

The Elysian Market: The Moral Rhetoric of Northern Silk

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When the United States House of Representatives proposed a formal resolution in 1825 to “inquire whether the cultivation of the mulberry tree, and the breeding of silk worms, for the purpose of producing silk, be a subject worthy of Legislative attention,” it did so in hopes of establishing within the United States production of a commodity that had hereto been provided almost entirely by foreign suppliers.¹ The value of silk imports, from 1821 to 1825, was estimated at \$35,156,494, a lucrative investment opportunity that prompted Congress’s Resolution.² For several years, Congress debated whether legislative action should be taken to encourage the cultivation of silk, though a bill was never passed. Throughout the 1830s and into the early 1840s though, state governments and many Americans, especially in the North, saw in silk the prospect for more than just financial gain. Advocates of northern sericulture saw a potential way to minimize complicity with the slavery-driven cotton economy.

As historians point out, silk never became as lucrative a market as Congress had hoped; it registers as only a blip, a speculative bubble, in the history of northern agriculture and investment.³ The primary contribution to the bursting of this bubble, historians Paul Gates and Marjorie Senechal note, was that silk advocates enflamed the “multicaulis mania” by driving up the prices of trees they themselves were selling, promoting the profitability of silk only to increase their own sales.⁴ During the height of “the silkworm craze,” speculation for *Morus multicaulis*, a newly discovered genus of mulberry tree that

provides the leaves that silkworms feed on, drastically increased tree prices, and when blight in the early 1840s destroyed most of *Morus* trees, economic interest in silk largely came to an end.⁵ However, as Senechal notes, “The sericulture dream did not burst with the bubble.”⁶ Similar to other forms of consumer activism within the antebellum era (such as the northern free produce movement and the southern non-intercourse movement), the idealism of silk that captivated its producers effected a broader reconsideration of the ethics of market participation.⁷ Silk’s effect on the northern market was hardly economic. Rather, I argue that the cultural work of the silk movement promoted economic and ethical independence from cotton, imagining a market-based means for supporting abolitionism.

The dual influence of ethics and economics on northern interest in silk can be seen in the Massachusetts State House of Representatives in 1844, when a Mr. Wright, representing Concord, described how silk presented an opportunity to relinquish the state’s reliance on slave-grown cotton: “Our cotton manufacturer are dependant [sic] on the south for their raw materials; silk would be our own, and states like individuals, cannot be too careful to secure within themselves, means for their prosperity and greatness.”⁸ Tying the growth of silk to the pursuit of “prosperity and greatness,” Wright views silk as economically liberating. Many northern advocates of the trade held a similar view toward silk: that it held the possibility of transforming northern sentiments into a fully realized—and profitable—state. Indeed, discussions on the benefits of sericulture almost always rely on a sense of futurity to make their case, a vision that often could be described as utopian.

As sericulture began to be associated with a variety of reform groups (taken up in abolitionist periodicals like *The Liberator*, by the utopian-reform community the Northampton Association, and in the African American periodical *The Colored American*), it came to be viewed by many northerners as having the potential to provide an economic solution to a moral problem. In that regard, the rhetoric employed in periodical debates over the merits of sericulture reveals the silk debate functioning as a microcosm of larger sectional debates over slavery, capitalism, and ethics. At the intersection of northern agrarianism and idealism, the northern silk movement sought to counteract the South’s attempt at economic independence post-1837 by positing a more ethical, anti-slavery economy.⁹

In this article, I discuss how advocates for the silk industry during the 1830s and 1840s, as well as northern reform communities, such as the Northampton Association, used silk to conceptualize an independent market wherein the value of labor and goods would be subject to new ethical standards, ones that certainly borrowed from free labor idealism of the time but that silk advocates portrayed as decidedly *northern*. Such a dynamic represents a desire to hold the marketplace ethically responsible to labor, demonstrating a belief that slavery could be effectively ended through full reliance on or usage of the market mechanism. I locate this belief as evidenced by congressional (both state and

federal) attempts to foster agricultural independence in the North through the growth of silk and statewide attempts to purify the northern economy of its relation to slave labor.

Thanks in large part to the work of historians such as Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, and Walter Johnson, the scholarly discussion on the development of antebellum capitalism has rightly turned to the extraordinary influence of the growth, distribution, and trade of cotton.¹⁰ The materials I discuss throughout this article—poems, journals, periodicals, society minutes, and literary essays—point to an alternative development of capitalism, one that never established a lasting foothold in the market but that nevertheless influenced the ways one section of the country began examining and questioning their relationship to their own labor, to the economy, and to slavery. After the Panic of 1837, some groups of northerners were questioning the financial and ethical cost of their continued entanglement with the cotton economy, and the northern silk movement provides one way to explore this question. To be clear, the silk movement was driven primarily by greedy businessmen and shady business practices, but the way they were able to sustain this movement was by tapping into a very real question that various sectors of the northern economy were asking themselves post-1837, namely, how to build an economy that more closely matched a distinct set of northern values, values not being shared by the South.

In its desire to reform market relationships, rhetoric surrounding the silk movement borrows from antebellum debates over free and slave labor, both North and South. Silk was certainly not the only medium for conversation over how to distance northern and southern economies or the influence of slavery on the northern marketplace. Lawrence Glickman shows in *Buying Power* that such a concern was foundational to the free produce movement of the antebellum North; Eric Foner, in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, analyzes how such a concern was a cornerstone in formulating the identity of the white laboring class, and a wide array of antebellum periodicals, from *The Liberator* to *The Lowell Offering*, similarly note and express concern over slavery's influence on and presence within the northern economy.¹¹ Silk differs from these discussions in that silk advocates were less concerned with establishing a labor or class identity but rather promoted a sectional identity that could be adapted to fit bodies that were not yet a part of the market economy. Women, children, the elderly, the formerly enslaved, the disabled—advocates of northern sericulture imagined all to be united by their shared sense of “northernness,” and with that came a certain set of rights and responsibilities.

The New Northern Agrarianism

The introduction of *Morus multicaulis* commenced what John Clarke called the third epoch of sericulture's history in the United States.¹² Centralized largely in the northern states, Clarke believed this new epoch would herald an era of success for silk cultivation, citing “evidence” that *Morus multicaulis* al-

lowed “two crops of silk [to] be raised in a single season.”¹³ In an article for the *Journal of the American Silk Society (JASSRE)*, Gideon B. Smith claims that such rapid growth particularly suited the American market: “It grows so rapidly that we can plant it this spring, and get a crop of silk from it this *summer!* Is this an objection to an American? Is not the speedy return of the proceeds of an investment the greatest recommendation that the investment of capital can have?”¹⁴ Smith’s parallel of *multicaulis*’s growth and use to the returns on capital investment speaks to a question routinely posed about *multicaulis*: if the tree is so great, why is it not grown in other countries, and why was it not being talked up to the same degree in other parts of America?

Like Smith, other advocates routinely touted the mulberry’s ability to grow anywhere in the Union, a new crop suitable for a new nation. Arguments for why silk should be grown in America employed a mixture of fantasy about America’s agricultural prosperity and recognition of the poor quality of farmland along the northern Atlantic states. While pamphlets and magazines are replete with discussions about what makes America particularly suitable to growth of the mulberry tree, America was routinely contrasted to old Europe and China, the latter historically leading the silk trade in both quantity and quality. But it was just this sense of history that advocates of American sericulture sought to take advantage of, arguing that the newness of America’s land allowed farmers to take advantage of *multicaulis*’s newness. “Silk could be made from the *morus multicaulis* in almost every section of the Union,” Smith explains. “We have no prejudices to contend with, no old orchards of other trees to get clear of, no bad habits to eradicate, as in Europe.”¹⁵ To Smith, “The reason is obvious” why *Morus multicaulis* is not used in Europe because “they have their old overgrown white mulberry trees to dig up and throw away.”¹⁶

Silk was especially attractive to farmers in the northern states at this time, faced with northern agriculture expanding further into the Midwest and with increased competition with southern cotton due to the cotton boom of the 1830s. Indeed, much of the farmland in the Northeast was losing its practicability for the individual skilled in husbandry. Apart from being unable to compete with the lower prices and larger acreage of farmland out West, northeastern farmland could not compete with the fertility of the Ohio River valley. Historians Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman explain that “with few exceptions, suitable farmlands did not exist in the East by this time.”¹⁷ All of this led to “a distorted picture of the Northeast” with its “thin, unproductive soil covered with rocks and boulders, its steep and rugged slopes . . . its long, harsh winters . . . its early frosts and short growing season, its nagging women, fretting children, tight-fisted and hard-hearted farmers, and shrewd storekeepers ever ready to cheat the unwary.”¹⁸ Such caricatures of northern farmland made silk an especially attractive crop, as advocates envisioned its ability to revitalize the northern landscape. Indeed, sericulture promised to resurrect northern agrarianism both economically and conscientiously.

Although advocates routinely touted silk's ability to be grown "anywhere in the Union," the rhetoric used to explain how to grow the mulberry at times seemed to be uniquely targeted toward northern farmers. For example, besides the caricature Gates provides above, he also gives an example from the Little Rock *Arkansas Gazette* that describes the North thus:

Such barren lands, such rocks and sands,
And then, good Lord! So hilly.¹⁹

It just so happens, regularly claimed *JASSRE*, that rocky, sandy, and hilly lands provide the very best growing conditions for *Morus multicaulis*.²⁰ The journal would at times specifically target the cultural and economic conditions surrounding northern agriculture, linking *Morus multicaulis* with the promise of economic and domestic revitalization. "There is still another view of this subject which is of great importance," claimed "An Address to the People of the United States" in the inaugural 1839 issue of *JASSRE*:

In all of these [the Atlantic states] we find large quantities of land, either naturally poor, or so reduced by culture as to yield no profit to the cultivator. The consequence is, that the people of these states are rapidly emigrating to the more fertile regions of the west to seek a subsistence for themselves and their families. . . . Now it fortunately happens, that poor, sandy, and almost worn-out lands yield the very best of silk; and although the quantity will not be so large as from more fertile lands, the profits will be such as to leave no inducement to the inhabitants to leave the homes of their fathers.²¹

The article quickly assuages the concerns facing northern agriculturalists: the reduction in available land, the westward emigration of farmers and family members, and the condition of the land quality left in the North. Gideon Smith regularly touted *Morus* as the ideal crop for depreciated northern soil: "Sandy soils and high situations are always to be selected, if possible. The soil can scarcely be too sandy. Indeed the finest trees the writer ever saw, grew in a soil too sandy for any other crop."²² Cultivating the mulberry in such conditions is conducive not only to the growth of the plant but also to the quality of the resulting silk, as the article "Mulberry and Sugar Beet" asserts: "The mulberry will grow on high, stony, sandy, and comparatively barren land; and although the poverty of the soil may decrease the quantity of foliage, it will improve the quality, and add fineness and beauty to the silk."²³ While Atack and Bate-man describe how many northern farmers were increasingly diversifying their products to increase their profits, which in turn "produced higher income levels but demanded more work from the farmer," *Morus multicaulis* waded into this conversation as well, promising very little time and labor while simultaneously

revitalizing the soil.²⁴ Indeed, “Mulberry and Sugar Beet” promises sericulture “would introduce to the farmer new and valuable, and . . . profitable productions; which, in rotation with other crops, would have a doubly beneficial effect on our agricultural interests. It would improve our lands, increase the amount of productive industry, and condense, improve, and enrich our population.”²⁵ However much the crop itself might restore fertility to the land, advocates of silk would frequently make clear that such changes would be brought about only if accompanied by a particularly northern ethos.

The Character of New England

The American Silk Society saw the potential to monopolize the silk trade and become exceedingly rich, though more frequently these financial gains were passed off as benefits to the American worker, who would be given “active employment” that would provide both financial and spiritual rewards.²⁶ Frequently in articles on silk that extolled the value of sericulture for workers, though, the benefits to the laborer are linked with a sectionalist ethos: the cultivation of silk brings increased utility and personal development to the unemployed in northern articulations of the debate, while in southern arguments, silk allows for increases to the labor and profits from slaves. With this sectionalist divide, northern special interest groups such as the American Silk Society promoted more ethereal, spiritual benefits that would be provided to the northern laborer, most notably a distancing from slavery. For example, Phillip Physick, a northerner, states in an editorial in *JASSRE* the ease with which the silk business, “in all its branches,” can allow “men and women, boys and girls, young and old, the crippled and infirm, high and low, . . . [to become] actively and profitably employed, without causing a blush to mantle on the cheek of any.”²⁷ As another article put it, the result of this equalization of employment opportunities would mean that “the whole community would be benefited by the services and labours of all such, and an impetus be given to the advancement of morals and intelligence.”²⁸ The “advancement of morals and intelligence” was not an isolated or minor thread in this discussion, becoming a focal point in a formal resolution of the Executive Committee of the American Silk Society. At their annual convention in 1838, the Executive Committee declared that

there are no occupations that promise more to ameliorate the moral and physical condition of a large portion of our population, and to elevate them in the scale of intellectual and moral worth, than those involved in the culture of silk. Poor children, indigent females, the lame and infirm of both sexes, and all ages, will find in this branch of industry employment lucrative, health and moral.²⁹

Of course, the moralism that accompanied the proposed elevation of workers through agrarian labor is a common trope throughout the antebellum era in the North, a staple of free labor idealism. But the silk movement nicely illustrates a specifically *northern* form of moralism.

Take, for example, a more direct comparison between two competing arguments published in *JASSRE* on why to help two groups of “helpless” laborers who are unable to successfully contribute to agrarian production: the first group northern whites and the second southern slaves.

Example 1: “The Humbug” (1839)

We shall behold a large helpless class of the community, that now can scarcely earn twenty cents a day with their needles, and upon which pittance they must live,—*live* did we say? no, endure life,—from which pittance they must pay house-rent, and support—or sustain life in half a dozen helpless little ones—these we shall see comfortably providing for themselves and families by making silk. Our worn-out old fields and waste lands, will then be covered with mulberry orchards, and dotted with the comfortable cottages and coconeries of silk growers.³⁰

In Gideon B. Smith’s example, the landscape itself is transformed, revitalized, and repurposed toward the growth of silk, a utopian vision of a restored countryside leading to economic success and independence. The profits from such a venture affect not only the individual laborers, formerly “helpless” and struggling to “endure life” but now “comfortably providing for themselves and families,” but also the entire North, collectively on the move to become economically prosperous and independent. The utopian vision that Smith presents is contrasted by the wealthy capitalist of the southern plantation in the second example.

Example 2: “Address of Rev. D. V. McLean, of New Jersey” (1839)

On all the plantations of the south, too, there are undoubtedly many—children, aged, and infirm slaves, and *mothers*—who are of little or no value to their owners in the production of sugar and cotton. . . .

Now, if these could be furnished with an employment by which they could simply support themselves, what a vast saving it would be to the planter? But how much more would his interest be promoted, if it is demonstrated that the labour of such a class, when applied to silk, is even more profitable than the labour of the most athletic field hands.³¹

For McLean, there are no “helpless” laborers, only slaves “of little or no value to their owners,” conforming to the myth of what historian Jonathan Glickstein in *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety*, terms economic exceptionalism. “Economic exceptionalism” describes a situation in which antebellum “disagreements as to the prevalence, and the relative efficacy and morality, of such [negative work] incentives coexisted with a mythology of American exceptionalism that alternatively extolled the salience and the benefits (both economic and therapeutic) of more exclusively positive labor incentives (e.g., the hope of improvement commonly held to animate northern wage laborers).”³² In other words, the same labor that provides a moralist incentive of personal responsibility and social ascension for the northern “helpless” laborers is denied to the southern slave. The labor of slave is denied and redirected toward the capitalist slaveholder’s profits. Indeed, the key comparison between advocacy for northern and southern sericulture is the moral versus monetary profits gained from cultivating silk.

According to some northern advocates and practitioners of sericulture, these moral benefits had the potential to extend beyond the individual laborer, as this labor was imagined to be a practical means of aiding the abolitionist cause. In William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist periodical *The Liberator*, an editorial titled “Silk Culture at the South” seriously considers the potential economic windfall that a national commitment to sericulture would create. Considering the possibility of the South deciding to partake in the trade and potentially overtaking the North in silk production, *The Liberator*’s response was simply “Speed it On.”³³ Reprinted in *The Liberator* from the like-minded antislavery *The Emancipator*, the editorial argues that the growth of silk in the South would do more to abolish slavery than other forms of northern influence, as silk brought with it not merely economic capital but moral capital as well, which would far outweigh any diminished monetary profits in the North.

In a somewhat logically dubious passage, the antislavery editorial continues to predict that the futurity of the South’s involvement in the business—that they “will surely engross” it—will further foster the mental and spiritual development of the slave. Considering the South’s potential interest in silk, the passage tells how

our southern exchange papers boast a good deal against the plans for silk culture at the North, and say the South will surely engross the business. Let them. One effect of it will be, to increase the intelligence of the slaves. Another will be to remove many poor women slaves from the crushing toils of the cotton field. . . . Speed it on.³⁴

Despite the continuation of forced labor only redirected away from cotton and toward silk, such redirection, the editorial believed, would more closely align

slave laborers with the principles of free labor, eliciting free labor's intellectual and spiritual benefits.

The Liberator's own article, "Light in the South," presented sericulture in the South not only as a means of personal empowerment but also as a more effective substitute for abolitionism:

A slaveholder told me the other day . . . that he *believed it* [silk culture] *would undermine the whole slave system . . .* and I trust you and I may see the day that the accursed thing is done away—for already *you are beginning to make us believe that it SHOULD be done, and WILL be done, but we had rather it would be brought about by silk than northern interference.*³⁵

What makes silk so attractive to the abolitionist cause is here expressed as its ability to materialize an ethical stance disassociated from sectional politics; free from "northern interference," the ethics attendant to sericultural labor will manifest themselves. "Two great staples of the United States of North America," mused John Clarke in his 1839 *A Treatise on the Mulberry Tree and Silkworm and on the Production and Manufacture of Silk*, "are now in our diorama—*Cotton and Silk*; but which is to become the greater, is the question . . . of the two, cotton or silk, the latter eventually is to become the greater, the more important staple of this country."³⁶ Clarke's prediction shows the ways the idealism that northerners applied to sericulture could be transferred into practical means, an economic power reflective of northern ethics. As the northern abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* framed it, those practical means would become evidenced not by the profits stemming from sericulture but rather by the ethical strides its cultivation preceded, namely the abolition of slavery.

Silk eventually overtaking the profitability of cotton was, advocates of the industry claimed, inevitable. Besides the "ample testimony" that interest in silk was "steadily advancing with an increasing rapidity such that it was evident that it would soon have to dispute with every other staple within the limits of the Union," the articles published in *JASSRE* routinely viewed silk as filling an increasing void left by cotton.³⁷ One such article, republished from *The Knoxville Register*, states, "We look forward with confidence to the time, not far distant either, when silk will become one of our most profitable staples. As our cotton districts are fast moving south, we believe the culture of silk may and will be profitably introduced to supply the place of that article."³⁸ The prospect of the economic gains of silk usurping those of cotton are echoed in an article on the Chinese mulberry in 1834, quoting "an intelligent and enterprising gentleman in Northampton" as saying that "the time is not far distant, when New England will produce Silk equal in value to the Cotton of the South."³⁹ Besides the differences in labor between silk and cotton, here silk is defined as a staple crop explicitly competing with cotton for agricultural dominance. Cotton is depict-

ed as an “uncertain paymaster” whose area of growth is being pushed farther south, and silk had the potential to fill the voids cotton was leaving, promoting a distinct set of ethics that would ultimately prove more effective than the efforts of abolitionists.

Northern advocates of sericulture believed that if silk were to usurp cotton as the main cash crop of the United States, then the practices specific to the cultivation of silk would in turn instigate the abolition of slavery.⁴⁰ The best way to encourage abolitionism while profiting from silk was, as an editorial in *JASSRE* pointed out, to unify the moral qualities of the northerner with sericulture. “The Spread of the Culture of Silk,” an 1839 editorial, specifically addresses sectional differences regarding silk cultivation, positing that the way to reconcile those differences lay not in the spread of the system of free labor but rather in the *character* of New England laborers:

Were we called on to designate the portion of the United States where the business of growing silk may be most profitably pursued, in association with, or in substitution of other productions, we should probably include that portion of the slave-holding cotton region. . . . We say most probably these, because it would only be to transfer the labor which is there, from non-paying cotton growing to silk culture. The labour which is adapted to one is precisely adapted to the other, needing, however, nicer attention and management. Were it possible for the planters . . . to unite with natural advantages and slave labour the *exact habits* of the New England man, they would in silk making, beat the world.⁴¹

Silk promises financial prosperity to the South only if the region can change the ways they treat their laborers, to be more like the “New England man.” Such changes not only would profit the South monetarily, as it would monopolize the world market—so the logic ran—but also would be regionally advantageous, enabling the South to hold another staple crop over the North and thus able to “beat the world.” What differed between northern and southern sericulture were not the steps necessary to cultivate silk but rather the “*exact habits*” of the laborers. These “habits” could be found, as Emerson claims in his 1858 address “Farming,” within the farmer: “If it be true,” Emerson writes, that “slaves are driven out of a slave State as fast as it is surrounded by free States, then the true abolitionist is the farmer, who, heedless of laws and constitutions, stands all day in the field, investing his labor in the land, and making a product with which no forced labor can compete.”⁴² Within the North, cultivation of silk furthered the abolitionist cause not only by decreasing the demand for southern cotton but also by spreading the habits of the northern abolitionist.

While interest in silk cultivation did not really take off until near the end of the 1830s (after cotton had emerged as a major export and after the establish-

ment of northern textile mills in the 1820s), an early fable from Lydia Maria Child shows the ways in which silk's association with sectional politics was cultivated in times of national economic turmoil. In her "Fable of the Caterpillar and Silk-Worm" (1832), Child uses three different silk-producing insects as allegories for the varying profits gained from silk cultivation, profits seen by Child to be directly proportional to the character of the laborer.

The fable tells the story of three different insects: Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm. Caterpillar and Spider begin with a conversation about their new neighbor, Silk-Worm, belittling the speed and quality of her silk until a "gentleman" shows up to defend the Silk-Worm. Although all three of the insects produce silk, the Silk-Worm is clearly the newest participant in this manufactory, Spider inquiring of Caterpillar, "What sort of a weaver is your neighbor, the Silk-Worm?"⁴³ While Caterpillar and Spider extol their silk, they critique their competitor, Silk-Worm, for her lack of production. Caterpillar and Spider make clear that they can create a vastly larger amount of raw material than Silk-Worm can: Caterpillar "can weave a web sixty times as quick," and Spider daily re-creates a web unequaled by Silk-Worm.⁴⁴ Both of these creatures feel as if their raw materials are not valued or rewarded as properly as they should be, reminiscent of the southern sentiment that led to the 1832 Nullification Crisis, wherein South Carolina threatened to secede after the passage of an economic tariff they thought unfairly favored the North. Indeed, Caterpillar and Spider are united in their critique of the less productive Silk-Worm.

But as the gentleman explains, the critiques of these "foolish creatures," based on the speed, production, or quantity of the raw material, are missing the point; "rail not at productions, which ye cannot understand!" the gentleman tells Caterpillar and Spider.⁴⁵ Caterpillar "boast[s] of [her] *rapid* performances," but these performances "contain the eggs that will hereafter develop themselves, and destroy blossom and fruit," a concern sharing resemblance to the fears of slave insurrection that were sweeping the South in the wake of Nat Turner's recent 1831 Rebellion and the argument Child makes in *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) that it is her "conviction that slavery causes insurrections, while emancipation prevents them."⁴⁶ Slave labor may mean more "*rapid*" production, but it elicits eventual violence. Spider's product, on the other hand, beautiful though it may be, is "broken by a dew-drop," demonstrating its low quality.⁴⁷ A similar critique would be further expanded by Child the following year, when she published *An Appeal*, wherein she claims that freedom brings with it increased investment by the worker in the quality of the labor so that "the slave does not care how slowly or carelessly he works; it is the free man's interest to do his business well and quickly. The slave is indifferent how many tools he spoils; the free man has a motive to be careful."⁴⁸ Indeed, the gentleman's critiques of Caterpillar and Spider, that they mass-produce inferior products that will eventually lead to negative repercussions, are similar to the antislavery stance Child developed throughout her life.

The gentleman instead praises the product of Silk-Worm, who, “like genius expiring in the intensity of its own fires, she clothes the world in the beauty she dies in creating.”⁴⁹ The unknown “neighbor” to Caterpillar and Spider, Silk-Worm’s productions may require further labor—she may not even live to see it, expiring “in the intensity of its own fires”—but the end result “clothes the world in beauty,” beauty the Caterpillar and Spider are unable to provide in the long term.⁵⁰ The utopian close of Child’s fable, a world “clothe[d] . . . in beauty,” is prescient of the free labor rhetoric that would be used to promote silk cultivation and the ways silk became an object of fascination to utopian communities like the Northampton Association.

The Northampton Association was rather unusual as far as nineteenth-century reform communities go, a stark contrast to the pastoral images of other utopian communities, such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands. However, through its commitment to sericulture, the Northampton Association found they could both provide a forum for abolitionism and be financially profitable. In sericulture, the Northampton Association had found a way to sustain their idealism while ethically participating in the marketplace.

Whereas other utopian communities like Fruitlands conscientiously abstained from the use of cotton due to its relation to slave labor, Northampton profited from that abstention. Apart from what the founders of the Northampton Association perceived to be the profitability of silk, the crop held a particular appeal to the more utopian inclinations of the community. For the Northampton Association and other utopian communities, the simultaneous cultivation of a crop and the intellect provided the backbone for self-sustenance, and cultivating silk was touted as an especially easy way to do this, available to all. Silk was especially amenable to the association’s labor reform aspirations, as Senechal explains that “from 1832 to 1846 silk was the object of utopian visions, first the industrial aspirations of a charismatic and unreliable businessman, Samuel Whitmarsh, then the industrial egalitarianism of a utopian community led by the idealistic and rigidly reliable Samuel Lapham Hill;” what interested Whitmarsh and Hill was the commonly discussed belief that “sericulture is a lifeline for the poor,” which could be used to establish more egalitarian labor systems.⁵¹ This aspect of the association was perhaps its closest tie to Associationism, using the factory as the phalanx wherein a large number of community members lived and worked.⁵² The devotion to silk is what truly distinguished this association from other utopian communities, though, as “to abolitionists, silk had a further virtue. Though not a substitute for textiles made from slave-grown cotton, it was a ‘free’ product, made without reliance on slavery. . . . The most optimistic projectors of the silk industry could envisage its future role in a Northern industrial economy freed from dependence on the products of slavery.”⁵³ Within the walls of the silk manufactory at the Northampton Association, the reformers hoped to transform not only northern agriculture but also northern industry.

The Northampton Association’s prominence as a utopian community often goes unnoticed by literary scholars today, as the community did not produce

many literary works. However, the community was an attraction to many northern antebellum intellectuals, including prominent literary figures, speakers, and Transcendentalists.⁵⁴ Dolly Stetson, a member of the community, describes in a letter to her husband how the community was visited by the “eloquent fugitive” Frederick Douglass for a talk, one of many speakers on slavery, and one of Douglass’s two visits.⁵⁵ Sojourner Truth lived at the association for three years, during which time her *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York in 1828* was written. One of the community’s founders and leaders, George Benson, was brother-in-law to William Lloyd Garrison, who spent a summer living there. Lydia Maria Child spent time living nearby in Northampton between 1838 and 1841.⁵⁶ And the prominent abolitionist David Ruggles, who memorably helped secure the escape passage of the fugitive slave Frederick Douglass, also spent a number of years residing in the community. But apart from the intellectual pursuits available, for Dolly Stetson the true appeal lay in that the community provided the best possible means of building and spreading her family’s “moral power,” unable to be cultivated elsewhere because the family did “not have the wealth and station to render [it] worthy of notice.”⁵⁷ Stetson had written such to her husband, James Stetson, when he broached the idea of leaving the community. Only within the reformist community and through the cultivation of silk did Dolly Stetson believe her family could increase their chances of enacting practical reform, especially as it related to abolitionism.

The success that the Northampton Association found, brief as it was, lay in that it integrated the growth and factory production of silk “and so avoid[ed] the social divisions that were growing up between farms and factories in New England.”⁵⁸ Members of the community saw their profits from sericulture in more than just monetary terms; the real profits of Northampton’s silk labor lay in its reason for Associationism, the development and usage of what Stetson called “moral power.” In silk, Stetson, like other northern advocates of sericulture, saw potential to profit from their moral, antislavery beliefs.

Silk’s Secret Amelioration

To be certain, the silk business was still a business; not all parties involved shared the same sense of idealism, and some promoters surely took advantage of silk-lined idealism to increase their own personal revenue.⁵⁹ However, that silk was not solely the object of a few greedy businessmen looking to take advantage of others or of radical idealists is evidenced by the ways advocates spoke of silk when they did not have such staunch capitalist or idealist aspirations. Certainly, critiques of silk advocates and journals that helped enflame the “multicaulis mania” are warranted, but once the idealism they were proffering took hold, it exceeded the bounds of both their control and that of the market, extending beyond the burst of the silk bubble. For the editors of the New York *The Colored American*, a weekly African American magazine that ran

from 1837 to 1841, silk offered hopes of financial success and independence for black Americans living in the North.

The Colored American, Donald M. Jacobs explains, appeared at a time when “the concern for the well-being of one’s brethren remained strong within the Black community.”⁶⁰ As a whole, *The Colored American* desired to improve the social and civic participation of its northern black readers, often publishing pieces, especially in its early issues, meant to educate its readers on American and world history. These yearnings affected the publication’s discussion on agriculture, often emphasizing the communal nature of the profession. Indeed, *The Colored American* routinely touted and praised the profession of farming for its readers, regularly claiming, “Farming is the policy for colored Americans” and “That farming is the best policy, and the best occupation for colored Americans, we have always thought, *and always SAID.*”⁶¹

For all of the suggestions that farming be pursued by its readers, *The Colored American* did relatively little to provide any practical means of pursuing the trade, at times offering pieces of advice on the joys of gardening and what vegetables could be grown and at one point running a single brief article urging the growth of “Mr. Thorburn’s ‘Chinese Seed Corn.’”⁶² However, three years into the run of the publication, after regular praise, advocacy, and encouragement for its readers to engage in farming, *The Colored American* began a ten-part series on how to properly grow and cultivate silk, its single greatest attempt to provide readers with practical advice in how to become farmers and establish financial independence. Before the first article in the series, the editors commented on why they were devoting such a lengthy run and large amount of space to articles on silk:

We are giving on our 4th page and shall continue to give weekly, large extracts from the . . . approved works on the growing and manufacturing of silk. This, to us, appears to be a . . . important subject. The silk business, no doubt, for years to come will not only be a very useful but a very profitable business. It can be commenced and carried on, in all parts of the country, with very little capital.

We know of no business, except if be market gardening, which so commends itself to the situation and means of colored men. Its simplicity, its easy progress in extension, its manage— . . . by females, children and aged infirmity, . . . its saleableness all, all, commend themselves . . . our notice and experiment.

We hope our people, as many as have it in their power, and have not a better business, will take hold of this subject. Brethren let us no longer be behind others in our enterprise

and . . . God has made us equal, mentally and physically, to any other race of men. — Let us practically demonstrate the fact.⁶³

In this rationale, the futurity of the silk trade parallels the future of the African American race. The ability of silk to be grown anywhere in the country—which other advocates had similarly praised—here is made to parallel the case for racial equality, as “God has made us equal, mentally and physically, to any other race of men”; just as silk can be cultivated anywhere in the country, so can it be cultivated by anyone. That the “silk business, no doubt, for years to come will not only be a very useful but a very profitable business” provides the vehicle for African Americans to likewise demonstrate their usefulness within and membership of society, which had been presented as the true benefit of “agricultural pursuits,” allowing them to “practically demonstrate the fact” that “God has made us equal.”

After the last article in the silk series was published, the paper ran a small piece commenting on the extracts. The article starts with employing the same fraternal language as that in the first article, using the words “brethren” and “our people.” But whereas the cultivation of silk was previously described in terms of its relationship to the larger group, here in the closing remarks it is transformed into individual responsibility: “Who will remain poor and dependant when the road to wealth is so easy, and the labor required so inconsiderable?”⁶⁴ The larger group had worked to do its part—the paper had provided the extracts, which the editors hoped “have been filed by our brethren, and that they will be perused and reperused, until the simple method of producing one of the most important articles for profit in sale or beauty and durability in wear, is perfectly understood by them all”—but the remaining path to wealth lay in what the paper frames as the responsibility of individual empowerment. Although the profits of silk moved from the collective group to the individual, the ethics that silk developed flowed from the individual to the collective sectional community.⁶⁵ Growing silk required northern values, and once dependence on those northern values was proven to be profitable within the national market, so would the black race be empowered.

Even though sericulture never did outweigh the value of cotton, largely defeated in the early 1840s, it shows the ways in which the possibility of a new agricultural crop quickly became wrapped up in sectionalist debates over capitalism and slavery. Although cultivation of the crop did not necessitate the presence of a large slave labor force, the ways that the cultivation, utility, and profits of silk became split along sectional lines highlights not only cultural differences between the North and South in regard to the ethics of labor but also the ways capitalism was imagined differently throughout the antebellum era. The timing of the silk craze, in the years immediately following the Panic of 1837—the moment when the South was purposefully trying to distance itself from trade with the North, moving to monopolize the global cotton trade—

shows a divergence in the ways antebellum Americans conceptualized their relationship to capitalism: in the South, an emphasis on the profits for the owners of trade; in the North, a concern with each individual's means of economic development. Slavery not only affected economic development in these regions but also influenced the different ways each section imagined their relationship to the economy at large. As scholars on the history of American capitalism have shown, slavery impacted markets far beyond the southern plantation. What the discussions around antebellum silk show, though, is northerners trying to figure out how they can distance themselves from that market, to have not only an economy that is no longer responsible for or influenced by slavery but also a market that is more reflective of the "character" of the North, the imagined rights and ethics shared by the northern states through their prohibition of slave labor.

Notes

1. Richard Rush, *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, Transmitting the Information Required by a Resolution of the House of Representatives, of May 11, 1826, in Relation to the Growth and Manufacture of Silk, Adapted to the Different Parts of the Union* (Washington, DC: Gales & Seaton, 1828).

2. The 1825 Resolution compared silk to the diminishing value of American exports, particularly grains, which had in 1817 totaled "\$20,374,000" and in 1825 brought in only "\$5,417,997," a decrease of 376 percent (Rush, *Letter*).

3. Erika May Olbricht details how the possibility of silk revolutionizing the economy was a key point that silk advocates often made, dating back to the early seventeenth century. Historians of silk look at antebellum silk production as a wild and speculative fervor that had little positive benefit for investors, leading scholars to variously call it the "multicaulis fever" and "the silkworm craze" (Alfred T. Lilly, *The Silk Industry of the United States from 1766 to 1874* [Cambridge, MA: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1875], 8; Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815–1860* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston], 1960, 303). For more on early attempts of the Western silk industry, see Erika May Olbricht, "Made without Hands: The Representation of Labor in Early Modern Silkworm and Beekeeping Manuals." For a nineteenth-century history, see Lilly, *The Silk Industry of the United States from 1766 to 1874*. For a twentieth-century history, see Gates *The Farmer's Age*; Olbricht, "Made without Hands"; Eric C. Brown, ed., *Insect Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 223–41; and Lilly, *The Silk Industry of the United States from 1766 to 1874*.

4. Gates, *The Farmer's Age*; Marjorie Senechal, "Part One," in Jacqueline Field, Marjorie Senechal, and Madelyn Shaw, eds., *American Silk, 1830–1930: Entrepreneurs and Artifacts* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), 3–85.

5. Specific dates for the collapse vary, though most scholars see the burst occurring in the early 1840s.

6. Senechal, "Part One," 30.

7. The silk movement has much in common with other forms of consumer activism of the antebellum era. For more on the history of consumer activism and the free produce and nonintercourse movements in particular, see Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. chap. 3.

8. "Silk Culture [1]," *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, March 23, 1844, 1 (*American Periodical Series Online*, accessed November 8, 2009).

9. For more on the influence of the Panic of 1837 on the development of southern capitalism, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013), esp. chap. 10. For a great exploration of the ways the Panic of 1837 influenced literary discussions of cotton in the South, see Katie Burnett, *Cavaliers and Economists* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2019).

10. See Edward Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; and Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

11. Glickman, *Buying Power*; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

12. These first of these epochs was from 1623 to 1783, the second from 1783 to 1830, and the third beginning after that. John Clarke, *A Treatise on the Mulberry Tree and Silkworm and on the Production and Manufacture of Silk* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1839).
13. *Ibid.*, 121. John Clarke was superintendent of the Morodendron Silk Company of Philadelphia.
14. *JASSRE* ran from 1839 to 1840 under the editorship of Gideon B. Smith. It should be noted that Smith, who was widely credited with the discovery of *Morus multicaulis*, was also engaged in the business of selling the tree. Although a large number of the articles throughout the periodical are Smith praising or defending sericulture and *Morus multicaulis*, the journal served as the official organ of the American Silk Society and printed minutes and details of the society's meetings. *JASSRE* also contains various articles and letters written by people whom Smith thought would help advocate the silk business. Gideon B. Smith, "The *Morus Multicaulis*," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 4 (1839): 146–48.
15. Gideon B. Smith, "Debates in the Silk Convention," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 1 (1839): 9–27.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987).
18. Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 23.
19. *Ibid.*, 23n2.
20. In an uncanny similarity, Drew Swanson details how the growth of tobacco in the Piedmont region was often promoted in very similar ways. The similarities between silk and tobacco show how farmland along the Atlantic coast was frequently misused and often unable to compete with more profitable agricultural ventures farther West. Like silk, tobacco, too, promised a revitalization of unprofitable farmland. See Drew Swanson, *A Golden Weed: Tobacco and Environment in the Piedmont South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
21. Gideon Smith, William Gibbons, and Samuel R. Gummere, "An Address to the People of the United States," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 1 (1839): 27–31.
22. Gideon B. Smith, "Cultivation of the *Morus Multicaulis*," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 3 (1839): 81–87.
23. "Mulberry and Sugar Beet," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 3 (1839): 105–7.
24. Atack and Bateman, *To Their Own Soil*, 10.
25. "Mulberry and Sugar Beet," 106.
26. "National Silk Convention," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 1 (1839): 1–5.
27. Philip Physick, "To Matthew Carey, Esq.," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 9 (1839): 303–7.
28. "Culture of Silk Furnishes Employment," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 11 (1839): 376.
29. "American Silk Society," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* no. 1 (1839): 6–7.
30. Gideon B. Smith, "The Humbug," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 10 (1839): 317–22.
31. D. V. McLean, "Address of Rev. D. V. McLean, of New Jersey, Before the American Silk Society, in the Hall of the House of Representatives, at Washington, Thursday evening, Dec. 12, 1839," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 12 (1839): 377–91.
32. Jonathan Glickstein, *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety: Wages, Competition, and Degraded Labor in the Antebellum United States* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).
33. "Silk Culture at the South," *The Liberator* 9, no. 30 (July 26, 1839): 120.
34. *Ibid.*
35. "Light in the South," *The Liberator* 9, no. 22 (May 31, 1839): 88.
36. Clarke, *A Treatise on the Mulberry Tree and Silkworm and on the Production and Manufacture of Silk*, 4–5.
37. *Ibid.*, 121–22.
38. "The Spread of the Culture of Silk," *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* 1, no. 1 (1839): 9–27.
39. "Article 2—No Title," *Maine Farmer and Journal of the Useful Arts*, September 26, 1834, 291 (*American Periodical Series Online*, accessed November 8, 2009).
40. For a parallel discussion on the how Afro-American culture throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed differently depending on the specific agricultural crops and practices being used, see Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85, no. 1 (1980): 44–78.
41. "The Spread of the Culture of Silk," 87–88.

42. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Farming," in *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 87. My reading of "Farming" builds on Stephanie Sarver's in *Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), where she claims that "'farming' is Emerson's attempt to apply his philosophy of nature to communal activities implicated in a social and economic complex" (17), showing the adaptability of farming in its New England context to a certain ethical philosophy.

43. Lydia Maria Child, "The Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm," in *The Coronal. A Collection of Miscellaneous Pieces, Written at Various Times* (Boston: Carter and Hendee, 1832), 181–82.

44. *Ibid.*, 181.

45. *Ibid.*, 182.

46. *Ibid.*; Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, edited by Carolyn L. Karcher (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

47. Child, "The Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm," 182.

48. Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, 72–73.

49. Child, "The Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm," 182.

50. The Silk-Worm's death after the spinning of silk is a natural step in the life span of the silkworm, Senechal describing how by this point in time, the silkworm had been domesticated to the extent that "if their food didn't come to them, the worms would pine away and die. Even if the silkworm did spin a cocoon and was left to mature until it freed itself, the resulting moth would have ruined the silk in its process of escape, dying mere moments later. Senechal, "Part One," 33.

51. *Ibid.*, 5, 27. Whitmarsh was responsible for the original Northampton Silk Company, which Hill and the other founders of the Northampton Association bought and repurposed for their community in 1841 after the company had declared bankruptcy.

52. Associationism, a related form of Fourierism, was a philosophy that influenced a large number of utopian communities throughout the antebellum era (including Brook Farm and Fruitlands). For more on Associationism, see Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

53. *Ibid.*, 143.

54. The Northampton Association occupies a rather unique position in its status as "utopian." Although not quite Transcendentalist and not quite Fourierist, the association was attractive to members representing both communities, as historian Marjorie Senechal tells how "Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Samuel May, Wendell Phillips, and other sympathizers stopped by to see how the experiment was going" (Senechal, "Part One," 33). William Lloyd Garrison visited for part of a summer and regularly exchanged letters with Benson. As Christopher Clark puts it, the Northampton Association was part of a broader movement to create "practical utopias" (Christopher Clark, "'Real Community Letters': A Family, Its Correspondence, and a Utopian Community," in Christopher Clark and Kerry W. Buckley, eds., *Letters from an American Utopia: The Stetson Family and the Northampton Association, 1843–1847* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004], 8). For more on the Northampton Association's status as a utopian community, see Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 1–14.

55. Dolly W. Stetson, "Stetson Family Correspondence, 1843–1847," in Clark and Buckley, *Letters from an American Utopia*, 21–158.

56. Child's husband owned a nearby farm where he attempted to cultivate the sugar beet, a crop more directly espousing abolitionist causes. Child was not a member of the Northampton Association, though she did have many contacts there and helped procure a position for David Ruggles within. For more on Child and Northampton, see Clark, *The Communitarian Moment*, 51–52.

57. Stetson, "Stetson Family Correspondence, 1843–1847," 98.

58. Clark, *The Communitarian Moment*, 143.

59. The story of *Morus multicaulis* demonstrates this disjuncture particularly well. Gates and Clark argue that interest in sericulture was largely manufactured by speculation in *Morus multicaulis* from investors like Gideon B. Smith who were looking for quick and easy profits. Smith, a regular contributor to *JASSRE*, is often singled out as having especially stood to gain from the fever over *multicaulis*, though he was just one of many contributors to journals "which published and republished short accounts of silkworming that were calculated to arouse the cupidity and interest of readers" (Gates, *The Farmer's Age*, 303). Through the efforts of advocates like Smith, the prices of the tree quickly and dramatically inflated, and despite their use as food for silkworms, there were many speculators and advocates for the trade who dealt almost exclusively in sales of *Morus multicaulis*, favoring direct monetary profits over the supposedly higher spiritual and moral profits from the cultivation of silkworms. When the tree was affected by a damaging and widespread blight in the early 1840s, there was a "sharp reduction in interest in the silk business" (306), and silk did not regain such a level of national interest until the end of the nineteenth century.

60. Donald M. Jacobs, *Antebellum Black Newspapers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976).

61. "Important Subject," *The Colored American* 2, no. 4 (January 27, 1838): 3; "Husbandry," *The Colored American* 2, no. 6 (February 17, 1838): 3.

62. "Our highest ambition, in a pecuniary point of view, for our brethren, would be to see each family of them possessed of 200 acres of good land, in some healthy part of the United States, with good buildings and well stocked, and a plenty of 'Mr. Thorburn's "Chinese Seed Corn"' ("Increase—Chinese Corn," *The Colored American* 2, no. 34 [October 13, 1838]: 2).

63. "Silk Culture [1]," 1.

64. "Silk Culture [2]," *The Colored American* 3, no. 14 (June 1, 1839): 2.

65. *Ibid.*, 3.