

Children's Literature Association Conference 2019
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Creating Spaces For Child Activism:
Antislavery Efforts in *Step by Step: or Tidy's Way to Freedom*

In the antebellum period, children's abolitionist literature encouraged young readers to engage in various forms of activism. Following the model of Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), most texts used a white protagonist to rally white children to protest slavery, whether by changing their prejudiced views about African Americans or by convincing adults to improve the lives of enslaved persons. However, *Step by Step: or Tidy's Way to Freedom* (1862) uses an enslaved protagonist—a biracial girl named Tidy—to advocate for emancipation. Published by the American Tract Society, *Step by Step* charts how Christian faith sustains Tidy from childhood into young adulthood through various masters. It is an important text because it gives enslaved persons more agency than previous children's abolitionist novels: it shows how enslaved children can be activists instead of passive receivers of activism.

In this paper, I argue that Tidy's activism is possible because she creates spaces to resist slavery. Drawing upon scholars of cultural geography, such as Joël Bonnemaïson, Sarah Holloway, and Gill Valentine, I show how Tidy reorganizes space to construct a voice and identity separate from her prescribed status in the slave system. She also creates new spaces for herself in outdoor spots away from her master's control. The physical sites then form gateways to imaginative and spiritual spaces. Additionally, the novel suggests enslaved children can be powerful activists when they accompany slaveholding children and enter child-specific spaces, such as the nursery, school, and outdoor play areas. Through reading Tidy's story, real children could produce their own imaginative spaces of resistance that engendered empathy and encouraged activism. Although the anonymous author writes the book to white children and ultimately prioritizes their roles in abolitionism, *Step by Step* gives new focus to enslaved children. It demonstrates how they can contribute to the antislavery project in essential ways, even if they must do so one step at a time.