The Biopolitics of Childhood in the Long American 19th Century

Edited by Lucia Hodgson and Allison Giffen

First published 2025

ISBN: 9781032563527 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781032563541 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003435068 (ebk)

3 The Biopolitics of Sexual Consent in Lydia Maria Child's Reform Fiction

Lucia Hodgson

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003435068-5

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

3 The Biopolitics of Sexual Consent in Lydia Maria Child's Reform Fiction

Lucia Hodgson

In the 1840s, the American writer Lydia Maria Child aligned herself with a growing social movement aimed at reforming laws against the sexual seduction of unmarried women. In 1844, she wrote an article for the *Boston Courier* in which she reported on the trial of Amelia Norman, a white Northern woman charged with attempted murder of the wealthy gentleman who seduced her when she was sixteen. In her defense of Norman, Child articulated a blistering critique of the legal options available to victims of seduction:

> [The prosecuting attorney] said that betrayed women had redress at the civil law. I never hear that assertion without burning indignation. *What* is the redress for a broken heart, blighted reputation, the desertion of friends, the loss of respectable employment, the scorn and hissing of the world? Why, the woman must acknowledge herself the *servant* of somebody, who may claim *wages* for her lost time! With indignation and scorn, I appeal to common sense and common justice, against this miserable legal fiction—this impudent assumption that I am a chattel personal. It is a standing insult to woman kind; and had we not become the slaves we are deemed in law, we should rise *en masse*, in the majesty of moral power, and sweep that contemptible insult from the statute-book.
> (Child, "Letter from New York, No. V" 2)

In this passage, Child refers to the fact that the only legal redress for seduction was a civil action based in *per quod servitium amisit*, a feudal tort that enabled a master to sue someone who had injured his servant for "loss of services" (Hibbard and Parry 338–339).[1]

In the nineteenth century, seduction generally referred to coercive sexual intercourse with an unmarried girl that did not meet the strict legal definition of rape, that was "neither fully 'chosen' nor demonstrably 'forced'" (Haag 3). A victim of seduction could not bring criminal charges or sue on her own behalf. Rather, American courts recognized a father's right to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003435068-5
This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

sue his minor daughter's seducer based on the proposition that she was his *de jure* servant, in that fathers were entitled to the services and wages of their minor daughters. As long as a girl was under twenty-one, unmarried, and living in her father's household at the time of the seduction, her father could claim the "legal fiction" of lost services, whether or not she was actually providing any services or generating any wages. The daughter could not bring suit on her own behalf and her own willingness or unwillingness to engage in sexual relations with the accused was not relevant to her father's legal case. The issue was that she had become less valuable to her father in her ability to support the economy of the household through services, wages, or marriage.[2]

Child's critique of the seduction tort invokes two reforms efforts in which she was involved at the time: anti-prostitution and anti-slavery.[3] Although concerned with different segments of society—young free white women vs. enslaved Black women and men—the reform efforts were rhetorically entangled through popular analogies between free white women and enslaved Black women and between prostitution in Northern cities and master-slave sexual relations in Southern society.[4] Child's analogy between the seduced girl and "chattel personal" suggests that seduction law reduced free girls to the status of enslaved girls who were subject to systemic sexual violence without legal recourse. This formulation called attention to the plight of enslaved girls and simultaneously displaced their suffering to arouse outrage on behalf of seduced white girls. Child's analogy also invokes the anti-prostitution argument that seduction was a major, if not the major, cause of urban prostitution that reduced free women to a form of sexual slavery.[5] The movement to reform seduction law drew support from both anti-prostitution and anti-slavery efforts because their rhetorics were intertwined and because they both wielded the seduction narrative to sway public opinion.[6] The first American bestseller, *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* published in New York in 1794, was a seduction narrative, and it was still tremendously popular in the 1830s and 1840s.[7] Lydia Maria Child adapted the genre in her reform writings, publishing the anti-slavery short story "The Quadroons" in 1842 and the anti-prostitution short story "Rosenglory" in 1846.

As I will argue in this chapter, Child's seduction narratives codified the traits of a seducible girl and the conventions of an illegal seduction in ways that led ultimately to substantive legal reforms but severely circumscribed who could make a convincing case that she was a victim. In Child's hands, the genre's traits and conventions biologized sexual consent through implicit theories about the racial nature of resistance to illicit sexuality and the transformative effects of illicit sexual activity on the capacity for such resistance. American sentimental fiction and law worked together in the nineteenth century to root the capacity to withhold sexual consent in

the body, as a racialized biological capacity to restrain sexual impulses and to repulse sexual overtures. From this perspective, Black girls were born incapable of withholding sexual consent, and white girls became constitutionally incapable of doing so after their first illicit sexual experience. Child's stories enabled a biopolitical sorting of the population of white girls into those who could believably be coerced into sexual relations and those who could not, and simultaneously undermined arguments for providing enslaved Black girls with legal protection from sexual violence.[8]

Seduction and Sexual Consent

The seduction narrative is driven by one overarching dramatic question: why does the heroine consent to sexual intercourse with the seducer? She is almost always a fifteen-year-old girl who has everything to lose by having sex out of wedlock. As Child emphasizes in the *Boston Courier*, the victim of seduction will likely suffer from "a broken heart, blighted reputation, the desertion of friends, the loss of respectable employment, the scorn and hissing of the world." In fiction as in life, the seduced girl often comes to a bad end: she likely faces a stint as a prostitute since she will have alienated her family, friends, and the possibility of "respectable employment," and she often experiences an early death brought on by poverty, disease, and pregnancy. The dramatic work of the genre is to explain in a credible and compelling way why the heroine finally says yes to the seducer's overtures—why she ultimately gives her consent.

In late eighteenth-century iterations of the American seduction genre, the heroine consents because she mistakenly believes that she is already married to the seducer or that she will be shortly. This was also the most common reason given in the hundreds of short seduction tales that appeared in reform periodicals like the *Friend of Virtue* in the 1830s and 1840s.[9] When Child adapted the genre for her reform efforts, she maintained the basic plot, but she did so without the promise of marriage as the explanation for the heroine's fall. This decision reflected the fact that Child was focused on the enslaved and the poor, and the convention did not work at all when the heroine was enslaved since slaves could not legally marry, and it did not work as well when the heroine was impoverished since a promise of marriage from an eligible and desirable suitor was less believable. Child crafted alternative explanations for consent to seduction that were better suited to her reform goals. Her plots illuminated the oppressive circumstances that drove enslaved and poor girls to consent to illicit sexual activity. But Child's seduction narratives suggest that she did not feel these circumstances were sufficient to explain her heroines' poor sexual choices. In both "Quadroons" and "Rosenglory," Child also developed biological explanations for why her heroines were susceptible to seduction: they had

inherited certain temperaments from their mothers that made it difficult, if not impossible, to resist sexual overtures.

The theory of the "sentimental politics of life" developed by Kyla Schuller provides a method for reading Child's stories that illuminates the racialized biopolitical workings of her implicit biological understanding of sexual consent. Child wrote her sentimental reform stories "The Quadroons" and "Rosenglory" as sentimentalism was becoming a dominant American biopolitical technology and as heredity was newly understood as a biological concept. Her fiction was central to the development of a sentimental biopolitics of heredity in the nineteenth century. Biopolitical governance works "by fostering the health and vitality of some members of the nation, while designating others for dispossession and death" (Schuller 2). In Child's writings, sentimental biopolitics works by promoting the protection of young white sexually inexperienced girls from sexual exploitation and by characterizing sexually experienced white girls and all Black girls as fit for sex work. This categorizing relies on a racialized biological understanding of female sexual consent: Black girls inherit from their Black mothers an inability to withhold sexual consent; white girls inherit from their white mothers the capacity to withhold sexual consent, but exposure to illicit sex impairs this capacity.

In the terms of the nineteenth-century "sentimental politics of life," female sexual experience is a central node of biopolitical control, and sexual restraint is "an overdetermined criterion of civilization" (Schuller 84). A girl's capacity for sexual nonconsent is determined by the relative impressibility of her "race" and her own "body's relative capacity for receiving and regulating impressions" (41). In sentimental and scientific discourse, whiteness is a signifier of civilization and impressibility, and Blackness connotes a profound lack of both. Within these discourses, Black girls were born sexually promiscuous with "a primitive inability to temper impulses to touch with reflective thought," and "consigned to the immediacy of . . . instinctive response, captive to whatever stimulations crossed their paths." And they were incapable of developing the capacity "to direct appropriately nonimpulsive, emotional responses to sensations" (3). White girls were born chaste and free from "the impulses dictated by immediate sensation" (18), but their gender made them hyper-impressible. Their "heightened impressibility" (21) made them vulnerable to dramatic degeneration and to the reemergence of "their animal and savage substrate" (12). Once engaged in illicit sexual activity or even immersed in a milieu where such activity took place, white girls' capacity to restrain their sexual impulses eroded. The ruined white girl lost the sexual and racial purity that underwrote her biological categorization as civilized.

According to this line of thinking, many white girls themselves became unimpressible after illicit sexual relations not despite but because of the

racialized polarization of girlhood impressibility. Their "highly responsive natures and a correlated delicacy . . . frequently threatened weakness" (Schuller 40). Their hyper impressibility made them capable of advanced civilization and of dramatic degeneration into the racialized "primitive" state of sexual promiscuity. Once exposed to illicit sexual activity, their capacity to regulate their feelings and actions degraded. As Schuller recounts, reformer Charles Loring Brace believed that girls who had grown up in the Bowery had been exposed to so much "vice" that they were "too primitive" to be reformed "and lacked the self-control necessary to resist sexual temptation" (148). His Children's Aid Society would not assist girls over twelve because they were presumably already sex workers and, in Schuller's words, "too thoroughly saturated with the impressions of others" to be helped (148). Exposure to illicit sex was thought to ruin white girls, turning them into promiscuous bodies without sexual restraint not unlike Black girls. Like all Black girls, sexually experienced white girls were deemed unfit to reproduce future citizens and simultaneously well-suited to service the market for illicit sex.

The Quadroons

When Child in 1844 drew the analogy between seduced white girls and chattel slaves in reference to the case of Amelia Norman, she had already explored the relationship between the seduced and the enslaved in the anti-slavery story, "The Quadroons." The story suggests that Child was acutely aware of the popular libel that Black girls, especially the enslaved, were inherently sexually promiscuous. As Robin Bernstein writes, the emergent concept of childhood as sexually pure "resembled the cult of true womanhood in that each discourse attached sexual innocence to white children and women respectively. Antebellum black children, like black women, were assumed to be ineligible for sexual purity" (42). In "The Quadroons," the heroine Rosalie is Black and enslaved, yet born sexually innocent and capable of both refinement and deep feeling. However, she is also almost white, and her trace of "African ancestry" is associated with a romantic ardor that defies social convention and traditional morality.

Rosalie is the prototype of the so-called "tragic mulatta" figure whom Child is credited with inventing.[10] This figure is, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes, a "beautiful woman who appears to be white, who manifests all of the personal graces fostered by freedom and privilege, but who, through the accident of a few drops of 'black blood,' is legally a slave" (468). In Rosalie, Child created a heroine who shared as many characteristics with the traditional seduced white middle-class heroine as was possible for the enslaved daughter of an enslaved Black mother. Rosalie is an almost-white enslaved Christian girl, the daughter of a well-to-do white slave owner

and his enslaved concubine. In addition, Rosalie believes herself to be free, under the impression that her father legally emancipated her when she was a child. As the story points out, she is nonetheless by law Black and enslaved *despite* the attributes she shares with elite marriageable white girls: laws against interracial marriage, the story's narrator tells us, "could not be reversed in her favour, though she was the daughter of a wealthy merchant, was highly cultivated in mind and manners, graceful as an antelope, and beautiful as the evening star" (62). The story's critique of anti-miscegenation laws is evident but mitigated by the fact that Child objects to them primarily in a case where they are applied to a legally Black person who is all but white in body and upbringing.

The law prevents Rosalie from marrying Edward, the white gentleman who falls in love with her. The reason for Rosalie's consent to an illicit sexual relationship with Edward is therefore on one level quite simple and compelling: "a union with her proscribed race was unrecognised by law."[11] In all ways, she is a very suitable wife for him. Their relationship is based in "genuine love," not simply motivated by physical attraction: "the purity and bright intelligence of her mind, inspired him with far deeper interest than is ever excited by mere passion." Where the tragedy of the traditional seduced heroine lies in the fact that she succumbs to pressure to consummate her marriage before it can legally take place, the tragedy of the seduced "quadroon" is that she cannot legally marry her seducer. As in Rosalie's case, the "tragic mulatta" has "no legal hold" on her lover's "constancy," and therefore she is inevitably eventually abandoned by him ("The Quadroons" 62).

The traditional (white) seduction heroine dies of shame often in childbirth; Rosalie dies of "deep, deep sadness" (70) after experiencing suicidal impulses ten years after her child is born. The fact that Rosalie dies of grief testifies to her refined and sensitive character, countering the myth that Black women are insensitive and unimpressible. But in the context of the seduction narrative, it nevertheless underscores that she doesn't die of shame over having had sex and giving birth out of wedlock. The story defends Rosalie's illicit relationship with Edward, but it does so through what we can call a "sentimental racialism" which classifies bodies according to a racialized attribution of feelings. Child develops a biological rationale for Rosalie's consent that counters the stereotype that Black girls are shameless. This biological explanation is rooted in her inherited "poetic and impassioned temperament" (73): a Romantic sensibility that prioritizes feeling, nature, and spirit over reason, convention, and law. Child emphasizes the racial nature of this "temperament" by contrasting Rosalie's feelings with those of Edward's legal wife who has "never experienced" "the impassioned tenderness" that Rosalie feels for him (68); "her blue eyes were gentle, though inexpressive" (65). The story's explanation for Rosalie's lack of

shame—her deep love—does push back against the libel that Black people are not capable of deep emotion that transcends sexual desire. But her story simultaneously reinforces the libel that people of "African ancestry" are less capable of controlling their feelings and acclimating to social rules, or, to put it in nineteenth-century terms, becoming civilized.

Unlike her free counterpart, the "tragic mulatta" cannot die of shame because she enters an illicit relationship knowingly and willfully. She cannot be duped by a false promise of marriage or sham ceremony because legal marriage is not an option. Rosalie insists that she and Edward be married in a Black church because "[t]he tenderness of [her] conscience required an outward form of marriage," even though she knows that the ceremony is not legally binding (62). When Edward "playfully" reminds Rosalie that he is not legally bound to her, she draws strength from "her high poetic nature [which] regarded the reality, rather than the semblance of things": the "reality" is that their marriage is "sanctioned by Heaven, though unrecognised on Earth." Edward and Rosalie are bound by love rather than law. As she tells him, "If your affections fall from me, I would not, if I could, hold you by a legal fetter" (62–63). Rosalie is not ashamed of her illicit relationship because, in her view, it is only illicit on earth by the terms of man-made laws that unjustly prevent recognized unions between people who love each other deeply if they are understood to be from different "races." Child's story defends Rosalie's choice to live with Edward as if they were married but does so by reifying a racially essentialist notion that passion plays a determining role in Black women's social lives.

Rosalie is biologically capable of dismissing social convention in favor of love and sublime surroundings; because she is "surrounded by an outward environment of beauty, so well adapted to her poetic spirit," she is "happy" (63) in a situation her free peers are taught to find degrading. It is Rosalie's capacity for deep feeling, not a commitment to conventional morality, that motivates the termination of her illicit relationship with Edward. When he proposes that she can continue to be "his real wife" even after he has married someone else, she resists because she feels too much to share him: "He was not prepared for the storm of indignant emotion his words excited. Hers was a passion too absorbing to admit of partnership" (67). She is not sufficiently chaste to resist a sexual relationship because it is illicit, but she is "too pure and kind" to betray Edward's new bride. Edward continues to convey "earnest pleadings that she would consent to see him again" in letters he delivers along with his continued financial support, but Rosalie continues to withhold sexual consent because he is married to someone else. Rosalie is guided by feelings. She gives and withholds sexual consent for sentimental, not rational, conventional, or moral, reasons. Her capacity to withhold sexual consent from illicit relations is compromised by a trace of "African ancestry" that enables her to adapt

enthusiastically to a situation that society decrees she should find repellent and degrading.

The story's inclusion of the tragic fate of Rosalie's daughter Xarifa emphasizes Child's view of the inherited racialized nature that directs Black girls' sexual decisions. Unlike traditional seduction narratives, "The Quadroons" tells the story of two generations. After her father's death, fifteen-year-old Xarifa is left in a "lonely and unprotected state" with no one to turn to but George Eliot, her British harp teacher (72). She consents to an illicit relationship with George that ends dramatically when her maternal grandfather's relatives seize her as their enslaved property on the grounds that neither her mother nor mother's mother were ever formally emancipated.[12] Despite George's attempts to purchase her, she is sold to the highest bidder and sequestered in the household of her new owner. Along with her status as a slave, Xarifa inherits from her mother the biological attributes that make seduction inevitable, attributes associated with her "African ancestry." In her description of Xarifa's eyes, Child establishes a theory of the heredity of racialized feelings: "The iris of her large, dark eye had the melting, mezzotinto outline, which remains the last vestige of African ancestry, and gives that plaintive expression, so often observed, and so appropriate to that docile and injured race" (63). "African ancestry" transmits the affective characters and experiences of one generation to the next: "Xarifa inherited her mother's poetic and impassioned temperament" (73), as well as her capacity for a depth of feeling that enables deep grief and deep love. Xarifa's inclination to consent to seduction is both inherited from her mother and nurtured by her upbringing. Despite the fact that she is the daughter of two unmarried parents, "Xarifa learned no lessons of humility or shame, within her own happy home." When she, on walks with her mother, is subject to "some contemptuous epithet" uttered by passing "white ladies," Xarifa feels anger rather than mortification: "her dark eye flashed fire" (63). Once again, her eye is the racialized source of strong feelings that do not include shame.

Like her mother, Xarifa does not experience the conventional shame of the white victim of seduction because she easily places love above convention: George's seduction was "lucky . . . for her enthusiastic and affectionate nature; for she could not live without an atmosphere of love" (63). She succumbs to illicit relations in line with, not against, her "nature." In mildly erotic language, the story links her inherited "poetic and impassioned temperament" to a pleasurable sexual initiation: "to her, above others, the first consciousness of these sweet emotions was like a golden sunrise on the sleeping flowers." Xarifa and George subsequently live as lovers, enjoying "*La Belle Passion*," in the same secluded cottage as her parents before them, "that flower-embosomed nest . . . consecrated by the Fates to Love" (73). Xarifa, like her mother before her, consents to an illicit

sexual relationship without resistance due to her capacity for and commitment to "love." This capacity for love is rendered as a form of virtue, even spirituality, but it is nonetheless a racialized and eroticized trait that is potentially hard to distinguish from a libelously attributed promiscuity. Whether spiritual or not, it is a capacity that leads to illicit sex.

In her attempt to adapt the seduction genre to the abolitionist cause, Child creates Black female characters with the capacity to feel deeply. But by the same racial logic, they also consent easily to illicit sexual unions, and they can pass this inclination on to their daughters. The strength of this logic from an anti-slavery perspective is that it makes the story's conclusion possible: reduced to enslavement by her grandfather's relatives, Xarifa dies by suicide after being forced to have sex with her master. Coercive sex without love renders her "a raving maniac" who ends her life by slamming her head against a wall. This ending counters the proslavery myth that Black girls, especially those who have had sexual experiences, cannot be sexually violated, a myth that in turn validates the assertion that sexual violence is not a routine element of enslavement. However, this anti-slavery logic comes at a high price. Only a certain kind of Black girl—the "tragic mulatta"—can register as a victim, and the rationalization for her consent contributes to the myth of Black sexual promiscuity.

The "tragic mulatta" is, by definition, profoundly atypical in both her racial traits and life experiences. Child's story critiques the fact that Xarifa is condemned to be considered Black though her body is nearly white: "She belonged to a proscribed race . . . though the brown colour on her soft cheek was scarcely deeper than the sunny side of a golden pear" (71). The implication is that her almost-white skin should allow her to enjoy the privileges of whiteness and avoid the degradations of Blackness. Reduced to the status of a slave and targeted for sale, Xarifa epitomizes incongruity:

> The gentle girl, happy as the birds in spring-time, accustomed to the fondest indulgence, surrounded by all the refinements of life, timid as a fawn, and with a soul full of romance was ruthlessly seized by a sheriff, and placed on the public auction-stand in Savannah. There she stood, trembling, blushing, and weeping; compelled to listen to the grossest language, and shrinking from the rude hands that examined the graceful proportions of her beautiful frame.
>
> (73–74)

Child's presentation of an enslaved heroine with all the qualities of an upper-class free girl is an effective abolitionist strategy; it invites white readers to identify with the tragic situation of the enslaved girl. And Child's sentimental racialism casts the "tragic mulatta's" remaining African ancestry in a positive light: she is capable of deep love for a white gentleman,

righteous anger at social condemnation, profound disgust in response to offensive language, and raving insanity as a result of rape. However, the strategy suggests, by implication, that all the enslaved girls who are not light-skinned, indulged, refined, and extremely beautiful are not equally threatened or degraded by sexual exploitation and violence and are not equally deserving of either sympathy or protection. The "tragic mulatta" narrative focused attention only on violence against ultra-privileged, almost white enslaved girls and simultaneously reinscribed the biological connection between "African ancestry" and sexual promiscuity.

Child's sentimental racialism both counters and reinscribes the libel that Black girls lack the virtue to withhold sexual consent to illicit relations. It does this by attributing to biology what is in fact attributable to circumstances. Child's "tragic mulattas" choose concubinage even though the enslaved, by definition, do not have the freedom to make unfettered choices. The proslavery myth that enslaved girls willingly consented to sexual relations with their masters because Black women were naturally sexually promiscuous was deployed to deny the sexual coercion endemic to the system of slavery. Child's sentimental myth that enslaved girls do not experience shame in illicit sexual relationships seems similarly libelous. Child herself wrote in her anti-slavery pamphlet, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of*

Figure 3.1 Woman and Child on Auction Block

Americans Called Africans (1833), that enslaved women "are unprotected either by law or public opinion. . . . They are allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame" (19). Within ten years of this observation, Child created the "tragic mulatta" character whose lack of shame was biological and inherited rather than denied by circumstance. To some extent, this shift speaks to the particular constraints of the seduction genre when adapted to the anti-slavery cause. It works to create a main character who registers as a heroine despite her race, but it requires an explanation for her sexual fall that traffics in the myth of Black female promiscuity.

Rosenglory

Child's anti-prostitution story, "Rosenglory," was first published in 1846 in *Fact and Fiction: A Collection of Stories*, an anthology of short stories that also included a reprinting of "The Quadroons." The story participated in a reform tradition of creating sympathy for prostitutes by attributing their turn to prostitution to seduction. The *Friend of Virtue* published hundreds of brief vignettes about girls from the country who were seduced under promise of marriage and then abandoned in the city at a "house of ill fame." In "Rosenglory," Child complicates this stock narrative by portraying a heroine, Susan, nicknamed "Rosenglory," who unlike other beautiful and innocent white girl characters grows up impoverished in the city. Child creates a scenario in which poverty rather than the promise of marriage explains the heroine's descent into prostitution, a scenario that takes seriously the role of socioeconomic circumstances in forcing young girls into a life of sex work. But Child simultaneously subscribes to the theory that exposure to illicit sex permanently transforms white girls into unimpressible animalistic beings for whom sex work is not repulsive or degrading.

In "Rosenglory," Child creates a heroine who stands in implicit and explicit contrast to the "tragic mulatta" of "The Quadroons." By using similar tropes in the two stories to different effect, she underscores the differences between white and Black girls in ways that contributed to what Bernstein calls the "the racial polarization of childhood [sexual] innocence" in the mid-nineteenth century (19–20). Like Xarifa, Susan is "an extremely lovely child," and she has inherited an "intense love of the beautiful" from her mother (242). But there the similarities end. She has deep feelings, but they are not at all erotic. She is innocent and chaste, committed to the church and to propriety. Her feelings are child-like, focused on natural wonders, not sexual sensations. Her engagement in illicit sex reflects not privilege or the dismissal of convention but underprivilege and economic necessity. The "tragic mulatta" consents knowingly and willingly to illicit relations. Susan resists illicit sex to the extent that she possibly can, and she succumbs only when her destitution leaves her no other option.

Whereas Rosalie and Xarifa are as socioeconomically privileged as enslaved women can possibly be, Susan is as socioeconomically oppressed as it is possible for a free white girl to be. The epigraph to "The Quadroons" emphasizes the race and elite status of the heroines. It consists of four lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," including "Come then and hear what cruel wrong/ Befell the dark Ladie" (61). This epigraph foreshadows that fact that Rosalie and Xarifa are worthy of sympathy because of their race and class. "Rosenglory" begins with two long epigraphs that stress the heroine's economic destitution. The first contains eight lines from the popular *Proverbial Philosophy* (1838) that describes the childhood of a "fair girl" that leads to her seduction, including the lines, "she drinketh the wormwood of dependence; / She is marked as a child of want; and the world hateth poverty." The second is a quote from Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), including the passage: "go into the squalid depths of deepest ignorance, the uttermost abyss of man's neglect, and say can any hopeful plant spring up in air so foul that it extinguishes the soul's bright torch as soon as it is kindled?" (241). Epigraphs in both stories convey their moral: the heroines are not at fault for their seductions. But the epigraphs to "Rosenglory" stress that Susan never had a chance to escape her fate of seduction and a life of prostitution. From childhood, she is like a plant deprived of light and oxygen. Unlike Rosalie and Xarifa, who follow the lead of their racial inheritance, Susan is driven by circumstance to thwart her innate sexual propriety.

Susan's childhood circumstances are extremely dire, both physically and emotionally. She is the child of an unemployed alcoholic father and a downtrodden mother who ekes out a living for the family by washing rags she finds in the streets and selling them to paper factories. Susan spends her early years enduring a "blighted youth" filled with "Many a hungry day, and many a night of pinching cold," along with beatings from her father and days spent following her mother as she works "hooking up rags from the dirty gutters of the street" (243). Xarifa "gr[ows] up in the warm atmosphere of father's and mother's love, like a flower open to the sunshine, and sheltered from the winds" (63). By contrast, Susan's "young life was opening in dark and narrow places; though, like the vine in the broken tea-pot, she caught now and then a transient gleam of sunshine." When her father dies and her mother is dying from tuberculosis "brought on by constant hardship and unvarying gloom," the children end up in a poorhouse (245). Xarifa's privileged upbringing only intensifies her inherited erotic temperament. Susan's orphanhood and destitution are necessary to explain her profound social and economic vulnerability to illicit relations because, in Child's view, she, like all white girls, has inherited a strong capacity and inclination to resist sex out of wedlock.

Where Rosalie and Xarifa are legible as victims of seduction to the extent that they share the upbringing of a privileged free girl, Susan is legible to the extent that she suffers like the enslaved. Paradoxically, Child's literally enslaved characters lead the lives of free and privileged girls, while her free character endures the conditions of enslavement. At eight years old, Susan is indentured as a servant in the household of a middle-class family. To underscore her oppression, Child stresses the slavery connotations of the word "bound": "She was, indeed, bound; for Mrs. Andrews was entirely forgetful that anything like freedom or enjoyment might be necessary or useful to servants." Susan has to care for a "heavy baby" who cries into the night, "scour knives" and "scrub the pavement" while "her master and mistress" are out on the town (246). Her "mistress" treats her like "a machine for her convenience" (248). When the children are grown, Susan is "confined to the cellar kitchen, from which she looked out upon stone steps and a brick wall" (247). She is abused, confined, isolated, illiterate, and alone.

Susan's poverty and dependence cause her to become the sexualized object of unavoidable male attention which contributes to her representation as a figurative slave. As a child who spends her days in the streets with her mother, Susan is subject to the proprietary gaze of upper-class men. On one occasion, a "gentleman" gives her a rose which Susan innocently calls a "Rosenglory" because she is thinking of "her pet Morning-Glory" whose blossoming had "filled her with passionate joy" (242). In response to her innocent and child-like outburst, the "gentleman" pats her on the head and says, "You are a little Rosenglory yourself; and I wish you were mine" (243), a phrase which likens Susan to an enslaved person who can be owned and exploited. Susan becomes the object of the predatory gaze of Master Robert, the son in the household where she is a servant, "a petulant, over-indulged boy" who had become "a selfish, pleasure-seeking lad." As a boy, Master Robert treats Susan like his own personal slave: "he had been in the habit of ordering the little servant to wash his dog, and of scolding at her, if she did not black his shoes to his liking." Soon enough "he began to notice that she was a very handsome girl" (247). Susan's portrayal as a figurative slave displaces the suffering of the literally enslaved yet draws on their suffering to provoke sympathy for her. To be a figurative slave is to be without the possibility to refuse seduction, yet this recognition is not extended to the literally enslaved in Child's seduction stories.

Susan's consent to illicit sex is the result of a series of incidents brought about by economic dependence and want. The incidents leading up to the seduction stress her innate virtue and modesty. Susan initially becomes indebted to and infatuated with Master Robert because he convinces her mother to allow her to attend church services and to provide her with "better clothes" that make such attendance possible. She becomes attached to him during their weekly visits to church where "the lovers sat in the same

pew, and sang from the same hymn-book." Although Susan falls "deeply and fervently" in love with Master Robert, her love is childish and asexual: "He was very handsome, and she delighted in his beauty, as naturally as she had done in the flower, when her heart leaped up and called it a Rosen-glory." Her love is of the spirit, not the flesh: "no other lips spoke lovingly to her, no other eye-beams sent warmth into her soul." Susan is "ignorant . . . of the hidden dangers and social regulations" of her situation, but she nonetheless is instinctively innocent of sexual desire and concerned about deceit. Although the most intimate thing they do is sit next to each other in the evenings next to the window and look at the sky, Susan is "troubled . . . with a consciousness of wrong" because their meetings are secret. When Susan first falls in love with Master Robert, Child emphasizes her economic and situational dependence on him and explains her emotional vulnerability: "If the gay, the prosperous, and the flattered find it pleasant to be loved, how much more so must it be to one whose life from infancy has been so darkened?" (249–250). Master Robert shines the light that has been missing from Susan's life and is necessary to her very survival of her circumstances.

Despite her deep love, Susan does not engage in illicit relations with Master Robert while she is employed as a servant. But the discovery of their platonic relationship leads to the same harsh consequences as if she had. Despite her innocence, Susan suffers the punishment of the guilty. Mrs. Andrews, the cruel mistress of the house, judges Susan as if she were "encased in [Mrs. Andrews'] own hard crust of worldly wisdom." She treats "[t]he poor heedless neglected child of poverty . . . as if she were already hardened in depravity." She calls her an "ungrateful, good-for-nothing hussy" and accuses her of "trying to ruin and seduce" her son. As the narrator points out, "This was reversing matters strangely." Susan is contrite though confident in her own virtue: "She was ashamed of having practiced concealment, as every generous nature; but this feeling of self-reproach was overpowered by a consciousness that she did not deserve the epithets bestowed upon her" (251). Once Susan is accused of sexual impropriety, her socioeconomic circumstances deteriorate dramatically. She is expelled from service in the Andrews' household without the cloak she has earned. She has to leave her subsequent employment without the shoes she has earned because she refuses the master's attempts to pay her to have sex with him. She takes some money on her way out the door to compensate herself, is sentenced to the prison on Blackwell's Island, and leaves prison with no option but to agree to become Master Robert's mistress.

Unlike Rosalie and Xarifa, Susan falls not from an innate eroticism but because she has no other way to support herself. Although Xarifa is also orphaned and "unprotected" when she consents to be with George, Child emphasizes her amorous, not economic, needs. But Susan agrees to

be Master Roberts's mistress only after she has tried "to lead a decent and industrious life" but been turned away from positions as a household servant because she has been in prison and has no references. In addition, the narrator directly addresses judgmental readers: "Those who deem the poor girl unpardonable for consenting to this arrangement, would learn mercy if they were placed under similar circumstances of poverty, scorn, and utter loneliness" (256). The condemning reader is made to feel like the awful Mrs. Andrews whose unfair condemnation of Susan reveals her own corruption.

Although Child explains Susan's fall by emphasizing her "poverty, scorn, and utter loneliness," she also develops an explanation rooted in biology. When Susan consents to have sex with Master Roberts after she has served her prison sentence, she is no longer sexually pure. Rather, she is a destitute woman whose time in prison has corrupted her character. Child emphasizes that when her second employer first insinuates that he wants to have sex with her, Susan is still sexually innocent: "she blushed and was confused by the expression of his countenance, though she was too ignorant of the world to understand his meaning" (253). But by the time she leaves prison, she has her own fair share of "worldly wisdom." The judge who sentenced her to prison solicits her sexual services and "the girl listened with such a smile as was never seen on her innocent face, before he sent her to improve her education on the Island." Though Susan has "no natural tendencies to vice," her exposure in prison to the "polluting conversation and manners" of the other inmates saturates her with "evil knowledge" (254) that permanently degrades her innocence. Child does not suggest that Susan has had sex while in prison, but rather that her association with other sex workers has deprived her of the inherited capacity to withhold sexual consent.

"Rosenglory" clearly alludes to a *Friend of Virtue* article published a few months before titled "Effects of Contamination," which argues that exposure to vice can transmute innocence into perversion. It tells of two young girls whose incarceration in Blackwell's Island with its exposure to women "who were steeped to the dregs in vice, and openly boasted of their depravity" transforms them from "guiltless" innocents into bodies permanently infected with "corrupting and cankering vice." Their time as inmates causes a permanent transformation in their character that is evident to those around them. The prison "Matron" tells the *Friend of Virtue*:

> I watched them narrowly, and could daily observe the foul destroyer creep stealthily into undisturbed possession of their souls. In a brief period their full dereliction was accomplished. The rank poison of *contamination* had done its fatal work. Years spent in open, shameless prostitution could not have turned out more finished scholars, as their altered deportment, coarse, vulgar language and horrid oaths gave painful evidence.

Here the article maintains that the exposure to prostitutes is tantamount to the experience of working as a prostitute. The young girls, like Susan, "became incorrigibly bad" and become prostitutes themselves, joining "the ranks of vice and crime" (223). Exposed girls become "shameless," willing and fit to exchange sex for money.

When Master Roberts marries, Susan descends into prostitution. Child's story connects seduction and prostitution but, significantly, by way of poverty and imprisonment. It is exposure to predatory men and corrupt women that causes Susan to consent to illicit relations, not a false promise of marriage or sexual temptation. In Child's fictional world, once even an innocent white girl has been exposed to illicit sex, she loses her refinement and virtue, and thereby to some extent her whiteness. Sex work reduces Susan to the racialized "animal and savage substrate" that lurks in all human beings. When Susan's brother, now blind, is reunited with her after years of separation, he doesn't recognize her voice. He hears her talking with another woman, but "The voices were without inflexions, rough and animal in tone, indicating that the speakers led a merely sensual existence" (256). As a result of her experiences, Susan has lost the capacity for judgment and morality. She no longer feels shame at illicit relations nor resists them. She has become willing and fit to exchange sex for money. Child's progressive link between socioeconomic circumstances and sex work is mitigated by her understanding of sexual vice as a kind of disease that changes the body's biology, eroding its chastity and resistance to illicit sex.

Conclusion

Together, "The Quadroons" and "Rosenglory" argue against seduction in ways that establish a racialized biological basis for sexual consent. According to this view, Black girls are born without an innate aversion to illicit sexual relations. Even if they have only a trace of "African ancestry" and have been privileged with "all the refinements of life," they still manifest an "impassioned temperament" that accepts illicit sex. White girls are born with an organic aversion to illicit sexual relations, but their experiences can completely and permanently erode that aversion. In a sense, they become biologically Black: they lose their capacity for reflection, self-control, and aversion to social impropriety. Arguably, the biopolitical messages of Child's seduction narratives contributed to the limited and exclusionary reforms to sex law that took place in the 1840s.[13] American states did not pass any laws addressing the pervasive and violent sexual exploitation of enslaved girls. They did not take a page, for example, from the British Caribbean where in 1826 the Jamaican Assembly "conferred legal protection against sexual abuse to enslaved women and girls" (Turner 217).[14]

American legislators did substantially reform seduction law for free girls but not in ways that recognized the role of socioeconomic underprivilege in condemning girls to a life as prostitutes. Rather they doubled down on preserving female virtue from moral injury. They required alleged victims to be perfectly chaste and marriageable and to have succumbed to seduction in response to an unfulfilled promise of marriage. In narrating the stories of nontraditional heroines with alternative motives for succumbing to seduction in slavery and freedom, Child's stories reinscribed a prejudice against any white girl who engaged in illicit sex, even if she did so in response to violence or socioeconomic deprivation. Ultimately, Child's prejudices contributed to the cultural attitude that all enslaved girls, except the whitest and most privileged, and most white girls, except the evidently sexually innocent and sheltered, could unproblematically be condemned to a life of sexual exploitation without legal recourse.

Notes

1 In the early nineteenth century, free women had rights that enslaved women did not have, including the right to withhold consent to sex. But that right was constrained in a number of ways. Legal rape was difficult to prove and exclusively applied; it did not encompass most forms of sexual violence and it did not apply to victims with prior sexual experience. Legal remedies for seduction that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were rooted in patriarchal notions about daughters as forms of serviceable property, and the girl's consent was not material. Fathers could sue under *per quod servitium amisit* or "loss of services," a feudal tort that allowed a master to sue anyone who injured his servant and thereby diminished the property the master had in his servant's labor. The father sued the seducer of his daughter because his property in her body was "less serviceable to him"—her labor or her chastity had been damaged and devalued. For more on the seduction tort before mid-nineteenth-century reforms, see Ehrlich 22, Haag 4-5, and Sinclair, esp. 41-47.
2 For legal histories of American seduction law, see Larson and VanderVelde.
3 For more on Child's life as a reformer see Karcher and Moland.
4 Greeson discusses these analogies in the context of the later decades of the antebellum era. She argues, "it was the politicization of illicit female sexuality in urban gothic discourse that provided the conceptual framework through which the sexual order of Southern slavery could be made intelligible—and intolerable—for Northern readers" (279). My analysis of Child's seduction stories suggests the opposite, that it was the representation of the enslaved girl as a seduced heroine that made prostitution legible as systemic sexual exploitation.
5 For a discussion of nineteenth-century reformers who linked prostitution to seduction, see Sánchez, chapter 3.
6 Histories of this reform movement include Ehrlich, chapter 3, Sánchez, chapter 3, Robertson, Section I, and Freedman, chapter 3.

7 Ann Douglas describes *Charlotte Temple* as "the biggest best-seller in American literary history . . . until Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, half a century later" (vii–viii).
8 For a history of the lack of US laws regulating sexual violence against enslaved girls and women, see Feinstein and Sommerville.
9 See for example "An Interesting Case," in which the seducer "avowed himself to be her friend, and made solemn pretensions, as is usual in such cases, to sincerity of purpose and fidelity of heart" (107); "For the Friend of Virtue," in which the seducer "professed a strong attachment for the younger sister, and by flattery, promise of marriage, etc. succeeded in accomplishing her ruin" (148); and "Singular Case of Seduction and Abduction in Providence," in which a young man "seduced" a young girl "under promise of marriage, and then refused to fulfil his promise" (159).
10 For a history of the "tragic mulatta" figure, see Raimon and Manganelli.
11 For the history of antebellum anti-miscegenation law, see Lemire and Pascoe.
12 By contrast, Charlotte Temple's daughter, Lucy, is an infant when her mother dies at the end of the novel. Lucy is the subject of a sequel that is, significantly, *not* a seduction narrative. Unlike Xarifa, Lucy does not inherit sexual promiscuity from her mother. The impact of her mother's fate is circumstantial, not biological. Lucy falls in love with a man who, unbeknownst to her, is the son of Charlotte's seducer. When she learns this, she ends their relationship and leads a long virtuous life as a single social reformer.
13 For an overview of the legal reforms, see Freedman, chapter 2; and Robertson, 339–348.
14 But as Turner makes clear, planters were not concerned with the welfare of enslaved girls but were anxious about the impact of rape on reproductive potential (216–217).

Works Cited

Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood From Slavery to Civil Rights*. America and the Long 19th Century. New York University Press, 2011.

Child, Lydia Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*. Allen and Ticknor, 1833.

Child, Lydia Maria. "Letter from New York, No. V." *Boston Courier*, 6 February 1844, p. 2.

Child, Lydia Maria. "The Quadroons." *Fact and Fiction*, C. S. Francis, 1846a, pp. 61–76.

Child, Lydia Maria. "Rosenglory." *Fact and Fiction*, C. S. Francis, 1846b, pp. 241–60.

Douglas, Ann. *Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple*. Penguin, 1991.

"Effects of Contamination." *Friend of Virtue: A Monthly Journal; Devoted to the Dissemination of Light & Truth on the Subject of Moral Reform*, 15 July 1846, p. 223.

Ehrlich, J. Shoshanna. *Regulating Desire: From the Virtuous Maiden to the Purity Princess*. SUNY Press, 2014.

Feinstein, Rachel A. *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence During Slavery*. Routledge, 2018.

"For the Friend of Virtue." *Friend of Virtue: A Monthly Journal; Devoted to the Dissemination of Light & Truth on the Subject of Moral Reform*, 15 May 1841, pp. 148–49.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "Slavery, Race, and the Figure of the Tragic Mulatta; Or, the Ghost of Southern History in the Writing of African-American Women." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, edited by Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson, University Press of Virginia, 1997, pp. 464–91.

Freedman, Estelle B. *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Greeson, Jennifer Rae. "The 'Mysteries and Miseries' of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2001, pp. 277–309.

Haag, Pamela. *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism*. Cornell University Press, 1999.

Hibbard, Andrea L., and John T. Parry. "Law, Seduction, and the Sentimental Heroine: The Case of Amelia Norman." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2006, pp. 325–55.

"An Interesting Case." *Friend of Virtue: A Monthly Journal; Devoted to the Dissemination of Light & Truth on the Subject of Moral Reform*, 1 July 1838, pp. 107–09.

Karcher, Carolyn L. *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*. Duke University Press, 1994.

Larson, Jane E. "'Women Understand So Little, They Call My Good Nature "Deceit"': A Feminist Rethinking of Seduction." *Columbia Law Review* 93 (1993): 374–472.

Lemire, Elise. *"Miscegenation": Making Race in America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

Manganelli, Kimberly Snyder. *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse*. American Literatures Initiative. Rutgers University Press, 2012.

Moland, Lydia L. *Lydia Maria Child: A Radical American Life*. The University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Pascoe, Peggy. *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Raimon, Eve Allegra. *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Robertson, Stephen. "Seduction, Sexual Violence, and Marriage in New York City, 1886–1955." *Law and History Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2006, pp. 331–73.

Sánchez, María Carla. *Reforming the World: Social Activism and the Problem of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Iowa Press, 2008.

Sinclair, M. B. W. "Seduction and the Myth of the Ideal Woman." *Law and Inequality*, vol. 5, 1987, pp. 35–47.

"Singular Case of Seduction and Abduction in Providence." *Friend of Virtue: A Monthly Journal; Devoted to the Dissemination of Light & Truth on the Subject of Moral Reform*, 15 May 1845, p. 159.

Sommerville, Diane Miller. *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

VanderVelde, Lea. "The Legal Ways of Seduction." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1996, pp. 817–901.