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Chit Chat: Juvenile Journalism, Gentility, Gender, and Genocide

The handmade magazine "Chit Chat" displayed in the Hidden Literacies project is one item in a collection of small illustrated books and periodicals, accounts of family life, drawings, maps, and glass-plate photographs produced in the late 19th century by three brothers, young boys from a farm family in the town of Goshen, in the rural mountains of New Hampshire. All these materials can be accessed at "The Worlds and Works of the Nelson Brothers" <https://www.ats.amherst.edu/childhood/>. My recent scholarship has been largely devoted to contesting the tendency to trivialize childhood, to discount children as sources of social meaning or cultural production. The Nelson family archive is "hidden" in the way that almost all childhood cultural production has been hidden: it has been hidden by disregard. It is also hidden because even the literacy narratives we do have about late nineteenth-century boyhood have tended to be structured by anxieties about boys' affluent, urban, leisure – that is, they offer a model of literacy very different from the Nelsons' mix of hunting, fishing, farming, and book-making. "Some folks think that writers have very easy lives," the brothers write in one of their many home-made periodicals, "but this is wrong it is true they do not use their mossel [muscles] as much as farmers but it is all the time wareing on their mind and brains" (*Horse Rase*). While I am very much interested in making visible the hidden literacies of rural childhood, I also want to invert the goals of the Hidden Literacies project, and think as well about the troubling things that literacy may naturalize and so hide. The ubiquity of cultural norms makes them hard to see.

The Nelson brothers clearly took great pleasure in amassing and preserving varied and detailed depictions of their family, their town, and their play. The Nelson brothers' archive is unusual because the children who created all these materials come from the sort of ordinary working rural household that tends to leave little individual mark in the historical record—but

the sorts of cultural production evident in the Nelson's bookmaking were actually fairly usual childhood literary practices in kind if not in scope. Many nineteenth-century children played at being newsmen and publishers, and many played at exploring unknown lands, leading triumphant armies, and killing enemies.

Ida and Hial Nelson had four boys. The first three sons were born in fairly swift succession—Elmer (in 1878), Arthur (in 1880), and Walter (in 1882)—and then nearly a decade later (in 1891) came Ernest, “the pet and plaything of us all,” as his mother wrote. In 1897, when the older boys were in their teens, they compiled a volume they called “Sketches of Our Home Life” and pressed Ida to write an introductory piece describing the boys’ own childhoods. If she wrote this short memoir at her sons’ prodding, her account makes it clear that her own literary interests did much to foster her sons’ bookmaking bent. “Elmer loved to have me comb his hair,” Ida recalled of her first baby, “I always let him have his picture books to look at, and I would make up little stories about them.” Soon the boys themselves became story-tellers and book-makers. When Elmer was around 10, Arthur 8, and Walter 6 years old, the family lived in a rented house in the center of Goshen. Ida wrote of those years:

This place was close to a brook which furnished much pleasure to the boys making a fine place in which to paddle barefoot, or sail boats. These last it was Walter's great delight to go across the road into papa's [Cooper] shop and make. The pastures furnished delightful places for playing Indian. Mr. Sholes very often hired the boys to help him pull weeds, or rake hay, or pick cabbage worms.... The great indoor amusement of Elmer and Arthur here was writing story books, these they covered & kept in a box, till they really had quite a little library.

Sixty-three volumes of this homemade library survive. In “Sketches of Our Home Life,” Walter explains how the brothers’ play in this Goshen brook prompted the boys’ bookmaking:

Each of us owned a small island in the brook on which we built houses and miniture fortifications and had battles which Arthur (the worlds historian) made very stirring with accounts of spirited charges and valiant repulses; he also made maps of the

islands which we had named Big, Long and round continent's and peopled them with millions of imaginary inhabitants about which we wrote many stories.

The vast majority of the Nelsons' books are about—and often purport to have been written and published in—their imaginary “World.” [fig. 1] The particular New Hampshire terrain of the Nelsons' Goshen house and its neighboring brook and islands comes to anchor the geography of another world with its many continents, diverse nations, complex interrelated economies, and richly elaborated history. The maps the boys make of their world—drawn over many years and differing levels of skill—chart the same recognizable big, long, and round shapes. [fig. 2] They proudly tout among the commodities of their world the mining of “iron,” such farm bounty as “hay” and “fruit,” and the hunter's market in “furs”; they also locate on their maps the production of “books” and “pictures.” In the brothers' imaginary “World,” literary practices claim space and location.

Writing is also ordered in time. Periodicals make up about half of the surviving volumes in the Nelsons' homemade library. They come in a wide range of genres. Farmers, the boys produced a few agricultural papers. *The Intellectual Farmer* (initially published in the real world of Goshen) asserts pragmatic goals:

Even in this modern time of ours there is still to few papers relating to farming, gardening and fruit growing and besides they are to high priced. There ought to be papers that were lower enough in price. That, however poor the farmer, he could offord [afford] to take one, and by taking, and studying it he might be made a wealthy farmer. Now this is the purpose of our paper.

By its second issue the paper relocated to the imaginary Farmingtown with its fantastically productive farms: “We have 20 or 30 million water melon plants up now who can beat that?” The boys were avid hunters and produced a slew of magazines aimed at outdoorsmen, some drawn by young hands and others with developed skill. When the Nelson family moved out of the town center, the brothers added a new “Forest Continent (FC)” to the places of their

imaginary world and published “The Pioneersman” (7 issues survive) from that more wild place [figs. 3 and 4]. Many periodicals document the violence and tensions of World news, the pride of major construction projects from telescopes to bridges and even in 1893, in parallel with Chicago’s Columbian exhibition, a World Fair [fig. 5].

The issue of *Chit Chat* included in the Hidden Literacies project also dates from 1893 and includes among the items advertised on its back pages a souvenir album for the World Fair held in the imaginary city of Allentown on Forest Continent. *Chit Chat* is the only periodical the Nelson boys produced that presents itself as a family paper intended for a juvenile audience. The Nelson family were clearly vested in the sort of literary domesticity nineteenth century children’s magazines hoped to foster. The family portrait the brothers stage in their parlor [fig.6] includes a map on the wall, a shelf piled with books, Papa and Walter reading, and a newspaper spread on the table. Note the string running from Elmer’s hand that he used to trigger the camera. As Elmer explains, the Nelsons’ interest in photography is the direct result of the boys’ love of periodicals—and of guns:

During the spring and early summer of 1896, Arthur was getting subscribers for *The Youth’s Companion* in order to get himself a rifle, and among the premiums which he got was a Harvard camera using a 2-1/2 X 4 plate and a Phoenix camera using a 2-1/2 X 2 plate. We received them the 3rd of July, we like the looks of them very much and they seemed very simple. The larger one Arthur gave to me and the smaller to Walter. We were soon trying them.

The Youth Companion’s innovative marketing scheme proved highly successful, making it the juvenile magazine with the largest circulation throughout most of the nineteenth century. As Paul Ringel notes, subscribers to *Youth’s Companion* “came from not only the elite but also the middle and working classes.... What the families shared with children’s magazine editors was neither economic nor social status but an ambition for advancement and a belief that carefully

managed engagement with the market economy could help...fulfill these aspirations”(7). In subscribing to children’s magazines, Ringel argues, families hoped to acquire “gentility.”

Premiums were among the most engaging features of *The Youth’s Companion*, and the boys clearly take great pleasure in creating the elaborate “Premiums” pages of *Chit Chat*. The Nelsons’ premiums offer items that support literary pursuits and Nelson seeds alongside world-making and warfare: a writer’s box, a tablet of paper, the game of “Authors,” a “Geography Game,” its box decorated with an unmistakable map of Big Continent, flags, and

THE NEW STEAMER MARY

This is the boys delight a regular model of a war ship that now sails in Big Continent navy this is a real little war boat it has the little holes for the canon to come out a boy will play with this for hours at a time

This “real little war boat” modeled on “a war ship that now sails in Big Continent navy” portrays the brothers’ imaginary World as actual and present. In presuming the market appeal of such toys, the Nelsons clearly do not think of their games as uniquely their own, but are confident that the war play they have enjoyed on their island/continents would “delight” any boy. The Nelsons’ own hand-hewn forts and manuscript publications may epitomize the “autonomous, unstructured, or self-structured play” Howard Chudacoff contrasts with the rising prominence of manufactured toys and adult supervision during this period (7), but commodified playthings are among the pleasures of the Nelsons’ imaginary World.

The January 1893 *Chit Chat* claims to be co-edited by two imaginary figures, “Ethan Allen” (not the leader of the Green Mountain boys, but his namesake president of Big Continent, and an alias for Walter Nelson) and William J. Little (prolific author, president of Long Continent, and an alias for Arthur Nelson). The oldest brother, Elmer Nelson, also penned pieces for *Chit Chat*: the first serial story bears his pseudonym “Bert Green” and is marked by Elmer’s characteristic detailed technical instructions on how “The Castaways of Mink Island” build their

raft. Although unsigned it is very likely that the “Boy’s Column” instructions on how to build a traverse were drawn and written by Elmer as well. Like *Youth’s Companion*, *Chit Chat* emphasizes the age range of its intended readers, producing a Children’s Page or Column for its youngest subscribers. In addition to its “Boy’s Column” *Chit Chat* also emulated *Youth’s Companion* in announcing the intention to please girl readers as well as boys. The poem that heads this January issue with its warm but also “caged” domestic scene, although probably written by Arthur, purports to be written by William Little’s wife, Etta Little.

January is here
 the coldest month of all the year
 and we sit by the fire light
 on a midwinters night
 and ro[a]st our apples
 and pop our corn
 while out side the blustering storm
 seems to be in a rage
 because he cannot get
 into our cage
 Etta Little

The 1892 volume of *Youth’s Companion* included a lovely series of memoirs by prominent women authors—Sarah Orne Jewett, Margaret Deland, Lucy Larcom—about their own girlhoods. The Nelson brothers appear to have taken the hint, and included a piece on the “Unknown Wives of Well Knows [Known] Men” in the January 1893 issue of *Chit Chat*—although they clearly had a hard time finding anything to write about these women besides appearance, housekeeping skills, and these women’s relations to narratively more interesting men:

We well know Fred Warrington the king of Rock Island but seldom hear anything about his wife [...] Mrs Warrington when six years old began to learn to sweep and when ten to spin and when fourteen years old was quite a house keeper she was bor[n] in a small board shanty by a babling stream her fathur was a shoe maker not by any means rich. He and a few other settlers had moved into that region which is now Small City when 22 she married Fred Warrington who in one month after he

was marr[i]ed was king for his fathur had died with the heart disease and had dropped suddenly to the pavement when out on the street taking a walk. Fred Warrington has got a pretty wife though not what one would call perfectly handsome still she is very good looking and is as good as she looks

Ironically, the piece is signed: “William J Littles wife.”

The question of what lives are worthy of narration underlies the Hidden Literacies project as a whole. While *Youth's Companion* sought a wide demographic in terms of class and region, the magazine's founding had largely been motivated by cultural anxieties about the children of a more leisured and urban middle class, deprived of the physical activity, intimacy with nature, and productive labor characteristic of farm boys like the Nelsons. The lead serial in the 1892 *Youth's Companion*, “A Tale of the Tow-Path,” tells a didactic tale about a rural boy who, tiring of the labor of haying, goes fishing and is caught and punished by his father. Angry at what feels like injustice, Joe runs away and so learns to value his strict moral home and the honest work of farming. For the city boys reading about Joe's trials and transformation, the farm becomes a symbolic space of virtue. The Nelsons generally do not write such didactic tales—a quick perusal of the serial stories included in this issue of *Chit Chat* will reveal far more of violence and dime novel adventure than can be found in the pages of *Youth's Companion*. But the brothers do seem to recognize the role that their rural lives played in the national imaginary of boyhood. One of the stories in the January *Chit Chat* narrates the pleasures of a group of city children sent to the country for the summer. In this tale there is no haying, and the boys get to spend all their time in a mix of fun, angler knowledge and skill, and lazy, lyrical beauty: “soon they began to fish the farmer caught lots and Tom and Roy a few what fun it was now and then they saw a pickrel go skimming along or a black bass laying near the top of the water sunning him self and Tom and Roy was sorry when the farmer said they must go in to dinner.”

“A Tale of the Tow-Path,” written by Homer Greene for *The Youth’s Companion*, ran as the lead story over six issues of the magazine from January 7 to February 11, 1892, the cliff-hanger end of each segment a prod to buy the next week’s paper. *Chit Chat* copies this serial format: the January 1893 issue contains four serial stories, some but not all of which can be traced through other extant copies of the magazine. In “Trading Post Stories: In the Wilderness,” the trapper “Mink Skin” tells a rapt Trading Post audience of the various times when he “nearly got killed” by Indians, robbers, and wild animals. “[‘]I should think you had had an adventure[,’] my men all cheered” and demonstrating the serial nature of such oral sites of storytelling, “I told him [them] that we would have the other next time.” The stories serialized in *Chit Chat* have different settings and situations, but whether tales of island castaways, of a wilderness fur trader beset by robbers, the crew of a gun boat, or a white boy captured by Indians, the basic content of the narratives are remarkably similar: a mix of exploration of wild lands and fights with dangerous enemies. The world-making play that undergirds the Nelsons’ bookmaking is essentially imperial: a thing of conquest, settlement, development, and war. Serials, like empires, thrive on expansion.

The Nelsons well knew that claiming lands entailed the death and expulsion of prior inhabitants. Walter recalls:

Playing Indian was the most exciting game we played in those days and I hardly believe I should yell louder if I should see a genuine, wild-Indian than I did then. The last year or two, that we lived there we had a platform in a great spruce for the white-man's fort and our stratagems, surprises, and pitched-battles were blood-curdling in their intense reality and the neighbors said that we could be heard half-a-mile away as some body was being scalped by the wooden tomahawks or getting killed from ambush in the alders with milk-weed spears.

As Philip Deloria has shown, “playing Indian” has proved a highly durable cultural performance, a way of expressing a wide range of American virtues from the revolutionary era to the present.

Sometime after 1898, the Nelsons photographed the Indian play of other, younger children, perhaps including their little brother Ernest [fig. 7]. In the boys' own "blood-curdling" play some children must have wielded "wooden tomahawks" and "milk-weed spears," but the "we" of Walter's narration plays the white man. Thus, as Robin Bernstein says of the violent ways white children used their black dolls, children and their play "were not only repositories and reflectors of racist culture; they were its co-producers" (212). The exuberant creativity and pleasure of the Nelson archive are powerfully, crucially, and perhaps inextricably linked to the most exploitative and destructive aspects of American history and culture. Part of what is hidden in the charming literacy of the Nelson's periodicals is genocide.

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Sources

The Nelson brothers are certainly not the only children to create their own "World." In 1897, G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association, published *The Story*

of a *Sand-pile*, (E.L. Kellog and Co., 1897) in which he provided a detailed report on an elaborate miniature community built and sustained over many summers of family sand-play. The late Robert Silvey had produced an alternate world in his own childhood, and together with psychiatrist Stephen MacKeith undertook the first systematic research into what the pair called “paracosms,” soliciting accounts of childhood play-worlds from both children and adults in twentieth-century Britain. Their findings on the nature and patterns of such play are reported in Stephen MacKeith and David Cohen, *The Development of Imagination: The Private Worlds of Childhood* (Routledge, 1992). The writing by children that has received the most scholarly attention is also rooted in such world-making: like the Nelsons, the Brontë siblings recorded the histories of their imaginary worlds in tiny handmade books; much of the Brontës’ juvenilia, edited by Christine Alexander, is available in *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Alexander also co-edited with Juliet McMaster an excellent critical anthology on the youthful writing of a wide array of British authors: *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), which includes a chapter by Alexander on child-made periodicals. I have written about another nineteenth-century New England family whose children created extensive libraries of home-made books in “Practicing for Print: The Hale Children’s Manuscript Libraries.” *Journal of the History of Childhood & Youth* (March, 2008). The Hales, like the Brontës, were a highly educated and literary family, as were the boys whose sand-play was recorded by G. Stanley Hall. What is so unusual about the Nelson archive is that it preserves the cultural production not of an educated elite, but of farm boys. Kenneth B. Kidd’s chapter “Farming for Boys” in *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004) discusses the literary celebrations of

farming written in anxious recognition that American boys were increasingly abandoning family farms.