
Borders of Desire in Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*

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Abstract

Responding in part to what Nina Silber identifies as America's post-Civil War romance of reunion and reconciliation, Lydia Maria Child crafted an alternative narrative in her 1867 novel *A Romance of the Republic*. Child casts the tension between a romance of reunion—with its urge to forget—and a romance of reconstruction—with its drive to remember—as an erotic struggle. Rather than simply urging Americans not to forget the brutal realities of slavery and sexual exploitation, Child suggests that this past cannot be forgotten, much as sexual desires can never be fully repressed. Whereas the romance of reunion rests on an erasure of the slave's perspective—on the sublimation of history and of the slave's desires—*A Romance of the Republic* gives voice to the slave while simultaneously acknowledging the power of interracial desire. Cross-sectional marriage might promise a clean break from the past, but historical relationships between masters and slaves insistently impose demands on the present. Rosa, a slave, dramatically disrupts the honeymoon of slaveholder Gerald Fitzgerald and his northern bride Lily Bell, irrevocably altering the couple's prospects for the future. A "veiled singing shadow," Rosa haunts both the southern master and his northern wife well after her song of loss and longing—"Farewell, my dark Virginia bride"—fades into the night. Efforts to police longing across racial lines by repressing and punishing desire between some individuals while promoting and rewarding desire between others are bound to fail, Child implies. The very act of imagining a border between two bodies, in fact, inevitably fosters a desire to cross it.

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