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“When Children Are Not Glad”

Sympathy, Performance, and Power in Abolitionist Children’s Literature

In antebellum American society, neither women nor children were seen as full citizens, and neither group possessed any direct political power, consigned as they were to the private, domestic sphere. And yet, many women produced stories ostensibly written for children that packed a quite radical political argument: abolitionism. This essay hopes to add to existing work on abolitionist women’s writing by exploring how the literature abolitionist women wrote expressly for child readers provided a unique opportunity for both the writer and the reader to advance the abolitionist cause. This literature became a device for women to teach their children about slavery, as well as a forum for speaking to each other, even across racial divides, about the abolitionist cause. This essay will pay special attention to how female authors of abolitionist children’s literature performed a conservative notion of their gender identity – mother and moral teacher – in order to call for progressive change. Additionally, the focus these women placed on young enslaved characters forces readers to recognize how slavery prohibited the newly-formed, but deeply important, nineteenth-century ideals of childhood and the performance of this identity. Thus, abolitionist children’s literature had a twofold power: it used the unique features of the child’s identity to elicit sympathy and make a persuasive argument against the slave system, both of which provided a “safe” space for women to contribute their political expression.

Introduction

The message at the end of Lydia Maria Child’s 1831 story “Jumbo and Zairee” is uncomplicated enough for her presumed reader, a young child, to grasp: a white, slaveholding man buys freedom for an enslaved African-American family. He voices his rejection of a system which allows the family to be treated not as humans, but as chattel; after doing so, everyone weeps with joy. In this story, published in *Juvenile Miscellany*, the children’s magazine Child edited in addition to

her many other profitable and popular domestic writing ventures, she depicts African culture as worthy and intelligent. She holds that all humans, both black and white, come from the same God. And, when Child's slaveholder character, Mr. Harris, declares, "I have tried to show my gratitude to the negroes by being a kind master; but I am satisfied this is not all I ought to do. They ought to be free. What is wrong in the eyes of God, cannot be made right by man," her argument, though spoken through a fictitious children's tale, is potent.¹ The slave system must be abolished, and immediately.

Just two years after the publication of "Jumbo and Zairee" Child published a tract called *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, where she expressed such similar political ideas as those in the aforementioned story as immediate emancipation of enslaved peoples and racial equality. But her *Appeal* was written for adults, so the abolitionist, anti-racist argument was overt. Child delivered it in her own voice, not hidden in the words of fictional characters – and its reception was dramatically different. Upon the publication of *Appeal* her hitherto best-selling domestic advice books went out of print, many publishers refused to accept her new writings, and she lost her editorial post at *The Juvenile Miscellany*, as outraged parents (presumably the same who had happily read Jumbo and Zairee's tale to their children two years earlier) cancelled subscriptions in droves. The storm of backlash plunged Child and her husband, already cash-strapped from their joint abolitionist work, into financial despair.²

The striking contrast in the reaction to these pieces raises questions about why a woman could express such ideas about slavery and race in a story for children without backlash, and yet be so soundly condemned when she published the same views in a political tract. But, even more so, the question must arise: why would Child – or any woman living in nineteenth-century American society – choose to write anti-slavery, anti-racist literature for a child reader during this period when neither women nor children had any political power, and when neither was considered a full citizen? In the following pages, I argue that children's literature became a vital space in which women voiced resistance to dominant pro-slavery and racist views without jeopardizing their position as a "true woman" within nineteenth-century gender ideals. The nineteenth-century American woman's only "proper sphere" was the home, and intellectual pursuits were la-

1. Lydia Maria Child, "Jumbo and Zairee," in *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, ed. Carolyn Karcher (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997), 153–159.

2. Carolyn Karcher, "Introduction: Children's Literature and Domestic Advice," in *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, ed. Carolyn Karcher (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997), 99–100.

beled both unnatural and dangerous;³ thus, political speech and action always placed women in a precarious situation, where their very identity as "female" could be questioned for overstepping their socially-accepted role. Yet, a political argument could be made with much less scrutiny in works which ostensibly upheld the antebellum feminine ideal of domesticity, such as sentimental writing, with its focus on emotions (particularly, sympathy) and family life (particularly, the mother and her children).

While much the same could be said of any type of sentimental abolitionist literature, including the literature for adult women that has received significant attention in recent scholarship, the lesser-studied body of work written expressly for young readers offered perhaps an even more useful venue for the abolitionist argument. As the conflicting public responses to Child's two works show, writing for children provided a sort of safe space for women to express political views, a forum not only for women to teach their children, but to speak to each other about the abolitionist cause.

Although this rhetorical veil was important to the genre's goal, the figure of the child – both the child character in the writing and the child reader – is equally crucial to this body of work's impact. As the notion of childhood as a separate identity emerged for the first time in the nineteenth century,⁴ authors of abolitionist children's literature focused on how slavery inhibited these new, but deeply-held, ideals of a child's social role in order to condemn the slave system overall. Such a critique was made all the more biting for how it unmasked the fallacy of one of pro-slavery critics' most crucial arguments: slavery was "patriarchal" in its aims. Additionally, since early American women were tasked with raising a new generation of "good" Christian citizens,⁵ by placing their abolitionist argument within children's stories (a genre most didactic in aim during this era) the authors essentially manipulated the conservative role of the moral educator for a progressive aim. Indeed, by both utilizing and subverting conservative ideals of femininity and childhood, abolitionist children's literature offered a persistent and persuasive call for a progressive change – a call that was less controversial because of its platform, but no less powerful and significant in its contributions to the cause.

3. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18.2 (Summer 1966) 151–174.

4. Deborah C. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830–1865* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

5. Deborah C. DeRosa, *Into the Mouth of Babes: An Anthology of Children's Abolitionist Literature* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Press, 2005), p. xvii.

1. Womanhood and Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America: The Identity as Performance

Before examining any of the abolitionist writing itself, however, it is necessary to understand what it meant to be a woman and a child in antebellum America, as well as how these identities should be performed, or enacted in visible ways. When I refer to “performance,” I am using a definition that draws from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. That is, identity is not something inherent or innate, but rather socially constructed. The way societal expectations and constructions influence identity is so powerful that indeed identity is not expressed in an act, but rather identity *is* the performance of an act itself: you are what you do, and your society will name you by this.⁶ For Butler, there is no stable identity outside of the actions; gender does not exist as a noun outside the gender expressions which are said to be its result.⁷ Her theory of performativity, however, does not imbue subjects with the ability merely to shrug on and off many identities (or any identity) at will, as an actor playing many parts. Rather, the individual subject is constrained by the normative standards of his or her society and must meet these standards in action to claim a socially-recognized identity. In order to claim “woman” as an identity, for instance, an individual must continually reiterate those actions deemed “feminine” by her specific society.

Although Butler’s work focuses on more modern interpretations of gender, the feminine identity of antebellum America displays both this socially defined and continually reiterated nature. Indeed, as Barbara Welter describes in her essay “The Cult of True Womanhood,” a certain socially-legible performance was central to claiming the identity of “woman” within this era. The nineteenth century woman was judged to be a “true” woman by displaying – to herself, to her family and to her larger society – four vital characteristics: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. “True women” were devoted to their Christian religion, and used their supposedly “natural” inclination to faith to shine salvation on their husbands and families. To be a true woman, she must also protect her virtue at every turn, for without purity, she was “no woman at all,” and subject to madness, desperation and even death. True women followed their husband’s will; where he acted, she responded, an order seen as vital to the continued functioning of the republic and even the greater universe.⁸ Her most important stage for performing this role was her own household; by displaying all her other virtues while keeping up a comforta-

6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

7. Butler, p. 33.

8. Welter, pp. 154–164.

ble and cheerful home, she could raise a family of good, American Christians, thus keeping her country strong.⁹

Slipping in the performance of any one of these cardinal virtues meant not just societal disapproval, but indeed a stripping of her identity as a woman, as evidenced by females who did eschew the order being termed "no woman," "semi-women," and "hermaphrodites." As Welter puts it, the women who do not perform this set of values are "read out of the sex."¹⁰ That is, women who transgressed by not performing the cardinal four virtues in their own writing – women like early American feminist writers Margaret Fuller and Frances Wright – were condemned by the larger society with the barrage of articles in popular women's magazines which decisively deny the title of "woman" to such deviants.¹¹

It is essential, however, to recognize that "true womanhood" could not extend to all females in antebellum America: the constraints of its many demands meant only white, free, middle-to-upper class women could possibly hope for admission into this group. For enslaved black women, not to mention the legions of poorer women of any race, the ideal of sitting quietly by the hearth, instilling Christian lessons to her docile children all day was impossible, due to the economic necessity of work outside the home. Still, the ideals of true womanhood came to be embraced by certain sectors of the black community, particularly for the small-but-growing community of free blacks in the Northern states. True womanhood, as practiced in the white free world, was the antithesis of slave women's reality, where they served a dual role as physical laborer and sexual commodity. Thus, for free black women who strove to attain the ideals of true womanhood, the performance became a reclamation of an identity that the slave system denied so many of their sisters.¹²

Indeed, while the economic realities meant a "perfect" performance of true womanhood was impossible for most black women, African-American women in the abolitionist movement consciously championed these virtues in their own group

9. Welter, p 171. It should be noted, however, that this notion of woman as the moral educator for a nation appears before the 19th century. Often termed by historians as "republican motherhood," it appeared with the emergence of the nation itself. Women's domestic roles as mothers were seen as inherently civic, for they were charged with raising children who would uphold the republican ideals of the new nation. See Linda K. Kerber's extensive work on Republican Motherhood, particularly her 1980 book *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (University of North Carolina Press).

10. Welter, pp. 154, 172–173.

11. Welter, p. 173.

12. Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

as a way to draw parallels between the races.¹³ As such, the performance of “true womanhood” became vital as a sort of bridge, a commonly-held ground between upwardly-mobile and middle-class black families and their white counterparts. I will later argue that Harriet Wilson, one particularly interesting writer of abolitionist children’s literature, uses this performance to establish her authority in making her political argument.

Alongside this standard of true womanhood, a new conception of childhood as an identity with its own culturally-accepted performance began to emerge in the nineteenth century. As Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues in the introduction to her book *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth Century Culture*, the cultural conception of childhood as a time of life distinctly different and separate from adulthood was not always a given, but rather a “gradual and uneven transformation” spurred, in large part, by economic changes.¹⁴ Sánchez-Eppler writes that, while at the beginning of the nineteenth century most children were still participating in some form of labor to support the family, as the century progressed with increasing industrialization as well as new child-labor laws, children gradually began to lose their economic value. “Childhood – valued for love, not labor – demonstrates the nature of this new mode of social organization even more clearly than changes in the status of women, for whom love, after all, was seen as a type of work,” she writes.¹⁵ Sánchez-Eppler argues that while this change did not happen all at once, or even uniformly, for the country, the shift became most noticeable as the nineteenth-century progressed, and ideas of the child as naturally depraved also shifted to conceptions of children as natural innocents, as “blank slates” on which parents could inscribe their own moral values. Like the adult “true woman” dependent on and submissive to her husband, the “true child” also could expect to be dependent on his or her parents for protection, for care, and – perhaps most important to the young American child – for the moral guidance needed to become a good citizen of the republic.

Even more than adult women, the child’s identity came to be seen as a state of perfect purity, of godliness. Indeed, as Welter points out through her extensive examples of stories about the need to “protect” virtue, an adult woman’s purity was always at risk; the “fallen woman” trope was so popular because this purity could so easily be compromised by one slick man’s seduction.¹⁶ But as Deborah DeRosa argues in her book on antebellum American juvenile literature, children were seen as

13. Yee, pp. 46–48; 58–59.

14. Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth Century Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xvii.

15. Sánchez-Eppler, p. xviii.

16. Welter, p. 156.

"naturally" good and innocent, full of play and joy, and holding a "more profound awareness of enduring moral truths."¹⁷ Likewise, as Jane Tompkins describes the notion of childhood in her examination of the most famous American abolitionist novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, children had a "natural sanctity," making them angelic forces able to lead their county's adults closer to Christian notions of salvation.¹⁸

Because children were seen as blank slates to be molded into good American citizens, DeRosa argues that much nineteenth-century children's literature focused on teaching values which would secure the nation's future, such as the abundant morality tales stressing a Protestant/capitalist work ethic as the way to reach one's happy ending. Abolitionist children's writers appear quite aware of this plot formula; however, their works show a manipulation of the expected narrative trajectory, where the hard worker is not rewarded. In Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, for instance, the author depicts a hard-working serving girl who attempts to obey every order, but is beaten instead of praised.¹⁹ Such deviations are quite effective because they necessarily force the nineteenth-century American reader to question the current social order when the expected plot goes "wrong."

These two identities – womanhood and childhood – lend a sort of dual power to abolitionist children's literature. The true woman, imbued as she was with her higher piety and virtue than her male counterpart, was charged with shaping her family's, and especially her children's, morals. As DeRosa notes, most domestic writing was considered "non-threatening" because it did not conflict with the performance of femininity; but writing children's literature was perhaps the "safest" form for women writers. Indeed, since teaching children was a crucial tenet of true womanhood, penning didactic tales or verses was an ideal performance of this identity.²⁰ In addition to the special power of the child as a figure in nineteenth-century society, then, the genre also provided a sort of cloak for political discourse. As much of this writing was published in family magazines, meant to be read by a mother to her children, the supposed "safety" of children's literature proved a clever circumvention of social barriers: authors necessarily had to imagine a dual audience, and anything said to the child was thus also said to the

17. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism*, p. 9.

18. Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *Sensational Design: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1986), 122–146, p. 129.

19. Harriet E Wilson, *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

20. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism*, p. 9.

adult woman imagined to be reading the story as well. The juvenile literature of the day thus became a space for women to speak to each other, to share ideas and to gather support for the abolitionist cause.

2. Sympathy's Role in the Performance of Identity

Of course, both Sánchez-Eppler and DeRosa are quick to point out that qualities embedded in a “cult of childhood” or true childhood were available only to the middle- and higher-class free society in nineteenth-century America – a society that was, save a few exceptions, overwhelmingly white. Yet, the ideal of true childhood, like true womanhood, was enthusiastically embraced by this power-holding group, and this thus gave the abolitionists writing children's literature a crucial place for critique. If one performed true childhood by being joyful, innocent and playful, then the slave child's clear inability to perform this role could be displayed and emphasized in order to criticize the slave system as a whole. For an enslaved child, joy was destroyed by savage beatings and the pain of watching parents or siblings sold away; innocence was shattered by the countless acts of violence they suffered or witnessed; and playtime was swallowed by work. Their childhood, as it would be known in dominant culture, was lost, and nearly all abolitionist children's literature displays a pressing anxiety about this loss.

One writer who was very concerned with the loss of childhood was Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, a Boston native and Unitarian Sunday school teacher who became one of the city's leading reformers. In the juvenile magazine she edited, *The Child's Friend and Family Magazine*, Follen includes many poems which focus on this loss of childhood. One poem, simply titled “Lines: On hearing of the terror of the children of American slaves at the thought of being sold,” which was printed in an 1844 edition of the magazine, includes two stanzas bluntly contrasting the ideal performance of childhood and the way slavery forbids this performance. It reads:

When children play the livelong day
Like birds and butterflies,
As free and gay sport life away,
And know not care nor sighs:
Then all the air, seems fresh and fair,
Around above, below
Life flowers are there, and every where
Is innocence and love.

When children pray with fear all day,
A blight must be at hand;

Then joys decay, and birds of prey,
Are hovering o'er the land:
When young hearts weep, as they go to sleep,
Then all the world seems sad:
The flesh must creep, and woes are deep,
When children are not glad.²¹

Here, the picture of true childhood is very clear in the first stanza, with its pictures of play and happiness. This is what the nineteenth century middle-class audience thinks childhood should be; so Follen includes a picture of childhood familiar to both the white child and the secondary audience of the white mother sitting next to the child.

And yet the second stanza completely contradicts this picture. Although Follen does not explicitly name the subjects in either stanza, her title lets us know that the children who "pray with fear all day" must be those terrified children of American slaves. The slave children here get to experience none of the ideal traits of childhood Sánchez-Eppler and DeRosa lay out; but perhaps most troubling for the mother/adult side of the dual audience is the fact that the mother cannot perform her role as caregiver and comforter, either. The slave children's prayers of fear come because they know their parents cannot offer them the protection and happiness which a true child should have.

The poem certainly aimed to teach a lesson, as was common for conventional nineteenth-century writing for children, which often showed the moral or social correction of a young protagonist. But, as DeRosa states, juvenile abolitionist literature modified this trope by presenting "young victims who do not need moral reform but instead need rescue from an immoral system."²² Follen's fearful, praying children – doing nothing wrong but suffering nonetheless – certainly need this rescue.

3. The Reformatory Power of Sympathy

Follen's poem does not aim merely to teach about slavery's existence; instead, its goal is to teach sympathy for the slave, or to teach "right feeling." Lines like "a blight *must* be at hand," or "the flesh *must* crawl" can be read as ones which simultaneously allow the reader to perform sympathy and teach the performance of this emotion.

21. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, "Lines: On hearing of the terror of the children of American slaves at the thought of being sold," *The Child's Friend and Family Magazine* (April 1844) accessed via The American Periodicals Series Online.

22. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism*, p. 43.

The words let Follen perform her own sympathy through the image of a skin “crawling” with disgust. On another level, the word “must” shows the words to be a tool for teaching children this right feeling. For, by writing “must,” she is instructing her (mainly white) children readers about the correct way to respond to this sad scene; she is saying that they, too, should feel their flesh crawl and feel a “blight” over their homeland.

“Feeling right,” of course, was not limited to the juvenile sect of abolitionist writing. In her essay on pain and sympathy in antebellum America, Elizabeth B. Clark argues that, as religious thought at the time moved to celebrate the body’s integrity and the ideal of a benevolent God, depictions of slaves’ suffering bodies – including graphic descriptions of beatings, abundant references to tears or screams, and ruminations on bodily pain – came to have “strategic value” for abolitionist writers. As Clark explains, sympathy – a term which in the nineteenth century also encompassed the modern-day understanding of empathy – was “a complex process in which the observer’s willed attentiveness to another’s suffering gave rise to an intuitive empathetic identification with the other’s experience.”²³ As such, abolitionists tried to use this “intuitive” identification to show why slavery could not be tolerated: if one felt right, then one would necessarily object to and protest the system.

For the female writer charged with the moral upbringing of her family, then, teaching sympathy to a young reader, as Follen aims to do in this poem, was part of this ideal performance of womanhood, for it combined both the cardinal virtues of piety and domesticity. Follen, too, is assuming the voice of a moral instructor here. Even the reading itself is performing womanhood: the woman reader feels sympathy because Follen uses tropes of true womanhood and true childhood, from the piety implied by the child’s praying to the references to innocence and play. Additionally, because of the assumed double audience of abolitionist children’s literature, the “lesson” of how one should feel about slavery could be clearly and boldly repeated to adult women as well. Follen – and other female abolitionists – thus can perform true womanhood through their own sympathetic feelings, and, at the same time, rally other women into abolitionist activism.

Readers can see the teaching of sympathy at work in another of Follen’s poems, “The Slave Boy’s Wish.” The verse begins with a list of fanciful wishes from free children: “I wish I was a bird,” or “I wish I was that butterfly” – all images that fit the performance of a true child’s playful happiness. Halfway through the 32-line poem, however, the speaker clearly changes into a child who cannot experience this

23. Elizabeth B. Clark, “‘The Sacred Rights of the Weak’: Pain, Sympathy and the Culture of the Individual in Antebellum America,” *The Journal of American History*, 82.2 (Sept. 1995) 463–493.

playfulness. He states he wishes to be a fox, hidden away, or a cloud near heaven, for he is a slave, ending the poem by lamenting:

What wicked action have I done
That I should be a slave?

I saw my little sister sold.
So will they do to me;
My Heavenly Father, let me die,
For then I shall be free.²⁴

By starting with the free children's happy wishes, Follen allows the free child reader to see himself in the poem; but the quick changeover to the slave child's voice extends this sense of identification to the enslaved youth as well. DeRosa terms such moves as "emotional analogy," and such a description seems apt here: the child first sees himself, and then sees someone who at first seems so much like him, but turns out to be very different indeed. Follen thus makes the assumed reader – a white, free child – to see the parallels between himself and this child slave – and as such, she aims to teach sympathy.

Again, the didactic tale is not a moral corrective for the child – the implied answer here to "What wicked action have I done?" is clearly "nothing." Instead, it is the larger slave system that is condemned by the boy's final wish to die, for it is his only way to freedom. The correct performance of childhood is utterly impossible here – for what could be further from being a joyful, innocent creature "valued for love, not labor" than suicidal wishes – and hence both child and adult audiences are taught that slavery has to be wrong if their ideals of childhood are to be maintained.

Importantly, the sympathy Follen calls for here is not just for the physical pain of the suffering enslaved boy she depicts, but also sympathy for his lost childhood, which thus refutes a very important pro-slavery argument: that slavery was a beneficial institution, with African-Americans figured as the child in need of protection. DeRosa notes that in the pro-slavery children's literature, which was widely published in the Southern states around the same time as Follen's poems, slaves are referred to as "kindly treated," hugged by their young masters and cared for. Pro-slavery literature showed slaves as "good children," and indeed, even the slave system was often referred to by its supporters as a "patriarchal" institution.²⁵ But Follen's poems insistently deny this by showing the absence of childhood, the inability

24. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen. "The Slave Boy's Wish" *The New England Farmer; A Monthly Journal*. Feb. 1859. Accessed via The American Periodicals Series Online.

25. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism*, p. 40.

to perform true childhood as a slave. Essentially, Follen's poems argue that since even slave children cannot truly be children, we cannot believe adult slaves are also happy "good children" under the firm but loving father of the slave master. Her work shows that there are no children in slavery.

* * *

Abolitionist writing that relies so much on sympathy may fall subject to the same criticism as all sentimental literature, which is that the work allows readers to stop at this "right feeling." If people reach sympathy and cry for the poor suffering slave, critics of the genre argue, then they can pat themselves on the back for being good Christians and feel superior and go on their way – or, as Marcus Wood puts it, the slave's suffering becomes "only relevant as the key site for the individual witness's exploration, or testing, or his/her capacity for sympathy."²⁶ Sympathy and sentiment thus can relieve the reader of the need to act; the free white reader's reaction matters, not the actual enslaved black body's suffering, and nothing changes.

Despite the fact that recent scholarship has shed light on the important problems with sympathy and the sentimental genre, I argue that this mode of critique obscures the truth of the simple but quite radical intervention these women attempted. These were Northern, free women, living physically and emotionally removed from the enslaved blacks, and yet, through their focus on qualities like love and mothering, they elide that great chasm. In their work, they strive to make sympathy supplant difference. The psychoanalytical critiques such modern critics as Wood, Saidiya Hartman or Marianne Noble²⁷ use to focus on what "pleasure" a white reader took in a slave's suffering does a disservice to the original writers by too quickly dismissing their aims, and their effects. As Jane Tompkins argues in her groundbreaking work on the power of sentiment in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is faulty to consider that abolitionist writing was somehow choosing feeling over action, because, for the authors, the moral revolution would necessarily precede any legal and political upheaval. For an abolitionist, nineteenth-century woman writer, changing feeling *was* changing reality; moving Americans' moral compasses to recognize slavery as evil was the most vital step in reforming the world.²⁸ The currency of true womanhood becomes quite real here: in re-affirming the well-entrenched social ideals of family and Christianity through depicting slavery's denial of these very

26. Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, (Oxford University Press, 2002).

27. See Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* and Noble's *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, for these critics, like Wood, place much focus on the pleasure the reader takes in scenes of suffering and pain.

28. Tompkins, p. 133.

beliefs to other human beings, a writer necessarily calls for a revolution of both thought and action. Or, as Welter argues, an abolitionist woman writer's use of feeling demands action, for it suggests those who share her "right feeling" might be better suited to leading the burgeoning republic than the men "making such a hash of things."²⁹

This power of sentiment to effect change manifests itself even more clearly in abolitionist children's literature, where writers often quite explicitly show feeling right and acting right as inextricably entwined, rather than opposed. With their pedagogic aims, I argue, these writers want to make young readers learn that adopting these morals can lead to a better world.

In the Lydia Maria Child story discussed earlier, "Jumbo and Zairee," this goal of social change through changing hearts is quite clear. Child, one of the most prolific writers of both abolitionist and conventional domestic literature, writes a story about an Englishman, Mr. Harris, who finds himself shipwrecked along the African coastline. The king and queen of the nearby tribe, Jumbo and Zairee's parents, care for and shelter him like an honored guest. While everyone gets along well, Mr. Harris eventually must return home to England, and when Jumbo and Zairee try to sneak aboard Harris's ship, they accidentally land on a slave ship bound for America. Their father, too, ends up in the American slave system, and eventually Jumbo and father find out that their old friend Mr. Harris lives nearby. The pair beg Mr. Harris to buy them away from a cruel master, and to buy Zairee, who was sold to another plantation, as well. Mr. Harris buys them all to reunite the family, but then chooses not to enslave them, instead damning slavery as against God and sending the family home to freedom in Africa.³⁰

The story closes with scenes of jubilation, and Mr. Harris' elevation to Christ-like status as Zairee falls to her knees and cries over his kindness.³¹ The earliest parts of this story focus on feeling, aiming to incite sympathy with descriptions of such events as Jumbo and Zairee's painful Atlantic passage; but Child clearly shows that this feeling necessarily leads to action: when Mr. Harris looks at his old friends, and feels sympathy for their plight, he must reject slavery.

As the free, white child reader would still be a dependent, the direct action of literally freeing slaves could not, of course, be repeated immediately. Yet the story nonetheless decidedly leads young people to a real change, through such scenes as Child's description of the cruel slave ship captain: "You will ask me if this man was

29. Welter, p. 174

30. It should also be noted that Child was still a supporter of colonization, or returning slaves to Africa, when she wrote this story. Child later reverses her viewpoint, calling for slaves to be released and treated as full citizens in America.

31. Child, p. 159.

an American? One of our own countrymen, who will make it their boast that men are born free and equal. I am sorry to say that he was an American,” she writes.³² The change asked of the child reader, then, is thinking differently about their country and feeling the gap between what it supposedly represents and the reality of its current slave system. As the tale closes with freed slaves, Child shows here how sympathy is the vital impetus for a changed society.

The style of Child’s writing here is also noteworthy: although it is couched in a very childlike tone, it is a most biting critique on the hypocrisy of slavery existing in a country founded on ideals of freedom. The words may be simple, but the message is weighty and quite political: how can the “land of the free” so visibly and completely suppress so many human beings’ freedom? Here, Child manipulates one of the central tenets of the newly-formed ideal of childhood – innocence, being a “blank slate” – to make a very potent point about American ideology.

Like Child, Follen aims to teach sympathy as a spur to social change in many of her writings, particularly in her clever didactic device of adopting the voice of a child to write faux “letters” to her juvenile magazine. In one such letter, “A Pic Nic at Dedham,” from the October 1843 edition of *The Child’s Friend and Family Magazine*, Follen assumes the voice of a young boy writing a letter to his mother. The “young boy” writes about his visit to Dedham, a suburb of Boston, where he watched an anniversary celebration for the abolition of slavery in the West Indies nine years earlier. As he listens to the speeches and looks at the banners around him (which he says are printed with slogans like “God never made a tyrant or a slave” and “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”), he finds himself questioning his parents’ views on abolitionists. “When you and father speak of the fanaticism of the abolitionists, you can’t mean this I’m sure,” the “boy” writes.³³

Later, full of abolitionist sympathy, the boy hears of Christian men selling other Christian men and is truly horrified. “I think if the men don’t all do something about slavery soon, we boys had better see what we can do, for it is too wicked.” Through the boy’s growing consciousness of slavery’s evils, Follen teaches her young readers sympathy, but even the letter itself – replete with the child’s addresses to the adult reader to stop slavery immediately – can be seen as Follen’s attempt to change a system through teaching feeling. One especially interesting action is implied because Follen addresses the faux letter to a “mother.” Follen thus suggests that sympathetic children readers will turn and teach their parents what they take away from her writing, the perfect performance of true childhood as endowed with a near-angelic

32. Child, p. 155.

33. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, “Pic Nic at Dedham,” *The New England Farmer; A Monthly Journal* (Feb. 1859). Accessed via The American Periodicals Series Online.

quantity of innocence which can guide others to greater salvation. As Follen's young boy speaker in this letter says, "the men" haven't done anything about slavery yet, so perhaps the emotional responses to their own children's pleas will move them where the political arguments of other adults did not.

In other such faux letters, Follen makes this connection between feelings and abolitionist action even more immediate, as in one selection from an 1847 edition of her magazine, titled "Letter V: To a Young Friend." Here Follen writes to a fictional young girl called "Alice" about a box of goods sent to sell at an Antislavery Fair she helped organize, and opens the letter with praise for the pretty objects, showing her sense of excitement that they will earn lots of money to support the cause. She then asks: "Who filled up these numerous great boxes with such beautiful things? Was it the great, the powerful, the rich, in the worldly sense of these terms? No, not these alone," she writes, before going on to describe how the toys and trinkets had notes attached saying they were made by young English schoolchildren. She closes this letter by describing the children's small sacrifices so they could save pennies to buy supplies, and asks her children readers "Shall we do so little, when so called strangers do so much?"³⁴ Such letters are particularly important because they also require American readers to question the verity of their fundamental national mythology by showing England – the supposed tyrant, shrugged off less than 100 years earlier – as a place more dedicated to the cause of freedom, as a place which has already abolished the repression still thriving in the "new" world. Similar to Child's use of a "child" asking whether a slaveholder could claim himself to truly be American, Follen here sharply criticizes the hypocrisy of slavery. The change she shows as resulting from sympathy is simple and direct: sympathetic children can financially support the anti-slavery cause, even in a small way.

Both of Follen's letters show how abolitionist feeling, and intervention, become part of the performance of true womanhood and true childhood. The true child – pure, joyful, "naturally" godly and more closely aware of "enduring moral truths" – will listen to these stories and both feel sympathy for the slave and want to act to change the state of affairs. The true woman – the moral nurturer, whose most vital role is raising her children well – will not only have to feel sympathy over slavery's "lost childhoods," but also intervene when her own children question the evils of slavery, if she intends to be a sound moral teacher. The authors know that adult women readers must validate the child's concerns in order to maintain their performance of true womanhood, of piety and moral-guide mothering, and thus this vexing tension could bring more people to the abolitionist cause.

34. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen. "Letter V: To a Young Friend" *The Child's Friend and Family Reader* (Feb. 1847). Accessed via The American Periodicals Series Online.

It is also striking that these writers clearly intend to teach monogenesis, or the idea that all humans were created by the same God, and thus endowed with the same natural abilities and subject to the same rights. Slavery's apologists often rested their argument on the theory of polygenesis, which held that the races were created separately – a view that was also held by many anti-slavery activists who still saw blacks as inferior, despite their arguments against the slave system. Follen, for instance, often repeats statements such as “we are all one family” or other such sentiments calling for a unity between races.³⁵ Child's “Jumbo and Zairee” takes an especially pluralistic view, as Child recognizes difference in cultures between the Africans and the whites, but doesn't see this difference as hierarchical. She praises Jumbo and Zairee's parents and depicts African culture as intelligent and worthy. Hardly a radical statement by modern standards, this view was quite subversive in antebellum America. Many of the same people who called for an end to slavery still displayed a lack of knowledge of African culture, a belief in polygenesis, or a pervasive fear over racially-mixed marriages.³⁶

In these cases, DeRosa's argument about children's literature as “safe” space for women to express political ideas seems true, for a woman expressing the same sentiment in such public forms as speeches likely would meet repercussions for declaring such radical beliefs; but she can embed these same ideas freely in a didactic morality tale for children. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, just two years after the publication of “Jumbo and Zairee,” Child's tract *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* brought her harsh criticism for voicing the same ideas she wove through the children's tale. The crucial difference was not in the politics, but the platform: what could be written in a kid's story, it appears, could be dangerous in an adult political tract.

4. Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*

While Follen and Child twist morality-tale standards from showing a young protagonist in need of moral reform to instead showcase a system in need of reform, Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel *Our Nig* perhaps best manipulated the reward/punishment trope. Indeed, Wilson's tale begins in the most archetypal way, with a Cinderella-style young lead: a poor, but pretty and sweet girl, who scrubs and cleans and fetches all day long, working under the cruel direction of an evil mother-figure, only to retire to a cold, hard bed at night. But in *Our Nig*, there is no prince, no fairy godmother – no real person,

35. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, Letter V. To a Young Friend,” *The Child's Friend and Family Magazine* (Feb 1847). Accessed via The American Periodicals Series Online.

36. Carolyn Karcher, “Introduction: Slavery, Race and Reconstruction,” in *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, ed. Carolyn Karcher (Durham, Duke University Press, 1997), 135–152.

nor imagined deity – who saves the overworked, underfed heroine, Frado. Wilson shows Frado receiving constant counsel to “be good” to her mistress, Mrs. Belmont, and includes many details of Frado starting the day before sunrise or working through a sickness to demonstrate her attempts at obedience and industry. Yet “being good” brings Frado no reward. As such, Wilson both relies on and refutes the morality-tale standard of happy endings for good, obedient children: in the stories in a traditional juvenile magazine, a child protagonist might perform some work or learn to obey a command, but the tales there end in praise. When Wilson’s Frado is “good,” however, she still receives a scolding, or, more often, a beating.

Although *Our Nig* is a novel, it is mostly autobiographical. Both Wilson and her character Frado were mulatta girls whose parents died young and left them abandoned to indentured servitude in a wealthy white family. Wilson (and her novelized self, the character of Frado) was not technically a slave but rather a servant; her poverty and the entrenched racism of nineteenth-century America effectively rendered her in bondage throughout her childhood. The book’s subtitle – *Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There* – also shows that the story is essentially one of human bondage. As such Wilson, although living in the Northern free states, was just as much “owned,” just as much oppressed, as her counterparts in the South, due to her race-based destitution.

According to Harvard literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, in his 1983 re-print of the tale (its first introduction to modern American readers), *Our Nig* is the first novel published by an African-American woman.³⁷ That alone makes the book remarkable; but the fact that the book appears to have been received as children’s literature makes the volume even more interesting – and, it proves again how children’s literature could be a vital space for abolitionist women of diverse backgrounds to enter the political debate which was otherwise difficult to enter, and further a cause many wanted to ignore. Eric Gardener, in his study of the original owners of *Our Nig*, finds that nearly all the documented owners were white, middle-class people who lived near Wilson’s home in Milford, New Hampshire, and who were under 20 years old when the book was printed in 1859. Gardener admits that his evidence is scant, for he located only 34 copies of the first printing of *Our Nig*, but through his tracing of ownership via signatures, inscriptions and library acquisition records, he concludes that “the book’s purchasers either interpreted or deployed *Our Nig* as a book geared toward the moral development of young readers.”³⁸

37. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Introduction,” *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

38. Eric Gardener, “This Attempt of Their Sister’: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* from Printer to Readers.” *The New England Quarterly* 66.2 (June 1993) 226–246, pp. 227–28.

Yet, while the documented owners may have been white, Wilson says her intended audience is blacks, writing in her preface: “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters.”³⁹ So, where Follen, Child, and white writers of abolitionist children’s literature had a sort of dual audience – white children and the adults (most likely, the mothers) reading to them – Wilson’s story can be seen, in a way, as having four “audiences” in the white children and parents Gardener documents, as well as the literate black parents and children she had hoped to reach. Beyond Gardener’s evidence, the book also can be read as children’s literature because nearly all the action takes place when Frado is between six and 18 years old, making the process of a child’s growth the focus. To establish her authority as a writer, Wilson also relies on many of the conventions of domestic sentimental literature’s reliance on true womanhood’s virtues. She continually calls for God’s help to showcase her piety, and in her preface she maintains that her writing is not meant to show herself “erudite” but is rather an act of the utmost domesticity: she is attempting to mother by writing the book, for she claims hopes its sales will sustain her child. Certainly, while the perfect performance of “true woman” meant she did not work outside the home, as Wilson needed to, Wilson calls upon other aspects of true womanhood which she can perform – her mothering, her Christianity – to make a bridge between herself and white Americans.

Yet while Wilson does try to establish common ground between herself and the larger traditions of true womanhood and children’s literature, she subverts these ideas to make a more effective critique of slavery and inequality. For instance, Wilson uses the ideal of a child as an innocent, a “blank slate,” when a severely-beaten Frado cries about her state to James, one of the family members who is kind to her. When she asks “who made me so?” James answers “God,” and Frado continues, asking if the same God made him and sweet Aunt Abby as well as the diabolical Mrs. Bellmont. When James answers yes to all, Frado says “Well, then I don’t like him.” James asks why, and Frado says with heartbreaking simplicity: “Because he made her white and me black. Why didn’t he make us *both* white?”⁴⁰ While Frado is constantly silenced throughout the book – Mrs. Bellmont even stuffs her mouth to keep the neighbors from hearing her during beatings – as a child, she can speak the truths others cannot.

Here Wilson is also cleverly manipulating the true woman’s virtue of piety: an adult woman is supposed to be secure in her knowledge of Christianity, but as

39. Wilson, p. 4.

40. Wilson, pp. 28–29.

a "blank slate" ripe for moral guidance, Frado/Wilson can show confusion. Her rejection of the God known by her white masters is certainly a departure from the traditions of both true womanhood, where Christian piety was central to identity, and also the many religious children's tales, where learning more about God brings a child more happiness and peace. When Frado seeks an answer to better understand her budding spirituality, however, the supposed teacher – James, as the adult – is speechless; there is no moral guide who can lead her from this thicket. "I don't know; try to go to sleep, and you will feel better in the morning," was all the reply he could make to her knotty queries. It was a long time before she fell asleep; and a number of days before James felt in a mood to visit and entertain old associates and friends," Wilson writes.⁴¹ Here, she shows the hypocritical gap between Christian ideals and the reality of Christian practice in a slaveholding country; she shows how bondage actually makes both the enslaved and the master suffer a spiritual crisis. Thus, the scene uses and subverts traditions simultaneously, making for a very cunning and potent condemnation of dominant American ideology.

Such scenes, read by a white child, could be seen as trying to teach sympathy in much the same way Follen's and Child's works do. But Wilson, as a mulatta herself, does something her white counterparts do not: she shows the potential for action, however small, for the black child reading the book, a child who is an object without agency in much of the work by white abolitionists. Even while showing how her bondage inhibits the performance of true childhood, Wilson includes moments when Frado shows resistance to the limits of her role. For instance, she has much fun at school, quickly winning friends, for her "jollity was not to be quenched by whipping or scolding."⁴² Here, the display of a true child's identity – the expression of joyfulness and play – is a sort of resistance, for Frado tries to reclaim the identity of child denied to her by her masters.

Frado makes other moves to assert her agency as well: when Mrs. Belmont insists Frado eat off of her already-used dessert plate, Frado has her dog lick it clean first, essentially saying "I'd rather touch what a dog licked than what your mouth touched" to the mistress. And, perhaps most importantly, when she does reach her teenage years, she finally yells "Stop!" before a beating and vows not to do any more work if she is touched again.⁴³ Follen's and Child's works leave the black children they feature voiceless. But even though Wilson's Frado literally cannot speak throughout the majority of the book, Wilson allows her to regain

41. Wilson, p. 29.

42. Wilson, p. 22.

43. Wilson, pp. 22, 39, 58

this often-suppressed voice by writing the story from Frado's point of view. For the young black reader, then, Wilson teaches that they can resist, that they should seek empowerment – and that it is the system that is not “good,” not them.

5. Conclusions: A Subtle Power

In a culture where women's passivity and submissiveness were regarded as both a natural inclination and a vital pillar upholding American civilization, abolitionist children's literature opened a space for women to express a political argument without jeopardizing their identity as “true women.” Certainly, there were American women fighting for abolition at this time who actively worked to break down limiting boundaries of this gender ideal: Sojourner Truth, baring her muscled arms and proclaiming her physical prowess while offering her famous “Ain't I a Woman” speech in 1851, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton's regular mix of women's equality throughout her decades of abolitionist work, offer just two examples.

And yet, as the instance of Lydia Maria Child's near-ruin following her political tract *An Appeal* so vividly shows, breaking from the standard performance of womanhood could be perilous. Child's reception was far from unique: Sarah Jane Clarke Lippincott lost her position as a *Godey's Lady's Book* editor once she began publishing newspaper articles in abolitionist newspapers, and sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke often faced violence when speaking at abolitionist rallies.⁴⁴ Once relinquished, the mantle of true womanhood was hard to reclaim, and, impressive though women like Truth and Stanton might have been, they were still outliers.

But I do not mean to suggest that writers who did express their abolitionist sentiments through a performance of true womanhood chose this venue for fear of ostracism alone. On the contrary, with her responsibility as the moral guide for a whole nation, as the pedagogue to bring up a new generation of Americans as good, Christian citizens, there was a power in performing the identity of true womanhood, as well as power in the figure of the child they included in their works, as a newly-recognized identity. Relying on the social importance of each of these identities gave the authors power to change feelings, and through that, move America to end its most damning institution.

To be sure, the bulk of abolitionist children's literature may not have the bold drama of those abolitionist works which loom largest in the contemporary American imagination, such as Truth's speech, Abraham Lincoln's proclamations, John Brown's impassioned courtroom defense of his Harpers Ferry raid, or Frederick Douglass's narrative. As an expression which combined two of women's most cultu-

44. DeRosa, *Into the Mouths of Babes*, p. xv.

rally affirmed roles – the mother who teaches her child and the pious guide for her household – it gave her a platform to spread a message of revolution from a stance which upheld the most traditional of beliefs. But traditional positions certainly did not preclude revolutionary politics, for Wilson, Child and Follen were proclaiming racial equality in the abolitionist message they delivered inside children's magazines nearly 20 years before Lincoln's Emancipation proclamation.⁴⁵

Beyond Wilson's book, abolitionist children's literature is a fragmented body of work, pieced together from poems, letters and short stories which usually appeared in magazines alongside such innocuous fare as stories counseling children to play nicely with their siblings or Sunday School songs. Perhaps it is a body of work which speaks more subtly; yet, taken together, it comprises a persistent, persuasive call to change in the course of America's move to better meet the ideals on which it was founded.

45. In addition to the stories and poems mentioned above, see, for example, Follen's full cycle of "Letter to a Young Friend" pieces published concurrently with the life of *The Child's Friend and Family Magazine* (1853–1848), where many times, enslaved people (as well as other degraded races, such as Native Americans) are depicted as equal to whites, or stories such as "The Little Greek Girl" (1827) or "The St. Domingo Orphans" (1830) from Child's *Juvenile Miscellany*, where children of different races are shown to have the same capacity for feeling and thought.