

SONIA DI LORETO

# KINSHIP, AFFILIATION AND ADOPTION

*Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Hope Leslie and Nineteenth Century American Literature\**

**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the status of various forms of affiliation and adoption narratives and practices as depicted in some early American texts, at a time when different ideas about kinship, and a multitude of possibilities of affiliation were acceptable in the context of the American household and family. In recent years the study of adoption in American culture has been a flourishing area of investigation in the larger horizon of American Studies, showing how the topos of adoption and the question of non-normative formations of family are often the critical loci where experimental thinking is going on. Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie; or the Early Times in the Massachusetts*, published in 1827, and other later nineteenth-century tales, are useful testing ground for thinking about kin terms, kinship relations, and forms of affiliation and adoption both in the colonial period and in the early nineteenth century, especially with regards to inter-ethnic interactions with Native Americans, and to the presence of black children and especially black orphans in the Northern states.

**KEYWORDS:** American Literature, Adoption, Family, 19th Century American Culture, Kinship

One of the most memorable passages in American literature is the final scene of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), often regarded by critics as a praise to independence and freedom. At this point of the novel Jim reveals to Huck that his father is dead, leaving him an orphan, if a wealthy one, and Huck has to make a decision about his future:

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Jim says, kind of solemn:

“He ain’t a-comin’ back no mo’, Huck.”

I says:

“Why, Jim?”

“Nemmine why, Huck – but he ain’t comin’ back no mo.”

But I kept at him; so at last he says:

“Doan’ you ‘member de house dat was float’n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah, kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn’ let you come in? Well, den, you kin git yo’ money when you wants it, kase dat wuz him.”

Tom’s most well now, and got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I’d a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn’t a tackled it, and ain’t a-going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.

THE END. YOURS TRULY, *HUCK FINN*. (369)

If we look at this without the lenses of an Americanist reading about independence, or as an ode to liberal individualism and personal entrepreneurial spirit, we see a thirteen-year-old boy refusing to adapt and being adopted, because, as readers might clearly remember, Aunt Sally represents the evangelical proponent of domestic conformity, in a patriarchal domestic system where the orphans have to perform a precise role within the adoptive family, that of the docile and passive individual, grateful recipient of the benevolent charity of the bourgeois family. Huck, therefore, is justifiably preoccupied to have to assimilate to the middle class and to the protestant principles of charitable citizenship, and considers declining the offer by way of fleeing outside of Aunt Sally’s reach and the State’s control. Because the novel is a strong critique of sentimental literature, Mark Twain prepares his readers to exactly this moment, without truly offering an alternative to Huck’s future. If it might sound adventurous to “light out for the Territory” in the context of Twain’s novel, it does not necessarily seem like a viable or very healthy option for a young adolescent, especially because there seem to be no alternative to the two options offered to Huck.

In what follows I would like to consider the status of various forms of affiliation and adoption narratives and practices as depicted in some early American texts, in order to survey a cultural landscape where different possibilities were still available, prior to the end of the nineteenth century, when we get to the discouraging alternatives Huck faces in the novel: either conform to sentimental tropes of domestic assimilation, or live a rough life on the frontier.

As a lot of contemporary popular stories for children and young adults clearly indicate, the trope of adoption and the question of non-normative formations of family are often the critical locus where some experimental thinking is going on. Children and teenagers look at Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Mowgli, Kung

Fu Panda, Mr. Peabody and Sherman, Harry Potter, Alvin and the Chipmunks, and they see possibilities and sometimes extraordinary powers for children with no biological parents near them, raised in an adoptive and at times less than conventional context. Therefore, I think it would be intriguing to examine what stories were circulated in the early part of the nineteenth century, when the United States was a new nation with a number of groups different in religion, ethnicity, power and social status. How was the structure of non-biological families and kinship formation imagined in early America? What kind of impact did it have on the nation formation or in the establishing of traditional family structures?

The last few years have witnessed an interest in the study of adoption in American culture, reflecting the current sensibility about the practice of adoption, and also the possibilities of thinking about non-normative forms of kinship and family formation. Some of the most recent studies include, for example, Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (2002); Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers. Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America. 1850-1929* (2003); Cynthia Callahan, *Kin of Another Kind. Transracial Adoption in American Literature* (2010); *International Adoption in North American Literature and Culture: Transnational, Transracial and Transcultural Narratives*, edited by Mark Shackleton (2017). By looking at these texts it is clear that most of the interest in adoption and kinship studies lies with the modern and contemporary period, and there is a smaller amount of scholarship focusing on the nineteenth century and earlier. One of the texts that examines earlier phases of American culture is Carol J. Singley's *Adopting America. Childhood, Kinship and National Identity in Literature* (2011). In her introduction Singley states that "adoption narratives are rooted in the American migratory experience: they reflect politically and culturally the severed ties to Great Britain and the construction of new forms of social and governmental organization. They also derive from a New England tradition of Calvinism and the cultural practices aligned with it, including an emphasis on salvation and good works that appears in representation of adoption from colonial times through the modern period" (4). Another more recent study, Dawn Peterson's *Indians in the Family: Adoption and the Politics of Antebellum Expansion* (2017), addresses a special policy of adoption: "in the decades following the U.S. Revolution, a number of American Indian women and men and elite U.S. whites supported the placement of Native children into "white" households throughout the existing United States." From affiliation practices, to plans to absorb Native populations in the expansionist nineteenth century United States, there are numerous examples of familial and kinship conglomerates worthy of analysis.

Before entering a discussion about different terms associated with family and adoption, I would like to provide a basic definition of the term adoption, as examined in this paper. By adoption I mean not only the establishment of a parental relation between an adult and a child, that in modern times, and more precisely after the first modern

adoption legislation, the Adoption of Children Act passed in Massachusetts in 1851 has been the basic understanding of adoption, but also the welcoming and permanent affiliation of a child or children into a family or household.

As the study of what Michael McKeon has termed “the secret history of domesticity” clarifies, the structure of the family has often been a reflection of the formation of the nation state, but as McKeon’s painstaking analysis demonstrates, the analogy of the family to the state is far from being transparent because “the metaphor entails a metonymy – that if the state is like the family, it is also composed of families” (113). McKeon’s study alerts us not to establish easy equations, and helps us ponder the nuances of the terms. I would like to start my discussion with a lengthy quotation from McKeon’s *The Secret History of Domesticity* in order to set up the terms of the analysis:

When people speak of the family at this time [early modern period] they are likely to have in mind one (or more) of three senses of the term that we tend to distinguish from one another. First and perhaps most important, “family” was a term of primarily spatial designation, referring to all those who lived under the same roof –in the same household – under the acknowledged authority of its (usually male) head. Second, “family” had a temporal inflection that evoked one’s lineage, genealogy, and ancestry, specifically the diachronic dimension of “blood” relations, but by extension those aspects of wealth, prestige, and power whose synchronic coalescence might be assumed by virtue of one’s lineage. The sense of lineage might easily coexist with that of household. [...] Third, the language of “family” was used to refer to the circle of kin both within and outside the household. The standard kinship terms in this period are similar to those in our own; but this is a deceptive correspondence in that early modern usage was far looser in its application, incorporating a broader but variable range of reference depending on specific contexts of use. However, the inclusiveness of these kin terms also diminished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, becoming more restricted and definitive over the course of this period. In addition, collective kin terms like “relations,” “friends,” and “connexions” shuttled back and forth between what we would call familial and nonfamilial reference, often serving to designate a basic kin relation without specifying its particular nature. Our own usage makes clear that these collective categories have become separated out from familial reference during the modern period. (121)

This explanation helps clarify not only the various terms associated with kinship and family, but it also provides a crucial historicization that could foster a clearer understanding of distinct historical periods and contexts.

In light of these considerations, and keeping in mind the cultural evolution of certain terms, I would like to take as the primary object of my study an early American novel, Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie; or the Early Times in the Massachusetts*, published in 1827, because I deem it an apt testing ground for thinking about kin terms, kinship relations, and forms of affiliation and adoption both in the colonial period and in the early nineteenth century, especially with regards to inter-ethnic interactions with Native Americans. I will also keep within the horizon of my purview other texts both from the same period and later, in order to look at how the presence of black children and

especially black orphans in the Northern states constitutes a problematic cultural, social, and legal conundrum.

In the early times of the colonies, orphans were received in the households as a welcome aid to the great amount of labor that colonial settlers faced every day in order to take control of the land, and, at times, they were treated with sincere benevolence. In her book, Carol Singley discusses the Puritan attitude and the culture that ensued from the belief of being part of the New Canaan, as the Puritans recreated a community with ties that typologically represented the body of Christ. “Adoption” was a religious and spiritual term that indicated salvation bestowed by God the Father to his chosen children. In this regard the Puritan community envisioned the possibility of embracing other members, even though not everybody received the same consideration, or was granted the same legal status, due to discriminatory practices based on ethnic, class and religious differences.

As Karen Balcom describes in her “Constructing Families, Creating Mothers: Gender, Family, State and Nation in the History of Child Adoption”: “the practice of turning ‘strangers’ into ‘kin,’ of raising the child born into another family ‘as one’s own,’ can be traced to the colonial period of Euro-American history and much further back in the history of Native America. However, the legal practice of adoption as it exists today was not a part of the colonies’ English common law inheritance” (220). Although the term “adoption” along with its practices appears in the early period, there is no legal framework to accompany variables of the same concept. As mentioned before, “the first ‘modern’ law of adoption in the United States (severing previous family ties, incorporating the child legally into the adopting family, and including a provision that the courts must adjudge the adoption to be “in the best interest of the child”) was passed in Massachusetts in 1851” (Balcom 2006, 220).

Obviously, from 1851 on, and considering the vastness of the country, ideas and modes of adoption underwent a great number of changes and were crystallized in very distinct ways according to differing social and cultural influences. It is not in the scope of the present article to delineate a history of kinship relations or adoption in the United States, but it is certainly necessary to historicize the different narratives.

By focusing on Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, I intend to emphasize the fluidity of the nation in its early times, when the new micro-community created around different practices of affiliation and adoption customs had more possibilities to engage in changes and reforms, albeit brief and impermanent. My claim is, in fact, that Sedgwick’s novel entrusts the responsibility of imagining a more inclusive and open society to the small community composed by the young generation. *Hope Leslie*, therefore, combines the political awareness of social integration and racial interrelations of the nineteenth century, with the more fluid legal and conventional apparatus of the seventeenth century, thus creating an imaginary past set in an optimistic version of Sedgwick’s contemporary present. The

question of the relation between the form of the novel and the consolidation of the nation has been widely studied and debated. More recent works have reconsidered some of the assumptions of that relation by reformulating the context of national formation with that of colonialism. In this regard, according to Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “the literary genre of the novel and the political form of the nation remain in tension and dialogue with colonialism, the global market, and imperialism even as the nation gains political authority in England and the United States” (251).

*Hope Leslie* is set during the Puritan period, a transitional moment between two generations of settler colonialists in North America, and it marks the moment when the colony of Massachusetts enters the modern era. This text clearly shows the passage from obsolete epistemological systems, both European and Native American, to a new vision, and new systems, where religious spirit, civic virtue and scientific interest are intertwined. The presence in the novel of historical characters, such as John Winthrop, John Eliot, and the Indian chief Mononotto, provides historical depth and invites the readers to reconsider some of the episodes of the Pequot wars,<sup>1</sup> one of the most gruesome events in colonial history.

Similarly to another novel of the early nineteenth century, set in the colonial times, Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times* (1824), *Hope Leslie*’s younger generation, distant from the European political events and kept away from the government of the colony, creates room for rebellion, within a framework of alternative inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations. In both novels the young women protagonists embody the rebel (and revolutionary) spirit, thus breaking some rules and helping to imagine the narrative space (if not the political reality) for major changes. In *Hobomok*, for example, the puritan protagonist Mary Conant, violates a series of norms, first eloping with the Indian Hobomok, and having a child with him, and later returning to the Puritan community when she decides to build a family with her first lover, a white man, and her son, whom is formally adopted by her husband. In a similar vein the acts of rebellion and non-adherence to the norms in *Hope Leslie* are often planned by the female protagonists, the white Hope Leslie, and the Indian Magawisca, as they attack the ethical structure of the colonial government or the relations between Puritans and Indians. Sometimes these actions are narrative tools to bridge the colonial time of the story to the more modern time of the writing, as Jeffrey Insko suggests: “Placing Hope in relation to both her fictionalized seventeenth-century world and the reader’s own (future) world, the novel asks the reader to imagine a kind of cross-cultural community, a simultaneity among historical periods” (190). In any case, those actions create a realm of possibilities that at

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<sup>1</sup> The novel uses the spelling “Pequod” but historians now prefer the modern “Pequot”.

first might look historically inaccurate, but that, on the contrary, shows, precisely, some of the prerogatives of both the times and the geographical area considered in the novel.

The novel starts in early seventeenth century England, showing a generational conflict between Sir William Fletcher, a staunch Anglican, and his namesake, a nephew who is unfalteringly devoted to the new puritan creed, and whose friends are John Winthrop and John Eliot. For hereditary reason William is meant to marry his cousin Alice, daughter of Sir William. If this project reflects the cousins' personal desires, it implies that William abjures his puritan faith, and conforms to the Anglican church. However, William does not intend to renege and thanks to some form of financial independence, he starts planning a new life in the colonies. Alice is willing to go with him, but she is kidnapped by soldiers sent by her father, and she is forced to marry the Anglican Charles Leslie. William, meanwhile, is firm in his proposition, and finally leaves England after having married a young puritan woman. He boards the same *Arbella* that in 1630 takes John Winthrop and his group of dissenters to the colonies in North America. On board the *Arbella* Winthrop delivers the sermon "A Modell of Christian Charitie" where he speaks of a new theory of society, based on hierarchy and authority, that should be like a "Citty upon a hill," model and exemplary for everyone, and a trope that has become one of the foundations of American exceptionalism.

If in Europe the structure of the family has to reflect the structure of the church, and bow to the authority of the head of the family/church, it seems that things are a little different in the new world, at least as represented by Sedgwick in her novel. William Fletcher's family is the epitome of the "frontier family", and for this reason, I think it a very good example of the possibilities – or impossibilities – of inclusiveness or exclusivity. Fletcher's family is indeed what McKeon defines as the "spatial designation" (120), the household that gathers all the members of the family, but it comprises also ideas of lineage and kinship. First of all, it is interesting to note where this family decides to settle. They, in fact, do not live in colonial Boston, but choose to live in the middle of the American wilderness, in a homestead named Bethel, becoming therefore a community of a "contact zone,"<sup>2</sup> with a more fluid and open structure, and a heterogeneous composition. Fletcher's family is made of his wife Martha, their various children, most importantly Everell, the first born, and it includes also two Indian children, Magawisca and her brother Oneco, who are prisoners of war left to live among the Puritans, after their nation, the Pequots, was defeated in the war. This group will furthermore receive

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "contact zone" drawing from Mary Louise Pratt's volume *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*: "[contact zones are] social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (7).

Hope and Faith, Alice Leslie's daughters, who, once orphaned, are sent to live with Alice's former lover, and become part of this variegated formation.

In one of the first scenes of the novel, Fletcher asks his son Everell to go and meet the Indian girl, while at the same time he tries to explain to his wife the arrival of Alice's daughters, moving back and forth, within his conversation, between the Indian children and the girls: "These children will bring additional labour to your household; and in good time hath our thoughtful friend Governor Winthrop procured for us two Indian servants. The girl has arrived, the boy is retained about the little Leslies; the youngest of whom, it seems, is a petted child; and is particularly pleased by his activity in ministering to her amusements" (Sedgwick 1827, 21). It is clear that in Fletcher's eyes the Indian children will be able to provide additional labor, while the two English girls represent sentimental remnants of his youth. In this regard, Fletcher is practicing what Peterson described as occurring some decades later: "As the United States aggressively pushed into Indian territories east of the Mississippi River between 1790 and 1830, a wide range of governing elites declared the importance of assimilating Indian people into the U.S. body politic, which they describe as a free white national family". Assimilation and imperialistic expansion are the public facet of this form of "adoption", but cohabitation and intimacy of children in the same household may inspire different feelings from those considered by Fletcher or governing officials.

This interesting combination of blood relations, sentimental affiliations, and political captivity provides a representation of the vast arrays of possibilities of being part of a family in the colonial times. In *Hope Leslie*, the younger generation, constituted by Everell Fletcher, Hope Leslie, Magawisca, Oneco and Faith Leslie, lives in such proximity and intimacy that the narrative often hints at both fraternal feelings and romantic attachments. Because of the geographical location, the historical circumstances, and the political events, this new community will have to re-draw the boundaries within the conflict of colonizers and colonized, and to start to reconsider a series of sentimental options: for this very reason, *Hope Leslie* is one of the few texts that explicitly discusses the mixed unions between whites and Native Americans (as we have seen, *Hobomok* is another one), and where even sentimental attachments are more fluid and discontinuous than in other texts. One example is the union between Faith Leslie and Oneco, as the result of affiliation and adoption of the young English girl by the Pequot nation, when she was kidnapped by Oneco's father Mononotto. After having been offered the option of going back to the Puritan community and to her sister Hope, Faith decides to live her life with Oneco and among the Indians. Everell is another example, this time of multiple attachments. At the beginning of the story he seems to be attracted to Magawisca, then becomes engaged, almost *malgré lui*, to a puritan girl, but once it becomes apparent that Esther cannot be part of their small rebellious community, Everell finally turns to Hope Leslie, hence coming back to the fraternal/domestic household of the inception of the

story. The relation between Everell and Hope is marked from the very beginning by a strong bond, which the two characterize as a sort of fraternal affiliation, or, as Ivy Schwartzer defines it, a “friendship as a superior form of affection and affiliation associated with disinterest and justice” (176). In fact, when Hope writes the long and detailed letter to Everell, keeping him abreast of all the dealings and events occurred during his long absence, she signs it “thy loving friend and sister” (Sedgwick 1827, 115).

The fluidity of the relations between the young characters, and the indeterminacy of their statuses (brothers and sisters? lovers? captives?) allow for a certain latitude in their behaviors. My claim is that it is exactly this condition of indeterminacy and non-clarity in the familial and legal status of some of these characters, that gives them the autonomy to intervene precisely in some of the legal decisions made by the puritan government, in an effort to protect members of their micro-community. Their unique recognition of equality and fraternal bonds among themselves allows them to see one another as worthy of life and liberty, even though the society at large might not be aware of that. The first instance of the construction of the special empathic relation among the young generation is represented by the conversation between Everell and Magawisca, when she tells her version of the colonial attack to her village and people.

During their cohabitation Everell learns from Magawisca to conceive of a different perspective, and the two, together, become the first critical core of the community. Magawisca shows Everell the other side of the story, when she narrates her version of the attack to the Pequot village. This is a moment of profound sympathy, that will establish the sense of belonging and understanding of the two young protagonists. Similarly to the domestic fiction of later years, and especially the great amount of children’s literature produced in the nineteenth century, the children and adolescents are the most perceptive, sentimental and sensitive models of civic virtue and citizenship, and they have the task to imagine a new, more inclusive and sentimental, society.

When Magawisca tells Everell the story of the attack on the Pequot nation, she dwells on the details of the death/execution of her brother Samoset, and she makes clear the link between the moral law, and the religious practices, while demonstrating, at the same time, that this is not the case with the English community: “Magawisca paused – ‘You English tell us, Everell, that the book of your law is better than that written in our hearts, for ye says it teaches mercy, compassion, forgiveness – if ye had such law and believed it, would you thus have treated a captive boy?’ ” (Sedgwick 1827, 51).

Turning sentimentalism against itself, Magawisca is the critical and inquiring mind, which cannot quite conform to the puritan norms, and partly, cannot accept the decisions made by the Indian authority either.

During the course of the novel the three main young characters build an alternative form of kinship and decide to intervene outside of the laws of the colonial government

and society. The two main actions to which I am referring here are Magawisca's intervention to save Everell from the capital punishment decreed by her father Mononotto as revenge for the destruction of his village and his family, and Hope and Everell's subsequent decision to plan Magawisca's escape from the puritan prison in Boston, after she had been captured by the puritan soldiers. In both cases the basis for the action is the recognition of value, independently from blood relations (and sometimes in spite of), but in the name of a shared life together on the frontier. It is because of the shared experience of the household, and the ways in which the respective knowledge is transmitted (from the Indian characters to the puritan youth, and vice versa) that these characters are able to create a community that provisionally and impermanently functions as an alternative to the puritan government and society, providing an example of "adoption" as a creation of kinship relations outside of the sentimental and cultural boundaries imposed by puritan norms or Indian customs and regulations. This micro-community, though, is not stable and cannot be a model for a new society, because, by the end of the novel, only certain affiliations become permanent, and those who do not belong with the American vision of progress, will not be assimilated, welcomed, or permanently "adopted".

When Magawisca is freed from the prison, Everell and Hope try to convince her to stay with them: "And must we now part, Magawisca? Must we live without you?' 'Oh! No, no!' cried Hope, joining her entreaties, 'your noble mind must not be wasted in those hideous solitudes.'" (Sedgwick 1827, 332). Magawisca, then, provides a lesson in Indian wisdom and poise (as represented by the author), insisting on her communing with the Great Spirit and with Nature. Hope continues her pleas: "I cannot ask you,' she said, 'I do not ask you, for your sake, but for ours, to return to us'" (Sedgwick 1827, 332). Magawisca, however, is determined in her decision, and parts from them after having received two sentimental tokens given by Hope: one chain with Everell's lock of hair, "taken from his head when he was a boy, at Bethel – it will remind you of your happiest days there" (Sedgwick 1827, 333), and a small miniature of Everell, kept by Hope on a ribbon. As Hope retains the relation with the real person, Magawisca receives the sentimental substitution, simulacrum of her impossible relations. Similarly to other Indian literary characters in other texts of the same period, Magawisca disappears into the forest, quietly performing the "vanishing Indian", unable, like Huck Finn, to find a place in the American domestic vision of progress. Ultimately, even the brief fantasy of racial assimilation propounded by the novel is not a viable option. As in other cases, race plays a crucial role in narratives of kinship, affiliation and adoption, and it becomes a constant concern and often the point of disruption.

If in the early decades of the nineteenth century *Hope Leslie* depicts a realm of possibilities for affiliation, kinship and adoption within an ideal micro-community, other texts of the so-called sentimental tradition engage with the presence of orphans and with

the questions inherent to their assimilation in the American society, and especially what function they can serve in the reconsideration of a nation made of individuals, rather than families and lineage. As in the case of Victorian literature, populated by a great number of orphans (*Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* are among the most memorable), American sentimental novels take up adoption themes in all possible variations. According to Carol Singley, “the proliferation of adoption fiction occurred at a time when Americans were celebrating democratic individualism, freedom from English influences, and a sense of unlimited potential” (96). The orphan protagonists of *Bildungsroman* novels such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854) are rewarded not only with a home but with a right place in the domestic republic. As Cindy Weinstein claims in her study *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, most of the sentimental fiction of the American antebellum period is about the making of a family: “the making of a family is the task that awaits most sentimental protagonists, but what makes this endeavor so interesting and important [...] is that in the process of making a family, the family is being redefined as an institution to which one can choose to belong or not” (8). However, all the orphans mentioned above are white children, thus more easily assimilated and included in nineteenth-century United States.

At the same time, the American family in the nineteenth century is a fraught terrain, due to the presence and influence of slavery and its consequences, and therefore no study about family or familial practices could possibly avoid the question of the presence of black orphans, and black children in general, in the cultural production of the era. The possibilities of being incorporated and integrated – as problematic as they were – deemed viable for Native children were impossible for blacks: “Unlike people of African descent, whose identities became synonymous with slavery – a status that denied black people the very rights or recognition of kinship – Indians were described as free people who could potentially be incorporated into the U.S. national family, a process that in turn mandated that Indians adopt the social, economic, and familial values associated with white U.S. society” (Peterson).

Even though one of the most obvious texts to examine in this regard would be *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet E. Wilson, I believe it would be even more interesting to look at some highly understudied materials that circulated in the evangelical and tracts societies of the time, extremely busy in their conversion activities and anti-slavery work, and that targeted the young readers, as well as the adults. Black orphans and black asylums for children are mentioned in quite a few of the periodicals of the 1840s or 1850s, and some of the articles detail the development and organization of such institutions in cities like New York, or, for example, they publish tracts such as *The Orphans’ Advocate and Social Monitor* (Boston), in order to move the population and to find help for city charities.

Among these publications, and similar to the standard sentimental stories about orphans, one text quite interestingly stands out: *Little Robert and His Friend; or The Light of Brier Valley*, written by Mrs. M. J. P. Smith and published by the American Reform Tract and Book Society in Cincinnati in 1861. This small volume is relevant and interesting for a number of reasons, first for the time and place of publication: at the inception of the American Civil War, in Cincinnati, in Ohio, a free state but very close to the slave states, where the presence of blacks was certainly significant. Moreover, the organ of publication is also quite relevant: the American Reform Tract and Book Society was involved in anti-slavery activities while at the same time keen on evangelization.

The story is typical in that it provides a male version of the “Little Eva” narrative: a saintly white child who helps a destitute, sad and not-yet-Christian black child to overcome his ignorance, thus turning the black person into a model Christian. Little Robert is the black child with the drunken father and the unhappy and inadequate white mother. Frederick Alton is the angelic white boy, who is intent on saving not only Little Robert (he is called “Nigger Bob” by his schoolmates), but of redeeming the whole community of Brier Valley, convincing the town officials to have Sabbath meetings, and reforming the rebellious youth. The most interesting aspect, though, is that Robert, because of his desperate life, contemplates suicide, and is saved by Frederick who arrives at the very nick of time to prevent Robert from jumping off a cliff: “A shudder of horror thrilled along Frederick’s nerves, as with a cry of dismay he sprang forward, and threw his arms about the child, just in time to save him from taking the fatal leap” (Smith 1861, 30). As in the case of *Hope Leslie*, and as in the case of other texts about young children or teenagers, the responsibility of saving the life of the black child (or the orphan, or the Native Magawisca) does not lie in the society at large, which in fact not only does not protect them, but endangers them with all its laws and customs, but it rests only on the singular individual Christian child, who proves to be the most civic minded non-citizen of the community. Interestingly enough, Frederick behaves very much like Little Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but he goes a step further. Indeed, once he perceives that he is about to die, he asks his mother to raise the black child, Robert:

‘it is a strange request, I know, dear mother; but it will make me very happy in dying if you will promise me to take little Robert in my place when I am gone.’ A look of agony was on the mother’s pale face. ‘Not in your place, darling; I cannot take him in your place! But if it will make you happy, I will promise to adopt him for your sake, and do the best I can to bring him up for a life of honor and usefulness’. (Smith 1861, 100)

In this exchange it is the youth who directs the adult’s choices, and, according to the sentimental vocabulary and framework, he is very political in the fact that he asks something exactly when the request cannot be denied, because it is a deathbed wish.

If American society and culture can only imagine adoption as substitution (a dead white child for a black child), it can never go as far as imagining a black family welcoming a white orphan. However, it seems to me that this text, by using the sentimental tools of an established tradition, is conceiving of a possibility that was still distant and certainly rarely practiced outside the realm of fiction: the incorporation/adoption of a black child into a white family, and in fact, a non-conventional nuclear family, because Frederick's mother is a widow, left poor by the ever-present incapable husband. Given the potential subversive of this story of adoption, one wonders what could have happened to Huck Finn if Mark Twain had been a little more prone to sentimental tropes, and had made Jim adopt Huck.

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