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The Education of the Black Child: Reading African-American Children's Literature till the Black Power Era

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the development of African-American children's literature from the 19th century to the 1960s and 70s. From church poems, which were written to discipline black children, African-American children's literature developed to become what Bishop calls a 'socially and culturally conscious literature.' It not only informs African-American children of their rich black heritage but at the same time instils pride in their race. In conclusion, this paper also offers a brief analysis of some of the 20th century African-American children's books from the perspective of class and gender.

Keywords:

African-American Children's Literature, Education, Oral Tradition, Realism, W.E.B. Dubois, Class-consciousness, Gender.

This paper seeks to trace the development of African-American children's literature with its origin in the 19th century African Methodist Episcopal Church's newspaper, *Christian Recorder* (Haywood), till the development of novels exclusively meant for black children in the 20th century. In its initial phase, literature for black children was solely meant to inculcate disciplinary values to make them examples of moral beings to white people. However, literature produced for African-American children underwent a tremendous change in the 20th century after the publication of W. E. B. Du Bois' magazine for black children, *The Brownies Book* in 1921.

The *Brownies Book* became an indispensable instrument of engendering pride in the black race from the very childhood. However, one cannot overlook the fact that in its initial developmental phase (1900- 60s), black children's literature rarely depicted deprived sections of the black population and more often than not depicted male characters as protagonists.

African-American Children's Literature and Mainstream Children's Literature

Much of the literature produced for children is defined by the didactic tone of its content with the explicit intention of conveying a moral message to children. The circumstances in which African-American children's literature¹ came into its own², were also informed by the growth of African-American self-consciousness and the rise of a discourse of black pride. African-American children's literature from the beginning of the 20th century has played a defining role in empowering African-Americans and infusing a sense of pride in their shared history and culture.

The foremost agenda of black children's literature is to depict African-American children in a positive light and undo the harm caused by the western historical and literary portrayal of African-Americans as uncivilized. Katherine Capshaw Smith also draws attention to this purpose that black children's literature serves. According to her

it caters to the immediate need of strengthening the self-esteem of African-Americans because literature has the power to psychologically impact them as children in a way that will forever stay in their mind as adults.

Another distinctive feature of African-American children's literature, one that makes it stand apart from children's classics of the 19th and 20th century, is its emphasis on realism. Hence, the depiction of everyday struggles and sufferings of blacks is hard to overlook. The fantastic and adventurous world that often characterizes mainstream books for young readers like *The Secret Garden* (Burnett 1911), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain 1876), *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (Pyle 1883) is replaced by realistic and historic accounts of slavery, racism and the struggle to love one's own self in the American society. The titles of some of contemporary African-American children books emphasize this fact – *Unsung Heroes* (Haynes 1921), *I Love My Hair!* (Tarpley 1998), *If I Ran For President* (Stiere 2007), *You Can Do It* (Dungy 2008), *Chocolate Me* (Diggs 2011), *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levine 2007).

Neglected till the latter half of the 20th century by mainstream academia, African-American children's literature has assisted black people in embracing their rich African heritage and investing pride in their race. Literature for black children also provided sensitive educational material suited for the needs of children who had been accustomed to reading books depicting white characters as the protagonists and blacks as inferior and uncivilized minor characters. It is hardly possible to overlook the fact that the depiction of black characters in some of the mainstream children's classics has been racist. For instance, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920) by Hugh Lofting depicts a black character, Prince Bumpo, who wishes to be white so that he can marry the princess. This implies that not only is black skin undesirable but also mortifying. The depiction of black protagonists like Epichaminondas, in the 1907 popular series, *Epichaminondas and His Auntie* by Sara Cone Bryant is overtly racist as the humour of the book is derived from the fact that Epichaminondas is black and slow-witted. Thus, historically the representation of African-Americans in American children's literature has been demeaning, a reality that would make a black child highly conscious of her/his race. Moreover, since blackness has also been associated with sin in mainstream white culture it leads to a negative impact on the mind of African-American children.

In her study "The Negro Character as seen by White Authors," Sterling Brown analyses the stereotypical way in which blacks have been traditionally portrayed in white fiction (qtd. in Bishop 2007). The seven major stereotypes of black characters in fiction as highlighted by Brown are – the Contented Slave, the Wretched Freeman, the Comic Negro, the Brute Negro, the Tragic Mulatto, the Local colour Negro, and the Exotic Primitive. In this reference Bishop observes that most common representation of blacks in children's literature is the stereotype of 'Comic Negro' and the 'Local Color Negro'. Bishop in 'Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Door' (1990) observes that books should not just be 'windows' to the real world but also be 'mirrors' which reflect the readers' selves. In this light, it would not be farfetched to say that the books read by African-American children before the 20th century never portrayed a black child in a favourable light. This was a strong blow to the dignity of African-Americans since their childhood.

The Origin of African-American Children's Literature in the 19th century

The project of educating the black child goes back to the African-American oral tradition (Bishop 1). However, the history of African-American children's books which directly addresses a black readership begins with W.E.B Du Bois magazine, *The Brownies' Book* in 1921. However, the earliest extant example of children's literature published by an African-American is by Amelia E. Johnson (Harris). Living in Boston she started a monthly magazine, *The Joy*, to which she contributed short stories and poems for two years. Later she wrote a novel, *Clarence and Corienne or God's Way* in 1890, which was published by the American Baptist Publication Society of Philadelphia. The novel follows the lives of a brother and a sister who are turned out by their drunkard father after the death of their mother, and how they struggle to survive and climb the socio-economic ladder through hard work. They are finally rewarded at the end as one becomes a physician and the other a teacher respectively. Though this is generally considered the first African-American children's book by many scholars (Capshaw, Harris) this view has been challenged by Haywood on the ground that the race of the protagonist is not explicitly mentioned. However, A. E. Johnson did not enjoy large readership and not many blacks could have read her novel because of high percentage of black illiteracy in the 19th century.³ Thus, as Haywood observes, one cannot classify *Clarence and Corienne* under the category of black children's literature. Even when a handful of poems and stories were being produced at the end of the nineteenth century, they were generally used to convey Christian values of hard work and love as it was produced by church and schools.

C.M. Haywood has drawn attention to some material produced for black children between 1854 and 1865. The African Methodist Episcopal Church's press, Book Concern, produced a black newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*, which printed many hymns, Sunday school material, poetry, essays, serialized novels, church histories. The children's section was called "The Child's Cabinet" and later the "Child's Portion" included poems "Schools at Home" (December 1855), "The Eyes that Mocketh at its Father" (Feb 1861), "The Missionary Child" (Nov 1862) (Haywood). In 1880, a newspaper called "Our Women and Children" was started by Baptist publication of Louisville, Kentucky and women writers like Mary Briton, Gertrude Mossell, Amelia Tilghman, and Victoria Matthews contributed poems for children. However, it is to be noted that all these poems emphasised on inculcating family values and were aimed at building a sense of discipline among African-Americans to show whites that blacks were moral beings and to counter the stereotypical image of blacks in mainstream literature as being false (421-25).

As mentioned before, one cannot neglect that these formal literary 'texts' held educational value for the black child. However, the origin of African-American children's literature resides in the rich African-American oral tradition (Bishop). Bishop further observes that from an early period in the world of slavery, blacks had recognized the value of literacy and the interrelation it bore to the prospect of freedom from bondage. In addition, education also meant the preservation of their culture as distinct from the American culture. Thus, due to the outlawing of reading and writing among slaves, they used stories of the Brer Rabbit as a medium to educate their children about the knack of living in a world where their subordination and inferiority were considered as an inherent traits of their race by whites. David Cunningham points that the tales of Brer Rabbit were adventurous tales of a small powerless creature who used trickery to survive while being surrounded by dangerous animals like the Brer Fox and Brer Bear, a symbol for the hostile slave masters. The Rabbit on the other hand, becomes a symbol for helpless black people who had to survive by their instinctual wit in the western world.

Therefore, the denial of literacy and suppression of their culture caused the African-Americans in the New World to rely solely on singing and storytelling as a medium of expression and education (Bishop). Another means of explaining the everyday phenomena to their children were the “how-and-why” folktales about the creation of the world (Cunningham). Thus, storytelling became a medium of preserving the culture of their ancestors and imparting crucial knowledge about the world that awaited every slave child. Thus, the role of oral tales in shaping the African-American consciousness cannot be disregarded.

As Eugene D. Genovese has pointed out, most of the slave children were not required to work until the age of eleven or twelve. Further their parents made it a point to teach them deference towards white and black adults. Some part of the experience of the slave condition came to the child's understanding through the whipping and selling games that the slave children played (Genovese). However, much of the knowledge that black children received was from the folk songs and spirituals that talked about their sufferings and their dream of freedom from bondage. Spirituals were Christian songs created by the slaves which focused on the hardships of slavery while also emphasising the values of endurance.

Moral strictures about the right behaviour and civility towards whites were also conveyed through teachings from the Bible, a book respected by many African-Americans (Bishop 6). The Bible was an important reader for instructing black children because parallels to the sufferings of black people could be easily drawn and their subsequent deliverance by God, as a reward for their patience, were easily visible in it. Thus, in the Bible could be found hope and salvation for the deprived black souls for their next life. African-Americans also used the Bible to learn letters and words (Bishop).

Bishop (2007) also draws attention to the early books that African-Americans used to read in the secret schools or the pit schools run by blacks, abolitionist schools and missionary schools. One of the books that African-American's referred to was the Noah Webster's Blue-back-Speller or *The American Spelling Book* (1783) because of its easy accessibility in every household as it was what the white kids used to read (Bishop 6). 'The book contained some fables, poems, realistic stories, and dialogues, usually moralistic in tone. Thus, for many children, both black and white, the speller was the 'first "literary" text' (Bishop 6).

Bishop further points out how the first efforts to provide formal education to African-Americans were made in the Reconstruction era by the government and northern missionary societies with the establishment of the Freedmen's schools in the South. School books like *The Freedman's Spelling Book* were more or less used to convey values of family, morality and love. Since it was published by the American Tract Society, founded to disseminate and publish Christian literature, the books published by it were overtly moralistic.

As Ashton and Richards have pointed out, a clear difference between the books used by white kids and the ones used by freedmen emerges when one compares the contents of the two books. The paternalistic tone towards the freedmen is clearly visible in Lesson 42 in the *Spelling Book* which depicts a white civil war soldier who has just returned home to his daughter. It goes on to say:

Let us be grateful that the war is at an end. It was sad to see men die in battle, but it was to make us free. We will not forget all what God did for us.

Later a lesson in etiquette about dressing says:

Sarah is vain and silly at her attire. This is very silly. She may be fine and gay, but this will make her no better. The Bible says a meek and a quiet spirit is in the sight of God a great price.

Moreover, Lesson 94 tries to dissuade black people from smoking cigarettes, a lesson which never appears in white children's book, betraying the assumption that blacks are vulnerable to consuming tobacco and liquor. Another interesting observation about the *Spelling Book* is that it talks about manual labourers like farmers, carpenters, tailors, carriage makers to name a few. However, jobs like teaching, practicing medicine are deemed unfit for blacks as they are omitted from the list of occupations.

The Second Reader is also moralistic in tone as Lesson 15 contains the picture of a black family sitting together with the father reading a book to the children and the mother busy with sewing. This is a model black family exhibiting a middle-class attitude. Kristine Ashton says:

These readers (Freedman's) taught freedmen to read and to write, but they also inculcated the religious values of the American Tract Society. The Freedmen's readers taught emancipated slaves the "duties" of freedom by attempting to shape them in a Victorian mould.

However, one cannot overlook the fact that *The Freedman's Third Reader* included biographical details of some African-American people like Phyllis Whitely and Frederick Douglass, underlining the fact that black people were provided with some historical details of successful African-Americans figures. *The Spelling Book* also contains an illustration of a young black girl on the cover page scribbling the word, "Freedom" on the black board, which is significant as it overtly conveys the relation between literacy and freedom. However, of the total pictures in the book only twelve depict black people (Ashton and Richards). This implies that the Freedmen's reader holds a high moral stand and also showcases moral superiority held by whites. Thus, in the writings of the women writers for black children in the nineteenth century, there is a constant emphasis on portraying African-American people as morally upright and disciplined.

***The Brownies Book* and the Development of African-American children's literature in the 20th century**

The first effort to portray black children in a positive light and as protagonists was made by W.E.B Du Bois in 1921 with the publication of *The Brownies' Book* which included poems, fiction, games, advisory section, letters, and pictures for the young black readers. It was published by Du Bois and Dill Publishing, established especially for printing children's material after Du Bois felt the dearth of such reading materials for children. Since much of what was taught to black children in school books and what they read as fiction did not reflect a positive attitude towards their race, history and culture, he thus, wanted to correct children's literature. Being the first illustrated magazine for blacks that sought to ameliorate the dignity of the black people, each issue of the magazine also contained photographs of well-dressed, middle-class black children indulging in various activities like reading, riding the horse, playing violin, or simply posing for the photograph. Thus, these images of blacks could convey the unsaid to children, that "black is also beautiful."

Mary White Ovington, a white radical of the NAACP portrayed a black girl as a protagonist in her novel *Hazel* (1913), which depicts the trials of an eleven-year-old Boston girl spending a winter in Alabama. Hazel finds life in south different from Boston and learns how problematic racial differences are. The portrayal of black characters in the novel is humane. However, Du Bois felt the need to address black children explicitly so that they could develop a positive attitude towards themselves but at the same time not succumb to racial hatred. This became evident in the various sections of the *The Brownies' Book*, designed to preach and to inform that brown or black was normal and beautiful. Bishop points out that though the critical reception of these books has been good, the commercial success of each varies according to the time. For example, in the early years of the 20th century, black literature written for black children was only read by blacks, which formed a very small readership. However, the five thousand odd subscribers of the magazine establish the fact that some middle-class black children were reading it ardently (Bishop). With its singular efforts, Du Bois publishing company sought to correct certain stereotypes regarding blacks which he felt would work great harm to black children's mind. Thus, as Donald F. Joyce says in *Black Book Publishers in the United States: A Historical Dictionary of the of the Presses, 1817-1990*, "Du Bois and Dill Publishers was the first black owned publishing enterprise established to produce reading material expressly for the black children which would be published by black-owned book publishers" (93).

Elizabeth Ross Hayne's *Unsung Heroes* (1921), a biographical book, which elaborates the achievements of seventeen African-American men in history, was also published by Du Bois and Dill Publishers. With the publishing of this book, black children for the first were encouraged to read the history of the great black men like Booker T. Washington, Alexander Pushkin, Alexandre Dumas, to serve as their role models. It should be noted that at this point the production of children's literature in the early 20th century was limited to few individual efforts of the like of Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. Woodson who, father of the Negro History Week, established the Associated Publishers. He published *The African Myths, Together With Proverbs* (1928) which detailed the fables of a jealous blind man, a disobedient daughter, a rivalry among brothers, with thought-provoking proverbs and humour. *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939) by Woodson narrated stories about African figures which had been distorted through western history and contains the portraits of Mbundu's Queen Anna Nzinga, Shaka of the Zulu Kingdom, and King Behanzin of Dahomey to name a few.

It was only in 1932 that white publishers started paying attention to publishing black children's books. Arna Bomtemps' *Popo And Fefina: Children of Haiti* (1932) written in collaboration with Langston Hughes, was the first book published by a white publisher, Macmillan. Bishop calls Bomtemps as the father of black children's literature. The book portrays the life of two siblings moving to Haiti with their father, a fisherman. Unlike the mainstream novels which portrayed adventures of only white protagonists, this work featured two black children. *Popo and Fefina*, thus, was an immediate success in its time and many of Bomtemps books are still in print (Harris). Part of the success of this work can be attributed to the fact that mainstream publishers published their books at a time when there were rising demands for integration. Thus, "the Intercultural Education Movement influenced the white authors" and also white publishers "to produce books featuring African-American characters" (Bishop). The interest of these publishers can be traced to the increasing demand which these books had generated as increasing number of African-American children had started going to school by the 1940s.⁴ Thus, it was only a reasonable investment for white publishers to publish books with a black protagonist in the mid-20th century.

African-American literature produced for children from 1930s to the early 60s is referred to as the “social conscience” literature by Bishop in her book *Shadow and Substance* (qtd. in Bishop 2012). Author grouped under this category highlight integrationist values and advice white people to inculcate social conscience. For example, Jesse Jackson’s *Call me Charley* (1945) is about a black boy trying to prove his worth to his white school’s authorities. Bishop draws attention of how all these books ignore everything except skin colour. Illustrated by Doris Spiegel, the pictures in this novel shows Charlie immersed in various adventures like riding a bicycle with his white friend Tom Hamilton, running after a truck or preparing for a dive. Though these books celebrated African-American culture and dialects, they can be read as efforts to downplay race and uphold the humanity of the characters. This phase includes literature produced by a handful of authors like Bontemps, Hughes, Dunbar (poems published in 1941 called *Little Brown Baby*), Effie Lee Newsome, Jesse Jackson, Countee Cullen, Lorenz Graham and Gwendolyn Brooks.

When one talks about white publishers one is forced to question the way they influence the writings of African-American authors. In *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth century African-American Literature* (2006), John Kevin Young examines the interrelation between book production, editorship and African-American works. He points that a black author publishing with a white publisher generally had to edit or delete words and incidents in such a way that though the racial theme were maintained, they were no longer offensive to a white audience. Further, one could say that the children’s books produced by the white publishers from 1930-60, which emphasised the assimilation of the blacks in a white society, were more or less also motivated by white editors’ views. Jesse Jackson drew attention to this fact in relation to his early novels including *Call me Charley*. He felt that his perspective in these books was influenced by white editors who reflected the perspective of English editors for a white audience (Lanier 1997, quoted by Bishop 2007, 61). Thus, though despite the discussion of racial themes in *Call Me Charley*, the demands are “a very small advances in race relations” (Lanier 1997, quoted by Bishop 2007, 60).

However, one finds a drastic change in the writings for children when independent black publishers like Third World Press, Just Us Books, L. Hills Books and the Black Butterfly start publishing books for black children. Bishop says that this drastic shift which occurs in the late 1960’s is towards a “culturally conscious literature,” (Bishop 2012) whose sole intention is to speak to black children about their culture and race. The distinguishing elements of these books are that they are “told from the perspective of African-Americans and the setting in an African-American community or home. These texts also include some means of identifying the characters as blacks like their physical description, language, cultural tradition and so forth” (7).

Class and Gender

While analysing the history and reception of these books, one cannot ignore the content of African-American children’s book and the way they reflect ideologies of the society they were situated in. When examining black children’s literature from the perspective of gender, it should be noted that the first writers of African-American children’s literature in the 19th century were women. The themes of familial love dominate their writings because it was considered the duty of women to bring up children and inculcate in them tender emotions like familial bonding. As far as central characters are concerned most of the children’s fiction produced for black people in its early phase

(1930s -60s) depict male protagonist as the seekers of adventures and the women are seen residing in the house.

Bontemps's *Popo and Fefina* portrays Popo as a free spirited boy, however, his sister helps her mother in the house. Much of the fiction of Arna Bontemps depict male protagonists like *Sad-Face Boy* (1939) which describes the adventures of Slumber and his brothers, Rags and Willie who travel in the city, take a ride in subway and get expelled from a library. Bontemps' *To Pet a Possum* (1934), *The Lonesome Boy* (1955) and Jesse Jackson's novels also portray the life of male protagonists. We generally do not find single mothers running the house or a black girl who enjoys the same amount of freedom as her male counterparts. However, after 1960s some novels do depict the girl child as the central character which can be attributed to the rising number of woman authors who later start writing for children.

One also needs to focus on the class-consciousness of the literature produced for black children in the early phase of its development. The literature produced till the end of the 19th century and the twentieth century directly addressed a particular class of audience – the black middle-class. However, the black middle-class should be seen not only in economic terms but also a desire to move up within their class (Bishop). Much of the literature produced by Bontemps, Hughes, Jackson, Graham depicts characters who belong to economically stable families. *The Brownies' Book* also contained accounts of students under the column "The Little People of the Month," who had succeeded at school or and pictures of the Sultan of Abyssinia to showcase the progress of the black people.

Bontemps's *Popo and Fefina: Children of Haiti* characterize Popo and Fefina from a peasant family, but moving from the village to the town. Though the novel details the poverty of the family, Bontemps stresses on family bonding and hard work, qualities characteristic of the middle class:

Papa Jean. . . a big powerful black man with the back torn out of his shirt. He wore a broad turned up straw hat and pair of soiled white trousers; but like all peasants of Haiti he was barefooted. He walked proudly, and there was a happy bounce in his steps as he led his little family towards the town of his dreams.
(1)

One exception to this case is Johnson's *Clarrence and Corienne* which depicts a drunkard father who abandons his children. But such portraits are few, if not non-existent and might have been characteristic of the nineteenth-century literature for black children but not the twentieth-century. Thus, while lower class characters do appear in black children's literature it is more often than not a way to depict their struggles to achieve a goal – socio-economic mobility. Black children's literature of the 1930s- 60s lays stress on middle-class values as a way of advancement of the black race. Since the purpose of black children's literature was to supply children with black protagonists and develop a positive attitude towards their race, thus, it is imperative to show protagonist who are under the care of both the parents who are working hard for social advancement.

Jesse Jackson's *Call Me Charley* (1945) is about a black boy trying to cope up in an all-white school. Charlie's efforts to educate himself at any expense makes up the central theme of the novel. His parents work for a white doctor and help Charlie to gain education. Many books of the fiction produced in this period also include adventures tales, which do not focus on social realities. For example, poems written by Countee

Cullen, *The Lost Zoo* (1940), contain talking animal figures with humour and fantastic tales. Langston Hughes *The Dream Keeper* (1932), a collection of poems, contains poems about love, autumn, winter in addition to poems about racial themes.

Thus, when analysing literature produced in the first half of the 20th century, one finds a conscious omission of class divisions present within the black community. Though some novels like *South Town* by Lorenzo Graham and *Hazel* by Ovington focus on class distinctions, however, the central character more often than not belongs to a family where both the mother and father support the child. And the few times when poor African-American's are depicted, they belong to well-functioning families, with the absence of abusive fathers or single mothers. One can thus arrive at the conclusion, that though realistic in depicting racial inequalities, African-American children's literature overlooks the point that a number of black people live in extreme poverty and that many young people fall prey to drug addiction. Thus, African-American children's literature of the first half of the twentieth-century provides a 'feel good image' of their race which might lead to the misrepresentation of the actual circumstances of the majority of the black people.

Notes

- By African-American children's literature one means literature written by and about African-Americans.
- A phrase used by Bishop. 'Coming into its own', which spans the period of the Harlem Renaissance and the 1940-50s, is different from the origin of African-American children's literature because whatever little literature was produced before 1900, in the form of school books and poems, had a predilection to sermonize.
- "Approximately 80 per cent of the black population was illiterate in 1870. By 1900 the situation had improved somewhat, but still 44 per cent of blacks remained illiterate." National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970; and Current Population Reports, Series P-23, Ancestry and Language in the United States: November 1979.
- The illiteracy rates have been relatively low, registering only about 4 percent as early as 1930 (NAAL).

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