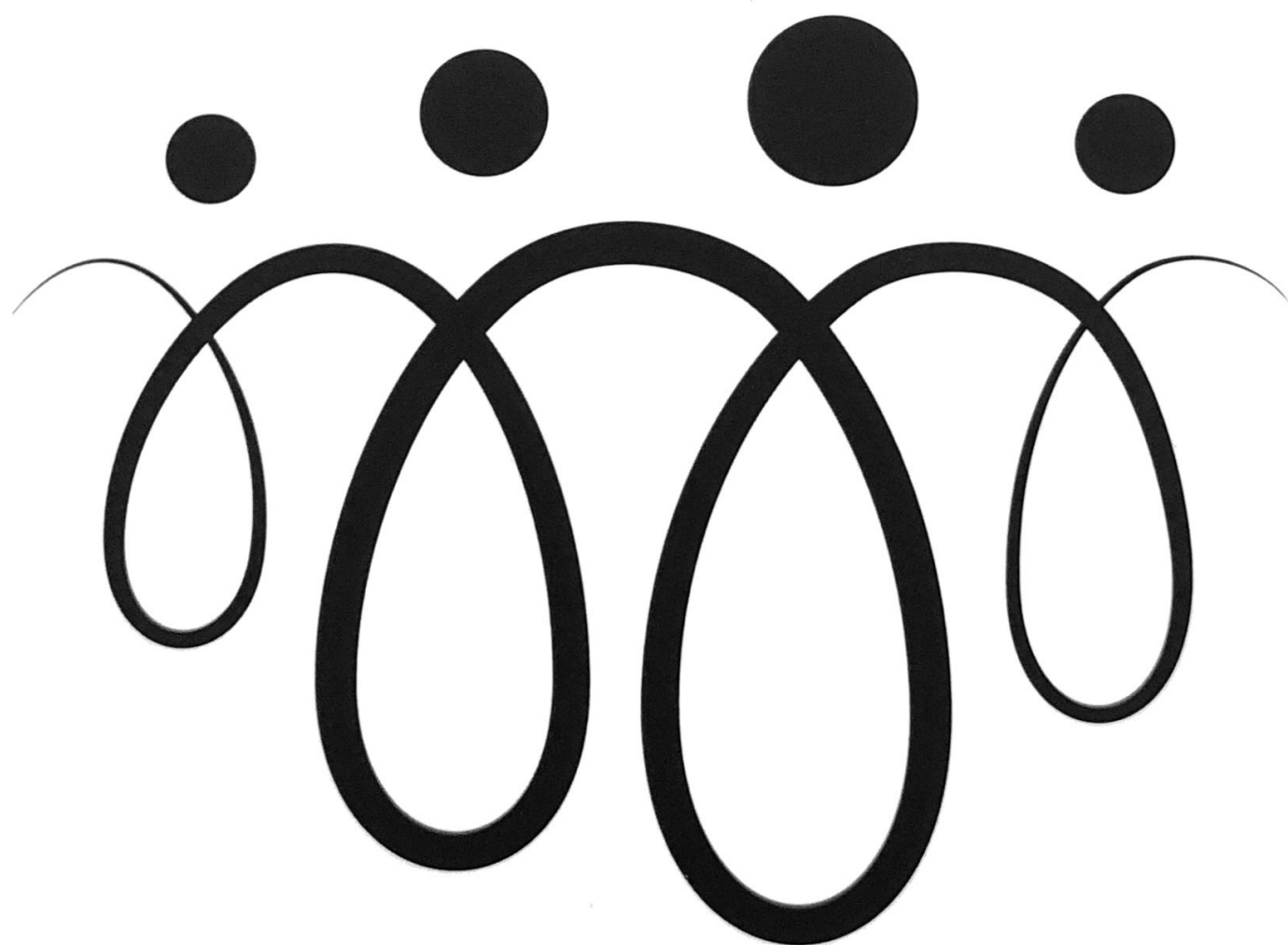


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Aida Rosende-Pérez (eds.)

FAMILY IN CRISIS?

Crossing Borders, Crossing Narratives



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Black Orphans, Adoption, and Labor in Antebellum American Literature

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When discussing the plantation complex, the institution of slavery and their gradual abolition in the Atlantic world at large, Kris Manjapra observes that "during this age of abolition, new forms of forced and coerced labor arose on a global scale, and the plantation as an exploitative, racial, political-ecological complex began to expand and travel the face of the earth" (361). This assessment about the plantation complex invites us to ponder also what forms of household labor existed outside of the framework of the plantation system, and to what degrees they involved the black free population, and especially its youth. If we concentrate on the state of Massachusetts, for example, as a free state, void of the existing infrastructures regarding slavery, we learn that "in the eighteenth century and before, most children's work outside the household constituted a form of bound labor, not free labor. Formal indentures, either for apprenticeships or for simple service, exchanges labor in return for support and education" (Schmidt 317).¹ Only later, "over the course of the early nineteenth century, Massachusetts courts gradually abandoned this set of legal rules, replacing them with one that allowed minors to enter the world of free labor" (Schmidt 318).

As Schmidt explains, children, both white and black, could become indentured servants and work for a household until they reached their maturity. If bound labor was one of the ways in which children, especially destitute and orphaned children, could find themselves becoming part of a household, another one was adoption, as the formal and legal procedure of establishing a familial and parental relationship between an adult (or adults) and a child. I associate these two modes of household life because I wish to emphasize how they share some important elements, which

¹ "Written and sealed, such agreements represented a bargain between a parent, usually a father, and a master, not between a child and an employer. Long-standing legal precedents, often referred to as the 'privilege of infancy,' prevented minors from making contracts for anything other than necessities or education. In a second phase of judicial activity completed by the 1840s, a series of children's labor contract cases led the Massachusetts courts to produce a set of rules for children's work. The courts authorized minors to make wage contracts for themselves by fashioning the concept of implied parental consent" (Schmidt 317).

can more easily emerge, if studied together. What I believe is crucial to notice is that both these practices are regulated by norms regarding property and inheritance: in the case of bound labor the child is only afforded sustenance and in some cases education, therefore completely excluded from patrimonial privileges, while in the second case, the adopted child becomes part of the family and is eligible to acquire the family's estate.

The first law concerning adoption in the United States is the *Adoption of Children Act* (1851), when Massachusetts established adoption as a social and legal operation based on child welfare, rather than adult interests, expressing the conditions for adoption as follows: "If [...] the petitioners, are of sufficient ability to bring up the child, and furnish suitable nurture and education, having reference to the degree and condition of its parents, and that it is fit and proper that such adoption should take effect," then the child "shall be deemed, for the purposes of inheritance and succession by such child, custody of the person and right of obedience by such parent or parents by adoption, and all other legal consequences and incidents of the natural relation of parents and children, the same to all intents and purposes as if such child had been born in lawful wedlock of such parents or parent by adoption." This law does not explicitly name the race, or the status of the adoptee or the adoptive parents: "Any inhabitant of this Commonwealth may petition the judge of probate, in the county wherein he or she may reside, for leave to adopt a child not his or her own by birth." This Act is consistent with the cultural practices preceding it, when, in the absence of legal regulations, the custom for adopting a child was based on the guidance provided by the Bible, according to which the adopted child is compared to the community of Christians, that through adoption gains access to the kingdom of heaven.

This biblical foundation for adoption can be found, for instance, in a piece titled "Dialogue about Adoption," in *The Christian Sentinel* (Three Rivers, Quebec) and published on 8 July 1831, which demonstrates that the religious argument culturally circulated in the early decades of the 19th century, not only in the United States, but in Canada as well. In this piece, in fact, the theme of adoption is hermeneutically expounded in the section "Childrens' [sic] Department" through a conversation among three people, Charles, Thomas, and William. By using the reference to Dick Brown, "a poor orphan boy," and reminding the others how Mr. Johnson "told Dick, that if he behaved well, and became a good young man, when he came of age he would make him heir to his estate," Thomas invites the other two to view the church as God's family, where "all church members are his adopted children," thus becoming "inheritors of the kingdom of heaven."

In an article titled "The Spirit of Adoption," published in the weekly *The Presbyterian* (Philadelphia) on 6 September 1851, the writer mentions an exemplary parable in which "a rich man, having no son born of his body, and wishing to have one standing in that near relation to him, and on whom he may bestow his affection

and his estate, picks up a poor child out the street, or out of the alms-house, and adopts him as his son." In reading this short anecdote two elements stand out, namely the question of property and the issue of class: the prospective father is a "rich man" and the "poor child" is going to receive "his affection and his estate." The article continues by suggesting that the sentiment that the child should feel is gratitude, once again reinforcing the idea that adoption is a favor bestowed by a powerful entity over a desperate creature: "If a great king should condescend to go to the poor-house, and adopt a child of wretchedness and poverty, and make him the heir of his riches and of his kingdom, what words could express the feeling of obligation which would be experienced by an ingenious mind?" After having prescribed the right affective relations between different classes, the author moves into the religious sphere, connecting the practice of adopting a child to the community of Christians, quoting from Romans 8: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our Spirit, that we are the children of God. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ," (*Holy Bible* 140) further commenting that "this spirit of adoption is the richest privilege vouchsafed by God to his children on earth." According to the Scriptures and to custom, therefore, the spirit of bondage is the opposite of the spirit of adoption. I would like to start with this distinction in mind in order to look at how these two cultural and legal practices are reflected in representations of childhood in 19th century American literature.

If the Bible provides a metaphorical language for the idea and the praxis of adoption, it likewise transfers into the social and legal spheres the strong sense of property and inheritance connected with this particular family union, as it becomes apparent when reading texts dealing with adoption in the antebellum era. So, while property is a crucial element, that travels through all the cultural systems, from legal language to the religious sphere, to literary representations, other aspects, like race and class, don't seem to be explicitly named: in the language of the law used in the *Adoption of Children Act*, and in that of religion drawn from the Bible, there are no references to race or the class status of the children, as if these two categories were irrelevant in the formation of families in the 19th century Northern states. But we have seen how at least class makes an appearance in print publications dealing with adoption. Therefore, it seems only logical and pertinent to wonder how 19th century culture at large, and literature more specifically, dealt with questions regarding the adoption of black children, or their lives in bondage. In this essay I propose to look at adoption and bound labor as two mutually exclusive cultural practices of family relations, because I believe that, couched in the conventional and popular vocabulary of sentimental literature, so popular in 19th century United States, there are interesting subtexts regarding economy and questions of property, which are especially evident when race enters the picture. Sentimental language,

in fact, rather than obscuring economic issues, emphasizes them, in a sort of cultural bas-relief. Both, adoption and bound labor, are the means for transferring and accumulating property, but while in the case of adoption property remains within the family, ensuring in fact, a clear hereditary line of succession, bound labor is connected to the accumulation of property for the employers and the public (state), but certainly never for the child, whose welfare is distributed among a number of different agencies (asylum for the orphans or other benevolent institutions, employer, the public), thus diffusing all social responsibility while avoiding direct accountability. In both cases, though, children are requested to perform the sentimental work of experiencing the prescribed feelings necessary for them to be granted a role in society.

While I would agree with Cindy Weinstein's claim that "the cultural work of sentimental fictions is nothing less than an interrogation and reconfiguration of what constitutes a family" (9), I would revise the notion that "the generic goal is the substitution of freely given love, rather than blood, as the invincible tie that binds together individuals in a family, thereby loosening the hold that consanguinity has both as a mechanism for structuring the family and for organizing the feelings of the people in it" (9). I believe, in fact, that children, especially those who are considered the burden of the public and civil society, are requested to demonstrate their worth by performing the sentimental work that is often waived for adults, especially white men, typically absent, ineffectual or dead in American sentimental literature.

By looking at Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, published in 1859, and other shorter texts appeared in periodical publications in the 1840s and 1850s, I will consider what the prospects imagined for black children, and especially black girls, are, in order to access the world of property and ownership, often in contrast to the sentimental rescue provided to white protagonists such as Estella in *Great Expectations* (1860), or Ellen in the *The Wide Wide World* (1850), and Gerty in *The Lamplighter* (1850).

*Our Nig*² is a work that has been read as a clear critique of the supposed benevolence of the white North, and it is certainly in conversation with the sentimental texts of the era, since, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon remarks:

while sentimental liberalism and domestic ideology may have disproportionately benefited the white middle class by consolidating the moral and economic authority of members of this group, the association of liberty with housekeeping formed an influential ideology that spurred a range of engagements – from aspiring imitation to critical revision – among African Americans, immigrants, and poor

laborers who had little in the way of resources to maintain a home or to represent it as a space of 'leisure' for women and children (Dillon 204).

Far from showing reformable households, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* is a study in the utter impossibility for redemption, through adoption, or through bound and free labor, for at least three generations of African Americans in the early 19th century. This autobiographical novel describes the unhappy life of Frado, the protagonist, who is abandoned by her white mother, when she faces dire circumstances after the death of her black husband. Before leaving town, Mag, the mother, drops off her child in one of the better-off households, where six years old Frado is treated horribly by Mrs. Belmont, who is depicted as a cruel, unsympathetic enforcer of a harsh indenture for the girl. As an interesting example of life of free blacks in the North, *Our Nig* has been extensively studied, and, in the words of Carol J. Singley, it "demonstrates the limits of adoption for a poor, racially marked Northern child deemed unfit for the middle class. In this, the first African American novel by a woman, child placement is not redeeming but tortuous, offering neither a connection to roots nor a future opportunity" (139). While I agree that this text shows "the limits of adoption," I believe that race and economy complicate in remarkable ways the white sentimental narrative of a girlhood's redemption through goodness and hard work, showing, instead, how a fair amount of sentimental work is requested of black children, without any profit provided in this exchange. While Frado certainly represents what Nazera Sadiq Wright has termed "the trope of the self-reliant black girl in the face of adversity in the writing of African American women in the antebellum era" (60), it seems to me that the promises made by the sentimental ideology – that through good feelings, religious beliefs, and the ethics of work young people could elevate themselves and acquire property – don't seem to have the same purchase for black children.

As Gretchen Short claims, "socially stigmatized by both her race and her destitution, Frado is forced into the dependence her mother feared, a dependence which only tightens the already strait bonds of communal censure. The unofficial indenture that is the charitable response to her abandonment gives Frado a 'place' that is essentially no place, that denies her full membership in a household, a community, or a nation" (2). Frado moves from different houses, not really belonging to any, and the only relevant contribution she can offer is work, as Mrs. Belmont clearly states to her husband: "If you should go as you would like, it would not be six months before she would be leaving me; and that won't do. Just think how much profit she was to us last summer. We had no work hired out; she did the work of two girls –" (90). Not only does she provide profit to the white family, but she also doubles this profit, working for two, thus contributing even larger accumulation of capital for her white mistress. But this is not the only type of work she is asked to perform.

² The original title was: *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall even There*. By "Our Nig" (Harriet E. Wilson), and it was published in 1859 for the author in Boston.

In the complex structure of the novel, the white woman from the North, Mrs. Belmont, is the enforcer of the unofficial indenture. Her description is similar to those of women in the South, for which profit and property are of prime importance: like them, she does not hesitate to use torture to bring her servant to submission and despair. Her husband and the male children of the family are the sentimental figures with no direct power to intervene, nor cultural influence to change the course of action occurring within the household, but they are still exacting something. The husband is always afraid to contradict his wife, and prefers the attitude of not taking personal responsibility – notoriously chosen by Augustine St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*³ – while the two sons are either absent or dying the sentimental death made famous by Little Eva, proclaiming the existence of a “heavenly home together,” as James does in the following passage:

How poor you are, Frado! I want to tell you that I fear I shall never be able to talk with you again. It is the last time, perhaps, I shall ever talk with you. You are old enough to remember my dying words and profit by them. I have been sick a long time; I shall die pretty soon. My Heavenly Father is calling me home. Had it be his will to let me live I should take you to live with me; but, as it is, I shall go and leave you. But Frado, if you will be a good girl, and love and serve God, it will be but a short time before we are in a heavenly home together. There will never be any sickness or sorrow there (Wilson 95).

If for Mrs. Belmont the profit provided by Frado is capitalistic accumulation for her household, the only profit granted to Frado is offered by James' dying words, and their characteristic sentimental lack of action. Because he will not live, she would not be able to leave, stuck once again in the rhetoric of the afterlife. What is more, James asks her to perform sentimental work (“if you will be a good girl, and love and serve God”) for which she is promised the reward of another household, a “heavenly home together,” but nothing to improve her current household situation. It seems that every time the sentimental tide rises, it crashes against economic and capitalist issues, without being able to produce a valid material alternative. In this exchange James is not helping Frado practically: by being removed from the earthly picture, he also does not exert any influence over his wife in order to take Frado with her, thus showing how the system of bondage is presiding over any other possible relations. After he dies, his wife Susan and his son leave, in what can be perceived as a missed opportunity of salvation for Frado, reinforced by the short and sharp sentence used in the novel. While Susan “wished [Frado] to attend his burial as one

3 In her *Racial Innocence. Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein states that *Our Nig* “reimagined *Uncle Tom's Cabin*” in order to emphasize “black children's pain” (56) through “a narrative strategy of using racial flip-flops to decimate sentimental notions of childhood innocence” (58).

of the family” (Wilson 97), she does not seem to contemplate the prospect of taking the girl with her: “the family, gathered by James' decease, returned to their homes. Susan and Charles returned to Baltimore” (Wilson 102).

Once again Frado is left to her work, both material and sentimental, and her helplessness. When she turns eighteen, after years of abuse and violence, Frado finds herself weak, lame, and unable to take up work, hence having to resort to “the unpleasant charities of the public” (Wilson 124). The novel closes by showing how the protagonist, alone and with a baby to support, is left with only her written story, this book, which she prints as the only property she has, and through which she hopes, mistakenly, to profit from.

If for Frado the option of adoption is completely absent, and her life of bondage is the only possibility offered to her as a black child, in other texts, with white orphans as protagonists, the two paths are present and very clearly marked. An article titled “The Adopted Daughter” addresses the two options that orphans have in mid-19th century Boston: to be adopted or to be bound for work. In “The Adopted Daughter,” published in the *Youth's Companion* on 16 October 1845, a couple in Boston, after having lost three children to sickness, is now looking for adoption. They visited the Orphan Asylum, and they chose Ellen, even though they also noticed another girl, Ellen's closest friend, Maria Day. Ellen is raised without any acknowledgements of her past, until the revelation comes. When another family moves in the neighborhood from the city, she learns about her origins:

Mrs. Williams, to whose house she had been sent, had told her, with malice which can hardly be conceived, that she had no father or mother, but that she was a poor child, and come from the Asylum. And then [...] she pointed to the little servant girl, who was cleaning knives in the room, and told her that she was no better than Maria there, and she need not be above speaking to her, for they both came from the same place, and they used to be very loving, then.

Ellen and Maria Day shared part of the same past, but they were offered two distinctive paths: Ellen, as her prospective father remarked, “ought to be raised above the station in which she was born, because she is by nature, above it,” and therefore could be afforded the possibility of being adopted, whereas Maria Day, about whom we learn nothing, can only expect a life of bound labor. Interestingly enough the women here, Ellen's adoptive mother and Mrs. Williams, are the ones appointed to clarify and interpret the lives of the two girls, while at the same time obtaining from Ellen the sentimental work of “feeling right”, of “being grateful to her Heavenly Father:”

She told Ellen that what Mrs. Williams had told her was quite true, but yet, instead of being angry and sinful when she thought of it, she must be more grateful to her Heavenly Father for her pleasant home and many blessings, when she child she

used to love was at hard service. This was indeed, a bitter lesson for poor Ellen; but her naturally strong character was capable of receiving it, and from that time, although perhaps not as light hearted, she became a more thoughtful and grateful child.

The last text I would like to discuss is a short story that appeared in the Boston publication *Olive Branch*, on 4 May 1844, and titled "The Orphan." This story is an excerpt from the novel *The Home, Family Cares and Family Joys* by the Swedish writer Fredrika Bremer, translated by Mary Howitt and published in 1843. The passage chosen from the novel is the act of adoption of a black girl by a white family and her arriving in her new home. Because the periodical does not provide any indication about the context of the story, or about its writer, and only the names of the characters are left to somewhat signal their foreignness, readers might assume that the story could be set somewhere, or anywhere in the United States.

The couple in question, Ernest and Elise Frank are parents to six children. The father is the sentimental engine here, the figure who suggests adopting the child who lives nearby and who has just lost her father. When Ernest and Elise go to take her, the girl reacts aggressively and the text describes her as "half-savage." This is how Elise entices her: "If you will come with me this evening to my little children, you shall have sweet milk and white bread with them, and then sleep in a nice little bed with a rose-colored coverlet. The white bread, the rose-colored coverlet, and Elise's gentle voice, seemed to influence the child's mind." The readers learn of her appearance when she enters her new home, and is observed by the Frank children: "a very nice thin girl of about nine years [...], with black hair, dark complexion, and a pair of uncommonly large black eyes, which looked almost threateningly on the white and bright-eyed little ones which surrounded her." This encounter is both a study in contrast, and an effort in finding some common ground: the orphan is dark (black hair, black eyes), and the other children are white, but they are surrounding her, as if they wanted to engulf her, and incorporate her into the family. We learn that her name is Sarah, while we also learn some of the other children's names: Henrik, Louise, Eva, Leonore and Petrea. This last one is the child who will accomplish the rites of welcoming:

Petrea would so willingly give something with her whole heart. [...] Petrea really possessed nothing which was fit to make a gift of. She acknowledged this with a sigh; her heart was filled with sadness, and tears were just beginning to run down her cheeks, when she was consoled by a sudden thought. The girl and the rose-bush! [...] As the mother took Sara by the hand, to conduct her to rest, Petrea had the indiscribable [sic] delight of seeing that, from all the little presents which had been made to her, she only took with her the girl and the rose bush which she appeared to regard with pleasure.

Very clearly the act of adoption is performed by Petrea, who passes her most cherished possession to her new sister, thus marking her participation in the circulation of property in the family. Once again, the trajectory of the story tends toward the sentimental conversion of Sarah, who is transformed from being "half-savage" to be thoroughly domesticated. When the girl does not seem to be able to go to sleep ("The girl and the rose-bush hung over the bed, but still there seemed to be no rest in the snow-white couch for the 'little African'") the mother comes to the rescue by performing the ritual of sentimentally whitening the child, through the "Song of the Dove," which she herself composed :

There sitteth a dove so white and fair,
All on the lilly spray,
And she listeneth how to Jesus Christ
The little children pray.

Lightly she spreads her friendly wings,
And to heaven's gate hath sped,
And unto the Father in heaven she bears
The prayers which the children have said.
And back she comes from heaven's gate,
And brings that dove so mild—
From the Father on heaven, who hears her speak,
A blessing for every child.

Then children, lift up a pious prayer,
It hears whatever you say,
That heavenly dove so white and fair,
That sits on the lily spray.

This observant and controlling white dove is the symbol of the normativization of the young girl. The process of becoming part of the family involves therefore both her participation in the circulation of gifts and possessions, but also her complete acceptance of the constant motion of purifying, white, fair feelings of sentimental surveillance.

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III.

FAMILY – SOCIETY – TOGETHERNESS: Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces