Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: Northern African American Children's Cultural and Political Resistance, 1780-1861

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BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF CHILDHOOD: NORTHERN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN’S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE, 1780-1861

A Dissertation Presented

by

CRYSTAL L. WEBSTER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2017

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF CHILDHOOD: NORTHERN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN’S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE, 1780-1861

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DEDICATION

To the past, present, and future black children who continue to shape the boundaries of childhood
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the product of both my individual research and writing, as well as the love and labor I received from my family, friends, colleagues, and institutions at all stages of my student life. This support began in my childhood home when my parents, Art and Martha Sheffield, instilled within me a love of learning. My sister Angela was an incredible model-student of whom I tried to emulate. Extended family, including numerous academics and teachers, led the path towards knowledge-making. My journey into African American Studies began during my undergraduate career at Oberlin College and was cultivated by passionate faculty including James Millette, Gordon Gill, Pam Brooks, Darko Opoku, Meredith Gadsby, and Caroline Jackson-Smith. I am forever grateful to these faculty who allowed me to learn about myself and the field. Throughout my graduate career, I have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by inspiring scholars. Of these many incredible colleagues, my cohort members Nneka Dennie and Carlyn Ferrari have pushed my work in meaningful ways. In addition, Crystal Donkor, Johanna Ortner, Jacinta Saffold, Peter Blackmer, and Julia Bernier, have provided feedback and writing support. I have had the privilege of working with incredible faculty including my dissertation committee comprising of Manisha Sinha, James Smethurst, Barbara Krauthamer, and Laura Lovett, in addition to Mecca Sullivan, Karen Y. Morrison, Erica Armstrong Dunbar, and Britt Rusert. This dissertation has received institutional support from the University of Massachusetts Amherst Graduate School and the Library Company of Philadelphia. Lastly, but certainly not least, I could not have accomplished this work without the support of my husband Kwame Webster and inspiration from my daughter Zora-Wynn Audrey Webster. Thank you forever and I love you both.
ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF CHILDHOOD: NORTHERN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN’S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE, 1780-1861

SEPTEMBER 2017

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Notions of childhood as a distinct developmental period of life were concretized during the nineteenth century. Features of children’s lives including innocence, play, and exclusion from labor became markers of ideal childhoods as part of the racialized modernization of childhood. This dissertation uncovers the ways in which modern constructions of childhood attempted to subjugate northern African American children throughout the nineteenth century and highlights the means by which black children and conceptualizations of black childhood became agents and sites of resistance. In doing so, it demonstrates both how African American children experienced age-based forms of subjugation as well as their contribution to forms of activism that capitalized on the political power of black childhood.

This dissertation focuses on constructions of black childhood in prominent anti-slavery texts as well as the daily lives of African American children living in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York from gradual emancipation to the Civil War. Through an interdisciplinary engagement with organizational documents, school records, and textual representations, this dissertation explores the ways in which black childhood
was constructed, institutionalized, and made political. By examining expressions of black childhood and motherhood in black print culture, this study also demonstrates the connects the political discourse concerning black childhood with that of black womanhood and motherhood. As such, this study elucidates black children’s role within abolitionism, women’s rights, prison reform, and humanitarianism, thereby broadening the scope of relevant scholarship in African American history, the history of childhood and youth, and studies of political activism to include the oft-neglected subject of northern black children’s experiences.
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INTRODUCTION
THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND AGE: TOWARD A NEW APPROACH TO BLACK CHILDHOOD

“Bein alive and bein a woman and bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven’t conquered yet.” – Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf

In 1855, Frederick Douglass appealed to the sentiments of his readers through the experiences of an enslaved child in his autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom. There, he made the ostensibly undeniable claim, “SLAVE-children are children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule.” The existence of enslaved children challenged the legitimacy of the institution of slavery by exposing its contradictory elements; the exploitation of laboring child-bodies during a historical period in which children were increasingly perceived as innocent, fragile, and socially protected. However, by the date of publication of Douglass’s narrative, the terms and conditions that defined the category of childhood had evolved in ways that effectively denied black children claim of their childhoods by constructing its boundaries firmly around whiteness.

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1 Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf, (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 45
2 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (Champaign, Ill: Project Gutenberg, 1999), 47-8
3 For explanation of process of racialization of American childhood see Robin Bernstein: “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; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment…This innocence was raced white.” Robin Bernstein, Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 4
However, this process did not occur without opposition. As Douglass’s narrative demonstrates, African Americans were fiercely committed to the treatment of their children and the terms of their childhoods throughout the nineteenth century. In her 1861 narrative, when Harriet Jacobs revealed her young age during the sexual exploitation she endured at the hands of Dr. Flint as evidence of her “trials of girlhood,” she exposed the relationship between enslavement and corruption of childhood innocence. While Douglass and Jacobs’ popularized claims of the inherent rights of enslaved children, debates over black childhood also existed outside of the realm of slavery and were fostered in the U.S. North. For northern African American children, enslaved, indentured, or emancipated, their childhoods were similarly under siege due to the conditions and stipulations of northern emancipation. As a result, antislavery rhetoric, negotiations over indenture and apprenticeship labor contracts of children, critiques of black juvenile criminality, and educational activism were varied sites of contestation and political activism for northern black populations.

This dissertation explores the formulation and influence of such activism beginning with the implementation of gradual emancipation laws of the North and ending with the coming Civil War. In doing so it advances two major interventions. The first is that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, northern black children’s place within the developing social construction of childhood was precarious, as demonstrated by their limited access to play and schooling, as well as the continued use and exploitation of their labor. The second is that the negotiations over treatment of both individual black children and prevailing notions of black childhood and motherhood, challenged emerging boundaries of childhood that privileged whiteness.
Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood focuses on constructions of black childhood during the antebellum period and on the lives of African American children living in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. During this historical era, notions of childhood were evolving in ways that reflected the establishment of social constructions of race. I argue that northern black children lied at the convergence of these shifting constructs and that society experimented its evolving treatment of the nascent free black community upon the concept and conditions of black childhood. In response, black children’s lives became politically charged and conceptualizations of childhood held a key role in social political movements including educational activism, prison and labor reform, humanitarianism, women’s rights, and abolitionism.

Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood finds relevance and meaning in children’s beliefs, behavior, and their play as experienced by a group that has been historically marginalized by both age and race. In this study, I demonstrate that by expanding the focus from the world of adults, we can more clearly perceive the complex ways in which black children negotiated the conditions of their own childhoods, as well as the racialization of American childhood. In order to unearth the lived experiences of African American children, a group that is underrepresented in the historical archive, this dissertation adopts an interdisciplinary research methodology that mines the records of black children within historical sources including organizational records of African American schools and institutions for northern children, as well as private correspondence, diaries, and family papers. In addition, I find relevance and meaning in children’s literature and child-authored texts. As part of my study of African American childhood, I also examine constructions of northern black childhood and motherhood as
represented in slave narratives as well as in discourse of free black women in anti-slavery newspapers as a similarly political means by which black childhood was constructed. These expressions of black motherhood have rarely been interrogated by scholars of African American history and childhood studies, yet they illustrate the powerful ways in which black children’s experiences became an integral element of black women’s activism concerning motherhood.

This study engages particular assumptions of age, race, and gender in its examination of nineteenth century of childhood. Through the work of scholars of Childhood Studies, it has been well-documented that the concept of childhood and the figure of the child have been used as part of colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist projects. Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood adopts this useful child-centered analytical framework and firmly adheres to the notion that childhood is an historically specific social construction, not a biological category. Nineteenth century childhood was constituted in ways that rendered the notion of black childhood insignificant, irrelevant, or obsolete. Thus, I argue that when black children embodied characteristics and features of childhood that challenged the racialization of American childhood, they challenged the constitution of the concept itself. In other words, to identify formulations of childhood enacted by black children troubles the very stability of the category of childhood. In order to interpret black children’s experiences during a period in which their claim on the identity of “child” was disputed, we must therefore create a new grammar for understanding black childhood that displaces the naturalization of American childhood.

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4 For relevant explanation of the state of the field of Childhood Studies see Anna Mae Duane ed., The Children’s Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013)
Studies of expressions (or exclusion) of nineteenth century black childhood therefore require new theoretical models that take into consideration the intersections of age, race, and gender as a way to make visible the acutely subjugated position of black children.

This dissertation introduces one such theoretical model in its approach to race, gender, and age by interpreting childhood as a space that can be rendered, marked, occupied differently - a metaphysics of childhood. Similar to Ntozake Shange’s “metaphysical dilemma” of black womanhood wherein a black woman is not perceived as a legitimate woman and cannot fully embody the dual identities of blackness and womanhood, black children faced a disbarment from the “universal and physical” experience of childhood. The history of the development of the construct of American childhood demonstrates the ways in which black children were unable to fully occupy the metaphysics of childhood at various historical periods. Tracing black children’s behaviors and movement through, or disbarment from, social spaces and experiences allows me to interpret the constituted process of which black children and adults were able to interact, move through, around, and move beyond the construct of childhood. The actions of black children and adults produced a politics of black childhood that allowed black children entrance to a new metaphysical space of childhood. As such, I make the distinction between children as a social category marked by physical and biological characteristics, and childhood as a metaphysical space.

The individuals referred to as children in this study broadly fit the terms of the era, with the age of twenty-one initiating legal entrance to adulthood (particularly for white males), however I provide specificity for each period, region, and gender. Black girls experienced childhood differently than black boys, as did children in the South and
those in the North. Their negotiations of the metaphysics of childhood were diverse, though their ages may have been the same. Indeed, as many of the subjects of this dissertation did not know their ages, I rely upon their self-identification as children (a process that is interpreted as politically assertive) and historical contextualization.

The experience of childhood is also ontologically specific and therefore almost impossible to represent and preserve on adult terms. Therefore, sources within which black childhood are approached using a research methodology that actively considers the black child’s role in shaping the historical narrative as marked by both the child’s movement in and around spaces of childhood, as well as silences in the archive. This research methodology is informed by Darlene Clark Hines’ concept of the “culture of dissemblance,” a cultural “a veil of secrecy” that created silences in the archive around black girls’ racial and sexual subjugation, I argue that black children’s play can be similarly fugitive, yet intricately constructed. My analysis of movement and mobility is also aligned with Stephanie Camp’s use of “rival geography” in which she describes the construction of counter physical spaces in the planation in ways that challenged the stability of the slaveocracy as well as LaKisha Simmons’ attention to the spatial movement of black girls around and across “racialized geographies” of New Orleans.

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6 LaKisha Simmons argues that geography and movement held special meaning for black girls in New Orleans whose experiences and “relationship to power in the city,” were informed by “the physical placement of buildings.” *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, (University of North Carolina Press: 2015), 11
With this framework I argue actions of black children and adults produced a politics of black childhood that allowed black children entrance to the boundaries of childhood.

African American adults’ actions on behalf of their children have not yet been conceptualized as acts of resistance to racial subjugation. Similarly, a systematic study that explores the emergence and significance of African American children in movements concerning black political thought and activism has not yet been published. However, extant historiography on broader topics of the history of children, African Americans, and black women throughout periods of slavery and abolition offer examples of the development of a black political thought concerning the concept and experience of childhood. Engagement with, and reinterpretation of, these existing literatures as well as the history of American childhood makes visible the oft-overlooked experiences of African American children.

The “racialization” of American childhood was as pervasive as it was dangerous. On theoretical terms, a construction of childhood which placed white (and middle-class) children at the center rendered black childhood deviant, if not obsolete. On historical terms, by the nineteenth century the lives of black children became implicated by the exclusion of their childhoods through institutionalized legal practices. Ideas of childhood as related to enslaved and free black populations evolved throughout early U.S. history. Indeed, contestations over enslaved peoples and their childhoods can be traced to the first arrival of Africans to North America during the latter part of the seventeenth century.

During the colonial era, children experienced vastly different childhoods across race, status, and region. Some of the earliest colonists in the U.S., the Puritans of New England, expressed models of childhood that were a far cry from the modern treatment of
children as fragile and innocent. Historian Steven Mintz does much to elaborate this
dissimilarity as well as the multitude of changes that affected the lives of children and the
category of childhood throughout the seventeenth century through the twentieth. Puritan
conceptions of children as sinful beings represented a shift away from Anglican beliefs in
children as devoid of sin. These Puritan writings on children and childrearing were highly
influential to American constructions of childhood. In stark contrast to Puritans, Native
American children experienced childhoods marked by play, lack of inhibition, and
freedom from labor.

Enslaved Africans who were shipped to the colonies in the seventeenth century
were mostly in their teens upon arrival. However, as documented by Anna Mae Duane,
many of these Africans, some of whom might have legally fallen under the category of a
child, were effectively denied that privilege during the 1670s in Virginia; the first
implementation of laws that regulated terms of service for indentured servants based on
age. According to the law, those who were considered boys or girls when they entered the
colony were legally required to serve until aged thirty. However, people who were
imported to the colony by way of ships and were not Christian (nonwhite), “shall be
slaves for their lives,” regardless of their ages. Prevailing colonial notions of childhood
were reliant upon a form of paternalism that was eventually used “to create structures of
power over colonized people” that was “a key strategy in justifying domestic slavery.”

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Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 12, 17
8 Ibid., 33
9 Anna Mae Duane, *Suffering Childhood in Early America* (Athens: University of
Georgia Press, 2010), 131
10 Ibid., 13
Therefore, conceptions of colonial childhood functioned as a means of mediating colonial violence. The process of constructing the vulnerable colonial child was instrumental in shaping modern notions of American childhood.

Conceptualizations of American childhood gained special significance during the Revolutionary Era. The Enlightenment Era’s emphasis on equal rights and independence transformed child-rearing practices and social recognition of children. John Locke’s *Two Treaties of Government* (1689) advocated that children should be reared to become future subjects and autonomous adults. This document proved crucial to the establishment of revolutionary rhetoric in favor of colonial independence. However, these rights were not extended to children of African descent. Black writers whose meditations on their own childhood experiences during the Revolutionary era contributed to an early form of black childhood politics referred to by Duane as the “child-slave metaphor.” This metaphor influenced constructions of enslaved children and “helped initiate an important cultural turning point in Americans’ emotional engagement with the child.” Revolutionary Era narratives and reflections on enslavement including those of Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Venture Smith each represented childhood experiences using terms of suffering in ways that participated in larger discussions of the subjectivity of the child in the age of the Early Republic.\(^{11}\) Phillis Wheatley, in particular, has garnered scholarly attention for her subversion of revolutionary rhetoric of childhood. Literary scholar Lucia Hodgson’s analysis of Phillis Wheatley as a child-poet illustrates the many ways in which her writings and persona critiqued liberal theory and its exclusion of enslaved children’s subjectivity. Through her poetry, Wheatley simultaneously challenged notions of

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 141-5
childhood and citizenship with her “enactment, as an enslaved girl, of the pre-political phase of the liberal narrative of emergence” alongside “her apparently self-deprecating assumption of infantile ingenuousness and potentiality.”

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century’s Romantic visions of children as sinless developed into the mid-nineteenth century’s establishment of the racialization of childhood. During the mid-nineteenth century, the rise of sentimental notions of childhood influenced perceptions of children as the embodiments of innocence. Robin Bernstein aptly argues that this innocence was “raced white.” The racialization of childhood aided in the stabilization of whiteness and racial difference in ways that followed justifications of slavery and pseudo-scientific notions of race. Thus, sentimental childhood produced and reinforced racial ontologies. Nazera Sadiq Wright has highlighted the ways in which African Americans negotiated this trend in the literary realm. Wright identifies the significance of the figure of the black girl in nineteenth century African American literature as a representation of domesticity, racial equality, and proper citizenship.

Many scholars of nineteenth American childhood have explored the emergence of modern notions of childhood and adulthood in relation to sentimentalism and citizenship, but few have drawn connections to the experiences of enslaved and free African American children and cultural ideas of childhood. Several historians of slavery provide

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13 Mintz, Huck’s Raft, 76
14 Bernstein, Racial Innocence 4, 8
15 Nazera Sadiq Wright, Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century, (University of Illinois Press, 2016)
insight and broader historical context on the lives of African American children and their responses to the racialization of childhood. These studies of slave family and community life provide relevant analyses of nineteenth century African American children.

The institution of slavery, as it has been documented by many historians and most notably by Wilma King, relied upon the labor of enslaved children who were not afforded “a distinctive period of youth,” most distinctly enjoyed by upper and middle-class boys. Not only were enslaved people often ignorant of their ages, but their perceived development was constructed around the economic incentives of the slaveholder; they were considered adults when slaveholders dictated their work increase. King and others have argued that enslaved children were denied their childhoods due to the extreme conditions of slavery that was like living “under siege.” Though slaveholders might have identified enslaved childhood as a developmentally specific phase, as represented by the ways in which they enforced, restricted, and denied enslaved children expression of childhood, its facets differed drastically from the childhoods of their own children.16

While many writers and interviewees often reflected on their experiences of childhood during slavery in ways that resemble modern notions of childhood, the lives of enslaved children must be examined with regard to the cultural and historical context of the time. Researchers ought to consider the possible anachronistic consequences of applying modern cultural constructions of childhood represented in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives of the 1930s to the experiences of enslaved children prior to the modernization of childhood. Similarly, the argument that African American

children did not experience childhood relegates African American children’s impact on shifting constructions of childhood to the periphery. Studies of African American children’s experiences during slavery must take seriously King’s claims, however centering African American children’s resistance to paternalism and the racialization of childhood reconfigures each of the author’s research and analyses.

By the antebellum era, expressions of child-like behavior became cemented to descriptions of enslaved black adults as a defense of the so-called paternalistic relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved, resulting in the infantilization of black adults and the subjugation of black children. Proslavery advocates and pseudoscientists had a vested interest in a perceived intellectual stagnation of enslaved and black populations during slavery. However, enslaved populations resisted the sexual and labor exploitation of their children and actions regarding care of enslaved children were mobilized especially by African American women. Enslaved black women’s experiences as mothers reveal the ways in which expressions of black motherhood emerged out of the particular forms of oppression of which African American children were subjugated. One such expression of motherhood consisted within the interventions enslaved women made on their reproduction and childbirth. Enslaved motherhood also included the extension of mothering practices beyond biological children. Enslaved women’s emotional attachments to their children were influenced by the constant threats facing their children including separation, arduous labor, and particularly for enslaved girls, sexual abuse. Thus enslaved women’s relationships with their children, as Stephanie Camp has argued, “were instruments of both domination and resistance” for

17 Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n t I A Woman*, (New York: Norton, 1985), 75
slaveholders and enslaved women respectively.18 This interplay occurred outside of the slaveholding South, however studies of the topic have not yet critically engaged the lives of free African American women and their constructions of motherhood and activism on behalf of their children.

Indeed, African American children and adults’ political claims of black childhood were also not confined to daily acts of resistance under slavery. The abolitionist movement was one arena wherein African American men, women, and children actively influenced and participated. Manisha Sinha’s research features the interracial cooperation amongst whites and black abolitionists and community members and the ways in which these coalitions often centered the lives of African American children. For example, Quakers and manumission societies aided in efforts to create educational opportunities for free African American children in the North as was the case with the founding of abolitionist school such as the African Free School by the New York Manumission Society in 1787.19 However, despite the concerted efforts of abolitionists and the free black community, many whites vehemently opposed African American children’s access to public education. This topic is explored by historians of black education including Hillary Moss. Moss illuminates the antagonism African American educational activists faced in Baltimore, Boston, and New Haven. The debate over equal schooling in these cities reached hostile levels that sometimes erupted into violence. African Americans repeatedly fought to ensure educational opportunities for their children, but their efforts

are often interpreted from the perspective of adult involvement. This dissertation provides an analysis of African Americans ideas about childhood that merges African American children’s experiences in the educational spheres of the antebellum North with a child-centered methodology in order to provide a complete portrait of black childhood.

This rich historiography on nineteenth century childhood does much to contextualize the experiences of African American children during an era of unrest and a construction in flux. However, by providing a comprehensive study of northern black childhood, this dissertation intervenes on extant historiography by making clear the centrality of notions of race and childhood within these historical events, as well as the active role of African American adults and children. The first chapter explores the configuration of nineteenth century childhood by focusing on notions of play and leisure as related to black children’s experiences. This chapter examines the limitations placed on children’s play in orphanages and houses of refuge in Philadelphia and New York, as well as the emergence of a literary trope of black childhood in which childhood was performed in strategic ways in representations of both enslaved and free black childhood. In the slave narrative genre, this trope served to expose the sinister nature of the sexual and psychological violence inflicted on enslaved black children at the hands of slaveholders under slavery. Though African American children did find ways to enact playful activities, their play has been considered nonexistent or marginal. This chapter considers the ways in which black children activated forms of political activism through their play.

The second chapter examines the transitional period between enslavement and gradual emancipation of the late eighteenth century, an era that was mediated through the
lives of black children who remained continually enslaved or indentured. By examining the records of abolitionist organizations and their efforts concerning northern black children, in addition to indentures records found within the northern institutions, it exposes the ways in which the North continually relied upon black children’s labor and forms of exploitation that in the post-emancipation context.

During the antebellum era, a period in which educational access for African American children was frequently limited and often restricted within both free and slaveholding states, the pursuit of public schooling for African American children was a highly political, and sometimes dangerous, act. Chapter three examines the nature of learning in northern schools and the ways in which African American parents and children confronted racial subjugation in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. African American children’s educational experiences informed their relationship to notions of freedom and citizenship, and thus this chapter highlights African American children’s participation in juvenile anti-slavery activism. By comparing these texts and experiences to dominant discourse and debates over education and childhood this chapter illustrates the relationship between the actions of African Americans, their children, and national understandings of public education and childhood.

Chapter four explores expressions of black motherhood during the antebellum era by examining the experiences of nominally free black women in the North and their relationships to concepts of motherhood and childhood. By focusing on African American women's actions regarding the care of their children, this chapter illustrates the ways in which black women's attitudes, behavior, and activism functioned in ways that centered the protection of their children. This analytical framework identifies black
women’s constructions of motherhood as political claims for subjectivity in ways that make visible alternative forms of activism particular to black women’s experiences.

Throughout the nineteenth century, though many African Americans made political claims on behalf of black childhood, these contestations were often subversive and sometimes fugitive, eluding researchers of nineteenth century childhood. These oversights have had powerful consequences; perpetuating assumptions of childhood as white, and black children as lacking innocence. A complete account of the emergence of such discourse that actively considers the role of African American children makes visible the implications of the political power of black childhood as a profound and influential force behind social and political movements. By centering black children during the nineteenth century, this study elucidates innovative ways of conceptualizing resistance, while providing nuance to studies of black childhood as well as scholarly and daily treatment of African American children.
CHAPTER 1

FUGITIVE PLAY: THE POLITICS OF BLACK CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

“As his weakness increased, he indicated an anxious concern lest his nurse should suffer from exposure in attending upon him. But the tender sensibilities of his heart had been most conspicuously called forth on the decease of a younger brother, to whom he was strongly attached; not like the short-lived grief of childhood, which may be, and often is, wept into forgetfulness;-on the contrary, his sorrow was serious and lasting.”

-Memorial for Stephen Ricks, died at the age of 8, Association for the Care of Colored Children, June 4th, 1832

In 1828, a young African American orphan boy named Stephen Ricks arrived at Philadelphia’s Shelter for Coloured Orphans at the age of four and came from a family that was described only as “humble.” When he was seven, Ricks’ sensibilities astounded the women of the orphanage at which he was admitted, and his intelligence was described as “uncommon” and “unusual.” To the delight of his teacher at the Shelter for Coloured Orphans, Ricks relished the opportunity to reconstruct a map of the United States entirely from memory and would do so not only as part of his studies, but also for his own “amusement.” Indeed, Ricks’ intellectual pursuits apparently surpassed his social desires. According to his adult observers, Ricks “seldom inclined to mingle with other children at play,” or wished to leave the school room during the hours of recess and chose instead, “to remain in retirement in pen and book.” Stephen Ricks was adored by his matron and

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20 Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, First Annual Report, (Philadelphia: William Brown, 1836), 30
the officiators of the Shelter because of these qualities. He was praised even for mourning
the death of his younger brother Simon in a mature fashion, “not like the short-lived grief
of childhood.” Ricks was acutely aware of the forms of attention he received and for
which behavior. He was given acknowledgement for displaying behavior that was beyond
that of the other children. He responded to this treatment by claiming he would continue
to “try to be a good boy.”

At the age of eight, Ricks fell ill, and on February 7th, 1832, Ricks died, having
the majority of his life at the “Shelter.” The report published by the orphanage did not
provide details concerning his illness, but the public record of his death indicates that the
case of death was a pulmonary complication and that he was laid to rest at the Almshouse
burial ground. His life was one of very few that were memorialized in the yearly reports
produced by the Association for the Care of Coloured Children. However, the account of
his childhood serves as more than just a memorialization, it demonstrates one of the ways
in which many reformers constructed and acknowledged black childhood along lines of
maturity, innocence, and piety.

This chapter examines the lives of black children in antebellum institutions in
Philadelphia and New York, as well as representations of black childhood in texts
produced in the North, and argues that black children navigated prominent notions of
modern childhood in their embodiments of innocence and play, a politically-oriented
process. It reconstructs a history of northern organizations for black children including

\[\text{21 Ibid, 30-35}\]
\[\text{22 Census record for Stephen Rix: "Pennsylvania, Philadelphia City Death Certificates, 1803-1915,"
}\]
\[\text{The record indicates only that he was buried in the Almshouse Burial Ground. It is}
\text{unclear if this is the city almshouse, or that of the Society of Friends}\]
houses of reform and refuge, orphanages, and homes for destitute children and explores the ways in which these institutions designated space, both physically and philosophically, for the play of African American children. I argue that within these environments, black children were not only acted upon, but expressed their will and desire to be perceived as children in their enactment of, or deviation from, playful behavior. Children like Stephen Ricks’ behavior was interpreted by social understandings for how black children should learn, behave, and play. Ricks was given praise when he exhibited inclinations that distinguished him from the other children at the orphanage, especially when he showed an aversion to recreational activities.

Although Ricks undoubtedly touched the hearts and minds of the leaders of the orphanage, this account is based on adult observations, of which Ricks’ childhood was legible only under particular conditions. The elements of his life that might provide a less stylized portrayal of his time at the orphanage are omitted from their official record. Records of the orphanage and that of other organizations designated for black children therefore demonstrate institutionalized limitations on black children’s play. Black child’s play was constructed in particular ways in records in private and public accounts of antebellum black childhood, most commonly as a means to validate the maturity and innocence of black children.

Throughout the antebellum period, black children living in Philadelphia were impacted by historical events surrounding slavery and the coming the Civil War and emancipation, as well as increasing humanitarian efforts led by reformers who sought to take in poor and criminalized black children and youth. These actions were informed by modern notions of childhood that valued innocence and play emerged during the early
part of the century as an important element of middle-class identity. Although, the practice of play held special significance in the home, it was institutionalized through the differentiated designation of spaces for black child’s play. At the same time, the childhoods of white and middle-class children were characterized by longer years in school, limited labor contributions to their families, and increased permission to engage in playful exploration.²³

Published accounts of northern black children’s experiences with play and innocence demonstrate the relationship between the historical experiences of black children and discursive practices of black childhood. These narratives of northern black childhood expose an emerging discourse in which the play of black children was deemphasized, while innocence was highlighted. In these sources, play and innocence assumed political and literary meaning in ways that reflected efforts to represent black childhood in positive terms. These accounts countered racist characterizations of black children that sought to demonstrate their inherent delinquency and deviance. This trend followed the efforts and activism of African Americans who asserted age as a qualifier for citizenship.²⁴ In these writings, African Americans expressed black childhood in ways that highlighted universal elements of childhood, innocence, as part of a movement to protect children, and also to demonstrate the subjectivity of all African Americans.

Although today the developmental benefits of play may appear obvious, this characterization of childhood developed in socio-historically specific ways following

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discourse on slavery, the domestication of women’s labor, and educational reform. The most notable shift occurred during the late 1820s during which westward expansion and industrialization altered the material conditions of play. By the 1830s, influential writers on children’s development including Jacob Abbott and William A. Alcott constructed childhood as a period reserved for play and leisure to be fostered in the domestic sphere. Middle-class, white children were granted permission to enact practices of play as part of their schooling and domestic life. However, poorer children and children of color were not afforded the same opportunities for playful exploration. They often played outdoors in spaces that were not be designated for children, such as streets in urban centers, while Middle-class children were granted more freedom to play in unrestricted, but socially constituted ways. As middle-class values increasingly constructed childhood around play and schooling, children at the socio-economic margins who were unable to perform childhood that reflected these terms and conditions of play were perceived as non-normative.

By the antebellum era, expressions of child-like behavior emerged as a defense of the so-called paternalistic relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved. Proslavery advocates and pseudoscientists had a vested interest in a perceived intellectual stagnation of enslaved and free black populations during slavery. This discourse reinforced constructions of childhood innocence that developed into racialized notions of childhood in literary and cultural practices that overtly marked black children as inferior, as has been aptly demonstrated by Robin Bernstein. Bernstein identifies the mid-

nineteenth century as the period in which childhood became overtly racialized within
literature and mainstream culture. At this point, the black child came to signify the
opposite of innocence, as exemplified by the character Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s
*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Bernstein argues that notions of childhood innocence developed out
of sentimentalism and were characterized by “white childhood, and especially white
girlhood,” in ways that structured innocence as a reflection of whiteness. 26 While
Bernstein’s analysis indicates that African American children’s access to expressions of
childhood in the literary sphere were limited during the second part of the nineteenth
century, this chapter contends that African American children experienced limitations on
play and constructions of innocence even earlier, throughout the antebellum era.

In the North, constructions of childhood during the antebellum era were
manifested in ways that marked black children as other. Like black adults, African
American children in the antebellum North occupied a liminal space of freedom that was
tied to their race, gender, and age. Black children were legally and socially denied many
of the social advantages extended to white children and were not granted entry into many
of the orphanages of major cities, and were sometimes placed in adult prisons prior to the
establishment of juvenile houses of refuge for children of color. Stephen Ricks was one
of hundreds of black children who found their way into the institutions that aimed to
“protect,” “rehabilitate,” and “save” black children. Most of these organizations,
including the orphanages, destitute institutions, and houses of refuge were established in
the northern, urban regions of the United States, most notably in Philadelphia and New

26 Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from
York during the early nineteenth century, and provided racially segregated aid to children. Often these were incorporated during the antebellum era beginning in the 1820s and remained in operation through the turn of the century. The majority of northern African American children were not confined to these children’s institutions, however the formation and objectives of such organizations reflected the contested state of race and childhood during the nineteenth century.

As northern African American children during the early nineteenth century were disbarred from popular notions of childhood, African Americans fought for inclusion of their children into northern humanitarian institutions. African American children’s admission into organizations designed for their care, primarily by white benefactors, represented a way by which ideas about childhood and race gained salience. The records from these institutions offer understudied insight into the lives of non-elite African American children whose experiences were not recorded in the same ways as northern, black middle-class children. Within the context of these organizations, as well as in other records of northern black children’s lives, black children’s play was surveilled and negotiated in ways that both challenged and reinforced boundaries of childhood.

Outside of legal and social conditions that deprived northern African Americans of citizenship rights, escape or birth into the “free” North did not necessarily secure one’s status as free. Indeed, some African American children were legally enslaved or indentured to conditions similar to slavery throughout the nineteenth century. In the gradual emancipation laws that came to distinguished the North’s stances on slavery from the South, age was an important qualification for freedom. In some cases, African American adults were emancipated while their children’s labor was continually
appropriated as enslaved or indentured laborers, a process explored Chapter 2. These conditions of pseudo-enslavement and age-oriented freedom placed black children in an unfree status that was directly connected to age. Once they attained freedom, African American children entered an adult world that was similarly fraught.

Many northern states enacted legal practices of discrimination in the wake of their emancipation measures. Indeed, northern African Americans faced racism in almost all aspects of their public lives including housing, education, labor, and voting, resulting in a state of nominal freedom, or a form of freedom that did not include full citizenship rights. Racist practices did not subside during the nineteenth century, and in fact intensified as the population of the free black community increased. As northern cities experienced growth in their populations of African Americans during the 1830s and 1840s, with New York’s population of African Americans increasing by 72 percent and Pennsylvania’s increasing by 54 percent, many of the most overtly racist laws and practices in the North emerged. By the antebellum era, many states enacted racially discriminatory laws including that of Pennsylvania’s 1837 law that African Americans were denied the right to vote.27

African American children were deprived of many of the social and educational opportunities extended to their white peers. Common schooling practices in the North allowed children, primarily boys, to attend public school or to be educated at home. However, African American children were frequently prohibited from attending white schools. Consequently, the labor demands of their parents, as well as of those whom they

27 Martha S. Jones, All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900, 13
were likely indentured, limited their access to home-schooling. African American children’s access to childhood activities including play was restricted by the persistence of indenture labor systems. And, as was the case for adults as well, in many places African American children were sent to juvenile prisons at statistically higher rates than whites.28

The proliferation of racist laws and practices that began during an African American child’s infancy, coupled with the increasingly popular white supremacist discourse on the racial inferiority of African Americans, forced northern black children to encounter their racial status at a very young age. The difficult circumstances that were tied to being black during nineteenth century produced an experience of black childhood that removed children almost entirely from the protections of childhood. Children who were neglected by, or taken away from, the northern black community were the most susceptible to these forms of discrimination. Thus, African American children in the North were subjected to increasingly discriminatory laws and social practices that relegated a black child’s place in the social sphere of childhood marginal.

African American children were initially denied entry into orphanages, homes for the destitute or poor, and houses of refuge when they were established during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For example, one of the earliest orphanages was established in the city of Philadelphia, the Orphan Society of Philadelphia, included

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in its constitution that children must be white as a requirement for admission. In this way orphanages served as a means by which childhood became racially institutionalized.

Many institutions involved in the reform movement for the juvenile black populations believed they were providing aid and safety for black children who were in desperate need of their intervention. However, African American children in the North were often considered vulnerable, destitute, or delinquent based on assumptions of perceived racial inferiority and economic destitution. The humanitarian movements for children and juvenile delinquents were two distinct avenues by which disadvantaged children might be sheltered, rehabilitated, and educated. At their simplest form, they were designed solely with children in mind. However, as is often the case with charitable movements, though they undoubtedly sought to provide relief for children in dire need of assistance, they sometimes operated in ways that reinforced and aggravated existing forms of subjugation. This was especially true for African American children in Philadelphia and New York, regions that developed the first orphanages and houses of refuge exclusively for African American children.

Quakers, and especially women Quakers, led the movement to establish safe and accessible spaces for African American children who had been orphaned or were in dire circumstances. Quakers held a long-standing commitment to anti-slavery and it was out of this tradition that they critiqued the lack of orphanages for African American children in Philadelphia. Many of these orphanages and institutions were not initiated solely through white benevolent aid. Northern African Americans, both in organized groups and

by way of individual donations, made possible the creation of societies for the care of black children.

Although previous historiography on the history of African American orphanages identifies as the New York Colored Orphan Asylum, the records of the Shelter for Coloured Orphans in Philadelphia indicate that it was indeed the first of its kind, proposed and erected in Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century. At that point, Ann Yarnall, a member of the Philadelphia Society of Friends first met with an organization of black women from the city. The group requested her involvement in the creation of an orphanage for black children in the city and promised to raise funds for the purpose, of which they eventually collected one hundred dollars. This amount was then given to the Association for the Care of Colored Children in 1825. This Association was established by Beulah Samson and other women members of the Society of Friends on January 12th, 1822. The women included were from various parts of the city, in order to illicit wide-ranging interest in the project. They agreed to the value of the proposal and sought to acquire funds to build or purchase an appropriate structure for the orphanage. 

In 1829, an African American man donated fifty dollars and that gift, along with the interest collected from the initial donation and subsequent smaller donations, made possible the purchase of a house on Sassafras street, an area secured for the use of the orphanage. This house was deemed the “Shelter for Colored Children” or the “Shelter.”

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30 Previous literature on African American orphanages have identified the New York Colored Orphan Asylum, established on November 26, 1836 as the first orphanage in the country designed exclusively for African American children, however, archival record from the Philadelphia Association for the Care of Colored Children detail the organization’s early beginnings “around” 1814. See William Seraile, Angels of Mercy: White Women and the History of New York’s Colored Orphan Asylum, (New York: Empire State Editions, 2011), 8
Thirteen years later, in March of 1829, Stephen Ricks died at age eight after having lived for four years at the Shelter. Between the opening of The Shelter in 1822 and the association’s first report in 1836, 118 black children were admitted, 25 of whom met the same fate as Stephen Ricks and passed away. Many of the details surrounding the admitted children’s lives are unknown. However, the members of the society memorialized Stephen Ricks in their published report due to his extraordinarily pious spirit and academically advanced inclinations.

The history of the Shelter for Coloured Orphans also demonstrates a new perspective on Quaker ideals in ways that consider the role of women and children in the narrative of Quaker benevolent activism concerning the black population. African American women initiated the dialogue that led to the creation of the orphanage and worked alongside the white, Quaker women who incorporated the association. The African American community played a direct role in the creation of Philadelphia’s Shelter for Coloured Children in the years following its creation, and other antebellum organizations for black children, evident in their monetary contributions to the orphanage and their public advocacy. African American women were also employed in the Shelter for Coloured Children and Philadelphia’s Home for Destitute Children, an organization established in 1856.

At the Shelter, the first matron and teacher was a black woman, initially unidentified, whose contribution to the health and well-being of the children was cited as being invaluable to the association. The name of the woman was most likely kept secret due to the dangers she may have faced from anti-black violence in the city, sometimes
focused on children. African Americans’ direct participation was sometimes challenged despite their direct and indirect involvement in the creation and sustenance of many white-led benevolent organizations for black children. An African American woman, Emeline Sullivan, served as matron for the Home for Destitute Colored Children from its inception until 1865, when it was decided that Thomas and Susan B. Scanlan, white members of the association, should serve as Superintendent and Matron, despite Sullivan’s constant praise in the annual reports. In fact, just one-year prior, Sullivan and her daughter were recognized for having assisted in the events surrounding the arrival of children from the South (formerly enslaved), who carried a disease that spread into an epidemic at the home. Sullivan was “unwearied” in her care of the children and nursed the children to the point of “arduous and fatiguing exertions.” The reason provided for the change in positions was the increase in children attending the Home, most likely in relation to the Civil War. However, it is unclear why Emeline Sullivan did not remain associated with the home in any other capacity, a change that suggests disagreement over her removal.

Many members of the free black community outwardly criticized the operations of these institutions, including their racial segregation of orphaned children. The Colored American published a critique of the New York Association of Ladies and the

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31 Shelter for Coloured Orphans, First Report of the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 19
32 Home for Destitute Colored Children, 10th Annual Report, (Crissy & Markley Printers: 1865)
33 Home for Destitute Colored Children, 11th Annual Report, (Crissy & Markley Printers: 1866)
Home for Destitute Colored Children, 12th Annual Report, (Crissy & Markley Printers 1867)
announcement of its Colored Orphan Asylum. The authors rejected the notion that segregated orphanages should be established when functioning orphanages already existed, but refused to admit black children.\(^{34}\) The limited inclusion, and frequent exclusion, of African Americans in the function of these centers for children created another tension between the black community’s initial request for aid from white benefactors and the institutions’ admissions practices. Black parents, family, and community members were sometimes discouraged from retrieving their children when they were deemed unfit to provide appropriate guardianship. This became increasingly problematic the longer the organizations were in operation and in the context of the coming war. By 1861, The Home for Destitute Colored Children publically condemned the actions of many African American community members who attempted to reclaim custody of children, especially prior to their indenture. The Home provided the following account of a disagreement over the admittance of a black girl, apparently between her father and a woman:

An aged man, crippled by rheumatism, deserted by his wife, placed his two boys with us; good situations were obtained for them in the country. The father, having seen them in their homes, was so much gratified, that he called on one of the Managers to desire that his only daughter might be taken into the “Home.” The child was living with a colored woman who refused to give her up; the Managers assured the father that if at any future time his daughter needed protection, they would endeavor to extend it. Three years after, the old man died, and the orphan child was thrown upon the world without a friend or protector. She was found upon the commons by a gentleman, who, without having any knowledge of her past history, brought her to the “Home.” She was then placed in the country, in the same family with one of her brothers.\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) *New York Colored American*, April 29, 1837
\(^{35}\) Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, 6th *Annual report*, 5-6
This issue demonstrates the decisions the organization made both in its assessment of guardians, and movement of children. In this report, the Home for Destitute Colored Children did not consider the emotional and economic value of the child to the “colored woman.” The authors also failed to recognize the precarious position in which the child and woman would have found themselves after the death of the father, as likely without inheritance and guardianship rights. Furthermore, despite the fact that it condemned the placement of the child with the African American woman, the home did not see a dilemma in sending the child out to be indentured. Indeed, children often were indentured out to rural farmers, placing them far away from their established friends and family.

Humanitarian organizations expressed particular representations of childhood and reform in their representations of black children and adults in published reports. In the annual reports sent to subscribers, they frequently portrayed the free black community in ways that sometimes recognized the discriminatory treatment they faced, but still reinforced racial hierarchies. Often the humanity of the community it served, black children, was only recognized in relation to the apparent neglect of their parents due to their subordinate status. At its inception, Philadelphia’s Home for Destitute Children lauded the efforts of its members for having “saved” black children from “exposure to the bad influences of injudicious guardians, and the evils of their degraded condition.”36 Similarly, in the book sent to subscribers of the Shelter for Colored Children, the association included a passage from Exodus, chapter 2, verse 9, “Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages,” and queried of its subscribers, “shall the destitute condition of many babes of the African race, suffering under parental

36 Ibid, 5
privation, now fail to excite a similar effort of tender sympathy in a Christian community?” According to the organizers of the association, the black community’s subordinate status was due to the “burden of slavery for many generations,” a condition that resulted in African Americans’ fate to suffer “under consequent degradation, sustaining in the estimate of public opinion, the odium of a characteristic deficiency of mental capacity, and a practical default of moral principle.” Black children then faced a “double claim upon charitable munificence,” by way of being orphaned, and being black.37

Orphanages and destitute houses also reinforced notions of race and childhood through their admissions practices. In the constitution for the Philadelphia Shelter for Coloured Orphans, the association clearly outlined the conditions under which black children would be accepted into the orphanage. No child under eighteen months of age, and over eight was admitted to the institution. This age span reflected the belief that infants required direct, maternal care until eighteen months and should not be separated from their mothers, if possible. Many of the orphaned children who were accepted to the Shelter had living relatives including mothers. This reflected census data of female headed households in the North during the antebellum era. In the decades following the implementation of gradual emancipation laws, African American children in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia lived in single-parent households at increasing rates. In 1820, black women headed households in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York at rates of twelve, fifteen, and nineteen percent respectively. The death of a parent often produced single-parent households, frequently fathers due to their hazardous labor conditions. Most

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37 Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, First Annual Report, 13, 15
black children in these cities lived with both parents until the age of fourteen. Children were often orphaned by the loss of a one parent, most likely a father, initiating an economic situation so dire that mothers were no longer capable of supporting one, or a household, of children, as was the case for the girl cited by the Home for Destitute Colored Children who was “thrown out.” However, the vast majority of black children did not end up in orphanages and, those who did, parents, family, and community members often returned after a period of time to retrieve their children, using the institutions as temporary sites of refuge. Families also sent their children to orphanages for temporary boarding if they did not want them to enter into, or be confined within, indenture contracts. Black women who labored in domestic work, the most common form of work in the North, were sometimes unable to care for their children, and therefore place them in institutions such as the Shelter. Thus, boarding was an element of black culture of the North where poor blacks often relocated for work, thereby utilizing temporary living environments from friends, family, or the community. This phenomenon has also been examined in the latter period of the nineteenth century, and as scholars have argued, in various circumstances working-class and black parents, “initiated the admissions and dismissal processes, negotiating terms with the managers, and asserted control during their children’s stay,” enacting a type of “temporary” child-care system.

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Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 86
Ramey, *Child Care in Black and White*, 67
Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 99
The New York Asylum for Colored Children was one such organization that housed African American children who might be admitted temporarily by their family. The organization also made overtly racialized judgments of the parents of the population it served. The orphanage aimed to select its children based upon those for whom “neglect and evil example are sorrowfully apparent,” alluding to their own criminal behavior. It assessed that many of these children were cast aside by their own families and forced to enter into a life of delinquency. The stated aims of the organization were “judicious training-religious, moral, mental, and physical.” The home’s association outlined their guidelines for the reformation of destitute children, a process marked by moral, religious, and intellectual education and one that depended upon the retention of the children for a long period of time. This was in part a way to secure that children were not indentured out at extremely young ages. The indenturing of children impeded upon their access to play and leisure.

During the early nineteenth century, the free black community published various opinions on the proper development of children and their play in African American

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40 The home was established by white Quakers women after they discovered black children living in the cellar of the Bellevue almshouse, surrounded by “degraded adults,” under the supervision of a mentally unstable man. Seven children were immediately selected for admittance into the orphanage and the society was incorporated in 1838. The association admitted orphans primarily by way of their friends and family, but also was able to secure a room for schooling of both orphans and other African American children based on contributions from the New York Manumission Society. In 1847, after a measles epidemic, the association established a Hospital for the benefit of non-boarding children as well as orphans of the asylum. The New York Asylum for Colored Children also had a direct connection to the free black community in the form of its employees. James McCune Smith, prominent New York abolitionist, served as the home’s physician, and provided very detailed yearly reports on the physical health of the black children.

41 Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans, *Eighteenth annual report*, 13-16

newspapers. Although the concept of play had not garnered the level of attention it would during the second part of the nineteenth century, these publications demonstrate an early consideration of the meaning of play in a black child’s world. In February 1839, *The Colored American* published an advice column to parents entitled “Family Reading,” that encouraged them to fill children’s leisure with “amusing and useful reading.” The article instructed parents that although they may believe they cannot afford books, that they should “take but two meals a day” in order to “imbue the minds of children with an ardent desire for useful knowledge.” An article titled “The Infant Knowledge System,” published months later in October of the same year provided an even more assertive characterization of child’s play and leisure. The author countered the claim that children should be educated early, “shortly after the children are weaned” and questioned its readers, “is this wholesome—is it natural? Is it fair—is it humane, that a child should be cheated out of its childhood and sent to learn the ‘use of the globes’ before it has learnt to play at marbles?... Oh! In place of sending a child to school three or four years, let it enjoy three or four more years of healthy ignorance.” The daily activities of the children northern orphanages and institutions for black children illustrate the ways in which children’s play and leisure was only acknowledged under particular conditions.

The admission practices for the Philadelphia Shelter for Coloured Orphans demonstrate the association’s shifting notions of childhood, labor, and play. For example, from its inception, the Shelter restricted its admittance of black children based on their physical and mental ability. Children who had demonstrated “defective” mental

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42 *The Colored American*, February 2, 1839
43 *The Colored American*, October 19, 1839
capacities or “deformity of body” were denied entry to the facility, except by “special permission granted by the Association.” Therefore, the organization attributed particular values of childhood based on qualifications of age, ability, and level of depravity. This constructed vision of childhood reflected the Association’s conceptualization of able-bodied childness. Of course each of models of childrearing assume levels of economic privilege of the child’s parents, of which free blacks may not have had access. However, those who were admitted to orphanages and destitute homes might have had opportunities to enjoy play and leisure differently than children who remained at home.

Orphaned children’s daily activities were primarily structured according to efforts to provide religious and academic education. The first annual of the Shelter paints a vivid picture of the activities of these women and the children, a cooperative “family.”

It is customary at the Shelter, for the whole family to retire into the School Room soon after breakfast, to attend at reading a portion of the Holy Scriptures; then the small children are left at liberty to amuse themselves, while the older classes are employed in household service, until School opens at 9 o’clock, to close at 12. Dinner and subsequent relaxation fill up the interval between 12 and 2 o’clock; when School re-commences and continues from two and a half to three hours. Again dismissed the volatile spirits of childhood are in haste to realize the enjoyment of some animated recreation; this indulgence, carried to a reasonable extent, is succeed by a light supper and early retirement for the night.

The association designated specific times and places for different activities and ages. They centralized schooling, while the space between class and “service” was filled with play of their children’s own instigation. Black children’s authority and autonomy was expressed in these liminal spaces between structured time. The Association

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44 First Report of the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 26
First Annual Report of the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 4
45 Ibid, 5
acknowledged the children’s need for recreation, but only allowed it for “a reasonable extent.”

Later, the Association’s treatment of spaces of play were shaped by acts of racial violence. The Shelter was forced to abandon its original location at thirteenth and Callowhill Street when it was attacked during the 1837 riot after the creation of the Pennsylvania Hall, a site designed to foster anti-slavery activism and hold public lectures located over six city blocks away from the orphanage. On May 17th after the building’s opening events, a mob set fire the building and then moved on to other parts of the city where African Americans resided, attacking the First African Presbyterian and the Shelter for Colored Orphans. Although the association was already considering relocating the orphans due to the increasing size of the orphanage, the Shelter for Colored Orphans was forced to move due to the perceived danger following the attack.

The Association did not directly identify the attack in their published record and the only mention of it appears in its 1838 report in which the only explanation for the postponed move to the new building is that, “the late fire (with which the particulars of which the public has already been furnished,) has occasioned the delay.” However, the relocation of the Shelter provided the opportunity for the members of the association to describe in detail the benefits of the physical dimensions of the new building, and was the only time in the published reports in which the recreational spaces were described. In the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphan’s annual report published in 1840, the authors claimed the new residence provided the children with better ventilation in their rooms, as well as “sufficient ground for recreation and exercise, with a large play-room in

46 Ibid, 5
the basement story, for their accommodation in wet weather.” These new spaces became a source of pride for the Association and evidence of the success of the shelter, to be displayed to the supporters and donors to the Shelter. They entreated associates to observe the “poor orphans” in recreational spaces that provided “comfort” “enjoyment” and “liberality,” a considerable improvement from “the suffering and destitution which would probably have been their lot, had not this home been provided for them.”47 The association did not describe spaces designated for recreation of children in the remaining records of the organization, although it was in operation until the turn of the twentieth century when it relocated to Cheney, Pennsylvania as a home for girls.

During the antebellum era, juvenile delinquency became an avenue to enforce racially-distinct treatment of children. New York was the first city to allow black youth to gain entry to houses of refuge by creating a separate facility for children of color in 1835. Philadelphia’s House of Refuge opened fourteen years later. The physical construction of the spaces in which black children lived, played, and labored demonstrate forms of racial and gender stratification that reinforced racial and gender hierarchies.48 Theories that connected outdoor childhood play to a critical practice emerged primarily in the twentieth century. German theorists advocated the creation of specific places for play for outdoor fitness, contributing to the playground movement in the U.S. of the late nineteenth century. In this period, Friedrich Froebel promoted the concept of kindergartens, a child-centered space designated for the physical, mental, and emotional development of the

47 Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 4th Annual Report of the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1840), 5
Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans 5th Annual Report of the Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1841), 6
Prior to this, children might be granted outdoor space for recreation in destitute institutions or schools, but these spaces were not universally accepted nor applied to children of different backgrounds.

At the Philadelphia House of Refuge, children were categorized based on age and behavior. These distinctions are evident in the building plans for the white and colored departments. The department for colored children was proposed to be substantially smaller, in part due to its proportionally smaller population. The restrictions on space for African American children are more apparent as they relate to their designated areas for recreation, spaces that differed based on race, level of delinquency and gender. In the description of the building provided by the Board of Managers, the building and grounds plan for the colored department of the House of Refuge outlined areas designated “play ground” and “exercising yard.” The largest of these were the play grounds for boys of the first and second classes, the lowest (least delinquent) and middle designations for behavior. Boys of the third class were only provided an “exercising yard.” The same was allotted for African American girls, although each of the spaces were considerably smaller. These reflect assumed population distinction between black girls and boys, but the distinction amongst classes indicate that the architectural designers for the House of Refuge agreed that the most delinquent children should be granted the least freedom of recreation. Indeed, the institution stipulated in its rules and regulations that children

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should only socialize with those of their same “class,” even during recreational activities.

The 1848 annual report explained the justification for this differential treatment:

The arrangement of the buildings within the enclosure, which are all of brick, with slate roofs, is made with reference to a total separation of the boys and girls, and to the existence of three separate classes of both male and female inmates: the first (or best) and second classes each to have a play-ground and work-room, and the members of one class not to be allowed to converse with those of the other, on any occasion; the third class, consisting of the most depraved inmates, to be kept, until in a condition to warrant promotion to a higher class, in separate confinement.

Although the population of the African American community was comparable in Philadelphia and New York, the New York Colored Orphan Asylum served a much higher number of African American children than the Philadelphia Shelter for Colored Orphans. By 1854, the asylum had admitted 749 children, with an average of about fifty children each year as compared to the fifteen admitted each year to the Philadelphia Shelter. This discrepancy may have to do with the differing treatments of black children in the respective cities and their placement in houses of refuge. While a very small number of African American children were placed in New York’s house of refuge, almshouse, or prison prior to the Civil War, black children were admitted to Philadelphia’s houses of refuge and Almshouse at disproportionate rates of the general population numbers, with African American children occupying one-seventh of the 1837 population of the Philadelphia Almshouse for adults. Indeed, the city did not create a House of Refuge for African American children until 1849, despite the fact that one had

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House of Refuge, Memorial for the Board of Managers of the House of Refuge, (Philadelphia: 1851)
51 Philadelphia House of Refuge, 21st Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Joseph Harding Printer, 1848)
been created for white children only in 1828, most likely contributing to their high rates in the adult Almshouse. However, evidence indicates that during the antebellum era, New York officials considered Irish, not black children, the greatest delinquent population.\textsuperscript{52} It is therefore likely that there is a correlation between the conditions of black life in Philadelphia in which black children were sent to adult prisons, and the social and material conditions that limited support and for the care black children of Philadelphia in the antebellum context.

While the reports produced by antebellum organizations for black children typically did not include the voices of African Americans directly, private records of members of the association provide glimpses into African American children’s play. The Morris family papers, which include those of Catharine W. Morris a member of the Association, contain records of the Association for Coloured Orphans including the minutes to the first meeting of the association. The private record also houses a sketchbook, circa 1865, of portraits of family members and vivid depictions of children at play, Fig. 1. The drawing, most likely composed by Hannah or Luke, includes children embarking in many playful, outdoor activities in the rural setting of which the Morris family lived, outside of Philadelphia.

Fig. 1, Morris Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania
In one drawing, two of the children of the household, Hannah and Luke Morris aged eleven and seven respectively, played “blind man’s buff,” with a young girl who appears to be of color named “Rachel.” The game involved one child, in this case Hannah, who attempted to locate the other children while blindfolded. The game is represented at the moment of discovery when Hannah had just found Rachel as she tugged on her skirt, or Rachel may have been assisting Hannah by leading her. There are not identifiable records of Rachel in the Morris Family Papers, however close analysis of the image provides a sketch of her relationship to the children and social status. Though Rachel and Hannah appear to be similar in age, Rachel’s clothing differed slightly from Hannah’s, she wore an apron, did not have any decorative features like Hannah’s bow, and her skirt was
longer. Rachel was most likely a servant or an indentured laborer for the Morris family or a neighboring household. The drawing represents fugitive elements of the play of black children, and also demonstrates the likely relationships between interracial child’s play, and humanitarian Quaker activism. Hannah Morris eventually joined the Association for the Care of Colored Children and was listed as an annual subscriber to the Shelter.

African American authors also expressed particular visions of black child’s play in their representations of free and enslaved childhood during the antebellum era. The biography, *Memoir of James Jackson: The Attentive and Obedient Scholar Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months*, is an early representation of an emergent discourse on black childhood. Susan Paul, the author of the biography, was born into a prominent black religious family with ties to the abolitionist movement. She entered the field of education as a teacher of Boston’s African American Primary School No. 6 and Baptist Sunday school, and as director of the Garrison Juvenile Choir. After her sister passed away, she took in her four children. Throughout her life Paul consistently placed children at the center of her personal and economic concerns, and identified the plight and well-being of African American children as a site for further activism.53

Susan Paul successfully published her *Memoir of James Jackson* through the aid of Boston printer James Loring, after being turned away by the American Sunday School Union. The memoir is the first of its kind and documents the life of a young African American child, James Jackson, who grew up in Boston and died just before his seventh birthday. Paul, who was born into a legacy of free African American intellectuals and

53 Ibid
activists, penned the memoir as a didactic religious document aimed at educating both black and white children and parents, a popular style for juvenile audiences during the early nineteenth century. The book’s content and materiality suggest that it held special design and significance for African American children and as such, exists as an artifact of both instruction and play.\(^{54}\)

The narrative of James Jackson elucidates particular experiences of antebellum northern African American childhood in ways that provide nuance to common descriptions of play. The narrative details Jackson’s life, relationship with his mother, and his religious education. Though historians have unearthed significant background on Susan Paul, there is relatively little that is known about James Jackson. Census data collected in 1820 indicates that the Jacksons lived on South Russell Street in Boston and that James lived with his mother, two brothers, two sisters, and father until his father’s death in 1827 or 1828. It is likely that Jackson attended Boston’s Primary School No. 6, and that is where he and Susan Paul formed a relationship.\(^{55}\)

The *Memoir of James Jackson* exhibits many of the literary trends typical of nineteenth century writing including didactic spiritual moralism, between the performed spirituality of the young Jackson lie fugitive playful elements.\(^{56}\) The memoir’s preface directly addresses parents, encouraging them to “store the minds of children committed to them with religious truth.” Paul speaks also writes directly to children throughout the

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\(^{54}\) The original publication was small enough to be held easily by a child. Lois Brown ed., Susan Paul, *Memoir of James Jackson: The Attentive and Obedient Scholar, Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833, Aged Six Years and Eleven Months*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 25-28

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 5-6, 53

\(^{56}\) For explanation of nineteenth century literary trends within the Memoir see Lois Brown’s introduction to the text. Ibid, 25-52
body of the text and models appropriate behavior for African American children, while challenging notions of racial inferiority and inherent black deviance.

In her portrayal of Jackson, Susan Paul highlights the ways in which James resisted emerging constructions of black childhood. Paul never identifies anything in Jackson’s behavior that could be characterized as frivolous. According to Paul, Jackson’s early childhood was marked by his interest in school and carefree spirit. In contrast to stubbornness, Paul emphasizes Jackson’s obedience even when his mother would insist he cease playing and put away his toys. However, immediately following this depiction of Jackson at age three, Paul directly addresses the child readers of the text insisting, “any of you, my dear children, would have been pleased to have seen little James, only three years old, running about so happy, and so kindly telling his mother some little tale.” Jackson’s happiness and recreation was explored by Paul in ways that underscore his desire to please his mother. This expression of childhood was in line with emerging ideals of motherhood and “true womanhood” in which black women’s primary role was to educate their children.

Like Stephen Ricks, the activities that pleased Jackson were not those that were typically associated with the carefree nature of childhood. Paul explains that Jackson was permitted to attend school earlier than normal. Admission to primary school usually occurred at age four, but Jackson, who exhibited good behavior and desired to attend early, was admitted at age three. Jackson’s devotion to his studies elicited anxiety out of observers of his behavior, to which Jackson would respond that he would rather stay with

57 Ibid, 12
his mother than play with “bad boys.” His mother encouraged him to play “fearing he
would suffer for want of exercise.” In this way, Jackson’s behavior and his disregard of
playful activities defied ideas of “normal” childhood, placing his childhood in terms of
maturity.

Though Jackson did not participate in leisure activities by playing outside,
Jackson was represented by Paul as “innocence itself.” This innocence was not only due
to his age, but his religious spiritualism and racial ignorance. Karen Sanchez- Eppler has
argued that Paul’s analysis of James’ initiation into racial intolerance functions as a way
to explain how “‘prejudice against color’ is taught to children.”59 For Paul, racism was
learned, and racial inferiority was not an inherent trait of African American children’s
identities. Jackson’s spirituality was characteristic of his childhood innocence. Paul
claims, “the grace of God is to be magnified for what he was, for there can be scarcely a
doubt that he was under the special influence of his gracious Spirit. 60 Though Paul took
pains to demonstrate the ways in which Jackson’s nature was, “not like the disposition
which children commonly exhibit,” in doing so, she provides examples of childhood
behavior which were conceptualized as characteristic of modern notions of childhood in
which children were sheltered from labor. Paul expressed Jackson’s desire to abstain
from work on the Sabbath as a demonstration of his commitment to his spiritualism.
Jackson told his mother he did not want to assist her in grinding coffee by pleading,
“Well, ma, is not this the Sabbath?” to which his mother responded, “Well, James, you

59 Sanchez-Eppler, Karen quoting Susan Paul, Dependent States: The Child’s Part in
Nineteenth-Century American Culture, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005),
203
60 Paul, Memoir of James Jackson, 19, 41, 58
need not grind the coffee if you feel so about it.” Though Jackson’s response indicates, as Paul has illustrated, a commitment to Christianity, this commitment emerged in conflict to his mother’s instruction. Here, Paul represents his behavior in accordance with spiritual innocence. However, Jackson’s response embodied a desire to experience a childhood free from labor. This exchange is the only place throughout the memoir where Jackson’s chores were mentioned specifically, and he chose not to do them. Indeed, the significance of this part of the memoir is highlighted by its appearance in the press. This passage was selected for publication in the “New Works” section of the Liberator on August 1st, 1835 by anonymous letter to the editor, as a demonstration of the powerful articulations of childhood found within the text. Although James Jackson family’s socio-economic situation was not directly examined by Susan Paul, the fact that Jackson attended school at such a young age and lived in a two-parent household suggests that he was in a situation of relative social and economic advantage. It does not appear that Jackson labored outside of his home, as many other northern African American children did.

Although Susan Paul’s memoir of James Jackson represented black childhood in ways that reflected the period’s religious didacticism prominent in juvenile texts, she also offered biographical information on the life of a northern, black child and their opportunities, and limitations, concerning leisure and play. Zilpha Elaw’s memoir of her childhood and life describes an alternative perspective of northern childhood that included the racialized experiences of child-labor. The Memoirs of the life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw offers a similar

\[61\] Ibid, 63
documentation of religious expression and spiritual conversion and features an African American woman born in Philadelphia in 1790. The memoir was published in London in 1846 by Elaw. Though studies of the memoir have focused on elements of black spirituality and womanhood, it has not been examined as representative of the experiences of black childhood, and in particular, in relation to the tension between racialized child’s play in the North and religious expression.

Elaw’s memoir provides a glimpse into the ways in which free African American laboring-children conceptualized play. After the death of her mother when Zilpha Elaw was only twelve, Elaw was indentured to a Quaker family. While she labored for the Quaker family of Pierson and Rebecca Mitchel, Elaw’s father died. After the death of her father, Elaw began to associate joyful and childish times spent with the Quaker children with guilt. Though she mentioned being “very young” at the time, Elaw was ashamed to associate with the “juvenile members of the family,” in which “childish conversations,” caused her to feel “exceedingly sinful.” Elaw eventually overcame the follies of childhood through religious devotion. Elaw internalized a notion of childhood that excluded her from embodying the behavior exhibited by her white child-peers. Though it is possible that she was older than these children and closer to an age in which girls were considered women, she referred to these children as “childish companions.” Elaw considered their childish behavior as an action that distanced her from God. Elaw did not

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63 James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 89
64 Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit*, 54
65 Ibid., 54
describe any of the specific labor activities of herself and the other children, but she conceptualized her position in the home, as well as her spiritually as precarious in ways that excluded her from exhibiting similar playful behavior. Elaw’s memoir provides insight into the psychic process of an African American child in relation to the concept of play in ways that Paul is unable to access.  

Representations of black children’s play in memoirs of the North emerged in conversation with those of the slave narrative genre. Undoubtedly, nineteenth century black children’s access to play differed greatly under slavery. Accounts of play during enslavement frequently focused on periods of playful innocence, and then age-specific abrupt loss of childhood innocence. In the context of the slave narrative genre, play and innocence served a political meaning that developed into a trope of black childhood. In each of the popular slave narratives explored in this chapter, those of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, and Frederick Douglass, the enslaved childhood experience was represented in ways that highlight innocence as an expression of an essentialized childhood. These representations reflected political discourse and humanitarian of black childhood and treatment of black children in the antebellum North.

Various scholars have offered historical explanations of play under slavery. Eugene Genovese provides a rather romanticized perspective of the ways in which enslaved children played, including the assumption that the plantation environment contributed unique opportunities for play. Genovese constructed the plantation scene was one “with woods and streams to explore and to provide a setting for mischievous

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66 The designation of “middle-class” commonly applied to African Americans is different than the experiences of white middle-class families and individuals due to the social and structural inequities facing African Americans in nineteenth century America.
adventures, [enslaved children] did not have to rely as much as children in crowded urban environments on formal games to amuse themselves.” However, in his analysis of the play of enslaved children, Bernard Mergen challenges the notion that enslaved children were allotted unrestricted time to play. Mergen cites the lack of memories of play within the narratives of enslavement collected as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s. Within the collection, only 10 percent of those interviewed mentioned play. Wilma King’s expansive study on nineteenth century childhood describes play under slavery as, “a voluntary, enjoyable, and liberating activity” that was not an uncharacteristic aspect of the enslaved experience. King provides a nuanced perspective of the ways in which children’s leisure became an inventive and imaginative space for resisting the oppressive nature of slavery. King argues that role-playing games “taught children the values and morals of the adult world.” Similarly, David Wiggins addresses the play activities of enslaved children during the antebellum era in ways that highlight its function within the establishment of the enslaved black community. Wiggins argues that play and leisure allowed children to learn literacy, connect with peers, and to manage the trauma of slavery. Indeed, while enslaved children’s labor was exploited and commodified, to enact forms of play would be to directly resist the institution of slavery.

69 King, Wilma, Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011), 107, 109
Undoubtedly, enslaved children were figured in discourse on childhood and race, as well as featured in debates over the contradictions of slavery. Despite the absence of aspects of enslaved children’s play within the archive on slavery, as well as in writings of the enslaved experience by formerly enslaved, black childhood was continually represented in terms of innocence within the slave narrative genre and most notably in those of Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs. However, although historians have carefully examined the lives of enslaved children, the relationship between the significance of childhood within the slave-narrative genre and black children’s experiences in the North has not yet been fully conceptualized. I explore this topic by focusing on the ways in which black children’s relationship to play and innocence changed throughout the nineteenth century. Doing so complicates the assumed geographic and ideological divide of the “free” North and “slave” South by demonstrating shared forms of marginalization rooted in age.

In recounting their enslaved childhood experiences, Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass alternated between expressions of nostalgia, reminisces of grief, and digressions of horror. Each of these narratives, produced during the height of abolitionism, were written as textual evidence against the brutal institution of slavery in ways that demonstrate childhood innocence as a political tool of resistance. Though both national and geographic distances separated Prince from Douglass and Jacobs, their accounts share a narrative reinforcement of the innocence inherent in a universal childhood experience during enslavement during a period in which the enslaved black child was not granted innocence, nor was she granted the right to experience a “natural” childhood.
In many accounts of the enslaved experience that belong to the genre of the slave narrative, black childhood was featured either prominently, obscured, or figured as a trope to signal the ultimate act of self-emancipation. Mary Prince’s representation of her childhood functioned as part of an effort to expose losses of innocence rooted in girls’ labor and exposure to violence. While losses of innocence experienced through sexual exploitation, especially that of Harriet Jacobs, have been critically examined by scholars of slavery and childhood, Mary Prince’s focus on innocence and labor has not been interrogated through the lens of child-oriented forms of oppression. Indeed, Prince’s experience as an enslaved girl in the British West Indies offers a perspective on enslaved childhood that introduces the transnational uses of discourse of childhood across the Atlantic world.

The *History of Mary Prince* was published in London in 1831 by F. Whestley and A.H. Davis, with a preface provided by Thomas Pringle, abolitionist and secretary of the British Anti-Slavery Society. In her narrative, Prince’s childhood was presented in ways that appealed to an English audience by highlighting the more shocking aspects of her experience in stark contrast to the conservatism of the Victorian Era. By exposing her sexualized treatment and the harsh nature of her child-labor at such a young age, Prince not only struck horror into the hearts of the English on the basis of enslavement, but also more specifically, on behalf of enslaved children. Prince’s passages from the perspective of the enslaved child provided advocacy on behalf of the innocence of enslaved children, while simultaneously evoking sympathy for defenseless children.

Prince described how she was deprived of her natural or ascribed girlhood at the early age of twelve as she stood at the auction block for sale. Although this moment was
not described in terms that were inherently sexual, the language used to portray her experience implied sexual perversion. At this early age, Prince was “surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words-as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts.”

The “examination” and “handling” though not overtly sexual, was performed by white men on a young black girl’s body. The terms by which she was measured, with her “shape” and “size” forming units of value, was also executed by a white man. In this passage, Prince developed a language that merged gender with race and age, a choice that contributed to the emerging political conversation on the meaning of childhood and innocence.

Many narratives of enslavement similarly focused on the disruption of childhood. Mary Prince gendered this moment by highlighting the ways in which enslaved girls were forced to encounter sexually obscene white men and morally indifferent white women. In these narratives, the transition between childhood and adulthood was traced to a single moment of corruption. This moment is often described in ways that signaled sexual abuse, however Prince’s narrative suggests a different form of sexual violence, and one that was less explicit.

While childhood innocence of the early nineteenth century was defined in part as the developmental age between childhood and adolescence, or youth and adulthood, in The History of Mary Prince, Prince’s childhood innocence was experienced in the space between birth and enslavement. Mary Prince provided her British audience with utopian

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71 Ibid, 236
visions of a time free from social and economic limitations initiated by entrance into the labor-force of slavery. Her first description of her early childhood was not one of the inherent horrors associated with being a child born into bondage, but instead on the relationship between two children, black and white, enslaved and free. At this early time in Prince’s life, she was enslaved to a girl her own age with whom she would often play. Prince described this time as “the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow.” 72 This passage illustrates Prince’s self-conceptualization as a child during which she did not perceive of herself as a slave. For Prince, childhood innocence was universal and crossed racial and social boundaries. However, almost immediately after this explanation, the narrative shifted towards the end of childhood innocence. 73 This passage served as a common experience through which Prince’s British audience, specifically those who were women with children, could empathize.

Once she was sold away from her mother, Mary Prince witnessed barbaric acts of violence that remained as vivid in her memory as an adult as the day they occurred in childhood. Mary Prince witnessed the brutal murder of an enslaved woman, Hettie, an experience that, as Debbie Lee argues, destroyed both her childhood innocence and “her own sense of freedom.” 74 Upon being sold to Turks Island, Mary Prince’s narrative focus further shifted to one of physical torment. At this point in her life, though she was still a

72 Ibid, 231
73 Ibid, 232
young girl, Prince’s tone abruptly changes to descriptions of the physical anguishes she suffered. Her childhood innocence was lost to a form of enslavement that was expressed in much more overtly physical terms; the material conditions of labor transformed her child-body into that of a laboring, enslaved woman.

On the eve of the Civil War, Harriet Jacobs’ narrative famously represented black childhood in terms of play and innocence. Her narrative was published in Boston in 1861 and edited by Lydia Maria Child. In it, Jacobs frequently alluded to sexual corruption in the chapter “trials of girlhood.” After a brief period of adolescence, Jacobs was forced to experience her slaveholder, Dr. Flint’s, sexual advances. Jacobs identified this point, at the age fifteen, as “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” a statement that constructed enslaved children’s lives in terms of the forced-end of childhood and beginning of sexualized adolescence and adulthood initiated by sexual exploitation at the hands of slaveholders. Indeed, Jacobs’ encounters with Dr. Flint were framed in the narrative that used language to emphasize her own innocence and purity as a young girl. Jacobs described the process by which Dr. Flint corrupted her innocence through an exposure to perverse themes. “He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my maser…He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things.”

Jacobs ostensibly escaped a physical relationship by entering a consensual relationship with a different white man, Mr. Sands. Though the nature of her relationship with Dr.

75 Harriet Jacobs, Lydia Maria Child ed., Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, (Boston: 1861), docsouth online version, 45
Flint was described in ambiguous terms, Jacobs evoked childhood innocence in order to highlight the insidious nature of the violations of girlhood under slavery.

While Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs’ losses of childhood innocence concerned corruption of the child’s mind and body, Frederick Douglass’ representations of childhood innocence were rooted in a quest for knowledge. In the *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845 Boston by the Anti-slavery office, Douglass’ early childhood was represented with a focus on his mother, Harriet Baily. From an early point in the narrative, he provides a detailed explanation of the nature of the relationship between himself and his mother, one that he was deprived of at an early age. Douglass described how he and his mother were separated at infancy; a practice that he suspects was part of an effort to break ties between a mother and her child. Indeed, historians have found evidence of the practice of separating enslaved children at young ages from their parents, and for Douglass, separation from his mother was done to “destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child.”

Upon recalling the death of his mother, Douglass did not dwell on his feelings towards her, but instead was preoccupied with the mystery of who his father was, a mystery that remained unresolved with the event of her death. Though his narrative contains scenes of brutal violence typical for narratives of enslavement, for Douglass, the cruelest facet of slavery was a child’s deprivation of knowledge. In the opening of his narrative, Douglass exhibited frustration in his inability to provide details on his early life and age. He explains that he had always possessed, “a want of information… [which] was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the

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76 Gates, *The Classic Slave Narratives*, 316
same privilege.” This observation was used as evidence of the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

Douglass focused on this theme of childhood curiosity throughout the narrative, and it was this inclination that eventually became the driving force behind his self-emancipation. After being taught reading skills first by his mistress, he was constantly concerned with learning how to read and write, taking up all measures to ensure his own literacy. He identified the means by which he would secure his freedom as directly connected to liberating his mind. He discovered that reading exposed, “dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood… the white man’s power to enslave the black man.”

Douglass emphasizes that while he was a child he sought to break free of the mental bonds of slavery.

Douglass’s young childhood was devoid of the same physical violence that Mary Prince endured. He described the tasks appointed to him during this early period as being fairly easy. However, Douglass identified what for him was the most difficult aspect of slavery, an enslavement of the mind. He emphasized how the pursuit of knowledge in his childhood transformed into an actualization of manhood and masculinity indicated in the climactic moments of his text. Douglass illustrated how he first conquered the mental confines of slavery in his childhood, then conquered the physical boundaries in adulthood. The break from the childhood appears in his narrative and was marked by not

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77 Ibid, 315
78 Ibid, 338
only a physical disruption-in the form of violence against black bodies- but the more abstract psychological violence and denial of masculinity and manhood.

After this realization, Douglass confidently asserts that he “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom,” and he resolved to entreat young white boys to help him learn how to read. He paid these boys with bread and in return they would “give [him] that more valuable bread of knowledge.” Douglass, still a youth of seventeen, recognized that these boys would gain their freedom once they reached adulthood, while he was still enslaved. Douglass associated childhood with enslavement across racial lines, for even these boys were dependent upon their parent’s will. Douglass even identified more strongly with these young boys than his enslaved brethren. Douglass then realized they “will be free as soon as [they] are twenty-one, I am a slave for life!” In this way, Frederick Douglass demonstrated the ways in which age was marker for freedom and that in childhood, children share a universal experience of dependency. Douglass showed how it is not only his civil liberty of freedom that was being challenged, but it was also his manhood itself, as although he would reach the age of twenty-one and would also be a man, he would not be free and would therefore remain a child.

When Douglass gained his manhood in the climactic demonstration of physical power over the overseer Covey, he promised his readers they will see “how a slave was made a man.” The fulfillment of his intellectual manhood was cemented in a

79 Ibid, 338
80 Ibid, 342
81 Ibid, 350
82 Ibid, 342
83 Ibid, Narratives, 361
manifestation of his bodily masculinity. In the emblematic scene in which a seventeen-year-old Douglass and Covey are embroiled in a physical brawl, Douglass’s literal and figurative rising up represents his self-appointed entrance into manhood. 84 This marks a textual shift from representations of his childhood, an experience marred by enslavement, to adolescence and adulthood free from the confines of slavery. Douglass avoided disclosing the details of his escape from slavery, and as a result this scene is one of the most memorable of the text. His explanation of his childhood appropriately develops into climactic moment of his narrative in which he overcame Covey, childhood, and slavery itself.

Douglass also represented black childhood in his second biography, My Bondage and My Freedom, published in 1855, in which he provided an analysis of enslaved childhood that spoke to the development of stable notions of childhood that excluded African American children. In this text, Douglass argued,

children have their sorrows as well as men and women; and it would be well to remember this in our dealings with them. Slave children are children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule. But the sorrows of childhood, like the pleasure of afterlife are transient. It is not even within the power of slavery to write indelible sorrow at a single dash, over the heart of a child. 85

Douglass’s memoir directly challenged the notion that enslaved “property” were not children by displaying their desires for emotional attachment and play and the ways in which the institution of slavery severed familial bonds and disrupted playful behaviors.

Each of these texts approach the topic of childhood during slavery in ways that highlighted black children’s claim on childhood and their natural-born innocence.

84 Ibid, 365
Despite differences in their enslavement, gender, and geography, Prince, Douglass, and Jacobs each represented a universal experience of essentialized childhood as projected onto the lives of black children. While slave narratives were extremely popular in the northern region of the United States, northern African American children experienced forms of subjugation prior to and after the publication of prominent slave narratives. Although representations of enslaved black childhood in narratives of enslavement directly referenced slavery, these constructions also reflected and referenced the conditions of black childhood in the places they were published and read, the antebellum North. In advocating for the rights and privileges of childhood including those who were enslaved, the authors of slave narratives used childhood as a universalizing force, an argument that held relevance for the African American children in the antebellum North whose childhoods were similarly marginalized.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, northern African Americans similarly advocated for the recognition of black childhood as a social category by pioneering institutional recognition of their children in orphanages, houses of refuge, and destitute homes. In these settings, debates over the nature of childhood were expressed in negotiations over the ways in which black children should, or should not, play. Although playful behavior was increasingly identified as essentialized childhood, for many African American children and authors of texts of black childhood, the proper embodiment of play was a negotiated and complicated behavior for black children, like the “serious” and “lasting sorrow” Henry Ricks expressed when mourning his brother, evidence of his un-child like demeanor and maturity. In these constructions, authors sometimes resisted negative portrayals of black childhood by playing down the leisure activities of black
children. Indeed, Ricks was memorialized for existing in a space beyond childhood. The experiences of African American children explored demonstrate their exclusion from salient expressions of childhood. The movement of black child-bodies into (and out of) spaces designated for children including orphanages and homes for juvenile delinquents operated as one of the ways in which black childhood was defined and institutionalized throughout the nineteenth century. Within these spaces, and others in which black children occupied, their play was governed in racialized and gendered ways. As such, nineteenth century American children’s experiences, behavior, and play were a part of a negotiated process amongst those vying for equal claim on the category of American childhood.
CHAPTER 2
FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO INDENTURED SERVITUDE: THE DAILY LIVES OF BLACK CHILD-LABORERS

Provided always, and be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That Every Negro and Mulatto child born within this state after the passing of this act as aforesaid (who would, in case this act had not been made, been born a servant for years, or life, or a slave) shall be deemed and shall be by virtue of this act the servant of such person or his or her assigns, who would in such case have been entitled to the service of such child, until such child attain unto the age of twenty eight years, in the manner and on the conditions whereon servants bound by indenture for four years are or may be retained and holder.  
- Pennsylvania, An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780

In 1830, two years prior to Henry Ricks death, Lucinda Ricks returned to the Shelter for Coloured Orphans to retrieve older son, Henry, aged eight. She was successful in regaining custody of Henry, but left Stephen and Simon Ricks at the orphanage. Both Stephen and Simon remained until their deaths in 1831 and 1832 respectively. While Lucinda Ricks’ motivation for removing her son Henry from the Shelter for Colored Orphans is not represented in the historical record, Henry’s age when removed held particular meaning for the administrators of the Association for the Care of Colored Orphans. At eight years old, all children deemed physically and mentally fit were selected and sent to complete indentures or apprenticeships. Indeed, throughout the

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86 An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, March 1, 1780, Pennsylvania State Archives
87 Philadelphia Shelter for Coloured Orphans, Register of Children: 1822, Friends Historical Library, (FHL) Swarthmore College
The name of the mother is somewhat illegible and appears as both Luciana or Lucinda.
nineteenth century, northern orphanages both for African American and white children alike, instituted the common practice of indenturing or apprenticing out their children as a means of providing destitute youth with educational and vocational opportunities. In this period, northern African American children’s labor provided an integral part of the maintenance of familiar social and racial hierarchies, as well as aided in the establishment of new treatment of the northern black community during the volatile period between northern gradual emancipation and the end of the Civil War.

Nineteenth century children and youth labored depending upon a constellation of factors including the presumed ability of the child to perform the labor related to their gender, race, age, stature, and physical appearance; the impact of labor as a necessary element of reform of deviant children, a term that was deployed disproportionately to black children; the requests of the employer, and the relationship between the employers and the institution that indentured the children out. Unlike middle-class or elite white children, African American children, sometimes even those of fairly prominent backgrounds, represented a disproportionate percentage of the total population of children in systems of indentured servitude in the U.S. North.\(^8^8\) Non-elite and orphaned children, especially those who were black, were exploited by many systems of indentured servitude in part due to the lack of legal enforcement of regulatory measures as well as consistent oversight. In this chapter, I explore the phenomenon of black child-indentured servitude throughout the late eighteenth century throughout the nineteenth century and

\(^8^8\) Although white children were indentured in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, black children’s indentured labor followed gradual emancipation and took on a period of service that far extended those of whites. Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 177
demonstrate the ways in which their experiences in the post-emancipation North, especially of those in northern institutions for orphaned, delinquent, and poor children, blurred the lines between enslavement and freedom.

The labor of nineteenth century children and youth held both practical and instructional significance in the social landscape of the United States. Prior to the shift in notions of childhood, the existence of child-labor was unexceptional and did not provoke public condemnation nor outcry. Indeed, during the first half of the nineteenth century, child-labor as a concept occupied very little attention in the cultural imagination of Americans. Besides a small number of reformers who sought to eliminate child-labor, referred to as “employment of children,” African American writers pioneered criticism of the exploitation of children’s labor in abolitionist discourse, in particular within slave narratives. 89 Otherwise, from the colonial era to the early part of the nineteenth century, child-labor was a commonplace feature of life.

The earliest manifestation of institutionalized forms of child-labor were developed as part of systems of indentured servitude. Many children and adults from Europe entered the colonies as indentured servants, a system that functioned in Europe in part as a way to mediate the social problem that orphan and poor children created. In the context of the colonial United States, indentures helped secure passage of children and adults to the colonies under fixed-labor agreements. Indeed, a majority of colonists who settled North America south of New England were indentured. These indentures, and those established throughout the revolutionary era and early nineteenth century, typically

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spanned a fixed period of time, four to seven years, or until adulthood, ages eighteen or twenty-one. The contracts granted the “master” legal ownership of the labor of the indentured servant and were signed by those who were indentured, or in the case of children, their guardians. These children occupied various labor status including being “rented out,” indentured, or apprenticed. Indentures did not typically provide many educational opportunities for children. However, the ostensibly more valuable system of apprenticeships provided children and youth experience towards developing a skilled trade. In both cases, the masters of those who were bound were required to provide food, housing, clothing, and once released, compensation that might include a monetary allowance, tools, or livestock. However, as scholars have argued, the laws regulating indentured servitude were racialized at their inception. Masters of indentured black children could abuse them both physically and for their labor with very limited legal ramifications.90

As scholars have demonstrated, prior to the industrial revolution in the North, children of working families performed domestic and agricultural labor in ways that augmented their family’s economic needs. Families viewed this form of contribution to the economic function of the household as an opportunity to instill within their children industrious values. With industrialization came family-wage systems and new opportunities for women and children to labor outside of the house.91 African American men, women, and children’s experiences did not necessarily follow this historical

Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children’s Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 63-66
91 Hindman, Child Labor: An American History, 14
narrative. Under slavery in the North, their labor had been continually exploited, and therefore in the years following gradual emancipation, northern African Americans attempted to constitute their families and configure their households in ways that protected and utilized the labor of men, women, and children.

In much of the literature on child-labor in the United States, historians have argued that indentured servitude declined by the antebellum era, in relation to the rise of the industrial labor systems, shifting social treatment of children, and the emergence of child-labor reform laws of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the economic significance of child-labor, particularly that of white children, altered greatly as social discourse emphasized the need for children’s activities to be focused not on labor, but play and schooling. Scholarship has emphasized the fact that numbers of African Americans indentured out of gradual emancipation declined by 1820. However, generalizations of these shifts in social, legal, and economic treatment of children overlook the individualized experiences of being a child, black, and indentured as part of alternate systems of bondage that were particular to black children who were continually indentured in northern institutions. These children’s labor was manipulated through practices of binding out children, resulting in their inability to contribute economically for their families in the same ways as white children throughout the nineteenth century.

African American children were especially vulnerable to the appropriation of their labor due to their precarious “free” status in the wake of northern gradual emancipation.

92 Census data taken in Philadelphia in 1820 indicates that most African Americans were no longer indentured. However, 27 percent remained in white households, most likely as domestic laborers, and black women constituted 60 percent of those who continued to labor as domestic servants. Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom By Degrees, f181*
Despite the promise of emancipation laws throughout the North, many African American children were still held in bondage many years beyond their implementation. Pennsylvania was the first state to initiate the gradual emancipation of its enslaved population in 1780 in large part due to Quakers and antislavery activists. The 1780 law decreed enslaved African Americans born after its implementation on March 1, 1780 would be free after age twenty-eight.\(^93\) The implications of Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law extended beyond merely ending slavery and particularly impacted African American children. After its passage, black children’s status essentially changed from that of a slave to that of an indentured servant, effectively increasing the ages for the terms of service under Pennsylvania’s system of indentured labor from ages twenty-one and eighteen for men and women respectively, to twenty-eight.\(^94\) Although whites and especially white children were also indentured during this period, African Americans, especially black children, provided the majority of indentured labor in Pennsylvania. Many of the most vulnerable of the state’s black population, those who had been orphaned or sent to houses of refuge and reform, were often indentured to farmers in rural settings. As Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund have demonstrated, evidence suggests that some slave-holders sold child-slaves into systems of servitude in Pennsylvania in order to rid themselves of a moral association to the practice while profiting

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\(^{94}\) Due to the gendered differences in the terms of indentured labor, as well as the types of labor performed, black girls and women were indentured far longer than African American boys and men. Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, 28
economically. As such, merchants and farmers in Pennsylvania would “fill their labor needs while slave-owners in neighboring states salved their consciences but protected their pocketbooks.” Therefore, the state’s abolition of slavery produced a system of indentured servitude that specifically targeted African American children and youth.\textsuperscript{95}

Other New England states implemented similar laws that called for the gradual emancipation of their enslaved populations. Despite the three unsuccessful abolition bills proposed in 1777, 1779 and 1780, Connecticut legislatures passed its gradual emancipation bill in 1784, in part because the proposed law granted African American children born after March 1\textsuperscript{st} freedom only once they reached age twenty-five. In 1797, the age of emancipation was lowered to twenty-one.\textsuperscript{96} In 1784, Rhode Island passed a gradual emancipation act that stipulated boys and girls born after March 1\textsuperscript{st} would be apprenticed until they were eighteen and twenty-one, respectively. New York’s 1799 emancipation act granted freedom for boys born after 1799 at age twenty-eight and girls at age twenty-five. New Jersey passed its “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery” in 1804, stating that enslaved girls born after its passage would be enslaved until age twenty-one, and boys until twenty-five. In all of the states that did not issue immediate emancipation, northern slavery was not absolutely eliminated until the antebellum period. While apprenticeship systems that accompanied emancipation were considered a fair alternative to enslavement and a means to provide African Americans with opportunities to become self-sufficient, often within these systems, African American children, as Jeremy Belknap of Boston noted, sometimes found themselves “in a far worse condition

\textsuperscript{95} Nash and Soderlund, \textit{Freedom By Degrees}, 180
\textsuperscript{96} Edgar J. McManus, \textit{Black Bondage in the North}, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 170
than when they were slaves, being incapable of providing for themselves the means of subsistence."

While gradual emancipation impacted their lives tremendously, many African American children slipped between the cracks of the ostensibly liberatory project of the late eighteenth century. Their age and dependent status, positions that were aggravated by their social status if they were orphaned, absorbed into juvenile detention centers, or poor, affected their access to freedom. African American children’s transition to freedom was initiated by labor served in either an apprenticeship or indentured servitude contract over a fixed period of time, a process that created a direct correlation between freedom and age, and one that was acutely felt by the emergent free black community. As many scholars have demonstrated, the material conditions of many African Americans, especially children and youth who labored within indentured servitude, changed very little in the years following emancipation statutes. By examining the terms by which whites in New England referred to African American children born after this period into indentured servitude as well as their treatment in estate sales, Joanne Melish has argued that whites consistently refused to “acknowledge the children’s legal or ontological status as a free person,” by treating them as slaves socially and legally. Melish demonstrates that while the act of indenturing destitute white children through public intervention was common in New England beginning in the 1750s, by the period of gradual emancipation, such practices became a “tool of control of free children of color.” Indenture contracts

were extended for children of color and typically outlasted those of whites. Indeed for many, the cost of emancipation was that children might be separated and exploited.

Of course, the practice of exploiting African American children’s labor was not confined to the North. Under the plantation regime, the abuse of African American children and adults’ labor within the institution of slavery was overt, well-documented, and legally sanctioned. Enslaved children were valued in the slave market by their potential capacity to work and, in the cases of young girls and women, bear children as part of the commodification of their reproductive labor. The initiation of enslaved children into the labor-force of the plantation economy was calculated and deliberate, in relation to their age and stature. Black children’s labor ranged from performing domestic chores, to labor outside the household including tasks such as gathering firewood and care of livestock. Often enslaved children were required to tend to the needs of the children of their slaveholders or treated as “pets” in the household. From the perspective of enslaved children, the transition from childhood play to enslaved labor was abrupt and many argued resulted in the loss of their childhoods. It was not only the fact that they labored as children that proved psychologically traumatic, indeed white children in the South who were not privileged children of slaveholders also labored, however enslaved children were appropriated into a violent, cruel, and exploitative labor system from which their parents and families could not shield them.

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Historians, including Barbara Fields, have demonstrated the nuanced ways in which age influenced status in the spaces in which black children were often caught between enslavement and freedom. For the children of fugitive, formerly enslaved, and free blacks living in the “middle ground” of antebellum Maryland, their freedom was tenuous at best. In this context, children of African Americans who were defined as vagrants as well as those whose families did not provide them “habits of industry,” were sometimes thrust into the apprenticeship system by way of the orphans’ court, a system that shifted ownership of the children from the parents to whom they were apprenticed, allowing their employer to benefit from their labor and sell them without consent of their parents. These legal restrictions were placed on African Americans living in Maryland as part of social and legal forms of disenfranchisement that both distinguished the status of free African Americans from whites, and prevented free blacks from advancing socially and economically.100

Negotiations over the labor of black children under apprenticeship contracts and indentured servitude continued beyond the period outlined in gradual emancipation statutes. These disputes have been documented in the post-Civil War South. During the ambiguous and tense transition from enslavement to freedom, planters and freed people clashed over ownership of black children’s labor. At various instances, children were kidnapped and bound, as Frances G. Jones of Alabama had done with twelve children from two families. The families of these children were unable to prove their ability to care for them, and their children were legally indentured to Jones. In these cases, planters

100 Barbara J. Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 35
took advantage of the dissolution of formerly enslaved families under the institution of slavery while African American families attempted to protect both the labor and livelihood of their children.  

In both settings North and South, African American children living in the periods immediately following emancipation were subject to new forms of exploitation of their labor. This was in part due to the ambiguous legal and social status African American children occupied in the transitional periods following the implementation of gradual emancipation statutes in the North and the end of the Civil War in the South. To be clear, in the northern context, both black children and white children labored, especially those whose parents were not middle class. However, black children’s treatment within the indenture and apprenticeship systems of labor differed significantly from whites.

During the early nineteenth century, charitable organizations began to actively consider social treatment of black children in the urban North. These private institutions included orphanages, reform homes and schools, and asylums for the poor, injured, or abandoned. Many of the orphanages established in the North provided refuge to children who were either physically orphaned by way of loss of one or two parents, or socially destitute due to their social and economic status. These institutions were essential during the mid-nineteenth century as the number of vagrant children on the streets increased drastically; in 1848-49 the New York City police chief estimated that there were 10,000

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Apprenticeship laws were one of the most painful elements of the series of black Codes that were passed throughout the South following emancipation and supplied planters with free labor in the form of minors, either orphaned or taken from guardians who were classified as unfit to parent. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, (New York: First Perennial Classics, 2002), 201
vagrant children out of the total population of 500,000. As a result of their economic circumstances, many of these children were also characterized as criminals, four-fifths of New York City’s crimes were committed by minors in 1852. Other crimes were also rooted in poverty and included stealing. As a result, Charles Loring Brace, then secretary of the New York Children’s Aid Society, established systems of placing out children into the country. This developed into the accepted notion that the country allowed children to thrive outside of the immoral influence of the city and resulted in the relocation of 100,000 to 300,000 children on trains of to the country. The children sent to the country or west in the orphan train movement did not necessarily directly enter into labor contracts. Brace advocated for the removal of these children in order to supply them with “the greatest and sorest need in American families, a permanent labor, educated in the habits in the house.” However, at least in some cases, those who relocated children as part of the orphan trains also attempted to indenture them. In 1858, an orphan train that arrived in Springfield, Illinois and carried forty children from New York faced public criticism when they attempted to bind out the children. Of the incident, the newspaper reported, “There are a great many good Christian families about Springfield that are wealthy and do not wish their sons and daughters to do manual labor—are not partial to colored servants—are very religious: could not bear the thought of slavery.” The newspaper further conjectured, “If some Missionary Agent had taken that many little negroes from the plantations of Louisiana to Springfield…our good abolitionist

friends…would all have fainted at the horrid thought.”103 In this case the movement and indenture of white children elicited a response that criticized the contradictory actions of those who supported orphan trains and northern abolitionists. Northern African American children may have been relocated as part of Brace’s endeavor, however it is unlikely that the majority of orphaned black children were sent west on the orphan trains. Instead, many these children were sent into established and developing humanitarian aid societies, schools, and houses of reform.

In the context of northern, urban conditions, African American children were at a higher risk of being orphaned or destitute either by the loss of a parent or by their parents being deemed unfit to care for them. Vagrancy laws disproportionately targeted African Americans who were considered incapable of contributing to society. In 1788, Massachusetts passed a law that required vagrant African Americans to be expelled from the state or confined to the house of correction.104 Some of the children of these parents or others who were incapable of providing them care were absorbed within the northern black community. Others were sent, either by their families or by the court, to benevolent societies and reform centers that attempted to provide care for black children. When these parents or families arrived at the Home for Destitute Colored Children, for example, they were required to sign an official document stating they would “surrender” the child to be instructed, and bound out, by the said Association, for such a term of years, within lawful

103 Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, quoting from an editorial in the Belleville Weekly Democrat, April 17, 1858, Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children’s Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), *

104 Horton, James Oliver, Horton, Lois E., In Hope of Liberty, 102
By the 1840s, institutions such as the Shelter had garnered relationships with other institutions that harbored black children in the North, creating a relationship that allowed for black children to be moved from one institution to another, or back to their families when appropriate. For example, by 1842, the Shelter for Colored Orphans had apprenticed eight children, moved seventy-two children into the care of community-members, sent six to the Institute for Colored Youth, and three to the Philadelphia Alms House. The children were typically moved out of institutions into indentured contracts once they reached adolescence, or as was the case for the Shelter for Coloured Children, once they turned eight years old.

Many northern orphanages that took in African American children instituted the common practice of binding their children out to perform labor akin to indentures, however these were most commonly characterized as apprenticeships in their published records. Despite this fact, in many of these organization’s private records of African American children’s labor, these contracts did not indicate that the children were developing skilled trades. At times, the terms indenture and apprentice were used interchangeably without distinction between the types of labor children would be completing by these institutions. While other institutions for white children also undoubtedly blurred the distinction between skilled-labor and indentured labor, many of the benevolent societies that established orphanages for African American children publically declared that they apprenticed African American children as part of their

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105 Home for Destitute Colored Children, 7th Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1862), 12
intervention on their destitute conditions, placing in children’s hands the opportunity to improve the conditions of their race.

Once African American fathers, or in the case of his death or abandonment, mothers, surrendered their children to the care of the Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, they also surrendered guardianship rights. These children, defined by the institution as those who were under the age of twelve, and those sent to the institution via the city and state courts, were then bound with consent of the managers of the institution, not of their parents. The Home for Destitute Children vaguely defined the “apprentices” as those that would encourage children to “learn such trades and employments as in the judgment of the said managers and trustees will be most conducive to benefit and advantage of said children.” The only qualifier outlined in the institution’s constitution was that the home’s guardianship over their charges should not extend beyond the age of eighteen except in the case of African American girls, most likely in order to take advantage of their domestic labor. Here, as was the case for the Shelter for Coloured Orphans, black children were only to be returned to parents and guardians at the discretion of the institution.\textsuperscript{106}

While they attempted to provide African American children with indentures and apprenticeships that held instructional purposes and might allow children to advance socially, the orphanages and institutions designed for the care of African American children also benefited economically from the binding out of black children. In the contracts established between the organizations, the children, their guardians, and their new masters, institutions frequently deprived African American children themselves of

\textsuperscript{106} Home for Destitute Children, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Annual Report, 11-12
any claim of their compensation until satisfactory completion of their indenture. In the indenture contract deployed at the Philadelphia Home for Destitute Children for example, indentured children were to receive fixed amounts based on their age for an established period of time. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen, black children were to receive five dollars, from ages fifteen to eighteen, ten. However, if the child attempted to escape their indenture, their compensation was to be returned back to the Philadelphia Home for Destitute Children.\textsuperscript{107}

Other institutions incentivized indentures through the implementation of funds and scholarships for labor. The Shelter for Colored Orphans established a legacy fund specifically designed to reward successful completion of indentures and ease the transition from the servitude of youth to their “free” adulthoods. The Thomas P. Cope Legacy was instituted in 1859 “for the purpose of encouraging those who were placed out by us, to conduct themselves with propriety.” In that year, thirteen children were gifted the twenty-dollar sum after serving their masters.\textsuperscript{108} However, if the children were indentured but later returned to their families, did not complete their indenture, or if their behavior was deemed inappropriate, they were no longer eligible for the award. In some cases, children were sent to other juvenile reformatories such as houses of refuge, thereby dissolving their claim on their legacy. Some children and youth took their freedom into their own hands and fled their indentures. In these cases also, the legacy was not extended.

\textsuperscript{107} Home for Destitute Children, 40\textsuperscript{th} Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Billstein & Son Printers, 1895)
\textsuperscript{108} Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 23\textsuperscript{rd} Annual Report, (Philadelphia: printed by Joseph Rakestraw, 1859), 7
The exploitation of black children’s labor in houses of refuge challenges historiography on the topic of juvenile delinquency to consider the ways in which race and poverty informed children’s access to citizenship. Generally, the labor required of children in orphanages differed from that in houses of reform and refuge, institutions that housed older children and those who had been convicted of committing crimes. In houses of refuge, it was not uncommon for children to perform daily labor and chores that contributed to the overall function of the organizations. Children’s labor was often divided by gender, girls were tasked with performing domestic labor, and boys were given opportunities to learn specific trades. Some institutions that cared for orphans and younger children, such as New York’s Colored Orphan Asylum, established ways in which children would learn trades internally as a means to contribute to the labor of the orphanage. For example, the asylum prided itself on giving boys the opportunity to learn the trade of shoemaking. Here, boys worked “well and industriously, attending one session of school a day” for the dual purpose of learning the industry, as well as mending other children’s shoes.¹⁰⁹ In 1849, the Shelter for Coloured Orphans also highlighted the gendered opportunities given children. That year, the young girls successfully sewed 272 garments for the orphanage, a skill they identified as a necessary educational pursuit that would prove girls as “helpful to the family.”¹¹⁰ At the House of Refuge, a multiracial, but segregated, facility for juvenile delinquents, children were also indentured and

¹⁰⁹ Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans, 18th Annual Report, (New York: John F. Trow Printer, 1854), 7, HSP
¹¹⁰ Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, 13th Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Printed by Joseph Rakestraw, 1849), 3-4, LCP
apprenticed based on gender, and also their behavior. In 1844 a select number of white boys were indentured to skilled laborers, securing positions akin to apprenticeships with carpenters stone-cutters, shoemakers, skindressers, and a blacksmith. These apprenticeships totaled twelve out of thirty-six indenture contracts for the boys. The remaining two-thirds of the boys were indentured to agricultural labor. All of the girls, nineteen, were indentured as domestics. In the colored department, of which African American children represented a disproportionate percentage of the overall “inmate” population, African American children primarily provided labor for those who requested unskilled child-laborers as farmers or domestics. For both white and black children at the House of Refuge, the child’s gender was the primary indicator of their labor. However, only African American boys, not whites, were indentured as domestics.

For many northern reformers, children’s productive labor not only served to reform their lives that had been tainted by crime or destitution, but was also used to reflect the values and accomplishments of the institutions designed to care for them. The reports were circulated to their subscribers and sometimes published in newspapers, providing glimpses of the daily lives of black child-laborers as represented by their employers. The Philadelphia House of Refuge published reports of the successes of the children in their indentures in order to provide “ample proof that the discipline of the

111 The institution resolved to segregate their facilities on March 28th, 1830 and resurrect a separate building African American children and youth. Philadelphia House of Refuge, 3rd Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Joseph Harding, Printer, 1831), 6, HSP
112 Philadelphia House of Refuge, 16th Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Joseph Harding Printer, 1844), 9, HSP
113 Philadelphia House of Refuge, 23rd Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Joseph Harding Printer, 1851
house is attended by no moral degradation.” Indeed, in 1831 the institution admitted that they omitted unfavorable reports of indentures in order to avoid “unnecessary pain.”

Of the excerpts published of indentured African American boys, their masters highlighted their industrious labor, learning habits, and respectful behavior. These children were repeatedly characterized as “careful,” “obedient,” and “honest.” One praised his laborer for being meticulous with the weekly “pocket-money” he was gifted and commented that though he had not attended school he was, “taught at home by [the employer’s] son,” which was, according to him “far better.” By 1853 the institution had abandoned its omission of negative reports of indentures, at least as they referred to children of color. In that year, a child identified as J.F. was characterized as “obedient” but also “rather dull and slow.” C.B., of whom the institution apparently inquired, attended school, church, and Sabbath school, but had “not made any great progress.”

African American girls were also overwhelmingly described as “honest” and “obedient.” As part of her indenture, the child identified as S.J. was unable to attend school or church apparently because the only place of worship was a Methodist church, and her employer claimed she lacked the “disposition” to attend. However, S.J. continued her studies based on books supplied to her from the House of Refuge.

In some ways, the types of labor performed by black children cemented their statuses in the North in ways that reinforced the disenfranchisement of the black community following northern emancipation. Black children rarely performed skilled labor.

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114 Philadelphia House of Refuge, 3rd Annual Report, (Philadelphia: Joseph Harding Printer, 1831), appendix
116 Ibid
labor, and they were rarely bound out as apprentices. In most cases, they continued to conduct labor that was reminiscent of northern enslavement, placing them into exploitative social and economic systems including domestic and agricultural labor that did not promote their upward mobility in the economic sphere. Indeed, many of the administrators of benevolent aid societies, such as New York’s Colored Orphan Asylum, expressed public concern with preparing their children to enter into labor outside of that of servants. Some of the members of the society were in fact colonizationists, and therefore were arguably un-invested in the social and economic advancement of the black population in the United States towards full citizenship rights.117

For institutions that housed deviant children, or for children who were accused of committing crimes, labor was used as a tool of reform. The historiography on juvenile social rehabilitation has reflected this tension between protection of children within the private sphere and the development of the parental state concerned with child welfare. Child welfare reform was connected to the emerging parental state, an apparatus that emerged in part in relation to evolving considerations of children. Childhood became a phase upon which the parental state attempted to project and experiment concepts of social reform. During this period, as industrialization transformed children and adult’s relationships to labor, so too were social concepts of deviance. During the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, newly erected cities in the urban centers of the early Republic posed new threats as centers for danger, disease, and crime. The material conditions of adult labor in the cities impacted children’s behavior. Children were

distanced from the direct supervision of their parents, disrupting traditional systems of discipline enforced in rural, agricultural family structures.\textsuperscript{118}

Many of the juvenile reformatories designed for black children in this historical context were, like the orphanages, initiated by private, charitable institutions. The motivations and objectives of these institutions were informed by a milieu of cultural understandings of social control, dependency, race, and gender. In many of these so-called asylums, children’s “criminal” status was not necessarily determined directly by the court systems. Instead, criminal statuses of “destitution” or “vagrancy” were determined either by their parent’s sentencing, or by the institution itself. Indeed, failure to raise children according to the predominant legal social mores, ideas that were also racialized, resulted in children being taken from their families to be cared for by private institutions or the state.\textsuperscript{119} In this way, the social and economic conditions in which many northern, urban African American parents found themselves produced challenges to their legal guardianship over their children, ones that might result in the child being subsumed into the custody of the state.

Due to these circumstances, African American children living in the urban North sometimes spent their childhoods in houses of destitution, refuge, and reform, away from their families. These were institutions designed for the rehabilitation and reform of juvenile delinquents. Houses of refuge and almshouses were instated in the antebellum era of the 1820s and capitalized on conceptualizations of children as malleable and capable of being steered away from the malevolent influences of the adult, criminal world.

\textsuperscript{119} Woodhouse, \textit{Hidden in Plain Sight}, 67
during the crucial period of childhood. The institution of state-sponsored juvenile
delinquency centers began in New York City in response to concerns raised by residents
of juvenile criminals wandering the streets. Much of the criminal activity that initiated
these centers was conducted by white, juvenile gangs, of which African American
children did not actively participate. Northern cities of New York City and Philadelphia
provided most of these forms of social and criminal reform through their establishment of
centers for juvenile delinquency.120

New York City’s House of Refuge began admitting children in 1825 out of the
efforts of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, the first of its kind in the United
States. Once admitted, the children were separated into grades and divided by gender.
These children attended school and also labored within the institutions. Here, both
schooling and labor were seen as necessary elements of rehabilitation. Labor was
perceived as providing children with an understanding of “morals” in ways that would
influence their work as adults. Their labor was the antithesis of vagrancy, an increasingly
criminalized and socially condemned status. Reformers conceptualized schooling and
education as an “excellent cure for poverty and indolence.”121

Austin Reed’s newly discovered memoir that features his experiences as a
northern black child within the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems of the
antebellum era. In the complicated and fascinating memoir, one of the very few

120 Christopher Span, “Educational and Social Reforms for African American Juvenile
Delinquents in 19th Century New York City and Philadelphia,” *Journal of Negro
121 Span, “Educational and Social Reforms for African American Juvenile Delinquents in
19th Century New York City and Philadelphia,” quoting Pickett, 57
Quoting Frey, 181
documentations of northern black children’s lives from their own perspectives, Reed describes how he fled both indentured servitude and the New York House of Refuge to return to his “Home.” At one point after escaping the juvenile delinquency institution, his friends insisted, “Come, Rob…Join in with me and Joe and strike off to sea,” to which Austin Reed, who when writing referred to himself as Rob, responded “No, Jack, I am goin’ to return back Home to my mother.” Reed’s memoir demonstrates the lengths to which African American children sometimes attempted in order to escape indentured servitude and institutional reformation.

Philadelphia’s House of Refuge, began admitting African American children only after it had designed a separate facility for them. Prior to that, African American children accused and found guilty of committing crimes were sent to adult prisons. Ironically, this phenomenon originally motivated the creation of juvenile delinquency centers, however only for white children. This contradiction did not bother reformers in the earlier part of the nineteenth century who were more concerned with racial segregation than equal treatment of children.

While African American children were frequently indentured when attending institutions for orphaned or criminal children, other benevolent organizations also contributed to networks of black children’s labor. Abolitionist societies also played a powerful role in the indenturing of black children both in their financial support of northern institutions for black youth and by collecting indenture requests and procuring contracts. The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (PAS) was

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incorporated in 1789 and many of its members were Quakers or part of the Society of Friends. The PAS had a vested interest in the well-being of African American children. These ideological concerns emerged out of anti-slavery activism and attempts to help transition the formerly enslaved black population (especially children) to newly freed (or indentured) circumstances. They also sought to provide financial assistance to many benevolent societies that took in black children due to their shared ideological goals, and also due to the relationships between the organizations and members of the PAS, as both were often Quakers. Their Board of Education regularly donated to northern institutions including the Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children as part of their Committee for Improving the Condition of the Free blacks. The society’s subcommittees, the Committee of Guardians, Committee of Education, and Committee of Employ worked for the central mission to aid and assist black parents and children. As such, they played an important role in the procurement of legal indenture contracts following gradual emancipation in the late eighteenth century. The PAS also accepted requests for labor of black children, noted from 1836-1837 at the back of their attendance book for their school for black youth, the Clarkson school. The Clarkson school was built in 1812 specifically for the education of black children. When it opened, it admitted 94 boys, and on the second floor, 50 girls who were taught by Elizabeth Clendenin. The structure was also used as the main building for the society.\(^\text{123}\)

The inquiries for labor of black children demonstrate the intersections, and contradictions, between the society’s mission of securing education and jobs for a newly

freed, and in some ways dependent population. The requests include the name of applicants, their residence, and the “kind of persons wanted.” These requests included those for African American adults, but inquiries for young girl-domestics, around the ages of thirteen and fourteen, or “half grown,” made up the vast majority of these requests. At times these inquiries were specific about the types of features and attributes, both physical and in terms of demeanor, desired. For example, John Lyburn inquired about a “good girl for general housekeeping” and Thomas Harvey requested two children to accompany a mother. Some included those for children to raise, as was the case for a Mrs. Burke and David Hester, who both requested “a girl to bring up.” On rare instances, individuals specifically requested orphan children. However, it is unclear if these individuals were seeking to raise these children or indenture them, because the society did not include whether or not these were also children “to be brought up.” The society also did not explicitly take-in orphan children, although they provided schooling for the children of indigent parents. At times the organization wrote “supplied” next to the inquiry, suggesting they then procured indentures for these children and their employers. The records do not indicate where the PAS turned to supply those who inquired with labor, especially child-labor, or whether or not these were the same children they were educating in the Clarkson school. However, the fact that the inquiries were recorded in the same document as the school children’s attendance makes probable a relationship to these specific children and the inquiries. Perhaps the recorder took note of the inquiry and then flipped back through the attendance book for names and ages as a reference to the attributes requested. Indeed, these requests were not noticeably filed in other subcommittees concerned with indenture and were rather inconspicuous, suggesting their
nature as somewhat clandestine. However, the pages of inquiries indicate that the PAS contributed black children’s labor in a meaningful way, sending children to numerous homes throughout the Philadelphia region.\textsuperscript{124}

While the PAS managed these requests as part of their mission to supply black children, youth, and adults with respectable and productive labor, some of these requests mirror advertisements for enslaved labor on the slave auction-block. These included desired physical attributes of servants. For example, M. Satherwaite requested three “lovely-looking boys” of which the society provided two.\textsuperscript{125} The physically-specific requests extended beyond the ambiguous descriptions of beauty and included specific and racially-marked inquiries. Black children and girls who were light or mulatto were frequently requested. In the South, an enslaved person’s lighter skin tone indicated mixed race ancestry, a marker not only of a phenotypical proximity to whiteness, but also a physical reminder of the widespread practices of rape of enslaved women. The treatment and value of the products, namely children, of these violent acts therefore reinforced the rigid boundaries of slavery. Children of enslaved women, whether or not fathered by white men, were indeed also enslaved. In the slave marketplace, lighter-skinned slaves were sometimes preferred, but others rejected this feature for fear of the enslaved persons’ ability to pass. In the North, the presence of preference for lighter-skinned servants represented an adherence to racial hierarchies in ways that, as Michael O’Malley demonstrates, were economically motivated. Slave owning in the North and South, contributed to both an enforcement of white supremacy that held both social and

\textsuperscript{124} PSPAS, 1836-1837 Clarkson School Roll Book
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid
economic significance. In relation to northerners’ enforcement of racial hierarchies, O’Malley argues, “racial inferiority provided a psychic balance to a speculative economy.” He explains, “the idea of racial inferiority anchored social commerce. Northerners might abolish slavery, but they could regularly redeem their racial character at the minstrel show.” Therefore, the circulation of black child-bodies, most notably in ways that echoed and enforced the inferiority of the black community as represented by preferences for lighter-skinned children, benefitted white northerners ideologically and economically. These indenture requests represent one of the many ways in which many northerners adopted value-systems that echoed the South’s racial hierarchies. In this context, northern African American children’s labor in the domestic sphere became an embodiment of dominant expressions of social and economic status.

Although the New York Manumission Society also procured indenture contracts for black children, they played an important role in aiding black parents and families in the proper enforcement of guidelines outlined in the indentures, as well as in the emancipation of children whose masters violated state law. Sarah Gronningsater argues that despite their relative isolation from knowledge and access to legal recourse, African Americans nonetheless, appropriated the law “to their advantage” and consistently “managed to communicate with the Manumission society,” in order to advocate on behalf of their children. Abolitionist societies, while committed to the social and economic

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advancement of the emergent free black community, attempted to balance the procurement of proper employment for children and the desires of black parents and families to remain geographically close to their children.

Nonetheless, some of the children indentured through the PAS and those as part of other institutions were separated from their families. Sisters Mary and Harriet Jackson who were admitted to Philadelphia’s Shelter for Coloured Orphans by their father and were separated in age by only one year. Their parents, brother, and half-brother were all still at home with their father when they were admitted. Though the sisters remained together until at age nine, once she reached adolescence Mary, was indentured to Susan Erwin in Philadelphia, and Harriet was bound one year later to John Uwchlan in Chester County Pennsylvania. While Mary successfully served her indenture and received the institution’s legacy, there is no such record of Harriet.\textsuperscript{128} As part of their indentures, Mary and Harriet were separated from one another, and Harriet her relatives in Philadelphia, a distance of at least forty-miles. In some cases, parents and family members attempted to use institutions as temporary safe-havens for their children, hoping they might be cared for and then eventually returned, as was the case for Samuel Ricks. However, when these children reached the appropriate age to secure indentures, they were frequently separated sent to live and work for other households, making it difficult for their family members to regain custody.

The separation of children from parents, siblings, and other family and community members was a pronounced element of enslavement both in the North and the South. The mass-movement, both physical and social, of African Americans towards the

\textsuperscript{128} Association for the Care of Coloured Orphans, register of children 1879-1920
reconstitution of their families in the wake of Southern emancipation has been documented by historians. However, as opposed to the efforts to reconstitute families in the years following Southern emancipation, northern African Americans saw their grasp on their children abruptly ruptured during the years following gradual emancipation as parents were enslaved, or sometimes emancipated due to evolving northern attitudes towards slavery, while their children remained enslaved or indentured.

In many cases, children in urban centers like Philadelphia were indentured to the country to perform agricultural labor, a practice that removed these children from the familiar environments of their home to new settings that were far removed from their social networks. Philadelphia’s Home for Destitute Colored Children, like many other institutions, documented the reasons it indentured most of its children to the country. In its first annual report, the institution disclosed the fact that most of the inquiries for labor were from “the country” from those who had “heard but incidentally” of the home. The word-of-mouth distribution of knowledge for institutions that were indenturing black children indicate that this was an internal, economic network between those who ran the institutions, their subscribers, and those within similar social groups, namely other Quakers. During the early nineteenth century and the antebellum period, it was common for those looking to fill labor gaps with black children to correspond directly to institutions and individuals to meet their economic needs. At the Home for Destitute Colored Children, the inquiries reached such a volume that by 1864 the institution

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established a Committee of Managers to which individuals must apply in-person to “obtain [children] from the Institution,” on Saturdays.\textsuperscript{130}

Sometimes children in these environments attempted to challenge the terms of their indentures by running away. However, in doing so, they placed themselves in legal danger for violating their contracts, and if found, were often returned back to the institutions that indentured them or to houses of refuge after being sentenced for criminal offenses. Many of the organizations refused to care for children whose parents did not adhere to the indenturing of their children. In 1856, the Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children reported that more than half of their admitted children, nineteen out of thirty-seven, were discharged, “because of the unwillingness of the parents to have them placed under rules and proper restraint.”\textsuperscript{131} In these cases, institutions reluctantly returned children to their families despite their assumption of black parents’ presumed inability to care for their own children. That same year, only one child was returned to her mother, “to place,” indicating her mother would indenture the child. In all likelihood, black children sometimes ran away from their indentures, as indicated by incentives to complete indentures like those instituted by the Shelter for Colored Orphans. However, documentation of this phenomenon was not often recorded in the published records of institutions that bound out their children. To publically admit such an occurrence might endanger the reputable and benevolent status of such orphanages and houses of reform.

\textsuperscript{130} Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, \textit{First Annual Report}, (Crissy & Markley Printers, 1856), 7


\textsuperscript{131} Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, \textit{1st Annual Report}, 7
Many of the children who served these employers expressed unhappiness with their placements. However, most of the records of these occurrences were veiled in discourse of reform. Admitting to their subscribers that black children were sad or lonely while they performed labor as part of their placements, most of which were in the country, challenged the notion that such labor would result in the child’s reformation and guidance towards becoming a productive citizen. Indeed, while discourse that emphasized the redemptive potential of the country for urban children is more clearly associated with the postbellum period, this notion was applied earlier to African American children, and as was the was directly related to the requests for agricultural labor more than redemptive notions of labor in the country. In other words, the language of reform followed the actual placement of black children in the country as a means to justify their circumstances. While the Home for Destitute Children originally only specified its intention to place children based on those who had requested labor, by 1868 the institution publically stated their objective to indenture children “to respectable persons for house or farm service.” In 1870, this was altered to specify that children were “indentured to respectable families, in the country if possible.”

132 During this historical period, many of institutions designed to reform children appropriated the belief that separation from the ills of urban life would have powerful effects on youth. Separation from families, both by creating ideological and geographic distance, became an important

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132 Home for Destitute Colored Children, 15th Annual Report, (Crissy & Markley Printers, 1868), 1
Home for Destitute Colored Children, 15th Annual Report, (Crissy & Markley Printers, 1870), 1
element of reform for many northern institutions for black children, an objective accomplished through labor placements.

Many of the children who expressed indignation at being indentured to the country did not perform their labor adequately for their employers. Sometimes these children were returned to the institutions that had previously “cared” for and indentured them after failing in their contracts. In their published records, these situations were represented in ways that highlighted the achievements of the institution itself, not its failures to properly place children. In 1860, the Home for Destitute Colored Children documented the instance in which a young girl was returned to the orphanage after being placed in the country. The girl had been deemed “hopelessly unteachable” by her employers. Under the guidance of the institution’s Matron, the child accomplished her work in the home through “steady oversight and kind encouragement,” resulting in the girl’s “smiling face” while “busy at work.” In this case, the act of performing labor, whether in the country or in the household, was a necessary element of reform. This was undoubtedly a gendered response, and one might suspect that if a boy had been returned from the country domestic labor would not have been secured for him as easily. Children who ran away from their indentures could be forced into juvenile delinquency houses or, as was the case for black children in Philadelphia prior to the creation of the colored department in the House of Refuge, adult prisons.

Children who were displeased with their indentures or who sought to return to their families and communities sometimes escaped from their indentures. This was a

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133 Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, 5th Annual Report, (Merrihew & Thompson Printers, 1860), 1
phenomenon that crossed racial lines as both enslaved black children and families as well as northern white children fled enslavement, indentures, and apprentices throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact, even Benjamin Franklin notably escaped from his apprenticeship, an act that led him to be, in his own words, “suspected as some runaway servant, and in danger of being taken up on that suspicion.” Former masters and owners often published accounts of their runaway “property.” These advertisements contribute to the expansive databases of fugitive slave advertisements in ways that complicate representations of race, age, gender, and geography. The advertisements primarily span the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and those of fugitive slaves are less represented in the antebellum period following gradual emancipation laws of the late eighteenth century. However, advertisements for children and youth, especially African American were continuously published beyond the years of formal enslavement. These advertisements were issued in prominent newspapers including the Pennsylvania Gazette and Lancaster Journal.

White children and youth ran away from masters often due to exploitative circumstances and deprived conditions. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, servants increasingly challenged ill-treatment in court. Respublica against Cathrine Keppele, 1793, involved a court case over the indenture terms of an orphan boy, Benjamin Hannis, aged eleven. His patrons attempted to force his mistress to surrender the boy prior to the end of his service. In the mistress’ appeal, her attorneys claimed that children who were orphaned should be indentured in order to, evade “habits of idleness and vice.” The

counter argument was that servants in Pennsylvania were treated “in a very degraded state.” As James D. Schmidt has argued, indentured servants in this context, “could be whipped, and their service could be extended if they ran away, conducted business, or married.” The court ruled in favor of the child and decided not to hold him to the contract established in the indenture.¹³⁵

Advertisements of white child runaways, especially those of German and Irish immigrants, constituted were those of runaway servants during this period. In these advertisements, the identity of the runaway was specified primarily as an indicator of non-whiteness or foreignness. Indeed, white youth’s statuses were surveyed in ways similar to black youth, and they could be questioned and required to produce documentation of their status of freedom solely due to their age.¹³⁶ In the advertisements of white runaways, their physical appearance was sometimes specified, but usually only as part of attempts to quickly apprehend them. In the advertisements white children and youth were most commonly referred to as “lads” and were often apprenticed. While white children and youth were also subjected to indentureship terms from which they needed to escape, the essential difference between the practice was that black children were either born into slavery if born before 1780, or born into a type of enslavement that mirrored indentures. They were also indentured for longer terms than whites, and often performed labor that was less skilled.

¹³⁵ Schmidt, Free to Work 11
As such, African American youth sometimes risked punishment or even estrangement from their families to escape labor contracts. In the advertisements for these African American runaways, they were distinguished from whites through the marker of “negro,” or in the case of women, “negro wench.” Joseph Kenner was aged seventeen when he fled his master in 1795. He was described as being five feet eight or nine with “light curly hair” and a “remarkable black spot on the crown of his head.” The reward advertised for his securement was eight dollars.\(^{137}\) If they were runaway slaves, it was common for children to accompany runaway adults, especially mothers, both as part of enslaved families fleeing the Southern slavery or those who avoided northern enslavement and indentures of the late eighteenth century. However, in 1802, Frederick Baker advertised a ten-dollar reward for Hannah, a sixteen-year-old “negro wench” who ran away from her owner in Lancaster County on July 26\(^{th}\). The description of Hannah is very vivid, suggesting the owner or someone around her held intimate knowledge of her appearance and character, and was deeply motivated to get her back. The advertisements described her as,

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\text{Stout and well made about the shoulders, small round her waist, she is right black, of a smooth skin, big eyes, and when she looks at one, turns out the white of her eyes very much; had no clothes on or with her but a shift and low linsey petticoat of a bark colour, a copperas coloured handkerchief.}\(^{138}\)
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In 1803, William Hamilton advertised a mulatto girl aged fourteen who also ran away. Her physical appearance was also included, though without the details of Hannah’s dress and features. Both Hannah and the fourteen-year-old girl were born after 1780, having

\(^{138}\) Hawbaker, Gary ed., *Runaways, Rascals, and Rogues*
been born during a period that placed them in the position of serving masters beyond many other indentured servants and for terms longer than those instituted by other states’ gradual emancipation laws. Pennsylvania, unlike other states including New York and New Jersey, did not distinguish between the gender of the child when enacting the maximum term of indenture. Both boys and girls were to serve until twenty-eight years of age.

During the years following northern emancipation, former slaveholders and masters of servants frequently sold servants. They did so in order to anticipate the approaching emancipation of enslaved population, and to participate in the growing market of new forms of servitude for black children and adults. Often, slaveholders sold their “property” to states that allowed slavery. They sometimes did so by publishing advertisements. The advertisements for the sale and return of slaves and servants demonstrate the ambiguity of a black person’s status of freedom during the years following emancipation. For example, when a black family was advertised on January 7th, 1795, their seller, a man named George Fisher specified that they, “must be sold together or in the same neighborhood,” and made clear the distinctive statuses of each person. This detail was in accordance with the 1788 amendment which mandated,

if any owner...of any negro or mulatto slave or slaves...shall from and after the first day of June next separate or remove...a husband from his wife, a wife from her husband, a child from his or her parent, or a parent from a child, of any or either of the descriptions aforesaid, to a greater distance than ten miles,” would be forced to pay a fee.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{139} Melish, \textit{Disowning Slavery}, 101
\textsuperscript{140} The amendment specifies that the forced-separation is unlawful \textit{unless}, in the case of the separation of a child from his or her parent, the child is over the age of four. State of Pennsylvania, “An Act to Explain and Amend an Act, Entitled, ‘An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” (Philadelphia: T. Bradford)
The man was described as “a slave for life,” and was accompanied by “a mulattoe wench, who has about one year and nine months to serve.” Their two children were also included in the advertisement, aged three and one. All four were “registered according to the law.”  In 1798, Zachariah Bell advertised the sale of a sixteen-year-old with the qualifier that it was, his “time” that was available for purchase. In other words, although he was sixteen and born after Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation act was instituted in 1780, he was to be indentured until he reached age twenty-eight. Indeed the advertised “time” was for a remaining twelve years. In at least some cases, black servants challenged the legal legitimacy of indenture contracts on the basis of the age statutes in gradual emancipation acts. For example, in 1810, a black woman ran away from her indenture in Rhode Island and appealed to Moses Brown. Brown claimed that the woman had the right to be free because the abolition act “limits the Age of females at eighteen Beyond which they could not be held Either as Slaves since 1784, or by indenture.” In this case, the exploitation of the woman’s labor was directly related to her gender, as black women’s labor was continually illegally appropriated in the spaces in which they served as domestic laborers.

Black adults and children risked a great deal when they fled enslavement or their indentures. Regardless, young enslaved and indentured African Americans, those who were born after 1780 and were to be indentured until age twenty-eight, made up a large portion of advertisements in the Pennsylvania Gazette from 1795 to 1796. Sam, aged

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141 Hawbaker, Gary ed., Runaways, Rascals, and Rogues, 3
142 Ibid
143 Joanne Melish quoting Moses Brown, verso of letter from Mary Vinton, September [October] 12, 1810, Moses Brown Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, in Disowning Slavery, 1000
seventeen, ran away from his master in January of 1795. It was advised that if he was apprehended, that he be taken directly to the jail, most likely an adult prison. At this period, without the creation of juvenile reformatories that admitted black children and youth, there were not any other options but to be sent to adult prisons following the escape from an indenture. However, these types of advertisements subsided in the nineteenth century, making it difficult to ascertain if black children and youth continued to run away from the systems of labor of which many of these benevolent societies and juvenile delinquency centers placed them.

African American parents and families also attempted to reconstitute their families throughout the nineteenth century. These efforts were documented by the individuals and institutions that attempted to indenture black children. For example, in 1861, the Home for Destitute Colored Children criticized the African American community for their attempts to impede upon the indenturing of their children. The institution characterized African American families as “extremely jealous in relation to the placing of their children,” and complained that while they had “warm hearts, with acute parental instincts” the black community was “united to an ignorance deplorable to an intelligent community.” According to the institution, parents and families frequently attempted to regain custody of their children, “forcibly abductin[ing]” them once they have been educated for a period.


145 Philadelphia Home for Destitute Colored Children, 6th Annual Report, 6
African American parents and guardians sometimes indentured children themselves in order to avoid some of these exploitative conditions. While the indenturing of African American children through abolitionist and Quaker institutions was especially pronounced in turn of the nineteenth century Pennsylvania, in other northern states including New York, black children were indentured and apprenticed to black masters to learn specific trades. By the early nineteenth century through the antebellum era, black children, specifically boys, constituted the majority of the city’s chimney-sweeps. These boys were apprenticed into the dangerous and racially segregated trade either by their parents or through organizations and societies. The story of the efforts to regulate New York City’s chimney-sweeping trade from 1800 to 1820 is one in which race, age, and class converged into a politically-charged debate over who had the authority to control black boys’ labor.¹⁴⁶

The chimney sweep industry developed in England, following innovations in ventilation and heating of British households. In the United States, the trade was successful specifically in New York City due to the architectural composition of the city. New York homes followed the originally British design of narrow, “zig-zag” fireplaces in every room of each home. In these houses, known as Georgian homes, it was essential to clean the chimneys in order to avoid fire. This work was done by a young, or physically small, person who would climb up the chimney and brush the soot off the walls of the flue, then climb back down to gather the soot, a custom developed by Italians. The

entrance to the chimney was incredibly small, such that chimney sweeps did not wear any clothing save their underwear and a cap over their face.\textsuperscript{147} 

African American boys composed the overwhelming majority of those who conducted the most dangerous work of the trade, scaling and descending the chimneys. Before abolition, slaveowners hired-out the time of enslaved adults and children to master chimney-sweeps. Many of these children were presumably apprenticed by their parents or families who sought to supplement their economic status by apprenticing their children. Often, apprenticeships did not necessarily provide families with an additional source of income. The children were sometimes given a small fund upon completion of their indentures, and these might be supplied back to their parents. However, chimney-sweep masters theoretically supplied adequate food, clothing, and housing for the children, mediating their economic cost of caring for children. The supervision of children during the day as well as their vocational training were incentives for parents whose time was occupied with other forms of labor and whose children did not have access to infant, nursery, and primary schools.\textsuperscript{148}

Although reformers would later attempt to enact severe restrictions on the age of apprentices, the average ages of these children were between four and ten. The conditions

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] Gilje and Rock provide a detailed explanation of the process of chimney-sweeping: “a young sweep had to climb through the chimney with a scraper prying soot from the flue and brushing it down. After reaching the top and letting out a yell of triumph and relief, he would reverse the climb back to the entrance of the flue, scraping and brushing along the way. The soot at the bottom was collected in the apprentice's blankets and sold as fertilizer,” Gilje and Rock, “Sweep O! Sweep O!”: African-American Chimney Sweeps and Citizenship in the New Nation,” 508
\item[148] George Lewis Phillips, \textit{American Chimney Sweeps: An Historical Account of a Once Important Trade}, (Trenton: The Past Times Press, 1957), 50
\end{footnotes}
in which chimney-sweeps labored extremely hazardous. They were repeatedly exposed to soot, increasing their chances of developing “cancer of the scrotum,” and tuberculosis, and their skin developed callouses, bruises, and cuts from which they were often unable to receive treatment and properly heal. Their eyes were prone to contamination, at times developing a “red-rimmed eye” a symptom that became a visual marker of the children’s labor.\textsuperscript{149}

The lives of chimney-sweeps were sentimentalized in popular fiction and seriously deliberated by humanitarian organizations both in the United States and in Europe. The employment was closely associated with destitution and was so “despised” that at least in some contexts, including Dutch-occupied New York, the term was used as a derogatory slur.\textsuperscript{150} As black chimney-sweeps and master sweeps were increasingly employed in the colonial U.S., whites became unwilling to participate in the trade. This racial segregation of the trade was specific to North America. While boys were also commonly employed in the trade, England’s apprentices were not predominantly black as were New York’s. Indeed, children did not occupy the majority of chimney-sweeps in England and their employment of young boys in the trade gradually diminished by 1800. New York City’s employment of black child-sweeps increased through the first part of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{151} Even in urban centers including eighteenth century

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\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 508
\textsuperscript{150} George Lewis Phillips, \textit{American Chimney Sweeps: An Historical Account of a once Important Trade}, (Trent: The Past Times Press, 1957), 11
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 11-50
\end{flushleft}

Philadelphia, chimney-sweeps, “were generally negroes upon whose dusky faces the soot did not show.” In 1850, the report from the city’s House of Refuge commented on the employment as an indicator of racial, economic stratification. The organization claimed that despite the “despair,” that many African Americans faced claiming, “think you that the half-grown sweep would not gladly exchange his ragged and sooty blanket for the coat, vest, and ring of the flashy clerk or apprentice?”

By the nineteenth century, the majority of master sweeps in New York City were African American men. For the free black community, employment in the trade was one of the very few opportunities to conduct labor in a semi-autonomous space that included self-management and direct supervision over the labor of child-apprentices. The master sweeps performed the contracting of the labor and the training of the boys. However, as city officials sought to regulate the trade, the autonomy of the master sweeps diminished. While these regulations mirrored those of Europe’s reform of the trade in the eighteenth century, the European reform efforts towards centered on the treatment of poor, white children. In the United States, city officials claimed similar concerns for the well-being of the black child-apprentices, but their motivations were undoubtedly much more nuanced.

By 1810, New York’s Common Council issued a series of petitions to the state to regulate the trade based on the treatment of the apprentices. They described their lives as “destitute, miserable, and depraved,” and cautioned that the boys were “left to

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themselves; they enjoy none of the advantages arising from the care of persons willing to afford them opportunities for employment,” despite the fact that these children were apprenticed into the trade by master sweeps.\textsuperscript{154} The New York Manumission Society also characterized the plight of the boys as “a class of suffers whose condition is peculiarly unhappy” of which the council should consider the “subjects of commiseration and care.”\textsuperscript{155} The council responded by enacting a series of regulations on May 11, 1812 including age restrictions that prohibited the employment of boys younger than twelve. The legislation also included requirements for treatment of the apprentices relating to their care, hours of work, and proper licensing. The master sweeps responded by evoking citizenship rights, claiming a shared right to “paternal municipal regulation” as whites. City officials met many of their terms until a special committee filed a report in 1817 that claimed master sweeps were unable to treat their apprentices in humane and appropriate manners in the same ways as other (white) masters were. The master sweeps organized and again referenced their citizenship rights to conduct business at their discretion, and eventually were successful in stifling the council’s regulatory measures. However, by the 1820s, innovations in new sweeping technologies began to decrease the employment of master-sweeps and climbing boys.\textsuperscript{156}

Still, in 1838, New York’s Colored Orphan asylum decried the conditions of black children in the city who were “consigned to the charge of vicious and degraded persons, who employ them sometimes in sweeping chimney, or more frequently in

\textsuperscript{154} Report of the committee on the plan of John Boyreau, March 17, 1811 quoted in Gilje and Rock, “Sweep Ho!,” 516
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 518
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 525-531
begging, and other modes of eking out a scanty subsistence.” In the same report, the orphanage was disappointed to report that they had failed to secure admission of a child who was employed as chimney-sweep, “whose cruel service, several ineffectual attempts were made to release him, but he was finally lost sight of entirely.” This report was then published by the *Colored American*.

The conflict over the oversight of the chimney-sweeping industry has been aptly identified by historians as one that embodied the struggle between African American’s attainment of citizenship rights and authority over their children, and whites’ concerns over the labor of black children and youth. In their extensive study on the topic, Paul Gilje and Howard B. Rock conclude, “reformers believed that the education and training of black youths was crucial to the success of gradual emancipation,” and therefore centralized these concerns in their efforts to stifle the autonomy of master sweeps. The debate also demonstrates the essential role of control over black children’s lives and labors in broader political conflicts by both black and white adults. The dependent status of these children limited their authority in this public debate. While it might be an appropriate assumption to conclude that these children would not have desired to perform labor in a physically harmful environment, this notion does not consider their relative marginalization in other forms of indentured labor, as well as their forced-separation from their families and communities in indenture contracts that sent them to rural environments. The conditions of chimney-sweeps, though undoubtedly dangerous, in all likelihood provided some children with sustained access to the black community, of

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*Colored American*, December 29, 1838, Association for Colored Orphans, New York, New York

Gilje and Rock, “Sweep Ho!” 524
which they might be deprived if instead sent to juvenile reformatories, orphanages, and schools. Similarly, white reformers’ ideas of proper treatment of black children did not necessarily indicate their concern of the children’s personal well-being, and instead often contributed to paternalistic aims towards maintaining control over the newly freed population. These divergent ideas of childhood, labor, and control often collided in ways that directly impacted nineteenth century black children’s autonomy.

When Henry Ricks was returned to his mother prior to entering systems of indentured labor, he evaded the experience of which many African American children were subjected in which they were cycled into and out of northern institutions for children, indentured labor, and juvenile detention centers. Indeed, census data indicates that once Ricks returned to his mother, they lived together until his enlistment in the Civil War. Ricks experienced a childhood that included intimate and prolonged interactions with his mother, an experience of which many non-elite northern African American children were deprived. In turn, Ricks’ mother presumably benefited from the emotional and economic role her son played in the family’s social dynamics.

The use and exploitation of all children’s labor continued until the inception of child-labor laws in the late nineteenth century, however it was only black children whose labor served the more sinister role of providing employers with forms of labor that supplanted enslavement, a phenomenon that existed in the North and the South in the periods following emancipation. These systems therefore provided a precedent for the ways in which the South would eventually attempt to suppress its newly-freed population. In both cases, the continual use of black child-labor beyond emancipation represented threats to the promise of black citizenship and freedom.
CHAPTER 3

EDUCATING THE BLACK CHILD: SCHOOLING AND ACTIVISM IN THE ANTEBELLUM NORTH

We believe that the improved character and standing of the colored people in Boston, has been much advanced by the facilities offered for the education of our children, at the public expense; and believing that any thing which tends to lessen our eagerness to enjoy the advantages of a good education would be a great public evil.\(^{159}\)


Companions of youthful studies—never forget, that while others roam...[in] ignorance and sloth... your steps are here guided in the paths of knowledge—and your minds instead in the rules of virtue—destitute and naked perhaps should we have been, had not a kind proprietous agency, taken us by the hand and led us through paths strewed o’er with flowers—and from the direful scenes, which the ills of other children oft place before our view.

- Valedictory Address Spoken by Henry Hill at the Public Examination of the New York African Free School, 1815

During the 1840s, African American children at Boston’s segregated Smith School were subjected to abuse, ridicule, and exploitation at the hands of one of its teachers and headmasters, Abner Forbes. For one child in particular, a young girl, the experience was apparently so distressing that it forced her to flee the school and her family. According to the public report and investigation conducted by African American

activists, this girl, whose name was not recorded perhaps to protect her innocence, was “so used” that she left her family and attempted to be admitted to the House of Reformation for Juvenile Offenders where she stayed for months. The incident was documented in the record of the investigations into the Smith School and published in the August 2nd, 1844 issue of the *Liberator*. Although she appeared only as a footnote at the end of the many accusations against Mr. Forbes without further details, the description of the teachers’ previous actions against students and parents, as well as her extreme response to the encounter (or encounters) suggest that this was an extremely traumatic event, and one in which she possibly experienced physical or sexual abuse. This girl, unlike many of the other named children, desired to remain anonymous. She was also the only girl cited in the allegations of abuse. Indeed, the very placement of the girls’ ordeal, at the end of the long description of Mr. Forbes offenses and other children and adult testimony against the teacher, indicates the delicate nature of the act and the reluctance of the activists to investigate further.\(^{160}\)

In the 1844 incident at the Smith school, the girl’s physical and emotional maltreatment, as well as attacks on black childhood itself, were put on public display as part of educational activists’ condemnation of the Smith School and the city’s segregation of schools. At Boston’s Smith School, black children were subject to racist remarks, cruel treatment, and violent discipline including in the egregious scenarios described by the investigators in which children were, “whipped on the soles,” punched, and caned. These

\(^{160}\) For reference of limits of legal recourse for rape and sexual abuse of black children in a Southern setting, see Cynthia Greenlee’s dissertation, “Due to her Tender Age: Black Girls and Childhood on Trial in South Carolina, 1885-1920,” PhD diss., Duke University, 2014, worldcat
incidents were incriminatory enough as to inspire Boston’s black community to enact public testimony and appeal against Abner Forbes. In this context, African American activists who sought to secure black children and the black community’s social, economic, and educational place in the antebellum North were mobilized against the physical attacks on black children within the walls of the school, as well as ideological attacks on the legitimacy of their children’s educational pursuits.

In the antebellum North, particularly in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, African American adults, children, and white reformers centralized the concerns of black children’s education in their activism by attempting to create schools and institutions for black children. However, African American children encountered forms of opposition to their learning once these spaces were created, as was the case for the girl at the Smith School. The records of schools in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston illustrate the ways in which the period’s shifting pedagogical approaches as well as black children’s movement into and out of the social and physical spaces of learning shaped their claims and access to education, an essential element of nineteenth century notions of childhood. For many reformers, including abolitionists and African American activists, black education became the ground upon which ideas of race, childhood, and citizenship were cultivated. As such, many African American children living in the North expressed their desires for citizenship and their natural rights as children by attempting to attend schools.

This chapter reconstructs the daily experiences of northern African American children in northern schools and their subsequent participation in abolitionist activism during the antebellum period from their own perspectives using archives of black childhood in school records, a child-centered viewpoint. Although I consider and indeed
illuminate the relationship between their experiences and the development of discourse and literature concerned with black childhood of which adults produced and adopted, attempting to trace the experiences, feelings, and opinions of black children uncritically from this discourse would overlook the nuances, and indeed often the fractures, between adult understandings of black children’s desires, and the spaces in which children often made their claims known. In order to mine this archive with attention to these issues, I focus on African American children’s agency in their learning by highlighting their adherence to, and at times deviation from, popular forms of learning including rote memorization and the Lancasterian method, as well as their negotiation of the social and physical space of the schoolroom and of school materials, including the circumstances and conditions that led them to it, and those that discouraged them from it. Therefore, this chapter interrogates both with a critical eye on the child as a historical actor whose story often lies beneath the surface of the public record, discourse, and representation of black childhood.

Prior to the creation of public schools during the nineteenth century, for many children living in the North both black and white, education of children was conducted at home in semi-formal and informal ways by parents, mostly mothers. Under enslavement and indentured servitude, African American families were often unable to provide their children with domestic schooling due to enforced restrictions on their time and care of their children. Furthermore, many of these children were indentured themselves to masters who were reluctant to provide them with access to formal schooling outside of the vocational training they might have received. While the activist efforts of many educational reformers initiated and encouraged the Common School movement of the
nineteenth century, advocating public and universal educational opportunities for
children, these efforts not only excluded black children through practices of segregation,
the mere idea of the extension of educational to children of color sent many whites into a
fury of attacks on black children sometimes served to mediate anger and resentment at
the idea of educational equality.

In New Haven, Connecticut for example, Prudence Crandall’s school for black
girls was attacked by whites who attempted to burn the school down and broke its
windows and in 1831, the city’s white opponents to African American education
successfully thwarted the efforts to create the country’s first black college. Hillary Moss
documents how many whites in New Haven, a city that had in many ways represented a
steadfast commitment to education, continually countered black activist educational
efforts with fierce opposition and violence. Moss argues that this hostility reproduced,
“an argument for universal education that privileged citizenship instead of equality,” a
tendency that sought to “deny black people access to public education” as “noncitizens.”
In this context, the conflict over education became the stage upon which African
Americans and whites debated the racial meaning of childhood and citizenship.161

Throughout the nineteenth century, many African American children who sought
access to schooling continually experienced inferior treatment, abuse, and exclusion. As
part of their infringement on African American citizenship rights, whites managed to
enact legal and de facto forms of discrimination that limited options for African
American children to achieve quality educations. Of course, the role of education and

161 Hillary Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in
Antebellum America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 4, 18
schooling also extended beyond the geographic boundaries of the North and Southern, slaveholding states perceived education as a threat to the racial suppression upon which the slaveocracy depended. Many of the anti-literacy laws were in fact directly related to African American resistance and emerged in the wake of slave insurrections. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739, the South Carolina legislature made it illegal to teach enslaved persons to read and write. Its subsequent 1800 law prohibited literacy for both enslaved and free African Americans.

Despite these legal and material restrictions limiting access to literacy, historian Heather Andrea Williams has documented many of the subversive and secretive ways in which enslaved people learned to read and write by hiding books, learning from white children, exchanging goods for lessons, and utilizing Christianity as an avenue towards literacy. Williams argues, “African Americans, free and slave, designed all manner of strategies to elude the laws against learning.” Indeed in the post-war context, the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission reflected black commitment to education observing, African Americans were “eager to obtain for themselves, but especially for their children, those privileges of education which had hitherto been jealously withheld from them” as demonstrated by their public appeals concerning the rights of their children to be educated.\(^{162}\) In this way for many African Americans in the South, education and specifically literacy, was a powerful motivator and expression subjectivity and citizenship.

Outside of their direct exclusion based on legal practices of discrimination and violent means of intimidation, one of the more visible forces preventing northern black children’s entrance to educational spaces included the dependence on black children’s labor by black families due to the economic subjugation of the African American community. Many of these families depended on their children’s economic contributions to their family’s income through assisting in the household or through indentures and other employments. Furthermore segregation of schools limited the choices and accessibility of black children’s education. For those who were fortunate enough to be educated at a young age, African American children continued to face discriminatory treatment the moment many schools. For this reason, many abolitionists took up the cause of education as a central pillar in their activism against slavery and for black civil rights and citizenship.

Some of the earliest activism concerning African American education in the North was embraced by Quakers. Philadelphia’s movement towards the instruction of African American adults and children anticipated many other northern cities’. Throughout the eighteenth century, anti-slavery activists in Pennsylvania concentrated their educational efforts on enslaved and free African American children and adults in private, individualized ways. In Pennsylvania, these efforts were led by Quakers including Anthony Benezet and John Woolman. Their activism was manifested informally, and the first schooling practices were enacted in private homes of many Quakers. In 1758, the Bray School was created and in 1770 the Friends African School

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for enslaved and free African Americans was founded. However, these early educational activities only reached a small population of northern African Americans.¹⁶⁴

Black Abolitionist efforts founded many of the first, sustained schools for black children as influenced by these earlier forms of instruction established by white Quakers and anti-slavery activists. Often although abolitionist organizations funded northern schools, their activities were initiated by African Americans who organized their own schools and petitioned abolitionists. The 1797 American Convention of Abolition Societies identified this trend and commented, “We can with particular satisfaction inform you, that schools and places of worship have been established, and that they are well attended by people of your color.”¹⁶⁵ In the 1790s, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, or the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, funded schools created by African Americans including those created by Eleanor Harris and Ann Williams (1795), Cyrus Bustill (1797), and Absalom Jones (1799).¹⁶⁶ Abolitionists in New York, and Boston also created schools for African American children known as African schools or Free schools. In 1787, the New York Manumission Society opened a school for black children, the African Free School. At this period, Boston’s African American schooling efforts were led by Prince Hall, who organized petitioning for public schools for black children which led to the establishment of the African School in 1798.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton In Hope of Liberty, 22, 128
¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 151
¹⁶⁷ Margaret Hope Bacon, “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s Mission for Black Education,” (Pennsylvania Legacies, November 2005), 21-26
¹⁶⁷ James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 152
These early efforts led to many of the first sustained schools for black children in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. While during the eighteenth century, these efforts were largely enacted by both white abolitionists and black activists, in the nineteenth century as the northern, black population slowly moved towards emancipation, their focus increasingly turned to the instruction of adults and their children. Following northern emancipation, free African American communities attempted to fashion self-sufficient institutions and avenues for education to which the majority of the black population would have access. The black church served as a central means by which many African American children and adults were able to gain schooling and pursue semi-formal education. In these settings, African Americans established Sunday school classes that supplemented adult and children’s education. In Philadelphia, African Americans founded the Pennsylvania Augustine Society for the Education of People of Colour that led to the creation of grammar schools from 1822 to 1826.\textsuperscript{168}

While abolitionist organizations established ways in which African American children could have access to schooling, by the mid-nineteenth century, the work of African American educational activists often diverged from that abolitionist societies. The clearest indication of the shifting motivations and goals of educational activists, including between children and adults, can be found in the records of schools for African American children in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. These schools were organized in part by both African Americans and abolitionist organizations, and the treatment of children within the schools, as well as by the neighboring community, created conditions that resulted in disputes over proper education of black children.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid, 151
Prior to the construction and creation of formal schools for black children and adults, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery’s (PAS) Board of Education kept record of the of African American pupils taught semi-informally at the society, or formally at nearby schools for African American children, youth, and adults. Many of these records are dated as far back as 1792, and perhaps originated partly from some of the schools run by African Americans of which the society helped to fund. Many of these records include writing samples of adult and child pupils. These writing samples were recorded and preserved by the society in their educational records in order to serve the dual purpose of demonstrating the pupils’ achievements and growths, and also to demonstrate those of the PAS. Many of these illustrate mastery of writing and literacy as indicated by the author’s careful handwriting. While these records may appear only as a documentation a small aspect of eighteenth century black education, often they provide insight into both the experiences of the student and adult learners, and that of the teachers and members of the PAS.

The learning methods promoted by the PAS reflect pedagogical approaches of the eighteenth century that fixated on developing learning skills through repetition of writing and rote memorization of phrases. The instructors sought to imbue the African American community with both literacy, writing skills, and concepts of morality through this instructional exercise. These writing samples are a very rare example of sources of African American childhood in the archive, and provide portraits of their schooling as well as their relationship to the learning process.

Many of the writing samples collected by the society included notations that accompanied the writing, often on the reverse side, that described the author’s
background (sometimes age), relationship to the school, and sometimes their limits to educational pursuits. In one written by William Harding, Fig.3, on September 12th, 1795, includes the note, “The writer of the within is only allowed to come to evening school being now an apprentice to a cooper,” the craft of making barrels.\textsuperscript{169} Although the writers’ age was not included in the notation of the document, that the PAS indicated William was \textit{only} allowed to attend evening school suggests that he was not an adult, as most African American adults would have been either employed or enslaved during the day and unable to take advantage in the instructional activities offered by the PAS.

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\textsuperscript{169} Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1792-1795 Board of Education Samples of black Pupils, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP)
Fig. 4, PAS, 1795-1798 Board of Education Samples of Black Pupils, HSP
Ages of pupils were often included to highlight a particular element of their learning and of the ideologies of the PAS. One note described the author as, “a black Man about 24 years of age who had never attempted to write before he came.” Joseph Charlie’s writing sample claimed, “the writer of the within has been about six months at writing since he first began to make strokes,” indicating his fast mastery of penmanship. At times the pupils were rather old, and as such demonstrated African Americans’ readiness and enthusiasm to learn at any age. While the majority of the work selected by the PAS was authored by adults, the piece, “Riches have wings,” was composed by James Needham, a
boy described as “a youth about 15” who had “written some before the last winter.”

Charles Rustills practiced the phrase, “Avoid habits,” and was another underage pupil whose work was selected. According to the Board of Education, he and entered the school, “never having written before.” In each of these cases, the students’ ages were included to demonstrate a range of agility that perhaps transcended age. The younger students were capable of learning as were the older. Indeed the volume of selections of older pupils’ writing suggest the Board of Education was interested in providing evidence of learning that extended beyond youth.

The content of the writing included idioms intended to instill within the writer the skill required to compose the sentence, as well as its moral meaning and value. “Humility is a virtue” was repeated by pupils, as was the phrases “Wisdom and Virtue Shine.” Other passages selected for practice included, “Value your reputation,” “Bad manners avoid,” “Bounty becometh man,” “Caution bequeath security,” Many of these were short phrases designed to fit neatly across a paper and repeated virtually, but sometimes longer phrases for more advanced students were assigned including, “Repentance comes to late with all is consumed,” and “Stand in fear of God and you will be...” Sometimes these expressions proved too drawn-out of the pupils who often ran out of room and left the phrase incomplete. Many of these writing samples were presented at the Abolitionist Convention of 1795. A note accompanying one writing sample stated, “Specimen of writing of the blacks in one of the Schools in Philad.-Communicated to the Convention of

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170 Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1795-1798 Board of Education Samples of black Pupils, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP
171 Ibid
The national convention of abolitionist organizations first met in 1794 in Philadelphia and included nine societies. The convention was called annually until 1806. Indeed, at the convention it was proposed that the societies would, “give particular attention to the education of black children.” The education of African American adults was not addressed by the convention.

From the perspective of the students, some of which were children, these writing samples provide indications of pride associated with their own educational advancements. While the phrases were fairly short, each stroke took incredible care and skill, and very few of the samples selected by the PAS possessed errors. Of course, this is in part due to the motivation of the society to present some of finest examples of proficiency. However, the skill required to complete such writing assignments is clear regardless of the selective process of the society. In Solomon Mounter’s writing sample, “Opportunity neglected commonly brings repentance,” he is unable to complete the phrase consistently. Although this may have been interpreted as a failure to repeat the perfectly constructed penmanship of the first line, Mounter may also have inserted his own style and interests in the composition of the piece. His letters and style grew gradually larger as he continued the writing, concluding with his full name, location, and year, ways in which he was able to take ownership and autonomy of the instructional exercise.

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172 Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1792-1795 Board of Education Samples of black Pupils, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP
174 *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Second Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States: Assembled at Philadelphia...* (Philadelphia: 1795), 10
These children and adults most likely acquired their handwriting skills through the use of a book that contained the phrases themselves of which the pupils copied. The standard books for penmanship or copybooks that early writers often utilized, as Tamara Plakins Thornton has demonstrated, possessed other types of instructional messages and documents used for commerce.¹⁷⁵ These books may have been a source of disillusionment or frustration for youth who felt their social mobility was stagnant and thwarted by northern racial discrimination, especially for those employed in indentures outside of skilled trades. However, the ownership of a book itself of which the African American author contributed and marked may have also been a source of pride, regardless of the content. For people deprived of formal and informal schooling, and whose enslaved status was only just beginning to change, the possession of books and the ability to read and write were meaningful, if not powerful experiences. In these cases, the books served the symbolic significance of providing a newly freed population, or continually enslaved and indentured, access to forms of freedom. Possession of the book, a physical marker of schooling, granted African Americans access to the space of schooling. Indeed, Peter Groves signed his writing sample on “Improve thy Time,” with the large signature “Peter Groves his book 1798,” Fig.5.¹⁷⁶ In some ways the PSPAS interjected upon this process by removing the samples from the pupils’ books. In one note from William Latner’s writing, the Board of Education stated, “this copy is cut out before his reaching the middle of his second book of 6 sheets.”¹⁷⁷ One can only speculate

¹⁷⁶ Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, 1792-1795 Board of Education Samples of black Pupils, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, HSP
¹⁷⁷ Ibid
how pupils, in particular young African Americans, might have felt while their hard work was removed from their books and taken by the Board of Education.

As the society became more established in the early nineteenth century, it shifted its focus towards developing its own school for African Americans. In 1813, the Board of Education opened the Clarkson School, named after prominent abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. The society’s Committee of Education was primarily responsible for the activities of the school and concerned itself with providing newly emancipated African Americans with access to schooling, a fundamental right in the eyes of the organization. The school originally operated in ways that met the needs of both African American adults in the evening and children during the day. Clarkson Hall, the building in which the school operated, also served as the headquarters for the society. The society then opened a public school for African American boys and girls in 1822 and 1826. In 1828, these students were combined into one school on Locust St. In the subsequent next four decades, the society continued educating children and adults at Clarkson Hall. While the city’s Board of Education had taken measures to provide public schooling for black children beginning in the 1820s, the PAS still considered education of Philadelphia’s black children as an essential element of their activism. In 1861, the society established a school for black children on 19th and Spring garden and hired Martha Schofield as its teacher. This school served students as young as seven. Here, the children learned a range of subjects including geography and sewing for girls.178

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178 Bacon, “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s Mission for Black Education,” 22
James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 151
At the 19th and Spring Garden school, Martha Schofield kept record of the students’ progress both in terms of their learning as well as their response to learning. A series of undated notes written by Schofield were filed within the Board of Education’s miscellaneous documents and provide a detailed portrait of the lives of her African American child-learners. Some of the notes appear to be authored with the members of the abolitionist society or others who might donate to the school in mind, as she sometimes referenced the material needs of students. In one note she wrote simply, “I need more pens” and “We will soon need some more coal, as it is often too cold to be without fire.”¹⁷⁹ These notes, though from the perspective of a teacher, offer glimpses into the experiences of growing up and attending school as a black child in Philadelphia.

Schofield’s notes describe the conditions of northern black children’s lives in relation to the school. Many of these concern the physical and material conditions of black childhood and of the school itself. In one note, she references the students’ impediments to attending school explaining, “the school has been much smaller during the month, mostly on account of inclement weather and bad walking.” Attendance records from many of the schools of which the PAS aided and founded rarely included explanation for a low presence of students. Attendance was sometimes used in educational discourse to indicate the relative disinterest of students and parents in their schooling, including African Americans. This detail provided by Schofield countered the tendency to identify the pupils and their parents as solely responsible for a child’s educational attainment and explain the impediments to traveling to school from the

¹⁷⁹ Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Reports from Teachers and School Committees 1861-1862 and undated items, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Collection 490, HSP
perspective of the children. In a report from June 7th, 1861, Schofield indicated that many children, twelve out of twenty-eight, attended school irregularly most likely due to “several stormy days which prevented the small ones from coming.” This explanation was repeated throughout her reports and she later explained, “some of the children are very irregular in attendance, a rainy day keeps many at home.” These details concerning not only the children’s attendance, but also the weather demonstrates the physical challenges many of the students faced when attending school.

Schofield also documented many of the addresses of her students, making visible the length of their commute to the school, of which Schofield verified the children walked, sometimes without their parents. This information provides a portrait of the settings in which these African American children lived, as well as their access to the school. Eliza and Charles Bostick lived at 1526 Carlton Street, a ten-minute walk from the school. Isabella and Isaiah Hopkins, in addition to David Williams, lived five blocks away from the school, also a ten-minute walk. Eliza, Thomas, and William Jones all lived at 1216 Carlisle Street, the farthest distance from the school, about a twenty-minute walk. Out of the list of students thirty-six students, twenty-one lived within the same households or neighborhoods and would have presumably walked together to school. For many of these children, some of whom were quite young, weather could provide not only a physical obstacle for their school-walks, but also proved dangerous to their health. For many African American families living in the antebellum North, as James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton have demonstrated, “death was nearly a constant presence threatening

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180 Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Reports from Teachers and School Committees 1861-1862 and undated items, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Collection 490, HSP
family and community stability.”181 Therefore, a walk to school in inclement weather was not a small feat, especially for youth who also had responsibilities to care for younger children.

The other impediment to the students’ attendance was their parents’ work schedules. In one note Schofield explained, “The parents of so many children go out to work, and they have to stay home to mind the younger ones, is one reason of where [sic] being less in attendance.”182 On June 7th, 1861, Schofield noted that three students Aaron Wells, Louisa Wells, and Mary Buck, had begun schooling for several weeks but only attended a handful of days in order to “stay home to mind younger children.” Schofield presumably included these details to suggest that the students’ poor attendance was often out of their hands and that the phenomenon was not necessarily universal for all types of families.

For the black community of the antebellum North, it was common for both children’s parents worked outside of the households, including mothers, who were therefore unable to watch the children too young to attend school. In these cases, it appears that the students as young as six or seven would sometimes be responsible for care of infants. To avoid this, some parents and family members in the North might take advantage of institutions such as orphanages and schools for infants in ways that served daycare needs. One such institution was the Colored Infant School of Philadelphia, opened in May of 1828. The society that funded the school recognized the essential need of the black community at its opening claiming, the managers had recognized “The

181 Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 89
182 Ibid
beneficial tendency of our public and Sunday schools” but identified, “the prevalence of ignorance and vice amongst the poorer classes of society,” and “the degraded state of a great part of the coloured population of our city.”\(^{183}\) The school admitted forty children. However, the children who attended schools like the Colored Infant School were likely older than eighteen months and represented a fraction of the black population’s children. The parents of Schofield’s students apparently did not have access to these types of aid.

Martha Schofield’s notes also detailed the academic progress of her students in a June 1862 Report. In this note, Schofield explained, “All excepting the first class, commenced in the alphabet and considering their frequent absence, have improved nicely.” In this note, Schofield reported the students were learning spelling and geography, adding that concerning the latter subject, “only one or two had studied it before.”\(^{184}\) While Schofield’s notes mainly focused on the student’s educational growth, she also included commentary on their behavior and personal lives. Many of the children at the 19th and Spring Garden St School sometimes expressed enthusiasm at attending the school, and at other times interacted with Schofield in ways that indicated their reluctance or irritation at having to attend school. These representations of African American school children’s experiences ran counter to much of the discourse on black childhood produced by educational reformers. In the class of which Martha Schofield taught, she wrote about the issues facing many of her students both inside and outside the classroom.


\(^{184}\) Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Reports from Teachers and School Committees 1861-1862 and undated items, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Collection 490, HSP
In one instance focused on their behavior she wrote, “Generally those most full of mischief have learned most rapidly [the alphabet] being much less difficult for them to understand, one little girl who did not know a letter will soon read as well as any in the first class.” Schofield claimed that the students’ behavior differed between school hours and after school. While they behaved appropriately during school hours, “at recess and after school [they] often misbehave.” One boy, Aaron Wells, was suspended from school for behavior that was poor both in school and at home. Isaac Williams was expelled for “his conduct out of school and constant disobedience in.” According to Schofield, many of the times in which the children misbehaved were not directed at other students nor with her, but with white students from other schools. One day, a student named Taylor was involved in a conflict with a white boy, resulting in Taylor throwing a rock at the boy and striking him in the head. The boy was injured and the police were brought to the scene. While Schofield admitted to offering the police Taylor’s name and address, she commented, “the white boys ought to be arrested, as they often wait till [the children] are out of school and then attack them.”

Although by this point Philadelphia had many public schools of which African American children were able to attend, these schools were segregated from those of white students and sometimes only consisted of early, primary schooling for the first three grades. The white students in the nearby school that waited for the African American children to finish their schooling therefore intentionally sought them out to harass and intimidate them.

185 Ibid
186 Margaret Hope Bacon, “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s Mission for Black Education,” (Pennsylvania Legacies, November 2005), 21-26
These conflicts were not only initiated by children. Schofield described an event in which a “gentleman,” harassed her students “using the worst kind of language on his pavement,” to the point that his wife had to intervene. The reason for the man’s outburst was that the children had been running on the steps leading up to the school. The children’s actions reminded the neighbor of the physical presence of black children at the school adjacent to the man’s residence, one in which he could not bear without voicing outrage at their presence. It is also noteworthy that it was their playful behavior, their excited running into the schoolroom at the beginning of the day, that elicited rage from the man.

The children at the 19th and Spring Garden school encountered other schoolchildren who targeted them in part because of their educational pursuits. The attacks on black schools and orphanages by whites has been well-documented by historians throughout moments of racial unrest and these conflicts have been identified as one of the ways in which whites both in the North and South reinforced racial hierarchies of subjugation. However, these attacks did not always culminate in large-scale riots embraced by white adults. White children also participated in the daily conflicts over the right to pursue schooling, creating material obstacles in black children’s already unstable journey to and from school. African American children who attended the Spring Garden school were therefore steadfastly committed to their education in spite of the many impediments to their pursuits.

187 Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Reports from Teachers and School Committees 1861-1862 and undated items, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Collection 490, HSP
Although records of the children’s thoughts and beliefs concerning their education were not preserved, Martha Schofield often described the student’s behavior in detail. She claimed that their actions reflected their desires to be inside the physical building of the school beyond the school hours. She admitted that this was “a great difficulty,” and that children often chose to stay “about the house after school is dismissed instead of going straight home.” When Schofield would attempt to discipline them for this behavior they would “play truant next day.”\(^{188}\) Schofield also described the students’ actions during school hours. Often the students were despondent when disciplined. Schofield explained, “Some dispositions are such that at a word of reproach they violently fling their looks down and abuse them, which is a very bad example to the younger ones.” Their behavior was also sometimes such that the students would attempt to physically fight one another out of anger, and Schofield intervened, “to prevent them seriously injuring each other, not only out of doors, but even in.”\(^{189}\) It is unclear what produced the anger in the students’ dispositions of which Schofield described, but the social and material conditions of African American schooling undoubtedly would have impacted their emotional health. Indeed, the children underwent constant harassment and surveillance of their education, most notably when they left the classroom and stepped out into the city to make the journey home.

In this way, each of the issues facing the children were perhaps not disconnected, but all operated around the physical and social space of the school room and their

\(^{188}\) Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Reports from Teachers and School Committees 1861-1862 and undated items, Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers, Collection 490, HSP

\(^{189}\) Ibid
movement in to and out of it, a space of which the children felt safe and attempted to remain. According to the behavior described in Schofield’s notes, the students’ refusal to go home, low attendance after they were reproached for staying, and their reluctance to make the journey to school under threatening circumstances, the children conceptualized the school as a physical and metaphysical space of safety, a form of childhood of which they could traverse and gain access. Children exercised agency in the learning process by refusing to attend school under harmful conditions. Similarly to Stephanie Camp’s use of “rival geography” to describe the “movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space,” the schoolchildren’s public journey to the school, and their physical presence once inside, were enactments of a type of rival geography that challenged and rearranged the boundaries of childhood.190 Their negotiation of legible childhoods, the physical building of the school, was part of a politicized process of creating spaces of freedom.

While the 19th and Spring Garden street functioned for about a decade, as public schools for black children increased in Philadelphia, the need for schools funded by the PAS declined. However, the PAS continued its advocacy of black education beyond the Civil War and outside of the city of Philadelphia. After the war, the PAS established freedom schools in the South, of which many graduates of the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth eventually taught including Sarah Mapps Douglass. In the late nineteenth

century, the PAS lent support to institutions for higher learning including Hampton, Howard University, and Oberlin College.¹⁹¹

Like the PAS, the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the social advancement of New York’s African American population through its investment in the education of black children. The society was created in 1785 and by 1787 it had founded its African Free School. The school employed John Teasman, an African American teacher, from 1799 to 1805, who utilized the Lancaster method in which advanced students worked with teachers to assist in the schooling. African Americans who later joined the abolitionist movement including Alexander Crummell, Henry Highland Garnet, and James McCune Smith were graduates of the African Free School.¹⁹²

During the early part nineteenth century when the New York African Free School was at its peak in terms of its enrollment, it introduced public examinations of its students in which the brightest and most agreeable students would perform speeches and scripted readings in front of an audience of benefactors and interested guests.¹⁹³ The archive of these performances, as well as the observations made by visitors to the classrooms, provide a sample of the experience from the perspective of the child-performers. Anna

¹⁹¹ Bacon, “The Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s Mission for Black Education,” 24
¹⁹² Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 117
¹⁹³ Other Northern schools also utilized the method of showcasing their student’s progress through public examinations including the Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth and Boston’s Smith School. However, at the Institute for Colored Youth, the scripted performances were primarily written by the pupils’ themselves and the audiences were primarily African American. Philadelphia Institute for Colored Youth, *Objects and Regulations of the Institute for Colored Youth, with a list of Officers, Students, and the Annual Report of the Board of Managers for the year 1860*, (Philadelphia; Merriew & Thompson), 25
Mae Duane has adeptly argued that these records of black childhood, “offer insight into a set of overlapping cultural metaphors that structured black-white relations throughout the nineteenth century and beyond,” and represent an enactment of forms of paternalism between the white abolitionists and the black students and broader community. Though the children’s performances were undoubtedly mediated by adult interests including that of the white abolitionists and under the administration of Charles C. Andrews, as well as encouraged the students to embody paternalistic renderings of the African American community, these records also demonstrate the ways in which African American schoolchildren claimed the space of the schoolroom as their own.

Observations of the students at the New York African Free School were sometimes published and the administrators transcribed these for their records. In 1817, a report from the British and Foreign School Security to the General was published of observations made of a May examination. The report was filled with praises of the students’ intellectual and behavioral attributes. While in many ways the author renders the students’ abilities in spite of their racial backgrounds exceptional and astonishing, the report also provides a salient description of the activities and dispositions of the students. That day the guest witnessed, “300 Africans in an improved mental state,” who performed their work with more “strict attention… than in any school which I had visited.” The report includes an observation of the Lancasterian method enacted in which students worked with one another. It describes how students worked

194 Anna Mae Duane, “‘Like a Motherless Child’: Racial Education at the New York African Free School and in My Bondage My Freedom,” American Literature, Volume 82, No.3 (September, 2010): 464
simultaneously and independently, reciting the alphabet in one area and reading aloud in another. This method, established during the early nineteenth century, encouraged students to take authority of their learning and embody the classroom space as both learners and leaders.

These observations reinforced the notion that children of African descent could learn and advance in schooling to a high level. While discourse concerning education had already begun to advocate for children’s natural adaptability to schooling due to the malleable nature of their minds, these notions of childhood were not extended to black children. In 1849, Charles Lyell described the mental capacities of black children, a group that was only as mentally capable as white children “up to the age of fourteen,” after which they inevitably regress, “unless there be an admixture of white blood.”\footnote{Charles Lyell, 	extit{A Second Visit to the United States, Vol. 1.}, Lyell, Charles. 	extit{A Second Visit to the United States, Vol. 1.} (New York: Harper & Brothers, London: John Murray, 1849), 105} When reports of the New York African Free School’s black student intellectual achievement countered these claims, they were up against a proliferation of discourse that argued otherwise. In fact, the author addressed this tension and encouraged any who would doubt the veracity of his statements to “perform a pilgrimage to New York and at the shrine of education recant their principles and confess that the poor despised African is as capable of every intellectual improvement as themselves.”\footnote{New York African Free School Records, 1817-1832, Collection, Vol. 3} Though in many ways the report assumed racial distinctions, it also recognized the student’s capabilities as children, not as an aberrant group, a radical viewpoint in the context of the early nineteenth century.
Many of the records of the examination days at the New York African Free School include the valedictory addresses of the school’s highest achievers. These would have been the students who took leadership roles in the classroom under the Lancasterian method, and were prompted by the teachers and administrators to demonstrate their accomplishments through the public performance of speeches for the teachers, guests, and observers. Many of these addresses followed the same basic style of graciously thanking the benefactors of the schools, the teachers, and the classmates for the student’s experiences and as such appear formulaic, likely influenced heavily by adult intervention and scripting. Carla Peterson claims that the students at the New York African Free School were “nothing more than ventriloquists, mouthing the words of their benefactors,” however, this characterization elides the agency of African American children in shaping and taking advantage of the learning methods of the school. As the records of the performances indicate, their reflections upon leaving the school are many of the most emotional moments in the celebration. Though these were written by the school administrators, the literal and symbolic meanings of the child’s movement out of the schooling space provide poignant meditations on the meaning of schooling for African American children.

One such address was delivered by Henry Hill in 1815. While in his oration, Hill indeed took pains to acknowledge the “generosity” of the funders of the African Free School for providing students with the “greatest gift in the power of men,” an education, he also described the emotional experience of having to leave the school. On that day,

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Hill began his speech with the pain he felt at that he had “now arrived to that period when I am to take leave, and be separated from the immediate care and direction of you, by whom my youthful steps have been guided for the last five important years of my life.”

In this passage, Hill identified his separation from the teachers and administrators of the school, but not from his fellow students. Indeed, very few of the orations directly addressed other students except to encourage them to also be grateful for the benefactor’s generosity: “Companions of youthful studies-never forget, that while others roam at large in... ignorance and sloth, surround their youthful days-your steps are here guided in the paths of knowledge.” Nevertheless, Hill’s speech consistently referenced movement out of childhood and youth and into adulthood as initiated by his exit from the school. Within this framework, the school represented the space in which Hill was able to embody ideas of childhood.

The treatment of the students and families at the New York African Free School also reinforced social hierarchies in ways that saw both children and African American parents as dependent upon the intervention of the school. In one scripted performance, two characters William and James, one of which was James McCune Smith, dealt with the issue of arriving late to school. In the performance, William explained to James the reason he was late, that while he had been “teasing my Mother for my breakfast for some time,” she responded, “‘no hurry child, no hurry,’ and [sent] me to play a little longer.” To which James retorted, “Well I love to be obedient to my parents and know it to be my duty, but I really think that if I could not get my breakfast in time for early school, I should run off without it.” William defended his guardians and exclaimed, “Stop James! I

199 Ibid
can’t hear a word against my dear parents. I can excuse them, because they have but little
coloring themselves…” Duane has appropriately argued that this performance
introduces the “memory of slavery” through the trope of the “slothful mother figure.”
Indeed, William and James indicate that the mother is at fault for not encouraging
William to attend school on time. However, this performance of the schooling experience
also indicates an attempt for the school administrators to address tardiness in ways that
also spoke to the perceived tension between the home and the schoolroom. This suggests
that tardiness was indeed an existing problem at the New York African Free School, as
was the case with the Philadelphia Spring Garden school. It is likely that the children’s
attendance was similarly based on their aversion to the school, perhaps due to the
supposed strict disciplinary style enforced by Charles C. Andrews. It is also worthy of
note that within the script, the mothers’ reluctance to send her child to school on time was
characterized as laziness, but also with an interest in the child’s play.

In “An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the
New-York African Free School,” published in 1818, the authors also attempted to instill
within the parents’ values and beliefs of which the school deemed acceptable. Although
the pamphlet recognized the parents’ authority over the children, it questioned the
enactment of such authority by the New York black community. Indeed, the title of the
pamphlet insinuated that while it addressed the parents, the children belonged to the
school. The report recommended parents’ “frequent perusal of our ideas” on a variety of
topics including the language they should use around their children, religious activities,

201 Duane, “‘Like a Motherless Child,” 470
children’s character development, and discipline. Concerning their behavior around their
own children, the report cautioned, “your words, your manner, your actions, are all
observed and practiced by your children. Therefore strive to think twice before you speak
to, or in the presence of a child.” In these addresses, African American parental
behavior was called into question in patronizing ways.

The report also offered a meditation on finding appropriate work for children.

This, argued the authors, was a concern because

idleness leads to wickedness, so industry will be found happily to conduce to
virtue and sobriety; and it is incumbent, on parents to find employment for their
children, at a suitable age, as to furnish them with food and clothing for a want of
employment, or rather of suitable inducement to it, will soon deprive them of both
food and raiment.

At this point, the child-labor for all children including whites was still considered of
social benefit to the children themselves. However, the attainment of appropriate
employment for African American children was a difficult task, as discussed in chapter
one. Nevertheless, this was an incredibly important issue for the New York African Free
School; the pamphlet went as far as to warn parents that, “To suffer children to run the
streets freely, with promiscuous herds of idle wicked companions, is only fitting them for
close Confinement at mature age in a state prison or house of correction.” Here again, as
was the case for Boston’s Smith School, the house of correction was used as a symbolic
threat to the black child’s right to exist within the space of their own home, if they were
to “run the streets freely.” Their removal into houses of correction signaled entering an

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202 New York African Free School, An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the
Children Belonging to the New-York African Free School (New York: Samuel Wood,
1818), 20-21
unsafe and neglectful space, a threat that evoked fear out of both children and adults.\cite{203}

The NYMS’s African Free School No. 2 experienced periods of upheaval and decreased enrollment based on the shifting relationship between the society and the African American community in New York. While in 1808, the school boasted a high enrollment of 130 students, by 1830, its attendance declined rapidly, prompting the society to attribute the shifting interest in the school to, “indifference on the part of the parents, and a want of duly appreciating the beneficial effects of education.”\cite{204} These parents, however, were in fact far from indifferent, and fiercely advocated on behalf of their children for schooling that reflected their values and beliefs. black abolitionists led campaigns against the school based on conflicts with the school leader Charles C. Andrews’ association with colonization, disciplinary methods, and shifting school policies. In 1832, African American teachers and administrators assumed authority of the school, but were replaced by white teachers after the school was incorporated by the Public School Society. Each of these factors led to the school’s declining popularity by the late 1830s.\cite{205}

Boston’s schools for African American children also underwent considerable change throughout the nineteenth century. African Americans themselves led the efforts to create schools for black children after petitions failed to convince the legislature to enact schools for black children. In 1815 Prince Saunders secured funding from a white

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\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{203}Ibid
\bibitem{205}Sinha, The Slave’s Cause, 117
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merchant, Abiel Smith, for the establishment of a school which officially opened in 1835. Donations and tuition contributed to the finances of the school, parents of the students paid a little more than twelve cents per week to allow their students to attend.\textsuperscript{206} Despite the creation of public schools for black children in 1820, these schools were segregated and remained inferior. In this context, parents and guardians continued to send their children to the Smith School in order to allow their children to learn in a highly academic and safe environment.

In 1834, Abner Forbes was appointed master of the Smith School. He was initially supported by the African American community due to his history of abolitionist activism. However, eventually both Forbes’ personal feelings towards and treatment of his black pupils was called into question through the activism against the Smith School as part of the efforts to desegregate the city’s schools.\textsuperscript{207} During the 1840s, many African American activists became increasingly agitated with the state of schooling in Boston. One such individual was William Cooper Nell, a black abolitionist who aligned himself with William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist stances. While at the beginning stages of organizing petitions against the city for educational rights, Nell attended the Smith School’s annual exhibition, similar to that of the New York African Free School, and noted that the events were “delightful” and “instructive.”\textsuperscript{208} However, in 1842, critiques of the Smith School began to circulate in an anti-slavery newspaper. In the September 9th issue of the \textit{Liberator}, a letter to the editor entitled “Smith School, Belknap-street”

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, 152
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid, 78
detailed the shortcomings of its annual exhibition in ways that directly questioned the school’s teachers and administrators. According to the author, the students underperformed based on the last year's exhibition. The writer also pointed out that the school’s committee was not in attendance, of which they questioned whether “white schools shared the same fate[?]” The blame was not lobbied at the students, whom the writer claimed were able to answer questions due to their “superior gifts and ambition, rather than any extra labor upon them.” Many of those deserving of medals for their academic achievements did not receive any. The article ended with the somber commentary that,

Again, while the white children were feasting in the Cradle of Liberty, ours had to tarry at home to satiate prejudice. It would seem as though his holiness, Mr. Prejudice, might have in return given them some refreshments at their own school-house. But alas; this is not the case. To cap the climax, a reputed colonizationist of the old school was called in to address the throne of grace. A pretty dose, truly, for anti-slavery to swallow!  

Here, the author claimed that children were remaining at home to avoid the inferior treatment at the school, and referenced the accusations against Forbes’ associations with the colonizationism a movement more concerned with sending African Americans abroad than solving racial inequality.

The public denunciations of the school reached a peak during the public campaign against the school led by William Cooper Nell, John T. Hilton, and Henry L.W. Thacker. Following accusations of discrimination and harsh discipline, African American activists discouraged parents from sending their children to the school, resulting in a drop of attendance from 263 students in 1840 to 51 in 1849. These leaders helped to investigate

209 ‘Justice’ to William Lloyd Garrison, August 20, 1842, in the Liberator, XII, (September 2, 1842), 139
the charges against Abner Forbes of which entitled, *Report of a Committee of Parents and others interested in the Smith School, in Boston, relative to the official conduct of Mr. Abner Forbes, Master of said School*. This report focused on “the nature, degree and manner of punishment inflicted at the school, the language and deportment of the Master, both towards scholars and parents,” “neglect of duty, such as absence in school hours, reading newspapers, and writing in school hours, and allowing first class scholars to hear the recitations of junior scholars, when he should have heard them himself,” and finally, “expressing and entertaining opinions unfavorable to the natural intellectual capacities of the colored people as a race.” In it, Abner Forbes was referred to as “brutal” and “contemptuous.”

The report included the lurid details of the students’ dreadful experiences while attending the school. The case of James Brown, an eleven-year-old student at the school provided aspects of the school’s, as well as Forbes’, disciplinary procedures. The report explained that during recess the students were to be entirely silent. Brown violated this strict policy and “scuffled” with another student. When questioned by Forbes, the student claimed he did not “strike” the boy, of which the report confirmed was “literally true.” Forbes did not believe the boy and responded by “whipp[ing] him on the soles of his feet until, in the agony of his punishment, and to avoid further blows, he owned he had lied.” While he was being so abused, Brown apparently cried, “Oh Lord, have mercy on me!”

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to which Forbes retorted, “If the Lord would, I won’t.” In the authors’ condemnation of the act of whipping the boy it is clear that these types of disciplinary actions were not typically utilized of the African American parents and guardians and were considered unacceptable. Many of them, as abolitionists, were aware of treatment of enslaved children and adults in the slaveholding South and the cruelties African Americans suffered under the whip. Forbes’ treatment of the schoolchildren resembled such acts of racial violence.

While some scholars have argued that many white teachers and school leaders attempted to undermine the role of black mothers in their children’s education, the case of the Smith School demonstrates otherwise and particularly highlights the role of African American mothers who intervened on behalf of their children when they identified mistreatment at the hands of discriminatory discipline. The report documented a confrontation between Forbes, presented as an abuser, and a parent Angeline B. Gardner. Gardner was described in the report as a reputable person of “exemplary character,” and a church-goer. When her child did not return home from school, Mrs. Gardner went to the Smith School to look for him. When she arrived, the school house was dark and she could not make out the faces of three people inside. She called for her son “by his Christian name” to which he responded. When she entreated him to return to her house Mr. Forbes exhibited physical and verbal violence towards her and exclaimed, “Out, you vile Wretch.” Mrs. Gardner demanded that she be given her child to which Mr.

211 Report of a Committee of Parents... (Boston: 1846) in Uzelac, William Cooper Nell, Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, 136-37
Forbes responded, “if you don’t go out, I’ll put you in the House of Correction.” Following the incident, her child soon passed away.\(^{212}\)

In this part of the report, as with the case concerning the girl who fled the school for the house of correction, there are elements of sexual acts. It is unclear what the child was doing in the dark with other adult men, and if this informed Forbes’ aggressive reaction to Gardner. However, the event was undoubtedly also influenced by sexual politics inherent in a white man responding violently to black women. Mr. Forbes embodied similar assumptions about black women that perhaps threatened to undermine the racial and paternalistic hierarchy of the white teacher and black student. When challenged directly by an African American mother who exhibited deeply felt commitment to her son’s well-being and education, Forbes’ authority, as well as that of racial subjugation against children, was threatened.

Discourse on education was informed by popular notions of race and often argued that all African Americans were unfit to educate their children. This discourse placed special focus on the shortcomings of African American mothers. In this context, the exchange between Mr. Forbes and Mrs. Gardner might have been used to demonstrate the ways in which African American mothers sought to remove their children from school, and therefore did not highly value education. However, within the broader context of physical and verbal mistreatment at school, of which Mr. Forbes had been accused, African American mothers’ efforts to remove their children from such environments are demonstrations of attempts to maintain autonomy and protection of their children, as is explored in Chapter 4.

\(^{212}\) Ibid, 138
The final complaint against Forbes in the report concerned his personal sentiments against the African American community, specifically the learning capabilities of black children. While the report acknowledged that it was unclear if these beliefs were held when he began his position of headmaster of the school, as he had been a recognized abolitionist, they concluded that two or three years prior, Forbes had publically claimed, “the colored people were, by nature, a race inferior in intellectual capacities.” The report also introduced as evidence of his shifting beliefs an 1842 article published in the Boston Courier authored by “Clarkson,” which claimed, “I believe there is no human art or science, the acquiring of which has been specially denied them [meaning the colored people] by nature, if they can enjoy facilities suited to their nature.” The report alleged that Forbes wrote the article under the pseudonym Clarkson and that it represented his views expressed against both the black community and his own pupils. From the perspective of the black community in Boston, these views went against the fundamental mission of the education of African American children- that black children shared a universal right towards proper schooling and an intellectual capability with all children. The report concluded severely by stating,

we believe that the improved character and standing of the colored people in Boston, has been much advanced by the facilities offered for the education of our children, at the public expense;-and believing that any thing which tends to lessen our eagerness to enjoy the advantages of a good education would be a great evil-we feel satisfied that circumstances have arisen, which render it expedient that the relation of Mr. Forbes towards the Smith School should cease…

214 Ibid, 140
In this report, it is clear that the African American community sought to establish spaces in which black children’s education was prioritized, however at the Smith School they experienced extreme hostility once inside its walls. Following the report, Thomas Paul was appointed the new headmaster in 1849, however following the increase in public schools, the Smith School continued to lose attendance.

African American children and parents’ conflicts with the Smith School also concerned differing approaches to education promoted by colonizationists. The American Colonization Society (founded in 1817) initially involved both northern, educators and religious leaders as well as Southerners, both concerned with how to deal with the African American population in the U.S. The colonization scheme involved removing the problematic population and sending them to Africa. African Americans in Boston condemned colonization as, “clamorous, abusive, and peace disturbing.” African Americans were therefore especially passionate in their denunciation of Forbes due to his association with the colonization movement, either publically or indirectly as his treatment of his pupils indicated.

Like African American adults, many of the students’ experiences at northern schools like the Smith School stimulated their interests in abolitionist and antislavery activism. Their schooling efforts were politically charged with interests in black children’s upbringing and inclusion led to the development of juvenile antislavery societies in the 1830s. For example, William Cooper Nell’s politicization occurred during his own schooling. Nell was first educated at home and then entered public school at the

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African Meeting House church. He was highly successful in school and at thirteen graduated from Grammar School and met the requirements for the city-wide award of a scholarship for “the most deserving pupils.” However, as an African American youth, Nell was denied the medal. In spite of this, Nell found a way to attend the dinner by, “ma[king] good my court with one of the waiters, who allowed me to serve others as a fee for serving myself.” Once there, a teacher admitted to him, “you out to be here with the other boys,” to which Nell thought, “If you think so why have you not taken steps to bring it about.” Indeed, the incident had a powerful impact on Nell’s approach to education, and after that day he promised himself, “God helping me, I would do my best to hasten the day when the color of the skin would be no barrier to equal school rights.”

Nell later practiced law then befriended William Lloyd Garrison, becoming an active participant in the abolitionist movement.

As a youth, William Cooper Nell was a leader of the Garrison Juvenile Society, an organization established in the early 1830s. The editor of the juvenile magazine, *The Slave’s Friend* (1836-1838), claimed credit for the creation of such societies by inspiring interest in the antislavery cause through the reach of paper. Many of these societies were directly associated with other abolitionist and antislavery organizations, and some consisted of interracial membership. The Chatham Street Chapel Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society, existed as “an Auxiliary to the New York City Anti-Slavery Society,” to

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217 Uzelac, *William Cooper Nell*, 8
218 Jacobs, “The Nineteenth Century Struggle Over Segregated Education in the Boston Schools,” 77

Horton, James Oliver and Lois E., *In Hope of Liberty*, 217
which Lewis Tappan celebrated children’s role in the movement through their early
developmental upbringing concerning the ills of slavery. These beliefs, argues Deborah
C. De Rosa, diverged from the established idea that children were excluded from these
types of debates.\textsuperscript{219}

The existence of these societies for children reinforced the notion that children
and youth should be involved in the political affairs of the period, and that African
American children possessed the capabilities to exert their own citizenship rights and
advocate for those of others. Nevertheless, juvenile societies and organizations were met
with condemnation by those with different conceptualizations of childhood and the role
of children in issues that were presumably reserved for adults. Lydia Maria Child claimed
that the efforts to involve children in the antislavery cause were misguided and
overlooked the susceptibility of children’s minds and their inability to comprehend such
matters. Child argued, “children are of necessity guided by others, and because this step
is involved with questions evidently above juvenile capacities…haste to invest them with
the attributes of citizenship appears premature, and almost ridiculous.”\textsuperscript{220}

Despite this criticism, many juvenile societies were established and demonstrated
the promise of the future of antislavery and abolitionist activism. Societies were
established throughout the United States in Ohio, Rhode Island, Maine, New Jersey, New
York, and Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{221} The Junior Antislavery Society of Philadelphia was
organized in 1836 in order to “use every honorable means to effect [slavery’s] speedy

\textsuperscript{219} Deborah C. De Rosa, \textit{Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830-1865},
(Suny Press: 2003), 108
\textsuperscript{220} Lydia Maria Child quoted in De Rosa, \textit{Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature},
110
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid, 109
The society’s constitution offers one of the few insights into beliefs and organization of such groups at the hands of children and youth. The document indicates that membership was extended to all who were, “over the age of fifteen.” The society consisted of six subcommittees including those of Distribution, Ways and Means, Arrangement, Publishing and Printing, Free Produce, and Moral and Intellectual Improvement. The society had all male members and elected position holders.

Many of those who helped established the societies and participated as members were a part of existing networks of abolitionist parents, families, and communities. African Americans in Boston helped establish the Garrison antislavery juvenile society, the first of its kind. Susan Paul, the daughter of the former headmaster of the Smith School Thomas Paul, led the Garrison led the society’s juvenile choir. Susan Paul was also a teacher, became involved in the New England Anti-Slavery Society (NEASS) in 1833 after her classroom at Boston’s Primary School Number Six was observed by William Lloyd Garrison and other members as part of interests in black schooling. Here, her students recited their lessons by singing, the first formation of the juvenile choir. Paul’s choir performed at NEASS functions and elicited praise from the audience. In a review of the choir’s performance in 1834 reflected upon the especially meaningful moments of the songs when the content directly addressed slavery. The observer recounted, “several of the pieces produced no small emotion form their bearing upon a

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223 Ibid, 5
224 Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 254
certain ‘delicate subject,’ coming as they did from those who must feel their meaning.”

Susan Paul’s choir inspired subsequent choirs including the Garrison Juvenile Choir, or which Lois Brown argues, was not as overtly political and Paul’s.

From the late eighteenth century through antebellum era, African American children attempted to take their education into their own hands by appropriating popular instructional approaches and refusing to attend schools that were deemed unsafe. By advocating for the education of their children in the North, African American children and parents confronted the racial subjugation of their children’s present and future well-being within the social and political sphere. In doing so, African American children and their parents challenged the shifting construction of childhood itself, a concept from which whites increasingly sought to exclude African American children.

These efforts were not always completely in sync with those of white, abolitionists, and were especially at odds with colonizations who also claimed their concerns lay with African American education. Highlighting the experiences of African American children in northern schools makes visible the tensions between discourse on education that encouraged all children to attend school, and the trials they faced once there. For many black children, school was often not a space of intellectual growth and achievement, but one of fear and ridicule. African American children, parents, and guardians who chose to remain at home rather than be exposed to these types of institutions, as well as those who directly challenged the schools’ policies and

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226 New England Evangelist, 25 February 1837, 1
procedures, reappropriated the space of the home and school as spaces in which black childhood was recognized and celebrated.
CHAPTER 4

IN PURSUIT OF AUTONOMOUS WOMANHOOD: BLACK MATERNAL MOURNING AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE U.S. NORTH

In a process of time, Isabella found herself the mother of five children, and she rejoiced in being permitted to be the instrument of increasing the property of her oppressors! Think, dear reader, without a blush, if you can, for one moment, of a mother thus willingly, and with pride, laying her own children, the ‘flesh of her flesh,’ on the altar of slavery—a sacrifice to the bloody Moloch! But we must remember that beings capable of such sacrifices are not mothers; they are only ‘things,’ ‘chattels,’ ‘property.’

- Sojourner Truth, Olive Gilbert ed., *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 1850

In 1826, Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree, was denied possession of her child. This experience commonly marked enslaved motherhood wherein legal ownership and social autonomy over enslaved children was denied to enslaved parents. However, the sale of Truth’s son Peter, only six at the time, occurred in the “free” state of New York after the implementation of its gradual emancipation law of 1799. The exchange of Peter also violated the law forbidding the sale of enslaved persons across the border into a slaveholding state. Despite these circumstances particular to U.S. northern slavery, Truth was unable to bring her own children out of bondage, and was faced with the inevitable separation of her son once he was sold to Alabama. Though Truth took legal action and successfully appealed the illegal sale resulting in the safe return of Peter a year later, the experience resulted in the irrevocable loss of his innocence and altered the intimate bonds

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between the mother and her child. The trauma of Southern slavery had left an indelible mark on Peter’s childhood, and on Truth’s motherhood.\textsuperscript{229}

Instances of separation, loss, and exploitation of children were not confined to southern slavery. Black women like Truth who lived outside of the slaveholding South also experienced devastation wrought by the assault on the autonomy of black mothers and their children; Truth was enslaved and self-emancipated in the antebellum North. Although sales of northern children into Southern slavery were rather rare, Truth’s experience was not unlike many of those whose children who were removed from their families and sent to northern institutions, and then indentured to settings far removed from their families. In response to these challenges placed on African American families and mothers, both physical and figurative, black northern antislavery and racial uplift discourse centralized visions of autonomous black motherhood. This chapter explores a portion of the numerous meditations on motherhood during the nineteenth century in the U.S. North as they were expressed in Truth’s narrative, published in African American newspapers, and integrated within black women’s political activism. Northern African American women constantly battled and shrewdly negotiated the terms of their motherhoods in their daily lives as exemplified by acts of maternal mourning enacted when black children were separated from their mothers. Additionally, a political rhetoric of black mothering emerged within the \textit{Christian Recorder} and \textit{Provincial Freeman}, and was espoused by prominent black women activists. This discourse on motherhood became a means of claiming subjectivity for African American children and women. In

this sense, in the midst of fraught social and economic conditions, northern African Americans expressed the liberating potential of black motherhood.

Northern black women’s constructions of motherhood remain largely undertheorized within relevant scholarship. Their politics concerning motherhood are often portrayed in ways that highlight their roles as activists who transcended traditional gendered roles or as part of interracial efforts to appeal to white women. However, these characterizations devote less attention to the significance of their social functions and personal identities as mothers. Like black children, black women of the North were often mothers who, though privileged with freedom, held a precarious and consistently contested form of freedom. Northern African American women also contributed domestic and economic labor while they negotiated racist legal and social structures, conflicting gendered and racial ideologies, and the absence of autonomy of their children. Extant scholarship on the lives and activism of the women explored here often deemphasizes their identities as mothers, assuming their relationship with their children did not have constitutive elements to their politics. However, this chapter argues that northern African American women viewed embodiments of black motherhood as a politically

\[230\] In her study of black women abolitionists, Shirley Yee has argued that African American women highlighted motherhood in order to “appeal to white women and to create a common bond between all women abolitionists and slave women.” Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 123

advantageous entry-point for the development of radical forms of activism concerning abolitionism and early black feminism.

Although the expressions of motherhood explored in this chapter were published, they encompass many of those experienced by northern, black women. Educated African American women who gained access to social and political spaces often surreptitiously and subversively made public their personal meditations on motherhood. To refer to these women as elite or middle-class as has been claimed, however, does not accurately represent the social and economic conditions of northern black communities during the nineteenth century. Similarly, not all of the women explored in this study would have been considered “educated.” As such, these women are referred to broadly as northern black women in order to make visible their differing economic and social backgrounds. Though this chapter focuses on the development of a shared rhetoric of black motherhood as articulated by specific abolitionist literature and black women activists and intellectuals, its aim is not to limit this discussion to the privileged sphere enjoyed by these select women, but instead to illustrate the political power of African American children in nineteenth century social and political movements of abolitionism, women’s rights, and racial uplift.

Nineteenth century northern black women’s lives were implicated by broader mainstream ideological trends concerned with respectability and womanhood. black women’s rhetoric on motherhood provided African American women a way of appropriating and subverting dominant, racialized constructions of womanhood. Negotiation of these competing politics has been aptly identified by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham as “politics of respectability,” a means by which black women of the
Baptist church, “equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group.”\textsuperscript{232} Within their gendered constraints, northern African American women challenged the very constructions of motherhood by assigning political authority to their embodiments of maternal care. Situating these negotiations within the developing discourse on enslaved motherhood makes clear the discursive relationship between enslaved black women of the slaveholding South and “nominally free” African American mothers of the antebellum North, experiences that are often depicted as entirely distinct.

During the antebellum era, black women in the U.S. North contemplated formulations of motherhood in response to their social conditions. The cultural and economic forces that accompanied being African American while living in the antebellum North demonstrate the myriad of ways in which northern black women’s lives during the first half of the nineteenth century were far from ideal. Gradual emancipation laws of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth impeded upon black women’s physical and emotional proximity to their children. Expressions of motherhood in the North, were informed by these conditions, as well as enslaved women’s actions and experiences throughout the U.S. South and across the Diaspora. One such influential practice included the mourning rituals enacted for children who were separated from mothers. The frequency by which children were sold and separated from their parents produced affective practices of maternal mourning. black women in the North who occupied the tenuous space between slavery and freedom also responded to the

exploitation of their children by extending special recognition to the physical and emotional deaths of their children.

During slavery, African American women established practices of maternal mourning for their children as a means of managing the emotional distress of losing a child who had died, been killed, or was sold away. Mourning played an essential role for African Americans and functioned, as Suzanne E. Smith has argued, as “one of the most central ways the slave community was able to assert its essential humanity,” and often retained elements of West African traditions. However, under conditions of enslavement, mourning was a difficult endeavor that required negotiation of one’s labor and time in ways that resisted the strict oversight of slaveholders. Extant records on deaths of enslaved children indicate that the customary rites of funerals were extended to young children, and even infants. Through the enactment of mourning practices, African Americans and especially mothers demonstrated the emotional value of their children while incurring personal and collective risk of punishment. That enslaved and newly freed mothers also mourned children who were not dead, but removed from their lives, further demonstrates the influential role of children in black women’s experiences.

The phenomenon of maternal mourning expressed towards the sale of children appeared throughout the Diaspora. When Mary Prince, enslaved in Bermuda, recalled the “black morning,” (mourning), in which she was to be sold as a child away from her mother, the details of the day had been burned into her memory, especially the actions of

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234 Charles Ball, Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave (New York: Dayton and Asher, 1859), 198
her mother who was consumed by the devastating sale and was continually, “weeping for the loss of her children.” In her 1831 narrative, Prince recounted the ritual-like process her mother undertook to prepare her children for the auction block. She performed the mournful act of wrapping her children in thick clothing and lamented, “See, I am shrouding my poor children; what a task for a mother!” After Prince and her sisters were sold separately to different slaveholders, her mother “hugged and kissed us, and mourned over us.”

Though Sojourner Truth was enslaved in New York, a region vastly different from the plantation labor of the West Indies, mourning also accompanied the sale of a child in Truth’s representation of motherhood. In the narrative of Sojourner Truth’s life as edited by Olive Gilbert in 1850, Truth recalled the event of the sale of her brother and the emotional response that it elicited by her parents. The memory of the observations she made of her parents when faced with the separation of her brother provides a compelling depiction of practices of mourning for children in the North who were not yet dead, though they have been permanently removed from their families. Truth described how her parents, whom she portrays as having a “natural affection for their offspring,” reconstructed the event to her “for hours, recalling and recounting every endearing, as well as harrowing circumstance that taxed memory could supply, from the histories of those dear departed ones, of whom they had been robbed, and for whom their hearts still

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235 Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. With a Supplement by the Editor. To which is Added, the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African*, (London: F. Westley and A.H. Davis, 1831), 4-5
bled.” The loss of Truth’s enslaved brother, though still alive, represented a loss of a family and community member who possessed emotional capital. Though enslaved children’s labor often did not meet a practical economic need for their families, as was the case for Truth’s family, children’s relationships with their mothers satisfied a shared affective need and desire.

The religious education Truth received from her mother, Mau-mau Bett, attempted to prepare her for moments of loss by surrendering one’s life to God. In the occasional undisturbed time Truth’s mother possessed with her children she would, “endeavor to show [her children] their Heavenly Father, as the only being who could protect them in their perilous condition.” Her mother had anticipated and accepted her imminent sale away from her children and thus relinquished her fate and authority over the children to a higher power. Enslaved women often managed to communicate in coded language and gestures to their children the inevitability of disruptive events. This action provided enslaved mothers a form of control during otherwise devastating situations as they attempted to pass on a sense of knowledge and comfort to their children. Nevertheless, in 1810, Truth was sold to John Neely Jr. and witnessed as her mother, “set down and wept as though her heart would break.”

Truth’s own encounters with the forced-separation of her child Peter elicited a more active response than the religious and philosophical meditations of her mother.

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237 Truth, Narrative, 18
239 Painter, Sojourner Truth, 13
Though Truth was self-emancipated, her children remained enslaved and as such, she occupied the liminal space between enslavement as freedom. Truth had no legal ownership over her son and when Peter was sold to the slaveholder Solomon Gedney, the physical distance between them coupled with the loss of autonomy proved too excessive for Truth to bear. Other enslaved women faced similarly oppressive situations. Harriet Jacobs also privileged a form of autonomy over her children in which she remained physically close to them. When Jacobs escaped slavery, she endured prolonged physical confinement to remain near her children rather than risk the threat of sale and permanent separation. For both women, separation from their children made life unbearable, regardless of their “free” status.

Truth determined to enact Peter’s safe return and began by traveling to New Paltz and confronting her former mistress, Sally Dumont. Dumont responded with racist disdain for an enslaved black child. According to Dumont, Truth’s claim over her son was merely, “a fine fuss to make about a little nigger!” To that Truth demanded, “I’ll have my child again.” Through the aid of Quakers abolitionists, as well as lawyers John H. Rutzer and A. Bruyn Hasbrouck, Truth was advised to appear before a grand jury in Ulster County. After swearing before the jury that her child had been taken, she was supplied with a writ to deliver to Solomon Gedney. Truth walked “eight or nine miles” to do so. Meanwhile, Gedney was told by his own lawyer to return the boy or else he might be forced to pay one thousand dollars and serve fourteen years in prison so months later he returned with Peter. Peter was reunited with his mother, though not as a free child as he was still enslaved. Through the public legal action taken to retrieve her son, Truth was introduced to the contentious public debates over slavery and emancipation, an
experience that exposed her to anti-slavery networks and initiated her entrance into political activism.\(^{240}\)

Despite Truth’s efforts, when Peter returned he responded to his mother with distress and consternation, an emotional response that is not unsurprising for a child who recently endured a physically and psychologically traumatic experience. Peter “denied” his mother and entreated to be returned to his master who had “brought him from the dreadful South.” After coaxing from Truth, he finally admitted, “Well, you do look like my mother used to.”\(^{241}\) This would have undoubtedly been an agonizing reunion for Truth after her laborious and expensive efforts to retrieve Peter. The case represented one means by which Truth transformed the religious reasoning her mother had expressed at the separation and loss of her son to the resolve and determination to reconstitute Truth’s own family when she was faced with the sale of her own child. Her published work countered assumptions of black mothers’ perceived lack of control over the fate of their children and transformed affective mourning to active determination. This shifting expression of motherhood represented changing notions of black women’s autonomy over their children as informed by a response to the conditions of enslavement and newly-acquired freedom.

The public declarations of African American women and their children contributed to antebellum discourse on enslaved motherhood within abolitionist literature and free black women’s writings and activism. In its inception as a forum for black Abolitionists, the Christian Recorder sought to empower African American women as

\(^{240}\) Nell Irvin Painter, “Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic,” Gender & History, Vol. 2 No.1 Spring 1990, 3-16

\(^{241}\) Truth, Narrative, 47-53
embodying a Christian, moral motherhood in the upbringing of their children. The

*Christian Recorder* was the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal

Church in Philadelphia, and was influenced by religious rhetoric that merged Christianity

with the black experience. The newspaper was written primarily for an African American

readership and its discourse on black motherhood reflected the aims of its northern, free

African American activists.

The distinction between the lived experiences of free blacks and the discourse on

family, motherhood, and childhood espoused by the *Christian Recorder* and other

African American newspapers has been the subject of scholarship on the antebellum

northern black community. James Oliver Horton has argued that notions of gender

division and domesticity were prevalent in black newspapers. Horton highlights the ways

in which these newspapers promoted visions of black families that were, “both liberating

and burdening for black people.” Black women were advised to perform duties of true

womanhood wherein they were responsible for household chores, the education of their

children, and high moral standing as part of racial uplift ideology. These messages were

in conflict with the living conditions of the North where black women frequently worked

as servants, were perceived as sexually promiscuous, and had limited resources for their

children.\(^{242}\) Chanta Haywood argues that the *Christian Recorder* was informed by an

effort for free African Americans to construct discourses on “model families, model

children, and model behavior for an ethical or religious agenda and for political and

social reconstruction.” In her reading of the articles directed at African American

\(^{242}\) James Oliver Horton, “Freedom’s Yoke: Gender Conventions Among Antebellum Free Blacks.” *Feminist Studies*, (Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 1986), 58
children, Haywood aptly demonstrates the ways in which northern free African Americans constructed black childhood in terms that countered hegemonic constructions of black children as inferior. Like Haywood, I also problematize characterizations of publications for northern African Americans as “assimilationist,” and engage those who published in the Christian Recorder with an eye to the subjugated conditions particular to the antebellum North. Thus, the differences between message and lived experience within northern black’s notions of motherhood are not overlooked, but are complicated. Free black women did not have equal access to “respectable” motherhood as did white women. They therefore imagined motherhood as a potentially powerful autonomous space in an increasingly ambiguous world. The pages of the Christian Recorder became a site to produce and circulate constructions of black motherhood that in one sense reinforced gendered notions of domesticity, while reaffirming forms of black women’s subjectivity.

Throughout the publication of the Christian Recorder, articles with varying titles such as “Advice to Mothers,” “A Mother’s Love,” and “My Mother Knows Best,” centralized the role of black motherhood. The articles on motherhood that preceded emancipation countered racist claims of dysfunctional black families and irresponsible black mothers under slavery. These articles perceived of black mothers as powerful actors with the ability to instill not only religious morals, but also social lessons that resonated with the northern, free black readership.

Published on the eve of the Civil War in February of 1861, “To Mothers” authored anonymously represented the significance of black motherhood in the North. The didactic piece features twenty steps African American women ought to enact in order to embody proper motherhood. Many of these reflect the northern black community’s ideas about religion, education, motherhood and childhood. The article begins with a commentary on the role of women in the education of the children with the phrase, “the first book read and the last book laid aside by every child is the conduct of its mother.” Here, motherhood is equated with education. The focus on the role of black women in the education of black children was primarily a northern middle-class phenomenon due to the restrictions placed on literacy under the labor demands of slavery as well as the anti-literacy laws of the South. African American women were given the influential role of teachers of young, malleable minds. Indeed, the third recommendation further imbues values of education and motherhood, encouraging women to “let your whole course be to raise your child to a high standard.” This recommendation was in line with sentimental notions of motherhood during the mid-nineteenth century. While proper upbringing of children had previously been assigned to males, as white middle-class values began to confine women’s labor to the home, the focus of their labor evolved to encompass the educational in additional to emotional care of their children. Therefore, the previous economic attachment connected to children’s labor evolved into an emotional protection of childhood as a developmental phase free from work. Teaching their children at home would have been difficult for most northern African American women as their

244 Horton, “Freedom’s Yoke,” 52-55
labor was never solely, under slavery and within economic conditions of the North, confined to the realm of the domestic sphere.

During the nineteenth century, a mother’s value as a woman was tied to the proper upbringing of her children according to the established codes of womanhood and domesticity. However, for free African American women, to aspire to such an ideal did not reproduce dominant, middle-class family values, but instead allowed black women a form of authority over the physical space of the home, as well as of their children. Indeed, as the Christian Recorder advised mothers to, “let no one interpose between your authority and your child,” it advocated radical forms of mothering during the antebellum era by imbuing racial uplift ideology with radical and political responses to racist depictions of black mothers.\(^\text{246}\) Such expressions of motherhood during the ambiguous status of freedom in light of the 1850 passage of Fugitive Slave Act and a war over slavery, were truly profound in that they attempted to claim authority over black children, a group whose status was marked socially as inferior and therefore not requiring maternal care, and economically as sources of labor- indentured, apprenticed or enslaved. Northern African Americans emphasized the power of controlling the minds and futures of their children by subverting Christian piety and moral respectability.

The article titled, “The Influence of a Mother’s Prayers,” published in the Christian Recorder on February 16, 1861 was selected from the 1859 Joseph A. Collier Presbyterian publication, Christian Home or Religion in the Family. However, as it appeared in the African American periodical, Collier’s intended meaning of the religious vignette was altered and instilled with social significance specific to the northern black

\(^{246}\) *Christian Recorder*, 1861, “To Mothers,” February 9, Accessible Archives, Inc.
community. The article describes the life of a sailor who left his mother who had been widowed in order to pursue a life of “vice and profligacy.” The sailor endures a wreck at sea, and thoughts of his mother’s prayers give him the strength to survive. The article ends with the message that “many a parent, whose children, now tossed on life’s story sea, shall yet be saved in answering to their preserving prayers.” Their children, once safe from life’s dangers, will tell their mothers, “Mother, I knew you’d pray me home.” ²⁴⁷ The literal implications of the poem would have directly related to the experiences of northern blacks who were frequently employed in the maritime industry. However, the poem also implies subversive themes of separation of children, an event that frequently plagued free black mothers whose children might be taken at any moment. The *Christian Recorder* provided northern black women with practical ways of dealing with such loss through prayer, and advised that the power of such prayer would not only aid in dealing with the challenges to a mother’s authority over her children, but would ultimately successfully return children to their mothers, physically or spiritually.

The *Christian Recorder’s* role in the construction of discourse on northern black motherhood was not confined to literary commentary. The newspaper also advertised events designed specifically for black mothers. The December 6th issue in 1862 encouraged free black women to attend a lecture on motherhood given by Reverend Elisha Weaver, editor of the newspaper, at Brick Wesley Church. The event proposed to “wake up mothers to their duty.” Women were charged 15 cents, half of which went to the *Christian Recorder*. The event was expected to illicit high attendance as the

²⁴⁷ *Christian Recorder*, 1861, “The Influence of a Mother’s Prayers,” February 16, Accessible Archives, Inc.
organizers hoped to sell 500 tickets. Such lectures were intended to instill African American women with particular values of motherhood embedded within notions of respectability. These perspectives were undoubtedly gendered and commonly espoused critical commentary of women who did not express womanhood along axes of education, domesticity, and submissiveness. However, these notions of free motherhood also attempted to construct black motherhood in ways that countered subjugation of black children. African American women influenced and adopted such articulations of motherhood in their own contributions to the newspaper.

Contribution to African American periodicals was one of the ways in which northern black women entered and participated in the public political landscape. As Eric Gardner has argued, the newspaper was, “a center of early African American activism, educational opportunities, and church-related efforts (including publication).” African American women including Sallie Duffin, Lizzie Hart, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and many others contributed poems, short stories, and political commentary to the newspaper. However, women whose personal narratives cannot easily be traced within the historical archive also influenced discourse on motherhood in the *Christian Recorder* and throughout other black periodicals. “Home-Training” (April 12, 1862) is one such case in which there is not any biographical information identifying the other author other than the name, Minnie, but it is a reasonable assumption that she was a woman and likely African American, as representative of the majority of the periodical’s predominantly

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African American readership.\textsuperscript{249} The article provides a religious characterization of the duties of parents and mothers in the proper care of their children. Minnie warns parent-readers of the newspaper against merely sending their children to Sabbath school without supplementing their educational and religious instruction at home. Sabbath schools were a valuable means of education for African American children in the antebellum North in the midst of practices of racial segregation and discrimination that limited black children’s access to quality educational spaces.

Though the author reinforced the role of such institutions for the instruction of children, Minnie also demonstrates the potential gains introduced by the educational involvement of both parents. The article argues, if African Americans served the jobs of both parent and instructor, “what a different world this would be!” Though she emphasized the role of mothers and fathers in the schooling of their children, the duty belonged particularly to the mother who, “exerts a mighty influence for weal or wo upon the future lives of her children.” Minnie advises that, parents broadly, but “especially mothers,” hold the power to guide their children’s future success. The expectation that black mothers should perform domestic labor assumes a condition of economic stability to which many northern African American women did not have access. If women were to educate their children at their homes, they would be forced to forgo forms of labor that were often essential to the financial stability of their families. However, Minnie offers a notion of black motherhood she claimed rivaled that of the artist Benjamin West whose, “mother’s kiss made [him] a painter.” In doing so, Minnie subverted the proslavery

\textsuperscript{249} Eric Gardner, “Remembered (Black) Readers: Subscribers to the \textit{Christian Recorder}, 1864-1865” \textit{American Literary History}, (Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2011, pp. 229-259), 229
discourse on black motherhood in which mothers lacked social value and played an
insignificant, and sometimes harmful, role in the livelihood of her children.  

The Publications of the Christian Recorder issued during the Civil War and under
the editorship of Elisha Weaver were distributed throughout the South by Union army
soldiers.  

The circulation of articles concerned with the influential role of mothers may
not have resounded as strongly in the South as they did in the North, a context that not
only included frequent sale of enslaved children but also infant mortality rates that
doubled those of white children. However, “A Mother’s Influence,” authored by “U.
Press” and published on December 17, 1864 depicted the authority of maternal bonds that
were initiated by the birth of a child, beginning with the “first and faintest dawn of
intellectual consciousness.” According to the article, all mothers possess, “a powerful
influence [that] is already passing from the face and voice of the mother to the heart of
the child.” The article directly addresses motherhood under slavery and claims that
despite separation of an enslaved mother from her child, the “heart of the child was still
in the home of his mother.” This representation served dual, but distinctive, purposes
for enslaved and free black women. For African American women in the North, the
article counteracted the near-constant representation of the lack of autonomy of enslaved
mothers while demonstrating the natural authority of black motherhood. If the periodical
found its way to enslaved women, it attempted to provide hope and healing to the

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250 Minnie, Christian Recorder, 1862 “Home-Training,” April 12, Accessible Archives, Inc.
251 Gardner, Unexpected Places, 133
Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 95
Archives, Inc.
otherwise devastating situation of the separation of a child from her mother by reinforcing the power of instinctual maternal bonds that were maintained despite physical estrangement.

   Expressions of black motherhood produced by the *Christian Recorder* countered the near-constant debasement of African Americans in the bourgeoning field of proto-eugenics or racial pseudoscience. This proslavery discourse was introduced as a justification to the constant break-up of enslaved families by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781). By the antebellum era, biological notions of enslaved mother’s inherent inferiority became fully entrenched within mainstream writings on blacks. In 1858, Louisiana slaveholder George S. Sawyer asserted that instead of “emotions of parental and kindred attachment, lust and beastly cruelty” drove African American women’s emotional desires.254 The same year, Thomas R. R. Cobb claimed that African Americans’ “natural affections are not strong, and consequently he is cruel to his offspring, and suffers little by separation from them.”255 To invoke affective and influential care of children enacted by black mothers therefore directly opposed the increasing popularity and legitimacy of such gendered notions of racial inferiority. Indeed, variations of articles on motherhood included “A Mother’s Love,” “Maternal Influence,” and “A Mother’s Influence,” were published throughout the antebellum period within other African American periodicals including *The Colored American* and *The Freedmen’s Journal*. This repeated focus on African American

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254 George S. Sawyer, *Southern Institutes; or, an Inquiry into the Origin and Early Prevalence of Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Philadelphia, 1858), 222

maternity as tied to the state of motherhood rather than the mere act of birth presented a direct challenge to the animalistic characterization of enslaved mothers and their emotional detachment from their children.

Discourse on motherhood was also central within the Canadian newspaper edited by Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the *Provincial Freeman* (1854-57). Shadd Cary was a well-known black abolitionist, women’s rights activist, and emigration lecturer, editor, and writer. Shadd Cary was born in Wilmington, Delaware, but following the passage of the Fugitive Slave act of 1850, she and her family moved to Pennsylvania and eventually to Canada. She was involved in the abolitionist movement as a proponent of emigration. Through this work, she entered public debates on emigration and women’s roles in the abolitionist movement.\(^{256}\) Cary had been a public figure throughout both the abolitionist and women’s rights movements when she founded the newspaper *Provincial Freeman* in 1854 and continued as contributor and editor until it ceased publications in 1857. As editor of the paper, Shadd Cary published constructions of motherhood that were shaped by the conditions of freedom in the North as well as her own identity as a woman and a mother. Although she is commonly studied in relationship to abolitionist work, exploration of her own activism concerning education of children, as well as the newspaper’s construction of motherhood in an antebellum context expand analyses of Shadd Cary’s activism.

In her public engagements and activism, Mary Ann Shadd Cary struggled to balance an adherence to gender roles deemed appropriate for nineteenth century women

while challenging racism and sexism. Historian Jane Rhodes argues that Shadd Cary would adopt “Victorian femininity to shield her from the attacks of her enemies,” particularly during the instances in which when she was opposed by figures like Henry and Mary Bibb and James Holly on the issue of Canadian emigration and education of black children. Bibb, Holly, and others expected Shadd Cary to adopt traditional gender conventions, Shadd Cary asserted that it was instead men who violated these conventions by refusing to treat her in a ‘ladylike’ fashion.\textsuperscript{257} Though Shadd Cary unconventionally married later in life, she enacted a conscious negotiation of dominant gendered ideologies and positioned black motherhood as a powerful influencer within the abolitionist and women’s rights movements.

Though Shadd’s political stance on emigration was an integral element to her anti-slavery politics, she differed from Mary and Henry Bibb on the topic of public schooling. While Mary Bibb reached out to the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.) for aid in the issue of poor schooling conditions, Shadd claimed that black parents also paid taxes and therefore deserved quality buildings.\textsuperscript{258} She published her stance on the discriminatory treatment facing black children in Canada in the \textit{Provincial Freeman} on November 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 1855 by observing that “large and handsome school houses are erected for the children of the whites, while but a single miserable contracted wooden building is set apart for the children of the colored taxpayers of the entire town.”\textsuperscript{259} This perspective was in opposition to Henry and Mary Bibb’s idea to create a school

\textsuperscript{257} Rhodes, \textit{Mary Ann Shadd Cary}, 63  
\textsuperscript{258} Yee, \textit{Black Women Abolitionists}, 68  
\textsuperscript{259} Mary Ann Shadd Cary, \textit{Provincial Freeman}, 1855, November 3, Accessible Archives, Inc.
specifically designated to black children, and the issue of racially separate schools for black children eventually led Shadd to break with the A.M.E. church. The well-documented feud between Shadd, the Bibbs, was therefore centered around the proper education of black children in the North. Shadd eventually extended her political stances on the issue of black children’s education and the role of black mothers in the publications of the *Provincial Freeman*.

In 1854, Mary Ann Shadd Cary became the first African American woman to edit a newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*. As editor, Shadd Cary constructed narratives of black motherhood that challenged dominant racialized and gendered notions of the inferiority of black women. Although Cary was not yet a mother while she edited the *Provincial Freeman*, the forms of Victorian womanhood to which she aligned herself positioned women as domestic and as proper caretakers to children. In this sense, forms of womanhood informed by sentimental motherhood shaped Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s public expression of femininity in her participation as an abolitionist and women’s rights activist. In many of its articles on black women and motherhood the *Provincial Freeman* reinforced beliefs in the powerful influence of free black mothers. The article titled “Female Education,” published June 7, 1856 provides salient representations of free black motherhood. The article details the desires of African American children to be educated. As motivation for young girls it emphasizes their power over their children insisting that mothers “sit on a throne of power at the very fountain of life. She is a

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260 Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 69
goddess of all the springs and rivulets of humanity…she wields a scepter of vast power.”

In this passage, black motherhood is imagined in ways that evoke the monarchies of
mythic Africa. It gestures to legacies of motherhood and womanhood that precede the
slave trade with its elevation of African womanhood to the status of goddess.

The article continues its characterization of motherhood by claiming, “Oh, it is a
burning shame that our women are not educated to a greater vigor of body and mind!
They should be strong in will, thought, action, love, resolution, they should be stout-
hearted, high-souled, brave-purposed, yet always womanly.”

Seemingly contradictory elements emerge out of this passage as it instructs mothers to encourage their female
children to be strong-willed, yet womanly. The characteristics assigned these young girls,
education and empowerment, directly opposed hegemonic nineteenth century
representations of black motherhood as unstable, uncaring, and powerless and insists that
women can be educated while preserving their femininity and womanhood. The
_Provincial Freeman_ constructs motherhood in language that highlights the ways in which
mothers possess the ultimate authority and esteem.

Though in the years after editing the _Provincial Freeman_, Mary Ann Shadd Cary
married and bore children of her own, her perception of the duties of black mothers are
most clearly gleaned from the pages of her newspaper. In this context under the aims of
the abolitionist movement, Shadd Cary embraced constructions of free and influential
black motherhood. Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s navigation of male-dominated politics
created new spaces for African American women activists. One of these women, Frances
Ellen Watkins Harper gained prominence as an African American orator and writer on

262 “Female Education,” _Provincial Freeman_, June 7, 1856
the heels of Shadd Cary’s activism. The public relationship between the two women is clear, as Shadd Cary published works authored by Harper in the *Provincial Freeman*. Like Shadd Cary, Harper capitalized on discourses of black motherhood established during the abolitionist movement, including those she helped create as a contributor to the *Christian Recorder*, in order to reinscribe and reconstruct black motherhood.

In 1825, Harper was born free in Maryland. Her 1854 move to Philadelphia spurred her involvement in the abolitionist movement. Though she participated in the Underground Railroad and contributed to the *Christian Recorder* she is perhaps best known for her novel, *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* published in 1892. However, her activism in abolition, suffrage, and temperance movements was well-known and influential. Harper married at age thirty-five, rather late in life, in 1860 and bore one daughter and was step-mother to an additional three. Harper continued to lecture even after her husband passed in 1864.²⁶³ For as prominent as Harper was in her time, there is a surprisingly scant body of historical research done on her activism and constructions of motherhood. Scholars such as Frances Smith Foster have claimed this to be a problem of the archive citing a lack of evidence on the influence of motherhood in Harper’s life and activism. Foster writes, “We have no information about the effect that motherhood had upon her career.”²⁶⁴ These claims do not reflect her numerous poems, essays, and lectures of which motherhood is the central theme. To fill this presumed archival void, I interpret Harper’s own meditations on motherhood as well her physical embodiment of black womanhood as connected to her identity as a mother and as a formative force to her

²⁶³ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 4-10
²⁶⁴ Foster, *A Brighter Coming Day*, 18
politics. Throughout the nineteenth century, Frances Harper’s public persona in her lecturing, as well as the content and form of her literary writings, established practical public behaviors for African American women, in addition to sophisticated theoretical visions of black Motherhood that valued black women’s roles in the eradication of slavery and gender discrimination.265

The theme of black motherhood permeated Harper’s poetry throughout her writings during the antebellum era. Many of her poems evoked elements of the trope of mourning inherent in the loss of enslaved children. However, where proslavery and antislavery literature on enslaved motherhood had concentrated on the exploitation and trauma of enslaved black mothers, Harper substituted forms of resistance and authority inherent in black women’s identities. “The Slave Auction,” (1854) described the sale of children and the separation of enslaved families in highly sentimentalized form. Undoubtedly, such events contained “streaming eyes,” “bitter cries,” and a “mournful” crowd, outside of Harper’s fictionalized representation. However, by assigning affective responses to enslaved people, Harper directly countered the dehumanization of the black population and the alienation of black motherhood. Enslaved mothers did not respond to the deaths and separations of their children with stoicism, as it was represented in racist literature on enslaved mothers being circulated, but instead were filled with “anguish and distress,” for their children. Indeed, Harper argues that the emotional responses of enslaved mothers did not rival but actually surpassed those of white parents who had buried their own children:

Ye who have laid your love to rest,

And wept above their lifeless clay,
Know not the anguish of that breast,
Whose lov’d are rudely torn away.²⁶⁶

In this passage, Harper’s construction enslaved mother’s emotional response to their children’s sale claimed black women’s subjectivity through the experience of maternal mourning, an undeniably human affect.

Harper’s 1857 poem “The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio” published in the book *Poems on Miscellaneous Subject* revealed an act of political agency, though marked by tragedy, not typically assigned to enslaved black women. When Harper wrote the poem, she was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner’s infanticide one year prior. The case amassed national attention, and the events of the death were used to demonstrate the heartless nature of enslaved mothers and the deadly consequences of the injustices of slavery. However, Frances Harper challenged designations of deviant motherhood by highlighting Garner’s love for her children and by extension, her humanity. Her poem is written from the perspective of Garner, permitting the reader to enter the intimate space of an enslaved woman’s heart and mind. When faced with the capture of her children, the woman in Harper’s poem who is described as a “mournful mother,” determines “if Ohio cannot save, I will do a deed for freedom,” and will “find each child a grave.” The children’s only opportunity for freedom was “through the portals of the tomb.”²⁶⁷ Harper constructed Garner’s act of infanticide through the oppositional characterizations of life and freedom, and enslavement and death. For Garner and the woman in the poem, there could be no life for her children under slavery, especially considering the prospect of their potential separation, as slaveholders threatened the sale

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²⁶⁶ Frances Harper, “The Slave Auction,” in Foster, *Brighter Coming Day*, 64
of children as punishment for attempted escapes. The enslaved mother therefore mourned the loss of her children when faced with their re-enslavement, a condition worse than death.

Harper’s meditations on black motherhood were not confined to literary spaces. In 1892, Harper's notions of black motherhood became fully entrenched in racial uplift politics as represented by her “Enlightened Motherhood” address given to the Brooklyn Literary Society. By the time Harper presented at the Brooklyn Literary Society, racial uplift politics had become fully embedded within the cultural and political atmosphere of many black women’s lives as part of the black women’s club movement. The failures of Reconstruction that led to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, mass lynchings, and Jim Crow laws did not only affect African Americans struggling to gain social and economic standing in the South. Northern African Americans also faced de facto forms of segregation and discrimination that led to declining social and economic conditions. For those engaged in racial politics amidst the nadir period, competing notions of racial consciousness vied for legitimacy. Elizabeth McHenry has highlighted the social function of such societies beyond the practice of reading. Education, and reading in particular, became a form of identity-making as a disassociation from slavery. The political activism of northern black women was often fostered within mutual aid and literary societies popularized in the North during the antebellum era. For African American women with limited access to publishing and public political activism, the public reading and exchange of texts became a liberating space.²⁶⁸

In this context, Frances Harper began her “Enlightened Motherhood,” address by referencing this shift in racial dynamics citing, “It is nearly thirty years since an emancipated people stood on the threshold of a new era, facing an uncertain future.” Drawing distinction between the former powerlessness of black mothers and future possibilities, Harper claimed, “the work of mothers of our race is grandly constructive. It is for us to build above the wreck and ruin of the past more stately temples of thought and action.” In the 1892 speech, Harper expanded antebellum representations of free black motherhood by creating the qualifier, “enlightened motherhood,” distinguishing her construction of motherhood from one that was natural or ascribed based solely on reproduction.

Some races have been overthrown, dashed in pieces, and destroyed; but to-day the world is needing, fainting, for something better than the results of arrogance, aggressiveness, and indomitable power. We need mothers who are capable of being character builders, patient, loving, strong, and true, whose homes will be uplifting power in the race. This is one of the greatest needs of the hour. No race can afford to neglect the enlightenment of its mothers.

Harper’s vision of enlightened motherhood identified mothers as possessing the highly valued responsibility of raising black children of “good character.”269 African American women in Brooklyn, New York would have found these articulations of black motherhood in line with the racial uplift politics of which they were familiar. Throughout Harper’s speech, the women of the Brooklyn Literary Union heard black mothers described in Christian terms, and also as powerful moral influencers in ways that did not patronize, but instead empowered them to activate their own maternal authority.

269 Harper, “Enlightened Motherhood,” 1892, in Foster, A Brighter Coming Day, 84
Discourse on black motherhood in Frances Harper’s published works and speeches did not originate from the theoretical social gains of the post-emancipation era. The roots of these notions of black motherhood were informed by their experiences of enslavement, the marginalization of their children, and the politics of the northern black womanhood espoused by African American newspapers and promoted by black women activists. As such, black women in the U.S. North envisioned physical and rhetorical black children as capable of inspiring meaningful social and political perspectives. Serious consideration of the claims of these women for autonomous motherhood, as well as their acts of maternal mourning, not only reimagines the fraught space of black motherhood often depicted as transgressive and inhuman, but also extends analyses of black childhood to include the prominent constructions of black motherhood.
EPILOGUE

FROM SARAH ROBERTS TO TRAYVON MARTIN: OLD AND NEW BOUNDARIES OF CHILDHOOD

Listen, kids who die—
Maybe, now, there will be no monument for you
Except in our hearts
Maybe your bodies’ll be lost in a swamp
Or a prison grave, or the potter’s field,
Or the rivers where you’re drowned like Leibknecht
But the day will come—
You are sure yourselves that it is coming—
When the marching feet of the masses
Will raise for you a living monument of love,
And joy, and laughter,
And black hands and white hands clasped as one,
And a song that reaches the sky—
The song of the life triumphant
Through the kids who die.
- Langston Hughes, “Kids Who Die”

In 1855, a young girl named Sarah Roberts’ attempts to attend a closer, all white school in place of the more distant and more controversial Boston’s Smith School resulted in the prohibition of segregated schools in the state of Massachusetts. The case, Roberts v. City of Boston, centered on the experience of the child’s long and arduous journey to and from school on foot, a practice that marked generations of northern African American children’s access to schooling. Sarah Roberts’ father, Benjamin Roberts described his childhood walks to school, a racialized experience in which he was introduced to the distinct boundaries separating white children from himself.

Travelling from the residences of our parents, there, we passed the doors of several schools, and while we witnessed the boys and girls of our neighbors enjoying the blessings of the nearest schools to their homes, we were not only
compelled to go by them, but several others... The pupils of the several schools, as we passed, took particular notice of our situation; and we were looked upon by them, as unworthy to be instructed in common with others.\textsuperscript{270}

The case centered on this essential issue, that African American children did not have equal access to neighboring schools and that they incurred physical and psychological damage by traveling long distances to school. Although the Judge Lemuel Shaw ruled against Roberts, Benjamin Roberts appealed to the state legislature resulting in the passage of a law that resolved, “In determining the qualification of scholars to be admitted into any public school in this Commonwealth, no distinction shall be made on account of the race, color or religious opinion, of the applicant or scholar.”\textsuperscript{271} Sarah Roberts and her father demonstrated the ways in which northern black children traversed nineteenth century boundaries of childhood both physically and socially, and attempted to create new legal recognition of black childhood.

Sarah Roberts’ case represented the promise of antebellum activism on behalf of northern African American children. However, the case did not permanently establish protections for all African American children. The conditions of African American children’s lives, and the public activism concerning black childhood, evolved throughout the nineteenth century as the periods of the Civil War and Reconstruction invariably unsettled the lives of all American children, as well as initiated new formulations of black children as deviant. As was the case for Henry Ricks, many northern black children who came of age during the mid-nineteenth century well-aware of the stakes of the war and

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid, 229
actively participated in the battle to end slavery both directly as soldiers and indirectly as advocates of abolition. In the post-War context, emancipation signaled change, a phenomenon African Americans had grown to fear due to its indeterminate impact on enslaved families. Indeed, as Catherine Jones concludes, “children were at the heart of disputes over how emancipation and defeat would reshape the constellation of household relationships formerly anchored by slavery” and thus control of African American children by whites was used to establish and maintain racial hierarchies.\textsuperscript{272} Struggles over newly-freed children’s labor during Reconstruction were instigated by efforts to exploit African American children’s labor. African Americans expressed autonomy over their children by intervening on unfair and exploitative apprenticeship contract practices.\textsuperscript{273}

The activism of African Americans on behalf of their children during the years following Emancipation also took the form of efforts to reconstitute families and educate black children. In this context, the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission observed African American’s commitment to education and commented that African Americans were “eager to obtain for themselves, but especially for their children, those privileges of education which had hitherto been jealously withheld from them” as demonstrated by their public appeals concerning the rights of their children to be educated. In the post-bellum South, African American children and parents demanded that they be given opportunities to pursue schooling as part of their labor contracts.\textsuperscript{274} In doing so, African Americans evoked conceptions of childhood in which children’s education and cessation

\textsuperscript{272} Catherine Jones, \textit{Intimate Reconstructions: Children in Postemancipation Virginia} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015) 2


\textsuperscript{274} Heather Andrea Williams, \textit{Self-Taught}, 69-71
of labor was prioritized, adopting many of the efforts established by northern black populations. However, during Reconstruction and the subsequent Jim Crow era, particular visions of childhood dominated discussions of citizenship and freedom in ways that attempted to suppress African American children’s claims of childhood.

By the late nineteenth century, white supremacist policies limited protection afforded the category of childhood. The establishment of modern notions of childhood had become imbricated with racialized and gendered notions of subjectivity.275 The activism concerning the criminal justice system’s treatment of black children during the early twentieth century, as it has been researched by Geoff ward, challenges the narrative of children’s increasing social value exclusive of black children by exposing the emergence of social norms of deviance as tied to blackness during the Jim Crow and Progressive Eras. Ward argues that these notions had roots in the white supremacist ideology of the nineteenth century that perceived of black children as, “strange species of rigid or inflexible human clay…more suited to neglect and exploitation than to attempts at normalization and civic integration.” By the time slavery ended, African American children fell victim to punitive juvenile criminal justice systems. The creation of the convict-lease system, a harsh form of punishment and forced labor, “helped appease white populist sentiments while disenfranchising blacks, stabilizing a white power structure threatened by emancipation and Reconstruction.” African Americans responded to the formation of these cruel systems by establishing the black child-savers movement, a movement that resisted the criminalization of black children and the emergence of the

275 Ward, The Black Child-Savers, 40
parental state, an institution that emerged as a “contested and dynamic racial structure.”

At the turn-of-the twentieth century, the black child’s social and legal place in the reform policies of the Progressive Era was precarious. Many writers and intellectuals, most notably, W.E.B. Du Bois, resisted the era’s subjugation of black children by consistently and purposefully centering children in his construction of black social, political, and cultural identity. As a prolific African American intellectual, Du Bois’s writings and theorizations included the concept of black childhood as expressed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920). Du Bois directly addressed children within the pages of the *Crisis*, especially in its Children’s Number (1912-1934) and *The Brownies’ Book* (1920-1921). Du Bois’s discourse on childhood reveals how he conceived of the potentiality of the “emblematic black child” to lift, and perhaps eliminate, the veil of racial disillusionment in ways that constructed black childhood as a force that in and of itself challenges racial boundaries:

> With this Power there comes, in the transfiguring soul of childhood, the Glory: the vision of accomplishment, the lofty ideal. Once let the strength of the motive work, and it becomes the life task of the parent to guide and to shape the ideal; to raise it from resentment and revenge to dignity and self-respect.

For Du Bois, “transfiguring” was conceived as a political and theoretical tool; a means of furnishing the child-mind carefully with an awareness of the problems of the color line in ways that lead to its solution (or erasure), and this solution lies within the essence of childhood. Indeed, Du Bois’s articulations of childhood that may be read both in terms of

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the black child’s claim on U.S. citizenship, as well as the power of the “soul of childhood” to “transfigure” racial discord in a global sense.

Du Bois’s Progressive Era writings and presentation of photographs of respectable African American children in the pages of the Crisis was highly influential in the development of the era’s black political thought. These meditations were indeed relevant and foreshadowed subsequent treatment of black children at the height of Jim Crow Era violence and disenfranchisement. In 1931, the “Scottsboro Boys” case involved nine African American boys accused and convicted of rape, despite evidence that demonstrated they had not committed any crime. The boys’ treatment, including attempted lynchings as well as their sentencing, represented the criminalization and hypersexualization of black boys in the criminal justice system. By the mid-twentieth century, the concept of black childhood continually took on political significance as a central element of Civil Rights activism and reform.

Like Roberts v. City of Boston, Brown v. Board of Education (1955) considered the constitutionality of racially segregated schools and facilities in a national sense, overturning the “separate but equal” decision of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Black schoolchildren as they acted as conduits of the Supreme Court decision, and garnered sympathy while inspiring activism, in particular through the image and painting of Ruby Bridges bravely marching to school in 1960 New Orleans. Like the suffering enslaved child, exposing the abuse and murder of black children became important elements of the Civil Rights Movement. Emmett Till was lynched the same year as Brown v. Board of Education, and his mother’s decision to publically display his body in an open casket and publish images of his disfigured face forced the world to face come to terms with the
violent murder of the fourteen-year-old boy. Similarly, the 1963 deaths of Addie Mae Collins (aged 14), Cynthia Wesley (aged 14), Carole Robertson (aged 14), and Carol Denise (aged 11) at the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama evoked outcry and inspired protest including the Children’s Crusade March through downtown Birmingham.

Debates concerning black childhood continued throughout the twentieth century and persist today. The shootings and deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012, aged seventeen, and Tamir Rice in 2014, aged twelve, have reinvigorated activism concerning treatment of African Americans, in particular young boys, at the hands of police. For the assailants in these recent, infamous examples of violence, these boys were considered to be something other than children. By being perceived as deviant, dangerous, or adults, not only were black children denied the identity of a child, but they were also deprived of their lives and humanity.

New directions for political activism concerning black childhood were borne out of these recent tragedies. Social media movements claiming black Girl Magic, black Girl Genius, and black Boy Joy have assigned power and value to the brilliance of black childhood. These movements have focused on representations of black children in popular culture and media in response to the absence of positive images of black children. These trends mirror those of the nineteenth century in which children, parents, community members, and reform movements highlighted the determination and achievements African American children expressed in their daily lives.

While nineteenth century black children who lived in the northern cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York were subjected to constant forms of marginalization
including labor exploitation, exclusion from the social protections of childhood, and
denied equal treatment in education, they experienced and conceptualized new ideas of
what it meant to live at the margins of freedom. This political process influenced
discourse and activism of both the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The
exploitation of African American children became a stage upon which the long Black
Freedom Struggle has continually been fought. In this way, African Americans have
consistently capitalized on the inherent rights afforded black child in their activism.
These experiences demonstrate how African Americans contested the terms of childhood
and the nature of freedom.
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