

Karah M. Mitchell

American Antiquarian Society

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Written Presentation

Animals, Children, and Animating the Archive

Hello everyone! It's been so wonderful to be here. I came to childhood studies late in my PhD—it really wasn't until last year, after a meandering research journey, that I realized, "Oh, wow, I think I'm *officially* doing a childhood studies project" (thinking about nineteenth-century U.S. print culture, biopolitics, and the history of animal welfare discourse eventually brought me here, to childhood studies). Things really solidified last summer when I researched here at the American Antiquarian Society as a Lapidus Fellow, and I'm just so grateful to be back!

I'd like to begin by sharing my earliest childhood toy, from my personal archive. In the next 15 minutes, I want to constellate some ideas on this topic of "hearing the child's voice," and I felt that sharing this toy was a fitting way to open. This little lamb—as you can see—has been through a lot over the past 32 years; I keep her in a box with other stuffed animals from my childhood. The tag on her back left leg notes,

EDEN TOYS, INC.
N.Y., N.Y., U.S.A.
MADE IN HAITI
ALL NEW MATERIAL
STUFFING 85%
CELLULOSE FIBER PAD
15% OLEFIN FIBER

She looks different than she did when I was a baby (in a kind of “garden of Eden” before I sinned, as it were); a search for this (now “vintage”) toy on Etsy and Ebay shows me that she was originally ivory and had a blue ribbon around her neck. I can’t wash her because she has a music box sewn inside that miraculously still works (and I don’t want to dissect her). Any guesses as to what song she plays? (The audience correctly guessed: “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”) After all these years, she is still “animated,” albeit as an automaton; when the song plays, her head slowly moves back and forth. I share this object to prompt us to consider how animals and animal representations featured in our own childhoods: I think being attuned to this can help open us to hearing children’s voices as adults, as researchers.



(Image of my lamb toy that I showed during my presentation)

As I discovered last summer during my time at the American Antiquarian Society, this small object made in Haiti grew out of a complicated history from the nineteenth century to the present. Its origins can be traced to an early nineteenth-century print landscape in which little white girls with their little white lambs (some of whom have blue

ribbons on their necks) abounded. This cultural landscape reached its apotheosis in the poem “Mary’s Lamb” in 1830 (known today as “Mary Had a Little Lamb”), attributed to Sarah Josepha Hale. There was actually a battle about the poem’s origins between Hale and a Mary Sawyer from right up the road in Sterling, MA. Hale published the poem in her *Poems for Our Children*, and Lydia Maria Child published it in *The Juvenile Miscellany*; three years later, Child invoked this prior lamb discourse in a story, “The Little White Lamb and the Little Black Lamb”—soon before she had to give up her position with the *Miscellany* because of her strong anti-slavery stance. The tune that has persisted today comes from the chorus of a nineteenth-century minstrel song. As a quick YouTube and Google search shows, the song continues to animate the lives of children today.

In thinking about the continued **resonances** of just this one poem/song (from the 19C) that continues to **live** today, I’m reminded of Jacques Derrida’s concept of *le mal d’archive*, “archive fever.” He describes this “fever” as a burning desire to locate origins and to stave off oblivion. For Derrida, archive fever is a manifestation of a Freudian death drive: we archive to preserve our humanity in the face of death, but in that very act of preservation we also destroy, as walls are erected and the object is taken from its original, lively context. (Of course Derrida is theorizing here. Archives do physically **preserve** materials, and the American Antiquarian Society has of course done a wonderful job in doing so!) Derrida notes, “the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.” As soon as something is archived, it loses a sense of

“aliveness.” [And I’ve put the definition for “anamnesis” here on this slide since that word was unfamiliar to me; it’s interesting to recall here, too, how the very word “animal” has, at its roots, aliveness.] How then do we “animate” archival objects?

In thinking about what it means to “animate” the archive—and to hear children’s voices—I’d like to suggest that looking to ***animals*** may offer us a particularly promising avenue for this. Even in thinking about how children learn to speak, to read, and to write, as a look at children’s primers from the 18th-19th centuries (and honestly at children’s books today) shows us, we see that ***animals*** are pivotal to teaching children their ***ABC’s***. The animal body and the alphabet (and by extension learning to read) remain intrinsically bound together, as the images on this slide suggest.

In looking at children’s writings, we see real moments of ***liveliness*** that involve animals, moments where we get a stronger sense of their ***personalities*** (emphasis on “person” here: personalities that grow out of animal interactions). I include here just a few moments from the American Antiquarian Society’s holdings. So here we see a young Walter Goodrich (who grew up in Maine) recounting his shooting of a bird while in the woods with his two friends: “I wanted to fire at him dreadfully, but I was sorry for it afterwards. Poor little bird! he fell and breathed his last. I was so sorry that I killed him . . .” On my first slide, I showed some drawings from Esther Evans—who lived in Michigan—of birds alongside feather quill pens. She does not write “about” animals as far as I’ve found, but she does practice her signature and draws the implement of her writing, the thing that gives life as it were to her name: a bird feather. In a school context, we see a young child (as far as I can tell named “Inman”) assigning different names to different animals in a copy of Mary

Trimmer's *Natural History*. The last entry, on Worms, makes this child's feelings about school clear: "The whole school except me. P.D. Clarke biggest of them." In a "manuscript newspaper" (produced in New Hampshire), we see children creating their own periodical culture at school, including a "report" of a bird picnic (not pictured here) and an "accidents" section that features animal accidents, including a mouse who has injured his eye and a grasshopper couple who, in crossing a railroad track, "there little dog" (note the misspelling here) was "instantly killed." The edits here show the child writer practicing their writing: there's this sense of the learning process and the child making the creative decision for the grasshopper couple to have a "dog" instead of a "grasshopper" (as we might expect; grasshoppers don't have dogs, after all!).

In searching for children's voices in the nineteenth century we must continually remember how, in the past, some children's voices, including within their personal diary accounts, were not valued as important enough to be preserved and to be heard; additionally, standards of "literacy" were ultimately white-imposed standards. As I've been searching for children's voices, it's been much easier to find the voices of white, usually middle-class children. It is more difficult to find the voices of Black children and of Indigenous children—my research to find these voices is very much an ongoing process. But I want to share some moments from what I've found so far. At the New-York Historical Society are digitized records of student writing from the New-York African Free School. Here we see a young Edward T. Haines signing his signature and including a drawing of his writing implement—at the bottom, we see an entire bird, Haines' name ensconced within its body—the bird itself (a swan) is almost like the signature line under the name, its wings

even resembling the letters “E,” “T,” and “H.” In addition to a poem and short essay on the Lion, I also found a short essay on the horse, complete with a drawing, by Jacob Lattin. I was especially attuned to this after I had finished writing, for my dissertation, a chapter on animal autobiography at the turn of the century. *Black Beauty, the Autobiography of a Horse*, was published in an extremely popular 1890 edition in the United States as “The ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ of the Horse,” and it essentially inspired many animal autobiographies in the years that followed (to summarize, in these “autobiographies” Beauty and other speaking animals are racialized and presented as submissive in all of these different ways for the purpose of inculcating white, “humane” values). So, given this, I found it especially interesting that Lattin writes that the horse is “a bold and fiery animal even in a domestic state: equally intrepid as his master, he faces danger and death with ardour and magnanimity; he exults in the chase; his eyes sparkle on the course; and his whole air bespeaks spirit and energy . . . he is nevertheless docile and tractable; for he knows how to check and govern the vivacity and fire of his temper: he **appears** pleased to yield to the hand that guides him, and **seems** to consult the inclination of his master. He, in some measure, **appears** voluntarily to resign his very existence to the pleasure and accommodation of man” (my emphasis on certain words here in this written essay). When I compare this account to, say, Trimmer’s entry on the horse (which emphasizes this animal’s submissiveness), something quite different is happening here.

At the Archdiocese Archives in New Orleans, I examined letters from the Couvent School, a school founded by Marie Justine Cirnaire Couvent for free children of color. (Couvent was her married last name.) Couvent herself was born in Africa, sold into slavery,

and gained her freedom in Haiti, probably during the Haitian Revolution. These “letters” are school composition exercises for the children who were particularly excelling in English (as the children were being taught in French and speaking French). When one reads the letters, one can see how the teacher assigned different topics for students to imaginatively write about. This one, by a John Blandin, is reflecting on a hunting trip for ducks, and he describes finding—with sheer delight—a mother deer and her baby. He takes them home and builds a house for them, noting in his postscript: “My hind seems to be very glad and her young one is very gentle. I am taking very good care of them; I give the mother some corn and the little one milk. She is so pretty and has a black spot on her right eye.” This moment was just so fascinating to encounter, and indeed to reflect upon in relation for example to Walter Goodrich’s entry: we have these two instances of children with guns out in the woods, but they take different actions. At the Newberry Library in Chicago, I met with less success in finding what I was looking for, but one book there contains transcriptions of letters written by Cherokee children at the Brainerd Missionary Station in the 1820s. In this one letter from 1828, three girls, Christiana McPherson, Lucy A.C. Reece, and Sally M. Reece are writing to the President of the United States (at this time John Quincy Adams, but the same year Andrew Jackson became president). Sally writes of her and her schoolmates as being “like lambs before their teachers, pleased to gain that knowledge which to these benighted souls seems like the glory of Creation’s ray bursting from Chaos.” Of course the letters in this book had to adhere to the white-imposed standards of the missionary endeavor, and they are transcriptions of the original letters. I’m interested in thinking about

what it means here for this Cherokee child to think of herself as a “lamb”—especially given the context of little white girls and little white lambs that by the 1820s was flourishing.

I think it's in connecting the present to the archive that we can continue to animate our research and continually grow, continually interrogate *how and why* we are where we are. Last summer when I was on fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society, I spent much of the weekends biking around in the surrounding countryside (when the reading room was closed!). One weekend, I biked around Sterling to find the site of the original location of the Redstone Schoolhouse, where Mary Sawyer's lamb purportedly followed her to school. As I looked at the sign marking the site, I heard children playing in the distance. I biked down to where I heard these children and found this sign (and saw the children playing in a Bounce House). I didn't pay to go inside the petting zoo, but a teenager working the stand informed me that there are all kinds of farm animals for the kids to pet. As I looked around, I wondered: how strange that children are going around petting farm animals, meanwhile there's an ice cream shop with a giant cow face (with window AC units for eyes) and then a BBQ restaurant next door? (The menu includes “Chopped Beef Sandwich.”) All of this down the road from the purported site where Mary's little motherless lamb followed her to school one day. I've thought often about these children's voices that I heard that day when I have been researching in the archive, the relationship between the present and the past.

So, as I end my presentation, I'd like to leave us with this question: “How can considering animals in 19th-century children's literature animate not only the archive, but also our understanding of the present?” To maybe even add to this: How can thinking of

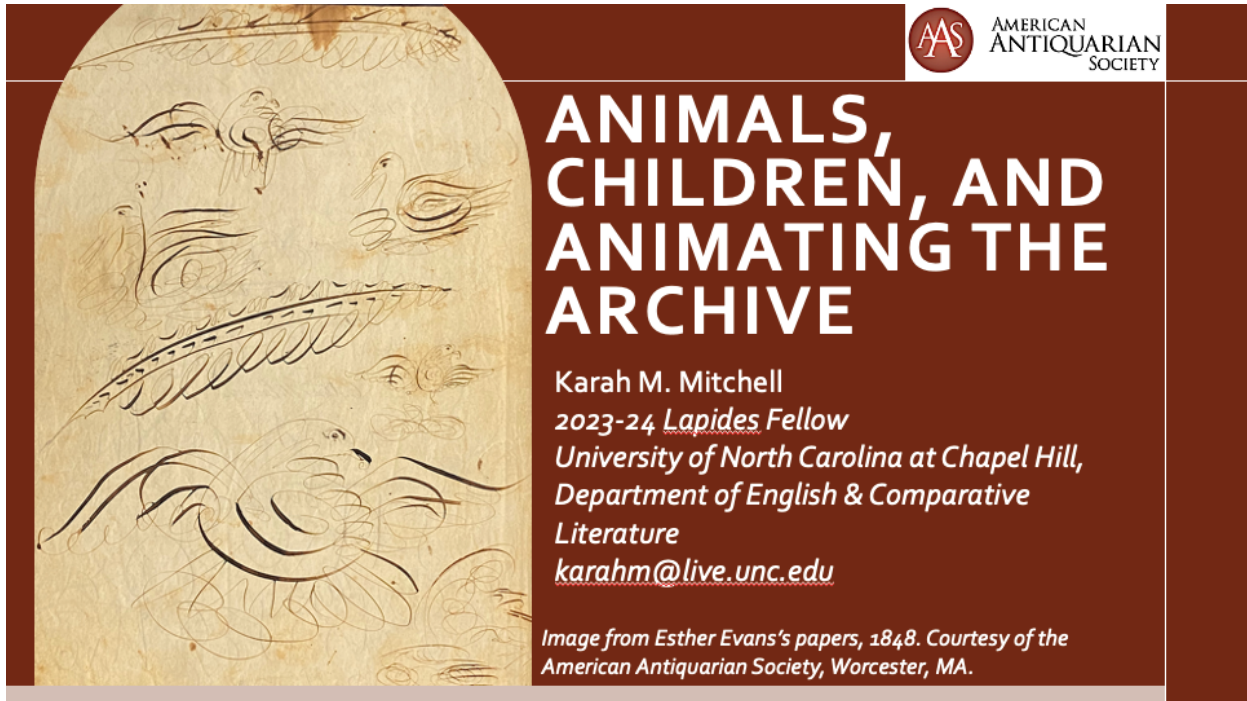
these two things together, as we attend to the present, help us attend more closely to children's voices from the past?

Thank you for listening to my talk! I've included here both my UNC email and my Gmail since I'll be leaving UNC this summer, in case anyone would like to get in touch.

Thank you so much again!

Bibliography

Please note that images of the materials discussed in this transcript of my presentation delivered on May 3, 2024 are on the PowerPoint slides. For reference, I have provided screenshots of the slides below, which include citation information:



ANIMALS, CHILDREN, AND ANIMATING THE ARCHIVE

Karah M. Mitchell
 2023-24 *Lapidis* Fellow
 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
 Department of English & Comparative
 Literature
karahm@live.unc.edu

Image from Esther Evans's papers, 1848. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

DEATH, LIFE, & THE ARCHIVE

2

"... the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis* as ***spontaneous, alive and internal experience***. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory." [my emphasis]

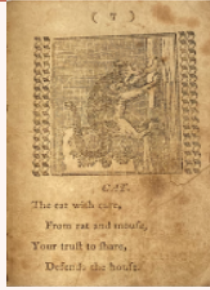
-Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. 1995. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, 1996. 11.

*anamnesis: "The recalling of things past; recollection, reminiscence." (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

animal, animate: both from the Latin *anima*: "air, breath, life, soul, spirit." (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

"A" IS FOR "ANIMAL"

3



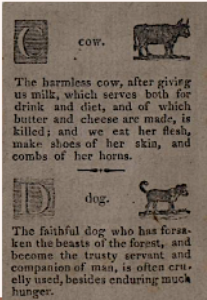
All materials on this slide courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. Clockwise from top left, images from:

New-England Primer. Boston[?]: S. Kneeland & T. Green[?], circa 1750.

Juvenal [Juvenile] Poems; or The Alphabet in Verse. New-Haven: Sidney's Press, 1805.

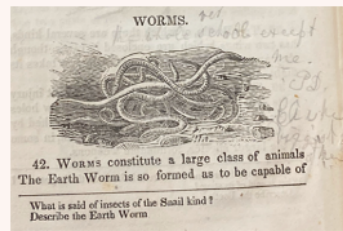
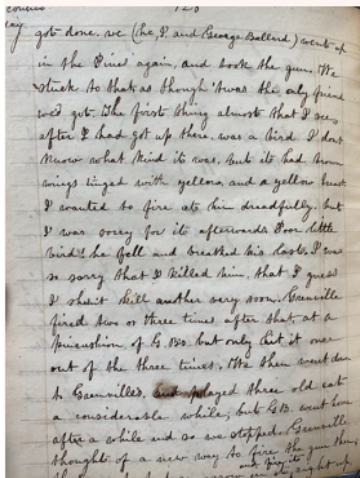
The Picture Alphabet, for Little Children. New York: Samuel Wood, 1813.

Jacob Abbott's *The Little Scholar Learning to Talk*. Boston: John Allen & Co., 1835.



HEARING CHILDREN'S VOICES

4

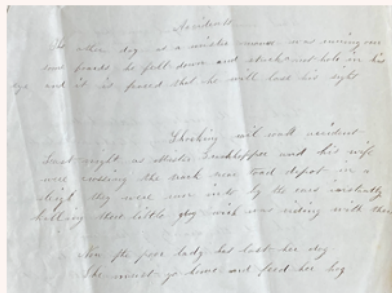


All materials on this slide courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. Clockwise from left:

A page from Walter Goodrich's diary, 1846.

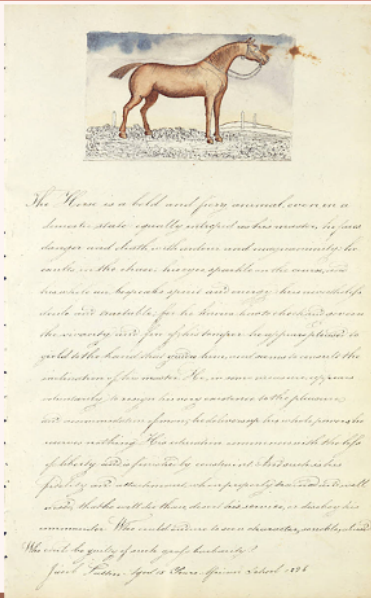
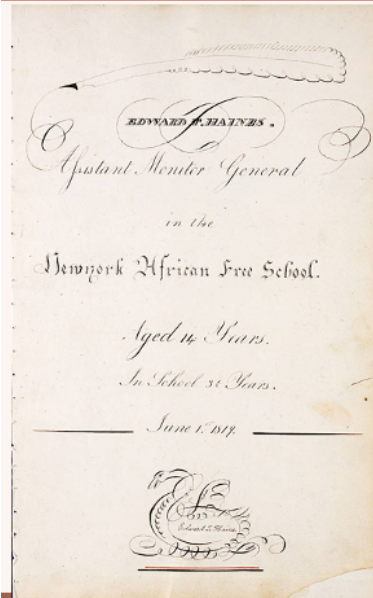
A page from Esther Evans's papers, 1848.

Schoolbook annotation by a child named "Inman" (based on the name penciled multiple times on the first page) for "Worms," in Mary Trimmer's *Natural History* (1832 edition, Boston).



"Accidents" section from *The Student's Coronet* manuscript newspaper, 1854.

HEARING CHILDREN'S VOICES



Images from the New-York African Free School Records, Volume 4: Penmanship and drawing studies, 1816-1826. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

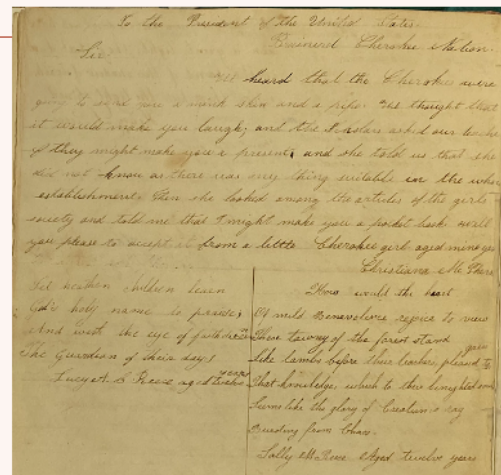
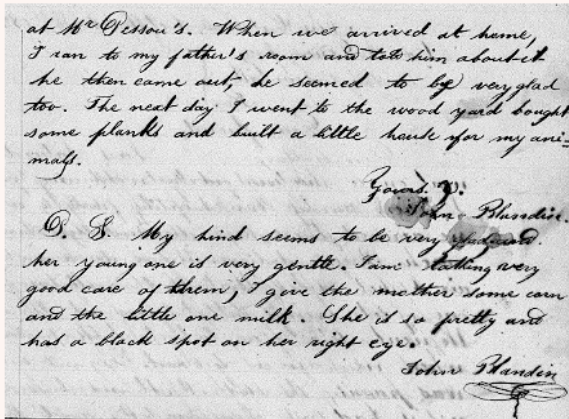
From left:

The 1819 signature page of Edward T. Haines, who was "Assistant Monitor General in the New York African Free School, Aged 14 years." (The prior pages include Haines's writing, specifically a poem transcription and math problems.)

An 1826 essay on horses and a drawing by Jacob Lattin, "Aged 15 years."

HEARING CHILDREN'S VOICES

From a letter written by John Blandin at the Couvent School in New Orleans, 1859. Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese in New Orleans.



From a letter written by three Cherokee children at the Brainerd Missionary Station, 1828: Christiana McPherson ("aged nine years"), Lucy A. C. Reece ("aged twelve years"), and Sally M. Reece ("aged twelve years"). Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.



Sign outside Davis Farmland—a children’s farm with a petting zoo—nearby in Sterling, MA, July 8, 2023. On this particular day, children were playing in a “bounce house” at the farm (they can be heard in the distance). Down the road is the original site of the Redstone Schoolhouse (where the “original” incident of Mary and her lamb occurred). (Video by me.)

A closing question: How can considering animals in 19th-century children’s literature animate not only the archive, but also our understanding of the present?

**THANK
YOU FOR
LISTENING TO
MY TALK!**

Karah M. Mitchell
karahm@live.unc.edu
karah.m.mitchell@gmail.com



I want to acknowledge in writing here that I first learned about the Couvent letters and the Brainerd letters from the work of Mary Niall Mitchell and Hilary Wyss, respectively. Please see their work as well as the sources that they cite:

Mitchell, Mary Niall. "Madame Couvent's Legacy: Free Children of Color as Historians in Antebellum New Orleans" in *Who Writes for Black Children? African American Children's Literature before 1900*, edited by Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 61-74.

Wyss, Hilary E. *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750-1830*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

I also want to cite here, for the reader's reference, scholarship that has continued to be particularly formative for my thinking on this ongoing archival research project:

Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York University Press, 2011.

Brooks, Lisa. "Awikigawôgan ta Pildowi Ôjmowôgan: Mapping a New History." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2018, pp. 259-294.

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Fielder, Brigitte. "Recovery." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2020, pp. 18-21.

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