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Floral Counterdiscourse: Miscegenation, Ecofeminism, and Hybridity in Lydia Maria Child's A Romance of the Republic

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Floral Counterdiscourse: Miscegenation, Ecofeminism, and Hybridity in Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*

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A reformer most of her life, Lydia Maria Child advanced the rights of women, native Americans, and African Americans in such works as *History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Nations* (1835), *Hobomok* (1823), and *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833). In her fourth and last novel, *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), she tried to reform postbellum society's persistent and vicious race prejudice. Describing her motives in a letter to Robert Purvis, a Philadelphia leader and founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, she wrote,

In these days of novel reading, I thought a Romance would take more hold of the public mind, than the most elaborate arguments; and having fought against Slavery, till the monster is *legally* dead, I was desirous to do what I could to undermine Prejudice. Child, *Selected Letters*, 182–3

A versatile writer with numerous novelistic and narrative options, Child chose a romantic incest and miscegenation plot for *A Romance of the Republic* as her best weapon for overturning racial division.

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Recent criticism of *A Romance of the Republic* focuses on the role of race mixture in solving the United States's race problem and on the critique of race and racism inherent in Child's baby-switching plot in which a white baby is raised as a slave while his black brother grows up in the master's house.¹ Critics have not considered how *A Romance of the Republic* takes advantage of the woman-as-garden convention to offer an uplifting floral counterdiscourse of botanical hybridity that counteracts prevailing postbellum prejudice which was constructing African Americans and mixed-race peoples as animals. By choosing such botanical names for her mixed-race heroines as Rosabella and Flora Royal and comparing those heroines to valued and aesthetically pleasing flowers, Child raises questions about the natural and the social. In particular, Child uses hybrid flowers to construct a philosophy of hybrid racial identity with language derived from contemporary botanical manuals. In *A Romance of the Republic*, Child attempts to elevate black women's status by using horticulturally identified heroines to construct a positive floral counterdiscourse that refutes negative bestial theories of hybridity and that reclaims African-American women's subjectivities as "pure" as flowers. Yet, Child falls short of a utopian floral vision of equality because she unwittingly equates black female agency with a flower's quiet passivity. That is, Child merges the discourse of race into the discourse of flowers in order to interrogate what is "natural" about Reconstruction racial ideology. While it might seem at first that the discourse of race and the discourse of flowers are at genetic cross-purposes, this essay will explore the discursive strategies of hybridity to yield a "green" analysis of Child's miscegenation plot.

The plot of *A Romance of the Republic* revolves around Rosa and Flora Royal, two beautiful and accomplished young women who, when their father dies a few chapters into the novel, find out that their long-dead mother had been a slave and that they are, therefore, mulattas and slaves, too. The dishonest Gerald Fitzgerald "marries" Rosa, knowing full well his liaison with her can be broken at any time. Fitzgerald subsequently legitimately marries the

white Lily Bell. Both women bear him sons at the same time. Rosa switches the infants so that her own son grows up in the white man's house unaware of his mixed-race heritage, and dies fighting in the Civil War. Rosa raises Lily's son as black. This boy, believing himself to be a light-skinned African-American, eventually marries a dark black woman, Henriet. Meanwhile, Flora Royal marries her German suitor, Franz Blumenthal, and Rosa becomes a successful opera singer and marries her old friend, the white Alfred King. The children of the two sisters become friends and the novel ends with a vision of a happy, multiracial household.

What motivates Child's use of botany, and what is the relationship between gardening and racial constructions? It is nothing new that for centuries women have been identified with flowers, beauty, and innocence. For example, when Alfred King, an eligible white suitor of the talented Royal sisters, first walks in the Royal's parlor, he exclaims, "'This is the Temple of Flora . . . Flowers everywhere! Natural flowers, artificial flowers, painted flowers, embroidered flowers, and human flowers excelling them all,' glancing at the young ladies as he spoke" (5). In addition, Alan Bewell points out the "role that botany played in late eighteenth-century sexual theory, which arose directly from the traditional association of women with flowers. This identification went well beyond the anatomical analogy explicit in the idea of sexual defloration, because women were consistently viewed as being linked, in ways that men were not, to the Realm of Flora" (Bewell 135). Yet, as Claudette Sartillot points out, flowers

appear as having no stable *topos*. In texts, as in the natural world, they are alive with strata, gems, devoted to metamorphoses and mimicries: they can easily be turned into their opposites and thus express the feminine, the masculine, or both—they can even show the artificiality of their opposition." (1)

Child, however, flexes the use of the plant world to create a floral counterdiscourse to prevailing postbellum prejudice against hybrid racial identity. In an essay on miscegenation and colonialism, Susan C. Greenfield argues that "ideas about sexual normalcy underwrote constructions of national identity and imperial ambition" (216). In *A Romance of the Republic*, Child similarly tackles

issues of sexual normalcy by linking female sexuality to flowers. Flowers literally are the sexual organs of plants and are an “expression of transgressive erotic desire” (Stein 46). To name Rosa and Flora Royal after flowers is thus to emphasize the sisters’ sexuality and sexual currency in society as well as their “natural” state, here constituted as guileless and chaste as flowers. However, since the women’s racial identity in the novel is as important as their sexual identity, the language of flowers redoubles onto the language of race, especially in the idea of hybridity.

To discuss the cultural and social consequences of Child’s merged discourses of nature, race, and hybridity, we can refer to Donna Haraway’s claim that “bodies, including sexualized and racialized bodies, appear as objects of knowledge and sites of intervention” (134). Rosa’s and Flora’s bodies are initially presented to readers, and to the suitor Alfred King, as objects of knowledge that embody finished accomplishment and polished beauty befitting Southern white gentility. With their trained voices, graceful and flirtatious manners, coiffed hair, and elegant dress, the sisters emblemize the class, race, and sexual status in which their father has “cultivated” or “bred” them. Rosa’s and Flora’s floral names link their cultivated status to the plant world, thereby questioning whether “cultivation” and “breeding” are biological processes or performances of social codes. Once the sisters’ bodies become racialized, that is, once race and hybridity suddenly become an issue when their slave condition is revealed, then Rosa’s and Flora’s bodies become sites of intervention onto which Child superimposes her reformist agenda of miscegenation and her moral critique of a racist society. At the same time, the limits of Child’s floral counterdiscourse are revealed in her inability in *A Romance of the Republic* to imagine darker black women contributing to cultural elevation.

Child’s florigraphic intervention serves as a counterdiscourse to the prevailing Reconstruction rhetoric of hybridity that invoked animals and animality to discuss species, race, and black women’s sexuality. For example, even the common term “mulatto” has a

bestial origin: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mulatto” as coming from the Spanish *mulo* meaning “young mule, hence one of mixed race.” Numerous theorists and racial scientists looked to animals and animal sexuality as a way to discuss human reproduction and hybridity. In *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin included a chapter entitled “Hybridity” and cited examples of crossbreeding in the animal world. Robert Knox, for example, wrote in *The Races of Men* (1862) that

[n]aturalists have generally admitted that animals of the same species are fertile, reproducing their kind for ever; whilst on the contrary, if an animal be the product of two distinct species, the hybrid, more or less, was sure to perish or to become extinct.

U.S. craniologist S. G. Morton, most famous for his *Crania Americana* (1839), in which he theorized a link between cultural advancement and brain size, argued in his essay “Hybridity in Animals and Plants” (1847) that “[s]ince various species of animals are capable of producing together a prolific hybrid offspring, hybridity ceases to be a test of specific affiliation.” W.F. Edwards based his theories of hybridity, published in 1829, on cross-bred mice (quoted in Young 11, 7–8, 131, 79). These examples of animal hybridity were then abstracted to apply to humans.

Racial scientists used animal discourse as a way to infer human sexuality and thereby embossed human hybridity with a negative patina. About Darwin, Harriet Ritvo notes that “[i]n the middle of his argument that species and varieties were indistinguishable, he consistently denominated the offspring of parents of different species as ‘hybrids’ while denigrating the offspring of parents of different varieties as ‘mongrels,’” words later used to label humans of mixed race descent. Further, Victorian animal breeders, concerned with purity of lineage and pedigree in animals, frequently denounced the mixing of bloodlines. Most telling, perhaps, is the concept of telegony, a belief widely accepted by nineteenth-century breeders and scientists, in which the sire of a female’s first offspring would influence her subsequent offspring. Evidently, in 1820, a chestnut mare of seven-eighths Arabian descent was bred with a quagga (defined in the *OED* as a “South African equine

quadruped, related to the ass and zebra, but less fully striped than the latter"). The first foal looked like both parents, but subsequent foals, sired by a black Arabian horse, nonetheless looked like the quagga. From this reported incident, as well as others, theories flourished predicated on containing and controlling female sexual activity (Ritvo 15–6).

If many racial scientists used the discourse of animality to describe human sexuality, it also appealed to many novelists, who incorporated bestial images in their fiction. For example, although George Washington Cable basically sympathizes with people of mixed-race heritage, he describes a mulatta as a "leopardess" in *The Grandissimes* (1880). Thomas Dixon, not at all sympathetic to interracial relations, describes Lydia Brown, the mulatta servant and mistress in his novel *The Clansman* (1905), as a "leopardess" with an "animal beauty." When Lydia hears her master talk about his view of Reconstruction, her face "wore the mask of a sphinx" (Dixon 100).

Since the normative discourse of hybridity was based on such animal imagery and suffused with negative connotations, Child needed a more positive discourse of breeding, cultivation, and natural production to serve her reformist impulses in *A Romance of the Republic*. Botanical metaphors personally resonated with her long-standing interest in gardening. For example, before her husband David departed on a speaking engagement on behalf of the Kansas Aid Committee, he tried to comfort Child, who was anxious as her father hovered between life and death, by protecting her beloved garden. Referring to these loving efforts, Child later wrote in a letter to him, "It almost made me cry to see how carefully you had arranged everything for my comfort before you went," especially the "bricks piled up to protect my flowers." After David's death, Child found comfort in her garden in Wayland, where she could recall David's voice "bidding a loving good morning to my flowers, as he used to do" (Karcher, *First Woman*, 101, 583).² Child's fondness for flowers and her interest in their language surfaces in some of her earlier works. For example, in her

short story "The Quadroons" (1842), Child endowed her mixed-race protagonist with a floral name, Rosalie. Child further links Rosalie to the plant world by frequently comparing her to a passion flower and remarking that her white lover, Edward, "fondly twined its [the passion flower's] sacred blossoms with the glossy ringlets of her raven hair" (91). In the first issue of her *Juvenile Miscellany*, Child wrote "The Tulip and Tri-Colored Violet," a didactic essay with talking flowers that encourages girls to cultivate qualities that will make them "useful and cheerful companions, in preference to those, which fit them only to be the gay flutterers of an evening" (389–90).

In an era when public speech was not encouraged for women, flowers and what became known as the "language of flowers," offered an acceptable way for women to express numerous sentiments and interact with the "wild" outside the home. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu introduced the idea of the language of flowers to Europe through letters she sent from Turkey in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the language of flowers "presented a set of highly formalized lists of meanings together with a whole semiotic analysis of this language" (Goody 133–52). Through the language of flowers in *A Romance of the Republic*, Child taps into a sentimental, virtuous discourse in order to overturn sexual and racial norms. The cult of true womanhood did not permit women to venture forth into unmediated wilderness, but women could bring the wilds home into a domesticated, supervised, planned, fenced garden in order to garden, paint flower images, and write sentimental poems about nature, activities that "positioned them as caretakers or teachers of nature's moral lessons" (Stein 25). The liminal space of agriculture and gardening has been described accurately as "an ambiguous conceptual position in American thought, belonging both to a green world of nature, a realm that exists independent of human control, and to a world defined by a human culture that dominates and influences nature" (Sarver 4). Women in this liminal space cultivated themselves as proper ladies while cultivating and taming unruly nature.

Elizabeth Petrino summarizes the dual, liminal zone of gardening as “[t]wo competing, though perhaps not contradictory, approaches to the natural world in nineteenth-century America: one scientific, rational, and exploratory, the other sentimental, aesthetic, and poetic” (Petrino 133). This border zone between domesticity and the wild also afforded women access to an acceptable form of science education: botanical instruction. Young ladies mastered how to arrange, send, and receive flowers and learned plant biology and identification at the same time. Likewise, as Kathleen Gips argues, “This scientific aspect gave validity and sense of purpose to naming flowers and translating their messages” (10). Even Mrs. Almira H. Lincoln’s academic tome *Familiar Lectures on Botany*, the text Emily Dickinson studied, includes a floral dictionary. Mrs. Lincoln notes in the introduction to the floral dictionary that “[b]esides the scientific relations which are to be observed in plants, flowers may also be regarded as emblematic of the affections of the heart and qualities of the intellect” (Lincoln 431). However, she revises the meaning of some flowers in order to influence girls’ moral constitution: “In a few cases, alterations have been made, in order to introduce sentiments of a more refined and elevated character, than such as relate to mere personal attractions” (Lincoln 431).

Yet this liminal space between the scientific and sentimental offered women a powerful cultural and rhetorical position in which to develop meaning, and it presented Child with a potent way to merge two discourses. Nineteenth-century poet Frances Sargent Osgood believed, as did many antebellum women, that flowers “utter in ‘silent eloquence’ a language better than writing” (Osgood 23). Floral dictionaries, which proliferated in the middle third of the nineteenth century, list flowers and their many potential meanings. It is astonishing, as one reads through these numerous floral dictionaries, how many different meanings could be assigned to one flower. In fact, because meanings could vary, it was important that both sender and receiver of bouquets referred to the same dictionary. The numerous meanings attributed to flowers in no way limited women’s choice in writing, but rather offered women

expansive access to expression.

Literature became flowers in numerous anthologies of poetry whose titles evoke the green world. Child's reliance on horticultural metaphors to convey meaning in *A Romance of the Republic* places her in floral conversation with an extensive community and tradition of antebellum women writers who linked literary offering and verdure. Consider the following list of titles: Dorothea Dix's *Garland of Flora* (1829), Frances Osgood's *The Floral Offering, A Token of Friendship* (1846), Caroline Kirkland's *Poetry of the Flowers* (nd), Lucy Hooper's *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry* (1858), Sarah Josepha Hale's *Flora's Interpreter and Fortuna Flora* (1850), Fanny Fern's *Fern Leaves* (1853), Grace Greenwood's *Greenwood Leaves* (1850), Frances Sargent Osgood's *A Wreath of Wild Flowers from New England* (1838), Child's own collections *Flowers for Children* (First and Second Series in 1844 and Third Series in 1846), and *A New Flower for Children* (1856), and even Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Kirkland firmly believed that flowers, poetry, and women readers were linked, a connection Child maximizes in *A Romance of the Republic*. Speaking of flowers, Kirkland wrote:

Universal is their hold on human sympathies; universal their language. Floral Poesy is, therefore, the most appropriate of all presents: and in giving this title to a language of flowers, and a collection of charming poems on them, we believe we have not been guilty of a misnomer. (Kirkland 7)

These titles reinforced the cultural idea of linking flowers, poetry, and femininity. Sarah Josepha Hale writes in her 1832 introduction to *Flora's Interpreter: or, the American Book of Flowers and Sentiments* that she hopes her collection "inspire[s] our Young Ladies to cultivate those virtues which can be truly represented by the fairest flowers" (Hale 1).

Gips explains that during the Victorian era, flowers were believed to embody human emotions and attributes, "so it seemed logical that they could also speak, using their own language" (26). Kirkland, as do many authors of books on flowers, goes on to detail this special language of verbalized flowers. For example:

When a flower is given, the pronoun *I* is understood by bending it to the right hand; *thou* by inclining it to the left.

"Yes" is implied by touching the flower given with the lips

"No," by pinching off a petal, and casting it away

"I am" is expressed by a laurel leaf twisted round the bouquet.

"I have," by an ivy leaf folded together

"I offer you," by a leaf of the Virginian Creeper.

"To win" a sprig of parsley in the bouquet.

"May," or "I desire" an ivy tendril around the bouquet (221).

While the language of flowers thereby offered Child an already codified set of meanings to draw upon, in nineteenth-century U.S. culture, black women were constructed as having a different link to nature, and the language of flowers did not necessarily speak their desires. An awareness of the double standard between the floral imagery used to describe white women and the bestial imagery used to describe black women finds full expression by Harriet Jacobs, whose *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) problematized the relationship between black women and nature. Child herself served as editor of Jacobs's *Incidents* and the organic orientation of *A Romance of the Republic* must have been influenced by Child's familiarity with Jacobs's interrogation of the starkly differentiated images of nature associated with black and white womanhood. For example, Jacobs states that black women "are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (49). Yet she recognizes the connection between white women and garden imagery: "the fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers." A black girl, however, "was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her" (Jacobs 49, 29). By calling attention to such a contrast, Jacobs seems to be critiquing readers' assumptions about metaphors racializing nature. When Jacobs flees from her master, she initially flees into nature, but the landscape she hides in is no garden. Instead, she finds herself in a swamp where she is bitten by mosquitoes and a poisonous snake. Such descriptions of nature echo the stereotype linking untamed nature to black women's rampant sexuality. Further, as Ann Gelder points

out, pastoral analogies in *Incidents* “conceal cultural violence with images of nature and culture in harmony,” especially in descriptions of homely, cultivated vines around slaves’ quarters (255). Jacobs wrote for a white audience that was, as Vera Norwood argues, “threatened by the thought that women of color could take on the mantle of the cultured domesticity reserved for Euro-American women.” Further, the woman-as-garden metaphor did not work for female slaves because “to portray a slave at ease among the cultivated flowers of the ornamental garden would violate the stereotype of the black women as, by their nature, incapable of purity” (Norwood 185, 192, 185).

Given these examples, it is extremely important to recognize Child’s strategy in greening Rosa and Flora Royal’s sexuality. By using botanical discourse to discuss race and hybridity, Child domesticates and cultivates proper white womanhood and sexuality for her mixed-race heroines. Child’s florigraphic rhetoric replaces the animality and debased figuration of nature she encountered when editing Jacobs’s autobiography, and effectively enacts what Stein labels the “ecofeminist axiom” that “questions of nature are always also deeply social concerns embedded within complex histories and that recourse to ‘nature’ has often been used to naturalize disturbing colonialist social arrangements” (116). In other words, slave women’s sexuality was “naturalized” as feral when compared with animals. Aware of this tactic, Child purposefully tries to “purify” black women by endowing them with floral graces usually reserved for white women.

Mrs. A.E. Johnson adopts a corresponding strategy in *The Hazeley Family* (1891). She portrays racially indeterminate characters, although she herself is African-American and the novel seems aimed at a black middle-class readership. Barbara Christian hypothesizes that,

in order to render her moral story about the qualities that young black respectable women (rather than stereotypical mammys or wenches) needed to keep their families intact and flourishing, Mrs. Johnson may have found it necessary to characterize her family in nonracial terms. xxviii

However, not only are Mrs. Johnson's characters nonracial, the heroine is named Flora, and the novel incorporates many images of flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Christian points out that the novel's nature imagery is not associated with sexuality or reproduction, but rather "the naturalness of family and home and woman's place in it" (xxxiv). Thus, the floral discourse in *The Hazeley Family* may reinforce what the novel's deracialized discourse suggests: that black women are entitled to the same status of pure-as-flowers true womanhood as white women. Much later, Zora Neale Hurston makes a similar move in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in her creation of Janie, a character, Norwood argues, "whose sexuality, by virtue of its expression through plant reproduction, was cleansed of disturbing connections with animal behavior. Janie's sensitive reading of the plants in her landscape also articulated African American plant lore and the importance of gardens in black women's lives" (Norwood 192-3). A *Romance of the Republic* predates Johnson's and Hurston's novels but shares their revisionary agenda of rewriting black female sexuality.

Specifically, Child's choice of characters' names rewrites stereotyped bestial sexuality through florigraphic rhetoric. Child names her characters after flowers to signal something about their comportment, virtue, values, and manner; in other words, their character. Referring to late-nineteenth-century novels concerned with race, Cathy Boeckmann argues that "the crucial and determining issue was not race per se but rather the implications and conclusions that could be drawn from the manifestations of racial character: the question of race had become a question of character" (Boeckmann 15). The link between race and character is particularly salient for literary convention, because, as Boeckmann suggests, the

notion of character clearly straddles the conceptual worlds of science and literature. Character is a building block of literature, and it intudes itself upon scientific discourse in the basic requirement that an assessment of character be *characterized*—whatever conclusions can be drawn about character have to be given shape in descriptive language. Therefore, an emphasis on inherited race character brought racial theory into a close relationship with literary notions about characterization. 15

In *A Romance of the Republic*, Child tries to counter “scientific” knowledge about race through floral characterization. That is, if Boeckmann’s ideas are applied to Child’s narrative strategy, then Child reveals her characters’ hybrid racial character by turning to the language of flowers and not to the language of scientific racism that does not do her characters justice. By relying on sentimental fiction’s convention of stereotypes, Child taps into cultural agreement about flowers’ symbolism and character and redresses negative scientific discourse on hybridity.

For example, for her principal heroine, Child chooses the name Rosa or Rosabella, whose beauty Child describes as “superlative and peculiar” (3). Undoubtedly, in choosing this name, Child means for readers to understand Rosa’s beauty, virtue, and loving and passionate nature because of the rose’s association with love, carnality, and ardor and its status as the queen of the flowers.¹ Perhaps Child also knew that the rose was one of the flowers most experimented with and hybridized. According to Samuel Bowne Parson’s popular tome, *The Rose: Its History, Poetry, Culture, and Classification*, only 182 varieties of roses existed in 1814. Extensive hybridizing produced more than 4,500 varieties by the time his 1860 edition was published (Parson. 182). Rosa Royal likewise is a hybrid: her father is white and mother is a mixture of Spanish, French, and African descent. Although Rosa is legally a slave, Child goes to great lengths to convince her readers that Rosa is well bred and highly cultivated. Because Rosa’s mixed race cannot immediately be identified and she passes as white, Child asserts Rosa’s refined character through refined floral associations.

Child’s language of hybridity in *A Romance of the Republic* resonates with the Victorian vocabulary used to discuss hybridity in roses. For example, to describe the way the races mix to produce Rosa’s lovely daughter, Child draws upon contemporary interest in cultivating hybrid plants:

Nature is very capricious in the varieties she produces by mixing flowers with each other. Sometimes the different tints of each are blended in a new color, compounded of both; sometimes one color is marked in distinct stripes or rings upon the other, and sometimes the separate hues are mottled and clouded. (302)

Rosa's daughter inherits the best racial traits of both her parents: "She inherited her mother's tall, flexile form, and her long dark eyelashes, eyebrows, and hair; but she had her father's large blue eyes, and his rose-and-white complexion. The combination was peculiar, and very handsome" (302).

Child's description here echoes Parson's explanation for the best way to achieve successful hybrid roses:

Those who intend to raise new roses from seed should select varieties differing as much as possible in color and habit. . . . These should be planted together in a rich soil, and as far as possible from any other roses. If there are among them any two varieties whose peculiarities it is desired to unite in a single plant, place these next to each other, and there may possibly be such an admixture of the pollen as will produce the desired result. (182–83)

Parsons explains that the hybrid plant will nonetheless maintain some "peculiarities" (a word Child uses) of its parents: "It is a fact generally admitted by botanists, that all varieties of plants will generally produce from their seed plants entirely dissimilar, preserving perhaps some peculiarities of their parents, but differing in many essential particulars" (189). Because flowers are a plant's sexual organs, Parsons's descriptions of the hybridizing process seems to parallel human sexual behavior. "Linnaeus, with many subsequent authors, published observations tending to prove that, even in the natural state, new species were formed by two different plants, the pistil of one having been fecundated by the stamens of the other" (187). Both Child and Parsons employ the word "peculiar" to mean special or distinct characteristics, which accords with the *OED*'s definition of "one's own private property." But "peculiar" also reminds readers of the common term for southern slavery: the "peculiar institution." In Child's text, "peculiar" is positive, pleasingly exotic, and reverses negative racial stereotypes.

Child's cooption of horticultural hybridization imagery is instructive, if not prescriptive. Clearly she means to teach educated readers a new way of viewing race relations by using familiar botanical language. The didactic dialogue she holds with readers echoes the pedantic dialogues found in Jane Haldimand Marcet's *Conversations on Vegetable Physiology* (1830), which teaches

botany to young ladies through conversations between a Mrs. B and her students Emily and Caroline. Particularly notable is Conversation XVI, "On Grafting," where Mrs. B explains the hybridizing art of grafting as "placing a portion of one plant in juxtaposition with another, in such a manner that they shall unite and grow together." Caroline responds with, "This, then, is not a mode of multiplying plants, but for changing their nature." Mrs. B adds: "The advantage of grafting consists in improving the quality, not augmenting the number, of plants. . . . The principal advantage of grafting consists in its affording an easy means of propagating individual plants, which have, either by cultivation or some casual circumstance, attained a high degree of perfection" (Marcet 198, 200).

Child's agenda of promoting racial equality and interracial marriage concurs with this botany manual that grafting or hybridizing results in "improving the quality" of the species. Here hybridity is a strength, not a method of degenerating a species or race. In finding such a positive model of species mixture, Child anchors her heroine's miscegenated heritage in the virtuous floral world and thus corrects predominating pejorative bestial rhetorics of hybridity.

Floral Royal Rosa's sister, receives the nickname "*Pensee Vivace*," French for "thought." According to floral dictionaries, pansies symbolized tender thoughts, hence their name from the French derivation. Pansies are also called *viola tricolors*, hearts-ease, or johnny-jump-ups, a name Rosa's suitor Alfred King (who is linked to the green world by his name, an inversion of the variety of daffodil known as the King Alfred) refers to as "Jump-up-and-kiss-me" (5). To nickname a black woman "Pansy" is to link her to thought, if not to identify her as a thinker. The name "Flora" also serves as a general term for anything relating to flowers and amounts to calling the black woman "Everywoman." As well, the name "Flora" also serves as general term for anything relating to flowers and amounts to calling the black woman "Everywoman." As well, the name "Flora" invokes the goddess Flora who rules over the plant world. Thus, Child radically modifies black women's

standing by choosing a name that suggests a chaste and thinking girl who functions as a universal representative of womanhood.

Rosa and Flora are so clearly identified as flowers, as are their daughters Lila and Rosen, yet the status of the other flower-associated woman who lives in their house, the black servant Tulipa, is questioned. Throughout *A Romance of the Republic*, Rosa's and Flora's rank as flowers remains secure. Yet when Tulipa calls them to tea, Alfred asks, "Is *she* a flower too?" Flora answers positively: "'Yes, she's a flower, too. . . . We named her so because she always wears a red and yellow turban'" (6). In some ways, Alfred's question serves as the driving question of the narrative, for during the course of the novel, Child tries to build a strong case that these women are as pristine and good as flowers. According to law at the time, all three women—Rosa, Flora, and Tulipa—are slaves, so Child's choice of the name Tulipa for the only *visibly* black woman is particularly interesting. While the floral name Tulipa accords the servant a sense of beauty, virtue, and true womanhood, the associations of the tulip are quite different from those of the rose, and raise provocative questions about Tulipa's sexual and racial status in the novel.

The tulip received its name, according to numerous floral dictionaries, from "tulipan" or "turban," which Frances Osgood describes as based upon the "similarity of its corolla to the superb head-dress of the barbarous Turks" (Osgood 52). The red and yellow turban of the Royal's slave no doubt recalls the exotic Turkish headpiece. Mrs. E. W. Writ writes that the

tulip has always been considered as the *rival of the rose*, displaying a more gorgeous and varied tinting of colours, to balance the superior fragrance of her competitor. The *Turks* regard this flower with so much favour, that in addition to their "*Feast of Roses*, their "*Feast of Tulips*" is celebrated annually in the Grand Seigneur's gardens, with a magnificence of splendour and pomp, that can only be compared to the fair scenes of the Arabian Night's Tales. (69)

Osgood similarly details the oriental fantasy of the feast of tulips where the harem leader watches a slave dance:

In the centre of the seraglio a splendid pavilion shaded the Grand Seigneur, who negligently reclined on costly skins; while the lords of his court, habited in their richest attire, were seated

at his feet to behold the dances of the lovely women of the court in all the luxurious display of their light and dazzling dresses. These sometimes encircled, and at others glided around the vases of tulips, whose beauty they sung (Osgood, *Poetry of Flowers*, 53).

It is significant to quote these descriptions of the tulip in the seraglio at length because when Alfred King first enters the Royal's residence and comments on the "Temple of Flora," he seems to have entered a harem, complete with "poor slaves," although at this point in the novel the sisters do not know of their slave ancestry. The ornate decorations, musical background, perfume, and flower-drenched maidens surely conjure an exotic atmosphere appealing to an eligible young man. Mr. Royal first notices Rosa and Flora's mother because of her dark, sensual beauty: "The irresistible attraction I felt toward her the first moment I saw her was doubtless the mere fascination of the senses" (19), an attraction befitting the stereotype of the mulatta's sexual availability. Since it is possible that Alfred King might similarly feel a sexual attraction to the sisters ensconced in their sensual floral temple, the harem-like nature of their home is deflected onto Tulipa. If the tulip and the rose are sexual rivals and the tulip contains exotic, orientaling, harem-type associations, then it seems that Child loads the darker black woman with sexual overtones, thus further sanitizing the sexuality of Rosa and Flora. The florigraphic rhetoric of names maintains Rosa's and Flora's pure womanhood while suggesting something else about Tulipa's.

Furthermore, the tulip was bred and hybridized extensively, and cultivated species commanded high prices during the economic frenzy of Holland's Tulipomania in the seventeenth century.⁵ Wirt also mentions that the tulip has no calyx. In the section of her book devoted to explaining the seven parts of a flower, Wirt defines the calyx as "the envelope in which in most cases, the tender flower lies, for a time, concealed, as the green leaves of a rosebud, which cover the blossom, and burst as the flower opens" (11). This detailed description casts the calyx as that which conceals or protects the flower's sexual parts until the blossom is ready to open. As a bondswoman, Tulipa has no calyx; that is, as a slave she is assumed to have ready sexuality. She does not have a pro-

tector or concealer of her procreative parts. She rivals Rosa sexually in that, in her turban in the harem and her slave identity, she absorbs negative connotations of the mulatta condition. By comparison to her, Rosa and Flora appear all the more virtuous, and dramatize how pure white womanhood depends on the existence of debased black womanhood for contrast.

Of course, the character with the most pure association is the white woman Lily Bell, the legal wife of Gerald Fitzgerald (Gerald had previously married Rosa, knowing that marriage to a slave would not be recognized as legal or binding). Hooper writes that “[w]e usually associate the idea of extreme whiteness with the Lily, so that it is common to express a pure white by comparison with the flower, as with snow” (93). Perhaps Lily has earned her last name because Wirt describes the lily’s corolla as “bell-shaped, smooth on the inside” (40). The character Lily is a verbalized flower in that she represents the purity of northern white womanhood that becomes debased through the institution of slavery. Child furthers her critique of a racist society by showing how slavery dirties white womanhood as emblemized by Lily—her husband Gerald Fitzgerald fathers two baby boys at the same time, one by Lily and one by Rosa, babies that Rosa switches so that Rosa’s mixed-race son grows up believing he is white, while Lily’s biological son grows up thinking he is black.

Other characters have floral names as well. The name of Flora’s adopted mother, Mrs. Lila Delano, recalls the lilac (signalling first emotions of love and fastidiousness). Appropriately, Mrs. Delano always dresses in violet. Right-minded, Mrs. Delano overcomes race prejudice to love and cultivate Flora as her adopted daughter. As Karcher points out, Mrs. Delano’s surrogate mothering of Flora “as a metaphor for the integration process” is still fraught with problems because, “[i]nescapably reproducing the built-in inequality of the parent-child relationship, it defines the white godmother as the adult and her black protégée as the child” (Karcher, *First Woman*, 522). Yet her name Lila, and her dressing in violet, link her to the *viola tricolor* *Pensee Vivace*, Flora’s nick-

name. Perhaps through the associations garnered in the green world. Child suggests that an affinity exists between the two women. Black and white women might aspire to the same goals and sensibilities and, although occupying different stations in life, might both be deserving of the same respectable and virtuous name.

Flora nicknames her suitor, Franz Blumenthal, "Florimund." His name obviously links him to the restorative world of blooms and flowers. He likewise is a hybrid, albeit a cultural hybrid of German ancestry. As a white man willing to marry a woman of slave origin, he at first seems to be perfect model for Child's utopian vision of intermarriage. Yet, as Karcher points out, he is "foreign-born—hence, free at the outset from American race prejudice [as Child believed was generally true of Europeans]—he does not represent a genuine solution" (522). Franz stands in contrast to the devious Gerald Fitzgerald, a character whose name noticeably lacks a connection to the green world. Further, with the word "Gerald" repeating in his first and last names, and with the name repeating in the next generation with his son, Gerald Fitzgerald, Jr., Child suggests an endogamous race purity that borders on inbreeding. Gerald Fitzgerald's name also clearly marks him as Irish, perhaps even "black" Irish in contrast with the English-sounding names of the Royal sisters, one of whom marries a man named King. Gerald Senior then is doubly bad: his name points to his racist ideas of purity of lineage and he aspires to an English status his Irish name betrays.

While Child attempts to value what the Royal sisters term the "olla podrida" (a miscellaneous Spanish stew) of mixed race, she fails in her representation of Henriette Falkner. Henriette is the mulatto wife of George Falkner, the switched baby Rosa raised as her own son. George is white, the biological son of Lily Bell and Gerald Fitzgerald, but he grew up thinking he was the black son of a slave mother, and hence he married a black woman. Susan Koppelman rightly points out that Child, in her 1842 short story "The Quadroons," was "the first white writer to grant black and racially mixed women the right to be 'ladies.'" Child portrays the enslaved woman

as partaking with grace and virtue in the life typically reserved for the mistress" (Koppelman, 2). Yet Lyde Cullen Sizer criticizes Child for the reasons Koppelman praises her. Sizer argues that Child:

retained a sense that New England white culture was preferable to all others; for blacks to enter white society as equals, they must become white . . . [W]hite men still had their choice of women, black and white, and black women were allowed to be "true women" by virtue of white desire to continue marking them as malleable, domestic and passive. (254-266)

Sizer is right, for, quite disturbingly, Child makes no effort to suggest that Henriette could also be a flower. Henriette's lack of a floral name stands out quite noticeably. Alfred King indicates that he cannot integrate George Falkner into U.S. society because George's "having a colored wife would put obstructions in his way entirely beyond our power to remove" (416). When Rosa asks Lily whether she thinks Henriette's daughter, and hence Lily's granddaughter, is pretty, Lily answers, "She might be pretty if the yellow could be washed off" (422). In fact, the kindest comment Child can muster about Henriette is that she "proved good-natured and unassuming" (420) when taught skills and behavior befitting a proper freed woman. Child's interest in using florigraphic discourse to challenge postbellum racism collapses in her representation of Henriette. By so obviously abandoning the botanical vocabulary she had carefully cultivated with other characters, Child marks the dark black woman as undeserving of purity and innocence. Child's failure to portray Henriette as a verbalized flower compromises the novel's power and radical vision.

As well, Child's admirable goal of assigning white women's qualities to black women can be criticized by recognizing that the language of flowers relegates women to a passive, purely ornamental realm. Bewell points out the damaging potential of "the botanical analogy, as it leads women to value blushing ignorance, weakness, beauty, and sweetness as essential to their sex, while equating virtue and power . . . with their ability to please men" (137). Since hybrid flowers often were unable to reproduce, Bewell writes that "men have actually cultivated women for the same purpose as they have cultivated flowers: to increase their beauty at the expense of their fruitfulness" (138). The sterility of hybrid flowers

may work in Child's favor, however, because slave women were "cultivated" for their status as breeders; therefore, black women "cultivated" for their beauty, without regard for their reproductive capabilities, realigns the social status of black women's bodies.

Child's astute use of florigraphic rhetoric and theories of hybridity to revise national prejudice accords with the role of hybrid plants in nation building. A new industry developed among pioneer nurserymen to collect, test, and hybridize new plants suitable for the untamed land. Plant breeders capitalized on the chance to create improved varieties of flowers and vegetables. Gardening magazines to support the new industry began to appear, including *Magazine of Horticulture* (1835–1869) and *The Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste* (1846–1876). Agricultural and horticultural societies were first organized in the 1790s and proliferated nationwide by the 1870s (van Ravenswaay 7–11). Hybridizing new plants to suit the climate of the new nation resonates with nationalism, for this botanical exercise seeks to cultivate both soil and nation simultaneously. If a nation can be defined by its distinct flora and fauna, then surely making United States citizens goes hand in hand with making literary and natural production. Not all flowers could take root out West. Child participates in a national project by similarly experimenting with hybridity. If flowers could speak their own language, and Victorians believed that flowers were the "alphabet of angels," then Child uses a horticultural language to spell out a new theory of race relations.

Child's national project of reforming race relations through florigraphic discourse parallels the subtle national agendas in contemporary floral dictionaries and poetry anthologies. For example, in her 1842 introduction to *Flora's Interpreter*, Hale knows her readers are familiar with English floral sentiments, and therefore imagines a distinctly United States audience: "To the Youth of America I commit my books." She writes that in her book, "[t]here is nothing new attempted, except in the arrangement, and the introduction of American sentiments," and she hopes that her collections "would promote a better acquaintance with the beau-

ties of our own literature” (v, iii). However, in her 1850 edition, Hale includes a new introduction, where she writes that “the most important aim of the work was to select and incorporate with our love of nature and flowers the choicest and best specimens of American poetry.” She acknowledges the overwhelming presence of British poets and injects a New World sensibility by asserting that “we have endeavored to place these truly classical specimens of the Old World literature in a new light, by linking them, as it were, with the hopes and loves of our ‘own green forest land’” (Hale iv). Similarly, Kirkland calls attention to a national agenda in her collection of poetry with an “Introduction by American Editor.” Hooper writes in her preface to *The Lady’s Book of Flowers and Poetry* that “[t]o the selections from our own native poets we turn with pride and pleasure,” and Dix hopes her *Garland of Flora* “might also display many pleasing traits of national manners” (Kirkland 1; Hooper 3; Dix 1).

A Romance of the Republic participates in this national linking of literary production with floral cultivation in its emphasis on hybridity and its emphasis on choosing New World soil over European soil. Rosa develops her operatic career in Europe, achieves the status of wife in Europe, and could easily remain there as a diva. However, she patriotically chooses to return to the United States. Likewise, the Falkners end up temporarily running the Marseille branch of the King family business, but we assume they will return to North America. The novel’s closing image, of a hybridized family enacting a patriotic tableau while singing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” can only be Child’s vote for a new mixed-race vision specific to the United States. Child suggests that hybridizing flowers is an aesthetically pleasing endeavor essential to cultivating a new nation and that the discourse of race mixture can be fruitfully grafted onto the discourse of nature to hasten social reform.

Notes

1. See, for example, Yellin; Karcher, “Lydia Maria Child’s *A Romance of the Republic*”; Karcher, *First Woman*, especially Chapter 19; Patterson; Nelson.

- especially her fourth chapter; and Mills.
2. I am grateful to Carolyn Karcher for directing me to these examples.
3. The textural examples from Jacobs's *Incidents*, as well as the theoretical positions, come from Vera Norwood's *Made From This Earth: American Women and Nature*.
4. For more on flowers' association with beauty, see Scarry, especially note 6.
5. For more on 'Tulipomania and the history of the tulip, see Pavord.

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