


Crystal Lynn Webster. *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North*

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As Dr. Crystal Lynn Webster discusses in the epilogue of *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood*, Black children continue to be demonized and dehumanized. This is evident from the shootings of unarmed Black children and youth in recent years, including Tamir Rice, Ma'Khia Bryant, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. Webster concludes her engaging, well-researched account on African American children in the antebellum North with the following about Black children in the twenty-first century: “By being perceived as deviant, dangerous, or simply adult, these Black children were not only denied their identities as children, but they were also deprived of their lives and humanity” (p. 146).

Webster lays the groundwork for understanding the present by seeking to redefine dominant narratives of childhood in the antebellum North. She considers “the political power of Black childhood and the economic role of Black children’s labor” as social and political movements informed the treatment of Black children in the North from enslavement to gradual emancipation before the Civil War (p. 13). Webster’s archival research includes sources from the New York Historical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania as well as newspapers and periodicals including the *Christian Recorder*, *The Crisis*, *The Emancipator*, and *the North Star*. Her analysis is detailed and meticulous, illuminating the ways that she reads against the grain. Webster also centers both activism and the investigation of what she calls the *metaphysical dilemma*, a theoretical model for understanding childhood as “both a state of being and a material site with racialized and gendered markers of physical development” (p. 5). In total, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood* makes an important intervention in the intersecting historiographies focused on African Americans, the North, and childhood as Black children and their parents and communities sought to counter how white people pathologized them.¹

Beginning with the Middle Passage and slavery, Europeans had no respect for African ideas of childhood; Black children were marked as “other,” which informed

¹Although *Chicago Manual of Style* capitalizes the terms “Black” and “White” in reference to race or ethnicity, the term “white” is in lowercase in this review, per the author’s preference.

differing notions of childhood for white and Black children. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most northern Black children lived in urban areas as either enslaved or indentured, and Black children's play was defined by constructs of racial superiority and inferiority, as detailed in Webster's analysis of paper dolls. To counter deficit thinking regarding Black children, some Black educators may have overcorrected, as in the case of Susan Paul, whose memoir of James Jackson emphasized his faith in Christianity and maturity without considerations of the importance of play. In some cases, Black children received support and care, having access to books, outdoor play areas, and other forms of play; however, Black children's play was often used by some white reformers to control Black children's behavior and by some well-intentioned Black activists to control how others thought of Black children.

As Black children negotiated orphanages and other institutional spaces, they encountered several metaphysical dilemmas of Black childhood: "protection, familial separation, pathologization, and racialized institutionalization" (p. 37). Because of concerns about "social control and deviancy" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reformers originally established orphanages for white children, but in time reformers established orphanages for Black children which became important sites as Black mothers, especially those who had lost husbands to terrible working conditions, sometimes sought temporary childcare. Webster documents—and this is not readily captured in other histories—how Black women actually helped to establish some of the Black orphanages, such as the Philadelphia Shelter for Coloured Orphans. However, white women, including Quakers, ultimately oversaw such orphanages for Black children, and the white community's enactment of anti-Blackness was evident in their politics, beliefs, and actions. Despite being antislavery activists, white women reformers held pejorative notions of the Black community. Reformers increasingly wanted to move orphanages for Black children out of Black communities because of their negative beliefs about Black communities. White physicians blamed Black people's biology, rather than the conditions of the orphanages, for Black children's health issues, and white mobs enacted violence against institutions housing Black children.

Webster also analyzes Black children through their work as indentured servants, which was a provision in many gradual emancipation laws of the new northern states. On the treatment of Black girls, she aptly notes that they most likely experienced both physical and sexual abuse as workers. Further, she details how advertisements for children to work were very descriptive, including attention to physical attributes and skin color, and how the institutions that helped to provide Black children as indentured servants profited from doing so. Similar to what Black adults experienced, Black children also faced the harmful effects of jobs like chimney sweeping, and continued to be exploited across class lines (unlike white children, for whom such treatment was relegated to the impoverished) until the passage of child labor laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to work, schooling is an important site for considering Black childhood. Though northern African Americans organized some of their own schools in

the 1700s, schools in the 1800s, especially those run by white reformers and educators, including the well-known Abiel Smith School in Boston, served as a means not only to inscribe respectable behaviors but also as sites of harm and mistreatment for Black children. Webster poignantly describes how Black children were beholden to white benefactors, which meant at times having to denounce their parents in public through skits. Moreover, she delineates how white people harassed Black children on the way to and from school, which, along with the harsh disciplinary measures, were reasons why Black children did not like schooling. While wrestling with how to provide quality schooling for their children, Black parents raised serious concerns about Abner Forbes, head of the Abiel Smith School, given his improper interactions with children and his belief in the inferiority of Black people. In 1849, a group of Black parents filed *Roberts v. Boston*, a court case that partly rested on the claim that Black students had to endure psychological trauma and the feeling of being denigrated while walking through white neighborhoods and by white schools.

Webster concludes by interrogating the negative stereotypes perpetuated about Black parents, in particular Black mothers, and the ways that Black people sought to counter such stereotypes. The rupturing of Black families in the North is not as well known as that of Black families in the South. When northern Black parents tried to reestablish their families, they “came into conflict with an emerging humanitarian discourse that characterized them as unfit to parent” (p. 116). A key way Black parents sought to reunify their families was to reclaim their children from orphanages and other institutions. In addition, through writings including those by Sojourner Truth and in outlets such as the *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Black women spoke about their experiences, illuminating Black mothers “as powerful actors with the ability to instill not only religious morals, but also social lessons that resonated with the northern free Black readership” (p. 130).

Beyond Boundaries takes us into the lives of Black children in the North and into the thinking of white and Black adults from different class backgrounds. Even well-intentioned white people often exhibited paternalism toward Black children and their parents, and Black children and parents, especially those still indentured and working menial jobs, carefully navigated dangerous everyday life, beliefs about their inferiority, and politics of resistance adhered to by middle-class African Americans who enjoyed a greater degree of freedom. Because each chapter covers roughly the same period, at times one might yearn for a more chronological account that allows for the themes addressed in each chapter to be discussed over time. Overall, however, Webster’s book provides much for historians of education to consider about Black childhood during the nineteenth century, and the ways that race and racism permeated the North. Webster’s important work expands and deepens our knowledge of why Black children continue to be dehumanized.