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## **“As Child in Time”: Childhood, Temporality, and 19th Century U.S. Literary Imaginings of Democracy**

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“AS CHILD IN TIME”: CHILDHOOD, TEMPORALITY, AND 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY U.S.  
LITERARY IMAGININGS OF DEMOCRACY

A Dissertation Presented

By

MARISSA CARRERE

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2015

Department of English

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## ABSTRACT

### “AS CHILD IN TIME”: CHILDHOOD, TEMPORALITY, AND 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY U.S. LITERARY IMAGININGS OF DEMOCRACY

FEBRUARY 2015

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*‘As Child in Time’* stands at the intersection of literary-historical studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S., political theory, and childhood studies. Limning the child’s contested position in cultural imaginings of democracy—at once embodying its ideals and marking its limits—I describe how the child offers a site upon which to demythologize U.S. democracy, yet also offers a vehicle that can meaningfully engage some of the irresolvable tensions fundamental to democratic thought. In particular, this project focuses on the child’s role in conceptualizing what we might call dilemmas of democratic time.

Chapter One examines how Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *The Linwoods* stages the anxieties elicited by the desire to perceive democracy as guided by timeless truths, while also recognizing that the democratic process necessarily entails the negotiation of ephemeral opinions, in order to draw out the novel’s self-conscious engagements with democracy at a theoretical level.

Chapter Two examines Ralph Waldo Emerson’s abolitionist thought, following the figure of the child into an exploration of the relationship between transformative political acts and the quality that Emerson calls “newness,” revealing how the child reinvigorates questions about the political value of his transcendentalism.

Chapter Three illuminates how Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter* uses the title character’s erased youth and foreclosed future to deconstruct exceptionalist narratives emblemized by the rhetoric of the Young America movement, while also locating democratic potentiality in humble moments of the unwritten now.

Chapter Four considers how Frederick Douglass’s insistence that the time for politics is “the ever-living now” inflects his representation of childhood. Where children in abolitionist literature are typically read as rhetorical devices for higher law ideals, this

chapter argues that Douglass's writing resists the displacement of anti-slavery claims from the subjectivities that speak them and from the historical moment in which they are spoken, instead submitting these claims to the actionable now.

The Coda reflects upon our critical moment and the status of "the child" in contemporary political dialogue, suggesting how the exchange between literary study, political theory, and the study of the child might supplement dominant modes of ideological critique with a form of critical "hopefulness."



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## INTRODUCTION

*'As Child in Time'* has a twofold aim and stands at the intersection of three disciplines: historical and literary studies of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century U.S., political theory of democracy, and childhood studies. As a contribution to antebellum literary and cultural studies, it focuses on the political and cultural work performed by the figure of the child, illuminating how as writers including Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville and Frederick Douglass confronted questions about slavery, nullification, exceptionalism, and the nation's vexed relationship to its revolutionary founding, they found in the child a productive vehicle for sustaining the irresolvable tensions vital to democratic thought. At the same time, as a contribution to the field of political theory, this project investigates dilemmas of democratic temporality as they are bodied forth through literary representations of childhood and youth. In sum, my purpose is to show both how the figure of the child articulated the temporal disposition of the nation and its politics at a particular historical moment and also to show how deeply the child is implicated in the more conceptual, ahistorical accounts of democracy found in political theory. In so doing, I seek to contribute also to the growing body of childhood studies scholarship, supplementing recent accounts of the relationship between childhood, citizenship, and nationhood, with a discussion of the child's figural role in democratic thought.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Recent work on childhood and citizenship includes Gillian Brown's *The Consent of the Governed: the Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Cohen's *Semi-Citizenship in Democratic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Lorinda Cohoon's *Serialized Citizenships: Periodicals, Books, and American Boys, 1840-1911*. (Lanham,

The distinction I make here between nation and democracy as categories of analysis is worth parsing. As historically-embedded objects, literary texts reflect and participate in the particularities of their moment and, as I argue, demythologize the national body of the antebellum U.S. as one that falls far short of a fully realized democracy. Yet as works of imagination, as I hope to show, these writings encourage us to treat democracy not merely as myth to be dismissed but also as a possibility worth engaging and striving toward. These texts collectively ask: in what temporal realm does democracy so-conceived exist? Does democracy only belong to the ever-receding but open future, toward which democratic action aims, and upon which higher law ideals can be imagined? And if so, how do we speak, act, and make political commitments in the present?

This project thus moves between treatments of the texts that are varyingly historicist and conceptual. Rather than seeking to fully place the literary relationship between antebellum childhood and democratic thinking into a historical narrative, and without pretensions toward using these works to realize a unified theoretical framework for describing democracy, this project “gathers” (a word I will return to later) pieces of a literary preoccupation, with faith that together they invite patient thinking about these texts both as historical objects and as occasions for imagining and theorizing democracy.

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MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006.); Caroline Levander’s *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); or Courtney Weikle-Mill’s *Imaginary Citizens: Child-Readers and the Limits of American Independence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012).

In an 1835 civics textbook by B. E. Hale, a young Robert and his father speak of the Constitution and governmental bodies, their lessons dappled with filial address: “executive power, my child,” “a tax, my child,” “original jurisdiction, my child.”<sup>2</sup> As “child” and Constitutional language meet again and again, we see that however intently the coincident emergence of the modern child and modern nation constructed childhood as a realm utterly separate from political life, childhood and democratic politics have in fact long been yoked. At once antithetical and intimate, foundational and impossible, this close relation between childhood and the political is crucial to understanding both antebellum childhood and U.S. democracy during this vital period of formation in the early nineteenth century.

The figure of the child in the civics primer offers an apt emblem for his reflexive position in antebellum American imaginings of democracy, for he is both the origin and the object of democratic teachings. That is, the child serves as a potent metaphorical tool for the emergent democratic self because he is culturally understood to be born with a natural, intuitive understanding of democratic principles. At the same time, the child is also precluded from actual democratic agency because he must mature into the perceived rationality that will authorize his political voice. The insistent detachment of children from participation in political life resounds even in the contemporary context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which claims the “very status of child means in principle that the child has no political rights.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the rhetorical child works as a “naturally” democratic figure, with an inherent understanding of the purest

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<sup>2</sup> *Familiar Conversations upon the Constitution of the United States*. Boston: E.R. Broaders, 1835. (72, 41, and 98).

<sup>3</sup> Mary John. “Rights in a Free-Market Culture.” *Children and the Politics of Culture*. Ed. Sharon Stephens. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. (106).

liberal principles, by the very same terms through which historical children are denied participation: that they are pre-social and irrational.

This doubled function of the child appears in a wide range of antebellum texts. For example, in Sara Willis Parton's 1853 collection, *Little Ferns for Fanny's Little Friends*, she rallies her young readers in a story entitled "Children's Rights":

Men's rights! Women's rights! I throw down the gauntlet for children's rights!  
Yes, little pets, Fanny Fern's about "takin' notes," and she'll "print 'em," too, if  
you don't get your dues.<sup>4</sup>

Fern's piece identifies children as a social group with a shared set of rights and civic concerns, only to mark the limits of this identification; using quotation marks to set off key phrases, she signals that her reform huckster voice is an affectation and the story is, self-consciously, a ruse. She invites her child readers into a fantasy of political self-advocacy, but this fantasy remains a kind of mimetic performance or play. Children, after all, are held to be neither interested in nor capable of participating in the adult world of real politics; tellingly, in this piece a "political paper" becomes a site upon which the adult and child worlds divide. A man who denies a child the window seat in the railroad car "sit[s] there and read[s] a stupid political paper" in an tableau that positions the child as foil to the political, notwithstanding the story's initial attempts to call its child reader into solidarity with a "children's rights" movement (188). Fern writes:

[Fanny] knew that the bright blue sky, gave your little souls a thrill of delight, though you could not tell why, and she knew that great big man's soul was a great deal smaller than yours, to sit there and read a stupid political paper. (188)

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<sup>4</sup> Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Payson). "Children's Rights," *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. Auburn: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1853. (188-190).

That the child “could not tell why” the wordless expanse of sky-in-window thrilled her soul, or why its deprivation is such an affront to her personhood, points precisely to the problem of understanding children as political actors: without a fully articulable consciousness, the child is outside of the rhetorical negotiation that provides the content of the oblivious man’s political paper. Even this playful piece written for a child audience cannot suppress the dissonance of the very idea of “children’s rights” in a democratic republic that depends on reasoned voice. As Holly Brewer has described, modern political formation in the United States actively defined citizenship and the right to political exercise *against* the figure of the child; in the shift from birthright to reasoned consent as the legitimating principle of political power from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, children came to represent everything that the enfranchised citizen was not, and “were explicitly excluded from equality in Revolutionary reforms and the ideology underpinning them.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the Kantian formulation, Enlightenment is precisely the emergence from “nonage” or “immaturity”—inscribing childhood in opposition to human understanding and autonomy.

Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intertwined romantic, domestic, Protestant, and republican ideologies transformed the cultural meaning of childhood, vesting childhood with a sentimental valuation, describing the child’s innocence, purity, and fragility and emphasizing the importance of tenderly cultivating children into future citizens. It is within this context that Fern’s gauntlet for children’s rights melts into a fully maternal fantasy in which the narrator wishes to be “mother to the whole of [those] “fresh, guileless, loving little children,” who could “climb on [her]

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<sup>5</sup> Brewer, Holly. *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2005. (4).

lap whenever the fit took” them (190). She writes: “O, I tell you, my little pets, Fanny is sick of din and strife, and envy, and uncharitableness!—and she’d rather, by ten thousand, live in a little world full of fresh, guileless, loving little children, than in this great museum full of such dry dusty withered hearts” (190).

This conventional redistribution—adulthood, politics, and reasoned voice on one side, childhood, nature, and moral goodness on the other—becomes particularly visible against the contrasting backdrop of the story’s titular premise, encouraging us to press on what otherwise might seem but tired tropes. That is, what is the political significance of children’s role as a moral touchstone? If children’s natural virtue is located in their pre-social state, their closeness to nature, and their irrationality, can those virtues survive the process of enfranchisement via the development of reason? What does it mean to locate our moral center in a state that is by definition ephemeral? Or, as in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s naming of Little Eva as “the only true democrat,” what does it mean to locate public or political ideals in a stage defined by its separateness from public/political life?<sup>6</sup> In another example, Catharine Beecher’s *Treatise on a Domestic Economy* defends democracy as the most natural of governmental forms by pointing to its alignments with the tendencies of the organic world, and those of children. But in the same breath, she also warns parents and caregivers that there are “none so ready as young children to assume airs of equality.”<sup>7</sup> All throughout the literature of this period, we see such limber movement from the child as rhetorical object summoned to authorize and naturalize democracy, to the child as a person not yet ready for democratic inclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*. Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1852. (257).

<sup>7</sup> Beecher, Catharine. *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. Boston: Thomas H. Webb and Company, 1843. (143).

It is precisely the child's capacity to contain such opposites that animates this project. On one hand, this figure is asked to encompass so much that it can become an overdetermined signifier, so full that it becomes emptied of meaning again. But on the other hand, because the child can hold in equipoise competing ideals, it offers a particularly productive site for political thought. That is, democracy is perhaps best served not by resolution of its fundamental dilemmas but by the sustained play of its agonistic parts. This project finds in the writings of antebellum political thinkers as diverse as Sedgwick, Douglass, Emerson, and Melville, rich engagements with questions of U.S. democracy through the representation of the child and the childlike.

The child is, as so many historians and cultural critics have noted, a particularly malleable figure, “a wonderfully hollow category, able to be filled up with anyone's overflowing emotions”—or political ideals.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, the figurative child as an ever-accommodating vessel can work to close down political deliberation and contest. From Ann Douglas's seminal argument about the sentimental child as a way for antebellum writers and audiences to feign protest against powers to which they have already capitulated, to Caroline Levander's recent illumination of the racialized child's role in coding the nation white, much criticism has deconstructed the politicized child in order to ultimately demythologize U.S. democracy.<sup>9</sup> While building on this work, I emphasize that these writers, in this early and defining period of American democracy, also find in the child a figure that can meaningfully engage some of the irresolvable

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<sup>8</sup> Kincaid, James., *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. (12).

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Avon, 1977; Levander, Caroline. *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W.E.B Du Bois*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.



tensions fundamental to democratic thought, and that can assist in imagining alternatives to democracy's practical failings. In particular, this project focuses on the child's role in conceptualizing what we might call dilemmas of democratic time.

These dilemmas can be summarized in two primary and related questions: first, how do we understand democratic temporality as both historical and eternal?<sup>10</sup> Second, what is the meaning of a democratic "now," when inevitable practical failings mean democracy is always only (at best) on the horizon of becoming? These conceptual questions in political theory were also operative historically, as we shall see, in the antebellum period and in its literary texts, where a persistent interest in the temporal disposition of the U.S.'s young democracy condenses around figures of childhood. Tracking these questions, this project builds upon the work in temporal analysis in both political theory and antebellum historical studies.

In the former, seminal political philosophers including Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin have described the implicitly temporal quality of democratic politics. For Hannah Arendt, the political requires constant renewal through new beginnings. She writes: "to preserve the world against the mortality of its creators and inhabitants, it must

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<sup>10</sup> This first question is one that might seem unnecessary to even ask, in light of our contemporary critical consensus that the eternal—and its kin, the universal and transcendental—always merely mask the historical and particular. Indeed, recognizing the historical contingency of our political ideals renders them humble and changeable and unsettles otherwise naturalized powers, in ways that are essential to democratic possibility. Yet, at the same time, we might also suggest that the *idea* of the eternal, even if in acknowledgement of its artificiality, is necessary to contest the historical. That is, to describe democracy only through its historical practice would mean to inscribe it with the racism, sexism, imperialism, and so forth through which it has operated, and would thus falsely suggest a fundamental link between democracy and these forms of its corruption. Democracy in a theoretical or transhistorical sense remains unobligated to preserve or repeat these failings, and can therefore enable not only critique but also vision.

be constantly set right anew.”<sup>11</sup> She locates this capacity for beginnings in the human condition of “natality”—“the new beginning inherent in birth.”<sup>12</sup> In Sheldon Wolin’s definition, authentic democracy or “the political”—by which Wolin means to make a distinction from the quotidian workings of daily “politics”—is “rare” and “episodic.”<sup>13</sup> A premise of Wolin’s thought is that democracy can only be fugitive, as it necessarily dissolves under the forces of institutionalization that would attempt to make it permanent. More recently, Bonnie Honig has suggested that Wolin’s version of anarchic, aconstitutional democracy “sets up a choice: between thinking of democratic constitutionalism as a ‘teleologically completed form’ versus a representation of a ‘moment’—a dichotomy that Honig suggests Jurgen Habermas attempts to integrate with his theory of deliberative constitutionalism.”<sup>14</sup> Deliberative constitutionalism aims to make live and active the “completed” or past form of democracy as inscribed in the Constitution, by emphasizing the Constitution as an ongoing project of the people. However, Honig argues, Habermas’s notion of constitution-making as a progressive process treats “generational time as a self-correcting learning process,” at the risk of closing down what she calls “promisingly and dangerously unscripted futures” (799-800). Similarly valuing the idea of a “live future,” Jason Frank has recently argued that the demos is not an empirical entity, but instead draws its power from “its persistent latency or virtuality, from the paradoxical reality that the people are forever a people that is not... yet.”<sup>15</sup> The “prospective time” of the people, Frank suggests, means that felicitous claims

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<sup>11</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977. (192).

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. (9).

<sup>13</sup> Wolin, Sheldon. “Fugitive Democracy”. *Constellations* 1.1 (1994): 11-25.

<sup>14</sup> Honig, Bonnie. “Dead Rights, Live Futures.” *Political Theory* 29.6 (2001) (799).

<sup>15</sup> Frank, Jason. *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. (5).

made in the name of the people during “constituent moments” are “shaped but never determined by the past” (238). Writing broadly on the topic, Clive Barnett has described democratic politics as involving the “articulation of multiple temporalities—of speed, urgency, decision; of patience, deliberation and reflection; of anticipation and prospective imagination; of retrospective judgment and revision; of foundations, origins, inheritance, and hopes.”<sup>16</sup>

In literary and cultural studies, the study of time has emerged within and in response to the rethinking of geographic relations. The spatial turn has profoundly reimagined alternative spaces and relations outside of and across national borders, and its distinct emphasis on space has led some scholars to call for more attentive treatment of time. For instance, when seeking new directions for the field of empire studies, Susan Gillman suggested time as a potential next step, asking: “how to compare, within and across times, through what temporal units as well as what spatial units?”<sup>17</sup> In 19<sup>th</sup> century literary studies, Thomas Allen has recontextualized the discourses of Manifest Destiny and American Imperialism by arguing for thinking of the nineteenth century U.S. as “an empire of time rather than space.”<sup>18</sup> While the temporal character of the early national and antebellum US is easily summarized by its singular, self-congratulatory futurist vision, the literature of this period offers a varied and often conflicted understanding of time. As Lloyd Pratt has recently shown, although “much of this period’s writing [seems] to articulate a uniform national destiny [ . . . ] the very same

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<sup>16</sup> Barnett, Clive. “Temporality and the Paradoxes of Democracy.” *Political Geography* 24.5 (2006). (641–647)

<sup>17</sup> Gillman, Susan. “The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?” *American Literary History* 17.1, 2005. (209).

<sup>18</sup> Allen, Thomas. *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Press. 2008. (13)

literature articulates at the level of form a modernity by not one but several distinct temporal dispositions.”<sup>19</sup> Approaching time also as a methodological concern, scholars like Wai Chee Dimock and Jeffrey Insko have challenged New Historicism by arguing against the “numerical,” “spatialized,” or “tenseless” time” that is its fundamental operating principle.<sup>20</sup> Dimock rejects the assumption that time should be measured in “uniform units,” in which the numerical quantity of the time between any two events can serve as an objective or transferable measure of the relationship between those events, and Insko argues against the historicist’s impulse to “treat literary characters and their creators alike as the property of the moment in history that called them into existence.”<sup>21</sup> Both espouse flexible, diverse, and pluralized notions of time beyond what Benedict Anderson names the “homogenous, empty time” of modernity,<sup>22</sup> encouraging cultural criticism not only toward more comprehensive recognition of temporal imaginings within history, but also toward a rethinking of our presumptions about time in the practice of history.

We can find productive sites for accessing temporal imaginings in representations of the child. For instance, in the speech that Oliver Wendell Holmes declared the nation’s “intellectual declaration of independence,” Emerson locates childhood in an indeterminate temporal space. In order to imagine how American “Man Thinking” can

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<sup>19</sup> Pratt, Lloyd. *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. (5).

<sup>20</sup> Dimock, Wai Chee. *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006. (123-124).

<sup>21</sup> Insko, Jeffrey. “Anachronistic Imaginings: *Hope Leslie*’s Challenge to Historicism.” *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004). 181.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006. ( 24-26).

develop a relationship to his personal history without deferring authority to the past, Emerson summons childhood's capacity to divert time's linearity:

The actions and events of our childhood and youth are now matters of calmest observation. They lie like fair pictures in the air. Not so with recent actions—with the business which we now have in hand. On this we are quite unable to speculate.<sup>23</sup>

Here “childhood and youth” are held in contrast to “recent actions,” and “the new deed.” And yet, they do not recede into a distant past or into memory of old, but rather into a kind of static, immediate presence: “*now*” like “pictures in the air.” As childhood stands in for the process by which present action becomes palpable and meaningful via its ripening into an observable past, this mode of observation nonetheless resists the “retrospective” that Emerson elsewhere reproaches.<sup>24</sup> The recent and new do not recede such that we then look back upon them; instead, they “detach,” and soar “into the empyrean,” in a temporal evasion. What Emerson so nimbly exercises here is the child's temporal expressivity.

The writing of childhood and youth tend to “*make time appear*,” to borrow Dana Luciano's phrase.<sup>25</sup> Modern childhood, it seems, is insistently bound to temporal logic; by many of the measures of biology, psychology, and civic life, it is definitionally a

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<sup>23</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The American Scholar.” *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*. Vol. 1. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1855. (97).

James Guthrie observes a similar representation of time in “Self-Reliance,” in which Emerson uses the phrase “above time”: “Unlike man, the rose does not exist in time—at least not as we conventionally comprehend it, that is, as the sum of past and future. By living always in the present, the rose exists anterior to time, or “above it” (2). Guthrie argues that with the nineteenth-century brought major reconceptualizations of time—as new geologic studies exponentially pushed back the beginning of time and destabilized the telos of man's arrival on earth—to which Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau responded by “reenvisioning time as an endless series of present instants” (1). (*Above Time: Emerson's and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions*. Columbia, MS: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> To select just one of many examples, this passage is from the opening paragraph of *Nature*: “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”

<sup>25</sup> Luciano, Dana. *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

chronological construct. And yet in the imagination, childhood is impossibly located in time. In its Romanticization, childhood becomes the nostalgic past, the object of yearnings to return; it is the stage always already lost. But if childhood is the origins, the “before,” it is also the “not yet;” childhood projects toward the future, the always becoming of possibility, the not yet of the adult destined to become.

In relation to political theory, childhood as a category of age coarticulates body and time, and thus encourages us to think about democratic citizenship in time. Where we often think of citizenship and rights in the terms of “who?,” age asks us to think also about “when?”—bringing the birthrights of the liberal self into a temporal frame. Since the rise of democracy, children’s disenfranchisement has been understood as a form of future-enfranchisement, in a conceptual frame that requires teleological thinking.<sup>26</sup> That is, to describe children as enfranchised-in-the-future is to both presume that future, and to evaluate the present through a projected lens of retrospection—without confronting the disenfranchisement experienced in the present. But, on the other hand, we might think of children’s future-enfranchisement not as a deferral of rights but as time meaningfully spent actualizing a political status.<sup>27</sup> And the time necessary for children to age into their political status invites us to consider parallel questions about the time required by democratic processes. As Sheldon Wolin has put it, “political time, especially in societies with pretensions to democracy, requires an element of leisure, not in the sense of a leisure class [ . . . ] but in the sense, say, of a leisurely pace.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, we might think of

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, in any formulation of the antebellum child’s guaranteed eventual rights, “the child” carries the same implicit definition of white maleness that does the liberal citizen self.

<sup>27</sup> And as we know, nineteenth century parental and educational discourse was keenly tuned to the time and effort required to raise children into citizens capable of self-government.

<sup>28</sup> Wolin has described how “political time” is “out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture.” (“What time is it?” *Theory and Event* 1:1., 1997). More recently, William

children's slow approach to full citizenship as having the democratic quality of being leisurely, and deliberative. In either frame, childhood brings into view the gap between the theoretical time of democracy and the lived experience of the political present.

From a literary and cultural studies' perspective, we should note that the child has also been a key figure in imagining the U.S.'s place in time. From its revolutionary birth the U.S. was conceptualized as a child—untested, unestablished, and dwarfed by the deep histories and sophisticated cultural and infrastructural establishments of the other nations on the geopolitical stage.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as we know, Revolutionary and early national leaders turned the U.S.'s infantile identity into the very premise for its independence and greatness. In *Common Sense*, for example, Thomas Paine writes that “the infant state of the Colonies, as it is called, so far from being against, is an argument in favor of independence.”<sup>30</sup> Paine follows the language of “infant state” into the metaphors of

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Scheuerman has described the implicit but often unrecognized temporal contexts for the separation of governmental powers: “legislative is prospective, or future oriented; judicial activity is fundamentally retrospective, or past oriented, and the executive is contemporaneous, or present oriented in its fundamental orientation.” The temporal role assigned each of these branches by classic liberal-democratic theory, Scheuerman argues, has become increasingly incompatible with what he calls “the social acceleration of time.” (*Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004, 26-29). Whether we trace it to a particular social-historical context, as does Scheuerman, or whether we see it as a Rousseauian paradox of democracy, as does Wolin, temporal discordances offer an important point of access for examining the relationship between the political and politics in practice

<sup>29</sup> Caroline Levander and Carol Singley similarly note: “the American nation, since its inception, has been identified with and imagined as a child.” In *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. (4).

<sup>30</sup> Adopting the title “sons” and “daughters of liberty,” early Revolutionary participants reconfigured the meaning of the filial relationship that Charles Townshend drew upon when— during Parliamentary debate over the Stamp Act—he condescendingly called the American colonists “children planted by our care, nourished up by our indulgence” (quoted in *The North American Review*. Vol 75, Cambridge: H.O. Houghton and Company, 1852. 142). If they were “children,” Paine and other revolutionary thinkers argued, the colonists had the right to turn away from their unfit parent. For more on this topic, see Jay Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800*. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1982). In one of the earliest dedicated studies of the child in American political culture, Fliegelman identified the US revolt against Great Britain as reflective of a broader ideological rejection of patriarchal authority, tied to shifting conceptions of family and childrearing. Metaphors of the newly-declared nation as a child shaking loose the tyrannical powers of the parent country developed within a Lockean parenting paradigm of filial autonomy, and articulated the rights of children to develop and declare their own loyalties.

familial relationships, such that the U.S. is no longer a developmentally infantile “child” in time but a filial “child” under an unfit parent. And we might pay attention to this slippage between the temporal and familial valences of the word “child.” Indeed, as generations are the human architecture of time, in many ways temporality *is* intrinsically familial. For instance, in his famous observations of the new nation, Tocqueville uneasily described how democracy’s diminishment of children’s reliance on their fathers threatened to sever “the natural and necessary tie between the past and the present.”<sup>31</sup> But there are certain temporal divergences in these various meanings of “child.” Where the filial child remains in a static relationship to the “past” that is the parent generation, the developmental child has but a fleeting claim on its position in time. So, while the mapping of the political onto the familial helped Revolutionary thinkers articulate the hierarchal relationships between colony and parent-country, it also raised a temporal dilemma: how can a nation galvanized in an identity of youthfulness ever “mature”—or even more simply, survive the passage of time—without losing that sense of self? This question is an iteration of the anxiety that resides always in representations of childhood’s ephemerality—the anxiety of impermanence. In a variety of antebellum texts richly engaged with the yet-emergent U.S. democracy, we will see, representations of childhood and youth limn these anxieties and pose these types of questions.

### *Summary of Chapters*

Chapter One discusses Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s 1835 *The Linwoods*, a novel that vividly stages the anxieties that condense around the desire to perceive democracy as

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<sup>31</sup> Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Ed. Richard D. Heffner. New York: New American Library, 2001. (228).



guided by timeless truths, while also recognizing that the democratic process necessarily entails the negotiation of contingent and ephemeral opinions. Written in the wake of the Nullification Crisis, this novel typically has been read as a responsive nationalistic call for union; however, this chapter suggests *The Linwoods* can also be read for its self-conscious engagements with democracy at a theoretical level. Because nineteenth-century America bore equal cultural investment in thinking of children as malleable and subject to social influence, and as transcendent and sprung true, the child permits Sedgwick to dramatize the conflict between the self-evident truth and the radical revisability of the Constitution, and of the patriotic feelings of its citizens. As the novel investigates how to understand the nature of political commitments—national and personal—across the passage of time, Sedgwick at once uses the novel to make normative claims in response to her particular historical moment, and to trouble the theoretical integrity of those claims.

Chapter Two describes how in Ralph Waldo Emerson takes up this problem in his abolitionist lectures, in which the figure of the child mediates between representations of political action as guided by transcendent law, and as contingently enacted through experiment. Following the figure of the child into an exploration of the relationship between transformative political acts and the quality that Emerson calls “newness,” I suggest that the Emersonian child is much more than a static Romantic symbol and encourages us to rethink the political value of Emerson’s transcendentalist thought. That is, many critics have insisted on the apolitical nature of Emerson’s thinking as a transcendentalist, while others have worked to reclaim his status as a political thinker by “de-transcendentalizing him,” suppressing his idealism in order to emphasize his more

pragmatist tendencies. The figure of the child, I argue, forges a reciprocity between these two competing discourses in Emerson's work, inviting us to see both and to recognize the ways that the play of the visionary and the pragmatist enriches Emerson's political thinking.

Chapter Three follows the title character of Herman Melville's novel *Israel Potter*, a dispossessed soldier of the American Revolution, as he spends fifty years chasing a promise of democratic freedom only to suffer its chronic deferral. Thus, the novel asks: if democracy is something we can always only ever pursue, what is its meaning in the present? Chapter Three illuminates how this novel uses Potter's erased youth and foreclosed future to critique the nationalist narratives emblemized by the rhetoric of the Young America movement, which sang of a singular past and a glorious destiny. While Melville's representation of the American Revolution as an unexceptional, chaotic, and failed experiment might imply a nihilistic vision of democracy, this chapter argues that Melville ultimately offers a kind of optimism. That is, by resisting the imposition of formal, logical coherence upon political life, Melville does not merely deconstruct exceptionalist narratives and the imperfect public realm which they conceal, but also opens that realm to contest and re-imagining. Staging fleeting but liberatory moments of present possibility that disrupt the novel's own end-driven narrative, *Israel Potter* locates democratic potentiality in humble moments of the contingent and unwritten now.

Chapter Four considers how Frederick Douglass's insistence that the time for politics is "the ever-living now" inflects his representation of childhood. Where children in abolitionist literature are typically read as rhetorical devices for voicing higher law

ideals, this chapter argues that Douglass's writing encourages us to read these moments as they document children making political claims. That is, rather than displacing these anti-slavery claims from the subjectivities that speak them and from the historical moment in which they are spoken, Douglass's writing submits the political discourses occurring in communities of children to the actionable now. As it limns a distinction between representations of children as tropes and representations of children as political actors, this chapter also engages the question that underlies much childhood studies scholarship: how to understand the relationship between "the child" and historical children? Douglass's epistemology having lived both beneath his institutionalized status as a "thing" and in the reality of his human subjectivity, I suggest, predisposes his work toward a particular sensitivity to the dynamic exchange between the figural constructions of children and its literal, lived counterparts. With an exploration of the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, this chapter describes how Douglass deconstructs the racist figurations of what he calls "genuine boyhood" to reveal the lived realities of children in slavery. At the same time, he finds in the figure of his own boyhood self a powerful way to articulate the dialectical inextricability of bondage and freedom that he finds both within slavery and within formal "freedom," disrupting the telos of the slave narrative genre.

Taken together, these chapters represent my yet-unfolding search for a supplement to the modes of ideological critique that have come to characterize politicized literary and cultural studies. Christopher Castiglia has described how, as a field, we "have

closeted our hopes . . . behind the harder-edged denunciations of critique.”<sup>32</sup> Seeking a form of political engagement in literary criticism that decenters disenchantment and disavowal, I permit myself to draw liberally from the field of political theory. Because political theory has disciplinarily investments in envisioning and articulating democracy as it should be, it offers relief to the literary critical practice of critique as an end in itself. However, this is not to imply that political theory offers a way out of literary study. Rather, it is the exchange of these disciplines that might bear the richest yield. In the frailest version of this exchange, political theory can inject literary criticism with normative claims, and literature can offer political theory scenic paraphrases. But, more productively, a dialogue between literature and political theory might leverage strengths from each—political theory’s leap toward the lucid realm of the political as it should be, and literature’s attachments to the ornate and sometimes mystifying complexity of historical politics as they are.<sup>33</sup> To this interdisciplinary ambition, I also introduce the study of the child.

Like “democracy,” “the child” is a too-ample term. Both are culturally unassailable—who would deny support to either?—and yet both are historically problematic. And as in the case of democracy, our collectively-held fantasies about childhood can have very little relation to the conditions that exist under its name. Much recent scholarship in childhood studies has interrogated the ways that “the child” is called into all sorts of troubling ideological and political projects that serve neither children nor the clear-eyed ideals “the child” is meant to invoke. Nevertheless, it is a contention of

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<sup>32</sup> Castiglia, Christopher. “‘A Democratic and Fraternal Humanism’: The Cant of Pessimism and Newton Arvin’s Queer Socialism.” *American Literary History*. 21.1 (2009). 160.

<sup>33</sup> For this understanding of the relationship between literary studies and political theory, I am indebted to the participants of the 2012 Democratic Vistas Interdisciplinary Seminar.

this project that, at times, the normative claims made through the figure of the child can reach toward authentically democratic aims. As a figure allied in the antebellum era with higher law, with imagination, with intuition, with experimentation, and so forth, the child can facilitate exciting visions of democracy. With an investment in forms of methodological hopefulness, these are the moments I seek in the texts here.

There are risks to introducing “hopefulness” to critical methodology—with its suggestions of presentist desires and critical softness. But we might also ask ourselves: what are the potential benefits of more optimistic form of scholarship? Or—to invoke and bend Gramsci’s well-known phrase, what is the potential for an optimism of the intellect?<sup>34</sup> And, in a question that is tangential but closely related, what might be gained by recovering the imaginative registers associated with childhood as politically-viable language? Reflecting on these questions, the concluding chapter of this project turns its attention back upon itself, to consider the critical moment and the status of “the child” in contemporary political dialogue.

Finally, given that I self-identify this work as belonging at least in part within the field of childhood studies, I must briefly address the literary historian’s dilemma of “the child.” From what is marked as an inaugural moment in the field of childhood studies, the 1962 publication of Phillipe Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood*, to its increasing

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Johnson has recently used the same phrase in an article titled “Optimism of the Intellect? Hegemony and Hope.” He writes: ‘Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ is one of Gramsci’s best-remembered sayings, and it has informed much fine critical analysis [ . . . ]. Yet political will and critical analysis are not as unconnected as Gramsci’s aphorism might imply. Too much criticism can feed despair about these ‘End Times’ and can paralyse the will. We surely need also an *optimism of the intellect*: theories and concrete studies that map out a more hopeful future, yet ground strategy in realist historical analysis. Perhaps we need to fine-tune our political-intellectual outlook to fit today’s chaotic world, where possibilities and catastrophe coexist so intimately. We need to recover what Ernst Bloch, the key Marxist theorist of hope, called ‘forward dreaming’.” In *Soundings*. Vol. 54, Summer 2013. (51).

disciplinary coherence, the historical and cultural study of children has asked scholars to interrogate the concept of agency, pressing harder on this notion in order to accommodate the subtle and partial ways children are actors in their own lives. Scholars of children, then, are called to meaningfully include young people in the historical record, and for historians, part of this project entails the methodological challenge of inventing new ways to find and interpret sources that bring us closer to children themselves. And yet, for literary scholars, the childhood studies' imperative to seek children's voices can be a fool's errand; adult-authored literary texts by definition provide deeply mediated representations of children and childhood, and the impulse to seek "children themselves" behind their cultural figurations by adults risks cultivating a nostalgia for presence, to borrow Derrida's language.

Nevertheless, literary criticism may too readily read rhetorical invocations of childhood and youth as signs only—as placeholders for purity, innocence, authenticity, naivete, infantilization, and so forth—without also thoroughly treating childhood as an experiential, historical, and social category. Literary scholarship has rigorously contextualized metaphors of femininity within historical matrices of gender relationships and metaphors of blackness in historical matrices of race relations, for instance, and we rightly would be uncomfortable isolating such metaphors from their implications for the subjects inhabiting these social categories. However, literary scholarship has been comparatively unbothered by the treatment of childhood as rhetorical object without regard for children as historical subjects. We can see how the child as discourse evacuates children as persons even in the critical language of "the child," for which much

scholarship, (this project included) comfortably uses the pronoun “it.”<sup>35</sup> While remaining primarily in the literary and rhetorical realms of figurative childhood, this project does acknowledge the careful distinction to be made between the metaphorical child and the lived experience of children, and occasionally highlights the exchange between the two.<sup>36</sup>

To the extent that this project treats childhood as a “thing,” it is in the sense of the word as Bruno Latour uses it. For Latour, simple objects become “things” when they pass over into “highly complex, historically situated, richly diverse matters of concern,” or “gatherings.”<sup>37</sup> Like the pearly dolomite that Latour uses as his example, childhood is “so beautifully complex and entangled that it resists being treated as a matter of fact.” And as a gathering, childhood invites us *in*—not to debunk it as an object, but to engage in it as an arena of ideas. It is in this spirit, I hope, that this project gathers its ideas about childhood and about democracy.

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Honeyman provides an extended discussion of the phrase “the child”: the “near bigotry revealed in readings of ‘the child’ [ . . . ] would be plenty obvious, not to mention offensive, if we constantly generalized representations of ‘the woman,’ ‘the black,’ ‘the Hispanic,’ and in doing so dared to speak for all” (10). In *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Critics like Karen Sanchez-Eppler and Anna Mae Duane have led the way in the recent turn to literary critical engagements with children as historical subjects. As Duane suggests, “metaphor is better understood as a dynamic conceptualization where each term of comparison becomes shaped by its juxtaposition with the other.” (*Suffering Childhood in Early America: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010. 11.)

<sup>37</sup> Latour, Bruno. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004). (234).

## CHAPTER I

### “I LOVE EVERYTHING AND EVERYBODY I LOVED WHEN I WAS A CHILD”: POLITICAL COMMITMENTS ACROSS TIME IN CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK’S *THE LINWOODS*

#### *Introduction*

As a seven or eight-year-old girl, Catharine Maria Sedgwick recalls in the autobiographical short story “A Reminiscence of Federalism,” she witnessed an old horse become the unwitting instrument of antagonism between local Federalists and Democrats. Clover’s “sides were pasted over with lampoons” like “a walking gazette,” she writes, and as he grazed from one hill to another he would traffic these insults back and forth between the rival parties.<sup>38</sup> When two young sweethearts, Fanny and Randolph, were forbidden to see each other by their feuding parents, the children used Clover to communicate their messages of love: “they maintained a continual correspondence by Clover. The art was simple by which they secured their billet-doux from the public eye. The inside contained the effusion of their hearts. The outside was scribbled with some current political sarcasm or joke” (25). The two parts of this billet-doux promise to fulfill simultaneous fantasies about childhood power and innocence: here are children who can navigate the adult world with pluck and disarming savvy, all while harboring purer feelings separate from the corrupting influence of that world.<sup>39</sup>

Once opened, however, the letter reveals that the children’s language is fully infused by the political atmosphere through which their romance is mediated. Fanny

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<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, Catharine Maria. “A Reminiscence of Federalism.” *Tales and Sketches*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1835. (24).

<sup>39</sup> For a rich discussion of how nineteenth century U.S. culture cherished the fantasy that children’s “dependency and vulnerability could be a form of power,” (71) see Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, particularly the chapter “Temperance in the Bed of a Child,” (69-100).



thanks her dear Randolph for “the gold eagles” (Federalist tokens), tells him an anecdote about Clover and “his papers,” and affectionately signs off (25). The adult political passions that were meant to conceal the children’s letter are in fact reproduced within it—undoing the imagined singularity of childhood that gives this ruse its charm. Nonetheless, the letter’s politics do not discourage Sedgwick from “smiling” at how “childish” is Fanny’s prose (71). The narrative object that is the billet-doux thus aptly embodies the dynamic that much childhood studies scholarship has described as source of both the child’s critical fecundity and inscrutability, in which children and adult idealizations of childhood continually construct and deconstruct and reconstruct each other.<sup>40</sup> With its literally enfolded relationship of childhood feelings and ostensibly “adult” politics, the billet-doux suggests the desires and difficulties of ascertaining where there exists—if at all—something authentically “childlike” that is distinct from the politicized environments in which children live.

This question emerges again on a playground in the opening chapter of *The Linwoods*, where a group of boys confound their adult audience with the un-childlikeness of their politically charged play. Mr. Linwood turns to his son and asks: “Herbert, can

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<sup>40</sup> For instance, the work of historians Karin Calvert, Miram Formanek-Brunell, and Steven Mintz describes how American children were affected by prevailing cultural thought about childhood, while also documenting how children as subjects interceded in and shaped that cultural thought; Calvert focusing on the material culture of childhood from 1600 to 1900, Formanek-Brunell focusing on the culture of doll production and play from 1830-1930, and Mintz offering a sweeping discussion of “myths” of childhood from the colonial period to the present. and purchased the dolls (5). (Calvert, Karin. *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994; Formanek-Brunell, Miriam. *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. ;Mintz, Steven. *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.) And for a critique of this methodological premise in the study of childhood, see Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence*, particularly the chapter titled “Introduction: Playing Innocent: Childhood, Race and Performance” NY: New York University Press, 2011. (1-29). Bernstein suggests that the scholarly model that describes reciprocity between childhood as concept and as lived experience is an “unsatisfying détente” (22). Bernstein finds a convincing and sophisticated solution to this problem in performance theory; however, I’m not sure that I find the “opposition” embedded into childhood studies as unsatisfying as does Bernstein.

you tell me what these boys are about? They seem rather to be at work than play” (17).<sup>41</sup> Herbert reports to his father that the boys are “throwing up a redoubt to protect [their] fort” to “keep off the British,” (17-18), and the loyalist Mr. Linwood is appalled by “the seeds of rebellion springing up in their young hot bloods”:

“A loud huzzaing was heard from the fort—“What does that mean?” asked Mr. Linwood.

“The whigs are hanging a tory, sir.”

“The little rebel rascals!—Herbert!—you throwing up your hat and huzzaing too!” (18)

With this scene, Sedgwick establishes the intergenerational conflict that the novel will work to resolve, between loyalist Mr. Linwood and his rebel children. Critical readings of *The Linwoods* generally describe it as domestic political allegory, responding to the nationalist concerns of its contemporary moment, in particular the passing of the Revolutionary generation and the threat of disunion raised by the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. By casting these concerns about the current generation’s national identity into the moment of its discordant origins, Sedgwick imagines the possibility of a reconciled and healthy national future through proper models of republican virtue. And in keeping with so much of the domestically minded literature of this period, Sedgwick treats the family and the state as intrinsically bound; the national narrative works itself out through the machinations of romance and familial reconciliation, following the self-reproducing model Shirley Samuels has so neatly described, in which the family must “create selves who create families who create states in the image of the family.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Linwoods, or, “Sixty Years Since” in America*. Ed. Maria Karafilis. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Samuels, Shirley. *Romances of the Republic: Women, Family, and Violence in Literature of the Early American Nation*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. (17).

Building on the scholarship that has underscored the microcosmic equivalence between the family structure and the state, with the parent-child power dynamic replicated between government and citizens, this chapter suggests that *The Linwoods* also renders a more gestural accordance between a citizen's childhood and the nation's Constitution. Each helping to conceptualize the formation of these respective political bodies, childhood and the Constitution are subject to equal and competing cultural investments in their being human, social, and subject to change, and in their being transcendent and sprung true. As the novel traces the development of its heroine Isabella Linwood from child to virtuous adult-citizen, its vexed negotiation of the origins and development of her political feelings as at once "true" and capable of being "remoulded" resonate with the novel's parallel concerns about the nature of the Constitution as a document at once sanctified and radically revisable. Further, this chapter suggests, the figure of the child in *The Linwoods* does not merely replicate or reproduce, but also undoes—as the novel troubles its own normative, nationalist claims. That is, through recollections of Isabella's childhood feelings, the novel questions the theoretical integrity of the idea that one can make the "right" political commitments in a democratic environment that by definition allows disagreement about the very premises upon which commitments are made.

*Political Feeling as "True and Safe" Instincts and as "Moulded by Circumstance"*

Although Sedgwick herself was not known for her political activism (Lydia Maria Child chided her for her tepid abolitionism),<sup>43</sup> her writing is dedicated to the project of

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<sup>43</sup> "Moderation! How *can* you be moderate?" wrote Child to Sedgwick in 1834. Quoted in *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*. Ed. Carolyn Karcher. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. (14)

editorializing early U.S. political history. Sedgwick's familial background positioned her in intimate relation to the Federalist / Democratic rivalries, and as Judith Fetterley has described, Sedgwick "grew up in an atmosphere pervaded by politics," and her work "reflects her profound belief in the American democratic experiment and her deep commitment to devoting her talents, as her father did before her, to the service of her country."<sup>44</sup> Mary Kelley likewise describes how "in her fiction, as in her life, Sedgwick registered the social and political debates through which Americans grappled with the freedoms and the anxieties, the rights and the contradictions they had inherited from the Revolution" (xvii).<sup>45</sup> Given her father's part in the Constitution's ratification, Sedgwick's nationalism was both political and familial. As such, a number of critics have emphasized *The Linwood's* obsessive investment in reconciliation and union, enacted through repaired filial relationships and reproduced familial relationships.<sup>46</sup> For instance, Isabella's and her brother Herbert's patriotism initially threatens to sunder the Linwood family, but as the war ends, their loyalist father comes to accept his children's political allegiances and to support Isabella's marriage to the democrat Eliot Lee. From this perspective, the novel conservatively resists the "descent into political divisiveness,"

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<sup>44</sup> Introduction to "Cacoethes Scribendi" in *Provisions: A Reader from 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Women*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. (41, 44).

<sup>45</sup> Kelley, Mary. "Foreword." *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Maria Karafalis's introduction to the text (*The Linwoods, or, "Sixty Years Since" in America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002); Shirley Samuels' chapter "The Family in the Novel: Cooper and the Domestic Revolution" in *Romances of the Republic: Women, Family, and Violence in Literature of the Early American Nation*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. 57-75); or Emily Van Dette's "It should be a family thing": Family, Nation, and Republicanism in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* and *The Linwoods*. *American Transcendental Quarterly*. Kingston: Mar 2005.19.1, 51-75).

as it uses the family model to imagine a solution for assuaging disagreement and remaining a political whole.<sup>47</sup>

Alternatively, the novel can be read for the dissension that persists even through the process of reconciliation. Emily Van Dette, for instance, underscores how the Linwood family's reconciliation is one that does not erase political divisiveness but embraces it. She writes:

Even while finally accepting his children's American patriotism in the final chapter, Mr. Linwood remains a staunch loyalist, mournfully watching the British leave New York. Just as in *A New-England Tale* Sedgwick carefully avoids sectarianism and calls for a sense of Christianity that will tolerate diverse denominations, in *The Linwoods* she imagines a family/nation that will allow diverse political positions. In both novels, Sedgwick's Utopian unions feature humanitarian leadership, mutual respect, and goodwill among the various members of families, nations, and communities.<sup>48</sup>

Van Dette's reading links Sedgwick's novel to the Lockean childrearing paradigm, by which the respectfully permissive parent-child relationship corresponds to the kind of national authority that allows for independent, self-determined, and diversely positioned citizens. What Van Dette calls the Linwood family's model of a "more loving, compassionate style of authority" offers a direct and corrective reply to the 1830's secessionists' assumption that dissent requires dissolution (62).<sup>49</sup>

We should note that the child in Van Dette's model is specifically the child in the filial sense—given definition by the familial structure. When Mr. Linwood "finally accept[s] his children's American patriotism in the final chapter," we are talking about

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<sup>47</sup> Karafalis, xxv

<sup>48</sup> "It should be a family thing": Family, Nation, and Republicanism in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* and *The Linwoods*. *American Transcendental Quarterly*. Kingston: Mar 2005.19.1 (62).

<sup>49</sup> Nancy Sweet likewise describes a kind of "virtuous dissent" in Sedgwick's first novel, *A New England Tale*, in which the disobedient daughter heroine figure models a balance between the enactment of democratic individualism and the preservation of social order. See "Dissent and the Daughter in *A New England Tale* and *Hobomok*." *Legacy*. 22.2, 2005. 107-125.

*adult* children.<sup>50</sup> The filial child, always within the context of the parental relationship, imagines dissent in terms of the hierarchal relationship between authority and citizen-subject. But, the novel also explores more complicated (and less utopic) implications of dissent. Unionists like Sedgwick insisted that the power of the Union (and the Constitution as its founding document) is called into being by the people collectively; by which the Nullification Crisis was not a problem of an over-exertive national authority as the secessionists argued, but of disagreement among citizens bound in equality. In the “Proclamation Regarding Nullification,” for instance, Jackson argued: “the people of the United States formed the Constitution [ . . . ] the terms used in its construction show it to be a government in which the people of all the States, collectively, are represented. We are one people.”<sup>51</sup> In this frame, disagreement occurs *among* citizens—a lateral rather than hierarchal dynamic. Such disagreement has its own set of dilemmas that, as I hope to show, this novel registers through the temporal (rather than the filial) child, as Isabella’s political development is measured in relation to and against her past childhood self.

While the disagreement between Isabella and her father requires pat resolution in order to maintain familial and social order, the persistent disagreement between Isabella and her childhood sweetheart Jasper Meredith leaves a number of questions unsettled. In his allegorical purpose of representing an old aristocratic order, Meredith functions to be redressed and replaced, but in his role as Isabella’s childhood sweetheart, Meredith hearkens to their younger selves, and in so doing his character repeatedly poses challenges to Isabella’s political convictions in ways that linger beyond his character’s expiration. By redirecting our focus from Isabella as a filial “child” to her childhood in

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<sup>50</sup> Van Dette, 61.

<sup>51</sup> “Proclamation Regarding Nullification.” December 10, 1832. Archived by the Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. <[avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jack01.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jack01.asp)>

the temporal or developmental sense, we can see how this novel wrestles with the origins and nature of political feeling in a democratic culture that recognizes the coexistence of dissenting opinions. As a figure that represents the social and developmental acquisition of identity, and as a figure with claims to an intrinsic or intuitive sense of self and world, the child crystallizes the novel's conflicting needs to represent political conviction as "mouldable" and as "true."

At the start of *The Linwoods*, young Isabella is clearly marked to become the heroine of the novel, but she is not yet the virtuous American citizen. When Herbert Linwood tosses his hat and huzzas with rebel enthusiasm, Isabella sides with their loyalist father, who calls Herbert a "fool" and promises to "cut him off forever" if he should "prove a traitor" (18). While it might seem that Isabella's early loyalism simply provides a starting point from which she can grow away, affording the narrative opportunity to represent patriotism as a rational choice and an act of self-authorization, Sedgwick nonetheless insists that what will be Isabella's mastery of her political future is the product of her *original* character. The narrator intrudes to note the apparent incongruity between Isabella's political feelings as a loyalist and her "born" character as a rebel: "So arbitrarily do circumstances mould opinions. Isabella seemed like one who might have been born a rebel chieftaness" (18).

Dismissing Isabella's loyalism as some chance byproduct of environment—arbitrarily moulded by circumstance—the narrator continues to evince the notion of an inherent self, opening the next chapter as such:

. . . it may seem that in their visit to Effie, [the children] prematurely exhibited sentiments of riper years—but what are boys and girls but the prototypes of men and women—time and art may tinge and polish the wood, but the texture remains as nature formed it. (19)

The narrator here refers to the children's excursion to a fortuneteller where, as some critics have noted, Isabella's blithe refusal to "bow to destiny" marks her as a new kind of citizen, rejecting the old model in which political feeling is determined by inheritance and birth rights, in favor of a republican model of self-enactment.<sup>52</sup> But, Isabella's capacity to make her own future is dissonantly predetermined; however Sedgwick might disapprove of meek-hearted Bessie's submission to the fate Effie delivers for her, the novel likewise submits its characters to the fate of their born constitutions. If Isabella can overcome her loyalist feelings, it is not so much because her future is unbound by any birth right obligations, as because she is indeed "born" into rebellion; it is her "texture . . . as nature formed it." From the start then, the novel is working with competing investments in the child's capacity to configure the citizen-self's character as both born or natural, and as unscripted or socially malleable.

These uneven imaginings of childhood continue as Isabella negotiates between her antithetical suitors: the extravagant, aristocratic Jasper Meredith and the virtuous, democratic Eliot Lee. As Isabella steadily transforms herself into a model republican citizen in tandem with her shifting romantic allegiances from Meredith to Lee, the novel stages a critical conversation between Isabella and Meredith. Meredith grows

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<sup>52</sup> For instance, Jeffrey Insko argues that Isabella's claim that she does not "bow to destiny" is important to the novel's "interest in transmission [ . . . ] insofar as hereditary transmission is simply a matter of certain traits and possessions passed down from one's forbears [while] electrical transmission, by contrast 'charges individuals' to act. This is why, in the novel, the English submit to destiny, while the American rebels refuse to do so and instead attempt to shape their own futures" (310-311). In "Passing Current: Electricity, Magnetism, and Historical Transmission in *The Linwoods*." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 56.3 (2010), 293-326. Philip Gould suggests that one function of this scene is to "establish the relative position from which virtuous characters like Isabella Linwood and Eliot Lee will develop" (239). In "Catharine Sedgwick's Cosmopolitan Nation." *The New England Quarterly*. 78.2 (June 2005), 232-258.



increasingly disdainful of his competitor, and here he dismisses his past relationship to Lee, calling it “boy friendship,” which:

. . . passes off with other morning mists—a friendship not originating in congeniality, but growing out of circumstances—a chance. (120)

Meredith’s derisive use of the term “boy friendship” recalls a moment earlier, when he had encouraged Herbert to prolong what he calls “boy-fever” as a way to avoid political involvement, instructing: “take my advice, be quiet, be prudent, neutral. As long as we are called boys, we are not expected to be patriots, apostles or martyrs” (32). In both instances, Meredith regards childhood as a time without substance or consequence. This vision appalls Isabella, who gives the utmost gravity to her childhood feelings:

Chance—friendship! [. . .] I do not understand this—*the instincts of childhood and youth are true and safe. I love every thing and everybody I loved when I was a child.* I now dread the effect of adventitious circumstances. . . the frauds that are committed on the imagination by the seeming beautiful. (120, emphasis added)

If the novel’s underlying concern is to strengthen citizens’ faithfulness to the commitment made in the nation’s “youth”— to, as Sedgwick writes in the preface, “increase their fidelity to the free institutions transmitted to them”— it might appear here that the figure of the intuitive child is being recruited to make a nationalist claim. That is, in contrast to Meredith’s willingness to unceremoniously shed his childhood ties, our budding patriot heroine is aligned with the nostalgic vision of childhood as a time of authentic attachment. Isabella’s fidelity to the instincts of her youth seems to reinforce the novel’s desire to identify a stable point of origin for convictions, an origin that is somehow exempt from the happenstances of chance that might render it ephemeral.

But, the scene shifts to become critically self-reflective of these ideas. Just as Isabella declares her abiding feelings for all she loved as a child, those “true” convictions

she believes persevere beyond the wavering influences of circumstance, Sedgwick deploys Meredith to remind Isabella—and the reader— of the danger of blind allegiance to one’s past commitments. Meredith replies strategically:

“I appeal [ . . . ] from this stage of our being, troubled and darkened with distrust, to our childhood—that you say is true and unerring;—then, Isabella, believe its testimony, and believe that, from the fountain which you then unsealed in my heart, there has ever since flowed a stream, never diverted, and always increasing, till I can no longer control it. . . . again, I appeal to the past:—were you unconscious of the wild hopes you raised when you said, I love everybody that I loved in my childhood?” (121)

And so Isabella must backtrack, frantically clarifying:

“Oh! [ . . . ] I did not mean that—not that!”

Whatever love for Meredith she might have felt as a child, *that* is not one of the “true and safe” instincts of childhood; she does not still love *him*, even if he was once one of the “everybody” she loved as a child. Neither, we may conjecture, does Isabella still “love” what was once her position of loyalism, the political counterpart to her childhood alliance with Meredith. While in earlier scenes the narrator (and reader) was able to easily sort Isabella’s true, born character from those undesirable opinions resulting from the “moulding” by circumstance, here we see the difficulty of parsing exactly which are the past products of chance and which are the enduring principles of “true and safe instincts.” As Isabella finds herself ensnared in this problem of her rhetoric, the novel makes palpable its own unease about how to make claims of commitment while also recognizing the ontological reality of contingency.

Isabella’s dilemma as she defends her childhood is the same Sedgwick faces as she defends the nation. How can Sedgwick model reverent obedience to the original commitments made by the Constitution, without “appealing to the past” as Meredith does

when he tries to rekindle his childhood relationship with Isabella, and when he conservatively resists the emergence of democracy? How to maintain the “sybilline gaze into futurity” that is Isabella’s greatest virtue, even as she returns her reader to the nation’s past? How to claim that one perspective (the union founded by the Constitution) is “true and safe” while others (the secessionism of the Nullifiers) are the misguided products of circumstance? Or to move further into the allegorical coordinates: how to understand the Constitution as a perfected document of self-evident truths, and as one that allows itself to be radically interpretable and revisable?

Intrinsic to these concerns is the novel’s narrative form. That is, a discussion of Sedgwick’s prescriptive vision of the nation’s relationship to its founding documents should consider the novelistic treatment of history’s objects through which she asserts that vision. Her restaging of the Revolutionary conflict liberally fictionalizes it and its characters. The preface’s claims to historical reverence notwithstanding—“It may be permitted to say, in extenuation of what may seem presumption, that whenever the writer has mentioned Washington, she has felt a sentiment resembling the awe of the pious Israelite when he approached the ark of the Lord”—Sedgwick performs a presentist treatment of the historical past, its characters and its objects, treating each as pliable, interpretative material (6).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This approach is consistent with what Jeffrey Insko calls the practice of deliberate “anachronism” in *Hope Leslie*. Insko argues that Sedgwick’s nonteleological treatment of history is in direct contradiction to the critical practices of New Historicism, that anchor a text in its historical moment of existence, to “protect the text against relativist readings, and in particular, against presentism, the naïve tendency of critics to read their own period’s assumptions and values into the texts and events of the past.” In contrast, Sedgwick challenges the very premise of chronological time as she authors what Insko identifies as the “present-within-history” (“Anachronistic Imaginings: *Hope Leslie*’s Challenge to Historicism.” *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004). 199.)

Of course, in fictionalizing the nation's revolutionary founding, Sedgwick was hardly unique; Michael Kammen has estimated that between 1775 and 1850 over one hundred novels were set in the Revolutionary period.<sup>54</sup> But what remains remarkable about Sedgwick's work is that its concerted reworking of the past, as Jeffrey Insko so acutely argues, is less concerned with the "unique historicity of fictions set in the past," than with "the fictive quality of history proper." That is, Sedgwick's treatment of history as fictive implicitly recognizes that both unconscious and willful partisan investments shape any and all visions of history.<sup>55</sup> Understanding herself as part of a perspectival tradition of constructing history, Sedgwick liberates historical content from a presumption of and obsession with accuracy or fixity. Instead, history becomes a workable medium that cannot help but be transported into the contemporary moment, interpreted and reshaped to address the circumstances at present.

The aesthetic and political principles that arise from the premise of history's "fictive quality" implicitly acknowledge the plurality of positions from which that history might be imagined. Hence, this form is consonant with and enables her more progressive political principles, offering Sedgwick "a way of dealing with both cultural and national identity in a pluralistic culture" in which the American *past*, and not just its future, is a "perpetually unfinished project."<sup>56</sup> But, the conflict of interpretation animating the Nullification Crisis and the threat of disunion represent precisely the more dangerous

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<sup>54</sup> See *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Daly also recognizes Sedgwick's temporal manipulations when he writes "Sedgwick could bring together her own time with that of the Revolution to create what Wai Chee Dimock calls "temporal hybridity," in "Mischievous, Insanity, Memetics, and Agency in *The Linwoods*; or "Sixty Years Since" in *America*." *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003. (152).

<sup>56</sup> Insko, Jeffrey. "Anachronistic Imaginings: *Hope Leslie's* Challenge to Historicism." *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004). (193).

consequences of history's pliability. As an unfinished project, the nation's past is subject not only to remaking but also to undoing. The simultaneous anxieties and potentialities of plurality and dissent reside in this novel's very form, and register in its repeated testing of the political claims made in Isabella's voice. Indeed, as *The Linwoods* celebrates the transformability of its citizen-characters' political thoughts and the harmonious co-existence of their dissenting opinions, it is keyed to an essential democratic principle: that political processes are moved by the negotiation of ephemeral opinions, and not by any entity's singular possession of truth. However, the democratic disposition is also a source of a fundamental concern in the novel: how, then, does one trust the validity—or dare to assert the “truth” of one's political convictions?

We can see this theoretical perplexity dramatized in another exchange between Isabella and Meredith. As Isabella comes fuller into her identity as a republican, she describes a transcendent new order in which a single agent of power can no longer “infus[e] opinion into other men's minds and call it policy!” and in which “all have equal rights and equal duties” (190). Meredith scoffs at the possibility of democracy and makes a conservative claim for the inevitability of “things as they are,” to which Isabella appeals to the flexibility of what might seem even the firmest traditions and fastest opinions:

The hardest metals are melted in the furnace, to be recast in new forms, and old opinions and prejudices, harder Jasper, than any metal, may be subdued and remoulded in these fiery times. (191)

Here we see Isabella give voice to the notion that democratic transformation is possible precisely because opinions are not indelible but can be remoulded, and that the remoulding of ideas is possible precisely because democracy recognizes that even the most entrenched conventions are but opinions. However, Isabella's triumphant political

expression is challenged by its own language. That is, this particular image of “moulding” importantly recalls the language of the narrator’s interjection at the beginning of the novel, explaining away Isabella’s childhood loyalism with the phrase, “so arbitrarily do circumstances mould opinions.” And just as Meredith earlier reminds Isabella that her “mould[ed] opinions” once included affection for him, here he again works to undermine the integrity of her convictions. To Isabella’s assertion of democratic “remoulding,” Meredith rejoins:

“And does our aunt Archer furnish the mould in which they are recast?—if she talks to you as she has to me of the redoubtable knight-errantry of [Eliot Lee], I do not wonder at this sudden inspiration of republicanism.” (191)

Meredith’s is a petty jab at Isabella’s budding romance, as he insinuates that she has been influenced by Aunt Archer’s lavish praise of her new crush, Lee. But, beyond his expression of jealousy, Meredith cuts to a question of substance, and it has the intended affect. Isabella is forced to evaluate the circumstances that have produced her newest political sentiment and admit to herself: “A deep glow, partly hurt pride, partly consciousness, suffused Isabella’s cheek. Her aunt’s was the only mind whose direct influence she felt” (191). Meredith requires Isabella and the reader to ask: how is this particular moulding which has produced Isabella’s twinned republicanism and affection for Lee not just as arbitrary as that which earlier produced her loyalism and affection for Meredith?

We might imagine that Meredith’s rejoinder is aimed not only at Isabella, but also at Sedgwick’s own narrative technique; as a “deep glow” betrays Isabella’s embarrassment, it suggests a kind of proxy blush for Sedgwick’s own self-consciousness about the heavy-handed political utility of the scene of “knight-errantry” to which

Meredith refers. In this scene, thieves storm into the home of the widowed Archer at night, with designs to capitalize on the chaos of the war. As Archer attempts to protect her two children—clinging to her in “the defencelessness of childhood” and with “utter helplessness,” even the thieves are temporarily stalled by their pitifulness, as the one charged with capturing a child for ransom is taken aback: “they’re blind, captain—both blind! [ . . . ] I can’t touch them—by all that’s holy I can’t!” (166). When the thieves do take the flaxen-haired Lizzy, Eliot Lee hears of Archer’s distress and he mounts a heroic rescue, leaping his horse over a precipice, battling the villain, and returning a seemingly lifeless Lizzy to her mother and brother, to be revived by the combined warming powers of a bath and the intense glow of her mother’s “fixed eye” (179).

Clearly, here is the child figure at its most stock—an object of pathetic helplessness whose sentimental powers are levied to confirm the virtues of the hero and to bring round the sympathetic feelings of those in audience. And this child figure is designed to support the novel’s vision of what it means to be an American, providing Isabella and the reader access to the most virtuous feelings of citizenship, as they are moved by Eliot Lee’s courage and compassion in the service of the people. But by making Isabella a bit embarrassed to have been influenced *by* these powers, Sedgwick makes visible her own (embarrassing?) attempt to influence *with* them. It is precisely this kind of self-conscious wrestling with the ways in which a citizen acquires political feelings – either the citizen that is Isabella’s character or the citizens that are Sedgwick’s readers – that gives the novel such rich engagement with the nature of political conviction. And whether appearing in Isabella’s nostalgic memories or as a sentimental

narrative object, the figure of the child calls attention to its facilitating role in this dubious process.

Ultimately, Isabella's romantic and political self-authorization requires her to disavow her initial faith in the "true and safe instincts" of childhood, embracing instead a worldview that emphasizes the influence of circumstance. In a final act of liberation from Meredith, she writes him a letter in which she identifies whatever "love" she felt for him as both produced and overcome via circumstances; she describes it "originating in the *accidental intercourse* of childhood" and then expresses gratitude that "*circumstances* were made strong enough to prevail over my weakness" (312, emphasis added). With this new attitude, Isabella is able to come fully into her new political identity, and its corresponding romantic relationship. Shortly thereafter, Eliot Lee affirms Isabella's transformation into the sovereign democratic citizen when he declares his love with this praise, which merges the civic and the romantic:

"in this short period I have seen your mind casting off the shackles of early prejudices, resisting the authority of opinion, self-rectified, and forming its independent judgments on those great interests in which the honour and prosperity of your country are involved." (322)

Isabella casts off "the shackles of early prejudices"—and romances—by conceiving her own biographical past as perspectival and contingent and thereby giving herself imaginative space for change. She no longer requires herself to sustain the fantasy that she loves everything and everybody she loved as a child. And yet, in her phrase "the accidental intercourse of childhood" we hear resonances of Meredith's notion of "boy-friendship . . . growing out of circumstances—a chance." That which authorizes her democratic transformation in fact appropriates the fickle language of its antagonist, and thereby evokes the question: if all is circumstantial, if there are no true and safe instincts,



if democracy fires a forge that can melt even the hardest opinions, how does one trust one's own convictions? Lurking in this novel is the anxiety: can there be anything true and safe in democratic politics?

The question of truth is one that political theorists have varying wrestled with, and more often, deflected. After all, democracy by definition must accommodate a plurality of voices, and appeals to truth imply the tyrannical and essentializing inclinations of singularity. In the introduction to a recent essay collection on the relationship between truth and democracy, Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris put it this way:

...the anxiety about talk of truth remains great: that once any such talk is allowed through the door, it must bring with it a history of metaphysical baggage and a future of political domination. In the academy, this anxiety has perhaps been greatest in the humanities and in political theory, where many have responded to it by either rejecting it or avoiding the whole topic. (2)<sup>57</sup>

Elkins and Norris describe two primary schools of thought that, while taking opposite routes, both reach the conclusion that truth talk inevitably works to undermine democracy. For poststructuralists, the pursuit of truth threatens healthy *dissensus*, and is “bound to the dangerous utopian fantasy of overcoming political agonism” (2).

Conversely, for Rawls and Rawlsian thinkers, truth threatens *consensus*, insofar as it interferes with the phenomenon Rawls terms “overlapping consensus,” by which citizens are willing to support basic laws for expressly different reasons, private to their own comprehensive doctrines. In literary critical studies, certainly, we are keenly aware of how anything that might be “truth” comes to us through the mediations of context, perspective, and language.

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<sup>57</sup> This volume differentiates between “truthfulness”—meaning not lying—and “truth,” engaging the more complex latter form, to question “whether the only important political virtue in relation to truth is that of not lying, or whether there is more to it than that; and whether the question itself of truth is not one that is necessary for our political life” (20). Elkins, Jeremy and Andrew Norris, eds. *Truth and Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

However, truth may yet have a theoretical place in political life. For Elkins, the wholesale rejection of truth as a viable term can have the unintended consequence of reproducing precisely the power dynamics in which truth claims were initially implicated and for which they have been rejected:

That appeals to truth and reason have, at times, in intention or effect, unduly narrowed the range of voices, ideas, and perspectives—that claims to truth-knowledge have, in short, had their victims—is undeniable. Yet as with any political vision born of victimhood, there is the danger of imagining liberation as merely the mirror image of victimization, as domination stood on its head, and in so doing, of reinscribing the very divisions through which domination was constructed: in this case, the oppositions of truth and contingency, truth and plurality, truth and opinion, reason and emotion, and such. (26)

To reintroduce truth to the conversation about democracy, then, is to unbind these binaries. And I would suggest that, through her imaginings of childhood and maturation as they play out on a political stage, Sedgwick is interested in precisely a non-oppositional relationship between truth and contingency, and truth and plurality.

That the novel preserves an investment in instinctual or “natural” politics is evident as it works to overcome one key form of dissent: the dissension between Isabella’s past and present political selves. The internal consensus the novel works to achieve is that between Isabella’s active political (cum romantic) commitments and her “true” “born” self. The narrative propels her from circumstantial loyalism to the patriotism that matches her innate character, the version of her self that was “born a rebel chieftainess.” When she once and for all rejects Meredith, he recognizes “what was in truth quite evident, that Isabella Linwood was *herself again*” (313 emphasis added). In the novel’s essential purpose of cultivating a new Isabella that is somehow also “herself again,” we can sense a residual need for Isabella’s patriotic feelings to not only represent

a reasoned, self-determined, and virtuous response to the conditions at hand, but to be somehow natural or true to who she always was—a creation that is also a restoration.

“Moulding,” the word we’ve seen recurring in this text, aptly has both the meaning of “an imparted form” and “the distinctive nature of a person or thing, especially as indicative of origin; constitution, character”—a conflicting simultaneity the novel engages.<sup>58</sup> While not accomplishing a fully-articulated alternate model, *The Linwoods* sustains a productive tension between the ways that democracy can permit and value plurality and dissent, can recognize the contingency of perspective, the fictive quality of history, and the radical interpretability and revisability of the Constitution, and yet also accommodate a desire for “truth” in the spirit of those affirming and transcendent instincts that we often find voice for in the figure of the child.

#### *Testing Its Own Normative Claims*

While beginning in a debate over tariff policy, in the end the Nullification Crisis did not represent conflict of ideology or interest, but the struggle over the foundational presuppositions upon which Constitutional debate can take place. On the side of the nullifiers, John Calhoun’s “Fort Hill Address” argued that the “great and leading principal is, that the General Government emanated from the people of the several States” and that the right of nullification is “the fundamental principal of our system, resting on facts historically as certain as our revolution itself, and deductions as simple and demonstrative as that of any political or moral truth whatever.”<sup>59</sup> The unqualified

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<sup>58</sup> “Moulding.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2003. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.silk.library.umass.edu/> March 2013.

<sup>59</sup> “The Fort Hill Address of John C. Calhoun, July 26, 1831.” Richmond: Virginia Commission on Constitutional Government, 1960.

certainty with which Calhoun presumes this fundamental principle was met with equal and opposite certainty from the side of the nationalists. Andrew Jackson's Nullification Proclamation denounced the idea of state veto and argued that "the people of the United States formed the Constitution . . . the terms used in its construction show it to be a government in which the people of all the States, collectively, are represented" (158). Ultimately, the crisis was resolved in 1833 through the Compromise Tariff, which addressed the topical issue of taxation, but which reached no meaningful resolution about the foundational principles for understanding the nature of the Constitution's origin and power.

Likewise, *The Linwoods* creates conditions for conciliation, but without ever addressing the foundational disagreements between its reconciled parts; by the end of the novel the Linwood family is intact and devoted to their unity, without its members coming to an understanding of each other's respective patriot and loyalist perspectives. On the one hand, the irresolution here is fundamentally democratic; the novel depicts how a unified collectivity can and must accommodate its disagreeing parts. But on the other hand, we can identify the novel's lingering anxiety about democratic disagreement in its depiction of Isabella's marital relationship. That is, while the Linwood family achieves a comfortable form of disagreement, the novel delivers Isabella into a marital relationship utterly untested by it. The narrator describes their idealized marriage this way:

[Isabella and Eliot's] intercourse had never been disturbed by the cross-purposes, jarring sentiments, clashing opinions and ever-annoying disparities, that had so long made her life resemble a troubled dream. (345)

This delivery of Isabella from the “troubled dream” of contested civic identity formation into a relationship of perfect consensus seems to paper over the novel’s more complicated investigations of disagreement. If as Shirley Samuels argues, “Isabella’s marriage, like that of other characters in the novel, involves her discovery of self in a political world, a founding of the family that is a founding of the state,” the state founded here is one remarkably without dissent.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, retreating even further from her novel’s more daring theoretical engagements, Sedgwick closes with a didactic affirmation of Isabella and Lee’s model marriage:

... it is only by entering into these holy and most precious bonds with right motives and right feelings, that licentious doctrines can be effectually overthrown, and the arguments of the more respectable advocates of the new and unscriptural doctrine of divorce can be successfully opposed. (260)

Here it is plain that the “holy and most precious bond” of marriage stands in for the national union, and the threat of the “new and unscriptural doctrine of divorce” for the specter of secession. Following the logic of this allegory, Karafalis interprets the passage this way:

If the bond or union was entered into with “right motives and right feelings” – and who would charge that the motives and feelings of the Founding Fathers were “wrong”?—then it is dissolute, immoral, and even unholy to abrogate it. (xxix)

And yet—without diminishing the nationalist claim that Karafalis is identifying in this passage—I would again argue that the novel contains moments of critical self-reflection that are not entirely effaced by its triumphantly solid declarations. Though certainly not suggesting that the Founding Fathers could be “wrong”—nor sincerely doubting whether Isabella’s motives and feelings may have been “wrong”—the novel *does* ask its readers to pay attention to the origin of Isabella’s motives and feelings.

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<sup>60</sup> Samuels, Shirley. *Romances of the Republic: Women, Family, and Violence in Literature of the Early American Nation*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.(64).

Isabella's mind was not regularly trained; and, like that of most of her sex, the access to it was through the medium of her feelings... something above the ordinary standard has been claimed for our heroine, but it must be confessed, after all, that she was a mere woman, and that the mainspring of her mind's movements was in her heart. How much of Isabella's enthusiasms in the American cause was to be attributed to her intercourse with Eliot Lee, we leave to be determined by her peers. (345)

It is not immediately clear to whom Sedgwick here refers. If Isabella's "peers" are those contained within the world of the novel, the question is held open indefinitely by their sheer inaccessibility. Or, if by "peers" Sedgwick means Isabella's fellow young American women—the imagined readers of this novel—then Sedgwick calls those readers into the active role of interpretation. In either case, what remains is the indeterminateness of the origins of Isabella's "right feelings," which are subject to observation and interpretation and perhaps even debate, *even* as Sedgwick holds them up as a model. Readers of antebellum women's fiction will be familiar with the sympathetic acquisition of political conviction "through the medium of [. . .] feelings" as an important and authorized mode of political participation for this period, and to be sure *The Linwoods* participates in this tradition. But Sedgwick's decision to call attention to this rhetorical mode at this particular moment is noteworthy because it directly follows her critique of women's reading—or lack thereof:

There are those who deem political subjects beyond the sphere of a woman's, certainly of a young woman's mind. But if our young ladies were to give a portion of the time and interest they expend on dress, gossip, and light-reading, to the comprehension of the Constitution of their country, and its political institutions, would they be less interesting companions, less qualified mothers, or less amiable women? (344)

The doubled attention to the reading of the Constitution and the "reading" of Isabella's political constitution reflects Sedgwick's sense of the consonance between nation and novel-making as interpretive acts. And with a pointed critique of "light-reading,"

Sedgwick seems to suggest that young women readers should take an intellectually assertive approach to both. To be sure, what we are talking about here is not serious doubt about whether it was “right feeling” that bonded the Isabella and Lee’s marital union, and the federal union. Indeed, the novel has already demonstrated how judgments of right and wrong represent contingent but not necessarily equally valid opinions, and it nonetheless stakes its own unapologetic claims for love and for nation. But, here we can detect a quieter and more anxious undercurrent that recognizes that political claims and commitments are not unquestionable, but remain alive precisely by being indeterminate and interpretable.

*The Patriotic Child*

In the final scene, the residue of the novel’s investigations again forms around the figure of the child. As Lee and Herbert return to the Linwood family following the end of the war, Herbert’s young child speaks his very first political conviction:

Eliot Lee’s eye met Isabella’s and returned its brightest beam to the welcome that flashed from hers. Herbert kissed his hand to his friends, and stretched his arms to his boy. Rose lifted the little fellow high in the air; he was inspired with the animation of the scene, and the word that was then shouted forth from a thousand tongues, the first he ever uttered, burst from his lips—“Huzza!” (359)

As this child achieves his first speech with a single exuberant expression of patriotism, he is at once a figure of social circumstance and of instinct; that breathy word that bursts from his lips is propelled by the inspiration of the crowd around him, and yet is also primordial in its very “first”-ness, and it leads “a thousand tongues.” The “huzza” also echoes the “huzzaing” of the boys and young Herbert in the opening chapters, as they played at rebellion. Now on the other side of the war, this child reproduces the liberatory crowing that according to the novel seems to rise so naturally from youthful lungs.

As a brief but important coda, we should note that the child held in Rose's arms encapsulates a problematic that a number of critics have identified in this novel, as a black woman quite literally shoulders the future generation of white American males.<sup>61</sup> Stephen Knadler, for instance, argues, "The Linwoods is finally, that is to say, about the Republican Mother as the defender of the property of the "white" national character" (14). Knadler and others make a vital observation about the deeply flawed historical practice of U.S. democracy, as Rose and the child express and perpetuate its racialization. Yet, following Judith Fetterley's suggestion, we might consider how "what is admirable about [Sedgwick's writing] cannot be separated from what is problematic, and that, moreover, it is this very entanglement that makes the text worth recovering in the first place" (79).<sup>62</sup> If we take seriously the novel's capacity to stage democratic dilemmas at a theoretical level—or if we take seriously the idea that national material can be re-interpreted under new circumstances and purposes and is not singly bound to the intentions and historical moment of its creators—we might also be able to read the novel's last child as a figure that consolidates unresolved discourses of democracy, and as it is connected to continually unfolding political contestation.

That is, as the novel uses the figurative child to unite its competing imaginings of the citizen-self and to affirm its political claims, it produces a national vision that is

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<sup>61</sup> See for example, Stephen Knadler's *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness*. USA: University Press of Mississippi. 2002; or Charlene Avallone's "Catharine Sedgwick's White Nation-Making: Historical Fiction and *The Linwoods*." *ESQ*. 55.2. 2009 (97-133).

<sup>62</sup> Fetterley describes how when nineteenth-century women-authored texts were first recovered, there was a wave of what she calls "hagiographic" readings, balancing the "misogyny informing previous treatment of these writers and texts." The responsive second wave of criticism offered critique, implicating "these writers and their texts in a variety of nineteenth century racist, classist and imperialist projects." Fetterley encourages alternatives to this binary opposition of celebration and critique (79). "My Sister! My Sister!": The Rhetoric of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*." *Catharine Maria Sedgwick: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Lucinda Damon-Bach and Victoria Clements. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003. (78-101).



identifiably racist. However, in the sense that the child-figure represents the spirit of U.S. democracy as at once guided by a kind of natural moral inspiration and as bodied forth within a temporal and social world, the child represents a fundamental principle of the democratic character that connects it to the debates about slavery and race that will continue long after this novel's publication, and beyond the limits of its flawed vision. In this way, this figure is positioned anticipatorily toward the intensifying Constitutional deliberation for which the Nullification Crisis acted as a kind of prologue. The antislavery movement's ability to embrace and successfully leverage the Constitution in the face of the historical fact that its framers permitted and participated in the enslavement of its own people reflected consensual dedication to the idea that the Constitution offers continuity with higher law ideals while also requiring ongoing revision to its historical and identitarian practices. While Sedgwick's novel at best makes moderate abolitionist efforts and at worst reinscribes the racialized systems of power that corrupt the practice of democracy, it also self-critically examines how one acquires and revises political feelings, a process necessary to the enduring and imperfect project of overcoming those forms of injustice that obstruct democratic ideals.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Contextualizing this chapter is a broad-sweeping question about how we might read 19<sup>th</sup> century American women's writing through the lens of political theory. Without question, the recovery of 19<sup>th</sup> century women-authored fiction by feminist literary criticism importantly introduced women writers to the political clime and canon; indeed, the very introduction of women involved disrupting the fantasy of an apolitical or ahistorical aesthetic canon and instead recognizing literary texts as politically, socially, and historically contingent. However, this body of work has not yet been fully explored for the ways it theorizes democratic governance and participation. Women's texts have been productively read for their political valences, for their explicit political critiques, and as political acts themselves, but we might ask: how does women's fiction theorize democracy not only in the ideological terms of a gendered relationship to the political center, but at the level of philosophical principle? Admittedly, in seeking the conceptual nature of political critique, I might be trying to tease a distinction that will ever elude: what precisely is the difference between reading a literary text for its political engagements, and reading a literary text as a mode of political theory? And how do we measure what in a literary text "counts" as clarified articulations of political critique? But even without necessarily accomplishing resolve for these questions, we can acknowledge that the literary archive of democracy needs to be troubled. To use an anecdotal but telling

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Following the figure of the child into antislavery discourse, the next chapter turns to the abolitionist writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in order to consider how these questions about the nature of political commitment take form in Emerson's negotiations of transcendental and pragmatist thought.

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example, we might look at *The Political Companions to Great American Authors*, a series that describes itself as “publish[ing] a broad spectrum of political theorists, philosophers, and literary scholars to examine classic authors and explain their continuing influence on American political, social, intellectual, and cultural life. By eschewing ephemeral trends of literary and cultural theory, this series reappraises American authors and their writings as lasting works of art that continue to inform and guide the American democratic experiment.”<sup>63</sup> This series encompasses companions to the following: Saul Bellow, Walker Percy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Steinbeck, Henry Adams, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and (forthcoming) Herman Melville. If the literary archive of democracy is disproportionately masculine—in this case to the point of exclusion—where does women's writing belong in relationship to this archive? I begin to offer a response to this question with this chapter's dedication to “read through” the historical and reach the conceptual in Sedgwick's writing.

## CHAPTER II

### TO SWEAR AN OATH IN CHILDHOOD: TRANSCENDENTALISM, PRAGMATISM, AND TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICAL ACTS IN EMERSON'S ABOLITIONIST WRITINGS

#### *Introduction*

Emerson's prose style has been called "an army all officers," aptly characterizing the imposing command of each and every of his sentences, and his refusal to subordinate any thought to a mere supporting rank.<sup>64</sup> However, the static, militaristic order implied by this metaphor fails to accommodate another equally definitive characteristic of his writing: its tenacious elusiveness. In "Experience," he describes the "evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers when we clutch hardest,"<sup>65</sup> This feeling of lubricity will be familiar to any of Emerson's readers who have tried to grasp firmly and name Emerson's thought, only to have the very next sentence send it slipping away into the systemless, ever contradictory deep of his fuller body of work. In its lubricity, we might call Emerson's prose not "all officers" but "all children." That is, this ephemerality is the one we associate with childhood, which is made evocative by its inaccessibility, made powerful by its evanescence. It is childhood's fugitive quality that would prompt Thoreau to muse: "we linger in manhood to tell the dreams of our childhood, but they are forgotten ere we learn the language."<sup>66</sup> In Thoreau's lament, childhood operates as the inexpressible for which language can only ever long; the moment childhood might be expressed in language accessible to adults, it would cease to

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, by Robert Richardson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. (202).

<sup>65</sup> "Experience." *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. 200.

<sup>66</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862. (399).

be. In its inconsistency, its spiraling motion, its resistance to its reader, Emerson's work is similarly elusive: to try to pin down and describe his thought can only mean to lose hold of it. The negative capability that animates our fantasies of childhood's unknowability inflects Emerson's pursuit of "that which hovers in gleams, suggestions, tantalizing unpossessed."<sup>67</sup>

The connection between childhood and lubricity is not only implicit in Emerson's rhetorical form, but also explicit in the content of his writing; in this passage of "Experience" for instance, he is referring to the terrible loss of his own child. And as we will see, the child becomes a crucial figure for limning elusiveness, particularly as it bears upon Emerson's political vision. The depressive mood of "Experience"'s opening paragraphs finds him naming lubricity "the most unhandsome part of our condition."<sup>68</sup> And for some, the lubricity of Emerson's own work is indeed frustrating; as Santayana famously asserted: "at bottom, he had no doctrine at all. The deeper he went and the more he tried to grapple with fundamental conceptions, the vaguer and more elusive they became in his hands."<sup>69</sup> However, elsewhere this lubricity is named the site of its most radical creative potential. Richard Poirier's classic *Poetry and Pragmatism*, for instance, stresses the power of Emerson's prose as it performs "a presence transferred to an ever elusive future . . . the action of becoming."<sup>70</sup> Julie Ellison observes, "more important

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<sup>67</sup> *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 9. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1965. (341).

<sup>68</sup> "Experience." *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (200).

<sup>69</sup> Santayana, George. "Emerson." *The Essential Santayana: Selected Writing*. Ed. Martin A. Colman. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009. (519).

<sup>70</sup> Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. (28).

than any momentarily stationary position [ . . . ] is the passage between positions.<sup>71</sup> As Emerson himself writes: “power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim.”<sup>72</sup>

But what is especially remarkable about the lubricious child is its simultaneous association with the greatest degree of permanence: an infinite, atemporal higher law. Romanticism’s formative influence on the construction of modern childhood, while sentimentalizing childhood’s ephemerality, also imparted the child with an unsullied, pre-social, intuitive knowledge of eternal truths. “The child amidst his baubles,” Emerson writes, is learning those laws that “refuse to be adequately stated” and “elude our persevering thought” but which are “out of time, out of space” and “in the soul of man.”<sup>73</sup> The figure of the child, then, is situated at the seam between two competing discourses that critics locate in Emerson: transcendentalism’s unmoving spiritual truths and pragmatism’s perpetual transition and movement.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the critical treatment of Emerson’s most iconic figuration of childhood: the self-reliant boy. Acknowledging the troubling ideology entrenched in Emerson’s vision of self-reliance and expressed through this child-figure, this chapter asks whether the Emersonian child can also—elsewhere—encourage another kind democratic thinking. Building on the critical conversations that have argued for Emerson’s status as an early pragmatist thinker while simultaneously

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<sup>71</sup> Ellison, Julie. “Quotation and Originality.” *Emerson’s Romantic Style*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. (153).

<sup>72</sup> “Self-Reliance.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. 129.

<sup>73</sup> “The Divinity Address.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. 70.

acknowledging the political relevance of his transcendental idealism, this chapter explores the child as a figure that mediates between these two otherwise competing worldviews. Specifically, I consider how the child in Emerson's later abolitionist writings about the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry expresses his vision of democratic transformation as requiring a transcendent connection to timeless moral truth while also necessarily taking the form of open, skeptical, and provisional action.

In so doing, I also implicitly intercede in those critical conversations that assume the Emersonian child is a static Romantic sign. For example, in a recent article Jane Thrailkill identifies the child as a "resonant metaphor for the pragmatist posture," but she is emphatic that the child she is discussing is *not* the detached Romantic, Emersonian one.<sup>74</sup> Thrailkill traces the image of the child through William James's, Stephen Crane's and James Mark Baldwin's turn-of-the-century texts, opening her discussion with Emerson's image of nonchalant boys in order to distinguish the pragmatist child from the Emersonian:

Emerson, following in the Romantic tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, and William Blake, offers the Child as symbol for clarity of vision and a relation to the world that is immediate, disinterested, and unsullied [ . . . ] Unlike Emerson's celebration of uncorrupted youthful detachment, however, it is the child's embeddedness in a world of persons and things that catches the pragmatist's eye. (265-66)

Thrailkill grounds her argument in late nineteenth/early twentieth-century evolutionary and child-study sciences, and thus emphasizes the increasingly biological accounts of childhood that produced the pragmatist child that she is studying. However, her portrayal

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<sup>74</sup> Thrailkill, Jane. "Pragmatism and the Evolutionary Child." *American Literary History* (Summer 2012) 24. 2: 265-280.

of Emerson's earlier, Romantic child does not do full justice to the complexity of its figurations. As a forerunner to pragmatist thinkers, Emerson discovers in the child not only an untethered, highly abstracted symbol, but also an embedded, relational subject. However contradictory they may seem, these forms are not incompatible, nor one superior to the other, in Emerson's work. Rather, the metaphor of the child accommodates and reconciles its disparate significations of the ideal, the ahistorical, and the detached, and the conditional, the contingent, and the embedded.

*Critical Conversations about the Iconic Emersonian Child*

Edmund Q. Sewall was twelve years old in 1842 when he attended a lecture by Emerson and recorded in his journal:

“Went to a lecture from Mr. Emerson in the evening. It was on Literature. I was not at all interested.” [ . . . ] One of his ideas was that everyone should think for themselves.”<sup>75</sup>

With this delightfully unimpressed journal entry, Sewall seems to skip right out from these famous passages from “Self-Reliance”:

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you.<sup>76</sup>

Sewall might not have delivered a more “swift, summary” redaction of Emersonian self-reliance than that “everyone should think for themselves,” nor might he have better demonstrated the “healthy attitude of human nature” than in his refusal to be “at all

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<sup>75</sup> Diary of Edmund Q. Sewall, 1842. Kept at Concord. Archived at The American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>76</sup> “Self-Reliance.” *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (122).

interested” in Emerson’s lecture. Sewall’s disregard for the lecturer’s authority indeed seems to substantiate Emerson’s claim; we might enjoy picturing him amused and affirmed by the boy’s blatant eagerness to escape the symposium and exercise his own wants for lemonade and a game of “I Spy.” Sewall’s rollicking, impish reactions to the joys—and bores—of his summer schooling suggest that Emerson did indeed find in his nonchalant boys an apt counterpoint to the “timid and apologetic” adult.

However, it is no unlikely coincidence that Sewall shares the attitude of Emerson’s nonchalant boys *and* their social station: he is also a white, male New Englander, comfortably housed and well-fed at the Thoreau brothers’ summer school in Concord, enjoying the conditions that engendered his access to an Emerson lecture, his having recorded the experience in a journal, and the archival preservation of the journal. Emerson’s attaching his model of self-reliance to this particularly privileged demographic has been, naturally, the subject of much critical contention.

For critics who have emphasized the masculinist nature of Emerson’s self-reliance, this passage shows troubling disregard for the unseen women and familial institutions supporting these boys. David Leverenz, in his account of Emerson’s “man-making,” asks: “what about the girls?”—calling attention to the presumed but invisible female support system in the kitchen.<sup>77</sup> Susan Ryan similarly argues: “What Emerson presumes but does not state [ . . . ] what allows the boys’ nonchalance to survive their positioning among “the helped” is that each boys relationship to whoever does the cooking is a socially sanctioned form of dependence, one that does not degrade him or

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<sup>77</sup> Leverenz, David. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989. (63).



limit his access to self-reliance.”<sup>78</sup> Ryan further suggests that Emerson is not simply ignorant or dismissive of concealed systems of support, but rather is unabashedly exploitative of them: “the enshrined dependent relationship between boy and cook, in fact, works to produce the ingratitude, the very arrogance and self-absorption upon which Emerson’s ideal of self-reliance depends” (82). Undeniably then, Emerson’s negotiation of autonomy and dependence through the figure of the boy-child is problematic. To be self-reliant, like the “great men [who have] confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age,” it seems, means to be like a very specific kind of child, requiring a certain gender, class, and race.<sup>79</sup>

From a different vantage, but one that finds the Emersonian figure of the child equally troubling, Christopher Newfield argues that the problem is not simply that Emersonian self-reliance is buttressed by concealed or exploited systems of dependence, but that it is in fact a form of self-subjection misrepresented as autonomy. Newfield reads the figure of the child as crystallizing the habits of submission that he identifies as the most detrimental of Emerson’s intellectual legacy: “Emerson imagines not those contemporaries who are extraordinary for their independence, originality, or freedom, but those *who submit like children to the highest authority*” (23, emphasis added).<sup>80</sup> In Newfield’s reading, to be childlike is to obey “transcendent law; accepting an external superiority . . . allowing one’s body and mind to be filled like a vessel” (23).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ryan, Susan. *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. (81).

<sup>79</sup> “Self-Reliance.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (121)

<sup>80</sup> Newfield, Christopher. *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>81</sup> For Newfield, Emerson’s vision of democratic freedom serves neither individual liberty nor collective well-being, but rather renders both “secondary to large doses of submission to preestablished and unequal

In these ways, Emerson's figure of the child may be complicit with what Julie Ellison calls the "embarrassments" of self-reliance.<sup>82</sup> And yet, we need not necessarily dismiss all of Emerson's writing of the child as entirely incompatible with democratic aims. Drawing on this critical conversation about the child in Emerson, I seek to supplement the discussion by highlighting the productive ways in which the child in his abolitionist writings facilitates his thinking about moral commitments and transformative democratic action.

### *The Child, Transcendentalism and Pragmatism*

Recent readings of Emerson have countered his reputation as apolitical and reclaimed his status as a politically engaged thinker.<sup>83</sup> But, this strain of Emersonian criticism has for the most part left behind the discussions of Emerson the Transcendentalist, in what Lawrence Buell calls his "de-transcendentalization."<sup>84</sup> Emerson's intellectual idealism, with his ethos of original intuition, imagination and private inspiration, has been, as Gregg Crane discusses, "ignored or dismissed by

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conditions" (2). While the discourse of liberalism—which in many ways has developed out of the Emersonian tradition—emphasizes a "balance" between opposing interests like individual autonomy and popular sovereignty, Newfield suggests that Emerson's "reconciliation of terms diminishes both" (2). Though I find Newfield's bleak assessment of modern liberalism generally convincing, in this chapter, and in the project as a whole, I remain invested in the forms of reconciliation that do not diminish but enrich their parts.

<sup>82</sup> Ellison writes: Emerson is "not only the saint of self-reliance, but the artist of its embarrassments" Quoted in Susan Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. (86).

<sup>83</sup> See, for instance, George Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.; Len Gougeon's *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.; Michael Lopez's *Emerson and Power: Creative Antagonism in the Nineteenth Century*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.; David Robinson's *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Purpose in the Later Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. (5).

<sup>84</sup> For a detailed history of this "detranscendentalization," see pages 265- 273 of Daniel Malachuk's "Emerson's Politics, Retranscendentalized." In *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Eds. Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2011. See also Jennifer Gurley's "Emerson's Politics of Uncertainty" in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*. 53.4 (2007). 322-359.

scholars and critics [who have] caricatured him and the Transcendentalists as escapist [ . . . ] too pure for the vulgar realities of politics” (93-94).<sup>85</sup> Speaking even more broadly, Daniel Malachuk argues that nearly all Emerson scholarship from the 1980’s forward has been constrained by the postmodern agenda and interpretative strategies of “the detranscendentalists”—including Bloom, Poirier, Kateb, Rorty, Lopez, and Packer—“who concluded that the best way to save Emerson was not to defend his transcendentalism as philosophically interesting, but to detranscendentalize him.”<sup>86</sup> For these critics, Malachuk suggests, Emerson’s spiritual, idealist, and supernaturalist leanings were embarrassments requiring suppression in order to retain the intellectual and political value of his work:

Religion, foundationalism, transcendentalism: for the [detranscendentalists of the 1980’s and 90’s] these had no value, except to the religious, the tender-minded, and children. A political theory for grown-ups—for the tough-minded, for the pragmatic—obviously must be emptied of talk of God and the soul: obviously must be secular.” (297)

With this passage, Malachuk emphasizes the secularist disdain underlying Emerson’s detranscendentalizing, but his language tellingly (if unintentionally) points also to the child. It is the essentialisms and “softness” associated with transcendentalism and childhood that make both politically illegitimate and unfriendly to postmodern definitions of experience. To recover the transcendental in Emerson, or, in Malachuk’s words, to “retranscendentalize [his] politics,” thus invites us to also reexamine and rethink the political nature of the child in his work.

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<sup>85</sup> Gregg Crane describes Rowe’s perspective this way: “In Rowe’s version, Emersonian idealism is unsuitable for any practical politics because its privileged notion of inspiration detaches the individual from society and renders social concerns trivial and political action unnecessary.” *Race, Citizenship and Law in American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. (94).

<sup>86</sup> Malachuk, Daniel. “Emerson’s Politics, Retranscendentalized.” *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Eds. Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2011. (296).

However, I suggest, the child in Emerson's writing not only returns us to his transcendentalism, but brings us also to his pragmatism, encouraging us to see both. My reading of the Emersonian child is thus guided by Jonathan Levin and Gregg Crane's respective identifications of "an abiding affinity" and "convergences" between Emerson's transcendentalism and pragmatism.<sup>87</sup> Poirier's reading of Emerson through a selection of his posterity, William James foremost among them, influentially located Emerson early in the lineage of American pragmatism, but in so doing (and as Malachuk has lamented) minimized if not entirely excluded Emerson's transcendentalism. Other critics have found the possibility of an Emersonian pragmatism preposterous, or unproductive, given his undeniable transcendental idealism. Neal Dolan, for instance, has called it "false to the best aspects of pragmatism [to] aggressively assimilate Emerson to its outlook" and Stanley Cavell has famously asked, "what's the use of calling Emerson a Pragmatist?"<sup>88</sup>

These debates hinge on the assumed incompatibility of these two positions—an assumption that Levin and Crane each work to redress. Both suggest that, in understanding the relationship between pragmatism and philosophical idealism, we must more carefully parse pragmatism and neopragmatism. Levin argues that neopragmatists "are made uncomfortable by what they style the latent Hegelianism of some of the major works of pragmatism," and therefore separate a "latent Hegelianism from what they characterize as pragmatism's genuine antifoundationalism" (17). Crane likewise suggests

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<sup>87</sup> Levin, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. (3).

Crane, Gregg. "Intuition: The "unseen thread" Connecting Emerson and James." *Modern Intellectual History*. 10 .1 April 2013. (59).

<sup>88</sup> Dolan, Neal. *Emerson's Liberalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. (9).  
Cavell, Stanley. "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?" in Dickstein, *The Revival of Pragmatism*. 72-80.

that the rejection of an Emersonian pragmatism follows critical acceptance “tout court, the characterization of Richard Rorty, James Kloppenberg, and many others that pragmatism is antifoundationalist.”<sup>89</sup> Against the rigid and mutually exclusive categorization of an idealist transcendentalism and an antifoundationalist pragmatism, Levin and Crane describe these categories as overlapping, Levin arguing that “pragmatism crucially depends on its latent idealism” (17), and Crane finding significant common ground in the concept of intuition (69).<sup>90</sup> Following in this vein, I give attention to the ways that, in Emerson’s abolitionist writings, the child permits Emerson to imagine political action that is guided by both an intuitive sensibility of a priori higher law principles and an improvisatory, contingent engagement with experience.

To the degree that Emerson has been characterized as irrelevant or “unsuitable” for politics, Emerson himself helped author this image. Even at one of his most explicitly political addresses, his 1854 speech on the Fugitive Slave Law, he opened with the disclaimer: “I do not often speak to public questions;—they are odious and hurtful, and it seems like meddling or leaving your work.”<sup>91</sup> Further, he at times expressed apathy toward action, with sentiments like that in “Experience” —“people disparage knowing and

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<sup>89</sup> Crane, Gregg. “Intuition: The “unseen thread” Connecting Emerson and James.” *Modern Intellectual History*. 10 .1 April 2013. (58).

<sup>90</sup> To elaborate these connections: Crane suggests that both Emerson and James turn to intuition to confront “‘the problem of modernity’: an increasingly disenchanted modern world..” Crane’s speculation is that both Emerson and James find in intuition “a viable means of rediscovering a universe imbued with value and that this type of recovery of something like enchantment can usefully work to regulate and check our instrumental approach to the world we inhabit.” Levin’s definition develops from a more explicitly religious perspective, against Rorty’s notion of pragmatism “‘de-divinizing’ of the world, by which he means a coming to terms with the absence of any transcendent values or ideals to guide our human actions.” Levin argues that, in the degree to which pragmatism “de-divinizes” the world, it develops out of Emerson’s rejection of dogmatic religion, rejecting “habitual and therefore degraded forms of spiritual and imaginative experience . . . in order to open the space for a more authentic experience of spiritual and imaginative ideals” (5).

<sup>91</sup> Also, in the 1855 “Lecture on Slavery”: “I have not found in myself the right qualifications to serve this [abolitionism] any more than other political questions by my speech, and have therefore usually left it in their [“men of ability and devotion”] honored hands. Still there is something exceptional in this question, which seems to require of every citizen at one time or other, to show his hand” (91). *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am very content with knowing.”<sup>92</sup> However, when in November of 1859, Emerson addressed the Tremont Temple in Boston on the subject of relief for the family of abolitionist John Brown, he indicated his utmost respect for Brown’s commitment to action:

I said John Brown was an idealist. He believed in his ideas to that extent that he existed to put them all into action; he said, “he did not believe in moral suasion, he believed in putting the thing through.” He saw how deceptive the forms are.<sup>93</sup>

Brown is an “idealist” whose ideas mandate material action to become belief, not unlike the point Emerson arrives at in the conclusion of “Experience”: “the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”<sup>94</sup>

In identifying the early origins of the anti-slavery idea that produces Brown’s political action, Emerson deploys the child in several of its most practiced roles: the

Wordsworthian “father of the man,” the Romantic wild boy, and the clear-eyed moralist.

I quote at length:

John Brown, the founder of liberty in Kansas, was born in Torrington, Litchfield County, Conn., in 1800. When he was five years old his father emigrated to Ohio, and the boy was there set to keep sheep and to look after cattle and dress skins; he went bareheaded and barefooted, and clothed in buckskin. He said that he loved rough play, could never have rough play enough; could not see a seedy hat without wishing to pull it off. But for this it needed that the playmates should be equal; not one in fine clothes and the other in buckskin; not one his own master, hale and hearty, and the other watched and whipped. But it chanced that in Pennsylvania, where he was sent by his father to collect cattle, he fell in with a boy whom he heartily liked and whom he looked upon as his superior. This boy was a slave; he saw him beaten with an iron shovel, and otherwise maltreated; he saw that this boy had nothing better to look forward to in life, whilst he himself was petted and made much of; for he was much considered in the family where he then stayed, from the circumstance that this boy of twelve years had conducted

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<sup>92</sup> “Experience.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (212).

<sup>93</sup> “To Aid John Brown’s Family.” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. (119).

<sup>94</sup> “Experience.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (213).

alone a drove of cattle a hundred miles. But the colored boy had no friend, and no future. This worked such indignation in him that he swore an oath of resistance to Slavery as long as he lived. And thus his enterprise to go into Virginia and run off five hundred or a thousand slaves was not a piece of spite or revenge, a plot of two years or of twenty years, but the keeping of an oath made to Heaven and earth forty-seven years before. Forty-seven years at least, though I incline to accept his own account of the matter at Charlestown, which makes the date a little older, when he said, "This was all settled millions of years before the world was made."<sup>95</sup>

To anyone who has spent time with abolitionist writings of this period, the child-figure in this passage might seem unremarkable, or at least, very familiar, as he bodies forth an innate sense of human equality and a natural condemnation of slavery. However, this instance deserves its own attention, given that this child-figure does not merely make a gentle-hearted moral claim, but underwrites Brown's historically contentious act of violent social protest.

To give a brief background, Brown moved to Kansas in response to the conflicts following the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, as proslavery settlers flooded the state, hoping to press it into slave territory. When in May of 1856 a proslavery militia launched an attack on the town of Lawrence and the violent assault of Congressman Charles Sumner, Brown retaliated in kind. On the night of May 24, Brown led a group of seven men, four of his own sons among them, in a raid on five pro-slavery Southern settlers, pulling them from their cabins and killing them. The following spring, he went on a lecture tour to drum up support and money for the struggles in Kansas, describing the victimization of his family while apparently glossing over his own acts of violence.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> "John Brown." *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. (121-122).

<sup>96</sup> For two varying histories of John Brown see David Reynolds' *John Brown, Abolitionist: the Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. NY: Vintage, 2006 or Stephen Oates's *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1984. As clearly indicated by the hyperbolic title, Reynolds' account describes Brown's heroic and influential role in

When Emerson heard Brown lecture in Concord, he was moved by the activist, writing in his journal:

Captain John Brown of Kansas gave a good account of himself in the Town Hall, last night, to a meeting of Citizens. One of his good points was, the folly of the peace party in Kansas, who believed, that their strength lay in the greatness of their wrongs, & so discountenanced resistance. He wished to know if their wrong was greater than the negro's, and what kind of strength that gave to the negro? . . . The first man who went into Kansas from Missouri to interfere in the elections, he thought, had a perfect right to be shot."<sup>97</sup>

Later, after Brown's unsuccessful 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, and his execution for treason, Emerson spoke of Brown's heroic martyrdom. The nature of Emerson's support for Brown has occasioned critical disagreement: was Emerson, as Larry Reynolds says, "duped" into backing a violent and misleading man?<sup>98</sup> Or was he, as Albert von Frank argues, in genuine endorsement of Brown's full commitment to the idea of resisting slavery, even if that resistance meant violence? At the heart of this disagreement is the question of how Emerson understands the relationship between idea and action, and the conditions of obligation to action in the service of higher law. One way to approach this question is as Emerson does in his portrayal of Brown: what does it mean to "swear an oath of resistance" in childhood?

In one view, we could say the child works to suppress or paper over Brown's act of violence. Given Emerson's expressed commitments to peace principles, it seems that he would have to elide Brown's violent action in order to praise him as a hero, and by invoking Brown's child-self, Emerson seems to be doing precisely that. We can see

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the abolitionist movement. Oates's account is often taken as the authoritative biography of Brown as a complex and highly mythologized figure.

<sup>97</sup> *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 14. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1965. (125).

<sup>98</sup> Reynolds and von Frank debate this issue in "Emerson, John Brown, and Transcendental Idealism: A Colloquy" in *South Central Review*. 28.2 (2011). 31-56.



Brown's convictions vaulted by childhood clarity, and his aggression diverted into coltish masculinity with the images of his boyhood "buckskin" clothing and love of "rough play." Brown's childhood, Emerson continues to suggest, formed in him:

a romantic character absolutely without any vulgar trait; living to ideal ends . . . and, as happens usually to men of romantic character, his fortunes were romantic. Walter Scott would have delighted to draw his picture and trace his adventurous career. A shepherd and herdsman, he learned the manners of animals, and knew the secret signals by which animals communicate. He made his hard bed on the mountains with them. . . (122-123)

This conversion of Brown into a caricature of tender, rural manliness can read as deceitful or evasive, as Emerson celebrates the poetical character traits that inform Brown's abolitionist stance while submerging the nature of his on-the-ground political action. Indeed, Emerson moves the issue out of the temporalized realm of jurisprudence and into the atemporal realm of higher law, in which his action was ordained not two, or twenty, or even forty-seven, but "millions of years" ago.

However, I would suggest this move is not politically evasive. As Crane has persuasively argued, Emerson engaged a species of higher law that is not a reductive moral absolutism but that rather encourages an "interplay of conscience (moral inspiration) and consent (political dialogue) which produces a plausibly universal moral consensus about the terms of justice and citizenship."<sup>99</sup> In rendering Brown through the image of the Romantic child, Emerson brings Brown's radical and divisive political action—understood if not explicitly spoken here—into relation with a "plausibly universal" ethical idea. Anticipating Brown's detractors, Emerson addresses them on the registers of both practical politics and higher law:

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<sup>99</sup> *Race, Citizenship and Law in American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. (6).

Nothing is more absurd than to complain of this sympathy [for Brown], or to complain of a party of men united in opposition to Slavery. As well complain of gravity, or the ebb of the tide. (123)

The idea behind abolitionism thus is as natural as gravity, and eternal, and exists beyond even the human institution of slavery; it is “older than Brown, and older than the Shenandoah Mountains...[it was] before Slavery, and will be after it.” However, it is the present and the experiential that call the abolitionist actor into being, we see, when Emerson asks: “Who makes the Abolitionist? The Slaveholder” (123). In his activism, Brown stands in relation both to a higher law that precedes and outlasts slavery, and the historical conditions created by slaveholders. By holding distinct but contiguous abolitionism as a transcendent idea and abolitionism in the form of its human enactment, Emerson works to address the competing demands of justice in the abstract and life and law in the material. If Brown was an imperfect abolitionist, he was made so by slaveholders and so be it; his abolitionism nonetheless aspires to a more perfect idea of justice, Emerson suggests.

In absence of details—and victims—this means-to-an-ends ethos is convincing. Yet, when we return to the historical particulars of Brown’s case, fundamental questions lurk unresolved: can we claim ethical soundness if fulfilling a higher law imperative requires action that not only violates positive law but also other higher laws—here for example, in the taking of human life? But on the other hand, were not Brown’s targeted and politically-vocal assaults a lesser evil than the passivity that would allow slaveholders to continue their wider, systemic practices of violence on the enslaved? Whether Emerson himself reached satisfying resolution on this problematic is difficult to say, given the vague, highly abstracted nature of his speech. However, what is

remarkable about Emerson's turn to abstraction here is what it suggests about his use of this kind of language. Emerson's romantic tropes are not at all a retreat into the inner ocean of private thought, or the ungrounded ether of transcendental idealism. Quite to the contrary, this abstraction represents a risky opening of space for provisional action, for flawed and troubling but committed groping toward something higher.<sup>100</sup> Vagueness has the political implication of permitting, or perhaps even forgiving, the action that moves idea out from the self and into the material world.

And at the heart of this language is the figure of the child, cohering the ideal and the contingent, the vague and the particularized. The child who has an immediate intuition of natural law, and who grows into the man of "romantic character" and "romantic fortunes," is the stock figure providing the poetical and unplaced locale in which to imagine the existence of higher justice. Yet, at the same time, he is the child who witnesses the beating of his enslaved friend. Out from the otherwise generic register of imagery composing this portrait of young Brown, the weapon startles in its grounded specificity: "he saw [his friend] beaten with an iron shovel." With this jarringly unabstracted biographical detail of the iron shovel, Brown's childhood self becomes individuated and embedded in the present, experiential terms of slavery's existence. For some critics, the pragmatist posture Emerson developed during the 1850's around the moral urgency of the antislavery cause represented a "replacement of the private and

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<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of Emerson's pragmatist "vagueness" as a rejection of dogmatizing beliefs, see Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*, pages 41-42. Also, Gregg Crane has described how Emerson's rhetorical practices of abstraction and vagueness allowed him to see and speak outside the historically blinding language of race, and to view the Constitution's Fourteenth amendment as an unfixed text subject to continuous visionary remaking. *Race, Citizenship, and Law*, 89-105.

visionary” or a “bracket[ing of] the ideal to cope with the recalcitrant real.”<sup>101</sup> But with the figure of the child, we might find something more satisfying than such absolute compromise; the child who “swears an oath of resistance” is impelled by confrontations with experience *and* guided by the clarity of transcendent vision, and so we see Emerson actively sustaining the play of the pragmatist and the visionary.

In contrast to Emerson’s praise for John Brown is his scorn for Daniel Webster, the subject of his 1851 and 1854 lectures on the Fugitive Slave Law. In 1851, in the “Address to the Citizens of Concord,” Emerson bewails Webster’s support of the law, calling it “treachery,” but he asserts that Webster’s cause will ultimately fail. Emerson declares that against the laws of nature, “all the arguments of Mr. Webster are the spray of a child’s squirt against a granite wall.”<sup>102</sup> Incidentally, Emerson once remarked: “The Collegians have seldom made for a better word than Squirt for a showy sentence.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, both the image of Webster as “a child’s squirt,” and the word’s ignoble acoustics are meant to embarrass him, showing him impotent and farcical in the face of higher law. And here is childhood’s rhetorical condition: it provides the figure that can immediately apprehend and swear an oath in the name of higher law, and it provides the image of bare human inanity.

This fundamentally doubled definition of what it means to be “like a child” appears all throughout Emerson’s writing and, of course, beyond it. But, these competing definitions do not render the Emersonian child a rhetorical catch-all, but rather, give it its salience. If Brown and Webster are *both* somehow like children, it is because when we

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<sup>101</sup> See for example, David Robinson’s *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Purpose in the Later Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. (5).

<sup>102</sup> “To the Citizens of Concord.” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. (60).

<sup>103</sup> JRWE 1849, entry 77

talk about being like a child, we are talking about a more palpable and expressible version of what it is like to be human, in a condition of knowing and not knowing, of living in and encountering the world, forming and committing to ideas, testing, and adjusting. In the presence of an ethical decision, a child might intuit a sense of justice and swear fidelity, or might instead test his own strength against it. Such is the child we saw earlier in the passage from “The Divinity School Address,” “ amidst his baubles [ . . . ] learning the action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force.” Emerson is clear that the laws this child is learning are transcendent; they “refuse to be adequately stated,” they “execute themselves,” they are “out of time, out of space.”<sup>104</sup> And yet, these laws are learned by play, and in all their transcendence they are also but toys.

The moral sensibility represented by the figure of the child then, is not absolute, nor pre-ordained; nor is the higher law it intuits directive. And to aspire to moral intuition expressed through the child is not to aspire to an idealized childish state that is irretrievably behind us, nor to aspire to obedience to something extraordinarily beyond us, but to recognize one’s unknowingness, and to attempt anyway to bring moral intuition to human action. In this way, we must slightly revise Malachuk’s assertion that “the 1844-1863 writings all elaborate upon this basic insight: not human laws but justice [ . . . ] necessitates an end to slavery.”<sup>105</sup> Instead, these writings suggest a more reciprocal relationship between higher and positive law, between the transcendent sense of justice and the contingent realm of politics. Indeed, at the same time Emerson calls upon higher law to dispute both Webster and the Fugitive Slave Law, he returns that higher law to the

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<sup>104</sup> “The Divinity Address.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. 70.

<sup>105</sup> Malachuk, Daniel. “Emerson’s Politics, Retranscendentalized.” *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Eds. Alan Levine and Daniel Malachuk. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2011. (277).

jurisdiction of positive law, addressing the “practitioners” of law themselves to remind them that higher law historically has been, and should be, “the palladium of the profession” against which Webster’s arguments can only haply spray.

Emerson continues on:

Mr. Webster tells the President that “he has been in the north, and he has found no man whose opinion is of any weight who is opposed to the law.” Ah! Mr. President, trust not the information. The gravid old universe goes spawning on; the womb conceives and the breasts give suck to thousands and millions of hairy babes formed not in the image of your statute, but in the image of the universe; too many to be bought off; too many than that they can be rich, and therefore peaceable; and necessitated to express first or last every feeling of the heart. (61)

The tendency of the universe to bear forth new children naturally spins the future away from Webster and the President’s agenda, Emerson suggests, with his (decidedly unromanticized) “hairy babes.” Emerson is vaguely Arendtian in this posture; by the sheer fact of newness, of human birth, action is possible or maybe even inevitable. The opposite of Webster, who Emerson denigrates as “a man who lives by his memory, a man of the past, not a man of faith or of hope,” the continuous renewal by new people “formed not in the image of [the President’s] statute” will refuse to repeat the past. And in this image of endlessly renewed childhood, we again see Emerson’s conception of the child as simultaneously connected to universals *and* embedded in particularities. The hairy babes will inevitably reject slave law because they are formed “in the image of the universe,” suggesting their correspondence to something that transcends the present corruption on earth. Yet at the same time, their radical potential comes from their ineluctable political-economic subjectivity— “too many that they can be rich and therefore peaceable,”—and the power of their collectivity—“too many to be bought off.” Emerson predicts higher law will overcome slave-law by the speaking of a moral

sensibility that occurs not only beyond the child's ideological subjectivity, but also within it.

*Politics, Passing into Literature, and Newness*

John Carlos Rowe argues that “Emerson’s political writings between 1844 and 1863 remain so profoundly divided internally between transcendentalist values and practical politics as to be practically useless, except as far as the value of their political rhetoric might be measured” (22).<sup>106</sup> However, this chapter contests the idea of such a division between transcendentalist thinking and practical politics, instead describing the two in productive relation. Further, we might trouble the division Rowe also implicitly establishes between “practical politics” and “political rhetoric”—one Emerson would likely reject. Poirier, for instance, writes of Emerson’s “belief that language, and therefore thinking, can be changed by an individual’s act of imagination and by an individual’s manipulation of words.” Indeed, by Emerson’s measures, political rhetoric that can be valued only for itself is without value in the first place—meaningful language must necessarily stretch out into the material world and beyond it.

In example, we can look at the speech Emerson made in 1854 at the Broadway Tabernacle, as he again addressed his profound disappointment in Daniel Webster.<sup>107</sup> Referring to Webster’s proclamation at the Bunker Hill Monument—a speech we will examine in more detail later in this project—Emerson describes his vacuous oratorical presence. “There was the monument, and here was Webster,” Emerson explains,

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<sup>106</sup> *At Emerson’s Tomb: the Politics of Classic American Literature*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1997.

<sup>107</sup> “The Fugitive Slave Law.” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

twinning Webster and the monument as equally impressive but inert symbols.

Continuing on, Emerson describes his performance of masterful but meaningless political rhetoric:

He knew well that a little more or less of rhetoric signified nothing; he was only to say plain and equal things;—grand things, if he had them,—and, if he had them not, only to abstain from saying unfit things;—and the whole occasion was answered by his presence ... Webster walked through his part with entire success. (76)

With command of the mechanics —organization, elocutions, transitions—Webster has what Emerson called “the privilege of eloquence,” but a “disastrous” want of moral nature. Without the genius that springs from the moral nature, Webster remains a rhetorician only:

I may here say as I have said elsewhere, that the moral is the occult fountain of genius,—the sterility of thought, the want of generalization in his speeches, and the curious fact that, with a general ability which impresses all the world, there is not a single general remark, not an observation on life and manners, not an aphorism that can pass into literature from his writings. (77)

That Emerson gives so much attention to Webster’s prose and oratory style, despite the readily assailable content of his support for chattel slavery, indicates the intimacy Emerson finds between aesthetic and ethical concerns. From the aesthetic quality of language, Emerson suggests, we can appraise the moral sensibility. Or, rather, in the aesthetic quality of language *is* the moral sensibility, or lack thereof. In this way, Emerson chases one elusive with another, the “moral” with this enigmatic thing that is the “passage into literature.”

The relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical bears upon the child as a figure for articulating moral sensibility, because we might suggest that the Emersonian child is ever passing into and between the literary. That is, if the child speaks an



instinctual morality, she also speaks an instinctual literariness. Take for example, the late journal entry in which Emerson writes:

The secret of poetry is never explained—is always new. We have not got farther than mere wonder at the delicacy of the touch, & the eternity it inherits. In every house a child that in mere play utters oracles, & knows not that they are such, 'Tis as easy as breath. 'Tis like this gravity, which holds the Universe together, & none knows what it is.<sup>108</sup>

This image of the child instinctively and unknowingly perceiving the secret of poetry echoes back through the length of Emerson's writing career. In the early 1836 *Nature*, the essay that for many critics represents Emerson's most blatantly neoplatonic thinking, the child mystically perceives an original relationship between word and object:

Words are signs of natural facts. [. . .] Most of the process by which this transformation is made [from "inward creation" to language], is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency may be daily observed in children. Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts.<sup>109</sup>

As Emerson here aligns the child and the "savage" in a recapitulative performance of language's development, he conjures their Romantic association with the remote, authentic, pre-social world as proof of the original correspondence between word and thing. This essentialist articulation of language has troubled Emerson's critics, who have found it typical of his democratically unviable idealism,<sup>110</sup> or who have defended him by dismissing it as an early and outlying position in his development.<sup>111</sup> In either case, the

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<sup>108</sup> "Nov. 1874?" *Emerson in His Journals*. Ed. Joel Porte. Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1982. 570.

<sup>109</sup> *Nature. Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (35).

<sup>110</sup> For instance, Christopher Newfield critiques how "the youthful *Nature* is indeed obsessed with grounding language in a nature causally linked to spirit [...] the younger Emerson links historical to natural and spiritual law, binds invention to imitation, and defines spontaneous selfhood as the return to the father, all of which constitute a case study in that abandonment of consent best described as authoritarian" (157). In *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>111</sup> For example, Poirier tracks Emerson's development away from the ideas initially espoused in *Nature*, in an argument which Neal Dolan summarizes this way: "Initially seduced in *Nature* by the notion of direct

child here assists the Transcendentalist fantasies least palatable to post-structuralist critical culture: that the creative imagination can—childlike—access an entirely private inner truth, and speak it unmediated.

However, in the 1837 speech “The American Scholar,” Emerson expresses what is an identifiably proto-pragmatist vision of the world’s plasticity: “it is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it.”<sup>112</sup> In this same lecture, Emerson describes a new kind of scholarship swelling forth in the “age of Revolution,” of which he sees the “auspicious signs” in “the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street” (67). Against the bookish and aristocratic traditions of formal scholarship, the “feelings of the child” represent the kind of unschooled poetry that Emerson sees particularly alive to the American political moment. In the 1841 “Intellect,” the child is both the figure of intuitive perception—looking at art and knowing immediately “if an arm or a leg be distorted in a picture, if the attitude be natural or grand, or mean, though he has never received any instruction in drawing, or heard any conversation on the subject”—and the figure of curious experiment—gravelling the “wisest doctor” with his “inquisitiveness.”<sup>113</sup> In the 1844 “Experience,” the child longs unknowingly for the

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correspondence between word and thing, Poirier’s Emerson soon comes around to the more sophisticated postmodern view that ‘the human situation in language ... is barely negotiable; it is precarious, limiting, tense, belabored.’ Duly chastened, Emerson gives up on naïve efforts to ground the self, or morality, or politics, on accurate representations of objective reality. He turns instead to complex rhetorical strategies of punning, troping, and playing one type of discourse against another in the hopes of occasionally finding seams in the entangling net of language, knowing all the way that the most such breakthroughs can provide is a momentary and unstable self-enhancement” (7). In *Emerson’s Liberalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.

<sup>112</sup> “The American Scholar.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (65).

<sup>113</sup> “Intellect.” *Emerson’s Essays*. Ed. Irwin Edman. NY: Harper & Row, 1951. (238, 229).

universal, while grappling with the particular: “The child asks, ‘Mamma, why don’t I like the story as well as when you told it me yesterday?’ Alas child, it is ever so with the oldest cherubim of knowledge. But will it answer thy question to say, Because thou wert born to a whole, and this story is a particular?”<sup>114</sup>

As always in Emerson’s writings, these thoughts about perception, about poetics, about artistic vision, about genius, are continuous with thoughts about ethics and politics; each folds ever into the next. And the two versions of the child’s perceptual relationship to the world that Emerson keeps in play—one in which the child intuitively perceives eternal truths which govern the universe, and one in which the child plays, experiments, and inquires into the particulars of a world in which those truths elude—prompt a persistent political question: what is the quality of the “moral” in the political? Or, to return to Emerson’s language in the Fugitive Slave Law address, what is the quality of political thinking that can “pass into literature”? Or, what is the quality of politics that has—to use another of Emerson’s phrases— “the newness”? Emerson writes in “Experience”: “in the thought of genius there is always a surprise; and the moral sentiment is well called ‘the newness,’ for it is never other; as new to the oldest intelligence as to the young child” (207). But what does Emerson mean by this “newness”? As the “gravid old universe goes spawning on,” does this “newness” mean to suggest that eternal truths are new to each wave of human subjects, and ever retain the feeling of “surprise” in their transcendence? Or does it mean the newness of reinvention, as truth remains open, ever newly built out upon the contingent “truths” prior?

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<sup>114</sup> “Experience.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (202).

By way of exploring these questions, we might look at the address that Emerson delivered in Boston in 1862, on the occasion of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>115</sup> In this address, Emerson opens by describing the remarkable rarity of such a “poetic” political moment and he describes its capacity to bring forth a “new” people (129). Comparing the Emancipation Proclamation to other “poetic acts”—the Declaration of American Independence, the British emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, the passage of the Reform Bill—Emerson describes how such moments transform the people as they “take a step forward in the direction of catholic and universal interests”:

These measures provoke no noisy joy, but are received into a sympathy so deep as to apprise us that mankind are greater and better than we know. *At such times it appears as if a new public were created to greet the new event.* (130)

The quiet spell of political measures that appeal to man’s higher nature and universal interests, Emerson suggests, evokes a new public to greet it. He likens these political moments to the transformative power of oration:

It is as when an orator, having ended the compliments and pleasantries with which he conciliated attention, and having run over the superficial fitness and commodities of the measure he urges, suddenly, lending himself to some happy inspiration, announces with vibrating voice the grand human principles involved,—the bravoes and wits who greeted him loudly thus far are surprised and overawed: a new audience is found in the heart of the assembly,—an audience hitherto passive and unconcerned, now at last so searched and kindled that they come forward, every one a representative of mankind, standing for all nationalities. (130)

As Emerson draws a parallel between the orator who surprises forth a new audience and the political act from which emerges a new public, he locates the transformational power in those “grand human principles” that connect and universalize. What is “new” here is the subjects, who are transformed by their access to perfected, eternal truths. Yet as

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<sup>115</sup> “The President’s Proclamation.” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Emerson continues on to describe in detail how the Emancipation Proclamation came to be, he shifts out of this transcendentalist language into something more pragmatist:

The extreme moderation with which the President advanced to his design,—his long-avowed expectant policy, as if he chose to be strictly the executive of the best public sentiment of the country, waiting only till it should be unmistakably pronounced. (130)

In this passage, the power of Lincoln's political measure is contingent, representing not eternal truths, but the "best public sentiment of the country." Emerson again suggests the element of "surprise" that attends the new, but the surprise comes not from a sudden burst of inspiration, but from a slow consideration of prior procedure; he describes Lincoln as "so reticent that his decision has taken all parties by surprise; whilst yet it is the just sequel of his prior acts" (130).

Admittedly, we have spun away from the figure of the child at this point. And yet, I think this political vision of the "surprised" and "new audience" is connected to Emerson's persistent interest in the child as a figure of "newness" or (its rhetorical equivalents in Emerson's syntax) as a figure of poetic and moral sentiment. What Emerson seems to suggest is that transformative politics that surprise the people into a sudden—if rare and momentary—sense of collective worldmaking are enabled by a faith in moral sentiment that is somehow at once "the best public sentiment" and more than it. The transcendentalist longing for universalizing moral truths does not preclude the pragmatist thinking that we see in Emerson's acknowledgement that any "truths" that guide political acts are necessarily contingent and built upon a long, slow process of truth-making.

Remaining open to Emerson's transcendentalism as enriching rather than compromising his political thinking might be instructive in the sense that it prompts us to consider our own unease about the political value of concepts like truth, intuition, and moral feeling—an unease which itself is historically locatable and worthy of skeptical treatment. For Emerson, democratic thinking and transformative political action were made expressible in the figure of the child precisely because the child accessed for him ways to imagine the democratic subject guided both by knowing and unknowingness, by transcendent truth and contingent experiment.

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Emerson describes transformative political moments like the one engendered by the Emancipation Proclamation as extraordinary, “once in a century, if so often,” “for short periods,” and “in rare conditions,” calling to mind Sheldon Wolin’s “fugitive democracy”—in which democracy is “rare” and “episodic.”<sup>116</sup> Emerson describes how democracy, in its elusiveness, is “as if awaiting a culture of the race which shall make it organic and permanent”—the conditional “as if” here suggesting that Emerson might concur with Wolin’s sense that the very institutionalization that would attempt to make democracy permanent would also dissolve it. With his suggestion that democracy appears suddenly in moments of “newness,” —in “the sally of the human mind into the untried future”—Emerson introduces a question that will guide the following chapter’s explorations of Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter*: if democracy is most alive in brief

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<sup>116</sup> “The President’s Proclamation.” *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. (129).

moments of new beginning, where do we locate it in—or perhaps, can it even survive—the institutionalizing narratives of nation-making?

### CHAPTER III

#### “...LETS GROW ALL HIS WINGS”: YOUNG AMERICA AND DEMOCRATIC TEMPORALITIES IN MELVILLE’S *ISRAEL POTTER*

To the degree this chapter is about childhood, it is about its narrative erasure and its metaphorical echoes. We begin with a deliberate exclusion of childhood.

“Imagination will easily picture the rural days of the youth of Israel. Let us pass on to a less immature period,” writes Melville in the opening pages of *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*.<sup>117</sup> That Melville feigns to feel no obligation to trot out any rural youth tropes from the wealth of cultural imaginings suggests not so much that Israel’s childhood is insignificant, but that it is overdetermined. In this novel that stages the painfully prolonged deferral of the reward of American democracy, as its Revolutionary hero is taken prisoner during the war and wanders England in poverty and alienation for years on end, Potter is figured as always-already an old man; early in his exile, Melville describes how Potter’s ragged clothing made him look “suddenly metamorphosed from youth to old age; just like an old man of eighty he looked [ . . . ] The dress befitted the fate” (22). Potter’s youth, so destined for erasure that Melville explicitly marks his refusal to document it, gestures to a question this chapter will pursue: in the antebellum decades, how did figurations of youth and childhood articulate anxieties about the temporal status of the young nation?

As both an early participant in the Young America movement and eventually as one of its most incisive critics, Melville’s relationship to its ideals of American exceptionalism has been a point of contest. Jason Frank describes the tension underlying

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<sup>117</sup> Melville, Herman. *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*. NY: Albert and Charles Boni, 1924. (7).



Melville's positioning in the US canon by prominent twentieth-century critics, when he asks: "how can the writer said best to encompass and exemplify the idea of America in the nineteenth century also be responsible for the most rigorous interrogation of the underlying assumption of that idea?"<sup>118</sup> For Frank, this tension is not paradoxical, but integral to Melville's political engagement, as he "understood the very ideals invoked by his Transcendentalist contemporaries to critique the failings of American society—freedom, independence, self-reliance—as complicit in the political pathologies they were called upon to diagnose and critique" (7). While readers are generally well-attuned to the "sharp critical thrust" of his commentary on contemporary political conflicts, Frank argues, more difficult to ascertain but more significant is the "conceptual nature" of his critique, as he "interrogated the very space of the political itself, the stage on which [ideological] controversies appeared and became publicly legible and significant" (7, 3). It is in this vein that this chapter seeks "the political itself" in Melville's writing (or un-writing, as we will see) of childhood and youth.<sup>119</sup>

First examining the ways in which fantasies about U.S. destiny and national age condense onto the Young America movement's rhetorical preoccupation with youth, I suggest that Melville's 1855 *Israel Potter* not only critiques the ideology of exceptionalism bound up with these imaginings, but also seeks to conceptualize the nature of the democratic political "stage." Specifically, this chapter suggests that Melville's novel disrupts its own end-driven narrative with fleeting but liberatory moments of present possibility, locating democratic potentiality in the contingent and

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<sup>118</sup> "American Tragedy: The Political Thought of Herman Melville." *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013. 7.

<sup>119</sup> The distinction between "politics," which are quotidian and ubiquitous, and "the political," which is rare and episodic, has become stock-in-trade in political theory conversations. Sheldon Wolin's term "fugitive democracy," for instance, represents a seminal articulation of "the political itself."

unwritten “now.” As Bonnie Honig writes: “the stories of politics have no ending, they are never-ending.”<sup>120</sup> By rejecting the imposition of formal and logical coherence upon political life, the novel’s critiques can ultimately represent an optimistic opening of the public realm to contest and re-imagining.

### *The Self-Contradictory Temporal Logic of Youth*

When Lincoln declared “we have all heard of Young America. He is the most *current* youth of the age,” in a speech in 1859, he indicated the ubiquity of the phrase in the cultural imagination.<sup>121</sup> But, however familiar this language might have been to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American audience, the Young America movement is surprisingly difficult to define, with consensus only on the ambiguity of its contours. As William Kerrigan writes: “the sobriquet ‘Young America’ appeared across the pages of magazines, newspapers, and printed pamphlet speeches throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Its meaning was ambiguous and multi-dimensional then, and subsequent scholarship on “The Young America movement” has been quite problematic.”<sup>122</sup> Working to sort the seemingly antagonistic literary and political agendas that all traveled under the name “Young America” between the years 1837 and 1855, Edward Widmer has described it in terms of two oppositional phases; the literary/intellectual Young America I committed to “the flowering of democracy, promoting culture and ideas” and the political Young America II representing democracy’s “deflowering, misleading people through the empty

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<sup>120</sup> Honig, Bonnie. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. (3).

<sup>121</sup>“Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions.” *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 3 Ed. Roy P. Basler. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953. (357).

<sup>122</sup> Kerrigan, William T. Review of Widmer, Edward L., *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999: [www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3605](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3605).

promises and slogans designed to steal land and treat human beings like chattel.”<sup>123</sup>

According to Widmer, the late 1830’s and 1840’s cultural agenda of intellectuals and literati including Duyckink, O’Sullivan, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Whitman, represented a buoyant and well-intentioned effort to cultivate distinctly national and truly democratic art and law. However, hinging on the 1848 U.S.- Mexican War, and much to the disappointment of its first adherents, this earlier phase of Young America gave way to an ultranationalistic political agenda marked by rapacious expansionism, violent dispossession of Native Americans and Mexicans, and disregard for the problem of slavery. Widmer concludes that these divergent intellectual and political versions of “Manifest Destiny” had “little in common” beyond the shared forum of the *Democratic Review* and the participation in both by John O’Sullivan (185-6). However, in a review of Widmer’s book, Kerrigan is wary of Widmer’s impulse to so cleanly detach the cultural nationalists of the 1830’s and 1840’s and the territorial expansionists of the 1850’s, a parsing that “seems to fit too conveniently with our modern values.” Whichever way we might understand the relationship between these two phases, what undeniably unites the full length of Young America’s tenure is its obsession with youth—metaphorically as well as literally.

Youth as rhetorical abstraction and as embodied experience were both vital to the Young America movement; its discourses relentlessly invoked the word “youth” to suggest national purity, newness, and vigor. But its constituents were also aware of the significance of their literal youth; Yonatan Eyal’s study of the movement’s political element argues that “generational self-consciousness [was] the crucial unifier of Young

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<sup>123</sup>Widmer, Edward. *Young America: the Flowering of Democracy in New York City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. (15).

America Democrats [ . . . ] few other ties bound New Democrats together as closely as age.”<sup>124</sup> Those various democrats who affiliated under the name Young America during the 1840’s and 1850’s did not share a single, coherent political agenda but self-identified against an earlier—and now aging—generation of Jacksonian Democrats. As O’Sullivan wrote in an 1839 issue of the *Democratic Review*:

[Old Democratic Party regulars] gradually crust themselves over the party, with an influence upon it paralyzing to all the generous simplicity, fervor, and truth, natural to democratic principles, until at last they ruin by corrupting it, and eventually, after the lapse of a greater or less term of years, the healthy vitality of the main body itself is roused from its long lethargy—its gallant and unsophisticated youth come forward on the stage, and take up and carry on the great mission of the party.<sup>125</sup>

Following in this track, Cornelius Mathews’s speech on June 30, 1845 declared “whatever that past generation of statesmen, law-givers and writers was capable of, we know. What they attained, what they failed to attain, we also know. Our duty and our destiny is another from theirs.”<sup>126</sup> Admitting that the metaphor of youth fails to possess the freshness it is meant to signify, Mathews concedes: “liking not at all its borrowed sound, we are yet (there is no better way to name it,) the Young America of the people: a new generation.” And in an 1852 article in the *Democratic Review*, the anonymous author describes an uneven matching of literal and metaphorical youth, roasting Senator John Breckenridge for being a “young fogy.”<sup>127</sup> Breckinridge had spoken out against the *Democratic Review*, claiming his support of “young ideas” but cautioning:

...the article announces a new generation of American statesmen—men not trammelled by the ideas of an anterior era—men who will bring not only young blood but young ideas... now sir, I am in favor of progress. I like young blood,

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<sup>124</sup> Eyal, Yonetan. *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. (9).

<sup>125</sup> *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* Vol. 6. Washington, DC: Langtree and O’Sullivan, 1839. ( 439-40).

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Widmer’s *Young America: the Flowering of Democracy in New York City*. (60).

<sup>127</sup> *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Vol. 30. 1852. (204).

and I like young ideas too (at a certain time of life) but I do not like this course. (204)

To which the *Democratic Review* author replied:

Of course he does not—how could young men with old ideas, at a certain time of life, or any other time of life, stomach such irreverent truths? [ . . . ] “immortal principles of our forefathers!”— old fogyism, ever deficient in originality, purpose, aim—unless a selfish one—incapacity to grapple with the time, to conceive the necessities of the time, or measure the desires or wishes of the people among which it lives—has nothing for liberty or progress. (205)

Despite his literal youth, this author suggests, Breckenridge has “old ideas.” And like O’Sullivan, this author insists on generational renewal: “because a man is a democrat, he is not, therefore, entitled to become a parasite and an incubus upon succeeding generations. [ . . . ] *We spurn such liens on unborn worlds, on liberty, on time*” (214, emphasis added).

This idea is not new to Young America. Jefferson’s well-known 1789 letter to James Madison declared that no “one generation of men has a right to bind another,” by reasoning that, were generations successive instead of overlapping, each generation would have full possession of the earth, and “what is true of a generation all arriving to self-government on the same day and dying all on the same day, is true of those on a constant course of decay and renewal.”<sup>128</sup> But this constant course of decay and renewal is interrupted in the Young America movement’s own timeline, as it underwent a quick generational turnover and then ignoble decline—at once performing and expiring under its own commitment to reject “old” ideas.

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<sup>128</sup> “Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Ed Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950. Document 23, 392-97. Online at <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch2s23.html>

Although Young America's espousal of generational renewal allowed its members to imagine the ever-youthfulness of the nation, it was also in conflict with what became its banner political project: Manifest Destiny. Cultural scholars and historians have well documented early 19<sup>th</sup> century America's triumphant rejection of the past and embrace of its future destiny. Emerson's naming America "the country of the future,"<sup>129</sup> the 1842 *Democratic Review*'s claim that "probably no other civilised nation has at any period so completely thrown off its allegiance to the past as the American,"<sup>130</sup> or O'Sullivan's declaration that "our national birth was the beginning of a new history [ . . . ] which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only,"<sup>131</sup> for instance, oriented the nation within an orderly, teleological, and singly progressing temporality.<sup>132</sup> But, I would suggest, if it was generational renewal that promised a continuous future of youth, Young America's visions contained the logic of their own demise. As Young Americans began to shape the vision of a detached national futurity into a directed destiny, they implicitly presumed their capacity and prerogative to define the nation's future. By claiming the self-evidence of the United States' destiny—and thereby projecting their vision onto the future—Young America in fact violated its belief that each generation inherits the earth to invent it anew, that no one generation can "spurn such liens on unborn worlds, on liberty, on time" (214).

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<sup>129</sup> "The Young American: A Lecture read before the Mercantile Library Association, Boston, February 7, 1844." *Emerson Texts*. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/>

<sup>130</sup> *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Vol 11, 1842 (225).

<sup>131</sup> "The Great Nation of Futurity" *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Vol. 6. 1839. (426).

<sup>132</sup> Wai Chee Dimock links this temporal rapaciousness to Manifest Destiny's geographic appetites: "America's claim to being the 'nation of futurity' has everything to do, apparently, with its geographical expanse, its territorial claims to an entire 'hemisphere.' Such an empire was to be one of both 'space and time,' for America's dominion in space would, in this formulation, ensure its dominion over time" (14). (*Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). Undoubtedly, the language of the temporal assisted the geographic expansionist project, but I want to consider these metaphors of youth and futurity not only as they are displaced unto space, but also for their temporal implication.

Further, linking the nation's future to the metaphors of age and bodily development—the American disposition to think of society as “a body progressing,” as Tocqueville put it<sup>133</sup>— would necessarily require suppressing the timeline that these metaphors invoke. That is, latent within the metaphor of youth is the bodily teleology of aging and, even, inevitable decline and death. We might consider, then, how proclamations of youth carry with them the specter of oldness, the all-too-sudden metamorphosis “from youth to old age” suffered by Israel Potter. Or, as Emerson suggested in his 1841 “Lecture on the Times”: “Old Age begins in the nursery.”<sup>134</sup> Into the space of childhood, otherwise often romanticized as ephemeral but timeless, protected from the pacing of the adult world, Emerson imagines the intrusion of time's inevitable march. This passage succinctly asserts the teleology of the life narrative that is so often suppressed in the celebration of Young America's seemingly ever-youthfulness, locating in youth the origins of aging, decline, and by extension, eventual death. Of course, national rhetoric of America's “youth” abstracted this concept out from its literal position in the narrative of the individual's biological lifespan. But, the temporality of an individual's age and the historical, political, and national temporalities remain conceptually entangled. For instance, here Emerson grounds the abstract temporality of “the times” in the bodily time of “the age”—or, “people”:

“The subject of the times is not an abstract question . . . if you speak of the age, you mean your own platoon of people” (261).

This embodied sense of “the times” as a communal simultaneity suggests a more than merely rhetorical relationship between the time of the individual body and the abstract

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<sup>133</sup> Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Eds J.P. Mayer and Max Learner. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. (343).

<sup>134</sup> “Lecture on the Times.” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 1. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1904. (284).

time of history; while Emerson emphasizes the infinite and unceasing nature of time (“Time is the child of the Eternity” he writes in the same lecture), he also insists that it is lived and experienced in the simultaneous, overlapping and bounded narratives of people’s lives.

This is why “youth” presents potential problems for imagining the national body in time. If youth is an atemporal national disposition that Americans inhabit indefinitely, continually renewed by the refreshing of generations, then this form of “youth” implies imposing that consensus onto those who have not yet come into it. That is, by presuming that future generations will carry on the American spirit of youthfulness, current generations implicitly project the values bound up in the idea of “youthfulness” onto those future generations. Conversely, if youth is temporally tied to the national body, something more closely related to the historical, temporal conditions of the new nation—if by youth, 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans meant “their own platoon of people” who historically and relatively speaking were literally “young” Americans in the projected lifespan of the nation—then this language has to suppress at least two sources of anxiety inherent in its logics. For one, the nation’s preoccupation with its youth requires suppressing the ongoing potential of natality; as, that is, the celebration of the geopolitical youthfulness produced by the revolutionary founding required also suppressing the possibility that revolution might happen again. At the same time, invocations of the nation’s youth also conjured the teleology of maturity and decline to come.

### *Suppressing Revolutionary Natality*

We can see representative iterations of these concerns about the nation’s youthfulness in Daniel Webster’s speeches made at the initiation and completion of the



Bunker Hill Monument—both in anticipation of and during Young America’s tenure as a self-identified movement. In 1825, Webster delivered an “Address at the Laying of the Foundation,” in which he was cautious to gird the revolutionary capacity known to exist in what he calls “the early age of this great continent”:

“The great wheel of political revolution began to move in America. Here its rotation was guarded, regular, and safe.”<sup>135</sup>

Webster contrasts this vision of America’s “safe” revolution with the wave of political revolution in Europe, which “received an irregular and violent impulse [ and] whirled along with a fearful celerity” (132). “We learn from the result of this experiment,” he continues, “how fortunate was our own condition.” Though the Bunker Hill Monument might celebrate revolution, it should not inspire ongoing revolutionary feelings; Webster is clear that any good revolutionary action that was to be made in this nation, is done:

“And let the sacred obligation which have devolved on this generation, and on us, sink deep into our hearts. Those who established our liberty and our government are daily dropping from among us. The great trust now descends to new hands. Let us apply ourselves to that which is presented to us, as our appropriate object. We can win no laurels in a war for independence. Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all. Nor are there places for us by the side of Solon, and Alfred, and other founders of states. Our fathers have filled them. But there remains to us a great duty of defence and preservation, and there is opened to us, also, a noble pursuit, to which the spirit of the times strongly invites us. Our proper business is improvement. Let our age be the age of improvement.” (135)

Any honor to be had through Revolution, he assures, has already been had. As he champions the conservative role of the citizen as inheritor and preserver, Webster works to resolve the tension between reverence for the legacy of the revolutionary forefathers and the national interest by quelling any cultural self-identification as a permanently

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<sup>135</sup> Webster, Daniel. “The Bunker Hill Monument.” *The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1879. (132).

revolutionary people. And eighteen years later, when he would address the completion of the monument, Webster would make similar efforts.

In 1843, the ceremonial address at the monument is punctuated by blunt statements of completion:

A Duty has been performed. A work of gratitude and patriotism is completed. [ . . . ] The Bunker Hill Monument is finished. Here it stands.<sup>136</sup>

While monuments are of course objects made to exist into the future, and to project forward the history they are memorializing, these single clauses in their stolid, declarative past tense repeatedly emphasize the monument's significance as an act that is *finished*. The celebration is in the notion of completion; the building of the monument and that which it signifies are both triumphantly, relievingly, past. And in this tenor of closure, Webster also addresses the passing of the "Revolutionary characters then present" to remind again that current generations do not belong to the time of political upheaval:

Heaven has not allotted to this generation an opportunity of rendering high services, and manifesting strong personal devotions, such as they rendered and manifested, and in such a cause as that which roused the patriotic fires of their youthful breasts, and nerved the strength of their arms. But we may praise what we cannot equal, and celebrate actions which we were not born to perform. (138)

Webster's, like many others,' is an exceptionalist treatment of the Revolutionary War and the political vigor of its generation; he imagines the revolutionary moment as singular, fated and to be revisited only with due reverential distance. But even as he seals off the natality exercised by that generation as a thing of the past, he hails the future generations into identification with that past:

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<sup>136</sup> Webster, Daniel. "Completion of the Bunker Hill Monument." *The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1879. (137-138).

And then, when honored and decrepit age shall lean against the base of this monument, and troops of ingenuous youth shall be gathered round it, and when the one shall speak to the other of its objects, the purposes of its construction, and the great and glorious events with which it is connected, there shall rise from every youthful breast the ejaculation, "Thank God, I—I also, AM AN American!" (151)

Webster's vision thus works to allay simultaneous anxieties. In the scenario he celebrates, the future youthful generations shall not act upon the revolutionary zeal that defined young America. But, nor shall the founding fathers' patriotic spirit be lost into "decrepit age;" American-ness shall ever inhabit youthful breasts as the monument and "the great and glorious events to which it is connected" instruct the feelings of future citizens. As we shall see, Melville's *Israel Potter* makes a centerpiece of the Bunker Hill Monument precisely to counter and critique these self-contradictory fantasies that seek to occlude the paradoxes inherent in 19<sup>th</sup> century democratic temporality.

### *Melville's Israel Potter*

*Israel Potter* has often been read as a frustrated response to the critical excoriation of *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*. The text was first published serially in *Putnam's Monthly*, through 1854 and 1855, and in a letter to George Putnam, Melville promised it would contain nothing "to shock the fastidious."<sup>137</sup> Melville's commitment to include "very little reflective writing in it, nothing weighty" seems to have had the intended effect; his contemporaries generally responded to the novel favorably. The reviewer at the *New York Morning Courier* and *New York Enquirer*, for instance, reported that the novel represented "a sudden and great improvement in [Melville's] style, which in this tale is

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<sup>137</sup> "Letter to George P. Putnam, Esq.: June 7, 1854." *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence*. Ed. Lynn Horth. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993. (265).

manly, direct and clear,” and “a pleasant contrast to that of [his] last book.”<sup>138</sup> Others, however, recognized in the book what may have been Melville’s punitive self-restraint. A review from the *Weekly Chronicle* in London suggested: “the book leaves the impression of having been carefully and purposefully rendered commonplace. You feel the author is capable of something much better, but for a freak is resolved to curb his fancy and adhere to the dustiest routine” (465). With 21<sup>st</sup> century Melvillian criticism making only a few nods toward the novel, it is easy to follow Melville’s attitude and dismiss this novel as potboiler magazine material. However, as any seasoned reader of Melville would forecast, the novel is no straightforward adventure narrative, but is richly and complicatedly engaged with questions of nation and democracy. Through its figurations of Israel’s body in time, the novel critiques exceptionalist narrative-making, while also working to conceptualize a democratic temporality that keeps open natal possibility.

When Israel Potter, a veteran of the battle at Bunker-Hill, finally returns to the United States after fifty years of poverty and wandering, he arrives on the Fourth-of-July, into the midst of a ceremonial celebration. The irony is none too subtle as Israel is nearly “run over by a patriotic triumphal car in the procession, flying a broidered banner, inscribed with gilt letters:—‘Bunker-Hill. 1775. Glory to the heroes that fought!’” (190). As critics have noted, this scene highlights the absurdity of hero-worship in what should be a democratic context.<sup>139</sup> Reaping neither the rewards of democratic citizenship nor

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<sup>138</sup> Herman Melville: the Contemporary Reviews. Eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. (455, 458).

<sup>139</sup> See for instance, Edward Tang’s “Writing the American Revolution: War Veterans in the Nineteenth-Century Cultural Memory.” *Journal of American Studies*. Vol 32.1 (April 1998). 63-80.

recognition for his sacrifices, Israel sits “mute, gazing blankly,” voiding meaning from the patriotic machinations he witnesses.

For readers familiar with the literature of the nineteenth century, this scene brings to mind at least two other American literary centerpieces—Washington Irving’s 1819 “Rip Van Winkle” and Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Though bearing no direct reference to American slavery, Potter’s alienation from the Fourth of July celebration is similar to Douglass’s famous censure of the “sham” and “hollow mockery” that “shouts of liberty and equality” are for those Americans denied these basic promises of the American Revolution.<sup>140</sup> Douglass’s disillusion originates in his daily exclusion from U.S. democracy, providing him a clarifying distance that Irving and Melville both construct for their characters via long trauancies. As Israel returns to the U.S., old and disoriented, to a town that does not recognize him, he is reminiscent of the whiskery Van Winkle. In both cases, the unfamiliarity of the places to which the men return ultimately serves to reveal how little has actually changed under the new order. When Rip observes the amended sign hanging over the village inn, on which King George’s “ruby face” is yet discernible beneath the new image of General Washington, his bewilderment only calls attention to the arbitrariness of this replacement of one figure with another.<sup>141</sup> Melville levies a similar critique when he dedicates the novel to the personified “His Highness, The Bunker Hill Monument,” addressing this object of ostensibly democratic patriotism in the obsequious language of aristocracy.

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<sup>140</sup> Douglass, Frederick. “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro.” *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Pre-Civil War Decade*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: International Publishers, 1950. (192).

<sup>141</sup> Irving, Washington. “Rip Van Winkle.” *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*. Paris: Baudry’s European Library, 1846. (37).

Melville's deeming the monument "the Great Biographer: the national commemorator of such of the anonymous privates of June 17, 1775" takes on particular resonance in the context of Webster's address to the same (2). According to reports of the speech, Webster electrified his audience when he proclaimed:

"it is not from my lips, it could not be from any human lips, that that strain of eloquence is this day to flow most competent to move and excite the vast multitudes around me. The powerful speaker stands motionless before us."<sup>142</sup>

At this point, Webster "paused and pointed in silent admiration to the sublime structure" and "the audience burst into long and loud applause. It was some moments before the speaker could go on with the address" (137).

For Webster and his captivated audience, the deferral to the motionless stone likely suggested something transcendent, the legacy of the Revolution too large and eternal and stolidly past to be voiced by any present individual. But for Melville, the stone as biographer points ironically to the voicelessness and anonymity of the individuals lost and forgotten by a culture too busy memorializing its ideals to notice when it is failing them. Israel's story of suffering, dedicated to the Monument but ultimately doomed to fade "out of memory," offers a sharp critique of both the democracy produced by the Revolution and the national fantasies made of its memories.

However, the novel does more than critique and demythologize. In fact, the novel seems less invested in demonstrating how the American Revolution was exceptionally failed or false, than in demonstrating that it was *not* exceptional. Paul Giles, for instance has described the dramatization of the "arbitrary status of national identity and of patriotic allegiance more generally" in this novel, and Robert Levine has noted how "in

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<sup>142</sup> Webster, Daniel. "Completion of the Bunker Hill Monument." *The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1879. (136).

his profoundly transatlantic and even global work [the United States] appears no better (or worse) than England, France, or the other nations that Melville alludes to over the course of the novel.”<sup>143</sup> In all of his bewildering and often comic encounters with Revolutionary battles and figureheads, the novel’s hero has almost no sense of patriotic identity or national purpose. As Levine demonstrates:

He is enlisted as a spy for pro-American forces but has no idea what they are up to, nor does he have a clear understanding of what either Benjamin Franklin or Paul Jones is doing in Paris. Though he fights in famous battles, he does not perceive their significance. The novel undermines the idea of a glorious patriotic march toward an eventual American victory [ . . . ] Potter participates in the American revolution as a confused, and for the most part baffled, historical actor. (xviii)

The hazy view we get from Israel’s perspective counters Webster’s claims for the Revolution’s absolute singularity. And by imagining the Revolution as indistinct and unexceptional, the novel implicitly undermines the logic that allowed Webster to claim that “we can win no laurels in a war for independence. Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all. Nor are there places for us by the side of Solon, and Alfred, and other founders of states. Our fathers have filled them.”<sup>144</sup> Characterizing the American Revolution as unexceptional does not simply perform the critical work of pointing out its flaws and failures; it also works to open back up the natality that Webster and many others were intent on foreclosing.

For Hannah Arendt, from whom I borrow this term natality, freedom is a matter of the capacity for beginnings. “It is in the nature of beginning,” she argues, “that

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<sup>143</sup> Giles, Paul. “Bewildering Entanglement: Melville’s Engagement with British Culture.” *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Ed. Robert Levine. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. (238).; Levine, Robert. “Introduction.” *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. (xxvi).

<sup>144</sup> “The Bunker Hill Monument.” (135).

something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.”<sup>145</sup> She continues:

This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (177–8)

For Arendt, freedom is not liberalism’s freedom of choice or the free will of Christianity’s *liberum arbitrium*, but a capacity for beginning that is linked fundamentally to childhood: “the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.”<sup>146</sup> Referring to Virgil’s fourth Eclogue, Arendt writes:

no doubt the poem is a nativity hymn, a song of praise to the birth of a child and the announcement of a new generation, a nova progenies; but far from being the prediction of the arrival of a divine child and savior, it is, on the contrary, the affirmation of the divinity of birth as such, that the world’s potential salvation lies in the very fact that the human species regenerates itself constantly and forever. (212)

Arendt links Rome’s ready acceptance of the “cult of the ‘child’” to Roman politics’ “unequaled, intimate connection with the integrity of a beginning in the foundation of their city” (213). Elsewhere, Arendt writes: “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew.”<sup>147</sup>

By bringing Arendt’s natality into conversation with Melville’s *Israel Potter*, I intentionally introduce a certain dissonance, for Arendt’s writing on the American Revolution figures it as an exceptional example of natality—precisely the notion I am

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<sup>145</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. (177).

<sup>146</sup> Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963. (213).

<sup>147</sup> *The Human Condition*. (9).



suggesting *Israel Potter* troubles. Arendt frequently held the American Revolution as model; in *On Revolution*, for instance, she describes the American Revolution as “conspicuously different from all other revolutions which were to follow (199) and particularly successful because it founded “a new body politic stable enough to survive the onslaught of centuries to come” (198). Describing the founding fathers’ understanding of beginnings, she writes:

As far as the men of the revolution were concerned, there were only two foundation legends with which they were fully acquainted [...] the biblical story of the exodus of Israeli tribes from Egypt and Virgil’s story of the wandering of Aeneas after he escaped burning Troy. Both are legends of liberation [. . .] and both stories are centered about a future promise of freedom [...] with respect to revolution, these tales seem to contain an important lesson; in strange coincidence, they both insist on a hiatus between the end of the old order. (206)

In contrast, Melville’s novel nods to the Israeli exodus with his own Israel, but his is *not* a legend of liberation, and it repeatedly denies its wanderer the future promise of freedom. In fact, Melville’s novel appears—although deceptively, as we will see—to discount natality entirely. In *Israel Potter*, childhood does not represent a beginning but is merely a prologue to a scripted ending. Melville writes of the young Israel:

...how little he thought, when, as a boy, hunting after his father’s stray cattle among these New England hills, he himself like a beast should be hunted [. . .] but so it was destined to be. This little boy of the hills, born in sight of the sparkling Housatonic, was to linger out the best part of his life a prisoner or a pauper. (7)

The unknowing child here is not a troped figure of pastoral innocence, but an occasion to dispel the reader’s sense of beginning; we meet young Israel *and* his old age—the beginning and end of the novel—simultaneously. These images of his youth exist only so they can give way to his early senescence. The narrator then “passes on” from Israel’s childhood to deliver him to the fate which the narration has already established.

As Israel joins American forces in the war, he is soon captured by the British, and makes several attempts to escape, his private bondage repeating in miniature the colonial American efforts to break from British control. Now, in these early adventures, Israel does seem to experience those revolutionary ruptures in time that Arendt describes. As a prisoner of war, Israel “lay for a month” in the “black bowels of the ship, sunk low in the sunless sea,” until this particular moment of unfated possibility:

But one bright morning, Israel is hailed from the deck. A bargeman of the commander’s boat is sick. Known for a sailor, Israel for the nonce is appointed to pull the absent man’s oar . . . No sooner does Israel see his companions housed, than putting speed into his feet, and letting grow all his wings, he starts like a deer. He runs four miles... (16)

Note how in this moment in which Israel makes a break for freedom, the novel’s past tense switches into the present. And even when caught from this break, Israel “still keeps his eye on the main chance—escape. Neither the jokes nor the insults of the mob does he suffer to molest him. He is cogitating a little plot to himself” (17). Disrupting the novel’s regular temporal perspective with a yet-unfolding present, Israel’s embodiment of futural possibility seems to suspend the fate we’ve already been promised will come. And even when captured a second time, Israel is not discouraged but rather plots to escape again, and with the unbolting of his chains, the narrative once again shifts into a hurried present tense:

No sooner was this unbolted by the foremost guard, than, quick as a flash, manacled Israel, shaking off the grasp of the one behind him, butts him sprawling backwards into the entry; when, dashing in the opposite direction, he bounces the other head over heels into the garden, never using a hand; and then, leaping over the latter’s head, darts blinding out into the midnight. Next moment he was at the garden wall. No outlet was discoverable in the gloom. But a fruit-tree grew close to the wall. Springing into it desperately, handcuffed as he was, Israel leaps atop of the barrier, and without pausing to see where he is, drops himself to the ground on the other side, and once more lets grow all his wings. (19)

But, abruptly, as winged Israel realizes he has ended up in a nobleman's park, the novel returns him to the past tense, and to the narrative of deferral and disappointment that was always already plotted in the title's "fifty years of exile" (19):

After running two or three miles, and hearing no sound of pursuit, Israel reins up to rid himself of the handcuffs, which impede him. After much painful labor he succeeds in the attempt. Pressing on again with all speed, day broke, revealing a trim-looking, hedged, and beautiful country, soft, neat, and serene, all colored with the fresh early tints of the spring of 1776.

Bless me, thought Israel, all of a tremble, I shall certainly be caught now. (19)

Israel as the absent subject of the participial clause—"pressing on again with all speed"—is seemingly ousted from the sentence by the intrusion of a temporal marker: "day broke." And the historical plotted-ness that comes with the "early tints of the spring of 1776" co-opts Israel's present with the past tense and its inevitabilities: "I shall certainly be caught now" (19).

At this point, Israel begins to hopelessly perceive all of his surroundings in the metaphors of imprisonment and escape—he looks around at the spring buds and perceives that "each unrolling leaf was in the very act of escaping from its prison" (20)—and he becomes "like a child":

He was so sad, and these sights were so gay, that Israel sobbed like a child, while thoughts of his mountain home rushed like a wind on his heart. (20)

Again, for Israel, childhood is bound with its loss. His own possession of youth is soon after relinquished as he switches clothing with an old man, whose "wretched rags . . . were but suitable to that long career of destitution before him; one brief career of adventurous wanderings: and then, forty torpid years of pauperism" (21). Israel is "suddenly metamorphosed from youth to old age" (22).

As one of its discounted actors, Israel only briefly and teasingly experiences that “legendary hiatus between end and beginning . . . between a no-longer and a ‘not yet’” that Arendt describes as characterizing the Revolution (206). Through the remainder of the novel, Israel will make many more attempts at freedom—he will, for instance, let himself loose from dumb enclosure in Squire Woodcock’s chimney into the “liberty” of the man’s closet—but none will move him again into the winged hiatus of the present. Indeed, when Israel escapes from the Squire’s home by outfitting himself in the deceased man’s clothing, he is again propelled only toward prefigured endings. Where he earlier found himself cloaked in the rags of “old age,” here he takes on death itself, as he is wrapped in the “dead man’s broadcloth” and begins “to feel almost as unreal and shadowy as the shade whose part he intended to enact” (84). And as Israel transforms himself into the dead man, he simultaneously inhabits the end of his life and the moment of historical past that fated that end; ghosting from his prison, Israel emerges into a hilly meadow that “magically reproduced to our adventurer the aspect of Bunker Hill, Charles River, and Boston town, on the well remembered night of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June” (85).

But if Israel seems trapped in the time of the national narrative, Melville’s Benjamin Franklin seems to thrive in its coordinates of nostalgia and destiny. When Israel meets the “venerable Doctor Franklin,” the narrator describes his age this way:

Yet though he was thus lively and vigorous to behold, spite of his seventy-two years (his exact date at that time) somehow, the incredible seniority of an antediluvian seemed his. Not the years of the calendar wholly, but also the years of sapience. His white hairs and mild brow, spoke of the future as well as the past. He seemed to be seven score years old; that is, three score and ten of prescience added to three score and ten of remembrance, makes just seven score years in all (44)

However, Melville wryly undercuts his own narrator's magisterial description of Franklin—and Franklin himself—with the next lines:

But when Israel stepped within the chamber, he lost the complete effect of all this, for the sage's back, not his face was turned to him. (44)

Franklin's power is in fact an "effect," and one that does not reach Israel. Melville here winks at Franklin's own belief in the performed self, while also reinforcing Israel's alienation from the collective imaginings or "effects" that produce the national community. Franklin, as an historical icon of the national founding and as an imaginative icon for the teleological myth of the American individualist, is positioned at the sum of "remembrance" and "prescience"—his age a cumulative of future and past, pleasantly exempt from the logics of historical and bodily time that have entrapped Israel in poverty, exile, and a preternatural old age. Unable to respond to Franklin's effects, Israel is also unable to benefit from the national promises Franklin symbolizes.

Indeed, after Franklin also fails to deliver on his literal promise of passage home to the US, Israel spends decades trying to escape his life of itinerancy. With his aplomb for the wryest of chapter titles, Melville names Chapter 25 "Forty-five Years," and promptly dispenses of the bulk of Israel's "fifty years of exile." While baffling a contemporary reviewer, who felt "five years in place of fifty, would have been a more appropriate title, seeing that forty-five of them are shuffled off in a few pages at the close," this chapter's collapse of years indeed carries through the fatalistic vision of a foreclosed future that the novel has been plotting.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *Herman Melville: the Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. (457).

We learn in this chapter that Israel has eleven children born to him during this span of undocumented time:

Meantime, according to another well-known Malthusian enigma in human affairs, his family increased. In all, eleven children were born to him in certain sixpenny garrets in Moorfields. One after the other, ten were buried. (185)

Here invoking British political economist Thomas Robert Malthus's dismay at human population growth in the face of insufficient living resources, Melville undercuts any natality that might have been suggested by the coming of Israel's progeny.<sup>149</sup> Ten of these children are narratively expelled before ever even having any presence in the novel. And the remaining child, Israel's son, becomes a vehicle for repetition, not newness. When father and son finally return to the U.S., and journey back to Israel's boyhood home, the house is gone and Israel contemplates the rubble where it once stood:

"what are you looking at so, father?"

"'Father!' here," raking with his staff, "my father would sit, and here, my mother, and here I, little infant, would totter between, even as now, once again, on the very same spot, but in the unroofed air, I do. The ends meet. (192)

Israel repeats his son's invocation of "father" to transfer the reference to his own, marking in the dirt and decay the place where he was once a baby and where his parents once sat. The image of generational circularity that ends this novel is not one of regeneration or continuation, but of negation. "Best followed now is this life, by hurrying, like itself, to a close. Few things remain," remarks the narrator (192). Unlike the transcendental Emersonian circles—around each of which "another can be drawn;

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<sup>149</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* was published in 1798.

that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning”—as father and son stand in the rubble, the ends of Israel Potter’s circle meet in totalizing closure.<sup>150</sup>

In this way, the novel’s conclusion might appear to be the most cynical of endings, a verdict on the irredeemable failure of the Revolutionary project. We can see how Michael Rogin would describe this novel as “undermin[ing] the revolutionary fathers, and the principles for which they fought.”<sup>151</sup> However, there is more at play here than fatalistic critique of the Revolution and its democratic project. To be sure, for Israel as character, the Revolutionary story is one of structurally inevitable disillusionment and disappointment, the prolonged suffering of destined endings, the “true old age of man” that can come at “eighteen or eighty” (22). But of course, texts are larger than their narrative account of a problem, and we can think of Melville’s novel itself as an attempt to actualize something more democratic than the democracy it describes.

### *Re-Opening Natal Possibility*

Sheldon Wolin has described how for Arendt, “audience is a metaphor for the political community whose nature is to be a community of remembrance.”<sup>152</sup> That is, the demos must collectively witness and preserve political acts and even political communities themselves, which are otherwise “not exempt from mortality.” With *Israel Potter*, Melville calls his audience into a community of remembrance that is without idealization or reverence or even any real discernible admiration for the founding

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<sup>150</sup> “Circles.” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001. (174).

<sup>151</sup> Rogin, Michael. *Subversive Genealogy: The Art and Politics of Herman Melville*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1983. (224).

<sup>152</sup> Wolin, Sheldon. “Hannah Arendt and the Ordinance of Time.” *Social Research*, (44.1) Spring 1977. (97)

narrative. As such, this community of remembrance is markedly different from that imagined by Arendt, for whom the success of the American Revolution is directly related to the “awe” and “worship” with which Americans treat the constitution—a word that Arendt means to refer not only to the written document, but also to the act of constituting into a “we the people” via the break with the old body politic. Arendt suggests that “the political genius of the American people, or the great good fortune that smiled upon the American republic” is their “blindness” or “the extraordinary capacity to look upon yesterday with the eyes of centuries to come.”<sup>153</sup> She goes further to say “one may be tempted even to predict that the authority of the republic will be safe and intact as long as the act itself, the beginning as such, is remembered whenever constitutional questions in the narrower sense of the word come into play” (205). In this formulation, we might ask—and much of the criticism on the novel follows this vein—how could Melville’s treatment of American beginnings be anything other than nihilistic?

But, by calling readers into remembrance of the American beginning as disordered, chaotic, and at times even arbitrary, I would suggest, Melville in fact opens natal possibility back up. That is, by depicting the American Revolution as *unexceptionalist*, Melville does not satirize the Revolution per se as much as he satirizes the revolutionary temporality articulated by Webster and many others—a temporality whose function is to at once celebrate and terminate the American Revolution, to make it an exceptional event (historically) and an unrepeatable event (temporally). The always-already aged Potter both exposes and mutely satirizes the community of remembrance that wants to dream itself forever young, so it can have things both ways. But, in the absence of a reverent treatment of the Revolution as a singular event, there is space to

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<sup>153</sup> *On Revolution* (198).



imagine the possibility of revising, and beginning again. This is not to say that the novel makes an argument for new revolutionary action, but is to say that the novel shakes U.S. democracy loose from the logics of exceptionalism that were designed to foreclose natality by containing it a narrative of past singularity and future progress, and so it keeps open the possibility of newness.

In presenting us with a narrative in which neither past nor future contain democratic promise, Melville asks us to locate the temporal stage of democracy elsewhere. If democratic possibility is neither enclosed in the historical stage of a singular and exceptional Revolutionary founding, nor a promise to be fulfilled by linear progress toward some kind of transcendent destiny, what remains are the fragile and often humble moments of the present. Measured within the full narrative of the novel, the ruptures into present tense, in which Israel “lets grow all his wings” to claim his liberty, are insignificant in the sense that they are fleeting, and fail to actually achieve liberty for Israel (19). But as these moments disrupt time and teleology in this novel, creating a hiatus in which to invoke a breathless sense of actualization—of beginning—these moments give a glimpse of democratic time outside of the remembrance and destiny narratives that this novel diagnoses as problematic. Arendt’s conception of “hiatus” as the time of revolution, “the legendary hiatus between end and beginning . . . between a no-longer and a ‘not-yet’” (206), might be modified by Melville’s imaginings of temporal ruptures that are not necessarily the exceptional breaks of revolution, but moments of present possibility.

Further, the very act of novelization brings the historical Israel Potter from the original autobiography into the eternal present of literary work. The political community

that is the imagined audience of such a novel is perhaps better described as a community of presence than of remembrance, as readers are forced to confront a contingent and unexceptional national story that invites the readers' engagement but prohibits their nostalgia or futurism. Melville's dismissal of extraordinary foundations or manifests destinies is not an invitation to cynicism; rather, we can take his moments of present enactment as tentatively imagining the temporal stage of an unscripted "now."

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The Bunker Hill Monument with which we opened this exploration of Melville also cast its long shadow in the imagination of Frederick Douglass. In 1854, Douglass delivered a lecture in Rochester, NY, reminding his audience that with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and with the anti-agitation platform shared by Whigs and Democrats alike, slavery was not simply a southern phenomenon but had "spread its death-like pall" across the northern states and up the shaft of the monument:

"[the slave] may pass into the New England States, to Concord, and Bunker Hill, and ascend that shaft, and ask in the name of the first blood that was shed at its base for protection, and even there, the hungry, biting bloodhound, and the master with his accursed chains can go and snatch the bondman away"<sup>154</sup>

Just as for Melville, for Douglass the Bunker Hill Monument stands testament to the American obstruction of the very freedoms it claims to celebrate. But where Melville's writing seems to suggest that we can locate alternatives to the nostalgic and futuristic mythologizing in moments of the democratic present, the position of radical unfreedom from which Douglass speaks raises the question: what is the meaning of democracy for

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<sup>154</sup> "American Slavery: Lecture No. 11, January 24, 1854." *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass (Supplementary Volume): 1844-1860.* Ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: International Publishers, 1975. (307).

those who are presently disenfranchised or oppressed—whose only hope of democratic freedom is the possibility of its future becoming? In the following chapter, we pursue this question through Douglass's representation of children and his own childhood.

## CHAPTER IV

### “LITTLE CONVERSATIONS WITH MY PLAYFELLOWS”: POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S WRITING OF CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN

#### *Introduction*

“Of all conscience, let me have those to deal with which have not been bewildered by the cares of life,” writes Frederick Douglass in the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, as he attests to the natural anti-slavery sentiments he consistently finds in the voices of children.<sup>155</sup> The Romantic notion that the child is born with an intuitive moral compass and uncorrupted sense of natural law will be familiar to anyone who has read abolitionist discourse of this period. But we should also note that implicit in Douglass’s statement of faith in the child’s naturally just conscience is the assumption that adulthood *will* bewilder and corrupt it. The natural sense of justice from which children speak cannot persist beyond the realm of childhood, it seems. However, Douglass ultimately rejects the commonplace resignation to the incompatibility of childhood morality and adult practical politics. Instead, he works to produce a national community that shares the bitter condemnation of slavery that he discovered in his boyhood companions, and so he aims to shrink the distance between “adult” politics and the seemingly impossible ideals often poured into the figurative child.

Looking specifically at Douglass’s renderings of childhood—his own and others’—this chapter examines how he imagines the political relevance of the child as it bears on the subjectivities of both children and the enslaved people equated with children.

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<sup>155</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005. (125).

First, I argue that Douglass authorizes political discourses occurring within communities of children, treating their voices not only as echoes of higher law, but as coherent if unheard political claims. Because Douglass seems to value the immediacy and intuitiveness of children's anti-racist claims, the second part of this chapter suggests, he implicitly poses a challenge to the modes of deliberative democracy that privilege slow and rational deliberation. Finally, and following this chapter's interest in reading children as political actors, I explore the ways that Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* limns the distinction between figural and literal childhoods. While deconstructing racist rhetorical appropriations of childhood that conceal children's lived experiences, Douglass also finds in the figure of his own boyhood a powerful way to assert his rise to autonomy and political selfhood, and to articulate the dialectical inextricability of bondage and freedom that he encounters even once freed from formal enslavement.

#### *Children as Political Actors in the Now*

In Douglass's texts, as well as in numerous other abolitionist writings, children operate as the voice of natural law that gives proof to slavery's innate injustice. However, we will see, when Douglass describes his pleasure when invoking white children's "fresh and bitter condemnation of slavery," we can read this scene as more than boilerplate abolitionist rhetoric. That is, their claims are not necessarily separate from the realm of politics, not simply poignant but quaint sentiment against which positive law might be judged. Instead, these claims might represent children's meaningful participation in political dialogue.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass describes how the white children he interacted with consistently understood the moral crime of his enslavement:

...although slavery was a delicate subject, and very cautious talked about among grown up people in Maryland, I frequently talked about it—and that very freely—with the white boys. I would, sometimes, say to them, while seated on a curb stone or a cellar door, “I wish I could be free, as you will be when you get to be men,” “You will be free, you know, as soon as you are twenty-one, and can go where you like, but I am a slave for life. Have I not as good a right to be free as you have?” Words like these, I observed, always troubled them; and I had no small satisfaction in wringing from the boys, occasionally, that fresh and bitter condemnation of slavery that springs from nature, unseared and unperverted [...] I do not remember ever to have met with a boy, while I was in slavery, who defended the slave system; but I have often had boys to console me, with the hope that something would yet occur, by which I might be made free. Over and over again, they have told me that “they believed I had as good a right to be free as they had;” and that “they did not believe God ever made any one to be a slave.” The reader will easily see, that such little conversations with my play fellows, had no tendency to weaken my love of liberty, nor to render me contented with my condition as a slave. (125)

How we read this scene has a lot to do with how we understand childhood. We can read this scene as fully rhetorical, as the strategic deployment of the pre-social, Romantic child as a placeholder for higher law principles. As Nicholas Buccola writes, “Children provided Douglass with an image of human nature uncorrupted.”<sup>156</sup> To be sure, in this capacity, the child serves an important role in Douglass’s argument and narrative craft. However, I’d like to argue we can also read this scene for its historical documentation of alternative ideological positions held within a community of children. Doing so requires first recognizing these children as political actors, whose participation in and against slavery Douglass documents just as he does that of the slaveholders, his fellow abolitionist leaders, and so forth. And, I think, Douglass encourages us to do so.

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<sup>156</sup> Buccola, Nicholas. *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. (81).

That is, given his experiences reckoning with and asserting his own subjectivity in the face of its institutional denial, his writings are predisposed to think searchingly about who—and what—can have thoughts. Nick Bromell describes how Douglass challenges the standard assumptions about the relationship between thoughts and subjectivity when he “trop[es] material things (the windmill, the sloop) as being ‘full of thoughts and ideas.’”<sup>157</sup> “The point is not to insist (as Douglass often does) that slaves were in fact ‘men,’ not ‘things’;” Bromell writes, “it is to reach ambivalently into the possibility of what thinking becomes, or rather is, when ‘things’; (slaves, windmills, sloops) are doing it.” In a related vein, Gregg Crane describes Douglass’s “emphasis on a dialogue of pre- and post-literate states of mind and that dialogue’s political and jurisprudential significance.”<sup>158</sup> Douglass’s acquisition of literacy is the famous turning point in his journey from slave to free man, but the moral perceptions of pre-literate children remain an essential element in the narrative’s argument. Crane suggests, for instance, that Douglass’ childhood wonder at the sight of the sailboats on the Chesapeake Bay “is not negated, explained, or replaced by [his] later more pointedly political reading of the symbolic significance of the sailboat image; the prior experience instances a basic affective relation between the human being and his universe” (112-113). With a similar posture, we can read Douglass’s depiction of children’s intuitive abolitionism as legitimated if unauthorized political thought.

The condemnation of slavery that Douglass elicits from children “springs from nature,” he writes, but it is also the product of talk. While “grown up people” avoided the

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<sup>157</sup> Bromell, Nick. “A ‘Voice from the Enslved’: The Origins of Frederick Douglass’s Political Philosophy of Democracy.” *American Literary History*. (Winter 2011) 23.4: 697-723.

<sup>158</sup> Crane, Gregg. *Race, Citizenship and Law in American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. (114).

subject of slavery altogether, Douglass talked “frequently” and “freely” with children, such that their condemnation of slavery was not only “natural” but also social—the product of collectively thinking and talking about a shared matter of concern. These children do not intuit principles of justice in spite of slavery’s existence, but in response to it. Further, Douglass insists that these “little conversations with [his] play fellows” influenced the early development of his political consciousness. Notwithstanding the infantilizing language he uses here, Douglass writes that these “little” conversations “had no tendency to weaken my love of liberty, nor to render me contented with my conditions as a slave” (125). And even from within the double subjugation of enslavement and childhood, Douglass elicited political discourse as well as action among other children, as they taught him to read. This political action is legitimated as real and accountable within the enfranchised, adult political realm by Douglass’s protective refusal to “give the names” of the boys—now at the time of publication grown men—who once gave their playfellow spelling lessons. Attesting to the historical veracity of this memory by noting the specific location of the boys’ childhood home, “they lived on Philpot street, very near Durgin & Bailey’s shipyard,” but fearful of the implications were he to expose their “unpardonable offense,” Douglass registers these boyhood interactions as acts of real, consequential political subversion (124). To read childhood in this passage only as a rhetorical tool for condemning slavery is to miss the seriousness with which it treats those children’s anti-slavery ideas and actions.

Douglass clearly values the officially unauthorized voices of the boys from Philpot Street, encouraging us to recognize their participation in the politics of their moment. Historian Joseph Kett has shown that, in the early 1800s, young people



participated equally and alongside adults of all ages in religious revivals, abolition societies, and temperance groups, and children and youth frequently joined adults at public political gatherings (43).<sup>159</sup> However, Kett, explains, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, “precocity” “increasingly acquired pathological connotations,” as the developing perception of childhood’s separateness required limiting children’s exposure to the adult world (135). We can see this cultural shift away from childhood participation, in the charged responses to young people’s involvement in political discourse as they formed juvenile abolitionist societies throughout the 1830’s. For example, while Douglass was still a youth, Lydia Maria Child wrote into *The Liberator* with this concern:

Your paper of the 14<sup>th</sup> ult. Contains a notice of Children’s Petitions to Congress, and an exhortation to abolitionist parents to encourage their circulation. I regret this measure exceedingly, and cannot but hope that it will not be carried into effect. I consider it an error of judgment, because the inevitable tendency will be to throw contempt on *all* our petitions; and it seems to be improper, because children are of necessity guided by others, and because this step is involved with questions evidently above juvenile capacities. Abolitionist parents ought thoroughly to prepare the hearts and minds of their children for the conscientious discharge of duties that will come with their riper years, but this haste to invest them with the attributes of citizenship appears premature and almost ridiculous. I have not as yet conversed with an abolitionist who did not view the subject in the same light.<sup>160</sup>

Child’s disapproval of these young people’s premature exercises in citizenship follows the belief in children as objects of socialization and perhaps even belies Child’s anxiety about how youth participation might subvert women’s (already tenuous) role as citizens, whose primary access to civic participation was through their nurturing and preparing the hearts and minds of their children. However, not all adults responded with such concern,

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<sup>159</sup> Kett, Joseph. *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790-Present*. NY: Basic Books, 1977.

<sup>160</sup> Quoted in *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.

and children did find numerous ways to involve themselves in the abolitionist movement, prompting Deborah DeRosa to speculate that “domestic abolitionists did not create purely imaginative tales with abolitionist children protagonists; instead they constructed them from their cultural moment” (108).<sup>161</sup> For instance, DeRosa historicizes the famous child of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* within the context of the juvenile abolitionist movement, proposing that “women authors perhaps replicated in fiction the reality they witnessed in juvenile anti-slavery societies” (11). In so doing DeRosa is able to “reconsider Stowe’s Little Eva as not only a ‘saintly child,’ but also as a young abolitionist grounded in political and gender politics” (11).

In an article in *The North Star*, we can see Douglass hold adults accountable to the political stances expressed by historical children. Several years prior to the publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, on September 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1848, Douglass reported that after enrolling his daughter Rosetta into the Seward Seminary, he discovered that “instead of receiving her into the school according to agreement—and as in honor the principal was bound to do, she was merely thrust into a room separate from all other scholars, and in this prison-like solitary confinement received the occasional visits of a teacher appointed to instruct her.”<sup>162</sup> When Douglass confronts the principal, Miss Tracy, she attempts to justify her decision with a rigged democratic experiment. Douglass describes how Miss Tracy puts the issue to a vote:

Before, however, carrying out my determination to withdraw the child from the Seminary, Miss Tracy, the principal, submitted the question of the child’s reception to each scholar individually, and I am sorry to say, in a manner well calculated to rouse their prejudices against her. She told them if there was one

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<sup>161</sup> De Rosa, Deborah. *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830-1865*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003.

<sup>162</sup> “H.G. Warner, Esq., (Editor of the Rochester Courier.) SIR:-“ *The North Star*. September 22, 1848. *Proquest: African American Newspapers*. <http://search.proquest.com.silk.library.umass.edu/news/>

objection to receiving her, she should be excluded; and said if any of them felt that she had a prejudice, and that that prejudice needed to be strengthened, that they might have time to whisper among themselves, in order to increase and strengthen that prejudice. To one young lady who voted to receive the child, she said, as if in astonishment; "did you mean to vote so? Are you accustomed to black persons?" The young lady stood silent; the question was so extraordinary, and withal so ambiguous, that she knew not what answer to make to it.

However, even under these conditions, the students vote unanimously in favor of Rosetta.

"Thanks to the uncorruptible virtue of childhood and youth," Douglass writes, "they welcomed my child among them, to share with them the blessings and privileges of the school; and when asked where she should sit if admitted, several young ladies shouted "By me, by me, by me!"

In advance of the Emancipation Proclamation even, this incident anticipates by several decades the debates of the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson case, which would uphold the constitutionality of legally required racial segregation, exercised in the public school system and beyond. The ruling, written by Justice Brown, argued that the Constitution could not "have been intended [to enforce] a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either" and continues to suggest that "if the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals . . . this end can neither be accomplished nor promoted by laws that conflict with the general sentiment of the community upon whom they are designed to operate."<sup>163</sup> By invoking "sentiment" and "natural affinities," the Court works to construct social boundaries as private, beyond the regulatory powers of law. But, of course, the Court privileges and writes into law the sentiments of those who do *not* want to "meet upon terms of social equality," leaving no public space for voluntary, mutual appreciation. As Saidiya Hartman describes, "in the

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<sup>163</sup> "Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896)." *Our Documents*. <http://www.ourdocuments.gov>.

post emancipation context, antipathy [ . . . ] determined the terms of relation allowed and prohibited by law. Ironically, the separate-but-equal doctrine could only be annulled by the development of mutuality and reciprocity.”<sup>164</sup>

Likewise, the democratic “law” at Rosetta’s school will only tolerate the sentiment of antipathy. The children’s welcoming cries of “by me! By me!” indeed sing with mutual appreciation and voluntary commingling, and so Douglass reasons, “after this manifestation of sentiment on the part of the scholars, one would have supposed that all opposition on the part of the principal would have ceased.” However, when Miss Tracy’s experiment in ceding decision-making power to the children produces only their unanimous resistance to segregation and collective embrace of their peer, she quickly deflects the power away from them again: “each scholar was then told by the principal, that the question must be submitted to their parents, and that if one parent objected, the child would not be received into the school.”

Indeed, one parent does object, and Douglass addresses him in the form of an open letter:

I say, to you exclusively belongs to the honor or infamy, of attempting to degrade an innocent child by excluding her from the benefit of attending a respectable school . . . [when] the young ladies of the school who saw the child, and had the best means of determining whether her presence in the schoolroom would be offensive or degrading to them, have decided in favor of admitting her, without a dissenting vote.

Douglass makes clear that these children do not simply intuit their position, but come to it through empirical, experiential knowledge of both their schooling and their peer Rosetta—they “had the best means of determining”—making even more ridiculous Warner’s single dissolution of the children’s unanimous will. But even though the

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<sup>164</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. (192).

children produce votes that don't actually count within the systems of power in place at the school, Douglass nonetheless measures Warner's vote against their unrecognized but meaningful majority. "You are still in a minority, and if I mistake not, you will be in a despised minority," he writes.

Douglass goes on to describe how the children respond when their will is overturned and Rosetta is expelled:

Three young ladies left the school immediately after the exclusion of my daughter, and I have heard of three more, who had intended to go, but who have now declined going to that institution, because it has given its sanction to that anti-democratic, and ungodly caste.

Note the subjects of this sentence; it is specifically the "young ladies" themselves, and not their parents, who are shown taking the action of leaving or declining to enter the school. The characterization of the school as "anti-democratic" refers directly to its act of segregation, but also extends Douglass's reportage of this incident as a failure in the exercise of democratic will. By framing this incident through the language of democracy, by which he labels Warner's tyrannical voice a "minority" and the children's unheard voices a "majority," Douglass authorizes these children as a people making a claim—even if that claim goes unrecognized by the system of rule.

The tyrannical silencing of the young people at Rosetta's school as they attempt to enact a more just world presents a challenge to the longstanding assumption that children's formal exclusion from political recognition is but a friendly form of future inclusion. From the Enlightenment forward, the pervasive naturalization of children's separateness from the adult world of politics has been premised on children's incapacity for rational thinking. As Holly Brewer has described, American democracy rose (in part)

under the influence of the Lockean theory of human development, which “denies the authority of the young to make decisions, even over their own lives, until they have attained full use of their reason.”<sup>165</sup> Unlike other forms of disenfranchisement, children’s denial of self-authority is not typically understood as oppressive, because of its temporary condition. Illustratively, Gillian Brown argues that in the Lockean consent theory underpinning American citizenship, “the eventuality of childhood’s end in adulthood aligns individual freedom with futurity, an expectation granted by birthright. Independent agency is postponed, but certain, *indeed certain by virtue of its postponement.*”<sup>166</sup>

However, Douglass early in his life understands the falsity of this premise. That is, from the radical unfreedom of his subject position, he knows that the freedom promised by childhood’s end is *not* a certain expectation—its guarantees are specious and conditional. As a child, Douglass lamented to his young white companions: “You will be free, you know, as soon as you are twenty-one, and can go where you like, but I am a slave for life” (124). Whatever individual agency is guaranteed via the “postponement” of childhood is guaranteed only to those children who also happen to be white boys. Elsewhere, Douglass recalls a moment when he allowed himself to be heartened by the myth of futurity and freedom’s inevitable alignment, thinking: “I am but a boy, and all

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<sup>165</sup> Brewer, Holly. *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2005. (4).

<sup>166</sup> Brown, Gillian. *The Consent of the Governed: the Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. (28, emphasis added). Brown “rereads” Locke, in order to “distinguish his thought” from “recurrent liberal and antiliberal misunderstandings of it” (8). Brown argues that contemporary critiques of liberalism’s detached individual might accurately describe the conditions of the late twentieth century, but are misapplied to Locke’s views. Brown works to “distinguish Lockean thought from modern American political liberalism and from the communitarian critique of that liberalism [in order to] clarify how the civic sense registered by republicanism stems from rather than repudiates Locke’s liberal vision” (9).

boys are bound to someone. It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free” (169). However, this thought is soon supplanted by the “ever-gnawing and soul-devouring one”: “I am a slave—a slave for life—a slave with no rational ground to hope for freedom” (169).

Beyond the racial and gendered conditionals that go unstated in the premise that “the eventuality of childhood’s end in adulthood aligns individual freedom with futurity,” this idea presents a temporal problem. To put it simply: the promise of future enfranchisement does little to address the conditions of the present. Brown’s argument tries to authorize subjectivity in the strange temporal stage of future retrospection—in relation to an imagined future enfranchisement. Rather than acknowledging children’s present disenfranchisement, Brown’s argument works to bend Lockean consent theory to include children “tacitly” and via “postponement”—locating political value in the very deferral of their enfranchisement.<sup>167</sup> In this formulation, what is more important than the eventuality of individual agency is the temporal interval that is opened in the postponement of that eventuality. Brown explains:

Put another way, agency is imaginative, outstripping and supplementing the present [ . . . ] In the provisionality of childhood, then, Locke finds a paradigm of freedom, which he defines as the suspended state before the determination and implementation of an act

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<sup>167</sup> In a review of the book, Brewer argues that Brown makes an inaccurate reading of Locke. Brewer writes: “yet Brown contends that Locke through children should and did consent, even to those in authority, such as parents. She supports her position with one passage on the “tacit” consent of children during their minority. But for Locke, tacit consent was the opposite of the reasoned consent that should underpin legitimate government [ . . . ] Locke and Thomas Paine only justified the independence of the adult child: for Paine, the boy who is grown to be a man can disagree with his mother (Britain) or father (the king.) [ . . . ] When she tries to discuss the status of women in comparison to that of children, her failure to acknowledge Locke’s arguments against children’s actual consenting leads to a torturous final section . . . (237). “Review: The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture by Gillian Brown.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Third Series. 60.1: (January 2003): 235-238.

[ . . . ] Liberty resides in mental suspension because this state affords us the opportunity to ponder and determine our actions [ . . . ] this injunction to reflection and projection, to consider what might follow from what we are going to do, also underscores a *temporal distance between agency and actions*. In this interval, Locke imagines the self as ratifying its determinations” [29, emphasis added]

However, Douglass’s life and work make clear the limits of democratic agency so-conceived. For Douglass this “postponement” or “temporal distance” does not necessarily enable but can rather frustrate democratic self-making and action; as a black person living in the antebellum U.S., he understands firsthand that not all people have the luxury of an interval between agency and action. That is, collective recognition of his human agency *does not precede* his action; to have his human agency publicly legitimated, he must take the action of claiming it.

This necessity is most dramatically apparent in Douglass’s Fourth of July Speech, which is *not* a deliberation in the interval between selfhood and action, but rather is itself an act of self-making.<sup>168</sup> In this speech, delivered on July 5<sup>th</sup> of 1852, Douglass famously performs his own exclusion from the American collective that he addresses, using the second-person “you”—“your nation,” “your fathers,” your independence”—to foreground his formal alienation from the holiday and the political freedoms it represents, while simultaneously working to call into being a new reality. This speech emblemizes what Jason Frank names a “constituent moment”—a moment that “enacts felicitous claims to speak in the people’s name, even though those claims explicitly break from the authorized procedures or norms.”<sup>169</sup> Where Brown’s Lockean formulation privileges the

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<sup>168</sup> Douglass, Frederick. “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro.” *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Pre-Civil War Decade*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: International Publishers, 1950. (192).

<sup>169</sup> Frank, Jason. *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. (210).



suspended state in which to “ponder and determine our actions,” Douglass reveals the need to disrupt that suspension in order to enact both personhood and a new collective “people” in the now.

For Douglass, on the occasion of this holiday that commemorates the national past and celebrates fantasies of the future, what matters most is the “ever-living now.”

He explains:

My business, if I have any here to-day, is with the present. The accepted time with God and His cause is the ever-living now.

Trust no future, however pleasant,  
Let the dead past bury its dead;  
Act, act in the living present,  
Heart within, and God overhead.

We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is the time, the important time.

Douglass locates himself in what Nick Bromell describes as “the temporal frame of democratic action: this moment, this now.”<sup>170</sup> And Douglass’s emphasis on the “now” is intrinsically connected to his rhetorical approach. Pointedly, he states his refusal to postpone or suspend or take any more time arguing the wrongness of slavery:

Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is wrong? *No! I will not. I have better employment for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.*”

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<sup>170</sup> Bromell, Nick. *The Time is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. (141).

For Douglass, slavery's injustice is so eminently clear—its truth already palpably in the now—that he need not spend more of his time arguing it.<sup>171</sup> In this way, this speech connects back to Douglass's treatment of childhood: just as it does not make sense to continue spending time arguing against slavery in the hopes of a collective arrival at a future when that argument will be legitimated by consensus, nor does it make sense to defer children's political insight into the future when it might be legitimated by their legal adulthood. To "trust no future," perhaps, is not only to reject the telos of a necessarily better future, but to insist on the actionability of those democratic truths that are already in the living present, even (or perhaps especially) when spoken by voices presently excluded from the demos.

#### *Implications for Deliberative Democracy*

Read together, Douglass's Fourth of July speech and representations of children assume the political validity of intuitive, undeliberated truths, and insist on the politics of "now," and in these ways implicitly challenge the limits of deliberative democracy as a mode that privileges "rational" voices and that requires time. Indeed, we can read Douglass's refusal to spend any more time explaining the injustice of slavery as his refusal to participate in deliberative politics. As Kimberley Smith has put it: "if democratic politics is ideally the realm of reasoned argument, as many [deliberative] theorists would have us believe, then Frederick Douglass's famous rejection of argument

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<sup>171</sup> Elaborating his refusal to argue, Douglass poses a series of rhetorical questions: "Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to understand? How should I look today in the presence of Americans, dividing and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to freedom, speaking of it relatively and positively, negatively and affirmatively? To do so would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding. There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven who does not know that slavery is wrong for him."

sounds like a rejection of politics itself” (1). Of course, Douglass does not reject politics itself, but he does challenge the equation of politics with deliberation.

By way of the briefest introduction, deliberative democracy suggests that the essence of democracy is in authentic deliberation, in which freely and equally-positioned people can resolve conflict and make decisions through the rational deliberative procedure. As opposed to the aggregative and reductively numerical form of decision-making that is voting, authentic deliberation has the capacity to consider a heterogeneity of voices, to engage a broad scope of potential solutions, and to empower citizen understanding of and involvement in political decision-making. And by many accounts, deliberation has become “the standard for the accomplishment of democracy” and “what democratic theorists aim for.”<sup>172</sup>

Of course, as deliberative democracy has come to dominate political theory discourse, it has engendered critiques. A prevailing criticism is that because deliberative democracy privileges rational argument, it perpetuates the empowerment of the dominant groups who have mastered that particular mode of communication and made it the signal of authorized politics. Lynn Sanders for instance, writes, “taking deliberation as a signal of democratic practice paradoxically works undemocratically, discrediting on seemingly democratic grounds the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative.”<sup>173</sup> Iris Marion Young, likewise, explains that deliberative democracy’s “tendency to restrict democratic discussion to argument carries implicit cultural biases that can lead to exclusions in

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<sup>172</sup> Sanders, Lynn. “Against Deliberation.” *Political Theory*. 25. (June 1997) 347-376. (347).

<sup>173</sup> Sanders, Lynn. “Against Deliberation.” *Political Theory*. 25. (June 1997) 347-376.

practice.”<sup>174</sup> Similarly, Kimberley Smith describes how the predominance of reason can obscure other potential forms of democratic participation, including “passion, interest, sympathy, or violence.”<sup>175</sup>

In response to this body of criticism, advocates of deliberation describe its potential for flexibility. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for instance, would likely describe Douglass’s rejection of argument as consonant with deliberative democracy’s capacity to temporarily withhold its requirements, in order to create new and better conditions for deliberation.<sup>176</sup>

These concessions seem to make room within deliberative models to recognize non-rational claims as politics. However, as Jason Frank demonstrates, these concessions authorize non-deliberative politics only retrospectively. For instance, within a more expansive definition of deliberative democracy, John Rawls is able to argue that when Douglass and likeminded abolitionists rejected deliberation, they “did not go against the ideal of public reason; or rather, they did not provided they thought, or on reflection would have thought (as they certainly could have thought) that the comprehensive reasons they appealed to were required to give sufficient strength to the political conception to be subsequently realized.”<sup>177</sup> Essentially, Rawls is suggesting, from a conceptual rather than historical perspective, Douglass’s abolitionist claims pass the heuristic test of reasonableness. And as Frank points out, “the problem with these

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<sup>174</sup> Young, Iris Marion. “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy.” *Democracy and Difference*. Ed. Seyla Benhabib. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. (122).

<sup>175</sup> Smith, Kimberley. *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason and Romance in Antebellum Politics*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1999. (1-2).

<sup>176</sup> Gutmann and Thompson write that deliberative democracy “consistently suspends the requirements for deliberation” in the cases when certain issues “cannot even reach the political agenda unless some citizens are willing to act with passion, making statements and declarations rather than developing arguments and responses” (4). in *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. (4).

<sup>177</sup> Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. (251).

eminently reasonable arguments is that they confidently presume the possibility of easily assessing ‘deliberative ends’ or ‘proper political reason’ in advance of the claims themselves” (226). Frank continues:

Viewed historically, the theoretical confidence of contemporary political liberals seems misplaced [. . .] the conceptual confidence that these writers evince in a liberal political culture’s ability to distinguish the temporarily unreasonable (but justified) from the simply unreasonable (and therefore illegitimate) depends on the ability to identify a kernel of justice, a “trace of reasonableness” within these claims. On this basis, Rawls can argue that abolitionists [like Douglass] *could* have argued according to protocols of public reason, and that given the opportunities for proper reflection they *would* have argued in this way. But the confident identification of such claims’ justice tends to be retrospective” (226).

In retrospect, Douglass’s claims appear eminently reasonable, given history happened to legislate in alignment with Douglass’s position. However, as Bonnie Honig reminds, the abolition of juridicial slavery is “a contingent historical achievement that could have gone otherwise.”<sup>178</sup> Because the retrospective authorizes non-reasonable claims not on their own merits but in relation to a contingent outcome, it “does very little,” Frank argues, “to support emerging political struggles” (226).

I’ve spent so long with Frank’s critique here because it points to the problem of theoretical approaches to democracy that cannot recognize non-deliberative claims in the present moment of their making, and in this way resonates with the problem I am trying to identify in Gillian Brown’s (representative) treatment of childhood.<sup>179</sup> Using childhood’s condition of temporary political exclusion in order to imagine “suspension” and “time to ponder and determine” as the most essential forms of democratic practice can obscure the ways in which those people who are unauthorized as rational agents or

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<sup>178</sup> Honig, Bonnie. “Dead Rights, Live Futures.” *Political Theory* 29.6 (2001) (797).

<sup>179</sup> By “representative,” I mean to suggest that I am not interested in quibbling with the particularities of Brown’s argument per se, but with the prevailing habits of thought about children which Brown’s argument represents.

who make claims in languages other than rational deliberation go unrecognized. For children, who are understood as categorically non-rational, their claims simply cannot be heard within present, ongoing political debate.

Whether or not children's exclusion from politics is a problem that should be addressed at the level of policy via radical rethinking of their participatory roles, are questions beyond the scope of this study.<sup>180</sup> Rather, my concern here is the implications of how, as scholars looking back into history, we read documentations of children's voices. When Douglass describes children making abolitionist and anti-segregationist claims, we are well-aware that these voices are deeply mediated by his narrative, and might even be rhetorical inventions. And we can compellingly describe these children as literary devices designed to invoke higher law principles that support his arguments. However, in doing so, we forfeit opportunity to hear these claims as belonging to the rationality and subjectivity of their speakers. Children's voices tend to register as explicitly political only when historical conditions happen to retrospectively "prove" the reasonableness of their claims, at which point we code these claims as higher law or some kind of preternatural moral intuition; ironically, then, children's claims appear utterly ahistorical precisely when they align with historically-contingent consensuses.

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<sup>180</sup> For an example of a project that thinks challenges the current status of children's formal disenfranchisement, see Andrew Rehfeld's "The Child as Democratic Citizen," in *Annals*. 663. January 2011. (141-166). Rehfeld argues that the UNCRC overemphasizes welfare for children as an inherently at-risk and dependent population, calling for the protections of more vulnerable children but at the expense of political rights of children and adolescents as a whole. Rehfeld argues for more creative, developmentally-appropriate models for children's participation in democratic politics; the "sudden possession" model of enfranchisement at age 18 is at odds with the continuous and developmental nature of what Rehfeld calls "political maturity"—the capacity for reason, consent, and self-aware cognition necessary for responsible political participation. Rehfeld's particular suggestions—fractional voting, national electoral constituencies, and political spending accounts—offer examples of innovative participatory institutions which could afford children opportunities to practice and cultivate political maturity, and demonstrate the arbitrariness of the currently operating model of children's full exclusion until their eighteenth birthday.

Instead, we might read the assertions made through and by the children in Douglass's writing as claims intended to interrupt their political present. When Douglass aligns himself with the boys who told him "they did not believe God ever made anyone to be a slave" and with the girls who cried welcomingly "by me, by me!" he shares with these subjects the condition of communal non-recognition of the rational agency required for them to count as participants in democratic procedure. Nonetheless, they speak alternative and coherent visions of the world as it should be. To read these children's claims as ruptures in the present is to be consistent with Douglass's insistence on "the ever-living now," "the important time." That is, rather than permitting the imaginative dislocation of children's anti-slavery ideals onto the ever-receding horizon upon which higher law might one day be realized, or into the future when they become adults and authorized to deliberate, Douglass's writing submits the palpable, undeliberated, abolitionism and anti-segregationism of these children into the actionable now.

### *The Literal and the Figural*

In a sense, a premise of the first part of this chapter has been to take "literally" the children that appear in Douglass's writings, treating them as political actors rather than as rhetorical objects. In so doing, I do not mean to ignore the reality that children in these texts can only ever be deeply mediated representations. Nor do I mean to treat Douglass's texts as mere historical records that offer mediated but otherwise evidential documentation of children. Rather, I would suggest that Douglass's writing invites readers to consider the ways that representing subjectivities—of children or otherwise—necessarily means navigating between the constructed and the material. And having

lived both under the institutionalized status of a “thing” and within the reality of his human subjectivity, Douglass is ontologically predisposed to be particularly sensitive to the dynamic exchange between the figural and the literal. In this section, we will see, Douglass’s treatment of childhood in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is tuned to relationship between the child as object and person, and its implications for articulating the experiences of enslavement and freedom.

Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was, until the last few decades, the privileged autobiographical text in the series of three that Douglass would pen across his lifetime. William Andrews has observed in his review of 20<sup>th</sup> century critical responses to the second 1855 text that, for many critics, “next to the *Narrative*’s pristine leanness of phrase and tone of ‘righteous anger,’ *My Bondage and My Freedom* can only be rated a tired and ‘flabby’ sequel that supplements the original text with ‘verbiage’ and only ‘stretches out’ and ‘dilutes.’”<sup>181</sup> More recently, however, *My Bondage and My Freedom* has earned recognition in its own right, particularly as a product of Douglass’s maturing intellectual mind via a decade’s worth of lecturing, traveling, publishing, and editing his own newspaper. The “larger, roomier, more detailed” text goes beyond the *Narrative*’s ending to document more of Douglass’s life in freedom but, as Andrews notes, “what is perhaps more remarkable [...] is the second autobiography’s expansion in scope and depth of Douglass’s memories of slavery” (217). This extended attention to his memories of slavery also means a much expanded description of his childhood.

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<sup>181</sup> Andrews, Williams. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-185*. Champagne, Il: University of Illinois Press, 1988. (267).



Douglass, as we shall see, names his early childhood “genuine boyhood”—characterized as a period of feral freedom. “Thus, freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy,” Douglass writes (44). This conspicuously counterintuitive statement appears early in the text, as he gives an introductory portrait of “the slave-boy” before moving into the details of his boyhood years. The extended passage describing the “genuine” slave-boy offers an ambiguous evaluation of enslaved childhood, worth quoting at length here:

If cold and hunger do not pierce the tender frame, the first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. The slave-boy escapes many troubles which befall and vex his white brother. [. . .] He is never expected to act like a nice little gentleman, for he is only a rude little slave. Thus, freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests; enacting, by turns, all the strange antics and freaks of horses, dogs, pigs, and barn-door fowls, without in any manner compromising his dignity, or incurring reproach of any sort. He literally runs wild; has no pretty little verses to learn in the nursery; no nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins, to show how smart he is; and, if he can only manage to keep out of the way of the heavy feet and fists of the older slave boys, he may trot on, in his joyous and roguish tricks, as happy as any little heathen under the palm trees of Africa. [. . .] He always sleeps in airy apartments; he seldom has to take powders, or to be paid to swallow pretty little sugar-coated pills, to cleanse his blood, or to quicken his appetite. He eats no candies; gets no lumps of loaf sugar; always relishes his food; cries but little, for nobody cares for his crying; learns to esteem his bruises but slight, because others so esteem them. In a word, he is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back. And such a boy, so far as I can now remember, was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating. (44-45)

To take at face-value Douglass' provocative declaration that “in a word,” the slave-boy is “joyous, uproarious, and happy,” is to miss the conflictedness at the heart of this portrait. One critic, for example, quotes selectively from this passage in order to neatly conclude, “all in all, however, the distress of being a young slave did not outweigh

its pleasure” (32).<sup>182</sup> Even Andrews, whose seminal work on Douglass otherwise consistently attends to its depth, does not address Douglass’ imbedded critique of enslaved childhood when he extracts from this paragraph only the rosy clauses: “in 1855, [Douglass’ childhood home] is described as a place of ‘the veriest freedom’ and ‘sweet content’” (219). To be sure, the childhood that Douglass gives us in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is decidedly different from the unrelentingly painful childhood he gives us in *The Narrative of the Life*; there seems to be real joy contained in this second and more ample rendering of his youth—in his recollections of his grandmother, the contours of her cabin, the mysteries of the Maryland landscape, and the expanses of his imaginative play. However, an audible note of irony pierces this introductory passage. Douglass bitingly writes the slave-boy’s wants into freedoms and endurance into joyfulness, and in so doing he lampoons the proslavery rhetoric that figured slaves as children in the care of paternalistic masters.<sup>183</sup> The slave-boy is free to jump into the river, for instance, because he lacks clothing, and he “cries little” because “nobody cares for his crying.” How are we to make sense of this seemingly self-contradicting representation?

Douglass’ paradoxically enslaved-yet-feral boyhood is intimately related to the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of the wild, white boy as the ideal of freedom and authenticity. Anthony Rotundo has explained that white middle-class boys were commonly described as “wild,” “careless,” “primitive savages,” and “full of animal

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<sup>182</sup> Scott Williamson writes: “Douglass recalled that he was ‘never expected to act like a little gentleman.’ ‘Freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests.’ Douglass availed himself of the privilege, and dealt with the accompanying distress as ‘water on a duck’s back’” (32). In *The Narrative Life: The Moral and Religious Thought of Frederick Douglass*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002.

<sup>183</sup> Douglass lectures on this particular rhetorical injustice in 1850: “the relation of master and slave has been called patriarchal, and only second in benignity and tenderness to that of the parent and child.” “A Lecture on Slavery, No 2, at Rochester” *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Pre-Civil War Decade*. Ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: International Publishers, 1950. (144).

spirits.”<sup>184</sup> Kenneth Kidd goes further to suggest that, “by the 1860s, the boy-savage association, underwritten by popular accounts of recapitulation was axiomatic in American letters.”<sup>185</sup> In 1853 Mrs. Manners lamented: “why is it that there must be a period in the lives of boys when they should be spoken of as ‘disagreeable cubs?’”<sup>186</sup> Mrs. Manners’ clucks notwithstanding, this seeming wildness was a cherished attribute of middle-class boyhood, as it signaled the retention of a properly masculine constitution despite the trend toward increasingly domesticated childhoods. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these ideas would fully crystallize in G. Stanley Hall’s explicit encouragement that American boys be raised as “savages” as early inoculation against the weakness, nervousness and diminished manliness caused by “excessive civilization.”<sup>187</sup> But even much earlier, the American wild boy had begun to make his sportive way into the cultural imagination. In 1841, for instance, Emerson penned his iconic “independent, irresponsible” boy as the embodiment of self-reliance (127). And historian Stephen Mintz reports the anecdote of a misbehaving child whose father “smil[ed] at the boy’s resolute disobedience” and in so doing “summed up the antebellum attitude toward boyhood;” that is, the exemplary boy is “adventurous, resourceful and self-reliant.”<sup>188</sup>

Racist tropes used to describe and justify black slavery intertwined with this discourse surrounding “wild” boys. Necessarily, these ideas about white masculinity

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<sup>184</sup> Rotundo, Anthony. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. (31).

<sup>185</sup> Kidd, Kenneth. *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. (16).

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Rotundo, 31.

<sup>187</sup> See discussion of G. Stanley Hall in Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. (78-79).

<sup>188</sup> Mintz, Steven. *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. (83).

were built on fantasies about blackness. African Americans were written out of the narrative of maturity and civilization—rendered always childlike and always uncivilized by their racial inferiority—yet, they were also written out of the logic of self-reliance; their permanent immaturity and savagery somehow did not afford them the same genuine selfhood and independence that the temporary versions of the same did for white boys. With unapologetic rhetorical inconsistency, the same set of signifiers was used to identify essential autonomy in one group, and to justify denying basic human autonomy to another. It is into the middle of this discourse that Douglass boldly introduces his “wild” and “genuine” slave boy.

An inconsequential slave-child, Douglass suggests, can enact “all the strange antics and freaks of horses, dogs, pigs, and barn-door fowls” and is “as happy as any little heathen under the palm trees of Africa,” a “sable boy” rolling “in the dust.” He is, in fact, a “genuine boy” (44-45). While ventriloquizing racist conceits, describing the black boy as animal and heathen, Douglass also subversively claims for the otherwise disempowered slave-child the masculinizing wildness of genuine boyhood. And in so doing, he cuts to the heart of the gender anxieties that prompted the sanctification of white boys’ wildness, by making a well-placed jab at the pampered “wild” white boys and the privileges they enjoy. While Douglass’s slave-boy does “whatever his boyish nature suggests,” the “petted white children” have “pretty little verses to learn in the nursery,” and “nice little speeches to make,” and must “swallow pretty little sugar-coated pills”—accentuating the effeminacy of these privileges (44-45). By describing himself as free from those “restraints” that “vex his white brother,” Douglass deftly appropriates for

himself, and for all “sable” boys, the antebellum ideal of American masculine self-reliance.

But if it is true that, as Robin Bernstein has recently argued, Douglass uses “romantic childhood to argue that black boys make better boys than their white brothers do,” we must also acknowledge (again) that this passage does not sound a single note but rather counters its own assertions about black boyhood (61). That is, while Douglass draws out the fantasy of romantic, wild boyhood to claim the black child as the ideal boy, he also returns the same metaphor to the particularized historical context of enslavement, prolonging it until it can no longer sustain its fictions. This lengthy passage exposes how those black boys who were truly “freed from all restraint” were so because they suffered neglect and were denied their right to be cared for as dependents, while white, economically secure boys who enjoyed the racial, economic, and political privileges bound up in the popular metaphor of boyhood “wildness” in fact lived quite *unwild* (that is: safe, comfortable, domestic, “sure of a dinner”) realities. The black child might make a better, more genuine “boy” than the white child, Douglass suggests, but what exactly is the meaning of this boyhood?

The metaphor of the “wild boy,” Douglass reminds, is not some fantastical whim of the imagination, but a misdirecting abstraction of real childhoods lived by black children. Douglass’s placement of the wild boy icon within the realities of enslaved childhood forces recognition of the literal meaning of the descriptors applied metaphorically, and falsely, to white boys. In this way, this passage resonates with the recurrence of the word “literally” in other 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American and native American narratives, such as Josiah Henson’s description of slaves “cheeks [. . . ] literally

caved in with starvation” (51), Austin Steward’s description of a woman whipped “until she was literally cut to pieces,” Harriet Jacobs’s description of the bloodhounds that “literally tore the flesh from [the slave’s] bones,” and William Apess’s insistence that “literally speaking, we were clothed with rags” (5). In addition to asserting the veracity that gave these texts their power within the antebellum reading public, these writers also remind us to not mistake their language for metaphor; to describe the lived realities of enslavement and racial persecution, these writers have only the same words that, for those in power and privilege, have no concrete attachments but offer loose and abstract expression. Later, Douglass will reveal that indeed “cold and hunger [did] pierce the tender frame” (44); he could “neither get a sufficiency of food nor of clothing,” he slept uncomfortably “in a little closet,” and that he felt degraded by the way he and the other children ate, “like so many pigs” (108-9). The feral boyhood imagined for white boys conceals the real wildness that is the neglect, deprivation, and invisibility suffered by black children.<sup>189</sup>

Yet as Douglass’s writing guides us to see the literal obscured by the figural, it does not simply privilege the literal. That is, it keeps both terms locked in dynamic struggle. At the same time that this text coerces the figural “genuine boyhood” of racist discourses to reveal the literal childhood it conceals, it also gestures to the figuration that is implicit in any purportedly “literal” language. “And such a boy, so far as I can now remember, was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating,” Douglass writes as he concludes the introductory passage of the slave-boy and transitions into the details of his

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<sup>189</sup> For a discussion of the cruelties of childhood in slavery, see Wilma King’s *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) or Barbara Bennett Woodhouses’s *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children’s Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

life (45). This series of distancers remind us that, however faithfully Douglass might narrate his own childhood experience, the boy on the page is a deeply mediated construction. And in this boy, we will see, Douglass finds a potent vehicle for challenging the political narrative embedded in the telos of the slave narrative genre.<sup>190</sup>

As is well known, at the time of writing *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass had parted with the Garrisonian abolitionists, in large part because he felt intellectually stymied by their expectations of his limited role in the movement. To Douglass' deep dismay, he found that the denial to African Americans of a narrative of personal human progression was not exclusively a phenomenon of enslavement. Even in the North as a lecturer for the abolitionist movement, and despite the movement's assertion that a black person requires "nothing but time and opportunity to attain to the highest point of human excellence," Douglass was in practice expected to remain a static representation of the nadir from which he escaped.<sup>191</sup> In *My Bondage*, he laments that despite his intellectual development, as he was "now reading and thinking" and had "new views" on the practice of slavery, the Garrisonians desired him to stay suspended in his past. In the oft-cited scene, Douglass reports: "during the first three or four months, my speeches were almost exclusively made up of narrations of my own personal experience as a slave. [ . . . ] 'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy.'" (269).

Devastatingly, Douglass recounts, his fellow abolitionists even recommended he maintain a "little of the plantation manner of speech" in order to authenticate himself as an ex-slave (269). The genre readily available to Douglass, the slave narrative, seems to

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<sup>190</sup> For a discussion of *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a "proto-critique" of the slave narrative genre, see Rachel Blumenthal's "Canonicity, Genre, and the Politics of Editing: How We Read Frederick Douglass." (*Callaloo* 36.1, Winter 2013, 178-190).

<sup>191</sup> Garrison, William Lloyd. "Preface" *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. Project Gutenberg. [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

only exacerbate this problem, as its fixation on the attainment of “freedom” tends to veil the complexity of the human experience on either side of the climatic escape. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, then, emerges from this moment in which Douglass is reckoning with how to understand the meaning of “freedom” in a “free” but deeply racist society, and how to assert and communicate the continuing growth of his intellectual power in a culture that refuses to fully recognize it.

James M’Cune Smith’s introduction to Douglass’s text represents one of the dilemmas of representing the relationship between bondage and freedom, as he describes Douglass as a “wild” boy who grows up into the “Representative American man” (23, 29):<sup>192</sup>

He is a Representative American man—a type of his countrymen. Naturalists tell us that a full grown man is a resultant or representative of all animated nature on this globe; beginning with the early embryo state, then representing the lowest forms of organic life, and passing through every subordinate grade or type, until he reaches the last and highest—manhood. In like manner, and to the fullest extent, has Frederick Douglass passed through every gradation of rank comprised in one national make-up, and bears upon his person and upon his soul everything that is American. (29-30)

Here M’Cune Smith intercedes directly in the popular recapitulation narrative that imagined individual human development mirroring the anthropological development of the human race, and that described black people as stalled in some early developmental stage. Like Douglass’s treatment of “wild boyhood,” M’Cune Smith holds this discourse accountable for its own logic; if Douglass suffered a period of wild savagery and social inferiority and subjugation, it was in fact a step in his achievement of fully empowered

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<sup>192</sup> As numerous critics have noted, Douglass’s choice to have M’Cune Smith write this preface was in itself a radical act of racial self-authorization, forgoing the traditionally white-authored preface that gave a stamp of respectability and approval to the black-authored text.



American manliness. Because it incorporates black subjects' most demeaning, dehumanizing experiences of slavery into the story of their redemption of their own lives, this sort of rhetoric effectively interrupts the dominant discourses that worked to exclude black men from masculine self-actualization and national belonging. But at the same time, this rhetorical move also creates an implicit teleology by which slavery authorizes the progression into full self-realization. For instance, contained within M'Cune Smith's assertion that, "for [Douglass'] special mission, his plantation education was better than any he could have acquired in any lettered school," is an inverted logic by which his childhood in slavery becomes the preparatory, authorizing condition for his self-realization as an advocate for freedom, when indeed, this "special mission" need not exist if black children weren't subject to "plantation education" in the first place (23). This problem—the need to afford the black subject social mobility and a narrative of individual progress without naturalizing a reductive line from bondage to freedom—expresses itself more broadly in Douglass' struggles navigating the particular kinds of oppression enacted by both the abolitionist movement and the slave narrative genre itself.

However, the figuration of his childhood allows Douglass both to insist on the progressive narrative of his own advancement and to disrupt the teleological narrative of the move from "bondage" to "freedom." As the writer of his own life, Douglass circles back; he returns to his childhood in slavery to write it again, and to write it more ambiguously. His first narrative followed the sequence: first oppression, then freedom. His second narrative responds to his better understanding of—and his disillusionment with—the "freedom" he had achieved.<sup>193</sup> Just as the title of this second text conjoins

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<sup>193</sup> William Andrews describes how the widespread experience of disillusionment for black people arriving into a "freedom" burdened with the oppressions of racism affected black writers: "the deepening sense of

“bondage” and “freedom,” Douglass’ rendering of his childhood demonstrates how these seemingly mutually exclusive experiences can be in fact complicatedly coexistent.

When describing his childhood home, for example, Douglass indulges in the sensual details of the space, enchanting its mundane objects: “here too, right at the side of the hut, stood the old well, with its stately and skyward-pointing beam, so aptly placed between the limbs of what had once been a tree, and so nicely balanced that I could move it up and down with only one hand, and could get a drink of water “without calling for help” (47). There is an organic, uncomplicated autonomy contained in this remembered act of retrieving a drink of water , and with this single detail, Douglass paradoxically but without irony marks his childhood in slavery as a time of authentic self-reliance. He asks wistfully, “where else in the world could such a well be found, and where could another home be met with?” using the figure of geographic singularity to describe what is really a matter of temporality—what Douglass truly longs for is this childhood moment of autonomy rooted in familial security (47). He seems to both mourn and recover that which he lost to slavery—his original sense of freedom and home—by carving out within his too-often painful boyhood years these poignant spaces of respite. By writing childhood places to imaginatively return to, Douglass disrupts the generic oppression-to-freedom line, creating a way of circling back in the otherwise end-driven narrative, to discover glimpses of truest freedom and comfort even amongst his enslavement. “Living here,” he writes, “with my dear old grandmother and grandfather, it was a long time before I knew myself to be a slave. I knew many things before I knew that” (42).

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frustration and injustice expressed by Afro-Americans in the 1850s, it is not surprising to discover black autobiographers increasingly depicting their fugitive careers as a lingering limbo of dreams deferred, not as a linear quest leading to a new world. Ironic reversals become a basic motif of the liminal autobiographer.” (*To Tell a Free Story*, 179).

This dialectical understanding of bondage and freedom reverberates with the 1855 text's doubled imperative to describe slavery as fully dehumanizing while also licensing the full humanity of people living within slavery.<sup>194</sup> The text's efforts toward these conflicting aims become particularly vivid in its revised rendering of Douglass's childhood introduction to slavery, we will see. In the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass marks his abrupt transition from childhood innocence to the reality of slavery, with the violent scene in which he witnesses his master beat his Aunt Hester. He describes it this way:

I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass.<sup>195</sup>

The act of violence is initiative for Douglass, and is immediate with its effect. Douglass emphasizes the first-ness of this event—the “first” beating he witnesses and the “first” of many to come. “It was all new to me,” he writes, “I had never seen anything like it before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she was put to raise the children of the younger women. I had therefore been, until now, out of the way of the blood scenes that often occurred on the plantation.”<sup>196</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass relocates this initiative moment into an earlier, less explicitly violent scene, when he is taken to Colonel Lloyd's plantation and separated

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194 Douglass's text implicitly contests the problem which Ann duCille identifies in the historiography of slavery, in which scholarship can be roughly divided into the schools of “ruination” and “resistance”—neither of which adequately describe slavery's effects on African American people. That is, to describe only the victimization of the enslaved is to reduce their humanity and replicate the oppressor's power to define their lives, but to describe only the resistance of the enslaved is to diminish slavery's atrocities and create grounds for apologist narratives. (“Marriage, Family, and Other “Peculiar Institutions” in African-American Literary History.” *American Literary History* 21.3, 2009. 604-617).

<sup>195</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. *Project Gutenberg*. [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)

<sup>196</sup> *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Chapter 1.

from his grandmother. Just as with the master's beating of Aunt Hester, Douglass has a vivid memory of the day he was removed from his childhood home: "child as I was, I remember as well as if it were yesterday" (48). And like the incident in the *Narrative*, which acts as "the entrance to the hell of slavery," Douglass defines this incident as "in fact, my first introductions to the realities of slavery" (50). But where the beating of Aunt Hester is extraordinary because it startles Douglass *out* of his childhood, the arrival at Colonel Lloyd's plantation is remarkable for its confrontation *with* childhood. Upon arriving at the plantation, Douglass first finds himself "in the midst of a group of children of many colors; black, brown, copper colored, and nearly white. I had not seen so many children before" (49).<sup>197</sup> Douglass describes himself overwhelmed by their numbers.

Where in the *Narrative* it was violence that he had "never seen" before, here it is

*children:*

"I had not seen so many children before . . . as a new comer, I was an object of special interest, and, after laughing and yelling around me, and playing all sorts of wild tricks, they (the children) asked me to go out and play with them." (49)

Douglass recalls wanting to play but being too fearful until his grandmother insisted:

"grandmamma told me to go and play with the little children. 'They are kin to you,' said she, 'go and play with them'" (49). Obedient, Douglass "went back to the part of the

house to play with them and the other children," but he reports:

"Play, however, I did not, but stood with my back against the wall, witnessing the playing of the others."

Again this scene hearkens to the *Narrative*'s "blood scene," as Douglass performs an act of witnessing—this time witness not to physical violence, but to the play of other

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<sup>197</sup> With this scene of the multicolored crowd, Douglass also makes gestures toward the fathering of slave children by slave owners, and to the arbitrariness of the racial markers.

children. Afraid of losing his grandmother, and of all which that bodes, Douglass is positioned literally and metaphorically outside of the ludic space of the other children, with his “back against the wall.” Caroline Levander has described how, when watching the master beating Aunt Hester, deaf to her pleas, “Douglass’s child comes into consciousness [of] the impotence of sentimental language to reshape power relations between differently raced and gendered bodies, because ‘no words, no tears, no prayers’ redirect slavery’s machinery” (33).<sup>198</sup> In this scene from *My Bondage and My Freedom* that I’m treating as a corollary to the scene in the *Narrative*, Douglass also represents the failure of sentiment. Mimicking sentimental forms as he implores understanding from his “dear reader,” Douglass describes how slavery precludes the possibility for sympathy: “Think it not strange dear reader, that so little sympathy of feeling existed between us. The conditions of brotherly and sisterly feeling were wanting—we had never nestled and played together” (50). But while these scenes share a critique of the sentimental, *My Bondage and My Freedom* interestingly reconfigures the forces of agency.

In the 1845 scene, Douglass’s child is initiated as a witness to the spectacle of a slave master’s exertion of power over the helpless body of a slave, but in the 1855 scene the initiation is something less overt, and it seems to occur within the community of children. Indeed, it is a fellow enslaved child who delivers the blow in this moment: “At last, while standing there, one of the children, who had been in the kitchen, ran up to me, in a sort of roguish glee, exclaiming: ‘Fed, Fed! Grandmammy gone! Grandmammy gone!’” (50). What is perhaps most poignant about this scene is not that slavery has denied these children their childhoods, but rather, that childhood continues on even under

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<sup>198</sup> Levander, Caroline. “Frederick Douglass’ Blood-Stained Gate,” *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol 34, Fall 2005: 32-40.

such circumstances. Douglass notes both the children's capitulation to slavery (the oppressiveness of their unwitting playfulness, the roguish glee with which the boy acts as proxy for the absent master's bidding) and the comforts they offer against it, as they "came around [him] and said 'don't cry,' and gave [him] peaches and pears" (50).

The transposition of the initiative moment from the explicitly rendered enactment of slavery's violence via whip-on-flesh to this haunting but subtler scene of communal reception bears upon the larger concerns of the 1855 text. The 1845 scene powerfully represents slavery's dehumanizing conditions through its sudden dissolution of childhood, but in so doing it occludes the subjectivity of the child who witnessed the scene, and divides time into a "before" and "after." By contrast, the children in the 1855 scene are fully embedded in slavery, with subjectivities that exist continuously in the conditions of that enslavement. When we imagine childhood dissolved by witnessing slavery's violence, it is the cherished but socially-contingent *idea* of childhood as a time of innocence, safety, and comfort that might suddenly vanish. But of course the subjectivity of young people does not cleave or dissolve, but must persist through. Douglass's child, witness to the ambiguously-rendered playing of other children, calls us to a more complex recognition of the enslaved child as a human subject, and then further to the challenges of representing humanity within slavery without reducing subjects to rhetorical objects that might best serve political narratives, but at the cost of the rich texture of actual lives.

## CODA

### REFLECTIONS ON THE CRITICAL MOMENT, METHODOLOGY, AND THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF THE CHILD

A simple way to describe this project is as guided by the question: how can thinking about childhood and youth prompt us to think about democracy?<sup>199</sup> As the preceding chapters pursued this question through the literary works of four antebellum U.S. thinkers, the figure of the child has moved in and out of focus, and through several discursive frames. Throughout, I have suggested that these antebellum writers found in the child a productive site for exploring theoretical dilemmas of democracy. In Sedgwick and Emerson's writings, we have seen how the child provides a way to investigate and express the relationship between the historical contingency of unfolding democratic politics, and the "eternal" or atemporal ideals which hold an important cultural function in the collective imagination. And in Melville and Douglass's writings, we have seen how representations of childhood—from its most figurative instances in the rhetoric of "youth" to its most literal instances in the documentation of young people—work to disrupt the telos of political narrative-making in order to locate democratic potential in the "now."

These chapters shift between historical and conceptual emphases. While grounded in specific material contexts—the Nullification Crisis, abolitionism, Manifest Destiny, and so forth—the arguments that I develop out of these literary texts also emphasize a

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<sup>199</sup> In a project of a different scope and kind than this one, this question might look like: how do children think about and participate in democracy? Or, how can democracy better serve the needs and interests of children? These are important questions, and I suspect that the more conceptual work I am doing here will ultimately lead my future projects to more direct contact with issues of historical agency and contemporary policy.

series of theoretical dilemmas, without assigning those dilemmas to a particular moment in history. In so doing, I am conscious of the ways that this project does not fully conform to the deeply historicist methodology that has come to define literary critical scholarship. This methodological approach reflects my sense that the field is starting to re-evaluate the relationship between literary study and historicism. While for good reason literary critical study should not and likely will not return to the willful ahistoricism of the New Critics, it might look for supplements to strictly historicist practices. *American Literary History* took precisely this topic as its theme for its recent anniversary issue; in the preface, Gordon Hutner writes: “we can wonder whether the critique born of historical consciousness has come to seem insufficient to meet the present burdens facing academic study.”<sup>200</sup> The Jamesonian injunction to “Always historicize!” Hutner suggests, “no longer seems so compelling a rationale.” As the field begins to reconsider its longstanding methodological premise, with some critics experiencing what Hutner names a “felt need for a replacement,” I find myself writing into a transformative moment that hasn’t yet identified its direction. Without any claims to have found a “replacement” I have experimented with supplementary modes.

In part, I have shifted from strictly historicist readings because they are so closely bound with the practice of ideological critique—also under reconsideration in some critical circles. The past three or four decades of scholarship have done profound work in deconstructing the ahistorical master narratives that had long dominated the field, dismantling the boundaries of the canon, exposing ideology, denaturalizing forms of power, and proliferating our understanding of identity politics. However, literary critical

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<sup>200</sup> Hutner, Gordon. “Editor’s Note.” *American Literary History*. 25.4 (Winter 2013): 695-698.



practices have also codified into a somewhat predictable form, what Brook Thomas has named a “negative hermeneutic of ‘unmasking,’” Susan Gillman has called “a project of expose,” and Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best have called “symptomatic reading.”<sup>201</sup> Nick Bromell has recently described it this way: “for thirty or more years now, these fields have been motivated mainly by an obligation to critique the world as it is, to question authority, to demystify ideology” (150). For literary and cultural scholars like these—and for some in other fields as well—the animating power of ideological critique might be waning. Bruno Latour, for instance, has questioned why critique has “run out of steam.”<sup>202</sup> He asks: “we are still able to go through the motions of a critical avant-garde, but is not the spirit gone?” (226).

Without minimizing the significance of ideological critique and my deep indebtedness to it, this project has developed in response to a curiosity: what can literary criticism look like, if it does not foreground disenchantment? Ultimately, I find myself seeking a form of political engagement in literary criticism, which supplements critique as an end in itself. To be sure, critique is not without implicit political claims; as Christopher Castiglia rightly notes, critique makes its claims through disavowal, suggesting its desires through that which it rejects.<sup>203</sup> And to be more explicit about our own values as critics is to risk normativity. While drawing upon political theory—which is disciplinarily more comfortable working with the normative—this project tries to avoid advancing its own normative arguments. Rather, it works to cultivate an attitude less

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<sup>201</sup> Thomas, Brook. *Civic Myths: A Law and Literature Approach to Citizenship*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.; Gillman, Susan. “The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?” *American Literary History*. 17.1 (2005).; Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus. “Surface Reading: an Introduction.” *Representations*. 108.1 (Fall 2009): 1- 21.

<sup>202</sup> Latour, Bruno. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004).

<sup>203</sup> Castiglia, Christopher. “Teaching, Hopefully.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*. 41.2. Summer 2011. (183).

interested in demystifying the ways the text is unaware of its own problematics, and more interested in finding the places where the text invites us into its dilemmas. Even as the antebellum literature examined here necessarily provides grounds for demythologizing U.S. democracy, given its embeddedness in the troubling ideologies of its historical moment, it also works to invigorate conversations about what democracy can and should be. At times, these texts explicitly critique their historical moment, and can be read for the ways they resist dominant systems of power, but I don't mean to suggest that this project seeks texts merely as acts of resistance—reactive to terms set by those in power. Instead, I mean to suggest that the texts I've selected also stage conceptual dilemmas by which they participate in the ongoing project of contesting, re-signifying and re-imagining democracy as a term which need not be restricted by its attachments to historically-contingent forms. As a creative act, literature can do this particularly well. What I'm working toward, then, is a methodology that opens texts to those moments in which democracy is not just an object to be described, but is in fact alive in the imaginative act of its description.

“We are all democrats now,” Wendy Brown has written, indicating the current status of the word “democracy” as an empty signifier.<sup>204</sup> Or, as Jodi Dean has described it, democracy has become but a “neoliberal fantasy.”<sup>205</sup> To be sure, the word “democracy” is applied to all sorts of political bodies, processes, and attitudes that betray its most vital premises. From democracy's first inception in the U.S., there has been a

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<sup>204</sup> Brown, Wendy. “We Are All Democrats Now...” *Theory & Event*. 13.2 (2010).

<sup>205</sup> Dean, Jodi. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Charlotte, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Dean suggests that the resurgence of the term “communism” is the only way to contest the capitalism that has subsumed democracy, while Brown takes the position that both communism and democracy are historically-sedimented terms that each have limitations in their capacity to contest the current state of politics; Brown favors the rehabilitation of democracy.

chasmal gap between the radical understanding of democracy as an emancipatory term and the compromised way it manifests in state-form, and each of the antebellum thinkers examined in this project in various ways interrogates the space of that gap. At the same time, as they write about and toward democracy, they also offer alternatives to the bleakest assessments. For Alain Badiou, for instance, democracy is but the expression of capitalism, with its ethos of “pure present” and transient desires taking form in figures of youthfulness: “the emblem of the modern world is democracy and youth is the emblem of the emblem, symbolizing as it does the absence of restraint on time” (14).<sup>206</sup> But in Douglass’s and Melville’s hands, the democratic temporality of “now” does not mean to obey the pleasure-seeker’s impulse of immediacy, but rather to inject democracy with urgency and actionability, un beholden to the regulating powers of past and future narratives. And where Badiou asserts there is “something essentially juvenile about the democratic ethos, something that feels like universal puerilization,” Sedgwick and Emerson might contest the idea that “juvility” is necessarily a bad thing for the democratic ethos, when it is also acts as a point of access to moral inspiration, and to the collective longing for truth.

It is not coincidence that this project is invested in both childhood and a more “hopeful” critical practice. The child’s profound capacity to articulate and provide impetus for hope and imagination might facilitate a kind of intellectual optimism by which we might, as Castiglia writes, “move beyond critique toward more direct expressions of hope.”<sup>207</sup> Castiglia suggests that “critical hope” is achieved by “passing

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<sup>206</sup> Badiou, Alain. “The Democratic Emblem.” *Democracy in What State?* Ed. Giorgio Agamben. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. (6-15).

<sup>207</sup> Castiglia, Christopher. “Teaching, Hopefully.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*. 41.2. Summer 2011. (183).

through despair in order to reach an earned hopefulness keenly aware of the conditions of suffering and injustice yet capable of conceiving and expressing a more justly-ordered world” (186). Richard Johnson similarly suggests that we need both anchored criticism and open dreaming, such that our expressions of “dreams and desires [ . . . ] correspond to the full range of our experience, including the inadmissible parts” (63).<sup>208</sup> Johnson writes: “political will and critical analysis are not as unconnected as Gramsci’s aphorism might imply [ . . . ] we surely need also an optimism of the intellect” (51). Of course, the child’s cultural attachment to hopefulness is not without its own problems. In his polemical *No Future*, for example, Lee Edelman targets the child as the tyrannical figurehead of what he calls “reproductive futurism,” in which “the Child has come to embody for us the telos of social order and has come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.”<sup>209</sup> The cloying cultural refrain that the “children are the future,” scholars like Edelman are right to recognize, can in fact represent much more insidious attempts to regulate the political present.<sup>210</sup> However, we do not need to reject the child and its attachments to hopefulness in order to reject the forms of futurism that work to defer democracy from the present. Indeed, closer critical engagement with the child reveals the all-too-obvious reality that children themselves do not actually belong to

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<sup>208</sup> Johnson, Richard. “Optimism of the Intellect: Hegemony and Hope.” *Soundings*. Vol. 54, Summer 2013.

<sup>209</sup> Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. (11).

<sup>210</sup> Queer theory has recognized the ways the figure of the child naturalizes the domineering temporal logics of the heteronormative, reproductive paradigm. Castiglia suggests that under the seemingly altruistic guise of caring for the children of the future, we in fact split time into “an undemocratic past and democratic future,” making a “democratic *now* nearly impossible to conceive,” and dividing people along the lines of whether they are “oriented toward the future (biologically and ideologically reproductive) or the past” (*Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. 5). Judith Halberstam argues for the alternative temporalities produced by queer subcultures, outside of the normative demands of “reproductive time” which naturalize a daily, generational, and national timetable “governed by an imagined set of children’s needs” (*In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. 5).

the future but, like all people, live in their present—the temporal frame in which democracy can be engaged, and perhaps even enacted.

*The Language of Childhood in Contemporary Public Thought about Democracy*

As a way to conclude this project, I'd like to move briefly into the present moment and out into public political discourse, to consider the rhetorical status of childhood in contemporary political language.

In September of 2013, CNN and ORC International conducted a survey about healthcare legislation and the impending government shut-down. A set of questions concluded this survey, in the following format:

“Do you think President Obama has acted mostly like a responsible adult or most likely a spoiled child during the recent debate over the federal budget?”<sup>211</sup>

The same question was asked about Democrats and about Republicans in Congress, and the results provided the content for a series of news articles that accordingly reported that “most Americans think Republicans in Congress are acting like spoiled children in this fiscal fight, with the public divided on whether the president is acting like a spoiled child or a responsible adult.”<sup>212</sup> While an otherwise unremarkable blip in the surge of media that surrounded the shut-down, the language of this survey alerts us to the strange place in which the childlike exists in our collective political imagination. We are compelled to ask: if children provide the best analogy for the behavior of our nation's most powerful

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<sup>211</sup> “CNN/ORC Poll: September 30, 2013.” *CNN*. [www.cnn.com/2013/09/30/politics/cnn-poll-shutdown-blame/](http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/30/politics/cnn-poll-shutdown-blame/)

<sup>212</sup> Steinhauser, Paul. “CNN Poll: GOP would bear the brunt of shutdown blame.” *CNN*. September 30, 2013. [www.cnn.com/2013/09/30/politics/cnn-poll-shutdown-blame/](http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/30/politics/cnn-poll-shutdown-blame/)

politicians as they threaten to functionally disable the federal government, who exactly do we understand children to be?

At the very same time that children are rhetorically positioned as the enemy of good “responsible adult” politics, they are also called into the sympathetic role as the victims of bad politics. A few months earlier, in the furlough of March 2013, for example, conservative commentators and media personalities criticized President Obama’s budget decisions by pointing to the closure of White House tours as a way to “punish children.” Fox News host Gretchen Carlson, for instance, seized upon the image of disappointed school-kids in order to rail against Obama:

“It’s so childish [ . . . ] Most people who are going to suffer from this are the kids. These are planned school field trips from long ago. Imagine if you’re one of these kids now who gets the news. But is that the intention? And I think this is what is so frustrating to so many Americans. Somebody alluded to the fact of putting your big boy pants on the other day, come on, can we just be adults about this?”<sup>213</sup>

Dizzily, the child offers both the image of the victim and the analogy for the victimizer; Carlson encourages us at once to sympathetically imagine the “suffering” of poor children missing their fieldtrip, and to critically imagine President Obama as “childish” and without his “big boy pants” as he slams the White House doors.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup>“Fox & Friends Trashes ‘Childish’ Decision to Nix White House Tours.” *YouTube*. March 6, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss0fHfBYhYI>

<sup>214</sup> And of course, however our politics might rely on the rhetoric of childhood, they operate with inconsistent and often feeble commitments to children’s actual well-being. Comedian Jon Stewart noted the disjuncture between the rhetorical appeals to childhood and the blatant disregard for the lives and safety of actual children when he highlighted how the very same political commentators who in March bemoaned the cancelled field trips to the White House, in October downplayed the effects of the Shutdown and scoffed at concerns that it could hurt children through the suspension of services like WIC and Head Start. Stewart scathingly paraphrased this attitude: “Hey, your kid didn’t get to eat breakfast—that’s your problem. My kid didn’t get to tour the White House—that’s *everybody’s* problem.” (“March of Dumbs: Government Shutdown.” *The Daily Show*. October 1, 2013. <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/t76w3p/march-of-dumbs---government-shutdown.>)

While there's a certain impulse to withhold our attention from news media personalities, in order to avoid incidentally validating their significance, it's also worth noting that news-entertainment shows from Fox News to John Stewart's Daily Show dominate popular political discourse, and public understandings of democracy filter through their lenses. And it's hard to hear Gretchen Carlson's lamentation for cancelled White House fieldtrips without thinking of Lauren Berlant's "infantile citizenship."<sup>215</sup> Berlant's complaint is precisely that our notions of citizenship have been reduced to the wide-eyed pilgrimage to Washington, as the political idealization of childishness produces a kind of naïve and passive complacency that she sees substituting for engaged citizenship. To be sure, when surveys like CNN's seek citizen "involvement" by asking whether politicians are behaving like "spoiled children," they infantilize the citizens themselves by precluding the possibility that their answer might have real meaning. If by "spoiled children" we agree the survey to be asking whether the politicians were stubbornly and dumbly insisting on having their own way, then the survey question forecloses the opportunity for citizens to engage in thoughtful evaluation of the ideological and political agendas at play on both sides of the debate, and instead limits citizens' participation to vague and reductive character judgments.

Berlant's formulation of "infantile citizenship" argues that the "ideal pedagogical outcome of contemporary politics is [the linking of] the fetus, the wounded, the dead, and the 'children' as the true American 'people'" (407). In this listing, "children" stands in for the disempowerment via infantilization—an all too common way that the figure of the child is manipulated for unjust purposes. However, a goal of this project has been to

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<sup>215</sup> Berlant, Lauren. "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship." *Political Culture*. 5. 1993. 395-410.

illuminate ways that the child is also attached to more authentically democratic modes of thinking. That is, I've sought to consider the ways that childhood—as a subject position, as a site for discourse, as an imaginative register—can offer rich political meaning. In this way, I see my interest in childhood in a kind of parallel to George Shulman's recovery of prophecy as a politically viable language. Shulman asks: "should small-d democrats reclaim and revise this language, so deeply tied to domination and to struggle against it?" (x).<sup>216</sup> Ultimately, Shulman suggests the answer is "yes." Though the political value of prophecy is "inseparable from what we find dangerous about it, [ ... ] we lose too much if we simply abjure prophetic language." (xv). Like prophecy (and indeed, intimately related to prophecy), the figure of the child is bound with many politically dangerous forms of rhetoric. But also like prophecy, it has potential political value that might be harnessed. And if we—and by we, I mean to suggest both scholars and small-d democrats—avoid the pathos, imaginativeness, and moral sentiment enabled by the language of childhood out of fear of its dangers, we cede its powers to those who are ready to (and do) use it uncritically and undemocratically.<sup>217</sup>

As a way to consider what it means to take seriously the political value of "childishness," we might look briefly at an example from the 2012 presidential campaign,

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<sup>216</sup> Shulman, George. *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>217</sup> I would suggest that in many ways the radical Right has claimed the rhetorical child for its agenda. Despite a set of political commitments that are qualitatively destructive to the welfare of children (particularly our nation's most socioeconomically vulnerable children) the Right has successfully used the child to brand itself as the party of "family values"—marketing its anti-abortion as protection of the unborn, its homophobia as a protection of children's "right to have a mother and a father," and its opposition to contraception and comprehensive sexual education, to aspects of the feminist agenda, and to the separation of church and state, as protections of the integrity of the nuclear family with the child at its center.



when Mitt Romney opened a presidential debate with a promise to cut off funding for PBS. Political theorist Bonnie Honig describes the incident this way:

The way [Romney] framed it was as follows: he said something like, ‘I love Big Bird as much as anyone, but it’s going to be the end of public funding for PBS if I get elected.’ So Big Bird, the character from the Sesame Street children’s TV show, became the damsel in distress of the presidential election for about a week. We saw images of a homeless Big Bird with a cardboard ‘will work for food’ sign—serious fun as part of the electoral season. But there was more than fun. When Mitt Romney named PBS as Big Bird, we found out not just that people are attached to this big yellow bird, but rather that they are attached to PBS and what it means. That is, we saw people’s longing to have public attachments to public things. Most commentators missed this, I think. They were distracted by the embrace of a children’s character by serious adults. They thought American politics had once again gone off the rails. Even people on the progressive left were making jokes about the infantile attachment of Americans to this child figure. . . . But the debate didn’t have anything to do with the infantilism or childhood programming; it really had to do with one of the few public objects in American political life.<sup>218</sup>

Honig’s analysis encourages us to not be “distracted” by the childish content and to recognize the political validity and even urgency of the public’s rise to the defense of Big Bird. I would go even further to suggest that this incident did not merely transcend its childishness, but rather that it was precisely the childish content which enabled its political salience; this debate *had everything to do* with “infantilism” and childhood. That is, the sentimental attachments which the Sesame Street character summoned made immediately palpable and expressible what Honig so nicely names people’s “longing to have public attachments to public things.” While childhood objects can be used problematically to substitute gut feeling for judicious political thinking, in this case Big Bird seems to have been usefully synecdochic for a broader policy issue, such that feeling and reason were working together in a collective defense of a public thing—one of the

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<sup>218</sup> “Juncture Interview: Bonnie Honig.” *Juncture*. March 2013. [www.ippr.org/juncture/171/10434/juncture-interview-bonnie-honig](http://www.ippr.org/juncture/171/10434/juncture-interview-bonnie-honig).

few public things left, Honig rightly points out. A less childish object than Big Bird could not have gripped the public imagination in the same way—could not have made so perceptible the feeling of the collective realm shrinking even further from us.

So, we might ask ourselves, what could it look like to take seriously the political value of those ideas we associate with children— imagination, hope, truth, morality, intuition, tenderness—and what do we diminish when we name things “childish”? In political theory, the “affective turn” has produced scholarship troubling the deliberative ideal of cool rationality and describing the political importance of emotion.<sup>219</sup> Dismantling the binary between “reason” and “emotions” has much to do with the childhood studies’ project of dismantling the binary between the corollary “grown-up” and “childish,” and it has the potential to open space for a kind of political engagement which does not give up the aspiration of impartiality but which permits those passions that enliven participation and action. And this dismantling might also provide us the grounds to reexamine our formal and cultural disenfranchisement of children themselves, whose otherwise “childish” voices might have political value now.

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<sup>219</sup> See for example the collection of essays titled *Bringing the Passions Back In: the Emotions in Political Philosophy*. (Eds. Rebecca Kingston and Leonard Ferry. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008) or Sharon Krause’s *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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