doi: 10.12957/childphilo.2024.81736

"with my love":
the colonial legacy of racialized pedophilic pornography in the atlantic world

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abstract
This essay provides a critical analysis of early-20th-century American postcards, focusing on the portrayal of black and white children as an aesthetic tool of white supremacy and pedophilic racist pleasures. These visual representations not only reflected but also perpetuated colonial ideologies and racial stereotypes, directly influencing educational practices and policies, and contributing to a social environment where discrimination and sexualization of children was normalized. The article begins with the stark contrast in the depiction of white and black children, revealing a pattern in which white children were often fetishized as embodiments of innocence and purity, while black children were subjected to pornified portrayals that reinforced negative stereotypes and sought to ensure the continued intergenerational subjugation of African Americans in the afterlife of slavery. A significant aspect of this analysis delves into the role of the zealous purity crusader Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) in shaping societal views on childhood innocence and obscenity during the Progressive Era. As a U.S. postal inspector, Comstock wielded substantial influence over public discourse and policy, particularly through his campaigns against the distribution of what he considered morally objectionable media representations. This examination extends to the racial implications of Comstock's adult-centric actions, exploring how they contributed to the differential treatment of black and white children in both media representations and broader societal contexts. The article argues that these images were not merely passive reflections of societal beliefs; rather, they were active tools used to shape and influence the educational and socialization processes of children, and they contributed to the perpetuation of Jim Crow violence, which was manifested through the sexual assault, castration, and lynching of black youth. Furthermore, this essay examines the broader socio-historical context in which racist and pedophilic images were produced and circulated. These postcards are still trafficked today under the false designation of 'Black Memorabilia,' reaching significant prices as vintage collector's items, but the article reframes them as a genre of explicit child pornography. This decolonial perspective critically challenges prevailing narratives that may sanitize or downplay the exploitative and violent nature of these images of black children. This essay urges a reconsideration of these consumer items' historical significance as instruments intricately complicit in sustaining colonial structures and ideologies surrounding childhood innocence in North America. Within this analytical framework, the dehumanization of black children through pedophilic pornography reflects a long heritage of anti-child violence in Western traditions and the colonial strategy of exploiting children of color as a lucrative mechanism for profit and libidinal pleasure.

keywords: childhood; race; america; innocence; pornography; pedophilia.

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“com amor”:
o legado colonial da pornografia pedófila racializada no mundo atlântico

resumo
Este trabalho apresenta uma análise dos cartões postais norte-americanos do início do século XX, com foco na representação de crianças negras e brancas como uma ferramenta estética de supremacia branca e dos prazeres pedófilos racistas. Essas representações visuais não apenas refletiam, como também perpetuavam ideologias coloniais e estereótipos raciais, influenciando diretamente as práticas e políticas educacionais e contribuindo para uma sociedade onde a discriminação e a sexualização de crianças eram normalizadas. O artigo começa com o forte contraste na representação de crianças brancas e negras, revelando um padrão no qual crianças brancas eram normalmente fetichizadas como personificações de inocência e pureza, enquanto crianças negras eram submetidas a retratos pornográficos que reforçavam estereótipos negativos e buscavam garantir a contínua subjugação intergeracional dos povos afro-americanos na vida após a escravidão. Um aspecto significativo dessa análise é o papel do zeloso defensor da pureza Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) na formação de visões sociais sobre a inocência e a obscenidade da infância durante a Era Progressista. Como inspetor postal dos EUA, Comstock exerceu uma influência significativa sobre o discurso e as políticas públicas, principalmente por meio de suas campanhas contra a distribuição do que ele considerava representações de mídia moralmente questionáveis. Essa investigação abrange as implicações raciais das ações adultocêntricas de Comstock, explorando como elas contribuíram para o tratamento diferenciado de crianças negras e brancas, tanto nas representações de mídia quanto em contextos sociais mais amplos. Argumento que essas imagens não eram apenas reflexos passivos de crenças sociais; na verdade, eram ferramentas ativas usadas para moldar e influenciar os processos de educação e socialização das crianças, e contribuíram para a perpetuação da violência de Jim Crow, manifestada através de agressão sexual, castração e linchamento de jovens negros. Além disso, este artigo investiga o amplo contexto sócio-histórico no qual as imagens racistas e pedófilas foram produzidas e divulgadas. Esses cartões-postais ainda são traficados hoje em dia, sob a falsa designação de “Memorabilia Negra”, atingindo preços significativos como ítens *vintage* de colecionador; mas estou redefinindo-os como um gênero de pornografia infantil explícita. Essa perspectiva decolonial desafia criticamente as narrativas vigentes que podem higienizar ou minimizar a natureza exploratória e violenta dessas imagens de crianças negras. Este trabalho pede uma reconsideração do significado histórico desses itens de consumo como instrumentos intrinsecamente cúmplices na manutenção de estruturas coloniais e ideologias acerca da inocência infantil na América do Norte. Dentro dessa estrutura analítica, a desumanização de crianças negras por meio da pornografia pedófila reflete uma longa herança de violência contra crianças nas tradições ocidentais e a estratégia colonial de explorar crianças de cor como um mecanismo vantajoso de lucro e prazer libidinal.

palavras-chave: infância; raça; estados unidos; inocência; pornografia; pedofilia.

“con amor":
el legado colonial de la pornografía pedófila racializada en el mundo atlántico

resumen:
Este ensayo ofrece un análisis crítico de las postales estadounidenses de principios del siglo XX, centrándose en la representación de niñas y niños blancos y negros como una herramienta estética de la supremacía blanca y de los placeres racistas pedófilos. Estas

representaciones visuales no sólo reflejaban sino que perpetuaban las ideologías coloniales y los estereotipos raciales, influyendo directamente en las prácticas y políticas educativas y fomentando un entorno social en el que se normalizaban la discriminación y la sexualización de los niños y niñas. El artículo comienza con el drástico contraste en la caracterización de niñas y niños blancos y negros, revelando un patrón en el que niñas y niños blancos eran a menudo fetichizados como encarnación de la inocencia y la pureza, mientras que niñas y niños negros eran sometidos a representaciones pornificadas que reforzaban los estereotipos negativos y trataban de garantizar la subyugación intergeneracional continuada de los y las afroestadounidenses en la vida después de la esclavitud. Un aspecto significativo de este análisis profundiza en el papel del celoso paladín de la pureza Anthony Comstock (1844-1915) en la modelación de las opiniones sociales sobre la inocencia y la obscenidad infantiles durante la Era Progresista. Como inspector de correos de Estados Unidos, Comstock ejerció una influencia sustancial sobre el discurso y la política públicos, especialmente a través de sus campañas contra la distribución de lo que él consideraba representaciones mediáticas moralmente censurables. Este examen se extiende a las implicaciones raciales de las acciones adultocéntricas de Comstock, explorando cómo contribuyeron al trato diferenciado de niñas y niños blancos y negros tanto en las representaciones mediáticas como en contextos sociales más amplios. En este artículo se argumenta que estas imágenes no eran meros reflejos pasivos de las creencias sociales, sino más bien herramientas activas utilizadas para dar forma e influir en los procesos educativos y de socialización de niñas y niños, y que contribuyeron a perpetuar la violencia de Jim Crow, que se manifestaba a través de la agresión sexual, la castración y el linchamiento de jóvenes negros de ambos sexos. Además, este ensayo examina el contexto sociohistórico más amplio en el cual las imágenes racistas y pedófilas eran producidas y puestas en circulación. Estas postales siguen siendo traficadas hoy en día bajo la falsa denominación de «recuerdos negros», alcanzando precios muy elevados como objetos vintage de coleccionista, pero el artículo las redefine como un género de pornografía infantil explícita. Esta perspectiva decolonial se enfrenta críticamente a las narrativas predominantes que pueden limpiar o subestimar la naturaleza explotadora y violenta de estas imágenes de niñas y niños negros. Este ensayo urge a reconsiderar el significado histórico de estos artículos de consumo como instrumentos intrínsecamente cómplices en el mantenimiento de las estructuras e ideologías coloniales en torno a la inocencia infantil en Norteamérica. Dentro de este marco analítico, la deshumanización de niñas y niños negros a través de pornografía pedófila refleja una larga herencia de violencia anti-niños en las tradiciones occidentales y la estrategia colonial de explotar a niñas y niños de color como mecanismo lucrativo de ganancia y placer libidinal.

palabras clave: infancia; raza; estados unidos; inocencia; pornografía; pedofilia.

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Figure 1

"The September Morn" painting by Paul Chabas, 1912 (author's collection)

Postcard of nude black child by Bernhardt C. Wall, 1913

introduction

During the summer and early autumn of 1913, American reaction to "September Morn," an award-winning painting completed two years earlier by the French artist Paul Chabas of a nude girl bathing in a serene lake, oscillated between outrage and mockery of the outrage.

A famous smut suppressor and child advocate, Anthony Comstock, threatened a New York City art dealer who showcased the painting in a display window and had the work banned from the mail. The controversial painting inspired poems, songs, vaudeville performances, cartoons, and comedies. Some cities allowed it to be publicly displayed but behind screens or with bathrobes and drapes over the girl's breasts and waist. Other communities barred the painting from galleries, streetcars, and cabs. Postmasters in Fort Worth, New Orleans, Montgomery, Birmingham, San Jose, Miami, Dallas, Omaha, and Kansas City banned postcard reproductions from being sent through the local mail. Students at Wooster College, in Ohio, gave "September Morn" a "flame bath," throwing prints into a bonfire as part of a campus-wide religious revival. Three men in different

cities were denied admission to the U.S. Navy for having the nude girl tattooed on their bodies. Recruiting officers and surgeons decided that the presence of that "obscene tattoo mark" would be "demoralizing to the Navy." The nude girl caused traffic jams, prompted arrests of art dealers, triggered a storm of protests by police officers, vice suppressors, clubwomen, and art communities, and stimulated heated debates over art and decency in newspaper editorials. Chicago's superintendent of public schools testified in court that the painting had "an immoral effect on children." A local priest argued that "it stimulat[ed] lust" and was "an improper exhibition of human nakedness". A jury in that city eventually decided that the painting could be displayed publicly.[2]

Before the uproar over the naked blonde bathing in a shallow lake quieted, a younger black burlesque rendition emerged. Another white male artist, Bernhardt C. Wall, extracted from and/or pandered to popular racist ideas about black children's sexuality to draw laughter and, in the process, generate a profit. Popularly known as America's "Postcard King," Wall was a native New Yorker and Spanish-American War veteran who made his living by drawing book covers and, in all, more than 5,000 picture postcards for the Ullman Manufacturing Company in Manhattan. For this nude portrayal of a black girl child, there were no public outcries of lewdness or indecency, no arrests or trials, no newspaper commentary, no censorship, and no restrictions on sending it through the mail. After more than a century since Wall created this one-cent postcard, I purchased a reproduction on

[2] "Artists Object to Removal of Picture Showing Nude Girl," *The Grand Forks Daily Herald*, March 7, 1913, pg. 8; "Police 'Art Critic' Seizes Prints of Famous Painting," *Duluth News Tribune*, March 19, 1913, 8; *Sunday Olympian*, March 22, 1913, 2; "Art Dealer Held For Showing Nude Picture in Window But Jury Declares Vice Commissioner's Judgment Bad and Frees Him," *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, March 22, 1913, 1; "When is art art? When wicked?" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 14, 1913, 3; "September Morn pits her beauty against censors," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1913; "Nude Held Not Lewd. Art Dealer May Continue to Show Painting," *Morning Oregonian*, March 22, 1913, 5; "September Morn Wins Case," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 22, 1913, 3; "Picture Returns to Show Window — Chicago Jury Finds Everything Proper in Display After Witnesses Disagree," *Duluth News Tribune*, March 22, 1913, 10; "Art Triumphs in Chicago.; Jury Decides Paul Chabas' "September Morn" Isn't Too Immodest." *The New York Times,* March 22, 1913, 1; "September Morn Caused Jam — Traffic Blocked Half Hour in Milwaukee When Picture Was Shown," *The Kansas City Star*, April 24, 1913, 1; "September Morn Not Guilty a Milwaukee Judge Says the Painting Sure is a Work of Art," *The Kansas City Star*, April 27, 1913, 1; "Pictures as Evidence; Judge approves it," *The Duluth News Tribune*, April 30, 1913, 2; "Police Put Ban on Art, 'Miss September Morn' and Other Paintings Are Barred," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 4, 1913, 24.

eBay for slightly under $40.00. It was marketed as a valuable 'Black Americana' collectible.

We can presume that this image was designed to poke fun at the controversy over the Chabas painting. With her too-red engorged lips, protruding eyes and hair plaits run askew, the image of a naked black girl bathing in a wooden bucket caused no repudiation from Comstock, New York's most famous spokesman for children. Chabas' white youth's body was construed as a source of enticement and pleasure that demanded regulation and concealment from public scrutiny. This measure aimed to mitigate its perceived capacity to disrupt and divert a nation guided by the principles of Puritanism, republicanism, and self-governance. These foundational ideals sought to enforce moral standards, cultivate a virtuous citizenry capable of exercising self-control, and encourage responsible decision-making. Nonetheless, this consideration did not extend to a black girl child, as blackness was not viewed as desirable but rather inherently linked with sexuality, characterized as uncivilized and uncontrollable. Consequently, Wall's nude image cloaked in a comedic veneer, was deemed unsuitable for inclusion within accepted community definitions of "smut."

Obviously meant to draw laughter from certain viewers, the black child appears just as defenseless as her white counterpart. At a first glance she seems to display a sense of modesty, but unlike the "September Morn" subject, with her idealized flesh and refined colors, there are no hints of sentimentality or beauty in this image. Her coarse features were clearly designed to make her appear physically unattractive. While Chabas sought to capture the innocent nude's "delicate charm," the artist of this postcard had different intentions[3]. The idea that a young black girl could be chaste, beautiful, innocent, worthy of a lament against obscenity, or that a provocative image of her could stir up the same kind of controversy as did a risqué image of an older white girl, seemed laughable. In this illustration, the black child herself appears to acknowledge being the subject of mockery and deems herself undeserving of scrutiny. The caption beneath her reinforces this sentiment: *"Go 'long, white man. I ain't no 'SEPTEMBER MORN'."*

[3] Twenty-five Years After. (1935). *Time*, March 18.

The girl in the bucket makes direct eye contact with the viewer, extending an invitation to walk away because there is nothing controversial for him to see, or to look at her naked body, watch her bathe, perhaps engage in more-intimate acts. Wall's postcard and so many others like it were allowed to circulate through the mail and were widely sold in drugstores and train depots. Their familiarity went along with the certainty that white America must focus on the preservation of a white future by protecting the purity of its own children. So the explicit public sexualization of white children became less acceptable to the extent that it jeopardized the stability and strength of a white-supremacist society. But black children were always readily available as alternatives for fetishization and abuse. The use of humor in this visual media served as a masking tool, obfuscating the overt sexual degradation of black children. This use of humor functions as a shield, desensitizing viewers and making it challenging for them to recognize the underlying pornographic elements, as they may focus more on the comedic aspect rather than critically evaluating the content.

These two images by Paul Chabas and Bernhardt Wall are connected by the context of their shared history. It is not an obviously simple story about the parody of one child at the expense of the other. Side by side, these pictures illustrate how late-19th and early-20th-century new media, censorship laws, purity campaigns, and ideas about sex coalesced to shape childhood innocence with racialized pedophilic overtones. The juxtaposition of these two girls reveals how ideas about child sexuality, consumerism, popular entertainment, and the rise of pornography in the Atlantic world were implicated in the racialized construction of childhood innocence during the Progressive Era. These objects of consumer culture are also artifacts of Jim Crow, and they visually express how black children became targets of amusement and sexual degradation in an era when children were supposed to be protected from such exploitation in the media. The creators of these images and the sustainers of notions of innocence, consciously or not, had some understanding that black and white children were constitutive of each other's racial identity. The objectification, power dynamics, profit motives, racial hierarchies, cultural imperialism, and reinforcement of the colonial project are all elements evident in

these visual representations, providing insight into the historical exploitation of black communities during the early 20th century.

There were impresarios and purity crusaders overseeing and controlling new national media. Recognized as protectors of children, they have never been written into the history of race. Here, for the first time, African American children and one of America's most famous purity crusaders will meet each other. U.S. Postal Inspector Anthony Comstock was one of the foremost icons of America's turn-of-the-century sex wars and most passionate spokesmen for children. His conscientious reform efforts, along with his ability to prime the social anxieties of New York City's elite and middle-class whites, made him a villain and a buffoon to some and a hero to others as he defined the genre of pornography even as he sought to suppress its production and circulation nationwide (Talese, 1993, p. 43; Heins, 2001, p. 30; Ernst & Schwartz, 1964, p. 21). Comstock's efforts were not merely about enforcing laws but also about imposing his own moral standards on the broader public, influencing societal norms and values by dictating what was considered acceptable or obscene. He wielded substantial authority over public discourse and policy, shaped perceptions of childhood and discourse around obscenity. But his campaigns of purity and rhetoric of childhood innocence were not neutral. They played an indelible role in reinforcing the differential treatment of black and white children in media representations that reflected power dynamics rooted in adultism—bias and systemic discrimination against children—and colonial structures.

While historians have portrayed Comstock as a flawed yet dedicated advocate for youth, neither he nor other child-saving reformers have been held accountable for their neglect of the filthy images of black children that circulated within white American visual media and consumer spaces. The elderly suppressor of vice may not have been a rabid perpetrator of more overt forms of racial discrimination against black children, but he was silent about the impact of racist and sexually explicit postcards that circulated throughout the U.S. (and European) mail system, his main domain of control. In an era when Progressive reformers fervently argued that children were innocent and needed to be protected from

various forms of vice and exploitation, black youth escaped Comstock's concerns. He thus operated as a silent actor in the drama of the construction of racial childhood. The exclusion of black children from his purity campaigns, and from the period's constructed category of innocence, illustrates how a generation of white Americans turned their consciousness away from the widespread cruelty toward and neglect of black youth. Comstock's silence as well as his outspoken crusades represent an untold story of how American childhood, black and white, was drawn into the web of social relations and the construction of racial hierarchy steeped in pedophilia at the turn of the 20th century.

Why did Anthony Comstock see sexuality in Chabas' nude painting, and ignore the more overt sexualization of black children in American postcards?

The answer: Anthony Comstock's reaction reflects the complex dynamics of white supremacist pedophilia. This ideology sexualized white children under the guise of purity, aiming to deny its desires, while it sexualized black children for perceived wantonness without such denial. Comstock's condemnation of Chabas' painting reflects his commitment to preserving the innocence of white children, which he viewed as endangered by such artistic depictions. This reaction exemplifies a broader societal impulse to protect white children from perceived sexual corruption. Conversely, his indifference to the sexualization of Black children in postcards highlights the entrenched racial biases of the era. The sexual exploitation of Black children did not provoke the same moral outrage because it aligned with white supremacist beliefs about their inherent sexuality. This dehumanization and hypersexualization were not seen as corrupting innocence but rather as confirming racist ideologies.

White supremacist ideology constructs white childhood around ideals of purity, untouchability, and innocence, particularly emphasizing the protection of white girls as paragons of virtuous childhood. Comstock's vehement reaction to Chabas' painting underscores this protective stance of children. For Comstock and his contemporaries, any depiction of white children in sexual contexts threatened their innocence, necessitating moral crusades to suppress and deny expressions of sexuality that could undermine this purity. This broader societal effort aimed to

maintain white children's innocence by rigorously controlling and denying their sexual representation, which was its own form of sexual objectification. However, Comstock's advocacy was not purely protective; it revealed his internal struggle with seeing white children as sexual beings and his attempts to deny these pedophilic predilections. His efforts to protect whiteness by shielding white youth from sexual objectification stood in stark contrast to the broader culture's sexual fascination with and fetishization of Black children. If he was truly concerned about safeguarding children from objectification, he would have acted against pornographic images of black children by banning their production and circulation.

Black and white children were sexualized in different ways, but black children were systematically denied the same innocence afforded to white children. Within the framework of white supremacist ideology, Black children were hypersexualized and dehumanized, perceived as inherently lascivious and devoid of innocence. This portrayal allowed artists, publishing companies and consumers to justify the sexual exploitation of Black children without eliciting the same moral outrage that protected white children. The hypersexualization of Black children reinforced racist stereotypes, portraying them as sexually available and inherently depraved, thus legitimizing their exploitation.

It may seem contradictory that white reformers and vice suppressors, who historically defined childhood by a lack of sexuality, could derive pedophilic pleasure from sexualizing Black children. However, they exploited the notion of childhood innocence in racially differentiated ways to reinforce their oppressive structures. While white children were shielded by notions of innocence and asexuality, Black children were systematically denied this protection. Their perceived innocence was manipulated and sexualized to serve the perverse desires of racists. Some might argue that the primary motivation behind the sexualization of Black children is rooted in racist ideologies rather than pedophilic desires. But it is crucial to clarify that while the racist dehumanization of Black children is indeed a central factor, it does not exclude the presence of pedophilic fetishization. White supremacy operated through a dual mechanism: it portrayed Black children as hypersexualized beings, thereby justifying their exploitation, while also deriving

perverse pleasure from their sexualization and denial of humanity. This intersection of racism and pedophilia highlights the multifaceted ways in which black children were objectified and dehumanized.

Some readers might also perceive a logical incoherence in the argument that figures like Comstock could deny childhood sexuality in white youth while engaging in the sexualization of Black children by allowing the circulation of pedophilic postcards. This perceived contradiction can be resolved by examining the selective application of childhood innocence within white supremacist ideology. This selective recognition allowed racists to rationalize their actions by viewing Black children as inherently different and thus outside the moral and social boundaries applied to white children. This dual standard facilitated the justification of their exploitative behavior while providing a cover for pedophilia targeting white children.

Finally, some might critique the focus on pedophilia as potentially detracting from the primary explanation of racism. However, these pornographic postcards of Black children cannot be explained by racism alone. It is important to acknowledge that the racial aspect of the oppression is indeed sufficient to understand the pleasure white supremacists derived from these postcards. However, the inclusion of the pedophilic element provides a deeper insight into the nature of this exploitation. By highlighting how white supremacy not only racialized but also sexualized Black children, we uncover the full extent of their dehumanization. This dual analysis underscores the comprehensive and multifaceted mechanisms of white supremacist oppression, offering a more complete understanding of the historical context and its impact. Subordinating or ignoring a child-based analysis obscures how white supremacy and pedophilia worked hand in hand.

White supremacy is a system built on the objectification, domination, and fetishization of those within its patriarchal domain - though the manifestations differ across groups. White men have historically desired and abused white women, white children, black men and women, and black children - each group in its own distinct way. The common thread is that this fetishization is inextricably linked to power structures and upholding patriarchy. In the post-Emancipation era, efforts

were made to distance whiteness from the dehumanization faced by black people. Reformers and vice suppressors banned white pedophilic images and eventually criminalized the rape of white women and minors. This was done not out of genuine regard for white women and children, but because it became increasingly untenable to maintain white overt white dominance over some members of the white community in the same way as black people if the future of whiteness was to remain secure.

Laws and public discourse shifted to create the appearance that white women and children occupied a different category than black people. However, in practice, white women and children continued to face sexual abuse and violence at the hands of white men. The banning of pedophilic depictions of white children served to legally and discursively distance whiteness from associations with the objectification of black people, protecting the construct of white supremacy itself. In other words, white supremacy upholds patriarchal power through the selective fetishization, abuse, and dehumanization of various groups, maintaining an ostensible moral high ground while still enabling the exploitation of white women and children behind the scenes.

Turn-of-the-century postcards suggest that black and white children were culturally imagined as opposites. The images operated as either positive or negative counterpoints to the other, helping to legitimize myriad racist laws and social practices, lending credence to pseudo-scientific theories about racial difference, and making the sexual degradation of certain groups of children appear benign and natural. Charged with racialist ideas concerning childhood and sexuality, the dissemination of explicit postcards spanning from 1890 to the late 1950s—during which the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) advocated for their removal—was a product crafted by and for white audiences. This enabled white individuals to openly and legally engage in pedophilic activities without acting upon their illicit desires. In doing so, they sought to differentiate themselves from those who perpetrated direct physical violence against black children. White artists, publishers, and consumers used depictions of racial stereotypes and lighthearted messages about slavery and lynching to express

nostalgia, love and friendship, to evoke laughter, ease racial anxieties, and exchange coded messages about their pedophilic desires for black children. These cards represent a specific sub-genre within child pornography, and they were part of a psychological ecosystem of pleasure derived from the spectacle of black pedophilic projection and humiliation.

How did the production of these sexually explicit images during the Progressive Era — as concern began to grow for protecting and preserving the innocence of children — work in concert with the mean-spiritedness of Jim Crow racism? How did the desire to control, ridicule, and sexually violate black children through media images and consumer goods serve as a source of sadistic pleasure for white audiences? Why do contemporary dealers of racist and sexually explicit images falsely advertise these consumer products as "Black Memorabilia" when they are not representations created by and for black people, but rather an artistic vision of a racist society that arrogated morality while deriving pleasure and power from subjugating black children and sharing tangible evidence of it? During Jim Crow, racist consumer goods allowed white people to live in a world of civility, purity, progressivism, morality, and modernity while playing in the world of pedophilic postcards, which were defined by their depictions of innate sexuality in black children. Both senders and receivers could imagine themselves as being outside the production of the filth they consumed, as is the case with those who resell these items today as Black Memorabilia. Dealers and buyers claim that they are trafficking in them not for the racism and child pornography, but because they are relics of a different historical era and are worth a lot of money.

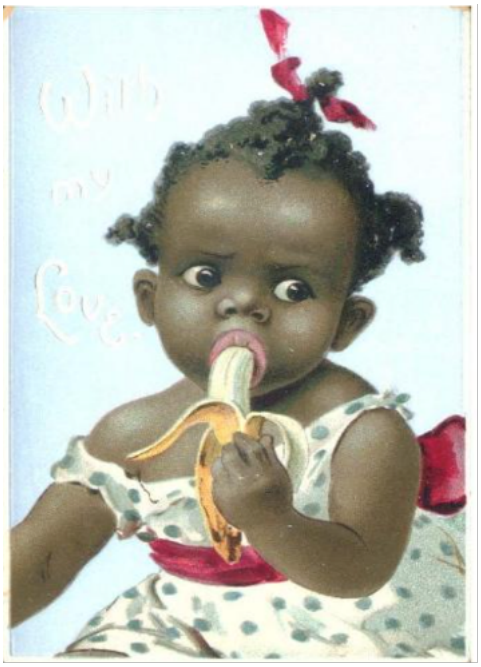
Historically, childhood in Western cultures has been distinguished from adulthood by a lack of mature rationality, moral reasoning, and personal responsibility. During the Progressive Era, reformers like Comstock publicly asserted that sexuality marked the boundary between adults and children. However, they also attributed sexuality to non-pedophilic images. White girls were not seen as asexual; rather, their sexuality was framed in terms of purity, virtue, and unavailability. These traits, while seen as protections of whiteness, also became categories of fetishization. Adults were perceived as possessing sexuality, whereas

children were ostensibly free from it. Black children allegedly displayed signs and behaviors of illicit sexuality in early adolescence while the white child's sexual instincts remained dormant, echoing the medical findings published in pediatric journals of the era. The visual imagery presented here is illustrative of how high scientific discourse became popularized. In this context, pornographic postcards of black children were more than they appeared to be. At worst, some white artists and viewers used them to displace their repressed desires for their own "innocent" and "untouchable" children onto black youth. Historians have made similar observations concerning erotic images of white children. Even if such images did not provide viewers with titillation, they offered certain assurances about white normalcy, morality, dominance, and superiority.

In 1985, the sociologist Viviana Zelizer published a classic study in which she argued that American attitudes toward and treatment of children underwent a transformative shift between the 1870s and 1930s. She maintained that the expulsion of children from the "cash nexus," or labor force, was followed by what she called the "sacralization" of their lives (Zelizer, 1985, chapter 1). Children's changing economic value determined their new social value, she argued. The view that children were objects of utility and financial contributors to the family network shifted to the view that they were "economically worthless but emotionally priceless" members of the middle-class family, to be invested in with sentimental value and moral meaning (3). Central to the new view that children were priceless was a changing understanding of children's sexuality. The dominant view at the time was that children lacked sexual desire and were not mature enough to engage in sexual activity. These ideas lent credence to policies that shaped child-labor laws, education reform, life insurance for youth, and the creation of a separate justice system for children and adults. It became increasingly taboo not only to make a profit off children through labor exploitation, but also to sexually objectify them in art. By the late 1880s, ideas about childhood innocence had provoked lawmakers to pass legislation extending certain protections from sexual degradation in childhood by raising the age of consent and revising rape laws (Cocca, 2004, p. 23; Odem, 1995,

p. 14). On the surface, it seems, such laws were created to protect all children, but when applied, they covered only white youth.

Figure 2



"With My Love," a 1910 postcard by child portraitist Frances Brundage.

A 1916 postcard by artist Donald McGill.

In the following, I bring together multiple historiographies, namely those concerning American consumption, the construction of childhood innocence, and the production of race. While numerous historians have studied the production of racial imagery and consumer items popularly known today as "Black Memorabilia" or "Black Americana", those historical works focus almost exclusively on adults. In these adult-centered considerations, the significance of childhood in the construction of race is marginalized or overlooked (Turner, 1994; Goings, 1994; Buster, 2000; Pilgrim, 2015, 2017). Black children, if they appear at all, are understood as proxies or stand-ins for black men and women, who are viewed as the main targets of white control and degradation. To look at both groups of children separately tends to repeat silences and exclusions. My goal is to bring these silences and exclusions under scrutiny by examining the production and circulation of juxtaposing images of black and white children. History has left us these remnants of what once circulated in all directions of our society, and they represent

merely one physical manifestation of how black and white children were separated even in the American imagination to reinforce racialized power dynamics.

picturing innocence

The first picture postcards portraying African Americans were released three decades after the Civil War, at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition, held in Atlanta — the same event where Booker T. Washington delivered his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in which he assuaged white fears about so-called uppity blacks and their quest to pursue equal rights. Washington's speech pledged accommodation to white supremacy, a tactical maneuver that ultimately failed to protect black people's property, civil rights, and humanity from white backlash. While visitors attending the exposition were able to see new technological innovations, they also witnessed ethnological exhibits featuring blacks and other exotic people as inferior savages. Such spectacles, along with newly emergent racist consumer markets in a variety of artifacts, helped buttress white ideas about black inferiority.

As the historian Grace Elizabeth Hale writes in *Making Whiteness* (1998), emancipation "made anything possible and nothing certain." With freedom came soaring black literacy rates, increased black mobility, the growth of the black middle class, the chance to own property, and the opportunity to construct a new kind of identity as free and competent citizens. The fulfillment of such possibilities would destroy white myths about black inferiority, just as fears about race mixing threatened racial hierarchy. As Hale asserts, a "culture of segregation" along with the consumption of racist consumer goods helped to create blackness as a commodity (15). Postcards represent merely one dimension of a persistent strategy to reproduce race and reclaim black bodies through consumption and profit.

Emancipation had destroyed a black childhood known to Americans for centuries, and it unleashed new possibilities for black youth born or coming of age after slavery. Mary Niall Mitchell reveals in *Raising Freedom's Child* (2008) that in the years preceding the Civil War, Americans used conflicting images of the black child to foreshadow the social, political, and economic consequences of emancipation. The images Mitchell explores reveal how Northern and Southern feelings about the

black child's future rested between hope and disorder. There were fierce debates over what kind of education black children should receive, as well continuing disagreements concerning their labor, racial classification, and citizenship status. Mitchell shows how white Northerners saw education as the means to transform former slave children into "models of discipline and propriety," with education providing the potential to "eradicate slavery's effects, producing instead industrious young people with the desires of free market consumers."

On the other hand, the idea of black children enjoying the same privileges as whites led to anxiety about the destruction of racial identity, the disappearance of a black agricultural labor force, the collapse of the plantation economy in the South, and fears about sexual mixing between blacks and whites (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 3-6). Essentially, if given a fair chance, the first generation of free black children had the potential to upset the nation's racial hierarchy. Though no longer part of a future cheap slave-labor force, black children still had economic value to white Southerners as exploitable laborers. Black children are not only juxtaposed with Southern crops in picture postcards, but were often depicted as giggly and plump. To promote the myth that they were well-fed and content with their status, just as white slave owners had claimed during slavery. While some images show happy children, they are also cast as an endangered species being eradicated by wild animals such as alligators.

By the late 1890s, there was a dominant consensus among whites in all regions of the country that the black child's future was problematic. Racist and pornographic images of black children began to be heavily trafficked, spreading a collective artistic vision of a society in which black youth had little, if any, intrinsic value to American society. Consumer goods that degraded black children were one of several categories of material culture that helped create what Hale calls "a common whiteness" to help alleviate post-Civil War tensions and justify new forms of discrimination and terror against blacks. Such goods were popular, she writes, because of their "wide capacity to embody the black as entertainment, labor, and product" (Hale, 1998, pp. 151-154). The explicit and dehumanizing portrayals in the postcards objectified black children, reducing them to mere commodities for

voyeuristic pleasure (King, 2008; Bernstein, 2011, p. 53). This objectification echoes colonial practices by which dominant groups often dehumanized, othered through a colonial gaze, and treated marginalized populations as objects of exploitation rather than as equal human beings. By portraying black children in a sexualized manner, visual media reinforced the notion of white child superiority and perpetuated a sense of entitlement to exploit and oppress other people's children.

A colonial strategy targets the most vulnerable members of marginalized groups to establish a culture of helplessness, making it easier to perpetuate broader systemic violence and oppression. Targeting children is a means of controlling future generations within marginalized communities. By subjecting children to sexualized exploitation, perpetrators exert influence over the trajectory of these communities, shaping the experiences and opportunities available to subsequent generations. Exploiting children disrupts the social fabric of marginalized communities by creating divisions, mistrust, and a pervasive sense of insecurity within the community, making it more difficult for individuals to collectively resist oppression. This calculated social disruption sends a potent message to black parents, implying a deliberate assault on their ability to safeguard their children and reinforcing a narrative of vulnerability which aligns with historical strategies employed by colonial powers to weaken both the protective structure of the family and any resistance movements.

Though not all white consumers of lewd postcards had racist preconceptions, the majority purchased commodity representations of blackness not just for humor, but also to search for individual and collective meaning during the era's social upheavals. While Hale and other historians have shown how consumer culture became implicated in the reconstruction of race during the Jim Crow period, they have not fully considered the use of children in this process. And their work has a Southern focus that overlooks the national circulation of new popular media and the broader significance of racial reconstruction, especially considering the Great Black Migration's nationalization of racial tensions. White artists, publishers, and consumers exploited the marketplace to dehumanize black children as one of many

strategies to impede the progress of a newly freed black citizenry and to deny black youth the notion of future possibility.

Anthony Comstock sought to control the upsurge of new visual media because he feared the ways in which print technologies could be used to encourage the wide distribution and accessibility of obscene material, which he believed would lead to further social and moral decay. Forty years before Comstock encountered the naked girl in the lake in the window of a New York City art dealer's shop, he had gained enough support from ministers, clubwomen, and preventive societies, along with financial backing from the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and wealthy New Yorkers, to successfully lobby Congress in 1873 to pass stricter anti-smut legislation and the means to enforce it. He traveled to Washington with a bag of naughty books, condoms, abortion literature, postcards, pills, and dildos to demonstrate before Congress that the uncontrolled production and circulation of obscene material had become a pressing national problem. During that meeting he also displayed 15,000 intercepted orders for pornographic literature written and mailed by schoolchildren (Morone, 2004, p. 229).

Based on this evidence, Comstock convinced Congress that public health and morality had taken a dramatic decline since the Civil War, and that the future of the Republic was in danger because the corrupting forces of Satan baited and lured the innocent souls of the nation's white youth. His reaction to and subsequent suppression of the "September Morn" painting decades later should not be understood solely as one man's crusade to stamp out smut, but also as a political act that reflects societal fears about social disorder, anxieties about the possibilities of taboo sexual liaisons across class, racial boundaries and age barriers, and the need for social control in a rapidly changing society. By policing the mail system, Comstock sought to limit children's exposure to all things dirty.

Before Comstock's intervention, the mail was often immune to local regulation, and there was little restriction on the public circulation of sexual literature or the exploitation of children in vaudeville shows, circuses, and brothels in New York City and other urban centers. Comstock targeted the postal system as the main source of the "insidious traffic." He would later write: "the mails are the

great arteries of communication — mighty thoroughfares leading up to all our homes and institutions of learning. The sanctity of the seal is the cloak of security to the villain." For Comstock, the mail posed a grave threat because it was "the most powerful agent to assist this nefarious business, because it goes everywhere and is secret," making pornography exciting. But the mail made it accessible. Left unregulated, the mail had the potential to cause chaos by spreading ideas about sex to certain groups, especially children who needed to be kept ignorant of sex, so they could pursue "proper" pursuits. Comstock (1880) would claim that filthy things trafficking through the mail ruined youths by inducing masturbation and other bad behaviors that tarnished their character and social standing and undermined their prospects (11-12).

Comstock blamed Jews and the Irish for flooding urban centers with smut and political corruption. His writings reveal his nativist sentiments, echoing white middle-class and elite anxieties about the deterioration of their social and political hold on power and the erosion of their cultural values with the incursion of immigrants. The sale of smut by political and cultural outsiders, he complained, had "succeeded in injecting a virus more destructive to the innocence and purity of youth . . . than can be the most deadly disease to the body" (Comstock, 1875, pp. 10-11). As Nicola Beisel has shown in *Imperiled Innocents* (1997), Comstock also linked vice and social decay to the fears of the middle and elite classes that their children would fall prey to immorality and would not be able to socially distance themselves from inferior groups of children. Exposure to vice, he maintained, "poison[ed] and corrupt[ed] the streams of life, leaving a moral wreck, a physical deformity, [and] enervated system" of innocent youth.

Without protection, "this cursed business of obscene literature works beneath the surface, and like a canker worm, secretly eats out the moral life and purity of our youth, and they droop and fade before their parent's eyes" (146). But turn-of-the-20th-century moral campaigns were not just a critical component of class formation and the consolidation of class privilege and identity, as Beisel and other social historians have maintained. They were also essential to the reproduction of racial identity and the preservation of white supremacy. Just as it

was critical to safeguard the future of the Republic by protecting the social and moral purity of white children, it was also essential to keep the black race in check by excluding its youth from certain reform efforts, regardless of class status.

Historians have located eroticism of children in other historical sources, such as child-rearing manuals, psychological literature, and advertisements. James Kincaid's *Child Loving* (1992) and Anne Higonnet's *Pictures of Innocence* (1998) have traced the historical romanticism of the innocent child and how mass-produced images acquired the ability to define cultural assumptions of what childhood looked like. Both scholars have considered how the focus on beauty, the choice of clothing and poses, and other symbolic elements contributed to depictions of white children as unintentionally sensual. The culture of the Progressive Era may have masked its pedophilic sexual fascination through the denial and abhorrence of erotic images of white children that circulated in an underground market — those that were seen in popular texts such as *Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Tess, Peter Pan,* and *Alice in Wonderland,* as well as Lewis Carroll's erotic photographs of little girls. Others have explored the ways that reformers, politicians, advertisers, and purveyors of children's culture used images of childhood to define innocence and to advance certain political, social, and economic interests.

Kincaid and Higonnet have argued that even as Progressive-era reformers and institutions helped construct conceptions of childhood by emphasizing children's sexual innocence and purity, their efforts eroticized children. Children's presumed innocence only reinforced desire for them as sexual objects. It is tempting to dismiss Kincaid's and Higonnet's assertions that the construction of white children as innocent somehow eroticized them. After all, their focus is mainly on romantic images of fully clothed vapid and angelic-looking children not engaged in illicit sexual activity. Even so, to the extent that white children were culturally constructed as forbidden and untouchable innocents, they became taboo objects of desire. But this focus on the eroticization of the white child has diverted concern from the more overt and sinister types of abuse of black children. Sexual images of black children have gone unnoticed in most historical discussions of innocence, and they have been given only passing mention by historians of race and consumer

culture, even though it was the black child that became the sole model of filth and indecency in the era's high-culture discussions of child sexuality and innocence.

The erotic images of white children did not carry the negative illicit notions that very public and filthy pornographic pictures of black children did. As Lisa Sigel (2000) has noted in her work on the rise of pornography in Britain and the Atlantic world, prior to Comstock's era, it was words that had been recognized as the main source of pornography. But during the 1880s and 1890s, cheap postcards helped transform pornography from words to pictures. This transformation, Sigel notes, dramatically broadened audiences' exposure to women as objects of desire, to scatological humor, to bestiality, and to the sexuality of people of color and children (861). These images, not always shocking today in a culture in which pornography is more visually graphic, were shocking in the past because certain acts were made visual. Progressive reformers, purity campaigners, and anti-smut crusaders most likely did not believe that in highlighting children's purity they were unwittingly sexualizing notions of innocence. Still, aside from the connection between Progressives and their alleged eroticization of childhood, modernization along with the rise in forms of print media and the segregated entertainment culture play a more significant role here.

The appeal of the forbidden in modernizing cultures and the availability of the forbidden in various media, like those that placed bare-breasted colonized women and naked children of color on readily available postcards and other forms of print media, excluded those groups as part of the ideal. Because black children were not considered fully human, they forfeited claims to protection, in both visual media and reality. Therefore, smut artists and viewers did not see themselves as guilty of child abuse because unlike white children, blacks were not innocent or pure. Black children were effectively fair game for abuse in a circulating medium that allowed white working-class people, as well as middle-class men and women, to "enjoy" black children's bodies, either sexually or in a crude, joking way, with impunity. Because American society still does not regard black children as fully human, these very same old postcards continue to circulate today now under the

guise of "Black memorabilia" or "Black Americana," with joking descriptions that attempt to obfuscate the potent sexual and racial themes (Goings, 1994).

During the second half of the 19th century, the United States enjoyed a major wave of consumerism, along with the promotion of new forms of communication that preceded the use of picture postcards. Initially, innovations such as the camera, telegraph, telephone, and mail system had their deficiencies. They were often too slow, too expensive, unreliable or inaccessible to most Americans before burgeoning technological developments added new dimensions and availability to the nation's streams of communication. Advancements in print technology and photography, the expansion of the railways throughout various regional centers and the passage of the Private Mailing Card Act, in May 1898, helped stimulate the massive production and distribution of postcards throughout the country. Until then, the U.S. Post Office had been the only establishment allowed to print postcards.

The entry of private printers into the postcard business paved the way for consumers to send cards through the mail for a penny instead of the regular letter rate of two cents. As a result, the demand for postcards soared and quickly spurred a collecting craze, especially among predominantly white middle-class buyers, particularly women, with disposable incomes and a taste for sentimental objects (King, 2008, p. 129-130; Goings, 1994, p. 11-14; Mellinge, 1992). In 1908, the Post Office reported that more than 677 million postcards had been mailed the previous year. The following year, Americans mailed more than one billion postcards (Davis, 2002, p. 2). By 1920, postcards had become what Sigel has called "a trans-Atlantic phenomenon," with roughly 140 billion sent worldwide (861). These developments created a new universe of images, stimulated the commercialization, massive consumption, and circulation of visual imagery, and transformed the possibility of exploiting images of children, women, blacks, and various ethnic groups at home and abroad.

To preserve social standing and encourage future mobility in a competitive, multiracial society, it was essential to raise healthy, happy, protected, and morally pure children by shielding them from harmful pictures, words, and ideas. Reform

efforts aimed at children, Beisel asserts, "are properly seen as struggles over class reproduction" and a means for the middle class to consolidate its own identity (Beisel, 1990, p. 217). It is important to note that she uses the "September Morn" painting as the front cover of her book to illustrate the connections among the rhetoric of childhood innocence, class reproduction and identity politics. Had Beisel seen Bernhardt Wall's black burlesque depiction of the artwork, perhaps her rich argument could have been further nuanced by an analysis of race, a dimension sorely missing from her work and other historical studies of childhood, reform movements and Anthony Comstock's career.

The sexualization of black children in popular imagery grew from the same ideologies and practices that prompted the sexual and racial degradation of black men and women. But there is a different kind of historical specificity to the objectification of black boys and girls, one that warrants a separate line of inquiry. Black children, like black women, were in some measure understood to be the "property" of black men and therefore subject to exploitation by white men, who as a means towards enforcing racial and economic hierarchy wished to violate the property of black men. However, a sexual image of a black child drawn by a white artist raises a different set of issues, not solely about the desire to strip black patriarchs of the power of protection and control over black women and children. Such pictures convey distinct ideas, anxieties, and the artist's own mixed feelings about the commonly upheld concept of sexual innocence associated with white children. Additionally, they reflect societal fantasies regarding black children's physical and intellectual development, sexuality, reproductive capacity and worthiness for citizenship. This kind of imagery constituted one critical dimension of a collective racial discourse about an emerging generation of black children —a discourse aimed at subjecting them to various processes of devaluation.

Postcards of sexualized black children reinforced white fears about black overpopulation, about social and biological contamination, and expressed the urgency of maintaining dominance over the first generation of free black citizens through an intense focus on its youth. White consumers, through the acquisition, transmission, and reception of explicit images featuring black children, actively

perpetuated racial stereotypes and the sexual degradation of black youth. This deliberate strategy sought to symbolically assert ownership over these lives, strategically eliminating black children as potential competitors and reinforcing the perceived superiority of white people. White supremacists utilized various tools, including emerging popular media and print technologies, as part of a calculated and insidious effort to undermine the future potential of a new, free black citizenry. During the period from 1890 to 1920, white society was fixated on the purification of the self, notions of manliness, the nation and the white race. This cultural preoccupation is examined in works such as Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* (1995), Elliot Gorn's *The Manly Art* (1985), Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen's *Meanings for Manhood* (1990), John Kasson's *Houdini*, *Tarzan and the Perfect Man* (2001) and Jackson Lears's *Rebirth of a Nation* (2009).

The reform activities of Anthony Comstock must be understood within this cultural milieu. Comstock was a purity crusader, but so were the Southern "redeemers," crusaders who sought to purify politics by disenfranchising African Americans. David Nasaw's *Going Out* (1999) argues that the rise of new, commercialized amusements was marked by racism that allowed the unification of diverse groups of whites to deride and exclude blacks to visibly remind themselves of their own privileged status. However, as demonstrated by the research of Kenneth Goings and Patricia Turner, in the later era of racial politics, cultural icons like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and the Negro porter on the Cream of Wheat box take on a more nuanced significance beyond mere racist contempt. Aunt Jemima embodied a nurturing figure, and Uncle Ben represented the smiling, grandfatherly black man—both serving as pre-industrial race figures that encapsulated values whites nostalgically yearned for. As Jackson Lears has argued, there was a covert element of white envy in representations of black people's supposed ease and freedom (2009). Such representations, which had an erotic component, expressed whites' desires to liberate themselves from the novel bondage of citizenship responsibility. Hence, the period from the 1920s through the 1950s was more concerned with assimilation than purification. White dominance had been secured by *de facto* and *de jure* schemes that cut the possibilities for black progress in North

and South. Popular amusements such as freak attractions, world's fairs, amusement parks, minstrel shows, the production of "darkie music" and racist children's books like Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* (1898) helped to assimilate European immigrants, too, into whiteness by excluding, marginalizing and parodying blacks.

There are many examples of the stark contrasts between white artists' depictions of black and white children. In a 1905 postcard drawn by Wall, a tidy-looking white boy dressed in blue overalls appears as a towering figure along a shoreline. Standing upright with a serious expression, he holds a shovel in one hand; at his feet are a pile of sand with sand pail, miniature soldiers, military artillery, and an American flag rising from a sandy mountain. The black boy, "A True American," as the caption reads, grins while clutching a large American flag. With his adult-like head and plump belly, he wears a cloth diaper as watermelon rinds lie at his feet. He tells his viewer: "I'm an American, same as you. And my favorite flag is red, white and blue. But when I'm hungry, 'tis plain to be seen . . . My favorite color is red, white and green." The humor attempts to obfuscate the real message that unlike white youth, black children will never fully grow up to achieve the competence required to handle the adult privileges and responsibilities of American citizenship. The vision is clear: the white boy will grow up to be a true American patriot, vested with responsibility, power and control, while his black counterpart will not.

One of the consequences of the rise in obscenity prosecutions, thanks to Comstock's efforts, was that they led publishers to develop new genres of pornographic materials by manipulating legal taboos to not only evade the law but also attract buyers (Dennis, 2009). Sexual images of black children, veiled in humor, represent one of those clever forms of manipulation. Censorship laws prohibited white children from being sexually objectified in art, but artists were allowed to produce obscene images of black children — and such images circulated in public markets and through the postal system. Comstock never used the term "pornography," but he applied the law named in his honor quite broadly to new forms of obscenity that captured his attention during his decades as guardian of

public morals.[4] But he was not a moral guardian to all children. Just as he argued that the aim of dirty pictures was to "pervert the taste of the young," "enslave the young imagination," and that the messages in such evil things caused social, moral, physical, and spiritual harm, he did not acknowledge that obscene pictures also surrounded black children growing up in the decades after slavery with the same kinds of dangers, along with new, powerful networks of racial oppression.

While Comstock was seeking to protect white children from being indecently objectified in or exposed to obscene pictures and reading, lewd images of black children proliferated through the mail. An examination of his writings, arrest ledgers of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice —which Comstock founded in 1973 — and secondary literature on his life and career reveals no evidence that he did anything to stop those items, despite their ubiquity. While Comstock's outrage over the "September Morn" painting reflects the attitude of the elite and middle classes trying to save the young from contamination, and for some, at least, to save the white race from racial pollution, it did not occur to him that African Americans had the same protective instincts and visions for their children.

The third period of racist-postcard production extends from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, as civil-rights struggles came to the fore. Although the mobilization for World War II, along with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives, slightly altered racial attitudes, approaches toward desegregation and social equality were met with a persistent backlash, especially from Southern conservatives. Cognizant of America's image as a democratic model, New Dealers and liberals began to question the contradictions and harm of discriminatory practices. As national discussions about the integration of schools and other public facilities intensified, postcard sketches portrayed black children with lighter skin tones and clothing colors. Even so, they were still presented as buffoons lacking the

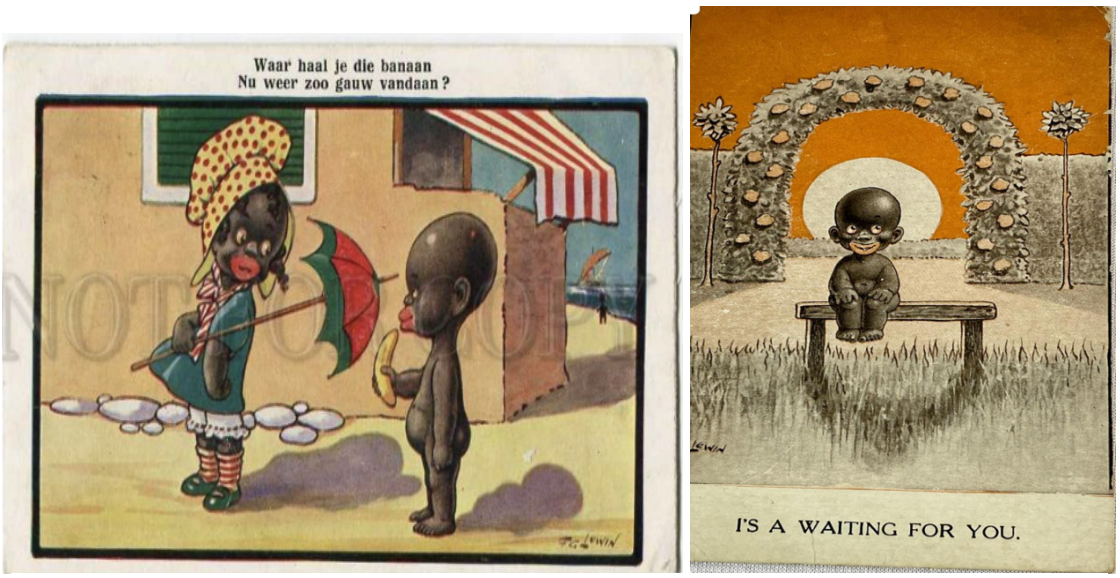
[4] There is much debate among scholars about the origins and definition of what constitutes pornography as well as its impact on sexual behavior. Walter Kendrick writes in *The Secret Museum* that the term "pornography" comes from the Greek "*pornographos*, writing about prostitutes." As Kendrick and other scholars have noted, Comstock freely interpreted what was obscene, lewd, lascivious, or indecent. Comstock and others in power constructed these definitions and were concerned with how sexual images and ideas shaped thoughts and behaviors of certain groups that were seen as needing to be controlled.

capacity to be educated or assimilated into American society even by their own parents, especially their mothers.

Images of African Americans, especially children, are more sexualized during this period than earlier, playing on white fears of integration and the dilution of the white race. An early 1950s postcard shows a half-naked black boy standing next to a fully clothed white girl. The boy's skin is much lighter than in previous such images, and his physiognomy is not as rough. With his hands at his chest, the boy appears to be offering something to the brightly dressed white girl. With her gleaming blond hair, blushed skin, and worried expression, she turns away from him, saying (in French), "No! . . chocolate makes me sick!" The caption line tells the viewer that the black boy has tried to offer himself to the white girl, perhaps for innocent play or perhaps for a sexual encounter. Clearly, she has already been warned about the dangers of mixing with his kind. Though the caption is in French, it was drawn by a New York artist and circulated throughout the United States. Meanwhile, nude black boys proffer sizable bananas to willing black girls, conveying a sexually suggestive message.

Comical postcards featuring black children share similar themes with other popular culture references and forms of entertainment. Their images, including black-baby tales, nursery rhymes, and minstrel themes, harmonized with more than 600 popular "coon" songs, a genre of popular music that fascinated Americans from the early 1880s until the 1920s. These degrading images were found even in best-selling books, films, pseudo-scientific theories, and medical and sociological studies. They shared antebellum ideas about black inferiority. Children's books such as Thomas Nelson Page's *Jack and Jake* (1891) and Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892) to name a few, specifically extended old and new ideas about racial inferiority to black youth (51). These texts not only perpetuated ideas about their stupidity and inferiority but also played upon white fears about uncontrolled sexuality and the dangers of integration. In an essay on black children in print media, the historian Wilma King has noted that stereotypical images casting black children in this way "relegated them to a marginal place and eliminated any hints of competition or agency that might threaten whites" (King, 2005, p. 123).

Figure 3



"I's A Waiting For You," a 1910 postcard by Frederick George Lewin. In another postcard, a girl asks the nude boy in Dutch: "Where did you quickly get that banana from now?"

Filmmakers attached the same kinds of cloying themes to African American children as they did to black adults. The racist humor is rooted in the minstrel tradition, though black children were not central figures in those popular antebellum spectacles in which whites corked up their faces and pretended to act out their own myths and fantasies about blacks. Donald Bogle (2001), the foremost authority on the history of African American film, argues that Hollywood conformed the escapades, physical features, and lifestyles of black children with the dominant racial themes of the era. Films and shorts such as Thomas Edison's *Ten Pickaninnies* (1904), D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Hal Roach's series *Our Gang*, later adapted as *The Little Rascals*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Topsy and Eva* (1927), all carry stereotypes and messages similar to those in picture postcards. The children in the cards resemble the scripted portrayals of famous child actors like Ernest Morrison (Sunshine Sammy), Allen Clayton Hoskins (Farina), Matthew Beard (Stymie), William Thomas Jr. (Buckwheat), and Butterfly McQueen, who starred as Prissy in *Gone With The Wind*. The black child, Bogle writes, "was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair

stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting" (Bogle, 2001, p. 7).

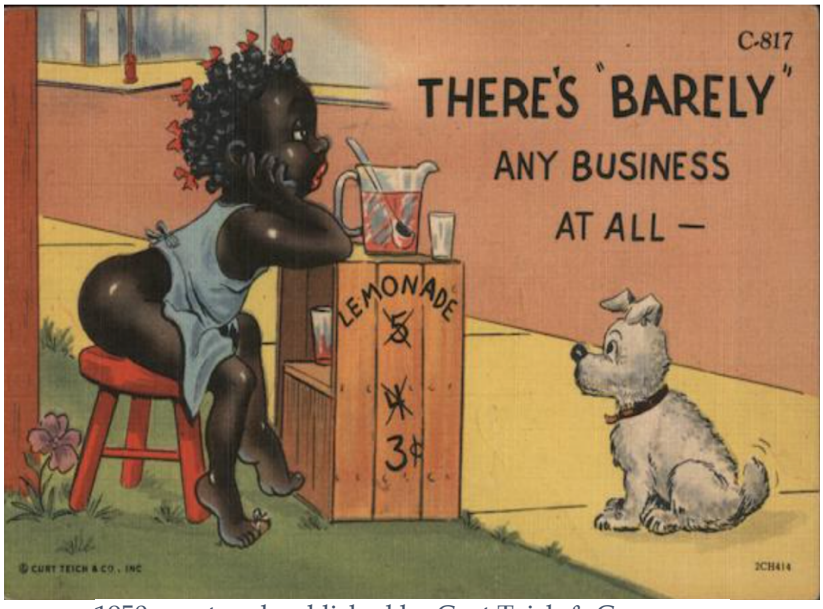
Again, the humor allowed viewers to engage in a collective laugh at the expense of black children while obfuscating the painful realities of their lives. The historian Ken Goings explains that these comical images created "the illusion that race relations were progressing in the South, and the North need not worry about its colored brethren in Dixie." Goings adds, "if African Americans could be depicted as happy clowns or 'Sambos,' then their conditions could not be that bad." (56) In the same vein, if black children could be depicted as happy, despite the poverty and violence surrounding their lives, then there would be no indication that the realities of growing up in a segregated society had a negative impact on their development and outlook on life. In essence, black children were depicted as happy despite being deemed unworthy of a protected humanity.

In an early 1900s postcard, two "quarrelsome coons" are juxtaposed with the beauty and femininity of a white girl. Published in 1908 by Raphael Tuck & Sons, this card was part of the "Happy Little Coons Series." The pitch-black girls, barefoot and clad in ragged dresses, fight over a white doll wearing a clean, flowing white dress. The "coons" prefer white dolls and beauty rather than their own physical traits. Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark's pivotal doll tests which examined children's attitudes about race in the 1940s, revealed the negative psychological impact on black children growing up during segregation. Their studies were crucial to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which dismantled "separate-but-equal" education on the basis that segregation harmed black children's self-esteem and development. The postcard indicates an understanding among whites that black children favored whiteness over their own blackness. Black reformers, too, were cognizant of this issue well before the Clarks' doll studies, and so were Black activists such as W.E.B. DuBois who used media outlets like *The Crisis Magazine* to publish photographs and stories of children to counter negative media portrayals.

picturing the "priceless child"

Racist postcards helped viewers consume stereotypes about the personalities of black children: they were potentially dangerous, but simultaneously they were clowns devoid of intelligence, irresponsible, lazy, and thus free from white conventions and social mores. Black boys, like black men, appear as docile little Sambos that lust for chicken and watermelon, as well as dancing, singing, and fighting. The Sambo stereotype justified slavery by alleging that blacks were happy and content to be servants for their white masters, and after Emancipation it was extended and projected onto the first generation of free black children as a means of limiting their prospects. In freedom, black children were depicted as having no pursuits other than to sleep, eat, steal, gamble, hustle, entertain, and engage in sexual behaviors. While reformers like Anthony Comstock were busy trying to keep white children from being exposed to this kind of vice, white artists drew black children as unashamedly engaging in it.

Figure 4



1950s postcard published by Curt Teich & Co.

White girls served as paragons of antebellum ideas about femininity. Their physical features, along with their behavior, idealized childhood. Some historians have audaciously argued that these kinds of images of pure, soft, untouchable white girls are themselves erotic and sexually exploitative because they invite the gaze of

predators. Perhaps, but when these images of white children are placed next to hardcore sexual images of black girls and boys, the discussion either changes dramatically or becomes conspicuously silent. It is not the focus of this project, however, to parse degrees of sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Rather it is to highlight contradictions in the discourse as well as address the silences and the consequences for black children's lives. Based upon archival evidence, as well as Comstock's reaction to Paul Chabas's naked white girl, it seems clear that artists and dealers understood that they could not sexually objectify white children in cartoons or photographs and publicly circulate them without prosecution. But the images examined here allowed white audiences to publicly view black children's (including infants) sexual development and to view them engaged in sexually taboo behaviors such as oral and anal sex, masturbation, prostitution, dendrophilia (sex with trees), zoophilia (sex with animals), coprophilia (attraction to feces), urophagia (attraction to urination), spanking fetish, and even bathing in a tub full of semen described as "Massa's baff."

In *Pictures of Innocence*, Anne Higonnet argues that through the realm of art the "romantic child" was born. The romantic child, she writes, was "socially, sexually and psychically innocent." She further asserts that adults sought comfort in such images. Higonnet writes: "The image of the Romantic child replaces what we have lost, or what we fear to lose. Every sweetly sunny, innocently cute Romantic child image stows away a dark side: a threat of loss, of change, and, ultimately, of death. Romantic images of childhood gain power not only from their charms, but also from their menace" (Higonnet, 1998, p. 23-24, 29). Despite this observation, like many other historians, Higonnet fails to deal with the ways in which white anxieties, sexual and otherwise, were redirected onto black childhood and allowed viewers to picture black children as devoid of innocence.

Since white girls were assumed to be sexually innocent, they deserved to be protected. Conversely, black girls were portrayed as exuding sexuality in their dress, behavior and suggestive caption lines. Thus forfeited their rights to certain protections reserved for innocent and worthy white girls — even while "innocence" is precisely what made those white girls the objects of sexual desire. In a

photographic postcard printed in 1900, a prepubescent black girl wearing a tattered white dress perches one hand on her hip and fans herself with the other, like a grown woman. Appearing hot and loose, she says to her viewer, *"SOME CLASS, EH?"* A similar postcard produced 30 years later by an unknown artist shows a young girl wearing a red dress and propped up in high-heeled shoes. She fans her groin area and proclaims, *"Dis tender chick'n done been possessed of a tender heart."*

Some white artists represented black girls as sexually mature at a young age, while others drew them with masculine bodies and mannish behaviors, unlike the prim, feminine white girl. Both distinctions are clearly derogatory. In the early 1900s, the artist Sarah E. Nash produced "The Sporting Girl Series" for Curt Teich & Company, a major publisher of postcards. In ""Baseball Girl," for example, a distorted-looking black girl holds a bat while standing over home plate. She says, "When at the bat I'm always right to knock 'em out Yes out of sight." In "Football Girl," a black girl named Sally punts a football and easily scores touchdowns.

Black girls not only look and behave much like boys in such images. Like adult black women, they also do the job of demeaning boys' masculinity, rejecting their advances, verbally cutting them down, hitting them over the head with various objects. Several historians have assumed that at the turn of the 20th century, as it became increasingly taboo to depict nude children in pictures, clear distinctions were made to create boundaries between adult sexuality and children's innocence. But such actions and notions were not universal. In fact, African American children were subjected to pedophiliac voyeurism, one that drew little distinction between black adults and children in terms of their bodies, behavior, character, and sexuality. This phenomenon shares similarities with historical depictions of white children in ancient European art, where they were drawn as miniature adults.

For white viewers, pornographic postcards not only proved black children's physical and intellectual differences and social pathology but also served as visual markers that reflected normal and abnormal child development in the burgeoning new fields of pediatric, psychology, and sociology. These images told viewers that black children were growing in the wrong ways (developing not their minds), lacking in self-control, and displaying deviance, which could be linked to their

oversexed bodies. Wilma King asserts that such images reinforced the notion that black girls especially were libidinous. "This sort of sexualized racism," she writes, "functioned as a rationalization for the exploitation of black girls and women across time and region." (King, 2005, p. 129)

Many people will see these postcards as evidence of black children being "adultified" and denied innocence. I disagree. Their innocence is not being denied. *Their innocence is the fetish.* Pedophiles don't adultify children. They are not attracted to adults. And white-supremacist sexuality is heavily imbued with pedophilic elements. They go hand in hand. White supremacy requires the infantilization of people of color, making them into "child races" not simply to exclude and exploit them as "children" but also to objectify, sexualize, and fetishize them. White-supremacist domination is at its core "mature" domination of the "immature," with all the perversities that come from a relationship of domination. It should come as no surprise that white supremacy has infected white conceptions of childhood, romance, love, and sex. And since white supremacy is so deeply structured by infantilization of racialized people, are we really surprised that black children have long been fetishized as sex objects in white media and consumer culture?

Images like these old postcards served to establish a normative representation of the black child's body in a state of nudity, framing it as both sexual and available for public scrutiny and tactile engagement. Such sexualized images communicated to African American adults that they did not fully possess control over the welfare of their young, because they did not have control over censoring the use of racialized child pornography. However, these images are frequently not perceived as societally produced. Often dismissed as mere manifestations of individual desire and white sexual fantasies, they carry significance in unveiling the societal construction of a racialized gaze that validates a sense of control over race relations.

For the artists, publishers, consumers and private exchangers of these postcards, the climax was not necessarily experienced genitally, but through the affirmation of a false sense of superiority that their consumption aroused. Producers, sellers, and consumers of racist and sexually explicit postcards may have

achieved psychological gratification through reinforcing harmful racial stereotypes, as the material often exploits power dynamics and validates prejudiced beliefs. Additionally, the pursuit of financial gain in the production and sale of such postcards could serve as a tangible form of gratification for those involved, while consumers may experience physical arousal through the explicit content, contributing to both psychological and physiological satisfaction.

These so-called "comical" representations of the Black child must be returned to sender — historically and theoretically recontextualized as aberrant racialized child pornography. And more important, black Americans need to seriously examine how white America's pedophilic romance with black children has led to an internalization of racist conceptions of their own children's bodies and sexuality, and how doing so has infected and damaged their pre colonial and pre-slavery family culture, parenting practices, and natural ways of being in loving kinship with children.

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submitted: 01.02.2024

approved: 19.06.2024