Mother's Joys: Portraits of Childhood in Friendship Albums

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The extensive friendship album collection at the American Antiquarian Society has helped me look at the multitude of ways young women, while in school and seminary, used these blank volumes as personal and pedagogical objects. Filling up the blank pages of a friendship album gave young girls an opportunity to practice their drawing and penmanship, while also circulating and exchanging poems and images that embodied sentimental girlhood in the nineteenth-century. I should note that the albums I have focused on and which I'm talking about today are all from before the Civil War, a somewhat arbitrary cut-off. For my talk today, I want to discuss some of the ways that images operate in the friendship album, propagating ideas of sociability, femininity, and white girlhood through the cultivation of beauty. At the same time, however, I also want to explore some of the ways we also see girls commenting on and contemplating these scripts of conduct, and the difficulty – even the impossibility – of perfectly adhering to them.

In the nineteenth-century friendship album, the distinctions between image and text were constantly blurred. With titles like "Floral Album" and "Album of Gems," and references to the text as a bouquet or a garden plot, each page was an aesthetic contribution that made up a greater, precious collection. This kind of collection is referenced in the images of bouquets grace many album covers, as well as illustrations from both the publisher and contributors. In this framework, the album-holder was someone who cultivated beauty and tended to the visual and literary pleasure of the book.

The intense emphasis on proper handwriting, which Carla Peterson notes was often done through practices of copying, had a graphic quality. Peterson states of one contribution in Martina Dickerson's album, one of the few known friendship albums kept by a Black girl held at the Library Company, "the graphic qualities of polite handwriting reflect both exteriority (dress) and interiority (judgement) and perhaps even… literary composition itself.[i]

For instance, the penmanship and the calligraphic features of the birds here are conspicuously similar – these birds feel as signatory as the signatures themselves.[2] I'll also quickly note that this attention to both the text and image sometimes persisted even when poems were taken out of the album binding. "To I--- ---", a poem published in *Godey's Lady's Book,* includes the subheading "Written in an Album Opposite a Picture Entitled 'The Indian Toilette,'" prioritizing the readerly perspective of the original open album book as opposed to the poem on its own, extracted and empty of this context.

The friendship album encourages these intermedial practices, often incorporating printed frames like this image of parchment and flowers, inviting the contributor to "complete" the image with their writing. In this page, we see one contributor imitating this framing which she had likely seen in other albums, placing the poem between a leaf with the title "To Isabella" and a volume simply titled "Bliss." Note that the border drawn around the poem is the same as the one drawn on the spine of the illustrated book. "To Isabella" reads:

> You have requested me to write
> Into your album book so bright
> Where others wrote as to remind
> True friendship which will not unbind[3]

At the risk of exhausting the punning potential of words like "leaf" and "bind," "To Isabella" fashions itself as an ornate loose page which binds the writer and album holder. The image suggests that the writer's message of friendship is a valuable one, taken from a narrative of bliss – uplifted in importance through the evocation of the book object – now bound forever with Isabella's *Album of Gems*. Her assertion that these writings will remind Isabella of "True friendship which will not unbind" is as much a praise for the *collection* of friendly sentiment in the book as it is a praise for Isabella's friendships. To follow a botanical metaphor, there is a sense of literary *grafting* happening here; a curatorial impulse when receiving or responding to an album request that seeks to capture both immediate feeling and a sense of constancy, to mimic the marks of prestige through a clearly personalized hand, and to combine artistic expectations with genuine emotion.

Repeatedly, album entries are referred to as items of historical and personal value - as one person wrote in Alice Cassidy's album, "The mementos of early friends are sacred relics."[4] These relics were textual and visual, both literary and literal, as this status held true for verses or illustrations as well as a carefully braided lock of hair.

The album, then, is both an aesthetic object and an instructional text. In this multiplicity, it represented the holder's sociability and the quality of their social circle, and by extension, their capacity for leading a moral life befitting of a lady with taste. At the same time that entries were often praised as flowers, offerings, and gems, entries also show that this place of carefully cultivated beauty was not immune to errors. In cultivating their bouquet of friendship, album holders and writers were keenly aware of the dangers the world posed to their feminine righteousness. An 1853 entry from a Miss Richardson to Eliza Wilson in her *Forget-me-not Album* fixates on the text, and therefore the lady's life, as vulnerable to disastrous errors.

> May this Album be an emblem of thy life
> And no foul blot upon its page appear
> Each page a day each day devoid of strife
> And heavenly virtue be thy polar star
> So when you filled the measure of your book
> And shall be called to pass the grand review
> That the great critic may approving look
> And happy see your errors are but few.[5]

"To Miss E. Wilson," like other poems which gesture at the consequences of not following a moral life, references the idea of a foul "blot" on the page as a metaphor for sinfulness. "Blot" here neatly envisions a mistake on the physical page, a blemish on the skin, and a corruptive stain which compromises one's ability to perform as sentimental ideal. The holder was subject to scrutiny not only from their friends and family, but eventually, judgment from God, dubbed here the "Great critic" surveying the album in "the grand review." The connection being drawn

between the pages of the album and the album holder herself interprets the page as a representation of her unsullied heart, body, and mind.

It becomes quickly apparent when viewing friendship albums that this instruction was highly invested in the formation of an ideal white subject, one which would inherit and reproduce these traditions of propriety, maintenance, and affection. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler writes of an 1824 friendship album kept by a Chinese student at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut, "copying is not a neutral act," but one that reveals "new ways of thinking about the processes of assimilation and conversion so central to ethnic and racial relations in the United States."[6]

The violence of American colonialism and cultural assimilation is embedded in the careful maintenance of white womanhood, literary traditions, and the societal progress they imply. This is usually an undercurrent of album art and writing but is seen explicitly in an 1854 album from the publisher Riker, Thorne & Co., which features a series of lithographs portraying native subjects interspersed between the book's blank pages. Titled *The Past, the present & the future* and owned by a Joseph Hill, the book includes images of songbirds and plants, as well as numerous Romanticized scenes of native life - women bathe and swing from trees, while men chase antelope and attend to their horses. These images demonstrate that the language of an implicitly-white literacy and propriety presented in the album is not separate from the notion of the native population as "past" – a framing which insists on a supposed "primordial" nature, normalizes their disappearance at the hands of genocide, and subjects them to an anthropological gaze akin to that of a naturalist. The ideal album keeper, typically a middle-class white woman (though the copy I examined was kept by a man), is thus held as a kind of national symbol of femininity affirmed by the exposure of native women's bodies. These bodies are likened to natural specimens of study, rather than as subjects to identify with.

We observe this in other engravings or illustrations. Perhaps as reflection of the sentimental taste for European imagery, landscapes, and period dress, one of J.C. Riker's *Album of Remembrance* (1827?) includes an image of Spanish explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa, and a Leavitt & Allen *Album of the Heart* (1859) includes an image labelled "the Crusades." Even though explicit colonial or religious violence was not a subject always suitable for an album, these images nevertheless imply that it remained in the periphery. Thus, the portrait and landscapes in these albums underscore a connection between the commodification of feeling in the literary marketplace and the colonial project: that the reproductive and sentimental politics of album contributions were engrained, and sometimes even face-to-face, with the racist, environmental, and sexual violence enacted by the United States against non-white subjects.

For my next example, I will talk about one image publisher J.C. Riker chose when printing several of their albums, an image of a child titled "The Mother's Joy." Images like this one were constantly being reused in albums to represent innocence (often in a bucolic setting and sometimes with animals). "The Mother's Joy" appears in a number of J.C. Riker albums, but (this is one of my exciting finds) the earliest appearance I could locate is in their 1832 annual *Affection's Gift; or A Holiday Present,* where it accompanies a poem of the same title by Lydia Maria Child. Child's poem addresses a girl named Mary, described repeatedly as gentle and

loving. The first two stanzas capture the general tone of the poem, emphasizing Mary's ignorance of the world's suffering:

> Why, what a busy maid thou art,
> With eyes so like a dove!
> And I am sure thy little heart
> Is running o'er with love.
>
> No grief hast thou, save now and then
> Thy bread and butter falls,--
> Or careless little bantam hen
> Escapes from her wooden walls.

Though the connection to the Child poem is not apparent in subsequent albums I found where Riker uses "The Mother's Joy" image as a title page, the message can still be easily inferred – the pictured child knows nothing of the world's grief and embodies an innocent joy. It is the encapsulation of the angelic white child of "holy ignorance" Robin Bernstein discusses in *Racial Innocence*, who enacts a "performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories."[7]

Importantly, not all album holders encountered these portraits of innocence without friction. When one of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society founders and educators Charlotte Forten wrote in the album of the young Mary Anne Dickerson, she titled her poem "The Mother's Joy," likely in reference the image on the previous page. Forten addresses a happy boy loved by his mother, while also describing her grief at the memory of *her* deceased mother. Many scholars have read the mixture of sentiment, abolition, and direct address that fill the proceeding album pages as a literary curation which speaks to the varied relationship middle-class Black girls and women had with this prescribed consumer culture. As Erica Armstrong Dunbar notes, the cultivation of emotion and relationships in the Dickerson albums extend beyond a "simple mimicry" of sentimentalism.[8] We see Forten challenging the prescriptive format of the album when she contributes to Mary Anne Dickerson's book. The poem reads:

> Thine is a happy lot sweet boy:
> Oh! What mine, were the same,
> Like Thee, to be my mother's joy,
> Like Thee, to [word] her name.
> My Mother's spirit, long has fled
> This world of war, and pain,
> But I do hope, although she is dead,
> To meet with her again.

Forten's conviction that she will meet her mother "again" support Jenifer Blouin's claims that albums keepers inscribed constant references to endurance and eternity in order to characterize forms of separation (both geographical and in death) as transitory.[9] While Forten likely did not know that "The Mother's Joy" originally accompanied a Lydia Maria Child poem when she wrote in Mary Anne's album, the contrast between the two verses is nonetheless striking – both

concern themselves with a child's ignorance of the world's suffering, but Forten's confronts the writer's unhappy lot directly. Jasmine Nicole Cobb argues that in naming the "world of war, and pain" beside the sentimental portrait of a white child, Forten's subversive verse reflects how "antebellum blacks inhabited and managed through belief in an afterlife."[10] Forten, then, turns the ease with which Child's Mary becomes this unnamed, generic child of the title page into a personal and specific poem about the Forten family that will be legible to those who encounter this album, as these semi-public objects had a controlled circulation. Forten's poem likely took on even more significance as Mary Anne's album gained more contributions, many of which allude to the later loss of Mary Anne's son William. This entry makes me wonder what kind of lasting impact or new resonance these two "Mother's Joys" had on Mary Anne, as she later wrote the poem "To My Dear Willie" in her album, which describes how, "The hopes of fond parents/Lie buried in gloom."

Thus, even as the album page is often a place of imitation, literary conformity, and white sentimentality, we see many young women using the album space to actively contemplate the models of feeling and conduct available to them. They use the page to connect with their instructors and peers, to articulate grief, and to question who is accepted in this world of innocence. To study the album is to propose a mode of recovery that doesn't only uplift the novel and original, but instead, focuses on the conversation seen in these "homemade archives," to borrow a phrase from Ellen Gruber Garvey's *Writing with Scissors.* I also see this kind of curatorial work by children in the friendship album's many coded messages, in the artistic liberties they take with their transcriptions, and in album which swap owners, where a child might doodle and write over previous entries, or where one takes ownership of a deceased person's album. Thus, we are able to examine not simply the texts themselves, but the elusive and ever-changing curation, circulation, and reinterpretations of these textual souvenirs.

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[i] Carla Peterson, "Handwriting and the Cultivation of Taste: Lines Copied into an African American Schoolgirl's Friendship Album, Philadelphia, 1840" in *Handwriting in Early America* ed. by Mark Alan Mattes (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023).

[2] *The Scriptural album with floral illustrations* (New York: J.C. Riker, 1852). Collection of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

[3] *Album of gems* (Philadelphia: Moss & Brother, 1859). Collection of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

[4] *Religious Album* (New York: J.C. Riker, 1844). Collection of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

[5] *Forget-me-not Album* (New York: J.C. Riker, 1853). Collection of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

[6] Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Copying and Conversion: An 1824 Friendship Album 'from a Chinese Youth,'" *American Quarterly* 59:2 (2007), 301-39 (p. 301).

[7] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 41.

[8] Erica Armstrong Dunbar, "A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia", *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 120-147 (p. 122).

[9] Jenifer Blouin, "Eternal Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Friendship Albums" in *The Hilltop Review,* 9 (2016), 63-76 (p. 70).

[10] Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "'Forget Me Not': Free Black Women and Sentimentality", *MELUS*, 40(2015), 28-46 (p. 37).