Raising Empires like Children: Race, Nation, and Religious Education

Karen Sánchez-Eppler

In the rearing of each and every child the processes of national formation are reproduced in miniature. This analogy between nation and nursery, which in the nineteenth century motivated the production of a veritable sea of cheap moral tracts for children, also informs my critique of these writings. As my title suggests, I am interested in these tracts because in the didactic baldness of their rhetoric they explicitly articulate the felt similitudes between the national projects of raising good, white, middle-class, Christian, American children and that of raising an economic and cultural American empire. In particular, Sunday School stories about mission work—with their emphasis on national, religious, and racial difference—provide an acutely legible account of anxieties over national identity and of the hope that the properly reared child might resolve all such troubles. The image of American imperialism in these stories is in many ways quite familiar, but in other ways it offers significant challenges to our usual assumptions about the relations between household, nation, and world and locates the threats posed by otherness not so much outside as within ourselves.

1. Domestic Empires: Questioning the Boundaries of the Home

By the 1880s the US was sending out into the “heathen” world the largest number of Protestant missionaries. Increasingly, these missionaries were women: missionary wives and unmarried female missionaries comprised 60% of the American mission force by 1890. Hence, the feminization of the foreign mission movement coincided both with the rapid growth in American missions abroad and with the increasing US interest in international expansion. Transporting their Victorian bric-a-brac and their domestic behaviors and ideals to Asia and Africa
as well as to the un-Christian tribes and slums within US territory, these women embodied a domestic empire.¹ Their evangelical expansionism suggests the inadequacies of depicting American empire-building as a reaction against, and a manly alternative to, the bourgeois, feminine home culture of sentimentality and domesticity.² It also reveals the limits of most accounts of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal. Although critical analysis of the culture of domesticity has proven increasingly concerned with the permeability of the period’s putatively separate—male or female, public or private—spheres, for the most part the nineteenth-century “Empire of the Mother” remains conceptually unencumbered by the continental and global projects of building an American empire.³ The Sunday School stories about missionary work, on which this study will focus, anticipate these manifestations of imperial domesticity in the relations they construct between the American child, home, nation, and the world beyond. The childhood reading of two generations of empire-builders, male and female, these stories inform both the rhetoric of extreme gender division and the reality of intertwined institutions that would characterize America’s global posture by the end of the century.

On the copyright page of his Tales for Little Readers, about the Heathen, Dr. John Scudder advertises his ambitious goals for this volume: “Should the eye of any Christian father or mother rest upon [this book] I would ask them if they have not a son or daughter to dedicate to the missionary work. The duty of devoting themselves to this work of Christ, or at least, of consecrating to it their money, their efforts, and their prayers, is the great duty to be perseveringly and prayerfully impressed on the minds of our children. A generation thus trained would, with aid from on high, soon effect the moral revolution of the world” (4). The belief that individual and domestic piety can change the world underlies all sentimental writing; it is, for example, what Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe claim for “Christian families” as they “go forth to shine ‘as lights of the world’ in all the now darkened nations” (458–59). Citing this passage, Jane Tompkins speaks in celebratory tones of The American Woman’s Home as “a blueprint for colonizing the world in the name of the ‘family state’” (144). She can applaud domestic expansion without irony because she is convinced that domestic colonization offers an “alternative” to the nationalist and capitalist varieties of imperialism. Scudder’s tales suggest that far from being alternatives, the moral revolution of the world in the image of American Christian domesticity and the economic and political forms of American imperialism are interdependent. Depicting
the child as a world evangelizer, Sunday School writing on mission work makes the connections between domestic order and international order explicit. The connections between domesticity and world mission, home and nation, faith and race that Sunday School stories find unproblematic nevertheless work to prop repressive imperialist policies and practices. Indeed, their very stance of innocence and the children who embody it are what make Sunday School stories such useful tools of empire.

The stories these tracts tell merge the sentimental, feminine, religious basis of domesticity with the aggressive, masculine, economic, and military project of imperialism in both ideological and rhetorical terms. As a genre they blur traditional gender bounds, commingling accounts of violence and danger with the conventionally domestic rhetoric of sentiment and piety. In many instances these crossings are metaphoric, suggesting imagistic links between what remain distinctly separate cultural arenas. Yet even in such cases the resulting imagery can be quite disquieting, as when in Aunt Fanny's "Pop-gun" anthologies each piece is introduced by the image of a woman with raised rifle whose gun—"Make Ready, Present, Fire"—shoots off a fitting moral and so presumably protects the children clinging to her skirts. Yet the targets of this martial domesticity are also children, arrayed like caught criminals with their hands raised. Perhaps intended to represent childish vices, they carry no clear symbolic markings that would let us read one as vanity and another as greed and so dismiss as allegory the little corpse shot down by this didactic gun (see Fig. 1).

The difficulty in interpreting Aunt Fanny's pop-guns as either a defense or an explosion of the domestic suggests the flexibility of the relation between the domestic and the adventurous that structures these missionary tales. Indeed, in the stories themselves such connections often become not simply metaphoric but literal, as domestic sensibility leads to exotic adventures, and dangerous exploits attract both "heathens" and readers to quite unadventurous virtues. Eleanor Fenn begins "The Missionary" by describing a young boy who, concerned for "the miserable ones who had no Bible, . . . bought all the books which told of their condition, and often his mother found him in his room weeping" (85). Although this proclivity to tears has a distinctly domestic locus (the boy's sentimental response is concealed within his room and discovered by his mother), this is not a story of interiority where the tears of identification would count as action. Instead the boy becomes a missionary and the story becomes an account of adventures: "Often he had to swim rivers and walk over burning deserts in order to reach villages in
which he hoped to do some good. Once he was bitten by a serpent and nearly lost his life, at another time he lost his way in a jungle, or thicket of brakes, and was saved from a tiger only by creeping under the matted roots, and concealing himself until the animal had passed by” (87–88). The desert, the jungle are no places for tears; one who cries concealed among matted roots risks not a mother’s but a tiger’s detection. This apparent replacement of sentiment with action does not, however, conform to the antidomestic imperialist model in which manly adventures are understood as a rejection of or fleeing from the too sentimental and feminine home. After all, the “good” for which the missionary swims rivers and crosses deserts is the good exemplified by the American Christian home. Indeed, the good the missionary brings may prove to be the very ability to cry. In Scenes in the Wilderness, the account of David Zeisberger’s mission to “a tribe of Indians living on the banks of the Susquehanna” (7) is full of “toil and danger” (9) compensated finally by the Indians’ conversion to a Christianity most clearly marked by soft-hearted tears. “Whenever,” said one of the converts, “I saw a man shed tears, I used to look upon him with contempt. I would not have wept though my enemies had cut my flesh from my bones. It is of God that I now weep, who has made my hard heart soft” (14). Thus, sentimental tears are themselves what missionary action brings to the wilderness.
2. Domestic Empires: Questioning the Boundaries of the Nation

The notion of a domestic empire seems oxymoronic not only because it would conflate—as these stories do—home and world, inward sentiment and expansionist adventure, but also because in geopolitical terms it would erase the distinction between the national and the international. Empires occur, the modern European model has taught us, when a nation's reign extends beyond national boundaries, when its hegemony exceeds the domestic. For a nation constructed through the displacement of native peoples and the accretion of a diverse immigrant population, the foreign remains still other and yet somehow inside the nation-home. Fenn describes a mission to Africa, Barrow’s story of “Little Ben” tells of an urban mission in New York, and Zeisberger’s missionary work lies along the Susquehanna. The fluidity of American identity and borders, which allows these stories to locate the otherness in need of civilizing both within and without, differentiates American imperialism from most European models and exempts the US from most theoretical accounts. The acquisition and permanent control of colonies was an explicit aim of US policy only between 1898 and 1912, yet America’s mid-nineteenth-century rhetoric of national identity and expansion reveals, as Amy Kaplan succinctly puts it, “United States nation-building and empire-building as historically coterminous and mutually defining” (“Left Alone” 17). Indeed, the very contested (domestic) nature of American imperialism makes it an important site for historical and theoretical analysis: in a fundamental way the case of the US embodies what Benedict Anderson describes as “the inner incompatibility of empire and nation” (88–89).

Although these Sunday School texts clearly depend on European, especially British, precedents—many tracts published in America are simply reprinted European material, and the most famous British missionaries (David Livingston, Robert Moffat, et cetera) are familiar presences in tracts written in the US—the internal, domestic contours of American imperialism make even an identical tract mean differently once it has crossed the Atlantic. For example, Ten Books Beautifully Illustrated for Children, printed and distributed by the Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge in New York, speaks of “our little English children” in a manner that indicates the collection’s origin in the Anglican church; yet surely the meaning of tales entitled “The Wild Karen Boy,” “The Little Hindoo,” or
"The Little Bushman" is different for an American reader. It differs not only because the American child's relation to these "little heathens" is less straightforwardly colonial than that of the English child but also because with "Love for the Bible" the collection includes the story of "[a] missionary in North America" (2) and his praise for a "little Indian [who] thought nothing of going back 100 miles over a stormy lake, in his little canoe, where he was tossing about for nine days, alone to recover his Bible" (6). It differs because although there are no representations of heathen children in England, the place of the American child is produced as a site of missionary action, a place where children must still be civilized into a bravely devout Christianity.*

Even within tracts written in America a description of New York City can sound virtually indistinguishable from one of Calcutta: "This mission-school was opened in one of the many dreary moral wastes in the city of New York where there is no Sabbath, no church, and no Sunday-school; where scarcely a Bible can be found in any habitation; where the houses are crowded with emigrants; where the streets swarm with miserable, ragged, half-civilized children; and where the haunts of sin and shame are seen on every side" (Maria 15-16). Where in the midst of this "swarm" can national identity be located? The notion of a "half-civilized" child marks a fault line in America, suggesting the partial nature of national identity in a nation built by expansion and immigration. Moreover, the situation of this "half-civilized" child evokes connections between the two meanings of "domestic" at play in my essay. For part of what makes New York seem so foreign and these children only partially or ambivalently American is the absence of homes. The narrator speaks of "habitations," of "houses . . . crowded with emigrants," of "streets" and "haunts," all explicit signs for the lack of that tranquil and loving familial enclosure the Beecher sisters celebrated as the American Home.

The succor the mission school promises to bring to a half-civilized, homeless, and decidedly alien New York is not one that fully extinguishes otherness. A few pages later the same narrator who saw "haunts of sin and shame" offers to replace that "dreary moral waste" with this visionary idyll:

Let the eye wander over the area from river to river, on any Sunday looking in upon a band of German children here, reading the Bible in the language of their fatherland; and there upon a school of Jewish children, reading the New Testament. Farther on is a collection of ragged news boys and in another place a class of Chinese. . . . In the instruc-
tion of these schools some of the best energy, talent, and piety of the church is acting upon the worst and most degraded elements of society. It is like the sunlight breaking in upon the clouds and chaos of an unfinished creation. (Maria 26–27)

Differences of language, original religion, class, and race all seem reconcilable before the Christianizing and Americanizing force of these mission schools. A finished creation, a perfected nation, would not contain such "chaos." Yet with the children ranged in their separate classes, this vision offers not a New York rid of its heterogeneity, nor a city that thrives upon difference, but rather a diverse population put in good (Christian) order. Anxiety over how to achieve such order—how to create and preserve a national identity capable of containing (in both senses of the word) swarms of internal aliens—inform these Sunday School stories about mission work. The solution imagined here seems to lie in refraining from fully absorbing this otherness: the mission school oddly un-Americanizes its students by marking them as others in need of conversion. Thus, the paradoxical task of consolidating a domestic empire accounts for one of the most striking features of these Sunday School stories: how little it seems to matter whether the missionary subject is located inside or outside US borders. Rather, it is precisely because the contested nature of American borders and American identity matter so much that these stories refuse to distinguish between internal and external "heathens."

3. Coloring American Faith

The project of consolidating a national or racial American identity that I have traced within these stories may seem at odds with their explicit evangelism. After all, the goal of a world mission evokes a global Christianity that would seem to dissolve rather than confirm national divisions. Similarly, the process of conversion affirms the spiritual value of national and racial others, insisting on the significance of "not race, but grace" for mission work. Indeed, historians of nineteenth-century American missionaries have noted that in their discourse—if not always in their practice—mission workers generally rejected the biological determinism that characterized scientific racialism during the second half of the nineteenth century. In opposition to the scientific and increasingly popular contention that, as George W. Stocking summarizes it, "race and culture were linked in a single
evolutionary hierarchy extending from the dark-skinned savage to the civilized white man” (vii), mission workers distinguished between race and culture, affirming that dark-skinned people were capable of embracing Christian beliefs, values, and even behaviors. What Christianity entailed for American missionaries, however, was not only spiritual but also cultural: their strategy of conversion may appear antithetical to racial determinism but it fully supports an ethnocentric cultural imperialism. These poles merely delimit the spectrum of missionary practice, enabling, for example, Alexander Crummell and other black American missionaries to link the celebration of a pan-Africanist culture with the “evangelization and enlightenment of heathen Africa” (Crummell 148). The categories for identity provided by race, nation, and religion jostle each other, refusing to combine in any simple or predictable ways.

*The Red Brothers* emphatically asserts the irrelevance of racial and geographic divisions to mission work: “The European with his white skin, the olive-colored Chinaman, the tawny Hindoo, the brown Malay, the black negro, and the red Indian of America are all alike the children of Adam. If, then, we are all brothers and sisters, surely we ought to love the whole human family, and help them if we are able, though our skins may differ in color, and wide seas may divide us from one another. And in what better way can we help those we love, than by sending them the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?” (5–6). Published by the American Sunday School Union, this text does not list the white-skinned American citizen who constitutes its audience. However, the meaning of the word “we” seems to shift in this passage from the all-inclusive “whole human family” to those unlisted white Christian Americans who already possess the gospel, who read the publications of the American Sunday School Union, and who should therefore “help those we love.” Etienne Balibar, theorizing on the relation between racism and nationalism, observes that “the racial-cultural identity of the ‘true nationals’ remains invisible, but it is inferred from (and assured by) its opposite, the alleged, the quasi-hallucinatory visibility of the ‘false nationals’: Jews, ‘wops,’ immigrants, *indios*, *natives*, blacks” (“Paradoxes” 285). Thus, *The Red Brothers’s* apparently inclusive list of the “children of Adam” can be seen as working to imply and assure the importance of the unlisted, invisible, white Protestant American.

*The Red Brothers* is just as concerned about distinguishing this American from the “European with his white skin” as from the “red Indian of America.” Thus, the book explains that “those who first visited [our red brethren] did not act as missionaries do
now: they did not seek to do good to their souls, but to possess the country" (6). While this tract is rare in its explicit condemnation of imperialism, this very anomaly serves to emphasize how even those texts most committed to a global spiritual “family” and most critical of the strategies of conquest remain engaged in the project of delimiting a national identity, chauvinistically imagining the US as the ideal Christian nation. The central task of this tract is to compare the European's false claim to Christian practice with the true Christianity (“like their blessed Lord”) of American missionaries: “[I]nstead of selling to them guns with which to shoot one another; and rum to make them drunkards, they give them the Bible, and tracts, from which they learn to be sober, and to dwell together in love” (18–19). Significantly, this tract never mentions Jacksonian policies of Indian removal—neither the “Indian Removal Bill” (1830), the suffering of the “Trail of Tears” (1838), nor the paternalism with which Jackson justified these forced migrations (see Rogin; Takaki ch. 5) can be acknowledged in this effort to affirm America’s position as the true Christian nation where the various “children of Adam” might dwell together in love.

“[D]enial,” Homi K. Bhabha writes of the contradictions of postcolonial identity formation, “is always a retroactive process; a half acknowledgment . . . that Otherness has left its traumatic mark” (“Interrogating” 205). The trauma for national identity that The Red Brothers’s silence would deny is simultaneously racial and religious, for if Christian civilization gives content to American identity, racial distinctions provide the borders of that identity. Thus, these Sunday School stories depict American mission work as simultaneously converting and reaffirming racial difference. Bhabha describes the colonialists’ paranoid ambivalence—"alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution"—in the demand to “turn white or disappear” (“Interrogating” 204). Yet in the face of its internal racial others, white Protestant America seems less ambiguously, more gratuitously, to insist that these others both assimilate and leave: for what else is asked by, say, the policy of simultaneously civilizing and exterminating the Cherokee, or by the American Colonization Society's double goal in shipping ex-slaves to Liberia of both Christianizing Africa and ridding America of free blacks. The problem for national identity that anxiously underlies so many of these tracts is that the otherness within America will not disappear; instead, these years are marked by its ever increasing, and increasingly multiple and complicated, presence. The Sunday School story that in my reading most explicitly narrates the formation of America as a Christian nation acknowledges this ra-
cial heterogeneity, deriving both Christian salvation and national allegiance from an interracial friendship. "The Indian's Revenge" tells the story of William Sullivan, who had come to America from England to make his "home and fortune" (5): "He was filled with prejudices, acquired when in England, against Americans in general, and the North American Indians in particular... [O]f the sweet precepts of the gospel he was as practically ignorant as if he had never heard them" (7–8). Ensconced in his American homestead, William spurns an Indian who asks for food and shelter, calling him an "Indian dog," though William's wife proves more generous and secretly feeds Carcoochee. Later, when William is himself lost and wounded during a hunting expedition, Carcoochee takes his "revenge"—and repays his gratitude to the woman who aided him—by helping the wounded man home. Revealing his identity, the illiterate heathen leaves William with an unwitting paraphrase of scripture: "When hereafter you see a red man in need of kindness, do to him as you have been done by" (21). Thanks to this act of mercy, the Sullivans both embrace their new homeland and "turn their hearts to God"; Carcoochee remains a friend and, seated by their hearth, learns to read the Bible and to love the Savior he had unknowingly imitated. The truly American Christian is thus born of contact between the godless Englishman and the heathen Indian. Rather than being monolithic narratives of white superiority, of inflexible assimilation and erasure, such stories suggest that national identity and religious identity are at once complicated and propped by race.

4. Little Angels and Little Heathens

The stories Sunday School texts tell about the formation of national and religious identity were written for child readers. The rearing of children involves the inculcation of such identities, the reproduction of national formation within the individual child. Thus, the nation's ambiguous relation to its heathen others is replayed in these texts' response to the children they would fashion into properly Christianized and Americanized citizens. In particular, these pedagogical stories function to reenact, and so transform, anxieties over the threat internal differences pose to national, racial, and religious identity. In practical terms the religious education of children promises to produce an ever more Christian nation. In narrative terms that education is revealed as itself a mise-en-abyme of cultural conversion in which stories of missionaries converting heathens work to further Americanize
and Christianize children—already identified as American and Christian—by turning them into missionaries eager to convert yet more heathens. Thus, the child so disciplined into American-ness performs as a model for national identity and hence as a means of disciplining the nation. In order to fully grasp this cycle we need to know more about how the religious education of children was imagined in nineteenth-century America.

"Where do you discover the supreme selfishness which is the essence and substance of all sin, if not in a little child?" queried Gardiner Spring in his 1833 *Dissertation on Native Depravity* (qtd. in Boylan 145). Throughout the early decades of the Republic, Calvinist belief that children are "by nature sinners" and that "estranged from the womb, they go astray as soon as they be born" dominated the discourse of child-rearing and especially of religious education with its emphasis on the need for conversion (Allen Hyde qtd. in Wishy 18). Orthodox ideas of infant depravity were countered with increasing authority by arguments for children's essential innocence such as Horace Bushnell's famous 1847 treatise *Christian Nurture*, with its proposal that children need not be converted, but rather, if properly reared, could be true Christians from birth. Indeed, far from periods of natural depravity, Bushnell claimed that "infancy and childhood are the ages most pliant to good" (14). By 1850 the direct and indirect heirs of Jean Jacques Rousseau would not merely reject any notion of innate sin but actually posit that "at birth the child is . . . but an incipient receptacle of that thought and affection, the proper protection, nourishment and exercise of which are capable of forming it into an angel; and this, indeed, is the ultimate design of its being" (Beaman 296; qtd. in Wishy 23). Between these images of the innately depraved and the incipient angel, historians have noted a gradual evolution whereby Calvinist doctrines of original sin slowly gave way before the desire of an increasingly domestic and child-centered American middle class to believe that their children, at least, were innately good. However clear this transition may appear from our historical vantage, the nineteenth century largely experienced childhood sin and sinlessness simultaneously. In practice American parents, Sunday School teachers, and the authors of juvenile religious fiction held an unstable double vision of children's relation to religion, at once seeing the child as naturally depraved and as naturally angelic.

This double conception of the child proves especially provocative for my argument that nineteenth-century America used the religious education of its children as a site at which to enact its anxieties over national and racial identity. For, once under-
stood as both depraved like the savage and angelic like the perfect missionary, the American child could fully and ambivalently perform all roles in America's Christian and civilizing mission to the world. By simultaneously working to convert heathens out there and Christianize children at home, these stories illustrate how the American child comes both to reflect and inform American imperialism.

The very notion of child as missionary is predicated upon a racial and national conception of evangelism: in arguing for the essential innocence and godliness of children, Bushnell purports that the gradual educational processes that nurture Christianity within the Christian home would supplement—indeed prove more potent than—the conversion of the heathen for the task of evangelizing the world. In a chapter entitled “Christian Stock,” he depicts Christianity as an inbred trait of character and spirit and hence a stock that can be consciously and biologically propagated. Christian Nurture thus differs from the dominant discourse of mission work through its linking of culture and race—the belief that civilization can be transmitted both educationally and biologically (see Wardley 210). Bushnell's notion of spreading Christianity through propagation depends, moreover, upon asserting the superior vigor of the “Christian races”:

The Christian body . . . stands among the other bodies and religions, just as any advanced race, the Saxon for example, stands among the feeble, wilder races. Like the Aborigines of our continent; having so much power of every kind that it puts them in shadow, weakens them, lives them down, rolling its over-populating tides across them, and sweeping them away, as by a kind of doom. Just so there is, in the Christian church, a grand law of increase by which it is rolling out and spreading over the world (180).

It is chilling to find that the text so celebrated for opposing Calvinist ideas of infant depravity bases its recognition of the inherent goodness of (Christian) children upon Christianity's success in “sweeping away” the “feeble, wilder races.” In Bushnell's project of disseminating Christian civilization, the child serves as the perfect and necessary conduit, since Christian nurture is the propagation that gives faith more bodies. The child sutures the potential gap between race and culture that constantly threatens to split open the myth of a white Christian America. Furthermore, Bushnell’s insistence on the importance of familial nurture—his contention that Christianity is best produced by Christian parentage and a Christian home—reiterates the conviction
that the child at home coalesces national identity. The child thus serves as the perfect missionary, embodying the racial, domestic, and religious purity of the nation.

Even as these Sunday School stories strive to produce such ideal Americans, however, they betray anxiety about children's innate depravity. Stories about the conversion of heathens frequently conclude by asking their child readers: “Shall that little girl, in a heathen land, be a disciple of Christ, and you, in a land of Sabbaths and Sabbath-Schools and Bibles, not give your hearts to the savior?” (Scudder, *Appeal* 136); “Are you doing as much as Akatangi to give the gospel to the heathen?” (*Stories* 8).

To answer “no” to such questions would threaten the alliance between Christian nurture and Christian stock. Having to answer “yes” casts the American Sunday School student as the anxious guarantor of a national and racial world order. Letters children sent to Scudder in response to his books and lectures suggest, however, that his missionary rhetoric may have had unintended, depraved, results. In one letter, published as an appendix to *Dr. Scudder's Tales for Little Readers* along with many other amusing epistles from pious children, the missionary's comparison of American child and savage is transmuted with a childish literalism into what should be a quite unacceptable cultural relativism: “O, how thankful we ought to be, that we were not born in heathen lands, O, if the poor heathen could only have such privileges as we have, how thankful they would be; and if we were born in heathen lands, I have no doubt that they would come and tell us about a savior” (170).

5. Domestic Savagery

The analogies Sunday School texts draw between the child and the savage have two sides: unconverted American children are represented as heathen, and missionary work is cast as the project of making heathens into good little children. Thus, while attitudes toward religious education reflect nineteenth-century notions of America’s world mission, depictions of missionary work encode anxieties about family order. Colonial discourses often aver that “primitive people” are infantile—a cultural stage to be outgrown. Nicholas Thomas has compellingly argued that this formulation proves particularly potent for mission work, since the image of savage as child (unlike more ethnological models of cultural hierarchy) facilitates the understanding of conversion as a kind of growth. Thomas argues that it is this emphasis on conversion, and the consequent need to represent
missionary subjects in a manner that can “at once emphasize savagery and yet signal the essential humanity of the islanders to be evangelized” (374), that causes missionary work to employ and enact “the notions of infantalization and quasifamily hierarchy in a far more thorough way than any other colonial project” (380). The nineteenth-century American child and the heathen to be converted prove apt and powerful metaphors for each other because both are viewed as ambivalent embodiments of wildness and innocence.

Sunday School stories about foreign missions depicted the heathen as depraved more on familial than on religious grounds. Without the Bible little heathens could never learn to be proper children. This is the lesson that the American Tract Society’s Stories about the Heathen and Their Children derives from a meeting between a missionary to Africa—the famed Mr. Moffat—and an elderly woman whose family, no longer able to support her, has abandoned her by the side of a mountain path: “We can not wonder that such things happen in Africa; for the same Bible tells us that ‘the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty.’ If these children had learned the holy words, ‘Honor thy father and mother,’ they would not have left their poor old mother to die” (Stories 3). Here the “darkness” of Africa is given specific content: the rupture of what missionary, Sunday School teacher, and good American child must all recognize as the appropriate, and indeed biblically commanded, way of being a family. Heathenism may be a religious problem, requiring the religious solution of conversion, but its sign is not spiritual so much as domestic. Thus, in his Missionary Narrative of the Triumphs of Grace; As Seen in the Conversion of Kafirs, Hottentots, Fingos and Other Natives of South Africa, Samuel Young begins by describing not religious rites but dining arrangements: “They use no tables, dishes, knives, or forks at their meals; but everyone helps himself by means of sticks, to the meat which is in the pot. For seats, they use the skulls of oxen, with the horns still attached to them” (5–6). Eating straight from the pot and seated upon the still horned trophies of the kill, the Kafirs scorn the divisions and distinctions characteristic of the well-kept nineteenth-century American home, thereby inviting Young’s and his readers’ scorn for the Kafir.

Theories of colonialism often note how Western assertions of cultural superiority have rested on the comparison of domestic norms. Accounts of heathen savagery work to justify imperial expansion, and such barbarism is best indexed by the condition of those whom the West recognizes as most vulnerable—women and children. Thus, the household, the appropriate locus
for woman and child, imagined within Western society as removed from the sites of cultural conflict and cultural power, becomes the essential index of social order. Imputed domestic dysfunction can then be used to justify redressive external intervention. The cultural import missionary discourse ascribed to the American home in no way contradicts its depiction as a "separate sphere" excluded from political, economic, and artistic power. To represent the bourgeois home with its properly privatized housekeeping and its properly pious and affectionate family as the guarantor of American cultural superiority only confirms the vicarious role of the domestic woman and child as markers, rather than producers or possessors, of status.

Western colonialism's generalized conviction that domesticity is the antithesis of heathenism gains quite specific and provocative meanings, however, once it is aimed at a juvenile readership. Sunday School writings about missionary work focus obsessively on familial behaviors. Such a focus undoubtedly had pedagogic intentions, making the "cruelty" and disorder of heathen ways recognizable by casting them in familiar—that is family—terms. The didactic intentions of these stories remain, moreover, explicitly double, seeking both to enlist American children in the support of mission work and to further their individual spiritual development. The failure of African children properly to honor "their poor old mother" illustrates both the difference of the Africans' darkness and suggests that American children who do not honor their parents are likewise savage and black. The Kafirs seated on their ox skulls serve as exotic reminders that civilization rests upon that childhood nemesis, good table manners.

The Christian child, moreover, should not merely conform to proper domestic norms but even becomes responsible for the familial perpetuation of those norms. Thus, the first lesson in honoring father and mother lies in ensuring that they behave as Christian parents ought. This is clearly true for foreign heathen like the newly christened "Bathsheba": when she became a Christian, her mother attempted to reclaim her for Hinduism by "beating her and spitting upon her" (Old Jesse 9), but "she behaved as a Christian daughter should do, and spoke none but words of kindness to her poor old heathen mother" (11) until "at last [the Hindoo mother] saw that this was a better religion than her own" (13). Thus, by behaving "as a Christian daughter should do," Bathsheba converts her mother from both her savage faith and her savagely violent modes of child-rearing. The tract concludes by insisting on the relevance of this pattern of disciplining one's parents for American families when it asks its readers "Have you a mother or father, brothers or sisters who are not
yet believers in Jesus? If so try by conduct like Bathsheba’s to make them love the gospel” (Old Jesse 15-16). Indeed, even a story about Sunday School students from middle-class American homes (where the great trauma of the plot lies in the news that a beloved Sunday School teacher will be leaving her class) advises that if one behaves like a “gentle, loving daughter and sister” “Christ will make you the preacher to bring your father and mother and brothers and sisters to him” (Davis 101). The task of disciplining one’s parents, of producing the Christian and domestic order of the family, epitomizes the double bind of the child in didactic fiction: however much these children may appear as disciplinary agents, they themselves remain without agency. It is never up to Bathsheba, or even the American Sunday School student, to define what it is that a Christian child should do.

Only by working to save the heathens—including the unbelievers in their own homes—can American children secure their own spiritual and domestic welfare. The horrors of domestic savagery narrated in these tracts focus on the cruelty of heathen parents, especially of delinquent, non-Christian mothers. Such a focus emphasizes the vulnerability of children and so the threat to their own happiness and indeed survival should the project of Christianization fail. This structure reflects not only children’s dependence on their parents, particularly their mothers, but also the equation of parental nurture with Christianity. After all, given the pious status of motherhood in Victorian America, a non-Christian mother appears as a contradiction in terms (see McDannell ch. 6).

Heathen mothers not only frequently fail to conform to these bourgeois idealizations of motherhood, but their deviance takes quite dramatic and terrifying forms—they feed their babies to fish and alligators (the most often repeated image of heathen maternal depravity). For example, Lydia Sigourney uses such an image in How to Be Happy: “You see how a mother loves her babe, how she carries it in her arms, how tenderly she nourishes it, if it is sick, how she nurses it night and day with pitying love, if it dies, how she weeps for its loss. But the heathen mother, tears her infant from her breast, and casts it into the river for the fishes to devour” (56–57). Sigourney’s comparison of two emblematic mothers reveals how much the power of depictions of maternal violence depends upon the idealization of maternal nurture. Conversely, evocations of cruel heathen mothering work to shore up the appeal of maternal Christian virtue. There is no greater threat to Victorian cultural norms than the possibility that the
See that heathen mother stand
Where the sacred currents flow;
With her own maternal hand,
Mid the waves her infant throw.

Hark! I hear the piteous scream,
Frightful monsters seize their prey,
Or the dark and bloody stream
Bears the struggling child away.

Fainter, now, and fainter still,
Breaks the ring upon the ear;
But the mother's heart is steel,—
She, unmoved, that cry can hear.

Send, O send the Bible there,—
Let its precepts reach the heart!
She may then her children spare,
Act the mother's tender part.”

(Scudder, Appeal 122)

This hymn appears within the story of a boy who, motivated by its tuneful plea, works and saves in order to purchase Bibles that he may “send, O send” to India. Hymn and story suggest that children’s missionary zeal can actually produce “the mother’s tender part”—can make steel-hearted heathens into proper mothers. Since such perceived maternal dysfunctions and the social disorder they symbolize validate British colonial control as well as American missionary action in India, imperial power once again rests upon a domestic ethos, and the culture of domesticity comes to serve imperialist ends.

Harriette G. Brittan was sent to Calcutta by the Woman’s Union Missionary Society in the 1860s—among the first group of single American women to engage in foreign mission work. There she wrote Kardoo, the Hindoo Girl, a story told in the voice of young Kardoo that recasts these familiar tropes of heathen domestic disorder from a more feminist perspective that discloses some of their cultural assumptions. While Kardoo describes her mother as all “love and tenderness” (10), she is highly critical of the distant (antidomestic) parenting proffered by Indian fathers. It is within this context of paternal absence and
patriarchal power that Kardoo tells the story of the vow that bound her mother to cast her baby boy into the Ganges "with her own hands" (116): "I had not once seen her kiss or embrace her darling. No tear was in her eye when she looked at him... She seemed petrified to stone. Her every movement seemed as though it were, by some means, independent of her will" (120). When the time for the sacrifice comes, the nursemaid’s narration endows the familiar scene with unfamiliar affect: "She walked quickly down to the river’s brink and without pausing an instant flung her babe from her as far as she could into the water. He sunk, rose again instantly, and as instantly the immense head and open jaws of an alligator appeared beside him, the next moment the headless trunk of the babe floated before us, dyeing the water with its blood. Your mother uttered a wild cry and would have flung herself after the child, had I not held her back” (123-24). Here the mother’s stoniness, her refusal to fondle her child, the quickness of her throw—all the marks other versions have taken to signify her unnaturally steely heart—stand instead as signs of her maternal love, of how much self must be turned to stone for the required sacrifice to become possible. The religious vow that ends in this baby’s gruesome death was taken by Kardoo’s father, and it is thus his will and his non-Christian faith that abuse and torture this beloved and loving mother. Brittan’s reimagining of this scene unmasks the extent to which missionary fantasies of heathen domestic disorder generally work to construct an image of a happy American domesticity dependent not only on Christian faith but also on patriarchal gender arrangements: the cult of domesticity’s penchant for idealizing and blaming the comparatively powerless mother.

Hinduism fascinates and appalls American readers precisely because of the ways it is seen to ritualize a patriarchal violence, present but disavowed in American society. The practice of suttee may thus be oddly directed in Sunday School fiction not at wives, the patriarchal victims, but at little boys, the heirs to patriarchal power:

My dear little boys, would you like to see your mother sacrificed in this way?—Those mothers who nursed you when you were infants; who used to sit by your cradles and rock you to sleep when you cried; and who used to watch you by day and by night, when you were sick? No! you would not like to see such mothers burned as a sacrifice to idols—but if you had been born in some parts of India, you would, with your own hands, kindle the fire to burn them. O how thankful you ought to be that you were born in a Christian
American Literary History 417

land,—a land where you have the Bible, which teaches you not to do such dreadful things. (Scudder, *Appeal* 23–24)

Scudder goes on to describe this “dreadful thing” in great detail for six pages including a “beautiful” illustration representing “the burning of one of these wretched women” (30). In these pages the patriarchal marital rights protected by suttee go unmentioned. The passage concerns only mother-love and the love of mothers; thus, even as it denounces heathen savagery, Scudder’s narration absorbs the image of marriage and maternity as a socially sanctioned, even compulsory, self-immolation. Addressed to boys, Scudder’s discussion of suttee offers a disquietingly double threat to its girl readers. With his long description of the good (American) mother, he provides a model of feminine behavior such readers should follow, suggesting, indeed, that if Indian mothers were more like these nurturing American mothers, sons would not or could not burn them. And yet within the son’s imagined pain at his potential loss, there may lurk another feeling, the titillating and submerged desire to “with your own hands, kindle the fire to burn” that omnipresent American mother with her pitying and controlling love. Indeed, in Scudder’s detailed elaboration of this ritual immolation, there are marks of taking pleasure in female suffering and self-abnegation that reinforce this double bind. These stories of violence by and against heathen women make it clear that while linking domesticity and empire may suggest the porosity of these putatively separate spheres, it also provides new trajectories for domination.

6. The Missionary at Home

The goal of missionary work is quite literally the multiplication of the American Christian family unit, especially the organization of gender and idealization of motherhood that characterizes it. The anxiety remains, however, that contact with heathens may in fact produce the opposite result—fostering the latent savagery and familial disorder that may yet lurk in American children and American homes. Or less obliquely, in this period of resistance to employing single women as foreign missionaries, there is the fear that missionary activity may destabilize familial and especially feminine roles and thus put at risk the very domesticity missionaries were called to spread. Of all the children invited to *Arthur’s Birthday Party* to hear “a talk about China,” only little Hatty exclaims, “I should like to be a missionary too”
Sunday School literature about missions . . . remains at best ambivalent about actual contact with otherness.

(41), and in the summary of happy and successful life forecasts that concludes the book it is only “dear Hatty Fuller” who no longer “lives upon the earth, but with the angels and our dear Savior in Heaven. And though she will never be a missionary to the poor heathen as she wished, we may be sure that there will be others found” (52). Such a conclusion suggests that the missionary calling is most desirable, productive, and safe when it remains a childhood wish. Why, we may ask, would a Sunday School story choose to kill off the one little girl who seeks to follow this evangelical call?

Sunday School literature about missions thus remains at best ambivalent about actual contact with otherness. Better to stay home and send Bibles. Surely there is a double message in the Anniversary Missionary Meeting of a Presbyterian church rewarding Sunday School students for their dedication to mission work by giving each child “the beautiful little paper, ‘The Child at Home’” (Barrow 97). With similar ambivalence Harriet Fisher: Or, The Missionary at Home—a juvenile biography of a woman who founded a successful urban mission—tells of young Harriet’s desire to be a missionary and of how that desire must be constantly deferred by the needs of her elderly father, her own community, and what the book calls her “every-day duties.” When finally her father’s death frees her to do missionary work, her desire to go to foreign lands is displaced onto needs closer to home: “For a more heathenish place I do not believe you can find in Hindostan, than in one part of the town of S____, not more than thirty miles from where we stand” (37). Ultimately Harriet Fisher: Or, The Missionary at Home chooses home as the best mission and actively warns against the self-aggrandizing allures of missions abroad. The asylum Harriet founds serves as a happily Christian and domestic home for “ragged and filthy” (75) children who “must be separated from the evil influences of their homes, or little hopes of their reformation could be cherished” (76). Her accomplishment compensates only uneasily in this narrative for her own lack of a more conventional family structure. Having her wards call her “mother” is not enough, and so this book apparently written to celebrate Harriet’s work with urban children finds the asylum of less interest than the daily responsibilities and relationships that impede her missionary zeal. What finally makes Harriet a good missionary and a good model for Sunday School scholars is in fact her very lack of zeal: “imagination—she had none! I could never discover anything like romance in her views” (9), the narrator exclaims in praise; rather, “her life is full of the lesson that one need not be great to be useful” (11). Thus, this biography of a young missionary
strives to eliminate all the attractions and adventures of a missionary calling—including the calling itself. The book closes by urging its readers to be “true messengers of [God’s] kindness and mercy to all whom they meet beside the paths of every-day life. TO DO THIS IS TO BE A MISSIONARY” (105). To imagine more might actually have disrupted the sanctified domestic contours of the American home, especially if you were a girl. 17

Such textual resistance demonstrates, moreover, that while the Christian education of American children may offer a benign model for expressing America’s world-civilizing goals, the mirroring of home and empire may yet prove disquieting on both fronts. The contiguity between the religious education of children and imperial cultural expansion seems as threatening to the American home as it is infantilizing to the others—home and abroad—they would evangelize. What I find most important about these stories is precisely the excessive and circular nature of the cultural anxieties they betray. The sanctity of the home and of the age and gender roles that define it, and the purity (or even existence) of racial or national identity in an ever more diverse America may support each other, but in their interdependence they must also threaten to reveal each other’s insufficiencies. These stories of America’s global mission to convert the heathen thus display, however unintentionally, all the ways in which America and the idealized American home are themselves ever in need of conversion. In one story intended to teach the lesson “honor thy mother and father,” Tiny, allured by fantasies of Indian life, tracks an Indian girl to her tent in the woods only to find not charm but dirt and disorder. Afraid that she will be scalped—itself a falsely romantic view—she is only robbed: “Tiny waited and wondered and thought of home and her father and mother and the baby, as she used to think about fairs, and Europe, and Heaven, as if it were something that she should never see; or as if she had been an Indian all her life and dreamed it all, and just woke up” (Ward 100). Or as if she understood the strange self-reflective manner in which the American home, family, celebrations of national community, sense of the world outside, and even religious faith all dream themselves through the identification of the child with the heathen.

Notes

1. Hunter provides the richest account of the meanings of foreign mission work for evangelical American women, including the concept of “domestic empire” (ch. 5). Pascoe reveals similar patterns of self-empowerment and self-
sacrifice, cultural empathy and cultural chauvinism in the work of female missionaries during this same period in the Western US.

2. The literature of American imperialism repeatedly enacts a rejection of domesticity, but the best critical discussions of this literature reveal that such reactions are culturally enmeshed in the very domestic structures they would reject. See Kaplan, "Romancing"; Romero.

3. Mary Ryan's *Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860* (1982), for example, never discusses "empire" in its geopolitical sense. My project is indebted to those studies that describe the home as a site of national identity, like Linda Kerber's of the role of "republican motherhood" in the political production of an American citizenry (*Women of the Republic:Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* [1980]) or Gillian Brown's of how the home constructs the public marketplace characteristics of American individualism (*Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* [1990]). Even in these studies, however, the continental and global issues of nation-building and empire-building remain detached from the domestic.

4. Other English collections do describe urban mission work and even juxtapose it with tales from missions abroad, but in these cases, though there may be a strong sense of class difference, the "Ragged Scholars" of London are in no way represented as un-English (*Ragged Scholars*). Stories of urban missions to cities in the contiguous subject nations of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales occupy an ambiguous middle position—not so other as India, but just as surely not English. See Boyd for the American reprinting of a tale about mission work in Edinburgh.

5. Coleman and Pascoe both argue that mission work entailed rejecting or simply ignoring the tenets of scientific racialism. Pascoe details how—despite explicit theoretical and practical rejections of racialism—hierarchical linking of race and culture could in practice continue to limit racial equality within the mission homes (ch. 4). On such debates over the import of "race" versus "civilization," Balibar cautions, "I fail to see any difference [between racism and ethnocentrism], once it is a matter of the absolute, innate, 'natural' superiority of the white race, Western values, and so on" ("Paradoxes" 287).

6. See also Balibar's discussion of how racism functions in the "process of building a community...creating lived ties and affects and common evidences among people in a society where, for example, kinship has ceased to be a central social structure" ("Racism" 18).

7. Handy and James H. Moorhead (*American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* [1978]) describe nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants' millennial vision of creating a fully Christian America. The US's political tradition of resistance to the institutionalization of a state religion in no way lessens this vision. Indeed, I would argue that the absence of a state religion positions everyone as a potential convert—structurally inviting internal evangelisms even as it protects religious minorities. Thus, the very gap between church and state may have made the missionaries' depiction of America as the quintessential Christian nation more amorphous and precarious, but it also made it more anxiously fervent.
8. Missionaries frequently functioned as quasi-governmental agents in the implementation of US policies of acculturation and removal. Yet white missionaries had also actively participated in tribal resistance to these policies. Most famously, in 1830 11 white clergymen working with the Cherokee were imprisoned for refusing to comply with the expulsion decree; the resulting supreme court ruling in *Worcester vs. Georgia* held that state law did not apply within Indian territories and proved unenforceable under the Jackson administration. See Bowden (173–78) and McLoughlin on the Cherokee tactic of resistance through acculturation including reliance on missionaries. Wald provides a chilling account of how *Worcester vs. Georgia* constructs the rights and subjectivity of American citizenship by eliding the racial and national others within US territory. Sunday School texts remain blithely silent on these conflicts in the missionary’s role. For example, *The Choctaw Girl* begins by explaining that “in the year 1831 this tribe began to move to another part of the country” (3), but although the story centers on the conversations between a missionary to “this new settlement” and a Choctaw girl badly injured during the winter migration, not a word is said about the (state) causes of her life-threatening “move.”

9. Bhabha is primarily concerned with the composite identities of the subjects/objects of colonial control, but his discussion remains trenchant for national identity as well.

10. Lloyd offers a stunning example of how racial identity and ego formation have been imagined in similar ways when he compares the “visual structure of racism . . . with what psychoanalysis supposes to take place in the castration complex”; in both cases difference must be recognized “as a mutilation of identity” (74).

11. McDannell details how the religious education of children came to replace actual worship as the primary domestic ritual for Protestant families (91–96).

12. *The New Jerusalem*, where “Errors of Education” was published, is a Swedenborgian publication, and in general nonconformist thinkers were much quicker and more thorough in their rejection of the fundamental tenets of original sin and infant depravity. For an early and influential example see Alcott.

13. The conceptual evolution from the depraved infant, through “the child redeemable,” to “the child redeemer” structures Wishy’s *The Child and the Republic*. Fleming ends his study of children in Puritan churches with the publication of Bushnell’s treatise, implying that after *Christian Nurture* religious education was no longer truly Calvinist (ch. 16). Tracing the institutional implications of this transition, Boylan cautions that “it would be erroneous to assume . . . that Christian nurture quickly displaced conversion as the main goal of Sunday School instruction. The two goals existed side by side for some time” (149). Conversely, Greven even finds signs of ambivalence over whether children are “embryo angels or infant fiends” among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century evangelicals (28–31).

14. Ortner’s paradigmatic essay suggests the extent to which women function as signs of culture. Suleri’s critique of the contemporary “coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories, in which each term serves to reify the potential pietism of the other” (759), ends with the evocation of a far less pietistic
alliance between postcolonial and female experience: the horrifying curtailment of women's rights accompanying the Islamization of Pakistan. To note that Suleri's tactics here recapitulate the nineteenth-century colonialist's practice of justifying British rule through appeals to the "condition of women" only intensifies the validity of her critique: the difficulty of an alliance between postcolonial and feminist theories stems precisely from the ways that concern with the "condition of women"—at least as understood by the West, but even in many instances as adduced by a multiculturally sensitive "harm principle"—often conflicts with concerns for cultural sovereignty.

15. Hill recounts both the reluctance of traditional mission boards to send single women overseas and the consequent development of female boards. The interdenominational Woman's Union Missionary Society, founded in 1860, was the first mission board devoted to sending single women overseas (44–46).

16. Among nineteenth-century domestic writers suttee became a fairly conventional image for the self-abnegation demanded by marriage. See, e.g., Sigourney's early poem "The Suttee" (1827), which seems to suggest that like the victim in the poem the American wife is often "bound . . . fast down to her loathsome partner" (15).

17. The anxieties about missionary work evident in such stories are not simply gratuitous; rather, they parallel what Hunter calls "the paradox of the missionary experience" (265). In practice, Hunter points out, missionary work afforded white American women power, independence, and authority well beyond the possibilities of normative domestic roles without requiring them to repudiate—as did more politically or professionally active women of these generations—the traditional genteel and self-abnegating image of proper femininity. Rather, inverting these stories that at once praise missionary work and recoil from its unfeminine ramifications, missionary women "extolled the virtues of the evangelical woman's sphere at the same time that their lives were celebrating their surprising and abundant liberation from its bonds" (265).

Works Cited


Arthur's Birthday Party: Or, A Talk about China. Boston, [1856?].


Brittan, Harriette G. *Kardo, the Hindoo Girl*. 2nd ed. New York, 1869.


“The Indian's Revenge.” *Morning Glory*. New York, [1848?].


Maria Cheeseman, or the Candy Girl. Philadelphia, 1855.


Old Jesse the Hindoo Mother. Philadelphia, [1857?].


———. Dr. Scudder's Tales for Little Readers, about the Heathen. New York, 1849.


Stories about the Heathen and Their Children. Boston, [1860?].


Young, Samuel. *Missionary Narrative of the Triumphs of Grace; As Seen in the Conversion of Kafirs, Hottentots, Fingos and Other Natives of South Africa*. New York, 1843.