

### Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North

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## Review

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**Webster, Crystal Lynn.** *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North.* University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$24.95 ISBN 978146966323 pp 186.

Since Philippe Ariès's assertion that childhood was a socially constructed—rather than a biologically determined—category, historians have debated when and how the lines demarcating childhood have been drawn. The nineteenth century—replete with Dickensian orphans, Civil War drummer boys, and Victorian cherubs—has been a particularly fertile field for childhood studies scholars to explore. In the nineteenth-century United States, where the color line drew boundaries around every aspect of life, the borders of childhood—and the assumptions of innocence and vulnerability that increasingly came to be associated with childhood—were largely understood to be impenetrable walls encapsulating whiteness. Scholars including Robin Bernstein, Brigitte Fielder, Mary Niall Mitchell, Wilma King, Karen Woods Weierman, Sarah Chinn, Nazera Sadiq Wright and others have explored how enslaved young people navigated structures that were antithetical to the needs of children. Yet the borders around a particular kind of privileged childhood extended well beyond the stark divisions between slave and free. Crystal Lynn Webster's new book, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood*, asks how gradual emancipation in Northern States assigned Black children spaces outside the boundaries of Victorian childhood. Webster also reveals the ways in which Black children were harmed when they *were* included in reformers' ideals about childhood, as white reformers felt that Black children's vulnerability required separation from their families.

Webster explores how Black children and their parents navigated the precariousness of antebellum life in the North through a capacious archive that includes everything from paper dolls fashioned after *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* Eva and Topsy, to institutional records of orphanages and juvenile reformatories, to the poems of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In so doing, Webster asks readers not to solely read these items as a referendum on the “future potential of Black children who might grow up to be significant influences on society, but rather [to view] their

childhood as an important site of interrogation which illuminates their vastly underappreciated impact on the postemancipation landscape of the North.” For Webster, the very existence of Black children and the communities that loved them challenged the boundaries that racism sought to draw around the meanings of childhood. Thus, children’s self-advocacy, and the advocacy of their parents and communities were vital players in “the political process of freedom-making” (3).

Webster offers glimpses of children who are rarely featured in histories of the Civil War era as they face and navigate unforgiving institutional structures. We meet Henry Ricks from Philadelphia, a boy whom orphanage authorities return to the care of his mother Lucinda, even while they maintain their custody of his two brothers, who shortly thereafter succumb to an early death. Webster asks us to consider the playtime of James Jackson, a Massachusetts child whose proximity to a prominent Black family allowed his story to be preserved within the genre of “good death” narratives that so often celebrated the piety of white children. As Webster illuminates, Jackson’s story reveals that even when Black childhood was included within narratives often reserved for middle class white children, the meanings attached to Black children were always stretched to make racialized arguments. In James’s case, both his play and his piety were held up as indicators of Black children’s potential.

As the book chronicles the lives of Black children at school, at play, and in institutional settings, *Beyond the Boundaries* illuminates the harms inflicted by allegedly well-meaning white reform movements, including the institution of gradual emancipation itself. Because gradual emancipation often required that Black children work without recompense until their twenties, families were effectually separated, and young people were denied proximity to their families of origin. Because of this imposed stress on family cohesion and the ability to make a livelihood, Black children were especially vulnerable to the rigors of poverty. White reformers then considered these hardships as evidence that Black parents needed to be usurped by (white-run) humanitarian institutions. Webster excavates the records of such institutions to make the case that Black children were subject to racist segregation and other harsh treatment within many of these places. Yet, this book is not merely a description of the harms imposed on Black children and families. Throughout the text, Webster chronicles pitched battles between African American communities and white reformers over how Black children were treated, how their labor was deployed, and where they would live.

By the book's end, the reader is left wanting more of these children's stories. The work of *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood* teaches us, among other things, how many stories are yet to be told. It is certain that this book will inspire many scholars in African American and Childhood Studies to continue down the path that Webster illuminates so creatively.

*Anna Mae Duane is Associate Professor of English and American Studies at the University of Connecticut. Her most recent book is Educated for Freedom: The Incredible Story of Two Fugitive Schoolboys who Grew Up to Change a Nation (NYU 2020), which chronicles the lives of abolitionist luminaries Henry Highland Garnet and James McCune Smith.*