislavery images tended to present a scene with multiple characters viewed from a distance—as opposed to, for example, the more intimate proximity of a mother-child portrait—they allowed viewers to imagine or inhabit the perspectives of a variety of characters rather than foregrounding a particular perspective. In this way, even as they purported to tell a detailed visual truth about slavery, these images allowed for a range of interpretations and viewing experiences. Whereas antislavery verse highlighted the intimate emotions of a single individual and often explicitly demanded certain feelings of the reader, images offered more varied possibilities. Because of this, such images simultaneously presented a tragic sense of the wrongs of enslaved people as well as an uncomfortable ability for viewers to align themselves with the perspectives of power by regarding the enslaved mother as an object. In her analysis of the “omniscient viewpoint” of the antislavery panorama, with its perspective of overlooking numerous scenes that all added up to a seemingly comprehensive truth about slavery, Teresa Goddu has argued that “the panoramic perspective provided the white Northern viewer access to a position of specular dominance over the landscape of slavery as well as the body of the slave.”49 These images invited the viewers to sympathize with the enslaved, even as they might see in the spectacle of enslaved bodies the reinforcement of their own position of privilege and authority. The body of the enslaved mother, then,
could elicit sympathy, but it also constituted a spectacle that highlighted the power of the implicitly white viewer.

As in antislavery poetry, the forcible separation of the enslaved mother from her children was a common scenario in antislavery visual culture. But in these images the focus shifted away from the subjectivity of the mother and toward the drama itself as it played out on the page. In consequence, the viewer’s attention might become distracted from the bond of sympathy that antislavery activists hoped to draw between the enslaved mother and the viewer. An image of a mother and her children being separated by sale was included in the *American Anti-slavery Almanac for 1838*, for instance, and was accompanied by two short stanzas of verse. The poem guided readers to feel the sorrow of the fond mother:

\[
\text{Ev’n her babes, so dear, so young,} \\
\text{And so treasured in her heart,} \\
\text{That the cords which round them clung,} \\
\text{Seemed its life, its dearest part;} \\
\text{These, ev’n these, were torn away!}
\]

But an almost identical image also appeared in a broadside, entitled *Views of Slavery*, this time without an accompanying text to instruct the viewer how to understand the scene by focusing on the emotions of the mother (see fig. 6.1). This image first drew the viewer’s eye to the figure of the wealthy slave owner, whose social stature was evoked by his physical dominance over the scene. In his elegant clothes and top hat, he towered over the other figures and gazed with the detachment born of self-assurance and power at the scene unfolding before him. Although the composition of the image clearly showed that he wielded the power in this scene, he was physically distanced from the perpetration of violence; the only hint the viewer might have perceived of his role in the scenario was the whip that he held casually in his hand. Next the image directed the viewer to the emotional heart of the scene, where a slave mother knelt, restrained by the heavy grasp of a slave dealer, reaching out in supplication toward her children as they were marched away from her by a man wielding a whip in one hand and her infant in the other. This image depicted the emotions of the mother being overwhelmed by power—the power over her body wielded by the three white men and perhaps wielded too by the viewer, who could be impelled to see the mother as an object of violence rather than as a sentimental subject. Her distress was potent and almost tangible, but the disorder of her body had the potential to make her emotions seem foreign rather than serve
as a means of forging a connection between viewer and viewed. Although such images must have been effective at eliciting outrage in the viewer, the physicality of the mother divided her from the revered figure of the sentimental mother.

These visual scenes highlighted the moment of physical rupture and loss for mother and child, but they also underscored the mother’s corporeality.
by exposing her body’s desperate force and the physical restraint imposed on her by the white men around her. Unlike the images of passive white mothers whose bodies seemed to retreat from notice, in these images of the distraught enslaved mother it would have been impossible for the viewer not to notice her body and the force applied to it. An image from the *American Anti-slavery Almanac for 1840* depicted another scenario featuring the separation of a mother and her infant (see fig. 6.2). This image showcased the force of the white man who grasped the mother firmly around the waist with one arm and pulled her away from the scene, a gesture that was disturbing in its perverse intimacy. This pair, the mother reaching out desperately toward her child and the man pulling her away, formed the heart of the image, allowing the viewer almost to feel the weight of their physical encounter. Almost in mirror image, on the far left of the scene, the illustration also depicted a white man restraining the woman’s infant in an identical grasp, highlighting the perpetuation of physical control over the enslaved body from generation to generation. Although this image invited the viewer to react in horror to the separation of mother and child, it was the sense of physical power enacted by the white men in the scene that was most palpable. Moreover, the image was accompanied by a text consisting of anecdotes recounted by slave traders who had been involved in the separation of families, thus shifting the viewer’s attention to the moral crimes—and the power—of the white men in the scene and away from the subjectivities of the enslaved mother and infant. Thus the fact that images of enslaved mothers were only sometimes accompanied by sentimental poems allowed for a much greater flexibility in the interpretation of these images. Without sentimental verse or narrative to guide them, viewers might be drawn to a variety of perspectives. Viewers could imagine the experiences of the tormented mother and sympathize with her plight, but they might also connect with the perspectives of power that allowed the white men in these images to observe, manipulate, and own the enslaved body.

Symbols of power were at the core of antislavery visual culture, shifting the weight of these images away from sentimentalism. The power of the slaveholder was most often signified by the lash, just as it was in antislavery poetry. In these visual scenes, however, the power of the lash seemed to carry more weight than the emotions of the victim. Poems often employed the lash in metaphorical ways, using it to represent the mingled physical and emotional cruelties of the slave system. As one poet wrote, “The lash of the master her deep sorrows mock, / While the child of her bosom is sold on the block.” Visual depictions of slavery, however, highlighted the con-
crete threat and perpetration of violence, showcasing unbridled power over the enslaved body. The broadside discussed earlier, Views of Slavery, offered a series of six scenes of slavery, two of which used the threat of whipping as the center of the drama (see fig. 6.1). These images used physical violence to stand in for the full range of slavery’s horrors. Some images of violence were more symbolic, however. A cover image of the American Anti-slavery Almanac for 1843, for instance, depicted an enslaved mother prostrate on the ground and attempting to shield her infant while an enormous eagle, nearly as large as the mother herself, viciously grasped her buttocks in its
talons. In the background of the scene sat the U.S. Capitol with the flag flying high. Here, then, the perpetrator of violence was the nation, which permitted the violence of slavery to persist even in the nation’s capital.

Perhaps the most provocative aspect of antislavery visual culture was the sexualization of the enslaved female body. Carol Lasser has argued that the antislavery movement was defined, particularly in the 1830s, by a voyeuristic tendency in both visual and written texts. Antislavery writers produced explicit discussions of the sexual immorality fostered by the slave system in order to generate moral outrage and activism, especially among women. Although this tendency declined, she argues, after 1840, when the antislavery movement began to put more emphasis on politics and gave less attention to the methods of moral suasion that had proved so effective in generating support among northern women, it is nevertheless possible to see the sexualization of the female body as a common thread running throughout much of antislavery print culture.

It was a common convention in antislavery visual culture to present both enslaved women and men as scantily clad, often with just a bit of fabric forming a short covering from waist to thigh. George Bourne’s Picture of Slavery in the United States of America, for instance, included images of women naked to the waist being whipped or sold, alongside his excoriation of the sexual immorality of slaveholders. The nakedness of the enslaved women served to enhance the power of the white men in each scene by highlighting the vulnerability of the women and their objectification by the white male gaze, which was typically multiplied by at least two or three male participants or spectators. In the image from the broadside Views of Slavery, described above, the distraught mother in question was naked to the waist, and her legs were bare, a fact that added to the shocking nature of the image while further bringing her corporeality to the forefront of the scene (see fig. 6.1). Her nakedness posed a stark contrast to the men in the scene, who were clothed from the tops of their heads to their heels. The clothed bodies exuded power and order; the half-naked enslaved female body signaled vulnerability and disorder. The physical disorder of the woman’s body would have made her figure foreign to genteel viewers, drawing a stark line between the virtuous sentimental mother and the vulnerable and disordered enslaved mother.

Alongside the exposure of enslaved women’s bodies, the forcible manipulation of those bodies by white men also signaled the sexualization and vulnerability of the female slave. Images of enslaved women being re-
strained by white men or tied up with ropes to be flogged offered visual proof of the absolute control white men held over enslaved women’s bodies. When viewed by readers who were steeped in discussions of mixed-race slaves and the perceived sexual immorality of southern slaveholders, these images no doubt also raised the specter of sexual coercion and exploitation. As George Bourne asserted in his lengthy testimony against slaveholding, “The slave plantations are a scene of promiscuous uncleanness, of the most abhorrent character, which defies all attempts to preserve the existence of decency, personal or social.” White northerners were thus alerted to the full implications of the unlimited control exerted by slave owners. Through these images the enslaved mother became associated with physical force, violence, and sexual vulnerability, experiences that created distance rather than fostering a sense of affinity between the white viewer and the enslaved subject.

Thus antislavery images offered more extreme visions of embodiment than did antislavery poems. Although these images drew on some of the same themes and scenarios as sentimental verse—the separation of families and the emotional devastation wrought by slavery—they did so in ways that highlighted the physicality rather than the subjectivity of the enslaved. Antislavery images depicted the enslaved mother as a disorderly body, half-naked, straining and wild with despair, manipulated and exploited by slave owners and traders. These images made it difficult to draw parallels between the enslaved mother, whose body seemed to supersede her subjectivity, and the sentimental mother, whose corporeality retreated in order to liberate her spiritual and emotional influence. The soft emotions of motherhood had little place in antislavery visual culture, which instead implied a stark divide between the white transcendent mother and the enslaved mother who was bound to her body by the violence and commodification inherent to chattel slavery.

Antislavery poetry and visual culture worked together to create a complex set of meanings around the figure of the enslaved mother, combining sentimentalism with a voyeuristic focus on the physical and emotional torments perpetrated by slaveholders. By articulating the deep emotions of enslaved mothers, antislavery poems asserted the humanity and the maternal virtue of enslaved women. Viewed in this light, these poems worked to elicit sympathy on the part of the white reader/viewer by redefining the enslaved mother as a legitimate sentimental subject whose maternal feelings could
foster a sense of connection between white women and enslaved women. The use of sentimental language and imagery in antislavery verse signaled that the enslaved mother belonged to a higher emotional realm, in spite of her social status, and her emotional outpourings forced recognition of her humanity and her status as a sentimental mother. At the same time, however, these same poems bound the enslaved mother within a more corporeal framework than her white counterpart by emphasizing the physical abuses of slavery and the spectacles of grief and suffering exhibited by the maternal body itself. The enslaved mother might express the proper emotions of a sentimental mother, but she was never allowed to transcend her body.

At the same time, visual depictions of mothers being torn away from their children tugged at the heartstrings of viewers and invited them to enter into the image and feel the plight of the enslaved mother. But the visual conventions of antislavery print culture ultimately served to further emphasize the corporeality of the enslaved mother by making a shocking visual spectacle of her body, highlighting the power and force exerted on the enslaved mother, rather than her emotions. Images of force and violence could serve to arouse the sympathy and indignation of the viewer, but they could also allow the viewer to focus on the perspectives of power that objectified the enslaved body. In these images the subjectivity of the enslaved mother became subordinate to the action playing out on the page, requiring the viewer to work harder to inhabit the emotions and perspective of the enslaved woman.

Thus in these cultural forms the enslaved mother almost came to be defined by her emotions and her claims to sympathy. But the sentimental re-definition of the enslaved mother was incomplete. In the end, her inclusion in sentimental discourse stopped short of allowing her access to emotional and spiritual transcendence. Instead, important differences in the ways white and black mothers were represented in print culture reinforced a racialized spirit/body association that granted the white mother access to a higher spiritual identity while relegating the enslaved mother to base corporeality. Antislavery print culture promoted a sympathetic sisterhood of mothers, but it was an inherently unequal sisterhood. Although the sentimental tropes used in antislavery print culture brought the enslaved mother within the same cultural framework as white mothers, they failed to allow her to fully inhabit the sentimental realm. Sentimentalism might seem to create a universal space of feeling and being that anyone could access, but for enslaved mothers that access was always limited by the ways in which they were defined by their bodies.
The emphasis on the corporeality of the enslaved mother in antislavery literature and visual culture is consistent with what we know about broader discussions of race, gender, and embodiment in the nineteenth-century United States. William Etter writes that “in the ideology of American slavery disembodiment was figured as the condition of intellectual power and embodiment as the condition of physical subjugation; whiteness and blackness, respectively, were figured as corresponding to each of these poles.”¹⁵ Nineteenth-century science used biological essentialism to explain and perpetuate race- and gender-based inequalities, making the body of the white man the implicit norm against which all others were defined and judged.⁶⁰ Privileging the mind over the body, nineteenth-century intellectuals insisted that the superiority of the white man was evident in the scope of his morals and intellect, while the inferiority of women and nonwhites was evident in their childish intellects and their disorderly bodies. White women were redeemed from their corporeality when sentimental poems and images transformed them into spiritual entities, but antislavery print culture consistently mixed sentimental imagery with troubling depictions of embodiment.

The fact that the enslaved mother was not allowed to become a transcendent figure in antislavery print culture meant that she could never access the cultural power and influence attributed to the white mother. While the transcendent mother was credited with perpetuating virtue and morality and strengthening the social order, the enslaved mother was used to display the disorder caused in American society by the institution of slavery. The antislavery message in these texts depended on illustrating the ways in which slavery destroyed what middle-class Americans held dear: female virtue, maternal love, and the sanctity of the domestic realm. Antislavery print culture called upon them to defend these pillars of genteel society and thus shore up their own claims to moral rectitude and influence. In the end, the enslaved mother was culturally useful only to the extent that her body could be made to reveal the cruelties of slavery and convince white northerners that their moral outrage demanded action.

The emphasis on enslaved women’s corporeality in print culture challenges us to reconsider the universalizing power that has been attributed to sentimental culture. Although the intentions of antislavery authors were surely reformist, race-based assumptions about what it meant to be an ideal mother showed through in the ways in which slave mothers were incompletely enveloped in the sentimental sisterhood. In this way, differing depictions of the white and black maternal body challenge scholars to see the
cracks in the appealing fantasies of a universally inclusive sentimental culture. More broadly, the ways in which white and black mothers were portrayed in print culture reveals that by the nineteenth century the maternal body had become culturally useful. It served as an essential vehicle for articulating race and class identity, and it was insistently deployed to signal notions of virtue and refinement or vice and corruption. Repeatedly, print culture inscribed the maternal body with the fantasies and fears of American society.