

**“His Western Life Will Make a Man out of Him”:
Adolescence and Homoeroticism in Horatio Alger, Jr.’s American West**

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

On December 8, 1864, the First Unitarian Church of Brewster, Massachusetts, ordained Horatio Alger, Jr. as its new minister. For the next fifteen months, he enthusiastically dedicated himself to his new position, gaining the respect and admiration of his congregation. During this time, he also continued to write stories and novels for adolescents, which he had begun publishing in 1864, garnering enough attention to warrant his inclusion in the *Cyclopedia of American Literature* in 1865.¹ His good fortune came to an abrupt halt in March 1866. The church responded to rumors that he had sexually molested two boys, aged thirteen and fifteen, earlier in the year, and declined to renew his contract. On March 19, the committee charged with investigating Alger concluded that he had practiced “deeds ... too revolting to relate.” Alger admitted that he had been “imprudent” with the boys, and the confrontation left him so embarrassed that he quickly left town, returning to his parents’ home in South Natick, Massachusetts. In their final report, the committee concluded that Alger was guilty of “gross immorality and a most heinous crime, a crime of no less magnitude than the abominable and revolting crime of unnatural familiarity with *boys*[.]”²

It is Alger’s “unnatural familiarity with boys” that this essay proposes to explore in relation to his juvenile novels set in the American West. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Alger wrote over a hundred novels for boys, many of which he set in New York City or small Eastern towns. In these novels, Alger describes a homoerotic process through which destitute young men attain middle-class respectability through the intimate mentoring of older men.³ Starting in 1874, though, with the publication of

Julius, or The Street Boy Out West, Alger turned his attention to the American West as a means to increase his book sales and to suggest new paths for the proper development of disenfranchised young men.⁴ In this novel, Alger draws upon the work of the Children's Aid Society of New York and represents the West as a small farming community in Wisconsin that frees delinquent adolescents from their lives of disrepute and poverty. Farming on the frontier serves as an antidote for the moral sickness and social ills that plague eastern cities, allowing poor young men the opportunity to cultivate lives of middle-class respectability through the owning of property and marriage.

In subsequent novels, Alger moved away from the Turnerian myth of the frontier farmer and, instead, set his stories in the context of the California Gold Rush, envisioning the West as a lawless place from which his heroes extract both wealth and manhood. The West continues to be a source of ample opportunity for hard-working young men, but these boys' decisions to leave their families in the East and strike out on their own also reflect emerging anxieties in the United States about male adolescence. Although this concept did not formally crystallize until 1904 when G. Stanley Hall published his monumental study on the topic, the idea that the onset of puberty initiated a new phase in a child's life became increasingly more prevalent during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.⁵ During this time sexologists, psychologists, parents, and teachers began to view male adolescence in particular as a threat to social and moral order. It became seen as a dangerous crossing into adulthood that boys could navigate successfully only by repressing all sorts of excessive desires. In their concern with their heroes' maturation—a concern that reflects an intimate, almost erotic interest in their transition—Alger's western novels resonate powerfully with this emerging discourse on adolescence

and map out a journey through it that emphasizes temperance, restraint, responsibility, and honesty. But even as Alger imagines the West as a place to rehabilitate the degenerate adolescent, transforming him into a robust, respectable, heterosexual man, he achieves this transformation through a series of homosocial and homoerotic encounters, which ironically purge adolescence of all its dangerous excesses and channel it into proper middle-class respectability.⁶

Adolescence and its Discontents

In the century prior to G. Stanley Hall's work on adolescence, the idea that young people experienced some sort of transition from childhood to adulthood was not absent from discourse on the family and social life, but how it described the transition certainly changed over the course of the century. In the early nineteenth century, American authors began publishing child-reading books in ever increasing numbers, which became very popular. These books revealed a new interest in childhood as a "distinct period of life and one which was little comparable to the years of maturity."⁷ And as the young republic witnessed growing nationalism during this period, the interest in books about raising American children in particular "reflected deep anxieties about the quality of American family life."⁸ These anxieties resulted in part from the impact of industrialization and its transformation of traditional agricultural family structures. In cities, families lost a certain degree of internal unity that previously had existed in rural areas when all family members shared common work in a common environment. Subsequently, the role of children changed markedly. They were no longer seen as miniature versions of their parents, and in urban settings, their lives and work became

increasingly discontinuous from their parents. Childhood thus emerged as a distinct period in a person's life that was understood to oppose adulthood.⁹

Starting in the 1830s, a number of advice-books were published that emphasized youth as a distinct period between childhood and full maturity. Exploring the problems of this transitional life period, this body of literature characterized it as “pliant” and “plastic,” and because of this “openness,” youth were “vulnerable to many kinds of danger.”¹⁰ These books hoped to instill the “mastery of the unruly self” in all young people, yet more often than not, the unruly self was male and the danger it struggled to master was sexual.¹¹ The concern for youth, then, focused mostly on helping young men maintain morality in spite of a tumultuous transition into adulthood. As Henry Ward Beecher writes in his *Lectures to Young Men*, “A young man knows little of life; less of himself. He feels in his bosom the various impulses, wild desires, restless cravings he can hardly tell for what, a somber melancholy when all is gay, a violent exhilaration when others are sober.”¹² As Beecher suggests, the inexplicable appetites of a young man's body not only threaten to overwhelm his own sense of self, but they also place him in an antagonistic relationship to the community around him. Controlling these desires—sexual or otherwise—is central both for helping young men transition into manhood more smoothly and for creating a respectable social order.¹³

In 1904, over twenty years of research and writing on this transition culminated in G. Stanley Hall's publication of *Adolescence*.¹⁴ In this epic study, Hall triumphantly announces his new paradigm for thinking about American youth and the promises and perils that they faced. He describes adolescence as a “marvelous new birth,” in which “[d]evelopment is less gradual and more saltatory, suggestive of some ancient period of

storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained.”¹⁵

Envisioning adolescence in terms of abrupt movement and breaking with the past, Hall presents it as radically different from childhood, a revolution that promises to transform the child into a more sophisticated adult. Yet as optimistic as Hall is about youth and its possibilities, he recognizes that this period of “storm and stress” can also lead to greater dangers. As “[y]outh awakes to a new world and understands neither it nor himself,” adolescents must be properly “husbanded and directed,” if they are to make sense of this new world and their new selves.¹⁶ Emphasizing the “plastic” nature of adolescence, Hall situates his new theory in relation to the social ills that he sees plaguing American life at the turn of the century.¹⁷ For Hall, as American life grew increasingly urban and industrialized, adolescence faced greater stress and temptation than previous generations, which he believed had to be remedied through interventions like his own.¹⁸ Through *Adolescence*, Hall not only identified this transitional phase and painstakingly catalogued every aspect of it, but he also presented his work as preventing what was in his mind the degeneracy of the nation’s young people.¹⁹

Street Boys Out West and the Children’s Aid Society

Paralleling the emergence of this discourse on adolescence, reformers and philanthropists also expended a great amount of resources on identifying and treating juvenile delinquency throughout the nineteenth century in the United States.²⁰ Cities like New York struggled with the growing problem of juvenile crime and child vagrancy that industrialization and urbanization brought, and in 1825, the New York House of Reform opened, the first institution formed in the United States to remedy such problems.

Similar institutions soon formed in Boston and Philadelphia, and even though the success of these organizations in reforming delinquent children was questionable, an enthusiasm for the project grew. By 1850, a number of institutions had come into existence across the country in cities like New Orleans, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati.²¹

One of these, the Children's Aid Society in New York City, played a central role in the writing of Horatio Alger, Jr., forming the basis for his fictional rehabilitation of juvenile delinquency. Since 1855, Alger had been supportive of this organization, which Charles Loring Brace founded in 1853 as a part of his vision to reform urban immorality.²² Even though the organization sponsored industrial schools for the urban poor and provided inexpensive housing for vagrant youth, it considered the placement of orphans with families living in the West as its most successful accomplishment.²³ After Alger's arrival in New York City in 1866, such activities earned his praise, and he spent a great deal of time with homeless boys who lived in boarding houses sponsored by the Children's Aid Society.²⁴ His observations led to the first installment of *Ragged Dick*, which appeared in February 1867 and narrated the story of one street boy's rise in class. The overwhelming success of publishing *Ragged Dick* as a book the following year only confirmed Alger's career choice as author of juvenile fiction.²⁵ Six years later, Alger applied his formula to the American West, and in *Julius*, he describes how the Children's Aid Society places Julius, a former city vagabond, with a family in Brookeville, Wisconsin, with the hopes of helping him to a better life. Focusing on the region's positive influence on Julius, Alger intends his novel to show how "in his new surroundings, my young hero parts with the bad habits contracted in his vagabond life, and, inspired by a worthy ambition, labors to acquire a good education, and to qualify

himself for a respectable position in society.”²⁶ Praising the work of the Children’s Aid Society, Alger begins to construct his own myth of the West, seeing it as a place with the power to solve the problems of the urban East.²⁷

In its endorsement of the philosophy of the Children’s Aid Society, Alger’s novel also powerfully resonates with Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis and his vision of the West’s power to “furnish the forces dominating American character,” a character that Turner saw as highly individualistic, agriculturally based, and strongly drawn to democracy.²⁸ Predating Turner’s work, Alger’s novel nearly serves as a fictional blueprint for the qualities with which Turner endows the West: *Julius* emphasizes the power of the West to heal and lend respectability to adolescence and significantly form a young man’s developing masculinity. Throughout the novel, the characters repeatedly refer to the West as beneficial to their health, as Julius does when he explains to a friend in the city that “I’m goin’ West for my health.”²⁹ Imagining himself working on a farm, he also hopes that a vigorous life of pastoral labor will help him “grow up respectable.”³⁰ On the train ride out to Brookeville, Wisconsin, Julius observes a pickpocket try to steal a watch from a fellow passenger and prevents the robbery. As Julius explains his hopes of improving himself in his new home, the man rewards him by giving him a watch and encourages him, saying, “You’ll have a better chance in the West than you would in New York.”³¹ As Julius’ new mentor concludes before he gets off the train, “His Western life will make a man out of him.”³²

The initial transformation that Julius experiences on his train ride only foreshadows the physical and moral transformations to come. As Julius settles into his

new home, the narrator takes great care to update his reader on the physical maturation of Julius and how working on the farm has changed him:

When we first made acquaintance with Julius, in the streets of New York, he was meager and rather undersized. Want and privation had checked his growth, as was natural. But since he had found a home in the West, he had lived generously, enjoyed pure air, and a sufficiency of out-of-door exercise, and these combined had wrought a surprising change in his appearance. He had grown three inches in height; his form had expanded; the pale, unhealthy hue of his cheek had given place to a healthy bloom, and his strength had considerably increased. This change was very gratifying to Julius.³³

Apparently, this change is gratifying to the narrator, as well, who later remarks on how Julius has “strengthened his muscles, and developed his figure,” and “would now be regarded as quite a good-looking boy.”³⁴ Identifying the homoerotic impulses behind such descriptions, Michael Moon not only observes that “[s]exual attractiveness is the one characteristic Alger’s heroes all have in common,” but also that Alger’s narrators are “fierce discriminators of good looks in boys.”³⁵ As in many of Alger’s novels, the narrator lingers over Julius’ appearance and lavishes praise on his physical development, investing his vision of robust western health with homoerotic undertones. Such homoeroticism amplifies the homosocial desire that drives the relationship between Julius and his foster father, Mr. Taylor, which establishes Julius’ respectability through their joint agricultural labor. As Mr. Taylor tells Julius, “I’m going to make a Western farmer out of you.”³⁶ Just as Turner emphasizes the role of the pioneer farmer in the development of the West and thereby the nation, so too, through farming, Julius becomes a moral and disciplined young man, a suitable citizen of the American republic. Under Mr. Taylor’s tutelage, Julius resists a number of temptations and ultimately proves his worth to himself and his new family. He earns enough money to buy property and marry

his foster mother's niece, settling down into his own respectable, middle-class life. As he later says to a group of street boys in New York who have gathered to hear of his experiences:

I was induced by Mr. O'Connor to go West. There I found kind friends and a good home, and had a chance to secure a good education. Now I carry on a large farm for my benefactor, and second father, as I consider him, and I hope in time to become rich. I tell you, boys, it will pay you to leave the city streets, and go out West. . . . If you want to prosper, and grow up respectable, I advise you to come out as soon as you get the chance.³⁷

As these passages show, Alger cultivated a similar vision of the West that Turner promoted nearly two decades later and through *Julius*, he gave the homosocial reform of the working-class juvenile delinquent an erotic charge, making the bonds between older men and strong, good-looking boys central to his ideal America.

Digging for Nuggets of Manhood in the Californian West

Following the publication of *Julius*, Alger continued to write about the American West, yet he discarded the Turnerian myth of the pioneer farmer and began to celebrate the myth of the miner, a figure that, like Theodore Roosevelt's archetypal western hunter, pursues a "strenuous life" out West to become a better man.³⁸ Starting with *Joe's Luck; or, A Boy's Adventure in California*, which he published in 1878, Alger wrote a number of novels in which his adolescent hero faces disheartening economic prospects in his hometown in the rural East and decides to try his fortune in California.³⁹ Aspiring for greater independence and stability, he must leave the East and his childhood behind and travel to the West.⁴⁰ Although necessary for the family's survival, his adolescent desire unsettles his family, who view his emerging independence with intense anxiety. In *The*

Young Explorer, Ben Stanton confesses to his uncle that he intends to leave Hampton, New York to find work. His uncle is shocked and tries to warn Ben against it:

“Where do you want to go?”

“I want to go to California.”

“Gracious sakes! Want to go to California!” gasped Job. “What put that idea in your head?”

“A good many people are going there, and there’s a chance to get rich quick out among the gold mines.”

“But you’re only a boy.”

“I’m a pretty large boy, Uncle Job,” said Ben, complacently, “and I’m pretty strong.”

“So you be, Ben, but it takes more than strength.”

“What more, Uncle Job?”

“It takes judgment.”

“Can’t a boy have judgment?”

“Wal, he may have some, but you don’t often find an old head on young shoulders.”⁴¹

Even though Ben’s uncle questions his judgment, it is precisely Ben’s lack of it that allows him to imagine setting out for California and ultimately rescuing himself and his family from poverty. Lack of experience and the restless impulses of adolescence help Ben resist tradition and see beyond his present circumstances. Yet Ben’s desires to improve himself also have the potential to lead him down a more transgressive path. Although Uncle Job respects Ben, he worries that Ben’s decision to seek his fortune in California is an imprudent one and will ruin him, both financially and morally.⁴² But it is exactly this test that adolescence must face and overcome in Alger’s later novels. Just as Theodore Roosevelt immersed himself in the wilderness of the West and saw his own “ranching and hunting experiences as a model for regenerating the lost manliness and vigor of his class,” so, too, do Alger’s heroes embrace a strenuous moral life in the lawless West.⁴³ In his later novels, Alger no longer portrays the West as a wholesome

place in which to reform the delinquent adolescent; rather, it becomes a wild place that the adolescent must confront and overcome to make himself a man.

This confrontation also entails restraining adolescent appetite, and in Alger's novels his heroes literally struggle with physical hunger as they test themselves against the West. Ben desires to go to California in part because he knows that Deacon Pitkin, the man who offers to employ him, and his wife will not feed him well enough. Admonishing Ben for his "hearty" eating, Deacon Pitkin says, "Boys should curb their appetites." But as Ben thinks, "I don't think I could curb mine."⁴⁴ Nor, as Alger suggests, should he, for Ben's appetite leads to self-improvement and drives him to think beyond his constrained circumstances. Yet in subsequent novels, Alger suggests that his young heroes' development also benefits from controlling their physical urges. In *Dean Dunham*, Dean, hungry from wandering around in the Rocky Mountain foothills, sits down to eat and confesses, "I am ashamed of my appetite, but I can't help it." As the woman serving him says, "Young folks is mostly hungry."⁴⁵ Even though Alger humorously acknowledges the needs of his growing boys, he also inhibits them. Like Dean, young men should begin to feel somewhat embarrassed by their inordinate physical needs and learn to restrain them. On his overland journey to California in *Digging for Gold*, Grant and his party run low on food and resort to "half-rations" and feel "the need of economizing."⁴⁶ As much as Grant and his companion Tom feel a "perpetual craving for food," their ability to withstand hunger helps them survive their journey through the great salt plains.⁴⁷ Eventually they do find food, but this test reveals that as much as, to echo Henry Ward Beecher's phrase, the "restless cravings" of adolescence initiate self-improvement for Alger's heroes, this process, like that outlined

by numerous other writers during the nineteenth century, also requires restraint and temperance if they are to achieve respectable adulthood.

Like Alger's first western novel, one of the ways that Alger curbs his boys' appetites and regulates their behavior is through the homoerotic bonds of male friendship. Once Alger's young men arrive in the West, they enter an almost all-male environment in which heterosexual male identities fail to be intelligible. Without women, these men and the adolescent heroes rely on each other for companionship, support, and affection. In *Joe's Luck*, Joe Mason and his friend and traveling companion, Joshua Bickford, set out for a mining camp in the vicinity of the Yuba River. As they progress further into the interior of unsettled California, Joshua becomes anxious at the idea of being so far from San Francisco, "out ... in the wilderness." He feels like he and Joe are the "only human critters in the world," which prompts Joe to compare their situation with that of Adam and Eve's:

Joe. "So we can fancy how Adam felt when he was set down in Paradise," said

"I guess he felt kinder lonely."

"Probably he did, till Eve came. He had Eve and I have you for company."

"I guess Eve wasn't much like me," said Joshua, with a grin.

He was lying at full length on the greensward, looking awkward and ungainly enough, but his countenance, homely as it was, looked honest and trustworthy, and Joe preferred his company to that of many possessed of more outward polish. He could not help smiling at Mr. Bickford's remark.

"Probably Eve was not as robust as you are," he replied. "I doubt if she was as tall either."⁴⁸

In this innocent but affectionate exchange between friends, Alger rewrites the creation story in terms of affection between an adolescent boy and a young man. Joe is Alger's new American Adam, a "self-reliant and self-propelling" figure that constituted one of the primary American myths in the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ As the new inhabitants of the

Californian paradise, Joe and Joshua reflect Alger's homoerotic myth of the West. Their awkward honesty and robust strength allows them to tame the wilderness and extract both mineral wealth and manhood from it. Affectionate male friendship makes it possible for Alger's adolescents to survive in the West, succeed economically, and thereby become adult men.

What is striking, though, about Alger's novels is not just the importance accorded to intimacies between men in the homosocial world of the mining camps, but the unique role that the adolescent boy plays in relation to the adult men. In his study of same-sex sexuality in the Pacific Northwest at the turn of the century, Peter Boag documents the prevalence of homosexual relationships among certain groups of migratory workers like loggers, miners, and ranchers. As he notes, these relationships often occurred between an adult and a youth or boy and fulfilled a number of sexual, emotional, and social needs for each person in the relationship.⁵⁰ Suggestive of such arrangements, when Ben passes through a small mining town on his return to San Francisco, Alger describes how nearly every miner in the camp attempts to persuade him to remain and work alongside him in a relationship that is one part fatherly, the other part spousal. As the narrator explains:

It is easy to understand why Ben should have received so many friendly invitations. A boy was a rarity in California at that time—at any rate, in the mining districts. There were plenty of young men and men of middle age, but among the adventurous immigrants were to be found few boys of sixteen, the age of our hero. The sight of his fresh young face and boyish figure recalled to many miners the sons whom they had left behind them, and helped to make more vivid the picture of homes which their imaginations often conjured up, and they would have like to have Ben join their company.⁵¹

Ben's charming adolescence and its blending of boyish effeminacy and emerging masculinity earn him the rugged miners' affection. Closely resembling the "punk" of

Northwest transient culture, Ben is a masculine youth whom the older miners hope will play the receptive or passive role in a relationship with them. Given the lack of women in the mines, the attraction to a masculine adolescent paradoxically permits and mitigates homosexual desire, for Ben's developing masculinity prevents the older men from perceiving him as a homosexual, yet his age endows him with enough effeminacy to justify their desire for him.⁵² Later in the novel, after Ben reunites Richard Dewey with his fiancé, Florence Douglas, and they are happily married, he returns with Jake Bradley to Golden Gulch and the hospitable offers of the miners. When they arrive, they "were welcomed in such a noisy style by the miners that it might almost be called an ovation."⁵³ The miners celebrate Ben and Jake's return to the world of men with such excitement that it suggests that everyone involved, perhaps including Alger himself, prefers the mining camp to that of the Eastern world of family and heteronormativity.⁵⁴ Through this scene, Alger resists the tendency at this time to see homosexuality as effeminate and diseased; instead, he uses the West as a way to write homoeroticism into the center of his moral vision for adolescent development and subsequently attributes a certain robust masculinity to the homosexuality that his stories suggest.

As much as Alger's fiction situates homosocial desire at the center of this man-making process, it ultimately requires that the adolescent hero forgo the all-male pleasures of the mining camp and return to his family. His western life may make him a man, but his newly found masculinity only becomes legible in the East. Near the end of *The Young Miner*, when Tom realizes his father is in danger of losing his farm, he vows that Squire Hudson, "shall be defeated in his wicked purpose, or my name isn't Tom Nelson."⁵⁵ Having earned the right to defend his name and honor, his voice shows how

he has changed in the West, for he speaks “in a quick, indignant tone, and his voice had a manly ring.”⁵⁶ As he successfully outbids Squire Hudson for his father’s property, in a chapter titled “Manhood,” his transition from boy to man is complete. His success in the West has allowed him to rescue his family and secure their futures. As he says, “When I think of the changes that fifteen months have made in my circumstances I consider myself the luckiest boy in the world, and have great cause for gratitude.”⁵⁷

In spite of these endings’ heteronormative insistence on leaving the West and its homosocial world, they comprise such a small part of Alger’s novels that it is tempting to resist the narrative closure that they work so hard to create. After all it is the hero’s adolescence and his journey through the West—his profound change in circumstances—that inspire his feelings of joy and comprise most of each novel. Certainly a number of Alger’s heroes do end up married, but almost just as many do not. Their eventual return to the West leaves open the tempting possibility of imagining them as life long bachelors, forever exploring relationships with other men. By celebrating homoerotic friendships between older men and adolescent boys, Alger’s westerns novels suggest that such relationships are essential for navigating the temptations of adolescence and necessary for the development of respectable men. From the wholesome pioneer farmer to the morally upright miner, the archetypes that Alger explores in these novels reflect his own distinctly homoerotic myth of the American West, a myth that envisions homosexuality as a normal and necessary part of Alger’s ideal America.

¹ Alger had been writing professionally for almost a decade at this point. While studying at Harvard he had dreamed of becoming a poet. After graduation in 1852, he published a number of poems in the *Boston Transcript*, and in 1855, he published *Bertha's Christmas Vision: An Autumn Sheaf*, which contained eleven short stories and eight poems. Even though the reviews were favorable, the volume did not sell well. Over the next few years, he continued to write for magazines. In 1857, he published his second book, a satirical poem titled, *Nothing to Do: A Tilt at Our Best Society*. In the early 1860s, he served as foreign correspondent for the *New York Sun* during his trip to Europe, which allowed him to write essays for other magazines, as well. After his adult romance *Marie Bertrand* failed to earn him notice in the early months of 1864, he gave up his literary ambitions and decided to write for children. In three quick months, he wrote *Frank's Campaign* and published it in the winter of 1864. The novel was well received and sold quickly, warranting a second edition in early December. His reputation as a poet, *Frank's Campaign*, his subsequent stories in *Student and Schoolmate* and the publication of *Paul Prescott's Charge* led to his inclusion in the *Cyclopaedia*. See Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985), 15-38, 43-65.

² Cited in Scharnhorst and Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, pp. 66-7; see pp. 1-3, and 64-7, for a fuller description of the events that led up to and followed Alger's dismissal from his position in Brewster. See also Gary Scharnhorst, *Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 28-30; and Bill Roach and Mary Roach, "Brewster Revisited," *Dime Novel Round-Up* 71, no. 2 (April 2002): 39-53.

³ See Michael Moon, "'The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes': Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger," *Representations* 19 (summer 1987): 87-110. Moon argues that Alger's "reformulation of domestic fiction" creates a "particular brand of male homoerotic romance" that "functions as a support for capitalism," 88-89.

⁴ Scharnhorst and Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, 111.

⁵ See G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904); John Demos and Virginia Demos, "Adolescence in a Historical Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 31, no. 4 (November 1969): 632-638; and Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000): 1-22.

⁶ Even though most of Alger's novels are discussed, if briefly, in Scharnhorst and Bales, and other book length studies of Alger, his Pacific Series and the other novels set in the American West have received little critical treatment in their own right. No scholar has examined them specifically in relation to the question of historical and literary representations of the American West. And although Alger's homosexuality has received increasing attention over the past twenty years, few scholars have explored how Alger's affection for boys and his fictional treatment of male adolescence relate to the emergence of a homosexual identity and normative heterosexuality in the late nineteenth century. Two of the most recent books on Alger acknowledge his homosexuality, but fail to see it as a relevant to their criticism of his life and work. See Carol Nackenhoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Marcus Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870-1900* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). My use of homosocial and homoerotic desire is drawn largely from and deeply indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985). Recognizing that homosocial typically refers to a type of male-bonding distinct from homosexuality, she nevertheless paradoxically wants to "draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic" and "hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society is radically disrupted." See Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1-2. Although the historical scope of Sedgwick's study ends roughly where this essay begins, I find her formulation useful for understanding how desire—sexual or otherwise—for adolescent young men and their development propels much of Alger's fiction. His writing inhabits the very disruption that Sedgwick wishes to explore.

⁷ Demos and Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," 633.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 636-637.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 634.

¹¹ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 4-5.

¹² Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men* (Boston: J.P. Jewett & Co., 1844), 21; cited in Demos and Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," 634.

¹³ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 6-7.

¹⁴ According to Demos and Demos, one of Hall's earliest descriptions of adolescence appears in a paper that he published in 1882, in which he describes this phase as one of "storm and stress" or crisis that he characterized by "lack of emotional steadiness, violent impulses, unreasonable conduct, lack of enthusiasm and sympathy.... The previous selfhood is broken up ... and a new individual is in process of being born. All is solvent, plastic, peculiarly susceptible to external influences." See G. Stanley Hall, "The Moral and Religious Training of Children," *Princeton Review* (January, 1882), 26-48; cited in Demos and Demos, "Adolescence in Historical Perspective," 635.

¹⁵ Hall, *Adolescence*, xv, xiii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ As Hall writes, "Modern life is hard, and in many respects increasingly on youth. Home, school, church, fail to recognize its nature and needs and, perhaps most of all, its perils," xiv. He also sees adolescents as facing greater moral dangers than previous generations: "Never has youth been exposed to such dangers of both perversion and arrest as in our own land and day," xv.

¹⁹ For a history of Hall's own struggle with adolescent desire, see Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 1-4.

²⁰ See Robert M. Mennel, *Thorns and Thistles: Juvenile Delinquents in the United States 1825-1940* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1973). Mennel argues that juvenile delinquency as concept that describes illegal activity that children commit emerges in the late eighteenth century. He sees the establishment of the London Philanthropic Society in 1788, the first institution of its kind that sought to reform poor children who turned to crime, as an indication of the shift in viewing children's misbehavior. He writes, "during the eighteenth century, juvenile delinquency slowly ceased to mean a form of misbehavior common to all children and became instead a euphemism for the crimes and conditions of poor children." See Mennel, *Thorns and Thistles*, xxvi.

²¹ See Mennel, *Thorns and Thistles*, 3-31.

²² For an early history of the Children's Aid Society, see Children's Aid Society, *The Children's Aid Society of New York: Its History, Plan, and Results* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbaeck, 1893). It includes the first circular that the society released in 1853 announcing its mission:

As Christian men we cannot look upon this great multitude of unhappy, deserted and degraded boys and girls without feeling our responsibility to God for them. The class increases; immigration is pouring in its multitudes of poor foreigners, who leave these young outcasts everywhere in our midst. These boys and girls, it should be remembered, will soon form the great lower class of our city. They will influence elections; they may shape the polity of the city; they will assuredly, if unreclaimed, poison society around them. They will help form the great multitude of robbers, thieves and vagrants who are now such a burden upon the law-respecting community.

As the rhetoric of this circular suggests, the future of the republic depending on the reforming the delinquent working classes. Suggestively, in his support of Brace's project, Alger makes the homoerotic relationships between older men and adolescents central to the smooth functioning of democracy. See Children's Aid Society, *The Children's Aid Society*, 4. See also Charles Loring Brace, *The Best Method of Disposing of our Pauper and Vagrant Children* (New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck & Thomas, 1859).

²³ As the early history of the society notes, "But of all the efforts of the Society to redeem juvenile humanity from the misery and suffering incident to a homeless life in a great city, the most inspiring is in connection with our system of placing homeless children in permanent homes in the West." Yet the power of the West's rhetoric seems more important than its reality, for as of 1893, the society had placed 97,738 children in homes "in the West," yet almost 39,000 of these children went to live with families in New York State. See Children's Aid Society, *The Children's Aid Society*, 39-40. See also The Children's Aid Society, *The Crusade for Children; A Review of Child Life in New York during 75 Years, 1853-1928* (New York: The Children's Aid Society of New York, 1928); and Miriam Z. Langsam, *Children West: A History of the Placing-Out System of the New York Children's Aid Society, 1853-1890* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1964).

²⁴ See Scharnhorst and Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, 76-80; and Stephen O'Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed* (Boston: New York, 2001), 230-231. Given the scandal in Brewster, speculations have abounded as to the nature of Alger's relationships with these boys. O'Connor emphasizes that no evidence exists that clearly establishes he had sex with any of these boys. Nancy Koppelman identifies the Bowery, one of Alger's favorite venues to frequent, as well known for "homosexual encounters and public sexuality." She suggests that "Alger likely continued to pursue homosexual encounters in New York, and his chosen venues and vocation would have served him that regard." See Nancy Koppelman, "The Construction of 'Respectability': Horatio Alger, Jr.'s Ragged Dick and Alger's Reputation," in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Crises of Identity*, ed. Yiorgos Kalogeras and Domna Pastourmatzi (Thessaloniki: Hellenic Association of American Studies, 1996), 130.

²⁵ As Scharnhorst and Bales note, *Ragged Dick* was Alger's first major success in terms of wide spread popularity and financial gain. They claim it was "the most popular story Alger ever wrote, technically his only best seller, and it remained continuously in print from at least forty years." See Scharnhorst and Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.*, 86.

²⁶ Horatio Alger, Jr., *Strive and Succeed: Julius or The Street Boy Out West and The Store Boy or the Fortunes of Ben Barclay: Two Novels* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967 [1874]), xiii.

²⁷ Contrary to Alger's overwhelming praise, O'Connor shows how mixed the results of placing orphans in the West were. In addition to the success stories that Alger's novel imitates, O'Connor also documents how the organization failed to follow up with the children once they were placed, how ineffective the screening process for families was, and the abuses that some children endured in their new families.

²⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 3. In his now famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner identifies the frontier and the West as the primary shapers of American identity and society. As he writes, "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West." See Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 3. For a discussion of Turner's thesis as it relates to the myth of the West as garden, see Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 250-260.

²⁹ Alger, *Julius*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³² *Ibid.*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁵ Michael Moon, "The Gentle Boy for the Dangerous Classes," 94.

³⁶ Alger, *Julius*, 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁸ For a discussion of the significance of both Turner's frontier thesis and pioneer farmer and Theodore Roosevelt's historical writing and hunter, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 1-62. As Slotkin points out, Roosevelt connected his own experiences in the West to earlier adventurers like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett and considered them models for his own vision of reclaiming American manhood. For Roosevelt, immersing himself in the wilderness of the West allowed him to live a "strenuous life" and become a better man.

³⁹ Following *Joe's Luck*, Alger launched the Pacific Series, a four book series that included *The Young Adventurer; or, Tom's Trip Across the Plains* (Philadelphia, Henry T. Coates & Co., 1878); *The Young Miner: or, Tom Nelson in California* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1879); *The Young Explorer; or Among the Sierras* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1880); and *Ben's Nugget; or A Boy's Search for Fortune* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1882). After these novels, a few others followed that were also set in the West, including *Dean Dunham; or The Waterford Mystery* (Leyden, MA: Aeonian Press, 1975 [1888]); and *Digging for Gold; A Story of California* (Philadelphia: John C. Weston, 1892). One of Alger's last novels, *A Debt of Honor. The Story of Gerald Lane's Success in the Far West* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1900) is also set in the West, but in this novel, Alger changes his standard plot. In this novel, Gerald, the young hero, actually grows up in the West, and after his father dies, he returns to the Midwest to reclaim money that his father's enemy owes. Rather than serve as a place to test one's adolescence and become a man, the West provides Gerald with a natural, wholesome home in which to grow up. His

journey takes him through the West as a tourist, working as the private secretary for an older Englishman. In his travels, Gerald becomes more sophisticated and learns how to survive in the business world of the East.

⁴⁰ Even though Alger's heroes all share a certain pride and reject the few unappealing economic opportunities that do exist, like learning a trade or farming someone else's land for extremely low pay, they do not wish to become excessively rich. These young men hope to secure enough wealth to allow them to live comfortable, respectable middle class lives. They desire money as a means to support their immediate or extended families, whether through paying off mortgages or sending siblings and cousins to school. In everything, it seems, moderation is the key for Alger and his ideal vision of middle-class respectability.

⁴¹ Alger, *The Young Explorer*, 15-16.

⁴² Similarly, in *Digging for Gold*, when Grant announces his plan to go to California to his step-father, it leaves him speechless: "Seth Tarbox dropped the hoe he had in his hand, and stared at Grant as though the boy had taken leave of his senses." See Alger, *Digging for Gold*, 65.

⁴³ See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁵ Alger, *Dean Dunham*, 193.

⁴⁶ Alger, *Digging for Gold*, 109-110.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁸ Alger, *Joe's Luck*, 137-138.

⁴⁹ See R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

⁵⁰ See Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 22. Although Boag focuses specifically on migrant labor in the Northwest, Alger's representation of life in the mining camps, which although takes place in the 1850s, was written in the 1880s, resonates powerfully with the historical material that Boag has uncovered. For a suggestive discussion of the possibility of same-sex eroticism during the California Gold Rush, see Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 168-172.

⁵¹ Alger, *Ben's Nugget*, 115-116.

⁵² See Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 27-35.

⁵³ *Ben's Nugget*, 237.

⁵⁴ This image strikingly recalls and revises Alonzo Delano's "A Live Woman in the Mines," a sketch in which a group of rugged miners enthusiastically welcome a new woman to their camp. Cited in Albert Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 101.

⁵⁵ Alger, *The Young Miner*, 267.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 287. Like Tom, Dean Dunham similarly draws on his experience, knowledge, and money from his experience in the Rocky Mountains to save his uncle's farm from foreclosure. When the villain of the novel refuses to deal with Dean, a mere "boy," Dean asserts his new sense of manhood, saying, "I feel competent to settle the matter." See Alger, *Dean Dunham*, 272.