The Mind of a Child
Images of African Americans in Early Juvenile Fiction

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In the narrative American historians typically tell about the coming of the Civil War, the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 invariably appears on the traditional list of significant events that contributed to the conflict between the North and the South. Historians generally fail to recognize, however, that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel was simply the most popular work that emerged from a mass of antebellum fictional literature dealing with the subject of American slavery. This tradition began long before Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and even before the first abolitionist novel, Archy Moore, was released in 1836 or The Liberator appeared in 1831.

The appearance of the black slave in American literary culture originated in the realm of children’s fiction produced in both Great Britain and the United States during the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In these narratives, aimed at an audience of ten- to twelve-year-olds, white authors for the first time fashioned black characters who displayed above all else a childlike docility and a heartfelt devotion to their white benefactors. These representations undercut the manhood of

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black men, thereby leaving a cultural legacy that would legitimate the denial of the manly privileges of political and legal equality to African American men in the North. Because the children who read these books in the 1820s and 1830s would grow up to become the adults of the antebellum period, the storylines and characters in this juvenile literature played a critical role in shaping the racial attitudes of white Americans who would make key decisions about black civil rights in the pre-Civil War period.¹

A close look at the first juvenile fiction involving slaves that was published in the United States urges an expansion of current scholarly wisdom on both the purposes of early children’s literature and the ways in which Americans in the early republic thought about race. In his 1980 essay “Children’s Literature and Bourgeois Ideology,” Isaac Kramnick argued that middle-class writers who created the new genre of children’s fiction in Great Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century consciously used this literature as a means of inculcating bourgeois values into the next generation of would-be capitalists. Kramnick, whose findings continue to provide the basis for the discussion among historians in this field, maintained that early children’s stories promoted character traits like industry and self-sacrifice to encourage children to work

¹ Eliza Farrar was the most explicit of these authors about her intended audience, stating in her preface to The Adventures of Congo that “the history of Congo is written for children from ten to twelve years of age.” [Eliza Ware Farrar], The Adventures of Congo in Search of His Master; an American Tale (London, 1823), v. Most of the other stories discussed here seem to have targeted approximately the same age group. There were at least three printings of Martha Sherwood’s The Re-captured Negro in the United States during the 1820s and early 1830s. All three came out of Massachusetts—Boston in 1821, Newburyport in 1822, and Greenfield in 1834. The Newburyport edition was titled Dazee; or the Re-Captured Negro. Farrar’s The Adventures of Congo in Search of His Master was first published in London in 1823, after which an American edition came out in Boston in the early 1830s and a second in 1846. By all accounts, the Juvenile Miscellany was widely read. On January 6, 1827, four months after its initial publication, Child wrote to Mary Preston, “the subscription to my Miscellany stands now at 850 names, and is every day increasing.” Letter reprinted in Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland, Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880 (Amherst, MA, 1982), 8. Child’s biographer Carolyn Karcher points out that the magazine was so popular that it soon provided Child with enough income to make her financially independent. Carolyn L. Karcher, The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child (Durham, NC, 1994), 79.
hard and save so they would maintain middle-class status as they became adults.²

The slave-related children’s stories released by American publishers in the 1820s and early 1830s, however, reveal that juvenile fiction of this period transmitted to the nation’s youth a particular understanding of what it meant to be white as well as what it meant to be part of the middle class. These narratives did not encourage self-reliance and the Protestant work ethic in young readers so much as they advocated the benevolent, paternalistic treatment of black slaves and servants by their white masters. The British authors who crafted many of these initial forays into children’s fiction, of course, probably did not write with the primary objective of teaching future slaveholders to be good to their slaves. Given the personal connection Kramnick has noted between the creators of juvenile literature and the emergent industrial classes, these writers may instead have been suggesting to the capitalists of the next generation a way to avoid social upheaval on the part of the lower classes that would make up their workforce.³ Regardless of the lessons these

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3. Maria Edgeworth, for one, though, was influenced by the writings of Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards, who cautioned against immediate abolition and argued instead that plantation owners should focus on improving conditions for their slaves. Edgeworth named the slaveholding hero of her story “The Grateful Slave” after Edwards. Nini Rodgers, “Two Quakers and a Utilitarian: The Reaction of Three Irish Women Writers to the Problem of Slavery 1789-1807,” Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, 100 (2000), 153, 155. On the group of “ameliorationists” in Britain that included Edwards see Claire Midgley, Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870 (London, 1995). In 1804, Edgeworth envisioned her audience for Popular Tales coming from “the respectable and useful middling classes of merchants, manufacturers, and farmers.” Rodgers has suggested that Edgeworth saw a parallel between the situation of slave masters and landlords like her father, who owned an estate in Ireland. Rodgers, “Two Quakers,” 153.
British authors intended to teach, however, plots involving masters and their black servants would have resonated with American children in a literal sense at least as much as they would have on an allegorical level. In a society with a population of over 3.5 million slaves and free blacks, white children could not help taking away from these stories certain morals about how whites and African Americans should relate to each other.

By consistently portraying whites as masters and blacks as their slaves or servants, early authors of juvenile literature clearly encouraged the belief among young Americans that “respectable” whites did not belong on the same social level as blacks of any class. Children’s fiction thus helped bring about the era of “racial modernity” that James Brewer Stewart has suggested prevailed among white northerners during the 1820s and 1830s. In Stewart’s definition, racial modernity meant that whites judged the status of all African Americans solely on the basis of their race, not by their level of education, economic achievement, or moral character.

Stewart also argued that the main racial fear northern whites harbored was that African Americans might become integrated with whites, producing an interracial society delineated by class and not racial distinctions. Yet children’s fiction of this era that featured black characters calls into question Stewart’s singular emphasis on “amalgamation” as white Americans’ chief anxiety relating to African Americans. The undercurrent of white uneasiness found in many of these stories stemmed not from the possibility that blacks would become assimilated into society on an equal footing with whites. Instead, the paramount racial fear revealed in these tales was that Africans and their descendants might at any moment rise up and engage in terrible acts of violent retribution against white men, women, and children. Thus, white children learned through these narratives not only that African Americans were naturally powerless and dependent on whites, but also that they had the tendency to lash out against the whites who were supposed to guide and protect these inferior charges. Such suggestions in the literature that white Americans read in their younger years only reinforced the phenomenon observed by Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 1830s that “the danger of a conflict between the white and the black inhabitants of the Southern states of the Union . . . perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans, like a painful dream.” Tocqueville’s claim that “the inhabitants of the North make it [slave revolt] a common topic of conversation” and “vainly en-
deavor to devise some means of obviating the misfortunes which they foresee” indicates that white northerners consciously worried about the possibility of black violence, particularly in the months following the Southampton Revolt, when Tocqueville spent time in the Northeast.4

To focus on these narrative explorations of Africans and their descendants points also to the important role that women played as authors and as mothers in shaping cultural ideas about slavery in nineteenth-century America. By the early nineteenth century in Britain and the 1820s in the United States, middle-class women were assuming primary responsibility for teaching children the appropriate moral and religious principles. Publishing children’s literature that was intended to fulfill these didactic purposes in the culture at large afforded some women the opportunity to influence boys and girls beyond the confines of their own homes. Whether as authors composing texts about slaves or mothers selecting such texts for their children’s edification, women played a vital part in fashioning the beliefs about slavery and race of the generation that would ultimately determine the fate of the slave system in the United States.5

Unlike later juvenile tales that featured slaves, such children’s narratives of the early republic period were not motivated by the desire to bring about emancipation. Though British authors like Eliza Farrar and Maria Edgeworth had their most honorable white characters declare in passing that slavery was wrong, their narratives made no attempt to promote an end to the institution. In Farrar’s The Adventures of Congo, the genteel and admirable Virginian Mr. Stewart pronounced his “detesta-

4. Though the primary source around which Stewart framed his article—a letter printed in the Liberator on April 2 and 30 of 1831—gives at least as much attention to the specter of race war as it does to “amalgamation,” Stewart’s essay does not. Stewart’s sole comment about the vision of black violence featured in this correspondence was that it should be taken as evidence of “how deeply white abolitionists feared the possibility of slave insurrection as they opened their crusade.” He does not attempt to connect anxieties about such a scenario to the ordinary white Americans who reacted so vehemently against the abolitionists, particularly in the years following the Southampton Revolt of 1831. Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity,” 184. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (2 vols., New York, 1981), 1: 242.

5. Deborah C. DeRosa makes this point about the antebellum period in Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830–1865 (Albany, NY, 2003). Karcher also provides an excellent summary of these developments in First Woman in the Republic, 59–60.
tion of the principles of slavery" and his belief that "the dependence of a slave degraded his character, that the exercise of power in a slaveholder hardened and corrupted the heart." Yet in less than a page, Stewart had abandoned his initial high hopes that he might easily emancipate the slaves left to him by his father. After two years, Farrar indicated, Mr. Stewart realized that "some objection presented itself, which was, for the present, insurmountable" with each of the plans for manumission he formulated. Likewise, the magnanimous slaveholder Mr. Edwards in Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro" wished "that there was no such thing as slavery in the world." Later in the same sentence, however, Edgeworth explained that Edwards "was convinced, by the arguments of those who have the best means of obtaining information, that the sudden emancipation of the negroes would rather increase than diminish their miseries." For unspecified reasons, then, Farrar and Edgeworth's characters resigned themselves to the continuation of slavery.6

Though they cannot be classified as abolitionist tales, stories like Edgeworth's and Farrar's reflected the belief espoused by many white authors that holding slaves was a dangerous business. As events in various parts of the Atlantic world revealed, black slaves posed a perpetual threat to the safety of white society in a number of New World countries and European-held colonies. For centuries, periodic revolts had plagued slaveholders in the Western Hemisphere, but the turn of the nineteenth century represented a particularly tumultuous period for the institution in both North America and the Caribbean. The most disturbing incident for whites took place when black slaves on the French island of St. Domingue initiated a war against their masters in 1791. During the thirteen turbulent years that followed, white Americans and Britons read in their

6. Farrar, The Adventures of Congo, 4. Maria Edgeworth, "The Grateful Negro" in Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels (18 vols., London, 1832), 5: 232. Edgeworth's story was first published in her Popular Tales in 1804. Although Lydia Maria Child would later write strongly abolitionist fiction, she did not begin to embrace the antislavery cause until meeting William Lloyd Garrison in June of 1830. It would be another three years before she published her first truly abolitionist work, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans, a nonfictional tract. Prior to 1833, Child used the pages of her Juvenile Miscellany to explore the possibilities of racial equality without taking a hard line on behalf of emancipation. See Carolyn L. Karcher, A Lydia Maria Child Reader (Durham, NC, 1997) and Karcher, First Woman in the Republic.
newspapers not only of the slaughter of masters by their slaves, but also of the rise to power of a black general—the former slave Toussaint Louverture—and, finally, of the government-sponsored massacre of the hundreds of whites who remained on the island in 1804. The reality of the situation became even more vivid to white Americans when, in 1793, thousands of refugee slaveholders and their families began pouring into U.S. ports from the island to escape the carnage.7

In the United States itself, evidence of slave unrest followed closely upon the heels of the St. Domingue uprising. Gabriel Prosser’s thwarted rebellion in Richmond in 1800, Charles Deslondes’s armed march on New Orleans in 1811, and Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy in Charleston in 1822 were the most well known of these attempts to subvert the slave system prior to the more successful revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Though historian Michael Johnson has called into question whether the Charleston plot actually existed, news of these potential insurrections nevertheless inspired fear in white Americans that the racial order and the lives of whites in their country could be destroyed by rebellious slaves as violently and as suddenly as they had been in Haiti.8

Authors first in Great Britain and, by the 1820s, in the United States used children’s literature partly as a way of working through the anxieties they or the children they wrote for might have had about the potentially violent nature of African slaves. Stories from both countries that were published in the U.S. during the 1820s stressed kind treatment of black slaves, but warned young readers in gentle (and sometimes not-so-gentle) ways that cruelty toward slaves might potentially provoke terrible retrib-

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8. Scot French has proposed that Nat Turner was not, in fact, the sole leader of the Southampton Insurrection, which he suggests may have involved a plot reaching well beyond Turner’s home county into North Carolina and other parts of Virginia. See French, The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory (Boston, MA, 2004), ch. 2. Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” The William and Mary Quarterly, 58 (Oct. 2001), 915–76. For the fascinating debate this article inspired among historians, see The William and Mary Quarterly, 59 (Jan. 2002), 135–202.
utive bloodshed against whites. These narratives presented an uncomfortably contradictory image of male slaves, in particular. Black characters showed an unwavering devotion to their owners in the same texts where others took pleasure in inflicting bodily harm on the whites who had oppressed them. Though the authors apparently sought a mollifying effect, readers could hardly have missed the dark undertones of black violence just below the surface of tales otherwise peopled with loyal and affectionate black slaves.

Several authors urged whites to show paternalistic kindness toward people of African descent left “in their care,” but principally so that they might avoid awakening the vengeful wrath of slaves. The kind, gentlemanly Mr. Edwards in Maria Edgeworth’s “The Grateful Negro,” for instance, believed that the role of slaveholders should be to “endeavour to make our negroes as happy as possible.” The reason he had “adopted those plans for the amelioration of the state of the slaves,” however, had less to do with disinterested Christian charity than with the fact that benevolence “appeared to him the most likely to succeed without producing any violent agitation or revolution.” Because Mr. Edwards “treated his slaves with all possible humanity and kindness,” he was able to avoid any concern about the possibility of an uprising on his plantation. In one scene, Edwards loaned his slave Caesar a knife to trim branches in the thatch of Caesar’s cottage. “‘It is very sharp,’ added he, smiling, ‘but I am not one of those masters who are afraid to trust their negroes with sharp knives.’” Caesar justified the trust Edwards placed in him, at one point “declaring he would sooner forfeit his life than rebel against such a master.”

Edwards’s less savvy counterpart, Mr. Jeffries, on the other hand, ended up with an insurrection on his hands after employing a brutal overseer. “The cruelties practised by Durant, the overseer of Jeffries’s plantation,” Edgeworth reported, “had exasperated the slaves under his dominion,” causing them to be “leagued together in a conspiracy.” The plans for the uprising described by Edgeworth mimicked the revolt effected on St. Domingue. The Jamaican slaves intended to “set fire to the canes, at one and the same time, on every plantation; and when the white inhabitants of the island should run to put out the fire, the blacks were


to seize this moment of confusion and consternation to fall upon them, and make a general massacre.” The ringleader of this plot, Hector, “even in his dreams . . . breathed vengeance,” Edgeworth informed her readers. Hector recalled one nighttime vision: “It was delightful,” he told Caesar. “The whites were weltering in their own blood!”

Twenty-six years later, Lydia Maria Child directly connected her story “The St. Domingo Orphans” to the Haitian revolt by setting the action during and immediately after the uprising on St. Domingue. The narrative, published in September of 1830, focused on the ordeal that the white Mrs. Jameson and her two daughters experienced during this chaotic time. Though Child separated her reader from the action slightly by having the Jamesons hear rather than see the massacre of whites at the hands of their slaves, the effect still proves chilling. “During the night

they could not sleep, for the shrieks and groans of those who were butchered by these unfeeling wretches,” Child recounted. Even more powerful was the scene where Mrs. Jameson pled with her captors: “Oh! If I must die because I am white, do, at least, spare my innocent children!” The mother of the two girls “had scarcely finished the words,” Child noted, “when a ferocious soldier came behind her, and cut the head from her body so suddenly, that her blood flew all over her unfortunate daughters.”

Child made the connection between harsh treatment and retributive violence more subtly in “Jumbo and Zairee,” published in her Juvenile Miscellany magazine in January of 1831. After the young African slave Jumbo suffered a brutal whipping at the hands of his white master, Child declared that “his heart was full of fury towards the white men.” Soon after Jumbo had recovered from the seventy-five lashes inflicted on him, “he was accused of wounding the overseer in the back, with an intent to kill him.” Later, Jumbo’s father confessed his own murderous intentions against a man he believed to be a cruel slaveholder. “I thought he had stolen away my children,” the former African prince admitted to his son, “and I have ever since been thinking how I could find an opportunity to kill him.” The kindness this master, Mr. Harris, had actually shown to his slaves shielded the exemplary slaveholder from such a harrowing fate. In describing Mr. Harris, Child noted that in contrast to Jumbo’s owner, “everybody said he was the kindest master in the world; that he visited his slaves every day, listened to their complaints, relieved their want, and never allowed the overseer to punish them without his knowledge.” Because Jumbo “felt sure he was good and kind, though he was a white man,” Child related, “Jumbo was glad his father had not killed” Mr. Harris.

If a master took into account the well-being of his slaves, early children’s authors emphasized that he could avoid inciting a revolt and instead would be rewarded by the affection and loyalty men and women of

12. Lydia Maria Child, “Jumbo and Zairee,” Juvenile Miscellany, 5 (Jan. 1831), reprinted in Karcher, A Lydia Maria Child Reader, 156, 158. As Karcher points out, Child directly acknowledged the influence Edgeworth had on her as a children’s author in the introduction to Evenings in New England, published in 1824. See Karcher, First Woman in the Republic, 60.
African descent naturally displayed toward whites. As a result, the young people who perused these texts encountered a model of race relations that was at once highly affable and blatantly unequal. Africans and African Americans came across as natural inferiors, requiring the protection and approval of their patrician benefactors. The humble gratitude of slaves and condescending indulgence of slaveholders suffused these narratives with a rampant paternalism that succeeded in concealing with reasonable effectiveness the darker side of relations between blacks and whites, masters and bondsmen.

In story after story published for children in the early American republic, writers tried to dismiss the threat of slave revolt by stressing the profound love and fidelity slaves felt for their masters. Both Congo and his son of the same name in Eliza Farrar’s *The Adventures of Congo* exemplified this attachment to Mr. Stewart and his son Charles, respectively. The servile devotion the elder Congo showed his master began when he became indentured to Stewart in Philadelphia. Congo, Farrar noted, found his situation with Mr. Stewart so desirable that when his term of indenture expired, his “countenance fell, and he turned away in silence from the presence of his master, to hide the tears which rushed into his eyes.” The problem, Farrar related, was that “Congo had been so perfectly happy in Mr. Stewart’s service, that . . . he feared he was to be abandoned by his best friend, and separated from those he most loved.” When Stewart then made it clear to Congo that nothing between them had to change, except that Congo would now be free to leave if he wanted to do so, the idea of leaving his master “implied a possibility so painful, that Congo was again made wretched by the bare mention of it.” According to Farrar, only when Mr. Stewart “allowed him the pleasure of believing himself inseparably connected with the family of his benefactor . . . was peace restored to the breast of the simple-hearted and affectionate Congo.”

Later in the story, Congo’s son likewise developed an almost visceral attachment to Mr. Stewart’s son, Charles. Like his father, the young Congo only felt himself complete when in the service of his white master. This connection fulfilled the wish of the older Congo, who had declared at Congo’s birth that he “loved his own dependence on Mr. Stewart, and was so happy in feeling himself inseparably connected with him, that

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his first desire, on becoming a father, was that his son should be equally inseparable from the eldest son of the house.” When the younger Congo determined to leave his father and go to England with Charles Stewart, Charles articulated Congo’s priorities in his observation that “the boy’s personal attachment to him far more than his curiosity, prompted his desire of accompanying him.”

After the ship they were taking to England sank and master and servant became separated, Congo’s concern for Stewart took precedence over any care for his own welfare. When he thought Charles might not have survived, the young valet’s “affection for his master made fear predominate over hope, more than it had ever done when his own life was in danger,” Farrar related. In the ordeal that followed, Congo never failed to place his relationship with his master above his own physical and spiritual well-being. In one instance, Congo put his soul in jeopardy by engaging in the sinful occupation of begging in hopes of gaining the means to find his master. Later, when Congo had the choice of keeping his leg or being reunited with Stewart sooner, he did not hesitate to choose the latter. “It was feared amputation would be necessary,” Farrar explained, “and as Congo understood the stump might be healed much sooner than the leg in its present state, he exclaimed, ‘Then pray cut it off at once, for I should prefer the loss of my limb to the loss of my master.’” Charles Stewart arrived soon thereafter, sparing Congo’s leg. But white readers could still be impressed by the dramatic sacrifice the young servant was willing to make for his white employer and were perhaps comforted by a black character who cherished his master far above even the soundness of his own body.

Many of the characters with African roots who appeared in early nineteenth-century children’s fiction harbored a fervent loyalty to genteel white men out of gratitude for the kindness these “benefactors” had shown them. Not insignificantly, two different authors in this period designated stories with the title “The Grateful Negro.” In her tale of that name, Maria Edgeworth reiterated on nearly every page Caesar’s indebtedness to his master for buying him and his wife so that they would not be separated. Repeatedly, Edgeworth affirmed that Caesar’s “feelings were . . . so strong that he could not find expression for his

15. Ibid., 29, 27, 66, 176.
gratitude,” that “gratitude swelled in his bosom,” that Caesar “continued
to speak of Mr. Edwards with the warmest expressions of gratitude,”
and, finally, that “the principle of gratitude conquered every other sensa-
tion.” The thankfulness Caesar felt caused him, in the end, to betray his
enslaved black friends and forfeit his own prospects of freedom by re-
vealing to his master that the slaves planned a wholesale slaughter of the
white planters in Jamaica. In a similar incident, Ambrose Serle’s “Grate-
ful Negro” also made a personal sacrifice out of gratitude to his white
master. When Robert’s owner found himself in financial straits because
of a lawsuit, the faithful slave, “well remembering his master’s kindness,”
remained with his master and went to work “as a day-labourer” to sup-
port this “gentleman.” Though Robert’s hard work ended up keeping
his master afloat through his brush with destitution, it was Robert whom
Serle’s title designated as the “grateful” one in the relationship. By focus-
ing on the indebtedness of slaves like Caesar and Robert to their gener-
ous white masters, children’s authors emphasized the inequality in the
relationship between whites and blacks and the cheerful complicity of
slaves in sustaining that inequality.16

Even in stories with more of an antislavery slant than Edgeworth’s or
Serle’s, black characters displayed a deferential reverence for the white
men who had rescued them from bondage. In Martha Butt Sherwood’s
Dazee, or the Re-Captured Negro, the adolescent Dazee met a white mis-
ionary, “Mr. W-,” after being recovered from a slave ship that had been
illegally attempting to transport him and other Africans to the Americas.
Sherwood related that Dazee went “on shore with Mr. W-, whom he
called his master, and from whom he could not bear to be separated.”
The title of the story (The Re-captured Negro), as well as Dazee’s desig-
nation of Mr. W- as “his master,” drew a parallel between the role of the
slave trader who initially captured Dazee and that of the antislavery activ-
ists who captured him again for their own purposes. In both cases, the
white men displayed an attitude of proprietorship over the young slave.
When Sherwood added about Mr. W- that Dazee had “transferred to
him much of that affection which till that time had been wholly confined
to his mother,” the author symbolically replaced Dazee’s biological

Happy Negro; to which is added, the Grateful Negro” (New York, n.d.), 15. The
American Antiquarian Society places the date between 1823 and 1825.
mother with a white father figure, an act that discounted the life Dazee had led independent of his white patron.\(^7\)

In Child's "Jumbo and Zairee," slaves once again owed their freedom to a benevolent white man, though in this case that white man was himself a slaveholder. In the story, the kind Georgia planter Mr. Harris ultimately bought Jumbo, Zairee, and their father and freed the family, who subsequently returned to their home in Africa. Once the former slaves were back in their native land, Mr. Harris's memory took on a mythic quality for the grateful Africans. "Often, as they sat together," Child relayed, "did they repeat to their neighbors, the story of the good white man." Zairee's worshipful treatment of the doll Mr. Harris had given her when she was a girl demonstrated the profound feelings she and her brother cherished for the man who had saved them from a life of bondage: "Zairee, although she was now a woman, kissed it and wept over it; she would hardly let any one touch it, so great was her reverence and gratitude for Mr. Harris." Once again, the "reverence" a young African felt for a white man elevated the slaveholder above the humble slave in the social order.\(^8\)

Even children's stories that explicitly denounced racial prejudice nevertheless supported the existence of a natural racial hierarchy. In *The Adventures of Congo*, a villainous Irish woman labeled the young Congo "one of the last of God's creatures" and "a filthy Negro." These "unchristian" remarks prompted the more gentlemanly Mr. Cooper to admonish his housekeeper that he "would hear no abuse of the boy for his color." Yet even Charles Stewart, whose "kind heart" was "agonized" when he thought Congo had died at sea, believed his black servant should remain in a subordinate social position. Charles Stewart's actions toward his valet went no further than good-natured indulgence of "the alternate tears and smiles, sobs and cries of joy, uttered by Congo" when they found each other after many long months. When Congo and Stewart were reunited, Farrar depicted Stewart as having generously "allowed his faithful servant to bury his face in the bosom of his long lost master." Congo himself relished this retention of an unequal racial order. The story concluded with a letter in which Congo proudly reported that

\(^7\) Mrs. [Mary Martha] Sherwood, *Dazee, or the Re-Captured Negro* (Newburyport, MA, 1822), 24.
\(^8\) Child, "Jumbo and Zairee," 159.
Stewart and his new wife had enlisted him “to live with them as their only man servant, and to-day I have begun to call her mistress, which she would never let me do before.” Congo’s joy became complete only when his servile position was restored and strengthened by the privilege of referring to Stewart’s wife as “mistress.”

Further reinforcement of an unequal racial hierarchy came when authors of juvenile fiction equated black men and women with children. By endowing black characters of all ages with childlike qualities, writers were in part trying to make it easier for young white readers to identify with people of a different race whose lifestyles were foreign to most British and American children. This tactic, however, also fostered in white children condescension toward people with black skin and a corresponding feeling of superiority over them. A British antislavery pamphlet from the 1820s asked children to “place yourselves for a moment in the situation” of a “poor child” who was an abused slave. Though the anonymous author was trying to encourage young white readers to develop an emotional connection to those in bondage, the title of the publication, *Pity the Negro*, suggested both the reformist intention of its author and its patronizing attitude. Young readers could identify with, yet also feel superior to, adult characters with black skin who possessed childish qualities. In “Jumbo and Zairee,” the African prince Yoloo “wept like a child” when he found out his children were alive. Farrar noted that with the elder Congo, “joy in his breast was like that of a child,” and he later commented on Congo’s “childish mistakes” with language, one of the qualities that made this full-grown African man popular with white boys and girls. Farrar frequently situated both Congos in the midst of whites who were much younger than they were, hinting that these grown men had much in common with children. When the younger Congo took a position as a servant in an English household, for instance, Farrar reported that “activity and good-humour made him the delight of the children, for whom he was continually buying gingerbread, and making playthings.” Earlier, on board the ship, Farrar observed that “the children found in Congo a most accommodating and merry playfellow.” Rather than defining him as a black adolescent approaching manhood and independence, Farrar chose to put Congo on a par with children.


half his age, thus giving him an air of frivolity and childishness that could hardly elicit the respect of white readers.21

In the wake of the St. Domingue uprising, the strategy of infantilizing healthy black men served in part as a means of making them seem less threatening to whites who had read the horrific newspaper accounts of black violence and white bloodshed on the island. Farrar included in her book a scene where she implicitly stressed the absurdity of the idea that black men with Congo’s innocence and playfulness harbored a desire to commit violent acts against whites who had power over them. At one point in the narrative, one of the younger Congo’s English employers, Mrs. Barlow, wanted an excuse to discharge Congo from her service. She therefore invented the allegation that Congo had been trying to kill

her. When Mrs. Barlow witnessed the young black man brandishing a carving knife, Farrar related that the calculating woman “shrieked violently . . . exclaiming, ‘He will murder me! He will murder me!’” and “fell into the arms of her husband apparently senseless.” Mrs. Barlow continued the deception when Congo later “took the carving knife from the dish” and she “uttered a groan and fell back in her chair, gasping as if with extreme terror.” Farrar clearly ridiculed such “terror” and the notion that any white woman “fancied her life in danger from Congo.” In reality, Congo was obviously not a menacing rebel bent on the destruction of his mistress, but instead “the innocent object of her detestation.” Charges that black men like Congo sought to endanger the lives of whites, Farrar implied, were both groundless and unfair to these “simple-hearted and affectionate” people.22

Children’s authors further emphasized the harmlessness and inferiority of African Americans when they presented black characters who took pleasure in occupying a lowlier position than the master’s children in the white household. The image of the mammy appeared in this fiction before it became a staple of the plantation novel, the genre generally credited with its introduction into American culture. In Isabel Drysdale’s Scenes in Georgia, published by the American Sunday School Union in 1827, Drysdale outlined what would become a familiar trope in nineteenth-century fiction when she described Aunt Chloe. “Those who have never witnessed it, can scarcely conceive the affecting tenderness displayed by the negro nurse to her little charge,” Drysdale intoned, citing a feeling that combined “strong maternal love with the enthusiastic devotedness of loyalty.” Aunt Chloe celebrated her own subservience to a child, solely because the nurse was black and the child was white. “She considers her master’s child as a superior being,” Drysdale noted, “and receives, with overflowing gratitude, the fond endearments of infantine affection.” By depicting black adults as the acknowledged inferiors even of white infants, authors like Drysdale denied these characters full expression of their manhood or womanhood. When these characters existed solely to dote on white children, they possessed little sense of self and little time to care for their own families.23

Women who composed children’s fiction in the early nineteenth cen-

tury prevented the African Americans they portrayed from exercising their right to serve as loving parents to their children. Instead, black characters prioritized the happiness of white children over that of their black sons and daughters. Chloe’s motherly affection for the white baby she nursed, for instance, seemed to Drysdale “to exceed the force of natural affection for her own offspring.” In The Adventures of Congo, Farrar distinguished the lack of concern the older Congo and his wife showed for their infant son, compared with the great care Mrs. Stewart showed for her children. “As neither Dinah nor Congo were half so particular about their child, as their mamma was about her’s,” Farrar relayed, the Stewart progeny “were allowed to pull little Congo, as they called him, and nurse him as much as they liked.” Dinah put the recreation of the white children above the safety of her own baby by being “well pleased to let them make a plaything” of Congo. This black mother seemed untroubled even when “she sometimes found him left alone on the floor of the room, or pushed into the corner of a large chair, whilst his young nurses were pursuing other amusements.” In this scenario, the black child appeared merely as a toy, or a “plaything,” designed to entertain white children rather than as a human being in his own right. Such scenes suggested to the next generation of white citizens that black children had less value than they did. They also implied that the bond between black parents and their children lacked the quality of white parents’ attachment to their offspring. By the time young people who had read stories like Drysdale’s and Farrar’s came of age in the antebellum period, early children’s literature had helped these cultural assumptions to become an essential part of the way white northerners thought about African Americans.

Whether as children themselves or as mothers of them, women writing in the 1850s received some of their cultural understanding of slaves and slavery from popular publications like The Re-Captured Negro, The Adventures of Congo, or Lydia Maria Child’s Juvenile Miscellany. Though alternate views of African Americans existed in American popular culture during the 1830s and 1840s, middle-class women like Harriet Beecher Stowe typically enjoyed far more frequent exposure to plantation novels and juvenile fiction that dealt with slavery than they did to minstrel

shows, scientific discourse, or the most radical abolitionist tracts. It is impossible to know exactly which of these texts individual writers of the 1850s had encountered over the course of their lives. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that connections did exist between early children’s literature and women who later composed slavery-related fiction. Sarah Josepha Hale, who in 1853 published *Liberia; or Mr. Peyton’s Experiments* as a rebuttal to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had contributed frequently to the *Juvenile Miscellany* in the 1820s. Louisa May Alcott, who authored antislavery narratives during the Civil War, borrowed the plot from one of Child’s stories in the *Juvenile Miscellany* for a scene in *Little Women* in which Jo March sold her hair to contribute to the family income. Although it is uncertain whether she read Maria Edgeworth’s “The Grateful Negro,” Stowe herself recalled that her mother had read to her and her siblings from *Frank*, another book by Edgeworth, during her childhood.25

Like authors of early juvenile fiction, female novelists of the 1850s carefully avoided presenting dark-skinned men as posing a physical threat to white Americans. The fear of slave revolt persisted among many whites in the late antebellum era, as is evidenced by the large number of authors writing about slavery in that decade who made a point to dismiss the notion that slaves constantly awaited the chance to rise up and kill their masters. Stowe’s Uncle Tom reacted with horror when another slave proposed that they kill the villainous master Simon Legree in his sleep and set free all those suffering under his cruel tyranny. “Not for ten thousand worlds, Misse!” he responded emphatically. “I’d sooner chop my right hand off!” He advised the slave Cassy that “good never

comes of wickedness” and that God had determined “we must suffer, and wait his time” rather than striking out against those who had enslaved them.26

In a strikingly similar vein, novels written to discredit Uncle Tom’s Cabin also introduced the specter of slave revolt only to emphasize the loyalty of black slaves who would defend their masters rather than see them harmed. In Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop, by northern minister Baynard Hall, the black slave Frank Freeman thwarted the plans of a malicious white abolitionist to incite rebellion among local slaves. Frank explained that when he thought “of the kind white folks here,” he “could not know that Mrs. Freeman, and Mr. Wardloe, and Miss Mary, were that night to lie weltering in a bloody bed—and remain silent.” In Sarah Hale’s Liberia, the slaves on the Peyton estate also took active steps to save the white family from a general insurrection that had broken out in the neighborhood. Nathan, “one of the older and most trusted servants, a man who had been ‘born and raised’ in the family, and upon whose judgment and fidelity” the family could rely, vowed to his mistress that he would stand by the Peytons “till I die, Miss Margaret.” To protect his owners, Nathan even assembled a small army of family slaves, distributing among them firearms as well as the typical weapons involved in slave revolts—“pitchforks, hoes, and rails.” This rude guard assured their convalescent master they would “defend him with their lives.”27

In the tradition of early children’s fiction, novels of the 1850s frequently infantalized black men to make them seem harmless. Stowe pointed repeatedly to the childish innocence of Uncle Tom: “Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of his prayer,” she noted early in the book. Stowe elsewhere informed her readers that Tom “had the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike.” These qualities were supposed to endear Uncle Tom to Stowe’s readers, but they also made a


27. Baynard Rush Hall, Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop, A Tale (New York, 1852), 62, 63; Sarah Josepha Hale, Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton’s Experiments (New York, 1853), 18, 19, 23, 34. For secondary literature on so-called “anti-Tom” novels, see Thomas F. Gossett, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture (Dallas, TX, 1985) and Barrie Hayne, “Yankee in the Patriarchy: T. B. Thorpe’s Reply to Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” American Quarterly, 20 (Summer 1968), 180–95.
clear commentary about the humble nature of all people of African descent. "The African," Stowe maintained, was "naturally patient, timid and unenterprising." When Stowe depicted Tom alongside the young George Shelby or Eva St. Clare, she implicitly equated him with these two children. Stowe described Tom as Eva's "simple friend," labeling the two of them "the old child and the young one." Much like Congo in Eliza Farrar's story, who "was continually buying gingerbread, and making playthings" for his master's sons and daughters, Uncle Tom focused much of his energy on procuring items with which to entertain white boys and girls. Tom, Stowe wrote, had pockets that "were full of miscellaneous articles of attraction, which he had hoarded in days of old for his master's children." This implicit identification of black men with white children severely compromised the manly nature of these dark-complexioned protagonists.28

Stowe crafted Tom in childlike terms partly so that her young readers would more easily identify with him. That Stowe meant children to be part of her targeted audience seems evident from her custom of reading her chapters aloud to her sons and daughters before sending the installments to her editor at the National Era, the magazine where Uncle Tom's Cabin first appeared, in serial form. In the 1878 edition of the novel, she recollected that "the weekly number was always read to the family circle before it was sent away, and all the household kept up an intense interest in the progress of the story." Stowe recalled that her initial audience for the scene where Uncle Tom died, the first chapter she wrote, had been her sons at ages ten and twelve, one of whom had been moved to exclaim, "Oh! mamma, slavery is the most cursed thing in the world!" By presenting Uncle Tom as a gentle, humble man who doted on white children, Stowe likely sought to gain the trust of young readers for whom black slaves seemed unfamiliar and therefore potentially disturbing. But in doing so, she also prevented white readers of all ages from seeing even a "large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man" like Tom as the equivalent of white men in masculinity.29

Many novels published in the mid-nineteenth century resembled early children's literature when they refused to affirm the right of black men

29. Quoted in Annie Fields, ed., Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe (Boston, MA, 1898), 147; Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, 18.
and women to put their families first in their lives. In these texts, African American characters frequently lavished affection on white children. Because the slave characters paid the children of their masters so much attention, however, their own children were often ignored or neglected, as with Aunt Chloe in Drysdale’s *Scenes in Georgia*. This strategy therefore served to devalue further both black children and the black family. In *Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop*, author Hall warned his readers to “attempt not to tear away the white babes from the black woman’s heart!” The consequence would be that “she would rend you, as if she were a raving maniac!” Other narratives tended to stress the self-sacrifice that black women, in particular, would make for the white children in their care. In *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, Caroline Lee Hentz noted that Aunt Kizzie, the “black nurse and mammy” of her master’s child, “would as soon have thought of cutting off her head, as refuse to gratify its most unreasonable wishes.” In the same vein, Lucy, the mammy figure in *Aunt Phillis’s Cabin* by Mary Eastman, told the deathly ill Miss Ellen, “You know I would die for you if ‘twould do you any good.” These authors blatantly glorified black characters who did not exist to care for their own families, but to cater cheerfully to white children. By assigning them this altruistic role, “anti-Tom” novelists denied black men and women true personhood. By encouraging white audiences to accept such arrangements as agreeable to both the slave and the master, these texts reinforced the belief in a natural and voluntary black dependency on whites promoted by earlier tales like *The Adventures of Congo* and *Dazee.*

The northern public’s celebration of the relationship between Uncle Tom and the angelic Little Eva spoke to the eagerness with which white Americans embraced the relationship between a doting black adult and a beautiful white child. After Stowe’s novel was released in 1852, this pair became one of the most widely recognized set of fictional characters in the nineteenth century. As testament to their popularity, manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic produced collectors’ plates, statuettes, porcelain mugs, and even muslin handkerchiefs that depicted Tom and

Eva enjoying each other's company in the pastoral setting of the St. Clares' garden. When consumers purchased any of this vast array of merchandise, they confirmed the continued appeal of the paternalistic ideal wherein adult black slaves looked up to young white children with a "respectful, admiring air" and cherished them more than they did their own offspring.³¹

The relationship between these well-loved characters was characterized primarily by Tom's hallowed adoration for Eva. Stowe remarked that, early in their acquaintance, Eva "seemed something almost divine" to Tom. Later, once Tom had become Eva's personal servant, the author reported that "it would be hard to say what place she held in the soft, impressible heart of her faithful attendant." This middle-aged black man, Stowe pointed out, "loved her as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine. He gazed on her as an Italian sailor gazes on his image of the child Jesus,—with a mixture of reverence and tenderness." In her elevation of a white child to the level of the sacred, Stowe suggested that it was natural for the ideal Christian slave Tom to occupy an inferior place in relation to a six-year-old white girl, and to do so willingly.³²

In Tom's relationship with another white child, George Shelby, Stowe suggested more clearly that the slave's attachment to the son of his master may well have overshadowed his love for his own children. When Tom discovered he had been sold away from his children, he "broke fairly down," as "sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor." But at the moment of departure, he seemed to ignore his sons standing with their mother, "sobbing and groaning vehemently," while his uppermost thoughts concerned his master's thirteen-year-old boy. "I'm sorry," he lamented, "that Mas'r George happened to be away." When George caught up with Tom before Tom and the slave trader had left the area, Tom's relief was palpable. "O! Mas'r George! This does me good," he exclaimed. "I couldn't bar to go off without seein' ye! It does me real good, ye can't tell!" Stowe never

³¹. Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 18. Thomas F. Gossett enumerates the vast array of Uncle Tom's Cabin collectibles manufactured in the 1850s in both Great Britain and the United States in Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture. For examples of these items, see http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/tomituds/toh-p.html.
³². Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, 127, 224.
depicted Tom embracing or even touching his own sons, but in the farewell scene with George Shelby, George “threw his arms tumultuously round his neck,” and Tom ended the interview by “stroking the boy’s fine, curly head with his large, strong hand.” At the end of his life, Tom once again indicated the supremacy of his love for young George over that of his own progeny. Though he also mentioned his children in passing, the dying Tom proclaimed that laying eyes on his former master’s son for the last time was “all I wanted!” and declared that George’s final visit “warms my soul; it does my old heart good! Now I shall die content!”

The good-natured physical abuse black parents in novels of the 1850s dealt out to their black sons and daughters reinforced the message to white readers that black children did not deserve the immutable tenderness lighter-skinned children did. Stowe, for instance, depicted Uncle Tom’s wife, Aunt Chloe, expressing mild annoyance at the playful antics of her two young sons. This irritation, however, ultimately manifested itself in subtle acts of violence toward her brood. She warned the boys, “Here you, Mose and Pete! Get out de way, you niggers!” and gave “now and then a kick, in a kind of general way, under the table,” where they were playing. “Better mind yerselves, or I’ll take ye down a button-hole lower,” Chloe threatened. As her frustration with them increased, the exasperated mother began “pushing away their wooly heads” and finally “secundoing her exhortations by a slap, which resounded very formidable.” Though Chloe meant no real harm toward her young sons, the repeated roughness this black mother displayed and the comedic value Stowe evidently intended this scene to have reinforced the notion that the mistreatment of black children should not be taken very seriously.

Authors who crafted novels meant to discredit Stowe’s tale seemed particularly to relish such scenes in which black adults physically abused black children. In *Tempest and Sunshine*, author Mary J. Holmes showed the enslaved cook Aunt Esther dividing her time between “turning the corn cake, kicking the dogs, and administering various cuffs to sundry little black urchins.” Another anti-Tom book, *The Cabin and Parlor*, likewise showed a black “aunt” chastising her young son merely for

33. Ibid., 34, 85, 86, 87, 362.
34. Ibid., 22, 19.
“tumbling noisily in” to the house with his brother. When the boy did so, author Charles Peterson reported that “the good dame turned back, made a dart at the boy,” then “caught him . . . giving him a hearty shake.” Calling him a “good-for-nuffin little nigger,” Aunt Violet “pinched his ear” and informed her child, “If yer make a noise while I’m gwine to de house, I’ll skin yer, sure as I’m a livin’ woman.” Rarely were black children actually hurt by such abuse, an outcome that subtly indicated to white readers that young African Americans were largely immune to violent acts perpetrated against them. When the mother of these children kicked them and labeled them “niggers,” or when an “aunt” treated them the same as she did the dogs in her kitchen, authors of the 1850s made a clear distinction between the kind of treatment appropriate for black children and that which white children deserved. For readers, such scenes reinforced the underlying message of black inferiority, even in texts like Stowe’s that might otherwise condemn the institution that perpetuated it.35

Such representations of the slave family in popular fiction left little room for black parents whose love for their children took precedence over the regard they had for the white families who owned them. Anti-slavery authors in the late antebellum period thus began to turn to light-complexioned characters in their efforts to gain sympathy for people in bondage. While such a strategy enabled Stowe and her contemporaries to strike an effective blow against the peculiar institution, it also prevented them from suggesting that black men and women merited full social, political, and legal equality with whites.36

In explaining his decision during the 1850s to craft a novel whose

35. Mary J. Holmes, Tempest and Sunshine; or, Life in Kentucky (New York, 1854), 9; J. Thornton Randolph, pseudonym [Charles Jacobs Peterson], The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters (Philadelphia, PA, 1852), 28.
heroine was a light-skinned slave woman, author J. T. Trowbridge later claimed a conscious attempt on his part to appeal to the existing racial sensibilities of northern readers. "I shrank from the thought of making a black man my hero," Trowbridge admitted, looking back from a turn-of-the-century vantage point. "Sympathy will be more easily enlisted for a woman, white, with native refinement and sweetness of character," he remembered thinking, "and yet born a slave, with all the power and prejudice of legal ownership and cruel caste conspiring to defeat her happiness." After all, Trowbridge had reasoned, the southern institution "condemned to a degrading bondage, not those of African blood alone, but so many of the disinherited descendants of the proud, white master race."  

The large numbers of "tragic octoroon" novels that appeared in the decade after Uncle Tom's Cabin played on the sympathies of white parents in the North by featuring young women who could have been the daughters or sisters of white readers, or who could have been those readers themselves. The title character of Mary Pike's Ida May, in fact, was the daughter of free white parents in the North. In a story intended to alarm a respectable northern audience, slave traders kidnapped the five-year-old girl and sold her to a planter in Virginia. White men and women in these novels who claimed light-skinned young women trapped in slavery as literal or adopted relatives expressed the kind of heart-rending trepidation authors would expect of their white readers were a child of theirs in similar circumstances. Northern white farmer Abimilech Jackwood of Trowbridge's Neighbor Jackwood, for example, vowed to help the lovely octoroon Charlotte escape the slave catchers who pursued her. "Back to slavery?" Jackwood exclaimed, "Our Charlotte! I'd as soon think o' lettin' my own darter go!" In Metta Victor's dime novel Maum Guinea, a local constable in New York who had been commissioned to recapture Maum Guinea's daughter Judy refused to follow the law once he had seen the girl himself. "She's whiter dan I am, and a darn sight purtier," he asserted. "I'd as soon help cotch my own sister." The familial bond these writers emphasized between white characters and their symbolic daughters or sisters was meant to awaken both the tenderness and the outrage of northern readers much more effectively.

37. John Townsend Trowbridge, My Own Story, With Recollections of Noted Persons (Boston, MA, 1903), 224-25.
than slaveholders’ violations of the bodies and the dignity of African Americans could.  

The considerable popularity of octoroon novels and theater productions in the 1850s indicates that this strategy worked. *Ida May* sold some 60,000 copies after it was published in 1855. Northern readers bought about 100,000 copies of Metta Victor’s dime novel *Maum Guinea* after it was released in 1861. In a decade when most publishers issued 2,500 copies per printing of a new novel, these volumes easily qualified as best-sellers. Though precise sales figures are not available for *Neighbor Jackwood*, anecdotal evidence suggests that Trowbridge’s novel also proved a decided commercial success, and the play based on the novel enjoyed a long run in Boston. Finally, Dion Boucicault’s drama *The Octoroon*, which opened in New York in 1859, became one of the best-known and most highly acclaimed productions of the century.  

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, of course, trumped all these successes, selling some 300,000 copies in the United States within a year of its initial publication in book form. Contributing to the popularity of Stowe’s novel was the entire family of slaves with light skin and “fine European features” she included. Whereas the dark-skinned Chloe kicked her equally black children around, Eliza Harris risked her life to save her nearly white son Harry by crossing the Ohio River on shifting ice floes. While Tom ended up sacrificing his own happiness, his freedom, and his family for his masters’ benefit, Eliza’s husband George, “a very light mulatto” who could pass for white, ran away from his master to defend his masculine rights to choose his own family. In stark contrast to Uncle Tom, George Harris did not hesitate to use violence to resist his white pursuers when he and his family were in danger of being recaptured. “Am I going to stand by and see them take my wife and sell her,” he


demanded of his Quaker rescuers—and Stowe’s readers—“when God has given me a pair of strong arms to defend her? No; God help me! I’ll fight to the last breath, before they shall take my wife and son.” As the slave catchers approached, Harris declared, “we’ll fight for our liberty till we die,” and then he shot the first man who threatened him and his family, wounding the white pursuer in the side. In presenting a slave who resorted to violent measures to achieve his natural, God-given rights as a man, Stowe sought to broaden white Americans’ understanding of male slaves. But Harris’s racial makeup nevertheless left intact popular conceptions of more typical slaves like Tom who were “of a full glossy black” with “truly African features.” George Harris could act on his frustrations with his enslaved condition when “flesh and blood can’t bear it any longer” only because he was of neither the same flesh nor the same blood as the more patient and obedient Uncle Tom.40

The representation of the manly, rebellious George Harris as practically white encouraged Stowe’s readers to identify personally with a slave, but these physical characteristics also diminished Stowe’s ability to promote racial justice and equality for African Americans no matter their skin tone. Likewise, by portraying her central black character as a docile child, Stowe discouraged white readers from looking upon even a physically strong, responsible black slave like Tom as worthy of the manly rights afforded white men in antebellum society. In this, Stowe’s novel resembled children’s literature of the early nineteenth century that presented African Americans as dependent children whose identities were hopelessly caught up with that of their white masters. This earlier literature contributed to a cultural climate in which black men throughout the North were divested of the right to vote, hold office, and serve in state militias by statutes put in place by the mid-1830s. In the years following the publication of these texts in the United States, states and localities also enacted laws or simply followed practices that excluded African Americans from public transportation, free schools, and certain forms of employment.41

40. Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 94, 91, 164, 172, 18, 14.

41. For the treatment of African Americans in the North prior to the Civil War, see Patrick Rael, Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Graham Russell Hodges, Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613–1863 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Joanne Pope Melish, Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England,
Early children's literature had an impact not only on the immediate legal status of African Americans in the North, but also on the way the rising generation of children who read these stories and books thought about race and slavery. In 1828, the Christian Examiner suggested that the topic of children's literature was "of more importance than it may appear at first sight" because "this is a reading community; and the sentiments and principles of many children are formed almost as much by reading, as by intercourse with the world." Parents also believed in the power of literature to shape their children's views, as evidenced by the dramatic drop-off in subscriptions to the Juvenile Miscellany after Child published her radical abolitionist tome An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans in 1833. Once they realized Child's position on the issue of slavery, mothers and fathers feared that their children would imbibe the principles of racial equality and immediate emancipation that the editor might forward in her popular periodical.42

Because the children of the early republic period would become the adults of the antebellum period, the views of slaves and slavery to which they were exposed in their formative years help to explain the ways in which they reacted to the debate over slavery that preceded the Civil War. The pervasive image of a loyal, loving black man suggested to young Americans in the early nineteenth century that good African Americans did not even want equal rights with whites, making the question of whether they deserved those rights wholly irrelevant. On the other hand, the figure of the frightening black rebel that lurked just below the surface of much early children's fiction encouraged a nervous kindness toward black slaves, but also made children think twice about the wisdom of freeing an entire race of men, in particular, who had the


capacity to commit animalistic violence against whites. Children who absorbed such cultural messages believed either that slavery operated primarily on paternalistic principles or that African Americans could pose a lethal threat to whites, or they accepted that both were true. As a result, abolitionists faced an educated public who feared for whites’ safety if slavery came to an end, and who believed the institution served the good of black slaves themselves. The prevalence of both beliefs created an uphill battle for antislavery activists determined to convince whites that emancipation was a moral imperative for the United States.

By crafting light-skinned slave characters with all the outward and inner qualities of ideal white Americans, authors of antislavery fiction made strides toward counteracting the myths that all slaves preferred bondage and that sinister violence by African Americans gravely threatened white Americans. Though Stowe and her contemporaries did not significantly alter the image of the black slave in their texts, they did introduce well-spoken, physically attractive slaves who yearned for liberty and would engage in brave acts of self-defense to obtain that liberty for themselves and their families. As northern whites began to contemplate issues to which African American rights proved central in the 1860s, well-known figures like the competent, manly George Harris and the persecuted but courageous wife and mother Eliza helped inform the political choices that northerners faced. Noble, genteel octoroon women challenged the idea that slave women could not measure up to free women as loving mothers or as managers of a tranquil, respectable household. Even if whites saw most black men as too docile and slow-witted to make good soldiers and too subservient and simple-minded to exercise sound political judgment, antislavery authors had presented them with light-skinned African American men whose capacity to be soldiers, voters, and even officeholders they could more readily accept. Though political considerations and the practical demands of wartime played essential roles in the decisions to raise black regiments during the Civil War and to give black men the suffrage during Reconstruction, the proliferation of “white slaves” in 1850s literature helped white northerners accept these dramatic reversals of prewar policies involving African Americans.

White Americans’ enthusiasm for granting black men and women an equal footing in American society, of course, proved short-lived. By the 1890s, northern whites and the federal government were looking the other way as southern states stripped away black voting rights and rele-
gated African Americans to substandard public facilities designated specifically for those of their race. Popular culture and public actions worked in tandem to stigmatize black men as beasts fully deserving of vicious extralegal violence for their licentious pursuit of white women. Novels, advertising, and early films resurrected the image of the black mammy with a vengeance, just as in reality white Americans brought black women into their homes to clean and take care of their children for starvation wages that nevertheless kept their families alive in an unforgivingly racist economic climate. By devaluing the individual personhood of the black characters they portrayed, white novelists and filmmakers of the early twentieth century built on the tradition begun a hundred years earlier by children's authors who had also promoted the notion that black men and women should exist primarily—or even exclusively—to cater to the needs of whites, rather than to build lives of their own. Until American popular culture could successfully shed the bifurcated image of the doting black mammy and the menacing black rebel, successive generations of white children would continue to grow up confident in their belief that African Americans deserved to be excluded from the political, legal, and even human rights that white Americans had so long claimed for themselves.