

Rescuing Childhood:
Representing the Orphan Trains in U.S. Popular Media, 1930-2013

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Introduction

“Your Honor, sir, I have six fine children, but since my husband died last year our struggle has been difficult, and my children have been exposed to the temptations of the street. I have done my best, but it’s unable I am to both feed them and protect them from danger.” She paused and took a deep breath. “So I have asked Reverend Brace to send all my children west to be placed in homes with good people who can give them what I can’t. Please, sir, it’s begging you with all my heart I am that you allow Michael to go with his brothers and sisters.”¹

As the judge very briefly debates whether or not to send 11-year-old pickpocket Michael Kelly to rot in Tomb’s Prison, it is Mrs. Kelly’s impassioned plea and, more so, her decision to give up all her children in the hope that each will find a better life, that tip the scales in favor of a second chance for Mike. The judge’s ruling in Mike’s favor and Mrs. Kelly’s sacrifice introduce Joan Lowery Nixon’s seven-book series, *Orphan Train Adventures*, 1980s and 1990s children’s books that follow Mike and his five siblings in their new homes out west. It seems unbelievable, pure fiction, that a loving mother would send all of her children far away to go live with strangers, but Mrs. Kelly is representative of a large group of very real immigrant parents and asylum caretakers who sent their children and charges, respectively, west on orphan trains in search of an opportunity for a better life.

In New York City of the 1850s, where Nixon’s story and the actual historical Orphan Train Movement began, homeless children roamed the streets begging for food, some, not unlike Nixon’s Michael Kelly, desperately resorting to thievery purely to feed themselves and their families.² As Mike could have been, thousands of young New York pickpockets and “Street Arabs,” often immigrants themselves or the children of new immigrants and some of them as young as five years old, found themselves locked up with adult criminals.³ Others banded

¹ Joan Lowery Nixon, *A Family Apart: Orphan Train Adventures #1* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1987), 43-44.

² “The American Experience: The Orphan Trains – About the Program,” *Pbs.org*. Web.

³ *Ibid.*

together to form gangs that became a growing problem for city police. In 1853, a young minister named Charles Loring Brace, recognizing the plight of these young vagrants, founded the Children's Aid Society to help provide what he saw as the only solution for these destitute children: "to send them away to kind Christian homes in the country."⁴ Thus began the Orphan Train Movement, a seventy-five-year social experiment in which the Children's Aid Society placed roughly 250,000 children in forty-eight states.⁵ Aware of the need for laborers in rural America, especially in the expanding west (now considered the Midwest), Brace believed farmers would be eager to adopt the homeless urban orphans not only as a source of extra labor but also to become an integral part of their families. Brace's program became the "forerunner of modern foster care."⁶

The "placing out program" of the Children's Aid Society would spawn multiple similar child migration movements, including a comparable placing out program sponsored by the New York Foundling Hospital which placed over 30,000 children during its tenure.⁷ Unlike the Children's Aid Society, the Foundling Hospital, a Catholic agency, configured "baby trains" of much younger children. In fact, the institution actually left in its foyer a bassinette where parents could anonymously drop off their children. Many of these birth families willingly sent their babies and toddlers out west to find new homes. Before the babies were sent away, the agency secured homes for them, and in each case a number was tagged to the child's clothing to coincide with the number given to the family who had promised to adopt him or her.⁸

⁴ "The American Experience," *Pbs.org*.

⁵ Suzan Sherman, "The Nearly Forgotten Phenomenon of the Orphan Train: A Dispatch from the Annual 'Celebration' of Riders, Descendants, and the Enthusiasts Who Love Them," *Gettysburg Review* 24 vol.3 (2011), Humanities Full Text (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost: 389.

⁶ "The American Experience: The Orphan Trains," *Pbs.org*.

⁷ Sherman, "The Nearly Forgotten Phenomenon of the Orphan Train," 389.

⁸ *Ibid*, 391.

The majority of children sent west on orphan trains, however, were sent via the more controversial orphan trains of the (Protestant) Children's Aid Society. These children were not matched with families before they left.⁹ Instead, one to three caretakers accompanied 30 to 40 children, ranging in age from babies to teenagers, on each train ride from New York City to the children's as of yet unknown new homes "out west."¹⁰ When they reached each western stop, the caretakers would clean up the children and bring them to the meeting place, often a local church, where the children were lined up on some sort of stage and, quite literally, "Put Up for Adoption."¹¹ Children with special talents like singing and dancing were encouraged to perform for a crowd of onlookers, many of whom came just for the spectacle.¹² Often, children were viewed like livestock; prospective adoptive parents, total strangers, felt their muscles and inspected their teeth, in search of free labor instead of a new son or daughter.¹³

Once chosen, children were often separated from their biological siblings, and while siblings were sometimes chosen by families in the same area and allowed to visit each other, just as often they were chosen at different stops then separated by many miles and left no choice but to "lose track of each other completely," not unlike what occurred at American slave markets, which overlapped with the Orphan Train Movement by a few years.¹⁴ Children not chosen at the first stop on any given trip were left wondering if something was wrong with them as they climbed back aboard the train to try again in the next location. Children who were chosen had to live with strangers, sometimes on remote farms far from any neighbors. Some were adopted by non-English speaking families in small Midwest communities of Germans, Norwegians, Danes,

⁹ Sherman, "The Nearly Forgotten Phenomenon of the Orphan Train," 391.

¹⁰ "Orphan Train History," National Orphan Train Complex: Preserving the Past for the Future, <http://orphantraindepot.org/history/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sherman, "The Nearly Forgotten Phenomenon of the Orphan Train," 391.

¹³ "Orphan Train History," National Orphan Train Complex.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and Swedes, or in the French-speaking state of Louisiana.¹⁵ The number of orphan trains sent west declined rapidly in the 1920s, due in large part to the growing amount of state legislation refusing entry to out-of-state child wards.¹⁶ The orphan trains ran in smaller numbers through the 1920s, and the last train ran in 1929, the same year the stock market crash and the Great Depression shook America.¹⁷

This thesis will not explore the Orphan Train Movement itself; rather, it will explore the relationship between 20th century portrayals of the orphan trains in media and the panics about childhood occurring during the time in which these media appear. I frequently use the term “orphan train media,” and for the purposes of this thesis, that term refers to representations of the Orphan Train Movement after the movement ended (in 1929) in journal articles, novels, young adult and children’s novels, children’s nonfiction, television episodes, and film. This thesis argues that the orphan trains have been mobilized in media throughout the 20th century by viewers and writers alike in search of a solution to modern anxieties about childhood. The popularity of orphan train representations in media from 1930 to 2013 has grown from a time of total silence to one of extraordinary public interest. This narrative reflects changing views about the welfare of American children and, in particular, anxieties about juvenile delinquency, child abuse, and the extent to which current foster care policies are acting in the best interests of the child. Orphan train media not only reflect current panics about childhood, but more significantly, the orphan trains themselves appear as a theoretical solution to modern anxieties.

Although no one in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s outwardly suggested a modern orphan train, the representations did espouse modern family values and timely commentary on

¹⁵ Sherman, "The Nearly Forgotten Phenomenon of the Orphan Train," 391-2.

¹⁶ "End of an Era: Orphan Train History," National Orphan Train Complex.

¹⁷ "Orphan Train History," National Orphan Train Complex.

childhood, and in these similarities and their presentation of the orphan trains, they suggest that a solution to modern day child-related concerns may be found in the orphan trains. Over the course of the 20th century, as panics about dangerous children shifted to panics about lost childhood and adult abuses of children, so did representations of orphan trains shift from their original presentation as a solution to urban decay to more complicated portrayals. The most popular orphan train media to date is Christina Baker Kline's novel *Orphan Train* (2013), aimed at an adult audience and portraying the orphan trains as a migration of misery that sent the majority of its riders to abusive families worse than what they had left behind on the streets of New York.

The chapters in this thesis will move chronologically, beginning with the year 1930, the year after the last orphan train ran, and culminating in 2013 with a brief discussion of Kline's bestseller. The first chapter covers the 1930s-1960s, thirty years of a near radio silence in which the Orphan Train Movement was displaced in media and history, overshadowed by more immediate concerns about poverty during the Great Depression and orphans in Europe during and after World War II. The second chapter of this thesis examines the 1970s and the first appearances of orphan trains in popular media as well as how they are representative of panics about gangs and dangerous youths in that decade. The third and final chapter discusses the burgeoning emergence of orphan train literature in the 1980s, particularly as a lens through which to view the new, growing panics about stranger abductions, child abuse, and the shortcomings of the American foster care system.

My thesis does not directly contribute to one area of academic discourse, as to my knowledge there have not been any other studies about the relationship between 20th century orphan train media and evolving panics about childhood. There is scholarly literature on the orphan trains and other child migration movements, but I did not draw significantly on any of

those sources as my thesis is focusing on the representations of the orphan trains in popular media. Therefore, I drew on popular media representations of the orphan trains which I read in juxtaposition to scholarly literature about the history of American childhood and panics about childhood in the 20th century. I did not find any one study that encompassed all of the shifting panics about childhood from 1930-2013 so I drew my information from numerous studies of different panics about childhood during the decades each chapter spans.

The exception is Steven Mintz's *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*. Although Mintz's book is a more general overview of American childhood which I needed to supplement with more detailed analyses, the text did help me identify patterns in child-related panics and form a broad picture of shifting views of threats to American childhood. I used Mintz's book to identify which key panics I should research in more depth and, while I was watching and reading orphan train media, to help me recognize these connections when they appeared. I also used his book to structure my chapters thematically and chronologically. From the fifteen additional secondary sources I gained more specific information about some topics Mintz mentioned more broadly, like fears about youth gangs during the 1970s and the sexual abuse of children in the 1980s. I compared these more detailed sources to my orphan train media in order to find specific connections between the two and determine what solutions various orphan train media were proposing for the modern panics they addressed.

As the Orphan Train Movement primarily focused on children, so are many, although not all, of the sources for this thesis geared to young audiences. The sources in support of this thesis include both nonfiction and fiction, some novels and scholarly articles, some film and TV episodes. While a majority of the media feature young protagonists and target young readers and viewers, there are other sources intended for adults. When viewing and reading these sources for

the first time, I found the greatest variation in the treatment of the orphan trains happened across time periods in keeping with specific trends rather than in terms of the target audience. However, there is a minor variation in the way some information is presented to children versus adults. The only substantial difference in presentation of orphan train media based on audience occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, a time period covered in my third chapter. I will discuss the possible significance of this difference later in this introduction when I outline Chapter Three.

When reading and evaluating my secondary sources, I examined orphan train media for any commonalities and differences, finding far more of the former than the latter. The strong correlation between shifting 20th century panics about childhood and the media portrayals of orphan train riders and their experiences led me to structure my chapters thematically as well as chronologically. My first chapter will explore the significance of the near radio silence in orphan train media from the 1930s to the 1960s. Within this first chapter, I will consider the few exceptions to this silence, including the nonfictional 1951 *Good Housekeeping* article “Good Boy,” about an actual orphan train rider’s experience, and a 1953 Hollywood “B” movie, *Scandal at Scourie*, very loosely based on the “Good Boy” article.

Chapter Two will study orphan train representations in the 1970s, focusing primarily on two sources: a 1974 academic article defending Brace’s mission to send children west on orphan trains called “The Children’s Migration” by Annette Riley Fry, and the 1979 TV film *Orphan Train* starring Jill Eikenberry, Kevin Dobson, and Glenn Close, based heavily on a 1978 novel of the same name by James Magnuson and Dorothea G. Petrie. Both sources emphasize the squalor of the New York City streets and the unforgiving life of poverty, gang culture, and crime that would consume the children were they not sent west to, as it was assumed, better homes. When read in conjunction with secondary literature about 1970s moral panics, these portrayals of the

orphan train reflect mounting concerns in the 1970s about gang culture and the relationship between derelict youths and urban decay. However, the orphan trains arguably emerge in media because their all-white riders provide a way to address modern concerns about street culture without also having to discuss the added concern about dangerous youth: that they were predominantly people of color.¹⁸

Media interest in the orphan trains grew over the course of the 20th century as evidenced by the relative boom in orphan train representations in television, film, and literature in the 1980s-1990s. The sources for my third and final chapter include two episodes from two popular western television series, the 1989 “Orphan Train” from *Guns of Paradise* and the 1994 “Orphan Train” from *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Literary sources include Andrea Warren’s 1994 biographical children’s book *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy’s True Story* and a number of books from Joan Lowery Nixon’s two young adult series featuring the Orphan Train Movement: *Orphan Train Adventures* (7 books) and *Orphan Train Children* (4 books).

As the 1980s panics about child abuse, fears of stranger abduction, and concerns about foster care policy were at the forefront of discussions about childhood, so did representations of the orphan trains bring to the forefront similar concerns in their historical context. In orphan train media there were a few new themes that emerged in keeping with the larger concerns about children during those decades. One recurrent theme was that the fact that children were taken in by “strangers” out west was, within itself, an added danger. Another common theme was that the orphan trains often separated siblings to painful ends; this reality was especially relevant to changing foster care policies that sought to determine how much weight to place on family reunification as opposed to adoption by new families. Finally, child abuse, a major concern of

¹⁸ John M. Hagedorn, *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.

the 1980s and 1990s, appeared frequently in orphan train media, both in the orphaned riders' new foster homes and back in New York City.

Among the instances of child abuse in orphan train media of the 1980s and 1990s the only noticeable difference I found concerned how panics about childhood were presented to child audiences as opposed to adult audiences. Joan Lowery Nixon's novel *Caught in the Act* is intended for young readers, yet it includes graphic descriptions of physical abuse throughout, as Mike's foster father beats him until blood seeps through his shirt.¹⁹ Physical abuse and neglect are present in a number of orphan train media intended for children; however, sexual abuse is just referenced in more adult orphan train media of the age. The 1979 *Orphan Train* film is based on a novel intended for adults, and both film and book include the description of a young girl rescued from a life of forced prostitution and molestation.²⁰ Similarly, the episode of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* featuring the orphan trains also has a young female rider nearly forced into prostitution, this time out west, although she is saved before the sexual abuse can begin.²¹ *Dr. Quinn* was not rated in America, but it features an adult protagonist, and some of its episodes are rated M in Australia (not for an audience under age fifteen), suggesting more mature subject matter.²² There was a significant shift during the 1980s and 1990s towards the protection of children from abuse, which stance could explain this distinction, but with the comparatively few sources of orphan train media that I have at my disposal, I cannot reach a definite conclusion, only acknowledge the discrepancy.

¹⁹ Joan Lowery Nixon, *Caught in the Act: Orphan Train Adventures #2* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1988), 134.

²⁰ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie).

²¹ "Orphan Train." *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, CBS Columbia Broadcasting System (Los Angeles, CA: WNBC, January 29, 1994).

²² Internet Movie Database (IMDb): "Orphan Train." *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, CBS Columbia Broadcasting System (Los Angeles, CA: WNBC, January 29, 1994).

As interest in the orphan trains increased over the course of the 20th century, so did representations of the orphan trains, particularly evidenced in the growth of orphan train literature, film, and TV presence in the 1980s and 1990s. While these portrayals show an increased interest in the Orphan Train Movement, however, they are products of the times in which they were produced. In each example of orphan train media presented in this thesis, themes and panics about childhood and youth culture determine what aspect of the orphan train experience is highlighted and how the stories, both fictional and nonfictional, are recounted. By studying these trends in orphan train media over the course of the 20th century, we learn about the times in which they were created, and it is those messages that are worth analyzing, perhaps even more than their highly subjective and sometimes even inaccurate representations of the Orphan Train Movement, the largest children's migration in history.²³ What we do learn, however, from these representations, is that the orphan trains are remembered through time as a solution, not always ideal, but nonetheless a relevant system worth examining in the search to help modern youths in need.

²³ Andrea Warren, "The Orphan Train," *Special to the Washington Post*, 1998, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/horizon/nov98/orphan.htm>, Web.

Chapter One

Where Have All the Orphans Gone? The Sound of Silence in Orphan Train Media, 1930-1960s

In the 1946 Christmas classic *Miracle On 34th Street*, even the most skeptical of children, Susan Walker, believes in Santa Claus after Macy's self-proclaimed Kris Kringle breaks into fluent Dutch to converse with a newly-adopted Dutch war orphan. The joy of the orphan's adoptive mother is eclipsed only by the little girl's delight, as she climbs up onto Kringle's lap to converse with him in her native tongue. The moment becomes even more idyllic as Kringle asks the child what she wants for Christmas, and the girl replies, "Nothing. I have everything. I just want to be with this nice lady."²⁴ In the 1940s, the face of orphans and adoptees in American media was very different from the social problem of street urchins that led Charles Loring Brace to send youthful criminals west on orphan trains for a new start.²⁵

The last orphan train had departed nearly two decades before *Miracle on 34th Street* came to theatres in 1947. After the economic ruin of the Great Depression followed by an international war, stories describing the plight of orphans were starting to reappear in popular media. This time, the orphans depicted were not dangerous, lawless, or unwanted immigrant children; rather, they were "innocents," European collateral damage of war. As the United States grew in global dominance, many Americans found the foreign war orphans increasingly desirable as adoptees and even believed it the financial and moral responsibility of their country to provide for these young war orphans.²⁶

²⁴ Internet Movie Database (IMDb): *Miracle on 34th Street*, directed by George Seaton (1947; 20th Century Fox).

²⁵ Annette Riley Fry, "The Children's Migration," *American Heritage* 27, no. 1 (1974).

²⁶ Laura Briggs and Diana Marre, *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 5.

In the forty-or-so years between the last orphan train ride and the beginning of popular media portrayals of the orphan train in the 1970s, there is scant mention in newspapers, television, or film of this large child migration. In later decades of the 20th century, the media often mobilized the orphan train as an example of a solution, sometimes celebrated, sometimes deplored, to modern anxieties about childhood. This chapter will focus on decades of orphan train media silence with a twofold aim. The first aim of this chapter is to prove the significance of the absence of orphan train references in popular media from the 1930s to the 1960s. The second goal is to understand this media silence regarding the orphan trains by looking at how the American public was viewing orphans, adoption, and later, transracial adoption from 1930-1960 and to explain why the orphan trains or a similar large child migration would not have been a useful solution in this later period.

The orphan trains began as a movement to integrate orphaned and unwanted city children into mid-western family life. By the 1930s and 1940s, the orphan trains had accomplished their mission; their riders had grown up and been assimilated into the Midwest and South. The poor, orphaned children who once rode the orphan trains had been incorporated into the general population and did not individually or as a group stand out from the rest of Americans who were affected in varying degrees by the poverty and other hardships that swept America during the Great Depression. Following the Great Depression, any knowledge of or focus on the orphans who had ridden the orphan trains was again eclipsed by the numbers of new orphans who had come to take their place. As the Second World War ended and America entered the Cold War, all orphans mentioned in media were European war orphans, so the concept of “orphan” acquired a quintessentially non-American connotation. Postwar humanitarian programs were determined to save these orphaned war children through the same means Charles Loring Brace had advocated:

adoption by strangers. This thesis argues that the treatment of the orphan trains in media often mirrors the current popular and political panics about dissident youths, orphans, and foster care in America. This chapter argues that in times when there is no easy connection between American youth and the orphans who rode west, or no connection the media is willing to admit exists, the orphan trains either disappear from popular conversation or are substantially modified in keeping with modern perceptions on just what constitutes an orphan.

This first chapter explores forty years of relative silence about the Orphan Train Movement and differing perceptions of orphans by dividing those years chronologically based on shifting trends. The first section of this chapter will address the years following the last orphan train ride west, with particular emphasis on the relationship between the Great Depression, World War II, and the disappearance of any mention of the orphan trains in the media. The staggering number of poor and needy Americans during the Great Depression meant that urban orphans were subsumed within the growing number of all needy children whose parents had lost their jobs. The relative prosperity that followed the Depression and, with the advent of World War II, the necessary focus on the war effort meant that poor, needy American children and orphans were no longer front page news.

The second section of this chapter will examine the postwar interest in orphans, particularly the media portrayal of a “new” category of orphan consisting of European war orphans, children fathered by American GIs, and, less frequently, American war “orphans” who lost fathers to the war. A far cry from the children of immigrants who had prowled the streets of New York and ridden the orphan train to a new life, these war orphans were not perceived as needing redemption or as menaces to society. Therefore, the street urchins who rode the orphan trains might not have seemed an appropriate comparison to make in media hoping to portray war

orphans as innocents that Americans should care for and adopt. This second section will also address two portrayals of the orphan train in 1950s literature and cinema that are exceptions that prove the rule. These two outlier sources are the 1951 *Good Housekeeping* article “Good Boy” by Mary McSherry with an accompanying illustration by Norman Rockwell entitled “Little Orphan at the Train” and a loose adaptation of that article, a 1953 Hollywood “B” film *Scandal at Scourie* starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. This section will particularly examine the film, which took significant liberties in modifying the article, from changing the gender of the child protagonist to, most significantly, changing the location of the train on which that child traveled west. By moving the story to Canada, *Scandal at Scourie* further emphasized, in keeping with the then-current perception of Americans, that orphans came from outside the United States, and the movie utilized the orphan trains as a solution for modern concerns about orphans outside of America: transporting the orphans en masse to eager adoptive parents.²⁷

The last subsection of this chapter will address the final years of the silence, specifically the baby boom era, when, for the first time in history, the demand for white babies to adopt exceeded the supply of white babies available for adoption. This last section will discuss multiracial war orphans and the increase in and growing acceptance of transatlantic and cross-racial adoption. Although the media in the 1950s-60s remains silent, not addressing the orphan train movement directly, the growing concerns about non-white youth in need create a perception of economically disadvantaged children of color that is very similar to the views Charles Loring Brace and the Children’s Aid Society held regarding immigrant children. The second chapter of this thesis will explore these similarities and question why, when the orphan trains do appear in

²⁷ Rob Nixon, “Scandal at Scourie (1953),” *Tcm.com*.

media in the 1970s, their riders are depicted as completely white, instead of as possessing the ethnic diversity of the historic mid-19th to early 20th century orphan train riders.

The Great Depression and World War II

The Wall Street crash of 1929 marked the beginning of a decade-long economic depression in the United States and around the world. That same year, the last orphan train rode west.²⁸ Although there are no known studies that explore the connection between the end of the Orphan Train Movement and the Great Depression, it seems natural that when the very middle class which had once been in a position to adopt children reached the poverty levels of those they used to help, attention nationwide would shift from helping the orphans to helping themselves. The very misfortunes of life that once appalled philanthropists and religious leaders alike had infected the entire country: As President Roosevelt said, “half of the children of America are in families that do not have enough money to provide fully adequate shelter, food, clothing, medical care, and educational opportunity.”²⁹ These starving, half-clothed, often homeless children were not the children of immigrants, the lower economic class of white children that comprised most of the orphan train riders, but a cross-section of the majority of America.

The orphan trains were recent history, but when the Great Depression hit America, starving children on the streets of New York were subsumed into the larger problem of starving people, children and adults, throughout America.³⁰ Rural America, once the destination of the orphan trains, was hit just as hard if not harder than urban America. Childhood poverty, in particular, was “especially severe” in rural areas, because during the Great Depression there were

²⁸ “Orphan Train History,” National Orphan Train Complex: Preserving the Past for the Future, <http://orphantraindepot.org/history/>.

²⁹ Robert Cohen, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 35.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

proportionally more children living in rural areas than in urban environments.³¹ In rural areas, poverty was a problem for more than just economic reasons, and especially in terms of the health of rural children. An economic depression post-World War I had brought to the forefront a number of diseases, particularly those infecting children in rural areas, and in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “the agrarian myth of childhood” that had once inspired Brace’s child emigration movement “began to shatter...caused by the long overdue recognition of farm children’s health issues.”³² Poverty in cities, including that affecting youth, had not disappeared, but it was now part of a larger poverty sweeping the nation. Gone was the image of rural America as a welcome alternative to urban squalor. The orphan trains and their mission to bring poor city orphans to robust farm families seemed far removed from a country where, at the time, such large numbers of people were poor, hungry, and in need of a home.³³

When America entered World War II, the economy began to pick up, encouraging Americans to consider once again ways to aid those less fortunate, particularly children. The years of tenement housing and immigrant children loose on the street had passed, however. The Second World War did not only revive the American economy; it also changed the focus of the American people. The phenomenon of war orphans, like the war effort itself, was a concern throughout Europe. The orphan trains were displaced by a new, modern image of “orphans” that post-World War II humanitarian efforts sought to save: the foreign (particularly European) war orphans. In a book about the half-orphaned children of American soldiers who died in World War II, Susan Hadler addresses the experience of non-European war orphans: “Most of us did not think of ourselves as orphans, even though we were fatherless. Like most people, we thought

³¹ Cohen, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt*, 36.

³² Lisa L. Ossian, *Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929-1933* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2014), 39.

³³ *Ibid.*

of war orphans as children in Europe or Asia who had lost both parents. We pictured a child in ragged clothes seated in the burnt-out rubble of a bombed building.”³⁴ If this “newsreel” definition of war orphan did not even include American children who had lost their fathers to the war, then it certainly left no room for American children whose orphaned status was the result of domestic circumstances like illness or neglect.

The discussion in American media of the need to rescue European refugee children through transatlantic adoption was not a far cry from Charles Loring Brace and the Children’s Aid Society’s similar aim to rescue New York street children through transnational adoption. The orphan train model could have been mobilized to propose a similar solution for the adoption of Europe’s war orphans; however, different, more localized European child saving missions displaced the orphan trains during World War II as solutions. In particular, Britain’s Operation Pied Piper, which temporarily relocated British children from bomb-riddled cities to the countryside, and the Kindertransports, which brought, also by train, Jewish and other children in danger in Germany to safety throughout Europe, were the images of child relocation presented in the media.³⁵ Orphan train riders in their personal narratives later in life talked about serving in World War II and building their families before and after that war.³⁶ Perhaps the silence during the earlier two decades was neither pointed nor a statement meant to imply that anyone considered the Orphan Train Movement irrelevant. Perhaps the orphan trains were simply caught between the past and the present, not yet quite historical enough to appear in analogies, yet no

³⁴ Calvin L. Chistman, ed., *Lost in the Victory: Reflections of American War Orphans of World War II* (College Station, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1998), xvii.

³⁵ *Ibid*, xvii.

³⁶ “Orphan Train Rider Stories,” National Orphan Train Complex: Preserving the Past for the Future, <http://orphantraindepot.org/orphan-train-rider-stories/>.

longer a viable solution for moving children in need to new homes, because the children in question were caught in a war-torn continent an ocean away.

Post-World War II Adoption Humanitarianism

The years immediately following World War II brought a return of interest in orphans and adoption, as the baby boom began and families that previously could not have afforded to adopt because of the Great Depression now enjoyed the American postwar affluence.³⁷ The baby boom and renewed support postwar for building families, led to skyrocketing adoption rates in the United States.³⁸ One factor that likely affected the media's portrayal of orphans was the war itself and its far-reaching, global effects. Gone were the immigrant street orphans. In their place the media focused on what was then the largest group of orphans needing placement: the war orphans who came from outside the country, not within as orphan train children once had.

As people's concern for homeless orphans became a humanitarian effort of Americans helping non-Americans instead of an internal problem, there was a growing interest in overseas adoption, possibly linked to the reality of illegitimate children fathered by American soldiers during the war.³⁹ In keeping with the increased pregnancies and births of the baby boom, adoption was also more accepted during the postwar period as a second chance for married couples who could not have children.⁴⁰ Even United States immigration laws were rapidly shifting postwar to enable these eager parents to adopt orphaned war children.⁴¹ An eagerness to adopt was certainly highlighted in postwar Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, and it was

³⁷ Sarah Potter, *Everybody Else: Adoption and the Politics of Domestic Diversity in Postwar America* (Athens, GA, USA: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 18.

³⁸ Fry, "The Children's Migration."

³⁹ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 5.

⁴⁰ Potter, *Everybody Else*, 18.

⁴¹ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 5.

in this medium that the orphan trains reappeared, albeit briefly. Although based on the true story of one American boy's journey west on an orphan train, the 1953 film *Scandal at Scourie* changed a majority of the facts in the boy's story, even going so far as to change his gender. Most significantly, the film changed the location of the orphan train he rode. This American film set the story in Canada, adapting the American Orphan Train Movement to the then-popular concept of "orphans" by using it to prove that, even in history, orphans were not Americans.⁴²

In *Scandal at Scourie*, the orphan trains are a solution not for urban decay or overpopulation, like the actual historical movement, but the result of a freak accident, a fire, merely a plot device to get an orphaned child to the parents who want her. The film does not mobilize the orphan trains as a historic child migration; instead, it transforms the concept and appropriates the orphan trains in a one-time train ride through Canada to find homes for orphans after their orphanage has burned down.⁴³ Despite heavily modifying historical fact, the film nonetheless employs the concept of the orphan trains as a solution, in this case to the problem of transporting children in need of homes to prospective parents who are ready and able to adopt them.

The Baby Boom and the Increase in Transatlantic Adoption

In *Scandal at Scourie*, the orphan trains were just starting to emerge as a memory of a historic adoption process with some tension between the fact that the majority of the orphans were born Catholic while the families and communities that became their new homes were predominantly Protestant. Early portrayals showed the discomfort in blending the two forms of Christianity, but nonetheless it was far easier to talk about blending two religions into a family

⁴² *Scandal at Scourie*, directed by Jean Negulesco (1953; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). YouTube.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

than to deal with the very real and more immediate concerns about the rapidly “browning” face of American foster care.⁴⁴ It is no wonder, then, that the earliest portrayals of the orphan trains in media as the adoption and assimilation of poor white children from America and Canada seemed far removed from the new orphans of the postwar period. These modern orphans were international adoptees and, in the later decades post-World War II, often children of color, while the orphan train riders, despite New York’s many ethnic classifications in the 19th century, were by 1960s standards “white.”⁴⁵

As mentioned above, post-World War II for the first time ever, the demand for adoptable white babies exceeded those available, so America looked elsewhere to adopt orphans; thus, the concept of orphans became associated with non-American children.⁴⁶ When not even the number of war orphans available for adoption could meet the demand for adoptable white babies in America, the concept of orphan became not only non-American, but also non-white.⁴⁷ Truman’s reforms to keep from “losing” all of Eastern Europe behind the “Iron Curtain” – from the 1,300 children from Hungary legally “resettled” during the Soviet War in Budapest in 1945 to children admitted during the Greek Civil War from 1946-49 – certainly brought large numbers of adoptable European orphans to America, but the numbers still were not enough.⁴⁸ As the supply was unable to meet the demand for white babies, American society became more accepting of white parents adopting racially and ethnically non-white children, particularly since America’s increasingly global presence led to a general feeling of “paternalistic responsibility” toward the growing number of international orphans, a moral responsibility to save a lesser people through

⁴⁴ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 9.

⁴⁵ Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1999), 12.

⁴⁶ Potter, *Everybody Else*, 18.

⁴⁷ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 5-6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

their children.⁴⁹ This moral imperative resembled the religious responsibility that Charles Loring Brace and other ministers felt for the souls of urchins in New York.

Perhaps one reason the orphan trains were so markedly absent in popular media of the 1950s and 60s was because viewing those orphaned children of the past under the emerging concept of “orphans” would have required thinking about white orphan train riders in the same paternalistic manner as Americans thought of Japanese atomic bomb orphans.⁵⁰ Although in the 19th century orphan train riders were considered ethnically “other” in New York City, by the 1950s and 1960s Irish, Polish, and other immigrant ethnicities had been subsumed into white American identities; therefore, the historic children were, by 1950s standards, white. It followed that not only were modern orphans no longer white, but orphaned Americans were no longer victims; now they were saviors. To refer to the Orphan Train Movement and compare those children, by 1950s standards needy white American children, to the children who needed saving in what Americans perceived as underdeveloped countries, might in some ways equate American saviors to the people they were looking to save. Conceivably, part of the reason for the decades-long silence about the orphan trains in media might have been because Americans were not ready to admit just how much they had in common with countries in need.

When the *Saturday Review* printed an article about children orphaned in Hiroshima after America dropped the atomic bomb, there was an overwhelming response from Americans who wanted to “sponsor” these children and even to change United States immigration laws so that Americans could adopt them.⁵¹ During the Korean War, unlike in World War II, the committees that had once placed endangered children living in war zones into temporary foster homes

⁴⁹ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 5.

(through Kindertransports and evacuation measures) now had adoption as their new goal. They advocated the permanent removal of these “endangered” children from their own families and communities for what the committees deemed the unparalleled opportunities new American parents could offer.⁵² Approaching the 1970s, the Vietnam War called for a remarkably familiar means of orphan transportation, if via the more modern conveyance of planes instead of trains. Operation Babylift took drastic measures to fly hundreds of children from Vietnam to adoptive families in America. The large child migration as a method of child saving had returned; soon, too, would the orphan trains return in popular media.⁵³

With American attitudes toward cross-racial adoption improving, there was also a rising interest in adopting American children of color, particularly African American and Native American children. World War II did not help most Native Americans recover from the Great Depression, and as Americans used their postwar affluence to adopt war orphans from abroad in the 1950s, state and federal bureaucrats looked for a method to encourage prospective parents to adopt Native Americans to help offset the growing costs of Native American children under state care.⁵⁴ The result, the 1958 Indian Adoption Project, encouraged the placement of Native American children in non-Native American adoptive families as a chance not only to cut back on federal expenses, but also to “assimilate[e] them once and for all.”⁵⁵ A similar experiment occurred with the rising number of African American children in foster care, as the state “experimented nationally with what the Korea program had initiated internationally” and encouraged transracial and cross-religious adoptions.⁵⁶

⁵² Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 8.

⁵³ Dana Sachs, *Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston, MA, USA: Beacon Press, 2010), 5-6.

⁵⁴ Margaret D. Jacobs, *Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World* (Lincoln, NE: UNP – Nebraska, 2014), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Briggs and Marre, *International Adoption*, 9.

These new mid-to-late 20th century orphan relocation programs and transracial adoptions spanned a far greater breadth of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity than had their orphan train counterparts decades earlier, but the ideas behind the two movements stemmed from similar beliefs and intents. In both movements there existed the belief that a drastic measure was necessary to save children who were culturally, socially, and ethnically different from those doing the saving and, usually, those doing the adopting as well. Above all else, the brief appearances of orphan trains in media during the 1950s reflected these similarities, and in particular, previewed how the orphan trains would be mobilized in future media as a historic solution and a possible model for modern attempts at mass child saving. Media in the 1930s-1960s might have been relatively silent in terms of any direct attention to the orphan trains, but the complex relationship between the historic Orphan Train Movement and the modern panics about childhood in the last three decades of the 20th century would be firmly rooted in the public perceptions of orphans, adoption, and race cultivated throughout the 40 years of silence: a calm before the storm of media that would erupt in the decades to follow.

Chapter Two

Yesterday's Youth 1970s Crime, Race, and Urban Panic Reimagined in Orphan Train Media

The 1979 film *Orphan Train* opens with somber music. As the year 1959 hovers over the bottom of the screen, superimposed over footage of dirty children in rags curled up in alleyways and lurking under railroad tracks, a voiceover narrates: “In 1854 there were living on the streets of New York City over ten thousand orphaned, abandoned children. Out of this desperate situation was born the orphan train. This is a fictionalized account based on historical fact.”⁵⁷ First to appear are Tony and Ben, two young brothers barely surviving on the streets by selling rats to be killed for sport, and Liverpool, the young teenaged street urchin who robs them. The film then follows Liverpool to a public hanging, where his fifteen-year-old friend Danny Mahoney, another street child, is led to the gallows. The policemen accompanying Danny to the gallows hesitate when Liverpool shouts to them. Upon Mahoney’s request, they permit him to approach the gate to say goodbye to Liverpool and give him his only possession: “Do you want my shoes? Go on, take them. You’re my friend, and I want you to have them.”⁵⁸ A man of the cloth recites biblical passages while walking young Danny to his death for the crimes of “burglary and assaulting an officer of the law with malice and cunning and without remorse.”⁵⁹ When Danny sobs, one executioner tries to quiet him, murmuring, “May God be with you.”⁶⁰

Although Liverpool is furious about the execution of his friend, it does not deter him from continuing down a similar path of lawlessness out of both his physical hunger and his

⁵⁷ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie). YouTube.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

desire for retribution. He continues assaulting police officers that attempt to stop him from stealing from vendors and teaching younger street boys to do the same. All that saves Liverpool from meeting the same fate as his friend Danny is the orphan train, which provides an alternative to prison time by transporting Liverpool out west for a fresh start.⁶¹ Danny Mahoney's death is a tragedy, but the film does not depict his executioners as villains: They let Danny bid goodbye to his friend, and they pray for his soul. Rather, the problems the film addresses are the urban decay and juvenile delinquency created by the desperate situation of city life in the 1850s. The city is the true criminal, and the orphan train is the hero who defeats that villain.

Once a relatively ignored aspect of American history, the orphan trains began to appear in the 1970s in academic works, television/film, and literature as a possible solution for similar contemporary problems of juvenile delinquency, crime, and urban decay. This chapter explores significant representations of the orphan trains in media in the 1970s and how these portrayals have been shaped by modern anxieties concerning urban decay, juvenile delinquency, and urban youth gangs. In these early depictions of the orphan trains, the trains were mobilized as a solution to an historic problem, and although no one suggests the formation of a modern orphan train, the implication in orphan train media during the 1970s is that it takes a drastic social move to interrupt the cycle of juvenile delinquency and urban decay.

This chapter will be divided into three subcategories based on the major anxieties of the 1970s and how they appear in orphan train representations. The first subsection will explore in greater depth the panics about juvenile delinquency and gang culture in the 1970s, and how the inevitability of poor, hungry, and dispossessed urban children turning to crime is reflected in portrayals of orphan train riders before they were saved from the streets of New York. The

⁶¹ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie). YouTube.

second subsection will discuss the growing concerns about urban decay as both a cause and a result of a developing gang culture and the rise in juvenile delinquency. This section will also describe how this cyclical relationship between youthful deviants and urban squalor is key in representations of the orphan trains in the 1970s, both in portrayals of the riders themselves and in supporting the movement as necessary to save the children and the city they plague. The last section of this chapter will examine more specifically the increasingly African American face of deviant youth and speculate as to the significance of whitewashing this racial tension by exploring it through the lens of the white immigrant children who rode the orphan trains.

The above chapter will focus on two significant sources of orphan train media in the 1970s: *Orphan Train*, a 1979 TV Movie based on the 1978 novel of the same name, and Annette Riley Fry's "The Children's Migration," a 1974 academic article defending the Movement. The 1979 *Orphan Train* film and the 1978 novel by James Magnuson and Dorothea G. Petrie that served as its inspiration are the first known fictional portrayals of the orphan trains. The authors of the book were already well-known at the time their novel was published. Magnuson had authored several popular novels and was a former Hodder Fellow at Princeton University and a recipient of awards and fellowships for his fiction. His co-author Petrie, who had a number of cinematic successes, would subsequently produce the film adaptation and go on to win two primetime Emmys for later works.⁶² The short interval between novel and film suggests that film discussions were already in progress either before publication or shortly thereafter, which is hardly surprising considering the authors' prior successes and Petrie's experience in film production. The 145-minute TV film starring Jill Eikenberry, Kevin Dobson, and, in a guest role, Glenn Close, was originally intended as a theatrical film with real-life celebrity couple Steve

⁶² Peter Kelton, "Best selling 'Orphan Train' more popular than previous sagas," *Examiner.com* (online), August 11, 2014.

McQueen and Ali MacGraw in the leads, but the plan fell apart after the couple ended their relationship.⁶³ Although neither the film nor the novel garnered much attention when first released to the public, in recent years they both “are making the rounds again, riding on the coattails” of Christina Baker Kline’s New York Times bestseller *Orphan Train*, which will be discussed in the conclusion.⁶⁴

The other main orphan train source for this chapter, Annette Riley Fry’s “The Children’s Migration,” is one of the earliest academic texts describing the orphan trains. Hardly an unbiased work, Fry’s article is influenced by her personal connection with the orphan train, as her husband’s grandfather, Charles R. Fry, was one of the agents who helped escort children west on the orphan trains.⁶⁵ The article itself was later republished by The Children’s Aid Society, the very first organization to sponsor and run the orphan trains.⁶⁶ While Annette Riley Fry does not suggest a modern orphan train as a solution to modern lawless youths, she is unequivocally positive in her portrayal of the orphan trains as a child saving movement, an extreme measure made necessary by the danger of the city streets.⁶⁷

Panics about Gangs and Juvenile Delinquency

Youth gangs were certainly not a new phenomenon in urban America during the 1970s, but a growing panic about the relationship between the juvenile delinquent members of street gangs and urban decay led to a number of studies and attempts by academics and popular media to pinpoint the cause of this perceived rise in youthful lawlessness.⁶⁸ “Sociological

⁶³ Internet Movie Database (IMDb): *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie).

⁶⁴ Kelton, “Best selling ‘Orphan Train.’”

⁶⁵ Annette Riley Fry, “The Children’s Migration,” *American Heritage* 27, no. 1 (1974).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Fry, “The Children’s Migration.”

⁶⁸ John M. Hagedorn, *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.

generalization supplanted any investigation of gangdom's complicated evolution since the nineteenth century," and as they had been in the mid-19th century, young criminals and gangs of teenage hooligans in the 1970s were the face of urban danger and crime.⁶⁹ The orphan trains began to appear in earnest in popular and scholarly literature during the 1970s, and the portrayals of the children who rode the train reflected 1970s panics about dangerous youths, in that the orphan train riders were described as deviant, criminal, and often members of gangs. The orphan trains, therefore, became a justifiable, if radical, solution: the only way to halt the growing danger of these young criminals and the only possible means for their redemption. There is a striking similarity between the portrayals of orphan train youths before they traveled west on the orphan train and the portrayals of modern juvenile delinquents, similarities which suggest a mobilization of the orphan trains in search of a solution to the modern problems of youth gangs and juvenile criminals that was perceived to be a similar challenge in the 1970s.

In her scholarly discourse on the orphan trains, Fry pays close attention to the orphan train riders before they were placed on trains and stresses their criminal roots or the likely equally criminal paths they would have followed had they not been rescued and sent west. She describes the older boys in New York as vagrants who "often became members of street gangs who terrified respectable citizens when they weren't bashing one another's heads in."⁷⁰ Others, if not already criminals, were headed in that direction even by their own admittance. Fry highlights this as the norm, quoting one former teenage orphan train rider who wrote to the society that sent him west, "What I would have been if I stayed in New York, God only knows. I had not gone so far in vice when you rescued me, it is true, but I was rapidly sinking into that terrible pit of

⁶⁹ Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, xiii.

⁷⁰ Fry, "The Children's Migration."

darkness.”⁷¹ The inevitability of juvenile delinquency in Fry’s description of the orphan trains mirrored similar concerns about the cyclical nature of crime in urban America in the 1970s, particularly in the transitional relationship between juvenile delinquency and more dangerous organized crime networks.⁷²

The 1979 *Orphan Train* film indicated a much more direct link between the orphan trains and the end of urban gang terrorization. Although 1970s scholars in their “sociological generalization[s]” failed to address properly the evolution of gangs from the 19th century to the present, the sheer number of studies suggests the popular interest in the 1970s in uncovering “the mysteries of adolescent street culture.”⁷³ Although now understood as “ahistorical and wildly ignorant,” the 1970s studies about modern gangs and juvenile delinquency were supported both popularly and intellectually.⁷⁴ One such commentator on the composition of gangs and their effects on urban society was former US Senator Birch Bayh, famous for authoring Title IX to the Higher Education Act, a “landmark legislation that prohibits discrimination based on gender.”⁷⁵ In his report on the “new” sort of gang plaguing 1970s urban America, Bayh wrote members were aged “anywhere from 10 years old to the early to mid twenties” with “auxiliary units of ‘midget’ or ‘baby’ members as young as 6 or 7...used as lookouts, scouts or messengers by main gang units.”⁷⁶

Whether or not his description was accurate, Bayh’s influence as a senator and endorsement of such a gang makeup is significant, and his description of urban gangs is very

⁷¹ Fry, “The Children’s Migration.”

⁷² Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, 30.

⁷³ Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, xiii.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Home: Birch Bayh,” Birchbayh.com, www.birchbayh.com/index.html.

⁷⁶ Birch Bayh, “Challenge for the Third Century: Education in a Safe Environment—Final Report on the Nature and Prevention of School Violence and Vandalism” S. Rep. No. Senate Committee on the Judiciary-ED135091 at 102 (1977), 39.

similar to the 1979 *Orphan Train* portrayal of teenager Liverpool and his cohorts on the streets of New York. Liverpool leads bands of boys in premeditated plans of thievery, as shown in a scene where he and his gang steal from a street merchant. First, the gang sends a decoy to distract the merchant while Liverpool and two others steal fruits and vegetables from that vendor's cart. Mouse, roughly 6 or 7 years old, serves as Liverpool's messenger and lookout not only in this scene, but for the entirety of the first part of the film set in New York City, and the other boys who form Liverpool's posse are all between the age of 10 years and their mid-teens.⁷⁷ Policemen attempt to crack down on the young miscreants but are ultimately frustrated, unable to keep up with the growing number of homeless children turning to lives of crime. Ultimately, the film maintains that only the orphan train is big enough to alter the paths of these young criminals.⁷⁸

In the 1970s, a crackdown by law and order campaigns against gangs and juvenile delinquents brought the return of the death penalty and increased mass incarceration, but these measures failed to end the public panic about dangerous youths.⁷⁹ Instead, increased law and order led to a widespread rejection of the criminal justice system, alongside concerns about, if not prison, then what was the solution for urban crime.⁸⁰ Whether or not orphan train media in the 1970s intended to offer a modern solution for juvenile crime that would mirror the solution provided by the orphan trains, the suggestion in these representations was that that level of radical change succeeded in the past at ending similar problems with juvenile urban crime, and

⁷⁷ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Dan Berger, introduction to *Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 3.

⁸⁰ Liz Samuels, "Improvising on Reality: The Roots of Prison Abolition," in *Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 33.

perhaps the implication was that a comparable radical move was required to solve such problems in the present.

The Perceived Cycle of Urban Decay and Criminal Youths

A common theme in both popular discourse and orphan train media in the 1970s was the inevitability of youth criminality in urban environments and the effects of such juvenile delinquency in causing further urban decay.⁸¹ Representations of the orphan trains in the 1970s revealed how street children fed into the crime and worsening conditions of urban America and showed them to be a product of the very squalor they produced: “[T]he children of the poor were under fearful pressure. Crime, drunkenness in epidemic proportions, and unbelievable overcrowding made growing up in New York a hazardous gamble.”⁸² If crime, drunkenness, and overcrowding made growing up “a hazardous gamble” a century earlier, certainly the same held true for 1970s children in gangs, growing up under similar conditions.

Fry presents the Orphan Train Movement as a means of ending the cycle of poverty and crime through reeducation. By removing children from the desperate situations of the street, Fry argues, the orphan trains helped remove the problem with the streets themselves: “In the 1870’s Brace noted that police statistics showed a striking decrease in arrests for female...juvenile delinquen[ts]—this in a period when the population had increased about 13.5 percent. Additionally, the number of boys imprisoned...had declined sharply during this period when the society’s emigration work was at its peak.”⁸³ In short, Fry argues, the crime rate dropped because a number of the “criminals,” desperate street children, were being sent west on orphan trains.

⁸¹ Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, 86-7.

⁸² Fry, “The Children’s Migration.”

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Removing delinquent children from the city to combat urban decay is only half of the argument made in media of the 1970s that defended orphan trains as a historic solution to juvenile crime and arguably offered an equally significant solution to current juvenile crime problems. The other half of the argument for orphan trains as a solution is that by changing the riders' surroundings from urban squalor to country farms, the delinquents ceased to be a problem and became upstanding members of society. Fry begins her article in 1875 with the story of four-year-old Willie, a New York Prison Association inmate deemed hopeless and "irrepressible" by the society agent tasked with finding the child a new home out west.⁸⁴ Within a few months of his adoption, Willie has become a beloved, reformed son, and the same agent writes back to New York, "[S]end out the little ones in yet larger numbers. The work is a success."⁸⁵ As Willie is completely reformed, so is the *Orphan Train* film's Liverpool. Strung upside down by his feet in jail, Liverpool is awaiting sentencing when Emma Simms offers him the chance to avoid jail by coming west on the orphan train; eventually, Liverpool does find his way to a new home and life in the west.⁸⁶

In New York City, Willie and Liverpool were child criminals with no chance of becoming honest, productive adults, but once the boys become passengers on an orphan train, their prospects for a better life improve tangibly. Liverpool is redeemed and adopted, and Willie, after just three months of fresh air and farm life, is similarly transformed into a welcome addition to his new family. While little Willie's past crime was likely not gang related and Liverpool's violence was targeted only at police officers who threw the first punch, the idea that both boys were without hope in their urban environments was a decidedly modern one and could easily be

⁸⁴ Fry, "The Children's Migration."

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham.

likened to the perceived hopelessness of children born in urban ghettos in the 1970s.⁸⁷ Media representations of the orphan trains offered the historic movement as a model of drastic reeducation and reformation, suggesting, if not directly stating, that a similarly large scale project was needed in the 1970s if anyone hoped to end the perceived degeneration of American cities and urban youth.

The Role of Race in Perceptions of Juvenile Delinquents and Gangs

In 1911 in New York, the Immigration Commission recognized 45 categories of immigrant races, including Irish, Poles, and Jews. As Linda Gordon noted in her 1990s study of the orphan trains, “The poor orphans were...from the point of view of Brace and the company...equally benighted racially.”⁸⁸ A fresh start out west meant freedom from the streets, but it also was a form of racial upward mobility. In Gordon’s famous example, a group of Caucasian immigrant children sent west on a Catholic baby train and placed with Mexican Catholic families were kidnapped by local Anglos who were furious at the racial mixing. Overnight, the racially inferior outcast children from New York had risen to the status of American: simply put, white.⁸⁹

In the 1970s, the effects of this whitening of former immigrants had worked its magic. The orphan train children in the film, novel, and article were all characterized as economically and situationally disadvantaged, but white. While the conditions of the orphan train riders in New York were presented as comparable to those defining the urban decay of the 1970s, the racial makeup of the riders was not similarly modified to fit the face of 1970s feared street youth. In 1970s studies on degenerating cities and youth gangs, “Race was prominent in psychological

⁸⁷ Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, 30.

⁸⁸ Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

explanations of delinquencies,” yet very little mention was made of “institutional racism,” ignoring the tyrannical policies of police in “minority areas.”⁹⁰ Inexpensive, federally subsidized mortgages were offered to white families as incentives to move to “racially restricted suburbs,” and the influx led to a growth in wealth concentration outside of urban centers and the destruction of urban businesses and economic infrastructure, as government policies and aid encouraged development of suburbs at the expense of America’s cities.⁹¹ While media in the 1970s reflected modern concerns about gangs and urban decay, an ignorance of, or more likely unwillingness to admit to the government-sponsored policies contributing to this decay in communities of color influenced orphan train representations.

In the 1979 film, the orphan train riders are not identified by their lesser immigrant status or by any form of racial othering, not even while on the streets of New York. Instead, what makes them “other” is their circumstance: that they are street urchins trapped in the most unforgiving of urban environments, New York City. The head of the gang of boys is not even an Irish or an Eastern European immigrant, common among the gang members of the 19th century, but a British boy, Liverpool, who would have been completely white, even by 19th century American standards.⁹² The insults police shouted at the boys on the street were remarks like “dirty streeter,” not disparaging remarks about their parentage or ethnicity. When the missionary protagonist of the television movie *Orphan Train* approaches wealthy donors for money to fund the first orphan train ride, those donors refer to the children as “immigrants and misfits,” an almost laughable description given that the only children shown to be foreign are Caucasian

⁹⁰ Hagedorn, *World of Gangs*, xiii.

⁹¹ Jennifer Tilton, *Dangerous or Endangered? Race and Politics of Youth in Urban America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 37.

⁹² Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 12.

Europeans in the form of two blonde-haired blue-eyed boys, a German boy called Dutch and the aforementioned Brit, Liverpool.⁹³

The eradication of race in orphan train media is significant in its removal of the main factor standing in the way of 1970s urban reform and uplift: racial tensions. The 1970s were not far removed from Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, and with the option of either addressing racial conflict or shifting responsibility, popular orphan train media followed the example of analysts, critics, and popular media alike: They pretended the problem did not exist. The only mention of African Americans in these three early works of orphan train media occurs in the novel adaptation of *Orphan Train*, in the form of “a runaway slave to save” and an even less significant “troupe of roving actors who do Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” neither of which is present in the film adaptation.⁹⁴ Although these characters did not play a significant role in the novel, their presence made reference to the deep-seated racial inequalities of the 19th century. Their removal from the film adaptation leaves a finished product devoid of any mention or acknowledgement of the plight of children of color or other disadvantaged minorities living in urban decay.

If the saving of 19th century New York City street children by orphan trains first seemed to emerge in 1970s popular culture as an analogy to concerns about urban decay and degenerative youth, particularly African American street gangs, then why “whitewash” the orphans? Intentionally or not, representations of the orphan trains in the 1970s came to espouse the predominant view, as expressed in popular and government policies, that social reform and uplift could best be achieved by those who were identified as part of the community. In the 1970s, Caucasian politicians were looking out for Caucasian people by encouraging flight to and

⁹³ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979).

⁹⁴ “ORPHAN TRAIN by James & Dorothea G. Petrie Magnuson,” *Kirkus Review*, July 2, 1978.

development of racially restrictive suburbs, leaving people of color to form their own community bonds and look after their own people, youth included.⁹⁵ In a world just beginning to recognize its guilt in a racially-charged past, advocating for a solution like the orphan trains – a community-wide responsibility for children and youth in at risk situations – was perhaps beyond the progressive lens of those engaging in the discussions. By ignoring racial differences and other distinctions that existed among immigrant orphan train riders, the orphan trains began in the media as a historic example of whites helping whites, perhaps a silent suggestion that it was time for present day minorities to help themselves as well.

Racial politics and urban panic about degenerative youth did not disappear in the years following the 1970s, nor could they be contained in one decade. The concerns about youth and childhood in the 1970s were influenced by the racial concerns and urban decay cultivated in the decades that preceded it, and in the decades that followed, the focus of urban panic shifted. Public fear about dangerous street youth shifted to concern about saving child victims of those dangerous streets. As children became victims instead of perpetrators, the portrayal of orphan train riders in fiction and nonfiction media shifted as well. These characters now reclaimed some of their ethnic identities – particularly Irish immigrants and the stigmas that surfaced in the 19th century – and the orphan train movement became less of a child saving form of urban reform and more of a complex issue of ethics and child welfare.

⁹⁵ “ORPHAN TRAIN by James & Dorothea G. Petrie Magnuson,” *Kirkus Review*, July 2, 1978.

Chapter Three

How Child Abuse Scandals, Stranger Danger, and Evolving Foster Care Policies Shaped Media Portrayals of Orphan Trains in the 1980s and 1990s

In the 17th episode of its sixth season, *Full House*, a popular television sitcom of the 1980s and 1990s, aired an episode called “Silence is Not Golden.” 11-year-old Stephanie (Jodie Sweetin) is forced to pair with an obnoxious classmate, Charles, on a partner project. When she learns that Charles’ father beats him, Stephanie struggles over whether or not to tell an adult, because Charles has sworn her to secrecy. Eventually, she does confide in her uncle (John Stamos), and Charles is placed into a foster family so that he and his father can receive “the help [they] need.”⁹⁶ When originally aired, the episode ended with Stamos and Sweetin offering a toll-free 800 number for Childhelp USA and telling the audience, “If you need help, someone is there for you.”⁹⁷ The implication in Stamos and Sweetin’s message and in the content of the episode is that the existence of child abuse is a reality and that it is not the lack of available resources to aid abused children but, rather, widespread public silence and stigma that constitutes the most pressing problem. This television episode is just one of many dramatizations of child abuse, a growing fear in the last two decades of the 20th century.⁹⁸

Trends that begin or are most prevalent in certain decades are by no means confined to a ten- year period; rather, they often are result of events in the recent past and have widespread implications that echo in the years that follow. 1980s and 1990s panics surrounding the abuse of children and other perceived threats to an idealized concept of childhood had their roots in earlier

⁹⁶ “Silence is Not Golden.” *Full House*, ABC American Broadcasting Company (Burbank, CA: WABC, September 22, 1987).

⁹⁷ John J. O’Connor, “Review/Television; For Children, a Drama with a Lesson on Abuse,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1993.

⁹⁸ Lela B. Costin, Howard Jacob Karger, and David Stoesz, *Politics of Child Abuse in America*. (Cary, GB: Oxford University Press, USA, 1996), 7.

panics about dangerous street children and youth gangs from the 1970s. This new panic was fueled particularly by media, especially television, in both fiction and news programs which sensationalized abuse.⁹⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, the focus on child abuse and growing panics about the welfare of children coincided with an increase in the number of orphan train representations in television, news sources, and novels and influenced the nature and extent of abuses depicted in orphan train stories that appeared during those decades as well.

The orphan trains, once represented in media as a solution to urban decay, were now presented as a complex vehicle of equal parts child saving and child endangerment, not unlike the rapidly shifting perceptions of modern foster care, the legacy of the orphan trains. In part, representations of the orphan trains in the 1980s and 1990s appeared to become propaganda for modern foster care legislation, as the orphan train representations shifted in portraying whether staying with the biological family or being adopted was in a child's best interest depending on the shifting policies of foster care during the late 1980s through the 1990s. While representations of the orphan trains in media questioned whether or not the orphan trains were in the best interest of the children who rode them, orphan train media were also a means of determining if similar policies stressing family reunification or adoption were in the best interests of modern-day foster children.

This chapter relies on various sources, but because it focuses in particular on a set of young adult novels by mystery writer Joan Lowery Nixon, a brief background on Nixon is useful: From 1964 to her death in 2003, Joan Lowery Nixon published at least one book a year for a total of 140 books in her lifetime, mostly mysteries for young readers.¹⁰⁰ Nixon won

⁹⁹ Costin, Karger, and Stoesz, *Politics of Child Abuse in America*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Kassie Dixon, "Nixon, Joan Lowery," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Uploaded August 31, 2010, Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

numerous awards in her lifetime, including two Golden Spur Awards for her celebrated *Orphan Train Adventures* series.¹⁰¹ From 1988 to 1998, Nixon wrote a total of eleven books about orphan train riders; the seven *Orphan Train Adventures* followed the seven Kelly siblings sent west by their mother who could no longer provide for them after her husband died, and the four *Orphan Train Children* followed children taken west on an orphan train led by Frances Mary, one of the Kelly children, now an adult. The sheer number of Nixon's published novels coupled with the extensive primary source research she performed before writing suggest that while the series was first published in the late 1980s, her research likely began years earlier.¹⁰² With this in mind, Nixon could well have been influenced by not just the politics of the history she was studying but also by the political climate of the time period in which she was writing, particularly the 1970s panics about juvenile delinquents and the state of American youth in cities, a situation which greatly paralleled the conditions of the 19th century New York City immigrant children who were ultimately sent west on orphan trains. Whether or not Nixon perceived these similarities and intentionally incorporated them into the fabric of her books, this chapter will explore how her 1980s and 1990s readers could, and likely did, construct a comparison themselves between modern child abuse and foster care policies and her representations of orphan train riders and their new homes.

Three sections will divide this chapter. The first section will discuss how the growing concerns in the 1980s and 1990s about child abuse by adults in positions of authority appeared in orphan train media of the time as threats to children both on the streets of New York and in their new homes. This section will argue that the clear references to child abuse in orphan train media suggest the orphan trains and similar adoption-centered child saving legislations were not a

¹⁰¹ Dixon, "Nixon, Joan Lowery."

¹⁰² "Biography: Joan Lowery Nixon," *teenreads.com*.

complete solution but required further reform and oversight. This first section will use the following examples: Andrea Warren's 1996 nonfiction children's book, *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy's True Story*; a 1994 episode entitled "Orphan Train" from the western TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*; and Nixon's 1988 *Caught in the Act (Orphan Train Adventures #2)*.

The second section of this chapter will explore how the 1980s and 1990s growing concerns about stranger abduction and abuse were reflected in orphan train representations. Often the frightening strangers in orphan train media were the strangers who adopted the children, and this section will explore how allowing unknown adults to adopt children from the orphan trains could be seen by 1980s and 1990s Americans as risky, possibly resulting in abuses akin to those suffered by children in modern stranger abductions, rather than as a viable way to find suitable homes for children in need. Primary sources for this second section will include three of Nixon's *Orphan Train Adventures* novels — *A Family Apart (#1)*, *Caught in the Act (#2)*, and *Circle of Love (#7)* — and the 1986 *Smithsonian* article "It Took Trains to Put Street Kids on the Right Track Out of the Slums."

The final section of this chapter will address how orphan train representations in the media served as subtle propaganda for the shifting 1980s and 1990s foster care legislation priorities from family reunification to adoption. In particular, this last section will discuss the influence of the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which made it the objective of state foster care to rehabilitate natural parents and return children to them whenever possible.¹⁰³ This determination that biological family is to be valued above all else appears often in orphan train media, which portray sibling bonds between orphan train riders and emphasize the importance of preserving these bonds by placing biological siblings together, if at all

¹⁰³ John E. B. Myers, *Child Protection in America* (New York, US: Oxford University Press, 2006), 100.

possible. Sources for this part of section three include Nixon's *A Family Apart (Orphan Train Adventures #1)* and a 1989 episode entitled "Orphan Train" from the western TV series *Guns of Paradise*. This last section will also analyze the changes in foster care policy and public opinion that occurred after the 1980 Act failed and was replaced with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). The latter shifted the focus from "family preservation" to the "best interest of the child," providing strict time lines for either reuniting children with their parents or formally terminating parental rights so that children could be adopted.¹⁰⁴ The primary sources for this section of the chapter are Warren's *Orphan Train Rider*, Nixon's *A Place to Belong (Orphan Train Adventures #4)*, and Nixon's *Will's Choice (Orphan Train Children #2)*. In examining the panics about childhood of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in relation to foster care, child abuse by adult authority figures, and fears about stranger abduction and abuse, this chapter seeks to understand how the orphan trains in media were a cautionary tale of the need for reform in and oversight by modern child saving and adoption programs.

Child Abuse Center Stage

An historian of American childhood, Steven Mintz writes about child abuse panics in the later decades of the 20th century, beginning with the high profile McMartin Preschool court case from 1984 which he credits as the "most sensational" of the public panic child abuse cases.¹⁰⁵ After one mother complained to police that her two-year-old son was molested at the preschool, the police sent a letter to hundreds of parents of present and past children from the preschool asking them to question their children about whether any school employees had "forced the

¹⁰⁴ Myers, *Child Protection in America*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 335-6.

children to ‘engage in oral sex, fondling of genitals, buttocks or chest area, and sodomy.’”¹⁰⁶

Highly suggestive questioning led over 350 children to admit to being abused, sparking a public panic about child safety. If day cares built for the supervision and protection of children were abusing toddlers, then how could children and their parents know whom to trust? This mistrust and fear of abuse in day cares and schools led to a surge of accusations of child abuse and especially sexual abuse of children in the 1980s and 1990s and criminal prosecution of these cases.¹⁰⁷

Discussions of abuse in fictional and nonfictional orphan train accounts are present in the 1970s but increase considerably in the 1980s and 1990s commensurate with the number of orphan train representations. The abuse of the orphan train riders by adults in positions of authority, be they caretakers in New York City and/or adoptive parents out west, was present in nearly all portrayals of the Orphan Train Movement in media in the 1980s and 1990s. While child abuse remains a concern in these representations of the orphan trains, nearly always these stories are juxtaposed with happy endings out west for other train riders, suggesting the orphan trains in media in the 1980s and 1990s could be seen as an argument for further oversight, not the abolition of, current child welfare programs. The orphan trains and their supporters were depicted as generally well-meaning; the abuse was shown as stemming from insufficient screening of prospective parents and staff by the organizations running the trains. When the sexual abuse of toddlers captured front page headlines of newspapers, so, too, did instances of sexual abuse appear in orphan train media, although generally in the form of the forced prostitution of teenage girls due to circumstance. The abuse of toddlers might seem unrelated to

¹⁰⁶ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 335.

¹⁰⁷ Myers, *Child Protection in America*, 187.

teenage prostitution; however, the latter provided a way to look for a solution in orphan train media for modern concerns about adults hypersexualizing innocent children.

In American popular culture, sexual abuse “emerged from obscurity in the late 1970s and the 1980s,” and in representations of the orphan trains in media, the same pattern appeared.¹⁰⁸ Young teenage girls, in particular, were often sexually exploited, both on the streets of New York and out west in media representations of orphan trains. In the late 1970s movie and book *Orphan Train*, a committed Children’s Aid Society worker struggles to wrest young Sarah from the clutches of a brothel owner who took in the orphaned child solely to raise her for a life of prostitution and who will surrender Sarah only if the worker reimburses her for the years of room and board she has provided for the child. According to the storyline, in order to save Sarah, Emma Simms, a Children’s Aid Society worker, must sacrifice the entirety of the funds she has worked so hard to raise for the funding of the first orphan train trip.¹⁰⁹

Although Miss Simms ultimately does obtain the additional money needed to fund the ride west, Sarah’s story serves to illustrate the abuses of children by people of authority, as the brothel owner was the only caretaker Sarah had known and succeeded in forcing the girl into a life of prostitution. It was only at the last possible moment that the overworked Miss Simms and understaffed Children’s Aid Society were alerted to Sarah’s predicament by another street child who befriended her. The need to devote more government resources and personnel like Mrs. Simms and the Children’s Aid Society to protect sexually exploited children could be one way orphan trains were mobilized in the later decades of the 20th century as a partial solution to protecting children from sexual abuse. The orphan trains and the adults looking after the riders until their placement once again save a child from prostitution in the 1994 episode “Orphan

¹⁰⁸ Myers, *Child Protection in America*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie). YouTube.

Train” from the western TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. In this episode, fifteen-year-old Jennifer, the oldest orphan train rider, signs herself into prostitution with the local brothel owner, Hank, because it seems no one wants to adopt the orphan train children and she sees no other option for herself. Additionally, Jennifer has a crippled younger brother she “has to look after,” and she believes because of her age no one other than Hank will ever want her.¹¹⁰ Earlier, Hank had offered to “adopt” Jennifer, making clear his intentions to exploit her sexually, but the protagonist, Dr. Quinn, stepping up to help look after the children until they were adopted, intervened and prevented the adoption to protect Jennifer from a life of prostitution. Jennifer is eventually rescued by Myra, herself a prostitute, who is approaching the end of her own contract and altruistically stays on in Jennifer’s place. Together, Dr. Quinn and the local reverend assure Jennifer that they will help her and her brother find the new homes and families, which they, and all children, deserve.¹¹¹

Orphans and impressionable young teen girls are portrayed in 1980s and 1990’s media as perfect targets for sexual abuse, and both Sarah and Jennifer are rescued by young mother-like figures who sacrifice something very important to them to give these girls a chance to recoup their lost childhoods. Thanks to the interventions of trustworthy adults, the happy endings for these teenage girls who barely escaped lives as prostitutes mirror the sustained efforts in the late 1970s and into the 1980s to combat the sexual abuse of children which, by the end of the twentieth century, had shown signs of success.¹¹² Courtroom dramas accented all child abuse cases, “transform[ing] child abuse from a social problem into a social spectacle,” particularly in

¹¹⁰ “Orphan Train.” *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, CBS Columbia Broadcasting System (Los Angeles, CA: WNBC, January 29, 1994).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Myers, *Child Protection in America*, 127-8.

cases like the aforementioned famous McMartin Preschool case.¹¹³ Like many that came before and after it, the case horrified America in its depiction of gross sexual acts performed on little children unable to defend themselves, not unlike the reactions orphan train media undoubtedly hoped to elicit from its viewers by showing the leering glances of adult pimps as they contemplated taking advantage of desperate, innocent young girls.¹¹⁴ Orphan train media was more than just another example of child sexual exploitation; the orphan trains themselves provided a possible way for adults to protect and save these young girls from sexual abuse, suggesting a similar call for reform and oversight by trustworthy adults to protect the innocent children of the 1980s and 1990s.

Although not depicted graphically, the physical child abuse described in orphan train media of the era shows a similar gross abuse of power that had become such a staple of 1980s and 1990s child abuse rhetoric. In the “Orphan Train” episode of *Dr. Quinn*, all of the orphans sent west appear as victims of abuse and neglect, displaying signs of malnutrition: three children have scurvy, two are anemic, one has rickets, and one boy, Jennifer’s brother, is missing a leg, having lost it when he was forced to work a man’s job unloading coal at the docks.¹¹⁵ Abuse in New York City, both by parents and institutions like orphanages, is even more vivid in Andrea Warren’s biography, *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy’s True Story*, which begins by relating how the father of the protagonist, Lee, after their mother’s death sent his three oldest out of seven children out on the street to “take care of themselves.”¹¹⁶ Abandoned with another brother at an orphanage, Lee was punished daily by being made to drink “bitter-tasting castor oil” or by being

¹¹³ Costin, Karger, and Stoesz, *Politics of Child Abuse in America*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “Orphan Train.” *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, CBS.

¹¹⁶ Andrea Warren, *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy’s True Story* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 12.

“left alone in a tiny room for hours.”¹¹⁷ Although Lee was not beaten, “as they did at some other orphanages,” Warren’s writing asserts that Lee was abused, nonetheless, stifled emotionally in a place where children were “never showed...any affection.”¹¹⁸ Neglect and abandonment may not rise to the magnitude of outright sexual molestation, but 1980s and 1990s cases of child abuse led to a heightened concern about the psychological aftereffects of abuse on child victims. Such media accounts could have influenced both Warren’s concern for the emotional abuses Lee suffered in his early childhood and the possible reading that the orphan trains, while not a perfect solution, may well have saved Lee from the emotional abuses of institutionalized care.¹¹⁹

Mental and physical abuse of young boys, particularly in the form of overworking male children as farm hands, is a recurrent theme throughout orphan train media in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly Nixon’s fiction and especially in her second *Orphan Train Adventures* book, *Caught in the Act*. The book follows eleven-year-old Michael Kelly after his ride on the orphan train which has taken him to an abusive set of new parents, Mr. and Mrs. Friedrich. These adults treat Mike like a criminal, and his foster father, who considers Mike to be merely free labor, is determined to beat the evil of the New York City streets out of Mike.¹²⁰ Formerly forced by his family’s poverty and hunger to resort to becoming a pickpocket in New York City, Mike suffers Mr. Friedrich’s warning that, “if you steal again, you will be beaten. You won’t like the beatings, so you won’t steal...I know how to handle boys like you.”¹²¹ Tormented and framed numerous times by his foster brother who does not want to share his parents, Mike endures severe beatings

¹¹⁷ Warren, *Orphan Train Rider*, 19.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 217-18.

¹²⁰ Joan Lowery Nixon, *Caught in the Act: Orphan Train Adventures #2* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1988), 6.

¹²¹ Ibid.

that “rais[e] welts on his back and legs” and leave him unable to get out of bed the next morning without “grabbing the bedstead for support, groaning [in] pain.”¹²²

Like Jennifer who feels she has no choice but to prostitute herself to take care of her brother, so Mike feels he has no choice but to endure the beatings and verbal abuse, because he fears the only alternative: being forced to return to New York City, where, as a criminal (pickpocket), he would be sent to rot in prison with adults.¹²³ When adult intervention eventually saves Mike, it comes in the form of a hired hand who stops a particularly vicious beating, refuting Mr. Friedrich’s claim that it is how to raise boys like Mike, the hired hand arguing, “How c[an] a beating ever be necessary? It is simply a large, strong man causing pain to a boy too small to fight back... You’ll only teach this boy that someday he can be large and strong enough to hurt someone else who is defenseless.”¹²⁴

Sexual, physical, and mental abuse played a large part in the orphan train narratives in the 1980s and 1990s. This rise in child abuse narratives coincided with a sharp increase in orphan train media. The growing public panics over and activism to end child abuse led to a heightened awareness of such cases that was reflected in the narratives of 1980s and 1990s writers and biographers of the orphan train stories. The abuse inflicted on children in these orphan train narratives was nearly always by an adult in a position of authority but rarely committed by a biological relative beyond the occasional neglect and abandonment by a parent unable to care for his or her child. The prominence of strangers as abusers in the plotlines of these stories was

¹²² Nixon, *Caught in the Act*, 23.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 61.

¹²⁴ Nixon, *Caught in the Act*, 93.

likely influenced not only by a general awareness of child abuse but also by the growing panic in the 1980s and 1990s regarding stranger abduction, abuse, and murder of children.¹²⁵

Stranger Danger

In the 1980s, “serious and prolonged” media focus was on child abuse by adults in authority, but equal attention was given to another emerging panic about child endangerment: abductions and abuse by strangers.¹²⁶ Missing children became a “leading social problem,” their faces looking out from flyers on telephone poles or displayed on grocery bags and milk cartons across America.¹²⁷ Although the Orphan Train Movement was not a mass kidnapping, it was a historical movement rooted in a trust for strangers: Prospective parents were bringing unknown children into their homes, and the children and organizations who placed them were trusting unknown families living out west to treat the children they adopted as their own rather than as unpaid farm hands, or worse. Trusting strangers without subjecting them to sufficient advance screening and expecting them to take in, sight unseen, city (street) children, often those whom no one would miss, could prove disastrous. That danger in the unknown is addressed in numerous orphan train media in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly Donald Dale Jackson’s 1984 *Smithsonian* article, “It Took Trains to Put Street Kids on the Right Track Out of the Slums.” As the title suggests, the article is an overwhelmingly positive spin on the orphan train experience, which it considers, when viewed in its historical context, a “generally accepted and applauded ... reasonable solution to a painful dilemma.”¹²⁸ Even Jackson, however, could not deny the leap of

¹²⁵ Alexandra Meltzer Goldman, “Threatened Innocents and the News: The History of a National Preoccupation,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014. Columbia University Academic Commons, 108.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Goldman, “Threatened Innocents,” 108.

¹²⁸ Donald Dale Jackson, “It Took Trains to Put Street Kids on the Right Track Out of the Slums,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 1986. Web.

faith the program required and the problematic endings that could follow for children who were placed with strangers: “Many were treated well and eventually adopted; others were shuttled from one family to another; some were abused and forced to work like oxen.”¹²⁹

The orphan trains were not just a cautionary tale about entrusting children to strangers, but also a call for awareness and for more resources, as the real cause for the children’s misery is not that they were sent west to new homes but that the organizations sending the children did not have the resources to screen properly the children’s prospective parents. The six Kelly siblings in Nixon’s *Orphan Train Adventures* series are prime examples of the range of possibilities that ensued from entrusting children to strangers. While all six siblings shared the same life in New York City, found new families at the same stop in St. Joseph, Missouri, and left the train stop with strangers, their individual lives reached very different conclusions: Mike met with physical abuse, while 13-year-old Frances Mary and 6-year-old Petey who stayed together found loving parents.^{130 131} 12-year-old Megan suffered continued verbal abuse from an adult neighbor, while 10-year-old Danny and 7-year-old Peg quickly assimilated into a positive new neighborhood environment and family.^{132 133}

An important note about Nixon’s representations of the orphan trains is that she does not fault the orphan trains for Mike and Megan’s miseries; rather, the Children’s Aid Society and its agents are portrayed as wanting what is best for the children. Unfortunately, however, they are limited by the resources available to them, as is particularly evident when they do not want to

¹²⁹ Jackson, “It Took Trains.”

¹³⁰ Nixon, *Caught in the Act*, 23.

¹³¹ Joan Lowery Nixon, *A Family Apart: Orphan Train Adventures #1* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1987), 160.

¹³² Joan Lowery Nixon, *In the Face of Danger: Orphan Train Adventures #3* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1988), 68.

¹³³ Joan Lowery Nixon, *A Place to Belong: Orphan Train Adventures #4* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1989).

allow Mike to go with the domineering Mr. Friedrich but cannot stop the adoption, because Mr. Friedrich has been vetted by a committee of his friends. Not until they see evidence that Mr. Friedrich has beaten Mike do they then have the proof they need to intervene.¹³⁴ In the final novel, the adult Frances Mary now accompanies a new group of orphans west, serving as their agent. As she watches them leave her care she realizes again just how powerless she and the agency are to protect the children once they have been signed over to new parents: “*But how do we know what lies ahead for these children?* She asked herself. *All we can do is hope for the best.*”¹³⁵

Not all accounts of the orphan trains in the 1980s and 1990s were positive; some portrayed the organizations who sent the children west and their agents as little more than kidnapers, because they cut off contact between the orphan train riders and their biological parents unable to care for them, even in cases where a biological parent supplied an address and wanted his or her child(ren) to stay in written contact with the parents. The terror of losing a child to kidnapping is certainly different from agreeing to hand over a child to new parents to raise, but the scale of the Orphan Train Movement and the limitations of the times meant that many children became lost in the system.

In media in the 1980s and 1990s, in such cases a child was as good as kidnapped, since even those birth parents who wanted to stay in touch with the children for whom they could not provide found themselves cut out of their children’s lives. For example, although one real orphan train rider, Lee Nailling, was sent away by necessity by a father who, following the death of his wife, could not take care of Lee and his many siblings, Andrea Warren devotes an entire chapter

¹³⁴ Nixon, *Caught in the Act*, 143.

¹³⁵ Joan Lowery Nixon, *Circle of Love: Orphan Train Adventures #7* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1997), 115.

of her nonfiction children's book to his father's final attempt to stay in touch with his sons which was thwarted almost immediately and intentionally by an employee of the agency sending them west. When Lee's father had appeared at the train station to say goodbye to his sons before they boarded the orphan train, he gave Lee, the eldest of the three, a pink envelope containing his address and asked his son to stay with his younger brothers and to write to their father, sending him their addresses once they were settled.¹³⁶ The matron tasked with looking after the child riders removed the envelope from Lee's jacket when the boy was asleep, effectively cutting off any possibility of his ever reconnecting with his birth father. When Lee awoke and, discovering that his envelope was missing, questioned the matron, she curtly admonished the distraught boy, "Where you're going you won't be needing that envelope... You must forget about it."¹³⁷

Summarily ending all contact between parents and children is an extreme measure, if not quite as extreme as kidnapping, and it suggests another important influence on orphan train media in the 1980s and 1990s: the changing political policy and popular opinion on what constitutes the best interest of children in foster care, the legacy of the orphan trains.

Changing Foster Care Policies of the late 20th Century

The priorities of foster care in America shifted greatly over the course of the last two decades of the 20th century. The 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act required all states to avoid, whenever possible, removing children from even abusive or neglectful parents. In cases where such removal was mandated by adverse conditions, the Act required the establishment of a "permanency plan" to return the child(ren) home, or, in cases where that was absolutely impossible, to move quickly towards terminating all parental rights and providing

¹³⁶ Warren, *Orphan Train Rider*, 28.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

“financial incentives for adoption.”¹³⁸ However, just over a decade later, concerns about the central importance of the biological family – rhetoric of the 1980 Act – led Congress to pass the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) which did not devalue the importance of family preservation but shifted the priority to the safety and well-being of the child above all else. To prevent children from languishing in foster care for years, ASFA established “strict time lines” either for children in foster care to be returned to their parents or for the termination of parental rights. In cases of sexual or repeated physical abuse, however, ASFA allowed states to bypass “efforts to reunify the family” and seek immediately to end all parental rights.¹³⁹

In popular media during the 1980s and 1990s, the Orphan Train Movement, much like its modern foster care counterpart, alternatively emphasized the importance of keeping families together and acting in the best interest of the child above all else. The detriment of separating families was often painfully evident in cases where siblings tried hard to remain together and, when unsuccessful, suffered severe trauma from their enforced separation. In orphan train representations of the 1980s and 1990s, the all-encompassing importance of acting in the best interest of the child was often apparent in orphan train riders who still had a living parent but, nonetheless, found better homes out west than what their parent could provide.

Published in 1987, Nixon’s *A Family Apart*, her first novel about the Kelly siblings, follows the eldest child, Frances Mary, who cuts off her own hair and pretends to be a boy, “Frankie,” because some families are known to take two siblings if they are boys, and she promised her mother that she would stay with her youngest sibling, Petey, and take care of him no matter what.¹⁴⁰ Frances knows that the parents who adopt her might send her back when they

¹³⁸ Myers, *Child Protection in America*, 100.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁴⁰ Nixon, *A Family Apart*, 54.

discover she is a girl, but she is determined to hide her gender and endure whatever consequences come from her deception in order to protect Petey for as long as possible, a clear sign of the familial bond she feels towards him and how important their remaining together is to her.¹⁴¹ The main action of the 1989 episode “Orphan Train” from the western TV series *Guns of Paradise* follows an orphan train rider whose sister was sent to another family in his quest to find her and ensure that they can stay together, although this goal means he must hide away and escape the men who, like bounty hunters, are pursuing him in their determination to deliver every orphan to his or her new home and thereby collect monetary awards from the adoptive parents. The siblings’ devotion to each other, desire to stay together, and refusal to be parted, no matter what the risk to their safety or to their hope of enjoying a happy, stable family life, shows just how deep their biological bond is. The intensity of the siblings’ bond and their choice of each other above the kind families they could have apart serves as an argument for family unification above all else, because in cases of siblings’ strong familial bonds, such connections, if forcibly broken, clearly cannot be replaced by placement in adoptive families.¹⁴²

Without denying the importance of sibling bonds, later orphan train media, much like the 1997 ASFA, placed the focus on the best interest of the child and often found that standard incompatible with letting children remain with their parents or even with keeping siblings together. In Warren’s *Orphan Train Rider*, Lee Nailling recalled the family who took his youngest brother away and how “Gerald realized what was happening and screamed for Lee and Leo [the third brother].”¹⁴³ When the family who chose Lee and Leo decided to keep only Leo,

¹⁴¹ Nixon, *A Family Apart*, 54.

¹⁴² “Orphan Train.” *Guns of Paradise*, CBS Columbia Broadcasting System (Los Angeles, CA: WNBC, October 28, 1989).

¹⁴³ Warren, *Orphan Train Rider*, 44.

Lee remembered watching Leo scream as he was driven away.¹⁴⁴ Although the siblings did not end up being placed together and that was traumatic, Warren describes their new homes as what proved best for each of them. All three brothers found loving parents, and the brothers maintained their connection to each other, thanks in large part to their new parents: “The three families arranged for the brothers to spend part of each summer together, first at one house, and then at the next. They did that until the brothers grew up.”¹⁴⁵ Late in life, when Lee located his other siblings who had not rode the orphan trains, he learned that they had grown up together on the streets, certainly a less appealing alternative to the life Lee, Leo, and Gerald had found out west.¹⁴⁶ The narrative of Warren’s book is in keeping with the ASFA, as it posits that although separating the children was traumatic, sometimes family unification is not in a child’s best interest, as it certainly would not have been for the Lee and his brothers, if that meant their father turning them out into the streets as he did their older siblings.

Most of Nixon’s books, too, highlight the importance of acting in the best interest of the child, even if that requirement keeps a family apart. In *A Place to Belong*, the story about 10-year-old Danny Kelly and his 7-year-old sister Peg who are placed together with a kind couple highlights both how much Danny has needed a father since losing his own father and the depth of the bond he has developed with his adoptive father, Alfrid Swenson. When Alfrid’s wife Olga dies and the Kelly children’s biological mother actually comes to live nearby, now able to reclaim and care for Danny and Peg, Danny recognizes that despite his love for his birth mother, the life he has developed with his new father is what is best for him, whereas living with their mother is best for his sister, Peg, who was closer to Olga than to Alfrid. Like Lee and his

¹⁴⁴ Warren, *Orphan Train Rider*, 54.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴⁶ Warren, *Orphan Train Rider*, 69.

siblings, Danny visits Peg and his mother frequently, but he has found in Alfrid Swenson the father figure he needs most of all.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, the titular character of Nixon's *Will's Choice* is the son of a traveling circus performer, Jesse Scott, who sends his son west because he believes Will is not a good fit for the circus life Jesse leads. Adopted by a doctor and his wife, Will finds in them better parents than he ever had in his father. When Jesse's circus arrives in Will's new town and Jesse offers Will the opportunity to travel with him on the road, Will chooses to stay with his new family; he realizes that although he will always love his biological father, Dr. and Mrs. Wallace are the stable parents he needs.¹⁴⁸ Danny and Will's stories are in keeping with the best interest of the child rhetoric of the ASFA in that in each case a biological parent is alive, but the narratives indicate that the child is better off continuing to live with his new adoptive parents.

In popular media of the 1980s and 1990s, orphan train riders served as a subtle form of propaganda for shifting child welfare policies. The media portrayed the best interest of the orphan train riders as staying with siblings when the 1980s policy prioritized family reunification and, as the policy shifted to favor adoption, orphan train representations, too, supported the position that sending the children out west to new families really was better for them than staying in New York City with the parent and/or siblings who were remaining there. The question of what truly was in the best interest of the child, however, was not simply a question for 1980s and 1990s foster care policy makers. Discussions of childhood, from questions about preventing stranger abductions to concerns about child abuse and sexual predators who specifically target children, are all related to the overarching question of how society should act in the best interest of its children and what factors are the chief sources of danger for children.

¹⁴⁷ Nixon, *A Place to Belong*.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Concerns about child abuse, stranger abductions, and foster care in these decades all led to a question in the media of whether or not the orphan trains were in the best interest of the children. Child abuse by authority figures as described in orphan train media ultimately showed the necessity for further government reform; nevertheless, the selfless work of the agencies and many of their representative in placing the children out west provided a positive element. The societies themselves and the agents who actually accompanied the children out west were not the problem; an increase in staff and a need for reform of those specific agency policies that were deficient (particularly in the screening process for prospective parents) were suggested as the solutions that could be found for modern problems by looking at orphan train media. 1980s and 1990s panics about stranger abductions and abuse also appeared in orphan train media during that time and provided a slightly less optimistic look at the orphan trains, sometimes portrayed as akin to abduction as they separated children from living parents and siblings, often permanently.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the orphan trains further served as a subtle form of propaganda for shifting foster care priorities, illustrating first the importance of family reunification through stories of sibling bonds that even the enforced separation that might occur after riding the orphan trains could not break. Later, as foster care policies shifted away from family reunification to a stronger emphasis on adoption, the orphan trains in media followed suit, showing how adoption could be in child's best interest, even more so than living with his or her biological family. Ultimately, media in the 1980s and 1990s portrayed the orphan train movement as a model (albeit one in need of reform) for the sort of activism needed to protect modern children from a variety of abuses. While popular media in the final decades of the 20th century portrayed the orphan trains as a semi-successful attempt to act in the best interest of abused children, later writers would draw very different conclusions.

Conclusion

As of March 28, 2016, Christina Baker Kline's *New York Times* Bestseller *Orphan Train* (2013) had 17,997 customer reviews on its American domain. The overall rating in number of "stars" from these votes is 4.6 out of a possible 5, with 67% of those who wrote reviews awarding the coveted five stars.¹⁴⁹ Two million copies of *Orphan Train* have been printed in 35 countries. Kline's novel enjoyed five weeks as #1 on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, over a year in the top five, and 90 weeks and counting on the *New York Times* Best Seller List altogether. The novel has been chosen as "One Book, One Read" by over 50 communities and campuses.¹⁵⁰ A feature film adaptation is also currently in the works.¹⁵¹

Kline's "sleeper hit" *Orphan Train* is without question the most successful piece of orphan train media to date.¹⁵² Previously an author of nonfiction and fiction published to middling success, Kline realized in *Orphan Train* her biggest success, a success both Kline and her editor attribute to, among other things, the book's "historical angle" about what Kline calls "a piece of American history...[that] has been hidden in plain sight."¹⁵³ Kline tours to promote her book but also actively posts on social media¹⁵⁴ about the Orphan Train Movement and prepares PowerPoint presentations to spread knowledge about the orphan trains.¹⁵⁵ The success of Kline's novel has brought increased popularity to the orphan trains in the 2000s, but, once again, this popularity must be viewed through the lens of its time. For 2013, when Kline's

¹⁴⁹ Amazon USA: Kline, Christina Baker, *Orphan Train* (New York: HarperCollins), 2013.

¹⁵⁰ "Orphan Train," [Christinabakerkline.com](http://christinabakerkline.com/novels/orphan-train/), <http://christinabakerkline.com/novels/orphan-train/>.

¹⁵¹ Dave McNary, "'Orphan Train' Movie Adaptation in Works," *Variety.com*, October 14, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/orphan-train-movie-adaptation-1201616816/>.

¹⁵² Rachel Deahl, "William Morrow Finds Sleeper Hit in 'Orphan Train': From Midlist to Frontlist," *Publishersweekly.com*, March 28, 2014. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/61635-william-morrow-finds-sleeper-hit-in-orphan-train.html>.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Christina Baker Kline, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/bakerkline>.

¹⁵⁵ Deahl, "William Morrow Finds Sleeper Hit."

Orphan Train was published, the panics about childhood were often embodied in concerns about the effectiveness of modern foster care and group homes. Kline herself makes this comparison between modern foster care failures and the orphan trains in her choice of dual protagonists: elderly widow and former orphan train rider Vivian Daly and a 17-year-old modern Penobscot Indian foster child, Molly Ayer.¹⁵⁶ Although Kline's *Orphan Train* is only one of many orphan train representations in the media so far in the 21st century, due to its popularity and influence I will treat it as emblematic of the time.¹⁵⁷

Almost from the first appearance of the Orphan Train Movement in media, portrayals of this phenomenon have served more as a vehicle for exploring anxieties about current American children than as historically faithful representations of children in the past. One of the first appearances of the orphan trains in media, the film *Scandal at Scourie*, completely erased the actual historical event, moving its orphan train to Canada and making it a one-time event. By placing the orphan trains outside of the United States, the film falls within the popular narrative of post-World War II media that equated "orphan" with non-American war orphan.¹⁵⁸ The orphan trains were more prominent in media in the 1970s with a strong focus on the urban streets the children had inhabited prior to their ride west, and in particular, on the juvenile crime and gang culture there. This reflected the panics of the 1970s regarding the recurrent cycle of

¹⁵⁶ Christina Baker Kline, *Orphan Train* (New York: HarperCollins), 2013.

¹⁵⁷ A few of the many examples of other orphan train media in the 21st century include: Barbara Anselmi, Sasha Nanus, and Susan Nanus' *Orphan Train: An Original Musical in One Act* (New York: Samuel French Publishers), 2005; Elizabeth Raum's *Orphan Trains: An Interactive History Adventure (You Choose: History)* (Mankato, MN: Capstone Publishers), 2011; Ethel Barker's *For the Love of Pete: An Orphan Train Story* (North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube Press), 2012; The Louisiana Orphan Train Society, Inc.'s *From Cradle to Grace: Journey of the Louisiana Orphan Train Riders* (Lafayette, LA: Cypress Cove Publishing), 2014; and E.F. Abbott's *Nettie and Nellie Cook: Orphan Train Sisters (Based on a True Story)* (Harrisonburg, VA: Feiwel and Friends, Macmillan), 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Cohen, ed., *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 36.

degenerative youth and urban decay plaguing American cities.¹⁵⁹ In 1980s and 1990s media, orphan train riders are sometimes still depicted as criminals, but they are far more sympathetic figures, driven to pickpocketing and other petty crime by circumstance. This more sympathetic view reflects concerns in the 1980s and 1990s about child welfare.

As much as the representations of orphan train media in the 20th century followed patterns of child-related panics and concerns, they also shifted in relation to changing perspectives of the Orphan Train Movement itself and, in particular, the question of whether or not the ends justified the means: Nearly all of the children were slated for misery in New York. If at least some could find happier conclusions out west, even accepting the reality that others might face physical and mental abuse, did that justify the trip? By the end of the 20th century, representations of the Orphan Train Movement in popular media had moved from a successful method of ending some urban juvenile delinquency to an extreme solution to an extreme problem of poverty and neglect.¹⁶⁰ The orphan trains were presented perhaps in the most nuanced manner in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes acknowledging abusive new parents, sometimes describing perfect new lives in the west, and just as often revealing not-so-perfect new parents whom the children came to appreciate and who came to value, even love the children, too. This question of whether or not the orphan trains were in the best interests of the children who rode them was, however, more than just an evaluation of the historical movement. From the moment orphan train media first appeared, it was inextricably linked to modern panics about childhood, and these parallels meant that orphan train representations became a method of looking for a solution to modern concerns about dangerous and endangered children.

¹⁵⁹ John M. Hagedorn, *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xiii.

¹⁶⁰ Donald Dale Jackson, "It took trains to put street kids on the right track out of the slums," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 1986. Web.

Moral panics about children began with fears about the cyclical relationship between juvenile delinquents in cities and urban decay in the 1970s.¹⁶¹ In orphan train media, including the nonfictional “The Children’s Migration,” the 1979 *Orphan Train* film, and its 1978 novel counterpart, a similar focus was placed on the squalor of the New York City streets and the assumption that any change would be better than the life these children would leave behind to ride the trains west. The homes at the end of the train ride appear to be almost an afterthought as the end of the *Orphan Train* film reaches its conclusion. The first forty minutes of the 140-minute film are devoted to detailing the terrible conditions in which the children lived in New York City; by comparison, only the last five minutes of the film focus on the homes the main orphan train rider characters find out west.¹⁶² These homes are shown in one short, mostly silent scene, where the children are surrounded by eager prospective parents who hug them while the narrator describes the happy, fulfilling lives they lived after adoption, eventually growing up to be mothers and fathers, professors and judges (although Liverpool, sadly, is killed in action in the Civil War).¹⁶³ The final voiceover of the film concludes that, “After this first journey, the arrival of orphaned and abandoned children became a regular and welcomed event in rural communities along the railway lines.”¹⁶⁴ In this representation, the orphan trains suggest a solution to modern concerns about urban decay and gang violence, as the ending message is that when juvenile delinquents are removed from urban decay, they can be reeducated and become upstanding members of society.

¹⁶¹ John M. Hagedorn, *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 94-5.

¹⁶² *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham (1979; CBS Direct to Television Movie). YouTube.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ *Orphan Train*, directed by William A. Graham.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the homes children found out west became more of the focus of the stories, although the squalor of the streets was also detailed, most noticeably in Nixon's *Orphan Train Adventures* series.¹⁶⁵ In his 1986 *Smithsonian* article, Donald Dale Jackson summarized media portrayals of the orphan trains perfectly when he wrote of the Movement, "By today's standards the orphan trains and the traumatic, auction- like lineups at journey's end seem callous and even barbaric. But in fairness they should be judged in the context of a time when the law treated ten-year-olds as adults and boys sweated beside their fathers in coal mines."¹⁶⁶ Jackson continues to assert that, in the context of the time, the orphan trains were (and perhaps should still be) "accepted and applauded as a reasonable solution to a painful dilemma."¹⁶⁷

The Orphan Train Movement morphed from a nostalgic solution to modern panics about dangerous youths in the 1970s to a more complicated and problematic solution to concerns about child safety in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s, the Orphan Train Movement continued to lose favor. By the time Kline's *Orphan Train* hit the bestseller lists in 2013, the Children's Aid Society and its orphan trains were vilified as nothing more than a service to rid New York City of its urchins and provide the west with free labor. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in Kline's book. This idea is captured in a scene in which ten-year-old orphan train rider Dorothy has run away from a physically and sexually abusive home and just told Mr. Sorenson, a Children's Aid Society agent and Miss Larsen, a kind schoolteacher not associated with the Society, her story:

¹⁶⁵ Joan Lowery Nixon, *A Family Apart: Orphan Train Adventures #1* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1987).

¹⁶⁶ Jackson, "It took trains."

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Chuckling, [Mr. Sorenson] shakes his head. “Ah, Miss Larsen, that’s not at all what I’m saying, of course not! I merely meant that sometimes, particularly if one has been through distressing events in one’s young life, one might be inclined to jump to conclusions—to inadvertently blow things out of proportion. I saw with my own eyes that the living conditions in the Grote household were, well, less than optimal. But we can’t all have storybook families, can we, Miss Larsen? The world is not a perfect place, and when we are dependent on the charity of others, we are not always in a position to complain.”¹⁶⁸

The easiest option for Mr. Sorenson is to return Dorothy to her adoptive home, despite her very real, very clear allegations of abuse, and the book implies that had Miss Larsen not intervened, very insistently, the young girl could very well have been returned to her former life of abuse.¹⁶⁹ Kline’s portrayal of Children’s Aid Society worker Mr. Sorenson is a far cry from earlier portrayals of agents taking children west. Even the callous woman in Andrea Warren’s 1994 *Orphan Train Rider* who separates Lee from his brothers and removes from his jacket the envelope containing Lee’s father’s address truly believes she is acting in the boys’ best interests in helping them toward a fresh start in the west.¹⁷⁰ Mr. Sorenson, however, has neither any empathy for young Dorothy nor any desire to act in her best interest; he seeks only to be rid of her and place her somewhere she will not be a problem to others.¹⁷¹ This extremely negative portrayal of the orphan train and its agents is in keeping with the growing disenchantment with foster care in 2000s popular media and paints a picture of the orphan trains as a solution which, much like modern foster care, works against the very children it claims to champion.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Kline, *Orphan Train*, 158.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 159.

¹⁷⁰ Andrea Warren, *Orphan Train Rider: One Boy’s True Story* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 28.

¹⁷¹ Kline, *Orphan Train*, 159.

¹⁷² Particularly evident in television shows about teenage foster children: see *The Fosters* (Freeform, 2013-present) in which fifteen-year-old protagonist Callie and her younger brother Jude suffer physical, mental, and sexual abuse at the hands of unfit foster parents and an abusive, uncaring system; or *Life Unexpected* (CBS, 2010-2011), in which sixteen-year-old protagonist Lux who is similarly abused sexually and physically, and, like Dorothy, is not believed by her social workers when she attempts to report the abuse.

Orphan train media in the 1980s and 1990s describe a very different end for children who encounter abusive families out west, as they eventually find a kind family to love them. This scenario constitutes a subtle support of the foster care and adoption policies during those decades. A prime example is Nixon's Michael Kelly, who is first placed with a physically abusive family out west but later is rescued and adopted by a kind Captain and his wife.¹⁷³ On the other hand, in Kline's *Orphan Train*, even after thrice renamed and re-settled Niamh/Dorothy/Vivian reaches her final home with Mr. and Mrs. Nielson who ask her to take on their dead daughter's name, she knows that she will never find love and family in them: "What I feel for the Nielsons—gratitude, respect, appreciation—isn't the same as a child's love for her parents...I am grateful that they took me in. But I am also aware every day of how different I am from them. They are not my people, and never will be."¹⁷⁴ As in Niamh/Dorothy/Vivian's case, orphan train media in the 2000s depicts the orphan train riders as victims and the orphan train system itself as an inherently corrupt, flawed solution, akin to the juxtaposed portrayal of modern foster care.

Trends in orphan train media in the 20th century said more about the present than the past. This thesis has shown how the Orphan Train Movement as represented in media is heavily influenced by various panics, particularly those regarding dangerous youths and youths in danger. In viewing present-day orphan train media and predicting future representations, it is equally important to keep in mind the trajectory orphan train media itself has taken. Over the course of the 20th century orphan train media, the problem has shifted from the city to a lack of regulation to the adults who participate in the movement. In the 1970s, when urban decay was

¹⁷³ Joan Lowery Nixon, *A Dangerous Promise: Orphan Train Adventures #5* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1995).

¹⁷⁴ Kline, *Orphan Train*, 197.

the problem, child welfare was the solution, and the concept of the orphan trains offered a welcome alternative through which cities and youthful deviants could be rehabilitated. In the 1980s and 1990s, concerns about deviant youths were replaced by concerns about child endangerment. The main tenet of the orphan train, that children should be raised in homes, not institutions, was still appealing as a goal for modern foster care, but the lack of reforms and controls on how the children were placed was troubling. By the 2000s, the general public's lack of faith in foster care had discredited the orphan trains and ended the use of orphan train media as a place to find a solution for modern concerns about children.

While 20th century orphan train media suggested possible solutions for modern panics about childhood, so far the 21st century has denounced the orphan trains as a failed "solution" that created child endangerment and abuse instead of solving those problems. Although the methods of the orphan trains are no longer viewed as a viable solution, however, interest in the orphan trains and their representations is on the rise in the early part of the 21st century. Will 21st century orphan train media return to their roots and once again suggest solutions to modern concerns about childhood? Or will the orphan trains follow the early 21st century examples and remain the epitome of modern foster care failures? Only time will tell.

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