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Prosthetic Affect: Nursing, Miscegenation, and the Reconstruction of the US Body Politic

On March 2, 1866, the Soldier's and Sailor's Union of the District of Columbia hosted a fundraiser for the benefit of amputee Yankee veterans and their families. On one of the walls, the Ladies' Auxiliary branch of this organization hung a giant banner that read, "Our disabled soldiers have kept the Union from being disabled" (qtd. in Jordan 148). Through its provocative doubling of disability, this slogan encapsulates popular perceptions of the Civil War amputee as a sacrificial figure: he who had heroically fragmented his body in order to preserve the sacrosanct unity of the national body politic. Thus, the alchemy of nationalist rhetoric transposed individual and collective, material and symbolic, diseased and recovered bodies. However, these overlapping anatomies invite several questions: to what extent did citizens embrace the notion that "disabled soldiers" had forestalled national disability? How was the language of national health contingent on the disability of a specific collective? And, gesturing back to the Ladies' slogan, did public commemoration of soldiers' sacrifices increase awareness about their disabled existences or, on the contrary, were these rituals a way of disguising their complicated bodily needs beneath the normative fabric of an "able" national body? In these commemorations of military disability, how much of the celebratory emphasis fell on disability itself and how much on the preserved inviolability of the nation-state?

This essay argues that the contingency between national and individual disability is best explained when framed within the larger sentimental discourse of Reconstruction. After all, the aforementioned banner exemplifies how the cultural idioms of "true womanhood" underscored the project of national reconciliation. Even if its message meddled in the manly business of war and politics, this inscription had been formulated, embroidered, and circulated by middle-class women. Because many of these women served as nurses, carrying the domestic creed of care, sympathy, and modesty to the epicenters of carnage (battlefields and hospitals), social historians have agreed that every woman during the Civil War was seen as a potential nurse (Schultz 20). As a result, the iconography of nursing galvanized the

call for sentimental Reconstruction. When nurses placed their healing hands on soldiers' injuries, they were also reaching out to transcend sectional hatred and to suture the racial, cultural, and economic fissures of the national self. Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a paradigmatic narrative of nursing, showcases the US nurse as an allegorical body whose "one hand stirred gruel for sick America," while "the other hugged baby Africa" (76). Like Alcott's volume, canonical writings on Civil War nursing are hardly ever about nursing *per se*. Moreover, these texts recreate anesthetic and prosthetic experiences, mitigating audiences' fear of racial equality while bandaging up the gaping wounds of Secession.

I refer to this restorative force as *prosthetic affect*: a sentimental narrative mode that relies on the "caring" tropes of nursing, wound dressing and prosthetics in order to restore the postbellum US body politic to a state of alleged wholeness, a state that, nonetheless, reproduces antebellum racial relations, hampers African American citizenship, and kindles US hegemony. By hugging "baby Africa," that is, reinforcing the view of African Americans as infantile, needy subjects not yet ready to become citizens, Alcott reinforces the racialist discourse of prosthetic affect. This discourse enabled members of the white middle class to celebrate a prosthetic body politic with the same intensity with which they abhorred a miscegenated one. Therefore, the affective bonds that produced national cohesion did so by suspending critical judgment and chastising interracial contact.

Critics like Jane Tomkins, Shirley Samuels, and Lauren Berlant have studied the paradoxical deployment of sentiment in American literature and culture. Their work insists that socially generated affects never operate independently from dominant ideologies. Applying this maxim to the historical context of the Reconstruction era, Nina Silber makes the case that, as citizens and legislators underwent the harsh trials of this period, they noticed that "what could not be accomplished through investments or through constitutional amendments might be accomplished through love" (40). This argument can be expanded by pointing out the understudied role of physical disability in the conceptualization and narrativization of this "love." Because bodies often display visible traces of historical violence, they also become the frequent target of restorative love, triggering strong nurturing desires and saturating the clinical process of rehabilitation with emotional overtones.

Disability Studies scholar Mary Klages contends that nineteenth-century representations of disability in the US constitute a "sentimental semiotics" in which disabled characters serve as "silent spectacles, images to be viewed by the non-disabled, whose importance has been in their ability to appear pathetic and to produce a sympathetic or sentimental response in non-

disabled people” (2, 17). Klages successfully addresses the representational mechanisms that hollow out the actual ordeals of disabled individuals, but she also fossilizes the very idea of sentimental disability by ignoring its generative value. Attentive to this generative capacity, the concept of prosthetic affect takes one step further the critical study of sentimentality by showing that US nationalism and its attendant racism also belonged to disability’s “sentimental semiotics”—that spectacles of war-related disability and nursing sought to awaken nationalist fervor and supremacist awareness beyond the obvious feelings of pity and compassion.

Seen through the lens of prosthetic affect, Civil War nursing constitutes a symbolic practice that enmeshes actual bodies and figurative bodies politic around competing categories of race, gender, and disability. In order to map out prosthetic affect and its chauvinistic appropriation of disability, the following arguments open with a cultural study of a famous prosthetic limb and then explains how the aggressive, masculinist model of national growth premised in the rise of prosthetic science reaches an aporia when it fails to signify at once sectional reunification and US imperialism. This discursive impasse led authors to sentimentalize prosthetic rehabilitation as a way of implementing sectional rapprochement, on the one hand, and an aggressive model of expansion, on the other. Nonetheless, Civil War nursing could also be redeployed to instigate political dissent. Thus, the last section of this essay examines Frances Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy* (1892), in which the author debunks the sentimental fallacies of prosthetic affect and reframes nursing as the warm-up of African American citizenship.

Teleological Bodies

With an unprecedented toll of more than 60,000 amputations, the Civil War transformed the social perception of the amputated body and marked a pivotal moment in the representational history of the US body politic (Figg and Farrell-Beck 454; Schroeder-Lein 16–19). Advances in prosthetic technology allowed orthopedists to normalize disfigured bodies, guarantee patients a modicum of functionality, and help them retain a sense of self-reliant manhood in an increasingly industrialized workplace.

In August 1862, the Board of Surgeons of the US Army sponsored Benjamin Franklin Palmer’s prototype—often called simply “the Palmer leg”—as the official artificial limb for Union veterans. In his essay “The Human Wheel: Its Spokes and Felloes” (1863), Oliver Wendell Holmes welcomed the Palmer leg and the thriving prosthetics industry as an unequivocal sign of national progress. Holmes extolled the virtues of the

Palmer leg on two fronts: aesthetically, it pioneered “a limb which shall be presentable in polite society” (307); politically, the Palmer leg signified the United States’ technological ingenuity and confirmed its role as the forerunner of capitalist modernity. Far from estranged, the Palmer leg’s political and aesthetic dimensions appear tightly interrelated, as Holmes manifests that “American taste was offended, outraged by the odious ‘peg’ which the Old-World soldier or beggar was proud to show” (320). Commenting on these outdated, “Old-World” predecessors of the Palmer leg, Holmes quips that, “legs cannot remain stationary while the march of improvement goes on around them” (307). His pun redefines prosthetized bodies as teleological bodies meant to march forward without looking back at the historical mess they leave behind. Thus, although the Palmer leg’s most obvious goal was to rehabilitate individual bodies, on a figurative register, it also propelled aesthetic and political exceptionalism. Its privileged location in the US Army Pavilion during the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia confirms its status as a potent symbol of national recovery and global leadership (Herschbach 35–36). Anatomic rehabilitation and the formation of a world power became one and the same thing.

Even if Holmes compensates for the violence of the war with its technological by-products, this convenient substitution does not unfold without contradictions. For starters, Holmes’s textual premise constitutes in and of itself a prosthetic operation. In other words, Holmes rhetorically substitutes the violence done to the body with its technological cover-up. The author barely mentions the war specifically and capitalizes instead on new technologies of the body, which, paradoxically enough, only the death-machinery of modern warfare could make possible. In consequence, Holmes fuels this collective telos as a fate predicated on Americans’ privileged grasp of technology, aesthetics, and democracy, not on the disruptive effects that the Civil War bore upon the same narrative of relentless progress.

The problem is that the Palmer leg obscures the historical transformations it is supposed to flaunt. According to David Yuan, “American ingenuity,” as Holmes endorsed it, “exists not only to reveal truth but also to hide it” (75). Overall, Holmes cannot reconcile the Palmer leg’s conspicuousness as an index of US progress with its other role: enabling soldiers to conceal their wounds “in polite society.” Bill Brown describes the resultant prosthetized body as “a body without memory, a national body with no nation” (155). Thus, Holmes turns prosthetics into a science of state-sponsored amnesia whose orchestrated act of forgetting salvaged the fiction of national unity. To *re-member* amputee soldiers through the Palmer leg prevented citizens from *remembering* the causes of the fratricidal struggle.

The vexed notion of rehabilitation is crucial here. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “rehabilitation” as the “[r]estoration of a person to health or normal activity after injury, illness, disablement, or addiction by means of medical or surgical treatment, physical and occupational therapy, psychological counseling, etc.” This definition emphasizes rehabilitation as a return to a state of normality: a return to the “normal” that also implies a return to the norm. In his magisterial history of disability, Henri-Jacques Stiker confronts the fallacious essence of rehabilitation discourse by rethinking it as a covert source of compulsory “identicalness” (“the problem of our society is not a failure to integrate but integrating too well, integrating in such a way that identicalness reigns”), which he later unmasks as “an integration of oblivion, of disappearance, of conformity” (132–33). The official definition of rehabilitation obscures rehabilitation’s complicit role with the prosthetic creation of teleological bodies, bodies designed to aggrandize the frontiers of the body politic once their compulsory “identicalness” obliterates individual trauma and historical memory.

Nineteenth-century constructions of sentimental nursing became the chosen vehicle for many artists to situate teleological, prosthetic bodies within a larger body politic that was still presented as humane and compassionate. Against this background, the nurse mediates between the dehumanized industrialism of the Gilded Age and the US promise of individual self-advancement, harmonizing the mechanization of society, its democratic potential, and the perpetuation of de facto racism.

The Limits of Sympathy

Whereas Holmes’s prosthetic tropes invisibilized and exalted disability at once, sentimental narratives enabled a less antithetical opportunity to stitch up national identity. Symbolic, affective scenes of caring helped middle-class audiences to come to terms with—rather than obliterate—a post-bellum nationscape marked by emancipation and Gilded-Age capitalism. Both northerners and southerners engaged in the sentimental presentation of veteran amputees. Rejecting Holmes’s jingoistic tone, these sentimental narratives ignore the actual prosthetic devices and exalt instead the restorative energies of pure sentiment. For example, in J. R. Bagby’s poem “The Empty Sleeve,” a southern wife tells her returning husband, “The arm that has turned to clay / Your whole body has made sublime” (347). This corporeal wholeness does not result from having an artificial limb attached to the stump, but from an aesthetic elevation to the “sublime” that originates in the indestructible bonds of matrimonial love.

Yet, the rehabilitation of these bodies through sentimental and aesthetic—rather than technological—channels was not enough to eradicate the racial tensions within the body politic of Reconstruction America. In Joel Chandler Harris’s “A Story of the War” (1880), the former slave Uncle Remus shoots and mutilates the Union soldier who comes to the plantation to liberate him. Nonetheless, everything gets resolved as the planter’s sister nurses and then marries the convalescent amputee. The ensuing marriage between a Yankee veteran and a southern belle seals the sectional wounds opened during Secession but, as life happily carries on, Uncle Remus and other ex-slaves maintain their loyalty bonds with their masters and reproduce as sharecroppers the cultural and political deprivations they experienced as slaves. The price that Harris’s narrative pays for national reunification is maintaining the antebellum racial codes of the plantation system. Therefore, his tale also relies on enforced amnesia, as Uncle Remus narrates the very act of mutilating his liberator as a moment of forgetting: “I den disremembered all ’bout freedom en lammed alose” (214). Dismembering the body of his direct emancipator, Uncle Remus confirms his membership in the national collective of teleological bodies—bodies whose completeness and normative status rely on forgetfulness and consent.

Even if famous writings on Civil War nursing present wounds and stumps as metaphorical reconciliation sites, these texts still organize their affective investments according to a racist ideology. Walt Whitman seems an unlikely suspect to add to this list; however, the emotional impetus that led him to nurture, caress, and kiss those soldiers under his guard usually falters when the poet stumbles upon blacks and Confederates. In a letter to his mother, Whitman confesses that:

When I meet black men or boys among my own hospitals, I use them kindly, give them something, etc—I believe I told you that I do the same to the wounded Rebels, too—but as there is a limit to one’s sinews and endurance and sympathies, &c. I have got in the way of confining my special attention to the few where the investment seems to tell best, and who want it most. (*The Wound-Dresser* 113)

Like the body, sentiment has its boundaries. There are places it cannot reach. Therefore, since the poet filters his affective input through residual racist and sectional prejudice, Whitman’s portrayal of nursing follows the dynamics of prosthetic affect. Furthermore, Whitman’s prosthetic affect also neglects (or purposefully forgets) the centrality of slavery, when he states later on that, in the Civil War, “[t]he Negro was not the chief thing. The chief thing was to stick together” (*Whitman’s Civil War* 227).

Yet, African Americans were instrumental to the Union “sticking together.” In the antebellum era, they supplied the labor that dynamized the

national economy. Between 1861 and 1865, more than 200,000 of them served in the ranks of the Union army. However, despite their central role in the war and its aftermath, African Americans confronted an endless succession of hurdles while securing war pensions—pensions that also subsidized veterans' access to prosthetic limbs. A recent monograph on Civil War pensions opens with a useful summary of the convoluted application process:

A pension-seeker began by describing his military service and disability to the Pension Bureau, which sought confirmation from the War Department and often asked applicants (or special examiners) to obtain corroboration from comrades, commanders, neighbors, and other witnesses. When his application was thus far acceptable, the veteran was instructed to report for a medical examination. After the physicians made their recommendations and the Bureau's reviewers made their decisions, rejected applicants could appeal the ruling or file a new claim if new disabilities arose; pensioners could also request payment increases when the law changed. (Logue and Blanck 36)

Extra factors prevented ex-Confederate soldiers, African Americans, and women (and, especially, African American women) from securing financial support. Whereas the Pension Bureau's "policies" were "on their face largely race neutral," the administration of such policies through the Bureau relied on racist and sectional filters that discriminated specific applicants. Racist prejudice easily found its way into the members of the Bureau, proven more impatient and stricter when the applicant's skin was black (Shaffer 6). In addition, African Americans' conscious decision to activate their citizenship status and, so, to whisk away their slave names also prompted the Bureau's disfavor, since its committee had no obligation to accommodate the demands of applicants who no longer went by their slave names or who had married and changed their family names (Shaffer 124). Moreover, the higher mobility of freed blacks after the war made it difficult for them to reconnect with their previous locations and produce the authenticating narratives that could guarantee a pension. Finally, the widespread illiteracy among African Americans complicated an already excruciating application process (Logue and Blanck 41–82).

The historical record suggests that prosthetic affect never became too sentimental around non-normative subjects who had to bear the extra burden of an amputation. However, this did not prevent the image of the amputated black veteran from becoming a staple of textual and visual narratives of sectional reunion. In fact, the lachrymose presentation of disabled

African American soldiers stood diametrically opposed to their actual relationship with the Pension Bureau. In Thomas Nast's dyptich "Shall I Trust These Men and Not This Man?" (Fig. 1), published in *Harper's Weekly* a few months after Robert E. Lee surrendered in Appomattox, we see Lady Columbia—a national allegory of the United States—indifferent to the pleas of ex-Confederate statesmen and quite obliging, instead, to the black Union veteran who lost his leg in the battlefield. Unlike with Holmes's prosthetic and forgetful bodies, there is no need for the black soldier to conceal his disabled status when entering "polite society." On the contrary, his stump here focalizes every gaze. An absent—yet extraordinarily present—cue, the black soldier's missing leg becomes a necessary element placing all observers on the same (sentimental) page. The personified nation adopts a nursing role and ushers the crippled soldier into her temple of nationhood. Nast encourages his readers to emulate Columbia: to pity and admire the black soldier who has placed his limb on the altar of the Union; in other words, to reframe Reconstruction as an affective enterprise detached from the ordinary spheres of politics, economics and cultural identity, and firmly rooted, instead, in a fictive realm of pure sentiment.

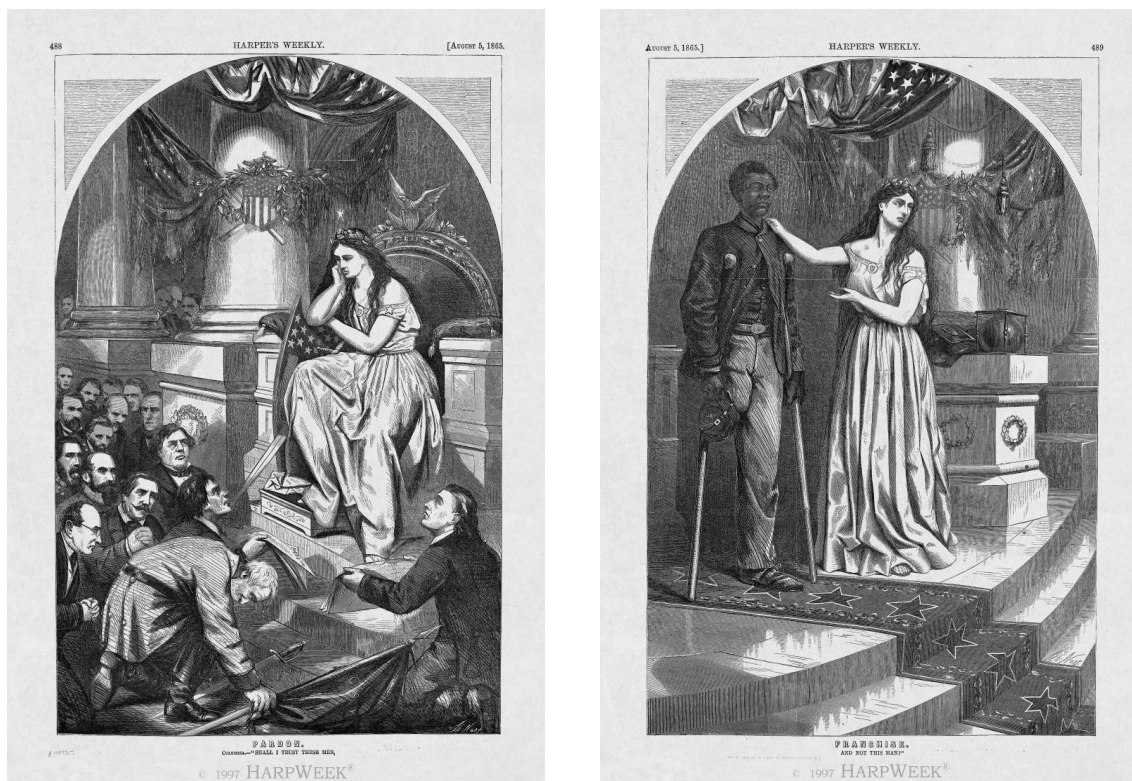


Fig.1. Thomas Nast, "Shall I Trust These Men and Not This Man?"

This sentimental realm flattened the very subjects it was meant to assist (Berlant 35). Black veteran amputees were useful as symbols; as entitled citizens, however, their status would often be called into question, if not openly ignored. Thus, different races could co-exist peacefully in the post-racial body politic of the United States as long as each one knew its place. Playing a new variation on the oscillations between national bodies and the body of the nation, the African American's absent limb here constitutes a prosthetic device for the national self: staring at it conforms to a sentimental ritual that accelerates national reunification. While Holmes and Palmer rushed to disguise the national wounds of white northern soldiers, it seems as if the African American stump had to remain a visible and accessible sign. The black soldier's missing leg becomes in itself a prosthetic device for national memory. Therefore, prosthetic affect inspired audiences to pity the disabled African American veteran, but it also perpetuated rigid racial boundaries and berated interracial contact.

De-sentimentalizing Nursing: Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*

Iola Leroy (1892), Frances Harper's Civil War/Reconstruction "race melo drama" inverts this practice (Gilman 223–27). Its plot centers on a mulatto protagonist who undergoes a dramatic turning point when she becomes aware of her African origins, is sold back into slavery, and escapes into the Union army, where her contributions as a camp nurse shape her activist consciousness. Outlining Iola's trajectory from brutalized slave to worthy breadwinner, Harper de-sentimentalizes Iola's nursing, turning Iola into a nurse who controls her emotions instead of being controlled by them.

In a chapter titled "After the Battle," Iola faces the horrifying panorama of the manifold corpses and injured soldiers brought to the hospital from the battlefield. When Iola assists her injured friend Robert Johnson, she, "tender and compassionate, humored his fancies, and would sing to him in low, sweet tones some of the hymns she had learned in her old home in Mississippi" (106). Despite the scene's mushy connotations, Iola's layer of tenderness soon gives way to the transmission of vernacular lore. In fact, the lyrics of Iola's "hymn" trigger a familiarity which allows Iola and Johnson to discover and restore their kinship ties as niece and uncle. In this chapter, Harper redefines nursing as a practice that gradually evolves from affective sympathy to sociopolitical dissent. Iola's song does not console Johnson's suffering nor does it bring a tear rolling down his cheek. On the contrary, after the song, Harper tells us that Robert's "reason had returned" (107). Here, nursing conducts a ritual of the brain, not of the heart. In the

pages that follow, Iola and Robert strategize their quest to reunite their entire family and set out to build the foundation of an African American community able to embody and even refine the middle-class values of temperance, thrift, and respectability.

By presenting Iola as a Civil War nurse, Harper undertakes an important risk: on the one hand, she characterizes Iola as a qualified professional; on the other, she extricates Iola's gift for nursing from the background of slavery and the opinions of those who, like Whitman, thought of African American women as inborn nurses or "mammies." Whitman conveys this belief when he scolds squeamish and naïve white middle-class nurses and asserts that, against the obvious risks of "having a genteel young woman at a table in a war. [...] There are plenty of excellent clean old black women that would make tip-top nurses" (*Memoranda* 55). In Harper's novel, Iola's nursing talents cannot be dissociated from her slave past. In fact, when Iola battles northern prejudice and finds a job, her nursing expertise constitutes her visiting card. Enacting a hypothetical job interview, Iola's mother asks her daughter "what is your skill?," to which Iola replies, "Nursing. I was very young when I went into the hospital, but I succeeded so well that the doctor said I must have been a born nurse" (160).

Iola debunks her allegedly inborn nursing talents by disposing of the excessive sentimentality that characterizes her white counterparts. Unlike Whitman, she does not succumb to the "limits" of sympathy. Instead, she deliberately delineates these limits in order to safeguard her independence and advance black citizenship, as evidenced by Iola's refusal of Dr. Gresham's marriage proposal (Gresham is a handsome white doctor who loses an arm serving the Union army). Scholars have already noted that Harper/Iola deliberately disrupt the marriage plot of many sentimental melodramas (e.g. Harris's "A Story of the War") in which nurse-patient relationships pave the way to a husband-wife compact that also seals national reconciliation. Russ Castronovo claims that, in her rejection of Dr. Gresham, Iola poses "a challenge to the national style of allegory that simultaneously abstracts and reduces persons by making them citizens" (226). I want to re-conduct this critique by factoring in Harper's additional resistance against the pathos of disability and the prosthetic affect it impels. This resistance leads Harper to invert entirely the relational scheme of Nast's dyptich. In *Iola Leroy*, the black nurse personifies an emergent African American collective that refuses to include a crippled white man in the domestic arena of normative citizenship or, as Holmes would have it, "polite society." Therefore, Iola's task is not to *remember/re-member* the national self, but to expose its heterogeneous, fictional wholeness. Clearly,

her gesture defies the cohesive drive of prosthetic affect, especially its reliance on corporeal symbolism.

As already noted, those in charge of reconstructing the split nation used amputation to return the body politic to a gestalt state close to the sublime, and, by extension, to situate it outside of pressing realities, turning it into an apolitical body politic. According to Silber, the language of sentiment allowed “conciliators” to “depoliticize the ideas and notions of reunion, suggesting that it was a concept so sacred and abstract that it could not be dirtied by the mundane specificities of politics” (55). This act of depoliticization goes hand in hand, I would argue, with the abstraction of personhood that takes place in the foundational documents of US citizenship—documents that Karen Sánchez-Eppler refers to as “embodied identities [...] masked behind the constitutional language of abstracted and implicitly bodiless ‘persons’” (1). “We, the people,” it would seem, do not need bodies once we are placed within the ideological matrix of liberal sentiment.

What happens when physical disability—a potent reminder that, after all, “the people” do have bodies—short-circuits the assumed disembodiment of citizens and war-victims alike and shatters the social harmony and identicalness assumed by sentimental and liberal ideologies? Whereas prosthetic affect capitalizes on emotional intensities (desire, longing, regret, and sacrifice) in order to minimize historical memory and abstract the bodily needs of its subjects, the US system of disability pensions—even if it hinges upon some of sentimentality’s rhetorical traits (compensation logic, celebration of sacrifice)—constitutes one of those cumbersome “specificities of politics” mentioned by Silber. After all, it is easier to sentimentalize a wedding than an application form.

In this sense, refusing to take pity on Dr. Gresham and to nurse him for life might prove Iola’s biggest accomplishment. Through this strong protagonist, Harper shows readers that nursing can be conducive to resistant forms of black citizenship rather than to the doubly binding institution of marriage with a racially “superior” man. Circumventing the marriage plot, among many other conventions of the Reconstruction-era melodrama, Harper complicates the sentimental premise that disabled soldiers have healed the Union and ultimately deconstructs the logic of prosthetic affect and its complicit role in postbellum nationalism. Her reversal of the prosthetic uses of affect in literature helps us grapple with the ways in which a miscegenated and prosthetic US body politic battled itself years after both armies had silenced their guns.

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