The Boundaries of Children's Writing and Reading

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American Antiquarian Society

Source: Landesarchiv Berlin

Questions of voice overlap with—even if they do not duplicate—the study of children's agency, perspectives, and experience. This quest immediately provokes methodological and theoretical challenges: How do we apprehend children's attitudes within texts often mediated or at least preserved by adults? Why does their agency matter? Who gets left out of the story with a hyper-focus on children's ability to influence the world? Taking children's voices seriously requires new methods, and attention to practice. The Historic Children's Voices project has now made this much more possible for early American milieus.

In the rest of my comments, I will briefly explore some theoretical considerations concerning agency and the value of children's writing. After drawing on examples from my earlier work on domestic writing produced by Central European youth in the early

nineteenth century, I will then say a bit about several texts from the American Antiquarian Society collection.

The long-standing structure-agency debate of the social sciences has touched our field, with agency constituting a critical framework for the history of childhood and youth for some decades now. A brief chronology might point to it as the focus of multiple articles in the very first issue of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* in 2008.[1] (While we are thinking about early American children's voices, I will also add that Karen Sánchez-Eppler's marvelous excavation of the Hale manuscript library appeared in just the second issue of that publication.)[2] More recently, challenges to the preoccupation of childhood studies with autonomy and power have emerged. My own awareness of these discussions dates to the 2017 meeting of the Society for the History of Childhood and Youth.[3] Some of this work has produced what I find to be welcome questions, such as Mona Gleason's identification of particular interpretative traps associated with an all-consuming quest to uncover children's agency, while she nevertheless asserts "the value of children's perspectives on, and contributions to, history."[4]

I would argue, however, that this general interrogation of children's agency reached a climax in Sarah Maza's claim, in a controversial 2020 *American Historical Review* article, that "children obviously don't make history."[5] Responses to Maza from scholars of childhood have been generative. My particular position is that I am not

ready to give up on historicizing the choices, power, and voices of children. We haven't yet coalesced around a persuasive alternative. And some proposed substitutions seem both to be abandoning subalternity and swinging the pendulum too much away from looking for children's perspectives.

Still, I have found these calls for theoretical precision useful, given the dichotomies sometimes offered by discussions of agency and voice. On one side, there is a desire to discover or even celebrate agency in the historical record, including resistance to or negotiation of disciplinary power. Thus we see the inclination of many historians of childhood and youth to seek out examples of children struggling against the dictates of their education with defiance or parody. On the other side, there is a desire to reveal and critique the propagandistic mechanisms of authorities and institutions. Thus we see an emphasis on the governance of children through top-down disciplinary practices. Even though these two approaches impulses stem from a similar political impulse, they are often in conflict. That is, either we understand children as agents with the capacity to reinterpret and dismiss their socialization, or we accept that adults successfully imposed a tyrannical worldview on young people.

In retaining my interest in agency, I do not look for middle ground between these poles, but instead investigate how agency and discipline worked together, inseparably, to shape the experiences of children and, in turn, their imprint on history. Literacy does have transformative potential for some individuals, but it has also—and in the same

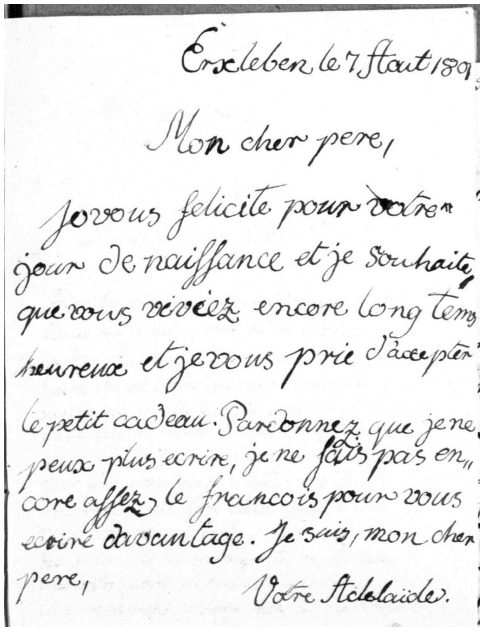
context—served as an instrument of governance and conformity. Children are forces of socialization at the same time and indeed because they are objects of socialization. Moreover, "they are children: individuals inhabiting and negotiating these often conflicting roles as best they can," as Karen Sánchez-Eppler has observed.[6] Witnessing the constraints on children's agency helps us question ideas taken for granted about adults as historical actors.[7]

Children exerted agency in the past when they made choices, exercised power, complied with adult expectations, and resisted authority. Individual children also influenced the perspectives and actions of individual adults—teachers, pedagogues, policy-makers, parents—shaping their ideas about childhood and how children learn. And, as we are learning from the riches presented in the digital project and at this symposium, they might do all of this through their own expression as well—putting their voices on paper.

We historians, literary critics, and teachers today are not the only ones who have valued the children's voices documented in the collection here. Before the curators evaluated these amateur books and manuscripts, before antiquarians and auctioneers collected them, before someone decided to pass them down through generations—or neglected to throw them out—there was an initial impulse to preserve the results of children's industry and imagination. It is no coincidence that the milieu I first studied produced and retained so much writing by youth. That is, there is a relationship

between 18th-century pedagogy's celebration of the child and the archival preservation of children's texts. In fact, I have encountered this as a challenge in my new research project, where youth in diaspora were less likely to produce or save similar documents —more on that in a moment.

This first set of examples are drawn from a project which examined German children's reading and writing practices during the years around 1800. In German-speaking Central Europe, Enlightenment pedagogic philosophy came to life in the families of an educated middle class distinct enough to earn its own name, the "Bildungsbürgertum," a term which highlights the key role education and self-development played in their formation. These families led the radical transformation of childrearing practices that served the new purpose of a crafted self. One of the greatest pleasures of that study was encountering the voices of children and youth in dozens of archives across Germany.



Erxleben le 7 Aout 1801

Mon cher pere,

Je vous felicite pour votre jour de naissance et je souhaite que vous viviez encore long tems heureux et je vous prie d'accepter le petit cadeau. Pardonnez que je ne peux plus ecrire, je ne sais pas encore assez le francois pour vous ecrire davantage. Je suis, mon cher pere,

Votre Adelaïde.

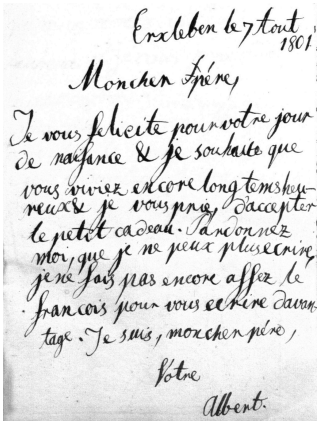
Erxleben August 7 1801

My dear father,

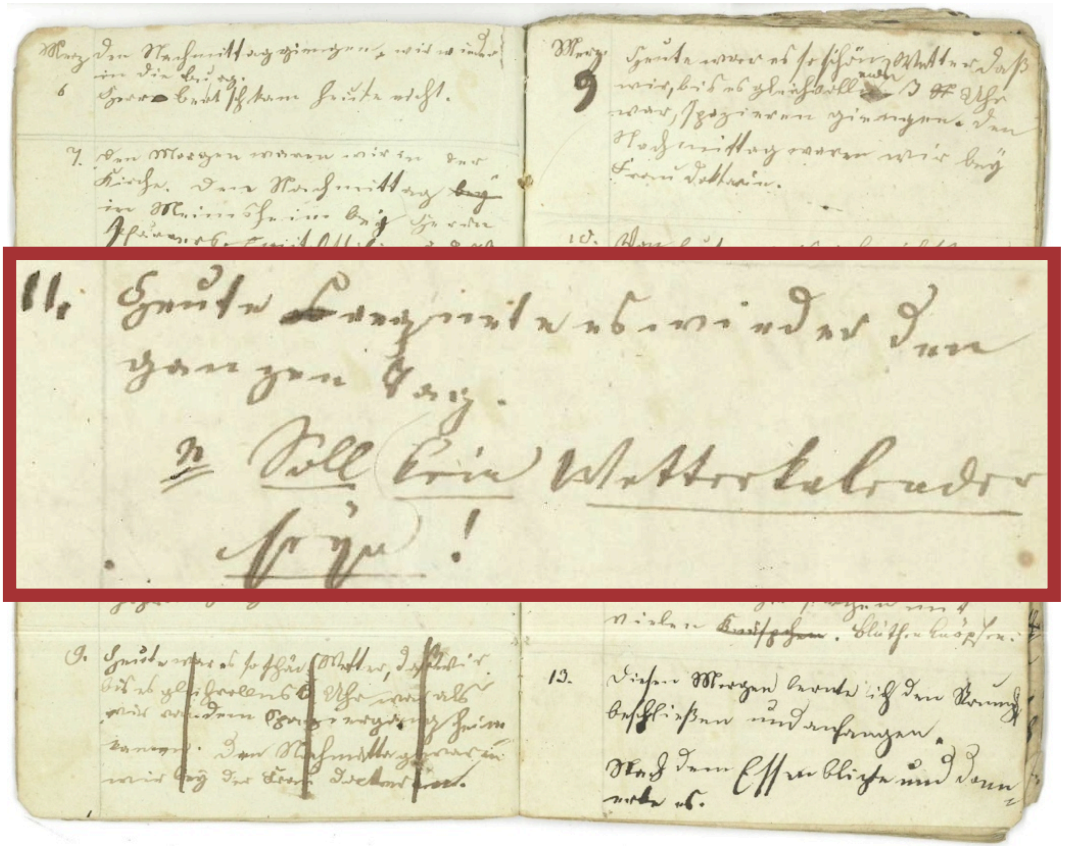
I congratulate you on your birthday and I hope that you will continue to live a long and happy life and I beg you to accept this little gift. Forgive [me] that I cannot write longer, I do not yet know enough French to write you more. I am, my dear father,

Your Adelaïde.

Yet even the prized find of a manuscript penned by a child sometimes failed to offer me much insight into that individual's perspective. This 1801 letter of birthday congratulations was written in French by an eight-year-old Saxon girl to her father before her brother wrote one identical—but for a few additional errors of spelling and


Erxleben le 7 Août 1801
Mon cher Père,
Je vous félicite pour votre jour de naissance & je souhaite que vous vivez encore long tems heureux & je vous prie, d'accepter le petit cadeau. J'adonnez moi, que je ne peux plus écrire, je ne sais pas encore assez le françois pour vous écrire davantage. Je suis, mon cher père,
Votre
Albert.

letter formation.[8] Both were likely based on a model, perhaps from a letter-writing manual. So this example does not tell us much about these particular children's inner feelings or opinions—but it does evidence adult expectations of their education as well as the importance of writing in family relations.



The fact that many artifacts of children's voices were mediated by adult supervision or crafted to meet the expectations of teachers or parents doesn't render them useless for thinking about the boundaries and contradictions of children's agency. One of my favorite examples of this comes from an 1830 diary of a ten-year-old girl, Marie Seybold, in which she wrote, "March 9 [1830] Today it was such beautiful weather that we went walking until it was almost 3 o'clock. March 10. I know nothing to write about today other than that it always rained. March 11. Today—it rained again the whole day." At that point, another hand appears in the manuscript, rebuking her, " *This should not be a weather almanac!*" On the twelfth, Marie wrote about the garden. But on the thirteenth? Back to recording lightning and thunder after dinner.[9] Despite the adult intervention, Marie continued to write very similar, short entries, often still preoccupied with the weather. At the same time, she kept track of her days in this form because adults required it of her; she made choices and expressed herself within clear constraints, which even included a contradictory requirement to be more independently creative. This encapsulates the tension between governance and agency that colored children's education.

Older youth, particularly, had other methods of responding to the intrusions of parents and teachers. I have been particularly intrigued by instances of linguistic code switching in youth diaries, sometimes used as a literal code. For one instance from 1847, seventeen-year-old Anna Hasenfratz, the daughter of a court bureaucrat, wrote in her

Anna Hasenfratz (unknown artist, c. 1841)

diary—mostly in German—about attending the celebration of a princess's birthday and described the gifts everyone else brought. Then she followed in French with this complaint: "My mother didn't let me bring a gift."[10] It is possible she was worried about her mother reading the implied criticism and sought to conceal her frustration—although in this case it is likely that Anna's mother also had some command of French. Alternatively, it may be that this was simply a moment when Anna wanted to write with the elegance French afforded her, perhaps because of the aristocratic context of her report.

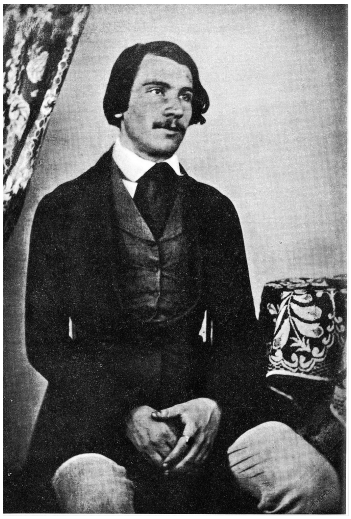
Within any social context and era, is it always more challenging to access "authentic" evidence of children's voices than it is for adults? Certainly the relatively late attention of scholars to the writing of non-famous youth might suggest that. But the postmodern unmooring of faith in representations of interior truth has also made us less concerned with a binary of "artificial" versus "natural" expressions in the archive. Outside inspirations, including intertextual references to fiction, permeated the youth diaries I examined. For example, fifteen-year-old Anna Krahmer turned to her diary in 1831 after hearing a devastating letter her older cousin and love interest Heinrich had written to her sister Therese:

> With the most bitter, serious, unloving tone in the world he says: I certainly must have wanted to playact a novel myself, because I wanted to ascribe one to him. They must be ideas from the girls' school, which Therese would perhaps still drive out of me; little me should not yet even think of such a thing etc.

Anna Krahmer at 15 (Gottfried Schadow, 1830)
Source: Deutsches Tagebucharchiv

This explicitly gendered criticism tied her behavior to the model of a novel, as did the practice diary-keeping itself.[11] Anna concluded that this exchange meant the end of her romance. Yet even while she tried to repress her feelings for Heinrich, Anna wrote with a passionate and insightful sense of her own feelings and self-presentation. (And, in fact, Anna and Heinrich were married seven years after she wrote this diary entry)

Supposedly authentic expressions of children, signaled often by error or excess, were increasingly valued by middle-class German families and pedagogues into the nineteenth century. The "childish" mistakes which marked a letter as in some sense more natural were paradoxically indulged in notes intended to display a young person's accomplished self-development. In 1823, for example, young Jacob Burckhardt wrote greetings to his grandmother which his mother originally commented on by noting that five-year-old Jacob had made "this beautiful letter" with the help of his tutor. But she was disabused of this and added a corrective: "No! Just now he

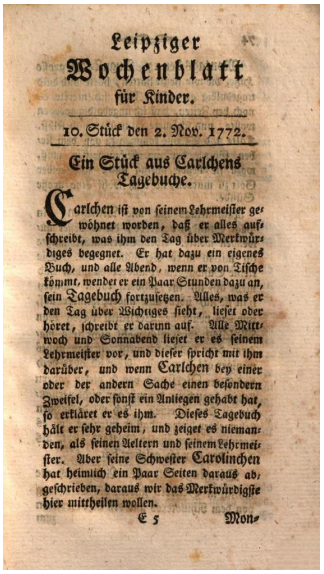


Burckhardt at about age 22
Source: Wikimedia Commons

says: Herr Munzinger guided his hand to the position for the beautiful [letters] and the 'untidy' [parts] he wrote alone."[12] She was charmed, and expected the grandmother to be charmed, by the little boy's scrupulous precision—and also by the faults in the letter.

The reason families treasured this letter writing style, which adults determined to be "childlike," demonstrates changing definitions of how a middle-class child should "naturally" behave and feel during the years around 1800. Letters constituted a useful tool for educating the emotions of young writers: teaching children how they should feel and how to articulate feeling in a socially useful way. As Willemijn Ruberg observes, "a child was free to write as he or she wished (confidingly, naturally, individually), as long as this remained within the bounds of what was deemed proper."[13] Being attracted to what nineteenth-century observers also believed to be the child's "natural" style is a strong but perhaps misleading temptation in the archive. Juxtaposing the analysis of texts published by adults alongside the study of children's manuscript or published writing is a useful approach for untangling some of these archival challenges. In 1772, for example, the periodical *Leipzig Weekly for Children* used a diary format in which "Little Carl" was instructed by his teacher each evening to write down everything remarkable that had happened to him. The magazine made a point of the diary being kept "very secret"—except that his parents and tutor had full access to it, of course, and in one issue, Carl's mischievous sister Caroline took over the diary for her own observations.[14] While attempting to ventriloquize child writers, the entries

themselves did not much resemble what real German children did with their diaries, being unsurprisingly longer, more literary, more polished, and more priggish.



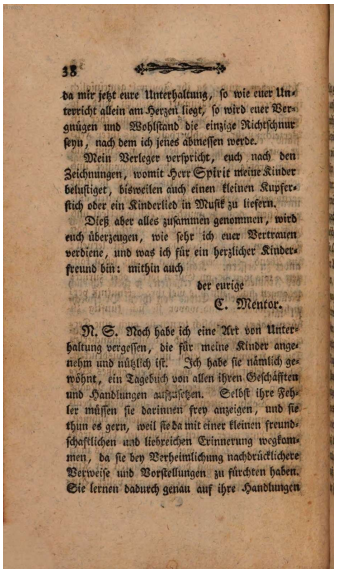
Leipziger
Wochenblatt
für Kinder.

10. Stück den 2. Nov. 1772.

Ein Stück aus Carlchens Tagebuche.

Carlchen ist von seinem Lehrmeister gewöhnet worden, daß er alles aufschreibt, was ihm den Tag über Merkwürdiges begegnet. Er hat dazu ein eigenes Buch, und alle Abend, wenn er von Tische kömmt, wendet er ein Paar Stunden dazu an, sein Tagebuch fortzusetzen. Alles, was er den Tag über Wichtiges sieht, lieset oder höret, schreibt er darinn auf. Alle Mittwoch und Sonnabend lieset er es seinem Lehrmeister vor, und dieser spricht mit ihm darüber, und wenn Carlchen bey einer oder der andern Sache einen besondern Zweifel, oder sonst ein Anliegen gehabt hat, so erkläret er es ihm. Dieses Tagebuch hält er sehr geheim, und zeiget es niemanden, als seinen Aeltern und seinem Lehrmeister. Aber seine Schwester Carolinchen hat heimlich ein Paar Seiten daraus abgeschrieben, daraus wir das Merkwürdigste hier mittheilen wollen.

E 5 Mon-



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da mir jetzt eure Unterhaltung, so wie euer Unterricht allein am Herzen liegt, so wird euer Vergnügen und Wohlstand die einzige Richtschnur seyn, nach dem ich jenes abmessen werde.

Mein Verleger verspricht, euch nach den Zeichnungen, womit Herr Sykrit meine Kinder belustiget, bisweilen auch einen kleinen Kupferstich oder ein Kinderlied in Musik zu liefern.

Dieß aber alles zusammen genommen, wird euch überzeugen, wie sehr ich euer Vertrauen verdiene, und was ich für ein herzlicher Kinderfreund bin: mithin auch

der eurige
C. Mentor.

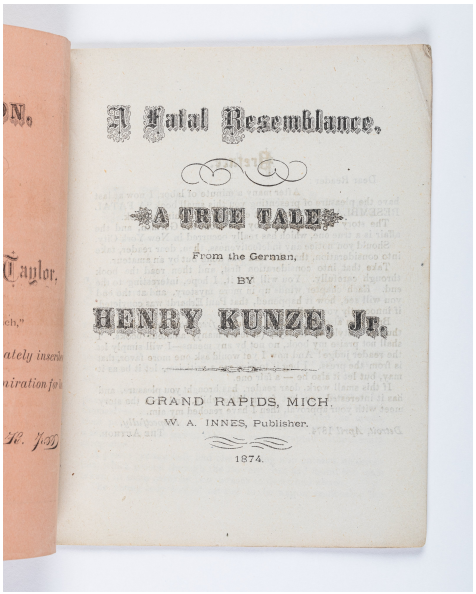
N. S. Noch habe ich eine Art von Unterhaltung vergessen, die für meine Kinder angenehm und nützlich ist. Ich habe sie nämlich gewöhnt, ein Tagebuch von allen ihren Geschäften und Handlungen aufzusetzen. Selbst ihre Fehler müssen sie darinnen frey anzeigen, und sie thun es gern, weil sie da mit einer kleinen freundschaftlichen und liebreichen Erinnerung wegkommen, da sie bey Verheimlichung nachdrücklichere Verweise und Vorstellungen zu fürchten haben. Sie lernen dadurch genau auf ihre Handlungen

Christian Felix Weiße used a similar approach in his late eighteenth-century periodical *The Children's Friend*.[15] Examining Weiße's transnational influence, Arianne Baggerman has argued that "as a pedagogical tool, children's diaries had an entirely different impact…than the liberating effect they were thought to have; on the contrary, such diaries led parents to exercise coercion and prompted guilt-ridden children to write very short entries."[16] I suspect Baggerman would agree, however, having published one of the most important accounts of an Enlightenment-era child's diary, that there remains a great deal to learn about children's daily lives, adult expectations, and even youth perspectives and agency by looking at such sources of historic children's voices—no matter how derivative, mediated, or resistant they might be. That will certainly be true with the increased access this project has made to the AAS

collection of children's writing, including breathtaking and boring manuscripts, imitative and imaginative amateur publications.

In my remaining time, I'll sketch just a few examples from my new, ongoing project tracking the effects of childhood sibling relationships on later life by looking at families in migration from Central Europe, Ireland, and Québec to the United States between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. (This foray into US history is what has happily brought me to the AAS.) In addition to archival material (family letters and business records), I'm also examining idealized representations of siblings presented to children as prescriptive models for them to follow—most especially in literature for young readers.

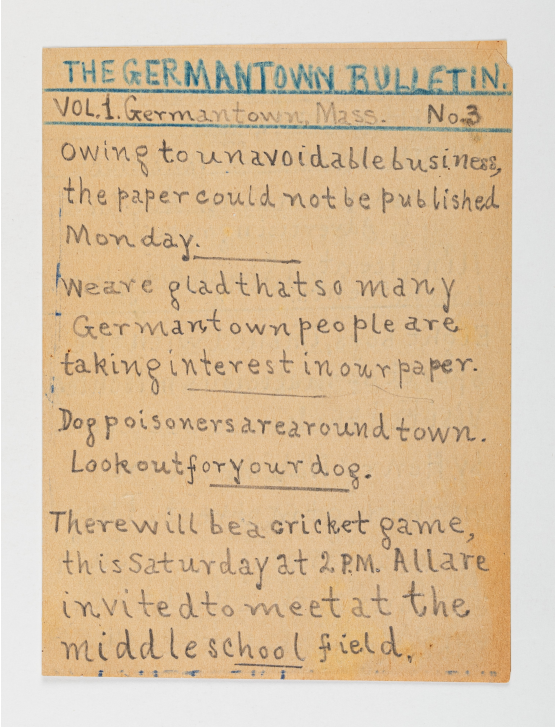
As Ashley Cataldo and Laura Wasowicz explain on the Historic Children's Voices website, there are material reasons why the collection tilts toward wealthier and white youth authors.[17] Among that group, they unsurprisingly tend to be Protestant and Anglo-American—or at least not recent immigrants. This is certainly not the end of the story when it comes to locating marginalized voices of children, and I know there is much more to learn on that front today from other symposium participants. But here a few items relevant to my project.



Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Just as in American children's literature published by adults in the nineteenth century, German-language texts provided grist for youth publications. One example here was translated by a seventeen-year-old in Michigan from a possibly fictional text, a Gothic case of mistaken identity for a German-American in New York City.[18] The work of youth translators is an area I hope to see developed in future research.

Germantown, today a neighborhood in Quincy, Massachusetts, was a planned community for glassblowers and weavers from Central Europe in the eighteenth century. Although it was no longer solely German by the era of this 1898 manuscript newspaper, a Mr. Henry Neumann is featured, as the victim of eight boys who broke some of his windows. The young authors of the paper write that this along with "the robbing of apple trees is the preliminary work of criminals–the kind that fill our jails and state prisons."[19]


THE GERMANTOWN BULLETIN.
VOL. 1. Germantown, Mass. No. 3

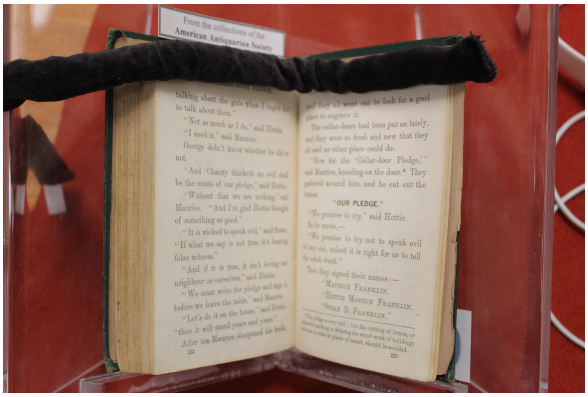
Owing to unavoidable business, the paper could not be published Monday.

We are glad that so many Germantown people are taking interest in our paper.

Dog poisoners are around town. Look out for your dog.

There will be a cricket game, this Saturday at 2 P.M. All are invited to meet at the middle school field.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society



I will end with another fictional attempt by adult writers to ventriloquize youth, showing an appetite by the 1860s for the "sayings and doings" of *Real Children* (American Sunday-School Union).[20] In this tale of kids sharing an anti-gossip oath they carve into the cellar door, a footnote cautions, "The pledge is very well; but the cutting of letters, or otherwise marking or defacing the wood-work of buildings…should be avoided." By this point in the transformation of modern childhood, children's minor transgressions had become not only a source of amusement, but even welcome markers of their "natural" difference from adults. How striking to see this indulgent condescension alongside amateur publications in which youth authors sought quite earnestly to participate equally in the genre conventions of adult discourse! Such a contradiction is just one example of what makes this project of Historic Children's Voices so valuable for investigating and teaching the history of childhood.

Parts of this paper were adapted from Emily C. Bruce, *Revolutions at Home: The Origin of Modern Childhood and the German Middle Class* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).

[1] Another useful account here is Laura Tisdale, "State of the Field: The Modern History of Childhood," *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 107 (2022): 949–64.

[2] Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Practicing for Print: The Hale Children's Manuscript Libraries," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 2 (2008): 188–209.

[3] Karen Vallgårda, Kristine Alexander, and Stephanie Olsen, "Against Agency" (roundtable, Society for the History of Children and Youth, Camden, NJ, June 22, 2017).

[4] Mona Gleason, "Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education," *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (2016): 447.

[5] Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1268.

[6] Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xv.

[7] As Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore ask, "To what degree has the 'obvious' marginality of children impeded our ability to see adults exercising a similarly middling kind of power?" "Introduction: Little Differences: Children, Their Books, and Culture in the Study of Early Modern Europe," in *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe*, 1550–1800, ed. Andrea Immel and Michael Witmore (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.

[8] Adelheid von Alvensleben and Albrecht von Alvensleben to Johann August Ernst von Alvensleben , August 7, 1801, Familie von Alvensleben, Dep. 83 B Nr. 238, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover. All translations are my own.

[9] Marie Seybold, diary, 9–13 March 1830, Q 3/48 Bü 3, Familiennachlass Schmidt, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart.

[10] Anna Hasenfratz, diary, August 3, 1847, Deutsches Tagebucharchiv.

[11] Anna Krahmer, diary, February 11, 1831, Deutsches Tagebucharchiv.

[12] The original German term here ("Wüste") is archaic or only in regional use today to mean something like "jumbled, disordered." Burckhardt scholars who looked at his juvenilia have interpreted the sentence in a similar fashion (Kaphahn 1935, xxii–xxiii; Markwart 1920, 180).

[13] Willemijn Ruberg, *Conventional Correspondence: Epistolary Culture of the Dutch Elite, 1770–1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 139.

[14] *Leipziger Wochenblatt für Kinder*, November 2, 1772 (repr., Ratingen: Aloys Henn, 1973).

[15] Christian Felix Weiße, *Der Kinderfreund* I, no. 1 (1776; repr., Leipzig: Crusius, 1778), 33.

[16] Arianne Baggerman, "Lost Time: Temporal Discipline and Historical Awareness in Nineteenth-Century Dutch Egodocuments," in *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Developments in Autobiographical Writing since the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker, and Michael Mascuch (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 470–71.

[17] Ashley Cataldo and Laura Wasowicz, "Missing Voices in Nineteenth-Century Child-Created Texts," accessed 1 May 2024, https://www.americanantiquarian.org/missing-voices-nineteenth-century-child-created-texts.

[18] Henry Kunze, Jr., *A.Fatal Resemblance: A True Tale from the German* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. A. Innes, 1874).

[19] *The Germantown Bulletin* manuscript newspaper, 1898, Mss boxes amateur 025, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester MA.

[20] *Real Children: Their Sayings and Doings* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, [1860–68?]).