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978-1-107-04368-8 - Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture

Sarah N. Roth

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Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture

In the decades leading to the Civil War, popular conceptions of African American men shifted dramatically. The savage slave featured in 1830s' novels and stories gave way by the 1850s to the less threatening humble black martyr. This radical reshaping of black masculinity in American culture occurred at the same time that the reading and writing of popular narratives were emerging as largely feminine enterprises. In a society where women wielded little official power, white female authors exalted white femininity, using narrative forms such as autobiographies, novels, short stories, visual images, and plays, by stressing differences that made white women appear superior to male slaves. This book argues that white women, as creators and consumers of popular culture media, played a pivotal role in the demasculinization of black men during the antebellum period and consequently had a vital impact on the political landscape of antebellum and Civil War-era America through their powerful influence on popular culture.

Sarah N. Roth is Associate Professor of History and Chair of the History Department at Widener University.

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107043688

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First published 2014

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Roth, Sarah N. (Sarah Nelson), 1972–
Gender and race in antebellum popular culture / Sarah N. Roth.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-04368-8 (hardback)

1. African Americans in popular culture – History – 19th century.
2. African American men – Public opinion – History – 19th century.
3. Women, White – United States – Attitudes – History – 19th century.
4. African American men in literature. 5. Slavery in literature.
6. Race in literature. 7. Masculinity in literature. 8. Popular culture – United States – History – 19th century. 9. United States – Race relations – History – 19th century. 10. United States – Intellectual life – 19th century. I. Title.

E185.625.R68 2014

305.800973-dc23 2014002463

ISBN 978-1-107-04368-8 Hardback

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many people for their selfless aid in making the publication of this book a reality. Some of them deserve thanks for their keen intellectual efforts in reading and commenting on the manuscript, in all its many previous forms – Michael Holt, Edward Ayers, Dylan Penningroth, Mitchell Snay, and, especially, Alfred Brophy, who believed in this project more than I did at certain critical moments. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers, who gave me the type of sound, insightful suggestions that we historians can hope for from only our most dedicated, passionate, and brilliant colleagues.

Special thanks goes out to Stephen Railton, who sparked my interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a cultural phenomenon and who introduced me to anti-Tom novels. My scholarly path would have gone in an entirely different direction, and this book would not exist, if it hadn't been for the graduate seminar on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that I took with him at the University of Virginia in the late 1990s. He has also supported the manuscript and my unflagging interest in all things related to Uncle Tom ever since.

Numerous scholars at various conferences over the past several years have provided me with helpful comments and insightful ideas that helped shape this book in untold ways. They include Winthrop Jordan, Jean Fagan Yellin, Donald Yacovonne, Sally Hadden, Emma Lapsansky, E. Anthony Rotundo, James Brewer Stewart, and Jeannine DeLombard.

Others were supportive financially of the research and writing that ultimately took form in this book. The American Antiquarian Society provided a short-term grant, and Widener University supplied numerous

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research grants as well as a much appreciated post-tenure sabbatical in 2009.

I would like to thank Laura Wasowicz for calling my attention to the American Antiquarian Society's holdings in children's literature, which became a critical component of this project. I am grateful to Jaclyn Penny, also at the AAS, who was extremely helpful in expediting my requests for images. And the staff at the Library Company of Philadelphia provided much appreciated assistance, especially Phillip Lapsansky and Connie King.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Debbie Gershenowitz and her assistant Dana Bricken at Cambridge University Press, who as editors have been diligent, available, and helpful beyond my highest hopes and expectations.

My thanks to the *Journal of the Early Republic* for allowing me to reprint portions of the article "The Mind of a Child: Images of African Americans in Early Juvenile Fiction" (vol. 25, Spring 2005), in a substantially revised form, as part of Chapter 1. Portions of Chapter 2 appeared in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134 (July 2010) as "The Politics of the Page: Black Disfranchisement and the Image of the Savage Slave." Chapter 3 includes a version of "'How a Slave Was Made a Man': Negotiating Black Violence and Masculinity in Antebellum Slave Narratives," which was published in the August 2007 issue of *Slavery and Abolition*. Finally, parts of the article "'The Blade Was in My Own Breast': Slave Infanticide in 1850s Fiction" from *American Nineteenth-Century History* 8 (June 2007) appear in Chapter 5.

I am indebted personally to a number of colleagues and friends at Widener for their moral support and intellectual prodding – especially Jayne Thompson, Stephanie Schechner, Barbara Norton, Rachel Batch, and Jill Borin. Beth Homan has been a constant source of aid and guidance for whom I am sincerely thankful.

My gratitude and affection go out in great measure to my family, particularly Curtis and Betty Nelson, William Roth, Kristin Powers, Orianna Roth Richards, Fred Sanford, and, of course, the inimitable Clare Roth. Finally, thank you to P.C.R., for Everything.