June 2022

The Burdens and Blessings of Responsibility: Duty and Community in Nineteenth-Century America

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The Burdens and Blessings of Responsibility: Duty and Community in Nineteenth-Century America

A Dissertation Presented

by

LESLIE M. LEONARD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2022

English
The Burdens and Blessings of Responsibility: Duty and Community in Nineteenth-Century America

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by

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DEDICATION

In 1892 my 3rd great-grandmother was fifteen years old and had just given birth to my 2nd great-grandfather. She would die five years later, at the age of twenty, of the same typhoid fever that would simultaneously carry off nine other members of her family.

There is a single picture of her, marked by the labelling gun of some other descendant. In it, she is well-dressed and forward-facing, surrounded by her siblings and parents. She is perhaps thirteen, with a large bow holding her flattened, dark hair back from her face, which is serious and sad-looking. There are other family stories, of course. A sea of young, serious, feminine faces printed in black and white that reveal very little. However, I continue to return to Lucinda. It stays with me that I am so much older now than she ever got to be.

These stories are and aren’t mine to share. And I worry how it sounds to put them here, as though they have culminated in me. But there is a great distance between the field and the factory and the desk, an even greater distance between the lives of the distant women of my family - children, sisters, field-hands, mothers, bodies, brides, beloveds, workers, corpses - and the life that I have been allowed to lead - only by them and through them. This is, perhaps, a pitiful acknowledgment to those lives, about whom so much has been lost and unrecorded and unremembered.

I want to remember them, and remember that I am here through the abundant and undeserved kindness of others, through friendship, through mentoring, through unearned privilege, through dumb luck, through my own tenacity, and through the unknowable hardships and successes of my predecessors. This dissertation is dedicated to them.
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There is, as my work shows, no such thing as a self-made individual. My work and my self are the result of endless interactions with others who supported me, helped me, answered questions, and offered guidance. I wish to acknowledge all of them in spirit if not in name.

I must thank my partner, Jeremiah Williams, who makes work and all of life a joy. Enormous thanks, of course, to Nick Bromell, who has guided and advised me from the first moment I arrived in Massachusetts. It has been a privilege to work alongside Nick and any success I reap is due entirely to his tutelage. Thanks, as well, to Hoang Phan and Britt Rusert who have both been such incredible sources of support as I nervously stumbled through the program these past five years and who were both always willing to meet and to read and discuss my work.

Thanks to Alanna Frost, Joseph Conway, and Chad Thomas – all of whom helped me through my Master’s program and made it clear that a PhD was in fact something that I could do. Thanks also to Heather Congo Gilliam, the first person to ever model for me what teaching and academia might look like, and the first person to suggest that I belonged in such a space. Thanks to the faculty and staff of UMass: Asha Nadkarni, Daniel Sack, Randall Knoper, Adam Zucker, Ron Welburn, Caroline Yang, Wanda Bak, David Fleming, Anne Bello, Stephen Clingman, Laura Furlan, Rachel Mordecai, and Jenny Adams. Thanks to my community of peers at UMass who have advised, uplifted, and celebrated me with very little in return except my friendship: John Yargo, Maria Ishikawa, Ben Latini, Angela Kim, Sean Ash Gordon, Neelofer Qadir, Jeremy Levine, Sharanya Sridhar, David Katz, Renee de Groot, Anna Klebanowska, and so many others.
ABSTRACT

THE BURDENS AND BLESSINGS OF RESPONSIBILITY: DUTY AND
COMMUNITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

MAY 2022

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_The Burdens of Responsibility_ traces the emergence of moral responsibility as both a concept and problem in the nineteenth-century United States. Drawing on a range of sources – works of literature, philosophy, domestic manuals, newspaper archives – I show how many Americans began to conceive of moral responsibility as distinct from both duty and rules of behavior prescribed by traditional social roles. Although ethicists today take this distinction for granted, it was an emergent and problematic space in the nineteenth-century United States, brought into being by historical forces, including the rise of market capitalism, abolition, changing women’s roles, and increasing concern with the responsibilities (not merely the rights) of democratic citizenship. I argue that American authors, thinkers, and citizens were compelled to negotiate the tension between familiar notions of duty (fixed, prescribed, automatic) and new calls for responsibility (improvised, self-authored, contextual).
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INTRODUCTION: THE BURDENS AND BLESSINGS OF RESPONSIBILITY

The relation between duty and responsibility was a central concern for many authors and readers in the antebellum U.S. Worrying over the arrival of “emigrants” and an increase in population, Thomas Paine, writing in 1776, argues that it is members’ “duty and attachment to each other” that constitutes the basis of society.¹ Nearly one hundred years later, in 1869, Henry Ward Beecher’s sermons ask a similar question: what is to be the basis of human connection and morality? For Beecher it is neither duty nor attachment, but “responsibility,” one “which we do not always think of,” but which nonetheless binds us to “our neighbors and fellow-citizens.”²

Responsibility, for Beecher at least, denotes a moral drive by which “the higher must serve the lower” and the individual must care for the public. Across the ninety-three-year divide between Paine and Beecher’s addresses, United States audiences had become attuned to a language of responsibility and had, in many ways, left the obligations of duty behind. How and why did this shift occur?

Responsibility was not a new concept for many nineteenth-century Americans. In fact, both duty and responsibility were often at the center of legal debates, discussions of race, popular sermons, sentimental literature and a variety of domestic and moral guidebooks. Moreover, as scholar William Brock³ correctly suggests, the century saw a shifting emphasis from individual responsibility towards a recognition of public responsibility as more public institutions were needed, particularly after the war, to account for the poor, wounded, and widowed that began to appear in droves too large for individuals and local communities to support. Thus,
a number of nineteenth-century Americans were compelled to reconsider the meaning of their obligations to their fellow citizens, particularly those most vulnerable. However, what such work overlooks is that the idea of individual responsibility itself was emergent and problematic as it conflicted with established norms of individual duty.\textsuperscript{4} This conflict, between duty and emergent forms of responsibility, forms the crux of my study. Confronted by large moral problems throughout the century, including a chattel slavery system, exploitative industrialized labor, and restrictive domestic roles for women, many Americans deeply reconsidered what their obligations towards others and themselves were, how those others might be appropriately identified, and where the limits of duty and/or responsibility lay. This reconsideration, importantly, drew many nineteenth-century Americans gradually and unevenly away from obligation and duty towards a sense of reciprocity and responsibility.

For some nineteenth-century Americans, whose thinking and inquiry were largely limited by hierarchies of race, gender, and class, including the limitations of prescribed social relationships (employer/employee; landlord/tenant; neighbor/neighbor), the tension between duty and responsibility appeared in a variety of different iterations that twentieth- and twenty-first century philosophy fails to fully address. Similarly, and unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century conceptions of duty and responsibility spanned a variety of disciplines and discursive arenas and it is important to note that not all nineteenth-century thinkers considered their terms so carefully. In fact, few thinkers conceived of their work as intentional interventions into the discourse of responsibility and duty. Instead, we more frequently encounter
thinkers and authors deploying these terms in the service of other, broader goals (abolition, jurisprudence, domestic guidance); as a result, we sometimes see terms used interchangeably, employed in highly variable ways (even within the same text), and applied without clear definition. Still, we nonetheless see that nineteenth-century understandings of duty and responsibility map onto the more recognizable concepts of deontology and consequentialism – duty as fixed action performed in accordance to habit or external command, and responsibility as measured primarily by its outcomes. Furthermore, the definitional indiscretions of the nineteenth century do not detract from the historical discourse of duty and responsibility. Instead, they emphasize the complexity and capacity of such terms, and reveal expansive, yet unexplored, interdisciplinary networks of theory and debate which spanned the century and permeated nineteenth-century thought.

The significance of these debates resulted largely from the multitude of cultural shifts which occurred throughout the century, particularly as the nation moved from the republic culture of the founders to the increasingly democratic culture of the nineteenth century. While in the previous century of revolutionary-era America, “the common or public good enjoyed preeminence over the immediate interests of the individuals,” the nineteenth-century instead saw emergent problem spaces regarding the state, the public, the individual, and how one might be responsible to either oneself or those beyond oneself. The shifting organization of labor from master/apprentice relationships to free laborers in a free market meant shifting responsibilities for employers and laborers, now more autonomous and simultaneously vulnerable. Middle-class homes saw a similar shift as domestic labor became more gendered and family members began to take on an
autonomy of their own, now defining family relationships through contractual ties of affection (rather than simply consanguinity); by extension, larger communities began to conceive of themselves along shifting lines of location, race, ethnicity, history, and shared experience. At the same time, the United States moved more and more towards the use of public and community programs of support for *citizens* – already a fraught and complicated identity. Each of these shifts, occurring across the American nineteenth century, mark the period as a significant historical moment of tension between the individual and the communal, the familial and the national, oneself and others.

To date however, the topic has received scant scholarly attention and responsibility has remained an overlooked key word of the period. This comes, as we shall see, primarily as a result of a critical disposition epitomized by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, both of whom regard responsibility with understandable suspicion and mark it as an internalization of external structures of control. However, while the rhetoric of responsibility *has* been historically deployed in oppressive ways – as Saidiya Hartman’s and Lloyd Pratt’s scholarship on Black indebtedness to the state makes clear – scholarly skepticism toward responsibility fails to keep pace with more current work in the fields of philosophy and feminist ethics, which advocate a possible return to moral responsibility as potentially productive for responding to our present historical moment. Thus, while such valid critiques must be borne in mind, they should not obscure the historical importance and potential current relevance of responsibility discourse.

My work, which draws upon a varied archive of both published and unpublished sources, shows how a range of nineteenth-century American writers
were more aware of the potential pitfalls of advocating for responsibility than modern scholars typically acknowledge. Indeed, they conceived of responsibility in creative and capacious ways that challenged and expanded traditional conceptions of duty. Simultaneously, these archives reveal vital and unexplored problem spaces of responsibility in discourses of abolition, philosophy, politics, labor, and domestic relations. Furthermore, by bringing the methodology of literary studies to this task, I am able to show how a variety of contemporaneous Americans thought of, dramatized, and engaged with constantly developing discourses in a variety of public and private spheres and am able to consider the material and historical conditions under which American authors considered issues of responsibility in ways that scholars have heretofore overlooked. In the tradition of literary studies, my project also approaches the literature of this period as twofold, reading them as both literary pieces and as important interventions into popular discourse, not separate from historical sources, but part of them.

Why responsibility now? In recent years, feminist philosophy has greatly reconsidered the role of responsibility in moral discourse. Iris Young’s scholarship illustrates the turn well as she notes both that the familiar notions of “personal responsibility” provide an “an isolated, atomistic way of thinking about individuals” and also that there exists a “distinction between guilt and responsibility” that many overlook. 11 Similarly, Emily Beausoleil’s work on responsibility as responsiveness argues for an approach to responsibility that marks its capacity for responding to others and engaging in reciprocal and active participation with those others. Though popular usage of responsibility relies upon its capacity to locate blame, scholars like
Young and Beausoleil instead provide alternative understandings of responsibility (as capacious and caring) and, as a result, also provide alternatives to the popular individualized and self-responsible subject. Like our common usage of ‘responsibility’ itself, Western philosophy and ethics has traditionally emphasized the individual and the self, a focus which feminist scholars and ethicists have countered in their work. As Cynthia Willett writes, modern Western philosophy’s focus on the self “eclipse[s] family, friendship, passionate love, and community, and…reinforce[s] a modern binary that divides the social sphere into autonomous agents and their dependents.”¹² I argue that nineteenth-century U.S. authors frequently approached this binary as a site of struggle.

We see this struggle, perhaps most famously, in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. On the one hand, he declares in “Self-Reliance” that he “shuns father and mother and wife and brother when [his] genius calls [him].”¹³ The agential, creative, male self, for Emerson, is one that exists independently of others. On the other hand, he insists upon an acknowledgement of the self, or one’s “sense of being,” as “not diverse from things…but one with them,” not separate and individual, but imbedded with and produced by others. Similarly, while for Emerson, there is seemingly little worse than being rendered vulnerable or dependent upon others, he simultaneously struggles throughout his work to differentiate individual agents’ ability to be self-regulating, self-policing, and self-reliant from the acknowledgment that all are, in some way, dependent upon others. Like Emerson’s struggle to separate his responsibilities to his self and to others (which also reflects a struggle to separate his individual self from a larger community), my project traces both the emergent
discourse of responsibility throughout the century as well as the simultaneous emergence of thinkers and authors whose work challenged ideas of the individual subject altogether. As a result, the central questions which my work seeks to answer are: How did nineteenth-century authors and thinkers conceive of duty and responsibility? In differing and contradictory ways? And how did nineteenth-century Americans determine for and to whom they must be responsible? My work is motivated in part by my belief in the continuing usefulness of responsibility and community for our present moment while unearthing the ways that they were put to use (or discarded) in the past. Ultimately, with an eye to feminist ethics of care, my work argues, at least in part, for a potential second look at such concepts despite their somewhat troubled and problematic associations. Thus, I also ask: How have thinkers of the past conceived of the self in radically connected and dependent ways? How have authors depicted vulnerability, community, and interconnection as generative and necessary? If, as we’ve seen throughout a variety of texts and, no doubt, in our own personal histories with the term, responsibility traditionally evokes hierarchy, power, blame, and consequences, then how might our relationships with others change significantly, how might we reimagine the world and our place in it, by thinking of responsibility not as a method of blame-placing, but as a moral obligation to a world in which we are endlessly connected.

**Pitfalls of Responsibility**

Alongside this history and recent reclamation of responsibility as a charitable intervention, the concept of responsibility is also simultaneously bound up in histories of control, discipline, and domination – as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler’s works
have both shown. To be held responsible for something, after all, is to be open to blame, and to hold oneself responsible is to enact the internal self-regulation that Butler marks as intrinsic to “subjection,” that is, “the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject”.\(^\text{14}\) For Butler and Foucault, responsibility becomes another means of self-regulation which enforces and internalizes external structures of control – we and others hold ourselves responsible for behaving in ‘appropriate’ ways and thereby self-police according to societal expectations which are generated by power structures which exist above us. Similarly, feminist thinkers have themselves been wary of responsibility in previous years. In particular, “many feminists have been uncomfortable with the judgmental language of responsibility that follows when praise and blame are taken to be its primary features.”\(^\text{15}\) The binaries established by this line of thinking – “judging people as good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy”\(^\text{16}\) – are, for philosophers and theorists, ultimately not useful ones. However, what we see in the nineteenth-century, and in more recent feminist work, is a more thoughtful examination of responsibility that challenges rather than reinforces such a binary.

Beyond the theoretical drawbacks of responsibility, Saidiya Hartman illustrates the historical pitfalls of the term as well. Her work in *Scenes of Subjection* traces how the discourse of responsibility, and duty in particular, was deployed in postbellum America as a means of entrapment for nonwhite subjects. As Hartman rightly notes, the postbellum period saw a discourse of responsibility which attempted to indebt Black subjects to white society as repayment for emancipation and attempted to hold Black subjects responsible for the nation’s Civil War and its
aftermaths. What Hartman names as “indebted servitude,”17 scholar Lloyd Pratt calls “transactional selfhood.”18 For both scholars, it is important to understand how Anglo-Americans employed the language of debt, obligation, and responsibility in order to coerce Black subjects whose selfhood was rendered conditional upon the fulfillment of unending obligations. It is necessary to engage with these well-documented appropriations of responsibility discourse used to actively oppress and legislate black subjects (a conversation made all the more necessary by racist scholarship which continues to make such claims – Larry Mead’s 2019 Burden of Freedom19 comes to mind). Still, in framing my work, I intend to differentiate it from the work of scholars such as Richard H. Brodhead, Laura Wexler, and Susan M. Ryan who approach responsibility discourse with strict hermeneutics of suspicion.20 Unlike these scholars, I will argue that nineteenth-century authors were more aware of the pitfalls and problematics of responsibility than modern scholars often give credit for. My work will show that the main proponents of responsibility were well aware of the risks embedded in their support of it and, as a result, took a far more nuanced and critical approach to preaching responsibility than other scholars have previously attended to. This approach gives attention to how authors expressed doubts about responsibility even as they endorsed it, while also acknowledging how they critiqued the concept of the sovereign, agential self, in particular a self that is independent from others. While I think about how authors advocated for responsibility I will also be thinking alongside their critiques of it as well. Does our responsibility extend to those who have harmed us (or who wish us harm)? Might we, in some instances, be
responsible for ourselves before others? How might responsibility to others (or community more broadly) obscure our self?

**Duty and Responsibility**

As responsibility and its new modes of thinking emerged, authors and thinkers critically engaged with both the extant concept of duty as well as responsibility in a variety of ways and often with little care to how they deployed the terms. Still, despite the differences in how various authors made use of responsibility and duty, there are some consistencies across discursive fields. While responsibility came fully into the American public consciousness in the nineteenth century, duty, as a term, had been in popular use since the country’s founding.\(^{21}\) It is perhaps not surprising then that the terms reflect both the needs of their particular moment and the shift towards a larger and more democratic populace. Furthermore, duty remained, throughout the century, a term of obedience, while responsibility, as we’ll see, took on a variety of capacious meanings. As Adam Smith, writing at the end of the previous century notes of “the established rule of duty:” “a wife…may sometimes not feel that tender regard for her husband which is suitable to the relation that subsists between them. If she has been virtuously educated, however, she will endeavor to act as if she felt it, to be careful, officious, faithful, and sincere, and to be deficient in none of those attentions which the sentiment of conjugal affection could have prompted her to perform.”\(^{22}\) In Smith’s example, duty may compel appropriate behavior even in the absence of sentiment; however, Smith notes that despite an “earnest desire to fulfill every part of their duty,” such a person will still “fail in many nice and delicate regards…which they could never have overlooked if they had possessed the sentiment that is proper to
their situation.” With regards to the “virtuously educated” and dutiful wife, we may firstly understand duty to be that which is performed out of obligation rather than sincere desire. Secondly, it is important to note that while duty may compel our actions (or compel our bodies to act), it is always distinct from sentiment, care, and feeling. Furthermore, that lack of care is felt by the recipient of our duty. Smith may at first argue that duty is enough to make sure that the wife is “deficient in none of those attentions” befitting a wife, but he is forced to admit that failure is ultimately unavoidable because sentiment is essential to the relationship. If duty is separate from sentiment, care, and feeling, then we might posit, as we will see other thinkers do, that responsibility is its inverse – dependent upon feeling and unable to be compelled simply by obligation.

Other authors throughout the century echo this understanding of duty and, by extension, responsibility. Harriet Wilson writes of her auto-biographical protagonist that in doing her duty “she moved about the house like an automaton…every duty performed – but an abstraction from all.” Dugald Stewart’s popular moral philosophy insists that mankind must disregard “tumults of passion” in order to instead “obey the cool suggestions of duty.” Both Fanny Fern and James Russell Lowell pen brief sketches titled “Love and Duty” and “The Parting of the Ways” (in which the two ways presented are Duty or Pleasure), each, like Stewart, suggesting that duty remains intrinsically separate from pleasure, love, sentiment, or passion. As William Wells Brown’s “half-Yankee, half-German” preacher, Hontz Snyder, tells an assembly of enslaved persons, “Now, when correction is given you, you either deserve it, or you do not deserve it. But whether you really deserve it or not, it is your
duty, and Almighty God requires that you bear it patiently.” He goes on to say that “it is the will of God who hath by his providence made you servants, because, no doubt, he knew that condition would be best for you in this world, and help you the better towards heaven if you would but do your duty in it.” For the assembled enslaved persons, it is clear that duty is always a means of control which originates from an authority above them. Duty is that which “you bear…patiently” and that which some higher authority deems “would be best for you…if you would but do…it.” Thus, duty is acknowledged as something which occurs from the top-down. Unlike Adam Smith’s unhappy wife who does her duty as a result of her education and other unacknowledged, unnamed reasons (which we might guess at, but never fully locate), Brown forces readers to acknowledge that duty is dependent inherently upon systems of power in which there is an authority and a recipient of that authority – one who dictates duty, and one who must perform it.

Frederick Douglass’s writings similarly build upon such understandings of duty. Using the language of duty, Douglass affirms the unnaturalness of enslavement, which is evidenced in the “rigid training” required to fulfill both “the duties of a slave” as well as “the duties of a slaveholder.” However, Douglass’s discussion of nature in this moment does more than merely reaffirm the wrongfulness of enslavement, it contributes to a significant, though easy-to-miss, intervention in the discourse of duty versus responsibility. We may return momentarily to Adam Smith’s example of a dutiful wife who “may sometimes not feel that tender regard for her husband which is suitable to the relation,” but who will act dutifully “if she has been virtuously educated.” Smith’s dutiful wife only comes to know her duty through her
(virtuous) education and would otherwise have no basis for how to act towards her husband besides her innate feelings toward him, which, as has been established, are lacking. In both Douglass and Smith, we see that we are educated in our duty and trained in the proper performance of it. Duty, then, crucially, is not innate. In fact, this aspect of duty is made all the clearer when compared to Douglass’s earlier articulations of the goals of enslavement, that it seeks “to blunt, deaden, and destroy the central principle of human responsibility” and “to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things,” namely their “moral and religious responsibility.”

Importantly, in both of these instances, Douglass asserts that responsibility and conscience are innate and defining human characteristics, they exist before they are stamped out by the experience of enslavement and they form the critical barrier between man and thing.

Regardless, Douglass’s suggestion that morality was an ingrained and, more importantly, God-given aspect of humanity was a popular philosophical belief of the time, particularly amongst Common-Sense philosophers whose work found increased traction with American audiences in both the late-eighteenth century and throughout the course of the nineteenth century. Thomas Reid, writing in 1819, notes: “our moral judgment, or conscience, grows to maturity from an imperceptible seed planted by our Creator.”

For Reid, while the conscience may be refined and developed in particular ways over time, it is nevertheless an ingrained aspect of one’s humanity. Other popular Common-Sense philosophers similarly argue that “the moral faculty [is] an essential and universal part of human nature” or query whether “the Moral Faculty [is] an original power” or “not intuitive,” but rather learned. Through each
of these brief examples we see a repeated deep interest in the inherent nature of conscience and morality. However, Douglass’s clarification of moral responsibility as an inherent aspect of humanity suggests more than merely conscience since the addition of responsibility implies the added requirement of action, not just feeling.

Like Douglass’s differentiation between unthinking duty and the moral choice of responsibility, the captain of Billy Budd similarly articulates his officers’ “clash of military duty with moral scruple” and posits a binary choice for readers between “military duty” and “moral scruple,” which follows common nineteenth-century delineations between duty and responsibility. Melville articulates that differentiation through Vere’s distinction between duty and morality and through the association of unthinking action with duty and moral choice with responsibility. For the officers of Billy Budd, their duty is a sort of “monastic obedience” which they religiously follow. Billy’s own “punctiliousness in duty” is noted by his shipmates and, throughout the story, readers see Billy “mechanically r[ise]” and “mechanically obey” orders without thought. At his execution, Billy’s peers similarly “yield…to the mechanism of discipline” and “martial duty,” obedience to which generates the story’s tragedy.

We may see then, that moral choice differentiates responsibility – agential, actionable, and based in feelings of empathy – from duty –passive, mechanical, deontological, and distanced from feeling altogether. Yet despite these fairly firm definitions, there remain variants and aberrations. Unsurprisingly, nineteenth-century conceptions of duty and responsibility spanned a variety of disciplines and discursive arenas. As a result, we encounter an expansive array of American thinkers who, despite deploying identical terms, vary in their usage of such terms, often reflective of
the fields in which they hoped to meaningfully intervene. While there exists a variety of usage across the century and across disciplines, thinkers’ choice to consistently return to duty and responsibility as their key terms across a variety of disciplines illuminates the importance of these concepts to nineteenth-century thought as a whole. Similarly, despite the capacious uses of these terms, there remains a frequent enough overlap of definitions to allow us to trace a successful, and nearly comprehensive, history of these terms and their deployment throughout the century by abolitionists, home-makers, physicians, laborers, lawyers, preachers, philosophers, and popular thinkers and authors.36

Chapter Outlines

Within this project, I trace a brief historical discourse of responsibility along five primary axes of historical development, following what I identify as the driving engines of historical change in the period. Although a discourse of responsibility extended throughout the century as a whole – and continues to operate today – my project will focus primarily upon the antebellum period. The nature of citizenship was changing rapidly and the slavery system, and emerging industrial labor system, pressed many Americans to consider their responsibility to others more deeply, while the gendered differences of the century were becoming more reified. As a result, my chapters are organized around many of these changes: debates surrounding the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, responsibilities between laborers and employers, the nation’s responsibility for abolition, women’s domestic duties and responsibility, and the reciprocal responsibility formed in specific diasporic Black communities. As we will see, these fields were not always distinct from one another and frequently
intervened into concurrent fields of debate – Catharine Beecher’s domestic guides are both pieces of popular culture as well as highly religious texts, Melville’s short fictions were also commentaries on law and labor, Jacobs’s autobiography speaks to experiences of enslavement, calls for abolition, and conceptions of community across diaspora. With this in mind, it is important to understand that the fields of debate which I identify above were neither in perpetual contact nor always neatly distinct, but, rather, concurrent threads of a complex and ongoing discursive web which spanned the century. As such, the texts which I investigate frequently overlap, interweave, entangle with, contradict, respond to, intervene in, ignore, and argue with one another in complex ways. Therefore, the axes which I identify and implement here are neither all-encompassing, nor always particularly neat; instead, they are merely loose coordinates along which we may trace a clearer image of the conversation as it manifested in the period.

The first chapter of The Burdens and Blessings of Responsibility begins with the historical democratization of citizenship and the subsequent distinction between individual and public-facing responsibility as many Americans began to conceive of themselves as citizens and individual agents (rather than as dependent subjects). If individual responsibility depended upon being self-controlling, sovereign, independent, and agential, then, as this chapter asks, what happens when those ideals meet with the realities of our dependence upon others, our vulnerability, our need for community support? Importantly, my first chapter considers the practices of responsible citizenship rather than contending with citizenship as merely a collection of state-sanctioned rights and liberties. This chapter argues that a variety of American
thinkers engaging in public philosophy weighed the potential benefits and pitfalls of strict individualism against publicly-funded aid and that beneath each of these discussions lies a struggle to accept and properly meet the vulnerabilities of everyday life – aging, illness, job loss, lack of opportunity, and so on. To be responsible then, particularly in the context of existing as a subject, is also, at its core, a discussion of vulnerability – who is to be responsible for alleviating the harm that comes to one’s fellow citizens, or are they to be wholly self-supporting and thus invulnerable? This chapter further suggests that Walt Whitman’s highly democratic poetry dramatizes these struggles as his work considers Americans’ responsibility, vulnerability, and their relationship to individuality and citizenship. Whitman’s poetry radically reimagines the United States as a single organism, interconnected and reliant upon all other parts while also constantly worrying over the potential loss of the individual democratic subject, dramatizing the very anxieties that plagued other Americans, uncertain of whether their responsibility ultimately lay with themselves or others.

The following chapter explores the new responsibilities that emerged between employers and employees, particularly as large economic shifts, class changes, and the industrialization of labor occurred. In this chapter, literary scenes of labor in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* and a collection of Herman Melville’s works (including “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids,” *The Confidence Man*, and “Bartleby, The Scrivener”) depict laborers as dutiful and mechanical, and unearth the problematics of responsibility in a globalized, industrialized, capitalist system. Like the discourse of self-responsibility that abounded in the arena of citizenship, workers were frequently depicted as
autonomous and agential – capable of mobility between jobs and economic independence. However, as the realities of the exploitative and industrial factory systems became more prevalent, authors, like many Americans, began to wonder if employers might possess special responsibilities for their workers. While Phelps’s novel attempts to bridge the class and labor gulf by locating similarities between working women and women of the leisure class, Melville’s works create a far more complicated picture of the working landscape. In Bartleby, readers are forced to grapple with the deeply interpersonal conflict of the story and with the alienating nature of capitalist work. In Paradise and Tartarus, readers themselves become implicated in the global network of labor where they are asked to consider their responsibilities as consumers. While neither author provides easy answers to the question of responsibility with regards to labor, each presents readers with a more insightful and complex view that modern scholars have not yet attuned themselves to.

Chapter Three, further following the distinctions of public and private responsibility investigates how responsibility was employed in a multitude of complicated ways both in the service of and in rejection of abolition. In particular, this chapter focuses upon the philosophical contributions of Frederick Douglass to abolitionist and responsibility-based discourse. Abolitionists, in particular, struggled to produce a convincing rhetoric of moral, political, and religious responsibility despite the consistent anti-Black violence apparent in both enslavement and the post-war period. Indeed, shifting views of responsibility were largely produced in the service of the abolitionist cause. Just as responsibility began to take on new, potentially non-hierarchical forms, the duty of “the higher” to patronizingly command
those who could not be responsible for themselves (a discourse employed against women, Black individuals, children, criminals, and so on) became a responsibility to “serve the lower” instead.\textsuperscript{37} This idea, of servitude and care towards those inferior in power, was quickly employed by thinkers like Frederick Douglass (who radically altered the concept to make one responsible and accountable \textit{to} inferiors rather than patronizingly responsible for taking care \textit{of} them). Thus, Chapter Three posits a dual reading of Douglass’s work – as abolitionist, of course, but also as a philosophical intervention into the century’s discourse of responsibility. Furthermore, I argue that Douglass was far more aware of the potential pitfalls of advocating for responsibility than modern scholars recognize.

Chapter Four considers, what L.G. Abell’s 1855 domestic guide names, “the momentous responsibilities of woman.”\textsuperscript{38} By engaging with an archive of domestic guides, women’s sentimental literature, and other daily writings by, for, or about American women, this chapter considers how nineteenth-century women negotiated the tension between how responsibility both empowered and limited them, particularly during a time when it was believed that, as J.F. Stearns preaches, “the influence of woman” was “not limited to the domestic circle,” but rather all of society.\textsuperscript{39} Following the trends of other discursive arenas, women struggled to reject traditional notions of duty in order to fashion themselves as responsible beings. As a result, Chapter Four turns away from responsibility towards duty, a concept that, as we see in Chapter One, revitalized during the war years, but which had never fully left the highly gendered world of domesticity. While discussions of responsibility and individuality were prominent among men of the nineteenth-century, women were still
frequently bound by the discourse of duty, prevalent in the previous century with the
invention of Republican Motherhood. As women’s literature grappled with
responsibility and duty, so too did they grapple with whether or not to frame their
female readership as individual agents and selves or as duty-bound and selfless
beings.

Finally, my fifth chapter looks to the new and capacious conceptions of
responsibility born out of a unique ethics of knowing developed under the impossible
conditions of enslavement and Black diaspora. More so than the chapters preceding it,
this chapter explores the possibilities of responsibility as a generative and care-based
practice. Though this chapter does not take responsibility as its strict key term, it
nonetheless reads the possibilities of a responsibility and community-mindedness in
which the individual self is decentralized. Chapter Five reads Harriet Jacobs’s
autobiography alongside a rich archive of Black newspaper advertisements in order to
reconsider the functions of responsibility for identifying community and, more
importantly, for offering new conceptions of the self and its relationship to others.

Return to Responsibility

Like Bruno Latour’s now-decade-old article on the subject of critique
fatigue,40 many scholars have made the turn from suspicion and skepticism towards
something else. Christopher Castiglia, in particular, writes that traditional critique has
become little more than what affect scholar Eve Sedgwick terms “paranoid
reading,”41 and what New Materialist scholar Jane Bennett calls “a disenchantment
tale,”42 which discourages affective attachment, belief, and hope, “exclude[ing] the
replenishing experiences of wonder that make the world worth fighting for and
encourage resilience when those struggles seem overwhelming.”

However, rather than dismissing critique altogether, Castiglia posits a new option, turning disenchantment and critique into “a practice of hope.” My work is similarly interested in hopefulness, in potentiality, and in reimagining. As Castiglia further clarifies, criticism that expresses hope is criticism that acknowledges and maintains the ideals that undergird our desire to engage in critique – that is, in order to construct a more just and worthwhile future. Writing in response to the recently passed Dred Scott decision, Frederick Douglass insists that his “hopes were never brighter than now.” Despite “the increasing strength and stability of slavery,” and the “broad and gloomy shadows” of “the many difficulties and discouragements that beset [abolitionists] on every hand,” Douglass persists with “another and a brighter view,” one of radical hope. Douglass’s position is, at least in part, a rhetorical one. The Dred Scott decision, following seven years on the heels of the Fugitive Slave Act, was a more-than-demoralizing loss to the cause of abolition. Thus, Douglass’s presentation of hopefulness for his discouraged audience functions as a much-needed tactic of re-motivation; however, this choice is more than simply a rhetorical strategy, as we see Douglass’s work consistently take stances that are “sober, but not hopeless.”

There is a need for hope, one which readers may see reflected in the subtle desperation of their own moment. We may locate, in the frequently-discussed nihilism of Millennials, in the popularity of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works, in the ignored anger of activists and Gen Z leaders, a distinct thread of despair, weaving its way solemnly through the twenty-first century.
Yet, it is necessary to note that hope, once a marker of naivete, has now become a meaningful practice of resistance against despair and apathy – Millennials have embraced (what popular culture has termed) Optimistic Nihilism, post-apocalyptic works have taken to imagining the communities built in the ashes of old societies, and activists and Gen Z revolutionaries continue their embittered resistance. In the face of oppression and death, Audre Lorde’s work suggests self-care as a radical intervention, in the face of alienation and political division, Jennifer C. Nash theorizes love, and, now, in the face of despair, my work locates a need for care, community, and hope. My project, which looks backwards in order to think forwards, cannot claim to furnish answers to the multitude of economic, environmental, social, and political trials of our present moment; however, in thinking about the usefulness of responsibility, community, and care as it emerged in America’s tumultuous past, I can only hope to locate potentially worthwhile concepts for America’s tumultuous present. In particular, as my project suggests, we might theorize responsibility, particularly as it emphasizes an orienting of the self towards the needs of others and the needs of the future, as an expression of hope, deserving of further investigation.
Relaying his observations of democracy in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville notes with some scorn that

in certain countries of Europe...the citizen is unconcerned as to the condition of his village, the police of his street, the repairs of the church or of the parsonage; for he looks upon all these things as unconnected with himself, and as the property of a powerful stranger whom he calls the Government.49

He continues that “when a nation has arrived at this state...though it may contain subjects, the race of citizens is extinct.”50 “Unconnected” and “unconcerned,” Tocqueville’s subject epitomizes non-responsibility. He is isolated, uncaring, and distanced from those people and things around him. This lack of responsibility to one’s community, Tocqueville maintains, marks the necessary difference between a nation of subjects and a nation of citizens. If, in nations of citizens, as Tocqueville writes, “the sovereignty of the people ostensibly prevails,” then, he argues, to be a citizen is to be capable of self-governing, to be connected with and concerned for one’s self, one’s home, one’s family, and one’s community. The “political virtue” of citizenship, he argues, is marked only by those possessing “responsibility of [one’s] own actions.”51 Subjects, by contrast, are submissive to and, more importantly, reliant upon structures beyond themselves.

Tocqueville’s observation that the United States was formed, significantly, of citizens, each a sovereign in their own right, was echoed by others of the century. John Greenleaf Whittier, writing in 1844, notes: “how serious… is the reflection that every American citizen is a ruler – a monarch,”52 while James Bryce’s much later 1888 American Commonwealth remarks upon a growing belief in “the self-reliant spirit of the
country.” Though Tocqueville and Whittier employ the language of monarchy, it is clear that the concept of self-sovereignty is entwined with that of self-responsibility. Still, their language reveals the inherent power embedded in the rights of citizenship. While such rights formed the basis for many discussions of citizenship, many nineteenth-century thinkers began to concern themselves with the duties and responsibilities – rather than merely the rights and status – of citizenship. This shift was primarily the result of population growth and the resulting increase in democratization of the U.S. polity. From 1820 to 1860, the population of the United States grew by 230 percent, “from just under 10 million to slightly over 30 million.” Just as some nineteenth-century Americans began to think of citizenship as more than a collection of rights, this chapter also takes its cue from such discourse and from modern scholarship that discusses citizenship as a series of practices that individuals engage in, rather than as merely a state-granted status. Or, as other scholars identify the difference, citizenship as “interior and cultural” as opposed to existing in relation “to exterior forces.” Citizenship, especially in the context of the nineteenth century, is, of course, both. As many nineteenth-century Americans worried over their responsibilities to others they drew most frequently upon citizenship as a practice, an orientation to others, an identity built upon connection with imagined communities. What does it mean (some nineteenth-century Americans asked) to practice good citizenship? How might citizenship connect oneself to other citizens and how might one then be responsible for those other citizens?

However, the status of citizen did come with real rights and an ability to participate in the nation’s democratic process in significant ways. Thus, there also existed a fear of losing access to these rights, particularly given how easily the status of citizen
was leveraged against Black Americans in the postbellum years. With the status of citizenship dependent upon the external desires of the state, and shown to be potentially mutable, another discursive thread arose wherein many worried over their ability to properly perform the sovereignty and self-responsibility that Tocqueville, Whittier, and Bryce note above.

By conceiving of citizenship and democratic participation as reliant upon one’s ability to be self-responsible, however, many who wrote on the subject unintentionally damaged any concept of mutual dependence (upon aid, charity, welfare, etc.). Thus, although some Americans today might argue that the benefit of citizenship lies in the assurances of public support structures, the nineteenth century laid the foundations for a contradictory understanding of citizenship – in which public discourse often framed citizens as both connected communities and as self-reliant, independent, and self-governing individuals. Meanwhile, the inevitable vulnerabilities of widows, orphans, paupers, the ill, and the unemployed, were discussed as simultaneously in need of alleviation and as aberrations. A number of writers engaged with these contradictions and dilemmas, struggling to decide between or reconcile the competing claims of responsibility to self and responsibility to others. One way that writers distinguished between these two competing claims was through ideas of in- and inter-dependence, as we will see in this chapter. American thinkers and writers worried over their responsibility to others, which might imply an interdependence with others that threatened their own imagined individualism and self-sovereignty.

For clarity, this chapter will be divided into three primary sections. Firstly, I will provide a historical overview that shows that self-responsibility was increasingly held to
be a requirement for citizenship. As a result, American citizens strove to depict themselves as fully independent, yet also perfectly loyal to the nation without indulging in unseemly requests for aid or public support in return. Secondly, I show that in the postwar period Americans began to feel increasing anxiety about vulnerability and public aid. These anxieties, when paired with a popular discourse focused upon one’s ability to be self-reliant, resulted in the emergent idea that those in need must be morally incompetent. Ultimately, the nineteenth-century discourses of responsibility and duty, which operated in the arenas of labor, domesticity, and enslavement, also directed public sentiment with regards to one’s position within a national collective. Furthermore, many nineteenth-century Americans’ conceptions of their role as citizens, and the benefits and relationships inherent in that role, mirror current struggles to determine the limits of public support, the relationship between oneself and one’s fellow citizens, and the relationship between oneself and one’s governing body. If, as Garrath Williams notes, “the Victorians invented and popularized the notion of ‘personal responsibility,’” then modern readers might wonder at what circumstances led to the sudden necessary distinction between personal and public (or general) responsibility, particularly at a time when, as populations grew, public works became more and more necessary. Finally, this chapter turns to contemporaneous literature, showing how authors of the time participated in the discourse of responsible citizenship. For authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson, responsibility bore the tinge of undesirable obligation, while for the poet Walt Whitman, responsibility instead evoked the intimate and intertwined nature of society. Each of these authors, however, struggle between their beliefs in self-sustaining individuals and the necessities of society, they also grapple with their desire for individualism and their
deeply felt responsibilities to a much larger collective. This chapter will provide an extensive reading of Whitman’s work since, as the “poet of democracy,” he dramatizes the struggle that many nineteenth-century Americans faced as they attempted to reconcile the possible existence of a fully independent self, with the possibility that they might be both dependent upon others and simultaneously deeply responsible to those others. Frequently, Whitman reimagines the world as a place of intersubjective connection, and suggests an American polity that is not separate, but rather a mass that moves together, each part uplifting and reliant upon each other part, a single structure; or, to draw upon Whitman’s own imagery, an organism that cannot survive separately. Yet, at the same time, Whitman’s poetry, like Emerson’s own work, betrays a concern that such a united whole might in fact come at the cost of the individual and unique self.

**Historical Overview of Democratic Responsibility**

The antebellum period saw a particular increase in the rhetoric of individual responsibility with the rise of both Jacksonian politics and the continued popularity of Common Sense philosophy. Jacksonians “denounced tariffs and corporate charters as class legislation, and obstinately fought internal improvements supported by the federal government,” while Common Sense philosophical texts similarly depicted individuals as moral agents responsible only for those things within their reduced sphere of influence. These calls for “individual liberty,” even at the expense of state constructed infrastructure, echoed what de Tocqueville himself observed at that time – a desire for individualism so strong that any government support felt like dependence. As other scholars have noted, “young men in nineteenth-century America…began to feel acute responsibility for the fates they incurred” as a result of both the changing work
landscape and the changing philosophy surrounding personal responsibility and self-interest. In this self-interested public market, the liberal individual subject can, as Thomas Augst writes, explain “the inequities and pathologies produced by capitalism societies as wins or losses earned by individuals.” As a result, the natural and unnatural vulnerability experienced under capitalism that produces poverty, sickness, and disability, can easily be framed as poor choices on the part of an individual agent. This framing resulted in the idea that necessary public works were instead unnecessary expenses aiding undeserving individuals.

Most notably, the political scholarship of C.B. Macpherson and Daniel Bromley, who each posit the prevailing notion of possessive individualism within the United States, offer the most salient insights for the paradox of American citizenship both now and then: that “individualism’s central difficulty lay in its possessive quality,” an idea “of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities owing nothing to society for them.” This possessive individualism, as Macpherson and Bromley name it, results in three primary challenges that this dissertation will grapple with. Firstly, there is the problem of individualism itself, in which actors consider themselves full independent agents, dependent upon no one. Secondly, there is the concept of proprietorship that Macpherson notes. When individuals consider themselves as owners of themselves it both creates a further distance from one’s self and others (since one’s self is a single contained and distinct whole) while also shifting the nature of interactions with others into “relations of exchange between proprietors.” In this way, each interaction between people instead becomes yet another market interaction. Finally, possessive individualism links both an individualist nature of the self with the possessive
greed and ownership of capitalist market relations. As a result, Macpherson reminds us, that “the most fundamental choice is what fraction of disposable income will be devoted to culturally reinforced hedonism and what fraction will…be available for other-regarding commitments.” Under possessive individualism, one’s individual freedom to acquire and own trumps any responsibility or “commitments,” as he calls them, towards others. While these three problems will appear throughout this chapter and the rest of this project, it is important to remember that no matter the terminology – possessive individualism, private/public commitments, market-based interactions, charity, etc. – the core issue in each of these remains the question of responsibility: to whom am I responsible and what might those responsibilities entail.

Much like the pitfalls of possessive individualism, concepts of self-responsibility, or to use Iris Young’s more modern term, personal responsibility, abounded in the century as individuals strove to mark themselves as self-reliant and independent. As Young asks: “What work does the ‘personal’ in the phrase ‘personal responsibility’ do? It emphasizes that the responsibility you have is for yourself and your family.” On the one hand, it insists that individuals “internalize the consequences” of their actions while simultaneously, on the other hand, it assures that individuals are safeguarded against feeling responsible for crises which occur beyond the bounds of themselves and their families. It is this latter aspect of personal responsibility which becomes most relevant in retroactively reading the nineteenth century as Americans questioned their own responsibility for looming issues like slavery, labor exploitation, poverty, and public works. While each individual “must self-sufficiently bear the costs of [their] choices and has no moral right to expect help from others” they are also safely held within a sphere
of personal responsibility that limits the amount of help they are expected to provide to others. Importantly, Young’s work makes clear that an investment in personal responsibility reveals a particular view of human nature and what it means to be a self: a view that encourages individuals to exist purely for themselves, neither receiving nor providing aid. Those invested in this view of personal responsibility are invested in an ethics of the self that is not easily dismantled:

The rhetoric of personal responsibility encourages an isolated, atomistic way of thinking about individuals. What it means to be responsible is for a person to maintain control over his or her actions and their consequences, and to make sure that they and only they bear their costs. A capable, responsible person does not depend on others. 71

Such a view of the self, as wholly independent, simultaneously denies any acknowledgment of vulnerability, interconnectedness, dependence, or responsibility for others. This view of the self – as individual, as atomistic, as heroic, as separate and independent from others – informs the depictions of personal responsibility and ideas of American citizenship (and American manhood) that flourish throughout the nineteenth century. Occasionally throughout the period, and in the minds of the century’s more expansive thinkers, this view of the self (as well as the category of citizen) was challenged by alternative conceptions of a self that is vulnerable, connected, dependent, and responsible for others far beyond one’s own sphere of influence.

With growing belief in “the self-reliant energy”72 and spirit of the country it is no wonder that public welfare quickly became a source of anxiety as Americans were reluctant to accept a dependent (or even mutual) relationship to others or their own potential vulnerability. Despite insistence upon the democratic nature of American society, many Americans nonetheless continued to think of themselves as individuals
responsible primarily for themselves and their property. As some nineteenth-century Americans began to conceive of themselves more and more as a democratic polity, bound to others through citizenship status and shared rights under the state, issues of personal vulnerability and public responsibility became more pressing than ever before.

This struggle to define the limits between responsibility to self and responsibility to others can be found in other spheres of discourse. In the emergent discourse of child education, for example, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody writes of education that “the child himself” (we may note the continued use of gendered language attached to individuality) must have “his attention turned inward as early as the era of responsibility begins,” this era, she writes, is marked as the moment “when every human being begins to act on himself…. Then his understanding is sufficiently developed, to see that he is an individual.”73 Though Peabody writes of “the era of responsibility,” she ultimately means a self-responsibility that allows the individual to truly inhabit his individuality by turning his attention fully inward (rather than towards others). Ultimately, as Derrick Spires’s scholarship on the period notes, in a nation that valued self-responsibility, “virtuous citizenship did not require the sacrifice of individual interest for the common good so much as the prudent regulation of an enlightened self-interest - do no harm rather than do good.”74 One’s highest purpose was recognizing oneself as an individual and then keeping to oneself and one’s own needs, an ethics which, as Spires argues, “brought into sharp relief the structural instabilities of a civic republicanism predicated on ‘more a willingness to get along with others for the sake of peace and prosperity’ than on the sense of shared responsibility for the common good or fellow citizenship.”75
Alongside citizens’ doubts regarding their responsibility to their peers, a discourse of duty to the state began to dominate popular thought as the war years began. Reverend Samuel Spear, writing in 1863, boldly states that “government is a divine institution” and, furthermore, that “obedience to the powers that be is a moral duty. Disloyalty is both a crime against the State and a sin against the God of Heaven.” He continues that all Americans “owe the duty of loyalty” and “allegiance” which he, interestingly, notes as that “of a citizen to his country, or of a subject to his sovereign.” Unlike the rhetoric of the early century, Spears makes no distinction between citizen and subject and instead posits that the requirements are the same for each – unyielding duty and loyalty to the authority of the state. Notably, Spears does not discuss what subjects or citizens gain in exchange for this loyalty, only that it must exist. The concept of unquestioning duty found increasing traction during the war years and was quickly entangled in the national identity of Americans as they began to consider “how individuals should behave as parts of a nation,” and as units of a whole. Urban guides and national pamphlets no longer warned “individual readers of the traps” of unscrupulous characters, but now emphasized the danger that such characters posed “to the national cause – the Union – rather than the individual reader’s well-being.” Surprisingly, however, this emergent nationalism did not ease citizens’ discomfort with ideas of responsibility to others. Instead, this shift served two important purposes. Firstly, readers began to think of themselves as part of a national polity, and of citizenship not merely as a guarantee of liberty, but as a set of obligations to the state. Secondly, readers’ concerns about their own well-being and the well-being of their families were now transferred onto the state – thus, threats to the nation easily became threats to the self and proper citizens were those who took
personally the welfare of the nation (distinct, importantly, from the welfare of other citizens). Importantly, the discourse of duty that arose during the war years (and for Black Americans post-emancipation) only further contributed to the problems of self-interest. While in previous years Americans’ had focused on self-reliance and a limited responsibility to one’s family, immediate community, and property, the nationalistic rhetoric of the war years now demanded duty, loyalty, and a conflation of the state’s enemies into one’s own. Furthermore, the threatened removal of citizenship and rights for Black Americans who could not perform citizenship correctly, produced heightened anxiety around the apparently mutable status of citizenship. As a result, postbellum Americans began to think of themselves as citizen subjects, still responsible for their own needs but simultaneously loyal to the state and viewing all demands upon the state as personal threats.

**Public Responsibility, Public Dependence**

In an 1877 address to the New York State Board of Charities on “The Causes of Pauperism,” Charles S. Hoyt disdainfully writes remarks that “by far the greater number of paupers have reached that condition by idleness, improvidence, drunkenness, or some form of vicious indulgence.” These “vices and weaknesses,” he continues, make apparent that “no out-door relief, whether public or private, should be given without careful investigation into the character and circumstances of the recipients.” Nine years earlier, Charles Loring Brace’s *Address on Industrial Schools* would similarly report that idleness “is also a great fault of the poor themselves. They are lazy, and regardless of promptness; many sleep late in the mornings.” While the hereditary and inherent deficiencies of the poor would eventually come to form a large part of the nineteenth-
century American discourse regarding public responsibility, these texts most meaningfully demonstrate the severe underlying suspicion Americans held towards other members of their “joint-stock society.” How, they demanded, might we know “the delicate line between the necessary alleviation of poverty, and the encouragement of…dependency.” For whom must we ultimately be responsible for? Why can these members not bear responsibility for themselves? Are they, as Emerson challenges, my poor? Furthermore, if it was believed that one’s dependence grew out of “vices and weaknesses” rather than acceptable need then one may very well be shown to be irresponsible enough to require loss of freedom – through imprisonment, institutionalization, or stewardship.

This anxiety appears in contemporaneous literature as well as authors dramatized and participated in popular discourse. Harriet Wilson prefaces her autobiographical work, *Our Nig*, with a curious appeal for aid: “deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life.” Wilson, who has been “forced” through dire circumstances to generate income for herself and her child, hopes to make clear to readers that she is both appropriately ashamed at her fallen state and “feeble life,” and also distinguished from those who would seek charity without contributing anything of their own. Throughout the text itself Wilson writes of being “rescued from charity” and, finally, having “nothing to save her from the ‘County House’” where those in need are “thrown upon the public for sustenance.” Wilson’s obvious disdain for charity despite her frequent need of it speaks to the fear of being read by others as dependent and irresponsible. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Silent Partner* novel of mill workers contains
similar moments: “No; he didn’t know of anything she could do for him. He’d never taken charity from nobody’s hands yet…He supposed it was fretful of him, but he’d rather lay in his grave.”\textsuperscript{89} The texts of the late nineteenth-century (both historical and literary) reveal an anxiety that lies beneath Americans’ refusal to endorse public programs and government support.\textsuperscript{90} Whereas in previous decades, admitting vulnerability might be shameful, it was, after the war and emancipation, also tinged with the underlying threat that one may not deserve the rights and freedoms of citizenship, a status that, as Black Americans knew well, might be restricted or retracted at any moment.

However, American dependence on others was not new. In prior years, individuals depended on kinship ties and on their larger communities for support. As Charles Sellers notes, even the supposedly self-sufficient sustenance farmer families of early agrarian America “were not wholly self-sufficient” as they relied on “a neighborhood division of labor.”\textsuperscript{91} These community forms of support were far less than ideal – they were restricted to only members of the community, they lacked resources and training, and they depended entirely on the ability of community peers to support needy individuals. Public institutions were dearly needed, but were severely underfunded and plagued by a distrust of dependence on others outside of one’s immediate social bubble. Thus, although the postbellum period saw a sudden rise in need for public programs of support, the anxiety around dependence did not lessen. As William Brock writes, the Civil war left in its wake a surplus of “widows, orphans, and maimed veterans,” and the years after the war revealed “a rising tide of pauperism.”\textsuperscript{92} As Brock notes, “public responsibility for the afflicted without means of support… [existed] as the last resort after
personal savings, family support, and private charity had been exhausted.” Thus, the shift that occurred during the nineteenth century, from private sources of support to government and state institutions, appears as a deeply contentious space where public structures are required yet also frequently despised by both contributing citizens and recipients alike.

The aversion that some Americans felt towards charity reveals their fear of dependence. As Michael Grossberg notes of nineteenth-century widows, “more often than not they were viewed as objects of pity and feared as potential drains on community resources. Consequently…widows, to an even greater extent than other women, were seen as persons in need of protection rather than as individuals with valid claims for legal rights such as custody.” To be dependent, then, was to steal resources from more able members and, furthermore, to be cast as incapable of holding legal rights. Once again Phan’s scholarship identifies the connection between “free personhood” and the rights-holding status of citizenship. As one’s status as free (as rights-holding, as independent) became increasingly entangled with the identity of citizen, then failure of any requirement of citizenship threatened full non-recognition by the state. Such was the subconscious, if not conscious, fear of many who strove to mark themselves as independent and self-responsible, lest they be seen as a parasite and, worse, stripped of existing rights. The desire to distinguish real need from parasitic or lazy individuals proliferated in nineteenth-century discussions of public aid. Hoyt’s address, like others of the time, demands stricter delineations between “voluntary pauperism and unavoidable dependence” and notes that this necessary distinction arises “both from consideration of the welfare of society and in strict justice to those who are compelled to bear its burdens.”
i.e. taxpayers and those of means. Thus, while it may be “believed to be the duty of society” to aid the indigent poor, it is the responsibility of benevolent organizations to more precisely apply their resources to “the really unfortunate and worthy sick poor” rather than “the vicious and unworthy.” Such populations must be distinguished from vicious and weak-willed dependents lest such bad habits proliferate in the population at large. As Charles Brace writes, there exists a “delicate line between the necessary alleviation of poverty, and the encouragement of pauperism and dependency.”

Susan M. Ryan, in her scholarship on benevolence, echoes this concern, noting that nineteenth-century Americans “often figured the strategic withholding of charity as an integral step in inculcating self-reliance among the needy.”

In part, the differentiation between true need and greedy dependence served to highlight who was self-responsible enough to earn the patronage of others. As Ryan’s scholarship notes, “writers of charity literature deplored beggars’ dependence, their failure to prosper” and, furthermore, indirectly highlighted “who was thought capable of achieving independence and, by extension, who was eligible for membership in a nation that increasingly conceived of itself – or, at least, of its white male population – as a collection of independent, self-asserting, and self-supporting individuals.”

One defining feature of self-responsible individuals and citizens was autonomy – “the idea that persons are self-sufficient, independent, rational contractors” – as a result, dependence and vulnerability marked a significant failure to properly exist as subject or citizen. It is to mark oneself as unfit: for citizenship, for independence, or for full personhood. Thus, even the most basic forms of dependence, “circumstances in which one must rely on the care of other individuals to access, provide or secure (one or more
of one’s needs,” generated deep anxiety for many nineteenth-century Americans. This anxiety appears both as a rejection of being reliant (and thus helpless) and of being relied upon in turn (being responsible for others beyond oneself).

Two primary responses to these concerns developed: logical argumentation and sentimental appeals. Public texts that advocated for welfare projects, like education or the end of pauperism through charity programs, readily explored why such projects were beneficial and why audiences should feel responsible for their enactment. While such logical threads were not always well-reasoned nor particularly careful in how they arrived at particular conclusions, there nonetheless exist consistent attempts to plainly connect audiences with feelings of responsibility for particular courses of action. As Horace Mann notes, if the object of human society is to “obtain happiness” and “avoid misery” through common effort, then, he convincingly argues, issues like ignorance and poverty are “a public as well as a private evil” that “society is responsible” for addressing through the implementation of social programs that will educate, “elevat[e] the masses of the people,” and, thus, he reasoned, garner more happiness than misery. Mann’s other texts follow a similar strain, with titles such as “End Poverty Through Education” and “The Necessity of Education in a Republican Government,” demonstrating a willingness to anticipate readers’ questions (why this? why am I responsible? and so on) and preemptively engage with potential detractors. Other authors, like those of Buckeye’s 1885 *Cookery and Practical Housekeeping* guide, were less tactful in their arguments, writing that careful training must be reserved for “those who assume the responsibility of parents” because while well-raised children become “a generation of saints, scholars, scientists, and statesmen, [and] of glorified humanity,” the current lack of parental
training has resulted instead in “the blind, the deaf and dumb, the idiot, the lunatic, the epileptic, the criminal, the drunkard, the glutton - thousands of human beings, in our young republic, that never should have been born; a tax on society, a disgrace to their parents, and a curse to themselves.” As the Buckeye Housekeeping guide makes clear, the weight of societal intervention, household guides, and public welfare programs held an enormous responsibility to produce a republic worthy of future generations and, perhaps more importantly, generations worthy of the future republic.

These appeals were at least partially successful. As Silas Weir Mitchell notes later in the century: “when it was discovered that citizens must be prepared for their political duties the schools were opened.” However, within arguments of why public aid must be given, there exist underlying beliefs regarding who is deserving of that aid and whose lives matter within the Republic of the United States. Thus, while Mann and others may successfully argue that publicly funded education is necessary for the production of a responsible citizenry, the implication remains that those deemed irresponsible may be disregarded. Similarly, in logically arguing for the necessary aid of those in need, inevitably there arises a means of locating “the deserving poor,” rendering charity not as “neighbourly love” (as the term was once was used to mean), but as “reward for approved social conduct.” Just as such arguments successfully convinced the American public of the need for certain programs, they simultaneously reified which people and causes were deserving of public support and which could be safely ignored.

**Whitman’s Entangled Mass**

Perhaps the most well-known nineteenth-century advocate of irresponsibility to others was Emerson. Notably, in his 1841 essay on “Self-Reliance,” Emerson complains
that “society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” and laments that “society is a joint-stock company, in which members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.”\textsuperscript{107} Though Emerson’s critiques were aimed primarily at what he saw as a push for conformity of thought, his depiction of society as a company in which members must “surrender” their liberty appears elsewhere as well. Frederick Douglass’s work dramatizes this struggle well:

\begin{quote}
The simple organization of a people into a National body, composite or otherwise, is of itself an impressive fact. As an original proceeding, it marks the point of departure of a people, from the darkness and chaos of unbridled barbarism, to the wholesome restraints of public law and society. It implies a willing surrender and subjection of individual aims and ends, often narrow and selfish, to the broader and better ones that arise out of society as a whole. It is both a sign and a result of civilization.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

While Douglass acknowledges that any organization of a people into a society must be a move towards progress (though modern scholars might disagree with such a claim), he also acknowledges that societies require “restraints” as well as “surrender and subjection.”\textsuperscript{109} Like Emerson’s criticism of the “joint-stock” nature of society, which demands participants support one another at the cost of their own “liberty and culture,” Douglass acknowledges that the individual cannot be prioritized in a “National body.”\textsuperscript{110} Though where Emerson criticizes, Douglass endorses – the restraints he names are “wholesome” and the surrender is “a willing” one. While Emerson claimed that the nineteenth-century was “the age of the first person singular,”\textsuperscript{111} the individual, the separate and independent “I,” Douglass paints the individual and their needs as “narrow and selfish.”\textsuperscript{112}
In both Emerson’s work – which scholars have sometimes simplified as individualist and sometimes read as more complex\(^\text{113}\) – and in Douglass’s, readers see the struggle of responsibility dramatized. To live in a society has great benefits, but also comes at the cost of the singular individual. To live in a nation-state with clear rights is similarly desirable, but it comes with laws and restraints that can feel stifling. As nineteenth-century Americans grappled with questions of slavery, industrialized labor conditions, a growing under-educated populace, a surge of indigent poor, and as the nation moved increasingly towards a more diverse and democratic polity, the question of responsibility – private and individual or public and community-based – emerged as one of the most disputed discourses and largest sources of anxiety. As the demand for public support grew, so too did the anxiety of the American public – suspicion, distrust, as well as reinforced calls for responsibility and an increased disavowal of that responsibility. As Douglass writes in Self-Made Men,

I believe in individuality, but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean. The highest order of genius is as dependent as is the lowest… If you can do in one direction that which I cannot do, I may in another direction, be able to do that which you cannot do. Thus the balance of power is kept comparatively even, and a self-acting brotherhood and inter-dependence is maintained.\(^\text{114}\)

Like Emerson, Douglass, though writing later here, is pulled between his desire to uplift the individual, the self-made, the self-responsible and capable, and the frightening admission that there is no such thing at all, that we are all interdependent upon others to do what we reasonably cannot.

Walt Whitman, writing only two years prior to Douglass, similarly troubles the space between self-responsible individuals and dependents.
We shall, it’s true, quickly and continually find the origin-idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth…. But the mass… character, for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weigh’d, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them.\textsuperscript{115}

Whitman’s poetry often speaks to “the singleness of man,” after all, his most famous work remains a “Song of Myself,” not a song of others. However, as Whitman notes here, though there may appear to be a contradiction between the individual and “the mass,” the task (of his work, of the nation) must be “to reconcile them.” As many scholars have noted, the struggle to reconcile the contradictory ideas of individualism and collectivism (or “aggregates and individuals”) appears throughout Whitman’s work at various points, though it is particularly present in “Song of Myself”.\textsuperscript{116} Building on this work, I aim to show here how this struggle looks different when we see it as returning on the nature and limits of responsibility. The poem itself begins with the central contradiction in mind as the narrator declares “I celebrate myself” while at the same moment insisting that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”\textsuperscript{117} Similarly, the narrator insists upon himself as “a kosmos…no stander above men and women or apart from them” - the “or apart from them” serving as a particularly illustrative moment of collective entanglement – only to later write that many things (people, discoveries, etc.) “come to me days and nights…but they are not \textit{the Me myself}” (note the emphasis and capitalization that sets the true “\textit{Me}” apart from the things that “come to me”).\textsuperscript{118}

Whitman’s “Song of Myself” offers a complicated celebration of the me that is also the you, but which is still me. Whitman writes of an individual self that is, at the same time, equally entangled and enmeshed with those (people and things) around them.
There is “the real me” (from As I Ebb’d), “the actual me” (from Passage to India), and “the Me myself” that we see here. Whitman contradictorily and confusingly presents an individual - a “Me myself” and an “I” to celebrate that individual self – who simultaneously exists as inseparable (“no stander above…or apart”) from others, going so far as to share everything down to the atom. Perhaps most famously, scholar George Kateb takes up this very struggle between the individual and the collective in Whitman’s works.\(^{119}\) Perhaps even more interestingly, Kateb is one of the first to consider Whitman as a political theorist in his own right and, as Samuel Beer writes, to take “Whitman seriously as a social scientist.”\(^{120}\) However, as we will see, my work differs significantly from Kateb’s findings. As Kateb posits, Whitman’s ultimate goal lies in advancing a composite individual, not a national collective. As Kateb writes, “A ‘compacted nation’ is antithetical to a composite individual. Nationhood is too close to a conception of group identity: a shared pride in tribal attributes rather than in adherence to a distinctive and principled human self-conceptualization.”\(^{121}\) Whitman, her argues, has no interest in group identity and the tribalism that comes from collectivity.

Whitman’s work in “Drum Taps” both celebrates the collective defense of the union and mourns, what Kateb names, the “indissociable bond between nationhood and war,”\(^{122}\) noting the speed with which individuals were incensed to fight and die at the behest of group politics. As Kateb argues, Whitman, through the war, well understands the costs of collective identity and instead posits an individual rights-holding subject capable of sympathy. For Kateb, Whitman’s poetry is recognition based: “we are alike in a certain way: Living in a rights-based democracy enables and encourages a certain recognition of likeness.”\(^{123}\) Yet, this recognition only allows for two individuals to
recognize one another as individuals. It fails to account for the myriad of ways in which we are, all of us, intrinsically and inseparably entangled with and reliant upon one another, a distinction that will be made more explicit in the sixth chapter of this project.

There exist a multitude of Whitman’s works in which the struggle between individualism and collective action comes to the fore. While in “An Interviewer’s Item” he writes that the United States “will not have great individuals or great leaders, but a great average bulk,” he writes elsewhere in the preface to *Leaves of Grass* that “the mission of poets” rests upon “the idea of perfect and free individuals.” Similarly, he struggles to place both the individual and the aggregate together – alternating between them and presenting them as mutually necessary:

This idea of perfect individualism it is indeed that deepest tinges and gives character to the idea of the aggregate. For it is mainly or altogether to serve independent separatism that we favor a strong generalization, consolidation. As it is to give the best vitality and freedom to the rights of the States, (every bit as important as the right of nationality, the union,) that we insist on the identity of the Union at all hazards.124

Here, Whitman’s interest lies not merely in distinguishing individuals from communities, but more importantly in determining the very nature of the United States. Like the nations’ very name, there exists a struggle (evident to Whitman through the war’s disruption of the Union) between the states and the union of those states, between individual subjects with rights of their own and “the aggregate” or collective that must bear in mind the needs and rights of others, between one’s responsibility to oneself and one’s responsibility to countless others. Here, as elsewhere, Whitman refuses to prioritize one over the other; instead, his task remains “to reconcile them” despite their contradictions.
However, when we look to Whitman’s poetry, rather than his thoughts on democracy, we notice the prioritization of one vision over the other. Scholar Betsy Erkkila argues that for Whitman, “a truly democratic America would require not simply a revolution in substantive practice but in literary form as well.”\textsuperscript{125} Thus, the newness of his poetic form and the catalogue style in which he constructs his poems – all-inclusive, equalizing – suggests a democratic nature that he wished to see in the Union at large.

Importantly, in his poem “Starting from Paumanok,” Walt Whitman declares that he “will not make poems with reference to parts.”\textsuperscript{126} To readers of Whitman, this claim may, at first, seem inauthentic. After all, Whitman’s catalog poetry is often seemingly comprised of just that, lists of all the things, people, and organic and inorganic parts of the world, everything from “weather-beaten vessels”\textsuperscript{127} and “cheese-cloth”\textsuperscript{128} to “strata of mountains, soils, rocks, [and] giant trees.”\textsuperscript{129} Yet, as Whitman clarifies, his project, while perhaps uninterested in separate and individual “parts,” instead takes up the task of representing “ensemble.” This term comes to represent for Whitman both the basis for his poetic project (as he himself identifies it) and, more importantly, a radical means of conceptualizing the United States and its democratic project. Like his task to “reconcile” the mass and the individual, Whitman’s poetry exists as a catalogue that one may easily read as simply individual parts, but such a reading would be, by Whitman’s own admission, a misreading since it is the mass that “is to be ever carefully weigh’d, borne in mind” and the “ensemble” which his poems are in reference to. If, as modern feminist scholars have noted, “the rhetoric of personal responsibility encourages an isolated, atomistic way of thinking about individuals” and that “the liberal subject model… is centered on the autonomy ‘myth’… that persons are self-sufficient, independent, rational
contractors,”

then autonomy’s inverse, vulnerability, compels the recognition that we are endlessly “bound up with the lives and stories of others” whom we have a responsibility to, then Whitman literalizes the idea that we are “bound up” with others – sharing all, down to the atom.

This radical reimagining of the United States as bound together appears in his “Poem of Many in One,” as he writes of the nation as a “compact organism” held together by “living principles, as the hold of the limbs of the body, or the fibres of plants.” While other authors conceived of the nation as an enlarged family or an “aggregate of…homes,” Whitman again goes beyond deploying the rhetoric of family, home, and community, which all draw upon one’s personal sphere of responsibility, and instead insists that readers consider the nation not as a large community of individual citizens, nor even as a large family of individual members, but as a single collective organism, an ensemble. Whitman demands a national paradigm shift in which Americans are forced to realize the ways in which they are inextricably bound up in one another, not as fellow citizens, or family or community members, but as cells in a single organism or limbs on a single body, which cannot exist separately and which must function collectively – “The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable.”

Despite Whitman’s supposed celebration of the self, it is a self that is always intrinsically entangled with, accounting for, and working alongside others. As John Michael notes of Whitman, “no poet has ever imagined himself more closely tied to the modern crowd…. not only his potential audience but also the body of democracy.”

As Michael’s work argues, Whitman’s poetry, full of ever-changing masses – of people and things and encounters – sings the song of democracy and citizenship within democracy, as
entangled, as interactive, as dependent upon one’s relationships to others. “The body of democracy,” then, is in fact many bodies always in relationship.

Whitman’s constant catalogues of his encounters and shape shifting during and after those encounters (“my voice is the wife’s voice…. I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there…. I am the hounded slave…””) offer a “commentary upon the nature of the self, specifically the receptivity of individuals to one another.” According to Luke Plotica, drawing upon the work of Patchen Markell and others, Whitman suggests that the self “may be serially and cumulatively changed and enlarged by actual or even imagined encounters with others.” In this way, Whitman’s work not only generates an understanding of citizenship as being part of a diverse polity of others, but also suggests that the individual self cannot exist without those others – that we are formed by and through our interactions with others and rely upon them for our very being. Unlike the individual and independent self that prior conceptions of citizenship suggest, Whitman fills his poetry with a myriad of encounters between diverse equals, encounters which “weave a thick civic fabric” that is wholly democratic and wholly reliant upon others.

There remains, however, a significant problem with the empathy that Whitman’s work proposes. When he writes, for example, “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” or when he claims to be “the hounded slave,” Whitman suggests an ability to empathize and to embody the experiences of those whose experiences he simply cannot (and will never be able to) access. In his desire to equalize individuals he has missed what is equitable or even realistic. Whitman’s radical reimagining of a nation in which empathy, shared experience, community, and interdependence are prioritized nonetheless results in a misunderstanding of how to
account for those with whom one cannot identify with. In fact, Whitman’s work suggests that there is no one with whom one cannot identify with.

Still, Whitman’s reimagining of the United States as an organism, dependent upon its inseparable parts, suggests a boundless responsibility to those far beyond one’s immediate community, location, and even historical moment (as we see in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). Indeed, his poems’ most crucial moments of care derive from a sense of responsibility even to those unknown to him: “I never knew you, yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.” At times, Whitman celebrates this responsibility for others as a necessary paradigm shift for the nation at large; however, he often simultaneously idolizes the individual and the separate, registering an anxiety about the costs of such responsibility. Does community with others, care for others, responsibility to others come at the cost of the self, Whitman seems to wonder. This fear echoes Emerson’s earlier concern about the limits of one’s responsibility to others. If we are, as Whitman’s poetry imagines, all merely parts of a single whole, are we then responsible for every ill that occurs across the entire expanse of the nation, of the citizenry, of the world of which we are also a part? However, while Emerson writes of responsibility as an externally-forced obligation that binds and restricts the individual, Whitman imagines responsibility as internally driven, indistinguishable from feelings of care and desire. His responsibility to the wounded soldier is not externally-produced nor societally enforced; instead, it blooms entirely from Whitman’s own tender feelings for the soldier. Responsibility, Emerson might say, is society’s way of forcing individuals to take on care for others with little or no reward.
Responsibility, Whitman might contest, is the inborn love that binds us to even those whom we cannot know.

Interestingly, Whitman’s most definitive word on responsibility at first appears to be one of individuality. Throughout his poems, Whitman addresses readers directly, and his poems promise readers no easy answers: these poems, as he writes in “Who Learns My Lesson Complete,” are “no lesson, [but they] let down the bars to a good lesson.” The responsibility that the poem suggests for readers is ultimately that they must discover for themselves what is worthwhile and look to their own guidance as individuals. Like Emerson’s suggestion that individuals must resist conformity and the easy answers offered by society at large, Whitman similarly hopes to direct readers’ interest inwards rather than outwards, suggesting that a readers’ responsibility is to determine meaning for themselves. However, these moments are few when compared with the collectivist image that Whitman provides in other poems. In “Calamus” Whitman addresses his work “To one a century hence or any number of centuries hence, To you yet unborn these, seeking you” while in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” he writes to “others” even “fifty years hence,” “you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence.” Here, Whitman writes “for the future” and for future readers, “whoever you are.” His poems, then, may be said to operate on two fronts. Firstly, his works call for readers to take it upon themselves to do the work of interpretation and become more fully developed individuals – “poems give you more than poems,” but “you must do the work, and make what is within the following song”\textsuperscript{141} and then “to form for yourself poems.”\textsuperscript{142} Secondly, however, in his continued address to readers directly, and to readers generations hence, we see yet again Whitman’s interest in the collective shine through.
Like “Brooklyn Ferry” and “Calamus,” where Whitman cannot help but depict a world in which we are in community with, and responsible to, distant imagined others and even those yet unborn, generations in the future. Similarly, though Whitman’s work insists that you, as a reader, must develop your own reason and beliefs, he cannot help but participate in the process with you, speak directly to you, and guide you. There is, yet again, no individual wholly separate from others. There is no self-made man. Instead, there are poems of which we are all apart – as poets, parts, and readers – and there are collectives in which we are enmeshed with those around us, dependent upon them for our formation, responsible to them even if they are unknown to us, even if they will not exist until long after we are dead. Whitman’s poem might preach individual responsibility and self-formation, but it practices collective responsibility and an orientation towards others rather than self-interest. Though Whitman struggles throughout his work between glorifying the individual and upholding the collective, his work ultimately posits the United States as a single organism, mutually responsible for each part of itself, rather than as a collection of distinct individuals. Similarly, in conceiving of the United States as a single organism, Whitman offers a worthwhile re-conception of the responsibilities of citizenship. We are, his work suggests, just as naturally responsible for others as we are for ourselves since, he posits, we are not separate at all, but are merely different parts of the same animal. In the ongoing and anxious decision between one’s rights and one’s responsibilities to others as an American and as a citizen, Whitman ultimately prioritizes collective responsibility over self-interest, providing an alternative to a liberal citizen model that insists upon disembodied individuals. Instead, his work demonstrates an equally dispersed responsibility and an almost new-materialist suggestion that we are, all
of us, entwined in intrinsic and inseparable ways that must influence our ethics towards one another – each belonging to me as much belonging to you.

Whitman’s work does not offer an easy answer to the anxiety of holding responsibility for others, but his work nonetheless echoes modern thoughts on responsible citizenship. As Catriona Mackenzie writes, “In contrast to the liberal subject model, which gives priority to the value of autonomy,” a “vulnerable subject model” instead values not individual rights, but the equal claims of the collective, “enabling a reconceptualization of state responsibility and of what we owe to one another as citizens.”

Like Whitman’s poetry, which insists upon a view of equality among all people (“every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”) this understanding of citizenship values equality in the service of rethinking our responsibility to others (instead of prioritizing our own individual desires). Instead of valuing an individual’s ability to overcome hardship, as self-responsibility does, a recognition of shared vulnerability serves to equalize citizens and clarify what responsibilities they have to one another and that they should rightfully expect from the state. As Mackenzie continues, a discourse of “individual autonomy, personal responsibility, and the minimal state often functions to mask social injustice, structural inequality, and corrosive disadvantage” in that it “shifts the onus of responsibility for redressing these problems away from the state and onto individuals.”

Prizing personal responsibility absolves the state of its responsibilities to citizens and simultaneously assures citizens that they similarly have no responsibility to one another.
CHAPTER II
“A CLAIM, A DUTY, A PUZZLE:” LABOR AND THE LIMITS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN PHELPS AND MELVILLE

In the middle of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s 1871 novel, *The Silent Partner*, the protagonist, Perley Kelso, newly partial mill-town owner, grapples with the uncertainties of her new position:

> there is something in this matter which neither of you touch. There is *something* about the relations of rich and poor, of master and man, with which the state of the market has nothing whatever to do. There is *something*, - a claim, a duty, a puzzle, it is all too new to me to know what to call it, - but I am convinced that there is *something* at which a man cannot lie and twirl his mustache forever.¹⁴⁵

Perley never fully names the “something” which she struggles to define here. Nonetheless, Perley’s concern, that there is, in fact, something that connects individuals beyond the social and legal relationships of “master and man,” “rich and poor,” employer and employee, reveals an important issue which increasing numbers of nineteenth-century working Americans struggled with. As we shall see, Perley’s perplexed effort to name the *something* that might explain the new feelings that she has towards the overworked and underpaid laborers of the mill-town dramatizes rising anxieties that the lives and responsibilities of individuals may be bound up with one another in complicated and unsettling ways. Just as other discursive arenas began to struggle with the nature of responsibility and its relation to duty, so too did responsibility emerge as a potential stumbling block for authors and thinkers engaged with the problems of globalized, industrialized labor. For Phelps, the intersections of class and gender drive the drama of her novel as her characters strive to consider the something that connects them and the something that they might owe to one another. For other authors, like Herman Melville, the issue was often even more complicated.
“What shall I do?” the forlorn narrator of Herman Melville’s 1853 “Bartleby, the Scrivener” desperately asks. “What shall I do? what ought I to do? What does conscience say I should do with this man, or, rather, ghost?”146 For the narrator of the story, who is also Bartleby’s employer, the anxiety that Bartleby produces in him is neither the result of Bartleby’s passive defiance nor his ghostly presence; instead, it derives from the impossible navigation of his own role and responsibilities towards Bartleby – what should he do? what ought he to do? what obligations and responsibilities does he have towards Bartleby? as an employer? as a landlord? as part of a “common humanity?”147

That the question of “common humanity” arises both for Phelps and Melville should come as little surprise. Both texts, after all, concern themselves primarily with understanding the duties and responsibilities that exist between “master and man” or employer and employee, particularly in spaces where traditional social and legal contracts of labor do not offer insight beyond what should occur “on business grounds alone” (Phelps 136). This chapter suggests that both authors are in (admittedly distant) conversation with one another. Both feature narrators concerned with the unnamable something of responsibility, with the common humanity of laborers and their employers, with the gendered dynamics of labor, and with the unique linkage between responsibility and confidence. While both begin with a nearly identical question, however, each reveals something quite different about the nature of the problem that confronted so many middle-class Americans around the middle of the century. Whereas Phelps’s novel, with its focus on female characters, casts light most explicitly upon the questions that responsibility provoked for women across class lines, Melville’s texts suggest the existence of responsibility even for those distanced from the factory system, and insist
that even readers themselves can no longer safely distance themselves from texts and must engage with their own complicated responsibility in a global market.

A number of Melville’s texts, as well as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *Silent Partner*, dramatize how conceptions of responsibility and duty informed, and were informed by, an increasingly changing labor landscape in which employers began to consider what responsibilities they might hold for employees beyond the duties specified of the labor contract. Ultimately this chapter suggests that shifting labor practices introduced a number of complexities to the already extremely complex notion of responsibility.

**A History of Responsible Labor**

While depictions of work throughout the antebellum period continued to employ the familiar “setting of farmers, craftsmen, and merchants,”

148 by the second half of the century, labor in America had changed dramatically. In previous decades, American farmers and small artisan craftsmen had been “the epitome of self-sufficiency and versatility, independent yeomen farmers as adept at mending a rake or cobbling a shoe as at plowing a field.”

149 The transforming labor market and the expansion of manufacturing capabilities now meant a new kind of work, one “that would gradually erode self-sufficiency and remake yeomen, artisans, and their children into workers dependent upon wages.”

150 Workers’ dependence went far beyond wages, however, as the invention of factory towns, the rapid loss of workers’ skills, and an increase of predatory labor contracts resulted in workers who were often as dependent upon the whims of their employers, managers, and the factory as they were upon wages. As labor historian Bruce Laurie writes, “A working class was in the making, and if its members were not yet factory drudges, they were increasingly dependent on wage labor, gradually stripped of
skills, and subjected to hard regimens of taxing work.”

Perhaps even more importantly, the changing landscape created an ever-widening gulf between laborer and manager, as “employer and employee drifted apart.”

Previous working relationships – of masters and apprentices, journeymen and contractors, artisans and patrons – operated under clearer obligations and responsibilities than in the new, changing landscape of industrial labor. This is not to say that exploitation and a shirking of those obligations did not occur. Master craftsmen frequently took on apprentices with no intention of fulfilling their training to completion, instead using their cheaper labor as apprentices/journeymen for as long as possible. Nonetheless, in the relationship of master and apprentice, there existed an understanding that, but for the final pieces of their training, they were peers – nearly equally competent in the work – who worked alongside one another more often than not. Industrial working relationships, as modern readers are aware, relied instead upon a strict hierarchy of owner, manager, and laborer, each owing nothing more to the other than what was forced of them. Pre-industrial craftsmen were similarly considered more responsible for the product that they created. As industrialism divided labor into smaller and more separate processes, the responsibility that any worker might feel towards their product diminished or disappeared completely. The old myths of labor – that productivity led to happiness, and that, through perseverance, one could work oneself to upward mobility – were beginning, rapidly, to disintegrate. The United States was no longer a nation of artist-craftsmen and farmers, and the slow shift to wage labor that rippled across the country brought with it increased class division. While “conduct guides, boys’ storybooks, handbooks of business advice, and magazine fillers - ingrained the idea…. [that] in the
fluid American economy, hard work, self-control, and dogged persistence were the
certain escalators of success," most workers instead found themselves reliant upon low
wages and poor working conditions, able to leave, but with few places to go. Despite the
continued (perhaps even more fervent) promise of mobility for laborers, by the end of the
century it was clearer than ever that popular rags-to-riches stories and tales of self-made
men were closer to myth than reality.

Working Americans quickly identified a stark difference between the private,
moral lives they were called to lead (by romantic literature, moral guides, ideas of
domesticity, religion, etc.) and the selfish chaos of the market. Critic Thomas Augst
writes that “public life became an arena for the assertive pursuit of self-interest,” and
his revelation should be hardly surprising. As individuals calculated their worth within a
shifting job market, the “moral duties once owed to others…vanish[ed]” in favor of
self-promotion, autonomy, and a desire for economic advancement without regard for
others.

Furthermore, alongside the expansion of market capitalism and the rise of
industrial forms of labor, an ideology emerged which emphasized individual personhood
and autonomy. Alongside these early inklings of possessive individualism the
expanded market of the nineteenth century saw a depletion of interpersonal relationships
and an increase in “personal interactions…confined to the realm of market relations.”
Individuals were, at least partially, transformed in one another’s eyes, no longer simply
persons, but buyers, sellers, workers, rubes, and confidence men all meeting with similar
self-interest and disregard for one another. Within this changing and bleak landscape,
the question of responsibility gained urgency and difficulty – who might be blamed for
such a dissatisfying system, or, at the very least, who might be depended upon to
ameliorate the situation of the new working class?

Phelps’s Sentimental Responsibility

For Phelps, and her protagonist Perley, the answer lies in the relation of “master
and man” whose supposed meeting “on business grounds” leaves much to be desired. If
the market had pushed moral relations into the sphere of the domestic and private,\textsuperscript{161} then
Phelps’s female characters-of-feeling hoped to bring them back into the workplace.
Phelps’s novel follows Perley Kelso, newly-named silent partner of the Hayle and Kelso
mills. Taking a sudden interest in the day-to-day operations of the mills, Perley meets Sip
and her disabled sister Catty who are workers in the mill. Over the course of the novel,
Perley learns more and more about how the other half lives and begins to suspect that
employers and even, perhaps, silent partners, might hold some responsibility for the dirty
and desperate lives of their employees.\textsuperscript{162}

At the start of Phelps’s novel, readers find Perley, lounging, “as she had been all
the opaque, gray afternoon, in a crimson chair by a crimson fire,” in her father’s library
without a care or worry. In fact, idly watching the rain outside, “she had not found herself
to be the possessor of another thought since dinner” (11). Perley, as readers are quickly
informed, sits as the absolute type of her class: idle, careless, effortlessly dignified, and
thoughtlessly catered to. Her compatriots, the lovely young Fly and Perley’s fiancé
Maverick, are no different, equally disinterested and without want. It is not until Perley
meets the young mill-worker Sip (and, later, her disabled sister, Catty) that she becomes
aware of her class at all:

The girl was not filthy, but the cleanliest poverty in a Boston tenement-
house fails to acquire the perfumes of Arabia, and Perley sickened and
shrunk. Yet it struck her as odd, for the moment, if you will believe it, that she should have santalina in her carriage cushions (26).

Sip’s smell, even at her cleanest, causes Perley to sicken and pull away from her, a high contrast to Perley’s freshly perfumed carriage cushions. That the seat beneath her might be more pampered and sweet-smelling than the woman before her forces Perley, for the first time, to consider “the gulf” between her life and the lives of those in the mill town. Once aware of it, however, Perley can think of nothing else and begins to care greatly about the discrepancies between employee and employer: “old, home-like boundary lines of things to which her smooth young life had rounded, wavered before her. It even occurred to her that she should never be happy again, for knowing that factory-girls at black molasses and had the cotton cough” (98).

With Perley’s new awareness, the old boundaries of her responsibilities – keeping to her class, maintaining her social outings, fulfilling her engagement to her father’s partner – once firm and clear, shake and dissipate entirely. The rest of the novel then dedicates itself to the complicated task of asking – what, after all, are her responsibilities to laborers like Sip and even Catty – “type of the world from which she sprang…the world of the laboring poor,” dysfunctional, degraded, “exhausted and corrupted?” (277). Having seen first-hand how the other half lives, Perley gains an awareness of class disparity – an awareness that Phelps posits as necessary for any kind of progress. Perley notes that she “never knew…what it was like to be poor” and that, furthermore, she considered it an unchanging occurrence of nature “a thing that must be, just as mud must be in April” (128). Through Perley, Phelps challenges her readers to imagine a world beyond those things “that must be.” Phelps suggests both that poverty is decidedly unnatural and that those with means have a direct responsibility to respond to it rather
than treat it like “mud…in April; a thing to put on overshoes for,” to shield oneself from selfishly and otherwise ignore.

Having completed the first necessary requirement that Phelps has set before her, in acknowledging the existence of class, Perley then dedicates herself to the task of providing aid to the working poor, a goal met with some resistance by the men around her. “Business obligation and responsibility,” after all, she’s reminded frequently, “are always so trying to a lady” (60). Perley’s frequent dismissal by men (particularly her fiancé Maverick) as just “a young lady with nothing else to do” who finds the working class to be “a diversion,” highlights the gendered motive of Phelps’s project (136). She sets Perley and Sip as foils to one another as typical women of their class and often draws reader attention to their extreme differences. However, their common womanhood provides a space for fellowship. Mocked by the men in her life, dismissed, unheard, and overlooked, Perley notes that “for the first time in her life, she was ashamed of being a woman” (59). Yet it is her womanhood that, Phelps suggests, allows her to see the factory system for what it is – an unfeeling and oppressive space created by men, a space that female workers, like Sip, also suffer under, dismissed, unheard, and overlooked. As Amy Lang writes, Sip and Perley “are offered ‘as natural allies.’” as “men control a world that silences Perley and Sip alike. Both the oppression of labor and the oppression of women are the doing of men” who are “motivated solely by profit.” The profit-driven dismissal of both Perley and the laborers that she seeks to help comes solely from men of means, whom the novel represents as unnaturally unfeeling.

In fact, it is Perley’s womanhood, and her assumedly natural sentimentalism that offers readers potential answers to the question of responsibility. Maverick, defensive
against Perley’s suggestion that he might owe some care to his workers beyond low wages and rented tenement housing, suggests that Perley thinks him “destitute of common humanity, just because [she] cannot understand the ins and outs of the thousand and one questions which perplex a business man” (136). Her inability to understand, it is implied, derives at least in part from her womanhood. Maverick and Perley’s conversation continues:

“One would think,” pursued Maverick, with a jerk at his mustache, “to hear and to see you, Perley, that there were no evils in the country but the evils of the factory system; that there was no poverty but among weavers earning ten dollars a week. Questions which political economists spend life in disputing, you expect a mill master -”

“Who doesn’t care a fig about them” interrupted Perley.

“Who doesn’t care a fig about them,” admitted the mill-master, “you are right; between you and me, you are right; who doesn’t care a fig about them - to settle” (140).

Like “the thousand and one questions which perplex a business man,” Maverick quickly complicates the issue by assuring Perley that these are “questions which political economists spend life in disputing,” questions that she, “a young lady with nothing to do,” should not venture to speak on (136). However, Perley’s interjection, which leads to Maverick’s admission that he does not care about his workers, clarifies for readers that the issue, which Maverick presents as overly complex, is really quite simple.

While the novel does not provide a clear inventory of the implicit responsibilities of the labor contract, readers see, through Perley, that one need only “feel right” (as Stowe says of the slavery issue) to see one’s responsibilities. Care and sentiment are the ultimate guides to the nature of our responsibilities. Interestingly, Phelps suggests that individual care might even take the place of social action as Perley talks down a potential work strike and Sip eventually takes to preaching gospel rather than workers’ rights.
Lang, again, notes that this potentially unsatisfying answer likely comes as a result of Phelps’s own implied position as the story’s firmly “middle-class narrator.”

By the end of the novel, Perley, though not advocating for revolution or labor strikes, has become alienated from other members of her class, now feeling deeply for the laborers she sees. Just as the novel “moves irresistibly toward harmonizing the differences” between Sip and Perley in order to preach gender solidarity, it similarly ends with a doctrine of class harmony. Nothing has been physically changed or resolved for the laborers of the mill town – their wages, the tenement buildings, and their needs all remain – but Perley, and by extension the reader, have now been made aware that they live in “a hungry world” (301). The something that Perley attempts to name, and that extends beyond the labor contract and connects workers and employers in “common humanity,” turns out to be care and sentiment brought on by the awareness of their condition.

Perley ends the novel reminiscing: “I undertook to help…at the first…but I was only among them at best; Sip is of them…so I left her to her work, and I keep to my own” (293). Disappointingly, Perley resolves to keep to her own class and to leave the workers to their own problems (except, it seems, in the case of quelling potential strikes). Fly, Perley’s posh friend, admits to not knowing much about the world or the people in it beyond her own isolated upper-class existence. “Perley was silent. She was wondering what good it would do – either the world or Fly – if she did” (301). Perley has learned how the other half lives, but resolves that it would do little good to share that knowledge with the stylish and shallow Fly. Perley, however, has been irrevocably changed by it –
alienated from Sip and the workers by virtue of her class and alienated from her class-fellows by virtue of her new knowledge.

Phelps’s decision to end the novel so ambiguously leaves readers today with more questions than answers. In terms of responsibility, the answer remains unclear, but Perley’s final sentiments would suggest that responsibility falls only to those who share struggle. Perley and Fly leave Sip to her work, and Perley sees no reason to trouble Fly with even the knowledge of what a “hungry world” looks like. Each keeps to their own and the impassable gulf between employer and employee remains. Any power that Perley might have wielded to alter working conditions remains disregarded, and even her earlier arguments that the workers might have libraries or schools or better housing seem to have disappeared completely.

Thus, while Phelps’s text proposes that women like Perley have a responsibility to care for the plight of others and to work towards some form of peace between classes, it raises worthwhile questions about responsibility only to leave readers where they began, uncertain of their obligations to those who toil for them. Must they work to alleviate the ills of the lower class? Might they themselves be implicated as a source of those ills? Must they offer care and support to those of lesser means? The novel, or perhaps even Phelps herself, might be read as self-conflicted. While the text cannot ultimately provide its readers with an easy answer as to the nature of their responsibilities, its very ambivalence might be reflective of the many uncertainties of its author and its potential readers. The novel fails to arrive at a convincing answer and offers no proselytizing. Instead, it raises questions and leaves readers to arrive at their own conclusions about
what is to be done: for Catty and Sip, for the other nameless multitudes of workers, for the privileged ignorance of others in the leisure class.

Though Phelps’s protagonist Perley remains unable to fully name the *something* that employers owe to their employees, she nonetheless arrives at one potential answer. While the men surrounding Perley assure her that the workers “will turn against [her]” without a second thought, Perley redirects the impetus (and the responsibility) back towards employers:

“…There’s neither gratitude nor common business sense among them. There’s neither trust nor honor. They have no confidence in their employers…”

“I was about to propose,” said Perley, quietly, “that their employers should exhibit some trust or confidence in *them*” (247).

Perley’s response illuminates three vital points. First, as the men scoff that such a response is “truly a young lady’s suggestion,” readers see, yet again, that the notion of disrupting labor hierarchies and enacting care towards workers is interpreted as sentiment and women’s thinking. Second, Perley importantly shifts responsibility back onto the employers themselves, highlighting (rather radically) that it is the responsibility of power-holders to enact care towards those more vulnerable. And third, Perley provides necessary connective tissue between ideas of responsibility and confidence. The workers have no trust that their employers will be responsible for their wages, their housing, their upkeep, and thus devise to take those things (and organize for them) wherever possible. The employers, similarly, have no trust in their employees as responsible individuals and so, driven by profit, restrict housing, food, payment, and access to employer-funded resources (Maverick states, with regards to child labor, that the more workers earn the more greedy and awful they become). For employer and employee, the lack of
confidence in one another derives entirely from a lack of belief that the other will be responsible, will fulfill their responsibilities, or will be rightly held responsible if they fail to do so.

Phelps’s answer to what Perley’s (and by extension readers’) responsibilities are might at first seem to be a simple one – that we must care for the needs of others as humans who have more in common with one another than we have differences. Yet, the novel’s ending ultimately fails to clarify what form such care might take. Perley leaves Sip to her own class and Fly to hers. She remains, straddling the gulf between the working poor and the upper class – seeing both and intervening in neither. The answer then might be that, at the very least, one must recognize and acknowledge the existence of potential responsibilities, though what those responsibilities entail we do not know. Like Phelps’s complicated ending, Melville’s work (twenty years earlier and anticipating the magnification of labor problems already in motion), further complicates the issue of responsibility – hoping to locate its limits and boundaries.

Melville’s Limited Responsibility

Melville offers readers two different means of approaching their uncertain responsibilities in labor relationships. The first, like Phelps’s own novel, an intimate and interpersonal look at the difficulties of navigating responsibility, appears in his 1853 story “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” The second, a large-scale view of the now-globalized market appears most clearly in his double sketch “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids.” While scholars have long read Melville’s works in terms of labor and, especially, the gendered aspects of working manhood, responsibility has not often appeared in recent criticism as a central concern for Melville. However, I argue that
Melville’s texts continually trouble the concept of one’s responsibility to others – the duty-bound officers and guilt-ridden Captain Vere of *Billy Budd*, the constant suspicion of fellow “human animal[s]” throughout *The Confidence Man*, the unmistakable distance between the “ideal of universal equality” and the daily “grindstone experience” in *Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs*. The responsibility that might exist between employee and employer, and the damning effects that occur when that responsibility fails, are a primary concern for nineteenth-century authors, particularly those already attuned to the issues of labor and economic alienation.

Though perhaps a more abstract portrayal of employer/employee relationships, Melville’s “Bartleby” nonetheless reflects the widening separation between the two and further complicates the *limits* of what one’s responsibility might be to others. Like Perley’s insistence upon a “*something*” that has not been accounted for by business obligations, but which remains necessary, Melville’s “Bartleby” similarly lays bare the inability of society’s institutions to account for more complicated social relationships and the demands of those relationships.

Most scholarship on “Bartleby” has focused its attention upon the titular scrivener himself; read, at times, as “an existential antihero,” as a philosophical character, and as a political representation of the radical refusal of work. However, it is the narrator, the well-to-do lawyer who employs Bartleby, who desperately seeks to understand the nature of his relationship to the scrivener. When readers meet the lawyer, he writes of his workplace affectionately. His workers have nicknames, a fondness for one another, and the lawyer (as a good employer should) knows his employees and the conditions under which they work best - “his management of the office depends not on a reduction of a
clerk’s character... but rather on rationalizing and coordinating their behavior as persons.” Under his management, the office functions much like a social terrarium, a closed circuit in which each employee works with and around one another and their individual needs - a “good natural arrangement,” (45) as the narrator himself describes it. It is in the addition of Bartleby that the narrator sees the coming death of this old method of worker-manager relations. While Bartleby’s refusal to work (a refusal framed softly as personal preference) disrupts the daily operations of the office, it is the narrator’s inability to read Bartleby, his inability to incorporate Bartleby fully into the office environment, and Bartleby’s alienation from his manager and fellow workers, that highlights the gulf between old and new work relations and shows “the corrosive effects that the new economic order had on traditional moral obligations.”

Refusing to work, Bartleby cannot be addressed as an employee, and living in the narrator’s offices and refusing to vacate, he cannot be approached as a tenant, yet he also cannot be easily categorized as a criminal either:

What! surely you will not have him collared by a constable, and commit his innocent pallor to the common jail? And upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done? – a vagrant, is he? What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? .... That is too absurd. No visible means of support: there I have him. Wrong again: for indubitably he does support himself.... No more, then. Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change offices.... if I find him on my new premises I will then proceed against him as a common trespasser (66).

The narrator’s desperate attempts to locate Bartleby’s criminality, and thus justify his arrest and removal, are also desperate attempts to locate his own relationship with Bartleby and his responsibility within that relationship. As an employer he has fired Bartleby to no avail, he has evicted him as a landlord without result, and so he is left attempting to conceive of their relationship as one of criminal and victim. If he can locate
Bartleby as a criminal, then his responsibility becomes clear – report the crime and have an arrest made. If Bartleby is not a criminal, however, then the narrator remains unclear about the protocol of his responsibility and remains entangled with Bartleby without clear recourse.

Bartleby’s potential status as employee or tenant are equally troubling to the narrator. What, after all, are an employer’s responsibilities toward an employee who will not work? Like the narrowly-avoided strike scene in Phelps’s *Silent Partner* where Perley’s earnestness convinces the workers that she simply can’t afford to pay them more, Melville similarly does not name Bartleby’s actions as a strike for better conditions. Nonetheless, unlike Phelps, who insists upon workers who desperately want to work and avoid the shame of charity at all costs, Melville instead offers a character who simply will not work and who makes no excuses for not wanting to work. As such, Bartleby becomes a specter of labor strikes without striking himself and a specter of working-class indifference to work ethic. As such, Bartleby embodies the fears that many held of non-working people, that “the indolent mind is…full of vermin” and that labor provides the cure for society’s ills. Here, however, readers see that it is labor itself that has driven Bartleby to the overwhelming apathy that he experiences. Furthermore, Bartleby’s soft refusal of work is not legible to the narrator as a strike. As the narrator notes, the “least sign of uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner” (47) would, as Thomas Augst writes, easily “make the employee’s behavior predictable and the manager’s action unequivocally certain.” If Bartleby’s actions were legible and predictable – a typical strike or a resignation – the narrator could easily respond to them. As it stands, however, Bartleby’s illegibility (neither employee nor striker, neither
tenant nor criminal) prevents the narrator from easily locating his responsibility to the scrivener.

Unlike previous exaltations of work – like Carlyle’s declaration that “a small poet every worker is” or Emerson’s assertion that “a man coins himself into his labor” and creates something new through his work – Bartleby’s labor requires neither poetry nor ingenuity. He leaves nothing of himself in his copied legal papers and produces nothing beyond more of the same. Melville’s depiction of labor, then, unlike Phelps’s workers, Carlyle’s poets, or Emerson’s artisan individuals, highlights the humanity that has been stripped from it. In part, the narrator’s obsession with Bartleby lies in the persistent feelings towards Bartleby that he cannot name, the common humanity between them that has been lost through labor and contract. After changing offices in an attempt to remove himself from Bartleby, the narrator is approached by the office’s new tenant who insists that the narrator is “responsible for the man you left there” (67). In response, the narrator answers with “assumed tranquility, but an inward tremor” that Bartleby is “nothing to me – he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him” (67).

The narrator once again attempts to understand his responsibility to Bartleby through conventional social relationships. He would, he admits, be responsible for Bartleby if they were related or if he was an apprentice, but since neither of those labels cleanly defines their relationship to one another he concludes that he cannot be held responsible for Bartleby or what becomes of him; yet the “inward tremor” that the narrator must overcome betrays the sense that he does not quite believe it to be true. In fact, in the days after the encounter, he admits to feeling “a charitable prompting to call at
the place and see poor Bartleby,” a feeling which he does not act on out of some unnamed “squeamishness” (68). Just as the “inward tremor” that the narrator feels is a dramatization of his anxiety that perhaps he does have some responsibility to Bartleby, we might similarly identify the sudden “charitable prompting” he feels as a sense of moral responsibility towards Bartleby. Despite his impossible claim that he and Bartleby are nothing to one another and his desire to be rid of Bartleby, he continues to feel compelled to “see poor Bartleby,” to feel sympathy for him and to want to see to his wellbeing.

The sudden urge that compels the narrator to seek out Bartleby arises throughout the story and suggests, as we will see Frederick Douglass’s work similarly suggests, that feelings of responsibility are naturally occurring. Just as Douglass writes that one’s responsibility can be felt as “the deepest and pure up-gushings of the unsophisticated human heart”178 and just as Thomas Reid (and other philosophers) write of an “original power or faculty in man, which they call the moral sense, the moral faculty, conscience,”179 so too does Melville’s narrator feel an innate moral responsibility that arises despite his efforts to suppress it. Melville’s work thus draws readers’ attention to a far more subtle discourse – is responsibility innate? Is moral obligation a naturally occurring, or socially produced construct? Furthermore, what are readers’ own feelings as they read the tale of Bartleby and what feelings might they themselves locate as innate or socially constructed? Might they themselves feel the same “inward tremor” that Melville’s narrator does?

Ultimately, despite the narrator’s protests, he is once again approached by the office’s new tenant and told “something you must do, and without delay” if for no other
reason than because, as the narrator explains, “I was the last person known to have anything to do with him, and they held me to the terrible account” (68). Like the narrator himself, the group that forms outside of his new offices has come to the same conclusion regarding the nature of his relationship with Bartleby, that he is somehow responsible for him because of their contact and their (albeit complicated) social relationship. While neither the narrator nor any of the “several persons” waiting to address the narrator about Bartleby can precisely name what their social connection to one another is, the sense that the narrator holds some level of responsibility towards Bartleby is nevertheless understood. One must distinguish, however, between the responsibility that the gathered assembly of tenants hope to place on the narrator and the responsibility that he feels himself bound to, but ultimately unable to name. As we have seen, the office’s new tenant hopes to hold the narrator responsible for Bartleby’s removal. In holding him “to the terrible account,” the new tenant seeks someone to blame for Bartleby’s presence and thus someone who must act in order to correct the situation in some way. Like Stowe’s Shelbys or Melville’s own Captain Vere, the narrator (though responsible for Bartleby) is being held to account by the new tenant and the gathered persons outside his door, and he will answer his responsibility to them as the previous owner of the offices and as the one they have identified as blameworthy for Bartleby’s being there.\textsuperscript{180} This responsibility is couched in terms of blame and reparations – the crowd’s decision to hold the narrator responsible for Bartleby means that he is somehow at least partially to blame for Bartleby’s presence and thus is the one who \textit{must} do something “and without delay.” However, this sense of responsibility – an obligation to right a wrong in which one is
assumed to be complicit – is subtly distinct from the responsibility that the narrator feels when thinking of his complicated entanglement with Bartleby.

For the narrator, while he is ultimately unable to admit his responsibility towards Bartleby in explicit terms, his feelings of moral responsibility appear most frequently in terms of sympathy and pity. As the narrator states upon hearing Bartleby’s first refusal, “with any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me” (48). Later, the narrator labels Bartleby a “poor fellow!” and, after discovering that he has taken up residence in the narrator’s offices, becomes struck by the “miserable friendlessness and loneliness” of the situation and attempts at length to explain his feelings and transfer his empathy to readers:

> His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible! Think of it…. For the first time in my life a feeling of overwhelming stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam…. The scrivener’s pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet (55).

Like the “something” that initially disarms the narrator, “touch[ing] and disconcert[ing]” him, here he is again unable to name what it is about Bartleby that is so affecting, nor is he able to fully locate his own feelings on the matter. He is struck with feelings of pity, melancholy, gloom and, what he takes to be, empathy for Bartleby as a result of their “common humanity,” and while the narrator never articulates these feelings as a sense of moral responsibility it is clear that the source of these feelings are his own conscience and a sense that he has not done all that he should regarding Bartleby. As we shall see,
like the men in the “Paradise of Bachelors,” who are deeply fraternal and hold “the most tender concern for each other’s health” as a result, Melville continually returns to the brotherhood of man – a familial tie generated out of a common humanity. His final vision of Bartleby, “laid out, among uncaring strangers,” seems to be an end which the narrator hopes to avoid, and there is something particularly upsetting to him about the idea of Bartleby’s loneliness, his being “among uncaring strangers” (55). The implication, then, is that the narrator feels he might, or perhaps should, counteract this vision by acknowledging Bartleby as “fraternal” to him, by knowing Bartleby as something more than a stranger, and by recognizing their relationship to each other (which he later denies), one too complicated for conventional social understandings. It is the narrator’s recognition of Bartleby’s potential suffering that allows him to feel empathy for Bartleby, which then becomes entangled with the narrator’s conscience as he attempts to determine what his actions towards Bartleby ought to be.

One way in which the narrator attempts to satisfy his own conscience is through the more familiar avenue of duty. The narrator of “Bartleby” similarly attempts to mitigate his actions towards Bartleby through more familiar channels, and, in doing so, further clarifies a necessary difference between duty and responsibility. After finally offering to take Bartleby away from the offices and host him at his own home, the narrator states, “I had now done all that I possibly could…with regard to my own desire and sense of duty, to benefit Bartleby, and shield him from rude persecution” (70). Despite the narrator’s self-reassurance, he continues to seek out Bartleby, attempts to pay for his better treatment, and, finally, authors Bartleby’s meager biography, all of which suggests either that the narrator is insincere when he notes that he had fulfilled his duty
towards Bartleby or that while he has in fact performed his duty, that duty was
insufficient in some way. That is, if we agree with the narrator that he has fulfilled his
duty – his appropriate social obligations – to Bartleby, then perhaps it is that duty itself
which needs revision. Like Maverick who ensures Perley that he has no obligation to the
mill workers beyond what is done on “business grounds,” the narrator of “Bartleby” has
duties only as an employer, a lawyer, etc. If we think of duty in this way – socially
determined and easily navigable obligations – it is easy to see how the narrator might feel
that he has in fact performed his duty to the best of his abilities. In fact, in terms of
employer, landlord, stranger, associate, victim, or any of the other labels that the narrator
attempts to place upon his relationship with Bartleby, the narrator goes above and beyond
the duties and obligations of these stations. He has treated Bartleby relatively kindly, has
offered him money, and has offered him a place to stay at his own home. While any one
of these actions might easily fulfill the narrator’s duties, they do not exculpate him of the
responsibility that he continues to feel.

Like the captain of Billy Budd who articulates his officers’ “clash of military duty
with moral scruple,” Melville attunes readers to the necessary difference between duty
and responsibility, the former a prescribed set of actions (either legally or socially) and
the latter something far more complicated. Bartleby’s narrator attempts to account for his
relationship to the scrivener through the familiar terms of employer/employee,
landlord/tenant, property owner/vagrant, while the officers of Billy Budd navigate Billy’s
trial through an understanding of their legal and military duty. Importantly, however,
neither the narrator nor officers feel that their responsibility has been appropriately
illuminated through these designations. By the end of each story, both Captain Vere and
the narrator remain haunted by the men whom they feel they have failed to account for – Vere dies with Budd’s name on his lips, while the narrator guiltily pens Bartleby’s meager post-mortem biography. In each of these instances, traditional social limits of responsibility, specifically those of relationships which are navigated through economic and legal structures, fail to fully account for the moral weight of responsibility and the complications of “common humanity.” Importantly, as we’ve noted, the narrator does go above the call of his duty and, in thinking of Bartleby as part of a common humanity, he accepts far more responsibility than many others would. Yet he nonetheless feels that his responsibility to Bartleby has not been fulfilled. Melville’s text does more than merely delineate a distinction between duty and responsibility, then. Instead, Melville’s story shows that once one accepts responsibility there are, potentially, no limits and no boundaries to it. At what point might the narrator be free of his guilt? At what moment can he say that he has done enough?

Despite the narrator’s duty having been performed, there remains in him a deep pity towards Bartleby, an empathy which he is unsure how to act on. He attempts to ease Bartleby’s imprisonment, bemoans his loss (“Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity”), and ultimately writes Bartleby’s meager biography as a reparative and repentant act. It is clear, then, that while the narrator’s social, legal, and professional duties are met, there is something about his moral responsibility to Bartleby that remains unsatisfied, something about the circumstances of their relationship that cannot, as Phelps’s work also suggests, be settled “on business grounds alone.”
Melville’s work further dramatizes the entanglement of responsibility and labor with the added problem of trust, mutual understanding, and confidence. As one of the central conversations of The Confidence Man goes:

“…Don't know exactly what to make of you. Upon the whole though, you somewhat remind me of the last boy I had on my place."  
"Good, trustworthy boy, I hope?"
"Oh, very! I am now started to get me made some kind of machine to do the sort of work which boys are supposed to be fitted for."
"Then you have passed a veto upon boys?"
"And men, too."
"But, my dear sir, does not that again imply more or less lack of confidence?" (132).

The Confidence Man, published only a few years after “Bartleby,” elaborates on many of its themes, though in different terms. Where “Bartleby” centers upon the collapse of a single man and the narrator’s difficulty navigating his responsibility to him on the basis of common humanity alone, The Confidence Man suggests the emergence of large-scale collapse reproducing in each instance in which men can no longer be asked to bear responsibility for their fellow men or to have confidence in them at all.

The Missourian in the passage quoted above makes more evident Melville’s connection between the degradation of human relationships and labor, as he discusses his forthcoming shift from “boys” to “some kind of machine.” No longer trusting human workers, and not wanting to be responsible for them (their pay, their hours, their needs), the Missourian declares instead that he will turn entirely to machine labor.

Machines for me…. cider-mill, mowing-machine, corn-husker—all faithfully attend to their business. Disinterested, too; no board, no wages; yet doing good all their lives long; shining examples that virtue is its own reward… (140).

Unlike human laborers who greedily require board and wages in return for their work, mechanized labor works for no reward and demands nothing of its employer. The
Missourian further decries the worth of “the human animal” a cost deficit, worth perhaps no more than their “peltries” (141).

Importantly, Melville’s distinction between machine and human here contributes to a much smaller thread that weaves its way alongside the discourse of responsibility and duty. As readers have seen, duty was frequently associated with mechanical and unthinking obligation – Harriet Wilson writes of herself as an automaton performing her duty, Frederick Douglass notes responsibility (not duty) as that which distinguishes man from thing, and in Melville’s own *Billy Budd*, he frequently renders the soldiers’ duty as a mechanical thing. In this moment from the Confidence Man, in Bartleby’s own “silent, pale, mechanical”(46) writing, and in Melville’s later suggestion that the women of Tartarus do “not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels,”181 readers see Melville’s interest in the differences between responsible people and dutiful machines.

Perley, in Phelps’s novel, similarly remarks upon the status of factory workers as “hands,”182 disembodied pieces useful only for the work that they can do. Phelps highlights that as hands or even as “the fingers of the world,” workers are hardly even human anymore, certainly not to “be mistaken for a thinking, aspiring, creating, enjoying compound” (71). The rest of “the world thinks, aspires, creates, enjoys,” but hands – merely parts to be used – can only work in their place. Melville’s Tartarus takes the transformation one step further. The maids are no longer disembodied hands or organic body parts, instead, as a result of further industrialization, they have become wholly mechanized and inorganic cogs, parts, not of a body, but of a machine.
These conversations tie together the threads that Melville subtly weaves throughout “Bartleby” and The Confidence Man. In both texts, readers see labor represented as impersonal and alienating. Bartleby copies the words of others, producing nothing of his own, within a cramped and windowless space, while the Missourian would just as soon go “boy-hunting” as fowling, greatly desiring the moment that men can be replaced by thoughtless automata. Furthermore, in each story, readers see that economic relations have degraded social relations. The men aboard the floating marketplace of the Fidele relate to one another only in their attempts to garner funds from one another or to hock their various services and goods. Thus, they remain strangers connected only through artificial and momentary social relationships that will end upon the exchange of money. As the confidence man himself notes, there exists, in the “sad world” at large, declaring: “very little, confidence...between man and man - more particularly between stranger and stranger” (36).

While confidence may not immediately appear to have a strong relation to responsibility, we might briefly look to popular nineteenth-century philosopher Thomas Reid who writes that in “many transactions …. in all testimony, in all promises, and in all contracts, there is necessarily implied a moral obligation on one party, and a trust in the other, grounded upon this obligation.”¹⁸³ What Reid names “moral obligation” we might easily call responsibility. All transactions (an apt term for the floating market of the Fidele) depend upon participants’ moral responsibility to fulfill their promised portions of the transaction and upon their faith that the other participant will do the same. Of course, there are also the legal avenues available to deliver consequences (to forcibly hold them responsible) if any terms remain unmet, but the essential and initial
engagement requires responsibility and, by extension, confidence. The lack of confidence between strangers in particular, plays an especially large role since, as “Bartleby” and The Confidence Man each argue, current economic relations render us all strangers to one another. The alienating effects of industrial labor are particularly damaging for male fraternal relationships – something which Melville values heavily in his works. As Dana Nelson’s scholarship establishes, whether the workplace was to be a space of male socialization or a space for “competitive individualism, [and] isolated actors” was a constant struggle. As modern readers see in Melville’s own texts there exists an identical tension between men who long for fraternity, but for whom labor becomes a stumbling block. The bachelors of Paradise are fraternal, but only as a result of their distance from the rest of the laboring world. The men aboard the Fidele are friendly and outgoing, but are always inhibited by the knowledge that at least part of that attitude derives from a desire for money.

Like Melville’s other characters, rendered strangers through capitalist exchange, the narrator of “Bartleby” is unable to identify Bartleby himself as either man or ghost – unable to accurately touch at his relationship to him. Is he being haunted by an apparition? Is he being targeted by a vagrant? Or is he missing some other identifier that might offer insight into his relationship with Bartleby? They remain, by the end of the text, strangers, alienated from one another by the economic gulf between them and by the incomplete social relationships available. Common humanity, it may be argued, quickly becomes lost beneath the titles and the hierarchies of tenant and landlord, employee and employer, rube and salesman, stranger and stranger. Interestingly, Phelps’s text offers readers the opposite view, Perley and Sip are separated by a broad gulf of economic
differences, but they are (as Phelps’s novel argues) always linked in sisterhood by virtue of both being women in a world dictated by men. Where class harmony fails, Phelps suggests, there must exist other avenues for locating common humanity.

**Melville’s Unlimited Responsibility**

Though Phelps suggests other avenues for establishing solidarity, like those of gender or race if not class, Melville’s work denies that even this possibility can exist under modern labor conditions. Unlike the intimate conflict of “Bartleby,” wherein the narrator must determine his responsibilities to “this man, or, rather, ghost,” and unlike Phelps’s own desire to bridge the gulf of class with interpersonal relationships, Melville’s paired “Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids” expands the problem of responsibility to a global scale, in which all those who participate in the expansive global economy are, in some way, implicated by it. Like the degraded social relationships of *The Confidence Man*, Melville’s diptych depicts global industrial labor systems that have not merely alienated individuals, but have generated an entirely bifurcated world.

Melville begins his two-part story in the paradise of bachelors. “Sweeter” and “more charming” than all “the oases in Sahara… [or] the isle-groves of August prairies,” the “dreamy Paradise of Bachelors” serves as a secluded social club for London’s unmarried gentlemen. The narrator’s description of his time among the bachelor’s reinforces its dreamy, oasis quality: he visits on a “pleasant afternoon in the smiling month of May,” and finds the bachelor’s themselves to be “care-free, right comfortable and most companionable,” with a distinct air of “comfort – fraternal, household comfort” about them (209). The atmosphere is so genial, in fact, that it offers restorative powers as
the narrator learns “that, during the repast, an invalid bachelor…enjoyed his first sound refreshing slumber in three long, weary weeks” (208-9).

The narrator’s image of this fraternity of men, feasting in their healing refuge, unburdened with “no wives or children to give an anxious thought” to, stands in sharp relief against the cold and unyielding landscape in which he finds the Tartarus of Maids. As the narrator approaches the factory which serves as the maids’ Tartarus, the very landscape indicates his descent as he passes the “Mad Maid’s Bellows-pipe…. the Black Notch…. the Devil’s Dungeon…. [and] Blood River” (211). Unlike the healing powers of the men’s paradise, the narrator is met instead with visions of an inevitable future for the laboring women:

I looked upon the first girl’s brow, and saw it was young and fair; I looked upon the second girl’s brow, and saw it was ruled and wrinkled. Then as I still looked, the two…changed places; and where had stood the young, fair brow, now stood the ruled and wrinkled one (215).

The narrator notes that he is “struck by the inevitability” and the “unbudging fatality” of the maids’ factory work. Work that would poison and deplete them, age them and disable them, and take any hopes for a life outside of the paper mill where they dedicate, as the narrator discovers, seventy-two hours a week for all the year.

There is, throughout “Tartarus,” a similar spirit of sympathy and sentiment that readers find in Phelps’s work as well. The workers are “passive-looking girls” working among “poisonous particles” as “their own executioners,” merely inhuman extensions of the great machines that they labor on. However, importantly, Melville does not merely hope for “Tartarus” to elicit feelings of sympathy in readers. Instead, “Tartarus,” particularly in its pairing with “Paradise,” offers an indictment, most obviously for the bachelors who sit in repose while the maids labor their lives away. Even the factory
manager is himself unmarried, “a Bach.” The male figure of the bachelor stands apart from and above the maids, laboring in deathly conditions under his watch. Like Phelps’s suggestion that the world of capitalist exploitation is definitively a man’s world, here the unfair burdens of labor similarly split along gender as well as class lines. Thus, the bachelor who oversees the maids and the bachelors enjoying their time in Paradise a world away are linked, by gender and by class, through their ability to flourish and benefit from the labor of others. Michael Paul Rogin offers a reading of Tartarus in which the maids’ labor provides a broader reading of the control that industrial capitalism generated over women’s reproductive possibilities. Certainly, Melville makes much of the women’s (or girls’, as he calls them) virginity. Others similarly read the diptych stories as clear foils to one another, demonstrating the power that maleness exerts even across space and in a variety of contexts. Such a reading would neatly pair with Phelps’s suggestion of a sororal bond between women even of differing classes. I myself note a similar point earlier when writing about Phelps’s female characters. However, Melville’s maids (all of a single class and labor condition) do not engage in the social, sisterly relationship that Phelps’s work presents. Their shared gender and shared condition do not make them sisters in labor; instead, their work renders them nearly non-persons, interchangeable pieces too exhausted to form human connection even with those whom they have so much in common with. Melville’s narrator depicts both bachelors and maids as equally, unnaturally stunted in their development. Each group exists within an isolated and highly gendered bubble and, as a result, are construed as deeply lacking in some way. The men have no families, and while it means no worrying it also means no reproduction or even life beyond their jobs and their occasional fraternal meetings. The bachelors are
also isolated and not forced to face the realities of the systems that uphold their paradise, reminiscent of Susan M. Ryan’s reading of Emerson’s metaphor of careless boys who feast and play without considering the (often female) labor that supports their lifestyle.\textsuperscript{188} Similarly, the women waste away with their unnaturally prolonged virginity intact, aging and decaying under impossibly difficult labor.

As Timothy Helwig writes, Melville’s repeated figure of the bachelor (as narrator and as character) expresses a nostalgia “for less alienated forms of masculinity associated with America’s agrarian past.”\textsuperscript{189} This reading appears most evidently in “Bartleby” where, as we’ve seen, the narrator struggles to locate his relationship to Bartleby (and thus his responsibility to him). As Helwig’s reading suggests, the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century drastically altered relations between employer/employee, the working and non-working classes, and even men in their everyday social interactions with one another. Bartleby’s alienation from his work – copying texts in a windowless space, producing nothing of his own – mirrors the alienation from others that the story ends with. Though not couched directly in terms of responsibility, isolation and alienation from others directly correlates to our accepted social relationships and responsibilities to those others – we cannot be responsible to those we are isolated from completely. The bachelors’ paradise must exist wholly separated and isolated from the world of the working women, because the factory system that makes victims of maids would undoubtedly do the same to the bachelors if only it could reach them. Their simple and joyous fraternity depends entirely on their distance from modern industrial labor, their happiness depends upon their ability to disavow their responsibility to others beyond their fraternal circle. Importantly, the bachelor’s (unlike other characters in Melville’s stories)
have identified the limits of their responsibility. They are deeply caring, communal, and responsible for one another – caring for the sick among their ranks and providing nourishment to each other – but such responsibility comes at the cost of excluding all others and isolating themselves. If we must determine the limits of responsibility to avoid the endless guilt the Bartleby’s narrator experiences, we must also avoid limiting our responsibility so much to only our immediate circle as the bachelors do.

Importantly, even in its brief incriminations of the bachelors, the text implicates not only the bachelors, but also the very reader of the text as well. As the narrator tours the factory, he arrives at a shocking realization:

> my mind ran on in wonderings of those strange uses to which those thousand sheets eventually would be put. All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things – sermons, lawyer’s briefs, physicians’ prescriptions, love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants, and so on, without end (220).

The narrator’s list of the numerous products that the mill’s paper will inevitably become includes all of those things which are both mundane and necessary in modern civilization. The necessity of the items speaks to the inevitability of the mill’s work. These are not items that readers can abstain from using and, in the case of birth registers and death-warrants, are items that are consumed (or created) in conjunction with merely being alive. Even readers who might hope to buy ethically-produced goods are caught by the trap of the distant, hellish paper mill, as the very paper that they read the narrator’s words from serves as evidence of exploitation and their own complicity. Even the desire of “Bartleby’s” narrator to “fill pages” reads as an indictment now that readers know the cost of those pages. By including the reader in his critique of globalized, industrial labor,
Melville suggests that it is not merely bosses and workers who must adjust their responsibilities in this new market, but consumers as well.

Notably, though Melville frequently employs the character of a narrator, Tartarus emphasizes his existence and readers’ own positionality as readers in ways that his other texts do not. As the narrator realizes the many products and systems that necessitate the existence of the Tartarus factory, readers themselves are made aware that they are holding one of the very paper products likely produced in such a hell. The text, in that moment, becomes more than simply fiction or even morality tale; instead, readers are forced to acknowledge the existence of the story, the narration, the character through which they are experiencing these events, and the fact that they, too, play a role in the tale simply by virtue of their own interaction with the text. Melville highlights readers’ response as a necessary part of fiction, and as a means of further complicating the idea of responsibility – what might it mean, after all, for readers to pause and acknowledge that the very printed paper that they hold in their hands is itself a commodity, a product of a global system in which they are hopelessly entwined, and thus at least somewhat responsible. How much exactly – what the extent and limits to responsibility might be – is precisely the question that these texts dramatize.

In offering a view of Tartarus that lays bare the exploitation of modern labor practices, Melville generates potential sympathy from his readership; however, in naming the direct source of that exploitation as the daily, necessary products that his readers make constant use of, Melville explodes the concept of responsibility in ways that modern scholars have not yet taken notice of. If Phelps’s novel ends by suggesting, rather disappointingly, that employers must simply care for their employees and try to bridge
the class divide through kindness, then Melville’s work offers a reading of modern labor systems that is far more expansive and damning. Rather than simply concern himself with the interpersonal relationships of employer and employee, Melville’s “Tartarus and Paradise” performs the impossible work of making visible formerly invisible market systems. Other authors of the time, like Frederick Douglass, were beginning to suggest (as we’ll see in the next chapter) that products or profits produced, even distantly, with the help of enslaved labor were complicit in the horrors of enslavement. Here, however, Melville takes an even more expansive approach in suggesting that all products of modernized, industrial labor that circulate within global markets are the products of exploitation. Even more radically, as we see in his list of items, Melville makes clear that one cannot opt out of participation in these global and horrific markets. To be born, after all, requires a state-sanctioned birth certificate, which must be printed upon paper produced in Tartarus, the hell that steals the life and maidenhood of women.

Melville’s work denies readers the safety of an easy answer or a moral decision. There can be no moral decision, his work suggests, since we are, all of us, from the very beginning participants in a fallen world wherein some feast fraternally and others “mutely and cringingly” slave away to make such lives possible. His insistence that readers notice such horrors and, importantly, their own contributions to them, problematizes the issue of responsibility in ways that other authors (like Phelps) fail to do and in ways that modern scholars typically fail to notice. The structure of the world, Melville suggests, is upheld by violence and horror. Our responsibility, then, is potentially (troublingly) limitless once we see that there exists a Tartarus beneath every pleasure.
CHAPTER III
“THE BURDEN OF HIS RESPONSIBILITY TO THEM;” ABOLITION AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S PHILOSOPHY OF RESPONSIBILITY

Concluding his 1838 treatise on the limits of human responsibility, Francis Wayland assures readers that, with regards to ever-looming moral problem of slavery, they retained “the obligation not to do anything for the purpose of changing the relation of master and slave.” To do so, Wayland argues without irony, would risk imposing upon enslavers’ “free will,” which “we have no right, either by ourselves or by others, to control.” Numerous intellectuals, inspired by the increasing influence of Common-Sense philosophy, encouraged their readers to more clearly identify themselves as responsible, individual, and free-acting moral agents; however, its moderate beliefs and non-interference tenets left them ill-equipped to address the peculiar institution of American slavery. As Wayland’s work demonstrates, American moralists, approaching the issue of slavery by way of Common-Sense philosophy, often produced disappointing results.

While it was arguments like Wayland’s with which abolitionists of the time had to contend, abolitionist literature, with its primary goal of “changing public sentiment,” tended to instead sway audiences with more pathetic appeals. Lengthy descriptions of the “unclean influences” as well as the physical and emotional traumas of enslavement abound throughout the genre of abolitionist literature. One of the most popular, and troubling, antebellum anti-slavery texts, Theodore Dwight Weld’s 1839 American Slavery As It Is, provided readers a veritable laundry list of horrors through its ongoing catalogue of physical violence and visceral scenes of torture. Such texts undoubtedly produced strong reactions in their readers. And despite claims that works like Weld’s did
not seek to excite interest “by the novelty of horrors which it describes,” it is clear that many abolitionists’ works often appealed to audiences by invoking the particular atrocities of enslavement.

As Wendell Phillips, outlining the *Philosophy of the Abolition Movement* in 1854, writes, “The object of this Society is now, as it has always been, to convince our countrymen, by arguments *addressed to their hearts and consciences*, that slaveholding is a heinous crime, and that the duty, safety and interest of all concerned, demand its immediate abolition, without expatriation.” Popular abolitionist tactics, as Phillips neatly communicates, focused efforts on reaching audiences’ “hearts and consciences,” more so than their minds. Furthermore, while philosophers readily engaged with a rhetoric of responsibility, agency, and accountability, abolitionists, as Phillips’s quote demonstrates, focused efforts instead on communicating a sense of moral duty to audiences – one based in feelings of slavery’s wrongfulness, rather than in the responsibility one might have to the enslaved themselves. Thus, while abolitionist texts were quick to recount enslavement’s horrors and moral degradations, they were also often surprisingly unwilling to do the polemic work of demonstrating how those horrors might result in a duty or responsibility for their audience. That is, abolitionist rhetoric often leaps from depicting horrors for its audience to assuming that the audience will then feel compelled to act without further discussion. Why they must feel compelled to act, why they should act in a particular way, and why it must be *they* who act were questions which many abolitionists left for their audiences to puzzle over for themselves.

These often-unanswered questions reveal the abolitionists’ own assumptions, of course - naturally, their audiences *must* feel compelled to act against enslavement after
hearing of mothers “sold with babies at the breast.” However, pro-slavery and anti-abolition arguments make clear that the assumed link between feeling outrage and feeling responsible did not always exist. Pro-slavery advocates rallied behind pseudo-scientific claims that Black subjects were evolutionarily distinct from white subjects. Conveniently, such arguments erased any claim that Black subjects might have had upon white audiences’ consciences as fellow humans. Anti-abolitionists, by contrast, were deeply affected by the moral arguments of abolitionists and often agreed upon the wrongfulness of enslavement. Where they differed significantly, however, was in abolitionists’ belief that they, as white citizens of non-slaveholding states, might have some moral responsibility or duty regarding enslaved individuals or the project of abolition. As Wayland’s text makes clear, despite the wrongfulness of enslavement, white audiences who could argue that they did not participate directly in the system maintained no responsibility to enact change. There arose, as a result, a significant problem space in the discourse of abolition. Abolitionists, in their assumptions about what others agreed upon as morally permissible, frequently failed to engage with the questions and criticisms of anti-abolitionists who, despite their anti-slavery inclinations, may have wondered about their own duty regarding abolition. Abolitionist discourse often avoided a critical engagement with responsibility or duty because such moral obligation was often assumed. It is only in the work of thinkers like Frederick Douglass, however, who operated as both abolitionist and moral philosopher, that we find a more critical consideration of duty, responsibility, and their meanings and potential limits. Thus, unlike other abolitionists, seemingly unwilling to appeal to audiences beyond (highly-warranted) feelings of outrage, Frederick Douglass’s work is distinguished by its
distinctly philosophical engagement with detractors. While much has been written regarding his abolitionist work at large, there remains a surprising lack of engagement with Douglass’s philosophical interventions, particularly into the broader nineteenth-century discourse of responsibility, duty, and moral obligation, which dominated American thought as Common-Sense expositors increased their presence in the American academy.

While this chapter engages with traditionally recognizable philosophers such as Wayland, Thomas Reid, and others, its primary focus will be the work of Douglass, whom scholars are only beginning to acknowledge as a philosopher in his own right. As a result, this chapter uncovers Douglass’s significant, yet often overlooked, philosophical contributions to nineteenth-century debates around moral responsibility, particularly within the context of contemporaneous pro- and anti-slavery arguments. Just as this project tracks how responsibility was theorized (and frequently retheorized) at a time when many Americans first understood themselves to be, as Wayland argues, “under moral obligations to [their] fellow men, both as individuals and as societies,” this chapter argues that such theories were inevitably complicated by the realities of enslavement and pushes for abolition. Similarly, this chapter argues that Douglass’s work simultaneously posits a radical ethics of responsibility while remaining aware of the pitfalls and problematics of such rhetoric for Black Americans in particular. As this chapter shows, Douglass’s work offers a more nuanced and critical approach to advocating for responsibility than other scholars have previously attended to and, as such, contributes to both abolitionist and philosophical discourses in ways which significantly impact our understandings of both.
This chapter begins with a nod to the extensive scholarship that has been produced on Douglass’s work thus far. I am by no means the first scholar to notice Douglass’s deep interest in responsibility; however, I place Douglass’s thinking about responsibility in a broader historical context and note the extent of his distinction between a responsibility to others and a responsibility for others. This chapter then turns to the important distinction between Douglass’s use of responsibility against other contemporaneous thinkers, his choice to use responsibility (rather than the more commonly used duty), and, finally, the largest of his interventions into responsibility discourse – his differentiation between a responsibility to and for others. My reading also differs from other scholars in that I urge readers to approach Douglass’s work as a philosophical intervention rather than just as an intervention into abolitionist discourse (although it is, of course, that as well). While scholars like Nick Bromell and Nicholas Buccola have generated a new tradition of reading Douglass’s contributions as a political philosopher, notable for his interventions into the discourse of rights, citizenship, freedom and unfreedom, there nonetheless remains a hesitance in naming Douglass a moral philosopher in his own right. Maurice S. Lee, in his text *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature*, builds a significant connection between Douglass and contemporaneous Common-Sense philosophers; however, Lee’s categorizing of Douglass as a “fugitive philosopher” reads (perhaps unintentionally) as a reluctance to name Douglass as a philosopher without caveat.

**Douglass’s Mutual Responsibility**

There exists a meaningful scholarly tradition of acknowledging Douglass’s interventions into responsibility discourse. Nick Bromell’s scholarship on Douglass’s
approach to democratic citizenship, most notably, acknowledges the simultaneous need for and insufficiency of personal responsibility with regards to abolition and, even more importantly, notes Douglass’s commitment to moral responsibility as an inherent part of humanity and human society. As Bromell writes, “the exercise of freedom must be accompanied by, and indeed felt to be, the fulfillment of an obligation…freedom and duty [for Douglass] were conceptually fused” since freedom without “moral responsibility was a continuing expression of the public philosophy that had tolerated, and perhaps underwritten,” slavery. Though Bromell employs the language of obligation, duty, and responsibility as one, his point nonetheless remains, that for Douglass, as we will see in this chapter, responsibility to others formed the bulwark of humanity and the glue of civilization. We are free, but we must not believe that we are so free that we are unbound from our responsibility to those beyond ourselves. Scholar Nicholas Buccola similarly notes Douglass’s interest in mutual responsibility, offering a rights-based reading of Douglass’s work. Buccola’s work suggests that mutual responsibility, for Douglass, functions because human community is built from connections between liberal individuals (as opposed to Douglass’s later suggestion in “Self-Made Men” that the liberal individual may not exist at all). In particular, Buccola argues that Douglass draws upon the self-interest of his audiences in order to provoke their support of abolition. As Buccola writes, “it is my business to stand up for the rights of others, Douglass argued, because my willingness to do so would strengthen the ‘sheet anchor’ that protects my rights.” While it is well established that Douglass drew upon a variety of rhetorical tactics, frequently simultaneously, I would argue that Buccola’s insistence upon the self and the individual as the basis for community and responsibility
risks framing Douglass’s work as an appeal to the selfish desire of audiences to protect their own individual rights rather than a radical reimagining of mutual responsibility that explodes the idea of the individual altogether.210

Still, the connection between rights and responsibility looms large in Douglass’s work. He notes in My Bondage and My Freedom that his freedom imbued him with “the rights, responsibilities, and duties of a freeman” and that being his “own master” meant that he took “responsibility for my own existence,” “as I had a right to do.” Similarly, in his Dred Scott speech, he argues that liberty is both the “right of all rights” and “the foundation of all trust, and of all responsibility.” For Douglass, responsibility often exists in conversation with discussions of rights and individual freedom. This connection holds two important revelations. First, that Douglass was always aware of the practical applications of his philosophical interventions. While he writes of responsibility, as we will see here, as a moral philosophical choice, he also makes clear that his philosophy is grounded in the realities of political enfranchisement and abolition. Second, that freedom forms the basis for responsibility. As we will see, and as Bromell’s scholarship similarly highlights, the freedom to choose distinguishes the weight of responsibility from the much easier actions of duty.

Although Douglass frequently connects responsibility and rights, he also expands beyond individual rights to depict the gravity of responsibility as a moral choice. In his later “Philosophy of Reform,” he illustrates a world infected by moral disease, which threatens all aspects of life (not merely individual rights). Douglass offers a picture of a world beset by oppressions of all varieties and deeply connected and responsible for those oppressions. Like the “inter-dependence of mankind” that he emphasizes in “Self-
Made Men,” Douglass similarly posits a world that is both morally and naturally
connected – even “oceans no longer divide, but link nations together.”211 Years later, in
1883, Douglass illustrates the point even more clearly, suggesting both that “every well
formed man finds no rest to his soul while any portion of his species suffers from a
recognized evil,” and that “every thing which is of long standing in this world has power
to beget a character and condition in the men and things around it, favorable to its own
continuance.” Thus, in the former, he argues that mankind inherently and innately holds a
morally felt responsibility to end the suffering of others and, in the latter, that the world is
interconnected to such a degree that all things, good or bad, eventually mold the very
character of the world around it. Each of these points suggest a mutual responsibility not
merely upon the basis of self-interest, but as a natural result of an inextricably linked
humanity and an intimately connected world.212 This repeated image of a world
connected (rather than divided by oceans and mountains) suggests a much stronger
investment in positing collectivity rather than appealing to audiences’ self-interest.
Importantly, though abolition remains his primary objective, Douglass does not discuss it,
as many other abolitionists do, as a single issue. Instead, the project of abolition,
Douglass suggests, does not end at emancipation and is, furthermore, less a project and
more an ethics in itself, one which recognizes that enslavement, oppression, racism,
colonization, genocide, sexism, and so on are all intrinsically connected by the very same
systems.

For Douglass, like Harriet Jacobs’s insistence that the immoral influence of
slavery endangers even the souls of Southern whites,213 slavery cannot ever be an isolated
occurrence. Instead, it degrades the moral character of everything that it has even the
least amount of contact with – a direct rebuttal to claims like Wayland’s that suggested there were limits and gradations to one’s participation in the slavery system. Northerners cannot absolve themselves of slavery’s wrongs through distance nor through supposed non-participation since the very nature of a nation, a people, or a world in which slavery exists is infected with the violence of the act, and every ethical encounter is tainted by it – “like a dreadful pestilence, it walks the over the globe, leaving all manner of ruin in its path.”214 As Douglass ends his 1854 speech, “tyranny is one the world over,”215 and the evils of Southern chattel slavery are not separate from the evils of indigenous eradication or colonization or exploitative labor practices or any form of moral degradation. As such, Northerners, and those abroad in nations without chattel slavery, are nonetheless connected by it, victims (as well as benefactors) of it, and, more importantly, responsible for it. Douglass’s image of slavery’s moral pestilence, walking the globe, contaminating all that it touches, suggests far more than mere self-interest or a focus upon particular rights. Douglass’s connection of the evil of slavery to all of the world’s moral degradation provides an unsettling aspect to his philosophy of responsibility, in that it greatly expands rather than limits and clarifies our responsibilities to others. If Buccola’s scholarship suggests a reading of Douglass’s works with our own individual rights in mind, then my work argues instead for a reading of Douglass that is far more expansive and, as a result, potentially more troubling.

As we see from Wayland’s helpfully titled *Limitations of Human Responsibility*, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s exaggerated dismissal of charity in “Self-Reliance,”216 and Douglass’s own immense effort in convincing his audiences abroad to direct their focus to American slavery, conversations surrounding responsibility were often primarily
interested in discovering the limits of that responsibility to others – we must identify what we are responsible for so that we may know what we are not responsible for. Here, however, Douglass suggests a responsibility that is, potentially, boundless. For Douglass, responsibility poses an existential question, not merely a personal one: what kind of world do you want to live in? What do you deem acceptable? As a result, impossibly, frighteningly, Douglass expands our potential responsibilities to include those people and things that lie far beyond our sphere. We are not merely responsible for ourselves and our homes, but for the moral state of the world. And, as we will see, this responsibility to others, for Douglass, forms an innate part of being human. However, it is necessary to note that for Douglass, to be responsible did not always mean to take blame for. Here, my reading of Douglass’s work differs from that of Bernard Boxill’s extensive scholarship on Douglass’s use of “moral suasion” to sway audiences. Boxill specifically traces Douglass’s use of fear and shame and while Douglass’s work is set apart from other abolitionists in his willingness to directly shame audiences for their inaction (something which many other abolitionists avoided), I argue here that it is Douglass’s choice to expand responsibility beyond a rhetoric of blame, fear, and shame that makes it so worthwhile and radically different from other discursive uses of responsibility.

**Responsibility to the Slavery Question**

Unsurprisingly, the project of abolition complicated ideas of responsibility deeply. As we have seen, Wayland’s philosophical interventions ultimately culminated in an abdication of responsibility for America’s chattel system. Others similarly employed the rhetoric of responsibility in order to justify the limits of their own responsibility to abolition. Reverend Moses Stuart, a popular biblical scholar and theorist, reassures
readers in his 1850 *Conscience and the Constitution*, published twelve years after Wayland’s work on the subject, that even in the context of a “restored fugitive” who is “sent back to be delivered into the hands of enraged cruelty,” “the responsibility…for bad treatment of the slave, rests not in the least degree on us of the North.”

Similarly, Catharine Beecher’s 1837 *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism* insists “that God will take the responsibility of bringing good out of this course; so that we ourselves are relieved from any necessity of inquiring as to probable results.”

Adam Smith, whose works, despite their publication in the previous century, would prove foundational for nineteenth-century philosophical thought, notes in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “the prudent man” is “not a bustler in business where he has no concern; is not a meddler in other people’s affairs…. He confines himself, as much as his duty will permit, to his own affairs” and, thus, “he is not willing to subject himself to any responsibility,” which is not imposed upon him. Smith’s self-contained and self-responsible man would remain a popular figure for nineteenth-century Americans, who frequently regarded themselves as individual moral agents, responsible first and foremost for only themselves and their property. Dugald Stewart’s *Outlines of Moral Philosophy* remarks upon Americans’ “attachment to property.” An attachment which, he notes, derives from the “desire to have [something] completely at our own disposal; without being responsible to any person whatever.” Published only eight years after Stewart, Jasper Adams’s *Elements of Moral Philosophy* clearly echoes the ideas of its philosophical predecessors: “every man has his own sphere of duty, his peculiar field of usefulness,” the world outside of which he need not concern himself with. Just as Smith had argued in the previous century, that “the prudent man…. 
confines himself... to his own affairs,” popular thinkers of the nineteenth-century similarly framed American men as individual agents with a limited sphere of attachments and responsibilities. What, they asked, could connect a citizen in New York to the horrors of enslavement in Virginia?

For abolitionists themselves, the rhetoric of responsibility remained a rarely deployed tactic. Given responsibility’s continued association with accountability (particularly for a committed wrong), abolitionists remained, understandably, hesitant to deploy any rhetoric that depended upon producing feelings of guilt and shame in audiences whose support they desired. While abolitionists had no qualms in proclaiming the South’s responsibility for the chattel system – Wendell Phillips identifies abolition as the deliverance of justice on Southern enslavers by finally “holding the intelligent and deliberate actor responsible for the consequences of his acts” – few abolitionist works held Northern audiences specifically “responsible” for enslavement. Abolitionists appealed to such audiences’ patriotic duty, their Christian sentiment, their emotional reactions to “the novelty of horrors” enslavement produced, their desire to deliver justice upon Southern enslavers, or their moral sense of Right and Wrong, but rarely employed the rhetoric of responsibility.

Douglass’s work had no such qualms. In 1846 he boldly declared that “emancipation is an individual, national, and an international responsibility” and denied claims “that slavery belongs entirely to the southern states of America and does not belong to the north.” He further asserted, “that slavery is an American institution – that it belongs to the entire community” in part because it is the whole of the nation that benefits economically from slave labor, and also, more obviously, because the Fugitive
Act had now transformed “the whole land” into “one great hunting-ground for catching slaves and returning them to their masters.”\textsuperscript{228} Four years later, Douglass again asserts that “the whole American people are responsible for slavery, and must share, in its guilt and shame, with the most obdurate men-stealers of the south.”\textsuperscript{229} Douglass’s insistence upon the collective responsibility of all Americans (and, even more radically, all global citizens) for the continuation of enslavement stands out as particularly noteworthy when placed alongside the century’s most influential thinkers and theorists who argued for the limits of responsibility instead.

**Duty and Responsibility**

While abolitionist literature often shied from responsibility, duty was far more popularly deployed. Douglass’s work, however, makes a clear decision to prioritize responsibility rather than duty as a result of duty’s long association with obligation rather than conscious moral choice. Douglass importantly differentiates between duty and responsibility in his own work and confirms a reading of duty as that which is done out of obligation and which often falls short of responsibility. He writes in 1883 that “freedom has brought duties, responsibilities and created expectations which must be fulfilled,”\textsuperscript{230} and in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that enslavement destroyed the “high moral and religious responsibility” of men in order to better fit them “for the duties of a slave.”\textsuperscript{231} In this latter quote Douglass also draws a connection between performing “the duties of a slave” – which requires that one “should know nothing but the will of [one’s] master” – and being reduced “to a mere machine,” whose performance of duty is unthinking and mechanical.\textsuperscript{232} As he similarly writes of Mr. Gore, “the cold, distant, unapproachable overseer of Col. Edward Lloyd’s plantation,” “when he whipped, he seemed to do so
from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences.” In describing Gore’s violence, Douglass notes that he whipped not from some passion nor particular feeling, but rather out of a seeming “sense of duty.” This sense of duty, paired with Douglass’s description of the overseer’s “cold, distant” nature, itself reads as cold and disconnected from the violence of the act. In particular, we might note that as a result of this “sense of duty,” Douglass writes that Gore “feared no consequences.”

If, as we’ve seen, responsibility was generally based upon the ability of one party to call another to account for their actions, then it follows that Gore in his duty, acting coldly out of obligation would be free from consequence. After all, the enslaved victims of these whippings are not able to hold Gore accountable and those with the ability to do so would see only a man engaging in the “faithful discharge of the duties of his office,” as Douglass notes (and as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Mr. Shelby similarly argues in defense of his actions). Douglass also complicates an easy understanding of duty, however. He writes:

It is easy to see, that, in entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, some little experience is needed. Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slaveholders. Nothing but rigid training, long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other.

Readers may quickly notice that Douglass affirms the unnaturalness of enslavement, which is evidenced in the “rigid training” required to fulfill both “the duties of a slave” as well as “the duties of a slaveholder.” However, Douglass’s discussion of nature in this moment does more than merely reaffirm the wrongfulness of enslavement, it contributes to a significant, though easy-to-miss, intervention in the discourse of duty versus responsibility. We may return momentarily to the example provided in the introduction of Adam Smith’s dutiful wife who “may sometimes not feel that tender regard for her
husband which is suitable to the relation,” but who will act dutifully “if she has been virtuously educated.” Smith’s dutiful wife only comes to know her duty through her (virtuous) education and would otherwise have no basis for how to act towards her husband besides her innate feelings toward him, which, as has been established, are lacking. In both Douglass and Smith, we see that we are educated in our duty, trained in the proper performance of it. A sense of duty, then, crucially, is not innate. In fact, this aspect of duty is made all the clearer when compared to Douglass’s earlier articulations of the goals of enslavement, that it seeks “to blunt, deaden, and destroy the central principle of human responsibility” and “to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things,” namely their moral and religious responsibility. In both of these instances, Douglass asserts that responsibility and conscience are innate and defining human characteristics, they exist before they are stamped out by the experience of enslavement and they form the critical barrier between man and thing.

For Douglass, then, while duty must be trained and learned, morality and feelings of responsibility are naturally generated, a byproduct of humanity. As he notes in his famous “Fourth of July” speech, for instance, enslavers not only betray God (their religious responsibility), but also betray their moral responsibility, “the deepest and pure up-gushings of the unsophisticated human heart,” which demands that we “be merciful…be humane…[and] do good.” Unlike one’s duty, which one is socially instructed in, these moral commandments gush naturally from even the most “unsophisticated human heart,” there is no education nor training required to produce them nor to know how to act in service of them. Douglass’s emphasis on
“unsophisticated” further implies the universality of his belief – all of humanity feels the up-gushings of moral sentiment regardless of education, intelligence, race, ability, class, etc. Thus, morality is not merely a distinguishing feature of humanity, but, for Douglass, it is shared equally across humanity regardless of context. Like his earlier insistence that responsibility is an innate and deeply felt aspect of humanity, and that duty is a socially construed obligation, performed mechanically and without thought, Douglass again contrasts responsibility as a highly actionable moral choice. Responsibility must be agential since, unlike duty, one must choose to act rather than be compelled to do so.

“Make a man a slave,” Douglass writes, “and you rob him of moral responsibility” since “freedom of choice is the essence of all accountability.” The command to “act, act” is thus an important aspect of responsibility for Douglass. As he writes of the Church’s involvement in slavery,

The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery. The sin of which it is guilty is one of omission as well as of commission.

The Church’s active advocacy of slavery is bad enough, but Douglass takes pains to emphasize that it is the Church’s inaction which makes it “superlatively guilty.” Like his earlier warning, “don’t think you can do nothing,” Douglass reminds his audience that it is inaction in the face of injustice that is most damning. “Do justice, though the heavens fall,” Douglass states, the insistence here to “do justice” further reflecting Douglass’s call to action. Yet again, part of Douglass’s project, to rouse abolitionists to action, requires this reminder from him; however, readers see that Douglass repeatedly names moral responsibility as a responsibility to do and to act regardless of circumstances.
Douglass’s belief that morality was an ingrained and, more importantly, God-given aspect of humanity was an increasing philosophical belief of the time, particularly amongst the Common-Sense philosophers whose work found increased traction amongst American audiences in both the late-eighteenth century and throughout the course of the nineteenth century. Thomas Reid, writing in 1819, notes: “our moral judgment, or conscience, grows to maturity from an imperceptible seed planted by our Creator.” For Reid, while the conscience may be refined and developed in particular ways over time, it is nevertheless an innate aspect of one’s humanity. Other popular Common-Sense philosophers similarly argue that “the moral faculty [is] an essential and universal part of human nature” or query whether “the Moral Faculty [is] an original power” or “not intuitive,” but rather learned. Through each of these brief examples we see the century’s deep interest in the inherent nature of conscience and morality.

However, Douglass’s clarification of moral responsibility as an inherent aspect of humanity is a meaningful one. While other philosophers of the time largely agreed that humans possessed a naturally-occurring moral sense of right and wrong, Douglass instead claims that humans possess an inherent feeling of responsibility along with their moral sense. Identifying right and wrong is merely the first step, but it is responsibility which tasks us with taking actionable steps to enact right and to end wrong. If our conscience enables us to locate what is good or bad, right or wrong, then our responsibility is the feeling that we should act on those designations.

Furthermore, as we will see, Douglass’s concept of responsibility was distinguished by its emphasis on feeling, unlike many contemporaneous philosophers, who argued for a more rational and logical approach to ethical situations. As Thomas
Reid writes, “there is a leading principle in the soul, which, like the supreme power in a commonwealth, has authority and right to govern. This leading principle they called reason” and it is reason, Reid argues, which “distinguishes men…from brutes.” We may notice that, for Reid, reason is the bulwark that separates human from nonhuman, as opposed to Douglass’s argument that it is “moral responsibility” and “conscience” which must be stripped away before men may be rendered either animal or mechanical. This distinction is an important one, since, as we will see, Douglass’s work suggests that moral responsibility is a principle produced and guided primarily by feeling.

In his “Fourth of July” speech, Douglass notes: “I was born amid such sights and scenes. To me the American slave trade is a terrible reality. When a child, my soul was often pierced with a sense of its horrors.” In his account of slavery’s horrors, Douglass both establishes his ethos as a firsthand witness to, and victim of, American slavery while also articulating the importance of feeling to claiming responsibility and, ultimately, taking action. He writes that his “soul was…pierced” by the “horrors” that he witnessed and experienced. Like “the deepest and pure up-gushings of the unsophisticated human heart” that Douglass marks as so vital to human nature and morality, he again makes clear here that moral action derives not from reason, but from those unnamable “up-gushings” and soul-piercing feelings. As he later mentions, the driving force behind abolition is the moment when abolitionists are “stung by a burning sense of wrong.” Douglass similarly notes that, for himself, “I see [the difficulties of abolition] clearly, and feel them sadly…. with an earnest aching heart.” For ethical situations, it is feeling, Douglass posits, that guides our actions, not reason. It is not enough to “see… clearly,” we must also “feel… deeply” with “an earnest aching heart.” Once more, too, Douglass
locates moral feeling and responsibility in the body. He is stung by slavery’s wrongfulness, “pierced” by it, and he feels it manifest as an “aching” within his heart. Responsibility and morality are not metaphorical nor distant concepts to be debated or merely thought about, instead they are found in bodily experiences and are almost always rendered as experiences of bodily pain. If responsibility is a burden in its ability to locate blame, then it is a further burden in its manifestation as frequent emotional and physical discomfort which directs us to act.

Though Douglass insists upon feeling as a necessary aspect of responsibility, it is not the whole of it. Douglass believes deeply in the power of feeling as a motivating force (“at a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument is needed”)\textsuperscript{255}, but insists that feeling merely motivates one towards their responsibility and action. And while other abolitionists depended heavily upon feeling, positing that it was human sentiment and right feeling that might compel Americans to act in the service of freedom, Douglass’s work instead suggests that, regardless of their feelings, the citizens of New York remain just as guilty as the enslavers of Virginia. Douglass’s suggestion that responsibility operates not in personalized spheres of influence, but in huge circuits of which we are all a part, similarly appears in his 1846 call for Scottish churches to “send back to America [the] blood-stained money”\textsuperscript{256} that they had received in donation from American pro-slavery churches. Douglass suggests here that every part of enslavement – the goods produced, the money circulating as a direct result of it, the social and professional circles that support it – binds one in equal guilt to the very perpetrators of slavery.
In his occasional invocations of accountability and guilt, Douglass employs responsibility’s most frequent use as a means of marking blame and sovereignty, the connotation most often deployed in racist discourse against Black subjects. As Isaac Brinckerhoff writes in 1864, “with the enjoyment of a freedman’s privileges, comes also a freedman’s duties and responsibilities,” which must be “patiently and cheerfully” fulfilled or else one is “not worthy of being freedman.”257 However, it is necessary to remember that, for Douglass, the sovereignty, selfhood, and right to freedom of Black subjects is never in question. Despite his typically universal approach to morality, Douglass posits that the experience of enslavement abdicates enslaved individuals from blame without removing their status as sovereign selves.258 While others argued that Black subjects were not responsible enough to possess freedom or be considered fully agential, Douglass instead argued that the context of enslavement disallowed blame-placing onto Black agents. Here, Douglass remains fully aware of the common pitfalls of responsibility, particularly when used in conjunction with accountability, but builds a philosophy of responsibility that avoids such pitfalls or, at the very least, takes them into account while nonetheless advocating for responsibility as a viable philosophy.

**Responsibility To and For:**

Eleven years after his declaration that any money from enslavement and any hands that benefit from it are themselves “blood-stained,”259 Douglass responds to Garrisonian efforts to leave the Union, stating firmly that there “is no freedom from responsibility for slavery, but in the Abolition of slavery” and, importantly, that Northerners would bear responsibility for slavery even after “dissolving the Union.”260 Like his declaration in Scotland a decade prior, Douglass conceives of the evil of slavery...
not as an isolated moral failing, but as a global system that one can never be fully extricated from – leaving the Union may remove slavery from being a strictly-speaking “American” problem, but it would not change the relation of those who benefit from its production and labor. To illustrate this point, Douglass offers two metaphorical examples that this chapter will spend some time untangling. The first draws upon a metaphor of familial obligation, in which white Northerners are framed as a negligent and absent father.

To desert the family hearth may place the recreant husband out of the sight of his hungry children, but it cannot free him from responsibility. Though he should roll the waters of three oceans between him and them, he could not roll from his soul the burden of his responsibility to them; and, as with the private family, so in this instance with the national family. To leave the slave in his chains, in the hands of cruel masters who are too strong for him, is not to free ourselves from responsibility.261

Douglass’s second example is a bit more colorful:

If I were on board a pirate ship, with a company of men and women whose lives and liberties I had put in jeopardy, I would not clear my soul of their blood by jumping in the long boat, and singing out no union with pirates. My business would be to remain on board, and while I never would perform a single act of piracy again, I should exhaust every means given me by my position to save the lives and liberties of those against whom I had committed piracy.262

Here, Douglass writes not of a father perpetrating harm out of neglect, but of a pirate actively committing violence. Thus, Northerners’ guilt must be two-fold. On the one hand, they are neglecting their responsibility in the matter of enslavement, and, on the other, are refusing to acknowledge how they directly contribute to and benefit from the slavery system (and failing to provide adequate reparations for that harm).

In both examples, Douglass narrativizes the ethics of responsibility in ways that insist upon its immediacy: children currently experiencing hunger, and victims currently
under attack. Douglass’s metaphors frame responsibility, then, as a moral response to an immediate threat which demands action and redress. In each example Douglass notably locates the ethics of responsibility within the bodies of those affected, the children’s corporeal experience of hunger, the lives and blood of the ship passengers. Similarly, Douglass’s note that he would be unable to “clear [his] soul of their blood” renders responsibility as a discernible stain, a manifestation of guilt much like the physical marking of Cain. For Douglass, responsibility is not a distant nor metaphorical problem (though it is presented through metaphor); instead, it is a visible wound on the body, it is a body under threat, or a body in pain. It is important to note that discussions of ethics frequently occur through the medium of metaphor; in fact, the most popular ethical dilemmas are those presented as narrativized thought experiments – a drowning child, a runaway trolley, and so on. Ethical exploration demands thinkers to engage what if scenarios, to think anecdotally, metaphorically, narratologically. Given the very real and present nature of slavery, then, we might consider Douglass’s choice to couch the issue of enslavement and abolition in the narrativized and metaphorical terms that he does – through the images of a repentant pirate and a neglectful father.

His first metaphor relies upon a familiar nineteenth-century choice to equate “the private family… with the national family.”263 While the individual remained the building unit of society, families (“individual[s]…set in Households”)264 easily served as shorthand for one’s duties and ties of obligations: “the household [is] a unit in its affections, aims, success. The rights, duties, privileges, preferences of every member of the family are discussed.”265 Other authors, like Henry Ward Beecher and Anna Julia Cooper (drawing upon Beecher’s work directly) as well as the slew of domestic texts that
emerged in the century, drawing upon ideas of Republican Motherhood, similarly argued that the family was but a reduced version of the state. Beecher, writing on “The Family as an American Institution,” argues that the obligations that bind one within the family must be applied “out of the family” – just as children are cared for, so too must the more vulnerable members of society. Cooper notes that a “nation is the aggregate of its homes,” while domestic texts repeatedly argue that it is familial obligation that generates national obligation. However, while this metaphor of the family was useful for many arguing for stronger bonds among Americans, it also proved a problematic image for Black and enslaved Americans. In this particular metaphor, the Northern states, in seeking to leave the Union and abandon millions to the horrors of enslavement, risk inhabiting the role of the recreant, “desert[ing] the family hearth” and “his hungry children.” Douglass’s metaphor, in rendering the North as father and husband and the enslaved population as suffering children, draws fully upon existing patriarchal and patronizing imaginings of enslaved people, which depicted them as reliant upon white aid and guidance. For pro-slavery advocates, such depictions argued for slaveholders as masters and fathers to helpless enslaved individuals in need of care (often literally fathers and “recreant husband[s]” to the enslaved women and children that they terrorized, raped, and fathered). However, Douglass uses the image here not to argue for Black helplessness, but instead for white obligation.

In pro-slavery sentiments, the argument was that masters must inhabit the loving and disciplinary role of father responsible for the enslaved individuals under his care since they were imagined to be incapable of being responsible for themselves. Douglass’s metaphor, however, in asserting that the negligent father is responsible, not
for, but *to* his children, disrupts this argument significantly. While Douglass confirms that white Americans are responsible/accountable for the institution of slavery, he denies that they are responsible for enslaved individuals (who, it is implied, can be responsible for themselves) and thus denies the popular conception of enslaved persons as irresponsible, child-like, and dependent upon the patriarchal stewardship of white Americans.

Importantly, in his attempts to engage sympathy for enslaved people, Douglass locates responsibility in the metaphorical bodies of children and ship passengers rather than the real victimized Black bodies existent under slavery. Douglass deftly substitutes the image of the wounded Black body for that of starving children and victimized ship passengers (all of whom white audiences could safely imagine as white, as themselves, as people they know). Given Douglass’s belief that one could not know or understand the experience of enslavement from outside of slavery, it is unsurprising that he chooses to couch the issue of enslavement in more accessible metaphors of neglect, violence, and theft. Similarly, Douglass argues that, just as responsibility is an immediate and actionable issue, ethics of responsibility are also inescapable and not spatially limited. This intervention is a clear deviation from contemporaneous philosophers like Thomas Wayland who writes that one is “in no manner responsible” for those things which one has not “sanctioned,” and that, even in cases where “the accomplishment of any specified good, be within the limit of our physical power, it does not, by necessity, follow, that we are responsible for the performance of it.” While Wayland argues for a responsibility that is easily eschewed, Douglass instead provides readers with a recreant husband haunted across oceans and continents by a responsibility which is inescapable. Similarly,
Douglass’s reformed pirate cannot ease the burden of his responsibility “by jumping in the long boat” (by distancing himself from the issue), nor can he rid himself of the gory stain of his victims’ blood. Furthermore, one’s responsibility remains unchanged regardless of distance or cause. Despite Wayland’s claims that one is never responsible for occurrences which one has not directly caused, Douglass provides a recreant husband who may or may not be the direct source of his children’s hunger; however, because of the nature of his relationship to them (that of a father), he is no less responsible to them for ending their hunger regardless of whether he has “sanctioned” that hunger or not, to use Wayland’s own terms.

Despite their similarities, Douglass’s two metaphors nevertheless demonstrate markedly different approaches to responsibility. Furthermore, and most importantly, Douglass’s examples explore the radical differences between one’s responsibility for others and one’s responsibility to others – the former leveraged to assign blame for the wrongfulness of enslavement, and the latter disruptive to popular nineteenth-century conceptions of how responsibility functioned and whom one might be accountable to. In the second example, Douglass, as an imagined pirate, argues that he must act and make reparations because he is directly responsible for endangering and harming others. He easily equates this to Northern abolitionists whose forefathers enacted slavery and who continue to benefit from the American slave system. As he says, “while in the Union, we are responsible for slavery;” that is, being part of the structure that built and continues to maintain enslavement makes Douglass’s piracy metaphor an apt one. Northern abolitionists are directly responsible, in their own way, for the American slavery system and so must make immediate reparations to attend to that harm. The view of
responsibility which Douglass employs in this metaphor is one which locates blame –
Douglass-as-pirate is responsible for addressing the harm he has caused, and abolitionists
must move to action because they are, at least partially, implicated in the crime of
American slavery. This belief was itself a diversion from many who argued, as Rev.
Moses Stuart would in 1850, that “the responsibility…for bad treatment of the slave, rests
not in the least degree on us of the North.” Furthermore, Douglass’s choice to equate
white Americans’ responsibility for enslavement with the act of piracy mirrors (and
anticipates) a future metaphor of Douglass’s that renders white America as a
“highwayman” for whom it is not enough to simply “stop robbing;” instead,
responsibility lies also in “restor[ing] the stolen goods.” In this text Douglass
continues,

The negro has been deprived, not only of liberty, of opportunity, of the
rewards of industry, but of his natural right to knowledge. He has been
kept, by force of law, imprisoned in a castle of ignorance; forbidden by the
laws of the land to learn to read the teachings of religion or science or the
rules of right living.

Like this later-used metaphor of the robbing highwayman, Douglass’s choice to render
slavery as an act of piracy similarly draws upon an American attachment to property –
imagine liberty, opportunity, and so on as stolen goods, thus making the crime of
slavery a theft (of people, of futures, of labor, of lives).

However, even these metaphors of theft fail to properly account for the horror of
slave-holding. As Douglass notes in 1854, “piety has been found among infidels, honor
among thieves, mercy among pirates; but piety, honor and mercy dwell not within the
habitations of the buyers and sellers of men.” Piracy proves too honorable a metaphor
for enslavement and, as Douglass continues in the self-same speech, enslavement
possesses a moral infectiousness that threatens North and South alike. Douglass asks his
audience “where slaveholders have ever kept a compact…. What treaty with the Indians have they respected? When has a slaveholder or a Slave State paid an honest debt…?”

And then, driving his point home further, proclaims “that system which gives absolute power to one man over the body and soul of another man, is in its nature aggressive, and the parent of all manner of treachery and fraud.” In his metaphor of piracy, Douglass argues that white Northerners must act because they are responsible for enslavement and, thus, must be accountable for ending it. In his metaphor of the negligent patriarch, however, Douglass insists that white Northerners have a moral responsibility to enslaved persons. The former example demonstrates responsibility’s frequent use as a means of blame-placing, and the second, a more complicated responsibility oriented towards others. Douglass’s choice to declare Americans responsible to enslaved persons (rather than for them), as we will see, is a radical one.

This critical difference, between a responsibility for and a responsibility to, appears in other texts of the period in illustrative ways. As Harriet Beecher Stowe’s budding abolitionist, Mrs. Shelby, demands of her husband, “Are we not both responsible to God for this poor girl?” In her question, Mrs. Shelby constructs a neat comparison between the dual uses of responsibility, she admits that she feels a responsibility for poor Eliza (largely because of Shelby’s status as “a woman – a mother”); however, her true responsibility is to God. Here the language of accountability once again becomes relevant and we see that while Stowe and Douglass differ slightly in their uses of responsibility, they both provide a more complete picture of the work that such an encompassing term performs. For Stowe’s Mrs. Shelby, her feelings of responsibility for Eliza mean that she feels called to act upon her and her circumstances and that she takes responsibility for
what becomes of her. We should particularly note that in this instance, Eliza is merely the object for Mrs. Shelby’s actions and feelings – Eliza may be aided or directed or turned away at the Shelbys’ discretion and with no recourse. Mrs. Shelby’s responsibility to God, however, is another matter altogether, and here a distinction must be made, which will clarify Douglass’s radical use of responsibility.

For Mrs. Shelby, her responsibility to God is one of accountability. It is God, ultimately and only, who will hold her to account for those things which she does or does not do. So, while Shelby’s responsibility to God may guide her in identifying what her actions regarding Eliza should be (what her responsibility for Eliza looks like), Mrs. Shelby is free to act for and upon Eliza because her ultimate accountability lies only to God. To put it another way, because of Eliza’s status as a fugitive, formerly-enslaved woman, Mrs. Shelby has no fear of consequences from Eliza if she fails in her responsibility for her since Eliza possesses no real means of holding Mrs. Shelby socially or legally accountable; instead, it is God alone who may deliver consequences and blame if Mrs. Shelby fails to act responsibly for Eliza. As a result, Mrs. Shelby is interested in appeasing her responsibility to God through Eliza, rather than identifying Eliza as someone to whom she should be responsible as an equal individual and subject. Because of Eliza’s inability to hold Mrs. Shelby to account (to hold her responsible), Mrs. Shelby may act in whatever way she determines best for and on behalf of Eliza so long as her actions fulfill her true responsibility, which is to God alone.

Given Stowe’s continued connection of responsibility with accountability, we may now more clearly see how Douglass’s use of responsibility is all the more unconventional. Let us return once more to Douglass’s metaphorical “recreant husband.”
As Douglass writes of the negligent father and his children, “though he should roll the waters of three oceans, between him and them he could not roll from his soul the burden of his responsibility to them.” Unlike Stowe, who makes a neat distinction between those whom we are responsible for and those whom we are responsible to, it is significant that Douglass’s “recreant husband” has a responsibility to his children, or, dismissing the metaphor altogether, that white Americans have a responsibility to enslaved persons. If it was popularly believed, as Francis Wayland so succinctly states, that “the notion of responsibility always involves the relation between a superior and an inferior,” and that “if I am responsible for any act to another, he has the right to command; and it is my duty to obey,” then we see how radical Douglass’s intervention is. Rather than conceiving of responsibility to others as hierarchical (an inferior meeting the demands of a superior), Douglass posits that responsibility might operate horizontally – that one may be responsible even to those who cannot hold one to account or deliver consequences as a superior.

Douglass insists both that we are responsible even for those who cannot hold us accountable, and furthermore, that we are responsible to those around us (particularly those most vulnerable and incapable of delivering consequence) rather than to the distant authority of God. By relocating responsibility to vulnerable populations, Douglass surprisingly places power with those whom society has deemed powerless and, frequently, disposable, forcing attention towards those immediately in need and away from high-minded religiosity (which, unlike responsibility, is never immediate in its promise of a better hereafter). As he writes elsewhere, “we owe something to the slaves, south of the Mason and Dixon’s line, as well as to those north of it.” Though couched
in terms of debt rather than responsibility, Douglass again insists not that we must act on behalf of enslaved persons, but that we are responsible directly and “owe something” to those persons. To once more return to the “recreant husband” and his hungry children, Douglass’s metaphor insists that one maintains a responsibility to one’s children despite their relative powerlessness while the message behind his metaphor similarly insists that the American people have a responsibility to enslaved persons despite their vulnerable status. Momentarily setting aside the problematics of a metaphor in which enslaved persons are rendered as hungry children dependent upon a negligent father, we see that Douglass’s insistence on a responsibility to enslaved persons, and children, is an argument for an ethics in which we are responsible to vulnerable members of society despite their perceived inability to hold us accountable. For Douglass, then, responsibility is not an issue of accountability or blame placing (though, as we’ve seen, it can be); instead, responsibility is acting justly towards others regardless of their ability to impose consequences.

Douglass’s choice of making whites responsible to enslaved persons (rhetorically indebting and obligating them to the enslaved population) disrupts the perceived racial hierarchy that grants whites power. Buccola writes, expanding on his earlier argument of Douglass’s appeals to self-interest, that “reliance on white self-interest seems to be a rather precarious foundation for black elevation…furthermore, the idea of appealing to white interests, one might argue, perpetuates the existence of a hierarchical and unjust social structure.” That is, if Douglass does appeal to white self-interest to garner support for abolition then he risks perpetuating the assumption that white rights are what truly matter. However, as we see from his critical intervention of responsibility to others
(and not simply for them), Douglass is both well aware of the problematic existing hierarchies of race and prepared to counteract and disrupt them in creative philosophical ways. Interestingly, Douglass’s intervention differs vastly from other conceptions of responsibility, both at the time and even in our modern moment. Furthermore, Douglass’s concept of responsibility seemingly anticipates recent interventions in feminist ethics. As Iris Young writes, “the ‘blame’ or ‘fault’ model of responsibility” remains the most popularly deployed definition of the term.281 As she continues, “one feature of this conception of responsibility is that its purpose is to pin responsibility on one agent in order to absolve others.”282 That is, if we consider responsibility as a means of locating whom is to blame for a particular outcome (say, Southerners and slavery), then one outcome of that is that others (non-Southerners who nonetheless benefit from slavery) may be absolved of any guilt or consequence. As we’ve seen with authors like Wayland, Stuart, and even the Garrisonians that Douglass’s work responds to, their work does seek to provide absolution for Northerners and whites not directly involved in the sale of enslaved persons.

Douglass’s implied theory of responsibility to those without the ability to enact consequences also stands apart from other, similar claims. Henry Ward Beecher, for instance, similarly notes a responsibility to those who have been rendered vulnerable. As Beecher writes, “Are you superior to him because you are frugal? Then you are to bear with his spendthriftness. I put on you the responsibility of taking care of him…. The law of the family must come in. If you think you are better than any body else, take care of that other body.”283 Like Douglass, Beecher suggests enacting care towards more vulnerable members (like children in a family). However, Beecher’s use of superiority
and family dynamics suggests some truth to the same supremacist and paternalistic ideas used by pro-slavery advocates to justify Black enslavement under the ‘care’ of whites and ultimately reinforces the very hierarchy which Douglass’s work disrupts. Beecher seems unable to justify a responsibility to those who cannot deliver consequence that is not self-serving (proving one’s superiority) or patronizing (caring for those who are lesser). A similar argument appears in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s (Beecher’s sister) *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where Mrs. Shelby tells her husband, and readers, that she has “tried … to do my duty to these poor, simple, dependent creatures.” Like Beecher’s own patronizing suggestion of a superiority that grants power as another’s caretaker, Stowe frames enslaved individuals as “poor, simple, dependent creatures,” inhuman, beastly, sympathetic, underdeveloped, and utterly dependent upon the benevolence of superior whites. Stowe’s choice of duty rather than responsibility is similarly noteworthy since as we have seen, one’s duty – marked by socially prescriptive obligations rather than one’s own moral conscience – does not account for one’s responsibility. Mrs. Shelby has, in fact, done her duty as a white Southern woman and as a slaver, but in doing so has fully missed her responsibility to the people that she keeps in enslavement.

Distinguishing his beliefs from other philosophers and abolitionists of the time, Douglass advocates for a responsibility that is moral, directed to (rather than for) others, differentiated from blame and accountability, that is felt deeply, that is agential, and that is inherent to all humans. Despite contemporaneous debates regarding the sovereignty, humanity, and capacity of Black subjects, Douglass nonetheless reimagines moral responsibility as a productive concept, a methodology for identifying good and evil with
the sovereign choice to enact good and cease evil, a means of reorienting ourselves towards others rather than positioning ourselves above them.
CHAPTER V
“FAITHFUL, PATIENT, SELF-DENYING:” READING WOMEN’S DOMESTIC DUTY

“Let woman ponder well her duties and responsibilities,” L.G. Abell instructs readers of her 1855 domestic treatise, Woman in her Various Relations, “and leave no subject unexplored that shall bear upon the happiness or good of the human family.”

Writing nearly forty years after Abell, Anna Julia Cooper similarly marks “the influence [women] wield upon our civilization.” Like Abell’s insistence that women should consider “the happiness or good of the human family,” and her later instruction that women must “look upon the ‘wrongs’ that exist in society… and ask herself if she has done what she could to prevent them?,” many middle-class Americans (Black and white) held that women constituted the moral center of society, and commanded immense sway over their families, communities, nation, and, ultimately, all of humanity. The rise of domesticity and the lingering philosophy of republican motherhood meant that “by 1830 the nature of woman’s contribution to society…became a national obsession;” furthermore, since women (as mothers and educators) “exercised a determining power over the fate of the Republic” at large, women and their moral influence were frequently deemed responsible for the welfare of all of society, not merely the sphere of their own household. As these examples suggest, over the course of the nineteenth century, American middle-class women were inundated with a variety of domestic guides, pamphlets, novels, sermons, as well as tracts and think-pieces, all dedicated to exploring woman’s “duties and responsibilities” as well as the “great social and moral power in her keeping.”
Despite the admission that as “wives and mothers…sisters and daughters” women are “deeply responsible for the influence [they] have on the human race,” domestic guides and literature take far more interest in the “varied duties of the family state” than in its responsibilities. Although the nineteenth-century saw an increased interest in the discourse of responsibility, particularly among male philosophers and thinkers, women’s domestic literature nonetheless remained far more concerned with duties and obligations than with responsibilities. This division underscores a significant difference between popular contemporaneous men and women’s conceptions of the self and one’s relationship to others. William R. Brock and J. Matthew Gallman have studied the cultural shifts that moved nineteenth-century Americans towards iterations of responsibility and duty that modern Americans are more familiar with; however, very little work has been produced regarding the gendered differences at work within these particular discourses. Despite male thinkers increased interest in responsibility (both private and, eventually, more public), women continued employ the language of duty, which both empowered and limited them significantly.

This chapter aims to make three interventions in the scholarly discussion of domestic guides and much of women’s literature more broadly. First, by reestablishing the larger historical context of a tension between (old) duty and (new) responsibility, I make it possible to see that women’s domestic guides were far more interested in the concept of duty than responsibility. Authors’ interest in duties reveal an orientation towards others and (perhaps) a precursor of modern feminist ethics that emphasize the recognition of one’s interconnectedness with others. Second, I argue that women’s literature at large was less interested in sentimental rhetoric than many modern scholars
suggest. Instead, domestic guides show that women authors (and their readers) were well aware of the performative, labor-intensive, and even calculated nature of care within the domestic space. As a result, I show that despite the frequent connection between duty and unthinking obligation, domestic authors’ use of duty did not assume an unthinking or mechanical nature to their domestic labor. In recognizing their domestic work (both sentimental and duty-bound) as labor intensive, domestic authors dismiss both the myth that women were more naturally sentimental than men, and the myth that dutiful work did not require the input of a thinking, agential individual. Instead, what we find in a variety of domestic guides, published across the century – as well as in some of the century’s more didactic pieces of domestic fiction, like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Pink and White Tyranny* – are authors who already assume women’s position as responsible individuals. That is, instead of arguing that women are self-responsible agents, they instead assume that women already conceive of themselves as agential. The role of such guides, then, was to instruct women how to supplant that responsible (and selfish) understanding of themselves and instead prioritize the more selfless ethics of duty.

**Dutifully Done**

Thinkers as varied as Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Horace Mann, Francis Wayland, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote with an eye to the responsibilities that “every man instinctively feels,”292 and the potential limitations of those responsibilities. “Are they *my* poor?”293 Emerson asks while, three years earlier, Wayland assures readers that they have “as citizens, no responsibility”294 to act against the slavery system. Nonetheless, women authors and thinkers advocated for duty and obligation instead. As we have seen, the move from duty towards a discourse of responsibility did not occur
suddenly. Instead, authors and thinkers continued to grapple with both terms frequently, often using one when they may very well have meant the other. Still, the choice, in women’s domestic writing, to so fully embrace “duty,” and maintain older and more familiar definitions of responsibility, does mark it as distinct from men’s writing. While, in other arenas, responsibility was growing in popularity as a term of agency – one’s self-responsibility as an individual – women’s literature nonetheless continued to employ the term solely as one of blame and consequences refusing to mirror newer conceptions of responsibility. As Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s writing succinctly puts it, “the era of responsibility begins… as soon as [one] is capable of right and wrong action.” Responsibility for domestic authors still held only the meaning of blame and consequence (to be accountable for “right and wrong action”). Importantly, as I will argue, domestic guides’ interest in duty should be read as a rejection of responsibility rather than a failure to keep pace with its changing meaning. As we will see, women’s guides often conceived of their readers as individuals and agents, but hoped to guide them towards an ethics of duty – an ethics that men’s writing eschewed in favor of emergent ideas of responsibility.

Though not a domestic guide, but rather one of many popular, didactic domestic fictions authored by a writer of domestic guides, Stowe’s 1871 Pink and White Tyranny, little treated by scholars, illustrates the complicated and original way that domestic guides and fiction dealt with responsibility and duty. Lillie, the novel’s over-indulged, negative example of womanhood who has wasted her best years on selfish pursuits, reunites with a previously scorned lover only to find that life does not run, as Stowe scornfully remarks “on the basis of French novels,” which promise young women only romance and gaiety. Stowe’s novel, by contrast, promises only a sober view of
women’s duties and Lillie ends the novel having failed as a mother and wife as a result of prioritizing her own selfish wants. Importantly, the novel never questions Lillie’s ability to be an individual, to possess wants, desires, and even a responsibility to herself or a responsibility for her own actions. Lillie gaily sows to her heart’s content and reaps the consequences of those actions. The question is not whether Lillie has agency, it is instead what she will do with that agency. Will she choose the “sparkle and stimulus,” as well as the allure of one’s “emotions,” or the duties of domesticity – of being a wife and mother.\(^{297}\)

The stakes of women’s duties and their responsibility (or accountability) for them are made clear in other guides’ more extreme descriptions. Helen Campbell’s 1881 guide warns that “criminal blunder[s]” like undercooked food and poor ventilation have steep consequences – “death has begun its work, and you are responsible.”\(^{298}\) Buckey’s 1884 Cookery and Practical Housekeeping issues an even more severe account of the stakes of women’s work, noting that without “special preparation” for the educating and raising of children (little “immortal being[s]”) society will see as “the result” a generation of “the blind the deaf and dumb, the idiot, the lunatic, the epileptic, the criminal, the drunkard, the glutton - thousands of human beings, in our young republic, that never should have been born; a tax on society, a disgrace to their parents, and a curse to themselves.”\(^{299}\) Like Stowe’s selfish and ill-fated Lillie, whose scorned obligations result in a life of unhappiness and a repentant demise, the non-fiction advice of popular domestic guides similarly communicated the enormous heft of responsibility as it befell nineteenth-century women since, as Abell once more makes clear, women’s actions fully “bear upon the happiness or good of the human family” as a whole.\(^{300}\)
Within women’s domestic guides, duty frequently carried a weight that responsibility, despite its association with consequences, did not. Although responsibility, as we have seen, commonly carried associations of blame and consequence, it nonetheless, as we have also seen, carried a freedom of choice as well. As Catharine Beecher writes regarding proper diet in the home, “it becomes the duty of every woman who has the responsibility of providing food for a family to avoid a variety of tempting dishes.”

Beecher’s distinction between duty and responsibility represents the distinction made by other domestic authors as well, and we see that duty (which may also be regarded as a severe obligation) retains a sense of must, while responsibility more greatly implies avoidable consequence and bears, instead, a moral sense of should. Similarly, responsibility appears most often as a distant or general moral decision, while one’s duties are specific, daily, and time sensitive chores. Domestic guides suggest that responsibility without an accompanying attunement to one’s duties (a sense of should rather than must) can sometimes supports a selfish and individualistic relationship with the world. Duty, on the other hand, is given a distinct moral weight, there is no choice about it; instead, duty is that which one’s very soul seems compelled to perform. As we shall see, domestic authors frequently employed a language of duty more often than that of responsibility. This choice reveals both the weight of their roles as educators, influencers, and caregivers as well as an admitted lack of agency. These domestic labors were not merely the result of should or responsibility, but the result of must, obligation, and duty. To perform the labors of womanhood – mother, wife, educator, caregiver, domestic worker, homemaker, nurse, religious instructor, cook, seamstress, decorator, and so on – was to understand oneself as duty-bound to those beyond oneself.
This proposed orientation to others – suggested by domestic guides and other female-authored texts – like other writings on responsibility and duty, opens a problem space wherein texts are constantly at odds with themselves, and where readers, even modern readers, are left unsure of how much was the product of genuine endorsement and how much was merely repetition of gendered divisions. As Lora Romero’s scholarship aptly suggests, it’s far more likely that “women were neither victims of false consciousness nor clever manipulators of an ideology forced upon them.” Instead, domestic authors, neither proto-feminist nor in need of modern scholars’ recuperation, were women who found, in the language of domesticity and the genre of homemaking manuals, means of negotiating, explaining, challenging, and upholding the demands of their domain. This chapter does not imagine domestic authors as upholding the very structures which sought to dominate them, as Ann Douglas’s work supposes, nor does it suggest that they performed as sly and manipulative authoritarians, as Richard Brodhead’s scholarship submits, and neither were they engaging in something wholly transformative and radical, as Jane Tompkins suggests. Instead, the authors of such guides posited potentially worthwhile views of imagined communities and ethics of care while also parroting much of the gendered discourse of their time. It is our duty, we might say, to excavate the problem space of duty within these texts in order to locate how such guides imagined the worlds and lives of their female readership and what those presumptions might reveal for modern readers.

The larger community that such guides interested themselves in was almost exclusively an Anglo middle-class community. Domestic guides write disparagingly about household workers, frequently using ethnic-identifying pseudonyms as catch-all
names: all German servants are Gretchen, Irish girls are Bridget. Furthermore, as the scholarship of Koritha Mitchell makes clear, domestic guides offered their white readership the perfect opportunity for dismissing racial and class disparities. By interesting themselves fully in the labor needed inside the home readers might safely ignore the world outside of the home. As Mitchell writes,

> White women can justify ignoring any responsibility toward the public good by aggressively prioritizing motherhood. How can anyone say their priorities are in the wrong place if they're elevating motherhood? But it's a particular motherhood, one whose politics are rooted in keeping things as they are rather than working to make the world less hostile for more people.

In this way, we see how an emphasis on duty within the home simultaneously allows readers to ward off any public responsibilities that might exist outside of the home. Busying oneself with the chores and obligations of domestic life, and investing oneself fully in the small, daily duties of life within the home could, as Mitchell argues, easily allow one to feel no responsibility for the large and public problems of the outside world. To put it another way, a woman’s responsibility to abolition could be neglected (and that neglectfulness forgiven) in favor of attending to the more concrete daily duties of household upkeep – such large moral causes could be safely ignored so long as one had washing and cooking to tend to. Importantly, although this chapter aims to show that women’s guides were more interested in an interconnected ethics of duty, this duty did not extend beyond the lines of race and class. Domestic guides, whether ideal or reality, nonetheless present a uniform picture of white womanhood: a mother/wife organizing a domestic respite for her husband and children, firmly overseeing her non-white (or at least non-Anglo) servants, and remaining perfectly unengaged from the disturbing inequalities beyond her door. Paradoxically, women are portrayed as both highly
influential in the world and simultaneously best restrained to their sphere of domestic work – educating their individual children and working in their individual space. Even in repeated insistences that “[Woman] occupies a station of extended and far-reaching importance…her views and feelings are not limited to her own circle, but will pass down to future generations,” it is clear that such influence only comes in the form of “the influence of a good mother” and only “felt centuries after she is sleeping in the dust.”

In this way, women’s guides suggested that women be collectively minded as long as that collective begins and ends with the family unit.

(U)nSentimental Women

Unlike responsibility, which Frederick Douglass and other authors have established as a deeply-felt moral urge, duty, particularly in the context of domesticity, was surprisingly unsentimental. Despite the frequent association of women and sentiment, domestic authors frequently portrayed the nineteenth-century domicile not as a place of great feeling, but, as Sarah Leavitt aptly notes, as “a small laboratory, where women could control the experiments.” There were, of course, more traditional experiments regarding food temperature, air flow, or pantry organization, but there were also social experiments as well, designed to identify the best methods for receiving desired outcomes from their children and husbands, as Catharine Beecher’s work demonstrates most clearly. Domestic manual authors encouraged their female readers to be not merely pragmatic, but calculating in their navigation of their sphere. Terms like affection and feeling appear scarcely, if they appear at all, and care is used only as a warning (“be careful that nothing is over nor under done”) or as a means to communicate the upkeep of something (when borrowing an item, which should always be
avoided, one must “take great care of it, and...return it as soon as possible”).\textsuperscript{311} Love similarly appears rarely, though when it is deployed (most popularly by Catharine Beecher), it is instrumentalized as a means of household government – “govern by rewards more than by penalties.... Love and hope are the principles that should be mainly relied on in forming the habits of childhood.”\textsuperscript{312}

Catharine Beecher’s approach to love will be familiar to those who have encountered Richard H. Brodhead’s scholarship on “disciplinary intimacy,” in which he traces an important shift in American child-rearing away from physical discipline towards emotional discipline or what he terms “discipline through love.”\textsuperscript{313} This shift appears most evidently (though perhaps surprisingly) in the contrast between the pro-slavery work of Thornton Stringfellow and Beecher’s \textit{American Woman’s Home}. As Stringfellow writes, “family government.... must begin in absolute despotism, instead of absolute freedom” since “all men are born slaves to parents, that parents have a right to their service; and a right to control them.”\textsuperscript{314} Furthermore, Stringfellow argues that it is in the family “that we learn that age ought to control infancy, that wisdom ought to control ignorance, and that liberty of action and opinion should be accorded by a standard that experience only can furnish.”\textsuperscript{315} Beecher’s \textit{American Woman’s Home}, published only eight years after Stringfellow’s pro-slavery tract, by contrast, argues instead that “the distinctive feature of the family is self-sacrificing labor of the stronger and wiser members to raise the weaker and more ignorant to equal advantages.... thus, the discipline of the family state is one of daily self-devotion of the stronger and wiser to elevate and support the weaker members.”\textsuperscript{316} While there are some, perhaps disturbing, similarities between the two markedly different texts – both conceive of the family as a
state to be governed and both acknowledge the existence of strong and weak members of
that state – what is most clear, are their differing approaches to governing the family
state, “absolute despotism” intended “to control,” on the one hand, and “self-
sacrificing labor” meant “to elevate and support,” on the other. While Stringfellow’s
view of the family continued to prevail in many homes, there was nonetheless a larger
cultural shift from families ruled by despotism to those invested in self-sacrifice.

Such a change also included a shift away from corporal punishment (Beecher
beseeches readers to “govern by rewards more than penalties”) and away from previous
conceptions of parent/child relationships as fully authoritarian and instead insisted that
children be thought of (and trained up) as responsible individuals capable, to at least
some degree, of self-government. As Michael Grossberg notes, the nineteenth century
saw the emergence of “a new perception of children” as individuals “with particular
needs, talents, and characters…consequently, authoritarian child rearing and hierarchical
relations succumbed to greater permissiveness, intimacy, and character building.” Notably, in conceiving of children as individuals, we see that even in the discourses of
education and child-rearing responsibility and self-ownership were gaining prominence.
Though, as we will see, even in these spaces, responsibility carried with it gendered
implications. Despite Grossberg’s positive depiction of this shift, Brodhead’s work
advances a more suspicious view. As Brodhead asserts, affection in the nineteenth-
century household works “not for the mitigation of authority but really for the extension
of its regulating hold.” That is, when parents reward appropriate behavior with love
and praise, “what the parent stands for” or “believes in” becomes, for the child,
indistinguishable from parental affection; thus, behaving rightly results in love, behaving wrongly in the withholding of that love, or in disapproval.\textsuperscript{321}

This belief, that children can be instructed through sweeter (if not more manipulative) means than physical discipline, emerges throughout a variety of guides. As Abell writes in 1853, “Never try to impress a child with religious truth when in anger, or talk to him of God, as it will not have the desired effect. Do it under more favorable circumstances” in order to associate good feeling with desired thoughts.\textsuperscript{322} Brodhead’s work approaches such advice critically, casting mothers as “sly authoritarians” who manipulate love to nefarious and controlling ends; however, I argue that what such advice instead reveals is how fully women understood, and how skillfully they navigated, their domestic roles and duties. Women’s choice to eschew traumatizing physical discipline in favor of developing a new regimen of discipline based in care, affection, and reward (rather than punishment) revolutionized parenting and domestic relationships. Instead of families organized and maintained through force, women’s new approaches to domestic governance gave rise to an idealized vision of an American family “bound together by a new egalitarianism and by affection.”\textsuperscript{323} Furthermore, the decision of domestic authors to clearly instruct mothers and young women in this new disciplinary system, rather than disguising their intentions through the language of love, affection, or care, reveals that they were fully aware of what they advocated for, its potential pitfalls, and its ultimate usefulness in domestic governance. Domestic authors did not, as Brodhead claims, deal in “sly” or coded instruction. Instead, they openly advocated for an alternative to physical discipline and significantly altered American homes.
Authors’ refusal to couch their training in more genuinely loving rhetoric, instead using love as a means to a desired end, appears in other aspects of domestic literature as well. L.G. Abell commands her readership to “study to acquire and retain a sweet temper,” to “be watchful over yourself” and over “the easy and voluntary manifestation in the voice and manner,” to keep “patience and forbearance” as “the sentinels within” just as “kind words and looks are the outward demonstrations.” These “outward demonstrations,” she notes, make “either the blessedness or the wretchedness of home.” Similarly, Julia McNair Wright’s *Complete Home* urges women to “cultivate graciousness as a duty, and cultivate as a duty also a harmonious neatness and beauty in appearance and in all that you do” since others “judge us by what they see.” Abell and Wright’s advice, that women must govern their outward appearance and their affective life in order to produce a pleasant domestic atmosphere, suggests that they believed that one could not rely upon naturally-occurring, familial affection to account for the demands of the home. Furthermore, these authors acknowledge that displaying affection, care, cheer, beauty, and a pleasant outward-facing demeanor were not inherent principles of womanhood (as some others at that time argued), but were instead further demanding aspects of labor, and just as necessary a domestic duty as washing dishes and educating children. Affection, as these guides demonstrate, was not merely understood as labor, but as labor which required specialized training and was not naturally occurring nor particularly inborn in women specifically. Such calculations similarly reveal a system of women authors and readers who understood their domestic position, and how to deftly navigate it, in more complex ways than scholars frequently acknowledge. These examples are neither proof of domestic authors’ sly ability to manipulate their husbands
and children, nor are they powerful examples of women subverting traditional domestic expectations. Instead, they are straightforward admissions that women’s work entailed performances of affection and care, and that such performances require training and become a form of labor.327

The dismissal of feeling evident in domestic guides and didactic literature generates an important dialectical tension in women’s writing: public writing by women advanced ideas of women as sentimental; domestic guides (by and for women), however, instead unveiled how sentiment was frequently little more than a rhetorical device. In Stowe’s didactic text it is her ill-fated protagonist’s over-investment in her “emotions” that leads to her downfall. However, Anna Julia Cooper, advocating on behalf of Black women’s education, appeals to her much broader readership with a commonly accepted truth of the time, “that as the man is more noble in reason, so the woman is more quick in sympathy.” Though Cooper’s work, authored by a Black woman advocating for Black women’s education, stands apart from the domestic guides this chapter addresses it nonetheless mirrors the thoughts of American nineteenth-century culture at large. As Stearns similarly argues, “there is a natural difference” between “the two classes” of men and women, “a difference which implies not inferiority…but only adaptation to a different sphere,” one of feeling rather than reason. Lydia Maria Child echoes similar sentiments, remarking that domestic education is necessary to “point the female heart to its only true resting-place,” the home.328 Abell likewise argues that it is woman “who moves the hearts of those who moves the springs of society.”329 Such expressions mark the domestic space as distinctly female, mark women as intimately tied to feeling, sympathy, and sentiment, and mark women’s moral power as the power to move “hearts”
through their feeling power (rather than through male-dominated reason). This understanding that women might change hearts rather than minds appears here, as we’ve seen, in two different variations: on the one hand, women suggest, as other authors of the time did, that they are in fact naturally more caring and suited to care work; on the other hand, women, when writing exclusively for women, tend to acknowledge that care work is a trained and necessary labor for enacting control over the family.

As we know, from the outpouring of sentimental literature during the nineteenth century, women were frequently assumed to be more emotional. Indeed, we see this belief echoed in current scholarship, which continues to frame the domestic sphere in terms of feeling. As Cindy Weinstein writes, “advice manuals of the period advance a theory of motherly love,” and women turned to them “to be more sympathetic.” However, despite this continued association of women and domesticity with sympathy and sentiment, domestic guides, as we’ve seen, rarely involved themselves in promoting the development of affection or feeling; instead, female authors framed domestic relationships in contractual and exceedingly pragmatic terms. As I argue here, domestic guides disrupt the prescriptive framework of sentimentality that has long been associated with women’s writing. The very existence of domestic guides, meant to instruct women in their household duties, highlights domesticity as labor requiring specialized training and the advice that such guides offered was far less concerned with sentiment than in the practical navigation of legal, social, and familial obligations. In using duty over responsibility, domestic authors represent duty in a more flattering light than other authors considered it. As we’ve seen elsewhere, duty was frequently depicted as thoughtless, effortless, or mechanical obligation. Responsibility, by contrast, was more
frequently associated with thinking active agents, a choice to act rather than an obligation to do so. What domestic authors suggest, however, is duty as labor, as necessary, and, really, as a superior form of ethics. Duty, after all, is that which one does not always want to do, but which one must for the care of others. It is easy, these guides suggest, to act on one’s feelings and desires, but true strength (or perhaps even power) comes in the denial of those desires for the sake of a larger community.

**Self-Denying Selves**

Still, as Anna Julia Cooper’s work expresses it, women’s position in the world is “a relative one.” That is, the texts that this chapter contends with understood women as not wholly separate or individual, but as parts of a larger structure in which they saw themselves and others as vulnerable and dependent. Works by modern feminist philosophers further illuminate the contradiction at play when one understands one’s self as formed by and dependent upon others. Such an understanding of the self can function simultaneously as a liberatory, community-centered ethics as well as a tool used by “those who are subject” to subjugate, cause harm to, and demand labor from those who participate in an ethics in which their own self-hood and subjectivity becomes decentered. On the one hand, a “relative” existence suggests a departure from a traditional or independent conception of the self and offers instead a recognition of the ways we are each formed by, imbedded with, and dependent upon others (both personally and structurally); on the other hand, however, so long as there are those who reject such philosophies and insist upon their status as subjects, this self-less ethics renders its advocates vulnerable to harm and to categorization as objects. While an attunement to the needs of others, and a belief in obligation and duty to those others, has the potential to
generate reciprocal relationships, it most often forces labor unevenly onto those who
uphold such ethics, women and Black women in particular.

Susan M. Ryan’s work lays bare how men and “those who are subject” use such
an ethics and orientation towards others, while not in itself a harmful ethics to uphold, in
order to further advantage themselves at the cost of others. Despite Emerson’s praise of
“the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner,” Ryan’s criticism reminds us that
“These irresponsible and independent boys…are embedded within relationships of
dependence, whether or not Emerson acknowledges them to be so, in that they receive aid
– in the form of daily appearing dinners – from their mothers, or their families’ domestic
servants or slaves, or other (usually female) caretakers.” While Ryan’s work illuminates
this issue in order to specifically criticize the idea of self-reliance, I am most interested in
her argument that the relationship between boy and mother or servant “is a socially
sanctioned form of dependence” that, in its invisibility, allows men to imagine a life of
self-reliance, or even a life as an independent self altogether. That is, in women’s
theorizing of themselves as self-denying and obligated to others they advocate for a
worthwhile ethics while simultaneously making themselves more vulnerable to those who
insist upon their own selfish subjectivity.

Yet, while women inevitably and unfairly bore (and continue to bear) the weight
of this vulnerability, what modern readers find in the century’s domestic texts is a more
complex depiction of existing in the world than what we now recognize as the myth of
individuality, which the majority of male texts of the same period offered. Though
feminist scholars have worked to make modern thinkers more accepting of the
acknowledgement that one is always bound to others through networks of vulnerability,
dependence, and obligation, this chapter does not mean to suggest that nineteenth-century women thinkers had fully developed such an ethics. Similarly, my work does not mean to suggest that the domestic recommendations of nineteenth-century authors are more valuable or worthwhile than other conceptions of one’s relationality to others. Still, I nonetheless argue that by looking to how women of the time theorized and conceived of their position contemporary readers might see how those conceptions pushed against popular understandings of existing in the world and led directly to modern understandings of one’s self as intrinsically connected to and reliant upon others.

Modern feminist theorists, like Susan Dodds, have long eschewed ideas of individualism and subjectivity, or “the idealized conception of the liberal person” which manifests as “an independent, autonomous agent, capable of making and acting on contractual promises.” Dodds and others have long criticized this ideal for its failure to appropriately account for vulnerability and dependence upon others since, as Dodds clarifies, humans possess an “inevitable primary dependency on others,” as a result of our embodied experience, and also rely upon others for our “developmental, relational, and social constitution of [ourselves as] human selves.” That is, not only are humans physically vulnerable and dependent (through childhood, temporary injury, disability, aging, etc.), but, in fact, depend upon one other for recognition of our identities, for care and reparations for harm, and for the very formation of ourselves as selves. Catriona Mackenzie’s work further clarifies Dodds’s point as she writes that while theorists generally agree that “to be autonomous is to be able to make choices and act in line with one’s reflectively endorsed beliefs, values, goals, wants, and self-identity,” feminist and relational theorists instead understand that no aspects of the self are self-generating or
unique. Instead, our selves are constantly “shaped and constrained by the social relationships and environments in which we are embedded.” That is, our sense of selfhood is always relative to (dependent upon and vulnerable to) others. While the nineteenth-century authors of domestic guides and literature do not theorize their position so clearly, they nonetheless frequently represent themselves as embedded with others, dependent upon others, and obligated to caring for others who are themselves dependent in turn.

While many thinkers of the period argued for the existence of a fully autonomous and independent self, capable of taking responsibility for only his self and those in his immediate possession, and a number of Black authors at the time posited a non-static self that could only ever be formed in conjunction and community with others, then texts for and by white women seemed to offer something in between – a self, not formed through others, but nonetheless obligated to others. Thus, women’s domestic guides are not interested in ideas of selflessness (nor any non-existence of a self), but rather in “self-denial” or “self-sacrifice.” Domestic authors, writing about the self and writing about women’s individual desires and tastes, certainly draw on a belief in the liberal subject – a self that is capable of being fully agential and individual – but, through duty and domestic training, they advocate for a denial, sacrifice, and dismissal of that self in favor of supporting other selves (men, children, and the imagined others affected by their potential influence). Domestic literature presents a world that operates in intricately connected ways held together only by the linchpin of women’s duty. One’s family state, one’s nation state, one’s children and husband and all of the distant relations of human society held together only as long as the domestic woman inhabited her place as merely a
working part dedicated to keeping a larger whole moving through the self-denying performance of her duties and obligations. Indeed, it frequently seemed that the emergent world of responsibility depended upon a continued world of duties just behind it.

Part of this contradiction can be seen in Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s writing on children’s education:

The child himself must, from the beginning, be made to cooperate, by having his attention turned inward as early as the era of responsibility begins; that is, as soon as he is capable of right and wrong action. When is this era? The time comes when every human being begins to act on himself…. Then his understanding is sufficiently developed, to see that he is an individual, and one of the agents by which himself is to be inspired and directed.340

Unlike the work of Judith Butler more than 150 years later, which criticizes how subjects are formed through the inward-turning actions “of self-reproach, conscience” and other processes of guilt “that work in tandem with processes of social regulation,”341 Peabody’s account instead advocates for the process by which children become selves through inward-facing concepts of responsibility and conscience. Importantly, we see that children will “be made to cooperate” by engaging in self-responsibility. This seeming contradiction follows other domestic writing where selves (almost exclusively women’s selves) are first made self-aware and self-responsible before orienting that self towards others. The child thus simultaneously learns their status as an individual and, more importantly, as an individual who must live with and cooperate with other individuals.

The gendered language of Peabody’s account does reveal a subtle distinction that remained between men’s responsibility and women’s duty. While the male child in Peabody’s example ultimately comes to realize himself as an individual and an agent, female children were often trained early in the self-denying practices of their mothers. As
Lydia Maria Child writes, “when a girl is nine or ten years old, she should be accustomed to take some regular share in household duties, and to feel responsible for the manner in which it is done, - such as doing her own mending and making,” etc. and that “when they are older than twelve, girls should begin to take turns in superintending the household, keeping an account of weekly expenses.” Child’s use of responsibility here matches other guides in that the girl’s feeling of responsibility “for the manner in which” her work is done suggests that there will be consequences to poorly-performed work and that the girl alone will be responsible for it. Thus, she is responsible (self-accountable) for the performance of her duties or obligations. As Stowe instructs her readers directly in *Pink and White Tyranny*:

> Love, my dear ladies, is self-sacrifice; it is a life out of self and in another. Its very essence is the preferring of the comfort, the ease, the wishes of another to one’s own for the love we bear them. Love is giving not receiving. Love is not a sheet of blotting-paper or a sponge, sucking in every thing to itself; it is an out-springing fountain, giving from itself. . . . That, O my dear ladies, is a nobler attainment than all your French and music and dancing. You may lose the very power of it by smothering it under a load of early self-indulgence. By living just as you are all wanting to live, - living to be petted, to be flattered, to be admired, to be praised, to have your own way, and to do only that which is easy and agreeable, - you may lose the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice; you may lose the power of loving nobly and worthily, and become a mere sheet of blotting-paper all your life.

The text’s insistence that women recognize “the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice,” suggests that there exists another route that women are duty-bound to avoid. This other path is one of selfishness and personal desire: it is “French music and dancing…self-indulgence” and “living just as you are…wanting to live.” Men, the text seems to suggest, might enjoy such pursuits, living for their own wants and tastes, choosing which responsibilities to dedicate themselves to. Women, however, must train themselves (and
each other) to inhabit a far more Christ-like role in order to both avoid the (supposedly undesirable) outcome of being “a mere sheet of blotting-paper all your life” and in order to fully locate the “power” of such self-denial. What this power actually entails, Stowe never says, but, given the outcome of the text, readers might imagine that the true power of women’s duty and self-denial comes in the form of a satisfactory Christian life with happy husband and children and the satisfaction of a job well done. The opposite path, a life of pleasure, which Lillie chooses, ends, the book suggests, only in ruin, loneliness, and regret – a woman whose life has amounted to nothing but unhappiness and the fleeting enjoyments of French music.

Interestingly, despite the lack of sentimental language in domestic guides, Stowe’s writing here overflows with appeals to love. Yet, in keeping with the dutiful language of domestic guides, readers see that love here is not a naturally-occurring phenomenon, but one which comes only after the attainment of self-sacrifice, for which women must be trained. Love here functions much the same as it does in her sister, Catharine’s, guide that determines love as useful in-so-far as it allows one to govern one’s self and one’s household peacefully. Perhaps, then, that is the true “power” of self-denial: power over one’s self and one’s own desires, of course, but also power over the domestic sphere and one’s household including the men and children in that household, power even, perhaps, over the whole of the nation as one spreads one’s influence. Still, despite a seemingly similar goal of exerting one’s individual influence and agency, women’s literature operates in a strikingly different philosophical frame than that of men. While male thinkers like Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, and Horace Mann exalt “self-love” and, sometimes, even the permissible “selfishness” of following one’s “natural
appetite or propensity,” female authors of domestic guides and literature have no such advice for their female readership. Instead, the ultimate lesson of *Stowe’s Pink and White Tyranny* is that woman must forego all self-fulfilling directives and dedicate her life fully to others if it is to be a life worth living. Furthermore, Stowe renders the self-serving woman as an object, “a mere sheet of blotting-paper” a thing “to be petted…flattered…admired” and passively worked upon by others instead of having access to “the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice” and “the power of loving nobly and worthily.” Stowe’s objectification of selfish women suggests that the only way to exist agentially, the only path to “power” and self-hood is through the very self-denial and subservience to others that would erase that self. As Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Beecher similarly assert for readers, domestic work “requires a great many sacrifices, and a great deal of self-denial;” similarly, “the distinctive duty of the family state, [is] self-sacrificing love” and “self-sacrificing labor” (ultimately one and the same).

The ethics offered by such domestic writing complicates modern understandings of white middle-class women in the nineteenth century. They depict women as agential individuals, as Sarah Walden’s work notes: “the fact that [such guides are] talking about women’s pleasure at all is significant, as it suggests an emphasis on the desires of the individual.” Walden also suggests that in writing of taste and comfort, women simultaneously focused public attention on women’s physical bodies in a way that centered their desire and capacity for pleasure in national discourse. However, Walden’s work does not contend with such guides’ insistence that true selfhood comes from denial of that very self and the prioritizing of others’ desires above one’s own. Gillian Brown’s scholarship, on the other hand, does acknowledge the self-denying aspects of domestic
literature stating that “against the self-interest of the typically male individualism Tocqueville analyzed” women’s ideal was instead “based on self-denial and collectivity.” Brown’s assertion is correct, however, her choice to set women’s ideal form against men’s supposes a dichotomy between the two that isn’t as accurate. As we’ve seen, casting men as individualists and women as collectively oriented misses the significant overlap between the two groups. The women depicted in domestic guides are individuals and aspiring-individualists. Their emphasis on the hard work of duty, obligation, self-denial, and caring for others operate in the service of the power that Stowe names but never fully identifies. There exists both a genuine interest in the state of the nation at large and in the state of future generations as well as a more calculating approach to delivering care as a means of managing one’s household. Domestic guides suggest both that women should be selves with taste and desires as well as self-denying in their trained interest in others’ wants. Women should invest deeply in collectivity and care and should recognize how that care may be leveraged for the achievement of particular self-interested goals (a happy life or, even, just the avoidance of an unhappy one).
CHAPTER VI
“TO HAVE HAD HIM SEEN ME AND KNOWN ME:” NARRATOLOGY, KNOWING, AND COMMUNITY IN HARRIET JACOBS’S INCIDENTS

In recounting the sexual violence and trauma of enslavement, Harriet Jacobs writes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that, in the case of mixed offspring, “the infant is…sent where it is never seen by any who know its history.” Like Frederick Douglass’s own autobiography, which documents children “placed…in the hands of strangers, who have no care for them,” Jacobs calls attention to the particular injustice of sending a child where it and “its history” are unknown, where it will be a stranger, severed from community and familial ties, where it will be uncared for. This detail, as we shall see, is a telling one, pointing to an aspect of Jacobs’s *Incidents* that other scholars have noticed, but not yet sufficiently explored: its concern with community and, in particular, the nature of intersubjective knowing that sustains community within conditions of extreme precarity and trauma.

Community, as well as concerns of maintaining familial and social relationships, lies at the heart of Jacobs’s work. Indeed, the first wave of critical analysis of the text primarily focused on this issue, often contrasting the individualistic (and male) representation in Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies with Jacobs’s more community-minded and family-centered work, noting that Jacobs’s “reliance on… maternal family members throughout her enslavement is in direct contrast to Douglass’s portrayal of autonomy.” Unlike Douglass and other male authors, Jacobs’s work focuses attention on families (not always consanguineous), larger communities, and social attachments maintained despite enslavement and diaspora. Building on this tradition of Jacobs scholarship, this chapter probes further into Jacobs’s representations of community and,
in particular, the kinds of intersubjective knowing practiced both within enslaved communities and within the larger diaspora of nominally free Black subjects living in the North. Indeed, as I will show, Jacobs’s treatment of the antebellum Black diasporic community, and the particular forms of knowing produced from the experience and challenges of diasporic life in those years, anticipates and illuminates the experiences and challenges that would be faced by millions of emancipated Black individuals after the Civil War. Conversely, I suggest that some of the often-overlooked texts produced from within the conditions of postbellum diaspora may help modern scholars better perceive the dynamics of knowing that are registered in Jacobs’s text, but often in ways too subtle to take note of without that supplement.

Specifically, in this chapter I draw upon a cast archive of postbellum “Lost Friends” advertisements. Such advertisements, authored by Black newspaper subscribers in the hopes of reconnecting with loved ones lost to the violent dispersal of enslavement, provide a more complete picture of the role of knowing for Black communities in the wake of enslavement and diaspora, and are animated by a similar ethic of knowing and forming relationships that calls back across time to Jacobs’s own work like an echo, allowing modern readers to return to Jacobs’s work with new understanding. The complicated connections of those searching for one another in the archive form what Jacobs names as the “tangled skeins” of enslaved families and communities – lives entangled with others, one’s own identity inextricable from them, and, furthermore, formed by them. What we see in the archives of “Lost Friends” advertisements and in Jacobs’s own work are radical reimaginings of community and consciousness oriented towards others (rather than more traditional conceptions of the self as an individuated
subject). Furthermore, we see that these re-conceptions are borne out in complex and intentional narratological work. The writing that both Lost Friends authors and Jacobs’s employs exemplifies the complex relationships and social reorientation that such authors are endorsing. That is, in their conceptions of how community is to be understood and navigated (as in process, as mutually constituting), such works (Jacobs’s autobiography and the Lost Friends archive) clarify and embody their meaning within their rhetorical decisions – the function of the piece exists inseparably from its form; thus, this article also looks to the complex narratology, deployed in both texts, used to communicate these reimaginings and expansive networks of community.

In the following pages, I propose to read both forward and backward, using the archive of “Lost Friends” advertisements as a means of making more explicit Jacobs’s own implied theory of knowing, community, and care, yet also using Jacobs’s text to shed a reciprocal light on this archive. In so doing, I follow the lead of scholars like Jeffrey Insko, Lloyd Pratt, and others who have questioned traditional linear historicist approaches to literary scholarship, and have likewise noted that enslaved narratives already lend themselves to a more complicated understanding of linear time as a result of their retrospective narration and even the time-distorting effects of trauma under enslavement. I thus invite readers to approach this chapter meta-critically and to evaluate the potential effectiveness of broadening literary history to include later texts that are neither produced nor influenced by earlier ones, but which nonetheless illuminate, call back to, and connect to earlier texts in meaningful ways.

**Practices of Responsible Knowing in Incidents**
At the end of her 1861 autobiography, finally free from the reaches of enslavement, Harriet Jacobs emerges from hiding.

When I rode home in the cars I was no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at people as they passed. I should have been glad to have met Daniel Dodge himself; to have had him seen me and known me, that he might have mourned over the untoward circumstances which compelled him to sell me for three hundred dollars (226).

Having attained freedom, Jacobs no longer feels the constant threat of identification which has plagued her throughout her time in hiding. Instead, she notes that she “was no longer afraid to unveil…and look at people as they passed” (226). Jacobs, in her boldness, goes so far as to add that she “should have been glad to have met Daniel Dodge himself,” and that, in fact, she wished for such an interaction that he might see her, know her, and subsequently mourn. More than simply seeing, identifying, or recognizing her—all dangers she has successfully avoided throughout her seven years in hiding—Jacobs, in her imagined encounter with Dodge, asks that Dodge will know her and her “untoward circumstances” (226) in order to feel the wrongfulness of it, to empathize, and to mourn, an act of extreme care.

To be known, Jacobs suggests, is to engage in a practice of care, to participate with, and respond to, the circumstances, needs, life, and story of another. In the two instances provided thus far—Jacobs’s imagined meeting with Daniel Dodge and the fate of children severed from their community—her representations of knowing and being known emphasize three main points and potential problems. Firstly, readers see that her imagined meeting with Dodge depends upon sympathetic knowing; that is, much like her relationship with Mrs. Bruce and her imagined white readership, Jacobs does not seek full community or reciprocal knowing with the white individuals around her, but rather
denotes a clear difference between sympathetically knowing one’s circumstances and the reciprocal knowing provided by other members of her community. Secondly, Jacobs, as well as Douglass here, demonstrates clearly how the circumstances of enslavement complicate how one knows others to be in relation to themselves – as family relationships are dispersed, as community is severed, and as cross-racial relationships are made more difficult – and imply a need for conceptions of community and means of knowing that differ from more traditional or conventional conceptions. Finally, Jacobs represents knowing and being known as acts of participatory care in which one is responsible for and bound up in the histories and lives of others, a stance that the “Lost Friends” advertisements, published thirty years after Jacobs’s autobiography, further illuminate.

Although there remains a great deal of difference between the type of sympathetic knowing that Jacobs depicts in her imagined meeting with Daniel Dodge and the more developed and reciprocal knowing she imagines regarding children being held in community with those who care for them and know their history, both of these moments nonetheless reveal Jacobs’s interest in the overall project of knowing – in its potential as a caring and liberatory ethics and in the pitfalls of its potential limitations. That is, if recognition theory implies two selves that already exist independently of one another, then perhaps knowing shows how selves rely upon each other for their formation, suggesting that selves are not self-constituting, but are formed through interactions with others. Thus, Jacobs’s interest in knowing suggests far more than a mere rhetorical choice; instead, Jacobs’s work, when read through and alongside the “Lost Friends” archive, helps us theorize new practices of knowing, of community, and of self-formation and helps us to see how Jacobs’s own practices of knowing was impacted by the traumas
of enslavement and diaspora. Jacobs’s autobiography thus offers readers two implied theories of knowing: the intersubjective knowing that constitutes network and community (different, as we shall see, from the sympathetic knowing practiced elsewhere), and a narrativized or narratological knowing wherein knowing is practiced through storytelling and an implicit recognition that, as scholar Cheryl Hughes writes, to be vulnerable and interconnected is to recognize that we are endlessly “bound up with the lives and stories of others.”

We see knowing more explicitly in another critical scene from Incidents, the attempted sale of Jacobs’s grandmother. Despite the promise of freedom upon her mistress’s death, Jacobs’s pursuer, Dr. Flint, arranges to sell her grandmother (known to the community as Aunt Marthy). On the day of the auction, however, it is Aunt Marthy’s community relationships that protect her from sale and win her promised freedom. In describing Marthy’s relationship to her community, Jacobs notes: “she had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves; consequently ‘Aunt Marthy,’ as she was called, was generally known” (8). The “consequently” that Jacobs strategically includes illuminates the complexities of being known, forming community, and the often-unnamable “benefits of the relation” (as Douglass may say). Jacobs’s initial detail about Aunt Marthy’s choice to share crackers and preserves with other families at first may read as almost incidental, a bit of local color to illustrate the sort of woman that Aunt Marthy was. However, Jacobs uses this anecdote in order to highlight the social weight and power of Aunt Marthy’s community interactions. Marthy’s crackers and preserves, her interactions with other families, her gifts, and her “long and faithful service” all contribute to a social bearing that protects her from further enslavement. Marthy has
participated in small and seemingly insignificant relationships over the course of years, relationships that ultimately protect her. With only the threads of small interactions and friendships, she has weaved community around herself like a protective cloak. Jacobs understands the full social weight of Aunt Marthy’s labors and attempts to communicate the importance to her readers by noting that “consequently… [she] was generally known” as a direct result of these efforts, and it is being known which saves her from sale. Jacobs continues:

Her long and faithful service in the family was also well known, and the intention of her mistress to leave her free. When the day of the sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block. Many voices called out ‘Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell you, aunt Marthy? Don’t stand there! That is no place for you’ (9).

Jacobs’s decision, in her description of Aunt Marthy’s almost-sale, to reduce the others on the auction block to “chattels” marks the powerful effects of such knowing and complicates our considerations of it. In Jacobs’s description that “she took her place among the chattels,” Marthy is distinguished from the others being sold and the crowd emphasizes to Marthy alone that the block “is no place for you.” Here Marthy’s community ties do not merely save her from sale, they render her as the sole subject among “the chattels,” who remain unknown and undefended. The community, in knowing Marthy, also feel a particular responsibility towards her and perform the difficult task of emancipating her as a result. While I will suggest a theory of knowing that, in many ways, refutes the existence of a single, individuated subject, it is important to note here how Marthy’s subjectivity is generated through community participation. That is, Jacobs’s writing does not deny the existence of a subject, an “I,” but instead suggests that one’s self is formed through an ongoing participation with other selves. To
offer an (perhaps oversimplified) example, the difference lies in Emerson’s self-reliant genius, who feels that his “self” is independent and separate from others and who distances himself from others when he seeks to feel more like himself, and Marthy, who understands that her self (and her freedom) is entirely dependent upon, and produced by, those around her and her relationships with them.

As historian Steven Hahn writes, enslaved individuals quickly expanded relationships beyond a nuclear structure as a direct result of both the “exogamous marriage patterns” as well as the constant upheavals of enslavement; as a result, and as a means of both survival and an assertion of humanity in a system seeking to deny it, enslaved people built “complex and geographically extensive kinship networks.” Jacobs and those she depicts in her text, take seriously the responsibility of these knowing practices and maintaining community ties. As we see in the moment when Aunt Marthy is rescued from the auction block as a result of these community relationships, Jacobs understands knowing to be a means of survival and protection as well as a method of resisting the aspects of enslavement that threatened to turn persons into nonentities.

**Practices of Responsible Knowing in the Archive of “Lost Friends”**

The need for broadened conceptions of community that Jacobs presents in her work are answered, at least partially, in the postbellum archive of “Lost Friends” advertisements. These advertisements, originally published in *The Southwestern Christian Advocate* from 1877 until 1929 with the hope of reconnecting those lost to one another through enslavement, take up the problem of knowing that Jacobs’s work presents nearly thirty years earlier. Importantly, these advertisements often begin with the same formulaic address: “I wish to inquire for my people,” “Please allow me to inquire
for my people,” “I wish to find my people,” “I desire to inquire for my people through our paper.”

Subscribers of The Southwestern Christian Advocate asked after parents, siblings, partners, friends, “fellow-servants,” relatives whose names they could no longer recollect (“I have forgotten the names of mother’s two youngest children”), and anyone who might be known to them in even the most distant of circumstances. One subscriber, Daniel Goodman, includes among his people his brother’s father and his mother’s previous husband. Their names, Joshua Tives and, simply, Harry, respectively, serve as clues to assist in Daniel’s search for closer relations (his mother and brother), but, more importantly, their inclusion demonstrates the capaciousness of a term like “people,” which may include kin, but is not limited by consanguinity. Though seemingly opaque, with some help from Jacobs we shall see that what I’ve called “network knowing” is practiced here, and that it is part of a broader phenomenon I’ll be calling “diasporic knowing.” As well, we’ll see that storytelling is also at work here in this effort to rebuild broken and dispersed community, as is a sense of responsibility. Subscribers’ choice to use “people,” rather than specifically marking those they searched for through more particular titles like father, brother, neighbor, or friend, illuminates how subscribers conceived of their community in more capacious ways than traditional familial or social labels allowed. In the South it is still common to be asked “who are your people?” and it is understood that what is really being asked is “who are you known to?” and, more importantly, “how are you known to me?”

The stakes of knowing, then, are the stakes of community ties, consanguineous bonds, and the webs of social life, all of which are
taken up and meaningfully considered and reimagined by both Jacobs’s *Incidents* and the postbellum “Lost Friends” archive.

The investigative work of finding one’s “people” – those one knows – is the work of the family ethnography, of ancestry work, but also of social connection that we lack the language to describe. What, after all, is the name for the bond between oneself and one’s brother’s father, neither kin nor stranger? What title could possibly account for one’s past “fellow-servants” who share both a last name (which is not your last name) and a history, but not blood? These examples illustrate the complexity of knowing and the stakes that must be accounted for when discussing a philosophy of knowing, community, and estrangement, particularly in light of the diasporic effects of enslavement. As Harriet Jacobs laments, “what tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery” (87). As the “Lost Friends” archive illustrates, and as Jacobs’s work similarly makes clear, however, these tangled skeins weave a complex social web of community and expand conceptions of whom we might care for and be responsible for. To illustrate the complexity of the Lost Friends’ project of knowing, I include Riley Reed’s advertisement below in its entirety:

Dear Editor – I wish to inquire through your valuable paper of some of my relatives. My brother’s name is Jack Reed. I left him in Eastern Texas about sixteen years ago. He belonged to Willis Reed. I heard he went to Louisiana. His father’s name is George Reed, and he was sold to Dr. Boil, of Mississippi. He was killed by a mule. Our mother’s name was Nancy. Our step-mother was Vinia Laughlin. Jack’s wife’s name was Matilda Modley. Nancy Reed, our mother, had but two children, myself and brother Jack. We had a half-sister – Sarah Laughlin. She belonged to a Laughlin of Mississippi. I have not seen her since she was six years old. That was in Talahatchie county, Miss., about five miles from Charleston. Sister Sarah had three other children – Polly, Priscilla and Matilda, and a brother, named Bill; and there are some others whose names I cannot remember. At the time we were separated I belonged to Nathan Reed. I am now living in Caldwell, Texas, near Luling. Any one who may identify the
above names will please write to me at once, at Luling, Caldwell Co.,
Texas.

Riley Reed.

Reed’s advertisement is a web of names and locations, but also odd moments and
significant memories that one might not immediately associate with the project of
locating someone. Though Reed names his own project as that of “identify[ing] the
above,” his choice to include that George “was killed by a mule” and to remember that he
has not seen his half-sister “since she was six years old” narrativize his experiences in
surprising ways. Like Sarah Royal’s decision to tell *Southwestern Christian Advocate*
readers “the last I saw of my mother she was standing on the beach at Matagorda, Texas,”
or John Holmes’s heartbreaking recollection of his capture by Southern soldiers and the
image of his own mother, “standing on the gallery crying,” we see, among the names and
places, the work of narrative and memory. Such moments mark the “Lost Friends”
archive as one of particular care and attunement.

**Identification, Recognition, and Knowing**

In order to think further about the capaciousness of community within both
Jacobs’s work and the “Lost Friends” archive, we must divert momentarily in order to
properly differentiate knowing from both identification and recognition. This difference
becomes strikingly visible in the contrast between “Lost Friends” advertisements – which
focus on community links and complicated social webs as a methodology for
reconnection – and advertisements posted prior to emancipation for the purposes of
identifying, locating, and recapturing those who escaped enslavement. Because runaway
advertisements’ primary goal was *identification*, the genre focuses on physical
characteristics that might enable white captors to locate a particular runaway:
…a likely mulatto boy, named Billy, 18 years of age, about 6 feet in height, thick set, full face. He is lame, having had his thigh broken by a fall; one of his arms is smaller than the other.  [359]

Osborne! He is 33 years of age, very stout and very black, with African features, about 5 feet 9 inches high, with very bad teeth, ruptured with hernia on the right side, and had on when he left a new truss.  [360]

Abner…. about 21 years old, 5 feet 7 inches high, or thereabout. Very slim and straight, speaks English only, no scars about him perceptible; had on when he went away a blue surtout Coat, a fur Hat, a pair of Bennets Cord yellow Pantaloons, a pair of brokans, and coarse shirt.  [361]

These advertisements, like others of the genre, distinguish the three men primarily by their bodies, identifiable through their marked differences, disabilities, and abnormalities or, in the case of Abner, the distinctive lack of such marks. Such advertisements, working in the service of identification, location, and recapture, demonstrate how the process of identification lives in/on the body (we identify others by facial features, clothing, etc.) and, in particular, in the differences that exist there – Osborne is marked by his worse-than-average teeth, Billy by his abnormally small arm, Abner by his slimness. Those whose bodies are marked as Other are more easily and quickly identifiable, as we know from the hypervisibility of Black and disabled bodies like Billy’s. These bodily descriptions also offer a legible history of violence – Billy’s fall, Osborne’s hernia, Abner’s slight frame and the suggested existence of imperceptible scars. As Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiographies, “my feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (208). While such descriptions hint at horrific and unelaborated histories, they also emphasize the Black body as a legible and material site of violence; ultimately, however, readers are left knowing no more about Billy, Osborne, or Abner, than when they began.
While the runaway advertisements may well have aided white captors seeking to identify the three men described above, they offer no real means for knowing Billy nor for recognizing him as either a subject nor as part of a larger community and social network. Thus, we see that identification, through its interest in locating bodies, renders individuals as an assortment of legible parts to be deciphered and singled out. Recognition, by contrast, maintains one’s status as an individual subject and “acknowledges the separateness of other persons who are selves like us.”

We find modern recognition theory first articulated in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an exchange between subjects, each working towards mutual and relational autonomy. At its best, recognition theory encourages us to consider the social and historical contexts in which we meet another subject, the identities which we each lay claim to, and the communities to which we belong, all in the service of arriving at the realization that we are, in fact, each separate but equal subjects (rather than objects to one another). In its ideal form, recognition theory reminds us that selves are constructed through community, family, social, and environmental contact, and that one’s sense of oneself, or of one as a self, is dependent upon the recognition given to and received from others – that our very selfhood is dependent upon others. In this way, recognition helps eschew more “heroic visions” of the self, which insist that we are individual, sovereign, atomistic, and self-determining, in favor of a mutually-created and dependent self – that is, I may recognize myself as a subject (or as part of particular contexts), but I require recognition from my larger community to affirm those beliefs about myself.

This dependence upon others for our self-identification renders us vulnerable. After all, if recognition is an acknowledgement of others as “selves like us” (39), then
misrecognition or nonrecognition marks the inability, or refusal, to recognize other persons or distinct groups as selves, as human, as agents, or as worthy of the treatment and privileges we reserve only for “proper” selves. Thus, while recognition theory has many advocates, it has also faced criticism, as we will see, for its failure to account for instances of mis- and nonrecognition, the victims of which are disproportionally selves that have been historically marked as Other. There exists another reason for vulnerability as well. If our sense of our own self depends upon recognition by others, then our sense of who we are is always shaped by our interactions with others, rather than pre-existing as something fixed which is either “recognized” by others or “misrecognized” by them. In other words, the very term “recognition” can imply the existence of a true or static self that is always ready to be either recognized or misrecognized by external observers. Instead, as more-nuanced theories of recognition argue, the self emerges from our social interactions with others. The self, as scholars like Emily Beausoleil argue, is a “self-information,” constantly created, constituted, generated, and formed through our interactions with and reactions to others.364

Furthermore, as Patchen Markell’s work makes clear, even mutual recognition, occurring under ideal circumstances, fails in that it perpetually orient us towards ourselves. Despite requiring an acknowledgment of particular contexts which construct the self, recognition nonetheless remains a search for sovereignty and independence. That is, as Markell writes, one recognizes others in the hopes of reciprocity, of being acknowledged as a self, “of arriving at a clear understanding of who you are and the nature of the larger groups and communities to which you belong, and of securing the respectful recognition of these same facts by others.”365 Despite the fact that mutual
recognition seeks to better situate individuals within social and historical contexts and bring them “back into the thick of social life, it also preserves, in transfigured form, the basic aspiration behind those images of agency: the aspiration to be able to act independently, without experiencing life among others as a source of vulnerability, or as a site of possible alienation or self-loss.” Thus, despite recognition’s usefulness as a philosophy of seeing others as equal selves, and despite its origins as a means of critiquing the sovereign self, what motivates the desire for recognition is the wish to have our sovereignty affirmed by others. The very idea of recognition, then, and even of mutual recognition, often fails to acknowledge the ways we are intrinsically created by and through others, implicitly affirming instead the belief that we are each an independent, agential, individual, bounded, and atomistic self. If identification locates others and their bodies as objects, and recognition sees others as a means of affirming ourselves, then how might a theory of knowing and being known by others avoid these shortcomings?

**Diasporic Knowing in the Archive of “Lost Friends”**

In order to think through knowing further, we might directly contrast the descriptions found in the Lost Friends archive with those of the runaway advertisements, the former an example of knowing, the latter of identification. As we see in the runaway advertisements, would-be-captors, in their desire to locate the men they are after, identify Billy by his previously broken leg, his too-short arm, and his “likely mulatto” color, Osborne by his stoutness, his blackness, his right-side hernia, and his “very bad teeth,” and Abner by his slim figure, his straight posture, his marked lack of scarring, and his clothes. Like Poe’s “Man That Was Used Up,” Billy, Osborne, and Abner are reduced to
an assortment of body parts and floating signifiers, arms and legs without people to attach themselves to. The men themselves (as selves) are obscured and disregarded. This obfuscation is unsurprising given the advertisements’ goals of capture and the genre’s lack of any iteration of care towards the subjects being identified.

While the Lost Friends advertisements are similarly interested in locating those whose whereabouts are unknown – there is, after all, an investigative process at work in the genre of “Lost Friends” advertisements, a smattering of places, former enslavers, first names, former last names, dates, and half-remembered moments and details, any information that might lead to a reconnection – their methodology differs enormously. In fact, despite their interest in locating loved ones, they often refuse to identify (or abstain from identifying) those loved ones through physical markers. Instead, without using any physical descriptions of their loved ones, they focus on names, memorable events, former enslavers, as well as community, familial, and social connections. That is, the “Lost Friends” advertisements clearly distinguish between identification, recognition, and a more intimate and engaged practice of knowing. They certainly make use of an accumulation of dates and places, names and distinctive memories, creating an intersecting web of identifying information in order to locate loved ones; however, these advertisements also posit a complicated methodology for knowing and memorializing. Rather than relying upon physical identification of their loved ones by strangers (or an identification of their loved ones as strangers to be surveilled), “Lost Friends” advertisers rely upon an intricate social and community network. Their loved ones are not dismembered parts to be identified, nor are they marked individuals, separate and distinct from others, rather they are inextricably linked to social, familial, and community
networks who know them. Even in the repeated inquiry “after my people,” we see that these searches are always a plural search, not for individual subjects, but for one’s family, community, groups, people. These advertisements depend upon and locate through community. There are no bodies here, no individuals either, just people, always plural, always linked, always connected, and seeking one another.

Importantly, just as these advertisements perform complicated narratological work that pulls readers between perspectives and demonstrates knowing through intense recollected moments, so too do these advertisements perform a complicated temporality. Authors, situated in their present moment, write of the past in anticipation of both a future in which their loved one reads their words and remembers with them and a future in which they are reunited as a result of their recollections. Similarly, just as readers are pulled between perspectives, looking through the eyes of Holmes, his mother, and observing as an outsider and third party, readers are also pulled through time from the last time someone was seen to a distant memory about them from the present in which the author asks for help to a series of cross-temporal moments that, together, like a mosaic, form a fuller picture of a person, a relationship, a community, a history. Within the genre of “Lost Friends” advertisements, many subscribers do choose to relate only the necessary names and places needed to locate their loved ones without further personal information. Narrativized moments are fleeting and, as we’ve seen, interspersed with more straightforward information; however, they occur frequently enough to be a distinct marker of the genre. Reed’s memories of his sister and uncle, Holmes’s recollection of his mother and step-father, Royal’s final image of her mother, are, though distinctly
affecting, by no means unique in their inclusion of particular memories to distinguish their loved ones.

William Russell, searching for the people who raised him notes, “there were two old people there by the name of Boason and Hucusher, and we used to call them ma and pa. We were given to them to raise after the death of our parent.” Caroline Williams recalls sadly that “our mother came to death by hanging herself.” Sophie Evans similarly remembers: “I was hired out from my mother, and when I came back she was sold, and I don’t know where to.” C.L. Crump, writing to provide further information to a previous subscriber’s advertisement, writes that his father “had a wife and four children there, three boys and one girl. The oldest was Caroll. He named me after him.” Such emotionally affecting notices remind us that the capacious reimaginings of community and family seen in something like the Lost Friends archive are, at least partially, the outcomes of enslavement and diasporic experience. The Lost Friends archive offers a necessary insight into the resilience and adaptation borne out of the material violence of enslavement. Children, parents, caregivers, family, and friends are continually separated and forced to knit new bonds in new places, which are often then themselves undone and rewoven again. Like Jacobs’s metaphor of the “tangled skeins,” to attempt to follow the thread of a single life through enslavement, war, and reconstruction is to come away instead with an intricately interwoven mass. Though these complex practices of knowing others and being known are born from the traumatic experiences and extreme conditions of enslavement, they can nonetheless yield insights of value for persons living in less extreme conditions.
Enslavement, as Cindy Weinstein’s work aptly argues, wreaks “consanguineous havoc” as it forcibly dissolves and reconfigures family structures. This havoc appears clearly in Jacobs’s narrative. As Jacobs writes, illuminating the “tangled skeins” of enslaved genealogy, “My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast” (3). Through enslavement, familial bonds are forcibly flattened, dissolved, severed, and re-made. As Douglass writes in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, one “marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system” lies in its efforts to destroy “all just ideas of the sacredness of the family” (142). As he later notes of his own family relationships, “brothers and sisters we were by blood; but slavery had made us strangers” and, most importantly, “I really did not understand what they were to me, or I to them” (149).

Just as enslavement sought to dissolve familial bonds, consanguinity itself produced a double bind for Black subjects throughout the nineteenth century. On the one hand, as Weinstein notes, any denial of the importance of blood-relations risked supporting pro-slavery arguments “which sought to validate the institution on precisely the grounds that affections could be disarticulated from blood.” That is, in de-emphasizing the importance of blood-relation to kinship, one risked supporting beliefs that Black familial relationships could be disregarded, dissolved, and redirected without harm. On the other hand, to place too much emphasis on the importance of blood-kin relationships risked reinscribing a belief that Black subjects, whose consanguineous relationships had been severed or disrupted, failed to properly reproduce recognizable family structures and thus could be justifiably dismissed from full participation and
integration into larger American culture. Enslaved subjects certainly maintained recognizable familial, lineal, and kin-based structures despite forced dispersal, and the maintenance of these “powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling, of continuity,” as Hortense Spillers notes, “remains one of the supreme social achievements of African-Americans under conditions of enslavement.”

As Spillers’s powerful work on the historical formation of the “Black family” reminds us, enslaved individuals “were forced into patterns of dispersal…into the horizontal relatedness of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement.” That is, in the violent separation of forced diaspora which enslavement repeatedly and purposefully produced, the vertical and patrilineal blood-based hierarchies of the so-called “traditional” family were frequently flattened into horizontal connections based upon a variety of qualifiers including, but certainly never limited to, blood-relation. In the tradition of “Lost Friends” advertisements I have chosen to similarly understand these relationships as one’s “people,” a capacious term capable of holding the meanings of family, kin, and community without attaching itself fully to the historical formations of those terms.

Like Spillers’s term, “horizontal relatedness,” the notion of diasporic consciousness can help us perceive and understand the capacious and creative relationships enslaved subjects developed from within captivity. From within the violent system of slavery, wherein familial relationships faced constant rupture from separation, removal, and dispersal, enslaved subjects both worked to maintain blood-based relationships (the majority of “Lost Friends” searches are for parents, siblings, and other family members) and simultaneously expanded the boundaries of family and
community to include relationships and social connections with no blood-relation nor even the language to appropriately name those relationships. No term exists for the relationship between Daniel Goodman and his brother’s father; in fact, dominant culture would likely term them strangers to one another. Regardless, however, Daniel Goodman clearly affirms his brother’s father among his people, among those known to him, among those he is responsible for locating and caring for. It is such feelings of responsibility and care that help to untangle the skeins formed in enslavement. These records of the material violence of enslavement appears clearly throughout the “Lost Friends” archive as subscribers detail their forced separations, traumatic events, and inability to recall loved ones’ names. Among the changed names, painful memories, and lost years, subscribers both illuminate the alienating effects of enslavement and, in their search for reunion, refuse it. While many familial relationships are successfully ruptured or dissolved, in their place subscribers offer capacious and creative new conceptions of family and community. If enslavement forcibly estranged parents and siblings, then it also forged bonds of kinship in surprising places, Daniel Goodman’s search for his brother’s father, Lucinda Martin’s inquiry regarding her “fellow-servants” (all alike sharing a slaveowner’s family name), William Russell’s inclusion of the “two old people” he “used to call ma and pa” among his “kin people.”

A diasporic consciousness sees connection and community across distances which traditional structures deem as wholly separate. While dominant culture would not recognize one’s previous “fellow-servants” as either family or kin – peer might be the closest term available – postbellum subscribers of the Southwestern Christian Advocate employ the term “people” to account for the multitude of connections which tie one to
one’s fellow-servants, but which are not recognized as familial ties: shared last names, experiences, and memories, common social networks and communities, emotional bonds formed through captivity, and a deeply-felt responsibility to those bonds, a continuous interconnected web of knowing and connection. While enslavement sought to violently rupture families, estrange loved ones, sever communities, and dissolve care and moral responsibility, enslaved individuals instead responded with an increased sense of community and kin that expanded far beyond traditional familial structures of parents and siblings. In place of hierarchized, concentric circles of community which moved outward from the self (I am responsible for myself, my family, my friends, my neighbors, my community, my nation, etc. in that order), postbellum Black subjects instead wove their tangled skeins into an intricately patterned network of social connection, care, and knowing.

To return once more to Jacobs’s and Douglass’s depictions of children removed from “any who know its history” (56) and those placed with strangers “who have no care for them,” (142) we see that the alienating power of enslavement does more than dissolve family structures, it undoes feelings of care and responsibility towards those who would otherwise fall within one’s closest community circles. As Douglass aptly notes, “it is deemed a foolish whim for a slave-mother to manifest concern to see her children …. why, then, should she give herself any concern? She has no responsibility” (153).

Enslavement, then, abolishes family designations and makes strangers of kin. Even more insidiously, however, by rendering those whom one should know as strangers, it disrupts otherwise assumed feelings of care and responsibility.
Emily Beausoleil’s work on political ethics illuminates the stakes of lost ties of responsibility clearly. Since responsibility demands accountability, answerability, and response, Beausoleil rightly notes that in our interactions with others we are simultaneously “responsible and response-able.” To put it another way, to engage in responsibility with others (being held to account, receiving blame or praise) is to be vulnerable to injury or criticism. It is a participatory exchange in which, as Margaret Urban Walker explains, “we are rightly able to call others to account even as we ourselves are rightly liable to be called to account by others.” In this participatory, vulnerable, and interactive encounter, we see reflected the ethics of knowing posited by the work of Jacobs and the “Lost Friends” archive. Community, care, knowing, encounter, and responsibility exist inseparably as Jacobs and others reject the notion of a bounded, individuated self and instead illustrate and advocate for community ties, responsibilities, and selves that are always in formation through others. As Beausoleil reiterates, and as the texts here make clear, echoing the works of Judith Butler, Susan Bickford, Iris Marion Young, Patchen Markell, and others, “We survive not as bounded and independent beings but through our reliance on networks of relation beyond our own skin.” Thus, we see, again, that the project of knowing is, importantly, a project of care. As both Douglass and Jacobs posit, knowing others (their histories, how they are known to you) is necessary to generating care for those others and feeling responsible for them. In the moments and years after we have identified and recognized one another – often problematically rendered as a singular, static interaction – we continue to know one another through social connections, hearsay, community networks, old memories, and half-remembered details. I may identify my mother by the color of her eyes, I may
recognize her as an individual when I first realize that she has desires separate from my own, but I know her through her interactions with others, through our shared networks, through her changing stories, through a lifetime of memories and interactions, through the color of the sun in her hair, through my final image of her, standing on a beach or crying on a gallery.

**Narrative Knowing in the Archive of “Lost Friends”**

Like these affective moments that illustrate the participatory practice of knowing, the “Lost Friends” archive further develops knowing as a process of orienting oneself towards others and acknowledging the ways in which we are enmeshed and embedded in our communities, entirely dependent upon them. What we see in the “Lost Friends” archive, and what they make apparent in Jacobs’s autobiography, is diasporic consciousness at work narratologically. That is, alongside capacious conceptions of whom one might include among one’s “people,” “Lost Friends” authors similarly demonstrate, through their writing, how knowing (unlike recognition, which too often implicitly seeks to affirm the sovereign self) is participatory, community-based, and highlights our dependence and enmeshment with others. If popular nineteenth-century thought suggested hierarchies of responsibility and care which begin from the self and move downwards, then postbellum Black conceptions of community reach across those structures through decentering the sovereign self, orienting towards others\(^\text{376}\), and highlighting (as their use of the term “people” does) the inability of existing categories to appropriately account for the complex relationships of care and responsibility formed beyond consanguinity and traditional social ties\(^\text{377}\).
The deeply affective and narrativized moments of “Lost Friends” advertisements illustrates this orientation towards others well. Such narrative moments do perform practical work - they memorialize loved ones since, as Holmes’s advertisement, seeking information “whether living or dead,” acknowledges, such ads may serve as memoriam for those lost loved ones who can never achieve reunion. Given the published nature of the advertisements, these personal memories also provide a space for collective and public mourning, both for those already known to be dead (“our mother came to her death by hanging herself”) and for those who may or may not be found (“I have not heard from any of my people since I left them”). Such memories also directly aid in the project of locating the lost. They create a personal connection, reaching through the text, offering a shared memory to loved ones who may be found, asking their loved ones to remember with them and to know them through their shared experiences. The chances for Riley Reed’s success in his search for his half-sister, for instance, increase with his seemingly minor recollection that he has “not seen her since she was six years old” somewhere in Tallahatchie. We may imagine a Sarah Laughlin (perhaps a common enough name) encountering Reed’s advertisement, drawing forth her own hazy memory of the last time she saw him, at the age of six, and seeking reconnection as a result. Among an impossible litany of names, dates, and places, such narrativized memories call attention to themselves and remind their potential reader of how they may be known to one another.

However, these narrativized moments do more than distinguish particular advertisements or provide room for mourning and memoriam. Their inclusion illustrates the capacious ways in which subscribers conceived of their community and the paradigm of connection and vulnerability from which subscribers begin. I argue that these
narrativized moments suggest that storytelling and memory not only function in the project of knowing, but constitute one’s very selfhood. That is, through such stories, readers understand themselves to be formed through the memories of others and their interactions with them, and understand their lives as stories which depend upon the participation of and intervention of others. Similarly, these moments show a diasporic consciousness which cuts across traditional community structures by employing complicated narratological devices that demonstrate more capacious conceptions of community. The stories in this archive dissolve the self and orient us towards others. In the act of storytelling, we become conduits, containers, and mediums. The self, the authoritarian “I,” disappears as the past, and the dead, and the memories and perspectives of others inhabit us and speak through us in its place. As one 1882 subscriber, D.J. Price, writes:

My Father’s name is Wm. Price; he left his parents’ home when 12 years of age, by the traders to New Orleans, and stayed there six months, when a farmer by the name of A.G. Jordan bought him and brought him to a plantation in Louisiana on Bayou Taplacat and in the village of Allen, La, and he has been living within 12 miles of this town, until last August 15th, when he passed through the dark valley of the shadow of death by the penetration of 12 bullets.

Price, originally writing in order to locate his uncles (“three in number” but only the names of two ever known), instead becomes biographer, memorialist, and medium for his father, whose life and death he lovingly and mournfully relates in carefully selected detail. It is important to notice that many of the details that Price includes of his father – that he left his parents’ “when 12 years of age,” stayed in New Orleans only six months, that he was shot with “12 bullets” – will likely be unhelpful in locating his uncles. In fact, Price’s motivations for writing to the Southwestern Christian Advocate (the search for his
uncles) are mentioned only briefly before Price himself is quickly shuffled out of the text in place of his father, which we see clearly in the significant shift from “my father” to the “he/him/his” third person perspective that fills the rest of the advertisement. Price himself is surprisingly absent from the text, despite authoring it in the service of his own search – that is, he is not writing this advertisement on behalf of someone else, which might explain the perspective that we receive. Instead, Price willingly and quickly decenters himself from the text altogether and acts as conduit for his father’s life and memories. This mediumship is most noticeable, perhaps, in Price’s retelling of his father’s death, in which he writes as though recalling a memory or a witnessing, not of the shooting, but of his passage “through the dark valley” of death, which none but his father could have knowledge of.

Price’s advertisement reveals what we, as literary scholars, often experience, that in writing one is not oneself; rather, authors become momentarily inhabited by the voices and perspectives which they write. Nor is this loss of self restricted to writers, as readers’ selves are similarly suspended through the act of reading, in which a similar inhabitance occurs. John Holmes’s previously quoted memory of his kidnapping demonstrates this effect on readers well.

I was then six or seven years of age, and was taken from home by some Southern soldiers who brought me to Texas, and I was sold three times. When I was taken the soldier drew a gun on my step father and made him put me up on a horse behind one of them. The last I saw of mother she was standing on the gallery crying.

Unlike Price, who eschews his own authorial “I” in channeling his father, Holmes maintains his first-person perspective throughout; however, he uses that perspective to guide readers through the difficult process of orienting towards others. As Holmes
describes his kidnapping, he walks readers around the scene, inviting them to consider and imagine the perspectives and feelings of those present in the frozen moment.

Through Holmes’s narrative, his rapid shifts in perspective from first to third-person, and his focus on a single, captured moment, readers are encouraged to look at the scene and the individuals in it more closely, to feel alongside them, and to experience a loss of self as they sympathize and inhabit the scene. Despite writing primarily in first-person, Holmes does not focus only on his perspective, but invites readers to consider the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of those present in the scene: the young Holmes, placed lovingly on horseback behind his captor, his step-father, with gun and threat thrust at him by soldiers, his mother, watching and weeping from the gallery above. Unlike traditional character-bound perspectives, the narratological moves of Holmes’s advertisement (his rapid movement from I to he and she), as well as many in the Lost Friends archive, compel readers to consider multiple perspectives in rapid succession. Similarly, the scant detail similarly invites its readers to further imagine the circumstances of the text. Like Caroline Williams’s mother who “came to death by hanging herself” or the circumstances of Price’s father’s own journey “through the dark valley” of death, Holmes’s capture, and other advertisements, make clear that there lies beyond the text an entire untold narrative, which readers may imagine and desire and mourn, but never know. The knowing, instead, remains only for those who do know (Williams, her mother, and those who knew her, Price, his father, and their loved ones, Holmes and whoever might be left from his traumatic capture), a shared and secret history that readers may only glimpse and guess at.
The genre of “Lost Friends” advertisements and their narratological choices demonstrate the power of storytelling and narrative to dissolve both one’s own self in the careful telling of others’ histories (as Price does), as well as readers’ selves, as they are compelled to consider and feel the perspectives of others at significantly affective moments. In both the writing and reading of “Lost Friends” advertisements, we see the importance of an orientation towards others’ experiences that diminishes the role of the self in the process of considering others. Stories dissolve the self – orient towards others; something in here about how all stories orient us away from the self – we lose ourselves in the telling of stories and in the act of remembering or inhabiting someone else’s story as readers. These moments in particular demand that we inhabit another perspective, that we feel deeply, that we consider multiple perspectives at once.

In this way, these moments demonstrate that reciprocal knowing consists in part of locating both the knower and the person known in a particular kind of narrative. Such narrative tells the story of trauma as witnesses and survivors narrate the horror that they and others experienced. As Jenny Edkins’s work clarifies, such narratives, those influenced by and born of trauma, “strip away the…commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities” and offer revelations that “question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans,” how we might relate to one another, and, as we see here, how such witnessing might render common language and accepted categories insufficient to articulate such experiences. It is narrative in which persons and hold simultaneous, different, yet equally valid, and sometimes-conflicting perspectives. Like Holmes’s mother, standing on the gallery and crying, the final image in Sarah Royal’s narrative is that of her mother “standing on the beach at Matagorda.”
Again, like Holmes, Royal’s account moves rapidly from first to third person, forcing readers to consider both Sarah’s perspective as well as her mother’s simultaneously: Sarah is seeing her mother disappear, who is simultaneously standing and seeing Sarah disappear. Like Price, who speaks for his father’s experience of death, like Holmes who walks readers through a painful memory, looking in from various sides, and like Royal, who presents readers with the lasting image of herself and her mother, looking, remembering, and feeling in a shared moment, there are not individuated figures with singular, competing perspectives. Instead, there is only a circuit of relationality, me knowing you knowing me, watching and looking and feeling in conjunction. These authors emphasize that the persons they knew and were known by, know and are known by, are not isolated subjects, but parts of wholes – bound to one others in ways that are inextricable, referential, and reciprocal.

Unlike most theories of recognition, which figure interpersonal/intersubjective knowing as occurring in a single, static instant wherein two subjects encounter and subsequently recognize (or misrecognize) one another, these narratives understand reciprocal knowing as a participatory and, more importantly, ongoing project, one that demands these moments of confused perspective. My point is not that reciprocal knowing as we find it in these narratives is more accurate or healthful than the conceptions of knowing that we find in most recognition theory. Rather, they show the contours, the limits, the unacknowledged assumptions, the disavowed privileges of many current theories of recognition, and they challenge us to revise our theories (our understanding of the simple act of “knowing others” accordingly). Similarly, they help us to see aspects of knowing in contemporaneous representations that we might overlook. Because knowing
is based upon ongoing interactions with shared networks, one’s knowledge of one’s mother (to use the example above) is continually formed and reshaped through meetings and separations, memories and second-hand connections. There is no single moment wherein one will ever fully recognize one’s mother as a separate subject from oneself; instead, there is only a lifelong process whereby one knows her. To put it another way, if recognition requires two separate selves acknowledging in a moment their separateness and their selfhood, then knowing, instead, renders interactions not as a singular meeting between separate subjects, but as reciprocal and unending circuits in which the self is decentered altogether.

**Return to Incidents**

The diasporic consciousness, extensive networks of connection, and narratological choices of the “Lost Friends” archive retroactively clarify much of Jacobs’s own attempts to express an ethics of knowing. Much like the archive, Jacobs similarly maintains an expansive network of family, friends, and acquaintances who make *Incidents* (and all the incidents of Jacobs’s life) possible. Perhaps the largest aspect of Jacobs’s work that the archive illuminates, however, is her narrative prowess and how her narrative contributes to her understanding of knowing. Like the narratological work of “Lost Friends” authors, Jacobs’s *Incidents* similarly, yet even more expertly, employs complex narrative techniques in order to illustrate her understanding of community. While scholars like Kimberly Drake have argued that Jacobs navigates between a “need to portray a ‘masculine’ self who throws off societal restraints and ‘breaks’ with the past…in order to free herself and start a new life,” on the one hand, and a “desire and need to maintain a connection to that community”³⁷⁹ and to her enslaved past, on the
other, my work instead notices the expert way in which Jacobs refuses a masculine or independent self in order to always bear in mind her relationship to her community and to others. Even in the very text of her autobiography (a public and masculine form of narrative), she continually allows her community to speak through her pen, directly addresses readers (always conscious of her relationship to them), and frequently demonstrates the complex social networks of enslavement that empower rather than restrict. That is, as we see in depictions of her aunts, her children, and other formerly enslaved women that she meets later on, Jacobs encourages a vision of community and familial ties that provides safety, protection, fulfillment, and care rather than portraying a desire to cast off that community in favor of full independence or freedom.

During her tenure in her “loophole of retreat” (128), Jacobs’s great-aunt Nancy dies from illness and, immediately, a conflict arises over whether Nancy will receive “interment in the white people’s burying-ground” at the demand of Mrs. Flint, or whether she will “lie with all the rest of her family” in “the old graveyard of the slaves” as per her family’s and community’s wishes (164). The dispute over Nancy’s final place of rest is settled only when Jacobs’s Uncle Phillip offers to pay for Nancy’s burial; notably, Jacobs’s careful language makes clear that Phillip cannot actually offer to pay for Nancy’s burial, but must, instead, ask “permission to bury his sister at his own expense” (165). As Jacobs writes of these and other negotiations in her narrative, the titles of Aunt and Uncle appear frequently, even for individuals who do not fulfill the typical consanguineous relation of the terms. Though a commonality across the autobiographies of formerly-enslaved individuals, Jacobs’s persistent use of the terms throughout her
work nonetheless points to the failure of traditional familial terminology to account for more complicated relationships.

Uncle Phillip’s request is granted (since, as Jacobs’s bitterly reminds us “slaveholders are always ready to grant such favors to slaves and their relatives” when money is on offer), and from her hiding place, Jacobs’s imagines how such a scene might appear to “Northern travelers, passing through the place” (165). Such outsiders, she writes, “might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the ‘patriarchal institution’” of slavery, “a touching proof of the attachment between slaveholders and their servants.” As Jacobs’s narrative has made clear to readers, of course, such an assumption could not be further from reality. As Jacobs indignantly writes, enacting a crucial and sudden switch from her first-person singular perspective to embody the first-person plural: “We could have told them a different story.” Jacobs imagines this alternative account of Nancy’s death:

We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings, that would have touched their hearts, if they had any hearts to feel for the colored people. We could have told them how the poor old slave-mother had toiled, year after year, to earn eight hundred dollars to buy her son Phillip's right to his own earnings; and how that same Phillip paid the expenses of the funeral, which they regarded as doing so much credit to the master. We could also have told them of a poor, blighted young creature, shut up in a living grave for years, to avoid the tortures that would be inflicted on her, if she ventured to come out and look on the face of her departed friend (165).

In her retelling, Jacobs crucially renders Nancy’s life and death as a “story,” one which requires both a collective telling – only the community, “we,” might relate it – as well as the participation of other characters in order to properly told. The story can neither be singularly told nor constructed around a single individual. Instead, the story contains Nancy’s own history, as well as that of her son, the circumstances of her burial, the
“wrongs and sufferings” of other enslaved individuals, and even Jacobs’s own narrative—all are inseparably bound together and to tell the story of one is to, by necessity, touch upon the stories of others. Similarly, in keeping with the reciprocity of Jacobs’s implied theory of knowing, such stories achieve completion (or, rather, are realized into reality) only in being told and heard. Thus, such stories, like the process of knowing, relied upon participation and reciprocity—telling and hearing, writing and reading, seeing and being seen.

Furthermore, Jacobs’s telling includes particular memories of Nancy, importantly, moments that further emphasize her connection to others. Jacobs writes of Nancy’s years of toiling in order “to buy her son Phillip’s right to his own earnings” for the price of “eight hundred dollars” (166). Phillip eventually utilizes these earnings, of course, to later bury Nancy. This memory, which, on the one hand, clearly demonstrates to readers the particular cruelty at work throughout the conflict over Nancy’s interment, clearly resembles the narrative work that Lost Friends authors will eventually perform in the decades after the war. Like the advertisements authored by John Holmes, Sarah Royal, and others, the story that Jacobs’s community would tell is a story of specific and personal memories, of interconnected moments and relationships, which all contribute to the process of knowing Nancy. As scholar Daneen Wardrop notes in her reading of Nancy’s burial scene, Jacobs’s repeated and insistent use of “we” throughout the passage, “is arresting…for the importance of community it conveys.” Jacobs, from within her hiding place, observing and unobserved, is able, momentarily, to serve as the medium for “the black community - that speaks its insistent ‘we.’” As Wardrop writes, Jacobs becomes able to write simultaneously “for the ‘we’ as well as the ‘I,’ for the many as for
her black, female self.”382 I argue, however, that Jacobs’s ability to write both “for the many” and for herself comes, not merely as a rhetorical strategy to articulate to readers “the wrongs and sufferings” of “the colored people,” but as a critical piece of her ethics of knowing.

Jacobs demonstrates, in her account Aunt Nancy’s burial and her later account of Aunt Marthy’s almost-sale, the power of community and being known as well as the multitude of ways in which individuals are, instead, actually community members. That is, Jacobs understands, and makes clear throughout her work, that the stories of an individual are always also the stories of others. The story of Nancy’s life and labor is also the story of “the wrongs and sufferings” of all enslaved people, is also the story of eight hundred dollars, is also the story Phillip’s life, is also the story of her burial, is also the story Mrs. Flint’s cruelty, is also the story of Linda Brent herself, “shut up in a living grave” and serving as witness to all (166). Like the very title of her autobiography, Jacobs presents her life as a series of scenes and small vignettes, a string of seemingly incidental incidents that ultimately culminate in the story of her life and in a more complete picture of who she is, what she has experienced, who she knows, and so on. Like the small details and narrativized moments in various “Lost Friends” advertisements, Jacobs similarly presents her life as a story which intersects with the stories and lives of others. Furthermore, these works suggest that moments which may seem incidental – Jacobs’s accounts of Nancy’s burial and Marthy’s narrowly-avoided sale, John Holmes’s image of his mother crying, C.L. Crump’s detail that he was named Caroll after his father’s brother – all shape each person, their experiences, and the series of stories, scenes, and incidents which culminate in their life. As Jacobs makes clear,
however, these seemingly small details are far from incidental. Aunt Marthy’s community-led rescue from the auction block demonstrates the very real power that knowing has, and, later, after Jacobs’s Uncle Benjamin is captured, Jacobs notes that no one is “allowed to visit him” but that her family “had known the jailer many years” and are thus able to gain access (20). Like Marthy’s being “generally known” by the community, the family’s connection to the jailer grants them privilege and access that they otherwise would not be able to come by.

While these complex social networks and means of accessing community strength influence Jacobs’s use of knowing, Jacobs work draws a meaningful distinction between the kind of knowing that produces care and the kind of knowing that produces community. Upon arriving in New York, Jacobs serendipitously reunites with her daughter and someone named Sarah, “the daughter of a woman who used to live with my grandmother, but who had left the south years ago” (186-7). Through Sarah, Jacobs meets Sarah’s mother, who greets Jacobs by reminding her how they are known to one another (“I used to know [your] father and mother”), as well as “a company” of others “all from my grandmother’s neighborhood.” As Jacobs notes, “these friends gathered round me and questioned me eagerly. They laughed, they cried, and they shouted. They thanked God that I had got away from my persecutors and was safe on Long Island” (187). Once again, Jacobs illustrates the capacity of community, which here includes those with similar experiences and distant knowledge of one another. Sarah, Sarah’s mother, and the others who gather around Jacobs to celebrate her freedom have no easily defined relationship to one another, they are not kin, they are not friends (though Jacobs labels them as such), but they are community members with a shared network of friends, family, and
acquaintances, a shared neighborhood, and the shared experience of enslavement under
Dr. Flint. Despite the fact that their relationship to one another does not fall under easily
categorized terms, the group of women understand their relationality to each other as
community (or “company” as Jacobs calls them).

It is worth noticing the difference in response that Jacobs receives from these
community members as compared with the reaction she receives from others who may
know of her story, but are not known to her through shared networks or experience. As
Jacobs writes of her daughter Ellen, she “liked her school, and was a great favorite there.
They did not know her history, and she did not tell it, because she had no desire to make
capital out of their sympathy” (213). Likewise, Jacobs herself regrets “that I never told
Mrs. Bruce my story” or let her “know how I was situated,” since “it would have excited
sympathy in her kind heart.” The sympathy that Jacobs receives, or fears receiving, from
Mrs. Bruce, Ellen’s school, and even her readers (“pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous
reader!” [60]) is markedly different from the affecting scene of mutual mourning that
takes place when Jacobs meets the group of women from her grandmother’s
neighborhood, though it does again highlight the potential power of sharing one’s stories
with others. Jacobs’s hesitance to share her story with white individuals reflects an
understanding that just as knowing can be protective (as is the case with Aunt Marthy), it
also renders one deeply vulnerable to the violence, attacks, and even pity of others. This
sympathetic knowing that produces pity and highlights vulnerability is made all the more
apparent in Jacobs’s work because it is not found in the archive of “Lost Friends.” While
such advertisements may hope to produce sympathy in order to garner help, there is no
fear that the authors or their “people” will be harmed or rendered vulnerable by the
advertisements. Like her reminder to readers that they lack shared experience – “you never knew what it is to be a slave” (60) – Jacobs’s connection with Mrs. Bruce, her wish for Daniel Dodge to see her, know her, and mourn her, and her relationship to her readers, nonetheless insists that while those outside of her community can know of her circumstances and feel care and sympathy, such knowing remains separate from the sort of community knowing demonstrated in Aunt Nancy’s burial, Aunt Marthy’s near-sale, the children removed from their homes, and the work performed by “Lost Friends” authors. The knowing apparent in such moments and works does not merely produce the sort of sympathy that knowing Jacobs’s story will produce for her white readers. Instead, it is a knowing that, as we’ve seen, is participatory, engaged, shared, built through complex social networks and community ties, and based in a recognition of connectedness to one another. Jacobs’s *Incidents* invites its readers – past and present – to ask whom they are responsible for, care for, and exist in community with.

To her contemporaneous readers, Jacobs warns that the model of sympathetic knowing they might have absorbed from sentimental novels, domestic treatises, and even other slave narratives, might be self-limiting and incomplete. To readers today, especially those with an interest in recognition theory, the practice of community, a feminist ethics of caring, and the work of building cross-racial alliances, Jacobs and the “Lost Friends” advertisements demonstrate what such knowing might look like and how we might consider community in more capacious ways that cut across traditional hierarchies rather than reinscribe them.
CODA: A PARABLE FOR THE FUTURE

This project has had a dual purpose. Firstly, my aim has been to establish responsibility as an overlooked term in the nineteenth century by looking at a variety of texts and discursive fields of the time. I hope that my previous chapters have sufficiently convinced readers of the term’s importance in the century. Secondly, however, and perhaps less overtly, I have strived to clarify that the dialectical and problematized nature of responsibility continues to be relevant for literary scholars across periods and genres.

To attune readers to this second purpose, and to look more closely at the temporality of responsibility – an aspect that I have hinted at in previous chapters, particularly in Chapter 4 – I must leap forward in time to Octavia Butler’s 1993 *Parable of the Sower* and her imagining of life in the United States in the mid-2020’s. Butler’s novel, presented as a series of diary entries, follows Lauren Olamina over the course of three years, from July 2024 to October of 2027. By the start of the novel in 2024, the United States is in the midst of the heightened effects of global warming – the coastlines have long sunk underwater, the South is ravaged by hurricanes, the North faces record-setting freezing temperatures, and the West Coast, where the novel is set, has become drought-ridden and beset by constant wildfires. All public services have become privatized – police and fire run as protection rackets – and public resources such as education or healthcare are non-existent. The economy has collapsed and money has become inflated to such a degree that those with wealth pool resources and revert to hand-crafting (or stealing) what they need while those without are forced into what Butler names “debt slavery” as they live in factory-owned towns working to pay off debt inherited from others or incurred simply by living. “Starvation, disease, drug damage, and
mob rule” (328) ravage the population while crime soars unchecked and individuals split
themselves into strict and separate racial categories. Governmental systems survive in
name alone and individual states have established closed borders to stop the flow of
interstate travel in search of resources.

Butler’s imagined future is an America that has degraded beyond the point of
return, yet still calls back to its readers with an insistence that there was a time (perhaps
their own time) “when it was still salvageable” (327). The United States of Parable of the
Sower bridges this project to readers own moment. Existing in the imagined (but now
very near) future of 2024, it nonetheless reminds readers that the history of the nineteenth
century is always present. As the novel notes, the country “has slipped back two hundred
years” as “something old and nasty is reviving” (118) – capitalist exploitation,
enslavement, privatization, and the white-supremacist individualism of the nineteenth-
century have returned in force, now spurred with new technologies, new crises, and larger
populations. Rather than the single-event-apocalypse that many pieces of media offer,
there is no “big crash” here, no “sudden chaos,” instead, things are perpetually
“unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit” (123).

The novel’s protagonist, Lauren, is differentiated from others both by her ability
to notice the implications of the deteriorating world around her and by her hyper-
empathy, a physical condition whereby she literally feels the pain of others as her own.
Lauren considers her empathy both a disability (particularly in such a violent landscape)
and, occasionally, a source of power. As she notes after the horrific death of her brother:
“If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn’t do such
things…. If everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who would
cause anyone unnecessary pain?” (115). For Lauren, having a “biological conscience” like hers would be better than “no conscience at all” (115). Lauren’s ability to empathize with others – even if only biologically compelled to do so – allows her to see the world for what it is, a collective space rather than a world in which one can survive as an individual. In a brief argument between her father and stepmother, readers see this insight presented anew:

“Did you notice,” Dad said, “That every off-duty watcher answered the whistles last night? They came out to defend their community.”
“I don’t care about them! It’s you I’m worried about!”
“No,” he said. “We can’t think that way anymore…. We all look out for one another” (75-6).

Like her father, Lauren understands that the old ways of existing – as individual agents in a capitalist world looking out only for one’s own wellbeing and the wellbeing of one’s immediate loved ones – are not only unsustainable and unethical, but are quite literally the very approach that has resulted in a dying world filled with dying people. Later on, Lauren’s group-mate, Harry, similarly remarks that he “hate[s] this world already,” but that “it’s not so bad if people stick together” (183).

*Parable* suggests then, through Lauren and her attempts to survive (importantly, alongside others), that in the face of apocalypse it is not strength, brutality, power, nor individual will that will save us; instead, it is community, hope, care, empathy, and responsibility, a term that Lauren clings to in moments of uncertainty. Speaking to her brother, Keith, who has abandoned the family and who will inevitably be murdered “by monsters much worse than himself,” Lauren notes her commitment to responsibility:

“You going to cook for me?”
“I’ve cooked for you hundreds of times. Thousands.”
“I know. But you always had to before.”
“Don’t be stupid. You think I couldn’t act the way you did: Skip out on my responsibilities if I felt like it? I don’t feel like it” (104-5).

Keith, remarking that she “always had to before,” operates under an ethics of duty or obligation; people do things for others simply because they are forced to and for no other reason. He continues to return home occasionally because he feels compelled out of obligation for his mother, he falls in with an illiterate gang and works as their reader because it is the most expedient way to gain power, and he murders freely because he sees others as sites of obligation or sources of potential violence, but never as people.

Lauren, on the other hand, not only acknowledges her responsibility, but claims it fully remarking that she doesn’t want to avoid it like Keith has. That to avoid her responsibility would make her into something monstrous like him, that her humanity and her responsibility are (like Frederick Douglass argues hundreds of years prior) entangled. Earlier, while the world around her continues its already-begun decline, Lauren attempts to awaken those around her to their own responsibility as well:

“Why do you want to talk about this stuff,” Joanne asked, bringing me back to the real fire. “We can’t do anything about it.”
“We have to.”
“Have to what? We’re fifteen! What can we do?”
“We can get ready. That’s what we’ve got to do now. Get ready for what’s going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward…” (54-5).

Joanne’s position echoes many current discussions regarding the state of the world, notably the belief that “we can’t do anything about it.” In Joanne’s case, part of her reasoning is her age, she is after all only fifteen, but the text does not allow that to serve as an excuse, or, at least, Lauren does not, declaring that they “have to” do something in
response to the world that they inhabit. This actionability again calls back to Douglass’s own suggestion that responsibility is both a deeply felt thing and actionable as well – the only cure for apathy and despair.

Responsibility, as readers have seen throughout this project, occupies a deeply troubled space. It is that which we wish to identify, to dodge, to absolve ourselves of, to embrace or enact. It is that which holds us accountable, which dams us, which separates us from other creatures, which marks us as human enough or which denies us access to that category. And yet, despite its failings and our misgivings about it, responsibility is also that which orients us towards others and their needs, that which compels us to work towards a world different (and hopefully better) than our own, that which binds us in inescapable community and that which reminds us that the only path forward is the path we take together. Nineteenth-century thinkers worked to untangle the term and make it usable in their own deeply troubled time. And, as Butler’s text suggests, when facing the revival of “something old and nasty,” the same old and nasty somethings that plagued Americans two hundred years ago, it is responsibility, care, and community that we might once again turn to, just as thinkers then did.

The book ends with the very parable that it takes its name from:

A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side….and some fell upon a rock….and some fell among thorns….and others fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bore fruit an hundredfold. (328-9).

The majority of the sower’s seeds come to nothing, they are choked out by thorns, devoured by birds, and withered in the heat, but some, by chance, fall upon good ground, grow well, and produce. The parable, like Butler’s text, tells of loss and suffering, but nonetheless there remains a thread of hopefulness for those seeds that might someday
come to something fruitful. The parable of Butler’s text offers a cautious hope and a command that readers must invest in care and responsibility for others, that it is empathy and community that insures survival, not violence or individualism. This project has focused its energies on the specific historical discourse of responsibility throughout the nineteenth century; however, responsibility remains a rich vein of discourse throughout modern texts as well, one which scholars would do well to note. Furthermore, as Butler’s text underlines, this project remains undergirded by the belief that the work of scholarship must provide worthwhile insights for its own historical moment as well. Like Butler’s imagining of a troubled future in order to offer insights to her twentieth-century readers, this project looks backwards to a troubled past in order to offer insights to modern readers who might revisit the possibilities of responsibility, care, and community in order to imagine different futures than the bleak outcome that Butler’s text offers.

As the text ends, Lauren looks to Bankole, the man she has taken as her partner and lover:

He shook his shaggy head, his hair, beard, and serious expression making him look more than a little like an old picture I used to have of Frederick Douglass (328).

In the near-hopeless future that Butler’s text predicts, where the United States has slipped backwards in time to the horrors of its past, there remains as well, alongside the horror, the same seeds of hope that once existed when all was thought lost. Butler’s imagined future is an apocalyptic wasteland of exploitation and enslavement, racism and constant climate crisis, the sins of the past born anew in old and recognizable forms. Yet together, only ever together, and with the hyper-empathy and outward-facing responsibility that Lauren and others have been burdened/blessed with, there nonetheless remains the
message that perhaps there is a world worth building and reimagining even in the midst of present horrors. As Frederick Douglass himself helpfully provides, “I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope.”}^{385}
Notes to Introduction:

16 Ibid.
Readers may rightly note the highly gendered nature of Smith’s example. As we will see throughout this dissertation there exists a common association of duty with inferiors—enslaved people, women, laborers—whereas responsibility frequently appears as the purview of free white men, individuals.

Ibid.

Frederick Douglass notes in his Fourth of July speech that moral responsibility comes as a result of “the deepest and pure up-gushings of the unsophisticated human heart.”


Ibid.


Thomas Reid, Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind, (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1819), 369

Stewart, The Active and Moral Powers of Man, 132.


Ibid.
Notes to Chapter 1:

50 Ibid., 80. Emphasis mine.
51 Ibid.
54 Tocqueville himself notes that “responsibility of [one’s] own actions” is a requirement of the self-sovereignty he discusses.
57 This will be covered in more detail in Chapter 4.
59 The democratization of American politics at this time is covered most extensively in Sean Wilentz’s scholarship. He traces what he names a “democratic rupture” in which, for the first time, masses of citizens gained suffrage and swayed the outcomes of large votes in what appeared to be a wave of egalitarian and democratic access. Obviously, as we will see, this democratization was still restricted to particular groups. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, (W.W. Norton & Co., 2005).
60 Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 54.
61 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 6.
66 Ibid.
67 Bromley, *Possessive Individualism*, 236.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 24.
Even long before the war itself, it was abolition, and especially the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, that shifted discussions from individual responsibility to duty for the state. The act also highlighted the problems of citizenship for both white and Black Americans. For the former, as Stowe dramatizes in her famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, white citizens felt compelled to act as an extension of the state apparatus, participating in the return of escaped or fugitive Blacks to the South. As Stowe’s Senator Bird anxiously and defensively states that while his “private feeling” may be against such a law, the “great public interest” compels him to complete the “very painful duty” of turning in the recently-escaped Eliza. His struggle between private feeling and public duty mirrors other moments in the discourse of citizenship where private and public converge.

This trade of citizenship and its rights for loyalty and duty found a fresh target in newly emancipated African-Americans. As Saidiya Hartman and Lloyd Pratt have each made clear in their scholarship, duty and responsibility quickly became employed in the postbellum period as a means of entrapment for Black subjects. The freedom and selfhood of Black subjects was frequently rendered as transactional – fulfill one’s obligations (cheerfully) or be recognized as unworthy of freedom, which is here portrayed as a privilege that might be revoked at any moment (selfhood and freedom, after all, cannot ever fully belong to Black subjects, but must be loaned by white society). Responsibility, in this regard, is a set of externally imposed obligations that one must fulfill in order to be recognized as appropriately human. One adequately performs self-responsibility or one is seen as irresponsible and is placed in the protective care of white society through enslavement and incarceration.


Ibid.

Charles S. Hoyt, “Relating to the Causes of Pauperism” (1877), retrieved from WorldCat.org.


*Emerson, “Self – Reliance,” In Essays and Lectures, 261.*

*Brace, Address.*

*Harriet Wilson, Our Nig,* 287.


I use anxiety here in the tradition of Freud’s General Introduction to Psychoanalysis in which anxiety is marked as a general condition as opposed to fear, which is expressed in response to a direct and identifiable object.


*Brock, Investigation and Responsibility,* 88.


*Phan, Bonds of Citizenship,* 171.

*Hoyt, Causes of Pauperism.*


*Brace, Address.*

*Ryan, Grammar of Good Intentions,* 79.

*Ibid., 77.*


Raymond, *Keywords*, 21.

Important to note that part of what Emerson is critiquing here is the traditional Lockean social contract theory. Although the scholarship itself is extremely dated, the work of Cameron Thompson and Odell Shepard note the many ways in which, as Shepard wrote in 1938, “the entire Transcendental Movement was a revolt against Locke.” Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays and Lectures*, 261; Cameron Thompson, “John Locke and New England Transcendentalism,” *The New England Quarterly* 35.4 (1962), 435-457.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Douglass, “Our Composite Nationality.”


Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” (1872). Douglass, also goes so far as to acknowledge that all of human existence and knowledge depends upon “those who have preceded us.” There is, Douglass ultimately suggests, no such thing as a self-made man and, more importantly, there never has been.


Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 27.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid., 23.


See Betsy Erkkila, Whitman the Political Poet, (Oxford University Press, 1989).


Cooper, *Voice from the South*, 63.


Ibid., 614.


Whitman, 1861 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. 

xiii
Notes to Chapter 2:


147 Ibid., 55.


149 Ibid., 15.


151 Ibid., 46.

152 Ibid., 47.

153 Even consumers, as Bruce Laurie’s work notes, were “accustomed to face-to-face barter” with producers/builders/craftsmen themselves. The new market economy dissolved those relationships and the responsibilities consumers and producers felt towards one another. Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers*, 30.

154 Ibid., *Artisans Into Workers*, 36.


157 Augst, *Clerk’s Tale*, 215-16.


160 Ibid.


162 While Phelps’s *Silent Partner* remains largely untreated by scholars (particularly in recent years), those who have engaged with this text (Judith Fetterley, Christine Stansell, William Lynn Watson, Donna M. Campbell, and others) focus almost exclusively on the gendered aspects of the novel and its possible feminist interventions. While I also take up the issue of gendered difference in Phelps’s text, I am more interested in the feelings of responsibility that Perley begins to feel for the laborers of her father’s mill. Though Phelps seems to gender these feelings, I read them more as representative of a general anxiety felt by middle-class Americans, not just middle-class American women.
Liberty, and brotherly kindness

knowledge, the skill, and the mental power of the world

Douglass, for instance, env


the text.

Warner Berthoff, New York:

following chapter.

Bartleby as Alienated Worker” Studies in Short Fiction 11.1 (1974) 379

the modern, alienated laborer. See Naomi C. Reed, “The Specter of Wall Street: ‘Bartleby, the Scriv

Literary scholars (particularly Marxist scholars) typically read with a focus on Bartleby as representative of

Political Companion to Herman Melville

Future page numbers will appear in the text.

Kevin Attell, “Language and Labor, Silence and Stasis: Bartleby Among the Philosophers,” in A


Literary scholars (particularly Marxist scholars) typically read with a focus on Bartleby as representative of

the modern, alienated laborer. See Naomi C. Reed, “The Specter of Wall Street: ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener'


Ibid., 195.

See Hoang Gia Phan, Bonds of Citizenship, who argues that Billy Budd functions as a specter of mutiny.

Henry Ward Beecher “Seven Lectures to Young Men” (1844). Quoted in Rodgers, The Work Ethic in

Industrial America, 11.

Augst, Clerk’s Tale, 224.

This illegibility exists for readers as well. Just as the narrator struggles to identify Bartleby’s motives,

readers similarly struggle to locate their own feelings with regards to the scrivener.


Emerson, “American Civilization” (1862), In The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson:


The Frederick Douglass Papers 2:359-387.

Reid, Active Powers, 231.

Readers will see the distinction between responsibility to and responsibility for developed further in the

following chapter.

Herman Melville, “The Tartarus of Maids” (1855), In Great Short Works of Herman Melville, Ed.

Warner Berthoff, New York: Perennial Classics, 1969, 210-222, 216. Future page numbers will appear in

the text.

See Nick Bromell, By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America, (The


Reid, Active Powers, 225.

Dana Nelson, National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men,


We might contrast this idea of a globalized world with other more hopeful visions of global connection.

Douglass, for instance, envisions that “the world wide ramifications of commerce- bringing together the

knowledge, the skill, and the mental power of the world - cannot but dispel prejudice dissolve the granite

barriers of arbitrary power, bring the world into, peace and unity, and at last crown the world with justice,

Liberty, and brotherly kindness.”
Notes to Chapter 3:


190 Ibid.


196 Scholar Benjamin Lamb-Books marks three primary avenues of abolitionist discourse: sentimentalism, Republicanism (or, appeals to patriotic ideals), and Protestantism. Each of these ways of problematizing slavery appears frequently across abolitionist discourse, and often throughout the same text as abolitionists attempted to cover multiple rhetorical bases at once. Regardless, however, the expansive archive of abolitionist literature makes clear that pathetic appeals and an emphasis on moral feeling dominated the discourse. Benjamin Lamb-Books, *Angry Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Slavery: Moral Emotions in Social Movements*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).


200 *Direct* participation is the crux here. Discussions of responsibility must always contend with reasonable limits to that responsibility. Wendell Phillips in his *Philosophy of the Abolition Movement* (1854) similarly caveats that responsibility for abolition is for “the intelligent and deliberate actor,” leaving room for the pardon of non-deliberate participants just as Wayland excuses those who do not directly participate. Douglass’s work, as we will see in this chapter, refines these seemingly reasonable limits and suggests that any and all participation – deliberate or direct or not, demands responsibility.

201 There are, of course, exceptions to this claim. Douglass’s own work, as I argue, does this most effectively, but other abolitionists like Henry Ward Beecher made efforts to address anti-abolition sentiment and articulate why seemingly unaffected Northerners might be compelled to aid in abolition.

202 Peter Myers’s work notes this well as he writes that Douglass was aware that “to infer oral obligation from natural sentiment alone would be an obvious error.” Instead, “it remains necessary to explain how differential degrees of moral obligation can attach to differential degrees of racial identification.” Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and Rebirth of American Liberalism*, (University Press of Kansas, 2008), 174.


Frank Kirkland posits a similar critique of Buccola’s reading of “Douglass as libertarian” invested in his existence as “a rights-bearing, independent, and self-determining individual.” As I will argue here and elsewhere throughout this project, it is not that these readings (either Buccola’s or Kirkland’s—who ultimately argues a similar reading to Buccola) are incorrect, merely that they risk missing the many moments in which Douglass and other thinkers of the period pushed back against the very idea of the individual, the self-responsible, the self-determining, the agential and independent self who is removed at all from others. Frank Kirkland, “Is an Existential Reading of the Fight with Covey Sufficient to Explain Frederick Douglass’s Critique of Slavery?” Critical Philosophy of Race 3.1 (2015) 124-151. Douglass himself asserted his belief in individuality in his 1872 speech “Self-Made Men,” and, like Buccola’s reading, affirmed that “individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean”—a part of an indistinguishable whole; however, Douglass takes pains to insist that “independence of [one’s] fellowmen” cannot exist because though we may “differ as the waves,” we are one as the sea.”


See Jacobs, Incidents, “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders.”

208 See Jacobs, Incidents, “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders.”


210 See Jacobs, Incidents, “Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders.”
Douglass notes in multiple places that slavery sought to deaden the inherent moral responsibility of enslaved persons.


Interestingly, Douglass resembles many women writers in this respect, investing efforts not in exalting reason, but in naming the importance of sentiment.

See Thomas Reid *Active Powers*, Dugald Stewart *Outlines of Moral Philosophy*, Jasper Adams *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*.

Douglass resembles many women writers in this respect, investing efforts not in exalting reason, but in naming the importance of sentiment.


Ibid.


Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 248. Douglass writes that “the morality of free society can have no application to slave society.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Cooper, *Voice from the South*, 63.


Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 32.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 145.


Ibid.


Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 83.

Notes to Chapter 4:


Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 60.

Abell, *Woman in her Various Relations*, 299-300.


Ibid.
While this chapter will, at times, use male/female to discuss various thinkers and writers, I am interested in how such thinkers expressed and felt socially-constructed rules of gender, not sex. That is, I do not seek to equate gender with sex despite any potential slips which may occur between my use of terms like men/women and male/female.

“Address to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society to the Women of Massachusetts” printed in The Liberator 1836.


Miss Leslie’s 1839 Behavior Book boasts “full instructions and advice in letter writing; receiving presents; incorrect words; borrowing; obligations to gentlemen…decorum in church; at evening parties….shopping; conduct in the street…lips; complexion; teeth; hands; the hair; etc., etc.,” while L.G. Abell’s 1853 Skillful Housewife’s Book, Catharine Beecher’s 1873 Housekeeper and Healthkeeper, and Helen Stuart Campbell’s 1893 Easiest Way in Housekeeping and Cooking include helpful advice regarding: the relief of croup, managing hens, “home ventilation,” human anatomy (“the connection of muscles and nerves” as well as “microscopic cellular muscular fibre”) and the processes of digestion, yard “drainage and water-supply,” antidotes for illness, stocks and soups, “principles of heat,” and a veritable plethora of other topics ranging from construction, household-planning, decorating, furnishing, cooking, child-rearing, education, biology, nutrition, physical therapy, social mannerisms, fashion, husbandry, literacy, cleaning, and so on; indeed, the claim that such texts were “complete guide[s]” appears to be neither pure marketing strategy nor undeserved boast.

1836

96.

20.

13.

xix
Even in the field of women’s labor history, scholars focus most often on women’s wage-earning labor. As a result, much of the discussion of domestic training is only in regards to domestic service work performed in other women’s homes. For scholarly discussions of domestic labor as part of labor history see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History*, (University of Illinois Press, 2007). See also Melanie Woods work which aptly names domestic guides as an early form of technical writing. Melanie C. Woods, “Nineteenth-Century American Housekeeping Books: Women’s Workplace Manuals, Historical Research in Technical Writing,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1998).


Abell, *Woman in her Various Relations*, 300.

Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 80.


As we will see in the final chapter through the work of Harriet Jacobs.


Peabody, *Record of a School* (1845), 188.


Notes to Chapter 5:


Others have noted the problematics of neatly separating the period into ante- and postbellum, primarily that the ante- and postbellum divide that historians and literary scholars frequently rely upon artificially limits our ability to view threads of connection across these periods. See Cody Marrs and Marrs and Christopher Hager, *Timelines of American Literature*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

For more on Black Diaspora see Ronald Segal’s *The Black Diaspora: Five Centuries of the Black Experience Outside Africa*. For more on the postbellum conditions of diaspora see Leslie Ann Schwalm’s *Emancipation’s Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*.


See Nick Bromell “Harriet Jacobs: Prisoner of Hope,” in *African American Political Thought*, Ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner, (Chicago University Press 2020), 95-115. Bromell draws particular attention to how trauma disrupts time for Jacobs: “Jacobs may be sitting in a room somewhere in Mrs. Willis’s house composing *Incidents*, but her narrator tells us that she still feels the effects of that long confinement on her body and her soul.”

Hughes, “Integrity and Vulnerability,” in *Recognition, Responsibility, and Rights*, 127.


Taken anecdotally from my own experience growing up and living in Alabama.

“Freedom on the Move” Project Database, Cornell University, freedomonthemove.org.


Ibid., 44.


Ibid., 24.


My own work thus aligns itself with scholars who take issue with Orlando Patterson’s theory of social death under enslavement. Rather, I argue that enslaved individuals responded to the extremes of enslavement with creative and new conceptions of social life and connection.
Many literary scholars continue to read the invocations of family values found in such narratives as strategic appeals to white, middle class sentimental readers and culture (see Arthur Riss “Sentimental Douglass.” In The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass, Ed. Maurice S. Lee, 103–17. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Similarly, many nineteenth-century scholars continue to harbor a (not wholly incorrect) Foucauldian suspicion of the family as a site of social disciplining (see Richard H. Broadhead, “Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America, Representations 21 (1988), 67-96).


Walker, “Moral Vulnerability and the Task of Reparations.” In Vulnerability, 112.


Though many scholars (and my own work with domestic literature) have illuminated how some sentimental fiction of the period accomplishes a similar orienting of the self towards others, I suggest that the two operate quite differently. In sentimental and domestic literature, readers note women’s frequent self-denial in favor of others’ needs. In these writings, however, we see not a self-denial in order to please or provide for others, but rather a serious acknowledgement that the self only exists insofar as it is formed by others – that one’s life is always a piece of another’s story – not self-denying, but community-minded from the start.

Many thanks to scholar Neenah Estrell-Luna (Northeastern University; author of Promises Made: The Resettlement of Our Allies, 2019) who highlighted to me the many ways in which this community-mindedness follows modern theories of “linked fate” among Black political subjects. For more, see Michael C. Dawson, Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics, (Princeton University Press, 1994).

Jenny Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.


Ibid.

Jacobs’s choice to use “company” is an interesting one when we consider that while a community are those who share commonality, a company refers to a group gathered together or the act of being with others. We might think about the subtle difference here and how these women are in company with one another (are together, gathered, being and existing with each other) rather than only in community with one another. See Cheryl Hughes, “Integrity and Vulnerability” in Recognition, Responsibility, and Rights: Feminist Ethics and Social Theory, Ed. Robin N. Fiore and Hilde Lindemann Nelson, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 119-129.

Notes to Coda:


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