“The Young and Romantic Will Like It”: The Abolitionist Short Stories of Lydia Maria Child

Fiona McWilliam
The title of this essay derives from a letter written by Lydia Maria Child to friend Maria Weston Chapman regarding “The Quadroons,” Child’s literary contribution to that year’s *The Liberty Bell*, an annual anti-slavery gift book for which Chapman served as editor. In her letter, Child tells Chapman, “You and [Chapman’s sister] Caroline will laugh at it heartily, and even little Anne will give it a *patte de velour*; but the young and romantic will like it” (*Collected Correspondence* 12/292). Carolyn L. Karcher reads these comments as evidence that Child “wryly predicted” her “pathetic tale of victimized racial outcasts” would capture “the sympathies of readers who wanted romance, not dreary fact” (“Rape” 71). Focusing heavily on what she considers to be the story’s failure and Child’s apparent acknowledgment of that failure in her letter to Chapman, Karcher writes that the story “did not reflect the political consciousness” of antislavery activists—that is, the story’s “romantic” aspects undermined its political potency (“Rape” 64). The focus of my own essay, however, is not on the success or failure of “The Quadroons”; rather, I look at Child’s self-reflective comments as an entry point to discuss the affective strategies surrounding her abolitionist writings. By “affective strategy,” I mean both an awareness of audience and an intent to encourage sympathetic identification between reader and text. Child’s statement makes clear that her story does not align with her personal aesthetics or even her usual authorial voice: she continues, “It sounds, in sooth, more like a girl of sixteen, than a woman of forty” (*Collected Correspondence* 12/292). But at the same time, the tale is directed not at abolitionist stalwarts like Chapman or Child herself but at those who will be drawn in by the story’s “much love-making” (12/292) and will, hopefully, embrace its abolitionist message. Furthermore, Child rightly recognizes that “the reader” is not a conglomerate but is composed of myriad individuals with myriad tastes.1 “The Quadroons” is directed at a particular audience by utilizing particular tropes and techniques.
Because Child’s use of sentimentality is clearly not mere thoughtless parroting of literary expectations, it becomes apparent that her awareness of convention indicates not only an attempt to prevent reader rejection but also to reach a different type of reader than those like Chapman (whom Child expects to laugh at the tale) and potentially spur those different readers to action. Child, for example, had a history of indifference to earning the approbation of literary aesthetes as well as to the idea of literary popularity. Her political writings resulted in public scorn and broken friendships. Child’s An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833) famously resulted in the Boston Athenaeum cancelling her membership and in the loss of the wide readership she had gained through her popular and mainstream writings (Karcher, “Introduction” 14). But at the same time, Child recognized that the anti-slavery movement could not be effective without a growing number of supporters.

Print media provided one such way to reach a large number of people, and as editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, Child sought to do just that. However, her editorial judgment was apparently not political enough for the (notably fractured) abolitionist community; while serving as editor, she lost the support of even her close friends, including Maria Weston Chapman, when she refused to use the paper as a mouthpiece for abolitionist in-fighting. In an 1843 letter to close friend and fellow abolitionist Ellis Gray Loring, Child reiterates that she took the position with the Standard “expressly on conditions that I would have nothing to do with fighting and controversy” and that as editor her concern laid “more at reaching the people than at pleasing abolitionists”—a sentiment that surely played into her fiction in addition to her editorial judgment (Selected Letters 193, emphasis in original). While there is no question that the Standard was always an anti-slavery paper, Karcher explains that Child “had formulated her editorial policy precisely with the aim of recruiting subscribers from this pivotal group [middle-of-the-road abolitionists] and then cultivating a true abolitionist consciousness in them” (First Woman 278). Overall, Child seems exasperated with those who, in her opinion, “ought to have sense enough to be aware; that they cannot have a paper to fight with abolitionists of all stamps but their own, and at the same time to find its way generally among the people” (Selected Letters 194, emphasis in original). Though she had only taken up editorship in 1841, she resigned by 1843—a decision that signaled a long break from abolitionist politics altogether (Karcher, First Woman 290-94).

Even when Child’s earlier writings (such as her widely successful novel Hobomok) won her popularity with what she referred to as the “Boston fashonables,” her description of the limelight was not exactly positive. For instance, she describes life amongst Boston literati to literary critic Rufus Griswold in a letter from 1846 as being trapped “like a butterfly under a gilded glass tumbler; I can do nothing but pant despairingly, or beat all the feathers off my wings, thumping against the glittering wall of limitations” (Selected Letters 232). We see a continued indifference to mass popularity when she responds to an 1859 letter from Mrs. Mason, wife of Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, in which Mason attacks Child for her support of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry and threatens a boycott of Child’s works in the Southern states. In her response, which was published in that year’s Liberator, Child states that since publishing her Appeal, “I have labored too earnestly for the slave to be agreeable to slave-holders. Literary popularity was never a paramount object with me, even in my youth; and, now that I am old, I am utterly indifferent to it. But, if I cared for the exclusion you threaten, I should at least have the consolation of being exiled with honorable company” (Letters 135-136). In regularly
noting a difference between popularity and the potential to impact readers in a political direction, she makes clear that literary reputation is of much less importance than laboring “earnestly for the slave.”

In light of Child’s commentary on her own political and artistic priorities, this essay explores Child’s use of affective strategies in “The Black Saxons” (1841), one of her early abolitionist short stories from The Liberty Bell. Unlike Child’s other two Liberty Bell stories from the 1840s, her romantically pleasing “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes: A Faithful Sketch” (1843), “The Black Saxons” has received little attention from scholars and critics. The two more popular stories have drawn interest for their use of the “tragic mulatta” type, for their depiction of the sexual exploitation of female slaves, and for their depiction of violence against the black body. While “The Black Saxons” is unarguably less sensational and more concerned with the development of its white protagonist than the African American characters, who fall into the background, the story provides fascinating insights into the workings of sympathetic identification. Child’s fiction appears almost a decade before Harriet Beecher Stowe famously tells her readers to “see, then, to your sympathies in this matter!”—that is, the matter of slavery—by “feel[ing] right” (452). But where Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin utilizes scenes of suffering, or what Marianne Noble calls “sentimental wounding” (131-32), to make readers feel for the slave by re-experiencing their own pain (that is, the reader’s own pain), Child resorts to a different strategy, which is less about feeling as or like the object of sympathy and more focused on directing readers’ sentiment outside the text as well as outside the self.

“Being on a kindling volcano, without knowing it”

In many ways “The Black Saxons” can be summarized as a story absent of action. The narrative is set around Mr. Duncan, a South Carolina slaveholder who spends his free time reading about his once-great Saxon ancestors who, thanks to the Normans, were reduced to “base Saxon churls” (20). So preoccupied is he with reading Augustin Thierry’s History of the Norman Conquest that he is oblivious to the fact that he has written every single one of his slaves a pass to attend the same Methodist evening meeting. Though described as a “proverbially indulgent master,” Mr. Duncan ultimately becomes suspicious of this newfound religiosity amongst his slaves and one night decides to follow them to one of their meetings. What he discovers is a slave master’s worst nightmare. Rather than a religious meeting, Duncan finds a large group of slaves, including those from neighboring plantations, debating the question “what shall we do with our masters?”—in other words, should they kill their white masters (31). But despite this momentous discovery, Child does not provide her readers with an equally dramatic response, for after much debate, the slaves decide against the use of violence and will therefore not murder their masters. Mr. Duncan, though startled by the discovery of the meeting, remembers his Saxon ancestors, who fought fruitlessly against their Norman conquerors, and in making a parallel between the two groups ultimately decides to not report the slaves for plotting an insurrection. Child writes that, despite the fact that Mr. Duncan chooses not to report the slaves, his moment of realization “did not, so far as I ever heard, lead to the emancipation of his bondmen” (43).

Much of the scant critical conversation surrounding the “The Black Saxons” centers on the story’s use of Saxon history, the depiction of insurrection, and the various implications of slave violence. Karcher comments that the story both “refuses the myth of
the loyal contented menial” and serves as a reminder that the slave, like Duncan’s Saxon heroes, remains “ready to lead a strike for liberty” (Karcher, *First Woman* 333, 335). María Carla Sánchez approaches the story from a different angle, instead focusing on the story’s depiction of reading, specifically Mr. Duncan’s reading of Saxon history, as “crucial to both a civil society and the reform of its uncivil flaws” (171). Sánchez argues that it is Duncan’s habit of historical reading that enables him to make a sympathetic connection with the would-be insurrectionists, which directly results in Duncan’s decision to not report the slaves. For Sánchez, though it does not result in Duncan freeing his slaves, it is a "small moment of mercy" (171).

In “The Black Saxons,” Child provides a theory of sympathetic identification between the white reader and the slave subject, played out through Mr. Duncan and the slaves, who question whether violence is necessary to ensure their freedom. Through the character of Duncan, Child provides a window into the affective processes of a man who, like the reader, encounters the slave subject not simply as “slave” but as an individual with desires and motivations. But, like the reader, Duncan’s reaction to this encounter is not a given: not all who read a sad story will weep, not all who recognize the humanity of the slave will act. Using third person limited narration, focalized through Mr. Duncan (that is, up until the second to last paragraph, where the perspective shifts to the first person), the text grants the reader access to Duncan’s thoughts and reactions as he attempts to make sense of the actions and motivations of his slaves. In this way, the story’s narrative structure is integral in that it both sets up and dictates the ways in which Mr. Duncan interacts and identifies with the slave characters. Meanwhile, the slave figures themselves remain distanced; the reader encounters the various African American characters at the same time as Mr. Duncan. But there are no prolonged scenes that allow the reader to get to know any of the black characters as individuals. When Duncan listens to the characters debating violence, the reader is listening in beside him. Child walks the reader, step by step, through the manner in which Duncan attempts to connect or identify with the slave subject.

In addition, the limited nature of the text’s perspective is extended to the story’s very title, “The Black Saxons.” Specifically, the title’s relation to the narrative hinges on both Mr. Duncan’s particular background and his interaction with the slaves. Thus, the title is both personal and contextually specific since the slave conspirators are “Black Saxons” not in earnest but only in the mind of Mr. Duncan, to whom Saxon history means a great deal and with which he closely identifies. The title is so contextually dependent, in fact, that it only makes sense in relation to Duncan. Saxon history itself means nothing to the men in their swamp, deciding the direction of their future freedom and not realizing that a white infiltrator is watching them. Nor would a reader without a view inside Duncan’s mind have any idea of the relationship between the slaves and the Saxons.

The story’s focus on Mr. Duncan creates a sense of distance between the African American characters and the reader, in that the reader’s view is largely dependent upon Duncan. In this way, Duncan’s identification with the slaves crucially models identification for the reader. Yet the mode of sympathetic identification in the story is layered, complex. Consider, for example, the moment when Duncan realizes that his slaves have duped him and the anxiety he feels when he considers the possibility that they are in league with Big-boned Dick, a runaway slave who is said to be the leader of a maroon colony in the nearby swamps. Duncan is initially furious that his slaves are associated with Dick, who is suspected of being responsible for the recent disappearance of food and livestock from
the surrounding plantations. But before anger can take hold of Duncan, something strange happens: he is "arrested by a voice within, which [...] at once struck up the lively ballad of Robin Hood" (24). “Like Banquo’s ghost, unbidden and unwelcome,” the image of Big-boned Dick comes “into incongruous association with his spontaneous sympathy for Saxon serfs, his contempt for ‘base Saxon churls,’ who submitted to their own fate, and his admiration of the bold outlaws, who lived by plunder in the wild freedom of Saxon forests” (24). Duncan finds himself unexpectedly consumed by associations of Saxon history. But the “incongruous association” he experiences is thoughtless and involuntary; it is both “spontaneous” and fleeting. The image of Big-boned Dick comes into contact with the complex range of emotions Duncan feels toward the historical Saxons: sympathy, contempt and admiration. This moment of realization quickly fades, however. “The admonition of awakened conscience gradually gave place to considerations of personal safety,” writes Child, and even “the skillfullest soldering of casuistry could by no means” fuse Duncan’s Republican sympathies with “the system entailed upon him by his ancestors” (24-25). Though certainly a key moment in the story’s plot, this moment also vitally details the failure of sympathetic identification. Caught off guard both by the surge of emotion and by the fact that it was apparently triggered by the image of a fugitive slave, Duncan is incapable of bridging the gap between the two. He cannot transfer his sympathies to the slave subject—and cannot, therefore, identify with him—because he does not feel for Dick but feels for the Saxons he so reveres. Once Duncan begins to process his own reaction, the potential for sympathy fades.

Indeed, once Duncan can consider the implications of his slaves’ actions without the interference of unwanted emotions and associations, he decides to follow his slaves into the swamp, to the so-called religious meeting. In order to avoid discovery, he dons “a complete suit of negro clothes” and “a black mask well fitted to his face” (27). Though within the realm of the story it seems completely logical for Duncan to seek out a disguise, it is at the same time important to pause and consider the implication of Mr. Duncan’s “black mask.” In following his slaves into the swamp Duncan feels his safety, if not his life, is at stake and seeks to protect himself by wearing a disguise. But if we press further, we see there is a duality to the mask (as there is to all masks) in that it becomes a tool for both identification and misrecognition; in other words, the mask prevents Duncan from being identified by his slaves while at the same time it masks his whiteness and identifies him as black to the other meeting-goers. In this moment, then, Duncan looks through his black mask, apparently indistinguishable to his own slaves. But the mask is a disguise that can obscure but cannot alter his identity: while he may look like his slaves he does not share a likeness of sympathy. One can be sure, for instance, that Duncan does not agree with the proposition to kill the masters or “ravish wives and daughters before their eyes, as they have done to us! Hunt them with hounds, as they have hunted us!” (31). But at the same time donning the “black mask” and wearing “negro clothes” grants Duncan access to the slave-controlled space of the swamp and to slave testimony.

Child’s theory of sympathetic identification becomes clear here in that the reader, in order to identify with the slave subject, must also wear a “black mask”—sympathy demands, as Glenn Hendler writes, that the reader feel simultaneously both like the object of sympathy “but in a way that maintains a degree of difference” and with the object of sympathy “in order to transform partial sameness into identity” (5). Yet if sentimental fiction asks readers to imagine themselves both like and with the object of sympathy (in
this case the slave), what then does it mean that Mr. Duncan is dressed and masked as a black man as he listens to the various speeches and debates and compares the men to “Robin Hoods”?

Although Duncan can put on a black mask to access the testimony of the slaves, he can also take off his mask whenever he chooses. It is interesting that the mask—to Duncan as well as to the reader—is always within reach, easily purchasable. We might, in fact, make a parallel between Duncan’s purchase of the outside markers of black identity and his purchase of black bodies in the slave market. The ease and availability of black identity is itself reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of the fungibility of the captive body, which, according to Hartman, “allows one to make the suffering of the enslaved his/her own” (19). Duncan, as slave owner, of course has access to his slaves’ bodies, but more importantly he functions as the owner and author of his slaves’ identities: he can “[make] the captive body speak the master’s truth” (38) and declare his slaves happy, contented, or troublesome without any need to connect these declarations and their actual psychic states. Hartman extends this analysis to include a (perhaps unexpected) exploration of empathy, which I argue is useful in understanding the dynamic of sympathetic identification in Child’s text. Hartman explains that, “properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or ‘the projection of one’s own personality into an object, with the attribution of the object of one’s own emotions’” (19). The problem with empathy has to do with what she calls its “slipperiness”—that is, when we make another’s suffering our own, we begin to feel for ourselves “rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach” (19). This pitfall (or even narcissistic impulse) is a risk present in all moments of empathy, but Hartman argues that it is the commodity status of the slave that makes the issue of empathy so “slippery” in the first place. Hartman continues, “by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery” (19). In other words, when the black body simply becomes a vehicle for white self-exploration, empathetic identification mimics the very dynamics it attempts to undermine. Because the captive body was historically more or less permanently marked as commodity, even moments of empathetic identification where, for example, a white speaker imagines him or herself as a slave, have the power to occlude and supplant the suffering of the other. While Duncan slips on the black mask, enters the swamp, and listens to the first-hand accounts of the slaves, he is indeed shaken by what he sees and makes an attempt to grapple with its meaning, but these experiences do not change the way he understands his relationship to his slaves.

As the debate regarding what should be done with the white masters concludes with the decision against the use of violence, Duncan finds himself once more haunted by the echo of Saxon history and, so, filled with questions; he asks himself, “was the place I saw tonight in such wild and fearful beauty, like the haunts of the Saxon Robin Hoods?” (43). Scott Peeples provides a reading of this moment, and suggests that the story’s conclusion “realistically suggests that moral suasion, the empathy symbolized by Duncan’s putting on a black mask, was insufficient. Duncan’s slaves refuse to kill their master; Duncan, at least momentarily, identifies with his slaves” (44). But I disagree that putting on a mask enables Duncan to truly empathize, primarily because it is clear that his feelings do not extend directly to the slave. Instead, they are mediated or filtered through “the brave and
free-souled Harolds,” the “fair-haired Ediths,” and “Robin Hood and his bold followers” (20). The story of the noble Saxons overtaken by Norman conquerors acts as a type of intertextual conduit for Duncan that allows what could be described as a displacement of sentiment; he does not feel for his slaves (or any of the slaves in the swamp for that matter) but for the enslaved Saxons who act as a stand-in. This is most evident in the moment when Duncan asks himself, “Who shall so balance effects and causes, as to decide what portion of my present freedom sprung from their [the Saxons] seemingly defeated efforts?” (43, emphasis added). Even after this bit of self-reflection, he cannot empathize because he can only understand the significance of the moment in relation to himself; when he wonders how much his “present freedom” resulted from the seemingly hopeless efforts of the Robin Hoods he has read about, he connects his present status with the actions of the past through Thierry’s text. It becomes clear, then, that Duncan does not feel either like or with the slaves but instead is only able to feel in relation to them. After the meeting, Duncan returns to a particular thought that struck him when reading Thierry’s History: “he remembered he had thought that troubled must be the sleep of those who rule a conquered people” (42). This seemingly ominous line, here repeated for the second time in the story, is perhaps less ominous when we consider that Duncan does not seem to fully recognize that he is amongst “those who rule.” Duncan at this point, too, remembers thinking but does not actually think this thought—as Child writes, he “remembered he had thought.” In this way, Duncan accesses a previous sentiment associated with Saxon history but does not seem fully capable of extending and applying it to the black men meeting in the woods.

Despite this sustained moment of thought and reflection, Duncan is not significantly moved; according to the narrator, “these cogitations” (43) did not result in the emancipation of his slaves. It is significant, however, that this moment of prolonged reflection is not described in emotional or sympathetic terms; rather Duncan cogitates on the subject before deciding to effectively do nothing. Of course, Child makes clear that Duncan’s inaction still has the potential to effect a type of change—his decision to not report the meeting will prevent the deaths of hundreds of African Americans while at the same time potentially creating a ripple effect that will influence the future of all African Americans. In lieu of freeing his slaves or even reporting the conspirators, Duncan instead “contented himself with advising the magistrates to forbid all meetings among the colored people” (44). Child writes, however, that his decision was not an easy one, that it was rife with “painful conflict between contending feelings and duties” (43). Despite his so-called “painful conflict,” the decision he makes is rather self-serving: it quells his conscience while preserving his economic interests.

But how, then, does Duncan’s apparent failure translate to the reader? Child’s own comments might provide particular insight into the affective workings of the story. In a November 1841 letter to Maria Weston Chapman, Child complains of “The Black Saxons” that she “was not satisfied with the motto to that story. I wanted something about being on a kindling volcano, without knowing it,” and adds “If you find anything better, change it” (11/285). The sentiment Child hopes to create is a powerful one; it indicates both a desire to startle, due to its sheer power and magnitude, as well as the desire to encourage movement, action—for what could one do upon discovering a “kindling volcano” but get out of its way? Child desires to begin the story with such an ominous “motto,” perhaps forewarning readers of what is to come.
Of course the plot of the story similarly depicts Duncan’s realization that all is not well with his seemingly contented slaves and the slave population near the surrounding plantations. Duncan is unable to realize that his own slaves might also be wearing a type of mask. We can refer back to a particularly performative moment when Jack, Duncan’s house slave, asks him “in wheedling tones” whether “massa be so good as gib a pass to go to Methodist meeting?” (21). Duncan takes him at his word and simply warns Jack about staying out late (to which Jack replies “oh no massa”), completely unaware that Jack is deliberating an insurrection that might result in Duncan’s own murder (21). Duncan, as well, seems unaware that Jack is even capable of the act of deliberation. He is completely comfortable with writing pass after pass for his slaves to meet in the woods while at the same time fully absorbed in the thought of Robin Hood and his “bold” followers roaming the free forest, attempting to usurp Norman power—never assuming, of course, that his slaves might have similar motivations as the Saxon rebels. Additionally, it is perhaps ironic that the slaves are metaphorically “unmasked” to Duncan at the same time as Duncan is, himself, wearing his black mask. If we reflect upon Child’s dissatisfaction with the story’s motto, though, it becomes unclear whether she was searching for an epigraph that reflected the story’s plot—that is, Duncan’s discovery—or whether she was looking for one that would engender her audience’s own realization.

Yet looking back at her letter to Chapman, we notice that Child’s comment never actually mentions any type of discovery or realization, but rather emphasizes the absence of recognition. We might ask if Duncan, in his failure to not just free his slaves but also to fully sympathize with them, ever really sees the “kindling volcano” stirring beneath his feet. Discovering the meeting and thinking about the Saxons pushes Duncan in contradictory ways: he will not report the slaves who met that night, but he will request more stringent laws regarding slave meetings, thus restricting the already severely limited freedom of the enslaved. It appears that Duncan’s historical perspective—which prompts him to align the history of his Saxon ancestors with the present day reality of those he enslaves—ultimately fails him. He valorizes the Saxons who fought fruitlessly against the Normans, but is unable recognize that his current position is more in line with the Norman conquerors than with the “brave outlaws of the free forest” (20). But his greatest failure might lay in the fact that he attempts to single handedly shape the future of the enslaved without regard to forces larger than himself. For if one such meeting occurs, surely there are others, or have been others, or will be others. Duncan’s (in)action is small, fruitless: he can recognize the trees, but cannot see the forest. On the other hand, the reader can see inside and outside of Duncan’s mind—can comprehend the size and power of the volcano while Duncan, limited to his own perceptions and thoughts, does not even realize the volcano exists.

In depicting Duncan’s failure, Child indicates to the reader both the limits of sentiment and the various ways in which sentiment works. Duncan’s displaced sympathy does not prompt him to act in a radical way, and while he likens the missions of the slaves to his Saxon ancestors, he himself does not feel like the slaves. However Duncan’s failure—whether it be a failure to form a sympathetic bond between himself and the slaves, or simple cowardice—makes a pointed statement. The reader has the potential to act as a type of corrective to Duncan, who cannot bridge the gap between himself and the slave, not to mention the gap between passive and active empathy. Yet if we consider that Child hopes to create societal change via the private reading experience, we arrive upon the much larger question of how one transforms private sentiment into public action. “The
Black Saxons” attempts to move readers in that very direction in its final sentences, where a first-person speaker (the first time this perspective is used) claims the story—which has up until this point functioned under the guise of fiction—is based in fact. Part of Child’s strategy, then, includes a blurring of the line between fact and fiction in her story, in claiming that her (fictional) story has a truthful basis.

Beyond Fact and Fiction

The truth claim, or the claim made by an author that the events of a work of fiction are truthful, is not uncommon in abolitionist fiction. These claims go beyond defending the veracity of published works against pro-slavery supporters; indeed, Justine S. Murison writes that abolitionists—“already branded religious enthusiasts and fanatics”—attempted to “eschew these connections through their claims to be sober, realistic writers, not prone to the enthusiasm of the era” (129). Child herself tackles the question of factual fiction and fictional fact in her response to the controversy surrounding the Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama (1838) for which prominent American poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier served as amanuensis (a fact that only added fuel to the fire).4 The narrative’s success turned into a scandal when the Alabama Beacon published an editorial challenging its veracity. Accordingly, abolitionist Lewis Tappan issued a public response in the New York-based Emancipator; the Beacon fired back with evidence and the American Anti-Slavery Society ceased printing the narrative that year (Cohen 113-17). Child writes of the on-going controversy in an 1838 letter to Theodore Dwight Weld: “To you and I, who look on the foundations upon which slavery rests, it is of the slightest consequence whether James Williams told the truth or not.” Yet she also concedes that “the doubt thrown on his narrative is doing incalculable mischief” (105, emphasis in original). These remarks are interesting for several reasons. Child admits that, personally, the veracity of Williams’s narrative is inconsequential because—regardless of whether Williams “told the truth”—his narrative speaks to slavery’s violation of “eternal principles, which embrace the rights and happiness of every human being” (105). Her reaction indicates a belief that both fact and fiction have the potential to communicate truth. At the same time, she recognizes that fact is important to the reading public, and that fiction masquerading as fact has the potential for “incalculable mischief,” in that it could potentially result in anti-slavery texts (and the cause as a whole) being dismissed as lies purposely manufactured by radical abolitionists (105).

Yet, while a false slave narrative may contain foundations of truth, Child acknowledges that there is an unarguable emotionally persuasive power to fact. Earlier in that same letter, Child relates a story of a slave forced to wear an iron mask with only a few holes bored out for his eyes and mouth because he was suspected of attempting to escape. Child says to Weld, “I have often wished you could collect the variety of instruments of torture used, and deposit them at the A.S. [American Anti-Slavery Society] office. I believe such a collection would do a vast deal of good” (104). But even these “instruments of torture”—which seemingly serve as incontrovertible evidence of slavery’s barbarism—do not have the power to end slavery, but only to do a “deal of good” in the ongoing fight. Like most things, fact must be utilized properly in order to make the greatest emotional impact.

Given her stated ambivalence, it may seem strange, then, that Child chooses to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction in her stories, especially when we consider her
recognition of the mischief that could follow such a move. I argue, though, that understanding this move is critical to grasping Child's depictions of sympathetic identification. The final sentence of “The Black Saxons” has a first-person narrator assuring readers that she has “told it [the story] truly,” with only the “additional garniture of language and the adoption of fictitious names” (“Saxons” 191), which moves the story and its characters from the realm of fiction to the realm of fact. Nowhere else in the story does the narrator make any such claim—and indeed nowhere else in the story is the first-person narrator present but in the final two paragraphs. Child uses this tactic again, albeit in varying forms, in “The Quadroons” and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” her two other stories that appeared in the 1842 and 1843 issues of The Liberty Bell. “The Quadroons” ends with the narrator’s famous declaration, “Reader, do you complain that I have written fiction? Believe me, scenes like these are of no unfrequent occurrence at the South” (“Quadroons” 141). Though the narrator here does not claim the story is “fact,” the narrator also refuses to concede that it is wholly fiction. Indeed, the narrator’s voice asks the reader to “believe” in the truth of the story. “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes,” a story about the rape and murder of a slave woman named Rosa and the execution of her lover, George, ends with fictional newspaper accounts of the story’s tragedy: the Georgia paper that announces, “The black demon [George] was caught and hung; and hanging was too good for him” and the Northern paper which merely “copied this version” (“Pleasant Homes” 160). Here Child questions the very nature of the evidence we rely on for fact. She writes that despite these “official” accounts, “no one was found to tell” of Rosa’s rape and murder, and “not one recorded the heroism” of George’s actions: “His very name was left unmentioned; he was only Mr. Dalcho’s slave!” (“Pleasant Homes” 160). Ironically, the only source that “reports” on George and Rosa’s story is “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes”; therefore the voice of the narrator becomes inherently more reliable than the newspapers, and the line between fact and fiction becomes difficult to distinguish.

It is no coincidence that the move from fiction to fact occurs at the close of each of these stories. Up until the individual conclusions, each story’s universe is established and stable. However, Child strategically utilizes the final paragraph in each story to disrupt that universe by alerting readers to the fact that the story’s universe is apparently the same one in which the reader exists. Such a move functions to displace the readers’ sympathies, moving them from the fictional-textual realm to the political-social realm. That is, before this point, readers feel for Rosalie and Xarifa, or Rosa and George, as tragic characters in tragic plots. Child, though, effectively pulls the rug out from under the reader by connecting these stories to the real world. In doing so, she attempts to make clear that the reader should not merely feel for the characters per se but feel for all those whom the characters represent. If the reader feels for and identifies with, say, George, then s/he feels for the real slaves who exist in the readers’ (real) world. To go back to Child’s comment regarding “The Black Saxons,” it is the reader who realizes they are “on a kindling volcano,” that this oncoming event is not contained within the pages of a story but outside his or her own front door.

The facto-fictional legacy of “The Black Saxons” extends beyond its initial publication in The Liberty Bell.7 The same year as it appeared in the Bell it was reprinted in several newspapers, including the Liberator. In 1846, it appeared in Child’s short story collection Fact and Fiction; and in 1855, it was republished in African American abolitionist William C. Nell’s The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, noted for being “the first comprehensive work of African American history” (Eiselein 311). More curious, though, is
the fact that the story appeared in the July 25, 1861 issue of the *Independent*—exactly 20 years after its original appearance in *The Liberty Bell*—with the following prefatory note from the newspaper’s editors:

> The following story, which is very suggestive at this crisis, is strictly true. The Southern gentleman, who visited the swamp in disguise, and heard the speeches of the slaves, repeated them, as nearly as he could recollect, to a friend of Mrs. Child, and she committed them to writing. The incidents occurred during the war of 1812, when the probability of the British landing on our coasts was much talked of. (6)

Though it is not clear whether this editorial note was inserted with Child’s permission, there is some evidence that it (or at least the sentiment) may have been approved by Child herself, who wrote to *Independent* editor Theodore Tilton regarding the story’s publication:

> I agree with Mrs. Stowe that the publication of the story at this time will help the formation of public opinion in the right direction. ... It seems to me very desirable to manufacture public opinion fast now, that it may be in readiness to make suitable use of the crisis, which the madness of the South, under the guiding hand of Divine Providence, is bringing upon itself. (389, emphasis in original)

At the time Child agreed to have the story appear in the *Independent*, Harriet Beecher Stowe was regularly writing for the paper and one of the paper’s founding editors was Stowe’s brother, Henry Ward Beecher. By this time, Child had witnessed the astounding success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the potential for fiction to sway millions of readers. Furthermore, at the time of the story’s re-publication in the paper, the country had been at war for three months and the Union had very recently suffered a startling defeat at the Battle of Bull Run—a mere four days before the story’s publication.

In light of the shifting cultural context, perhaps simply hoping readers would be moved was not enough; perhaps insisting on the story’s veracity through the prefatory note and the concluding paragraph was a type of last-ditch attempt to grab readers’ attention. In her letter to Tilton, Child acknowledges the necessity of garnering public support as well as the power of fiction to encourage and create that support. Like her comment almost twenty years previous regarding her work’s success among “the young and romantic,” Child acknowledges not only the author’s power to reach audiences but more importantly the author’s potential to influence how the reading public thinks. Child straightforwardly states that she wishes to “manufacture” public opinion—that is, to both create and shape affect in a way desirable to the antislavery cause. Interestingly, in her comment to Tilton, Child does not appear to distinguish between public opinion and sentiment, though few would consider the two to be interchangeable terms. We could imagine, however, that at this point in the country’s history, “The Black Saxons” is not needed to make its readers aware of the “kindling volcano,” but instead to direct readers to the appropriate action. Of course, as “The Black Saxons” demonstrates, not all who read will feel, and not all who feel will act. In Mr. Duncan, and in the reading audience in general, the productive power of sympathy is not always a guarantee.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. This goal could be connected to the function of gift books—ornamented and aesthetically pleasing books that were meant to be given as gifts rather than purchased for oneself. Since these books were given away (or at least intended to be), there was potential to reach a different type of reader. According to Isabelle Lehuu, “the act of offering giftbooks was part of an economy of sentiment, an exchange of beautiful luxury goods for memory and love” (78). In this way, the sentimental power of the gift book is not limited to the texts within but exists within the book itself, which served as what Lehuu calls a “leaflet of memory” (76).

2. Child felt pressure from “Garrisonian” abolitionists, or abolitionists who aligned themselves with *Liberator* editor William Lloyd Garrison (including her friend Chapman) to use the paper to denounce those who opposed Garrisonian politics and policies. Compared to the *Standard*, Garrison’s *Liberator* had a much smaller circulation. Child, who sought to increase the reading audience of the *Standard*, feared that using the paper to publicize abolitionist in-fighting might alienate both current and future readers, reduce circulation numbers and ultimately, like the *Liberator*, “repel all but a limited number” (*Selected Letters* 194).
3. We can also make a connection between this moment, in which wearing the “black mask” enables sympathetic identification, and Child’s only dramatic work, *The Stars and Stripes: A Melo-Drama* (1858). Like “The Black Saxons,” Child’s drama was published in the abolitionist gift book *The Liberty Bell*. Eric Gardner notes that it “may have been designed for either or both closet drama/novelistic reading or small amateur (family or social) theatricals” (440). The play, whether performed or read aloud within the space of the home, asks those participating to (like Duncan) “wear a black mask” by both performing the roles of and in imagining themselves as the slave characters. Furthermore, that Child’s “melo-drama” appears seventeen years after the publication of “The Black Saxons” perhaps suggests a sustained belief in (or prolonged hope for) the power of sympathetic identification as a tool to change the hearts and minds of the public.

4. For more on the Williams controversy as well as an interesting take on the racial politics of fabrication, see Cohen (101-32).

5. The very next year, Weld published *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, which uses southern newspapers and first-hand accounts from slave owners, clergymen, overseers, and professors for evidence. Weld goes beyond merely convincing readers of slavery’s evils: “Reader, we know whereof we affirm, we have weighed it well; more and worse WE WILL PROVE” through the “scores and hundreds of eye witnesses” (9, emphasis in original). *American Slavery* turned out to be immensely popular; according to Thomas C. Leonard, it sold 100,000 copies in its first year, making it “the most popular item on antislavery lists until *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared in 1852” (121).

6. The final line referenced above only appears in the version published in *The Liberty Bell*. The version of the story in Child’s short story collection, *Fact and Fiction* (1846), has the last line removed.

7. In addition to the above, a thoroughly revised version of the story appeared in *The Freedman’s Book* with a new title, “A Meeting in the Swamp.” *The Freedman’s Book*, for which Child served as editor, was “developed to help freedmen and women become literate and make a life for themselves in a country still divided over their very status” and included pieces by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Frances E.W. Harper, and Harriet Jacobs (Stewart 701).

---

**ABSTRACTS**

Cet article s’intéresse à l’attention portée à l’affect par Lydia Maria Child, écrivaine populaire du XIXᵉ siècle et fervente abolitionniste, dans sa nouvelle peu étudiée « *The Black Saxons* » (1841), publiée pour la première fois dans le gift book abolitionniste *The Liberty Bell*. En parcourant les correspondances personnelles et publiques de Child, il apparaît clairement qu’elle était tout à fait consciente de l’impact que la fiction pouvait avoir sur le lectorat américain, impact qui pouvait être utilisé à des fins de réforme sociale. En particulier, “*The Black Saxons*” offre un point d’entrée productif dans l’utilisation que fait Child de l’affect : la description d’une compassion inhabituelle qui figure dans cette histoire illustre un sentiment arbitré ou filtré, plutôt qu’elle ne dépeint des personnages en proie à la compassion ou à l’empathie. En outre, la stratégie de Child vise à déplacer la compassion du lecteur du domaine fictionnel et textuel vers le domaine politique et social.
AUTHORS

FIONA MCWILLIAM

Fiona McWilliam is lecturer in English at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She received her doctorate from Florida State University in 2014. Her work has appeared in *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* and *Studies in American Fiction*.