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“Those people must have loved her very dearly”

Interracial Adoption and Radical Love in Antislavery Children’s Literature

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ABSTRACT This essay reads a little-studied, probably white-authored abolitionist children’s novel in which white parents adopt a black child and love her as much as they would a white child. *Harriet and Ellen; or, The Orphan Girls* by “Lois” (1856), depicts interracial kinship predicated on familial love and backed by radical abolitionist and antiracist politics. The novel is a test case against which to evaluate both proslavery and mainstream abolitionist representations of interracial kinship. While proslavery literature dubiously likened the system of plantation paternalism to kinship, white mainstream abolitionist literature perpetuated a similar model of white supremacist stewardship. Interracial kinship through adoption is therefore foreclosed in most white-authored abolitionist literature. In *Harriet and Ellen*, one white and one black child are adopted into white families who love them without distinction of biological parenthood or race. This essay reads the novel’s representation of interracial adoption as a model of radical love, in which black and white parents do not simply love their children similarly, but white parents love their black, adopted child. In *Harriet and Ellen*’s representation of adoption, interracial kinship more closely resembles African American depictions of valuing nonbiological black children, challenging the prioritization of biological kinship for familial love.

In the preface to her 1856 abolitionist children’s novel, *Harriet and Ellen; or, The Orphan Girls*, our author, “Lois,” writes, “I have taught in colored schools in—, Ohio, and elsewhere. I am acquainted with worthy colored people who were brought up by the Quakers; know of colored children who have been adopted in white families, and are treated as children; and have

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known colored students who were not recognized as such by their classmates, even after weeks and months of intimate acquaintance.”¹ Opening this children’s story by addressing the question of treating black children *as children*, Lois broaches a now-familiar theme in childhood studies—the historical construction of the child as white—and asks her young readers to reconsider.² Acknowledging the racism that would exclude black children from the very category of childhood, the author rejects this exclusion in favor of a relatively radical antiracist, antislavery sentiment. Treating adopted children “as children” further suggests treating them as though they are one’s *biological* children—refusing to prioritize biological kinship over relations of adoption.

While the novel’s antislavery message is its ultimate goal, the complexity of this message lies in the recognition of black children as children who can be valued even by nonbiological, white parents. By incorporating the black child into this structure of interracial family, Lois revises prominent models of white stewardship over black children that resist interracial kinship. Rather, this author advances a model that recognizes the black child as lovable kin—even for white adults.

This essay reads *Harriet and Ellen* as an interracial adoption story of radical, antiracist love. By promoting not only antislavery beliefs but also antiracist ones, *Harriet and Ellen* can be counted among the more radical texts of antislavery children’s literature.³ I argue that the novel’s radical element lies in its promotion of antiracist kinship, particularly in its representation of white people who are capable of valuing a black girl as a family

1. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen; or, The Orphan Girls* (1856; repr., Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1865), v. This novel was first published in 1856 and reprinted in 1865. All page numbers refer to the 1865 edition.

2. As Robin Bernstein and others have shown, the racist practice of construing childhood “innocence” as inherently white has often denied black children the privilege of being understood to require care and protection. See Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011). In addition to the nineteenth-century African American writing I discuss here, academic work that prioritizes black children, by writers such as Wilma King, Mary Niall Mitchell, Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Nazera Wright (and, in later historical periods, Katharine Capshaw), becomes necessary to counter historical trends in children’s literature and childhood studies that have prioritized white children and childhood to the exclusion of nonwhite children.

3. Paula Connolly defines radical abolitionist literature for children as representing slavery in the United States as “an unquestionably cruel system under which people suffered tremendous injustices” and which “often argued for racial equality and called for an immediate end to slavery.” See Paula T. Connolly, *Slavery in*

member as worthy of inclusion as a white, biological child. While this children's novel is rather moderate in its address to a readership of white children, its sentimental abolitionism, and its centering of white characters and white abolitionist sentiment in favor of black character development or interaction, the illustration of white antiracism manifesting itself in familial relation defies more prominent depictions of white abolitionist relations to black children. *Harriet and Ellen* aims toward (but falls short of) incorporating black children into the liberal norms of family and nation-state, but at the same time it insists, as did both white and black radical abolitionists, that neither the family nor the nation ought be based in white supremacy. The white supremacist system of slavery is ultimately what kills the novel's main characters, foreclosing the lives and lineages of both white and black children. In other words, *Harriet and Ellen* proposes that if white or black children would have any future, it could only be through the forms of kinship advanced by white and black radical abolitionists: in families that produce equal measures of love and care in kinship across racial difference. Insofar as families further the aims of the nation—reproducing forms of race, kinship, and power—the model of kinship and care at the center of *Harriet and Ellen* projects a nation fundamentally different from the one these two girls ultimately inhabit.

Harriet and Ellen was published in Cincinnati by the American Reform Tract and Book Society in 1856 and reprinted in 1865. In the absence of reviews of children's literature during the antebellum period, reader responses to *Harriet and Ellen* have not yet been found, but Deborah DeRosa argues that the American Reform Tract Society's impressive offerings, productivity, and geographical distribution of the society's texts ensured that "each was probably insured a widespread audience."⁴ The relative success of the American Reform Tract and Book Society might also be characterized by the fact that, according to DeRosa, it would become "the most prolific publisher and champion of women's abolitionist juvenile literature."⁵ *Harriet and Ellen* therefore appears within a larger contemporary context of abolitionist literature more generally, and abolitionist children's literature specifically. It was marketed in the back matter of the society's publications, and its eventual reprinting after the war is a sign of both its

American Children's Literature, 1790–2010 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 15.

4. Deborah DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830–1865* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 31, 36–37.

5. *Ibid.*, 34.

popularity and the society's commitment not only to abolition, but also to the ongoing work of antiracism. The author's anonymity (known only as "Lois" in sources that discuss her) prevents us at present from putting this novel into a frame of its direct influences, nor do I know what readership this novel might have had among African American people. My connections to this body of literature are therefore thematic, rather than causal, and reflective of the larger web of influences and similarities among anti-slavery and antiracist writing.

Discussing how *Harriet and Ellen* merges the genre of the orphan story with abolitionist sentimental fiction, I read this story alongside other nineteenth-century narratives of care for black children. Both fictional and nonfictional representations of black women caring for their own children abound in abolitionist literature, but depictions of white people who treat black children with as much care as black people do are rather scarce. By representing white characters who not only understand the value of black children to black parents, but also value a black child as their own, Lois presents a model of antiracist love that is foreclosed in other prominent antebellum abolitionist stories. Moreover, *Harriet and Ellen's* regard for an orphaned black child is comparable to nineteenth-century African American care for orphaned black children. It is akin to writing about orphaned black children in the black press and in African American literature. This resemblance is the most radical aspect of Lois's narrative of familial love.

I present *Harriet and Ellen* alongside antebellum depictions of interracial adoptive kinship that are foreclosed for black children in texts such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), the moderate (racist) abolitionism of the relationship between white adults and black children in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and the depiction of universal Christian kinship in children's literature such as Lydia Maria Child's abolitionist story "Mary French and Susan Easton" (1834). By reading this children's novel alongside African American writing such as Harriet Jacobs's and other nineteenth-century black press reports about caring for orphaned African American children and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), I show how *Harriet and Ellen* more closely resembles these narratives of black children in nonbiological families.

The comparativist readings I give here move across and between white abolitionist and African American-authored texts to help us understand how writers from these different racial and political positions constructed notions of kinship and childhood. I posit here that white care for black children is framed as the highest form of radical antiracist practice when it

is modeled after African American care for black children. This form of interracial kinship avoids simply reproducing racist models of stewardship, acknowledges the effects of racism and slavery on black children, and regards black children as worthy of parental love. By broadening our scope of abolitionist children's literature to include understudied—though not insignificant—texts like *Harriet and Ellen*, we can more easily counter arguments that universalize the racism of mainstream white abolitionism.

To show how *Harriet and Ellen* does this cultural and critical work, I explore how it draws on and revises common nineteenth-century generic tropes, both within and without abolitionist literature and by both white and African American writers. First, I situate *Harriet and Ellen* in its immediate domains of orphan girl narratives and abolitionist children's literature. But to understand the stakes of interracial kinship through adoption that the novel depicts, I then compare it to other white-authored abolitionist literature in which black children are not incorporated into white families but remain outside kinship relations as wards of white stewards. Finally, I compare *Harriet and Ellen* to literature about caring for black children written by African Americans, and I find that its models of care for and kinship with black children most resemble these. It is because of this resemblance that I claim *Harriet and Ellen* advances radical antiracist kinship. It proposes an antiracist futurity through the equality of love for black children across racial difference, a radical antiracist sentiment that is absent from most white-authored antislavery literature.

THE ORPHAN GIRLS AND ABOLITIONIST SENTIMENT

Harriet and Ellen merges the nineteenth-century orphaned girlhood story with the generic conventions of sentimental abolitionist narratives. The novel's subtitle, *The Orphan Girls*, suggests elements of popular novels such as *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World* even as *Harriet and Ellen* departs from these. As Carol Singley shows, "Disrupted biological families and elective family units are a defining feature of American literature."⁶ In common versions of such stories, Singley writes, orphaned girls are depicted as "seeking affiliation through adoption, needing the security

6. Carol Singley, *Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3. For discussions of adoption in later children's literature, see the "Special Issue on Orphanhood and Adoption in Children's Literature," ed. Sarah Park Dahlen and Lies Wesseling, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2015).

of home, and settling into their new families' routines with model behavior."⁷ *Harriet and Ellen's* story of *The Orphan Girls* follows this pattern to some extent. While we don't actually see the events that produce these girls as orphans, they frame the novel's opening as we read, "Harriet Glenn and Ellen Boyd . . . were both orphans, and remembered nothing of their parents."⁸ Following her parents' deaths, Harriet is raised by her grandparents. Ellen's mother was a mixed-race black woman whom the Boyds harbored as a fugitive before she died a week after arriving at their home. The Boyds have been raised as Quakers and "had lost none of that genuine kindness toward all mankind as fellow-beings, without regard to caste or color, which is so characteristic of this interesting people."⁹ Their adoption of Ellen immediately follows her mother's death and is apparently prompted by this mixed-race mother's own wishes. We read, "Mindful of their promise to the dying, that they would take care of her child, they took the little babe, then but a few weeks old, and kept it for their own. Ellen, though she knew they were not her parents, always called them father and mother."¹⁰

Harriet and Ellen truncates the orphan girl story here, emphasizing instead more specific tropes of abolitionist sentimentalism. Even though the Boyds have adopted Ellen as their child, we learn that her mother and thereby Ellen herself were legally enslaved before they escaped to the north. Ellen's slaveholder discovers, claims, and re-enslaves her. While her adoptive father searches for her in an attempt to secure her legal freedom and reclaim her as his child, Ellen is sold to a slave trader, suffers an injury from the abuse she endures, and dies just as she and Mr. Boyd are reunited. He takes her body north for burial, where her adoptive family and the larger community mourn her loss. Harriet, overcome at the loss of her best friend, dies as well, presumably of grief over slavery. In a final act of solidarity with her sisterly friend, Harriet asks her parents to inscribe on her own tombstone the words "Jesus loves the poor slave."¹¹

7. Singley, *Adopting America*, 91.

8. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 11–12.

9. Ibid., 13. Like other mainstream abolitionist literature, *Harriet and Ellen* displays a pan-Protestant version of abolitionism, marking out Quakers as distinct only within the novel's northern Christian community. I will discuss the particular religious implications of the text's abolitionism below.

10. Ibid., 14.

11. Ibid., 121.

I read *Harriet and Ellen* as part of the larger strain of mainstream, white-authored abolitionist literature most often associated with Harriet Beecher Stowe and with abolitionist children's literature more specifically.¹² My discussion of this genre follows a long history of academic work on nineteenth-century American women's writing and particularly work that has taken seriously the political and aesthetic import of sentimental literature.¹³ The role of the child in sentimental literature is significant, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler regards the role of the sentimental as not only a function of gender, but also "a product of and a response to ideas about childhood and the acts of children."¹⁴ In abolitionist children's literature, sentimentalism worked similarly to produce and reflect ideas about enslaved black people and, especially, to garner sympathy for enslaved people. Frequently didactic, this genre merged its abolitionist message with religious instruction, claiming antislavery sentiment as essential to embracing the Christian ideal of God's universal love. In opposition to proslavery Christianity's insistence on slaveholders' hierarchical position as God's intermediary masters of black people on Earth, antislavery Christianity often presented God, alone, as "master" and humans—black and white alike—as "His children." Lois preached a

12. For a discussion of antebellum abolitionist children's literature as a genre, see Deborah DeRosa's *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature*, and her edited collection, *Into the Mouths of Babes: An Anthology of Children's Abolitionist Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005). On reading Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as children's literature, see Barbara Hochman's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851–1911* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), esp. 104–30.

13. Since Ann Douglas's 1977 *The Feminization of American Culture*, literary critics have debated the role of the sentimental in American literature, focusing on points aesthetic and political, many shifting away from Douglas's dismissal of the sentimental and, especially, away from regarding sentimental texts as apolitical or unworthy of academic inquiry. See texts such as Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and the essays in Shirley Samuels's *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). My own reading of sentimentalism in abolitionist children's literature follows these dominant trends in nineteenth-century American literary studies and in childhood studies, in particular, exhibited in more recent work by writers such as Karen Sánchez-Eppler in *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Anna Mae Duane in *Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010.)

14. Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States*, xxiii.

sermon of God's universal love of white and black children in her introduction, and she used this model of God's love as the Christian model for abolitionist—and even antiracist—sentiment. Because of Quakers' prominent role in trans-Atlantic abolitionism, Quakers were often represented as a kind of shorthand for radical Christian abolitionism in this and other antislavery writing, including Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In *Harriet and Ellen*, we see the Boyds' Quakerism used as a signifier of their radical position on racial equality.¹⁵

At its outset, this abolitionist children's story resembles another: Lydia Maria Child's short story "Mary French and Susan Easton," which appeared in *Juvenile Miscellany* in 1834. We first see Child's two friends (the former white and the latter black) in a paradise in which they are unaffected by racism and which Sánchez-Eppler characterizes as an idyllic world of interracial domesticity.¹⁶ The girls' paradise is disrupted when they are both kidnapped and sold into slavery. (Mary's skin is artificially dyed for the purpose of disguising her as a black—and therefore enslavable—child.) The girls are abused, punished for vocalizing their claims to freedom, and separated. Mary's whiteness is discovered by an enslaved black woman who notices that the coloring on her skin is not permanent. Her father has set off in search of her and they are ultimately reunited. Susan is never recovered, and we never see her again following her separation from Mary.

Like Child's story, the arc of *Harriet and Ellen* also frames slavery as having effects not only on the enslaved child, but also on the peaceful northern community. *Harriet and Ellen* begins with the image of two girls who are already successfully incorporated into their respective adoptive families. The girls are morally perfect, their parents having instructed them in Christian values of kindness to others. This moral perfection can be read in the girls' friendship with one another, which is also framed as familial love, and Lois tells readers that "these orphan girls loved each other very much, so much that if they had been sisters, I doubt if they could have loved any better."¹⁷ Harriet and Ellen's sisterly friendship transcends the girls' many differences from one another. Moreover, their love also transcends their

15. For a critique of this view of Quakerism as antiracist or even universally racially progressive, see Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice* (Philadelphia: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2009).

16. See Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30.

17. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 15.

racial difference, as "it mattered not to those girls what their color was, they only knew that they loved each other, and the kind friends who filled to them the place of parents."¹⁸ This antiracist message is framed, simultaneously, as a Christian one, and at its heart is the model of Christian family.

Harriet and Ellen's message of Christian abolitionism is also indicative of its publication venue. The American Reform Tract and Book Society distinguished itself from similar publishers of religious texts (such as the American Tract Society) in its attention to abolitionism. Supported by officers who held decidedly antislavery views and having early support by the prominent white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the society circulated antislavery writing as an essential part of its organizational mission.¹⁹ In another of the society's publications, *Walter Browning; or, The Slave's Protector* (1856), a message from the Office and Depository of the American Reform Tract and Book Society appears, dated February 1, 1856. Describing the society as "the offspring of necessity, brought into existence to fill a vacuum left unoccupied by most other Publishing Boards and Institutions," it emphasizes its continuing mission: "It is the aim of the present Directors to use all possible economy, and bring out a larger series of Tracts, and especially to increase the number of Sabbath School Books, so that Sabbath Schools may be furnished with Christian Anti-Slavery Literature, in connection with other subjects, without unnecessary delay."²⁰ The back matter of *Harriet and Ellen's* 1865 edition does not contain such a notice, but advertises some three dozen books (including *Walter Browning*), most of which are labeled "for Sabbath school and family libraries," and almost one hundred tracts, sixteen of which are described as "children's tracts." Centering antislavery sentiment within its Christian instruction for children, *Harriet and Ellen* adheres to this larger publishing mission.

As a novel about "orphan girls," *Harriet and Ellen* frames the national problem of slavery as a familial one. The shared Christian family makes slavery a shared concern, as its effects on one member has implications for others. In the case of Harriet and Ellen, the girls' happy lives are similarly disrupted by the threat that slavery poses for Ellen, whose enslavability is contrasted with the girls' implied equality. The novel's subtitle suggests the story's commentary on nonnormative kinship structures. In terms of the truncated orphan plot that sets the stage for this abolitionist story, the fact

18. Ibid.

19. DeRosa, *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature*, 32.

20. *Walter Browning; or, The Slave's Protector: Founded on Fact* (Cincinnati: American Reform Tract and Book Society, 1856).

of Harriet's status as an orphan is rather extraneous. The death of Ellen's mother is an important point in her own narrative of fugitivity and explains the mixed-race child's temporary freedom in this northern town, but Harriet's status serves mainly to form her in parallel to her black counterpart. Both girls have been orphaned, but both are initially in loving families who care for them deeply and have taught them to care for one another. Even the fact that Harriet is raised by her biological grandparents does not seem to give her a status of privilege with relation to Ellen's. We come to understand that both girls are well loved by their adoptive parents and this form of family is not considered inferior to others. The parallel adoptions of Harriet and Ellen—one founded on biological relation and racial resemblance and the other lacking these factors—suggests that readers are to make no distinctions between these families as more or less valid than the other. Absent any apparent legal relations, the higher religious imperative figures these nuclear families as a microcosm of the larger Christian family, which—significantly—is a racially inclusive one.²¹

Harriet and Ellen's many differences from one another are acknowledged, but these do not impede their friendship. Additionally, the girls' dissimilarities are not framed as racialized ones. Racial difference is acknowledged only in these girls' contrasting relationships to racial oppression. Like Child's story about Mary and Susan, Harriet and Ellen's interracial friendship story takes up the unjust nature of a race-based system of slavery. The latter story also treats the more general problems of antiblack racism and white supremacy. Before Ellen is threatened with enslavement, she is exposed to the racism present in her own community. While the Boyds and the Glenns hold antiracist views, they don't (like the Frenches and Eastons) live in an isolated community free from apparent racism. As white parents of a black, mixed-race child, the Boyds acknowledge racism's presence and its danger to their daughter. The Boyds understand racism inasmuch as they try to protect Ellen from its effects by not initially telling her about her black ancestry. Following in the tradition of mixed-race literary heroines, Ellen does not know her racial background early on in the novel, although she knows she is adopted.

This does not, however, amount to Ellen's "passing" as white. Ellen's initial lack of knowledge about her African ancestry does not extend to the adults in her community. Her birth mother, a fugitive from slavery, was not

21. I discuss the novel's seemingly informal model of adoption with relation to adoption's legal conditions in the next section.

passing in her northern hometown: "Her yellow complexion and black curling hair, told plainly that she was part colored. She was what people called a quadroon, that is, one-fourth black and three-fourths white."²² Because her origins are widely known, Ellen does not pass for white in this community, and neither do her parents attempt to hide Ellen's race from anyone other than the child herself. As a result, Ellen eventually learns the knowledge from which her parents tried to shield her. We read that "she knew the history of her mother's sickness and death, and had accidentally learned that she was colored."²³ Discovering her racial difference from the majority of people in her community, Ellen also comes to understand racism. Lois explains, "She knew the deep-seated prejudice that is entertained almost every where against colored people."²⁴ However her parents might attempt to shield her from racism, they are ultimately unable to do so.

Because Ellen's race is generally known among their neighbors, Ellen's position as a daughter within a white family is a matter of controversy in her community. Some town racists are upset that Ellen is treated as an equal to white people: "Some such as these said, 'They wondered what Mr. Boyd wouldn't do next for that child; wondered if he thought he could always impose her upon his neighbors' children as an equal. To be sure, they had always treated her well, if she was colored, but it was most time she was told what she was, and a check put upon her career, before she went too far.'"²⁵ These racist remarks demonstrate that the Boyds' antiracism is deliberate. It is exercised despite opposition to their supposed "imposition" on white supremacy. The Boyds' treatment of Ellen as "an equal" of white children is radical enough to elicit this response from their racist neighbors, and they show no signs of condescending to this racist position. In this, the Boyds are represented as Christian models of antiracism.

By presenting his black daughter "as an equal" of white children, Mr. Boyd, although he may well be aware of the potential reactions from racist neighbors, maintains the expectation of her acceptance. The Glenns' acceptance of Ellen as an equal illustrates that this is not a wholly ridiculous expectation. This is one antiracist possibility for interracial acceptance: the inclusion of a nonwhite child into white structures of community and family, importantly without requiring the child to "pass" as white. The suggestion of Ellen's social equality in a predominantly white community is a fairly

22. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 39.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

radical one for antebellum abolitionist literature. I call this radical in part because the suggestion of equality between a white girl and a black girl is one specific possibility foreclosed by other nineteenth-century texts. While the national system of slavery prevents its characters from carrying out the Christian model of interracial family, the novel does give us, in its white characters, models for their relation to the black child. Lois's depiction of Ellen itself is not as interesting, then, as the depiction of her white characters' interaction with her, framed as family relations of care, treatment, and advocacy.²⁶

BLACK GIRLHOOD AND FORECLOSED ADOPTION

In *Harriet and Ellen*, adoption is more a function of sentiment and practice than a legal arrangement. The 1851 "Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act" has been regarded as the first modern U.S. adoption law; major federal adoption legislation did not appear until the late twentieth century. While this law established legal obligations between adoptive parents and children and focused on child welfare rather than adult interests, much was left to the discretion of individual judges, rather than strict policy.²⁷ Set in "the beautiful valley of the Muskingum," in the state of Ohio, *Harriet and Ellen* refers to no specific laws pertaining to adoption.²⁸ The modern reader gets the impression that adoption functions informally, rather than legally, in the narrative and, for reasons I will discuss further in a moment, the unavailability of legally recognized adoption for Ellen is yet another function of slavery.

Diana Loercher Pazicky calls the African American the "ultimate orphan," as "orphanhood . . . serves as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of slavery" and the incomplete adoption into the nation.²⁹ When

26. For work that does attend specifically to more nuanced nineteenth-century representations of black girlhood, see, for example, Nazera Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

27. For more on the legal history of adoption in the United States, see "History of Adoption Practices in the United States," Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/history/, and the University of Oregon's History of Adoption Project, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/index.html> (accessed February 18, 2016).

28. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 11.

29. Diana Loercher Pazicky, *Cultural Orphans in America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 179.

African American children are also literal orphans, fiction often converges the domestic scales of the home and the nation, simultaneously suggesting black people's incorporation into the white family and the United States. Indeed, when the system of slavery allows for the orphaning of children, these narratives converge. The possibility of Ellen's social equality within her family, among close friends, and (hinted, though not realized) in her northern town is further foreclosed by her lack of legal equality. Ellen is not secure, even within the Boyd family, by virtue of her enslaved status.

Although the establishment of adoption law set a precedent of sorts for defining nonbiological parent-child relationships, other legal factors affected relations of child guardianship. The enslavement of African American people is perhaps the most obvious of these. Enslaved mothers passed on their enslaved status to their children and thereby had no more *legal* right to them than they had to their own bodies. Even in the case of children born to enslaved women and free white men, the legal relations of slavery trumped parental relationships. We see this, for instance, in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which her children's free, white father, Mr. Sands, must purchase his own biological children from Jacobs's enslaver in order to have any legal right to them.

Enslaved status prevented some African American parents from having legal ties to either biological or nonbiological children.³⁰ An account of a legal hearing in an 1855 issue of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reprints a report from the *New Bedford Standard* regarding a guardianship dispute about an African American child. A woman had left an "adopted child" in the care of a Boston couple while she traveled to Canada following the passing of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which put many (free and legally enslaved) African American people in danger. Upon returning, the woman petitioned for guardianship on the grounds that this would benefit the child's welfare. The account reports: "She was asked whether she was a fugitive slave or not, which question she declined to answer. The case was not decided, and the further hearing was postponed to a future time."³¹ Here we see how this woman's own legal precariousness prevented her from exercising the legal rights that would have been afforded to white adults.

30. The racist construal of black adults as perpetual "children" in need of white domination (in proslavery rhetoric and elsewhere) also contributed to arguments that would deny black parents the right to determine their own children's best interests.

31. "Guardianship of a Colored Child," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, August 17, 1855.

As Mark C. Jerng notes, throughout the nineteenth century “writers tell stories concerning adoptive relationships without a precise legal or social definition and in which the social meanings for adoption are still fluid.”³² In the mid-nineteenth century, legal adoption had not yet displaced the practice of caring for orphaned or otherwise endangered children in orphanages. Nor had the legal arrangement of adoption supplanted less formal practices of caring for children in individual homes. Nineteenth-century practices of caring for orphaned children would also be racially segregated, as white communities had expressed less interest in incorporating black orphans into mainstream institutions and efforts to place children in homes. As an 1828 article in *Freedom’s Journal* titled “The Shelter for Colored Orphans” notes, “The colored child, whom nature or oppression had deprived of its natural protectors, is not unfrequently left to work its way though the world with little of that sympathetic care which we accord to those of our own complexion.”³³ African American communities therefore took it on themselves to provide for black children.

The fear that children’s interests would not be given priority was one concern of organizations working for black orphaned children. The 1838 “Second Annual Report of the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans” observes, “Colored orphan children, are in many cases, consigned to the charge of vicious and degraded persons, who employ them sometimes in sweeping chimneys, or more frequently in begging, and other modes of eking out a scanty subsistence.”³⁴ Accounts of attempts to provide for free black children appear in the black press alongside antislavery discourse, raising the question, perhaps, of the fates of enslaved children who lost their parents.

Regarding adoption, different legal relationships come into play when considering enslaved black children. Although adoption law was still fluid by midcentury, laws concerning slavery were not so new, and in the course of *Harriet and Ellen’s* plot we see that laws concerning slavery and property trump any family claim the Boyds may have to Ellen. Even if her adoption were formalized somehow by law (though the novel gives no indication that this is the case), her mother’s enslaved status—and hence the girl’s own enslaved status—would override any law designed only to determine legal

32. Mark C. Jerng, *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiv.

33. “The Shelter for Colored Orphans,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 14, 1828.

34. “Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans,” *Colored American*, December 29, 1838.

bonds regarding *free* children. As a slave, Ellen is removed from any category from which she might be afforded legal protection, and rights of slaveholders' property take the place of parental rights. Further, though state laws generally governed both slavery and adoption, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 created a federal imperative for the recapture of self-emancipated people, implicating white northerners in the national protection of slavery by requiring them to assist in black people's re-enslavement.

In this historical context, it is perhaps clear to see why the possibility of white people's familial love of a black child is more often supplanted by depictions of enslavement and abuse. Frado, the protagonist of Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel, *Our Nig*, is never incorporated into the white family with whom her white mother abandons her. We might think of *Our Nig* as presenting a racialized version of the orphan narrative, in which what happens to a black girl is decidedly different from what happens to white girls in this genre. Frado is valued only for her labor and deliberately excluded from the family sphere. Mrs. Belmont, the white northern woman in whose house Frado works, even goes so far as to send her into the sun without a bonnet so that her skin will become darker. This darkening is an attempt to ensure that Frado is recognizable as black, the establishment of which is meant to prevent her from being mistaken for one of the Belmont children. The idea that racial differentiation will define the boundaries and limits of family not only prioritizes biological family but also maintains the family as a racially exclusive unit. Mrs. Belmont's white supremacy demands that a mixed-race child must be prevented from being mistaken for her own, and to ensure this, Frado's racial difference must be made apparent. This construction of the family as white makes interracial adoption inconceivable. As Singley writes, for Frado, "adoption is never an option."³⁵

Our Nig recalls other orphan girl stories that feature narratives of abused girlhood and unloving guardians, but it lacks the requisite savior figure who will rescue the girl, care for and Christianize her, and ultimately prepare her for the heteronormative domesticity of womanhood. The happy ending of the orphan girl's maturity and security never happens for Frado, who suffers a disability as a direct result of her childhood labor and is later left unable to support herself and her child. The death of her father has removed Frado from the love and care of a black parent; racism has resulted in Frado's abandonment in an unloving household and prevented her from being adopted into any semblance of white family.

35. Singley, *Adopting America*, 120.

In most nineteenth-century American literature, the limitations of family merge with those of racial belonging. Where we see other mixed-race characters, they are most often unrecognized by or otherwise divorced from their white family members, or their blackness is unacknowledged or deliberately hidden to facilitate the guise of an exclusively white family. This includes characters like Richard Hildreth's Archy Moore, William Wells Brown's Clotel, Frances Harper's Iola Leroy, and Lydia Maria Child's "quadroons." Texts in which white characters welcome black characters (who are recognized as such) into white families are much more rare, and all the more exceptional.³⁶

The most prominent nineteenth-century representation of what one might—in the very broadest of senses—call interracial adoption appears, of course, in the relationship between Ophelia St. Clare and Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's iconic abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). I present this as an "adoption" only in the loosest possible use of the term.³⁷ Topsy and Ophelia's relationship revolves around the Christian conversion of the "wicked" black girl and the reform of the racist white northern abolitionist. Here the possibility of interracial kinship through adoption is foreclosed by Ophelia's own racism. Although working to free an enslaved child, Ophelia does not become a mother to the black girl. Singley argues, "Ophelia rescues Topsy from slavery and provides housing and education, but she cannot bring herself to love Topsy or adopt her."³⁸ The absence of love between these characters is doubly explained by Ophelia's aversion to black people and Topsy's "wicked" disposition. As an enslaved child, she has been raised with neither Christian instruction nor middle-class manners that meet Ophelia's standards. Stowe's novel ultimately works to counter the argument that black people cannot be part of what Phillis Wheatley calls "th' angelic train" of Christian inclusion. It does not, however, make the bridge from black people's Christian inclusion to one of social, national, or political

36. Lydia Maria Child's 1867 novel, *A Romance of the Republic*, is one example.

37. Carol Singley, *Adopting America*, 13–14, 129, notes the relevance of Topsy's story for nineteenth-century adoption fiction, indicating how nonwhite children do not follow the conventions of white children in such stories. As in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, the role of black children in white domestic spaces is generally one of laborer, not kin. Nevertheless, these stories of black children who do not become family members within these respective white domestic structures suggest the adoption narrative even as they deliberately foreclose it.

38. Singley, *Adopting America*, 121.

inclusion in white society. Stowe's racial separatism also ignores the possibility of an interracial family operating as a microcosm of God's interracial family.

In the case of Topsy, Stowe also forecloses enslaved black people from filling parental roles to biological or nonbiological kin. The separation of Topsy from her biological mother, then, dooms her to this "kinless" life, a critique of slavery's detriment to the family that additionally oversimplifies enslaved black people's relationships with one another. Wilma King notes: "If enslaved girls and boys enjoyed a childhood, it was because their parents and fictive kin made that possible. They stood between children and slaveholders or others who sought to control boys and girls psychologically and break their will to resist."³⁹ Among slave narratives, Sojourner Truth famously escapes with her child in her personal narrative (1850); Harriet Jacobs works tirelessly to ensure her children's freedom, even while considerably risking her own safety to do so in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Likewise, abolitionist literature shows the enduring love of enslaved mothers, as in Stowe's own image of Eliza crossing the frozen Ohio to freedom with her child.

Even when enslaved children were separated from their biological parents, they were not left entirely without care. In the absence of biological parents, enslaved black children were generally cared for by other enslaved people. Marie Jenkins Schwartz notes: "When circumstances prevented parents or other kin from guiding their children to adulthood, they wanted unrelated slaves to assume the responsibility—not slaveholders. 'Fictive kin'—slaves who stepped in to carry out the tasks and rituals of daily life in the absence of relatives—were made necessary by owners, who treated slaves as interchangeable commodities when they bought, sold, or relocated them according to their own economic interests, but they helped hold paternalism in check."⁴⁰ Because enslaved people were often forcibly separated from biological family members, they relied on nonbiological structures of kinship for care and support. By the end of the Civil War, mass deaths and displacements had produced a considerable rise in the population of orphaned children. Harriet Jacobs, after ensuring freedom and provision for her own children, worked in refugee camps for displaced African American people

39. Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 212.

40. Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.

in the District of Columbia. Children are among the population she reports about in her wartime correspondence with the *Liberator*. In one report, Jacobs writes: "We are now collecting together the orphan children, of whom there are a great number, owing to the many deaths that have occurred of late. In justice to the refugee women, I am bound to testify that I have never known them, in any one instance, refuse to shelter an orphan. In many cases, mothers who have five or six children of their own, without enough to feed and cover them, will readily receive these helpless little ones into their own poor hovels."⁴¹ Jacobs ends this dispatch with the exclamation "O, when will the white man learn to know the hearts of my abused and suffering people!"⁴² Like writers in the antebellum black press, Jacobs calls on readers of the *Liberator* to contribute to charitable organizations assisting freedpeople, including institutions for orphaned children.

At the same time, Jacobs also reports about black women who care for orphaned black children outside institutions, by raising them alongside their biological children. Writing simply as "Linda," Jacobs reports one such case:

One day, while in the hospital, a woman came in to ask that she might take a little orphan child. The mother had just died, leaving two children, the eldest three years old. This woman had five children in the house with her. In a few days, the number would be six. I said to the mother, "What can you do with this child, shut up here with your own? They are as many as you can attend to." She looked up with tears in her eyes, and said—"The child's mother was a stranger; none of her friends cum wid her from de ole place. I took one boy down on the plantation; he is a big boy now, working mong de Unions. De Lord help me to bring up dat boy and he will help me to take care dis child. My husband work for de Unions when dey pay him. I can make home for all. Dis child shall hab part ob de crust." How few white mothers, living in luxury, with six children, could find room in her heart for a seventh, and that child a stranger?⁴³

The black women Jacobs describes are willing to care for these children; their difficulties doing so are economic, being recently freed and displaced people themselves. While proslavery narratives of paternalism sought to categorize all black people as "children" in need of slaveholders' supposed

41. Harriet Jacobs, "Colored Refugees in Our Camps," *Liberator*, April 10, 1863, 60.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Linda [Harriet Jacobs], "Life among the Contrabands," *Liberator*, September 5, 1862, 144.

"care," it was overwhelmingly African American people themselves, not white slaveholders—or white abolitionists—who cared and provided for African American children. Even in Child's "Mary French and Susan Easton," white people remain uninterested in black children's welfare. No white travelers pause to help the enslaved children as they are being kidnapped, and Mary French's father never thinks to help recover his daughter's black friend. When Mary is disguised and sold as a black child, it is an enslaved black woman who first shows sympathy to the crying child, discovers Mary's whiteness disguised under blacking makeup, and helps facilitate her freedom.

Removing the possibility of a black mother's influence on Topsy, Stowe represents the only potential black mother figures for Topsy in the St. Clare household as either unfit for women's domestic duties (Dinah) or preoccupied with caring for their white enslavers and deliberately prevented from fulfilling the role of a black mother (Mammy). She therefore leaves us with only white slaveholders in this paternalistic role. While this is meant to illustrate the ill effects of a slaveholding system, Stowe does not view Topsy (or any of her black characters) as incorporable into white domestic structures, be they familial or national. Topsy's non-adoption therefore illustrates the limitations of white mainstream abolitionism. The impossibility of Ophelia's and Topsy's kinship culminates with Topsy's departure from the United States to become an African missionary. In this inherently racist and hypervisible literary representation of black girlhood, Stowe paints the black child as someone who is not inherently lovable, but someone so marred by the effects of slavery that even a well-intentioned abolitionist like Ophelia struggles to accept her. As Robin Bernstein argues, Topsy's later iterations, in minstrel shows and other depictions, would reflect this refusal of inclusion, as "her reconstructed progeny defined black children out of innocence and therefore out of childhood itself."⁴⁴ Topsy's "success" lies, then, not in her ability to be incorporated into the St. Clare family or into the American nation, but in her ability to be removed from them.

Working against Wilson's and Stowe's representations of black girls as excluded from white structures of family, *Harriet and Ellen* shows a very different depiction of interracial relations. One difference between Topsy and Ellen can be attributed to *Harriet and Ellen*'s assumption that black girls are not inherently worse than white girls and to the experience of love and care that is afforded to Ellen but emphatically denied to Topsy. Separated from loving adults who might fill the role of a parent, Topsy is instead

44. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 16.

given to Ophelia as a slave. The experiment Augustine imposes upon his sister by suggesting that she teach the child herself considers neither Topsy's own best interests nor the interests of black people for their children. Though Stowe takes the time to describe Ophelia's initial aversion to and eventual tolerance of a black child, Topsy's feelings toward Ophelia are barely a concern, even in an abolitionist text. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Our Nig*, white adults abuse and enslave black children, struggle to tolerate—let alone love—them, and fail to retrieve them from enslavement as they would their own children. *Harriet and Ellen's* depiction of the white abolitionist parents of an enslaved girl is therefore at the heart of its antiracist sentiment. It is important, then, to read not only the way black children are represented in these texts, but also how white adults are depicted.

Unpacking the racist caricatures of black child characters that portray them as unlovable or unincorporable is useful, but attending to the racist failings of white characters can help us better understand a text's stance toward antiracism. It is not the child who is unable to be loved or incorporated into family, but white racist people who are unable to extend kinship ties beyond biological relatedness or white supremacy. Topsy and Frado are not unincorporable into their respective households because of their blackness, but because of the Belmonts' and the St. Clares' racism. On the other hand, the Boyds display a radical love by recognizing the child of an enslaved woman as lovable—as lovable as any white child might be—and by acting accordingly.

RADICAL LOVE

Responding to slavery's destruction of nuclear families through sale and separation, antislavery literature did proclaim the love between black parents and their children. Along these lines, Stowe's Eva St. Clare explains, "Papa, these poor creatures [black people] love their children as much as you do me."⁴⁵ Countering the practice of separating enslaved families, the fact that black people cherish their children just as much as white people do theirs is a long-standing abolitionist argument. Throughout antislavery fiction, we see many a black mother saddened or frantic that her child has been sold away from her. This parallel structure of affect, however, does not avoid the suggestion of racial separatism. Seldom does abolitionist fiction represent black children who are loved by white people.

In *Harriet and Ellen*, not only do black and white parents love similarly

45. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 241.

and children forge interracial friendships untainted by racism, but white adoptive parents also love their black child. While one might argue that this representation problematically focuses on white characters instead of black ones, this model also shifts some focus away from proving black worthiness of love in favor of modeling white antiracist behavior. This model of familial value works against proslavery models that value enslaved children only for their labor potential or arguments that likened paternalistic plantation slavery to kinship, as well as against antislavery models of white stewardship. In effect, the radical love represented in *Harriet and Ellen* focuses on white parents' treatment of their child in a way that, I argue, urges us to look beyond white parenthood for comparison.

Because Ellen is a black child with racialized problems, the Boyds cannot simply treat her as they would a white child whose racial privilege would protect her from these experiences. As the Boyds deal with their daughter's experiences of racism and her enslavement, their reactions fit best with representations of black parents, who frequently contend with such problems in abolitionist literature. In effect, the Boyds do not simply treat Ellen as they would a white child; they treat her the way black parents would care for their children under similar circumstances. Though Ophelia proves to be a poor substitute for the mother Topsy has been denied, the Boyds' care for Ellen follows her black biological mother's own care. It is to her that they make their promise to raise the child, and the black woman is not simply forgotten following her death. Even though she does not remember her, Ellen's mourning for her mother is recognized, and her parents help facilitate her remembrance. The child's mourning is introduced with her complaint that her and Harriet's mothers have not been memorialized equally. Upset, Ellen tells her mother, "Hatty's mother has tombstones at her grave, but there is nothing at all at my mother's grave."⁴⁶ Mrs. Boyd explains that there is no tombstone because they did not know what to inscribe on one: they knew no more about her mother than her name and that her daughter was to be named after her.

This conversation does not end here, however. Although she does not know what to write, she invites Ellen to suggest an inscription, telling her, "if you can find any thing suitable, we will have some put up."⁴⁷ The minister ultimately suggests the words Ellen chooses: "In memory of Ellen, the stranger, who died January 5th, 1839. 'I was a stranger and ye took me in; sick, and ye ministered unto me. Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of

46. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 17.

47. *Ibid.*

these my disciples, ye have done it unto me.’”⁴⁸ Mr. Boyd notes (and objects to) the double-orientation of this inscription, which not only memorializes Ellen’s mother but also lauds their Christian virtue in harboring her. This seems, perhaps, an inappropriate attention to white characters in favor of black ones. Even in the memorialization of a self-emancipated black woman whose flight has resulted in her child’s temporary freedom, these white saviors are lauded.

Not forgetting or necessarily supplanting Ellen’s black mother, the Boyds use their position as white free people to acknowledge Ellen’s feelings about unfairness and respond accordingly—a depressingly rare treatment of black children in antebellum literature. Jacqueline Ellis argues, “To become nurturing rather than harmful, transracially adopted black girls’ anger needs to be described, understood, expressed, and recognized as a rational and legitimate response to racism.”⁴⁹ Ellen Boyd does not express anger, however. In this story’s fictionalized Christlike construction of black girlhood, she feels not anger but only sadness at the various injustices she faces. This absence of anger, however, frames Ellen as a child who does not need correction. Unlike the steward-sinner opposition of Eva and Topsy, both Harriet and Ellen are represented as perfect children. Raised in loving, Christian households, neither girl is unworthy. This representation suggests black girlhood as parallel to white girlhood in some ways, although the story’s representation of the injustices and dangers faced by black children resists this parallel. Rather than correct Ellen’s feelings, the Boyds acknowledge them and respond, correcting not her but their own behavior by providing the missing memorial to Ellen’s biological mother.

When jealous neighbors “wondered what Mr. Boyd wouldn’t do next for that child,” it is this act of memorializing her dead mother to which they refer.⁵⁰ By honoring Ellen’s wishes for this memorialization, the Boyds also express antiracist sentiment (though unknown yet to Ellen). Because their neighbors know Ellen’s history, they read this act as an expression of racial equality—and some townspeople do not approve. Ellen’s parents show no signs of putting a “check” on her “career.” Like Harriet’s parents, they send their daughter to boarding school, that she may be educated like other children from their community. The inclusion of children in racially integrated spaces of equality is an aspirational one for antislavery children’s literature.

48. *Ibid.*, 18.

49. Jacqueline Ellis, “Nurturing Anger: Race, Affect, and Transracial Adoption,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 43, nos. 1/2 (2015): 215.

50. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 19.

It speaks to the hope for generationally realized changes to systems of racial oppression, promoting some of the same ideals as racial uplift literature. Mary Niall Mitchell addresses the promise of images of "emancipated slave children" following the Civil War as similarly suggesting a future of racial equality.⁵¹ The question of incorporating black people into the nation was largely connected to questions of how generations of free black people might be educated and incorporated into the political life of the nation as citizens. Mitchell writes, "Freedpeople's demands that their children receive regular schooling became central to labor negotiations with planters and federal agents throughout the South after emancipation."⁵² In truth, the education of free black children had long been a concern for black parents, in both integrated and segregated environments.

Unfortunately, Ellen's educational privilege inadvertently exposes her to further racism, as one of her classmates, Julia, is a white girl from a slave-holding family. Other children also know Ellen's racial background, and another child unwittingly reveals Ellen's race to the girls' schoolmate while she is visiting with Harriet and Ellen over break. Julia, a southern belle mean girl, is indignant to learn that she has been associating with a black girl as an equal. Ellen is devastated at the overt racism of her classmate. The Boyds do not attend to this racism by consoling Ellen about her blackness, however. Her father's first response at hearing who has upset his daughter is "God forgive her!"⁵³ Though this seems an odd response, his prayer goes on to acknowledge both Ellen's pain and Julia's wrongdoing, as he prays to God "for strength to sustain the stricken, suffering one, and forgiveness for her who had done a great wrong; and above all that God would hasten the day when mankind would remember that they were members of one great family, and treat each other as such."⁵⁴ Moreover, neither the Boyds nor the Glenns return their children to the boarding school where they might encounter such racism again.

By means of nineteenth-century fiction's reliance on coincidence, Julia happens to belong to the family that had enslaved Ellen's mother. Julia tells her family about Ellen, the fatal connection is made, and her Uncle James claims Ellen as his property, giving her to Julia as a present. After Ellen has been introduced to enslaved life on the plantation, Julia's northern grandmother from Connecticut, Mrs. Moreton, suggests that Ellen's enslavement

51. Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3.

52. *Ibid.*, 4.

53. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 69.

54. *Ibid.*, 70.

must be unusually difficult because she is not accustomed to being enslaved. Mrs. Moreton hinges her critique of Julia's actions on Ellen's adopted family, guessing that Julia may care for the Boyds' feelings even if she does not care for Ellen's. She tells Julia, "Those people must have loved her very dearly, or they never would have done so much for her. Think how they must feel."⁵⁵ While this argument prioritizes white feelings (something not uncommon for abolitionist literature), the Boyds' response to their daughter's enslavement is important here.

In abolitionist literature, the white fathers of mixed-race, legally enslaved children seldom prevent their children's enslavement. Most often, they themselves are their children's legal owners, and even the most well-intentioned of them (such as Henry Morton in Brown's *Clotel* and Alfred Royal of Child's *Romance of the Republic*) are ultimately negligent in this respect, which leads to their children's enslavement by creditors after their deaths. Mr. Boyd is not Ellen's enslaver, however; by adopting her, he does not gain property but harbors her illegally. Because the law favors slaveholders' interests over those of parents, the Boyds cannot prevent Ellen's enslavement, although "everything was done that could be to save her."⁵⁶ Later we learn of the Boyds' efforts to retrieve their daughter: "Ever since she was taken from [Mr. Boyd] he had been unremitting in his efforts to recover her freedom."⁵⁷ Following the trial that determines her enslaved status, he tries to purchase her but is refused because Julia's family's interest in her is more than monetary. "Mr. Boyd then sold property and borrowed money, till he had raised a sum sufficient to meet the highest possible price that could be asked for her, and to cover whatever traveling expenses might be incurred."⁵⁸ Asking a friend who won't be recognized to try to obtain her, he learns that the uncle has transferred Ellen to his niece, who refuses to sell her. Ellen is sold south, following a general worry that the more attractive enslaved girl will outshine her "mistress," and Mr. Boyd himself travels to New Orleans to attempt to purchase her from the trader.

This effort is remarkable not only because the attempt to retrieve an enslaved child evidences the Boyds' love, but also because it demonstrates their free, white privilege. "Mary French and Susan Easton" contrasts the material conditions that affect white and black families, showing how, even though both girls were equally loved and valued by their parents and by one

55. Ibid., 81.

56. Ibid., 77–78.

57. Ibid., 114.

58. Ibid.

another, black girls face dangers that white girls do not. Exposing the different dangers of enslavement also reveals the privileges of free, white parenthood. Unlike Susan Easton's black father, who is himself in danger of enslavement, Ellen's father is able to and does search for her after she is enslaved. Like Mary French's father, Ellen's is protected by the advantages of white privilege as he travels and interacts with slaveholders to recover his daughter. And like Mr. French, he reaches his daughter, though too late to save her from death.

While we acknowledge the white privilege that allows Ellen's father to use these particular tactics to retrieve his child, his effort might also be compared to black parents' efforts. Susan Easton's father in Child's story does not travel in search of his daughter because he fears being captured himself—something that may, we understand, make this search futile. We know that black parents put themselves in danger in order to protect their children from the violence of enslavement. Even Stowe gives us Eliza crossing the ice to save her son from being sold away from her—an image of black motherhood that counters Topsy's absent one. Black women's slave narratives also tell of the trials of enslaved parenthood. Harriet Jacobs's months spent in hiding is another prominent example. To secure her children's eventual freedom, Jacobs risks her own re-enslavement to be near them, even though this necessitates forgoing the role of mother, lest the very young children accidentally reveal her whereabouts. Sojourner Truth knows her son will soon be free according to the gradual emancipation laws of New York State, but when their enslaver illegally sells him south, she walks away from her slaveholder's home in search of a solution to free him. Traveling miles by foot, raising money, and waiting months for court processes, Truth also combats those who dismiss a black mother's love as unimportant, asserting both her attachment to her child and her parental rights.

Other parents of enslaved children tried to purchase their children from enslavers or tried to escape with them. Many, many more enslaved parents were unable to gain their children's freedom.⁵⁹ Formerly enslaved people's attempts to locate their children following emancipation have been documented in the African American press and in personal letters.⁶⁰ African American people strove and sometimes even managed to sustain family

59. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 52–54.

60. See Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Love and Marriage in Early African America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2008), esp. 265–326, and Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York: New Press, 1997), esp. 193–243.

relationships despite physical separation and enslavement. As Frances Smith Foster tells us, not all African American kinship relationships under slavery were simply “too fragile to withstand separation.”⁶¹ African American people also used notions of extended or “fictive” kinship that formed bonds beyond nuclear families and biological relatedness. These efforts show black children’s value as children rather than chattel. Even from their varying positions of oppression, records of black parents show that enslaved children were valued and loved in their communities.

This contrasts starkly with depictions of black children who are abused by their white caretakers, like Frado and Topsy. Mitchell writes of failed adoptions of black children who were promised care and schooling in white, northern families but were instead put to work as domestic servants, and Berlin and Rowland show white Southerners’ interest in orphaned black children for their labor value.⁶² Harriet Jacobs writes similarly of this problem with her younger brother and her own children when she leaves them in the care of their white father’s family. Likewise, abolitionist literature shows the white fathers of enslaved children as unwilling to grant their freedom. *Harriet and Ellen* takes up a different scenario for white parents of an enslaved child. Because Mr. Boyd is not also his daughter’s enslaver, he fills a different role—more like that of the failed abolitionist lovers of the “tragic mulatta” genre than that of these women’s white family members. His reaction to the enslavement of his child also resembles those of the enslaved people who used whatever laws, opportunities, and resources were at their disposal for their children’s care.

Thinking of the Boyds as following models of black parenthood rather than white parenthood allows us to see how their actions fall along the spectrum of radical abolitionist fiction. For white abolitionists, treating black children as family members was a far cry from the most prominent examples. But models for how to treat black children do exist in various representations of black parenthood, and we might think of the Boyds in this children’s story as more closely resembling these models than examples of other white treatment of black children, such as the Belmonts’, Ophelia’s, or even Mr. French’s. In this sense, this radical abolitionist children’s novel condemns slavery in a way that, as Connolly suggests, “was closest to the slave narrative in rhetoric and ideology.”⁶³

61. Frances Smith Foster, *Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121.

62. See Mitchell, *Raising Freedom’s Child*, 139, and Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 237–43.

63. Connolly, *Slavery in American Children’s Literature*, 15.

One story line strikingly similar to *Harriet and Ellen's* can be found not in abolitionist children's literature, but in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Reconstruction-era novel *Minnie's Sacrifice*, published serially in the *Christian Recorder*, the organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1869. A racial uplift narrative that takes place over the course of the antebellum period, Civil War, and Reconstruction, it contains a plotline of interracial adoption that bears a resemblance to that of *Harriet and Ellen*. A Quaker couple, the Carpenters, who have lost their only child agree to take in a mixed-race child whose white, slaveholding father wishes to free her and whose enslaved mother cannot help her. Like the parents in Ellen's story (and in Harper's later novel *Iola Leroy*), the Carpenters initially hide Minnie's racial mixture from her, "Not because they love her less on the account of the blood that is in her veins," but because they fear exposing her to the racism she will inevitably experience once it is known that she is black.⁶⁴

Though Harper presents this image of white care for a black child, this is not the only model of adoption her novel gives us. Other white people do not afford black children the care and consideration that the Carpenters give Minnie. Her father's white wife wants her sold rather than freed. Once her race is publicly known, many of her school friends reject her. Here, as in abolitionist literature of the antebellum period, Quakers stand in not simply as a religious sect, but as examples of a particular brand of radically antiracist abolitionism. These white people are the exception rather than the rule in Harper's novel, and the only comparable model of care for black children we are given is within the black community itself.

In the novel's later depiction of African American people in the Reconstruction-era South, Harper presents caring for orphaned black children as a common duty of black families. In the example of one "industrious couple," we see that "even in this humble home they had taken two orphan children of their race, and were giving them food and shelter. And this kindness to the orphans of their race Minnie found to be a very praiseworthy practice among some of those people who were not poorer than themselves."⁶⁵ Like Jacobs's reports about African American compassion and care for orphaned children, these later examples set a model of care that is distinguished from dominant white modes of regarding black children as unworthy of such care.

64. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice*, in Harper, *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 31.

65. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

Harper provides these examples of black adoption as a parallel of sorts to Minnie's Quaker parents, the Carpenters. Though Harper returns Minnie to an African American community once she learns of her racial ancestry, prioritizing her identification and alignment with black people as essential to her uplift narrative, the model of white abolitionism and antiracism on which she focuses is this familial one, which bears the most resemblance to African American approaches to nonbiological kinship. Harper ultimately reserves the conversion of white racists as the duty of white, rather than black, people: the Carpenters are easily the "best" white characters she provides, who exhibit the most potential for carrying out this antiracist work. Harper's implication that abolitionist and antiracist projects demanded white radical involvement and that being able to incorporate an African American child into a white family was one marker of white ability to offer an antiracist model to the larger white community are also exhibited in *Harriet and Ellen*. These similarities between the Boyds and the Carpenters illustrate the limitations of other abolitionist characters who, like Ophelia St. Clare and even Mr. French, cannot fathom regarding black children as children of equal value to white ones.

ANTIRACIST FUTURITY

Harriet and Ellen departs most clearly from the "orphan girl" sentimental genre in its ending. Though it begins with adopted girls who already exhibit moral Christian behavior and who have been successfully integrated into their families and community, the violence of racism and slavery denies them what Singley calls the "security of home" that marks the end of other orphan stories.⁶⁶ This ending forecloses the possibility of marriage for both girls. Rather than showing the protagonists' maturation and successful entry into womanhood, the story's conclusion exposes slavery as causing childhood deaths, thus preempting an ending resembling other orphan girl novels. *Harriet and Ellen's* sentimental ending uses the deaths of both protagonists to evoke abolitionist sympathy from readers. The novel curtails the girls' childhoods and prevents their entry into adulthood, and thus *Harriet and Ellen's* gesture toward futurity lies in its hope that child readers will promote abolitionism and antiracism.

The novel's ending resembles both Child's and Stowe's to some extent. In Child's story, readers are allowed to feel sympathy for Susan Easton, who is never recovered from slavery, but only in her absence. Susan disappears from this story following her separation from Mary; afterward, it is

66. Singley, *Adopting America*, 91.

only Mary who we see suffer under slavery. While Mary mourns her lost friend, no other white characters seem to. Her father, having rescued his own daughter, does not think to assist his neighbors in looking for their child. Readers are meant to view this as a gross unfairness, but we do not see the antiracism of Child's message modeled for us by any of her adult characters. Unlike Mary and Susan, whose fates differ, both Harriet and Ellen die in childhood. Even though she is reunited with her father, the effects of slavery have been too great for Ellen to bear. Like Susan Easton, she is effectively unrecoverable from slavery. But she does not die unmourned by the white community. Following Ellen's death, Mr. Boyd buys a coffin and conveys her body north, to be buried next to her mother's grave. Still, this story does not end with Ellen's death, but with Harriet's. Like Eva, Harriet dies of sympathy for the enslaved, so bereft at the loss of her friend that she cannot carry on with her own family, as the recovered Mary French must.

As the parallel stories of Harriet and Ellen revise the Eva-Topsy pairing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they also revise Stowe's ending. Like Eva, Harriet is a white-girl martyr to slavery, and the death of a little white girl similarly serves an abolitionist end. In a deathbed scene not unlike Eva's, Harriet tells her parents, "Jesus loves the poor slave; write it on my tombstone—Jesus loves the poor slave." And thus she passed away.⁶⁷ Topsy lives on to mourn Eva, but this living is not a complete triumph for black girlhood. Eva receives the most sympathy in this story, and Topsy's ultimate conformity to white Christian standards of behavior, freedom but not family with Ophelia, and exportation to Africa are claimed as a success.

Even though Lois, in the novel's last pages, asks her readers to "*pray for the poor slave*" in emulation of God's love, much of the text's didactic instruction focuses on correcting racism.⁶⁸ Avoiding the sin of racism—even more than pitying the enslaved—is the larger challenge presented to white child readers. The Christian message of the abolitionist story is an antiracist one. In her introduction, Lois writes of God's instruction "Little children, love one another," emphasizing that this love must extend beyond differences of race and class. To fail to emulate God's antiracist love is presented as sinful, as she calls out her white, northern child readers' racism: "You did not think, did you, when you slighted that ragged little boy, that God had told you to love him? You did not think, when you called that poor girl names, and ran away from her because she was black, that God had said,

67. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 121.

68. *Ibid.*, 122.

you must love her too?”⁶⁹ Lois asks readers to correct un-Christian actions and provides models of universal love for them to emulate. Prayers for “the poor slave” are requested, but this is accompanied by a call to Christian action.

Claudia Nelson frames late nineteenth-century orphan fiction as presenting displaced children whose “proper ‘work’ was presented as the spiritual and emotional uplift of adults.”⁷⁰ This work is also true of the children in abolitionist fiction—either abused enslaved children or dying sympathetic white ones. Little Eva’s death and Susan Easton’s disappearance serve to impress on white children the unfairness of slavery. The paired deaths of Harriet and Ellen do something similar to both of these tales: they present the very real dangers of slavery for black children and also the sympathetic death of a white child. With Harriet’s and Ellen’s deaths, any further radical antiracist possibilities also die for this story. The potential for racially integrated community, interracial friendship, and interracial kinship is laid out for this story’s readers. One wonders what possible future Ellen’s parents might have intended or made possible for her, beyond providing her with an education alongside her white friend.

That the white girl does not die in place of the black girl in this story is a significant revision of the Eva-Topsy relationship. One might understand Harriet’s death as one of solidarity rather than substitution. This solidarity might be compared to Lois’s refusal to grant any kind of happy ending to her antebellum abolitionist readers. In the text’s final pages, we read: “And now, my dear children, my story is ended. It is a sad one, I know, but slavery is a sad thing. I would not willingly fill your young minds with images of sorrow, but this world is not all sunshine; sin has made its mark upon it, and where sin is, there must be misery. Slavery is one of Satan’s strongholds, and I want you to aid in its overthrow, you are young yet, I know, but you will soon be men and women, and go forth into the world, to advance the cause of Christ or of Satan. You can not stand still and look on, for Jesus says, ‘Whoso gathereth not with me scattereth.’”⁷¹ Refusing to shield white children from sadness about slavery, Lois implicates them in correcting this sin. The sentimental deaths of Harriet and Ellen are familiar to abolitionist readers. Sadness—not anger, retribution, or even the punishment of Ellen’s enslavers—marks the end of the novel. One might say that black girls in

69. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

70. Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850–1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 7.

71. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 121.

nineteenth-century literature must, as Ellis describes, "replace [their] anger with feelings that are deemed, in our white supremacist society, to be more acceptable, less confrontational, more productive."⁷² What counts as "more productive" in abolitionist literature must often be read as "more productive for white people." Ellen produces sympathy, but also sadness that extends to Harriet and to Lois's white child readers.

As Lois teaches white readers to accept black children as equals, she proposes a future in which different racial relations among adults might become possible. This focus on futurity is in keeping with the project of teaching children in order to promote social justice action. Not necessarily a substitute for instructing adults, antislavery children's literature's forward-looking temporality bases itself not only in notions of progressive futurity, but also in education. Acknowledging that children must be taught to work against slavery and to participate in antiracist sociality, this literature takes up white antiblack racism as a problem to be addressed alongside slavery.

Harriet and Ellen's abolitionism is deeply invested in logics of reproductive futurity. The novel concludes with the deaths of two children, and so the threat of slavery to individuals is also figured as a threat to the social order itself. The figure of the child, in Lee Edelman's words, "embod[ies] for us the telos of the social order and [has] come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust."⁷³ Though the deaths of black children and adults are commonly depicted in white abolitionist literature, constituting a kind of necropolitical spectacle, Lois yokes the symbolic futurity of both black and white social orders by placing the deaths of Harriet and Ellen in parallel. What does it mean, then, to mark the genealogical end of both the white and the black child?

The figure of the dying child, too good for this world to ever grow into adulthood, supplants any promise of an interracial future for Lois's characters. But while interracial family and black futures are foreclosed, this is framed as tragedy, an inevitable result of the slaveholding nation. The interracial family is therefore idealized as it is displaced from this world to the next, suggesting an antiracist heaven that is provided as a model for worldly striving. Telling her readers, "He loves black children just as well as He does you," Lois presents this model of God's antiracist love as a model for children but also extends this as a model for parents. Using a familiar Christian framing of family, she writes: "God is our Father; He is their Father too,

72. Ellis, "Nurturing Anger," 224.

73. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

for He made them as well as us. He is the Father of every body, and did you ever see a father who did not love his children?"⁷⁴ Good fathers must love their children, Lois suggests, and this extends to the fathers of her protagonists. Reading God's racially universal love as a model for interracial family, Lois frames antiracist familial love as Christian.

In this shift from the larger Christian family to the nuclear interracial family, Lois rejects the imperative that the family is a racially contained group. Because the Christian family is not divided by race, she suggests, nuclear families need not be, either. By showing white parents' responses to their black child's racialized problems, Lois models interracial relationships that her readers are then meant to construe outward, again, to larger scales of interaction among Christian "children." The love possible in this interracial family is represented not as a mere anomaly, but as an example of people doing God's will. As interracial adoption is presented as a radical act of love, one might wonder what other constructions of interracial family this text suggests, even as it does not fulfill them.

The limitations of this novel notwithstanding, *Harriet and Ellen* offers models of white antiracism that surpass the most mainstream abolitionist literature of the antebellum period. This novel's close resemblance to African American narratives of care for black children reveals the limitations of more prominent abolitionist children's literature. Including this text in discussions of more prominent abolitionist children's literature broadens our perspective for imagining this genre, while my incorporation of African American models of childhood is meant to expand childhood studies' scope accordingly. Moreover, *Harriet and Ellen* allows us to think beyond simply racist models for the convergence of race and kinship in early America, and especially for narratives of interracial kinship in the nineteenth century.

74. Lois, *Harriet and Ellen*, 11.