

Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body. By Karen Sánchez-Eppler. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. x, 197 pp. \$30.00, ISBN 0-520-07959-0.)

Karen Sánchez-Eppler, an assistant professor of American studies at Amherst College, has published a book on the subject of embodiment between the early 1830s and the Civil War from which American historians have a good deal to learn. At first glance her project defies historians, for its coherence is elusive: she lumps together authors with seemingly little in common and admits in her epilogue to “as much discontinuity as connection.” Yet the book does have an uncanny coherence. The United States Constitution in its original form was bodiless, Sánchez-Eppler says, with the Founding Fathers’ “men” referring solely to wealthy white males. Imprisoned in bodies that announced their difference, those who were not white men were left to struggle for constitutional embodiment through campaigns for suffrage and full citizenship.

These political campaigns marked the work of writers as disparate as antislavery feminists such as Lydia Maria Child (1802–1880), who despite good intentions had to obliterate blackness in order to emancipate it; the Brooklyn poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892), whose poetics of merger and embodiment were grounded in the dynamics of slavery; the fugitive slave autobiographer Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), whose merger of the personal and the political became a means of resisting the oppression of slavery; and the reclusive Amherst poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), who internalized sociopolitical meaning in her work. Sánchez-Eppler connects the political issues on which historians usually concentrate with the task of critics who analyze strategies of representation; she shows how issues of embodied identity permeated literary discourse, even in writing as ostensibly divorced from the political economy as Emily Dickinson's.

An example of what literary critics call the new historicism, Sánchez-Eppler's book illustrates the reciprocity between the discursive and the material, between epistemology and ontology. The new historicism instructs literary critics about the relation between texts and historical context, which historians take for granted, but it also tutors historians in what the critic Walter Cohen terms the "arbitrary connectedness" of seemingly disparate documents.

Despite its concentration on what Sánchez-Eppler calls the "body," this small book finally leaves a reader dissatisfied, on both historians' and critics' terms. First, the basic conceptualization, though insightful and critical, is weakened by the blind spots of the authors in question. Sánchez-Eppler acknowledges this limitation with regard to what the critic Hortense Spillers calls the "flesh," the physical stuff of history, as opposed to the "body" that discourse constructs. The result is that whole categories of people—who were important historically (such as dark-skinned women slaves and poor white women) but who do not appear in the fiction or autobiography under review—never appear in these pages. The book ultimately remains imprisoned in the nineteenth-century discourse it seeks to analyze: Sánchez-Eppler continually cites the "contradictions" and "ambivalence" of her sources, but she can-

not free herself from the circumscriptions of their thought. Second, reading this book on its own terms produces another kind of frustration. *Touching Liberty* is not illustrated, even though it speaks of images. Perhaps the soft-cover edition will at least reproduce on its cover the emblematic photograph on the dust jacket.

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