

“VICIOUS INFANTS”: ANTISOCIAL CHILDHOODS AND THE POLITICS OF
POPULATION IN ANTEBELLUM U.S. LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT
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Childhood as we now recognize it – innocent, vulnerable, and above all, precious – is deeply rooted in antebellum thought, when a culture of child worship drove much of sentimental politics and literature. Yet, this version of childhood does not begin to address the host of antebellum children who were never imagined as the future of the nation, except as a future to be warned against and avoided. At the same time that images of children as angels and treasures saturated U.S. culture, regulations binding children under systems of indenture, imprisonment, and slavery also took their greatest hold. This dissertation therefore offers a counter-history of childhood that focuses on its function as social threat in the antebellum United States, contending that conventional accounts of sentimental youth have overwritten other, less comforting models. Linking a variety of institutional literatures, such as law, medicine, and carceral theory, to literature by authors including Herman Melville, Harriet Wilson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Brockden Brown, the dissertation argues that the antebellum period saw the rise of multiple modes of childhood governing a maturing subject’s trajectory towards or away from adult inclusion. These representations of childhood as antisocial serve to decouple the ideals of individual development and national inclusion, suggesting that children inhabiting a state were not inevitably its future citizens and could instead endanger its

stability. Instead, it argues, these children came to represent sites for the imagination of alternative models of reproduction and group coherence.

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PREFACE

In 1758, Carl Linnaeus set out a taxonomy of the human population. A revision of the system he had first published in 1735, Linnaeus's tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* classifies humans by the racial categories that were beginning to be consolidated – proposing different human species for African, American, European, and Asian peoples with a collection of physical traits describing each – but the system also includes two subspecies that operate much less conventionally. One, *Homo monstrosus*, acts as a catchall for racialized groups whom he believed to be physically deviant from the larger categories. Each of these smaller groups, which include the so-called Patagonian giant dwarf of the Alps, are assigned a specific region and a set of common characteristics, such as size or timidity (22-23). The remaining type, *Homo ferus*, works more strangely. Although he offers three shared traits of four-footedness, muteness, and hairiness within the species, Linnaeus' chief definition of *homo ferus* comes, unlike all the other species of humanity, as a list of six cases describing purportedly feral children: the Bear Boy of Lithuania (*Juvenis Ursinus lithuanus*), the Wolf Boy of Hesse (*Juvenis Ursinus Hessensis*), the Irish Sheep Boy (*Juvenis Ovinus hibernus*), Peter of Hanover (*Juvenis hannoverans*), the two Pyrenean Boys (*Pueri Pyrenaici*) and Jean of Liège (*Johannes Leodicensis*) (Linnaeus 20).¹ Apparently trusting to his readers' familiarity with the feral children whom he references, Linnaeus provides no information about any of these cases beyond these names, nor does he give any further information about the group as a whole.

¹ The 1766 edition adds three children to this list, two female and one male. Thus, although feral childhood may have more readily accorded to boys, gender was not a central organizing principle in the structure of Linnaeus's taxonomy.

How do seven children scattered across Europe, most of whom never met one another, constitute a coherent group? And, more pointedly, what type of genealogical thinking is Linnaeus relying on when he so quickly assumes that the grouping will be clear to his readers? *Systema Naturæ* anchors the other taxonomic categories of humanity into a stable geography and more recognizable kinship; they are the people who have lived an area, reproducing their supposedly unique traits across the generations. They represent, in other words, a version of what Alys Eve Weinbaum has termed “the race/reproduction bind,” or a model of race that inheres within heterosexual reproduction. Parentage, however, does not define the feral child. Instead, one of their few common traits seems to be their disconnection from the predictable patterns of life around them; they are a population defined by their estrangement from the populations around them. The basic premise of genealogy asserts that a group – whether a family, race, or nation – can be recognized and traced over time, even as its individual members are entirely replaced by new individuals. Linnaeus’s feral children function in almost perfect opposition to this, defined by individual examples and their discontinuity with previous generations.

In other words, the category of the feral child does not only mark a type of childhood. What it means to live as a feral child or how an adult might recognize one is left entirely unexplained. The feral child is less the archetype of a subject than the concrete trace left by a system of reproduction and the measure of a group’s legibility as a collective identity. The species *Homo ferus* is as much a type of population, with its own source of coherence distinct from geography or genealogy, as it is a classification of certain exemplary children. Nor is the feral child alone in bearing this representative

weight. As I will demonstrate across *Vicious Infants*, visions of childhood so often index different visions of reproduction, whether social or biological, that the implications of this uneven access to childhood extend beyond the experiences of children. Moreover, it is an assignment that enables authority. The feral children of the eighteenth century were objects of intense scrutiny, public spectacle, and pedagogical experimentation. One of Linnaeus's most famous examples of *Homo ferus*, Peter of Hanover, was paraded among the British nobility until his novelty waned, and he was sent to a farm where he was collared and labeled, lest he wander away (Newton 50-51). Similarly, the "vicious infants" of my title were children legally classified as so criminal that they were given over entirely to state control, to be imprisoned until adulthood without right to trial. To be deemed a "vicious infant" was, thus, to have one's future deemed intolerable and in need of unqualified state intervention.²

As Kenneth Kidd observes, during the antebellum period, the scene of European stories about feral children begin to shift towards more distant imperial spaces, displacing these fears of child wildness onto bodies coded as foreign or primitive. However, as racial hierarchies began to be consolidated as an internal element of U.S. society, the category of the non-assimilated or unassimilable child persisted into the most domestic sites of nineteenth-century U.S. literature and – although they are often racialized – childhood otherness could take unexpected forms. Take, as one of the most obvious examples of deviant children, *The Scarlet Letter's* Pearl, the illegitimate child of Hester

² As the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania ruled in 1838, the vicious infant who has been imprisoned has been "snatched from a course which must have ended in confirmed depravity" (Wharton 11). However, as I discuss in my first chapter, even imprisonment was seen as insufficient to "reform" a subset of these children.

Prynne and “born outcast of the infantile world” (84). Pearl is shunned by her Puritan community because of her social status, but Hawthorne also invests her with a more essential removal from her world. Her eyes possess “a strange remoteness and intangibility” that register a level of difference from even her mother, who finds her “intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse, sometimes so malicious [...] that Hester could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl were a human child” (82).

Hawthorne’s catalog of traits – intelligence, inexplicability, perversity, and malice – is not the diametric opposite of the sentimental child. It is a version of childhood that has an opposite orientation towards adult authority, which can neither contain it nor understand it. The effect is not freeing. Under examination by the Governor and religious orders, Pearl refuses to declare that she was created by God, but instead insists that she was “plucked by her mother off the bush of wild-roses that grew by the prison-door” (99).

Pearl’s proposal of an alternative genealogy echoes the fact of her birth outside of socially-sanctioned reproduction and symbolically aligns her with the pleasure of roses over the punishment of prisons. Most immediately, though, Pearl’s declaration nearly leads her to be taken into custody, separated from her mother, and presumably set to labor as an apprentice for another family. Only intervention from Dimmesdale, her guilt-ridden father, prevents the then three-year-old girl from forcibly becoming a ward of the state.

Hawthorne is relatively admiring of Pearl's freedom and there are widely accepted arguments that she is based partially on his own daughter, Una.³ However, Pearl also acts a literary mirror for the specifically antebellum discourses that were increasingly coming to see childhood's futurity not as a promise but as a threat. One commentator on these forms of vicious infancy was Charles Loring Brace, the philanthropist who would later become famous as the major force behind the so-called Orphan Trains that shipped children westward. His warnings, first published in 1854, about urban poverty and, in particular the urban poverty of children born to Irish and German immigrants, display a similar ambivalence about social disconnection of the children whom he wished to educate:

It should be remembered, that there are no dangers to the value of property or to the permanency of our institutions, so great as those from the existence of such a class of vagabond, ignorant, ungoverned children. This 'dangerous class' has not begun to show itself, as it will in eight or ten years, when these boys and girls are matured. [...] They will vote. They will have the same rights as we ourselves, though they have grown up ignorant of moral principle, any savage or Indian. They will poison society. They will perhaps be embittered at the wealth, and the luxuries, they never share. Then let Society beware, when the outcast, vicious, reckless multitude of New York boys, swarming now every foul alley and low street, come to know their power and *use it!* (322)

³ The parallels between Una Hawthorne and Pearl were first explored in depth in T. Walter Herbert's 1988 "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender."

Fear, rather than pity, drives his warning that New York was infested with an “outcast, vicious, reckless multitude” threatening to overrun it. The peril that this “dangerous class” offers to Brace is not a specific menace, though, so much as it is the internal threat to the known social order and more specifically to that predictable continuity of sovereignty that he terms “the permanency of our institutions.” As the conventional language of reproductive futurity takes on the character of apocalyptic prophecy, what seem like children – and therefore harmless, trivial, and above all apolitical – will rise up into rights-bearing adults, because to the eyes of the state, they are citizens as much as anyone else. Brace’s warning, though, is that these future citizens have no loyalty to the laws and class hierarchies into which they have been born, and thus no reason to continue them; their lack of recognizable socialization places them as far outside national tradition as “any savage or Indian.” The fear of these vagrant children, then, lies in the idea that they are the future, but a future with no affinity to the present and guaranteed only to appear to observers like Brace as a place of disorder and unpredictability.

Reading Pearl’s ability to scare her mother alongside Brace’s jeremiad on the homeless children of New York alongside the taxonomies of feral children points to a counter-history of childhood as a social threat. I certainly chose my title, “Vicious Infants,” in part for the unexpectedness of the phrase, but more importantly because it registers a real and historically codified type of child. As a criminal designation, vicious infancy stripped subjects of their ability to participate in a social world outside of institutional control, potentially for as long as they could be classed as minors. The goal was sometimes reformation, albeit through brutal methods. Brace, for all his forebodings, was comparatively revolutionary in his belief that the children of immigrants could be

assimilated, but believed that they first had to be transported as far away from their communities. More often, and more importantly for my purposes, though, legal and scientific accounts of purportedly deviant childhood claim, by their own account, that some types of children exist beyond intervention. Like Pearl, whose adult self is banished from the narrative to an “unknown region” (277) out of reach of history, leaving the reader unsure whether “the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave” or if she was eventually “subdued,” the children of this project are rarely reclaimed (226).⁴ In this regard, I scout the limits of sentimentalism to consider which children are beyond the transformational force of pathos, but I also push against the presumption that sentimentalism, even broadly defined, was the only discourse dictating antebellum cultures of childhood.

My focus on these childhoods excluded from socialization emphasizes what childhood can tell us about the constitution of the social. By the antebellum period, childhood had crystallized as a key symbol of the relationship between generations, but also of the relationship between the individual and the larger social world. This is clearest for the most familiar case. Long before Linnaeus imagined the possibility of a feral population from a constellation of remarkable children, the balance between liberal individualism and the necessary continuity of a social world had been the rhetorical work of more conventional childhood. John Locke made his foundational claim for liberal individual freedom by managing the relationship between a newly born subject and the

⁴ In my emphasis on the irredeemability of some children, I also depart from Kenneth Kidd’s excellent study of feral children and late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century boyhood, which argues that the association between wildness and a normative child development out of that wildness structures much of our ideas about adult freedom.

established social and political world into which they were born. As the apparently pre-cultural being described in Locke's model of the *tabula rasa* (blank slate), the child promises, on one hand, evidence that adult subjects have an intrinsic claim to liberty. Locke writes, "saying that 'begetting of children makes them not slaves to their fathers' as certainly sets all mankind free as his affirming the contrary makes them all slaves" (177). In this promised freedom from previous generations, is the presumption of a radical innocence of history; each birth, for Locke, represents an escape from history, and therefore offers an erasure of systemic history from private life. However, as that pre-cultural *tabula rasa*, Locke's version of the child was also primed to be a generality, a subject distinct but formally equally and socially identical to all other subjects. Locke's child, in other words, formed a means to think about the liberal individual in the multiple.

Scholars have increasingly recognized this centrality of childhood in antebellum conceptions of collectivities on a number of scales, whether nationality, race, religion, or the family.⁵ This new importance reflected and reinforced changing conceptions about the nature of childhood, as discourses about children began to consolidate into the form we recognize today. Holly Brewer, an early American historian, places the early nineteenth-century as the horizon of a new form of childhood premised on the exclusion of minors from legal consent or contract. Because minors in the early U.S. were seen as unable to play an equal role in law, Brewer contends, they came to be seen as needing protection from the public sphere – helping to spur the development of a more strictly

⁵ Anna Mae Duane and Robin Bernstein have each described the evolution of childhood in this period as a rhetorical tool for the consolidation of whiteness. Caroline Levander and Courtney Weikle-Mills have added to this a focus on a children's role in antebellum visions of citizenship as simultaneously naturalized and freely chosen. Diana Walsh Pasulka argues for the sudden and pervasive presence of child saint figures in antebellum Puritanism, during which the genre of child hagiography became "ubiquitous" to mainstream U.S. religion (53).

delimited private sphere to shelter them. This notion that children should be primarily defined as the objects of protection also took momentum from its use by white supremacy to argue that the children of white U.S. Americans needed to be saved from racialized threats of violence or, in pro-slavery tracts, from labor. In her readings of Indian captivity narratives and other narratives of racial menace to white families, Anna Mae Duane suggests vulnerability as the defining term of childhood. Likewise, Robin Bernstein notes the emergence of innocence to separate the supposedly delicate white children from the coerced labor assigned to their black counterparts.

Theorists considering sovereignty and social relations on a broader scale have further come to view such childhoods as ideal territory for conservative utopian thought. Because its futurity is bound up in adult retrospection, projection takes the form of an idealized regression back to a supposedly purer past. That is, adult thinkers often present childhood as a known entity, having been children themselves, and therefore assume that its trajectories into the future can be fully managed -- albeit through a regimen of painstaking corrections. As Foucault wrote of nineteenth-century Europe, “the education of children was the fundamental utopia, crystal, and prism through which problems of conduction were perceived” (231). Studies of childhood have accordingly concentrated on the dual uses of childhood as contact point and warrant for governmental power, in that the perceived vulnerability of the child to external forces serves both as an opportunity for social conditioning and a justification for a “protective” control. Child development, in this understanding, is inseparable from a forcible molding of citizens. In its assertion that young subjects have a natural belonging to a community and subsequent

insistence that these subjects be disciplined into belonging, socialization can act as an instantiation of sovereignty.

More recently, too, queer scholars have added a focus on the ways that political obsession with utopic childhood shapes the lives of adults. Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, and Lauren Berlant have each argued that the relentless futurity associated with this utopian vision of the child is used to narrow the present desire of adults into heteronormative channels. This version of childhood serves a site on which the future may be inscribed; once designated as the fragile vessel of that perfect future, it becomes a pretense for policing the present. Moreover, the centrality granted to children in national discourse reflects and reinforces a sense that the temporality that matters is a linear futurity based in straight, biological reproduction. As Jack Halberstam explains these connections between generational rhythms and state power, the ongoing movement of “values, wealth, goods, and morals” from parents to children “connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability” (5). By intertwining childhood, biological reproduction, and state structures of power, the nation creates a sense of naturalized continuity located in the family and then claims that continuity for itself.

Critical work on childhood, however, does far less to address what happens when adults fail to recognize themselves in children – when the future that is ascribed to childhood represents an intolerable rupture or when the child in question is excluded from any socially acceptable adulthood. José Muñoz has commented, with devastating understatement that “the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity,” noting that Edelman in particular “accepts and

reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white” (95).
What is childhood when it is deliberately cut off from national futurity?

The challenge of the conventional answer – that such a childhood is no childhood at all – is that it overwrites the ways that juvenile bodies never eligible for sentimental childhood were nonetheless classified and defined by youth. Throughout the early nineteenth-century, industrial demands for the cheap labor of child workers led rural families to send their children away to work in urban areas and produced a legal redefinition of children as contractual agents in their own right, in order to allow hiring to go on at a distance from parents.⁶ The result was a wave of displaced children with dubious family ties, a legally uncertain access to personhood rights such as contractual consent and private property, and the mobility necessitated by temporary labor. A host of new categories came with this turmoil, from street Arab to juvenile delinquent, to describe children who had left the domestic sphere. Similarly, the antebellum period saw the increasing attention to black childhood under slavery, as it became a point of explicit management for plantation owners. In order to guarantee a steady stream of enslavable bodies once the international slave trade had been deemed illegal, slave owners learned to deploy the category of childhood as an investment strategy, producing a comparatively young labor force. According to the work of historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz, more than 40 percent of slaves during the antebellum period were under the age of fifteen and a third of slaves were under ten.⁷ Childhood under these circumstances took on a double-

⁶ Schmidt, James D. “‘Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood’: The Legal Construction of Child Labor in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts.” *Law and History Review* 23.2 (2005): 315-350. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 February 2015. See Chapters 1 and 4 for further discussion of these changes.

⁷ Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Born in Bondage*, 5.

edged nature, wherein futurity could slip seamlessly into the actuarial terms of investment and return. Far from being irrelevant to such subjects, childhood operated as a dimension of power through which their property, labor, and freedom could be appropriated by the state. Moreover, childhood's close connection to reproduction offered a means to control which groups were legible as groups. The ability to be recognized as a population, whether as a population with a history and a future or one with an essentialized and immutable characteristics, was thus bound up in the status of each type of childhood.

What could be an obscure quirk of Linnaeus's taxonomy helps us understand a strand of thought in the U.S. that had substantial material effects on those placed into these alternative models of population. Linnaean thought has been coupled to U.S. theories about humanity and its subdivision on the elite level since before *Systema Naturae* had even been published. The *New York Mirror* bragged in 1833 that the contributor most cited in the text is Alexander Garden, a Scottish-born botanist then in residence in South Carolina (325). Other US correspondents included Thomas Jefferson ("Celebration at Flushing") and, botanist and New York politician, Cadwallader Colden (Vaughan 949). By the mid-nineteenth century, Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* become a standard part of academic libraries and was a common citation in scientific treatises.⁸

As a point of comparison, Schwartz further notes that this demographic pattern was not present in slave-holding nations in Latin America, which relied on the transport and purchase of new adults to maintain their labor force.

⁸ For instance, even a cursory survey shows that *Systema Naturae* is included the library catalogues of Harvard University by 1830 (98), the Library Company of Pennsylvania by 1835 (272), the New York Society Library by 1850 (265), Brown University in 1843 (263), the University of Vermont by 1854 (77), the University of South Carolina by 1849 (80), and the Library of Congress by 1840 (173).

However, Linnaean taxonomies also had a more pervasive and less official place in US culture. Outside formal botany, as Alison M. K. Klaum demonstrates, Linnaean ordering shaped the largely female-authored genres of floral art instruction and floral poetry. Readers of James Fennimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827) would have encountered Dr. Obed Bat, a character whom Joshua Masters observes is a disciple and parody of Linnaeus (67). More surprisingly, though, residents of Flushing, New York might have attended picnics thrown by the branch of the Linnaean Society in honor of the biologist's birthday in 1823 and 1824, and those in Hartford, Connecticut might have encountered the society's 1836 lengthy birthday proclamation.⁹ The 1824 party in Flushing, which began on the "new and elegant boat *Linnaeus*" featured a letter from Thomas Jefferson regretting his absence but stating his desire "of meeting the great naturalist himself, and of assuring him in person of the veneration and affection with which his memory is cultivated here" ("Celebration at Flushing" 148). The lectures in botany prepared by Almira H. Lincoln in 1829 may have best captured the ubiquity of Linnaean thought in their explanation to adolescent readers that "the classification of Linnaeus was received with scarcely a dissenting voice" and that "what this system was, you have not now to learn, since it has been the basis of your botanical studies" (qtd. in "History of Botany" 472). Lincoln may have overstated official acceptance of Linnaeus, but her essential point remains that U.S. taxonomic thinking drew reflexively from Linnaean thought.

This question of how to constitute a group and what relationship that group identity has to genealogy was more than an abstract question in the antebellum US.

⁹ For accounts of these birthday honors, see "Arts and Sciences: Birth-day of Linneus [sic]," "Celebration at Flushing," and "An Address to the Citizens of Hartford, on the Birthday of Linnaeus."

Versions of childhood not bound up with a future community of adults were crucial in framing exclusions from adult citizenship. While much of the work on potentially deviant children has emerged from the field of British literature to examine figures like the criminal orphans of Charles Dickens or the so-called “watercress girl” of Thomas Mayhew, the US portrayals of childhood have their own specificity as a means to confer or contest political inclusion.¹⁰ The U.S.’s specific roots in settler colonialism meant that geography did not act as a simple register of belonging. This is, in part, because expansionism to the west incentivized the government to extend sovereignty over the mobile settlers, and thereby to the areas they entered, without extending citizenship rights to the indigenous peoples who continued to live there and, in part, because the slave-based economy of the nation required a legal separation between the concepts of residency and citizenship. While Great Britain’s empire created similar racial hierarchies, the space of the island itself provided a symbolic source of purity and identity for British subjects. This spatial logic described by Carl Schmidt as division between the territory of insular European states, which were treated as discrete and individual (141), and all other land which was regarded as being amorphously “free to be occupied” (172). While questions of British identity unquestionably arose in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literature, they were treated in far more spatially defined terms.¹¹

By contrast, U.S. legal thinking relied far more on definitions of citizenship as a trait that could be passed between generations. In 1790, Congress established

¹⁰ For representative works in this vein, see Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers* (2010), Claudia Nelson’s *Precocious Children and Childish Adults* (2012), or Jacqueline Rose’s foundational *The Case of Peter Pan* (1992).

¹¹ FN Simon Gikandi, *Tropicopolitans and Out of Place*

citizenship's ability to be conferred by parentage, as well as location, structuring American nationality by *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) as by *jus soli* (right of soil). This law, entitled "An act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization," enacted three principles: long-term residents might receive citizenship through federal naturalization; the children of these residents would also be naturalized by this process, provided that they are under twenty-one; and the children born to U.S. citizens traveling abroad receive U.S. citizenship as a birthright.¹² The goal of such laws is to define what legal scholar Kristin A. Collins has called the "parent-child citizenship transmission" and thereby to stabilize national identity over time (2136). As the law established, children marked a critical relay between generations of Americans, ensuring that travel – or conquest – could not disrupt the U.S.'s sovereign claim on a family and that the recognition of new citizens established their descendants as new chains of future citizens. Naturalization of a resident subject, and the accompanying incorporation of the resident's children into the nation, however, applied to "any alien, being a free white person" (103). Collins describes force of such limits as amounting to a form of population control; she writes that "by determining which citizens' children would be recognized as citizens, [*jus sanguinis* law] helped regulate the actual reproduction – and racial composition – of the citizenry" (2139). Antebellum ideas about how strongly and in what ways children are connected to their parents had significant effect on subjects' lifelong ability to access rights.

¹² This 1790 was replaced in 1795 by another law of the same name, which preserved these central points and added a more detailed description of requirements for naturalizations, including a renunciation of previous political loyalties and hereditary titles (*Public Statutes* 414-415).

In 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment officially changed this, by establishing at least a technical right to citizenship for anyone born within the country's borders. Though children have of course continued to be flashpoints of debate over questions of national belonging and government power, during the period from the nation's inception through the Civil War, they were uniquely central to debates about relationship between individuals and the social body. These conversations draw from legal discourses, but they also extended to extralegal conceptions of community on scales ranging from parent-child bonds, which I discuss in my first chapter, to the global population patterns of Malthusianism, which I discuss in my third chapter. Whether children were imagined as the reflections of their parents or as wholly new subjects made tremendous difference to the nature of any group identities that they were assigned.

The central stakes of my project are thus two-fold. First, my project continues the research by those like Bernstein and Duane into the historic inequalities contained in and perpetuated by literary representations of childhood. More pressingly, though, rather than adding to a catalog of oppression, I broaden our vocabulary for imagining childhoods that sprang up in the face of this abuse. Rather than returning to a set of historical children and pleading that they too be included in a version of childhood that we have already critiqued for its damaging effects, I return to a period when the languages of childhood were very much in flux in order to find alternatives to the current scholarly fixation on innocence and biological futurity. Because these configurations' importance in asserting the individual's connection to collective history, my interests also touch on the intersections between the politics of group identity and utopian imagination. As I have discussed, the most mainstream view of childhood in the U.S. asserts the moment of birth

as a break from the forces of history and government authority. When the child-figure grows up, her eventual assimilation can then appear as evidence for the goodness and rightness of the systems she is joining.

Alternative presentations of childhood can borrow from this utopian opening without sharing its conservative conclusions. Linnaeus's list of feral children, for example, offers a patterns of rupture that is very different and far less stabilizing. Feral children's coherence as a group emerges not out of any simple line of descent but from their shared disconnection; they are a group defined by a failure of social reproduction to latch onto the products of biological reproduction. Their status as specimens permanently defined by youth (as *juvenis* or *pueri*) marks their ongoing orientation towards this socializing moment that never comes, but it also signals the feral child's role in imaging a group sustained over time. It thus offers a frame for the arhythmical repetition of feral generations, born not of biological reproduction or social nurture, but of the former in absence of the latter. It acts, in other words, as the means of imagining a new form of population with a relationship to futurity that is equally distinct. Far from being a niche interest relevant only to young subjects, the many theories of socialization generated in the antebellum world reflect experiments in theorizing the social itself, as well as for imagining what might be possible outside the social.

Throughout *Vicious Infants*, I return repeatedly to this space outside of the social and to representations of children who live in this state of persistent disconnection. A crucial framing for this project is thus that of "antisocial childhoods," a term I use to describe the array of childhoods, including the titular vicious infancy, that were designated for subjects preemptively excluded from the markers of maturity, such as

property-holding and citizenship, that would otherwise guide their development. The antisocial child is one who can never grow up to join the social body that describes her and is therefore present by those adult observers as frighteningly unrecognizable or incomprehensible. Moreover, when antisociality is persistently ascribed to children who are racialized or classed, it threatens the coherence of the group to which they belong by disrupting generational interconnections. The childhoods I discuss in this project likewise act as a portioning out of collective futurity, seeking discursive control over a population's ability to endure over time.

Of course, my methodology imposes group identities of its own, and in focusing on versions of childhood that stray so far from conventional definitions, I risk naturalizing the idea that there is some inevitable or cohesive identity shared by subjects of a certain age. Instead, I want to resist this tendency. Age, as I study it, appears as a cultural narrative, not a biological reality, and the texts in my archive engage with childhood as a significant system of classification because they were writing in a world that had made childhood significant; childhood as a frame for understanding young subjects was only unavoidable to the extent that it had become a culturally dominant narrative of the antebellum U.S. As a result, my study does not attempt to set out any absolute age range and instead follows the texts own perceptions of what persons count as children. One version of this work might have resulted in a tracing of discourses of “childishness” as it migrates across peoples of every age, and in some moments I do

extend my focus to subjects traditionally considered adult.¹³ However, my chief interest lies in childhoods that were recognized begrudgingly from the antebellum sense that childhood *was* a natural phase of life, born of the Enlightenment use of children as a touchstone for natural man and enshrined, albeit with unstable age limits, by the laws of minority I discuss in my first and last chapters. I thus work from two central assertions: first, antebellum culture assigned different types of childhoods to children in different social positions and, second, that the writers nonetheless worked in a framework which viewed age categories as a source of identity. While I argue that age intersects with race, class and other categories, and was interpreted differently as a result, all of the texts that I consider also present themselves as participants in a larger conversation about childhood. In saying that I consider childhood a cultural narrative, I mean, of course, that it is a socially constructed and historically particular set of ideas about what it means to be of a certain age. However, I also mean the public discourse's reliance on children to represent the border between individual and collective life makes the act of interpreting childhood a specifically literary task, rooted in figuration and characterization.¹⁴ Many of the labels I discuss arise in institutional contexts outside of literature, but their force is to make a literary argument that these children are representative outside themselves. The incorrigible delinquent was created amidst the paperwork of juvenile prisons, but it also provided an interpretative framework for narrating the social body and those who fall outside it. Medicine, likewise, produced the idea of the prodigy as a limit case for legible

¹³ For example, Catherine Robson's excellent *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentlemen* (2001) offers one such methodology in her argument that upper-class men defined their subjectivities through an identification with the fantastical and idealized girlhoods of Victorian literature.

¹⁴ For further discussion of character as the intersection between a putative individual and multiplicity, see Julian Murphet's "The Mole and the Multiple: A Chiasmus of Character."

inheritance, endowing it with its own relationship to genealogy and history. The texts themselves bring a literary hermeneutic to interpret children capable of representing multiplicities outside of themselves. However, explicitly literary texts are also crucial to the project's archive. As these figures repeat in more conventionally defined literature, their complex implications for the kinship and the social world of the U.S. are typically explored in greater depth – implications that can then be reabsorbed by the original institutional discourse. I therefore make no case for a strong division between the literary and the non-literary, but instead attend to their overlapping languages while respecting that they prioritize different questions. Combining institutional discourse's focus on multiplicity with literature's attention to singular subjectivity allows for the clearest attention to the ways that various iterations of childhood shaped recognition of group identity and of the continuity of a group over time.

Thinking Population through Childhood

Studying childhood beyond the trajectories of liberal individualism fundamentally changes how sovereignty emerges through and into opposition to child subjects. We are accustomed to theorizing children's relationship to the state in terms of a Foucauldian discipline that works at the individual level or, more precisely, that works to constitute the individual so that it will have an object to control. This interest is not wrong – my first chapter is partly dedicated to following these questions – but it can eclipse children's role in another, equally Foucauldian question, that of population. For Foucault, population is a different creature than the mathematical total of individuals living in a country; it operates on a scale entirely removed from individual subjects, encompassing

the whole bodily life of a state's residents: "the population is pertinent as the objective, and individuals, the series of individuals, are no longer pertinent as the objective, but simply as the instrument, relay, or condition for obtaining something at the level of population" (42). This shift in focus from subjects to the amassed human life of a nation shows that what we think of as group identity is no less socially produced and changeable than subjectivity itself. More importantly, though, Foucault suggests that the forms used to describe subjectivity and reproduction, "individuals" and "the series of individuals," change the form that population takes. Linnaeus's feral child leads to a form of population that manifests its own ferality.

Working through the frame of population can do much to improve our understanding of the relationship between children and sovereignty. First, it replaces the attentiveness of discipline with a management that can entail neglect, taking populations of children as a physical reality without necessarily investing in them as subjects that could take an active part in the system. The warehousing of children labeled as "incorrigible" criminals, for instance, would fall into this category of demographic management, which cares about accounting for bodies in the aggregate but not in individual subjectivity. Similarly, Foucault's explicit break from the family as the central analogy of and locus for power has a startlingly literal equivalent in these children whose lives exist largely outside of the domestic sphere. Population instead emphasizes the power that stems from control on the largest scale, rather than repeating assumptions that children can be understood exclusively within the private sphere.

Finally, reading the forms of childhood as reflective and constitutive of the forms of population reveals the uneasy stance that each holds between the discursive and the

material and the potential that both population and childhood therefore hold to slip, at least momentarily, outside imposed structures of power. I do not mean that children are somehow pre-social, nor that population is any straightforward reflection of nature. Instead, they are sites where discourse insists on the materiality of embodied life and on discourse's own limits. This can be because liberal ideology has declared that children can be born as bodies outside of socialization, as I discuss in chapter 1, or because governmental understandings of population insist that the term is powerful precisely because it represents a supposedly unquestionable biological quantity. As Foucault defines it, population is a phenomenon that remains partially opaque, even to the governmentality that produces it:

The population is [...] everything that extends from biological rootedness through the species up to the surface that gives one a hold provided by the public. From the species to the public; we have here a whole field of new realities in the sense that they are the pertinent elements for mechanisms of power, the pertinent space within which and regarding which one must act. (75)

For Foucault, this space between species and public provides both the sense of amassed life that the state sets out to control and the limits of a state that can grasp the "surface" of the public but not the underlying biological processes. In this regard, Foucault's population is anchored in a biology that cannot be directly reached by discourse and that must be reached indirectly; Foucault's example is a sovereign controlling imported goods in order influence a population's access to food and, so, its ability to grow (71). This claim that "population appears therefore as a kind of thick natural phenomenon in

relation to the sovereign's legalistic voluntarism" in turns lends population a measure of unpredictability (71). Sovereignty created population as a tool of management, but naturalized it and lent it credence by declaring it as existing, in part, outside of direct control.

The childhoods I study draw on this peculiar relationship with materiality with dual effect. Because the child body is presented as an unsocialized, purely biological object, children are also assigned an estranged relationship with the state. This estrangement most often takes the form of exclusion, but it also opens up an opportunity. Antisocial childhoods reveal an incipient vocabulary of demographic management, in which the differential images of childhood produced for children of color and laboring classes served to naturalize hierarchies in adult society. However, they also mark spaces in which authors and historical subjects in these exiled groups could write about viable forms of life that are not permeated by U.S. sovereignty and which follow trajectories in new directions. They allowed such writers to attach value to children beyond the limited framework of innocence and vulnerability and also allowed experimentation with genealogies outside of straight reproduction. Thus, by turning attention back to these alternative formulations of childhood in which the juvenile represents danger rather than promise, we can better trace a history of contingent or refused assimilation to national citizenship. In reopening these past models of childhood, I therefore hope not only to build upon our understanding of a particular cultural history of age, but also to reassess alternative models of embodiment and political community.

A corollary claim that *Vicious Infants* therefore makes is that studying childhood changes our theoretical understanding of population. Population, as Foucault outlines it

and as it has typically been used, is a predominantly singular entity. Certainly, it is defined by the exclusion or threatened exclusion of subjects marked as deviant. However, as the supposed sum total of life in a state, there is only one population by which to be counted or from which to be expelled. The US has never had such a singular accounting of the peoples whom it claimed to be under its sovereignty. My point is not just the obvious fact that different groups were treated differently. The archives of antisocial childhoods demonstrate that different groups were constituted differently and were defined as holding different relationships to reproduction and genealogy, both biological and social. More than multiple populations operating in parallel within a nation, we must understand the multiple forms through which populations may be interpellated or erased.

Overview

The opening chapters of *Vicious Infants* take up the antisocial childhoods as they emerged from law and medicine respectively. The first of these chapters, “The Incurrible Child: Juvenile Delinquency and the Fearful Rise of the Child Self,” argues that theories of juvenile delinquency joined with models of family management of the child body to create a category of child criminal beyond socialization. The 1820s and 1830s saw the first official classification of child criminals as a distinct group and the earliest institutionalization of these juvenile delinquents in child-only jails, known as houses of refuge. This chapter reads the day-to-day records of the New York House of Refuge, the first of these prisons, alongside popular domestic manuals ranging from John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* to Lydia Marie Child’s *The Mother’s Book*. These texts, I argue, converged to generate visions of childhood as disruptive and

criminalizable. In their attention to the limits of the body as a means of reforming or interpreting child character, these manuals and institutional records frame a different relationship between body and subject than conventional Foucauldian discipline. This chapter examines how the perceived opacity of the child body to adult scrutiny reproduces juvenile subjectivity as a suspect entity, one that is unknowable and therefore always potentially deviant from the broader social body.

The next chapter, “Medical Discourses of Prodigy and Constructed Discontinuities of Black Childhood,” moves to a still more extreme version of a physically alienated childhood. Prodigy has historically been a double-edged term, joining the marvelous and the monstrous together to name a category of the unpredictable and unprecedented. Redeployed in the Atlantic world to classify young black genius together with spectacles of black disabled bodies, however, the dual nature of the concept of prodigy came to pathologize and exclude black childhood from historical genealogy. This chapter follows the prodigy as it emerges from medical discourses on black infancy as a site of aberration and failed inheritance and then tracks the persistence of this figure into three literary texts – Jonah Barrington’s “Skinning a Black Child” (1827), Henry Clay Lewis’ “Stealing a Baby” (1850), and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). I argue that these texts take up the medical exclusion of the prodigy from inheritance in order to associate the black child with disruptions to white kinship. Finally, the chapter turns to a little read African American-authored 1835 biography, Susan Paul’s *Memoir of James Jackson, The Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months* to argue that Paul’s portrait of a brilliant and doomed pupil reclaims the black prodigy’s exclusion from history into a form of practical utopianism.

The second half of the dissertation examines how these antisocial childhoods also provided new forms to two of the genres most associated with traditional or sentimental childhood: the sentimentalism reform novel and the coming-of-age novel. My third chapter, “The End is not a New Beginning: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Malthusianism, and the Reform Novel,” considers how Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brush with Malthusian views of children allowed her to rewrite the easy resolutions of sentimental fiction, in which the birth of a new generation often offers utopian escape, into the more crowded world of her novel *Dred* (1856). As scholars such as Elizabeth Povinelli, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman have discussed, the conventional role of children in sentimental reform novels is to promise an easy end to the problems raised by the novel. The birth of children, as signs of pure futurity, banishes the social problems of the plot into a redemptive horizon beyond the end of the book. Reading Stowe’s second novel in light of her interactions with Thomas Malthus, however, reveals a vision of white children as indexing histories of settler colonial violence, rather than escaping it. Through the specter of an overpopulating U.S., Stowe deploys childbirth to resist sentimentalism’s impulse towards cathartic closure and to demonstrate that white childhood instead perpetuates the racial violence that it seeks to erase.

The final chapter of the project, “Outgrowing the Body: Contract Law, Child Labor, and the Coming-of-age Narrative of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*,” takes up the coming-of-age narrative in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*. Noting Wilson’s projection of a contractual framework to her protagonist’s unfree labor, I argue that Wilson uses civil law’s unstable construction of child privacy to redefine the bildungsroman for a working-class, black subject. During early industrialization, the legal standing of child workers

was subject to constant revision as courts attempted to balance a version of freedom through contract against the belief that childhood was imperfectly rational and only partially autonomous. In the process, the contractual child worker became an instance in which legal persona could not be cleanly abstracted from the material body and thereby troubled the line between social and corporeal versions of personhood. By drawing on this legacy of child contract, Wilson experiments with the meaning of physical development when it is disconnected from economic markers of adulthood, in essence, asking what a growing body signals when it is paired with a stagnant social position. In attempting to write the answer, Wilson uses the child body as a means to reintroduce the physical particularities of race and disability into the language of labor contract. In so doing, she imagines a distinct form of privacy for her protagonist that provides a recognizable subjectivity and will that remain wholly isolate from the intrusions of contract.

This sweep from laws written to separate children from the social body to subjects invoking legal childhood to exclude themselves suggests the degree to which antebellum visions of childhood were inextricable from visions of socialization and of the social world itself. Whether a social group is presented as naturally and continuously replenishing itself with children who were legible heirs to its adult members or whether its children were eclipsed and its population imagined as erratic, disjointed, or irregular could determine if that group could be counted as a part of the nation and determine its members' claim to citizenship. The damage that can be done by declaring certain childhoods antisocial occurs both individually and in the aggregate. However, as I hope to show, the child deemed antisocial has therefore also been a means of imaging different

forms of sociality and new configurations of sociality. The denial of innocence can insist on historical memory. Conversely, the erasure of history can make space for less constraining types of belonging. To be clear, I make no pitch for antisocial childhood as a utopian escape, if for no other reason than that utopian escape is the very way by which liberal sovereignty insists that each new generation of its chosen children are kept in perpetual innocence from the historical conditions of its existence. Most antisocial childhoods proved to be sources of pain or dispossession, but even those authors bent on reinvesting them with other meanings were necessarily engaged with a discourse that held the potential to wound. Much like recent challenges to definitions of the human, these rewritings of the child retain awareness of the category's past and ongoing violence. However, by insisting that new experiences of childhood and new relationships between generations or within generations all be recognized as such, these authors challenge the inevitability of that "the child" might be.

The Incurable Child: Juvenile Delinquency and the Fearful Rise of the Child Self

One peculiarity of the child's deportment remains yet to be told. The very first thing which she had noticed in her life, was—what?—not the mother's smile, responding to it, as other babies do, by that faint, embryo smile of the little mouth, remembered so doubtfully afterwards, and with such fond discussion whether it were indeed a smile. By no means! But that first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was—shall we say it?—the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom!

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

If antisocial children, feral or otherwise, haunt the edges of antebellum discourse, the most basic question is their origin. How does a child become antisocial, or alternatively, how does she fail to enter the social world? My introduction proposed that the antisociality of the *Scarlet Letter*'s Pearl mirrored contemporary thinking about whole host of historical children who were placed outside of conventional assimilation. In this chapter, I begin this broader project by focusing on how the inhabitants of the antebellum U.S. imagined this assimilation and how they imagined that it might fail. Although she will not appear again in this project, Hawthorne's wild child provides one last clue to how this process was understood. Pearl's isolation – Hawthorne describes as her as possessing a “depth” that “lacked reference and adaption to the world into which she was born” – appears to have been cemented by a primal scene gone desperately wrong. In place of an emotional connection with her mother, in which Pearl might have echoed, “as other babies do,” Hester's smiles and so learn to share affect, Pearl's first social encounter occurs under the emblem of punishment. As Hawthorne describes, with an almost exaggerated horror, the spark of Pearl's affective life is the scarlet letter itself, the sign of her mother's criminality and her own illegality.

The terms of Hawthorne's concern are allegorical and historical. However, the stakes of imagining children who had been socialized by punishment were entirely topical at the time of *The Scarlet Letter's* 1850 publication. As child subjects began to flood cities, prisons became an increasingly common means of managing children and conversations about child socialization became increasingly focused around punishment's effect on character. The immediate catalyst for these changes was a demographic one. By the early to mid-nineteenth century, industrialization had increased urban populations of all ages, and child workers, useful in factories for hands able to fit the tight spaces of factory machines, were no exception. Moreover, because states had responded to the need for short-term child labor in factories by allowing juvenile workers to make their own contracts without requiring parental oversight, many of the children in these cities were operating with an unprecedented degree of independence and mobility.¹⁵ A boom in immigration brought around 300,000 new arrivals to New York every year (Stoutt 71). The immigrants who remained were, in the words of Walter Kamphoefner, disproportionately "young, single, and mobile" (84). This shift presented a two-pronged problem to commentators: caught in a contradiction between this urbanized youth and Romantic visions of pastoral childhood, they also had to account for the sheer numbers of unattached children that immigration and industrialization had brought. In 1849, for instance, the New York chief of police estimated that 10,000 children lived in the streets (qtd. in Hindman 464). While a fraction of these subjects were funneled into the public orphanages that proliferated between the 1830s and 1860 (Hacsi 19-21), a parallel

¹⁵ For a discussion of the legal details of this transition, see James D. Schmidt's "'Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood': The Legal Construction of Child Labor in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Law and History Review* 23.2 (2005): 315–350.

discourse emerged from the penal system to define the social standing of these urban youth. Labelled with the newly popular term “juvenile delinquent,” children in the city could be criminalized for having unstable housing or a home that was deemed unsuitable by authorities or for participating in informal economies ranging from prostitution to petty theft to picking chips of dried horse manure to sell as fuel.

The development of the special category of the criminal child required a reworking of both labels, reconciling the guilt attached to the former with the innocence attached to the latter. On one hand, the version of criminality that could encompass childhood’s diminished agency called for a focus not on personal morality but rather on subjects formed by environmental determinism. On the other hand, to criminalize juvenile subjects is to imagine a child without attachment to the social order whose future they represent. Thus, instead of framing children as the natural property of the state, delinquency presents a set of young subjects who must be forced to belong and, in doing so, projects a set of eventual citizens explicitly coerced into their civic roles. Delinquency discourse instead abandons judgment of personal character of the delinquent by imaging that character as wholly inaccessible to others and therefore to disciplinary surveillance. Sovereignty, under such a regime, becomes an explicit assertion of power operating without fictions of consent and, in turn, generates a trajectory to adulthood for these subjects that is not a growth into the social contract but a static exclusion. Delinquency discourse, in other words, naturalizes the position of poor children who have no legal adult roles available to grow into, categorizing them as subjects who can never be incorporated into the social order in order to justify their exclusion. Yet this language of

ungovernable children also provided antebellum Americans with a way of conceiving of themselves as free adults with individual character.

Specifically, I argue that a legal construct from the early days of delinquency discourse, that of “the incorrigible child,” can help unpack the juncture between the child and disciplined subject by adding an emphasis on the ways that child characters like Pearl defy scrutiny. From a legal stance, incorrigibility emerged a penal category tied to harsher penalties. As it appears in William Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, the “incorrigible rogue” is the most extreme of the criminal classes, exceeding both “idle and disorderly persons” and “rogues and vagabonds” in their hardened criminality (169). When applied to juvenile delinquents, then, incorrigibility marks a similarly habitual deviance. For juvenile law in particular, though, incorrigibility came to be an offense deemed in itself, labeling those children beyond correction and paradoxically placing them in a position that is so outside the reach of state discipline that they are given over to state discipline entirely.¹⁶ In its wider legacy, however, the incorrigible gains a measure of power from the quality of being beyond correction. For instance, in the *Yale Literary Magazine* in 1847, “incorrigible” is deployed to describe not a recalcitrant child, but a geometric principle which cannot be disputed. In this sense, the “incorrigible” takes on a specific epistemological standing based on the idea that some statements must be accepted as true. Grounded in phenomenological experience of the body – scents, tastes, pains – the incorrigible assertion is one that, whether true or not, exists beyond interrogation by any other parties; it is a personal claim simply not open to question (Coliva 59). Likewise,

¹⁶ See, for instance, the 1826 Assembly Act founding the Pennsylvania House of Refuge and authorizing it to commit children indefinitely for “incorrigible and vicious conduct,” and the 1838 case, *Ex parte Crouse*, confirming the already extent practice of doing so without the extension of habeas corpus.

when the children were labeled as incorrigible, the word carried with it an association beyond the immobility or refusal to change and, instead suggested an asociality so fundamental that it defied surveillance. Incorrigibility named, therefore, the infuriating and frightening gulf between disciplinarians and the charges whom they wished to form into their image, the state of seeing a set of children as the future but failing to recognize any connection extending from themselves into that future.

I approach the category of the incorrigible child by bringing together two distinct archives written from either side of the question, one which assumes deviance and the other which assumes its absence: records from the early years of New York's juvenile delinquency facilities and the popular genre of domestic manuals on child rearing.

Despite the differences between their intents and venues, both discourses converge on the same question: by what means can one assert authority over an unformed subject and, more difficult still, from that foundational assertion, what paths exist to a socialized, adult citizenship? By reading these two archives in parallel, we find a conjunction of state sovereignty and everyday domestic life beyond the common metaphors of paternalism and into the messy details of ushering a subject, often an unwilling one, from the bare life of infancy and into the possibility of civic life. In each set of texts, the attachment of sovereignty to the child subject relies on managing a balance between the projected interiority of the individual and the physical body born into a system of power. The uncertain civic status of children highlights this tension between narratives of sovereignty by bringing together fictions of citizenship by blood or birthplace and citizenship freely chosen. That the domestic manual and the legal institutions of delinquency, on the whole, deploy divergent strategies for imposing belonging upon their charges, however, points to

a process of differentiation between the types of citizens that they can become. Middle-class children, disciplined by appeals to sentiment and inner feeling, are raised to internalize sovereignty while poorer children are raised into adult roles that never escape the reassertion of power by force. Incurability, I argue, comes to describe this latter form of subjectivity, inscrutable to power and thus left to remain under its full power.

In framing how antebellum Americans attempted to frame interactions with children, I read from five popular domestic manuals discussing the methods of correct parenting. Four of these are products of roughly contemporary American writers and were originally published in either Massachusetts or New York: Amos Bronson Alcott's *Observations on the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction* (1830), Lydia Maria Child's *The Mother's Book* (1831), Heman Humphrey's *Domestic Education* (1840), and John A. Gere's *The Government of Children* (1851). The fifth, John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, is an obvious outlier geographically and temporally, but despite its English origin and 1693 publication, Locke's work had a considerable afterlife shaping American attitudes about childhood. Its most prominent antebellum publication was in an 1830 volume, *The Library of Education*, edited by prominent educational writer and the editor of the *American Journal of Education*, William Russell. Moreover, in her work on the coevolution of child rights and American independence, Gillian Brown also reminds us that Locke's *Thoughts on Education* was broadly consumed, even more so than even his most popular work on political theory, *Two Treatises on Government* (17). Nor was Locke's advice taken merely as abstract philosophy. As *The American Annals of Education* describes Russell's edition, Locke's work is "not mere speculative essays, – but the simplest and most direct discussions of subjects in the

highest degree practical” (393). Thus, while Locke’s historical role in forming the foundational ideas U.S. childhood was considerable, I here group him with U.S. manuals to preserve the on-going use of Locke to address immediate questions of child rearing. Two chief factors guided the selection of my five sample texts from the considerable stacks of manuals published. First, I sought texts which were prominent either for their authors or for their popularity with readers. Locke’s importance to the genre, as I have discussed, is clear. Lydia Maria Child had gained fame for her earlier historical fiction, as well as for another household guide, *The American Frugal Housekeeper* (1829) and her work in the juvenile periodical press. Moreover, *The Mother’s Book*, in particular, met with such success that it was republished not only in England, but also in Germany. A. Bronson Alcott, too, was an emerging, if polarizing, celebrity in the field of education for his pedagogical experiments, particularly at the Temple School in Boston, and for his ties to the Transcendentalists, ties which also helped his ideas receive repeated coverage in *The Dial*. John A. Gere, a leader in the Methodist church, was lesser known, but his guide found very high, if not entirely surprisingly praise, from *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, which declared a wish that his books might “[find] its way into every Christian family in the land” (146). Finally, Heman Humphrey, though no longer well-known, was a widely-published Congregationalist minister and early president of Amherst College, who was discussed and published in a range of periodicals including *The North American Review*, *The Christian Observer*, *The Christian Secretary*, and *The New-York Monthly Magazine*. In addition to readership, I chose texts whose content traced childhood back to infancy, rather than focusing only on older children, in order to match my particular interests in the intersections of primary socialization, discipline, and the child body. For

instance, while both Humphrey and Alcott also published texts directed at adolescent students, I focus on their writings about the more primal scenes of education.

From these manuals, I turn to a survey of the inmate profiles written during the first five years of the juvenile delinquency institution of New York, beginning with its first entry on December 25, 1824.¹⁷ As I read them, the records of the New York House of Refuge work as an ad hoc attempt to reconcile the methods put forward by domestic manuals with the group of delinquent children to whom they can claim no genealogical connection and whom House officials were preparing for lives in a different class than their own. Because they did not see these children as versions of themselves, House officials turned instead to environment as a key to understanding delinquent children and to violence for molding them. In selecting the physical as sole object of scrutiny, however, House officials lost their claim on the inner lives of delinquents, declaring them to be a mixture of inaccessible and unchangeable that I classify under the term incorrigible. That is, by reading what were functionally bureaucratic documents as formal experiments in characterization, these delinquency records reveal the strange place of incorrigible subjectivity between the environmental and the individual, between the physical body and projection of a mind within. Rather than arguing that this log offers a well thought-out framework, I emphasize the moments of rupture when the observer can make nothing of the child observed. Faced with a child self whose interiority cannot be fully gauged either in the terms of agential consent or physical duress, the authors of these records came to see young bodies with a menacing degree of social illegibility.

¹⁷ The institution would not officially open until January 1st, 1825, but then Superintendent Joseph Curtis began mustering and profiling the first group of inmates shortly before that date.

Unlike the accepted Foucauldian theory of discipline, in which the self is invented as a means of control, I argue that this invention also enabled the social alienation and atomization of such subjects who, from poverty or ethnicity, were placed the discipline of delinquency.

Socializing the Child Body

For all of his interest in educating the mind, John Locke was also absorbed by the problem of disciplining the body. While the bulk of his *Thoughts on Education* is devoted to developing faculties such as reason, judgment, and virtue, Locke begins his text by noting the impossibility of rational improvement without physical management: “I imagine the minds of children as easily turned this or that way as water itself: and though this be the principle part, and our main care should be about the inside, yet the clay cottage is not to be neglected” (84). Unlike the easily swayed mind, the physical conditions of the child could only be managed, not scripted wholesale. As a result, Locke’s famous treatise on the training of human reason begins with an exhaustive regime for addressing the child body. Cold, wet feet are recommended to strengthen character (82). Melons, peaches, and plums must be banned, but gooseberries are acceptable – provided they are eaten ripe, with bread, and only before meals (96). Beer is allowable but only at “Blood-hot” temperatures (95), and bowels movements must be carefully monitored and kept to a strict schedule (101). Locke’s digressions on the body seem to balloon, unable to leave any aspect of physical life as a variable in his curriculum. Attempting to control the bodily condition of the child at every turn, Locke suggests that the physical must be corralled by constant and painstaking discipline to give access to the mental. In other

words, as I want to suggest, the unruliness of the child's body is threateningly contiguous with the limits of adult authority.

This problem of socializing the corporeal was at the heart of one of the driving tensions of the antebellum domestic novel as a genre: the need to incorporate children into liberal democratic society while preserving the decidedly non-liberal dependency of childhood. In his history of the concept of character in U.S. reform literature, James Salazar argues that such literature struggles with the paradox of being simultaneously a nationalist project in training children in American behavior and a project in asserting that an independent American character had existed all along. He writes that, because they acted "as guides as well to the formation of self-governing and independent citizens, these character-building manuals imagined the child not simply as the 'plastic' material [...] but also as the kind of self-founding, antigenealogical national subject" (14). As Salazar observes, the drive to naturalize national identity required the projection of an innate personality, where an innate Americanness might reside. Moreover, the idea of a child who could be perfectly conditioned into obedience conflicted with the need to understand adults as individuals capable of autonomous thought and, therefore, properly democratic voting practices. The child of these manuals' rhetoric must retain a measure of selfhood that remains asocial, in order to imagine them growing as having the personal freedom necessary to be a socially functional adult.

The difficulty of imaging even the model childhood as continuous with the disembodiment of rights-bearing adulthood was most pointed in such manuals when they attempted to address the determined corporeality of the child – the awkward predicament of severing physical growth from rational development and, subsequently, of preserving a

fantasy of the pristinely disembodied citizen. Much as the officials of the House would do, these domestic advisors relied upon the body as an index to understanding and asserting authority in the form of corporal punishment over child subjects who seemed too little socialized for other appeals. In this reliance on the body as a failsafe to accessing a selfhood posited as elsewhere, however, writers meet with the corollary fear of disconnection between bodily comportment and interior state. Too much attention to the body could produce a deceitful subject who learns to conform only outwardly. However, because the discourse of childhood also foregrounded the body as a non-negligible aspect of the juvenile subject, attempts to understand juvenile discipline appear stranded between the embodied dependent that they saw children as and the vision of a disembodied, rational adult that they wished to create. These manuals collectively reveal, then, a crisis over the child body as the simultaneous grounds and obstacle to socialization.

Locke's emphasis on the physical management of childhood as the underpinning for moral adulthood permeates guides written during the antebellum period as well. Humphrey, in fact, very nearly paraphrases Locke's metaphor of water and clay cottage, declaring in one passage, that "although the young *mind* is that priceless gem which it should be a guardian's supreme care to polish, the *casket* must not be overlooked, nor neglected" (61). Similarly, Alcott believed that the primary force in infancy was the "claims of animal nature" and insisted that a session of active play was the necessary preparation for a child to be able to engage intellectually, claiming that bodily energy must be dealt with for intellect to be invoked (5). Child, meanwhile, goes so far as to trace the national characters of the Dutch and the French back to the manner in which

they are physically handled as infants. Dutch “heaviness,” she ponders, must spring from Dutch infants being kept in “repose” for too long, while French “vivacity” originates from the parental tendency to be “perpetually tossing them about” (1). An American body, too, was not simply born but had to be handled into being, according to her theories of attending from the beginning to the sensory life of the child. If the ideal subject of the early U.S. was the disembodied subject of liberalism, these manuals make clear that the training of that eventual adult was nonetheless a process rooted in the physical.

Accordingly, in these U.S. manuals, children’s bodies appear overwhelmingly as the first means for socialization of a non-speaking infant. Humphrey, for example, sees the primal scene of the infant social life as lying in a recognition that bodies code a deeper feeling, promising that a mother “conveys her meaning in tones, and looks, and smiles, and frowns, to her darling boy, long before it is capable of understanding a single word she utters [...] and in this way she begins to mold its temper and habits to her wishes” (Humphrey 42). Faces act in the absence of language as a naturalized method of communication, allowing immediate access to an infant’s character and allowing its socialization to begin before it is physically capable of social behavior. An infant is rewarded with a smile and punished with a frown, and this basic affinity through superficial recognition allows the mother a means of controlling the deeper questions of the child’s “temper.” Child seconds this idea of infantile responses to a mother’s face and extrapolates a version of the child body that remains connected to its mother even after birth. Claiming that infants will cry at the sight of their mothers looking unhappy, Child frames the situation as a matter of innate communication. She explains that such a young child “cannot possibly *know* what that expression means, but he *feels* that it is something

painful [emphasis in original]” (4). In this privileging of feeling over knowledge, Child imagines an inner life that need not be socialized from a blank slate, as it were, but one that receives the emotional life of its parents so immediately as to be almost an inheritance. This connection, so visceral that it almost exceeds the category of communication, stages the child as always already socialized by merit of belonging to the body of the mother; she imagines infants as, in a very literal way, being a part of a social body through the intensity of the maternal bond.¹⁸

This method of infant training through bodily response, however, had its more brutal extensions as well. Gere, too, insists that there is no reason to delay training a child until it is capable of either speech or reason, because it can instead be made to respond to physical stimuli. He therefore promises a technique for teaching crying children to calm themselves on command before the age of six months. Instead of maternal empathy, though, Gere admits that “in general, it will be indispensable to make an appeal to fear” as the basis for this pedagogy (59). His advice is that a guardian faced with a crying child should first attempt to distract it with a few words but, as this will often fail, recommends that he or she escalate to violence:

It may be necessary to add, on the same principle on which physicians apply counter-irritants, suddenly but gently, a *slap*, or a *shake*, just sufficient to render fear the predominant passion at the moment, – and then it may be eased off, as already described. But some rare instances will occur, in which these means will not only not answer the purpose, but

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that, as with many of the mechanisms of childhood, this imagined bond was a tidy way of policing female sociality, as well, by insisting that mothers refrain from any “violent passion or emotion,” lest they be responsible for poisoning their child.

serve only to increase the passionate excitement which obtains in the midst of a fit of squalling, or of obstinate, silent resistance to parental authority. In such instances, imitate the practice of physicians, who order blisters to establish upon the surface a centre of sympathy, and repeat the slap, or ply the rod, the instrument directed by the Holy Scriptures, with an intention to *smart*, but never to bruise or injure, until it is obvious that the sensation upon the surface becomes the centre of interest, and no longer.

(59-60)

Given the excess of the advice itself – that if slapping an infant once fails, then the answer is to strike again – it does possess a strange kind of internal logic, offering a theory of interaction with what is still a largely asocial being. If the child is crying, Gere reasons, the adult can distract it out of a tantrum by inspiring a new “predominant passion” of fear or pain. In his choice of medicine as the arena for a training that could as easily been made a matter of etiquette or morality, Gere makes an implicit claim that the route to a child’s thoughts and feelings is fundamentally a physical one. Sympathy, as it appears in this interaction between parent and child, is hardly the product of abstract affinity but rather the physiological impulse that can spur feeling; the “centre of sympathy” is the site of an instructive pain, coupling physical sensation and mental attention in an immediate proximity.

Gere’s suggestion would have been thoroughly controversial and he himself acknowledges that some of his methods have been condemned as “oppressive and cruel” (82), but they would have been polarizing precisely because they pinpoint contemporary fears about whether childhoods predicated on force could produce the types of middle-

class, liberal adult that the manuals' readers would have imagined themselves to be. As they would with the New York House of Refuge, discussions around how embodiment shaped the social status of the child converged around the issue of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment made explicit how greatly adult authority relied on the child body as a relay for controlling the child self. However, in isolating the body as the source of power, corporal punishment also articulated limits to adult authority, tracing it to a mode of domination that was judged as always partial and, moreover, as a thoroughly unacceptable basis for sovereignty over the adult citizen that these manuals attempted to produce. Thus, when Gere advocates that pain precede language as a system for communication with infants, he does so directly from the premise that authority over the child corresponds strongly with authority over the adult, because at the heart of Gere's method is his belief that fear "appears to lie at the foundation of all human obedience, from infancy to old age" (59). In other words, for those opposed to corporal punishment, identifying physical force as the fundamental socialization for the child self threatens to undermine the putative freedom and rationality of the adult self.

Gere's theoretical basis, if not his conclusions, follows directly from Locke, for whom corporal punishment threatened to disqualify children from democratic citizenship. While Locke's extrapolation between child liberty and the political rights of adults springs from a considerable tradition of paternalist analogies – his *Two Treatises of Government* famously rebuts Filmer's own conflation of royal and paternal authority – his discussion moves beyond analogy and into an analysis of how corporal punishment shapes the development of child subjectivity itself. He critiques whipping, therefore, as making the child into an adult unfit for political participation:

Such a sort of *slavish Discipline* [as whipping] makes a *slavish Temper*. The Child submits, and dissembles Obedience, whilst the fear of the Rod hangs over him; but when that is removed, and by being out of sight, he can promise himself impunity, he gives the greater scope to his natural Inclination; which by this way is not at all altered, but on the contrary heightened and increased in him; and after such restraint, breaks out usually with the more violence. (113)

The prospect at least of physical discipline seems inevitable, because for all his reluctance, Locke still admits that when faced with what he interchangeably terms “obstinacy” and “rebellion,” physical checks are the only assertion of control (138). Counterintuitively, though, the failure of corporal punishment is the submissiveness it first seems, for the child’s “natural Inclination” is not subdued but “heightened and increased” until it is capable of all the more violence. Whipping is ineffective, in other words, because it isolates the body and thereby teaches the child that outward appearance can be used as a shield between its inner self and any illicit desires lurking there and disciplinary surveillance. Instead of the self imagined by liberal democracy that internalizes the authority to which it answers, the beaten child is made into a slave only able to resist power by deception. Moreover, this invocation of slavishness in the context of child rearing would have registered more than incidental rhetoric to its U.S. readers. As Richard Brodhead has argued, there was a general shift in discourse around corporal punishment, particularly the language of whipping, that made it inextricable from the violence of plantation slavery. Locke’s turn to the slave, already more than metaphor at the time it was written, would have appeared in the antebellum period as an especially

pointed instruction for how to preserve the democratic mindset, and tacit whiteness, of a potential citizen.

Locke's warning against corporal punishment links questions of the child body and civic identity by suggesting a bifurcated theory of the self. To some extent, treatment of the child body matters because it molds the character of the adult. Yet it cannot do so entirely. Locke's model of the self in this passage, instead, divides between the social presentation of the self and an asocial, private self, labeling them "temper" and "natural Inclination" respectively. Temper, as the aspect of character that can be made "slavish," is socially-determined and determines, in turn, how the self is expressed to others. Natural inclination, on the other hand, is the innate element of the character which does not seem to depend on nurture and which may be hidden or revealed to others, according to the individual's temper. Corporal punishment intervenes in this dynamic by strengthening the asocial tendencies of the self; as Locke concludes, a beating leaves the child's natural Inclination "heightened and increased," but better concealed. To grow into a proper citizen, on the other hand, children must be trained with a temper that can moderate between their desires and the external social world. Essentially, it must undergo the process which I have been referring to as socialization.

The aversion to corporal punishment in Child's manual is similarly not concerned with an abstract dislike for violence or even a wish to avoid causing the children pain, but rather with the fear that it would teach children how to put on a deceptive face of obedience. They might learn to act good without being so. Unlike Gere, Child finds intimidation to be an inadequate source of authority, on the grounds that "mere fear of suffering never makes a person really better. It makes them *conceal* what is evil, but it

does not make them *conquer* it [emphasis in original]" (36). As she continues to explore the division between children that "conceal" and those that "conquer" their vices, Child outlines the dangerous possibility that a man may grow up having learned by force to "regulate his outward behaviour" and to project "outward goodness" all without having "cleanse[d] his heart," avoiding punishment through "hypocrisy" or "concealment" (37). In this worst case scenario, the child disciplined by force matures into an adult who lives deceptively, functioning socially yet never revealing a true self to the rest of the world. Indeed, Child's feelings about the dangers of corporal punishment were so strong, or the social pressure to condemn it compelling enough, that she added a "Concluding Chapter" to her 1844 republication of the *Mother's Book*, which recants her original edition's stance that physical discipline might be acceptable in some very rare instances and instead insists that force could never be used without sparking "rebellion" even when "its outward manifestations might be restrained by fear" (171).

For both Humphrey and Alcott, too, corporal punishment comes to be associated with an asocial emotional life, because the two agree that beating children threatened to teach them to perform an insincere obedience and thereby to cordon off their feelings from scrutiny. Rather than restricting the practice, however, as Locke and Child do, they reshape corporal punishment to train children explicitly in the proper way to feel about their pain. For Humphrey, this attempt to reconnect the child's mental and physical response is a fairly conventional suggestion that guardians themselves perform the emotional effect that corporal punishment is intended to have upon the child. "Let him see," Humphrey advises, "from your countenance and from the tones of your voice, that every stroke costs you more pain than it does him; and he must be perverse indeed, if he

does not yield and reform” (60). Though beatings should be rare, when they happen, parents must actively present that beating as an act of emotional transference, suppressing the role of physical suffering so much that the chief injury should appear to be parental grief. What Humphrey’s recommended ritual assumes is that the physical punishment will not naturally have an affective impact or will have an impact that is unpredictable. Much as his advice pivots syntactically from one meaning of pain to another, the suggestion is pedagogical exercise in teaching children to translate from violence to sentiment and to understand corporal punishment as focused on that latter intangibility rather than on physical threat. To put it differently, Humphrey implicitly argues that if parents want to discipline children through the body, they must also socialize how the way that children connect interiority to flesh.

Alcott extended this idea further still. In an even more unusual stance on corporal punishment, instead of advising guardians to convey their own pain with every blow, Alcott entirely redirects the physical pain to the adult. Although he does not directly discuss the practice in his own writings, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s *Record of a School* (1833) describes him inverting the scene of punishment and requiring that disobedient students strike Alcott for penance (Brodhead 68). As Peabody describes it, this reversal was the “most complete punishment that a master ever invented,” because it produces a pain that can “touch the heart to love” (145). Likewise, in Alcott’s explicit advice on governing infants, interiority is a learned trait. He writes: “the reflection of [the teacher’s] character will open the deeper fountains of their nature, and prepare them for the knowledge of themselves. Taught to look within for the dictates of duty, they will be led to the exercise of self-knowledge” (21). This elaborate pattern of reflection and

substitution – children must observe adults so that the children can observe their own desires and learn to live without external guidance – follows a similar pattern to his insistence that a child striking an adult to see adult suffering in order to teach a self-inflicted pain born of remorse.

Alcott's reversal of disciplinary roles appears bizarre, if not somewhat sexualized, from modern perspectives, but, though it was always controversial, there is also evidence that his methods struck a popular chord in its own time. When his daughter, Louisa May Alcott, fictionalized his pedagogy and included approving scenes of his unique proxy approach of punishment in her 1871 novel *Little Men*, public interest was enough to spur Peabody to republish her own account of Bronson Alcott's teaching. Indeed, read in the context of these other domestic manuals, Alcott's inverted approach to pedagogical force responds to the same problem of how to understand and discipline an asocial subject as his generic contemporaries, even if his answer is a more extreme one. Set alongside Humphrey, especially, the scene of suffering adulthood takes on a different light and becomes an exercise of teaching intersubjective relationships. Humphrey's lesson that internal and external must correspond recurs in Alcott's underlying premise that when a guardian feels grief at the behavior of a child, its corollary is that the child should cause the corresponding physical pain as well. Rather than teaching children to mimic the grief of their parents, Alcott assigns physical pain to adults in order to make the punishment a pristinely emotional exchange. In thus forcing children to inhabit the place of the striking adult while also in the place of the chastised child, Alcott expands a child's misbehavior into a communal injury in which physical pain cannot mark an incorrigible child self because even that pain is attached to the parental authority. Alcott transforms the

isolating effect of corporal punishment into a way to make children embody discipline themselves and thereby submit to it.

In this ultimate preference for a suffering adult over a suffering child, Alcott marks the extent to which neither children nor the pain of children was a simplistic rallying point for U.S. society. Instead, as fears of antisocial childhood moved between the institutionalization of poor children and the training of the affluent, disciplinary experts from both spheres came to see child bodies themselves as products of human training and, in that recognition, came to doubt their strength as relay between adult and child. Moreover, because those in authority saw themselves as products of the system they ran, the child came to signify a paradoxical site, in which to imagine the potential for a democratic citizen also required preserving the possibility of a profoundly unassimilable childhood.

The risk of such an oppositional childhood, however, is higher for some children than others. As these manuals make clear, the danger of the body barring access to the child's character was far less with one's own, biological children than with the children of strangers. In fact, according U.S. manuals, the supposed bond between a mother's and child's bodies offer the first means for socialization. Recall, for instance, Humphrey's belief that a mother's face was innately legible to her child. Similarly, Child extrapolates from this theory of face that a version of the child body must remain connected to its mother even after birth. Claiming that infants will cry at the sight of their mothers looking unhappy, Child frames the situation as an instinctive physical bond that links their emotional states, explaining that such a young child "cannot possibly *know* what that expression means, but he *feels* that it is something painful [emphasis in original]" (4).

The extent of this corporeal connection to the family so intense that Child returns to an already rather outdated theory that a mother's emotions could be transmitted to a child through milk, declaring that "children have died in convulsions, in consequence of nursing a mother, while under the influence of violent passion or emotion" (4). This connection, so visceral that it almost exceeds the category of communication, stages the child as always already socialized by merit of belonging to the body of the mother. She imagines infants as, in a very literal but temporary way, being a part of a social body through the intensity of the maternal bond.

Where a biological relationship could stabilize this fear that the body would prevent true socialization, then, no such privilege existed for the children of strangers. In a passage that she later recanted, even Child, the otherwise staunch opponent of corporal punishment made an exception for the children who might join the family as adoptees, servants, or apprentices. She explains that, while she "[does] not believe that most children, properly brought up from the very cradle, would need whipping," she also cautions that "children are not often thus brought up; and you may have those placed under your care in whom evil feeling have become very strong" (37). Violence, for Child, is reserved for children brought from outside the household, as a means of compensating for the affective gap between a guardian and a child estranged by the "evil feeling" of an improper background. It might evoke incorrigibility, but it seems the only bond possible when a child has been raised so outside an adult's experience. As I will argue, for House officials, too, the paranoia that their charges had secret inner rebellion marked a sense of wider disconnection. The institutions had brought them in contact with types of childhood they had never lived from classes and ethnic groups to whom they felt no

affiliation. To see a child as incorrigible, then, was to see him or her as a break in the social order, living at a remove from any life that persons in authority could imagine.

Delinquent Characters in Profile

The first prison intended specifically for juvenile criminals in the United States was built in New York City in 1824. Known as Houses of Refuge or, less frequently, as Houses of Reformation, such institutions were part of a larger transatlantic fascination with juvenile delinquency, explicitly borrowing their design from similar establishments in London and Dublin (Hart 25). Though the U.S. was slower than Britain to adopt separate penal systems for minors, the idea caught on quickly enough that within thirty years, as the *Pennsylvania Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* from 1854 reports, Houses of Refuge had since been founded in Philadelphia; Boston; Portland, Maine; Providence, Rhode Island; Westborough, Massachusetts; Rochester, New York; Pittsburg; Cincinnati; and Chicago (“Art. Lii.”).¹⁹ Although the details of the schools differed, the typical program for inmates consisted of a full workday meant to train the children in a profession while also allowing the institution a source of financial support. An 1827 report by the New York House of Refuge, for instance, reported that inmates attended two two-hour school lessons and labored for another eight hours with its one hundred and twenty-two boys working at “chair-making, shoe-making, tailoring, brass nail manufacturing, and silver plating” (16) and its twenty-seven girls working at “baking,

¹⁹ Even this list is not nationally comprehensive, missing at least the incorporation of a New Orleans House nine years prior to the report’s publication (“Records of Correctional Institutions”).

tailoring, sewing, and washing” (18).²⁰ Because time served in the House was regarded as rehabilitation rather than punishment, inmates were not given sentences of a specific length.²¹ Instead, if their behavior was deemed suitable and an opportunity was available, they left the institution by indenture into an apprenticeship or, more rarely, they were released to familial. If not, Houses had authority over their charges until they reached the age of majority, which was typically twenty-one for male subjects and eighteen for female.

The common arguments for building Houses of Refuge, rather than age-integrated prisons, relied on bringing together the two contradictory halves of the discourse on juvenile criminality. On one side, the pathos of a popularized childhood innocence suffering in prison permeated many sentimental appeals for the construction and funding of institutions of delinquency. The Chief Justice of Massachusetts in the 1820s, for instance, wrote a much-quoted address endorsing South Boston’s House that declares prison unfit for minors, because “these unhappy little victims of neglect, or shameful abuse of authority, are hardly proper subjects of punishment – their offences are not their own” for, as he continues, “what more terrible than to immure in the physically and morally foul apartments of a jail, a child of eight or ten years of age, without means of instruction or information, and then to turn him into the world with an atmosphere about him, which will repel every thing fitted to purify his body or his soul! [sic]” (qtd. in

²⁰ As an official report on the institution’s benevolence, these work hours may well have been exceeded in practice, especially as increasing income from inmate labor was both a source of direct funding and evidence of sustainability used to argue for future support from external patrons. Moreover, the report itself notes that the in-house work done by female inmates “engrosses almost the whole of their time” as those twenty-some children were responsible for clothing the whole of the Institution’s population (18).

²¹ Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqville seized on this point in their *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* as a proof of the educational value of the House (112).

Sergeant 39-40). Children, such advocates argued, erred through ignorance of the law brought about by bad upbringing, rather than individual malice. Putting minors in prison, therefore, was merely to educate them in the ways of adult criminality, corrupting their remaining purity by contact with convicts.

On the other hand, texts such as Gustave d Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville's *On the Penitentiary System in the United States* (1833) complained that, because of the pathos inherent in the child prisoner, juries would refuse to convict even repeat offenders when the only option for sentencing seemed so harsh (111). As advocates for the Philadelphia House of Refuge put it in an 1840 pamphlet entitled *Design and Advantages of the House of Refuge*, this pity itself can breed further criminality in its young objects:

If such delinquents are liable to be treated, when pursued, in the same manner as older and hardened ones, it is almost impossible to arrest their progress in depravity and mischief. Most men shrink, with repugnance, from harshness to youth. The prospect of making them convicted felons is repulsive; and thousands have been permitted to continue unmolested, in preference to hurrying them to the Penitentiary. Thus our most natural sensibilities become panders to public wrong, and contribute to keep up the juvenile gangs so necessary to the schemes of old culprits. (4)

Too much sympathy is actually an act of unkindness instead of mercy, the author contends, because it leaves children on the street, where they may be preyed upon by gang leaders. Keeping child criminals away from adult convicts, in other words, returns them to the hands of the adult criminals still outside of prisons, so that the only way to

keep the two groups reliably apart is to found an alternative institution. In separating these two classes of bodies, the pamphlet also seeks to guard a rhetorical gulf between the social standing accorded to criminals and that accorded to children. To juxtapose the treatment of the former onto the putative precious body of the latter produces the “repulsive” chimera of social positions; it is, in other words, to imagine into being the hardened criminal child known as the incorrigible.

Translating the mechanisms of the adult criminal code into a penal code for juveniles, however, also required developing a system for gauging the character of subjects liable to be seen as blank slates. Thus, along with this new form of criminality came a need to recalibrate the alignment between individual and environment as commentators were forced to reckon with just how responsible delinquents could be held for their actions. A few reports of juvenile crime did frame it, explicitly or tacitly, as a matter of individual moral choice. The discussion of a young thief in an 1835 New York newspaper shifts immediately into a repetitive apostrophe of the “Young Man!” reader, warning that he avoid the same fate (“Crime Among the Young”).²² More famously, Charles Dickens, an otherwise strong proponent on behalf of criminalized youth, formed his 1839 *Oliver Twist* around the notion that his protagonist’s innate goodness saves him time after time from attempts to drag him into crime and so disinherit him; Oliver’s continued innocence offers proof of upper-class moral strength and condemnation of all those lower-class characters around him who do not themselves resist delinquency. More

²² For a similar instance of delinquency as a subject of didactic literature, see also “The Children’s Column: What I Saw: Or, Little Lee’s-Sin.” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (1833-1865) 3 Jan. 1850, which takes a juvenile theft as occasion for individual moral speculation and readerly instruction.

generally, too, the basis of nearly all reform movements, Houses of Refuge included, was that of moral education, with the accompanying notion that a “good” child could not be a criminal child and, conversely, that criminal child could not be a good one.

As a general rule, though, the discourse of delinquency is less likely to ascribe bad character to a delinquent than it was to ascribing an absence of any character. That is, the discussion of child crime is far less interested in inner motivation or intention than in inventorying the external causes that had produced child subjects as criminal. The suspects were many. For example, when the board of managers of the Philadelphia House of Refuge offered a prize for the best essays on juvenile delinquents, they introduced the winners with a list typical for the period, including “the rapid natural increase of our population,” “the influx of ignorance, sottishness and crime from foreign lands,” and “the corrupt influences which grow with the growth of our cities, and extend with the prosperity and enterprise of the country” (6). For such commentators, delinquents act as a social barometer, absorbing and reflecting whatever set of social evils are preoccupying the writer, such that their share of childhood “innocence” lies in their lack of personal will. The 1850 New York sermon, *Juvenile Depravity and Crime in Our City* by revivalist and eventual utopian Thomas Lake Harris, presents delinquency as a product of overwhelming influence rather than personal failing:

A man can conquer circumstances of evil provided his spiritual will be quickened [...] *But the Child is passive*. Circumstances exercise over it a forming and influencing power. Poison may be mingled with its food and with its drink that shall disease and madden its young life in body and

mind. It may drink vice from its mother's bosom and imbibe contagion from its father's touch. (6) [emphasis in original]

Child subjects in this framework were distinct from adults in their unusual openness to the influence of their environment. They were able, as Harris writes, to “drink vice” and imbibe contagion” because they lack the clear boundaries between internal and external worlds that would allow for anything like a private self in the liberal sense. They are reflective, not agential figures.

The importance of the environment in anchoring adult understanding of the child was not a model exclusive to delinquency. Rather, delinquency's obsession with urban youth (a term that remains something of a euphemistic pejorative) derives from a more general coupling of child and nature arising the late eighteenth century. Observing the period's preference for meadows as the site of “true” childhood rather than factories or even classrooms, Alan Richardson has observed that the prototypical child of early Romanticism is “Edenic, natural, and asocial,” in that the child's singular connection to the idyllic natural world marks its innocence of human vice, even as the child's innocence acts as guarantor of that the natural world really must be idyllic (14). The use of the pastoral to link ideas of childhood with pristine nature carried over into the U.S. context as well. As Ralph Waldo Emerson described childhood in his 1836 essay “Nature,” the natural world surrounding a child is so constitutive of the child's character that there is no clear boundary between the one and the other. While “the sun illuminates only the eye of the man,” he writes, it “shines into the eye and heart of the child” such that “the inward and outward senses” perfectly correspond (11). The idea of innocence relies, in part, on a natural setting, because the child's singular connection to the idyllic

natural world marks its innocence of human vice, even as the child's innocence acts as guarantor of the natural world's idyllic character.

From this perspective, for a child to be born and reared in a bustling city bordered on perversion. Where a child in open exchange with nature signified purity, a child whose sense of self fused instead with the artificial space of the city verged upon an equally unnatural character. Children of the city might have been objects of pity, but they were not to be trusted. An 1856 self-help manual from Boston, *How to be a Man: A Book for Boys*, put the matter directly, declaring that "cities abound with boys who are old in mischief and crime. They take great delight in leading astray the simple-hearted; and if boys from the country come within reach of their influence, they are almost sure to be ruined" (179-80). Rural boys are "simple-hearted" and untainted, but city boys become "old" beyond their age. City children are equally corrupted and corrupting to others, acting at once as victim and perpetrator.

The inmate profiles written by the House Superintendent mirror this divide between delinquent as a victim of environment and as culpable criminal agent. As institutional texts, these case histories are fairly consistent and systematic in their structure. As each new inmate entered, he or she were assigned an identifying number and would have an interview with the current superintendent who would ask for a brief version of their early biography (e.g., age, birthplace, ethnicity, status of parents, with whom the child had lived) and then press them for an account of all past crimes, however minor, the inventory of which would be recorded in full. This biographical background forms an introduction to the second half of the document, those records taken of the child's time after they had become an inmate of the House. This portion, entitled

“Remarks,” consists of dated entries which could vary in frequency from every few days to an annual update and which featured brief character sketches or recorded significant events in the child’s reformation, or non-reformation, such as indentures, escape attempts, or persistent rule-breaking. Nearly all remarks sections include at least one entry made after the delinquent had left the House recording relapses, professional standing, or merely a lack of further information.²³

Treating these entries as an attempt at a hermeneutics of child subjectivity which dissolves into incoherence suggests the anxiety that surrounded the child body when it emerged from the space of the city. Michel Foucault has argued that reformatory discipline constructs the subjectivity that it reforms by treating the corporeal as the immediate sign of a non-corporeal, truer self; he writes, in *Discipline and Punish*, the body “serves as an instrument or intermediary” which power interacts with only in order to “reach something other than the body itself” (11). The body which House administrators encounter, however, is a denaturalized one, formed by an artificial environment. That bodies are social objects is no revelation from a critical vantage, but the archives of the House show the official realization that the corporeal could be an unreliable witness to the intentions and inclinations of the children they imprisoned. As the House trained the body into compliance, its officials are forced to recognize their failure to scrutinize anything but the body itself.

The disciplinary history of Ann McCollister, the fifth inmate to enter the House and one of its early failures, suggests the frustrated attempts at communicating with a

²³ The organizational layout of these documents requires an unorthodox citation method. To preserve specificity, I have chosen to cite parenthetically first with the relevant case number and then, when relevant, with the date of the cited remark.

delinquent subject. Her biography prior to entering the House includes more criminal activity than the average entering child, but her involvement in petty theft and sex work was nothing out of the ordinary. Born in New York to an enlisted and subsequently absentee father and a working mother, Ann bounced between informal employments, roaming the streets, the Almshouse, and, after being taken up for theft, Bridewell prison. On January 5th of 1825, Ann was transferred from Bridewell into the House of Refuge. She was, at that point, twelve years old. Ann remained at the House until 1830, when she aged out of the program and was moved back into the Almshouse as a “hopeless subject.” In the interim, she escaped or attempted escape from the House continually, stole, injured a teacher with a knife, and was almost consistently defiant to attempts at rebuke. At last record, she had left the Almshouse, collected several other women who had been delinquents with her in the House, and, together with these House veterans, started her own brothel. In short, Ann was not reformed.

The process of Ann’s non-reformation as it was recorded by Superintendents Joseph Curtis and N.C. Hart was a process of trying and failing to find a medium of communication.²⁴ Most pressingly, the records come as an attempt to make Ann’s body into the point of contact for her subjectivity, against her considerable resistance. The unusually lengthy first entry of the Superintendent’s remarks written twelve days after her entry to the house in the log portion of her profile, for example, offers a miniature drama

²⁴ Curtis resigned as superintendent in 1826 and was succeeded by N.C. Hart (Doc. Rel. 100), who remained in the position until he stepped down for health reasons in 1837 (“Annual Report” 74). Because the two held converging attitudes regarding delinquency and to highlight the institutional nature of their narrative voice, I refer the author of a given entry by title rather than personal name.

of refusal on Ann's part to be involved in the House's discipline. The Superintendent describes the event:

She is the most refractory of all the girls she appeared to treat the repeated admonitions with indifference, and as if to [illegible] whether she could receive any but pleasant words her conduct during most of the day bespoke a total indifference to all that was said to her; in private (before tea) she would not give the least appearance that she was disposed to do better, [I] found it necessary to chastise her as a child which she received with a display of stubbornness to me surprising though she must have suffered much yet after she was seated there was no appearance of a tear or any irregularity in breathing Her reply to my first question was as clearly spoken, as full of temper as before she was corrected, after a few moments reflection, I found myself considerably exhausted I then found it necessary to give her solitary confinement. She went to Prison at 6 o'clock PM with much firmness of manner Shortly after I carried her 3 Blankets and made her bed not a word was spoken. (Jan. 17, 1825)

This interaction comes in three waves. The first is purely discursive. At stake are "repeated admonitions," "pleasant words," and Ann's "total indifference to all that was said to her," whether praise or criticism. Ann does reciprocate, though, in her meeting with the superintendent through her entirely clear and forthright refusal to change her behavior; she is honest about her intention to remain criminal. After talking fails, the superintendent turns from words to action – appealing to his authority over her body by "chastis[ing] her as a child," a euphemism for corporal punishment that emphasizes the

body as a source of influence for subjects seen as underdeveloped in reason. Finally, the corporal punishment having failed to subdue Ann's speech, all attempts at verbal communication are cut off ("not a word was spoken"), and the Superintendent reduces the demonstration of his authority to his control over her physical experience in its entirety by isolating her in prison; his personal delivery of blankets to her appears then as a performance of Ann's material dependence on his good will.

I also want to pause, however, on the specific moment of failed corporal punishment in this anecdote and suggest that its ability to leave the Superintendent "considerably exhausted" – and thereby to turn the record's scrutiny fleetingly back on its author – represents a crucial moment of disjuncture in the attempted socialization of Ann. As I have discussed, under Foucauldian models, the disciplined body acts as a means of inventing an inner self or soul, with materiality acting as the immanent medium on and through which power can operate. What the author encounters in Ann, though, seems to be a body that itself has not been socialized to respond to discipline. Though the Superintendent imagines from his experience of bodies that Ann "must have suffered much," she shows none of the bodily signs that would have let him interpret her pain, for as he marvels, "there was no appearance of a tear or any irregularity in breathing." Unsurprisingly, without Ann's body as a point of contact, her posture towards the House, and her "temper" at the Superintendent, remain unchanged. Instead, it is the Superintendent who is left apparently shaken and in need, as he writes, of "a few moments reflection" by the paradox of corporal punishment's effect on a subject whose physical body appears unruly. The regularity of Ann's breath has itself become an

element of her moral deviance, not because it reflects any specific vice, but because it marks the Superintendent's utter failure to engage anything other than the body.

The lessons that Ann learns in her time at the House and the height of her improvement lies, in fact, in constructing a wall between her intentions and her outward comportment. At her best, Ann's profile presents her as having tricked her observers into optimism. Only two notes of more than two dozen show approval of Ann, one noting that she has "recently made profession of a religious nature which gave us much encouragement" (Sept. 31, 1825) and the other, more ambivalently, observes she "now and then evince[s] [...] a disposition to do well" (August 1, 1828). The case history, however, describes both her religious awaking and more general wish to improve as diversions and false signs, which prove utterly useless in predicting Ann's future behavior, as in each case, the entry that signals hope also includes its disappointment. Her religion is quickly submerged in "her strong propensity to evil" such "she again becomes ugly and troublesome," and the entry that observes her occasional improvement in disposition declares that she would always "again break forth in wickedness" and comments, almost passingly, that her "last very bad act was in stealing the matron's sweetmeats, and plotting to burn the female house." Where, in most cases, arson plots alone are enough to justify an entry in the log (which is not to suggest that they were especially rare), for Ann, the case is extreme enough that they become merely anecdotal evidence of an incorrigibility that is much broader than any set of acts alone. After this latter entry, the record stops for two years, resuming only to recount the aftermath of Ann's departure from the House, as if stymied entirely by her recalcitrance. In fact, Ann's education lies entirely in this improved ability to perform a mode of sociability

that she does not feel, moving from an unrepentance that permeated speech, body, and putatively mind into an unrepentance that could be kept temporarily apart from her external behaviors and sheltered in a version of selfhood that not only remained unchangeable but had become thoroughly illegible.

Perhaps an even more pointed example of the anxiety surrounding the unstable signification of child bodies comes in the profile of Samuel Slowly, who as admitted in 1826 at the age of fourteen. Unlike Ann, Samuel was criminalized without his having committed criminal acts of any kind, entering the House solely because his father took Samuel to be committed to avoid supporting him.²⁵ The first portion of his stay in the House is accordingly low profile. The first note made under “Remarks” records Samuel’s indenture away at little less than five months after his arrival, suggesting that he was found to be in no need of major reform. The profile takes a sharp turn, however, after it records Samuel’s escape from his indenture and his eventual recapture by police, because the Samuel who returns is markedly different than the one who had left. The Superintendent marvels at the scenes caused by Samuel’s arrival:

His appearance was very excentric – his hair long – his movement much like a female &c. – He states that he left his Master Mr. Mappa in Girl’s clothing to avoid detection – served better than a year in the country in the capacity of a Girl – came to the City in the same habement – some however judged that he was a Morphredite [sic] – and whenever he

²⁵ This type of immurement for entirely financial reasons was technically against the original spirit of the institution, but was not especially unusual – for John A. Mead, for example, the Superintendent ponders, “I rather think this boy has been sent here in consequence of the poverty of his mother” (214; Dec. 2, 1826) – and by the 1838 Pennsylvania case, *Ex parte Crouse*, the right to treat children as delinquent for having parents guided inappropriately was legal precedent.

appeared in the Streets, let his apparel be what it might, he was mobbed by boys &c. so strong was the impression that he was neither male nor female by the remarks of the boys in the Yard – that means was taken to ascertain the fact, - when lo, he was a man – but had practiced to put on female airs in walk &c. – so much that he still in walk &. carries the appearance to this day [sic] (Inmate 138; April 5, 1831)

Samuel returns to the House physically changed, but the Superintendent is hard-pressed to locate precise nature of the change. The most he can do is to list – “hair,” “movement,” “walk” – but his frequent refrain of the catchall “&c.” in this short paragraph suggests his difficulty in finding exactly what it is that signifies Samuel’s gender as female. Foiled by appearance, he turns to anatomy as the ultimate arbiter of identity, recasting the mob assaults of Samuel, which he also reports as incessantly repeated, into a singular moment of discovery building to a dramatic apostrophe, “lo, he was a man.” Of course, the physical conclusion itself was a foregone one. As a former inmate, Samuel’s anatomy would have almost certainly already been known to House officials. However, the insistence on returning to the body to settle what had already been an officially settled question, whether Samuel was to be treated as male or female, appears as an attempt to manage the fact that Samuel’s body has also learned to be female so thoroughly that, even after a seemingly definitive conclusion, the Superintendent circles back to the femininity that continues to mystify him.

Whether Samuel saw his assumed disguise as an opportunity to express a gender identity which had to be otherwise hidden or strictly as a role that he had be forced into situationally in order to avoid arrest is beside the point, because what is threatening about

the incident from the Superintendent's vantage is the impossibility of resolving that question. Even the noun provided to name his gender indeterminacy, "Morphredite" (a colloquial variant on "morphodite," itself a variant of "hermaphrodite"), is a hazy assignment of an already unstable signifier, rather than any stable pathology or a taxonomy. Etymologically, too, the label is apt. "Morphredite" sheds its ties to the classical namesake suggested by "hermaphrodite" and instead takes up a closer association to the Greek "-morph," a suffix which would normally indicate a formal similarity to the thing named by the first portion of the word. Without this first element to anchor the suffix to a particular thing, however, "morphredite" signals the purely formal, suggesting the recognition that a structure or order exists, while giving no sign as to what that organizing principle might be. To mark Samuel as a morphredite, then, is to record a form of subjectivity which eludes other understanding; the Samuel of House records is coherent but not recognizable.

The Superintendent's greatest frustration, though, comes not in spectacular failures like Ann's recidivism or Samuel's femininity, where there is at least a narrative to the failed reformation, but in those cases where he realizes his inability to describe at all. A persistent rhetoric emerges across the first five years of the House's records in which, rather than characterizing the most difficult children, the Superintendent collapses into tautology. Entries declaring, often in full, that "John is John still" (385; Oct. 27, 1831), "Wesley is Wesley still" (454, June 11, 1828), and "Alfred is Alfred still" (323; Feb. 1, 1828) are less description than they are abdication of description: when past entries struggle to set down just what John, Wesley, and Alfred were like, such notes add nothing but temporal duration to the portrait. Similarly, to move from a portrait of Sarah

Doxey that describes her as having “a curious combination in conduct and disposition” in that “sometimes she is as good a girl as can be wished” but “at other times she is disagreeable and stubborn and but little dependence can be placed upon her” (116; Jan. 1828) into the plain declaration that “Sarah is about Sarah still” (116; Oct. 15, 1830) is an abbreviation, not a change in meaning, because the latter is the only reliable thing to be said about a girl who is sometimes one way and sometimes entirely different. Where external signs promised to be symbols of an inner self, these tautologies suggest a collapse of this relay. To be Sarah has a particular meaning, but the Superintendent has no insight into the content of that meaning beyond that particularity. Her behavior can be documented endlessly, but nothing like the portrait of private self can be gleaned from that data. As result, the Superintendent cannot have the slightest assurance that a moment’s good behavior is an internalized improvement rather than either a calculated ploy or just a fluke. Because the House cannot construct a knowable version of Sarah’s self, it certainly cannot hope to reform that self into a lawful citizen.

As a result, the language of individual progress, that ideal *bildungsroman* of growth into conformity which would signal institutional success, instead lapses into stasis. Tautology, by definition, cannot develop into anything but itself, and bureaucracy takes on something very near despair as it struggles to manage such records like those for Peter McKeaman, a boy sent to the House in early 1828 at the age of ten for petty theft and vagrancy, for whom sequential entries read:

March 31, 1831 – Peter is about Peter still

October 27, 1831 – I hardly know what to say about Peter – he affords but little hope, – no confidence can be placed in his word, gets clear of all the

labour he can by dishonesty – restless in his disposition, forward in his manners – and on the whole we have to hold him with a curb bit as to government to keep him any way tolerable

Sep. 10, 1833 – Peter is about Peter still

(400)

The imposition of dates seeks to corral the profile into an appropriate temporality, dutifully insisting that two and a half years have elapsed, but the contents of those remarks suggest strongly that something other than the linear time of calendars is at work. Peter at sixteen is indistinguishable from Peter at thirteen, and Peter at thirteen equally seems alike to the eight-, nine-, and ten-year-old Peter said to have denied his “roguery so innocently” to the judge that he was twice let off from jail. Peter seems at once to be a set point in the history of the House, but also, to be a figure who defies any stable description; the Superintendent has “but little hope” for the future, while also “hardly know[ing] what to say” about the present. Peter cannot grow up because he cannot be known well enough for officials to notice a change, and severed from the potential for an eventual maturity, he loses his claim to childishness as well.

Paradoxically, the categories of delinquency present him as a subject removed from age itself, stranded in a persistent exclusion.

Trajectories of Incurable Lives

If delinquency can have this freezing effect on individual development, eclipsing biological age for the civically-defined adulthood which delinquents were ineligible to mature into, the status of delinquency also threatens to expand beyond any discrete period

in a subject's life. It is a preemptive dismissal of a life in its whole. In this light, the trouble which inmates like Peter and his associates represented to the House was not a problem of a few exceptionally "hard" cases, but rather the exposure of an underlying complication to disciplinary methods more generally, one which the cultural standing of childhood at the times brings into particular relief. In his comparatively neglected section on the importance of juvenile criminals in establishing institutional discipline as we know it, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* declares that "delinquency is the vengeance of the prison on justice," arguing that the sudden ability to punish children as criminals without attaching criminal culpability to them allowed criminology more generally to broaden from crime as event to crime as pathology (255). While I thoroughly agree with this assessment, the conjunction of childhood and the penal system that appears in the antebellum U.S. has even broader consequences for thinking about the criminality assigned adults. In this section, I will suggest that, when read together, domestic manuals' devotion to finding a baseline medium for socializing children and the House's records of children who seem never to be brought into the social world of discipline reveals a different type of subjectivity assigned to this intractable deviance by institutions unable to characterize them otherwise: the incorrigible. A double-edged status of being undisciplinable and therefore turned over entirely to state power, incorrigibility allows us to see both how populations of children are differentiated into their adult roles and to understand the configuration of the child body more generally under state power as a potential obstacle to state surveillance.

That is, the grounding assumption of the House's disciplinary regime is that, by constant monitoring and correction of the body, the child's character may be formed,

monitored, and corrected. As Foucault writes, that surveillance “invests bodies in depth,” so that the corporeal must be read as a symbol of the incorporeal (217). Delinquents such as Ann and Samuel, however, present bodies that explicitly need socialization before they can become intelligible to others and, in the process, learn to trick observers into thinking they have more insight than they do. Ann, whose body is displayed as horrifyingly unresponsive to violence when it fails to provide the tears and labored breathing that the Superintendent demands, must gradually learn to present a face of strategic remorse. Perhaps even more unsettlingly to the House’s taxonomies, the fugitive Samuel retrains his previously masculine posture into a feminine one as a disguise from surveillance. In other words, the putative correspondence between body and character, which had made it possible for the House to imagine reforming children by changing their environment and dictating their routines, became a tool for inmates to foil observation. The idea that one can act one way and feel another is hardly unique to delinquency, but to consider children simultaneously as having been born outside of social norms and as capable of this deception is to accept that there may never be full understanding of the children being raised. Even the best-behaved child threatens incorrigibility if behavior can be a ruse rather than a reflection of a stable, inner self.

Delinquency discourse thus reproduces domestic manuals’ fears how corporeal punishment alienates rather than integrates the child. Beginning as it does from a position of alienation, however, it reaches a more extreme conclusion. That is to say, domestic manuals, whether they support or oppose corporal punishment, identify the consequences of focusing attention on the body as losing the chance to control interiority – a program which, thus far, is quintessentially Foucauldian. The difficulty which the House

encountered was that it found it had no stable handle on the body either. External observations fell terrifying flat in guessing inner desire. This illegibility of incorrigible delinquents gives the Superintendent's records an air of paranoid reading, as they struggle to attach meaning to signs given by inmate behavior, while also doubting the reliability of those signs. Even good behavior could inspire doubt in an inmate's profile.

Where bad behavior is at least taken as a faithful reflection of the child's-wishes, good behavior can equally signal reformation or manipulation. For instance, when the fifteen-year-old John Beekman was sent to prison for three days following an escape attempt, his promises to improve were read only as further symptoms of his depravity. The Superintendent records: "He is this evening taken out of Prison, he appears penitent, as could be expected; we think him capable of acting the Hypocrite to an uncommon extent, shall not restore him to full privileges at present" (9; April 30, 1825). By forcing John to submit to authority, the punishment would seem to have had exactly the desired effect, but as the Superintendent presents it, the effort was a failure. The promise offered by John's penitence is reversed by the qualifier that it is only what "could be expected" and thereby reframes it as a confirmation of his skills in "acting the Hypocrite." This socialization into acceptable behavior is as much a liability as it is progress, because that it is shown transparently as a product of force. John's penitence is to be "expected" from his circumstances and therefore is discredited as evidence of personal inclination. Delinquent motivation is thus caught in a curious bind. Though it must be legible to the Superintendent for him to trust it as a stable sign of character, for it to be too legible as stemming from convenience, necessity, or coercion risks leaving the child's projected truer desires more inaccessible to the House than ever.

This sense of inaccessibility breeds in turn a feeling that incorrigible delinquents are entirely unpredictable in their actions. If good behavior might be calculated to deceive, then past action is no sign of the future. Thus, the Superintendent often returns to his fears that inmates who reform, do so only when an authority is watching. Of James Bennett, for instance, he writes that “perhaps we never had a much more hopeless case but by preserving with strict discipline of every variety, that appeared rational for several months, he begins to be afraid, however of nothing but punishment” (442; May 17, 1828). Charles Wright, too, an inmate repeatedly beaten for trying to climb over the House walls, is damningly set down for good behavior so strategic that it cannot be believed, for, as the Superintendent frets, “the whole of his conduct appears to be governed by policy” (69; April, 16, 1826). The improvement in Charles’ behavior is no sign of an increased willingness to follow House rules, for the Superintendent speculates that in fact “he has never lost sight of his former propensity for escaping” (69; April, 16, 1826). The practical effect of guarding subjects like Charles and James who were “governed by policy” or “afraid [...] of nothing but punishment” is to mandate keeping those policy and punishment constantly present, so that the like-reformed behavior, however insincere, also remains present. Hypersurveillance is the only response to a prisoner who always needs watching. The apparent common sense of this policy, however, stems from incorrigibility’s particular production of an unknowable subject, by failing to provide a deeper self for the House to monitor, incorrigible delinquents are excluded from the more common narrative of internalizing and reproducing an external force and remain instead in the stage of needing a constant monitor.

If incorrigibility sounds like a frustration of power on any level higher than the personal temper of the Superintendent, its longer term effects suggest that any temporary victory came at a high price. Most obviously, they tended to be incarcerated at the House for far longer, because official had no legal recourse for expelling unredeemable inmates. They were allowed to send inmates deemed physically unable to work away to the Alms House, and there are hints that the House used this outlet to expel at least a few troublesome children.²⁶ Given the number of successful escapes from indenture, as well, it is tempting to suspect that some of the runaway apprentices were pursued were harder than others. In general, though without set sentences, inmates had to be held until they were no longer delinquent, whether because they had reformed enough to be indentured or because they had aged out of the category. When they did leave, the category of incorrigibility channeled inmates' lives along tracts which were deeply gendered but joined by their marginal statuses and their persistent vulnerability to the type of absolute power represented by the House.

Men had the most defined path for leaving the House. The labeling of male inmates as incorrigible may have kept them from entering many of the more skilled professions, but as a group believed to need constant force, they were primed to entered into the whaling industry's a system of coerced labor. Whaling became a place of last resort to warehouse delinquent boys who were held to be unfit for other professions. A sampling of these dismissals gives a sense how common and how unvaryingly boys were

²⁶ I refer here chiefly to the suggestive case of James Dillon, a boy whose record consists of two remarks. The first, made two months after his entrance to the House, declares that him "the most extraordinary we have yet to deal with" and "in every respect disobedient and disrespectful," despite multiple beatings, so that he was eventually sent to the main prison to subdue him (55; June 16, 1825). After an unusually long period of two and half years without any documentation, the silence is broken by an abrupt declaration that James is "an unfit subject" due to "Epileptic fits" and has been sent off to the Alms House.

written off from the House as well as from freedoms which life on land more generally provided:

Isaac is an unstable and wickedly disposed Boy and I think will never do for anything out of the House but a Whaling Voyage (136; January 1828)

He's a smart boy, but deep – little can be said as to his state of mind, we fear that he will not stay anywhere, except on board a 3 year voyage (416; April 24, 1829)

In the Boy there is nothing special he is rather inclined to vagrancy than otherwise. We hope that the advantage of a good long voyage will help him (35; March 14, 1825)

We fear James will ruin himself. Nothing more can be done for him if returned, except sending him a [sic] Whaling voyage (78; December 12, 1828)

Edward became unmanageable by his Master, who in consequence sent him a whaling voyage (80; December 12, 1828)

The most popular destination for troublesome male inmates, whaling in many ways offered a close approximation of House conditions for incorrigible subjects believed never to have matured into a larger scope of freedom.²⁷ With open ocean substituting for the walls of the House, shipboard indentures prevented the escapes frequent in the countryside, while the beatings that had forced submission from inmates continued as floggings onboard. The concordance, however, reads in both ways. The whaling industry suited the beliefs of House officials that incorrigible delinquents could not be self-controlled agents, but the House's production of a set of young men eligible for unfree labor also fueled whaling with a body of men that it could justify coercing into work.

²⁷ House officials were also quite canny about the institutional benefits of disposing of the most difficult inmates, as the Superintendent records expressing, when a mother complained about her son's indenture at sea: "I told her that after a two years trial we were unable to qualify him for anything except the Floridas or Navy – and that the managers had no idea of keeping hopeless boys, they must make room for more hopeful cases, etc. (454; October 21, 1829).

Whipping a negligent sailor might have been seen at best as unfortunate necessity, but whipping an incorrigible delinquent into productive citizenship was public service – an early and casual privatization of penal reform enabled by incorrigibility’s pathologies. For incorrigible girls, adulthood held still fewer options. Without a profession available to women that held equivalent recourse to the bare force and strictures as whaling, they were largely left to struggle haphazardly to find a place outside the House. The records of women who left unreformed thus are slipshod and patchy. The assumed fate for those who did age out was that, one way or another, they would eventually end up in institutions that were the adult equivalent of the House. Hence one inmate, Sally Ann Kingsland, is sent off with the note that “We fear the Refuge has done her no good – and that she will fetch up at Bridewell or the penitentiary [sic]” (45; April 8, 1825). Many women did end in with a last record in an institution, but many more slipped out of the archive altogether. Euphemisms such as having “returned to her former habits” or being “back on the Town” obscure the precise fate of women who might be surviving off hidden economies such as sex work and theft or be engaged in an illicit relationship or more generally be living in a way not legible to the Superintendent. Precise fates seemed to matter less when subjects neither qualified for legal positions in the market nor fell back into the reach of record-keeping institutions. For women, then, the legacy of incorrigibility was the permission for official legers to leave their lives in disapproving silence, under the assurance that they were incapable of more productive lives and undeserving of happier ones.

The final blow of incorrigibility is thus to isolate those lives it has touched and cut them out of history. The judgment that person a person was fundamentally sealed off

from the other lives around them was also a judgment that to be incorrigible was to be external, exceptional, and forgettable as minor flukes of a system that bears no responsibility for their condition. This erasing is already at play in the same archives dedicated to amassing delinquent histories. Even a cursory reading of House records can feel like an exercise in superlatives: each bad case contends to be the worst, wickedest, and most hopeless case that the House has ever had the misfortune of seeing. Where this hyperbole at first individuates its objects by making them at least remarkable in their shortcomings, by the fourth, fifth, or tenth extreme, these worsts of the worst begin to blur together. The rhetoric of each individual profile argues that that the case is too unusual to represent any larger whole, but the repetition of singularities builds its own collective of children raised to be left out.

Coda: Incorrigible Afterlives

In 1925, Sigmund Freud wrote a brief foreword to a colleague's book, *Verwahrloste Jugend (Wayward Youth)*, by August Aichorn. The choice of Freud to write an introduction seems as though it should have been a natural fit: Aichorn's text consisted of a series of case histories of delinquent youths in Vienna, detailing in classical psychoanalytic terms the drives behind acts of deviance and advising how these drives could be redirected in appropriately social ways. Yet, within a space of his three-page preface, Freud falters as he tries to lay out the relationship between psychoanalysis as he understood it and the analysis of troubled children. "The child," he writes, "has become and the main object of psychoanalytic research," supplanting even its original object, the "neurotic" because "analysis has revealed that the child lives on almost unchanged in the

sick patient” (v). Thus the child, even as it supplants, is subsumed and remade into a diagnostic tool for the neurotic, worth understanding as the reference point for a neurotic patient’s development that, by evidence of a deviant adulthood, must have gone awry. Childhood is important because it produces the symptoms of adulthood, and thus as the chief tool for analysis, becomes more important than even those symptoms themselves as the way to understand neurosis.

This positioning, however, cannot stand entirely unchallenged as the introduction for a text about children who display deviant symptoms in their own right, and Freud seems ill at ease in characterizing these patients who seem to be precocious in their neuroses. Already a surprisingly brief introduction for a lengthy monograph, Freud strikes a tone stranded between self-deprecation and dismissal as he distinguishes the “healing” process of analysis and the “education” of child analysis and then distances himself from the latter, explaining that he has only on a “slight” role in this new child-centered model. Yet the relationship between adult and child subject shifts again, as Freud attempts to distinguish his work in treatment – as he calls it, re-education – from the pedagogical work that he introduced:

The child, even the wayward and delinquent child, should not be compared to the adult neurotic, and re-education is something quite different from the education of the immature. The possibility of exerting influence through psychoanalysis depends on quite definite conditions, which may be described as the “analytic situation”; it requires the formation of certain psychic structures and a special attitude towards the analyst. When these factors are lacking, as in the case of children and

young delinquents and, as a rule, in criminals dominated by their instincts, the psychoanalytic method must be adapted to meet the need. (vii)

While the neurotic as victim of delayed development *may* be usefully compared to the child, the child *must not* be compared with the neurotic because their development is too early even to be delayed. The psyche to be analyzed, those “certain psychic structures” which separate the child from the child-like neurotic, does not yet exist fully enough to be treated. As Freud seems to understand childhood, even in the case of delinquency, the problem takes the form of a dearth to be filled, a need for education install those apparatuses which would then allow the analyst to confront a recognizable subject.²⁸ Freud thus turns to an alternative pairing, that of the child and the criminal, through the idea that both are unformed interiorities who must be educated into have “psychic structures,” before they can be disciplined into psychological normalcy.

This leap from one form of asociality to another, as Freud likens the child too underdeveloped for therapy with the equally unresponsive criminal, hints at the ways that incorrigibility and its offshoots are coded into the models still in use for imagining the psyche. Just as the linking term of “young delinquents” emerges in Freud’s passage to bridge between the categories of child and criminal while existing in an unsteady combination of contrast and overlap with each of those two, incorrigibility provides a language of alienation to describe criminality through unlikely analogy with the child. Childhood deviance provides evidence of adult individuality, registering interiority as an accumulation of memory and private development. The possibility of delay or rerouting

²⁸ Worth noting, too, is that nothing more is said about how psychoanalysis might be “adapted to meet the need” of these unsuitable objects of analysis, except in the form of general education.

in child development promises a tool for observing, understanding, and normalizing adults behaving outside of social constraints. The delinquents themselves remain inscrutable; absent the socialization into psychoanalytic constructs, they have no inner landscape that Freud can recognize. Freud's inclusion of the criminal "dominated by [...] instincts" further underscores that the delinquents of Aichorn's study are largely ineligible to grow into the neurotics of his work. The unspoken factors of race and class that leave children more likely to be labeled delinquent can therefore disqualify them from the very concept of a psychoanalytic adult self.

Prodigious Pip: Black Infancy and the Medical Construction of Racial Kinship

I have heard,” murmured Starbuck, gazing down the scuttle, “that in violent fevers, men, all ignorance, have talked in ancient tongues; and that when the mystery is probed, it turns out always that in their wholly forgotten childhood those ancient tongues had been really spoken in their hearing by some lofty scholars. So, to my fond faith, poor Pip, in this strange sweetness of his lunacy, brings heavenly vouchers of all our heavenly homes. Where learned he that, but there?

Moby-Dick (1851), p. 463

Among the many strange metaphors of *Moby-Dick*, the particular strangeness of Starbuck’s comparison of Pip, after he has been abandoned for hours on the open ocean, to a fever patient hardly registers. The basic meaning of the image is familiar to readers of Herman Melville: the sublime manifests itself in the contrast between infinite knowledge and its emergence in the singular and socially abject Pip. What threatens to be lost in this reading is the function of the medical and, more particularly, its mediation of childhood and history. Starbuck may be justifying his faith in eternity, but he does so through diagnosis. From his perspective, the “lunacy” of Pip’s speech is as pathological a condition as a fever, regardless of how lucid or discerning he is in this purported madness. It is pathological, in fact, precisely insofar as Pip is discerning. Much as the fever transforms men into unconscious containers of languages that they cannot know, Pip’s wisdom proves to Starbuck that Pip must not understand what he says. Starbuck thus transforms the ocean’s partial destruction of Pip, as it “jeering kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul” into a hermeneutic practice (401). Defining Pip by his physical body – its illness and vulnerabilities – Starbuck reads his words as symptoms of Pip’s materiality, rather than signs that Pip has a transcendence of his own,

excluding him from the symbolic weight of his speech. His words may carry futurity in their promise of “heavenly homes,” but Pip himself remains trapped by the flesh.

This mixture of racialized medicine and social unmooring in the discussion surrounding Pip may seem like esoteric choice on Melville’s part. However, I argue that this figuration is instead part of a persistent association of black infancy in the antebellum U.S. with medical abnormality and genealogical unpredictability. Medicalizing black infancy became a means by which white supremacy sought to present black subjects in the United States as collectively being an anomaly, at once unanticipated and unrepresentative, and so exclude them from the continuities of national population. In my analysis, inheritance, or rather the exclusion from inheritance, thus takes two primary meanings. First, in the days of early race science and shortly before the rise of genetic theory, the burgeoning science of inheritance sought to define how traits were passed from parent to child and to create racial boundaries based on these heritable traits. However, inheritance also has a less clinical role in historical imagination, determining who holds an ongoing relationship with which aspect of the past or, in other words, who can claim what history. Through this intersection, medical discourse can help us understand how literature defined the black child’s relationship to both private family and public history. Namely, by pathologizing black infancy as a case in which the lines of inheritance break down, medical discourse and the literatures that adopted its ideas works to distance African American subjects from national history.

Starbuck’s confusion about Pip’s relationship to past and future alike echoes throughout *Moby-Dick*, reflecting the larger dislocation of a character who has neither a certain age, nor origin. For Melville, the terms of biological childhood and social

infantilization are identical, and though it is Pip is repeatedly called small, dubbed “Black Little Pip” (115) and “poor little Pip” (511), Melville gives him more pathos than definite standing as adult or child. Likewise, his being called “boy” relentlessly throughout the novel could as easily signal the racist address of a grown man or the status given workers low on the ship’s hierarchy. As Melville writes in *Redburn* (1849), “boy” is also a class demarcation onboard a ship: “You must not think [...] that persons called *boys* aboard merchant-ships are all youngsters [...] In merchant-ships, a *boy* means a green-hand, a landsman on his first voyage. And never mind if he is old enough to be a grandfather, he is still called a *boy*; and boys’ work is put upon him” (111). Because it has been so implicated as a language of power to demarcate who should and should not be accorded authority, age cannot be isolated to any simple biological or chronological absolute. His personal history is similarly muddled. As an “Alabama boy” (115) from Connecticut (420), Pip defies any simple categorization as enslaved, free, or fugitive, but he also troubles the conventions of backstory; Pip presumably had a life before he boarded the Pequod, but not one that we are allowed to see.

Pip, in other words, has an uncanny relationship to historical genealogy, one that I term prodigious. In its common contemporary meaning, only one aspect of prodigy’s definition has truly survived, the idea of a child who is precocious beyond her years. In the antebellum period, however, the word indexes a deeper history of collision between science and religion, as the term that had once meant miracle moved into medical journals to name the unpredictable form and behavior of unruly bodies and to call for their great scrutiny from the medical profession. The kernel of religious wonder at the root of prodigy, in other words, became a way of naming something that seemed to fall

outside of scientific explanation and therefore to urge the need for closer scrutiny by medicine. As such, the prodigy was used to name the body whose difference emerges from outside of medicine's understanding of causality, and therefore seemingly from nowhere. The prodigy names the moment created where science looks from child back to parent and recognizes no link, or when science examines the child and cannot recognize the possibility of a parent. It is, in part, the stripping of kinship that Hortense Spillers describes when the medical solicitation for black bodies denies the subjectivity within and kinship between these bodies, rendering, as she writes, "the entire captive community [...] a living laboratory" for dissection (68). But more particularly, it is the child left as an apparently spontaneous life, after the genealogy that created her had been erased, illegitimated, and ignored.

When analyzing antebellum Black childhood, scholars most often frame their analysis through the figure of the picaninny, the pejorative term most popular in white descriptions of children with African or indigenous ancestry. The two figures certainly have overlap. However, studying their cultural presence brings a different set of questions into view. In my reading, the picaninny represents the inverse double of the prodigy, framing black childhood as a site of utter fungibility, as disconnected from the past as the prodigy is but focused on a belief in the exchangeability of black children in the present. As Jayna Brown shows, the word itself encodes the economics of slavery into black childhood:

The term picaninny comes from *picayune*, a coin of small value circulating in the United States during the 1800s. The derivation of the term picaninny signals the interchangeability between the black child

bodies and the small bits of money required for their acquisition. Not always purchased but often “made” on the plantation, they embodied the very public marketplace politics of sexualized subjection at the heart of the domestic sphere. Slave children were living currency. (24)

To frame a child as a picaninny, then, is not merely to dehumanize her, but also to homogenize her value as one commodity among a pool of many. As Brown notes, this lateral mobility also encodes an alienation in temporality similar to the prodigy’s, citing Topsy’s famous declaration in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that she’d had no parents but had “grow’d” as a sign of her displacement in time (86). As she notes, too, the Pequod’s demands that Pip dance and play music for them suggests the minstrel performances demanded from the “picaninny” stage tropes on tour at the time (27).

Nonetheless, the physical manifestation of the prodigy is quite different and as a result brings to the fore a white supremacy focused on seclusion rather than equivalence. To return one final time to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for an example, on his first introduction, Eliza’s son Harry is made to perform in the role of picaninny, singing and doing a series of imitations, while his owner addresses him by the name “Jim Crow.” At the heart of the performance is the frenetic mobility of Harry’s body, which allows him to match his song with “many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body” and enables his parody of old age with a transformation of “the flexible limbs of the child” into an “appearance deformity and distortion” (3). The ease with which Harry’s body shifts from one role to another upon command hints at the more literal ways in which he cannot possess his own body and harkens back to the liquidity of a body circulating on the market which Brown observes. Unlike the fungible picaninny, the prodigy represents a break in the chain of

social equivalence between subjects that also redefines the prodigy's relationship with temporality. As many scholars of queer theory have demonstrated, white childhood has been a tool for ordering the temporality of social life around projected future generations.²⁹ Much as this projection imbues white children was an almost sacred value, the affiliation of childhood with futurity also rests in the reading of the child as a transparent symbol of the citizen to come, rather than as a subject who is already immediate in the present. The infant's material dependency must transform into a symbolic promise that of an adult future. The prodigy, on the other hand, particularly as it emerges from medical discourse, is stuck in an all too recalcitrant body and, through this language of freakishness, estranged from community with others and any sense of continuity with his or her history.

To track the use of prodigious childhood as a means of denying black futurity, I turn first to medical discourses presenting black childhood as a site of aberrant bodies and disrupted genealogy. These increasingly technical discourses surrounding infancy seize on the body of the black child as a spectacle of frighteningly unpredictable inheritance, which threatens to overwrite categories of whiteness. From this broader survey of medical journals, I consider two texts that exist in both the literary and medical spheres: Sir Jonah Barrington's "Skinning a Black Child" (1827) and Henry Clay Lewis's "Stealing a Baby" (1843). As these authors draw from medical discourse and ideas to construct their fictional worlds, they provide a clear fossil record of the prodigy's

²⁹ Jack Halberstam, for instance, enumerates a reproductive time that dictates a proper age by which an adult should marry, a family time that centers on perceived needs of children for stable scheduling, and a time of inheritance that tracks the slower drift of property and culture between generations (5). For Elizabeth Freeman, this generational logic allows for the equation of family futurity with national and racial teleologies, using individual births to suture public and private temporalities. See also Lee Edelman for a focus on child futurity.

transformation into a literary figure and its role in the narration of racial kinship. As I argue, the prodigy offered a way to capture and contain challenges to white paternity by exiling blackness outside of genealogy.

By contrast, I then turn to a neglected work of African American biography, Susan Paul's *The Memoir of James Jackson, the Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months*, arguing that this early portrait of black childhood as a positive experience draws on the elements of the prodigy in order to challenge that erasure of prodigy but also to expand recognition of kinship beyond the nuclear family (183). An attempt to rewrite the figure of the black child denied futurity as a hagiography, *The Memoir of James Jackson* transforms the atemporality of blackness into a saintly transcendence. Paul's portrait of her brilliant and doomed pupil thus acts as a means of harnessing black prodigy into a form of practical utopianism, in which James' early potential and untimely death unify readers in a call for their own self-perfection. This little-read narrative, labeled by its editor Lois Brown, as the first biography by an African American author and likely the first non-fiction biography of an African American child, also challenges the most basic conventions of sentimental child death (1). By redefining the child martyr as a black boy, Paul transforms the exclusion of the prodigy from history into a transcendent overcoming of history that eschews linear genealogy for a network of communal pedagogy and care.

Finally, in my conclusion, I return to Pip to show how reframing him as one among a company of comparable prodigies reveals a network of intersecting models of racial kinship already present in *Moby Dick*. While the isolating logic of the prodigy pushes us to see Pip as a singular, exceptional figure, the fuller reading of the figure's

history allows us to see him as a part of a larger system in which children of color are made exceptional in order to exclude them. Recognizing this pattern allows us to see not only the cancelation of black kinship, but also how dependent antebellum understandings of white kinship were upon that cancelation. Namely, that the cultural work of prodigy provides the necessary backdrop for white genealogy to take shape at all.

Medical literature and the elaboration of the prodigy

In 1808, more than a dozen physicians were summoned to a New York court to give their expert testimony on the race of an eighteen-month-old girl. The case at hand was a paternity suit brought against Alexander Whistelo, a black coachman in the city, by the municipal almshouse housing the child and her mother, Lucy Williams, a woman who described herself as the daughter of a “Scotchman” and a “black sambo”³⁰ (Wheeler 200). Williams had identified Whistelo as the father because, as she testified, he had kept her prisoner and repeatedly raped her in the time leading up to the pregnancy. Whistelo, in turn, claimed that a white man who had broken into his home and had also assaulted Williams was the father, while Williams maintained that she had successfully fought off her white attacker before he could rape her (195-8).³¹ The role of this panel of medical experts, then, was to determine whether her daughter, a child with phenotypically white features, could have been fathered by a black man.

³⁰ Later in the case, a witness would define “sambo” as the racial category for person who is half “black” and half “mulatto,” though it is not certain that this is the sense in which Williams used the term (Wheeler 364).

³¹ In an extra complication to the case, as D. Graham Burnett notes, one of the testifying experts was a biologist who also employed Whistelo and was rumored, at least in part by the defense lawyer, to be the absent white father in question (87).

Medical expertise, however, could arrive at no consensus. The majority of the physicians agreed the child's appearance appeared too white for her to have a black father. A few, however, were not so sure. Most notably, a witness for the almshouse introduced as Dr. Mitchill argued – in testimony ranging from albinism to vitiligo to his past treatment of a woman so startled during pregnancy by the butchering of a favorite cow that it purportedly reshaped her child's feet into hoofs – that parentage did not have such a stable effect on racial presentation. The immediate reason for the difference of opinion was that Mitchell drew his conclusion from a much broader mixture of sources than the other physicians testifying, including three case studies from contemporary medical journals, references to Buffon's natural history, a personal anecdote, an appeal to the incidents portrayed in Scottish poetry, and a story told by the early modern philosopher Nicholas Malebranche. In response, Whistelo's lawyer sarcastically cross-examined him on the scientific theories of Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Pliny, suggesting that Mitchell's brand of medicine should be dismissed outdated and irrelevant (211-212).

In other words, the crux of the case rested simultaneously on the definition of racial heritability and on the consolidation of medicine as an expert discourse. This confrontation between the exceptional case and more everyday medical experience is best defined by another witness, Dr. Williamson who argued that “if this was the child of that woman [Williams] by that man [Whistelo], it is a prodigy; and he did not believe prodigies happened, though daily experience unfortunately proved that perjuries did” (202). Drawing on older definitions of prodigy as a religiously tinged wonder, Williamson's quip, which was repeated in the defense's closing statement, outlines a

boundary to the data that is intelligible to science. To understand the child in question as being the phenotypically white daughter of a black man would make her appearance unexplainable by modern medicine and therefore place her outside of medical experience. Unable to reconcile William's account of her pregnancy with his understanding of science, Williamson discounts the former. Thus, in contrast to Mitchill's openness to consider reports of nearly any genre, his testimony evokes and then banishes the older scientific tradition of marvels and hearsay.

Williamson's point-of-view proved to be the more persuasive. The judge eventually found in favor of Whistelo, and Williamson's sense of a more carefully controlled set of scientific data matched the larger trends of the medical field as the century progressed.³² Yet, if the prodigy represented cases too extreme, unexplainable, or arcane to be treated as medicine, that term would have a surprisingly resilient life in antebellum discourse. Of course, during the period, prodigy encompassed several meanings. The new centrality of childhood to popular culture helped to put its modern suggestion of young genius into heavy circulation, as part of the discussion around the "natural" potential and limits of youth. Prodigiousness, too, often circulated with a somewhat flattened meaning to indicate quantity or size. However, when the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* describes the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker as "prodigies" in 1829 ("The Siamese Brothers") or comments on the "prodigious muscular

³² For instance, in an 1825 manual on the presentation and analysis of medical evidence by Scottish surgeon and editor of the *London Medical Repository* James Gordon Smith, Mitchill's testimony is mocked with the note that "Surely, American judicature, *outré* as we are taught to believe it, could not allow this to as *evidence* [emphasis in original]" (365). Williamson's comments on prodigies and perjuries, on the other hand, are applauded as doing "great honor" to its speaker and as being an exemplar of "forensic wit" (363).

power” of J.A.J. Bihin, who was known as “The Belgian Giant” in his act for P.T. Barnum, the word points in a different direction (“The Belgian Giant).

What I want to suggest is that Williamson’s choice of “prodigy” as the term for those with bodies outside of medical understanding would nonetheless remain a part of the vocabulary of medical discourse, coming to describe subjects who were made into medical spectacles because they did not fit medicine’s narratives of embodiment. This use of the term has long-standing relationship with Disability Studies more broadly. The Bunker twins, for instance, have been the subject of a recent increase in scholarly interest in racialized disability, and the label of “prodigy” is itself has also been discussed in specifically DS works.³³ I want to pursue, however, is a narrow focus on the way that prodigy captures a particularly raced frame into which black bodies, particularly those of infants, were placed by the medical gaze. Returning to the more specific context of Lucy Williams, a child scrutinized by a dozen doctors to determine whether she had three black grandparents or only one, emphasizes how medical discourse turned to blackness to construct their theories of heritability.

The focus on black infancy as a limit case for the inheritance of parental traits stems in large parts from the continued influence of Enlightenment authors on antebellum medicine. A passage republished repeatedly in the antebellum US from Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon’s *Natural History*, for instance, lingers on the cases of albino children born to black African as a potential threat to theories of innate, heritable blackness, only to dismiss these children as “accidental” and “barren” flukes not

³³ See, among others, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “Staring at the Other,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* (2005) or Joseph M. Straus’s *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (2011).

reflective of race broadly (178-180).³⁴ Similarly, Immanuel Kant’s “On the Different Races of Man” (1775) uses the heritability of blackness to children in order to define the concept of race, arguing that the children of one white and one black parent are “necessarily hybrid, or blendings,” rather than proper continuations of either parent’s genealogy (qtd in Eze 40). Unlike the case of the child of a blond and a brunette parent, in which the infant might have the physical traits of either one of her parents, the child of a black and a white parent would, Kant contends, resemble neither parent. In these ventures into scientific inheritance, the infant born black became a key sign of congenital difference, promising through the evidence of complexion to be an empirical metric for the relationship between parent and child as well as for racial categorization. In other words, because blackness was seen as a hypervisual and distinctly bounded trait, it became one of the key phenotypes used represent both racial and familial inheritance.

In this pursuit for a scientific measure of race, however, the black infant was also significant not as a symbol of racial stability, but as a point of apparent systemic breakdown. Specifically, much as these early iterations of racial science were drawn to discussing black infants as signs of intrinsic difference, they were also faced with what must have seemed to them as the uncomfortable fact that, like white infants, black infants may be born with a range of complexions, including the same complexion as a newborn white infant. As a 1797 translation of Buffon explains, the “children [of African descent] are born white, or rather red, like those of other men. But two or three days after birth

³⁴ Alongside a number of British editions, versions of this passage were published in Boston in 1831 as part of *A Natural History of the Globe*, in Brattleboro MA in 1834 as part of *A System of Natural History*, and in New York in 1857 as part of *Buffon’s Natural History of Man, the Globe and Quadrupeds*. I cite from the earliest of these three. Kant’s work was frequently printed in the US; however, his work was discussed in periodicals of the time, including *Littell’s Living Age* and *The Biblical Repository and Princeton Review*.

their color changes to a yellowish tawny, which grows gradually darker till the seventh or eighth day, when they are totally black” (*Barr’s Buffon* 345). Similarly, an 1865 English translation of Blumenbach’s anthropological treatise declared that infants were born all with the same complexion and that it is only “in progress of time [that] the skin of Ethiopian infants turns to black” (108). For some, including Blumenbach, this shift in skin tone was evidence that whiteness and blackness were environmental effects only gradually inscribed on the body, but for others, particularly as environmental theories of race declined, the existence of light-skinned African children remained an unexplained oddity – Kant’s *Physical Geography*, for instance, lists it as one of several “curiosities” of blackness (qtd. in Eze 60) – paralleling the figure of the “albino negro” as a limit case for complexion’s ability to function as the marker of race.

The confusion, and sometimes consternation, surrounding the apparent paradox of the black infant who is not yet black, however, lasted far beyond Enlightenment science, lingering in white medical discourse produced throughout the nineteenth century. As late as 1898, the New York-based *Medical News* ran a column declaring its total ignorance about the color of the black newborn. The impetus of the column was an international debate on the subject; the *Medical News* piece mocks the London-based *Lancet* for its uncertainty about a French doctor’s claim that “negro babies up to the age of seven days are similar in every respect to white babies” and ridicules for the *Lancet*’s call for physicians in South Africa to settle the question. The columnist suggests that American doctors might be able to answer the question more conveniently, but strangely, the American doctors whom it cites are equally contradictory: “an Alabama medical man says negro babies are black from the beginning, a Missourian says they are sallow or

creamy-white” (766). While taunting the importance of the question, the *Medical News* is itself absurdly unable to answer it, concluding with a general call to readers “with a newly-born picaninny or two on hand” to write back with an answer. That is, if the sarcasm of the author seems directed at English doctors’ ignorance regarding something commonplace for Americans, the piece illustrates a more pointed ignorance on the part of U.S. doctors. The variability of infant complexion that was well-known a hundred years earlier, if an exaggerated or distorted form, and still directly encountered by contemporary doctors on a regular basis has by the point of this publication been so erased from official knowledge that to ask the question itself appears as a joke.

Before this officially sanctioned ignorance of the late-nineteenth century, antebellum medical discourse more readily discussed the obstacle that a newborn’s complexion offered to the racialization of infancy. New Orleans physician and race scientist, Samuel Cartwright’s 1857 essay “Natural History of the Prognathous Species,” contends that races constitute different species in a genus of humanity, going so far as to assert a fundamental difference in the number of skeletal plates in the skulls of white and black infants.³⁵ Absolute as Cartwright attempts to make this divide, he stumbles over what he terms “one remarkable particular,” the question of infant complexion: the children of white and black parents “are both born *white*, and so much alike as far as color is concerned, as scarcely to be distinguished from each other [emphasis in original]” (708). Cartwright quickly promises that, however white at birth, the child of

³⁵ I here cite from an 1860 republication in a proslavery volume entitled, *Cotton is King*. However, Cartwright’s work extended beyond his region, appearing in one of its earliest forms in *The New York Day-Book* in 1857, and eventually was republished as an appendix to the volume of trial records published for the Dred Scott case.

African American parents “begins darken and continues to grow darker” after an unspecified “very short time” (708). The emphasis, though, which he places on both how dark the child will eventually become – a healthy child will age into a “shining black color” – and the care with which he underlines the inevitability of this differentiation, which will happen “whether exposed to air and light or not,” signal the potential danger of a such instability and Cartwright’s desire to contain it (708). For infancy to have a changeable complexion, particularly in a period when the very notion of heritability was under heavy debate, was to suggest a permeability in racial boundaries in serious need of management.

Thus, as color became solidified as the ultimate marker and metonymy of race, the black infant (or rather, the black infant who might not yet be black) existed in a state of strange suspension. On one hand, infancy could appear to prove that racialized phenotypes – and therefore race – were congenital and essential to the individual body. However, the black infant body did not fit such a convenient model for medical discourses of race. Instead, as I have suggested, the material circumstances of birth fed into a more oblique but no less destructive ideology of race: the construction of black infancy as a chaotic site of freakishness on which history and genealogy alike have no purchase. As disabilities scholar Ellen Samuels defines it, the discourse of freakishness was used in the antebellum period to racialize disability. In her discussion of Millie and Christine McKoy, Samuels explains the racialization of disability in this way: “enfreakment describes the process by which individual difference becomes stylized as

cultural otherness” (56).³⁶ However, the enfreakment of black childhood, to borrow Samuels’s term, runs in both directions. The figure of the black infant “born white” conflates the categories of racial difference by making individual variation into a trait of racial variation. Put differently, the black child “born white” is racialized by not only by the color of her eventual complexion or that of her parents’, but also by the perceived unpredictability of her body.

In the early nineteenth century, this association of black infancy with physicians’ attempts to study heritability on an empirical basis was further intensified by new interest in superfoetation. Now more commonly referred to as superfetation, the phenomenon refers to the purported possibility of an additional fertilization occurring in an already pregnant woman, producing two fetuses gestating simultaneously without being twins. Eager to find instances of this unusual situation, doctors had essentially two ways to recognize a pregnancy involving superfoetation. The first was to look for cases in which a woman either had a miscarriage and then, shortly after, delivered a child or had two miscarriages with a short period of time – the presumption being that twins would have miscarried or been born together and that such events must represent two distinct pregnancies. Such scenarios were reported, but they could be difficult to substantiate, given the difficulty of diagnosing a miscarriage and the hazy sense that doctors had of normal conception times.³⁷ Such cases were also not easily distinguishable from the conception of twins and subsequent miscarriage of one.

³⁶ The McKoys were enslaved, conjoined twins displayed in circuses and medical journals since infancy and who might easily have joined the prodigies considered in this chapter,

³⁷ Schwartz, for instance, cites an antebellum doctor who announced that a large baby had been gestated for eleven months (129).

A more supposedly definitive method of demonstrating superfoetation, and one certainly more salacious to readers, was to report women who seem to have fathered twins by two different, racially distinct men. For example, a letter written in *The Medical Repository*, a New York medical journal, incidentally edited Dr. Mitchill of the Whistelo case, supported claims of superfoetation with two cases of women giving birth to twins who appeared to have different racial identities. In a brief anecdote, mentioned as an aside, the author recounts “negro woman brought a black child and a mulatto at a birth,” after purported sexual encounters with her black husband and, later, with a white man (323). His focus, however, is given to a longer tale of a white woman who delivered twins with differing complexions, leading the physician to conclude that she had been impregnated by both her white husband and an unnamed black man. He teases out the mechanics of this situation in some detail, reasoning that “the one [egg] was accidentally impregnated with semen of the white man, and the other impregnated with semen of the black man, and therefore one [child] was white and the other a mulatto” (323).³⁸ By this account, race (or more precisely, the phenotypes associated with race) is made to act as an early guarantor of parentage, promising to differentiate between the “semen of the white man” and the “semen of the black man.” Paternity can, the author suggests, be indisputably inscribed on the body.

Much as these reports seem to promise to stabilize genealogy, they also reiterate the constant threat of a broken genealogy, summoning up visions of women who cross

³⁸ For examples of other medical accounts tracking superfoetation by race, see John Stearn’s “Article VII. A New Theory of Conception,” *New York Medical and Physical Journal* (July, August, September 1825) 4.3, 360-368; “Superfoetation,” *The Medico-chirurgical Review* (June 1824) 1.1, 181-2; or, for a British example, A.T. Thomson’s “Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence: Pregnancy,” *The London Lancet* (January 21, 1837) 1.699, 578-582.

the color line to have multiple sexual partners and threats of black men lurking to ruin white marriages. All this is a familiar set of tropes, invoking fears of miscegenation, female desire, and black masculinity.³⁹ Collectively projected onto the symbol of the black infant, however, they take on the more particular form of the prodigy, marking the limits of what can be recognized as kinship. The ability to project racial identity onto infants - effectively, to diagnose a child as black – provided physicians a seemingly unquestionable way to trace inheritance, but in a way that could only negate genealogy. A white-appearing child of a married, white couple does not eliminate the possibility of infidelity, but a black-appearing child of that couple appeared as proof of a different father. Racial phenotype could not confirm paternity, but it did seem to offer a way to definitively negate it.

The signification of the prodigy as a life outside genealogy could even emerge in more extreme cases where black childhood may have no literal presence. One 1808 letter written by a Dr. Chris. C. Yates and published in the journal *The Philadelphia Medical Museum* entitled “Account of a Monster” opens with the promise of presenting “a very extraordinary animal [...] produced by a three year old heifer” (254). The details of this origin are quickly thrown into doubt, however, by his tale of a heifer that showed “symptoms of great distress” and is locked in a barn on the farmer’s quoted presumption that “she was getting mad.” On his return, the farmer finds the heifer “licking what he supposed was her calf,” though he had not believed that she was pregnant. In a strange

³⁹ This sensationalism can also have more explicit presence in the clinical tone of the report. An account from the *Dublin Journal of Medical and Chemical Science* and republished in *The American Journal of Medical Sciences* shows its alarm through excitable punctuation: “One child was white, the other evidently a half caste [...] The same difference of color was strikingly evident in the umbilical cords of the infants! but not in the membranes or placenta. On inquiry it appeared that she was in the habit of intimacy with a negro, shortly after or at the time she had conceived by her husband!” (“Case of Superfoetation”).

turn, Yates reports that “on a nearer approach [the farmer] discovered its form different from what he expected, and attempted to take it up by the legs, when the heifer darted at him with violence, struck her hoof against the monster’s head and broke it,” after which the cadaver was promptly sold, preserved, and put on display, where Yates first encountered it.

From this gothic beginning of a disturbed animal that may or may not have given birth to a strange “monster” whom she seems to instinctively fear, the report shifts abruptly into a more conventionally technical description of the body’s anatomy, which the examiner presents as the uncanny double of a black child:

From the forehead over the back of the neck, it very much resembles a child; indeed the head from a back view would be mistaken for that of a child. The nose resembles about as much that of a negro as of a calf, I think rather more. [... .] The arms or fore legs resemble the human; there is one joint more; it measures from the shoulder to the elbow about four inches; from the elbow to the next joint (which is half way between the elbow and hoofs) three inches; [...] from here the hoofs or webbed fingers begin to extend themselves, dividing into five parts, distinguishing thumb and fingers, having at the extremity small marks or spots where the nails should have been, the substance of the hand or hoof the same as of the calf. From below the under jaw or chin down to the pubes, human; breast broad, abdomen *full*. [emphasis in original]

It is hard to pinpoint the ethical standing of the body that Yates describes. On one hand, it is most likely nothing more than a cow fetus that had developed in an unusual way and

whose owners had packaged in extra mystery for the sake of profit. But it is impossible to miss, in the constant refrain of how very much like a black child it is, the possibility that this was a human life that Yates has reduced past the level of even the animal. Note, too, how careful the farmer is to avoid stipulating that his heifer actually gave birth to the body he sold; absent for the birth and unsuspecting of the pregnancy, he can only say that he “supposed” the body to be a calf.

Rather than trying to tag some certain status to body described, then, it is more critical to notice how easily the black child becomes the form through which uncertain genealogy is attached to a body. In reports of superfoetation, the black infant signaled a transgression across racial boundaries, but her complexion also promised to allow an accounting for genealogy. For “Account of a Monster,” the transgression is more stigmatized and relies on the conflation of blackness with animality. Bestiality, rather than miscegenation, is the threat underlying this report, an explanation that Yates manages both to suggest and to distance himself with his conclusion that “at first glance every one is impressed with its resemblance to a negro child, and many suppose it the issue of a man with the heifer.” The accusation would follow antebellum association of black masculinity with hypersexuality, yet this is not precisely the scenario that Yates offers. Rather than attributing blackness to the putative father, race emerges only in the child, acting not as a sign of membership in a group identity but as an additional symptom of its confused status between human and animal.

There is a further material factor to this rhetoric only hinted at in Yates’ mention of the infant body sold and displayed. Because enslaved subjects were often sold, or just given, to physicians as objects to be manipulated for research, black bodies became a

central source of subjects for reports on physical deformity and disease. As Todd Savitt's work on antebellum medicine establishes, the bodies of slaves of all ages were routinely made test subjects for experimentation, dissection, and exhibition. However, the greed of plantation owners who were eager to raise birthrates left pregnant women and their children especially vulnerable to physicians attempting new procedures. This worked to the advantage of medical students as well as to established practitioners. In Southern medical schools, students learning obstetrics routinely used the childbirths of slave women as opportunities for practice, until their skills were deemed polished enough for white clients (Stowe 55). For many doctors working in that area, the first infant they would ever deliver would have been black and born enslaved, while slave women were forced to endure the mistakes caused by these doctors' inexperience. For established physicians, too, access to enslaved women significantly enabled the founding of reproductive health as a science. Among example, J. Marion Sims, the so-called "father of gynecology" and inventor of the modern speculum, claimed his title through a prolonged sequences of experimental vaginal surgeries performed on three slave women named Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy, all of which were done without anesthetic and frequently in the presence of spectators (McGregor 49-50). It was the living bodies of enslaved women and their children, then, which provided the foundation for the new fields of reproductive science.⁴⁰

While physicians framed their work on adult slave women largely in terms of their reproductive potential, black infancy came to be particularly associated with the

⁴⁰ For more on the role of black women in the early development of obstetrics and gynecology, particularly in the work of J. Marion Sims, see also "Mastering the Female Pelvis: Race and the Tools of Reproduction" in Terri Kapsalis' *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum* (1997).

commercial and medical display of congenital disability. In her history of childbirth under slavery, Marie Jenkins Schwartz demonstrates the competition and informal marketplace for possessing the bodies of black fetuses and infants as medical samples, particularly when they commanded the extra medical “interest” of disability (220). She notes, in particular, one southern doctor named Charles A. Hentz, whose journal revels in receiving one infant slave cadaver swathed in newspaper as a “present” for his collection and another, an only partially developed fetus, which he kept for himself after treating an enslaved woman who had miscarried (qtd. in Schwartz 218). Schwartz further argues that attending the birth of a child with unusual, congenital disability was a source of publications and prestige for physicians, who in turn were ruthless in obtaining the bodies of such children from enslaved parents unable to protest. As she records, at least one former slave, Ellen Betts, recalls a child who had been born with two faces being bought from its owner by a physician, who then murdered the child and preserved its body in “a jar of brandy” (qtd. in Schwartz 223). Black infants were one of the key populations through which physicians discussed disability and therefore generated spectacles of disability to be presented to the wider public.

Thus, through the conditions of medical practice, blackness became doubly associated with unpredictable bodies, first because non-white skin was represented as a physical abnormality in itself but also because the most prominent examples of disability were drawn from slave bodies, recirculated from plantations into the market of medical specimens. While antebellum discourses of blackness and disability converge on a very broad level as categories of bodies pushed outside of normativity, through the filter of infancy, they took on a far more particular and overlapping symbolic weight. The black

infant body and its unruly complexion appears already in such discourse as a body that defies management, its categorization suspended or made provisionally as an act of faith in the heritability of racial markers. Its association with congenital disability mirrors and reinforces this fixation on the body which breaks from its genealogy. If normative reproduction imagines the birth of each generation as a uniform extension of the present into the future, through medical discourses of abnormality, the figure of the black infant came to represent a perceived threat to these continuities.

As mentioned, in her brief discussion of medicine under slavery, Spillers identifies the medical gaze as having an unbinding effect on enslaved bodies' relationship to social structures. In a physician's advertisement to slave owners to sell him ill or injured slaves, she notes that, amid his list of valuable diseases, not only are slaves made into bodies without subjectivity, but the possibility of those bodies having feeling for one another is erased (68). Medicine's objectification acknowledges no possibility for black kinship. Yet, the black infant, perhaps precisely because her origin has been so mystified by this refusal to see kinship, provides the key figure for medicine to consider how bodies are inherited between generations and the limits to that inheritance. In other words, at the same time that medical portrayals of black infants as prodigies erase black kinship, they provide the technical framework through which white kinship is allowed to exist. As I argue in my next section, when the prodigy moved into the realm of the literary, it took on still greater and more explicit power in defining white genealogy, such that the refusal of blackness from history became the precondition for even imaging white genealogy.

Literatures of Medicine

Accustomed as we currently are to a sharp division between the prose of the medical report and the prose of literature, the two appear side-by-side in antebellum journals, making the drift of medical notions of race into literature, at times, a very short journey. Historically, the growing preference for medical schools over individual internships was contributing the establishment of medicine as an expert discipline, with an emerging system of credentialization and technical discourse. Still, this shift was in its early days, and even professionally trained physicians routinely drew on the information from other medical traditions, such as female midwifery and folk knowledge of herbs (Stowe 7). Medical discourse could thus be quite wide-ranging in scope. For example, in *Almshouse v. Whistelo*, the paternity suit I discussed above, the expert witness Dr. Mitchill draws one of his references from poetry and treats the authority that case as comparable to his other evidence.⁴¹ Literature and medicine certainly represented different fields, but they were fields with significant crossover.

Medical journals at the time tend to take a protective view of their authority, frequently publishing columns decrying “quacks” or making uncomplimentary asides about midwives, but even they can be decidedly esoteric in their contents. Discussions of disease often run alongside commentary on medical ethics or the health concerns of marrying young or long epistolary debates on academic scandals; *The London Medical and Surgical Journal* includes in an 1830 issue, without other context, a recipe for dandelion coffee taken from a gardening manual (175). Likewise, a blurb it published in

⁴¹ Mitchil cites “a case, called the Black Case, in Haddington’s poems” (209). I have not been able to trace the poem in question, but Mitchil summarizes it as a white woman giving birth to a black child after her husband spills ink in her shoes.

the following year considers new regulations concerning beer brewing (348). However, even articles that are conventionally medical in content also often take the form of literary genres. Reports on the state of medicine abroad are often upfront that they represent the author's memories of a trip and thus strongly echo the form of contemporary travel literature.⁴² Similarly, first-person narration was the common model for case studies, recounting how the doctor encounters a patient, how treatment unfolded, and at times, the dialogue exchanged between doctor and patient. Published in another venue, some antebellum case studies could be taken for memoir or short story, rather than rarefied science.

In tracing the appearance of the prodigy into more conventionally literary canon, I therefore begin by examining how it appears in two texts that emerge in this space of disciplinary overlap, asking how the prodigy's role in marking biological reproduction also shapes notions about kinship more broadly. These two texts reveal that, when the prodigy migrates into literature more explicitly interested in social structures, it figures most immediately in a crisis over the status of white paternity. Where the social structures of kinship had served as the sole guarantors of fatherhood, the medical trappings of the prodigy threaten a different mode of tracking genealogy, one that is less easily contained. The fear of miscegenation is active, but this racial policing also suggests how much the ability to use race to define biological inheritance and kinship – to proclaim with confidence, as the superfoetation cases studies do, that this twin is the child of a white man and that twin the child of a black man, regardless of whom their mother

⁴² An 1831 article on the "Medical Institutions of Naples" in the *North American Medical and Surgical Journal*, for instance, punctuates its descriptions of various Italian hospitals with recollections of patient performances he saw and the individual doctors whom he met (17-62).

had married or of what their mother might say – threatened the legibility of white genealogy. If a medical examination could assign children from one race to another and therefore from one father to another, it could also throw any other signifier of kinship into doubt. Thus, the ability to expel the black child from narratives of white family and to disqualify them from genealogy as spontaneous and isolated flukes was *both* a reiteration of black social death and an attempt to redefine white genealogy.

The earlier of these texts, Barrington’s “Skinning a Black Child” (1827), seems to have migrated into the medical world partly by merit of the already literary qualities of the case studies. “Skinning,” a parody of country doctors that first published as a part of Barrington’s satirical memoir of life in Ireland, was republished fairly predictably into *The Athenæum*, a London literary journal. Then, and perhaps less predictably, it reemerged in the *London Medical and Surgical Journal*, where it was presented between a report on blood chemistry and a report on cholera treatment and given the headline “State of Medicine in Ireland.” The format of all three of these articles is the same, with only an editor’s foreword to warn that the story’s report should not be read seriously. Nor was the inclusion of conventional literature (i.e., fiction, drama, or poetry) a recurring feature of the journal, which suggests that the journal’s editors saw “Skinning” as some combination of a satire of a medical case studies and commentary on colonial medicine, a topic that was often covered in the journal.⁴³ When the excerpt was republished in the United States, it appeared mainly in generalist magazines or literary gazettes.

⁴³ A survey of the eighteen issues of the *London Medical and Surgical Journal* leading up to the issue with “Skinning” reveals no other explicitly literary pieces, but does show multiple articles on medicine in Ireland, the West Indies, and the United States. There are also a few lengthy excerpts from biographies written about notable thinkers that might have helped make Barrington’s memoirs less incongruous in a medical journal.

Nonetheless the medical jargon which forms a central portion of the prose echo the other conventionally medical articles often republished by mainstream papers and might persuade an unwary reader that it is a scientific, rather than fictional account.⁴⁴

The scene opening “Skinning a Black Child” is a hopeful one. George Washington is hosting a banquet to celebrate the birth of his first child as his wife is in labor upstairs. The revelry is interrupted, however, by the midwife’s stammering announcement that, while mother and child are both healthy and resting, there is something unusual about the newborn son. First, she exclaims of the infant, “it’s – not so – so *white* as it should be [all emphasis in original]” and, to the contrary, “the dear little boy is – is – is – quite *black*” (152). As a chorus of “‘*Black! black!*’ echoed from every quarter of the apartment,” the women of the party quickly decide that, as Mrs. Washington’s virtue is beyond question, the child must be a Satanic imp, a quite literal offspring of the devil. Meanwhile, Mr. Washington and his wife’s brother, Lt. Palmer, seek a more empirical reassurance in the form of a physician who convinces them that, the coloring of the child’s skin is actually a rather large birthmark. Though acknowledging that the mark is unusually expansive, covering the entire body of the child, he argues that it might still be removed like other birthmarks, through a gradual removal of the affected skin. Thus, they settle on the titular strategy – skinning a black child in order to find the white child within. The plans fails in a predictably ghastly fashion, as deeper and deeper gashes reveal only deeper and deeper levels of blood, flesh,

⁴⁴ I have found republications of this tale in Philadelphia’s *The Ariel*, a “Literary and Miscellaneous Gazette,” as well as in New York’s *Evening Post*, although its contemporaneous republication in *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* further suggests the popularity of the story in the larger Anglo literary sphere.

and finally bone that is itself revealed to be black. The physicians declares the boy to be a hopeless case and refuses to further attend to “a thing that was so clearly supernatural.” The family, thus, exiles the boy to live with a dry-nurse and to die an early death after being gored by his father’s cattle (152).

Hard as it is to process, readers of its day seem to have encountered “Skinning a Black Child” as a joke, a funny quip about the rural Ireland. Although it is introduced in its Philadelphia and New York republications with little comment, “Skinning a Black Child” was printed in London’s *The Athenaeum* with the description of being a tale “too good to pass up” (409) and is recommended for “those who love a hearty laugh” (411). *The London Medical and Surgical Journal* very carefully and somewhat stodgily outlines the reasons why the story should not taken as documentary truth but eventually settles on the surprising endorsement of it as a “precious narrative” nonetheless (818). These short paratexts are, of course, nowhere close to a satisfying reception history, and presumably not even all white readers, much less black readers, would have taken the violence quite so in stride. Still, the dramatic irony of a narrator announcing an obscure, Latinate condition to explain a white woman’s giving birth to a black child in almost the same breath that he mentions a black man also being in the household makes it clear that the story was structured to be humorous. The ease with which laughter and black children – or more particularly, laughter and the medical torture of black children – go hand-in-hand points the particular short-circuit that the black child represents between thinking of family as a social structure and family as a biological unit. Their appearance in these texts is as proof of infidelity, their blackness an uncomfortably biological sign that sex, rather than (white) marriage, has produced them.

This disconnect between the respectable and the bodily forms the basic premise of Barrington's joke. Polite society is so eager to preserve Mrs. Washington's honor that they overlook the black valet living nearby in her brother's household, revert to antiquated and absurd medical theories, and eventually attempt physically to hack away the evidence of an indiscretion from the newborn's body, all in order to avoid doubting her loyalty. However, rather than simply being a misogynist parody about the faithlessness of women, though it certainly is that as well, "Skinning" offers a fundamental challenge about whether patriarchal genealogies have ever been reliable.⁴⁵ From the outset, the patriarchal figure's own identity is as much a matter of dispute as his son's. Mr. George Washington is not *the* George Washington but "Mr. George Washington, of Dureen, in Ireland" and is only "supposed" by local rumor to be "some distant blood relation" to his more famous counterpart (152). The basis of this belief, which Barrington frames as laughable, is the town's absurdly strong faith that social genealogy (the stuff of marriage, pedigree, and surnames) is the equivalent of biological genealogy and blood relation. The same logic that makes his wife's son unquestionably his drives Washington's assurance that two men of the same name must inevitably share a lineage.

Through this blurring between the social and the biological, the specific crisis of inheritance represented by the unexpectedly black child represents is a crisis of inherited property. A large part of the obsession with his child's racial presentation lies with

⁴⁵ If Barrington's introduction of the black servant in the opening of the tale, immediately before a paragraph on the inexplicable variation of skin color among newborns is not enough to tip off the reader, the child's eventual death after a "horning" from one of his father's cows ensures that a cuckolding is in play.

Washington's attempt to reinforce his own claim to a vaguely imagined, but strongly held belief that "his Excellency [President Washington], when dying, would leave a capital legacy in America to his blood relation, Mr. George Washington" (152). This more distant and more explicitly property-minded tie thus ultimately becomes most important goal in the bloody attempts to re-race the infant:

The mode [the physician] pursued was very *scientific*; he made two parallel slashes as deep as he could in reason, about three inches down the upper part of the arm, and a cross one, to introduce the forceps and strip the loose black skin off, when he could snip it away at the bottom, and leave the white or rather red flesh underneath to generate a new skin and show the proper colouring for a god-child of General Washington. (152)

The fantasy of manipulating and remaking the infant's body suggests a desire to take over the role of the mother's body in forming the child with a "new skin" in the husband's image, a pre-*Frankenstein* attempt to replace maternity with masculine science. In this substitution of father for mother, though, Barrington also overleaps the immediate father for the abstract approval of the putative godfather, General Washington. The Irish Washington needs confirmation that biological reproduction follows the forms of social kinship and, more particularly, that marriage secures paternity, in order to make a shared surname into a blood tie.

The persistence of blackness, which lasts down onto the very bones of the child, however, adds more of a complication to this narrative than as a sign of an extramarital sexuality. The doctor's search for the "white or rather red" to be found within young Washington parrots and brutally redefines Buffon's assertion, discussed earlier, that all

children are born “white, or rather red,” substituting the red skin of a newborn for the red flesh of a wound. However, while Buffon’s original assertion would make all newborns racially ambiguous, Barrington’s interpretation rests on a notion of blackness as fundamental and immutable. Thus, after his final cut into the child, the doctor announces a difference that permeates the body, declaring that “he could see the very bone, black also [...] actually dyed in the grain” (152). The child’s difference runs so deep that it cannot be effaced. Yet what is interesting here is not that the child is banished from the putative line of Washingtons but that his blackness banishes him from genealogies more generally. While the reader is meant to understand that the biological father is the black valet from America, the medical conclusion is that the child is “either the devil or a *lusus Naturæ*,” (or freak of nature). He does not become the son of a black man; he becomes an imp whose origin is spontaneous and beyond human knowledge and yet whose body, as a sign of those origins, acts as a site of obsessive and brutal investigation.

As the text describes it, then, the child’s blackness upsets established notions of genealogy as a whole. If a child of Washington would inherit property and as well as whiteness, the child of a practically or tacitly enslaved “servant” paradoxically inherits the inability to inherit. Not only is the young Washington denied full entry into the Washington family, the identity of his probable father is erased and denied; his blackness prevents him from being seen as a true son of Washington, but Washington’s pride prevents him admitting that his son might have another father. The child and his probable, biological father are thus ironically aligned only by the social refusal to grant any either of them family ties. The newborn George Washington, the child of an effective slave and the product of a relationship that cannot be socially acknowledged, becomes a

monstrous object that seems to be emerge from nowhere. His body and its genealogical markers are thereby made to bear the weight of a history that society cannot record.

Much like the grotesque humor of “Skinning a Black Child,” the “Stealing a Baby” is, at first reading, white supremacy’s take on slapstick. First published in the *Spirit of the Times* in New York and later republished as part of an 1850 collection, “Stealing a Baby” is the first-person narration by a semi-autobiographical character, Madison Tensas or “the Louisiana Swamp Doctor,” who recalls being an overly earnest and slightly disreputable medical student and his courtship of the wealthy Lucy, a name borrowed from Lewis’s real-life romantic interest (Anderson 31). Obsessed with dissection, Madison steals a black infant cadaver in hopes of studying its anatomy in the comforts of his own home, an echo of the historical practices discussed above. The plan misfires, however, when his would-be fiancée, Lucy, involves him in an unexpected tryst that is then interrupted by her father. The hijinks culminate in the untimely emergence of the dead child, whose falls out the student’s coat in the moment when the couple tumbles the ground in front of the sweetheart’s protective father in an illicit birth that ruins Madison’s chances at marriage, family life, and access to Lucy’s wealth. The punchline is vile one, even in the context of an unabashedly vile story, hinging on the comic misattachment of childhood and family to a black body, when by the reasoning of the story, they should belong only to white one. The latter promises lineal futurity while the other, offering death at the most literal level, suspends the narrator in a state of perpetual bachelorhood.

The intimacies that take shape around this prodigious birth of a black cadaver from the pocket of a white man end Madison’s attempt to become a patriarch in his own

right. Barred from a relationship with Lucy and disgraced among genteel society, Madison, as his older narrating self explains, fails to marry or have the legitimate children who could carry on his family line. Instead, in his theft of a dead child and its apparently spontaneous reemergence is that he enters a distorted parody of that kinship, in which property rights and the physicality of bodies form the explicit basis for connection, rather than the factors to be repressed or denied. Accordingly, the narrator recounts his theft as moment in which the infant places some hold upon him, rather than the opposite; Lewis writes, “I strove to depart, but something formed a bond of association between that dead nigger baby and myself, which held me to my place with my gaze riveted upon it” (154). This is not a scene of ethical recognition and certainly is not a humanizing interaction for the dead child, who remains attractive as an object of study and mutilation. Still, in that moment of desire, when Lewis’s narrator imagines himself in possession of the child body, there is a slippage into the similarly corporeal guardianship of the family. The medical student’s interest in the body causes him to treat it as “tenderly as if alive” (154) and his assertion of ownership remakes the corpse into an entity that he calls “my baby” (156).

This form of unmasked guardianship clearly has no benefit for the deceased infant and mimics much as anything the paternal roles used to sanction slave ownership. However, by placing such a socially unsacred body is placed in a “bond of association” with a white man striving to become a patriarch, the text also associates white domesticity with corporeality and death. By introducing a particularly material version of the body as admissible into domestic bonds of feeling, the child/corpse suggests a reinscription of the Tensas’s desire for the white Lucy into a similarly ghoulish interest in

co-opting bodies. In light of the student's morbid tenderness to the child, an already semi-necrophilic confession that, mid-kiss with his lover, he would sometimes examine her lips and wonder "whether, even in death, electricity by some peculiar adaptation might not be able to continue their bewitching suction" moves from the realm of self-deprecating bookishness into monstrosity (153). Because he can enter something mirroring the forms of kinship with a body that is politically barred from such elevation, the effect is to recast his romantic relationship as possessing a dangerously similar physical element.

This unbinding effect that juvenile flesh can have on the social configurations comes through most clearly in F.O.C. Darley's illustration of the moment when the child tumbles into the street in front of Tensas's would-be fiancée, her jealous father and the city marshal, entitled "Stealing a Nigger Baby" [see Figure 1 at end]. The image offers a caricature of an impossible birth; the medical student lies rocked onto his back with his feet up and askew while staring at the child that has appeared beside him. His hat, fallen back to his shoulders creates the appearance of feminine bonnet while a peculiar roundness to his chest hints a bosom. Meanwhile, in the long, thin object trailing out from between Tensas' legs, perhaps a fold of clothing or a riding crop, there is also the suggestion of an umbilical cord forgotten in the after birth. It is as if, because his unacceptable selection of child has cut him off from the projected role of the patriarchal head of a household, Tensas has slipped into a monstrous form of femininity instead – a stance that, judging from his facial expression, horrifies no one so much as himself.



“ My cloak flew open as I fell, and the force of the fall bursting its envelope, out, in all its hideous realities, rolled the infernal imp of darkness.”—Page 137.

Illustration 1, “My cloak flew open...”

Moreover, the fleshiness that is the prevailing quality of the dead child sprawled in the foreground – its body is the only skin revealed in the image other than the uncovered faces of the other figures and the details of its collapsed and chubby limbs,

with its tiny detailed hands and dimpled elbows bent at delicate angles, are presented with a more careful realism than the rest of the group – seems to have also carried over into Lucy. Though she is entirely covered, dark gloves give the appearance of hands the same shade as the child. Her broken parasol, snapped at the shaft, suggests a complexion whose fairness is no longer protected, while the shared posture of the two (head turned away from the viewer, one arm up and one down with cocked wrists) further aligns the pair. Even the symmetry of their two bodies in relation to the sprawled male figure suggests a paralleling of their respective roles in relation to him. The child's undermining effect on a sentimental reading of the couple, which emerges in the text largely as a retrospective reevaluation, appears in the picture as a synchronous realignment of ties. The unplanned arrival of a black infant not only distracts the protagonist from his white, potential wife, but it simultaneously puts the values that she represents to the story in doubt. In both the text and illustration, the black infant, divided by race and death from its potential parent-figures, proves to be an ultimately inassimilable self and one whose inclusion becomes the undoing of the structures that seek to absorb it.

Such texts recode black infancy as being not just outside of normative reproduction, but as an active threat to those genealogies, because the black infant, born without access to legally-enforced marriage, marks a space outside its reach and proves that life is ongoing there. This is in no way a utopian departure. In the context of Lewis's Louisiana, the unexplained birth of a black child in close proximity to a white father-figure suggests the sexual violence and rape underpinning slavery far more strongly than it promises any escape from official surveillance. Moreover, the identification of any sign of a growing African American population as a threat and the idea that a black subject is

so essentially a social danger, even before she develops the ability to think or act, justifies further violence against adults and children alike.

Pip: An Aside

The second half of this chapter moves to Susan Paul's attempt to rewrite the prodigy as a viable life and even a source of liberation, but before I move on from the medicalized prodigy, I want to pause and tease out a little more what it means to be a figure who is pushed outside of genealogy and yet be used to define it. It is not obvious how or why social death, particularly such a complete social death as the all-but-stillborn prodigy, could construct the temporality of the social. Nor is it easy to shift from Lewis and Barrington's deathly infants into fully living beings who nonetheless remain pushed out of history, because to be labeled a prodigy by medical discourse is to be excluded from subjectivity. The prodigy is a body to be examined, tested, or manipulated, but it is not a person, nor is it a character in any straightforward sense. This projection of blank flesh dovetails easily with the passive dependence of infancy, but can the prodigy outlive this infant exclusion? In other word, how does the framing of black childhood, or even more particularly of black infancy or black birth, extend to shape depictions of black lives more broadly?

To circle back to Pip, the character with whom I began, Melville seems to offer a case of prodigy attained later in life. Pip's age is never established, but Ishmael believes that there is an acute cause for his separation from the crew and status as a medical oddity: his abandonment at sea. There no diagetetic evidence of a change in Pip's actual behavior, but certainly after the crew decides that he is an incurable "idiot," Pip knows

that a part of himself has been lost. Wandering the deck, he reminds the crew over and over that he is not a part of the ship, but has been banished to someplace elsewhere, repeatedly imploring sailors “who’s seen Pip? [...] Monsieurs, have ye seen one Pip?” (512) and demanding they recognize that “Pip’s missing” (500). The social alienation and self-alienation of his position thus becomes a symptom of delusional speech and further confirmation for the crew that Pip’s behavior reflects the pathological, rather than the personal.

However, to present a before and after of Pip’s estrangement fails to capture how this social alienation also distances Pip from linear time. Part of his distance from his shipmates is that he must survive with a different kind history than they do. Introduced as being “prelusive of eternal time,” a Melvillian translation of the always already, Pip lives not just the proleptic time of a novel that continually foreshadowing its tragedy, but in a paradoxical preemption of those warnings. The narrator warns that the Pequod’s crew would go “to lay the world’s grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever come back,” but, as for “Black Little Pip,” “he never did -- oh, no! he went before” (115). The syntax is slippery, allowing “he never did” to refer to the journey as much as to the return, such that Pip either does not join the crew in their voyage to death because he will have already drowned on the way or does not return from that encounter because he will have died and therefore preceded the surviving portion of the crew in their still eventual death. That both are true, because Pip both does and does not die before the rest of the Pequod, indicates how difficult it is to map a timeline of even Pip’s personal history, for in either case the contradiction of one who “never did” because he did “before” loops back to the subject who is precedes time. Pip thus provides us with the

negative construction of the always already, the already never, to a subject who born into social cancelation.

Sanctifying the Prodigy

The cluster of associations that I am tracing under the term “prodigy” is perhaps especially pernicious because it also works to translate individual achievement that might have been proof of African Americans’ humanity into signs of aberration. Like Ishmael’s conclusion that when Pip speaks “heaven’s sense” it must be thanks to his “insanity” rather than his wisdom (402), prodigious thinking trades on a skewed logic of exceptionality. The more extraordinary a black subject is the less representative she is of any larger potential, except the potential to be abnormal.⁴⁶ Because history was and is often written as series of famous men, in the style of Carlyle’s heroes, the tendency to pathologize remarkable lives as flukes or oddities not only worked to dismiss those subjects but also dismissed the idea of African Americans having a broader connection to the past. Confronting and transforming the figure of the prodigy was therefore also an important means for black authors to rescript notions of collectivity and a collective past outside of racial essentialism.⁴⁷ Extracting the prodigy from the realm of science or medicine offered an opportunity to reimagine the structure of social kinship at the same time that it allowed a humanizing of individual subjects.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Stephen Best’s discussion of the public reception of the pianist known as Blind Tom in *Fugitive Properties*. Contemporary reviewers, he argues, treats Tom’s music as so strangely distanced from Tom himself that the musician appears only as an uncanny conduit for a thoroughly external gift. Thus, the beauty of the performance came to a measure of how strange the audience found its source.

⁴⁷ For a longer discussion of the racialization of the connections between individual and group identity, particularly as it affects black biography, see Sharon Holland’s “When Characters Lack Character: A Biomythography,” *PMLA* (2008).

Though it is among the first African American biographies ever published, Susan Paul's *Memoir of James Jackson* places very little weight on the qualities that conventionally distinguish a historical figure. Indeed, one of the most conspicuous features of Paul's 1835 text *Memoir of James Jackson* is how little value the text places on fame, public accomplishment, or even narrative suspense. A glance at the full subtitle – "The Attentive and Obedient Scholar who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months" – gives as good a summary of Paul's hagiography as one could ask. This disregard for the trappings of plot or narrative development suits its subject: a brilliant and deeply Christian boy who died before he could *do* much of anything. Yet, in telling the story of such an apparently ahistorical subject as James Jackson, marginalized by his race, his age, and his illness, Susan Paul rescripts the role of the black prodigy to remake its historical discontinuity into an opportunity. By lingering not on the ways that James's prodigy falls beneath the historical record, but rather how it exceeds the historical record, Paul reconfigures what types of genealogies are worth recording. *The Memoir*, instead, allows for a means of removing genealogy from the domains of both historical time and biology and redefines it as a spiritual relationship. Paul's prodigy, in other words, emphasizes James's elevation through the active efforts of his community, in order to show how the bonds of teaching and faith create a utopian practice capable of giving reprieve, if not full escape, from history.

Harkening back to Puritan stories of saintly child deaths, such as James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671) or Cotton Mather's appendix "A Token for Children of New England" (1700), the child hagiography was a tremendous popular and rigidly formulaic genre when the *Memoir* was first published. From the 1820s through the 1840s, the New

York-based American Tract Society alone released a series of more than a dozen such accounts of child deaths, at times reaching more than printing runs of more than ten thousand copies per year (Pasulka 57). Paul's biography draws from an accordingly well-defined set of religious conventions to mark its subject as one of the elect. James is commended for his devotion to authority, for his "constant desire to please" his teacher makes James "an assistant, by his example" in "the government of other children (92); his unusually retentive memory for hymns and scripture (74); and his love to hear the Bible read, even when his siblings grow restless (76). Peppered with scriptural excerpts and lyrics from hymns, the text is also creates an authorial persona who is far more interested in continuing tradition rather than personal originality. Furthermore, while James is exemplary for his intellect – Paul's narrator reports that "during the first year which James attended school, he learned more than many children do in three" (83) – this scholastic genius is carefully funneled into the norms of childish goodness that is James's true distinction. His memory regarding the rules serves his obedience, his curiosity fuels his questions about God, and his eloquence allows him to play "little *preacher*" to the other children (88). As Paul explains, James's precociousness registers not as an early advance into adulthood but as a concentration of the virtues prescribed for childhood, declaring, for instance, that "we must be indulged in saying, we never saw a child who seemed so much like innocence itself" (93). James is remarkable precisely because he fulfills the role of the conventional child so perfectly.

Yet, as the publication history of *The Memoir* reflects, Paul's placement of an individual and genuinely historical black child into these standardized forms of white childhood resonates with a much more radical effect. As Lois Brown, the scholar who

recovered *The Memoir* and verified its history, explains, Paul originally sought distribution through the relatively apolitical channels of the American Sunday School Union. Only after the Union refused, presumably for fear of controversy, did Paul agree to have the biography published through abolitionist channels. If, as Max Cavitch suggests, such literary rituals of mourning act as a moment of unification by “bolster[ing] the threatened family ties for which the dead child is also the symbol,” Paul’s addition of James to this genre canon therefore acts as a tacit insistence that the death of a black child should equally be a touchstone for bolstering a cross-racial U.S. community (144).⁴⁸ Thus, while the Preface names two audiences, its white and black readers, the opening of the *Memoir* itself combines them into a single body, addressing them familiarly as “My dear children” (69). By its form alone, the *Memoir* encourages this consolidation into a single family by presenting James’s legacy as a collective loss and a shared experience of grief.

However, Paul’s deployment of the child saint to describe a black child also aligns him with the prodigy narratives which I have discussed, threatening to reduce his genius to peculiarity and transform his final illness into a confirmation of his abnormality rather than his holiness. In order to prevent such narratives from isolating James, Paul proceeds with thorough replacement of the corporeal with the spiritual. For James, himself, this means a total silence regarding his physical body except for three moments in the text: first, as an aside mentioning his “dark skin,” when he is bullied for his race

⁴⁸Another factor in the categorization of *The Memoir* as a primarily abolitionist text may well be what Cavitch terms the “antebellum crisis in the economic value of the child” (18). As Cavitch argues, the presence of enslaved and therefore commodified children in the U.S. forced even writers who were only explicitly discussing white children into a reconsideration of the links between property loss and child death – a crisis which the mourning of a child potentially eligible for slavery must certainly intensify.

(71); second, a brief mention that “sometimes, he was attacked by [...] very wicked boys, and badly hurt” (87); and, finally, his death scene, which is the only occasion when his body receives prolonged discussion. By contrast to the rest of text, the description of James’s failing body, finally dying after convulsions and pain, both more prominent and more detailed:

James still looked as if his heart was full of joy; but his eyes began to grow dim, his hands were cold, and in a few minutes all was calm; the glazed eyes of the dear child once more beamed forth with unspeakable delight, and he exclaimed, ‘This is God my Saviour; O Lord, this is Jesus.’
– His eyes closed, his heart ceased to beat, and all was still. James was dead. Nothing remained but a cold and lifeless lump of clay. But his spirit, with which he used to love God, was carried away by angels to heaven.
(103)

James’s heart, his hands, and his eyes provide the action in their alternating fading and revival, but their integration into a body, much less into James himself, appears only on the very threshold of death and still only in the oblique summations that “all was calm” and “all was still.” Even this vague collective of “all” is revealed to be a full body only after the departure of James to heaven – when “nothing remained but a cold and lifeless lump of clay” – and even in that moment, the Paul replaces the physical body with a symbol, proffering a symbol of materiality rather than materiality itself. James’s body, then, appears precisely in order to mark its inability to represent James himself.

Such a division between soul and flesh is hardly unusual, but in Paul’s hands, the division becomes a more pointed rebuke of the expert authority that physicians normally

held over black children. That, at the first sign of illness, Mrs. Jackson “immediately” sends for a doctor announces a degree of respectability and wealth, as well as affection (97). Upon his arrival, however, the doctor is examined by James, as to his spiritual health, rather than the reverse. Asking the physician if “you *love God, my Saviour?*” [Paul’s emphasis]” and if “you know God my Saviour?,” James shifts the encounter to a realm in which he holds the authority and thereby changes the tenor of the doctor’s thinking. The physician’s response that James is “*a happy child*” proves to be the only diagnosis he makes (102). Similarly, when physical disability appears in the text, in the form of a concluding poem “The Little Blind Boy” about a black child who is refused entrance to an all-white institution for the blind, it quickly transforms from a physical condition affecting him to a spiritual condition affecting white authorities. As the child speaker complains, school officials “cannot see / My soul through my skin” (107) and as his mother consoles him at the poem’s close, “many with eyes are far blinder than you” (108). Paul retains a language of stigma for disability, but she makes clear that that stigma should attach to a spiritual quality rather than a physical one.

This careful devaluation of the biological subject in preference for the spiritual subject further gives Paul the framework to make James the impetus for a qualitatively different kind of kinship, one removed from reproductive lines and focused on religious concordance. For instance, the affection and devotion of James’s relationship to his teacher, Paul’s own persona in the text, rivals and sometimes surpasses the strength of his relationship with his mother. When his mother commands James to grind coffee on the Sabbath, he refuses because his teacher has taught him otherwise, and after this only conflict between mother and child, James persuades his mother to agree. This remaking

of attachments follows an antiracist mission as well. Warning her young readers from disliking people for being black, Paul invokes the nuclear family in order to expand it:

God has made them all, and loves all that are good, and so should *we* always have courage enough to love any body who is good. Would you love your sister or brother less because they had black or brown hair? or your father or mother because one had black eyes and the other blue eyes? No, I am sure you would not love them any the less. (71)

Anchoring humanity in a mutual relationship to God, Paul begins an experiment of physical substitution with more immediate relative – swapping one hair color for another, turning one set of eyes black and the other blue – in a transformation that changes her readers’ families, piece by piece, into new bodies and challenging her readers to name the moment when they become strangers. This gradual transmutation separates the sentimental affection of family, not just from family resemblance but from any factor other than internal merit, for we are told to “love any body who is good.” That is to say, James is not simply the ultimate Christian for children to emulate. As a culmination of goodness, he deserves to be the pinnacle, Paul suggests, of the reader’s family attachment.

This sense that readers should feel closer to James because of his exceptional merit, rather than distanced from him, structures the larger relationship which Paul builds between James’s genius and his social world. As Brown notes, the *Memoir* directs away from such individual struggles as conversion or doubt and emphasizes instead how much James’s wisdom is the result of collective support: “Paul credits James’s ‘great many friends’ in that community for encouraging his Christian faith and his educational

progress. [...] This exemplary child is a product of a virtuous community: region, class, and race both define and produce James Jackson's identity" (39-40). James, for instance, is able to attend school early because unnamed "friends" persuade his mother to make a special application (73). What is perhaps even more remarkable about the kinship system that supports James, however, is that these friends have no clear status outside of friendship. They are not identified as either relatives or as belonging to a profession that would encourage this mentorship, such as teaching or religious ministry. Instead, their connection to James appears solely as the product of their benevolence and James's own merit. Any determinedly realist reading of the *Memoir* would recognize that this friendships must have relied on existing systems or institutions, as factors like James's relatively middle class standing and his family's church membership must have been the conditions of possibility for these advocates to take interest in a then three- or four-year-old child. However, Paul's presentation of them as arriving both seemingly from nowhere and as the natural consequence of "the good behavior of James" allows the young reader the space to imagine kinship not as a predetermined or rigid genealogy, but as a malleable environment that they themselves can shape (73).

This is not to say that Paul had no interest in practical policy for reform. Indeed, the very fact that there was a school in Boston willing to instruct James at all was partly the product of ongoing activism by Paul outside of the *Memoir*, as well as by means of the text itself (Brown 11). However, her focus lies in fostering the social networks that enable practical change. As her preface frames it, the *Memoir* should spur readers to correct the neglect of African American, declaring that "these children of our brethren have too long been neglected. There is among them many a gem, and whose is the guilt

that they are not brought out from among the rubbish and polished?” (67). In other words, because James’s uniqueness stems from the attention which teachers and other adult role models have given him, his accomplishments establish the potential of other African American children, elevating rather than eclipsing them. For Paul, prodigy thus is the result of collective effort and social connection; far from being a freak or a fluke in the system, the prodigy is the best representative of the group as whole, because he or she is the sum of their assistance.

As such, the story of James Jackson opens out from the individualist conventions of most biographies to a sense of textuality as a source of connection instead of isolation. Paul manages this shift in part through an emphasis of literature as shared scripture, inserting a history of the Bible that also becomes a lesson for her readers in their shared history. Beginning with Adam and Eve, she recounts Christian history as a history of writing and preserving texts:

God directed a man by the name of Moses, to write these things down in a book, so that the people could see how he had punished the disobedient men who lived in that age of the world. So Moses wrote all these things in a book, and the people whom we call Jews, kept this book in their temple. After this, other men who wrote what God directed them to. The people had their writings collected. This made what we call the Old Testament. There was no more writing for a long time, until our blessed Saviour came into the world. Then God commanded those men who were with *him* to write what the Saviour said, and what he did; so four of them wrote an account of these things. (75)

Scripture, in this account, exists to connect a present generation to one of the past, stretching across geography and race, as well as time based on the idea that one age should learn of and from another. Likewise, history pauses in the intermission between the testaments because, for Paul, history and text cannot be extracted from one another. Moving immediately into a portrait of James's devotion to the Bible and an exhortation that her own readers should listen and read it with equal care, Paul tracks a continuity of texts from these Biblical origins through the life of James and into the lives of the readers meeting James and, through his story, also consuming this version of scripture.

Paul's emphasis on James's story as a means to connecting lives resonates in her formal choices as well. Nested in the account of the exceptional James are anecdotes of multiple other, more ordinary children, whose narratives only intersect with James's in the loosest thematic sense. Nancy, a "little girl [...] only four years" conquers her fear of the dark through her faith in God (82). Henry, a "poor little fellow," is taught by his sister to fear black people without reason (72). Nameless children, too, populate the short narrative, providing educational anecdotes in their failures to learn their lessons (74), their attempts to convert family members (76-77), and their attention-seeking (87). Some echo James as models to be imitated, and others over examples to be avoided, but the cumulative effect is to surround his life with a cloud of parallel lives. His narrative, Paul suggests, can only be understood as part of a network of others, so that while his may be the central story, it remains fundamentally interwoven with and shaped by those around him and those reading about him.

Through such reconfigurations of history, the alternative genealogy around James also transforms his exclusion from national futurity into spiritual futurity. James's family

ties are, from the outset of the text, fixed in a cyclical emergence from and return to the eternal time of heaven, rather than linear inheritance. Named for his late father, whose death when James was less than two years old spurred his early interest in Christianity, James imagines heaven as “*his home in the skies*,” locating his future destiny in his origin (99). Likewise when Paul’s preface advocates that the adults responsible for black children should “store the minds of the children committed to them with religious truth,” the return she promises is partly the earthly promise that, “in this life,” they will be “respected in society” (67). Its main benefit, however, is that “in the world to come, they shall be acknowledged as the heirs to life eternal” (67-8). By learning what James learned, they can join him as heirs in this inheritance, forming a family in defiance of the legal and social erasure in a utopian pedagogy. This spiritual futurity thus remains a bleak comfort and, arguably, an escapist one, premised on the reminder that even excluded children will eventually die and that the precocious child will do so sooner.

Despite this, to dismiss Paul’s vision as quietism is to miss the way that her relative mistrust of either reproductive or national futurity – that is, her unwillingness to distinguish genealogy as the only meaningful connection or historical progress as the only meaningful victory – opens new possibilities for activism in the present. By largely dismissing the types of political futurity put forward by liberal narratives of progress, Paul outlines a system of care for children that does not value them for their potential as future citizens or parents or national saviors, but as the people they already are. James’s death does not mean that his teacher or mother’s efforts were wasted. Rather, the *Memoir*’s recognition that his life is a history worth knowing confirms the need to educate and value black children and to treat them, regardless of whether they will be

allowed the opportunities to use those skills in adulthood. Almost exactly a century after Paul's *Memoir*, Langston Hughes published an echo of the prodigy's joint association with exclusion and escape in his 1937 poem "Genius Child." The close of the poem asks the reader whether she can "love a monster / Of a frightening name?" only to conclude that "*Nobody loves a genius child. / Kill him – and let his soul run wild*" (9-10, 11-12). Like James, Hughes's child is tragic, because his potential is so great that he cannot fit into his world and is therefore appears as a threat to it. Yet in both of their deaths there is something more than simple tragedy: there is a radical refusal to see growing up into an active member of society as an unambiguous victory.

The chance that death offers for these figures of the prodigy to "run wild" is thus more particular form of the many freedom-in-death tropes of the nineteenth century, because it so thoroughly decouples individual progress from social progress. If the original damnation of the prodigy is the removal from historical genealogies, Paul gives us a way to see that as a utopia on a small scale, investing value in a life that would never otherwise register in history. Indeed, without Paul's text, the only other archival trace of him is a brief mention in a local newspaper that correctly records the date and location of his death but provides him with the wrong first name, calling him "George Jackson" (Brown 58). There seems to be nothing else, and it would be surprising if there were. Yet to the extent that she also shapes James's life into a repetition of the dead children of color that fill the worlds of medicine, Paul allows us to recognize in those populations of bodies something beyond their abjection and disconnection. If we have lost the way to access the memory of these prodigies, Paul reminds us that historical legacy is not the best measure of a life, nor connection to the present the only connectedness that matters.

Pip, Again: Reproducing Prodigies

In the end, then, is there any use left for Pip? If he is a repetition on a well-worn theme, the takeaway may not be to dismiss Pip as stereotype, but rather to avoid taking his apparent isolation in *Moby Dick* at Ishmael's word. Once we know that Pip is not such a singular figure in antebellum culture, others like him emerge throughout the narrative as well. Indeed, children of color pervade Melville's novel in figurative and literal forms, and they do so at some of the most critical moments of kinship formation. The queer bond between Ishmael and Queequeg has, for instance, long been something of a critical commonplace for Melville's description of the two laying in bed as a "cosy, loving pair" (51) and of Queequeg embracing Ishmael as if he were "his wife" (24). Less remarked on is that Ishmael's bond with Queequeg is cemented by the symbol of a dead and disabled black child, in for the form of Queequeg's idol Yojo.

First confronted by the statue, Ishmael interprets it as something very like antebellum medicine's idea of the prodigy. Seeing Queequeg take Yojo from his bag, Ishmael describes it as "a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the color of a three days' old Congo baby" and, having heard that Queequeg sold taxidermied human heads, believes at first that the statue is "a real baby preserved in some similar manner" (22). This initial image seems deliberately grotesque, reflecting Ishmael's early fear of Queequeg's racial difference, but elements of this first vision echo in descriptions of Yojo, after Ishmael realizes it is wooden and even with after Ishmael and Queequeg become close. Thus, Yojo remains oddly childish as Queequeg's "little negro" (22) or his "innocent little idol" (51) or resting "cross[ed between] his arms on his

breast” as Queequeg tests his coffin for size (462). Yojo plays the part of the uncanny child most importantly, however, in allowing Queequeg and Ishmael to bond over caring for him during the rituals of feeding and kissing before bed (51). Yojo thus becomes child-like enough for Ishmael’s participation to register not just as the religious syncretism that is the explicit in the text but also as a form of alternative family feeling – one able to register the “heart’s honeymoon” that follows the shared attention to Yojo as meaningful relationship, even without the possibility of other reproduction (51).

If the deathly child of color is used as a supplement for genealogical reproduction in Queequeg and Ishmael’s relationship, it also proves to be the point of departure for Melville’s vision of an environment outside of historical genealogies of imperial conquest. Nantucket, the center of the U.S. whaling industry and proxy home for Melville’s characters, appears as a heterotopian space paralleling white empire in a less devastating form. It has “conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders” and yet seems to occupy a territory outside the dominion of Anglo-American empire. Melville declares, “let American add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India [...]; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucket’s” (61). This apparent escape from imperialist expansion, however, in the history that Ishmael provides, exists only through the tragedy of its Native American discoverers:

Look now at the wondrous traditional story of how this island was settled by red-men. [...] In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast, and carried off an infant Indian in his talons. With loud lament the parents saw their child borne out of sight over the wide waters. They resolved to follow the same direction. Setting out in their canoes,

after a perilous passage they discovered the island, and there they found an empty ivory casket, – the poor little Indian’s skeleton. (60)

This christening of the island through the death of an indigenous child makes way for the silent substitution in Ishmael’s explanations: the people of the supposedly extra-imperial Nantucket are no longer Native Americans. Somewhere in the history, but unmarked in Ishmael’s telling, these original inhabitants are replaced by its current Anglo-Americans residents. Instead, Nantucket’s origin story does the work, fairly heavy-handedly, of naturalizing this dispossession by founding what would have been the Wampanoag claim to the island on the end of a genealogy. The death of the heir who would have carried the Indian claim into the future allows Ishmael a fantasy of Nantucket as a space in which territory works differently and where Anglo-American presence does not represent the same imperial expansion as elsewhere, even though it is enabled by Indian death just the same.

Pip’s presence on the ship thus stands in to remind us of the lives that have been left out of the narrative. However, he is not merely a passive symbol. Instead, Pip also hints at his own bitter awareness of that, much as the corpse-like Yojo provides the catalyst for Ishmael’s bond with Queequeg, the ship’s sense of kinship is directly figured by the image of black kinship under erasure. In one of his most famous experiment with perspective, Melville assigns each of the chief officers a different reading of the doubloon that Ahab hammers to the mast as the reward for the man who spots the white whale and that “one and all the mariners revered [...] as the White Whale’s talisman” binding them together in their quest (416). Each analysis is revealing of the viewer – Starbuck sees God, Ahab finds ego, etc. – but Pip, encompassing all of these interpretations in his chant

that “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look,” offers the final reading of the doubloon as marking a form of canceled genealogy. After renaming the doubloon as “the ship’s navel” and complaining that the whole crew was determined to “unscrew” that navel, he shifts his attention to the mast supporting it. Pip, alone in his focus on the structure behind the doubloon, recalls a memory of his childhood: “my father, in old Tolland county, cut down a pine tree once and found a silver ring grown over in it; some old darkey’s wedding ring. How did it get there?” (420).

Pip’s initial vision of the doubloon as navel and therefore as the place of primal incubation recasts the oath that the crew swore over it from nihilistic vengeance into a birth. Yet, if the crew has been born as a new social body, they seem equally bent on dissolving that fellowship and “unscrew[ing that] navel,” because their unity is based on the shared desire to kill Moby Dick and claim the doubloon for themselves. This birth, then, is strongly anti-reproductive one, seated not only in homosociality but also in what almost must be called a pre-Freudian death drive. Pip’s shift to marriage, the most conventional vehicle for reproduction, hinges on the shared exclusion of racialized marriage from genealogy. The token of “some old darkey’s wedding ring,” overgrown in a tree trunk with all its meaning lost, is the ultimate symbol of the relationship that will not enter history. So little history attaches to that marriage that the only way that Pip has to identify the wedding ring as having belonged to a person of color is that the ring and the marriage it represented has been abandoned and forgotten.

Unlike the rest of the crew, Pip has some access to the traces left this kinship, but it is only at the cost of his only exclusion and abjection for, even among the Pequod’s crew of isolatoes, the prodigy remains on the outside. If the vision of black infancy as an

exception from reproductive history and futurity allows Melville to make it a means to rendering other types of non-normative kinship legible, these broadened horizons reinforce the abjection and exclusion of those bodies. By the novel's logic, to have written Yojo as a living child, rather than as a block of wood in the form of a child's corpse, would have driven Ishmael and Queequeg apart, because caring for him would require a reinvestment in future-oriented family that, for Melville, is inextricable from straightness. Similarly, while Melville's crew are made free by abandoning futurity for the present, Pip has no such chance. Trapped with a living body and drowned soul, Pip remains the sign of, not a participant in, the crew's refused future.

Prodigy thus holds a double-edged power as proof of a life that is constantly alienated by racial policing but yet that proves the limits of that policing. This doubleness is perhaps also inherent in its attachment to childhood, for if infancy has been a means of connecting kinship and history, it is because childhood's position between generations and its association with an ahistorical innocence have allowed it to become a symbol of both continuity and discontinuity. Hence, Giorgio Agamben argues for a connection between ghosts and children as "belonging neither to the signifiers of diachrony nor to those of synchrony" and therefore "appear[ing] as the signifiers of the same signifying opposition between the two worlds which constitutes the potential for a social system" (84). In other words, the dead subject and the not-yet-socialized subject share a position as being neither quite signs of time passing or of time being frozen; births and deaths might seem to signal the change brought by time, but they repeat continually and endlessly. Prodigies may seem isolated, but they appear over and over, and through that

repetition, they not only reaffirm white genealogy but also persistently remind that there is life, and kinship, beyond the white institutions of family.

Tempting as it is, then, to seize on children as the way to reject kinship that is dependent on its historicity and with it the genealogical fixations of white patriarchy or to announce as Lee Edelman does, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized” in order to say “fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop,” the symbolic associations of the black child are neither straightforward nor necessarily straight (29). José Muñoz’s response to Edelman that not all children are “the sovereign princes of futurity” reminds us that any viable counter to genealogy must take into account that those figures used to prop up genealogy can also be those who suffer from its exclusions (95). Recognizing the character Pip as both part of an ongoing mode of alienation for black subjects and as an inroads into recalling lost histories and the alternative possibilities they offered provides a way to think about how the attempts to break out of normative kinship can sometimes reiterate the very kind of exclusions that they seek to escape. The nexus formed by childhood, blackness, and the many strands of inheritance certainly is an essential site to consider reimagining kinship, but as Paul’s work shows, the most productive means to that goal may lie in recognizing related suffering and thereby reimagining the image of prodigy itself.

The Children of Malthus: Overpopulation, Resolution, and Reform in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*

As [British enclosure] progressed northward, the demand for labor in the great towns absorbed the surplus population; but when it came into the extreme Highlands, this refuge was wanting. Emigration to America now became the resource; and the surplus population were induced to this by means such as the Colonization Society now recommends and approves for promoting emigration to Liberia.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), p. 303

In the years immediately after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe found herself subject to two apparently unrelated strands of public criticism. The first was controversy over her novel's end, which exiles several of its surviving black protagonists to Liberia. The second, now obscure, controversy arose during Stowe's 1853 speaking tour of Britain and Ireland promoting the antislavery movement and her novel. That scandal centered on the fact that, despite her dedication to liberation in the U.S., many of Stowe's British patrons were themselves implicated in the ongoing violence of enclosure and the Highland Clearances. Her memoir of the trip, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, provoked especial ire for its chapter-long endorsement of the Duchess of Sutherland, an aristocrat whose family had spearheaded the enclosure movement and who had hosted Stowe with an elaborate hospitality during her tour, culminating in the gift of a gold bracelet shaped like a shackle (Newman 29). Remarkably, for a text written to answer a public outcry already circulating in British and U.S. newspapers, *Sunny Memories'* defense of the Highland Clearances turns back to the site of her earlier critique to argue that the Clearances are the product of the same inexorable laws that had spurred colonization in Liberia. In a chain of equivalence that suggests that the U.S. is to

Scotland what Liberia is to the U.S. Still more strangely, the common factor for Stowe between these two displacements is a distinctly Malthusian conception of “surplus population” spilling beyond the nation. Surplus population has reproduced at a rate that national borders cannot contain.

It is not necessarily surprising that Stowe’s vision of Scotland turns on ideas of population – Karl Marx was only one of many critics of Sutherland who accused her of the specific crime of Malthusianism.⁴⁹ Yet, why do these ideas of a population reproducing unsustainably evoke Liberia as a necessary term for explaining ideas that long-predated that nation? Moreover, what frame of reference allowed Stowe to equate the U.S. with the site of her failed ending to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, while likening the U.S. to Scotland in the same breath? One answer, I argue, can be found in the novel that followed her British tour, Stowe’s 1856 *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. Although *Dred* has seen a surge of critical interest for its ambivalent endorsement of violent resistance, the novel’s foundational interest in population and in particularly Malthusian ideas of birth and reproduction has gone largely overlooked. However, by attending to the influence of Thomas Robert Malthus’s 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* in the text, I argue that we can recognize *Dred* as a substantial revision of *Uncle Tom’s* depictions of both reproduction and narrative resolution. Borrowing from Malthus’s conviction that the domestic sphere is inseparable from the political world but

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “The Duchess of Sutherland and Slavery.” [February 8-9, 1853] *Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, ed. James Ledbetter. (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 113-119, 116.

Donald McLeod’s parodic response to *Sunny Memories, Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland* (1857), echoes Marx in its condemnation of the “monstrous sophistry” that allowed Sutherland to espouse a “desire to liberties and blessings upon the American slaves, which they so sternly and Malthusian-like deny to their own people” (112).

formed a significant source of the nation's problems, Stowe challenges the reform novel's drift towards the reproductive futurity of marriage plots and their implicit reliance on settler colonialism. Instead, *Dred* offers an experiment in thinking about populations that have run out of colonies to which to escape and about families that are the vehicles for political violence.

Stowe's refusal to let reproduction form the horizons of the novel has especial significance for the long-standing difficulty of reconciling Stowe's moments of radicalism with her novels' tendency towards much more conservative endings. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has famously come under scrutiny for the ease with which the radical potential present in the midpoint of the text deflates into a comparatively placid ending, in which white readers are left "feeling right" while black characters are neatly banished to heaven or to the Liberian colonization project. In Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass's final published exchange about the value of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, nearly the only point of agreement between the two is the error of the colonization plot.⁵⁰ As one contemporary African American reader summarized the close of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "Uncle Tom must be killed, George Harris exiled! Heaven for dead Negroes! Liberia for living mulattoes. Neither can live on the American continent."⁵¹ The novel's resolution thus seems to uphold a white-only U.S. as the reward for white abolitionists, such that, as Isabella Furth argues, Liberian colonization "serves as a means of purging a retrograde

⁵⁰ Martin Delany, "Mrs. Stowe's Position" and Franklin Douglass, "The Letter of M.R. Delany," *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (May 6, 1853): 1. Both are available on *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture*, University of Virginia, 2012. Web.

⁵¹ Quoted in Isabella Furth, "Manifest Destiny, Manifest Domesticity, and the Leaven of Whiteness in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Arizona Quarterly* 55 no. 2 (Summer 1999): 31-55, 45.

element from the American utopia.”⁵² Rather than positing a solution to racial violence, Stowe offers her readers the appearance of closure by instead proposing a removal of raced bodies from the field of that violence.

The intensity of the criticism for this reliance on Liberia to solve the problems of the U.S. may well have come as a surprise to Stowe, because the ending that she gives George and Eliza is perhaps the most conventional and traditionally satisfying one available to the novel; they marry and raise children in a supposedly undeveloped land secluded from the political problems of the novel. Liberia, in that framing, emerges as a prop for a marriage plot that even Stowe recognizes as insufficient to the narrative. Only after showing the impossibility of a stable home in these places, does the plot raise the prospect of Liberia; before projecting their move to Liberia, Stowe displaces the family from Canada to France and, after political turmoil, from France back to the U.S. (608). The plot’s basic structure, too, seems to suffer from the inadequacy of a conventionally novelistic ending, in which characters meet good fortune through individual merit without any larger systemic change, to address the impossibly systemic nature of U.S. racial violence. Noting Stowe’s movement to “two fictional codas and one non-fictional chapter” clustered at the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Christopher Diller observes that it is “almost as if she did not know where or how to conclude her story” (27).

The promise of a peaceful domesticity fails to cohere in the face of a political system that does not recognize the integrity of black families. This critique of marriage plot is made explicitly by several African American authors of the period. Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) famously ends with the declaration “Reader,

⁵² Furth, “Manifest Destiny,” 48.

my story ends in freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” and that she still does “not sit with [her] children in a home of [her] own” because what freedom she has is insufficient for security. Similarly, in his 1850 *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, Bibb offers regret for the domesticity he was able to find under slavery only contributed to the slave system’s numbers, writing that “if ever there was any one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over, it is that of being a father and a husband of slaves. I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am only the father of one slave” (44). Within the area of the U.S., the impossibility of the marriage plot as a resolution for black families was a well-established point.

For the children of George and Eliza to signal the promise of an escape from oppression, Stowe cannot just establish a new household. She must imagine some space in which that household could be plausibly distanced from the public sphere, a move which, as Mark Rifkin has argued, historically relies on an imperialist vision of the world as empty space.⁵³ Stowe’s syllogistic alignment of Scotland, Liberia, and the U.S. however reveals a concerned awareness that Britain was treating the U.S. in the same way that the U.S. was using Africa – as a means of resolution for the displaced bodies that result from a “surplus population,” regardless of whether the other space has already been populated.⁵⁴ The particular conditions through which Stowe would have encountered Malthusianism – the resident of a settler-colonial nation observing a wave of

⁵³ Mark Rifkin, *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014).

⁵⁴ Before Marx took up the term, the phrase “surplus population” was common shorthand for the terms of Malthusian debate. For instance, Dickens’s 1843 *A Christmas Carol* uses Ebenezer Scrooge’s complaint that charity that only promotes “surplus population” to cue readers to Scrooge’s Malthusianism (Christianson 80).

immigration to her country at the same time that U.S. continental expansion was slowing – registers in her particular interest in the putative elsewhere that British Malthusians (though not Malthus himself) saw as a solution to population problems. As such, the actual text of *Essay of Population* is in many ways less important than the history of its U.S. reception. In particular, I argue that the marriage plot relies upon an imperialist imaginary of open space that is impossible in Stowe’s Malthusian world. The liberal vision of family as starting in a new space outside of existing politics breaks down with Stowe’s awareness of colonial space as an already occupied area.

This geopolitical imaginary thus has major implications for narrative form. However, it also substantially alters the role of children in Stowe’s novels. Critical interpretation of childhood in U.S. literature, particularly nineteenth-century literature, has focused predominantly on depictions of white children as a source of utopian innocence, even as they attend to the subjects excluded by that construction.⁵⁵ At the same time, a similar and related focus has also grown up around the character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva as the defining template of literary childhood of the period, with occasional comparison to the minstrelsy of Topsy, her enslaved counterpart in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). But how might the conversation change if attention shifted from Stowe’s first novel to her second, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), and the archetypal child shifted from Eva to the slightly older and far less innocent Nina?

⁵⁵ Most notably, Robin Bernstein has suggested that idealized child purity, coded as white, is the defining trait of antebellum literature’s depiction of childhood; she writes, “by the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself” (4). See, additionally, Lauren Berlant, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Lee Edelman for broader theoretical readings of child innocence as a pernicious form of utopianism and Anna Mae Duane, Viviana Zelizer, and Karen J. Sánchez-Eppler for more detailed examinations of such qualities in the nineteenth century.

Rather than sentimentalism, I argue that the relevant lens for understanding the children of *Dred* is actually closer to Malthusianism and influenced by Stowe's time in Scotland, bringing not utopic relief but an intensification and multiplication of whatever problems the marriage plot might seek to solve.

The stakes of this recentering from Eva to Nina therefore go beyond either a thought experiment in the disciplinary formation of child studies or another rereading of *Dred* as an isolated text. While I am interested in both of those goals, my priority is that reconsidering the ways that children can animate political novels can also reorder our understanding of how nineteenth-century plots are able to encapsulate social problems. The child seen by sentimentalism and the child seen by proponents of Malthusianism prompt dramatically different orientations towards history. The former's insistence on childhood as a separation from the social order of the "adult" world establishes the basis for liberal individualism's singular forgetfulness of the past by suggesting that each new individual arises from a vacuum. The latter, as grim and potentially dehumanizing as it can be, is able to imagine birth as the index of an accumulating time. In short, it lets us see children not as retreats into either domestic bliss or sentimental catharsis, but products of and participants in their social world.

Where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sought to accomplish this by falling back onto a trajectory out of the national into the settler colonial, *Dred* takes on the far more difficult business of finding resolution when the household carries its politics with it. By presenting childhood as a product of inequality, Stowe prevents the founding of any new family from serving as a substitute for the systemic, legal problems of *Dred*. This failed departure from the reach of slavery into domestic bliss is, I argue, the moment when an

unlikely strand of Malthusianism creeps into Stowe's work, allowing her to see childhood ongoing imbrication in slavery and to critique the novelistic endings that she herself had employed. If Malthusianism is premised on the interpretation of reproduction as having a dystopian bent, then the establishment of a new family is no longer an opening in the political sphere but a continuation and intensification of national decline. In the case of *Dred*, the U.S. relation to Malthusianism sets her characters on an impossible search for new land on which to build new families, in hopes of reaching that now nonexistent space beyond politics. Finding none, they spiral inwards towards the impossibly crowded wilderness of the swamp at the center of the novel. Through the site of this dense life, Stowe captures a different role for the child, recasting birth not as a departure from systemic history but as a continuation and crystallization of it.

Malthus and the Americas

If Stowe had been born in Britain, rather simply a repeat visitor, turning to Malthus as a key for understanding her work would be a relatively familiar critical move. It is increasingly common for scholars to recognize the influence of Malthus's theory of an inevitable overpopulation over British literature in the nineteenth century. These critics, including Lauren Cameron, Philip Connell, and Emily Steinlight, have mapped a persistent and sometimes antipathetic influence on how British authors imagined political economy, poverty, animality, and biopolitics more generally, pointing to both the personal connections between Malthus and the literary community as well as to the

saturation of Malthus's ideas in public discourse.⁵⁶ However, no comparable body of criticism exists in U.S. literary studies.⁵⁷ This absence is not for lack of early U.S. readers. In their recent study, *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus*, Alison Bashford and Joyce Chaplin push for a more global understanding of Malthus as central to nineteenth-century understandings of empire.⁵⁸ As George Johnson Cady demonstrates, many of the first pieces of political economic writing in the U.S. make reference to Malthus, and a number of influential thinkers – such as Matthew Carey, Alexander H. Everett, and George Tucker, along with many others – wrote essays responding directly to Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Conversely, Malthus's ideas had their own American roots. Malthus's interest in the effect that marriage has on rates of reproduction drew much of its inspiration from Benjamin Franklin's 1755 essay on population growth in the Americas, *Observations on the Increase of Mankind* (Eustace 7) and Malthus's 1807 edition of *Essay on Population* repeatedly cites Franklin as source and interlocutor.

Critical inattention to Malthus's place in early American literature is instead more likely prompted by the unstable standing of the *Essay on Population* among U.S. readers. Malthusian ideas circulated quickly and widely among political elites like Thomas

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Lauren Campbell's "Mary Shelley's Malthusian Objections in *The Last Man*," *Nineteenth-Century* 67 no. 2 (September 2012): 177-203; Philip Connell's "Wordsworth, Malthus, and the 1805 *Prelude*," *Essays in Criticism* 50 (2000): 242-267; Dallin Lewis, "Prophesying the Present: Shelley's Critique of Malthus in *A Defense of Poetry*," *European Romantic Review* 25 no. 5 (2014): 575-590; Maureen Noelle McLane, "Literate Species: Populations, 'Humanities,' and *Frankenstein*," *ELH* 63 no. 4 (1996): 959-988; and Emily Steinlight's "Hardy's Unnecessary Lives: The Novel as Surplus," *Novel* 47 no. 2 (June 2014): 224-241.

⁵⁷ Rare essays have taken up the question – Beryl Rowland's "Sitting up with a Corpse: Malthus according to Melville in 'Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs,'" *Journal of American Studies* 6 no. 1 (April 1972): 69-83, for example, offers one such analysis – but there has been nothing approaching the sustained attention shown in British studies, particularly after the end of the eighteenth century.

⁵⁸ Alison Bashford and Joyce Chaplin, *The New Worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: Rereading the 'Principle of Population'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Jefferson (Jefferson 526) and John Adams (Adams 206), both of whom discuss it in their personal correspondence.⁵⁹ For more casual readers, too, periodicals such as the *Richmond Enquirer* ran essays summarizing and debating Malthusian principles (Eustace 13-4) and, by 1809, the first U.S. imprint of *Essay on Population* had appeared in Washington DC (Eustace 15). Yet, as historian Nicole Eustace argues, the considerable interest among Americans had more to do with celebrating the high birthrates of Anglo settlers in the U.S. than in worrying about the misery that Malthus ascribed to those births. As she observes, “often, when Americans did offer any approval of Malthus, it was only to applaud his exact and methodical accounting of American population strength, not to agree with his argument that future increases should be curtailed” (17). Malthus, in other words, was more significant for many early American as either a convenient antagonist for patriotic political economists or, in more hurried readings, as a source of pride and publicity for the country’s growth, without regard for Malthus’s larger claims.

By the time of Malthus’s death in 1834, popular awareness of his *Essay on Population* was thus hinged on quite different reading of the text than the concerns about scarcity that drove British readers and that largely drive modern interpretations. Such readings often produced Malthus as a European foil for the heady optimism of U.S. settler colonialism, praising American fertility. For instance, when *The Cincinnati Mirror* published a column in 1835 announcing Malthus’s death, they approach his work with a

⁵⁹ Though Adams does not disagree with the content of Malthus’s arguments, he was somewhat cynical about their novelty, declaring in a letter to John Taylor, “that the first want of man is his dinner, and the second his girl, were truths well known to every democrat and aristocrat long before the great philosopher Malthus arose to think he enlightened the world by the discovery” (516).

typically askew understanding of his argument. The unnamed author recommends Malthus as “the ablest expounder” of political economy and is confident that his ideas will already be familiar to the newspaper’s readers, declaring that “everybody knows something of his peculiar doctrines in regard to population” (“Death of Malthus”). The substance of what that something is, however, is also quickly put in doubt, because for the author, the heart of Malthus’s argument was neither poverty, nor misery, but children and the freedom to have them. The author’s summary of Malthus’s work – that “the rearing up of children was about the worst sort of business which could be pursued; and that their increase would at some day call upon government to interpose checks” – provokes a tangent that occupies the rest of the column, which returns to Malthus only in its final sentence. Bragging that Ohio is unbeatable for its number of “flaxen-headed, chubby-headed yonkers,” the column turns from Malthus to a rhapsodic image of sailing down the river and seeing that “in front of almost every cabin [...] a swarm of children” radiating “contentment and affection.” For the columnist, these children evidentially mark the true, titular “Death of Malthus” by supposedly demonstrating the ultimate failure of his ideas.

This reading of Malthus is somewhat glib – joking, for example, about the apparent hypocrisy of Malthus himself having fathered nine children – but its dismissal of Malthusian population theory as irrelevant in the U.S. is not so superficial as it first seems. Indeed, the text of *Essay on Population* has its own conflicted relationship with the Americas that shaped this U.S. response, predicated on still uncertain status that the newly-independent U.S. held to the British geographic imaginary. If *The Cincinnati Mirror* seems unimpressed by Malthus’s predictions that rising populations were a

danger rather than a strength, its blithe pride in the children of its western territories emerges from a mythology of settler colonialism that Malthus himself helped to reinforce, even as he doubted how long-lived its exceptionalism would be. The U.S. reaction to Malthus, as a result, was always mediated by its textual status as evidence and application in *Essay on Population*, as well as by the U.S. geopolitical standing as former colony and ongoing empire.⁶⁰

As a system that edges towards an equilibrium between births and starvation, Malthus's population theory traces a historical process tending towards a state close to stasis, arguing that the poor of Britain already live in this harshly balanced state of necessary scarcity in which greater resources would only lead to greater need. Attempts to alleviate their hunger must fail, he argues, because "the transfer of three shillings and sixpence a day to every labourer would not increase the quantity of meat in the country. There is not at present enough for all to have a decent share" (94). In his view, Britain's population has grown to the edge of what it can sustain and any attempt at relieving the resulting suffering causes these classes to produce still more children and therefore still more need.⁶¹ While granting the possibility that food supplies might increase and calling for some measures to promote agriculture, Malthus's conclusion is that no such reform

⁶⁰ For an example of the way that Malthus's use of early U.S. demographics as evidence could inspire pride, see *The North American Review*'s 1822 article "An Inquiry concerning the power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind," which declares that "it was not, however, until the publication of the American censuses, that the world was enabled to judge with any degree of accuracy, in how short a period this doubling could be accomplished. [...] Most of the writers who have attempted to answer Mr. Malthus, at least those whose works have lived long enough to cross the Atlantic, have been content to acquiesce in the truth of the geometrical increase" (289).

⁶¹ He writes of the English Poor Laws that their "obvious" effect is "to increase the population without increasing the food for its support. A poor man may marry with little or no prospect of being able to support a family in independence" (97).

could ever be sufficient. He writes, for instance, that “the demand for an increase quantity of subsistence is, with few exceptions, constant everywhere, yet we see how slowly it is answered in all those countries that have been long occupied” (100). Teleologies of progress bottom out in this state of a need that is “constant” and amelioration that comes “slowly,” if at all. Nations “long occupied” reach what is essentially a saturation point, unable to change the condition of a significant portion of their population.

However, because he stations Britain at this late stage of population growth, Malthus turns to the Americans as a form of control, imaging the Anglo settlers of the U.S. as roughly analogous to some earlier, as yet unpopulated western Europe. Census data from 1740s New Jersey is set alongside that of England and France to suggest the latent reproductive potential of those nations, if they were not already under the stress of their existing population. U.S. population figures also form the basis for half of his most famous formulation⁶² – the notion that population increases exponentially:

In the United States of America, where the means of subsistence have been more ample, the manners of the people more pure, and consequently the checks to early marriage fewer, than in any of the modern states of Europe, the population has been found to double itself in twenty-five years. This ratio of increase, though short of the utmost power of population, yet as the result of actual experience, we will take as our rule, and say, that population, when unchecked, goes on doubling itself every twenty-five years or increases in a geometrical ratio. (74)

⁶² Though Malthus cites another demographer, Richard Price, for the data behind this rate, the assertion that U.S. populations doubled every twenty-five years appears earlier in Franklin’s “Observations on the Increase of Mankind” (Franklin 9).

Malthus centers U.S. reproduction as the nearest available approximation of ideal human fertility, substituting its rate of population increase as the universal rate of increase. However, in the same moment that Malthus founds his theories upon U.S. data, he distances those settlers from the effects of his models. It is precisely because he asserts that land is available and unoccupied, despite his acknowledgements elsewhere of Native American populations, and that settlers are “more pure” – essentially, that the checks of misery do not apply or apply much less – that he can set up the U.S. as the normative model for human reproduction. His arguments therefore echo myths of American exceptionalism, presenting “the English North American colonies” not only as making “by far the most rapid progress” compared with contemporary colonies held by other European nation, but as being “probably without parallel in history” for its increase in number” (105). Malthus establishes the U.S. as the exception through which he proves the rule.

Although his rhetoric overlaps with the most chauvinistic strands of U.S. nationalism, *Essay on Population* makes clear that a decline into poverty and bare survival remains inevitable. In a work designed in large part as a counter to the utopian narratives of progress put forward by William Godwin and Marquis de Condorcet, Malthus is similarly cynical about imperial expansion as a means of avoiding the poverty of Europe. Hence, as much as he praises it above non-British colonies, Malthus makes clear that a U.S. decline into the same poverty and bare survival is inevitable. Disputing philosopher’s Richard Price’s belief that American democracy made the U.S. into a special case, Malthus argues that “even civil liberty, all powerful as it is, will not create fresh land” and observers can be “perfectly sure” that the unparalleled population growth

he claims “will not long continue” (197). What appears exceptionalist in Malthus is quickly reframed as evidence that the U.S. is on the same trajectory as other nations, albeit at a different stage, and that nothing can be done to depart from this path towards misery. As he writes, “the situation of new colonies, well governed, is a bloom of youth that no efforts can arrest” (198). Thus, settler colonialism may stave off misery from the settlers, but the growth that Price saw as proof of a bright future, Malthus took as evidence that a future decline was inevitable.

What difference is made for U.S. readers of Malthus, therefore, is not a question of final results but matter of temporal orientation. Where for Britain, Malthus’s writing suggested an endless continuance of a suffering that was already present and mundane, for the U.S., the coming of Malthusian conditions appeared as imminent catastrophe. For British readers *Essay on Population* predicts the impossibility of reform, promising that whatever policies might be put in place, the current situation of the country would be the perpetual situation of the country. For U.S. readers invested in Manifest Destiny, however, the core of Malthus was that their time as an alternative to and improvement on Europe was running out. As soon as they were unable to colonize further, the misery associated with the “Old World” would come for the New. Preempting Frederick Turner’s “frontier thesis,” the pro-slavery academic Thomas R. Dew proclaimed as early 1836 that “the time must come when the powerfully elastic spring of our rapidly increasing numbers shall fill up our wide spread territory with a dense population – when the great safety valve of the west will be closed against us [...] then will come the great and fearful pressure upon the engine,” threatening mobocracy and an end to private

property (19).⁶³ What had been a critique of the Poor Laws, in other words, took on the air of the apocalyptic, as the coming applicability of Malthusianism to the U.S. came to signify a secular end of days for the nation.

The debates that sprang up around population theory were accordingly slanted towards concerns, or even outright fears, about the nature of that terminal stage of history. Even many Malthusian opponents, most prominently the political economist Henry C. Carey, took Malthus's vision of an eventual scarcity caused by over-population as possible, arguing less with its content than its immediacy. As a result, anti-Malthusian writings could take on their own strand of apocalyptic language, but with the greater sense of distance and therefore complacency about that future. Carey writes, for instance, that "the time *may* arrive when the world will be so fully occupied that there will not be even room, but we may safely leave that distant future to the benevolent care of the Deity" (77). Similarly, a column for the *North American Review* entitled "An Inquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind" declares Malthus's basic tenets of population to be "undeniable" but mockingly likens policy decisions based on those tenets to a "speculatist in natural philosophy" demonstrating that "the sun was gradually but surely expending its stock of light and heat" and therefore recommending "the instant necessity of economizing with the utmost care our fuel and oil" (396). While these scholars did also seek to counter the grounds of Malthus's arguments, a large part of their response was to defer his version of the future to some more distant horizon.

⁶³ For additional discussion of Dew's Malthusian pessimism, see Hodgson, "Malthus and American Slavery," 760-761.

In contrast to its original application, U.S. writers therefore took up Malthusian analysis not to justify the present as inevitable but to argue for a deliberate management of how this future, stable population would be composed. As Dennis Hodgson argues, Malthusianism played a significant role in the U.S. debates over slavery, offering pro-slavery advocates evidence in favor of plantation-based paternalism as the only viable system for managing population. At the same time, as Hodgson demonstrates, anti-slavery writers used Malthus to portray slavery as forcing white populations to struggle for increasingly scarce resources against a purportedly faster-growing black population. For critics of immigration, too, this competitive population model supported a depiction of imperial expansion in the West under threat from the Irish, Scottish, and Southern European populations settling west as well. In fact, one of the most famous such pamphlets, *A Plea for the West* (1835), was published by Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher. While Beecher does not cite Malthus directly and does retain the possibility of a utopian nation, his assertion that "the West is filling up as by ocean waves; and [...] the capital of the East and of Europe hold competition for her acceptance and use" retains a sense of finite territory and inevitably explosive populations (30-31). For writers like Beecher, the chief relevance of Malthus in the nation is as an exhortation to seek racial, ethnic, and religious homogeneity in the U.S. lest this coming scarcity threaten white Protestantism's hold on national resources.

What Stowe Learned from Scotland

The popularity of citing Malthus by both pro- and anti-slavery advocates during the debate over slavery had cast Stowe as a tacit interlocutor of his population theory from

the first publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In an 1858 article titled “The Problem of Free Society” published in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, for example, readers are equally warned away from “the darkest fictions of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe” and encouraged towards “the splendid work of Malthus on Population,” signifying Stowe and Malthus’s shared status as central figureheads for the intellectual debate over abolition. Yet, the article also gestures obliquely to a more complex connection. In the midst a discussion of the suffering of the British working classes, the editorial pauses to take a swipe at one of Stowe’s supporters, declaring “that very Duchess of Sutherland, the patroness of Mrs. Stowe, and writer of a Pharisaical appeal to the ladies of America on the subject of slavery, has ejected for that purpose hundreds of her tenants.” Thus, in rehearsing an old argument that British laborers deserved more sympathy than American slaves, the article makes a similarly common accusation of hypocrisy within the abolitionist movement.

To understand the full import of this aside, though, requires readers to be aware of the controversy that had broken out over Stowe’s time in Scotland. As mentioned, U.S. readers might have learned of the scandal partly through the writings of Karl Marx, who objected to the convergence of the anti-slavery movement and the forcible enclosure of common lands.⁶⁴ In his 1853 *New York Tribune* column “The Duchess of Sutherland and Slavery” critiquing Stowe for her choice of host, Marx describes the shift from the community-based practices of Scottish crofters to an abusive tenancy system, declaring “the person who stood at the head of this economic revolution was a female Mehemet

⁶⁴ In a footnote in *Capital*, Marx suggests he was among the first to bring the contradiction to the U.S. public, writing that he “gave the facts about the Sutherland slaves in *The New York Tribune*” (892), and though other papers, such as *The New York Observer* and *The Liberator* also reported the stories, Marx’s column does appear to be one of the earliest such articles in the U.S. press.

Ali, who had well digested her Malthus – the *Countess of Sutherland*” (116). Complaints against the friendship between Sutherland and Stowe intensified with Stowe’s publication of *Sunny Memories*, which explicitly contests accusations of cruelty in the press and judges the whole arrangement as an “almost sublime instance of the benevolent employment of superior wealth” (313). This markedly favorable approach to the Sutherland estate’s policies is also underscored by Stowe’s explanation of the demographic changes that enclosure brought in a passage that is one of her clearest nonfiction references to population theories and suggests the influences that her friend’s “well digested” Malthusianism found a ready audience. *Sunny Memories* also generated the comparison between Liberia and Scotland that provided my epigraph. Stowe’s history of Scottish overpopulation finding outlets in the United States mirrors Malthus’s analysis of Scotland from the third edition of *Essay on Population*, which claims that “half of the surplus births in Scotland is drawn off in emigrations” (504).⁶⁵ Moreover, her attention to balancing of “surplus population” against the “resource” of available land, whether in America or Britain, aligns her framework for understanding this process as a natural flow of bodies in mass with the collective bodies that Armstrong identifies with Malthus.

More crucial for understanding Stowe’s literature, though, is her attempt to translate between Scottish emigration to the U.S. and the potential for African American emigration to Liberia. By the time she wrote this passage, Stowe had already publically recanted her apparent support for Liberian colonization as well as her decision to end

⁶⁵ Before Marx took up the term, the phrase “surplus population” was common shorthand for the terms of Malthusian debate. For instance, Dickens’s 1843 *A Christmas Carol* presents Ebenezer Scrooge muttering about how charity only promotes a “surplus population” as a way to cue readers that Scrooge’s heartlessness is a product of his Malthusianism (Christianson 80).

Uncle Tom's Cabin with its invocation.⁶⁶ Records of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in New York a year earlier report that Stowe wrote to them claiming her dislike for the American Colonization society, the primary force in deporting African Americans to Liberia (Powell 123). The minutes of this meeting also include a personal testimony from an acquaintance of Stowe's that "Mrs. Stowe had told him that if she were to write 'Uncle Tom' again, she would not send George Harris to Liberia" (qtd. in Powell 123). While the comparison might thus suggest an oblique criticism of Sutherland, Stowe's recasting of both migrations make them appear less as engineered events than as inevitable, natural flows; the displaced population that cannot be "absorbed" within the nation overflows the borders of the nation.

Because Stowe has so little interest in individual action, whether on the part of the Sutherland estate and the American Colonization Society or by the Scottish farmers and the African Americans those bodies sought to remove, her portrait of these settler expansions has a marked lack of utopianism. There is no hint that removal to the U.S. will start a new society for Scottish farmers, nor that Liberia will prove to be a promised land for African Americans. In fact, rather than isolating these settler colonies as exceptional spaces or escapes from the pressure of enclosure or slavery and anti-black violence, her emphasis lies in the ways that Scottish settlement in the U.S. or African American settlement in Liberia are, in fact, the ongoing results of these systems.

Compared with George's apocalyptic vision of the Liberian colony in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

⁶⁶ I here follow the distinction made by Martin Delaney and others between "colonization," signifying a coercive and white-led removal of African Americans to Africa, and "emigration," a voluntary and black-led renunciation of the U.S. The distinction does, however, break down somewhat in my discussion of Malthusian framings of these processes, as notion of individual agency gives way to aggregate forces.

as the field for “another era to arise” and sign of a coming “hour of universal peace and brotherhood” (611), this later Liberia is almost incidental, as if the “surplus population” drifted naturally to any place perceived as more empty.

Rather than offering emigration as an oppositional way of life or a true alternative, Stowe frames these departures as continuations, albeit in different forms and different spaces, of the systems at work in the original nation. This is the difference made by the U.S.’s standing as settler colonial standing; it cannot serve precisely as counterpart to either Britain or Liberia because, as Stowe’s recursive analogy – the U.S. is Britain’s Liberia, and therefore Liberia serves as the equivalent of U.S. for the U.S. – demonstrates, it overlaps each position. This overlap therefore does not and cannot place the peoples of the U.S. and Liberia in any truly common footing, for its triangulation also erases the genocide still at work in clearing the Americas for the U.S. However, for Stowe, the comparison does seem to offer a reminder that if Britain can treat the U.S. as merely an outlet for excess population, treating Liberia as a tidy space of resolution fails to account for the ways that migrant populations raise new issues of their own or for the lives already in progress there.

The Crowds of Dred

While public backlash against the Liberian colonization plot of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* alone might have been enough to ensure that her second novel *Dred* would take a different approach, Stowe’s brush with Malthusianism registers in *Dred*’s attention to the social and narrative problems created by too many births. Even from the distance of plot summary, *Dred* is an over-crowded novel. At the text’s opening, the novel’s center appears to

be a fairly conventional coming-of-age story, in which the motherless protagonist Nina Gordon must mature from the thoughtless flirtations that have resulted in her simultaneous engagements with three different men into the Christian and heterosexual maturity of marriage. The narrative quickly branches out, however, to the struggles of her enslaved half-brother Harry, who is desperately trying to keep the plantation afloat to protect his sister and to prevent all of the plantation slaves from going to auction, while also trying to preserve his marriage with the naïvely perfect Lisette. After Nina's love interest, the aspiring lawyer and idealistic abolitionist Edward Clayton arrives, the novel adds his struggles with the legal system to its plot lines, along with the characters of his parents and sister. Running alongside the family plots of the Gordons and the Claytons is a plot strand devoted to the difficulties of a poor, white family squatting on the edge of the Gordon family. Over the scope of the narrative, Stowe also takes up two trials based on real events and a religious controversy, each centering on characters not yet mentioned. Beside all this is the connecting thread offered by the figure of Dred, an escaped slave, mystic, and son of Denmark Vesey who lives in the swamp near the Gordon plantation and preaches to bring about divine justice by active revolution.

Dred's presence in the text and the centrality that the novel's title gives his otherwise peripheral role has drawn a number of critics to note how immediate the prospect of apocalypse appears throughout *Dred* and how inextricable Stowe's eschatology is from her abolitionism. Claudia Stokes describes the plot of *Dred* as enacting the "fulfilment of biblical prophecy" and as a considerable escalation of Stowe's millennialism, in that "where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only foretells the imminent destruction of American civilization, *Dred* dramaticizes such an event, as slavery unleashes chaos

and lawlessness” (104). Samuel Otter concurs, declaring that “Stowe in *Dred* tells a different kind of story than she had in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” because, as he explains, “in *Dred*’s swamp, facts are saturated with figures and the nation is on the verge of apocalypse” (35). Dred’s oracular position seems clear, given his frequent declamations such as “the day of vengeance must come” (518), but the parallel that Otter raises between “facts saturated with figures” and the apocalypse helps to suggest why the statistical imagination of population would mesh so closely with the mystic warnings of eschatology. No single individual success, or individual martyrdom can hope to be sufficient for the mass imagination of the novel; the cosmological ending that is promised by Dred, but always deferred, represents the only scale on which resolution could even be posited.

That is to say, in the comparison inevitable to criticism about *Dred*, that character functions very differently than in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Where that novel’s logic of salvation by messianic sacrifice – in which the goodness of Eva and Tom make their sacrifices sufficient to organize the novel’s emotional weight around their loss – employs characters as archetypes so that their singular fate also signals larger social changes, that metonymic chain is altogether messier in *Dred*, because the crowd of characters too be represented and redeemed is always swelling. As one otherwise sympathetic review published in *The National Era* in 1856 complained, “there is no one character that runs through the whole book, like Uncle Tom” (162). The lack of a clear central protagonist to whom readers can cling registers in modern criticism as well. In his explanation of the greater success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Lawrence Buell largely attributes *Dred*’s problems to its more contradictory characters: Harry is too “torn by self-division” to be

properly heroic, “Eva’s adolescent quasi-analogue Nina Gordon remains so long a frivolous belle that her transfiguration into serious-minded plantation head seems unconvincing,” and Clayton is “compromised” by his “impracticality and quixoticism” as well as by his association with “Nina’s wobbliness” (242). In other words, all of the characters evoke clear types, but none can quite embody that type fully enough to become the almost metaphysical icons that the Eva, Tom, and Legree were. Collective identities in *Dred*, whether of femininity or Christianity or even human evil are always multiplying and extending in too many directions, for one character to embody so many lives.

One way to explain this shift is to frame it, as Buell does, as an increasing interest in realism and in the collision of that realism of with romance (242). What, though, does might the “wobbliness” that disqualifies Nina from Eva’s role as national saint and scapegoat tell us about the novel’s multiplying body of characters, its persistent interest in finding an end that can satisfy our interest in them all, or its continual frustration of those hopes? What does the failure of the central child’s innocence, the complication of a girl who has clear sexual desire and is a few years too old for that desire to be overlooked, reveal about Stowe’s narrative project? Unlike the tidy allegories of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that trade on infant utopianism and its underlying promise that domesticity can rescue politics, *Dred* is resolutely committed to endings that exceed the marriage plot and to avoid treating childhood as a source of closure. A sweeping system of apocalypse looms over the text, because the individualist resolutions of private romance only add to the problem of a system that feeds off reproduction. Amid the sprawling expanses of

flawed characters, the birth of another child only recapitulates the injuries structuring Stowe's domesticities.

Nowhere is this Malthusian influence stronger than in the plot that unfolds on the borders of both the plantations and the swamps, in Stowe's depiction of the poor families squatting at the outskirts of the Gordon property. These families are, like the slaves that Stowe describes, alternatively caricatured and pitied as the excess of the slave system, shown as perpetually unable to find wage labor in a slavery-based system and always at risk of falling into slavery themselves – a point that Stowe makes quite directly, having Nina's aunt declare that "There is n't any help for them, unless, as I said before, they were made slaves; and then they could be kept decent" (150). The basic argument that slavery injured white labor was a common one among the more openly anti-black critics of slavery (Foner 59-65), and although she never paints these poor whites as the single or even the central object of slavery's harm, Stowe's willingness to adopt this line of argument veers unsurprisingly close to its racism. What this attention to these squatters do allow, however, is to provide a very near analogue to the displacement of Scottish farmers that she discusses in *Sunny Memories* and thereby serve as a proxy through which Stowe refines her earlier endorsement of that "progress."

Thus, while the conditions that create this population are distinctly U.S.-centered, the language with which the land-holding plantation owners discuss them echoes nothing so closely as Malthusian disregard. These opinions, voiced most often by Nina's uncle, John Gordon, and her two aunts, Maria Gordon and Mrs. Nesbit, frame poor whites as an impossibly entrenched demographic problem, for which reform is impossible.

Annihilation is, as John Gordon declares, the only answer:

“It’s perfectly insufferable, what we proprietors have to bear from this tribe of creatures!” he said. “There ought to be hunting-parties got up to chase them down, and exterminate ‘em, just as we do rats. It would be a kindness to them; the only thing you can do for them is kill them. As for charity, or that kind of thing, you might as well throw victuals into the hollow logs as try to feed ‘em. The government ought to pass laws – we will have laws, somehow or other, – and get them out of the state.” (251)

As a “tribe of creatures” and an infestation of “rats,” the poor, for John Gordon, have moved past the perceived moral failing like idleness, alcoholism, and dishonesty often used to rationalize their class to become both animalized and intrinsically plural. They are, as Aunt Nesbit put it, a “whole race” onto themselves (151). Mass violence in form of John Gordon’s wish to “exterminate ‘em” or mass displacement in the equally violent but more vague desires for “laws, somehow or other” to police them out of the state become the only answer with a scale large enough to answer for Gordon’s framing of the problem on the level of population (251).

This rejection of charity is quickly undone by the power of sympathy, to an extent. Nina’s kindness to the children of a nearby family, Fanny and Teddy Cripps, is repeatedly held up as a sign of her developing goodness, and she becomes a model for Fanny, in particular, after the death of the children’s mother (297-298). Even her Uncle John immediately retreats from his position when he sees starving squatters face-to-face with an ambiguously worded declaration that “if people are going to starve, they mustn’t come on to my place to do it. I don’t mind what I don’t see – I wouldn’t mind if the whole litter of ‘em was drowned to-morrow; but, hang it, I can’t stand it if I know it!”

(258). Stowe partly plays off the selfishness of this charity, in which blissful ignorance is presented as preferable to aid, by making John into a somewhat buffoonish character, blustering but soft-hearted and comically terrified of his wife, who in turn develops some minor willingness to give food to the squatting family (289).

However, *Dred* remains deeply suspicious of the ability of this downward flowing benevolence to offer any meaningful counter to the systemic problems of either poor whites or enslaved peoples. After giving food and shelter to the family he had intended to evict, John laments that “there must be some place for them in the world” (254), echoing the family’s own explanation that they squat because they “an’t got nowhere else to be” but “have to got be somewhere,” but more importantly acknowledging the inadequacy of his piecemeal offerings (252). They may be coming to his house for dinner, but they have no place to stay. Instead, their reliance on John’s goodness is immediately revealed as vulnerability, not a utopian hospitality. John continues his sympathy for the squatters by indignantly wondering, “why can’t we pass a law to take them all in with our niggers, and then they’d have some one to take care of them.” His proposal of white slavery, though repugnant to Stowe for both racist and abolitionist reasons, is also the closest that she comes to a systemic recommendation (254). Its menace lies partly in its sense of being an inevitable possibility. As well intentioned as it might have been, even Nina’s attention to the Cripps is, first, premised on their ability to claim relation to a class above their own by right of their mother’s having been a Peyton and therefore “one of the most celebrated families in Virginia,” a reputation zealously guarded by the children’s enslaved guardian Tiff (131). Moreover, Nina’s attention and tutoring in “proper” class behavior cannot actually do anything to “save” the children; their only means to escape poverty and an

increasingly abusive father and stepmother is a literal escape orchestrated by Tiff away from the South. In other words, their environment determined their situation in a way that neither education nor individual action could change. Departure is the only option.

In fact, for all that Nina's relatives voice a hyper-violent strand of population control, Stowe herself adopts many of the demographic logics underpinning their thought. In her persuasive reading of *Dred*, Holly Jackson argues that the text driven towards thinking of groups that extend beyond the nuclear family. Noting that one of the plot's closing gestures is, after Nina dies abruptly, to settle Clayton in a platonic threesome with his sister and her friend, Jackson suggests that Stowe's true group ideal "a more group-oriented affinity, [...] denying special significance to relationships that guarantee the reproductive futurity of the social order, the traditional maneuver of the marriage plot" (85). The groups that Jackson traces are largely positive, but her description of Stowe's tension between her "pronounced strain of genealogical determinism" and her "desire to dethrone the family" need not only produce only the affirmative bonds of what Jackson terms "a nonkin model of political community" (77). Instead, this insistent focus on a relatedness that exceeds the personal attachments of family also hews closely to models of population, in which reproduction is no longer the sign of transcendent intimacy so much as an almost mechanistically determined byproduct.

The Family Life of Population

Reading Stowe through this lens of population does not erase the importance of domesticity in *Dred*, but it does highlight the frightening or even predatory relationships that can underwrite the nuclear family. Scarcity makes especially clear that the family is a

system of distributing resources, and that its members may not benefit equally. The children of these impoverished families take on an accordingly threatening air, oscillating between piteous and monstrous. Their lack of education renders them, in the words of Harry, to be “wild white children” (155), while at other times, they are “scared, cowering children [...] with features wasted and pinched blue with famine” (252). The burden that their birth represents to the family unit is also made surprisingly clear in Stowe’s portraits of infancy as animalistic or even cruel. When, for instance, John Gordon confronts his squatters, one of his first sights is of a “miserable, haggard woman, with large, wild eyes, sunken cheeks [...] and long, lean hands, like bird’s-claws,” whose suffering is compounded by nursing: “at her skinny breast an emaciated infant was hanging, pushing, with its little skeleton hands, as if to force the nourishment which nature no longer gave” (251). The blurred boundary between animacy and death of “little skeleton hands” trying to draw food from a starving woman presents maternity as an almost gothic torment made all the more unsettling by the reversal of an infant actively at work “hanging, pushing” upon the passive body of its mother.

Even in more traditionally sentimental scenes, in which children might be expected to be a locus of sympathy, Stowe decenters them, emphasizing instead the pain that they themselves can generate. In a portrait of the dying Susan Peyton, who had fallen from the genteel poverty of Nina Gordon into more dire straits by her marriage to John Cripps, for example, Stowe recirculates the language of sympathy without quite including her child:

The poor, frail creature in the bed seemed to be in one of those helpless hours of life’s voyage, when all its waves and billows are breaking over

the soul; and while the little new-comer was blindly rooting and striving at her breast, she had gathered the worn counterpane over her face, and the bed was shaken by her sobbings. (127)

Because she once held higher class status, Susan is accorded a more humanity and clearer sense of interiority than the “haggard woman” John encountered; in place of “hands, like bird’s-claws,” she has a “soul” as well as a name (251). In the midst of this highly conventional language of sympathetic relation, though, in which readers are invited to recognize “one of those helpless hours of life’s voyage” as an experience they might have endured themselves, Peyton’s child is markedly excluded. Its label as a “new-comer” frames the infant as an intruder, while its thoughtless “rooting and striving” against the body of a weeping woman emphasizes the animal side of infancy. Where the reader can feel for Susan’s pain, the unnamed child shows no sign that it can and seems driven only by selfish survival.⁶⁷

Stowe’s borderline demonization of infancy allows her to extrapolate a critique of the harms of compulsory heterosexuality from Malthusian reproduction. Susan suffers partly from the negligent cruelty of her spouse but also directly as a result of her children. Though hungry herself, she routinely gives up her meals to feed them, an act simultaneously naturalized and made sinister by Stowe’s explanation that the children, Fanny and Teddy, had “stood hungrily regarding her, as children will regard what is put on to a sick mother’s plate” (137). They stand watching her, as they might watch her

⁶⁷ This notion of a child, even an infant, without a natural connection to her or his mother’s pain challenges a common antebellum belief that that infant affect is instinctively aligned with what the mother is feeling. See Chapter 1 for instances of this belief and a longer discussion of its implications.

food, in a slippage between being a mother and being consumed that is intensified by the detail that a “sick mother’s plate” is under particular scrutiny, apparently because she is a weaker target. Their relationship, though framed as far healthier than that with their father, resembles parasitism far more than an ideal of maternal martyrdom, especially because Susan so explicitly regrets her role in the family. Her greatest emotional connection with her children comes when she hails the future adult version of Fanny, begging her daughter to find a different life than her own: “go away! go away, child! O, I wish I had never been born! I wish you had never been born, nor Teddy, nor the baby! It’s all nothing but trouble and sorrow! Fanny, don’t you ever marry! Mind what I tell you!” (127). Domesticity and, in particular, the reproductive burden of so unwanted births – Fanny’s, Teddy’s, the baby’s – have destroyed Susan so thoroughly that her last words about the comfort of Jesus can only partially mitigate that her second to last words, “give me rest – *please* do!” plead for the quiet privacy of death (142).

The lives of the Cripps family have a tenuous value in the overarching antislavery mission of *Dred*, threatening to divert the course of the narrative from an abolitionism based in the natural rights of black characters like Harry and Dred into a murkier argument about the injuries that slavery inflicts on white labor.⁶⁸ Yet, while their presence and the hazy presence of the other families like them may not do much to illuminate slavery directly, they do fundamentally change the status of the family and romance plots driving the Gordons and Claytons. By insisting on the material labor

⁶⁸ Although, I do not address it here, *Dred* has long been understood as practicing a particularly legal and rights-oriented form of sentimentalism. For a classic discussion of this interplay between feeling and law, see Gregg D. Crane’s “Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe’s Antislavery Novels.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 51.2 (Sept. 1996): 176-204.

underpinning childhood, Stowe's frighteningly selfish infants set the possibility of an angelic child at a slant and, as I will argue in the next section, the failure of Susan's death, Christian as it was, to elevate, redeem or affect her children in any way other than abandonment cues the reader early in the novel to doubt just what heroic death can accomplish in a novel with more interest in the aggregate than the individual.

Marriage Plot and the Malthusian Child

One effect of the conventional marriage plot more broadly has been to regulate when children crop up in the narrative, pushing them from the main body of the novel to either end of the text. Children appear more frequently at beginning when the protagonist is a child herself or at the end, as proof and epilogue of a successfully established marriage. The point itself is an old one. Henry James's 1888 "Art of Fiction" defines the basic cliché of the "happy ending" as a parceling out of "prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, [...] and cheerful remarks" (382). Progeny, alongside property, has been one of the most popular currencies with which novels reward their protagonists and mark the happy resolution of plot. Exceptions abound, of course. Seduction plots, such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *Adam Bede*, generate the most mid-narrative children, but the scandal of those children and their function in the novel is that their untimeliness proves a deviation from the marriage plot proper; the very appearance of such a child proves that the path to marriage has gone wrong. Likewise, for sentimental novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the tragic redemptive force of the angelic, typically feminine child who dies mid-narrative is that because she dies without having matured into parenthood, the untimeliness of her death endows her with the transcendent authority of spiritual guardian. In the case of Eva,

for instance, Gillian Brown has argued that Eva's saintliness emerges from the uncanny maturity of a girl who "emblemizes the virtues of motherhood as well as of childhood," so that by her death, "Eva is the child who is the mother to the woman" (519). Such child saints die without reaching the closure of their own children because their sanctity depends on a sense that they have exceeded a normative sense of age and development.

For the more mundane and "deserving" protagonist, however, passing from being a child to having children marks the successful development of subjectivity and its accompanying agency. One of the most widespread readings of this movement from childhood to childbearing in U.S. literature has focused on individualist development, reading the protagonist's decision to marry as a break from an unhealthy form of domesticity and the establishment of a new, more individualist model of kinship. As Cindy Weinstein has argued, the initial youth of the main character stages a scene of dependence and inherited scandal from which she is redeemed by the individual agency of liberal romance, contrasting that final expression of will with what she terms "the pain and disaster of the consanguineous family" of her youth (130). For female protagonists especially, the expression of consent contained in the marriage plot proves the highest form of freedom available to them and the greatest proof that they have chosen their adult life, even as it presents heterosexual marriage as the exclusive and inevitable option. Gretchen Murphy, too, observes a particularly compact version of this pattern in her description of sentimental fiction's tendency for siblings-by-adoption to become romantic partners. For Murphy, this incestuous strain highlights the importance of the shift between a household of birth and a household of choice, arguing that "when the couples turn from siblings into lovers, they create a new social fiction that replaces an imperfect

one imposed by a previous generation's choices. Their horizontal bonds represent a democratic, bourgeois resistance to symbolic patriarchal power" (354). In other words, the shift to marriage also marks a new orientation towards power that promises an escape from the weight of the past, while retrospectively proving that the child-protagonist at the novel's opening had always possessed the seeds of that individuality.

To read the marriage plot as an answer to the initial, childish dependency of the protagonist, though, also introduces a certain circularity: the philosophical problems of childhood are apparently solved through the promise of more children. This second generation may represent the offspring of a purportedly more democratic, bourgeois family structure, but the basic challenges raised by child dependency to liberal individualism remains. A number of critics, including Cindy Weinstein and Lauren Berlant, have noted that this seeming inevitability of the heterosexual romance as being both proof of many female protagonists' agency and their only option in life, staging the imposition of a norm as a celebration of private choice. But this circularity also tempers the relationship of children to the larger social body as well. Nancy Armstrong observes that, on one hand, the tendency of British Victorian novels to unfold through cyclical waves of childhood allows for a mediation between isolated lives and the predictable repetitions of a community:

The figure of reproduction obviously lends itself to a linear developmental narrative, where an individual start off as less than a full and independent individual and progresses, as Moll, Jane Eyre, Pip, and other protagonists do, to a social level where his or her individuality can be socially recognized and sanctioned. To signal this achievement, the story cannot

stop there but must reproduce itself. Moll writes her story; Jane has a child and writes her story; Pip vicariously reproduces himself through Bidly and Joe. (109)

The exceptionalist logic that seems to underpin such plots' promise to extract the course of a singular and particularly remarkable life softens in this closing gesture towards a future beyond the end of that life. By turning to reproduction, Armstrong argues, such novels reframe the trajectory towards marriage from concern merely over individualist consent into a leaning towards community. By ending *Great Expectations* with a miniature, second Pip – whom the narrating Pip recognizes with a start as “I again!” (Dickens 430) – the focus moves towards how stories *like* Pip's recur and form a predictable network of similar lives. In this sense, childhood is a sign of communal continuity, marking the similar lives running parallel to and sequentially from the life of the protagonist.

Literary children, particularly that happy second generation, thus serve a two-fold and contradictory role: their innocence promises that the protagonist has successfully broken from the historical specters of bad kinship, and their futurity guarantees that this historical break will continue to resonate throughout their community. They demonstrate that the protagonist has made a life of her own, but they also guarantee that the effects of that life extend beyond her death. To put a finer point on the matter, such children act as the critical relays between the private and public spheres of the nineteenth-century novel, allowing a happy collective future to be extrapolated from the happily domestic end of a single life. Their ability to stand in as proxy resolution for the political problems of the

narrative relies on the continued vision of childhood as zone of idyllic escape; without innocence, childhood offers no departure from either history or politics.

My discussion thus far has taken a non-intuitive route towards an observation routinely made about both British and American novels of the period, namely that the political stakes of reform novels are often twinned with plots about heterosexual romance and the successful culmination of those romances are taken as a resolution-by-proxy for the reform, or revolution, left undone in the narrative; the marriage plot preempts and replaces the political plot.⁶⁹ As with any truism, there has been a good deal of discussion about the limitations of such a model. In this case, the pushback has centered around the model's reliance on a separation between the political and the private. As scholars including Patricia Yaeger, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, and Barbara Leah Harman have argued, domesticity is by no means an apolitical space, and a shift in setting from factory to heath can sometimes represent not a retreat from the political so much as politics by another means. I heartily agree with these stipulations. However, rethinking this narrative tick with attention to the narrative function played by children and by their role as a synecdochal representation of a larger social solution left beyond the horizon of the novel allows for a stronger understanding of what *type* of childhood is necessary to support this interpretation. More importantly, it allows for an analysis of how the alternative models of childhood circulating in the period create different types of plot resolution and irresolution – particularly given that these childhoods are often reserved for children of color, queer children, and poor children. Just as recognizing the politics that can inhere in

⁶⁹ For a foundational discussion of this trope, see Ruth Yeazell's "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: *Sybil*, *Mary Barton*, and *Felix Holt*," *Novel* 18.2 (Winter 1985) 126-144.

some versions of domestic life shows critique in novels whose endings otherwise appear timid or even reactionary, acknowledging that not all portraits of children feature innocence or futurity can help us reread the conventional ending of a new birth in a way that is both more historically accurate and more politically useful.

Specifically, the child's ability to stand in as proxy resolution for the political problems of the narrative relies on a vision of childhood innocence and domestic exceptionalism that never inhere in Malthusianism. Far from the "infant citizen" ideal described by Lauren Berlant as being "not yet bruised by history," the child in Malthusianism represents a continuation and intensification of the political problems that preceded its birth (*Queen of America* 6). As Armstrong argues, Malthus's focus on human desire in the aggregate takes a sharply contrary view of the reproductive drive common at the end of a novel; as she writes, under Malthusian frameworks, "reproduction ceases to rely on a linear progressive narrative and begins to observe the logic of repetition" (115). Distinguishing between the successive logic of reproduction and the impersonal amorphousness of repetition, Armstrong reads Malthus as dissolving the correlation between private and public satisfaction, describing his *Essay on the Principle of Population* as an "assault on the novelistic assumption that individual gratification on a mass scale would lead to collective well-being" (128). I noted earlier the inability of *Dred* to find archetypes – one perfect Little Eva or saintly Uncle Tom – whose suffering can stand in for the redemption of the other characters. A similar excess appears on the scale of the family. No birth can be messianic enough to signal resolution for *Dred's* political romances because birth is itself a political event, thus decoupling romance from resolution.

Indeed, though it is intensified and made visible by poverty, the dysfunction of the impoverished Cripps family extends throughout all of the families of the text. The intra-family conflicts of the Cripps, all struggling for a share of the same pool of too little food, are echoed in the Gordon family, despite their very different material circumstances. While the Cripps' hunger allows for a concrete demonstration of the costs that children exert on adults, the same set of pressures emerge in similarly damaging ways in the Gordon household in order to provide Nina with childhood. By making obvious the forces necessary to produce children like Nina – the human costs of white girlhood – Stowe repositions the symbolic force of white girlhood. In her reading of Eva's role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Hortense Spillers argues that the structuring logic behind Eva's death is a patriarchal compulsion to punish the girl for her desires that is then extended into the body of Tom ("Changing the Letter" 176-202). *Dred* proceeds by an inverted logic, dramatizing the destruction of black bodies necessary before a white girlhood can even be imagined. By thus building the production of white childhood into the historical trajectory of slavery, Stowe prevents childhood from serving as a substitute for resolution; the white children of *Dred* are part of the problem and no source of utopian relief.

The Production of White Girlhood

This mistrust of reproduction on the large scale also filters into the individual childhoods of *Dred*. With a name that makes her link to girlhood almost allegorical, Nina has a very decided aversion to becoming an adult, despite her late-teenaged years, showing a

reluctance to marry that aligns her with Susan Peyton's warnings.⁷⁰ Though the text opens with her having accrued three engagements, marriage remains unappealing and confining to Nina, who declares, "I think it's a very serious thing, this being married. It's dreadful! I don't want to be a woman grown. I wish I could always be a girl, and live just as I have lived, and have plenty more girls come and see me, and have fun." (118). The erotics of this wish to remain in girlhood, surrounded by girls and steeped in fun, hinge on the pleasure of unproductiveness and stasis – the luxury to "live just as I have lived." Where heterosexuality leads towards maturity, labor, and seriousness, the experience of childhood permits a sense of sexuality without constraints or burdens. Like the otherwise unspeakable desire that Spillers locates in Eva's wanting of Tom (191), Nina's immaturity allows her a free-floating aura of sex not yet funneled towards family or home. Unlike Eva, though, the other characters of *Dred* seem well aware of these desires.⁷¹ As her then fiancé Clayton remarks, "Nina isn't a woman; she is a *child* - a gay, beautiful, unformed child" (59). Nina's childishness is not contrary to her sexuality but is part of its allure.

However, much as childhood is not excluded from the sexual desires of adults, Stowe's child characters are, from birth, interwoven into the systems of inequality that she depicts. Millie, the enslaved woman largely responsible for raising Nina explains that she has endured the sale of her fourteen children with the profit going to raise the

⁷⁰ Nina's biological age is not clearly marked in the text. At its opening, Clayton refers to her as eighteen (61). However, by the time of her death, which comes after some three or four months in the time of the plot, the narrator refers to her as seventeen (460).

⁷¹ As a college friend of Clayton describes her on one occasion, Nina is "a spicy little puss" (384) and, on another, she appears full of mysterious animation: "She's alive, every inch of her! she puts me in mind of a sweet-briar bush, winking and blinking, full of dew-drops, full of roses, and brisk little thorns, beside! Ah, she'll keep him awake!" (391).

children Nina's Aunt Harriet. For Millie, the production of angelic-seeming white girls is already reliant on the hidden sacrifice of black children. As she says of Nina's cousin and counterpart, "when Miss Susy came home from boarding-school, she was a pretty girl; but I didn't look on her very kind, I tell you, 'cause three of my chil'en had been sold to keep her at school" (236). The equation is as direct as it is brutal; three black girls must be erased for every white girl who enters the scene.

Millie's loss is extreme, but it is not unique, for Nina's childhood is revealed to be yet another repetition in a cycle of such sacrifices. Nina's joyful carelessness about money is subsidized by her mixed-race brother Harry, who having been charged by their dying father to act as guardian for his sister, has kept her out of bankruptcy by repeatedly using his own freedom-money to pay her bills. His continued enslavement is, by the most literal accounting, the cost of her continued innocence, a fact that Harry himself is aware of and tries to tell Nina, declaring "Love you? You have always held my heart in your hand! That has always been the clasp on my chain" (199). As the case of Harry shows, the violence of these family ties extends beyond the physical into the affective. Millie shows immediate and sustained resistance to the sale of her children, but for a character like Harry, raised to conflate family and slavery by his father/owner, his investment – again, a literal, as well as affective one – in maintaining Nina's childhood on conventional terms costs him his freedom, a fact that her eventual death has no redemptive power to counter.

The power that white childhood does exert in *Dred* instead proves to be the power of extending slavery outside the institutions of enforcement, demonstrated most directly again by the Cripp household. Temporarily abandoned by their father after the death of

Susan, the still functionally enslaved Tiff takes charge of rearing Teddy and Fanny, acting as both parents while directing the children adopt the manners of his former, higher-status owners, the Peytons. This parentage proves Tiff's affection for the children, his social awareness, and his considerable talent for adopting society's various roles, as well as undermining the essentialism of these roles; as Jackson describes it, "Fanny learns to be a white upper-class lady from a gender-bending black man" (81). Yet the forms that Tiff's household takes recapitulates slavery, seemingly because slavery shapes the only attachments that he can imagine to the children. As Stowe describes the home that he owns, it is both a perfect, secluded happy family and a crystallization of slavery: "the interior of the poor cottage bore its wonted air of quaint, sylvan refinement; and Tiff went on with his old dream of imagining it as an ancestral residence, of which his young master and mistress were the head, and himself their whole retinue" (499). In fact, it is because their home is removed from institutions of slavery, which would have otherwise put Mr. Cripps in charge, that Tiff is able to recreate this fantasy of aristocratic Southern family.

To reduce this "dream" to false consciousness alone would patronize a character who, while often cloyingly subservient and caricatured, also maintains his own secret connections with Dred (514) and successfully escapes with the children to the swamps and onto to the North. Instead, Tiff occupies a more complicated stance, in which his expressions of devotion to Teddy and Fanny are both important markers in his own identity. Labeled during their time in New York as part of the collective of "Tiff and his children," Fanny and Teddy are the family that Tiff made for himself, but because those family forms emerged in slavery, they never entirely depart from it. Even after the group resettles in Canada, the language that Tiff uses to show his pride in a grown Fanny is that

she socializes with families that are “e’enamost up to old Virginny” (676). He has successfully taught her to be as good, or almost as good, as slaveholders. Thus, while critic Tess Chakkalakal turns to the enslaved marriages *Dred* for an example of family relationships formed without the state – arguing that “a marriage between slaves provided Stowe with the necessary terms to articulate the condition of an ideal marriage” because they are shown “existing apart from the law” (33) – vertical family relationships between guardians and children become a site where slavery can persist in new, extralegal forms.

The Spaces of Resolution

Stowe’s attention to the potential of children to embody and reenact oppression warps the geography of *Dred* into new shapes and spaces, and it provides us alternative ways of interpreting her concluding move to convention. Martha Schoolman’s reading of the novel’s recursion to the central swamp of the title as a place of refuge and resistance urges critics not to understand the Great Dismal Swamp as what she calls the “ultimately normative project” of reinvesting in the nation, because the swamp is not straightforward national though it lies within national boundaries (170). Instead proposing a dialectic pattern of internal reform spurred by the pressure of revolutionary violence, Schoolman argues that *Dred* “triangulates the fantasy of a resistant region – the imaginary free place on the map – with the political drama unfolding in 1856” (170). Through depictions of maroonage, Schoolman suggests that Stowe and other white abolitionists attempt to reconfigure the dynamics of their movement and build stronger interracial alliances outside the hierarchies of the U.S. Still, what I want to suggest is that Stowe’s vision of this withdrawal and the further withdrawal to Canada that awaits the swamp’s residents

does not so fully shed the structures of the nation, because for her, this movement towards a sheltering wilderness still follows the scripts of settler colonialism. In particular, they preserve the family structure that makes settler colonialism possible.

For Stowe, the dream of departing from the state in order to protect the family retains its ties to both empire and the marriage plot. The promise of the swamp is as explicitly literary, as it is political. Hannibal, an escaped slave who becomes a leader among Dred's men, for instance, joins the ranks of Stowe's literate slaves but though he has a Bible, his reading of choice is instead *Robinson Crusoe*, because the marronage novel avoids him a glimpse of liberty that Bible apparently cannot. Reading it, he imagines a precursor of his marronage:

There he yearned after the wild freedom of the desolate island. He placed his wife and children, in imagination, in the little barricaded abode of Robinson. He hunted and made coats of skin, and gathered strange fruits from trees with unknown names, and felt himself a free man. (639)

Stowe does not discourage or discount Hannibal's dream, but she does dwell on parallels between her version of marronage and the colonialist departure from Europe to the Americas. The swamp provides that "wild freedom" but also tracks to the fantasies of empty land that inspired Defoe. Moreover, Hannibal's desire is not just to be the man alone in nature, but the family alone. The domestic ideal of a "little barricaded abode," closed off from intrusion, runs so closely parallel to the portrait of the home as a sphere without politics so thoroughly challenged throughout the novel that it is hard to imagine this dream without considerably footnoting what it means to export family in this way.

In her much-cited essay, “Manifest Domesticity,” Amy Kaplan challenges critics to remember the centrality of “women’s work” on home in defining and expanding national boundaries. Stowe’s move to consider the domestic even in exile performs a comparable maneuver in reemphasizing that because politics structure domesticity, escape to a new home in a new space may export politics with it. Thus, as novel finally embracing the cliché of the marriage plot, with Fanny’s long-lost aunt returning to bestow Canadian land enough for the various characters to form a new settlement and wealth enough for Fanny’s happy wedding to a family friend - a reversal so artificial and unlikely that Stowe herself marks its literariness, pronouncing the inheritance “so romantic a nature, that, had we not ascertained it as a positive fact, we should hesitate to insert it in our veracious narrative” – attention turns not to what is resolved but what remains the same (671). The final words of the novel, showing of a proud Tiff “trundling a little wicker wagon, which cradled a fair, pearly, little Miss Fanny, whom he informed all beholders was ‘de very sperit of de Peytons’” return us to Tiff’s role in Virginia pushing the original Miss Fanny and Miss Susan before her (678). The hauntings of the slave-holding Peytons lingers in the ambivalent repetition of white infancy.

As interested as *Dred* is in institutions, whether law, religion, or government, Stowe therefore suggests that leaving these structures behind is not enough, when slavery and racism have also saturated the narratives available for that departure. The making of a new family in the wilderness is itself a continuity of historical processes rather than a break in them and, if anything, threatens a hastening of collective misery that multiplies the social forms that it seeks to escape. The birth of a new Fanny in Canada only gives the spirit of the Peytons a foothold in new territory. Though it is a project that the novel

never fully accomplishes, by re-embedding childhood in the systems of the past, *Dred* pushes for a reexamination what it might mean to step outside the nation without the shield or confinement of imperial domesticity, to encounter the crowded world without reproducing it.

Outgrowing the Body: Contract Law, Child Labor, and the Coming-of-age Narrative of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*

“When an infant’s contract is in its nature beneficial to him, it binds him in infancy and at age: when prejudicial, it is absolutely void from the beginning.”

Leech v. Agnew, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, 7 Pa. 21: 1847 Pa LEXIS 195

Cynthia Barns entered the public record in 1822, when she was seven years old.

Described as the child of a dead father and a mother “who is poor and exposed to want and distress and has no one to take proper care of her,” Barns represented a problem to the town of Pomfret, Connecticut. While it was clear that someone had to take care of her, it was an open question who in the community would do so. Pomfret lacked the institutions – orphanages, children’s homes, or juvenile prisons – that would have stepped in had Barns lived in a bigger city or a later decade. Instead, the town deployed an earlier tool for managing unattached children, opting to indenture her to a Samuel Richmond and his wife. In exchange for the promise that Barns would serve them “faithfully and dutifully” until the age of eighteen and a one-time sum of twenty-five dollars, the document contracts the Richmonds to care for Barns’s needs in the present, by “furnish[ing] her in sickness and health with proper food, physic and clothing suitable for every day ware and suitably for Lord’s day with suitable Lodging and washing” and to train her for the future in “the business of housewifery & pinning & knitting & sewing.” As a precursor of the welfare state, indentures of this kind functioned as an explicit suturing of a subject into social structures from which they were otherwise excluded – Barns was understandably considered unable to find a profession on her own, and her mother was considered too poor to act as a guardian.

The resulting document looks strange from the perspective of contemporary divisions of public and private. Barns is held to be too young to enter into the market herself and, so, must be placed within a family, yet her physical labor is still presented as a marketable object available as compensation for her care. Similarly, the wages that Barns receives come in the form of goods and services that are often seen as falling outside of the sphere of employment; she receives no money during her apprenticeship but does have a promise that her physical needs will be met. Barns's indenture comes close to being a privatized system of welfare, but her status as both a laboring body available for contract and a subject in need of protection from the market creates a more fundamental complication to ideas of private and public. Indenture subsidizes her eventual entry into the workplace through a limited exposure to the same, projecting a future of work that is paid for by the same labor that the text excludes from the public sphere.

Despite its paradoxes, the indenture of Cynthia Barnes was an utterly generic transaction for that period in New England: first, because apprenticeship was a common means for managing supposedly indigent children (Tomlins 275), but also because the text itself relies on a long tradition of conventions about what it means to be and possess an apprentice. Although the document itself is handwritten, its form follows the scripts of printed indentures of the day, listing the parties involved, then the term, then the duties of the apprentice, the reciprocal duties of the master and mistress, and finally a standardized concluding oath. When I say, then, that the indenture was a generic document, to all appearances, its genre is that of the contract. Two parties have come to a potentially mutually-beneficial arrangement, sanctioned and enforceable by law. But, and it takes no

special close-reading to see this, the norms of contract just as absolutely do not apply to Barns. The nominal role of the indenture is to substitute for Barns's inability to consent to contract, and it is not at all clear that she is even a party to this agreement. Her signature does not appear and the introduction lists "Select men" of the town who are making arrangements on Barns's behalf. Regardless of these limitations on Barns's consent, recognized even in the indenture binding him, the document nevertheless maintains the basic forms of contract and appears *as if* Barns's consent can be safely stipulated without its actual inclusion. Cynthia Barns, as we know her through this document, thus appears as a curious inversion of market tendencies to emphasize the will and privatize the body.

Beyond its role as a not-quite-contract, though, Barns's indenture relies on another and equally recognizable genre, that of the coming-of-age narrative. Spanning the girl's life from seven to eighteen, the indenture sets out to imagine how she will progress from an impoverished and fatherless child to a skilled worker, equipped with personal property (on turning eighteen, Barns will also receive "two good suits of Cloths" and a Bible) and an ability to work for herself in making clothing. The resemblance is more than more than incidental. As this chapter will argue, the logic of indenture like Barns's relies on its narrative power to imagine this development of a child considered to be outside the social world to an adult with a place in it. While my first chapter touches on the explicitly coercive aspect of these documents by noting their use as a tool of the juvenile prison system, this chapter takes up the productive potential of apprenticeship's estrangement from the rules of contract and from the market more broadly. The indenture of Cynthia Barns is a functional text meant to provide for her survival, but as such it is also a theorization of the relationship between her body needs and her projected value as

an economic agent that is made possible only by her age. What would it mean to take indenture's particular articulation of body, capital, and will as a potentially useful challenge to operations of contract, or to take the child apprentice as a key model for reconceptualizing the workforce more broadly?

This centering of the indenture as a means of understanding how individuals fit into economic systems is, I argue, one of the principal tasks of a novel focused on a child whose life echoes that of Cynthia Barns: Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel *Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. *Our Nig* focuses on the life of Alfrado more commonly called Frado, a young black girl in Massachusetts who, despite living in a nominally free state, works in bondage for a white family until she reaches adulthood. Wilson herself had been indentured as a child due to family poverty in New Hampshire about a decade after Barns was bound as an apprentice, and though *Our Nig* has been shaped by indenture, Frado's captivity has been largely read as a close analogue of slavery rather than a distinct system.⁷² Similarly, though the autobiographical quality of the text is widely acknowledged, *Our Nig* is more often read as an intersection between sentimentalism and the slave narrative than as a participant in the coming-of-age narrative herself. I do not mean to suggest that the critical tendency to minimize the importance of age in the structure of *Our Nig* is negligent or even entirely wrong. However, I do want to attend the generic expectations that this reveals about the bildungsroman. Frado is difficult to slot into the traditional role of a character who has come of age because the conclusion of the novel leaves no sense of Frado becoming reconciled with the social order or having an established place within it. By *Our Nig*'s

⁷² See Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (2001) for one such reading.

end and during the close of her adulthood alone, Frado has left the Bellmonts, worked at sewing, learned to manufacture bonnets, returned to the Bellmonts, left again, married, had a child, been abandoned by her husband, and gone into business as a seller of hair serum. As the text closes, Frado begins to write her narrative after having been forced to place her son with the Poor House and with no prospects of escaping the institution herself except – and, here, Wilson juggles character and author – through the sale of the novel.

One reason that indenture has received relatively little attention in *Our Nig* is that the idea of such an arrangement only enters the text through retrospection and, even then, is presented almost explicitly as fictitious. Late in her time with the Bellmonts, when she is approximately sixteen or seventeen, Frado considers her chances at either escaping from or killing the abusive Mrs. Bellmont, whom she refers to as “Mrs. B.” With practical concerns and the intervention of an “overruling Providence” preventing these options, however, Frado “finally decide[s] to stay contentedly through her period of service, which would expire when she was eighteen years of age” (60). This set “period of service” is mentioned causally, as though it has been an established feature in Frado’s life for the entire text. In fact, it is the only reference to any formal constraints on her labor, appearing to reference a contract whose existence Wilson has already made improbable. The moment when this arrangement might have been made, when Frado’s mother, Mag, first leaves her at the Bellmonts, Mag lies to both child and family, claiming that she will return for her child after an errand. Frado, for her part, continues to

believe that her mother will return for the first full year of her time with the Bellmonts, only gradually realizing her condition.⁷³

Wilson's exclusion of the indenture when it might be expected to appear and her reference to it when indenture was on the verge of being irrelevant, as I argue, forces a different reading of Frado's consent, but on a more basic level, it also reshapes the basic trajectory of the text. Wilson makes it impossible to see apprenticeship as foundational to Frado's development and, moreover, establishes that linear development might not be the way to understand Frado's life. To the extent that indenture shapes Frado's life, it does so in looping, unpredictable directions. Rather than following a conventional progression to property-holding adulthood, *Our Nig* undoes the associations between aging, class, and race to reread maturity as an index of power and therefore a change that, for Frado, cannot be linear.

The structure of *Our Nig*, as well as the historic lives of the antebellum children eligible for indenture, prompts us to think about what it would mean to narrate a life that does not take a simple arc towards market-based freedom, but that remains in flux, repeats, or stagnates. At stake is the long-standing difficulty that that the coming of age genre as a whole has had in encompassing the lives of dispossessed people. While it is common enough to encounter novels that begin with the young and poor, few end with such heroes. The proof of maturation tends instead towards the accumulation of capital and the stability that this capital can bring. The buoyant upward mobility of Horatio

⁷³ I differ here from Barbara A. White's reading. In her analysis of the autobiographical content of *Our Nig*, White considers Frado's limited education and her social context and concludes that the girl's indenture was likely real. My emphasis instead focuses on how artificial such an indenture appears within the narrative itself.

Alger's boy-protagonists are archetypal for such mobility, and while the end result tends towards the safely limited wealth of middle class life rather than unchecked luxuriance, property – in the form of stable wages, an established home, and basic comfort – demonstrate that a struggling protagonist has “made it” at last. As Jed Esty has written, the coming-of-age narrative has long operated as “the genre of progress” whether in showing that society can change to accommodate new member or, more often, that young misfits can successfully warp themselves into the shapes demanded by society (409). Unstable lives, in which no one profession ever lasts very long and no single home is permanent, along with overly stable lives, in which the same factory job lasts from puberty until death and one's hometown remains home, have less of a place in this canon of upward mobility. For a genre defined by progress, Frado's movement from captivity in a private home to a precarious life constantly under threat from slavers and destitution does not automatically register as plot.

If the traditions of the coming-of-age narrative dictate that a growing body be paired with a rising social position and accumulating capital, Wilson borrows from the discourses of indenture to create a text in which the temporalities of the body and capital at odds. Part of this analysis is born from the very real connections between indenture and poverty after 1800, but it is also born from the more abstract negotiation of the child body that indenture represented in period. Beginning the rise of early industrialization when Wilson experienced indenture, the legal definition of consent for child workers was subject to constant revision as courts attempted to balance a version of freedom based in liberal contract against the belief that childhood was imperfectly rational and only

partially autonomous.⁷⁴ In the process, the child worker became an instance in which legal persona could not be cleanly abstracted from material body and thereby troubled the line between social and corporeal versions of personhood. Yet in a time when contract was increasingly privatizing the physical needs of the youngest child workers, Wilson's return to older systems of indenture pushes against an erasure of the body. Instead, her work turns on the need for legal acknowledgement of the corporeal effect of labor. I argue that reading *Our Nig* through the lens of indenture law provides us with a vision of the child body under contract as a suspended and partial object that also signals their suspended and partial acquiescence to the social order. Rather than just another familiar critique of contract, Wilson, I want to suggest, borrows from indenture to formulate a different legal topos with a division between public and private that is not dependent on the course of bourgeois life.

I begin with an analysis of the legal reasoning behind indenture and its convergence with the coming-of-age form, after which I move to an overview of Wilson's triangulation of age, labor, and the body in her novel. In this section, I argue that the interplay between multiple definitions of maturity are critical to defining Frado's place within the Belmont family. In the overlapping set of social, chronological, and physical changes that mark progression into the adult sphere, Wilson challenges the naturalization of any single conception of development and instead turns attention to the coercive potential of these trajectories. I turn then to indenture's own narrative tendencies, tracking how first how apprenticeship contracts projected future integration

⁷⁴ See James Schmidt's "Restless Movements Characteristic of Childhood" (2005) for a historical overview of these legal changes.

into the adult world and second how they nonetheless retained a counterintuitive privacy around children in the present. By seizing on indenture's dual interpretation of the child body as a preemptive signal of adult legibility in the public sphere and as a site where law fails to take full purchase, Wilson leverages infancy to image the possibility of a will that exceeds contract. In its turn to an abstract infant body, indenture law posits the existence of a body that it does not seek to define. It therefore registers materiality and, more specifically, material embodiment, but it does not attempt to outline that body or to define its relationship with the self. Indenture, thus, offers Wilson a legal vocabulary to describe the physical effects of labor and poverty while leaving Frado a measure of personal privacy. Rather than merely a source of greater vulnerability, then, Frado's childhood offers her a position of remove and an opportunity to recast her coming-of-age away from assimilation.

Indenture as Bildungsroman

Infancy has not always meant the stage of very young life that it suggests now. For legal writers throughout the nineteenth century, infancy instead named a much longer stage of special status under the law. An early alternative for the category of the "minor," "infant" was generally used to classify subjects under the age of either eighteen or twenty-one years old as holding different rights and duties than adult subjects.⁷⁵ Yet, by modern categories of age and even by the term's informal use at the time, the legal writing that

⁷⁵ British common law established the threshold at twenty-one, setting the standard precedent for U.S. law (Blackstone 451). Some state laws, however, did create slightly different definitions. As an 1891 law dictionary notes, while infancy is generally categorized without reference to sex, Illinois legislated in 1864 that female infancy would held to end at the age of eighteen (Bouvier and Rawle 793). Similar differentiations occur in Pennsylvania laws from the 1830s regarding the indenture of minors in the custody of the states; see chapter one for this discussion.

emerges from this convention – in which phrases such as “infant females, at the age of sixteen” or “if the infant be a farmer” were commonplace⁷⁶ – feels like catachresis. The insistence that a twenty-year-old has less in common with a twenty-two-year-old than with a toddler or that an infant might sometimes stand, plow a field, or speak Latin likewise seem almost bizarrely disproportionate. The disjuncture of these images arises in part from the implied binary between infant and adult, in which maturity arrives all at once, but it also stems from a more basic break in how the law conceives of age. While “infancy” used informally summons up the deeply physical dependency of a subject unable to walk or perhaps even to sit unsupported, the parameters of legal infancy attempt to approach the details of the child body as largely irrelevant to its classification.

Instead, what nominally determines maturity or its absence under the law is the ability to be heard in the public sphere. Infant in this sense draws on the word’s origins, “in-fans” or non-speaking, to name an imposed silence, a declaration that the speech of a minor could not properly be recognized in court as the sign of intention or testimony (“Infant”). Thus, in the realm of law, a stage more commonly aligned with biological development came to index a set of absent or cancelled voices. Though practical nuances always existed and state laws made provision for younger marriage or younger criminal responsibility, the speech of a twenty-year-old witness was theoretically grouped first with that of a three-year-old, no matter how physically different their capabilities might be. The uniform silence imposed on these varied bodies, however, also points to a failure by the law to abstract civic identities before adulthood, so that even in legal infancy, the

⁷⁶ I have taken these particular usages from James Kent’s 1832 *Commentaries on American Law*, vol. II, pg. 227 and William B. Wedgwood’s 1867 *The Government and Laws of the United States*, p. 143.

body lingers. In the constructed silence of child subjects, the law traces the outline of a physicality that it was reluctant to acknowledge more directly.

Although legal infancy is a status apparently uninterested in distinguishing the body of a newborn from that of a post-pubescent, its rationale relies on the perceived weaknesses of the child body. William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, a 1760s treatise on British common law and the central source text for antebellum law, distinguishes infancy from adulthood in criminal cases lies in the difference between will and act. A crime must represent both a "vicious will" and a "vicious act," but infants cannot comprehend their actions well enough to be responsible for them. Blackstone writes, "where there is no discernment, there is no choice; and where there is no choice, there can be no act of the will, [...] he therefore, that has no understanding, can have no will to guide his conduct" (21). Classifying infancy alongside "idiocy, lunacy, and intoxication," he therefore determines that the physical actions of children cannot be understood as representative of their minds. Instead, children were held to be bodies acting without will, or without will that was officially legible. Thus, the silence prescribed to infancy arises from their excessive embodiment. In these instances when "the will does not join with the act," Blackstone seeks to establish why children should be spared from criminal responsibility and the harshest of criminal punishments (21).⁷⁷ However, this interpretation also provides the logic by which children were

⁷⁷ His argument that child criminals have historically been treated as a distinct class from adults does, however, include a number of exceptions and finely parsed distinctions that, much like the current U.S. system, rests in large part on whether the court believes the child to have adult understanding or active malice. For instance, although the age of majority for Blackstone is generally twenty-one, he records the burning of a thirteen-year-old girl for "killing her mistress" and the hanging of a ten-year-old boy for murder on the grounds that he attempted to hide the body and thus showed guilt (23).

excluded from a host of civil actions. As a group, he suggests, children were too bodily for the law to view their actions or their speech as a product of intent.

Though I explore the role of the body in child criminality in my first chapter, Blackstone's discussion of the relationship between children and the law also offers a different direction into the civil law and, in particular, to the question of contract. In a pronouncement that would persist in U.S. law throughout most of the nineteenth century, Blackstone determines that, because children's speech is not correlated with rational will, they may not generally enter into contract. He offers one exception:

It is generally true, than [sic] an infant can make no other contract that will bind him: yet he may bind himself to pay for his necessary meat, drink, apparel, physic, and such other necessaries; and, likewise for his good teaching and instruction, whereby he may profit himself, afterwards.

(Book 1, Part 2, 465)

Essentially, children are not answerable for the contracts they make, but they are answerable to any apprenticeship contracts they may enter. Indenture contracts constitute a space of crossover between the child as a dependent body and as a potentially independent agent, or between infant and subject. While children are considered too irrationally physical for other agreements, they may enter an exchange of their freedom for in return for bodily necessities. Though they cannot make decisions about properties or incomes, infants may decide who will provide for their bodies. Moreover, they can decide who will provide for their development into adulthood by providing "good teaching and instruction" that would eventually equip them with independent reason; they

can provisionally enter into a contract, provided that it promises the training that would make their future selves able to enter contracts.

Blackstone's vision of the indenture as the only contract amenable to childhood thus falls into a form common to literary narrations of childhood, that of prolepsis. Blackstone's infant can consent to an indenture because its end result is an adult able to judge the process as worthwhile and therefore offer consent retrospectively. The maintenance of the child body is similarly able to bear a momentary scrutiny of the law if this maintenance points towards an adulthood with no such bodily encumbrances. In other words, an indenture is valid if it offers a trajectory along which the child subject can develop into adulthood and, on the strength of that presumptive adulthood, the child earns a temporary ability to speak in the public sphere.

As several literary critics have argued, just such prolepsis guides the *bildungsroman*.⁷⁸ In his study of the coming-of-age narrative and twentieth century human rights law, Joseph Slaughter contends that, as a genre, *bildungsromans* promise a resolution obvious from their outset, because that the protagonist will gradually assimilate into the social order of adulthood and thereby naturalize that order as inevitable. Slaughter frames the *bildungsroman* as a utopian individualism, which provide "an idealistic scenario for the human personality to become the sovereign guarantor of its own development" while also prescribing the form that this individual sovereignty will take (103). Franco Moretti's *Way of the World* imagines a similarly

⁷⁸ I here treat the term *bildungsroman* as a subset of larger genre of the coming-of-age narrative, characterized by a closer relationship with canonical novel form, European class structures, and interest in individualism. While it has been the subject of the most intense critical discussion and is therefore important for describing how age has been theorized within literature, I prefer coming-of-age narrative to classify the primary texts of my chapter because they are less constrained by these conventions.

stacked deck, arguing that the structure of the British *bildungsroman* relies on an adulthood predestined to reach its fullest individual expression in the social world already surrounding it such that: “self development and integration are complementary and convergent trajectories, and at their point of encounter and equilibrium lies that full and double epiphany of meaning that is ‘maturity’” (18-19). The suspense of the story lies less in the arrival of a pre-determined adulthood than in the resolution of how the peculiarities of the private self will be revealed to have their own niche in social order.

The faith shown in both indenture and the coming-of-age narratives that the private subject will inevitably reconcile with the social order has long been part of liberal individualism’s promise that individual success will be seamlessly integrated into the greater good. However, this presumption that personal trajectories of growth will naturally come into accord with one another also relies on and reinforces a shared reliance on the biological as a guarantor that not only is maturity coming, but that it comes in uniform ways.⁷⁹ If Blackstone considers subjects under twenty-one to be too bodily to have a recognizable will, he also treats the physical development of the body as both a marker of development towards adult disembodiment and as proof that this second growth towards citizenship is unavoidable. For instance, the physical changes of puberty, for Blackstone, signal the arrival of a new kind of criminal responsibility but they also cast the coming of that responsibility as a natural process (22). Similarly, the momentum of the *bildungsroman* is partly borrowed from the biological trajectory towards physical,

⁷⁹ Much as the child provides a site at which the body cannot be cleanly separated from the subject in antebellum thought, the physical and social coming of age of the child also offers a point at which individualism crosses into its own variety of species thinking. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson crosses into a botanical account of human life, noting that “we fancy men are individuals; so are pumpkins; but every pumpkin in the field goes through every point of pumpkin history” (246).

chronological adulthood. The developing body provides the medium through which a host of less material changes are captured and expressed.

That not all bodies were permitted to mature into transparency, whether because they were marked by race, gender, class, or any other measure of difference, therefore acts as another way of explaining that not all subjects were eligible for a trajectory towards civic maturity. This exclusion has longed been paired with a matching limitation in the protagonists eligible for a coming-of-narrative, as it has most conventionally been defined, who may sometimes be female but is rarely a person of color or, perhaps still more rarely, someone who begins life as a poor worker and who remains that way.⁸⁰ The promise that all measures of development will be in accord – that the growing body subtends a developing mind and that developing mind, in turn, demands an accordingly increased social standing with an attendant increase in wealth – interprets the child body, much like indenture interprets the child's consent, as only the manifest sign of a longer teleology towards a capitalist and civically capable maturity. By largely avoiding protagonists who are not upwardly mobile, coming-of-age narratives are able to preserve this sense of developmental synchronicity.

However, though indenture contract takes the same formal logic to the coming-of-age narrative, they have historically extended to encompass a much wider set of subjects. Apprenticeship was a common enough start in the early and mid-eighteenth century for affluent tradesmen, merchants, and the male bourgeois more generally. Through the early

⁸⁰ See Franco Moretti's preface to the second edition of *Way of the World* for a longer discussion of the bildungsroman's tendency to avoid poor or working-class protagonists. Note also that although I list these categories of gender, race, and class mobility as distinct, they are certainly interrelated, as Harriet Wilson makes clear.

nineteenth century, as I will discuss, apprenticeship gradually moved closer to this model and away from any association with personal or economic development, even as its form continued to rely on that proleptic development. In other words, where the traditions of the coming-of-age narrative largely exclude the subjects who would have been excluded from full adulthood, the indenture contract came to use closely related forms to imagine the maturation of precisely those subjects predominantly left out of literature. For such subjects, indentures map a trajectory towards a civic incorporation that is not truly available to them, marking infancy as teleological but without defining its arc. This prompts the question I ask in my next section, whether attending to the details structures of child contract can also provide us with a less limited reading of the coming-of-age narrative in Wilson's work.

Aging into Labor

As I have already suggested, the uncertain resolution of *Our Nig* makes it more difficult to read the text as a traditional coming-of-age narrative. Another, more commonly noted obstacle is the unconventional opening, which begins not with the birth of the protagonist but with a compassionate account of her mother's life. From its opening, *Our Nig* denaturalizes how the course of a life is defined and the milestones by which its progress should be noted. In her reading of Wilson, P. Gabrielle Foreman notes that this formal trajectory of Frado's life eschews the generic dictates of both its immediate generic sources: the sentimental and slave narratives. Foreman rightly, I think, argues that Wilson substitutes these orderly movements from either exile-to-belonging or captivity-to-freedom with a cyclically repeating relationship to money, electing "economic

determination as a principal definer of narrative and personal development” (58). Within the cyclical maternities connecting Mag to Frado to George that form Foreman’s focus, however, is also a remarkable awareness of Frado’s individual development. Wilson’s attention to the development of her protagonist is strikingly meticulous, noting explicitly Frado’s age at six (11), seven (18), nine (23), fourteen (35), and eighteen (64), as well as including enough temporal markers to fill in many of the gaps. This section takes up this carefully plotted growth with the problem of Frado’s fictitiously contracted childhood as a forcibly realignment of typical coming-of-age trajectories of individual growth into a hierarchy of stagnations in social age following the lines of class.

Alongside her careful records of Frado’s age, Wilson also tracks much more contingent social markers of maturity; in her writing, age is far more than a matter of chronology. Frado’s youth – she is six at her arrival to the Bellmonts – is never isolated from her race, but rather dictates the lines along which her race would be used to control her. Where a white child would have had greater recourse against abusive indenture, Mrs. B. explicitly invokes Frado’s relative immobility after her daughter Mary first objects to having a Black resident in her home:

“I don’t mind the nigger in the child. I should like a dozen better than one,” replied her mother. “If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have so much trouble with the girls I hire, I am almost persuaded if I have one to train up my way from a child, I shall be able to keep them for awhile. I am tired of changing every few months.” (16)

The shaky alignment of “the nigger” and “the child,” though it likely refers most directly to the putative whiteness of Frado’s mother,⁸¹ also points to the conflicting ideologies at work between age and race. When Frado’s blackness is reinscribed as childish, she transforms from a perceived threat to white domesticity to a hyperdomestic object that Mrs. B. can amass by the dozen. This objectification draws a line between the racially unmarked but clearly more privileged hired “girls” whom Mrs. B. had failed to retain because they possess freedom of movement and the unprotected Frado who is trapped under her power.

In this bifurcation between types of child labor, we can glimpse the material side of a cultural ideology that Robin Bernstein has established, in which the basic underpinnings of what made a child worthy of protection were themselves permeated by race. As Bernstein explains, white children were granted special status through a focus on their sensitivity to pain, while black children were excluded from that status and their ability to feel pain denied. She writes, “pain became a wedge that split one idea – childhood innocence – diverging paths that produced opposing meaning in black and white” (36). These twinned constructions of childhood then crucially frame the relationship between children and labor along the lines of race, dividing between a self-possessed white child whose labor has at least the potential to grant personhood and a black child alienated from the humanizing pain that would articulate bodily action to personal interiority.

⁸¹ Wilson indicates that Frado thought of her mother as white. However, Foreman has usefully troubled the conventional acceptance of Mag’s whiteness by pointing to the relatively heavy burden of proof which female whiteness historically bore under law (60-65).

To write the laboring Frado, then, Wilson must contend with a discourse that would dissociate the strength evinced by Frado's work from her personal development, in order to keep her from emerging into the world as a fully recognizable person. As Mrs. B. declares from the outset, the position that Frado holds is precisely contingent upon the child retaining her youth, such that when her son suggests that the six-year-old Frado will quickly outgrow the small attic assigned her, Mrs. B. coldly explains that "when she *does*, she'll outgrow the house" (17). Her later declaration that, if Frado is not utterly subjugated, she might arrive "in the parlor, as smart as our own girls" reveals the cultural logic behind this ultimatum. Frado's growth threatens to make her far too close to the non-working status of the white children of the house and, so, to exclude her from the adult space of the parlor, she must be confined as a laboring child within the domestic space of the attic (50). As the white child who is always the nearest point of comparison, Mary Bellmont's maturity mandates a careful exclusion of Frado from the routines of female socialization – Mrs. B.'s removing Frado from school at the age of nine (23), forcing her "to do the work of a boy" (30), and cutting her hair short (38) – lest she infringe upon Mary's claim to domestic control. In this way, Frado's social status supplants her biological age, and, in order to maintain her bondage, Mrs. B. must perpetually exile her from the trajectory to adulthood.

Yet, this exclusion cloaks the intimate dependence of Mary's growth upon Frado's stagnation, for, under the orchestration of Mrs. B., not only is Frado alienated from her labor but her labor is appropriated specifically to underwrite the developmental arc of the white Mary. Mary, who is heavily identified with her mother, finally enters adulthood through usurpation of the work actually done by Frado, as she "was installed

housekeeper – in name merely, for Nig was the only moving power in the house” (35). Though both domestic knowledge and actual work are Frado’s, Mary “affect[s] great responsibility” and lays claim to still greater maturity for this knowledge and this work by noisily and violently performing her authority over Frado (35). In other words, she takes her place as head of the household, a place socially marked as that of a properly adult woman, only through a form of proxy maturity actually generated by Frado’s presence.

What immediately appears as twisted and absurd about this arrangement, in which an unusually immature child can lay claim to adulthood through the mature behavior of another child, is that the legal fictions of contract theory have been mapped onto the pseudo-biological realm of child development. In other words, there is nothing at all unusual in a story of one person appropriating the labor of another to advance her social standing; even beyond the bounds of capitalism, this is the everyday operation of power. That this extraction should happen cleanly, that the body should give up its labor pristinely and give that labor as an object of exchange to another, non-working body is the ordinary prerogative of capitalist labor. For Mary to be self-satisfied in commanding someone else to do the work of an adult woman, marks the nonsensicality of this disembodied model of labor in the form of a spoiled child. Neither Frado’s labor, nor the attainment of female majority associated with it, can be rented from her body nor be appropriated as a token of exchange. It is, in this sense, fitting that Frado’s imagined indenture is little more or less than the seizure of her childhood, a fiction of frozen development that she must somehow outgrow.

Yet the precise status of this maturing body remains carefully kept out of the frame of the novel. As Cynthia Davis has argued, Wilson's emphasize on the pain that Frado experiences is also designed to refute the commonplace sexualization of the black female body, and no doubt this contributes to Wilson's avoidance of long physical descriptions of Frado, particularly as she reaches puberty. There is another factor at stake, though, in this attention to development while hesitating to talk about the developing body directly. It is clear from the recurrent beatings that Frado endures that the flesh is a source of overwhelmingly oppressive discipline, and much of Mrs. Belmont's refusals to let Frado cry (56) seem designed to reduce the girl to a body alone. Where the pathos of a physically vulnerable child was a typical, or to follow Anna Mae Duane's arguments, even a definitional feature of antebellum literary children, the image of a black girl's body in pain also evokes the potential of a dehumanizing voyeurism. Saidiya Hartman's reminder of "the instability of the scene of suffering," in which sympathy promises white readers that they have an asymmetrical level of access of the interiorities black subjects, suggests that Wilson cannot premise Frado's childhood on her body alone. Instead, as I argue, the legal framings of indenture provide her with an alternative route to represent child embodiment without making it into a tool of either control or surveillance.

Records of Indenture

The historical traces that indentures leave about children reflect their ambivalence about such subjects in the public record. For instance, in 1834, a Pennsylvanian child named Mariah Elizabeth Perry was entered into a labor contract with one Humphrey Dillon, a man whose profession is not named in her indenture but whom contemporary records

indicate was an innkeeper in Bedford county.⁸² The contract, signed by Dillon and two county officials titled “overseers of the Poor” and witnessed by two justices of the peace, identifies Perry as a “female of color” and states that she is henceforth bound to work for Dillon, his heirs, and his agents. In exchange, she is promised “sufficient meat, drinks, apparel, lodging, and washing” as well as “the customary freedom dues to the amount of at least twelve dollars” at the time of release. That indenture was set to run from the date of the contract – May 28th, 1834 – until October 3rd, 1850, a date which the contract text notes as an aside will also mark her being eighteen years old. Barring the calculation implicit in these dates and the ambiguous sign that Perry’s own signature is not among the marks on the contract,⁸³ no other aspect of the contract indicates that the laborer in question is a two-year-old child with all of the productive potential of a two-year-old child. Instead, the indenture’s portrait is very little about Perry as she is, using the majority of its some two hundred words to describe who this child will be: an unfree laborer, a consumer of certain resources, and an eventually free woman with twelve dollars to her name.

The indenture’s relative unconcern with Perry as she was at the time of signing echoes the complicated relationship that historian Holly Brewer traces between childhood and contract. As Brewer argues, the gradual elimination of minors from civic rights throughout seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain helped to outline a world in which

⁸² *History of Bedford, Somerset, and Fulton Counties* 251

⁸³ Although child signatures or marks are sometimes included in indentures, there was no requirement at that time in Pennsylvania that the child consent to the contract; as Pennsylvania’s compilation of state law, *Purdon’s Digest* states reports in 1853, “it is not necessary that the infant should join in the indenture” (39). That law had changed by 1860 to require infant consent and participation in the contract, though the law’s application to indentures from Poor Houses and Houses of Refuge is far from clear (*Township and Local Laws* 309).

all other subjects were increasingly held as equal participants as the ability to consent, withheld from minors, came to overrule questions of wealth or rank. This elevation of consent as the true qualification for civic participation, rather than inherited rank, played a critical role in the early American preference for contract over status, to borrow Brewer's terms, as the defining structure of social relations. Perry's entry into contract presumes that, as little as she is able to be an economic agent at the time, her entry into adulthood will be sufficient to grant her that freedom. In other words, the indenture structures Perry's life as a division between youthful constraint and the individual freedom of adulthood.⁸⁴

That this last image of maturity and of Perry setting off with the twelve dollars of her freedom dues has a stronger presence in the document than Perry's reality at the time of writing, an unprotected toddler whose bound into a system that was singularly poor at enforcing its promises, points to the concentrated futurity of the text – a futurity that encompasses both the ongoing future of a growing body in need of regular food and care and the future perfect of the emergent adult Perry. As a result, though it minimizes Perry's status as physically dependent child to treat her as a pure agent of labor, the indenture also attempts to manage her bodily integration into adulthood. Her body's future physical needs are explicitly built into the future adult, eligible for freedom from

⁸⁴ Given her precarity as a very young child of color in the care of the state, Perry would have risked being made part of a still worse contract. Under a parallel justification pairing freedom with maturity (as well as a parallel desire to extract additional labor), Pennsylvania's provisions for gradual emancipation named twenty-eight as the age when enslaved persons would be released. Impoverished black children quickly came to adopt that age as the new standard, rather than the prior ages of majority (eighteen for female laborers and twenty-one for male).

bondage. Although the adult emerging from this contract is framed as a fully independent agent on the market, she retains an explicit history of a much more embodied self.⁸⁵

The difference between an indenture for apprenticeship and the contract ideally imagined by law is thus a difference in how the two agreements register the temporality of the body. Contract has historically been understood along two primary axes: first, as a “pure” (i.e., disembodied) exchange between the wills of two rational subject and, second, as projection from present intent to future action. As Thomas Hobbes’s foundational theory of contract in *Leviathan* (1651), it relies accordingly on a syntax of intent:

Signes of Contract, are either *Expresse*, or *by Inference*. *Expresse*, are words spoken with understanding of what they signifie: And such words are either of the time *Present*, or *Past*; as, *I Give, I Grant, I have Given, I have Granted, I will that this be yours*: Or of the future; as, *I will Give, I will Grant*: which words of the future, are called PROMISE. (90)

This “promise” thus rests on a chain beginning with the understanding and will of the contract writer – Hobbes continues on to gloss “signs by inference” as any implication of the text that “sufficiently argues the will of the Contractor” (90) - and extending into an imagined future. The future tense of contract in Hobbes’s account, though, carries a stronger weight than the futurity of common speech. While informal statements about a plan bear no obligation or, in Hobbes’s terms, transfer no right, setting down a future in contract enshrines it:

⁸⁵ Although provisions for the upkeep of workers did appear for in adult indentures, the substation of such bare supplies as food and drink for wages or land was more associated with child apprenticeship (Tomlins 242)

In Contracts, the right passeth, not onely where the words are of the time Present, or Past; but also where they are of the Future: because all Contract is mutuall translation, or change of Right; and therefore he that promiseth onley, because he hath already received the benefit for which he promiseth, is to be understood as if he intended the Right should pass: for unlesse he had been content to have his words so understood, the other would not have performed his part first. (91)

Contract, in this reading, works to stabilize two variables, the difference between two individual wills and the space between present and future. It acts as a “mutuall translation” between two understandings and two sets of interests, as well as guaranteeing that acts will have the agreed upon consequences. It binds two subjects to a common narrative of benefits to be given and received in a certain order.

Child indentures complicates this attempt at a shared projection because, though Hobbes accounts for the instability of time and the need to reconcile two views of the world, he takes for granted that the individuals themselves will be stable. Indenture, on the other hand, sets out to take a subject and transform her into a new, or significantly changed subject. As a result, even though standards differed greatly by state and era whether minors should sign these contracts themselves, the legal standard applied was that the contract would not be binding on the child if it does not benefit their development.⁸⁶ Where Hobbes’s view of contract assumes that the necessary translation

⁸⁶ James Kent’s *Commentaries on American Laws* (1832) notes, for instance, that an infant “may bind himself as an apprentice, it being an act manifestly for his benefit” (242). Similarly, indentures could be dissolved by the court system if they lacked education for the apprentice; see *Butler v. Hubbard*, 22 Mass. 250 (1827) for one such ruling.

is from one agent of contract to another, indenture takes up the additional task of mediating between infant and adult subject, or between the child that Perry is and the adult that she will become. If the contract fails to be an agreement that the adult eventually emerging from the indenture *would have* agreed to, then it is potentially void, because it fails to translate between the child immediately party to the contract and their adult self capable of sanctioning the contract. A good contract, he argues, is one that makes the child's consent continuous with the adult's will.

To demonstrate their benefit to the child subject, indentures provide their own version of a coming-of-age narrative, setting out a projection of how the child's life will unfold. For example, the 1817 indenture of Isaac Pennell Jr., a boy living in Radnor PA who was most likely about twelve at the time of signing,⁸⁷ explains his apprenticeship in terms of exchange between Pennell's labor and his master Joseph Dunn's investment in Pennell's future life. Pennell, we are told, will "[Dunn's] secrets keep, his lawful commands everywhere readily obey," nor will he travel without permission, marry, or any other way damage Dunn's household. In return, Pennell will be granted professional standing by being "taught or instructed [...] in the trade or mystery of a farmer." Pennell's promised road to adulthood is, like Perry's, enabled by provisions for food and shelter, but unlike Perry, he is also promised schooling in increments of "two months a year." The adult Pennell projected to exit the indenture will be a man with schooling, a trade, as well as "two good suits of Clothes." All in all, this later portrait is far more

⁸⁷ Though his age is not given explicitly, the specificity of his term of service – "Nine years three month[s] and twenty days" – suggests that it has been set based on the time to his majority, mostly likely to his twenty-first birthday.

complete than the child Pennell's, because as a farmer and property-owner, he possesses qualities that can be recognized by the law; the earlier Pennell possessed only infancy.

More critically, though, the indenture must also manage continuity of Pennell as a subject, even as it promises these changes. While the adult Pennell is given most description in the document, the contract is nonetheless structured around his infant counterpart. While Pennell did leave an official mark of consent on the contract with a slightly lop-sided "x," even if he had not, the adults authorizing the contract on his behalf – in this case, his father, Isaac Pennell Sr. – would have been able to do so only by merit of his status as an infant. For the indenture to have purchase and for that "X" to receive a socially-agreed upon meaning, it must mediate between these two stages, tracing the arc of Pennell's physical development into an arc towards consent.

The curve of aging towards a pre-set adulthood also worked to cover greater gaps than that shown between Pennell Jr. and Pennell Sr. As an early function of the welfare state, indentures also imagined continuities from children positioned further outside the social order that the contracts supported. Oliver Gautier, another boy who had lived not far from Isaac Pennell, was indentured in 1785 to a local merchant with the proviso that he was "a Minor and a Stranger here." He, too, leaves a mark alongside the signatures of the adult officials, but the consent he musters is clearly under constraint even within the document itself. Gautier's co-signers, two "Justices of the Peace" and six men identified as "Managers of the House of Employment," are identified as the active agents of the indenture; it is they who, according to the text, "have put Oliver Gautier" into his apprenticeship in a convergent policing of poverty and displaced youth. In this context, Gautier's mark does not register as his will, because there is no pretense that he could

have refused – particularly because without the literacy promised by the apprenticeship, his addition to the document reflects nothing about his understanding of the document. Instead, the mark stands in only to testify to Gautier’s physical presence. It tells us that he was there and little else.

The coupling work that the indenture does to link this “Minor and Stranger” with an uninterpretable sign to the socialized adult self with full signature is a process of norming a potentially deviant subject. Apprenticeship might give Gautier a place to belong, but it also clearly works to fit him into a preexisting slot. The coercion inscribed in Gautier’s contract makes more explicit what was also true of Pennell’s indenture to become a farmer. As pre-printed forms with spaces left for names, gendered pronouns, the details of profession and degree of education, they are, quite literally, fill-in-the-blank interpretations of maturity, with little other room for variation in the coming-of-age. Under indenture, Gautier must work to mature out of his status as infant “stranger” in a way that Pennell perhaps need not, but the distance between the two indentures is a matter of degree rather than a fundamental difference. Both were maturity that emerged from a contractual form that recognized bodily need as a legitimate basis from which to accord obligation.

However, by the time that Wilson experienced indenture, and certainly by the time that she wrote *Our Nig*, the reality of apprenticeships had begun to change. Children had long been players in the economic world as apprenticed laborers, but the structure of apprenticeship was legally defined at a distance from the unvarnished exchange of wage-labor. For example, as late as the 1820s, courts in Massachusetts ruled that apprentices were entitled to receive education beyond their immediate job training and even due

continued support when injury made them unable to continue to work (Schmidt 322). These pseudo-familial labor relationships presented their child workers as subject to a contract made between two adult parties, requiring no agency be devolved onto the children themselves. As social historian Vivian Zelizer observes, though, increasing industrialization during the antebellum period created demand for an alternative model of child labor (59). Unlike the longer term and, at least putatively, more skilled positions available to apprentices, factory owners required an influx of untrained and relatively mobile workforce of children, making it more difficult to retain paternal oversight of contract and leading to a greater court recognition of children as economic agents able to negotiate contracts for themselves.

With this revision came a shifting and heterogeneous set of attempts to redefine the private sphere of children into something closer to that of traditional wage labor. While it was traditional for indentures to stipulate simply that the needs of apprentices would be provided for as they arose, a series of transitional indentures began to push towards privatizing those needs back to the child. An early example is the 1818 indenture of William Chapin to a Philadelphia engraver. In this document, the pre-printed obligations to “procure and provide for him sufficient meat, drink, lodging, washing for an apprentice” have been crossed out and in the space where educational obligations were normally written in, the indenture instead promises that the engraver will pay “thirty dollars per annum, which payments are to be considered in lieu of Board, lodging, & wearing apparel.” Chapin’s indenture is an early instance of the coming shift to wages, devolving the responsibility for Chapin’s everyday care back onto the boy himself but promising that cash can make up the difference. As a result, the indenture (or wage

contract presented as indenture) declines to make Chapin's physical life a part of his employment, banishing those concerns from public record.

Chapin's indenture is an unusually extreme example, as well as one that seems to have ignored court requirement that apprenticeships include schooling. However, it was one of many indentures that increasingly in the 1820s and 1830s sought to remove physical upkeep from the sphere of the contract. The indentures of Charles Parker in 1829 Philadelphia and Edward Magee in 1835 Norristown, Pennsylvania each retain some of the standard obligations of care, but add a wage into the indenture. Along with the conventional list of "sufficient meat, drink, mending lodging and washing," Magee is to receive twenty-five dollars quarterly as a carpenter's apprentice. Meanwhile Parker is to receive lodging, board, and seventeen dollars per year for work in the same trade, but his claims to clothing and washing have been crossed out on the form.⁸⁸ Henry Risley, a joiner's apprentice in Connecticut, entered a similar situation in which he was promised both the rights associated with indenture – in his case, "board Lodging washing & Phisic [sic]" – but also promised thirty-three dollars a year and the promise of a raise to forty dollars a year when he turns fifteen. The change is partially attributable to the simple spike in demand for child workers that industrialism spurred and in some cases may be truly beneficial to them, but these transitional documents also suggest the incoherence of a changing ideology.

One particularly remarkable example of this burgeoning shift is the 1814 indenture of Amial Camp, a boy bound into shoemaking in New Haven, Connecticut. Unlike the other wage-inflected indentures we have considered, for which adaptations to

⁸⁸ In Magee's indenture, the provision for mending has been added by hand, and the others are pre-printed.

apprenticeship are wedged into pre-printed forms, Camp's indenture is entirely handwritten and leaves its authors with more space to experiment. The circumstances are typical. Camp is a seventeen-year-old "miner [sic]" under the guardianship of a man of unclear relation and, according to this document, has been bound to serve until twenty-one. What is unusual is that none of the promises of education, lodging, etc. are included in the indenture. Instead, Camp is promised that "he is to Receive after the Rate of Twenty Dollars the first year, twenty-five Dollars from Nineteen to Twenty & Thirty Dollars from Twenty one." What looks like another case of wage labor shoehorned into apprenticeship, however, quickly turns to something else in its next prescription: "Each payment is to be pay'd in Clothing as the Boy may want." Camp's potential wages are thus recategorized into older categories of care, or alternatively, the income that Camp will receive must come in the currency of fabric rather than cash.

There is real practical weight to this promise, and in lingering on it, I do not mean to suggest otherwise. By placing a specific value on his annual clothing allowance, Camp's indenture may have given him a stronger position from which to demand warmer or generally higher-quality goods. Similarly, the man indenturing him might have benefitted both from making his costs for the several years more predictable than those of a more conventional apprenticeship and from avoiding the difficult task of finding the cash that would have been necessary for a wage laborer. Nevertheless, a strange divide lingers in the instruction that "payment is to be pay'd in Clothing as the Boy may want." Even accepting a currency conversion from money to goods, how does the subjunctive of "as the Boy may want" register against the explicitly defined values of clothing Camp has been promised? Is this a matter of providing him shoes rather than a coat if he has the one

but not the other, or if Camp has the clothing he needs, a question of not providing him extra clothes at all? More to the point, if Camp somehow had all his clothing stolen or somehow destroyed and needed more than the promised twenty or twenty-five dollars could buy, would it still be his master's responsibility to clothe him?

The answer for this last question, in particular, matters because it forms the division between apprenticeship and wage-labor; in one, the extra cost would be structured into the employment agreement, and in the other, the burden providing for what "the Boy may want" remains more fundamentally with the boy himself. Camp's indenture leans towards the latter option, but the point is never fully clarified. Instead, the document suggests the degree to which the physical needs of children were in flux between the private and public sphere. The intrinsically unstable nature of the indenture, already designed to register non-public subjects through their potential to grow into a civic status, began to make apprentices even less visible.

Our Nig and the Semi-public Body

As industrialization continued to accelerate, the move to privatize the child body increased as well, until, as I have mentioned, contracts for child labor outside of apprenticeship became normal. However, this shift to wage-labor occurred unevenly, with white children moving rapidly into these new positions and apprenticeships disproportionately remaining with poor, black children, namely, the children who would be less eligible for court protection (Reiner 131). It is true that larger-scale industrialists may have found greater profit in a more mobile workforce of white children, whose high turnover made workplace abuses more difficult for the law to restrain. However, for child

workers who fell outside of the comparatively sheltered status of whiteness and therefore at a distance from even these meager legal comforts, the more permanent status of apprentice gave employers both stability and a workforce who could not easily protest their conditions, a situation that Xiomara Sanatamarina has described as the “pernicious ways in which ‘free’ labor could racially immobilize all black workers” (76). Where white child laborers might have suffered from their new designation as a relatively disposable workforce, black apprentices were given no illusion of the social mobility which indenture once promised. In lieu of narratives of development, apprenticeship acted in practice as a bare exchange of labor for moment-to-moment survival.

However, as Wilson makes clear, the apprenticeship that Frado claims for herself is not only diegetically unlikely but also increasingly anachronistic. Nothing about Frado’s young life suggests that she received the care promised by these older indentures. However, the nature of her complaints however - which that her clothing is “poor and scanty” and does not include “Sunday attire” (38), that her schooling was stopped at the age of nine (23), and that her lodgings were dark and “unfinished” (17) – shadow all the central provisions of more robust apprenticeships. Similarly, the gifts that Frado receives on her departure from the Bellmonts, in lieu of wages, reflect the traditional set of clothes, cash, and a bible that indentures had once promised apprentices but in diminished form; she receives a “silver half dollar” and “one decent dress, without any superfluous accompaniments” from the Bellmonts and a Bible from a more sympathetic

Bellmont daughter (65).⁸⁹ The true demonstration of Frado's legal reasoning, though, comes after she has turned eighteen and left the Bellmont family to work for neighboring families. After working through the summer, Frado becomes too "thoroughly sick" to continue. Because she has been left unable to afford medicine or even a room for herself, Frado falls back on the only social ties that she has left, the Bellmonts.

This claim of intimacy is clearly a matter of last resort for Frado and explicitly outside the bounds of even the most generous indenture. Still the reasoning that Wilson offers to explain why her former capturers should take in her adult self draws from the notion that employing indentured labor creates a responsibility for physical needs. As Frado puts it, she was reluctant to ask "yet she felt sure they owed her a shelter and attention, when disabled" (67). The commonsense impulse that the Bellmonts "owed" her and continued to owe her a basic physical welfare, despite her departure from their household, seems to stem from Wilson's ability to invoke indenture, rather than wage labor, as the basis for labor agreements. Frado's impulse is to say that her illness cannot be privatized, which is to say that it cannot be reduced to her own personal burden, because her health had been a part of her projected agreement with the Bellmonts. This argument hinges on the assertion that the employers of children must take on responsibility not just for wages but for food, clothing, and medicine. Wilson sanctions this belief by generalizing it to the town, noting that after a second period of Frado being unable to work, "all felt that the place where her declining health began, should be the place of relief; so they applied once more for a shelter" from the Bellmonts (67).

⁸⁹ Compare these gifts, for instance, with the indenture with which I began this chapter. In its reasonably generous provisions, Cynthia Barnes is promised "two good suits of Cloths proper and suitable for such person and a Bible."

Such an assignment of responsibility echoes the basic tendency of apprenticeship to find a family able to bear the otherwise public cost of supporting a community member, but the tendency to narrativize the physical toil of labor also reflects the temporal difference that indenture makes. Contract registers a moment of agreement and flattens the process of labor extraction back to that moment, but indenture evolves in order to narrate a continuity between the child who enters an apprenticeship and the legal adult who emerges. Indenture thus is able to track longer-term physical effects and is able to register when physical cost of an agreement continues past the end of the agreement itself. Frado's "declining health began" with identifiable agents, and they continue to bear responsibility despite the nominal close of the apprenticeship. It is here that the use of indenture law to critique the terms of adult labor more broadly begins to emerge. Although Frado sets out in the market after turning eighteen as an apparently free contract labor, her experience of work is interwoven with an accumulating cost to her health. She repeatedly sets out in new trades, only to repeatedly become too disabled to continue in them. With each iteration, Wilson returns to the notion that the Bellmonts are still ultimately the ones to be blamed.

As the rest of Frado's life unfolds, these revisions to the relationship between worker and employer begin to resonate with a reimagination of the proto-welfare system more broadly. As Frado's disabilities leave her intermittently unable to work, she moves from the Bellmonts to the town-subsidized care of two women to what the text's appendix, a series of testimonials endorsing the author's virtue, calls the "County House" (100), and is eventually forced to place her son, George, in the same institution while selling hair dye (79). From her own indenture to her need to place George in parallel

circumstances, Frado is continually forced to reckon with the public nature of her daily survival. This is not to say that the same is not true for people like the Bellmonts, who just as clearly rely on the labor provided by Frado's indenture. Frado is, in fact, quite cutting about notion that any of this assistance is selflessly given, describing one family that her adult self stays with as having "principle enough to be willing to earn the money a charitable public disburses" (67). Frado is also upfront about the misery of her needs being so explicitly a part of the public sphere, complaining of "the unpleasant charities of the public" and stating her determination to be self-supporting (68).

Although Frado sets out in the market with every intention of participating in a free contract labor, her experience of work is interwoven with an accumulating cost to her health. The urge to be productive is harmful for Frado, because as Wilson writes, she so often tried to work *as if* she were the disembodied laborer of liberal theory, so that "many times her hands wrought when her body was in pain; but the hope that she might yet help herself, impelled her on" (68). The damage builds, until she is unable to work at all and must rely on the town to pay for her treatment. For Wilson, the source of the harm is work itself, noting that "Frado was anxious to keep up her reputation for efficiency, and often pressed far beyond prudence" until "she entirely gave up work, and confessed herself thoroughly sick" (65). Frado thus experiences labor as fundamentally tied to her experience of her body and as having effects of far longer duration than conventional contract could register. Instead of her contracts operating as a fleeting sale of her labor, Frado's work appears to linger in the pain that she experiences. Wilson takes care to narrate what she terms Frado's "weary sickness" as having a history of its own (67). Though it intensifies after every job she undertakes, following a particularly acute attack,

Mrs. B. tries to blame the whole of Frado's condition on her most recent employer. Responding to a doctor's description of Frado as "all broken down," Mrs. B. responds "Yes, it was at Mrs. Moore's [...] all this was done," only to be corrected by the physician that "it was commenced longer ago" (66). The status of the Bellmonts as the origin point of Frado's illness, of being what Wilson writes was "the place where her declining health began," anchors Frado's disability as a continuation of her early mistreatment.

The difference made by reading these episodes through indenture is two-fold. First, the narrative force of indenture in its ability to bridge between a present apprentice enables Wilson's understanding of labor as something that shapes a subject and can linger with them far beyond the time of the labor itself. Second and perhaps more importantly, the recognition that work could result in such long-term and intimate changes to the worker also resurrects indenture's previous assertions that physical care was a basic tenet of employment. What Frado receives from the town is only what she first demands from the Bellmonts – food, lodging, and medicine – all of which formed the basic expectations of apprentice masters. As Wilson describes it, when the Bellmonts refuse to take in Frado a second time, there is "one only resource; the public must pay the expence [sic]" (67). The failing that Frado's town is compensating for, as a result, moves from a presumptive failure of Frado's part to an inadequacy of Frado's employers, a reframing that is even more forceful given that the Bellmonts' indenture was part of this welfare system from the beginning.

The deprivatization of the apprentice's body that is necessary for this shift may seem like one more way of controlling and dehumanizing subjects like Frado, but a return

to Wilson's legal framings changes the significance of physical references. As I described in the first section of this chapter, corporeality was allowed an acknowledgment in indenture that it could not receive in standard contract law. However, the nature of that indentured body is far from a straightforward object. Recall, for instance, the possibility of the sixteen-year-old infant plowman classed beside the toddler as equally incapacitated. What indenture records of the body is only the most indirect and notional reference; the flesh is recorded as a trace, not as an object eligible for scrutiny. The heft of indenture law is that the actions of the infant body cannot be separated from legal agreements, but that the two also cannot never be equated. In my final section, I will consider the converse of the semi-public status of the apprentice body, arguing as Wilson revises contract theory to make references to the bodily a valid public concern, she also writes a new privacy around the will. In this inversion, the growth into an adult world and the acceptance of public support does not require reconciliation or agreement.

Wilson and the Semi-private Will

In addition to her departure from the Bellmonts, one other narrative feature announces Frado's coming of age. A famous feature of Wilson's narrative is the decision to write from Frado's perspective while almost entirely using the third-person narration. This voice breaks in three places. Twice, a first-person pronoun appears in the paratext, as parts of the first and second chapter titles, but the only fully in-text use comes at the opening of the next-to-last chapter. In her reading of this inconsistent narrator, Santamarina argues that the distance that the adult Frado takes from her younger self reflects the extent to which "the black worker's labor generates his or her subjectivity as

a form of objectification” (76). I do not depart from this reading wholly, for I believe that it captures something important about the alienating condition of Frado’s captivity that causes her to describe herself as an “automaton” in her labor (54). I do, though, also want to retain the extent to which this distance places Frado outside of the realm of adult knowledge and adult control. The crucial point when the first-person pronoun appears in the body of the text corresponds not to a change in her labor conditions but rather to the arrival of her twenty-first birthday and the accompanying immersion in adulthood (70).⁹⁰ It is, in other words, both an isolation that causes her pain and a privacy that provides the space for her will to exceed its environment.

By defending the public’s obligation to acknowledge Frado’s bodily needs, Wilson threatens to put the status of her protagonist’s will dangerously in doubt. The inseparability of Frado’s consent from her physical condition, appearing in this instance as an obligation of age, has, to be sure, an entrapping effect; her consent is always extracted under the duress of her bodily needs. That is, if her contract to the Bellmonts is false, she nonetheless seems to have to accept its terms, deciding to remain “contentedly” until she reach eighteen, in part, because she questions her ability to survive if she does not do so – a decision, in other words, so predicated on indirect physical duress that it is difficult to muster as evidence of any definite agency (60). Priscilla Wald has expressed related skepticism about preserving autonomy in a character under such continual threat, writing that “Frado is possessed, internalizing a prescribed identity, through which the Bellmont family break the mischievous child in spirit as well as body.” In Wald’s

⁹⁰ In reading the opening of Chapter 12 as Frado’s twenty-first birthday, I differ from Foreman’s construction of the novel’s chronology, but do so on the grounds that Wilson declares it to have been “three years of weary sickness” since her departure from the Bellmonts at the age of eighteen (67).

reading, this overwriting of Frado is so pervasive that “her one gesture toward active resistance is itself authored by Mr. Belmont” (165), who worries that she is “looking sick” and “cannot endure beatings” anymore and thereby inspires her to resist Mrs. B.’s attempt at whipping her (Wilson 58). Wald suggests that even though Frado is the one who stands up to Mrs. Belmont and refuses to do work if she is beaten, the gesture is complicated by the fact that she is also obeying Mr. Belmont’s warnings.

The undercutting of this successful moment of defiance which should, by convention, signal the entrance of Frado into the sphere of adult independence – after which she seems only “*like* one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts [emphasis mine]” – could indeed be a sign of Frado’s erasure by her abuse, as Wald suggests (58). Yet, the tenuousness of an otherwise highly typical coming-of-age scene, when viewed in perspective of the text as a whole, offers another, more resistant reading. The scene invites us to mistake it for the absolute first awakening of proper willpower in Frado and, when taken as such, truly does produce a bleak outlook for her personhood. However, what the scene’s very typicality invites us to forget is the ways that Frado’s will has been on display from her earliest introduction. Wilson’s subversion of this particular scene, then, points not to a denial of Frado’s agency as such but, instead, to a rejection of the conventional model of agency more generally. If, as I have argued, the terms of Frado’s service prove inextricable from her growing body, her individual will proves to be a similarly asocial entity. Harkening back to the physical roots of infancy, this framing of embodied agency permits both a powerful critique of the vision of personhood as economic agency and, perhaps more importantly, a means of preserving Frado’s will in the midst of her coercion. By making will a personal physical experience

with limited communicability, Wilson also removes the opportunity to analyze and dismiss that will as being exclusively determined by her environment.

As I have suggested, *Our Nig* is permeated with signs of Frado's individual and inextinguishable will, reframing agency as being as inborn as any of her physical traits. The reader's first glimpse of Frado begins with her beauty but quickly blurs that beauty into mental determination; she is, Wilson writes, "a beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair, and handsome roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint" (11). Her spirit is not reducible to the sparkle in her eyes, but nor is it separate from her physical being. This embodied version of agency is intensified in Frado as a mark of her special strength but is not exclusive to her. Instead, the coupling of will and flesh also resonates in the side plot of Jane Bellmont's marriage plans, a strand of the novel which works through the troubles of child agency and contract in a far removed octave. Pressured to marry her rich suitor over her beloved suitor, Jane registers her fettered will through her bodily illness, until her father "bade her not make herself sick; he would see that she was not compelled to violate her free choice in so important a transaction" (34). With Mr. Bellmont's admission that "a free, voluntary choice was of such importance to one of her health," Wilson makes clear that embodied agency is not the racialized product of blackness but rather appears as a property of human will more generally (34).

The reality of Frado's will might threaten at times to mask the coercion of her situation under the veneer of consent, whether because of her teenaged decision to remain "contentedly" already mentioned or even the moment when a much younger Frado "resolved to tarry" with the Bellmonts despite the narrator's promise that she "would not

hesitate to wander away should she decide to.” Far from condoning the Bellmonts, though, Wilson is instead more fundamentally troubling the terms of consent (17). Though the two do overlap, this embodied will exists in imperfect alignment with the encapsulated and knowable moment of consent, as its epistemological standing in the text is carefully kept at the level of private truth. Frado’s status as “a wild, frolicky thing,” to borrow her mother’s half-marveling lament, speaks to a will pointing in multiple directions at once, a quality that cannot be questioned but is so unrestrainable that it refuses to be channeled into a single, instrumentalizable resource (12). Reiterated later as “the spark of playfulness [that] could remain amid such constant toil” as a result of “her natural temperament,” this essential source of self is precisely that which thwarts the Bellmonts’ disciplinary efforts to control it or, in other words, is aligned precisely with the public illegibility of legal infancy (31).

Similarly, the language describing Frado’s first entrance into the Bellmonts carefully establishes the existence of Frado’s will but refuses to presume that either she or her readers can have access to its origins. We are told that Mag’s order to go into the Bellmont home “seemed a novel request, but she consented” (14). Clearly, some type of decision has been made. Yet, as the narrator immediately continues, the act simply cannot be analyzed further, for “why the impetuous child entered the house, we cannot tell” (14). Where, in a true contract, consent would mark a moment of understanding between two parties on the strength of which mutual understanding each is then made accountable to the other, the choice made here is fundamentally inexplicable and, so, signals no possible establishment of a bond. All that is visible is that Frado, even as a small child, possesses a will, but the reader is allowed to feel insight into it much less intimacy through it.

Such privacy is perhaps a meager comfort, but, little as it is, it preserves a personhood for Frado outside of the logic of economic agency that is also more than a patronizing indulgence of a child able to be governed and assimilated. Rather than writing a young subject transparent to adult scrutiny, a self whose intent may be grasped and interrogated in a reductive opposition between consent and compulsion, Wilson sidesteps the absolutism of either classification by writing a child whose interiority is not on exhibition. By the bracketing of the origin of Frado's will as unknowable and its existence as unquestionable, the agency behind her decisions can be recognized without demanding that those particular decisions be perfectly separate from physical necessity. Frado's childish decisions may not be transparently rational, may not be free of duress or of bodily need, and therefore may not be those of a liberally imagined subject, but they nonetheless demand ethical recognition as being those of a subject. This ability to register a choice made in isolation as an act of will, rather than requiring there to be an agreement between two subject, is a model that indenture can offer but contract cannot. Much of Wilson's narration acts like those ambiguous "X"s of children signing indenture, stipulating a presence that does not allow intimacy.

Coda: A World Shaped by Indenture

Like many of the child subjects whom I have discussed, Frado's early life appears strikingly singular and Wilson's reinvestment in privacy seem to codify her loneliness as, at best, a necessary protection and, at worst, an existential fact. This, and the fact that my analysis has hewed relatively closely to Wilson's novel, could obscure the wider impact of Wilson's theorization. But the idea of contract as an analogy for a child's entrance into

the adult world has been a central argument in European and American philosophy since the time of John Locke. Wilson's deployment of indenture in the place of contract does more than document an unusual labor practice in New England; it opens a basic challenge to how we understand social bonds. Social contract theory posits that a nation is made up of a collection of voluntary members. Although both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke agree that birth into a society does not entail any obligation to that society, they also insist with equal strength that staying in a society indicates full agreement. Rousseau writes that "residence implies consent: to inhabit the territory is to submit to the sovereign" (153). In Locke's model, meanwhile, even "the very being of any one within the Territories of the Government" is enough to register as a "tacit consent" to that social contract (348). While children are nominally free from public obligations, for adults, the fundamental need to occupy a space is enough to bind one to the local social order. Thus, coming of age stands as an act of endorsement for the world that a subject has aged into.

What we might call Wilson's social indenture theory suggests an alternative. A population shaped by her version of indenture inverts the presumption that involvement in a society reveals something about that person's beliefs while leaving her responsible for physical needs. For Wilson, participation in a community might mean nothing more than that someone was born into it and that they rely on it for survival, but it does not imply approval or even acceptance. Wilson's revision allows for thinking about the reality of a coming of age without assimilation. Her model creates social resonances of this model for subjects who grow up with attachments to systems of power that they can never enter. What emerges from *Our Nig* more specifically, though, is the possibility of making demands on authority without reaffirming its legitimacy. Frado demands shelter

from the Bellmonts without treating it as reconciliation and accepts her town's payment for medical care as a straightforward matter of rights. She certainly does not regard either the Bellmonts or the town as a more legitimate sources of power when she receives it. Instead, indenture provides her with a way to narrate the effects of labor as lingering with the laborer and to insist that physical care is a basic part of the responsibility that an employer has for a worker, but to do so without requiring the worker's endorsement of the deal. Frado has been born into a labor system; she has not agreed to it.

This reframing also provides an example of the political utility of thinking about childhood in new ways. Wilson's apprentice may not have innocence as it is conventionally understood, because she is still expected to earn her keep. Nevertheless, the apprentice possesses a denaturalized relationship to power, one that can only be justified retroactively from the vantage of her adult self. Similarly, her relationship to futurity is tenuous in Wilson's work, because the indenture's promise of development is effectively void, but this too allows for the possibility of an individual privacy in the present. Wilson's non-teleological reading of childhood thus opens up to a more usefully flexing reading than simple futurity can allow. Emphasizing the temporal complexities implicit in representations of childhood can help to replace a politics of linear progress with one finding equal value in a coming of age that ends in stagnation or regression as narratives of progress.

Conclusion: Is Childhood Studies Something Other than the Humanities in Miniature?

Harriet Wilson's encounter with a childhood privatized by the market was not a moment that would last long in the U.S. In the decades following the Civil War, interest in child welfare increasingly moved from being either a family or commercial concern into a prerogative of the state. The nation that had only begun including the names of minors in the census in 1850 (Jackson and Teeple) had, by the end of the nineteenth century, developed laws against child labor, a system of public schooling, requirements for educating children and a host of reformers fixated on policies to protect children now seen as young citizens (Fass vii-ix). The rise of these "child savers," eager to secure and train waves of future citizens, was likely encouraged by the clearer definitions of citizenship that followed the 14th Amendment, which (nominally at least) gave a clear definition how how citizenship would be attached to future generations.⁹¹ With this stabilization, attitudes around the potential wildness of childhood, particularly of boys, grew more positive and was more likely to be seen as proof of white male freedom than of irredeemability.⁹² Similarly, the debates around heritability between generations began to be dominated by Darwinian notions that held inheritance to be a fundamental property

⁹¹ For a discussion of this legal precedents and its many exemptions, see Kristin A. Collins' "Illegitimate Borders: *Jus Sanguinis* Citizenship and the Legal Construction of Family, Race, and Nation." *The Yale Law Journal*. 123 (2013): 2134-2235.

⁹² See Kenneth Kidd's *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004 or the collected works of Mark Twain.

of all life – rather than a characteristic of social systems like family, aristocracy, or property.⁹³

But this by no means is to say that unequal childhoods ended. As Geoff K. Ward's *The Black Child-Savers* has shown, even the height of passion for reforms aimed at children, progressives consistently allocated fewer, if any resources for the welfare of black children. Social Darwinism, popularized in the U.S. by Horatio Alger novels, naturalized systemic inequality as the individual failures of children not “enterprising” enough to acquire property. The forcible removal and residential schooling of Native American children, already started during the antebellum period, began to intensify to devastating effects (Adams 8-9), and, beginning around the 1880s, the rise in biological Darwinism fueled eugenic attempts to eliminate children of color and children with disabilities on a massive scale (Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 95-100). It is equally apparent that the social differentiation of childhoods persists into the present. To name only a few examples, African American and Latino children of the eighties and early nineties could be labeled with the since-discredited diagnoses of the developmentally-stunted “crack baby”⁹⁴ or the terminally criminal “super-predator.”⁹⁵ Similarly

⁹³ Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species*, for example, promises that the terms of social relation used by natural scientists, such as “affinity, relationship, community of type, paternity” will, under his theory, “cease to be metaphorical, and will have a plain signification” for all forms of life (172). He continues, suggesting that all typology will be unified under a single understanding of inheritance: “our classifications will come to be, as far as they can be so made, genealogies; and will then truly give what may be called a plan of creation” (172). As Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger describe it, this work, “although falling short of presenting a general theory of heredity,” was “one of the first widely noticed works that exposed heredity as the central problem of biology” (73).

⁹⁴ For a longitudinal study undermining the reality of the “crack baby” narrative, see Betancourt, Laura M., et al. “Adolescents with and without gestational cocaine exposure: longitudinal

dehumanizing descriptions of children as “anchor babies” continue to be used to undermine the citizenship of predominantly Latino and Asian American families.⁹⁶ These discourses have direct and physical effects on the lives of such children. Recent research shows that not only are hospitals less likely to give black children effective pain medication (Goyal et al.) and police officers more likely to use force against African American children, white Americans more generally interpret black boys as being 4.5 years older than they are and as being less innocent than white or Latino peers (Goff).

Given the persistence and range of these typologies of “bad children,” what then does the particular discursive life of antisocial childhoods in the U.S. offer us? One answer lies as much in the institutional structure of U.S. academia as it does in the historical particularities of antebellum literature – namely, that the importance of the nineteenth-century in consolidating ideas about childhood has had a formative role in the shaping of modern child-studies. No one period, of course, has dominated the field, but two most common origin points neatly bookend the nineteenth century. On one hand, the literary scholar Anna Mae Duane suggests the mid- to late eighteenth century as a popular choice, noting that “many practitioners locate the origins of the Enlightenment, as part of that era’s interest in human nature” (3). From an economic and sociological perspective, another typical touchstone of Child Studies is Viviana Zelizer’s *The*

analysis of inhibitory control, memory and receptive language." *Neurotoxicology and teratology* 33.1 (2011): 36-46.

⁹⁵ For discussion and critique of the “super-predator” theory in criminology, see Soo Ah Kwon’s *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism and Affirmative Governmentality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 39-42.

⁹⁶ For discussion of this trend, see Priscilla Huang’s “Anchor Babies, Over-Breeders, and the Population Bomb: The Reemergence of Nativism and Population Control in Anti-Immigration Policies.” *Harvard Law and Policy Review*. 2 (2008): 385.

Priceless Child, which traces the formation of the modern sense of childhood as non-economic (or priceless) to the 1880s through the early twentieth century. Literary analyses of childhood show a particularly strong gravitation towards the antebellum period (mea culpa), likely because the rise of children's literature as an explicitly marketed occurred during this time and the child-centric nature of some of its most canonical texts. Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes to mind, as it has for many other scholars, as does the juvenile-centric reading first promoted by Leslie Fiedler in 1965. The antebellum period is thus a central vantage from which to consider just how Child Studies has taken its modern form.

In particular, it is worth questioning the concurrence of the rise of Childhood Studies with the increasing critique of the category of the human. The emergence of "the child" threatens to act as a surrogate for for the figure of the "human" as an object for seemingly universal ethical attention. Lee Edelman's *No Future* has been somewhat piled upon for its failure to consider intersectionalities such as race or disability and for its rejections of collectivity.⁹⁷ Its observations about the centrality of children, or at least some children, in U.S. politics, however, are not wrong. I write at a time when the U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's critique of her opponent Donald Trump recurs to the idea that "our children are watching" a signifier for moral condemnation that leaves open whether he should be judged for his many bigotries or his deviation from a set of traditional Christian values. It encompasses antiracism, feminism, and Christian evangelicalism. None of these ethical positions are named – lest they conflict – but the

⁹⁷ For one overview of this conversation, see Drew Daniel's review "Trading Futures: Queer Theory's Anti-Anti-Relational Turn

symbolic pull of these children suffices to evoke whichever might be most appealing to the given audience. Even the strictly academic structure of Childhood Studies has produced an interesting recapitulation of the academic studies of the human that have taken shape since the Enlightenment. In its present form, Childhood Studies encompasses Anthropology⁹⁸, Economics⁹⁹, Education¹⁰⁰, History¹⁰¹, Law¹⁰², Literature¹⁰³, Linguistics¹⁰⁴, Neuroscience¹⁰⁵, Philosophy¹⁰⁶, Political Science¹⁰⁷, Psychology,¹⁰⁸ Public Health,¹⁰⁹ Religious Studies¹¹⁰, Sociology¹¹¹, Theatre¹¹², and Women and Gender

⁹⁸ For an overview of this field and several representative texts, see Courtney L. Meehan's "Directions in the Anthropology of Childhood." *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. Vol. 3.2 (June 2011) 140-149.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, Cigno, Alessandro and Furio C. Rosati, *The Economics of Child Labour*. New York: Oxford English Press, 2005 or *The Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market*. Ed. Anne Trine Kjølholt and Jens Qvortup. New York: Springer, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ This overlap may be too obvious for good examples but see the *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* and *Children's Literature in Education*.

¹⁰¹ See, for instance, the journal *Childhood in the Past* or *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*.

¹⁰² For instance, see the journals *Child Law Practice* and *Law and Childhood Studies* or the resource *Kindex: An Index to Legal Periodical Literature Concerning Children*.

¹⁰³ See, for instance, this project.

¹⁰⁴ See the journals *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* or the *Journal of Child Language*.

¹⁰⁵ See Duke University's Child Studies group in the Psychology & Neuroscience Department.

¹⁰⁶ See Murriss, Karin. *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ See *Politics, Citizenship and Rights (Geographies of Children and Young People Series)*. Ed. Kirsi Pauliin Kallio, Sarah Mills, and Tracey Skelton. New York: Springer, 2015 and Lynch, Julia. *Age in the Welfare State: The Origins of Social Spending on Pensioners, Workers, and Children*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁰⁸ See the journal *Educational and Child Psychology* or the joint degree programs in Psychology and Childhood Studies available at the University Campus Suffolk, the University of Portsmouth, or a number of other universities.

¹⁰⁹ See for instance the *Maternal and Child Health Journal* or Blair et al.'s *Child Public Health*. (2003) 2nd Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹¹⁰ See the *Journal of Childhood and Religion* and *The Society of Biblical Literature's* "Children in Biblical Literature" section.

¹¹¹ See Gibson, Kristina E. *Street Kids: Homeless Youth, Outreach, and Policing New York's Streets*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

¹¹² See *Spotlight on the Child: Studies in the History of American Children's Theatre*. Ed. Roger L. Bedard and C. John Tolch. Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1989 or *Drama and*

Studies¹¹³ – each of which can be studied domestically, along the borders of area studies, or comparatively. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject has likely been a part of its appeal in recent years, but the overall profile of the field looks very much like a cross section of humanities writ large.

This formation does not need to be interpreted as anything deliberate; it is the understandable result of studying a status that might be applied to part of the life of all subjects in any part of the world, at any time. However, it is not clear how the idea of childhood – which has always been geographically and historically specific and which in a U.S. context has been constitutive of racial hierarchies and gender norms – would provide an anchor that is any more productive or less harmful than the category of the human itself. Indeed, heightened attention to “the child” could be harmful in ways beyond those that attention to “the human” might be. If “the human” has been critiqued for the defaults implanted by its Enlightenment-era origins, in which to be a person of color or a woman a deviation from the normative human, even the purest ethical attachment to “the child” as a heterogeneous category can threaten to give adults secondary value as less sympathetic subjects. An interest in the welfare of children has, for instance, long been a tool for controlling the behavior of the women who carry or parent these children.

If Childhood Studies can avoid falling into all the patterns of studies of the human, it must do so by accepting that childhood should never be an entirely coherent

Theatre with Children: International Perspectives. Ed. Charru Sharma. New York: Routledge, 2015.

¹¹³ See the spring 2015 special issue of the *Women’s Studies Quarterly* on “the child” or the September 2016 special issue of *GLQ* on “the child now.”

field of study. Scholars who would never dream of generalizing about “the human” continue to make casual reference to “the child,” as if the category were self-evident or even possible. Instead, Childhood Studies might be usefully aligned with Animal Studies as being an interest in how certain types of figures (namely, animals) have been constitutive of ideas about human selfhood without necessarily attempting to say anything about the reality of the figure itself. Alternatively, in her introduction to *The Children’s Table*, Duane has suggested Gender Studies as an analogue for the multiplicity of childhood. This model has imperfect parallels. For instance, childhood, as Robin Bernstein has shown, certainly contains performance but performative models of gender may not fit the physicality of childhood well. Still, treating it as a category of identity that operates similarly to gender could help to retain activist and policy-making approaches to the study of children.

Regardless, though, of the precise theoretical models that might be developed to connect, chronological age, social status and socially recognized age, Childhood Studies must not place its center in even a putatively singular subject. As this project has shown, a return to one of the origin points of the field reveals the fundamental plurality of visions of children. The angelic child never existed without the delinquent, the apprentice, the prodigy, or any of the other frameworks for childhood which this project might have considered but for which it lacked the space. Instead, these figures – which are themselves so invested in attempts to think about the antebellum U.S. as a heterogeneous set of populations with discontinuities, exceptions, and difference – point to childhood as an object of study in which multiplicity must be a central feature of not only its content, but also its methods. In other words, Childhood Studies should perhaps not be about a

special class of subjects, or even necessarily subjects at all. It might be more useful to consider a field not centered on the subject at all, but on how subjects are individuated or generalized and to have ethical attachments that are stranded somewhere between personhood and animacy.

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¹¹⁴ This is the version used in Chapter 1. Chapter 4 uses the second version of Blackstone.

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