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"A Complicated Story, An Unsolved Mystery": An Experiment in Poetry and the Ethics of Representation

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“A COMPLICATED STORY, AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY”:
AN EXPERIMENT IN POETRY AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

by

DARREN P. WOOD

A master’s capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York

2019

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Darren P. Wood

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

“A Complicated Story, an Unsolved Mystery”:

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Darren P. Wood

Advisor: Siraj Ahmed

The New York Juvenile Asylum, founded in 1851, was one of New York’s first institutional responses to the problems associated with the poor. It, and the theories of asylum that undergird the institution, still exist today in the form of Children’s Village. The location of Children’s Village, located just a few hundred yards from my home, prompted me to consider the distance between my family and the children who reside at Children’s Village; between my historical context and that of the children who resided at the New York Juvenile Asylum - and their parents who surrendered them there; and between my situation and theirs, bridgeable or unbridgeable through my capacity for empathy and imagination. This project attempts to understand and deepen my relationship to the children surrendered to the New York Juvenile Asylum and their parents by: considering the theory of the ethics of representation in literature; researching the historical and theoretical context for the New York Juvenile Asylum; and crafting a series of poems in the persona of the children surrendered to the New York Juvenile Asylum and their parents.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
On the Ethics of Representation	
A Series of Anecdotes to Manifest the Problems of Representation	2
On Representation as a Form of Discourse	4
On Aesthetics as Ethics	7
On the Ethics of Literary Empathy	10
My Ethics of Representation	14
An Historical and Theoretical Context for the New York Juvenile Asylum	
Historical Forces that Produced Poverty in Mid-Nineteenth Century New York City	16
The Upper-Class Experienced the Poor as Threatening Locally and Nationally	17
Psychic Reasons the Upper Classes Wanted to Institutionalize Poor Children	18
The Asylum Represented a Material and Ideological Approach to Disciplining Poor Children	20
Poems	
The Youngest in April Last by Accident in the Playground Fell	25
The Slipping Glass	27
A Child This Day, Surrendered by Me, Part I	29
A Child This Day, Surrendered by Me, Part II	31

Narrative Description of Capstone and Methodology	
Process of Development and Impetus for Capstone	33
Best Practices to Achieve Project Goals	35
Methodology for Writing Persona Poems	36
Relationship of Capstone to Concentrations and Courses	37
Evaluation of Project	39
Continuation of the Project	39
Appendix	41
Bibliography	42

Introduction

At the heart of this project are the persona poems, a series written in the persona of the children who resided at the New York Juvenile Asylum in its early years of mid-nineteenth century New York and of the parents who surrendered them there. The shape and sequence the capstone takes resembles the shape and sequence of my learning: first, my inquiries into the ethics of representation, which I had to embark upon in order to feel authorized to write the poems I would; second, the historical and theoretical context in which the children and parents were situated and represented that allowed me to imagine their experience in detail. After the poems exist a section in which I reflect on the capstone and sketch its future incarnation. I write here always as a father and with the keen awareness, made concrete by my geographic proximity to the current incarnation of the New York Juvenile Asylum, of the distances, sometimes slight, and sometimes huge, between us all.

On the Ethics of Representation

A Series of Anecdotes to Manifest the Problems of Representation

In 2017, the white artist Dana Schutz contributed to the Whitney Biennial a painting, “Open Casket,” that depicted the image of Emmett Till’s disfigured face, based on the infamous 1955 photograph from his funeral. Within hours of the show’s opening, the inclusion of the painting had provoked a strong critical response. The painter Hannah Black wrote an open letter objecting to the painting, arguing: “The painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun.” The painting remained in the Biennial, though the artist has since removed the painting from circulation and stored it in her private collection. Nevertheless the episode provoked a number of questions: Who is allowed to represent historical experience in art? How should an artist’s identity affect their right to represent? And to what degree should the right to represent be determined by public opinion?

In 2018, Anders Carlson-Wee published a poem in *The Nation*, a 14-line poem that attempted to make visible the labor that homeless people expend to make themselves inoffensive - even invisible - on the street. The poem was quickly and roundly criticized for its blunt depiction of its homeless speaker and its use of African-American Vernacular English. In a series of tweets the writer Roxane Gay, wrote, “Don’t use AAVE. Don’t even try it. Know your lane.” Who is allowed to write in a voice and dialect different from their own? To what degree is the sophistication or aesthetic quality of the work of art relevant to the question of the right of the artist to make that art?

In 2003, in his collection, *What Narcissism Means to Me*, Tony Hoagland published the poem “The Change,” in which a white speaker recounts a tennis match between two female tennis players, one white, one black, and employs the unmodified language of stereotype.

that big black girl from Alabama,
cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,
some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite
and

I couldn't help wanting
the white girl to come out on top,
because she was one of my kind, my tribe,
with her pale eyes and thin lips

The rhetorical purpose of the use of stereotype is to draw critical attention to an insidiously expressed racism by white people who would not characterize themselves necessarily as racist.

Claudia Rankine criticized the poem and recounted at an AWP conference her heated conversation about the poem with her colleague Hoagland; her chief critique was that while the poem presented this white speaker's racism in order to critique it, it did critique it explicitly enough. One of the discomforts readers have since had with the poem is the resemblance between the poet and the persona that delivers the poem. Does a poet have the right to employ problematic personas? On what grounds can we evaluate whether the poem sufficiently challenges that persona? Is a poet justified in constructing a problematic persona in order to make observations about problems - racism or misogyny, for example - within their own character? How should an artist calculate and take into account the particular asymmetrical power relationships between themselves and their subjects?

These anecdotes intend to illustrate the uncertain terrain on which writers - particularly writers who have accrued a disproportionate amount of power because of their identities - find themselves when writing about people whose identities and experiences are different from their own and raises many essential questions I hope to respond to in this project: Who gets to speak about and for historical figures? Under what particular conditions? As I construct a series of persona poems, I am interested to see if I can synthesize philosophy and theory into an ethics of representation that clarifies - and perhaps justifies - my agenda.

The problems that a sound ethics of representation should address and respond to are manifold, but I have attempted to organize them into three different categories: the first category addresses ways in which the meaning of representation is produced socially and discursively; a second category reflects on the aesthetic quality of the representation; and a third category considers the ethics of literary empathy.

On Representation as a Form of Discourse

Contemporary political discourse daily illustrates the impact that a speaker's identity and positionality have on the meaning of what they say. As the philosopher Linda Alcoff observes, "a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech" (Alcoff, 7). She notes, in addition, that "certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (7). Had Carlson-Wee identified as black, his poem might have been criticized for its clumsy handling of dialect, its able-ist language, its

limited imagination of the experience of homeless - in other words, the criticism might have focused solely on aesthetic or formal deficiencies in the poem - but his poem might not have been understood to have violated an ethic of representation: that he was categorically unfit to represent black American experience - or “Black suffering” - to borrow Hannah Black’s phrase.

Carlson-Wee’s intentions, “to address the invisibility of homelessness” (Schuessler) could not redeem the poem. For an author’s intentions - the meanings they desire their representation to produce - might be less relevant than the reception and re-production of those intentions and meanings by a critical readership. If meaning is produced discursively, the author shares with their audience the responsibility for producing the meaning of the work. Acts of speaking are situations that are always attended by a speaker and listener, situations which Alcoff names “rituals of speaking” (Alcoff, 12): “Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena” (Alcoff, 15). These rituals are contests, waged on uneven ground.

If meaning is produced discursively - if it is a fundamentally social and communal activity, one which we can imagine is sometimes convivial and sometimes critical - then what responsibility does an author have for the texts they might author, the meanings they intend, the texts they enter into circulation? If an author might not be responsible for the meaning a listener constructs, can they nevertheless be held accountable for the meaning a listener constructs? And what is the ethic that might govern their creation and circulation of texts? How can we simultaneously acknowledge the discursive production of meaning while making writers and readers accountable for producing meaning responsibly?

These critiques of a writer's right to represent have their own limits, however. As Alcoff observes, to object to a writer's right to speak for another, simply based on their identity, assumes that the speaker's - and subject's identities- are singular, rather than multiple and overlapping. To critique a white writer for representing a black subject - to argue that such an act is categorically an abuse of power - might ignore that the white writer identifies, also, as queer, as a writer writing in a non-native language, or as any multiple identities that might complicate the power differential between writer and subject. Tony Hoagland makes this point dryly in his letter to Rankine, in which he simultaneously acknowledges and complicates his identity: "of course I am racist; and sexist, a homophobe, a classist, a liberal, a middle-class American, a college graduate, a drop-out, an egotist, Diet Pepsi drinker, a Unitarian, a fool, a Triple A member, a citizen of Texas, a lover of women, a teacher, a terrible driver, and a single mother."

For Alcoff, too, flinching from the difficulty and potential harm involved in representing others, to "retreat from speaking," in her formulation, might itself represent a problematic cowardice that preserves power for the privileged writer: "a retreat from speaking for ... may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever" (Alcoff, 17). Kathleen Lundeen, a literary scholar, notes that this retreat from speaking for would mean that writers could only speak for themselves, producing volumes of metaphor and autobiography, extending themselves and their readers only to understand more deeply their own experience:

[I]f we were to insist on shared identity in all areas, writers would only be fit to represent themselves, and readers, to understand representations of themselves. By this logic, autobiography would emerge as the sole legitimate creative genre, and it would be suitable only for a readership of one: its author. (83)

Furthermore, Alcoff notes that avoiding speaking for others represents a damaging and wilfully ignorant position, akin to the formulation that some offer, that they "do not see race": "there is

no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others" (Alcoff, 17).

To resolve these quandaries, Alcoff proposes a shift in the geometry between writer and subject, from one of speaking *for* to one of speaking *with*: "[w]e should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (Alcoff, 23). In political or ethical realms, this different geometry appeals, suggestive of a more equitable social relationship, like one found in participatory ethnography. But in literature, what would this geometry look like? How could literature shift from witness or representation to dialogue, speaking with a fictional or historical subject rather than for them? I can leave this only as a clearer articulation of I inhabit in this project.

On Aesthetics as Ethics

Poets like to insist on craft as a defining characteristic of poetry: that its devices of sound and meaning, its traditions and forms, all indicate a quality of care by the writer that set it apart from other genres. Some of the theorists I read suggest that the quality of a poem's aesthetics might justify its representation of its subject. What might be the standards for craft and aesthetic that might help to distinguish work that achieves an ethic of representation and work that does not?

The poet and professor Natasha Saje articulates a few ethical principles concerning the representation of others. She quotes Wislawa Szymborska's poem about 9/11 and the people who leapt from the World Trade Center towers to their deaths, and the constraints a poet must impose on themselves in representing these victims: "I can only do two things for them -/describe this flight//and not add a last line" (Szymborska in Saje). The poet's responsibility begins and ends in

describing or witnessing their tragic death, but cannot extend to offering a comment, imposing their point of view, imposing their ego's desire to make meaning of another's suffering, "add[ing] a last line." But this principle seems inadequate: even a last line whose function in the poem is merely descriptive still necessarily plays a rhetorical function in the poem. The line conveys perhaps a sonic resonance, it resolves a tension in the poem, it comments on the rest of the poem through implication. Even the line Saje quotes from Szymborska employs the image of the people falling to their deaths to complete the meaning implied by "not add a last line." And the selection of the imagery, the framing of image within the context of the poem, the decision to make the poem in the first place, all indicate the poet has done more than merely describe. In this sense, all lines in a poem about a victim of a tragedy function rhetorically and comment on the subject.

If *withholding* is proposed as an ethic that might legitimize the representation of others, so, too, is *describing*. Saje suggests that depth of representation might sufficiently justify a person's right and desire to represent: "Ethical difficulty arises when poets write about subjects superficially" (Saje). The poet Philip B. Williams, writing about Ai, a poet celebrated for her wide-ranging and challenging persona poems, suggests that Ai succeeds where other persona poets might fail because Ai's poems demonstrate her interest in the facets of her personas; her poems speak to a "unique distinction or particular aspect in a problem," rather than a "facade," or "misrepresentation intended to conceal something uncomfortable or unpleasant." These terms that Saje and Williams employ do not particularly satisfy, though: that poets not write "superficially" seems simultaneously quite obvious as an aspiration (particularly for the poet!) and entirely subjective; and "unique" or "particular" do not offer much more than "not superficial" does.

Williams begins to carve out perhaps more satisfying categories for analysis when writing about “forgoing the obvious” in favor of the “moral ambiguity” in Ai’s persona poems - and what trouble that ambiguity causes for the poems’ readers. Williams writes, “She refuses to go for the easy idea of a situation or *the expected stereotype* of her chosen voice” (emphasis mine); the implication, according to Williams, is that “Ai’s ambivalence toward everyone in the poem allows for a second culprit ... to arise: you as the reader”:

The persona poem demands not just the (re)telling and satisfaction of predetermined audience expectations, but a revision of how one sees and imagines both actions and the people committing said actions. Otherwise, the poem risks falling into stereotype, moralizing, and empathy, the latter potentially catering to a voyeuristic desire to experience others’ lives without having to take on the risks and burdens of those lives, even the ones we imagine.

And this standard of transcending expectations in ways that force the reader to implicate and trouble themselves seems in many ways a credible way by which we might evaluate the ethics of representation in a persona poem: if it acknowledges that meaning is socially produced, is aware of the stereotypes that readers might bring to the persona in the poem, and finds a way to trouble and complicate those social expectations in ways that are “risky,” even “burdensome,” in productive ways.

One of the problems here, however, is that the terms of Williams’ ethics are on the one hand overspecified and on the other hand underspecified. The terms are overspecified in that the responsibility of a persona poem is to create a drama for the reader, in which they reconceive of their own stereotypes of the character in the poem; the reader, according to this ethic, is foregrounded and the subject of the poem is relegated to the background. The terms are underspecified in that the subject of the poem need not be accurately described, or deeply imagined, provided the representation of the subject transforms and grows the reader, provided the character in the poem exists in for the reader to make profitable use of it.

Techniques of metafiction might offer a way toward an ethic. Returning to Saje's thinking about Szymborska's 9/11 poem, her praise for the poem as it acknowledges its limits, the boundaries it won't cross, I wish to highlight the way in which the poem's recognition of the author's activity, the trace of the effort of the poet to make meaning of another's experience, might productively complicate the power asymmetry between writer and subject.

Saje writes, "poems that deal with the lives of others need to show an awareness ... that another person is always a complicated story, an unsolved mystery" and perhaps a responsible and ethical aesthetic necessarily names the author's inadequacy, the fallacy of their representing an experience that is beyond their own:

Moreover, all writing begins in ignorance and separation; the writer is trying to know someone else, trying to understand someone else's point of view through the act of writing. My point is that the finished poem's success can be measured by the thoroughness of the poet's understanding, or sometimes the admission of failure.

The goal of the poet should be "representing human subjects in their humanity, while remaining conscious of their own blind spots." Posited here is that metafictional elements - aspects of a poem that draw the reader's attention to the fact of the poem, the presence of the writer, the traces of their labor, their role, and their failures - make visible the problems of the poem for the poet. The reader is culpable, the writer, too, and in this way establishes the possibility of an honestly problematic relationship to the represented subject. The poet's limits might produce the subject more fully alive and human.

On the Ethics of Literary Empathy

When considering the ethical merits of representation in literature, theorists often evaluate the degree of empathy the writer has exercised for their subjects. Two theorists, in particular, help illuminate my thinking about the empathetic relationship between subject

(whether the reader or author of a text) and object of representation (the character or persona depicted in the text.

As Lundeen frames the conceptual problem, empathy involves an essential contradiction involving proximity and distance between reader and character, writer and subject. She writes,

The ethical dilemma inherent in empathy - *forever finding oneself either too close or not close enough to the object of self-identification* - is inherent in language itself, which embodies a self-contradictory dynamic. Every verbal act is essentially solitary in that it is initiated by an individual; it is recognized as language, however, only by consensus - that is, only if it is already understood by the listener or reader. Though language is a means of individuation, its materials come from a communally owned source." (91, emphasis mine)

And

Empathy, in essence, is an ideal of differentiated union with another, and that paradox should remind us that in literature, as in life, there are shared borders of identity that we are compelled to recognize but cannot cross. (92)

Empathy is an irresolvable contradiction between impulses to similarity and to difference that are inherent in a language that is necessarily both private and public. Applied to the question of ethical representation in persona poetry, then, the problem is double-edged: Either the empathetic reader or writer establishes a relationship predicated on similarity that consumes or obscures the subject; or the reader or writer establishes a relationship predicated on difference that alienates the subject as irresolvably different.

Emmanuel Levinas similarly address the first part of the problem that Lundeen observes: that the subject can totally subsume the object of representation by incorporating them fully into their own paradigm of understanding. A kind of possession - a colonization of the subject by the writer and reader - concerns Levinas, who writes:

The immanence of the known to the act of knowing is already the embodiment of seizure. This ... belongs to that unit of knowledge in which *Auffassen* (*understanding*) is also, and always has been, a *Fassen* (*gripping*). ("Ethics as First Philosophy," 76)

Concerned critically with a tradition in phenomenology, particularly as articulated by his former teacher Martin Heidegger, Levinas contends that understanding the other necessarily interpolates that other into a system of understanding in which the other is mastered and subjugated.

Interestingly, the poet Williams offers another point of view. He does not identify the writer's capacity to consume, through ego, imagination, or understanding, the subject as a problem, but as an asset. Writing about the persona poet Ai, Williams contends:

Regardless of the age, gender, occupation, religion, or other unique qualities of her speakers, Ai makes sure that as she moves through her speaker's psychology her imagination is at the front ... Her personas are simply facets of herself as a multi-bladed human being. (Part I)

The spatial metaphor is interesting: Ai moves *through* the speaker's presumably static psychology; foregrounded is the writer's imaginative capacity and her being, not the subject's.

For some, empathy exists only as a paradox; for others, an act of colonization. Can we conceive of an empathy that can permit a writer and reader to identify with the experience of the subject without seizing it in service of the writer's imaginative representation?

Writing about historians, the philosopher Gayatri Spivak describes an empathy that suspends the writer's consciousness:

the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness (or consciousness-effect, as operated by disciplinary training), so that the elaboration of the insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an 'object of investigation', or, worse yet, a model for imitation. (82)

If the writer is able to "suspend the clamor of his or her own consciousness," conditions are set for an encounter with the Other - an encounter in which the writer could accept the ethical responsibility imposed upon him by the Other, a "responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself [... o]r more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before *being*" (Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 83).

Responding to this profound responsibility to the Other would necessarily overcome the writer's ability to master the Other into their own interpretive framework, their own representation schema, their own meaning-making paradigm. The Other, in fact, would implicate the writer: "The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in doing so recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (Levinas, *Ethics as First Philosophy*, 83). This moment would surpasses the subject's capacity to master the object, the writer's capacity to even represent:

Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom. The face of the other in proximity, which is more than representation, is an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite" (Levinas, *Substitution*, 106)

An ethical representation would make the writer vulnerable to the Other in close proximity. In Levinas's words, "Relation is proximity, and this closeness subjects the witness to the possibility of being wounded" (quoted in Forché). The theorist and poet Claudia Rankine attributes a similar theory of vulnerability to Judith Butler in her letter response to Hoagland's poem:

Not long ago I was in a room where someone asked the philosopher Judith Butler what made language hurtful. I could feel everyone lean forward. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she said. We suffer from the condition of being addressable, by which she meant, I believe, there is no avoiding the word-filled sticks and stones of others. Our emotional openness, she added, is borne, in both its meanings, by our addressability. Language navigates this.

So one theoretical proposition regarding the ethics of representation is to construct a representation that does not master or consume the represented object into a paradigm of the subject's own making, but that recognizes the subject's essential "unrepresentability," a recognition that produces for the writer a moment when the writer is implicated, a moment of "wound," of "vulnerability."

If the writer is implicated in their own representation of the other, then the spatial relationship between the two is troubled in productive ways. Empathy is not made impossible

because it is only conceived as total difference or total similarity, nor is it made impossible because it is conceived of as an act of totalizing substitution, but empathy can be conceived of as a dialectic. The action from the subject toward the object has produced a reaction; the dynamic has become complicated, the possibility for mastery of the object diminished, the possibility for vulnerability for the subject increased. This paradox is echoed in Lundeen's thinking that empathy is a "condition of sympathy and alienation": "to put it another way, empathy manifests the apparent affinity one person has with another, but in so doing it magnifies the differences between them" (Lundeen, 90).

My Ethics of Representation

What I have endeavored to reveal in the section above is that my reading of the literature on the ethics of representation and empathy neither resolves nor clarifies; some contradiction, it seems, remain. So I endeavor here essentially to clarify the irresolvable tensions inherent in the act of representation, to make those tensions visible. Thus my attempt to synthesize below these tensions, an act which feels futile yet necessary - staking out the uncertain terms on which I can feel authorized and able to write - mirrors formally the contradictory and paradoxical nature of these ethics: they are declarations of uncertainty.

- Making art requires total freedom. Total freedom means total responsibility: the artist must be able to justify totally their choice to represent ONE thing from among ALL OTHER things.
- Making art is a social activity and must, therefore, be aware of asymmetrical power dynamics between the artist and the subject, artist and audience, and how those dynamics contribute to the production of the meaning of the art.
- Choosing NOT to make art - to leave room for others, to not speak for others - is occasionally the only (ir)responsible choice to make (choosing not to respond to or represent the subject, to be irresponsible, is, in some cases, the greatest responsibility).

- Art can cause trouble - for the artist, the audience. “But surely it is both morally and politically objectionable to structure one’s actions around the desire to avoid criticism.” (Alcoff, 22)
- Literature asks for great readers, sensitive to the differences between the author and their speakers and narrators, to the author’s rhetorical use of voice, dialect - but does not always get them. Writers have to lean into the trouble that comes back to them.
- On geometries: get them right. The act of representation is not the act of substitution (the writer for the subject), and empathy has a limit. Does the writer speak for, through, or to their subject?
- A persona poem should be researched. Research is insufficient. A persona poem should be imagined. Imagination is (also) insufficient.
- The subject, like the human, is like nothing else other than what it is. The writer must represent in service of original print.
- The writer must open themselves up to the possibility of being implicated, wounded, written by their subject.

An Historical and Theoretical Context for the New York Juvenile Asylum

Historical Forces that Produced Poverty in Mid-Nineteenth Century New York City

If part of my responsibility here is to represent the subjects related to the New York Juvenile Asylum, I endeavor here to understand better their lived reality and to establish the historical and theoretical context in which these subjects were situated and produced.

Mid-nineteenth century New York City is in many ways hard to imagine, the level of poverty and its effects being so high. Illness and disease threatened the welfare of the poor:

“Between 1850 and 1860 more than half of those under the age of five died each year - seven of every ten under the age of two” (Burrows and Wallace, 790). Perhaps these mortality rates should not shock as they do, in light of the environment in which people lived:

Overcoming sometimes violent resistance by impoverished owners, the police flushed five to six thousand pigs out of cellars and garrets and drove an estimated twenty thousand swine north to the upper wards that summer. (At the same time, in an exterminating frenzy spurred by municipal bounties, 3,520 stray dogs were killed in the streets, mostly by small boys with clubs. (786)

National and global conditions intensified poverty and its effects on children in New York City.

The Civil War claimed lives, divorce and family desertion rates increased, 1.2 million immigrants fled the effects of the Potato Famine in Ireland between 1847 and 1854, and 11 million working class immigrants arrived from Europe between 1870 and 1900 (Nelson, 3). The conditions in which poor New Yorkers lived and died unfolded in public view; there was no such thing as a private life for the poor, who lived in streets, stoops, staircases, or corridors (Mandler, 10). The public presence of poverty and an international recognition that “the traditional and accepted forms of correction and control of the deviant [had become] ineffective or disreputable” (Rothman, xxii) shaped how the city responded to its deviant poor. One famous example of the city’s response was its forcible eviction from what would become Central Park of over one

thousand residents, “[t]he sixteen hundred or so Irish Germans, and blacks who lived on the land - dismissed and disparaged as ‘vagabonds or scoundrels’” (Burrows and Wallace, 792).

The Upper-Class Experienced the Poor as Threatening Locally and Nationally

While poor and vulnerable New Yorkers lived in intensely challenging conditions, middle- and upper-class New Yorkers responded to those conditions with an intensity approaching hysteria, describing the poor and their environments with physical imagery suggestive of a mortal threat to the city. The Reverend Edwin H. Chapin in 1853 described visiting slums and seeing a “swimming mist of hideous transactions and hideous faces,” “pools dark with undistinguishable horrors,” and “masses of people ‘matted together in the very offal of debasement’” (Boyer, 89). And lawmakers seemed assured the New York City was fatally endangered by its slums:

Legislators investigating conditions in Corlear’s Hook worried that the cancerous horrors of the slums were spreading relentlessly through New York’s ‘veins and arteries.’ If nothing were done, they continued, ‘the heart and limbs of the city will sooner or later suffer, as surely as the vitals of the human system must suffer by the poisoning or disease of the smallest vehicle.’ (Burrows and Wallace, 774)

Charles Loring Brace, a social reformer and philanthropist later credited with founding the modern foster care movement, described the threat in 1872 in epic terms: “we should see an explosion from this class which might leave this city in ashes and flood” (Boyer, 97).

For some, the possibility that the poor might “poison” the city was not as threatening as the possibility that the poor might organize and gain influence and power, as in Boyer’s account of the position of a New York physician and public-health reformer in 1843: “‘The outcasts of society’ were beginning to ‘form societies of their own,’ warned Dr. John H. Griscom ... ‘thereby debasing ‘the character of the community of which they are a part’” (90). Brace seems to have shared this fear of the collective power of the poor: “Rather the danger Brace emphasized

was their potential for destructive collective action. ‘Herding together,’ he wrote of the origins of street gangs, they soon ‘form an unconscious society’ - and then trouble begins” (Boyer, 96).

If poverty was believed to threaten the society of New York City, it was also believed to threaten the national society and character of America. The head of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, Robert Hartley, felt that “urban poverty was (1) a massive threat to social stability and (2) the direct consequence of individual moral depravity” (Boyer, 89). Displaced children - the orphan, the child beggar, the vagrant, the truant - figured significantly in America’s imagination of the threat the poor posed to their country. Claudia Nelson, the literary theorist, describes the paradoxical relationship the United States has had with the orphan:

The United States has long presented itself both as self-made orphan (it celebrates every year the anniversary of the severing of its relationship with the mother country) and as adoptive parent to countless immigrants (4)

She goes on to argue that “[t]he real ‘work’ of child placement, from the child-saver’s point of view, was the salvation of America itself” (Nelson, 30). The visceral terms used to describe the poor in New York City and the symbolic import assigned the orphan suggest the high stakes at the time associated with responding to the problem of poor children in New York City.

Psychic Reasons the Upper Classes Wanted to Institutionalize Poor Children

What was at stake in the problem of the poor in New York City was not only the improvement of their condition but the representation of their condition, in ways that served middle-class attitudes and needs. Middle- and upper-class New Yorkers contributed to a representation of the poor in starkly different terms from themselves in order to affirm their self-identity and social standing.

The historian Paul Boyer observes the paradoxical nature of the role the poor were meant to serve in the imagination of wealthier citizens: “The urban poor were singled out as both cause and victim of a frightening array of moral and social evils” (86). Frightening, though, those evils might have been, they also made for alluring theater, drawing the inquisitive eyes of wealthier New Yorkers who could confer upon the poor their attention and pity. In 1852, the Ladies’ Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church purchased the Old Brewery, a tenement rookery, in order to demolish and replace it:

“To dramatize its demolition, the LHMS ran candle-lit tours of the rookery’s fetid interior, ‘where miserable men, women, and children ... moodily submitted to the gaze of the strangers in that community of degraded outcasts.’” (Burrows and Wallace, 775)

If the condition of the poor drew the attention and critique of New York’s middle-class and elite, their child-rearing practices drew even more condemnation. This condemnation served the middle class in their effort to clarify and affirm the identity and values of middle class New Yorkers: “Reformers maligned the parenting practices of poor parents in order to refine the image of their own parenting practices” (Bellingham, 127). Even though placing children out with family members or employers where they could learn trades was a common practice among working- and middle-class families, the practice was challenged by those parents who recently had gained the financial security necessary to suspend this practice themselves. Middle class parents, who recently had found security in society that allowed them to avoid “discontinuities in the care of their own children[,] imputed reprehensible motives” to parents who could not (Bellingham, 124).

In fact, central to this myth of the reprehensible parent was the notion of abandonment: the image of the destitute, perhaps drunk or immoral parent, surrendering children to their fate on the street occupied a central role in the narrative produced about the poor. And while the archives of the New York Juvenile Asylum do document instances of abandonment, they also

document many instances of more benign surrender: surrender because children were caught pilfering, throwing stones, were not obedient, or - in many cases - were hoping to be fed, clothed, and taught, so that they could find productive employment. The sociologist Bruce Bellingham “found that the problem of neglectful, abandoning parenting was substantially made up” (125).

Nelson also documents the Children’s Aid Society’s practice of “manufacturing orphans”:

Brace found it expedient to define such children as anti-children, their families (if families they had) as anti-families: as he remarks, ‘[their] ways are not our ways.’ Le Roy Ashby has documented the Society’s commitment to ‘manufactur[ing]’ orphans’ both by downplaying children’s existing family ties and by representing even concerned parents as depraved (*Children* 44 - 48). When the child’s family, and even the child itself, were the objects of fear rather than of sentiment, the question of placement took on a new meaning. (Nelson, 21)

Rather than morally depraved, resource deprived families routinely turned to surrender as a rational response to the insoluble problems they encountered:

The evidence of the midcentury Children’s Aid Society records suggest that surrenders were, for the most part, rational family responses to normal if unpredictable economic and demographic constraints or mechanisms to negotiate a transition from the status of dependent child to semiautonomous youth (Bellingham, 139)

If the cruelty of the situation poor New Yorkers found themselves in was not enough, it seems doubly cruel that they should be subjected to criticism for a common and rational response to their situation. But this criticism was central to the middle-class project of clarifying and legitimizing their system of value: “Child saving helped crystallize a middle-class ideology that stigmatized these sorts of adaptive family strategies” (Bellingham, 149)

The Asylum Represented a Material and Ideological Approach to Disciplining Poor Children

Even if the motives of representing these poor families and their strategies for dealing with poverty were suspect, the problem itself - children whose families could not, because of illness, death, shifting economic conditions, inconsistent employment, or persistent

underearning, provide stable care, food, housing, and schooling to them - was not. And in the mid-nineteenth century New York a variety of charitable institutions arose to respond to this “problem of poverty,” the asylum, among them.

The professor of social medicine, David Rothman, describes a number of reasons America and Europe settled on the strategy of isolation from familial context and confinement as the primary response to “deviant and dependent” children: “incarceration became the prime mechanism for punishment and treatment,” due to changing appetites for and attitudes toward capital or corporal punishment (xxix); and the “permeability of eighteenth-century institutions gave way to sealed-off space” (xxix). Not only did changing conceptions of punishment and incarceration contribute to the birth of the asylum, but a wider shift in the faith Americans had in social organizations turned them to the asylum:

Jacksonian Americans experienced a crisis of confidence in the social organization of the new republic, fearful that the ties that once bound citizens together - the ties of community, church, and family - were loosening and that, as a consequence, social disorganization appeared imminent ... In response to these perceptions ... they discovered the solution of the asylum (Rothman, xxiv)

If disorganization was the problem, radical organization must be the solution, and the program of the asylum represented a concerted adherence to the idea that “a dedication to the principles of work and of solitude, of steady labor and of isolation” (Rothman, xxix) could reform the deviant. This dedication to these principles was exhaustive: “the asylum presented the need to ‘construct from nothing a new social laboratory in which the whole of human existence could be programmed’” (Castel in Rothman, xxxi). The literature of the New York Juvenile Asylum put it even more explicitly:

We do not believe ... in the mawkish, sentimental and infidel philosophy of modern days, which discards the Bible method of disciplining the child into obedience. ... It is manifest that but little good can be effected with all our appliances, unless order and obedience to established rules are vigilantly maintained... (Rothman, 214)

This privileging of obedience and order had its roots not only in a cultural response to changes social context but in domestic ideas of what parents and children should be and do.

The ideal mother in child-rearing literature was strict but loving, ever affectionate with her brood, but always successful in commanding their absolute obedience. ... Much of the child-rearing literature instructed fathers to keep somewhat aloof from their children, lest they compromise their ultimate authority. (Rothman, 219)

This theory of parenting, when extended to the asylum, translated into significantly more draconian and severe terms. Describing The New York House of Refuge, Rothman wrote:

Terry argued that the best method for checking disobedient inmates was 'to take the largest and worst boy in the concern and make an example of him, which we did by *hand-cuffing* him in the presence of several others ... and sent him to be locked up on Bread and Water for a while (Rothman, 233)

The purpose of the charitable response to the poor might have been to instill the seemingly essential virtues of order and obedience. But these virtues had a strong ideological valence. One of the tacit goals of the charitable response to the poor was to impress their middle-class and elite values upon them. Rothman notes that “almost all the institutions ... confined the lower orders of society” (Rothman, xxx) and Boyer observes that “[t]he AICP [Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor] represented an institutional mechanism for transmitting the values of the city’s middle and upper strata downward into the ranks of the poor” (92). Boyer also notes that “the prominent object [of the New York Juvenile Asylum] has been ... to clothe the Institution as far as possible with those hallowed associations which usually cluster about home” (94), a middle-class home with all its domestic sensibilities and virtues.

A second ideological objective of the asylum was to transform the children of the poor into productive members of a capitalist economy. The New York Juvenile Asylum applied stringent methods for instilling discipline in the children who resided there, so that they could develop “self-discipline of body, mind, and heart and then [be apprenticed] to employers”

(Burrows and Wallace, 780). Brace of the Children's Aid Society named the capitalistic goals of its work even more starkly:

Brace also admired the 'independence and manly vigor' of the newsboys, suggested they might be little business man in the making - if only they could be instilled with a 'sense of propriety' and the desire of accumulation, which, economists tell us, is the base of all civilization." (Burrows and Wallace, 782 - 783)

The third ideological objective of the asylum was to assimilate its children into American ideologies and virtues. Reformers' shared concerns about the asylum's earlier incarnation, the house of reform and orphanage, which made children "regimented, repressed, and deprived of family life," characteristics that opposed and could undermine American principles (Nelson, 3). And for Brace, as he described in his *Short Sermons to News Boys* in 1866, the project of the charitable response to the poor was to inculcate in children Christian virtues, which would nourish the American soil.

Our great effort was to put these poor creatures - the vagrants, the houseless, the needy and criminal, and the uncared-for children of the great cities, where they could be most easily reached by Christian influence ... the hopeful field was evidently among the young. There, crime might possibly be checked in its very beginnings, and the seed of future good character and order and virtue by widely sown. (quoted in Nelson, 22).

Brace championed the practice of sending the children of the poor in the crowded cities of the Northeast to work for farmers in the West, sharing a popular belief at the time that the characteristics that would redeem the nation, characteristics of thrift, hard work, and self-sufficiency were most likely to be found in the soils of the West: "The institution would sow the seeds, declared the New York Juvenile Asylum, and leave their cultivation to others" (Rothman, 224 - 225).

The language is telling: children were conceived of as seeds so that they could then be farmed into plants. The language does not assign a great deal of autonomy or agency to the children (what if they did not wish to become plants?). Reflecting on the role of the children in

the research I read, secondary and archival, and in the writing I have done here, I am struck by their essential passivity and voicelessness. Rothman describes bluntly the lack of regard the administrators of asylums paid to the rights of the child: “Its administrators expressed no fears about a possible miscarriage of justice and were disinclined to bring the protections of due process to these minors” (209).

First understood to be nearly irredeemably poor, dirty, and depraved, at risk in their families, homes, and neighborhoods, these children served a use in affirming the middle-class’s identity. They served an additional use: capable of redemption into productive members of society, their transformation would valorize the efforts and virtues of those who saved them. And they also could provide cheap - and in many cases free - labor to families, part of a project of populating the West and affirming in America its conception of itself as a paternalistic and redemptive nation. The marginalization of these children is illustrated poignantly in the following images, the first of children residing in the New York Juvenile Asylum, and the second of children sent West by the New York Juvenile Asylum, Children’s Aid Society, and other charitable organizations:

[The perspective of a watchful eye and oversight] prompted the trustees of the New York Juvenile Asylum to ... prohibit the children from talking not only in their sleeping quarters but in the shops and the dining room as well. (Rothman, 229)

At each stop, the group would disembark to be paraded before locals who, attracted by advertisements of the orphans’ coming, had gathered with an eye to taking in a child. Those children who did not manage to attract a foster parent would reboard and try again in the next town. (Nelson, 23)

What I endeavor to do in the final section is to correct the balance of the historical record, if only by reconstructing what I can infer from the historical and archival record and imagining empathetically the experience of the children who resided at the New York Juvenile Asylum and were sent West from there.

Poems

The Youngest in April Last by Accident in the Playground Fell

Application was made for the discharge of Mary Ann and John Peel, by father,

Three children were committed on account of the mothers intemperance, mother since dead.

James the youngest, in April last, by accident in the playground, fell on some sharp pointed stone, the injuries received were such and as in the opinion of Dr. Russ, and Dr. Elliott Van Buren, who were called in by the Superintendent of the Asylum, as to render his removal to the NY Hospital advisable, after being removed there he lingered until the evening of Saturday last June 12th, when he died, the father saw the body of his son and not having means to bury it himself gave his full and free consent for its burial by the Hospital authorities. For more minute details of this case see report of Dr. Russ of this date.

The father having represented that the Rev Mr. McLeod would take charge of John It was ordered that he be surrendered upon the personal approval of that Rev Gentleman to Superintendent.

He was forever falling as a child,
trying to walk before he could.
When mother was fit to get out the door

she'd stumble out to the street,
staunch the blood flowing from his forehead,
then drag him inside. More often

we got to him first, gave him the comfort
we could until he calmed. He only had eyes for
the two of us, his brother and sister, never the last step,

the curb, the bundle of wood left at the stoop.
No surprise really that he fell onto that stone
the snow had spent the week drawing back from.

How still he lay on the thawing ground. No flailing
or gut-howling like all those other times, but limb-splayed
as everything else - the teachers drawn into a run, the doctor,

the fence that kept me from him and the younger boys,
the boys behind with sticks and balls idle in their hands -
pulsed with my heartbeats. At the hospital for two months

he lingered and I got to see him once in a row of beds
like ours, stayed late unseen, head bent into my cupped hands,
close enough to feel his cheek's warmth in the dark

his unsteady breath. They told me back in the Asylum
between breakfast and work that he had died. And me?
After Father named his body, then left it the Hospital,

with full and free consent, he gave me over
to Reverend McLeod. The window of my room
looks into the alley where he lets me

feed the cats and dogs. He tells me that
the measure of the world is how it cares
for everything no matter how small,

tells me in the evenings about this world and the next,
which is his kind of kindness, I guess. Though next
is a hard thing to believe in, here in the playground

that is frozen again, here in what is behind me, here
in this wish for a body to keep falling,
even falling a kind of flight.

The Slipping Glass

Tuesday, December 5

Dr. Spalding called.

Mr. Jos. Fettretch furnished a stereopticon exhibition for the children tonight. Mr. Patterson offered the children \$25 in prizes for the 15 best descriptions of the views exhibited.

William Robinson left the premises without permission and was returned to the Asylum by outsiders.

Billy never did get his timing quite right,
so he fixed the watchman's clock,
snuck through a hole in time and over the wall.

"There ain't nothing quite like getting out of a place
to know what freedom is and isn't, if you ask me,"
he'd say - but who asks any of us, and what does he know.

He's never spent a night sleeping out.
He's only here to get placed on some farm out West
where he can make something out of himself,

always on the lookout for something better,
but tonight he didn't even see what the rest of us did:
Mr. Fetteretch's stereopticon show.

I wish I could tell it so you could really see:
Niagara Falls, its strands of brushed lady's hair;
three men in a metal sphere suspended

at the horizon of water; above a town in Italy,
a balloon sucking in its waist like a woman's corset;
the sketch for an airship, a fish tip to tail, a banner for its fin.

But I can only describe all I can't really imagine
by the little I've seen. Past the time William
should have come back the show kept going,

Mr. Fettretch moving slides that had been still up to now.
The planets on their slow spin, like a horsecar's wheels
just getting going. You should have heard the laughter

unpracticed tear out of us at seeing the sleeping man,
his mouth opening to swallow rats. Then Cinderella
sweeping the cellar, Cinderella at the ball, Cinderella,

her hand reaching back up the stairs, head turned
over her shoulder, for that slipper, the prince.
Last, John Gilpin's ride, the tale of a buffoon

dragged 10 miles behind his horse in all that finery.
When Billy finally did come back, He'd been turned
into something else, wore shame on his face,

which didn't fit him quite right. He wouldn't
look at us, then couldn't, in solitary for a day.
And then gave us his back all night,

not that we were allowed to speak in the sleeping quarters
anyways. We lay still, strove for sleep
in the din of all our resounding dreaming.

Darkness sidled up next to our heads,
said it would listen and did and by morning
had emptied us of dreams. Still I wanted

to tell someone, anyone, what I'd gotten to see.
Mr. Fettretch had brought me close to the machine.
His showman hands in kerosene light manipulated

the small pieces, the one fixed slide fixed,
the other moving and named in quiet speech
his words of conjure and transformation,

the slipping glass, the stones descending,
the glass pivot, the brass acrobatic, they,
like the images spun out above our heads,
the promise of another world.

A Child This Day, Surrendered by Me
Part I

“in general, the mothers do not like to part with their children, even to get them in much better situations”

- Charles Loring Brace

William

I'd never known a book so big
The first time I made my mark too lightly

So had to do it again and it began to look
Like I was worrying the place

Like a dog working a wound on its leg
That wouldn't close no matter how much

She went over it with her tongue
The superintendent was kind

Put my name down gently and read
Aloud the promise I had made

We'd been written into a book before
William and me that night the streets

Had lain still the world listening loud we wondered
If it would snow but it never did and him in me

And then in the world the first surrender

And the first time I saw him I wept
For loving a thing more than anything

I could do for it Williams' certificate of birth
Was a single page and the times I wonder if

We ever existed I suppose I can find us there
I guess all our days have been a kind of surrender

To his stirring in the middle of the night
To his first steps out the door

To a love I could grow but never keep
I want you to know that this here

Is no kind of choice though is a kind of freedom
Knowing there's nothing else I can do

Can't keep him at work at the hotel
Can't keep him in this room its cold stove

Its old mattress its dry goods box
Can't write my name on these pages

Where I've learned how some pens stitch
And some sever

***A Child This Day Surrendered by Me
Part II***

I, _____ the _____ of _____ a child this day surrendered by me to the New York Juvenile Asylum, in accordance with the provisions of their Charter, hereby agree not to interfere in any way in the management or control of said child, not to visit _____ without the consent of the Visiting Committee, and not to ask or receive any compensation for _____ services, and in no way induce or endeavor to induce the said child to leave the Asylum, or the family or station in which the Directors may have placed _____ or to leave the place in which _____ may have been apprenticed; and fater a trial of three months, if the Directors of the Asylum shall from any cause see fit to return _____ I hereby agree to receive _____ back.

In presence of

Dated, New-York, _____ 185_

Henry

The first day I spent answering
His only question: *When is he coming back?*
The second explaining that he'd have to go, too.
The third avoiding the clear mirror of his eyes,
Avoiding his touch, his hand clinging to the hem of my dress.
I didn't know how I'd ever let go
If I got my arms around him once more.
This was a courage I'd never asked for, a matter of survival,
When we'd never really gotten the chance to live.

On this last day, I made my mark once more,
More practiced this time, wanting the mark to be
The book's last, wanting to rule over what I knew
And that no other mother should - that you can bring a life
Into this world but maybe not through it -
Wanting to loosen the pages from their leather bindings
Into fields where they would wave, white flags there
Captured by shafts of grass.

That night a dream hung over
The lake of my sleep. We are riding
A horsecar north into untracked land,
Land without device or design,
And in my memory of the dream
I know that soon we will arrive
To the last of this island
Where it softens into reeds and salt marsh,
The place between the ridges.
They will roll up their pant legs
And hunt for oysters and leave
For moments footprints in the mud
That forgives their soft soles

Before we can arrive,
The dream begins to clear
At the sun's first soft hand.
The last I see are the boys
Hanging over the back of the horsecar.
They are tearing off
Small scraps from the newspaper
They lined their coats with,
The breeze drawing the scraps out of their hands,
And as we whip by,
They bend their heads over their palms,
Whisper into the wind's ear
To make a wish, a wish, now gone.

Narrative Description of Capstone and Methodology

Process of Development and Impetus for Capstone

Behind our apartment a small wood provides a slight buffer between three large institutions: the school where I live and teach, the elementary school my children attend, and a residential treatment facility for troubled children. The wood is marked by tall trees that form a canopy far overhead and little undergrowth. The deer that make these woods their home have ravaged new growth and small bushes. Soil erosion results, and we occasionally find tall trees toppled across the path to school. Red-tailed hawks hunt gladly for small creatures that lack shelter. We stumble over rounded stones that suggest the road that once labored from town up the hill to a farm, whose root cellar still holds its shape under the forest floor. When my daughter was invited to bring something for show-n-tell to school, she chose a brick she'd found in the woods; it was very "artifact-y."

On the walk to school we emerge by one of the buildings that is part of the sprawling 180 acre residential facility Children's Village. It is a small blue farmhouse, marked by occasional institutional indicators: close-circuit camera, a steel door, a small sign naming the house. The cars parked in the driveway name their allegiances to private security services and, more recently, the Department of Homeland Security. For a number of recent years, Children's Village has interned children separated from their parents at the crossing of the border of Mexico and the United States. This is an old institution, formerly the New York Juvenile Asylum, founded in 1851 in Washington Heights by philanthropists concerned for and by the increasing number of destitute children on the streets of New York.

My interest in Children's Village began by virtue of proximity of place: What did it mean that this institution that moves children away from families in New York City and its environs

sits right next to my children's suburban public school and right next to my school and home? And my interest grew by virtue of proximity of time: How much of the current US policy of separating children from their detained migrant parents or deported immigrant parents could be explained by considering the asylum movement in New York City in the mid 19th century? What did it mean that the same institution that once separated from their families and housed children in 19th century New York City now separates children from their families and houses them today? What could this single site reveal about a larger historical and ideological framework that continues to exist in this nation today?

While these proximities of place and history compelled me, ultimately it was a proximity of experience - an empathy - that compelled me most. A teacher and writer of poetry, I have been deeply moved by collections and poems that construct an intimate, empathetic relationship between reader and subject through persona poems, often called dramatic monologues: poems conceived by a poet in the voice of an historical or literary figure. Examples that serve as inspirations for this project include: Molly McCully Brown's *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded*, Julia Bouwsma's *Midden*, Gabrielle Calvocoressi's *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart* and *Apocalyptic Swing*, Tyehimba Jess's *Leadbelly*, and Adrian Matejka's *The Big Smoke*, as well as shorter works, such as Frank Bidart's "Ellen West," Patricia Smith's "The President Flies Over," Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," and H.D.'s "Eurydice." These collections and poems conjure through the persona's voice the sense of historical characters as real, credible, and worthy of an empathetic relationship through the poems' use of image, dialect, and details, which are often meticulously researched. So I was interested to conjure this kind of empathetic relationship for myself and any reader of the poems by writing persona poems in the voice of children who formerly resided in the New York Juvenile Asylum.

This project, though, had a number of potential problems associated with it: namely the ethical problem of a person of power and privilege representing the experiences of children with less power and privilege in creative work. So there existed an array of questions I wished to consider in this project: Who gets to speak about and for historical figures? Under what particular conditions? How should an artist calculate and take into account the particular asymmetrical power relationships between themselves and their subjects?

In summary, this capstone project unfolded in three parts: research that endeavored to help me construct an ethics of representation appropriate to this project; research that situated the New York Juvenile Asylum and its residents in a particular ideological and historical context; and a series of persona poems in the voice of residents of the New York Juvenile Asylum (now known as Children's Village).

Best Practices to Achieve Project Goals

I employed an array of practices to work toward the completion of my capstone. Beginning with a careful reading of model texts helped clarify what I was aiming for - in language, content, and form - in my own writing. Reading model texts throughout the process continued to help me hear the kind of language and voices I hoped to conjure in my own work. Interviewing some of the writers of the model collections helped deepen my understanding of their process, their challenges, and their strategies.

Next I turned to the literature addressing the ethics of representation in an effort to test and clarify the right I had to represent the voices and experiences of these historical figures. I did not feel able to write a single poem until I had resolved for myself my right to represent and the ethics I would try to honor as I represented experiences different from my own.

Part of the responsibility I felt in crafting these poems was to ground them in an historical situation that felt credible, or, at least, plausible. Reading histories about New York City in the mid-19th century and secondary sources that helped contextualize charitable responses to the poor at this time allowed me to construct an historical and theoretical framework in which I could situate the experiences of the individuals I would write about. The archival material - thousands of pages of lists, notes, journal entries, correspondence, even gradebooks - of the New York Juvenile Asylum, carefully guarded and tended by the staff at the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library, provided invaluable insight: small windows into the lives of these children and their caretakers, traces of their everyday, lived humanity.

Methodology for Writing Persona Poems

While my method was not necessarily linear, it always began in the same way, with a hunt for language - a snippet, a phrase, a situation pointed to - that would give me a narrow and specific insight into the lived experience of a child or their mother. Archival, historical, and theoretical texts equally made for good hunting ground. In some ways, this process of searching for a small way into a poem resembled one of the larger aspirations of the project: to find a particular child in the midst of all that archival, historical, and theoretical material. And so I read for details that were so small and specific they pointed to a specific life, a specific situation. In some ways, the absence of the voice of the children, in both the historical and archival materials, gave me a certain degree of freedom to imagine and construct an experience or situation for the speakers of the poems. My writing was governed more by principles of plausibility than accuracy, the illusion of the real.

With the speaker and situation sketched, I could then try to clarify and develop what larger conceptual issue the poem might speak to, an issue that might derive from the theory of charity and poverty I researched. But what seemed, again and again, to dominate my thinking in my effort to represent these characters was my responsible to conceive of a credible and compelling psychological complexity for the speaker to inhabit.

Occasionally the poems contain metafictional elements, elements that draw attention to their natures as constructed, written things. Drafts of poems I decided not to include in this capstone borrow aspects of their form from the form of the archives (if part of the archive contained lists, the poem might do so as well, for example). And the voice of the poems - modern but occasionally informed by historical diction language or terms - should raise the reader's awareness of the author's presence and situation in time in the poem. The poems are framed by an excerpt or excerpts from the archive or an historical source; many of the poems contain an image of paper or documentation that alludes to the archive and its representation of the characters in the poem. And in some cases, the poems address the reader explicitly in an effort to wake up the reader to an ethical relationship to the subject in which they might be implicated.

Lastly, I tried, throughout, to listen to when I was present in the poem, to acknowledge how my experience and position might be placing pressure on the experience of the represented subject. I tried to honor the historical, psychological, and narrative integrity of the speaker. But, of course, I am sure that I am all over the poems in ways I do not even understand.

Relationship of Capstone to Concentrations and Courses

The capstone provided me a chance to synthesize my thinking in an array of courses and two concentrations, Life Writing and New York Studies.

- In my Introduction to Liberal Studies course with Rachel Brownstein, we read *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald, one of my favorite writers, and I thought a lot and wrote about issues of metafiction and how metafiction might have helped Sebald resolve some of the thornier questions related to the ethics of representing the Holocaust, particularly given his historical position (his father was a soldier in the German Army; his family never discussed, nor really told him, about his father's experience nor the Holocaust generally).
- In David Brotherton's course, *Studies of Youth: Marginalization and Resistance*, I first encountered theory that deconstructed representations of criminalized and marginalized youth.
- Many conversations in my "Teaching Race and Gender Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom" concerned representation and its ethics; many conversations in my "Speaking Truth to Power" concerned power and rhetoric.
- And while I was intrigued by the discussions about the ethics of representation in biography, autobiography, and memoir that we had in Life Writing concentration classes, I was not entirely satisfied by their premises about representation, accuracy, and the difference between non-fiction and fiction. So I was glad to have the chance to deepen my thinking about those issues here.
- Siraj Ahmed's course, "The Rights of the Refugee," conveyed the theoretical and material urgency of the rights of the vulnerable in ways that crystallized the need to do this work and its shape.

Evaluation of Project

In many ways I am pleased with the project, particularly with the way in which the poems are grounded in my researching and thinking about both the ethics of representation and the history of New York City and its charitable movements. And my trips to research the New York Juvenile Asylum archive at Columbia University totally excited me about archival work, which I had never done before, and encouraged me to continue to use primary sources in my writing.

I have reservations about my work, though. I had hoped to write more poems, but my pacing led me to spend more time researching and reading theory and history than writing. And in writing fewer poems than I intended I risk essentializing the children and their parents: the variety of their experiences is not reflected in the poems. I also have some questions about the aesthetics of my poems: whether or not I should have created the voices for the characters that I did; and whether or not I should have pushed toward a more lyrical style in the poems (I have concerns that the long narrative poems read as anxious in their effort to include historical context and information).

Lastly, when I return to Williams' reading of Ai, I cannot help but feel I have fallen short of the standard her work sets for persona poetry: "She refuses to go for the easy idea of a situation or *the expected stereotype* of her chosen voice" (emphasis mine).

Continuation of the Project

All that said, a sense has been emerging for a little while now that I might have the germ of a book here. While only five finished poems appear here, I have the conceit for many more poems. The book, as I am currently conceiving of it, would have four sections: the first,

autobiographical poems of family and domestic life; the second, the persona poems that appear here; the third, persona poems in the voice of children who were sent West; and the fourth, poems about the humanitarian and ethical crisis unfolding at the southern border of this country, as America wrests children from the arms of their parents seeking asylum. As the setting of the poems in the collection would move from domestic space to foreign border, it would manifest the aspirational trajectory of empathy and imagination. And the poems would be thematically organized by the ideas of asylum in its incarnation in mid-nineteenth century New York City and in its current incarnation in today's America.

Appendix

The title of this capstone comes from a quotation by Natasha Saje, cited in the body of the capstone itself.

“The Youngest in April Last by Accident in the Playground Fell” takes its title from and contains notes transcribed from the Administrative Records, 1853-1954, in the archives of New York Juvenile Asylum.

“The Slipping Glass” contains notes transcribed from the Administrative Records, 1853-1954, in the archives of New York Juvenile Asylum; alludes to entries in the Daily Log, November 1, 1899 - December 18, 1902 in the archives of New York Juvenile Asylum; alludes to stereopticon images from the digital collections of the New York Public Library; and depends upon the terrific resources of the Magical Lantern Society, found at <http://www.magiclanternsociety.org/>.

“A Child This Day, Surrendered by Me, Part I” takes its title and situation from forms in the Parent Surrender diary, 1853 - 1860, in the archives of the New York Juvenile Asylum; contains a quotation from C.L. Brace’s attributed by Claudia Nelson, author of *Little Strangers* to the film *The Orphan Trains* (2006); and alludes to details found in the General Operations Records, 1853 - 1950 in the archives of New York Juvenile Asylum.

“A Child This Day, Surrendered by Me, Part II” contains language and information (including the translation of the Native American word for Inwood *shorakapok* as “the place between ridges”) from the Welikia Project curriculum (<https://welikia.org/>) about the original ecology of Manhattan; and refers to information about children Brace sought to rescue found in Howard Husock’s article “Uplifting the ‘Dangerous Classes.’”

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