PLAYING AT CLASS

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Class and childhood are both highly visible yet often under-theorized features of nineteenth-century American identity, perhaps for the same reason: national ideologies of class promise that in the United States poverty, like childhood, is merely a stage to be outgrown. In this essay I will think about class conversely as an identity to be grown into and about childhood as a powerful site for such growth. That childhood is individually our most important period of identity formation has been a stable presumption of gender theory. I want to suggest that how childhood is imagined and inhabited similarly provides one of the most potent mechanisms of class formation, and one comparatively little explored. Moreover, not only is class identity constructed in childhood, but in nineteenth-century America childhood itself is increasingly recognized as a sign of class status. The invention of childhood entailed the creation of a protracted period in which the child would ideally be protected from the difficulties and responsibilities of daily life—ultimately including the need to work. “For the history of children,” Priscilla Clement explains, “the legacy of industrialization was the hardening of class lines,” with middle-class families’ exemption of their children from labor as one of the strongest markers of their difference from the lower classes. Thus to the extent that childhood means leisure, having a childhood is in itself one of the most decisive features of class formation. Yet since the “work” from which children were exempted never fully includes household labor, these general shifts in the definition of childhood function quite differently for girls than for boys.

Historians of leisure have charted the rising valuation of play throughout the nineteenth century while historians of the family have described the period’s idealization of childhood. My concern is with the links between these trends, as the same patterns of urbanization and industrialization that separate workplace from home, labor from leisure simultaneously function to commodify leisure-time and to idealize middle-class domesticity, especially that of childhood. “Play,” explains Bronson Alcott in justification of his pedagogical proposals, “is the appointed dispensation of childhood.” This wonderfully un-playful phrasing presents child’s play as part of the created order of things. “Appointed dispensation”
emphasizes in its very redundancy the guiding wisdom—divine and/or social—that regulates human affairs, and Alcott’s discussion of children’s play focuses on how teachers should use play to ready children for the “loftier claims” of “instruction” and “advancement.”4 Alcott, writing in 1830, was among the nation’s earliest champions of children’s play, and his defense of its “designed purpose” shows the marks of the culture’s general view of leisure as a largely suspect activity and childhood as besmirched by infant depravity and original sin.5 By the time Macy’s opened the nation’s first toy department in 1875 the merchandising of children’s toys epitomized how leisure, not work, would drive the consumption patterns of mature industrial capitalism. The 1870 census would be the first to track children’s employment, and it would be in the 1870s, too, that states would begin passing laws regulating child labor.6 These are enormous and extremely swift shifts in the cultural understanding of childhood, work, and play. I will focus my exploration on the verge of transition—the decades of the 1850s-1870s—and on the figure of the working child, whose need to labor stands in potent opposition to the burgeoning idealization of childhood as a life-stage appointed for play.7

This is not a simple story of play-time’s haves and have-nots, for with remarkable consistency it is the working child who is seen to embody play, and hence teaches the middle class about fun. By the end of the century, play—and the worlds of the imagination—would have become cultural markers for what was marvelous about childhood, and this culturally valuable play would be recognized as an attribute of middle-class affluence and leisure. Yet, and this is the crux of my argument, it is through depictions of working-class children that these middle-class ideals are first and most forcefully articulated.8 In particular I will focus on the paradigmatic example of the street-child. With street-trading one of the most visible forms of child employment in American cities, street-traders figured largely in literary and reform discourses as the representative child laborer.

As children, street-traders both embodied the chasm of class (since middle-class children would not occupy the streets in this way) and made that divide appear less frightening. For whatever New York’s chief of police, George Mastell, might say about the “idle and vicious children of both sexes, who infest our public thoroughfares,” an infestation of children poses a largely future threat, while the adult poor appear far more immediately dangerous.9 Street-children, as children, accrued much of the charm that the middle-class associated with childhood, along with the pathos of lacking most of the material conditions that made such charming childhoods possible. For these reasons images of

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street-children proved a popular means of representing and humanizing all that was troubling but attractive about urban spaces. These ambiguities express the instability, the cultural uncertainties, of the assignation of class identity to street-children. Distributors not producers, independent agents (however exploited), their labor is not characterized by the routinization of factory, office, or domestic work. Thus despite their extreme poverty and the harshness of their work conditions street-children are nevertheless frequently evoked to represent a kind of liberty from the constraints and abjection of labor. Marx would count “orphans and pauper children” among the “surplus-population,” that “industrial reserve-army” required for the “free play” of Capital. His analysis suggests how these figurations of street-trading as a form of play present a romance of the market, one that emphasizes the swirl of circulation and disregards the wasting of “surplus” lives. In a more conservative version of social critique, reformers like Charles Loring Brace (founder of New York’s Children’s Aid Society) would see in these children the clearest mark of social disintegration. Wai Chee Dimock’s observation that “leisure is class-inflected” not because “it is tied to one particular class” but because it is “variously nuanced and accented, when it is invoked as the salient characteristic for different groups” can thus be pressed one step further, with the recognition that street-traders are simultaneously seen to occupy a number of quite “different groups” with quite differently “accented” conceptions of leisure: they are workers, children, unproductive scamps, and entrepreneurs (or as they were often called by apologists, “little merchants”).

Literary representations of street-children ricochet between seeing them as spunky and resourceful (childhood insouciance simply taking the city and the labor it requires as conditions for a new kind of play) and seeing them as vulnerable and exploited (childhood innocence abused by economic and urban circumstances). In both versions the association of these children with the streets, the ease with which their stories serve as potent figurations of urban life, conflicts with the traditionally domestic accents of childhood. Take, for example, the newsboy:

“Can you tell me, my lad, the way to Broadway?”

“Another insult by gorry,” thought Bob, and quick as thought he touched his thumb to the tip of his nose, and wheeling his fingers in the air answered, “no you don’t, you don’t come it over this child”; and he looked back and relieved himself of a great laugh, while the questioner remained standing and looking after him in utter amazement. “Just as if he didn’t know he was in Broadway,” thought Bob, and he gave an extra key to the compass of his voice to show his contempt for all fooling.
A world where adults must ask the aid of children is a topsy-turvy place, one in which traditional models of deference, due to age or class, no longer hold. In a clash of cultures, Bob is as unwilling to recognize the depths of this gentleman’s ignorance of the city as the gentleman is incapable of recognizing Broadway or comprehending Bob’s response to his question. Bob’s insistence that “you don’t come it over this child” rejects all middle-class notions of what a child should be—innocent, ignorant, docile—and instead represents the child as the master of urban spaces; thumbing his nose at the very notion of deference, he is himself the champion of “fooling.”

The alternative to Bob’s jeering autonomy is sympathetic pain. “I had not gone far,” writes Lydia Maria Child in one of her Letters from New York,

when I met a little ragged urchin, about four years old, with a heap of newspapers, “more big as he could carry,” under his little arm, and another clenched in his small red fist. The sweet voice of childhood was prematurely cracked into shrillness, by screaming street cries at the top of his lungs; and he looked blue, cold, and disconsolate. . . . I stood looking after him as he went shivering along. Imagination followed him to the miserable cellar where he probably slept on dirty straw . . .14

Child’s Letters blend social criticism with rich accounts of the development of a moral and aesthetic imagination. They are thus simultaneously engaged in creating and elevating bourgeois subjectivity and in critiquing the social inequities that have historically made that subjectivity possible. Thus this letter, in which Child invites her readers to follow her imagination as it fabricates a future of abuse and ultimate criminality for the newsboy, presses on to ask: “When, oh when, will men learn that society makes and cherishes the very crimes it so fiercely punishes and in punishing reproduces?” (L, 84). The surprising word here is “cherishes,” a word that seems deeply descriptive of Child’s own imaginative procedures, and unsettlingly perceptive of the ways in which society may foster crime. To be cherished is just what the nineteenth-century middle class had understood as the child’s ideal but necessary role. The lisping, child voice, with its awkward grammar that proclaims the pile of newspapers “more big as he could carry,” is not, of course, the newsboy’s. It speaks in the third-person, and besides, among the first things that Child notices about this newsboy is that he lacks “the sweet voice of childhood.” By interpolating such a “sweet voice” into her letter, by the evident fondness with which she produces its little errors, Child demonstrates how a cherished childhood should sound.
One literary use of the newsboy is thus to define and value middle-class childhoods through the depiction of their antithesis. In Louisa May Alcott’s “Our Little Newsboy,” the possessive and the diminutive function to claim the newsboy for the middle-class home, and indeed the scene of the story is not Jo’s encounter with the newsboy, but her retrospective telling of that meeting as a bedtime story.

“If I saw that poor little boy, Aunt Jo, I’d love him lots!” Said Freddy, with a world of pity in his beautiful child’s eyes.

And believing that others would be kind to little Jack and such as he I tell the story.

When busy fathers hurry home at night I hope they’ll buy their papers of the small boys. . . . For love of the little sons and daughters safe at home, say a kind word, buy a paper, even if you don’t want it; and never pass by, leaving them to sleep forgotten in the streets at midnight, with no pillow but a stone.15

Here the middle-class child’s response to the story of a homeless newsboy is itself definitive of a childlike vision—Freddy has “beautiful child’s eyes”—and this vision urges charity upon busy middle-class men. In this realm of middle-class benevolence, commercial interactions come to seem like moral attributes, and to buy “even if you don’t want it” a mark of virtue. It is after all just as preposterous an imposition of possession for fathers to speak of “their papers” as it is for Aunt Jo to claim “our little newsboy,” but middle-class identity is being constituted in scenes like these so as to make the emotional traits of interest and concern indistinguishable from the economic processes of purchase and ownership. Read sentimentally, it is the middle-class child’s compassion that marks him as a good child. It is the middle-class father’s love of this child that affirms his class position and inaugurates the charitable social responsibilities of that position. Read commercially, middle-class affluence buys both comfort (material distance from need) and conscience (empathic proximity to need). Aunt Jo’s bedtime terms—from Freddy’s nursery to the newsboy’s stone—resonate with the end of Child’s letter, which finds her unable to sleep. The voices of street-hawkers outside her window “proved too much for my overloaded sympathies. I hid my face in the pillow and wept; for ‘my heart was almost breaking with the misery of my kind’” (L, 86).

Class identity, it seems, is largely a question of pillows. Soft beds support sentimental suffering; they create a safe space for imaginative identification and so teach the comfortable virtues of feeling for someone else the very pain that this class position, this soft pillow,
протекает от применения в один и тот же человек. Как Child представляет себя плачущей на свою подушку, “неясная смесь между сентиментальностью и домашним” что June Howard ясно указывает нам на истоки, указывает на то, насколько это важным является то, что является материальным состоянием среднего класса, которые предоставляют контур и возможности сентиментальности в образно-образной форме.16 Это эти комфортные частные места, которые позволяют автору и читателю наслаждаться чувствами.

The hard beds of street-children are perceived as teaching other lessons, but are just as certainly the source of class identities to be learned. “I know an old wagon, up an alley, where I can sleep like a top” (Y, 158), Horatio Alger’s bootblack Tim explains to Sam Barker, a greenhorn newly escaped to city life from the abundance and hard work of a New England farm. At day’s end the boys climb into the wagon together: “There is everything in getting used to things, and that is where Tim had the advantage. He did not mind the hardness of his couch, while Sam, who had always been accustomed to a regular bed, did” (Y, 164). This lesson of hard beds produces a certain hardiness and resilience that Alger marks as an “advantage.” Clearly the recognition that “there is everything in getting used to things” proves a comfortable antidote to the tears brought on by “overloaded sympathies.” But it is also true that such hardiness is one of the strongest attractions of Alger’s fiction. Sam’s sly resilience does after all keep him and the novel’s plot “adrift in the streets”; his scams carry him and his readers humorously from one scrape to the next while Alger’s anxious narrator “warn[s] my boy readers that I by no means recommend them to pattern after him” (Y, 84). Thus, as with Bob thumbing his nose, such stories of badly-behaved boys celebrate the play of street life even as they press their young heroes towards softer beds and office jobs.

Novelistic images of the “child wage earner as an urban folk hero” and “seedling entrepreneur” run, of course, counter to the historical record—very few if any children actually prospered through street-trading.17 But to note the falsity of such images, or on the other hand to question the presumptions that underlie Lydia Maria Child’s imaginings of the newsboy’s dismal prospects, should initiate, not foreclose, explorations of the representational work done by street-children. The simultaneous popularity of these two opposing images, in their very opposition, produces a middle space of exploitation and survival that may more accurately represent the non-continuous manner in which class identity is lived. Thus while these stock figures tell us a great deal about middle-class constructions of class identity, they do not end there for, as I will show, street-children themselves learned how to move...
within and manipulate these stereotypes. The annual reports of the Children’s Aid Society were bolstered with appendices of miscellaneous documents, examples of newspaper coverage of the Society’s work, reports and diary excerpts by visitors and Society staff detailing specific daily events, and most remarkable of all, large collections of letters written by children who had been helped by the Society and by the families that took in such children. These are obviously biased and mediated sources, but for all their limitations they provide a rich cache of documentation about the attitudes and experiences of particular, individual, nineteenth-century street-children. The understandings of childhood work and play voiced by these children overlap with and diverge from the representations offered by philanthropists and novelists. Thus the standard stories of street-child pathos or hardiness do not simply prove false, but rather provide a projected context which actual street-children strove to use as best they could.

Critics of Alger’s tales have not only pointed out the gap between his novels and the real conditions of street-children in New York, but also, both more surprisingly and more interestingly, the divergence between his novels and the “rags to riches” mythos that has grown out of them. Not only do Alger’s heroes rarely achieve riches, settling rather for the humble rewards of office jobs, but even this small success is never dependent upon the skill and industry with which they work their street jobs. Rather, Alger’s heroes get their “chance” at respectability through extra-professional services rendered to the wealthy: it is the finding and rescuing of wallets and children that most often win Alger’s street-boys their patrons. This is not to say that work is irrelevant; the newsboy Rufus, for example, is called “Rough and Ready” because of his readiness in hawking papers, while Ragged Dick easily supports himself as a bootblack because he is “energetic and on the alert for business.” But Alger is not, in fact, so naive as to represent a change in work habits as able to do more than increase a boy’s income within his street-trade and indicate his capacity for success in other, more respectable, jobs once luck has intervened to move him there. Moreover the new jobs as clerks and office boys to which Alger’s heroes rise are not represented as more richly remunerative than their street work. When Rufus leaves off selling papers to work for Mr. Turner the business man offers to pay his new clerk “the same you have been earning by selling papers,—that is eight dollars a week. It is nearly double what I have been accustomed to pay” (RR, 297). As Alger explains, the difference between clerk and street-boy derives not from the difference in their earnings but from different habits of expenditure. In the case of Ragged Dick,
There were not a few young clerks who employed Dick from time to
time in his professional capacity, who scarcely earned as much as he,
greatly as their style and dress exceeded his. Dick was careless of his
earnings. Where they went he could hardly have told himself. However
much he managed to earn during the day, all was generally spent before
morning. He was fond of going to the Old Bowery Theater, and to Tony
Pastor’s, and if he had any money left afterwards, he would invite some
of his friends in somewhere to have an oyster stew; so it seldom
happened that he commenced the day with a penny. (RD, 43)

Which is to say that the narrative of fitting street-boys for the middle
class that is Alger’s project proves to be all about redirecting play rather
than teaching work. In the process of these novels Alger’s boys learn to
save in newly opened bank accounts, and to spend the cash they accrue
not on swiftly consumed pleasures, but rather on more lasting markers
of status and domesticity: suits of clothes and regular beds. Thus
Alger’s heroes shed not only their “rags” but also their “riches,” if by
riches we mean the luxuries of consumption, leisure, and play. If the
audience for these books was primarily middle-class boys, might not
such readers remember them as rags to riches stories precisely because
in their renditions of street-boy excesses and pranks they offer such
riches—teaching middle-class children to play and spend? Mr. Turner’s
son, Walter, envies Rufus his income from selling papers: “I only get
fifty cents a week for spending money,” he whines (RR, 262).20

There is some evidence that street-children, at least those who relied
upon Newsboys’ Lodging Houses, read Alger’s novels as well. In 1870 a
New York Children’s Aid Society table of statistics on the children who
had stayed in the Lodging Houses over the past year found only ten
percent illiterate.21 Alger advertises in his “Preface” to Fame and
Fortune that his publisher A. K. Loring would “send a gratuitous copy of
the two volumes of the Ragged Dick Series already issued to any
regularly organized Newsboy’s Lodge within the United States,” and
some Lodging Houses appear to have taken him up on this offer:

The manager of the Newsboy’s Home in St. Louis writes, “when on East
last year, I got a copy of Ragged Dick, and the boys have enjoyed it so
much, that it will not last much longer, and are continually asking for the
second volume. You will oblige us very much by sending us a copy of
both Ragged Dick and Fame and Fortune.”22

I have no more detailed account of what it was about these books that
the boys in St. Louis so enjoyed, but their consumption of Alger’s stories
attests to the ways that their self-making was in conscious dialogue with

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fictional images of street-boys. Clearly, in the terms offered by the Lodging Houses (which quickly came to contain small libraries) and by Alger’s fiction (where the decision to spend an evening reading, rather than squandering earnings on oysters and vaudeville, is one of the strong markers of a boy’s rise), such enjoyment is itself a sign of reformation. But given the instability of riches and play in these books it is hard to be sure which pleasure is which.

When in the Second Annual Report of the Children’s Aid Society Charles Loring Brace describes the sort of boys he hoped to reach through the founding of Newsboy’s Lodging Houses, he emphasizes the non-domestic nature of their lives, and is evidently more troubled by their choices in play than by their exploitation in work.

The class of newsboys were then apparently the most wild and vicious set of lads in the city. Many of them had no home, and slept under steps, in boxes, or in corners of the printing-house stairways. . . . Their money, which was easily earned, was more quickly spent in gambling, theaters and low pleasures, for which, though children, they had a man’s aptitude. (R, 1855, 13)

Writing this account in the Society’s Second Annual Report, Brace’s use of the past tense suggests the possibility of reform, and indeed since the founding of the Lodging House, Brace happily reports, this “man’s aptitude” for forms of play that strike him as inappropriate to childhood has been largely redirected: “the game of chequers,” for example, was introduced into the Lodging House “as a check to gambling . . . serving to exercise harmlessly that incessant mental activity and love of venture peculiar to the class” (R, 1855, 14). The Lodging House also, of course, provided regular beds and baths. Yet despite such efforts to reshape the newsboys’ leisure, and the sharp charge of viciousness, it remains clear that it is precisely the newsboys’ peculiar love of venture that made this “class” such a potent embodiment of the play of entrepreneurial speculation, and similarly that made these street-children so attractive to reformers.

Frederick Starr explains that at the Philadelphia Newsboys’ Lodging House “pains is taken gradually to refine their tastes by entertaining lectures, readings, dramatic or otherwise, and innocent games.” Yet the Lodging House game he describes with greatest detail does not appear very likely to refine its players:

A certain game, admitting of no euphemism in its suggestive title has possession of the floor. This is no other than “The Pile of Maggots,” and
its nature is that of a vortex, drawing in all appreciative spirits with an irresistible offer of fun. The rule is for all to “pile in,” the best fellow keeping on top without injuring his competitors. Of course the party who supposes himself uppermost has but brief time for exaltation, soon finding himself at the bottom of the heap, and made thoroughly to feel his position. The struggle is generally of short duration, for as the fun grows fast and furious, the smaller boys shouting “Ouch! Get off uv me, you fellers,” the superintendent taps a bell, and all is quiescent instanter.25

“The Pile of Maggots” does not appear in William Newell’s Games and Songs of American Children (1883); Newell, after all, holds that children’s games almost “invariably came from above, from the intelligent class” and that while many games and songs “still common in our cities, judging from their incoherence and rudeness, might be inventions of ‘Arabs of the streets;’ these invariably prove to be mere corruptions of songs long familiar on American soil,” not immigrant made.26 In Starr’s telling, the game has the feel of a parable, but one in which Alger’s stories of “struggling upwards” are shown to require that others tumble downwards.27 Thus “The Pile of Maggots” plays at the inversion of the social order, and locates pleasure as much in the squirming and toppling as in any capacity to secure the “top.” I find the language of Starr’s account rather like the game itself in that his absurdly elevated phrasing contests for supremacy with the words that he quotes from the boys, so that the description of this game is itself a shifting pile of values and vocabularies. Starr’s obvious falsifications in claiming that such a game could be played “without injuring” the boys below or that one tap of a bell could reduce a heap of boys to “quiescence instanter” ultimately function to acknowledge the limits of staff control. If “The Pile of Maggots” indicates the boys’ capacity to make squalor into play, and so impose a kind of imaginative control over the hardships of street life, Starr’s narration of this game reveals a similar tendency among the philanthropists: a capacity to find “fun” and pleasure in the activities of these boys that they cannot manage to refine or reform.28 The vision of the street-boy playing offers a salve to middle-class consciences, and a fantasy of the vicissitudes of the market as a game, even as images of the street-boy’s vulnerability helped form those consciences. After all, few in the middle class could say of themselves, as Alger can of Sam, that without debts or assets they are “just even with the world” (Y, 251-52).

Mr. Tracy, Superintendent of a Newsboys’ Lodging House in New York, while claiming that the House is “working harmoniously . . . and its arrangements are popular with the boys,” nevertheless recognizes the
limitations of its appeal. “The temptations of a street life to such boys, and its excitements are so strong, that it is exceedingly difficult to get them in here, and induce them to stay,” he reports (R, 1857, 17). His accounts of the Lodging House are full of examples of such difficulties in reforming the street-boys’ models of pleasure and consumption.

These boys always live well when they have the money. This evening, while a number of them were telling each other what they had for supper, I undertook to reason with them about their diet,—that they should avoid some of the nice things which they had mentioned, and live more upon plainer food, as that was healthier and cheaper. That they should allow their reason instead of their appetite to control them in the selection of their food. “Ah sir,” said one boy, “when a feller is hungry and has a good diner smokin’ before him, it’s no time to reason; and I have made up my mind that them ruffled shirt ‘quills’ (clerks) shant eat up all the good things, no how!” I concluded to let the matter drop for the present, and took another subject. (R, 1855, 25; from a section entitled “Extracts from Mr. Tracy’s Diary”)

This street-boy understands himself to be engaged in a contest of status and pleasure with the city’s other horde of working youth, “them ruffled shirt ‘quills.’” Thus the boy is clear that Tracy’s terms of reason vs. appetite and the system of moral values they imply are an ethical gloss on what is in fact a class conflict. The boy knows that what is at issue is not learning to “control” desires, but the question of who gets to have their desires fulfilled. Starr makes a joke of the Philadelphia newsboys who upon learning that a Lodging House was to be opened in that city “made tours of the west end of the city, and brought back fantastic reports of several of the costly mansions there, which exactly met their lofty ideas.” What they got instead were “plain, yet comfortable, lodging rooms in Pearl Street.” I suspect that in suggesting more illustrious addresses these boys were jesting themselves—pointing out the gap between the wealth of their benefactors (whose addresses appear in the subscription lists) and the modest nature of their grandly offered largess. Why is it that what is appropriate for one appears absurdly “lofty” for another? In these pranks the boys talk back to middle-class philanthropic presumptions. Such responses suggest that the acceptance of these dinners and these beds does not necessarily mean concurrence in the process of reforming appetites nor gratitude for the beds and meals bestowed.

In an encounter with philanthropic visitors to a Newsboys’ Lodging House in New York the newsboys’ skill in balancing docility with provocation is even more apparent. After hearing their visitor speak,
newsboys were asked to treat him with a speech in return. Brace published an account of “Paddy’s” speech in his Annual Report for 1861 noting that it was “from the Daily Times.” He printed it again in The Dangerous Classes of New York, there identifying it as taken “from the journal of a visitor from the country” (D, 110). Presuming that both sources are true—that a visitor’s journal entry was published in the Daily Times—the disparity in attribution points to Brace’s shifting sense of which kind of source gives more authority to his account: the prestige of newspaper coverage or the immediacy and authenticity of a diary. In all events, these multiple publications make it evident that Brace recognizes this scene as peculiarly useful advertizing for the Lodging House. So it is remarkable how much of the newsboy’s ironic relations to the charity offered by Brace and the Children’s Aid Society remains legible through all of these beneficent publications:

“Bummers,” said he, “snoozers, and citizens, I’ve come down here among ye to talk to yer a little! Me and my friend Brace have come to see how ye’re gittin’ along, and to advise yer. You fellers what stand at the shops with yer noses over the railin’ smellin’ ov the roast beef and hash—you fellers who’s got no home—think of it how we are to encourage ye. [Derisive laughter, “Ha-ha’s,” and various ironical kinds of applause.] I say, bummers—for you’re all bummers (in a tone of kind patronage)—I was a bummer once [great laughter]—I hate to see you spendin’ your money on penny ice-creams and bad cigars. Why don’t you save your money? You feller without no boots, how would you like a new pair, eh? [Laughter from all the boys but the one addressed.] Well, I hope you may get ’em, but I rayther think you won’t. I have hopes for you all. I want you to grow up to be rich men—citizens, Government men, lawyers, generals, and influence men.” (R, 1861, 74-75; from a section entitled “A Visit to the Newsboys”; D, 110-11)

Paddy’s speech cavorts in “the area between mimicry and mockery,” as Homi Bhabha calls it; his performance for a philanthropic visitor permits him to imitate just such visitors, to play one of those “influence men” who can claim Brace as “my friend” and dole out advice and encouragement to hapless newsboys.30 For what is so very funny about Paddy’s identificatory claim that “I was a bummer once” is the group’s knowledge that the speaker had been a bummer—“roving about the streets of night without sleep”—in the recent past, and no doubt would soon be one again.31 Thus it is in the gap between the actual present tense and this fictive past tense of progress and reform that Paddy’s play doubles into critique. Paddy pleases both his audiences. The newsboy’s delight in this parody of their benefactors; with their “derisive laughter”
and “ironical kinds of applause” they join in the game of mimicry, playing at being a good audience, and thus record the pleasures of ridiculing this oh-so-familiar good advice. But the visitor and Brace clearly appreciate the performance as well, hearing not mockery but intimacy in this capacity teasingly to reproduce their moral lessons. In a way that Bhabha’s account does not quite recognize, it is clear that this mimicry is itself a mark of both inclusion and its limits: it is only in being part of this institution that Paddy can so knowingly mock it, and it is only to the extent that he remains outside its redemptive program that his words are funny. The appeal of Paddy’s speech lies in the multiplicity of its targets, joking at the expense of the boy with no boots and the well-heeled philanthropist. The newsboys’ famed capacity for play affectionately crosses class bounds, yet it is not without its barbs for both parties. As Paddy goes on to tell his life story of escapes from drunken and abusive parents, his audience grows ever more raucous.

“Well, boys, I wint on till I kim to the ‘Home’ [great laughter among the boys], and they took me in [renewed laughter], and did for me, without a cap to me head or shoes to me feet, and thin I ran away, and here I am. Now boys [with mock solemnity], be good, mind yer manners, copy me, and see what you’ll become.”

At this point the boys raised such a storm of hifalutin applause, and indulged in such characterizations of delight, that it was deemed best to stop the youthful Demosthenese, who jumped from his stool with a bound that would have done credit to a monkey. (R, 1861, 75)

The visitor will write down his memories of this speech and Brace will have them thrice published, yet (hiding the philanthropists’ power within the passive voice) “it was deemed best to stop” the performance as the game of imitation becomes contagious and the newsboys’ play at being a “hifalutin” audience threatens to turn into a “storm.” If play makes the newsboy attractive to middle-class benefactors, it nevertheless remains precisely the characteristic that such philanthropies seek to contain. It may be the visitor’s own penchant for irony that leads him to call Paddy “a youthful Demosthenese,” but it is his anxiety about the incivility of such play that leads him to turn the classical orator into a monkey.

The stories Brace tells of street-girls are quite different, and it is a difference of which he is himself acutely aware.

A girl street rover is to my mind the most painful figure in all the unfortunate crowd of a big city. With a boy “Arab of the streets,” one always has the consolation that, despite his ragged clothes and bed in a
box or hay barge, he often has a rather good time of it, and enjoys many
of the delicious pleasures of a child’s roving life, and that a fortunate
turn of events may at anytime make an honest, industrious, fellow of
him. . . . With a girl vagrant it is different. She feels homelessness and
friendlessness more; she has more of the feminine dependence on
affection; the street-trades too are harder for her, and the return at
night to some lonely cellar or tenement room, crowded with dirty
people of all ages and sexes, is more dreary. . . . Then the strange and
mysterious subject of sexual vice comes in. (D, 114-15)

Even here, Brace cannot quite let himself imagine a street-girl sleeping in
a box. Homelessness, crowds, and dirt—where boys may find delicious
pleasures—never offer such to girls. Femininity, in Brace’s often repeated
intensifier, requires “more.” That is, for a street-girl, Brace sees the loss of
the accouterments of domesticity without ambivalence, simply and purely
as loss—pathos without play. Yet while the domesticity offered by News-
boys’ Lodging Houses was imagined as refuge, that same domesticity
clearly figures in the Lodging House for Homeless Girls as the product of
their feminine labors. The Matron complains of “Their foolish pride or
prejudice against housework,” but boasts that under her administration
“All were taught that this Lodging House was merely a stepping-stone to
getting on in the world [that is no long term stays], and that nothing was
so honorable as industrious house-work” (R, 1863, 12-13). The sorts of
resistance boys show through play and consumption appear among
these girls as a more radical antipathy to domestic norms.

A young girl in our Lodging House was relating to us recently how she
had been attracted to another young girl there by hearing her answer
our Matron ‘No, Ma’am! I don’t know where my parents are. I don’t
care—I hate them!’ This was at once a common bond of sympathy
between the poor creatures! (R, 1858, 4)

That the “bonds of sympathy”—the emotional trait that underlies
philanthropic labors like those of the Children’s Aid Society—could be
forged out of the hatred of parents threatens to explode the domestic
ideals of these charitable Homes. Brace’s exclamation of pity (“poor
creatures”) insists on casting that bonding hatred as a mark of vulner-
ability and need, in a sentimental attempt to contain the reality that the
family might be a site of animosity, not succor. After all, the entire
structure of this charitable enterprise depends upon the presumption
that domesticating these children will suture the social wounds of class.

Indeed, the Society’s favorite project was not these temporary
lodging houses but rather its placing-out system, which largely relied on
its city charities to identify street-children who could be relocated to work in rural families. A highly innovative (and intrusive) program, the placing-out system was a self-conscious effort to invert the historical shifts in the practices and definitions of childhood. By transporting children who epitomized the new urban-based cultural patterns in order to provide agricultural labor in rural communities it recapitulated the time when it was normative for children’s work to form a regular part of the middle-class household economy. Significantly, in many cases the labor of the transported children served to decrease the amount of work expected of other children in the family, and thus helped produce the ideal of middle-class childhood leisure even within these rural settings.

In a letter written by a child placed-out with a family in Indiana, descriptions of the hired child’s labor alternate with accounts of how the children of the family play: “I can saw and split wood for the fire. The little boy’s father has given him a cannon.” There is no rancor in this letter, but the child writing it is quite matter-of-fact about which children in the household have the leisure and material support for play; the writer is clear too about the ambivalent nature of his or her inclusion in this household—sometimes speaking of a familial “we” and yet referring to the members of the family with oddly distant nouns: “the lady,” “the man,” “the little baby” (R, 1863, 62). In this way letters written to the Children’s Aid Society by children who had been placed-out powerfully document the children’s own acute sense of class identities and differences, and the ways that they manifest themselves in daily patterns of intimacy, work, and play. These letters regularly detail the children’s farm and school work, sometimes in pride (“I am busy now grafting our roots. Perhaps you would like to know something about gardening. I will tell you some kind of apples we have grafted” [R, 1859, 49]) and sometimes in complaint (“Had to be up early to chop wood, fetch water and feed the pigs, and water the horse. . . . Hadn’t I a time of it with that there horse—he used to kick up his heels so. I stayed one week there—couldn’t stand the work” [R, 1858, 53]).

Though deeply aware of how much their own days are structured by labor, the children who wrote these letters are remarkably consistent in the adamance with which they assert their need to play. Much like some children’s unwillingness to “stand the work,” constraints on play prove a significant rationale for leaving placements: “I have left Mr. S__. Mrs. S__ has been troubled with her head for about forty years, and she would not stand any noise, and I was very fond of singing, and sometimes I would sing, and not think anything about it, and she would scold me, and that was more than I could bear” (R, 1863, 66). “Fun”
figures in these letters as a defensible right in a way that seems to me quite unlike the attitudes towards play expressed in even the period’s most permissive and celebratory texts of middle-class childhood. “They say I am a good girl, but too wild and daring, and will get me neck broke if I do not stop; but I must have some fun” (R, 1863, 75), one girl writes; “You know we can’t be silent all the time, you know, so we must have a little fun once in a while” (R, 1861, 59), another child comments. In such letters the need to play figures as a powerful site of identity; the demand for at least “some” or a “little” fun is ardently claimed as a characteristic of self that survives these children’s quite drastic geographic and class relocations. If these children understand play as a basic need for the maintenance of self, their letters are equally clear about how the difficulties of maintaining that need—the real limitations on their mode and time for play—alter with their new environment.

Just as these letters defend the children’s right to fun—to wildness, daring, and noise—against the expectations of the middle-class homes in which they now dwell, the remarks directed to the street-children still living in Society Lodging Houses counter work-centered preconceptions of farm life and insist that fun is possible outside of New York: “I think there is as much fun as in New York for nuts and apples are free,” one boy writes, though the letter goes on to suggest that less edible aspects of New York entertainment may be harder to find in Indiana: he asks whether “FATTY” could send him “pictorials to read, especially the Newsboys Pictorial. . . . I want something to read” (R, 1860, 84-85). Another boy vividly advertizes the fun of horses and hunting while asking of news from the Lodging House:

Please let me know how the boys in the Eleventh Ward Lodging House are getting along. Tell them we are happy, and we hope they are also; if not, let them come out to see us, and we will make them happy. We will let them ride on our mustangs, or hunt with our double-barreled shot-guns, and we will go along with them and show them where there is lots of game, and then they will be happy. I bet. (R, 1872, 58)

Clearly, one purpose of these correspondences was to help the Lodging Houses “secure,” as the 1854 Annual Report put it, other children for the placing-out program (24). Children’s letters speak often of the rewards of placing-out that are consonant with the arguments mounted by the society itself—testifying to their “good homes” (R, 1861, 66), access to schooling, moral reform, and monetary success. But it is clear from letters like this one that the children also have an agenda of their own, and one as committed to preserving identity as it is to accultura-
tion. In this boy's fantasy of leading a battalion of street-children on a hunt the one-upmanship of competition with city pleasures is speckled with nostalgia for the Lodging House community of boys: this boy locates his happiness in the imagined possibility of mingling in play the parts of his life that have been severed by his move west.

Because their labor in these new families is largely domestic in nature, the assertion of this need to play appears more disruptive and troubling in girls. In a long letter a man in Peoria lays out the "pro and con" (R, 1857, 51) of keeping Elizabeth. The pros include her intelligence, "musical genius" (R, 1857, 52), physical weakness, and moral need; of the cons he writes:

She is a very bad girl. I cannot say that she is immoral. I have had fears and suspicions, but she assures me that she is not guilty of indecency in speech or conduct. She is bad in the sense of impudent, stubborn, disobedient, hot tempered, and ungrateful. . . .

And now, dear sir, when I tell you that I have young children, of whom it is necessary that Elizabeth should take charge, and that I am burdened with anxiety with regard to the influence such a girl must exert on them, you will understand why I am not desirous to keep her. I say nothing of the peace of my family or the trouble the girl causes me; but the question is—Is it my duty to risk the ruin of my children? . . .

With regard to her position in my family, I have not adopted her as my child, but we wish to make her, and have her consider herself, as one of the family; not as a servant. And just in this particular, we have great difficulty with her; she persists in the closest intimacy with our kitchen servant, which for her own sake and for the sake of order in our household, we cannot allow.

With regard to my treatment of her . . . I have on two occasions, inflicted a slight punishment. . . . I would not treat a servant so; but my children often need and receive chastisement. (R, 1857, 51-52)

Charged with care of the children but not a servant, one of the family but not adopted, this letter is riven by the contradictory nature of Elizabeth's place in the household. How much clearer and freer to be a servant—permitted the intimacies of kitchen friendships and safe from the rod. As this letter makes abundantly clear there are no imaginative structures that can accommodate the wild play of the street into the proper domestic work of girls. Girls' impudence cannot be recuperated for a capitalist enterprise, but rather threatens to disrupt the order of the household and ruin the children.

An unusually indulgent western family, with no children of their own, writes to the Children's Aid Society that the boy they have taken in "is
full of fun and play; and seems to be as happy as the happiest.” This letter recognizes and approves the child’s sense of play and presents those traits in easy balance with the industriousness and piety that the family also prizes. The letter goes on to describe the boy’s work habits, schooling, and church attendance, and concludes with the observation that “we feel that it is a great responsibility to train a child for the active duties of his life, but much more responsible for the never-ending ages of eternity” (R, 1860, 75). The boy writes too, and his letter similarly juxtaposes work and play, his responsibilities for the cows, his successes at school, and his boast-worthy collection of toys:

My large top will spin four minutes; I have got an India-rubber ball, and a boat that I made myself with a man on it, such as I used to see in New York. I have got a kite and a windmill, besides a good many other playthings. . . . I have got a large, nice sled—it is the nicest sled but H__’s; you can’t think what good times we had sliding down hill last winter on the snow. (R, 1860, 76)

His toys are an interesting mix of the made and the bought, the rustic and the commercial. His attitudes towards play appear similarly double, as clearly for this boy the “good times” of sledding cannot be fully disentangled from the consciousness of having one of the nicest sleds. If the play of the street appears largely to be about expenditure—of energy and resources—this play appears to be more about possession. A family who has taken in “a daughter of a drunken mother,” as Brace puts it in his header to this letter, appears similarly doting:

Being a cabinet-maker myself, I have furnished her with a small bureau, bedstead, &c., and she has learned to take care of her own and her doll’s clothes, and seems to take pride in keeping her things nice. We call her S__ A__, and consider her our own. (R, 1862, 48-49)

Yet this letter need not balance work and play, since for this girl play is itself a kind of domestic apprenticeship, where the girl learns the household skills her “drunken” mother could not teach her. If the cabinet maker and his wife have made of her a doll of their own, even to the extent of changing her name, this is only possible because the non-domestic family from which she comes can be so easily and thoroughly discounted.

Letters like these elaborate the ways in which play—which marked street identities—can also express incorporation into rural and middle-class values, and hence how conceptions of play themselves change with
shifting class position. The letters these children send back to the Lodging House thus participate to a surprising degree in the chiasmic imaginings of class and play that characterize middle-class discourses on childhood. They recognize how their new lives within middle-class households gain them far greater access to material conditions that facilitate play (toys, horses, and the security of meals and homes) and yet find in these comfortable settings a far more anxious conception of what it means to play.

Through the philanthropic publication of their life-stories and letters the children furnished a kind of real-life sentimental narration: allowing middle-class readers to imagine and sympathize with the horrors of the street, and to feel beneficent satisfaction over accounts of rescue and reform made possible by their contributions. The 1857 Annual Report included, for example, a detailed vignette describing a twelve-year-old orphan’s efforts to support herself “by selling wax-matches” and recounting her gratitude at being relocated by the Society to “a fine home” in Pennsylvania (R, 1857, 42). The report ends with a touching letter from the girl that affirms the society’s reformist agenda: “I have got acquainted with good girls who do not say bad words. . . . I hope I will never see the bad girls of New York again,” she writes (R, 1857, 42-43). Yet in the Report for 1858 there is another letter “from the little match girl” which, although it certainly attests to her pleasures in her new life, nevertheless suggests this sentimental tale of reform might be read slightly differently by the children themselves: “[Mr. Jessup] gave me one of your reports. I could not help laughing when I saw my letter there. . . . I should be glad to have you send me some of your Reports, they are so interesting to me” (R, 1858, 64). What accounts for her laughter? Is it amusement at her own younger self, delight in seeing her words in print, or a recognition—not unlike the laughter of the newsboys listening to Paddy’s speech—of the ways in which her letters play along with the Society’s program, knowingly producing the patterns of gratitude and reform that the situation requires? Even as her first letter affirms her separation from the “bad girls of New York,” her interest in the Reports indicates how these publications often functioned for the children as a kind of community newspaper, a means of preserving past relations and identities, a way to keep track, as one letter put it, of “how they are all in the City, and how times are there” (R, 1859, 45).

The Pile of Maggots, the oyster dinner, the child who “must have some fun,” the children the Lodging Houses repeatedly fail to “secure,” all testify to the inability of reformist discourse to fully contain these
unruly subjects. Just so the girl’s laugh intimates that the publication of these letters serves for her a different function than the reformist and sentimental harvest of donations and tears. Given the conditions of cultural production and preservation, it is hardly surprising that I have evidence for a far more detailed account of how the play of street-children shapes middle-class identity than I do for how it matters to the children themselves. Images of the street-child at play teach the middle class about the pleasures of circulation and expenditure and justify the free play of capital. Stories of street-children’s vulnerability and pathos elicit the generous sympathy of middle-class readers—distinguishing each caring individual from the exploitative system that produces such suffering. Which is to say that these apparently opposing images functionally support each other in exonerating the middle class’s increasing self-identification with childhood leisure. For street-children, however, play serves not as a measure of leisure but as a mechanism of resistance, a means of claiming autonomy and pleasure on their own, non-productive, terms—of thumping their noses at the middle-class values that this same play nevertheless helps to install. And yet in recognizing this resistance we see as well the difference that is gender: how for girls—who have no imaginable place in the play of the market, except in the terms of sexual vice at which Brace shudders—there is no way to figure work as a game.

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NOTES

1 Considering the vast array of studies that have explored childhood as a site for the construction of gender or racial identity, it is striking how very little work has approached class identity in this way, especially since the recognition that class is a social construction rather than a natural state is far more widespread. Mary Ryan’s historical analysis of the production of middle-class identities in the home is an important exception here, acknowledging as it does the large role that changes in child-rearing practices made in the consolidation of middle-class values (Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981]). Also see Carolyn Kay Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lices (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987), for an account of how paying attention to class alters the psychoanalytic norms of ego formation in children.


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5 Amos Bronson Alcott, 5.

6 See Clement, chap. 5; on the census see 133. For a provocative account of how “the expulsion of children from the ‘cash nexus’ at the turn of the past century . . . was part of a cultural process of ‘sacralization’ of children’s lives” in which emotional value comes to preclude economic utility, see Viviana A. Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 11.

7 Daniel T. Roberts concludes his historical survey of nineteenth-century trends in middle-class child rearing with the observation that “what seems clearest about formal child shaping is the fact of repeated change” (“Socializing Middle-Class Children: Institutions, Fables, and Work Values in Nineteenth-century America,” Journal of Social History 13 [1980]: 364). Roberts divides the century roughly in thirds, with the first thirty years stressing obedience to authority, the middle decades devoted to developing self-control, and the final decades of the century valuing imagination over systematization. What I find most valuable in his schema is his nuanced sense of the unevenness of transitions between these models so that in the disparate settings of home, story-book, and school widely differing ideals and expectations could be set upon the same child. In picking these decades I am focusing on the transition from self-control to imagination.

8 Melvin L. Kohn’s influential mid-twentieth-century study of what values parents strive to inculcate in their children finds a significant divergence between working- and middle-class families: working-class parents emphasize “behavioral conformity” (obedience, cleanliness, and good behavior), while middle-class parents stress “internal process” (curiosity, happiness, and empathy) (Class and Conformity: A Study in Values, with a Reassessment, 1977 [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977], 21). Clearly, in the nineteenth century all classes would put more stress on conformity to authority than now; still it seems plausible that the tendencies that Kohn describes may well reflect on the class differentiated attitudes held within actual nineteenth-century families, even as literary representations would apportion obedience and curiosity quite differently, producing well behaved middle-class children and playful working ones.
George Mastell is quoted in Christine Stansell, City of Women (New York: Knopf, 1986), 194.


First Annual Report of the Children’s Aid Society (New York: 1854), 6. In 1854 the New York Children’s Aid Society was founded in the charitable hope of mitigating the social and individual dangers of child poverty and homelessness. It initiated a flurry of experimental programs: industrial workshops, Sunday “meetings,” schools, and clothing distribution. Its most famous programs, however, were a placing-out system, which sent urban children to work in rural families, and a series of Newsboys’ Lodging Houses, which provided cheap but clean room and board for children working on the streets of the city. The annual reports of the society were compiled under Brace’s secretaryship, and much of the introductory and narrative materials appear to have been written by him, although the majority of each volume is made up of a collection of materials penned by others: treasury reports, excerpts from diaries, letters, and reports by various Society staff, and letters by and about individual children aided by the Society. These volumes are one of my most important sources and are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by year of the report and page number, and abbreviated R. I have worked from the complete run of these reports available at the New York Historical Society, but the first ten reports are more readily available in a facsimile reprint Annual Reports of the Children’s Aid Society: Nos. 1-10, Feb. 1854-1863 (New York: Arno Press, 1971). I also refer to Brace’s The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years Working Among Them (1872; rpt. Silver Springs, Md.: National Association of Social Workers, 1973), a book-length summary of these reports. The Dangerous Classes is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number and abbreviated D.


Elizabeth Oakes Smith, The Newsboy (New York: J. C. Derby, 1854), 36. Such stories of lost adults are standard features of Horatio Alger’s street-boy series. See for example the opening scene of The Young Outlaw, where Sam Barker asks ten cents for directing to Canal Street a country deacon already standing on it (Boston: Loring, 1875), 9-12. The Young Outlaw is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number and abbreviated Y.


The Newsboys’ Lodging Houses shared this ethos, often providing the boys with better clothes and by its second year opening its own savings bank, “a table in which each boy should have his own money-box numbered, where his earnings could be deposited. . . . This has given the first taste of the pleasure of saving” (R, 1855, 14).

Moon writes about the ways in which Alger’s narrative structures articulate the modest rewards and homoerotic bonds that impel corporate/capitalist culture. In this account the “rags to riches” formula speaks a truth about capitalism that is, I think, deeply consonant with the constructions of childhood and class identity at stake in my analysis here. In both cases the misreading of Alger’s stories correctly asserts the sources of pleasure and attraction within them.

“Number able to read and write 4,423; read only 2,371; unable to read and write 1,861; total 8,655 or 10% illiterate” (R, 1870, 18). I am not sure whether it is Brace’s math or his data that is off, but even a twenty percent illiteracy rate is not only impressive but also convincing once one considers what a crucial survival skill literacy must have been for street-traders, and especially for newsboys.

At the first opening of the Lodging House, it was made the condition of lodging that every boy should take a bath. To this there was great reluctance. Now it is prized as a privilege” (R, 1854, 14).

Vermin are a staple feature of Brace’s Annual Reports. Long passages are devoted to detailing the process, for example, of removing lice from the head of a boy: “a sight sufficient to make the strongest nerves quiver. Every hair on his head was alive with vermin.” But Mr. Macy, though “nearly sickened at his task . . . persevered for about three hours with shears and comb, and soap and water” (R, 1858, 54). Such passages record the quivering nerves of a middle-class sensibility, so as to mark the heroism of the Lodging House staff who must overcome such disgust in order to tend to these boys. In this context what are we to make of Lodging House games that blatantly play upon the aspects of street life that sicken the House staff?

The New York Children’s Aid Society’s Annual Reports contain lists of benefactors and their gifts, making it clear that the society drew many donations of clothing and gifts of one dollar or less (the list of donations to the Newsboys’ Lodging House in 1855 includes one dollar from “lod the Newsboy”; in 1857 “Tillie and Winnie” gave fifty-six cents, and at separate times that year five cents and one penny were “found.
in box" and duly counted towards the year’s total), as well as gifts like Mrs. J. J. Astor’s annual $100-$150 for Sunday Dinners or the nearly $4,000 that was left to the Society by Mr. J. B. Barnard’s estate.


31 This definition of “bumming” comes from “Newsboys’ Dictionary or Glossary” (R, 1855, 26).


33 See Clement on how children in prosperous farm families benefitted from the work of hired boys and girls (149).