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Girlhood in Black and White Authored Children's Publications,  
1887-1920**

Becca Driggs  
*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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Honors Thesis

“GREAT INJUSTICE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE”: AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLHOOD  
IN BLACK AND WHITE AUTHORED CHILDREN’S PUBLICATION, 1887-1920

By  
Becca Driggs

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for  
University Honors

History Department  
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Advisor: Dr. Rebecca de Schweinitz  
Honors Coordinator: Dr. Daren Ray



## ABSTRACT

### “GREAT INJUSTICE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE”: AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLHOOD IN BLACK AND WHITE AUTHORED CHILDREN’S PUBLICATION, 1887-1920

Becca Driggs

Department of History

Bachelor of Arts

Through comparison of publications in black and white authored presses, this thesis examines the literary role of African American girls in creating and dismantling nineteenth-century race myths. Fictional stories published in *St. Nicholas*, the most popular turn-of-the-century children’s magazine, reveal that white authors, specifically Southern women, intentionally crafted narratives demeaning African American girls to cement a national racial hierarchy. Their work indoctrinated white children in racism and undermined African American legitimacy in the decades following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Concurrently, black authors recognized these attacks and in their press explored the lived experiences of African American girls to counter harmful narratives and instill pride in African American children. This work is part of a movement to center children, specifically young black girls, in discussions of the African American liberation movement. Concerns over girls’ education and career opportunities held substantial weight in campaigns for increased black rights in the decades between Reconstruction and *Brown vs. Board of Education*. This work illustrates cultural opposition facing black girls specifically, and the ways their community united to help them overcome and endure societal odds.



## Acknowledgement

I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Rebecca De Schweinitz for introducing me to the historical field of girlhood studies. This inspired me to take a more critical look at what it means to be a historical actor and the ways some stories are overlooked. Additionally, I would like to thank her for mentoring me through my studies of African American history. This work taught me academic humility and the centrality of the black community throughout American history.

I would like to thank Dr. Daren Ray and Professor Sheree Bench for sitting on my thesis committee. Dr. Ray's positive spirit encouraged me to pursue an honors thesis with the knowledge I would be supported by the faculty at BYU. Through Professor Bench's class on women writers, I learned fluency with online newspaper databases, a skill I utilized over and over acquiring sources for my thesis. She opened my eyes to newspapers as a treasure trove of women's words which helped me find incredible women like Belle B. Dorce.

I would like to express my gratitude for Rachel Wadham, the children's literature librarian at Brigham Young University, for pointing me towards *St. Nicholas* magazine. This gave me an important source to understand the way turn-of-the-century magazines approached the subject of race on a national level.

I would like to thank my parents for supporting my pursuit of history. I am grateful for their confidence in my passions and teaching me throughout my life to respect those who came before us. Thanks for helping me advocate for the voiceless.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank my fiance, Jake Kozlowski, for his unwavering support throughout the process of writing my thesis. Thank you Jake for assuring me again and again I am a writer, for taking my ideas seriously, and for helping me turn thoughts into words. Like so many things in my life, none of this would have been possible without you.



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## Introduction

“Mimi was white, and Yuyu was black, and they belonged to each other” begins an 1897 story published in *St. Nicholas*, one of the most popular turn-of-the-century children’s magazines.<sup>1</sup> Written by Louisiana-native Ruth McEnery Stuart, “An Old-Time Christmas Gift” features two girls, Mimi and Yuyu, born the same day on a rural Southern plantation. The plantation mistress selects Yuyu as the destined maid to Mimi. The onlooking elderly African American women agree Yuyu was “sho’ born into luck.” As a signal of this fate, the enslavers place infant Mimi’s hand on Yuyu’s head to signify, “obedience on one side and protection on the other.”

While growing up, Yuyu and Mimi spend all their days together, and Yuyu counts down the days until she turns six and can take over as Mimi’s servant. When Yuyu gets stuck in a chicken-hole, Mimi is there to rescue her. They play together and laugh with one another. During their make-believe games, the two girls take turns being teacher and pupil, demonstrating themselves as intellectual equals. As they grow up, Mimi and Yuyu covet one another’s hair—Mimi wishes her hair was dark, and Yuyu longs for “the soft golden locks” of Mimi.<sup>2</sup>

The story continues with Civil War breaking out and both children suffer equally from its destruction as each day they await the news of war coming closer to home. When Mimi receives news of her father’s death, they weep together, mourning the great man he was. Yet an even greater tragedy occurs at the announcement of freedom for the enslaved. Upon hearing the news Yuyu falls to the ground and sobs, “An’ you mean to say dat we don’t n’er one of us b’long no

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth McEnery Stuart, “An Old-Time Christmas Gift,” *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 98

mo?” As a black girl, Yuyu is devastated at the thought that this announcement could mean she can no longer be with Mimi. She quickly asserts she has no desire to be free if it means being far from her friend. Loyalties established, as Yuyu’s friends and family depart the plantation, Yuyu faithfully remains on the Southern plantation and “agreed that even if all the world were free, they would always belong to each other.”<sup>3</sup>

The racial and sympathetic pro-slavery tone of Stuart’s story is typical of those found in the pages of the nationally-circulating *St. Nicholas* magazine. This piece, though superficially describing Yuyu and Mimi as equals– co-belonging to one another– ignores the fundamental power imbalance inherent in an enslaver-enslaved relationship. As much as Mimi might feel she belongs to Yuyu emotionally, legally Yuyu was her property, meaning sentiments aside, the young enslaved girl had no choice but to belong to Mimi as her property.



Figure 1: *St. Nicholas* Magazine cover, December 1918

Based in New York, *St. Nicholas* featured work by prominent American writers such as Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain and circulated over 100,000 copies at its peak. In its years of existence, this prominent periodical released only six stories that featured black girls, all of which appeared between 1887 and 1914.<sup>4</sup> The first story featuring a black girl is Grace Macgowan Cooke’s “Liz and Bednigo,” which follows a fierce rivalry between the two titular African American children as they perform their babysitting labor.<sup>5</sup> Liz seeks to prove she is the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid 102.

<sup>4</sup> Susan R. Fannon, *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge: The Legacy of A Children's Magazine Editor, 1873-1905* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Grace Macgowan Cooke, “Liz and Bednigo” *St. Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1893), 721.

best caregiver and runs into trouble when competition interferes with caring for her young white master. The less narrative editorial, “Sports of Negro Children” is an exposé by a New York politician deciphering the activities of southern black children. This editorial outlines various games played by these “strange creatures,” such as chanting rhymes while skipping rope and pretending to be animals. The article develops a clear distance between proper activities of white children and those southern African American children.

The next three stories, including the opening vignette from “An Old-Time Gift,” are all authored by Ruth McEnery Stuart, a Louisiana native who moved to New York to pursue a career as an author. Her second narrative, “Marth Ann and the Evergreens,” details the adventures of a little black girl living on a plantation and growing into race consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Her second story, “A Funny Little School,” follows a young educated black girl opening a school to teach her elderly friends and family to read.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the “funny little school” fails due to her limited leadership capabilities and the stubbornness of the adults in her life.

The final story featuring black girls published in *St Nicholas* is “The Watermelon Stockings” by Alice Caldwell Hegan, which details the experience of a girl trying to acquire her white mistress' watermelon patterned stocks.<sup>8</sup> Carried away with desire for the beautiful clothing, she clumsily catches the barn on fire, causing serious harm to the plantation and herself before being rescued by the plantation owner. As such, these stories depict black girls

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth McEnery Stuart, “Marth’ Ann of the Evergreens.” *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth McEnery Stuart, “A Funny Little School,” *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1899), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Caldwell Hegan, “The Watermelon Stockings” *St Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 823.

one-dimensionally as uneducated comedic relief through the abbreviated dialect in which they speak, the setting of the stories, and the pictures accompanying the words.

Though the authors published in *St. Nicholas* range from a prominent male New York political figure to an elite Louisiana woman, each of these stories reflects a similar bias of debasing the black community in the pursuit of elevating whiteness. As the opening narrative from “An Old-Time Christmas Gift” articulates, the enslaved community felt sadness at leaving plantation life due to the close connections with the enslaving family. Through children’s literature, both the white and black community revealed their interest in African American girls. White authors presented a limited, subservient place for these girls through fictionalized caricatures while black authors expand black girlhood through creating positive visions of their potential.

## **Historiography**

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, scholars began intensely scrutinizing children’s literature to understand historical developments, specifically the role of children’s literature in instilling a national identity in youth. In *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood*, Gail S. Murray discusses how writings for children, “often tell us much more about the... ideal child that society would like to produce than they do about real children.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, children’s literature reflects the broader concerns and anxieties of the American public, more than lived experience, a concept vital in exploring depictions of African Americans. To build off of children’s literature reflecting myths not reality, Paula T. Connolly discusses how the longing of southern authors for the “Old South” presented slavery as a mutually beneficial

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<sup>9</sup> Gail S Murray, *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), xv.

institution for both black and white people.<sup>10</sup> According to Connolly, through constructing fictional narratives that perpetuate African American life on southern plantations, authors reveal their idealized views of the formerly enslaved, a racialized history the former southern slave-holding class would like to produce that enshrines black willful submission.

Not only does children's literature reflect the ideas of the author, it also demonstrates thoughts of public acceptance. Murray, for instance, explores the turn-of-the-century transition in children's periodicals to a commercial, as opposed to didactic, endeavor looking in particular at *St. Nicholas* as an example.<sup>11</sup> Partly as a response to the rising middle class and children with disposable pennies, these magazines focused on appealing to and entertaining a wide, white audience. One of the main ways publishers made money was through exaggerating racial stereotypes for comedic effect.<sup>12</sup> This shift to consumable magazines relied on quick, easily digestible stories that did not require introspection from the reader, but instead relied on existing racial stereotypes that excluded African American authors unwilling to comply with demeaning stereotyping.

Recognizing the disparate representation of black children in literature, African American historians note the intentionality of black presses to challenge racial stereotypes and reclaim African American childhood. African American historians add nuance to studies of children's literature by forefronting the way black authors counter these narratives. Violet Harris's "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years" demonstrates black children as readers and active consumers of African American culture as early as the 1890s. She argues

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<sup>10</sup> Paula Connolly, *Slavery In American Children's Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 104.

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 182.



children's literature holds "both symbolic and real power" and reveals the ambitions and priorities of black authors.<sup>13</sup> Her work demonstrates that African Americans were not only aware of the negative impact of racialized children's magazines, but they also actively wrote and published to create a diverse narrative. In *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, Katherine Capshaw builds on this work by demonstrating the central role of children to the "New Negro Movement" of the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> Black activists believed the attainment of racial equality lay in children, and through popular literature such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) children's oriented magazine, *The Brownies' Book*, these authors imparted black history and culture to the rising generation. As Capshaw discusses, this magazine countered prevalent myths about blackness and centered children's experiences with race to give them language to talk about their experiences and advice for how to handle being African American in a white world.

Historians have not only explored representations of African American children in literature, but also lived children's experiences. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America* is the first exploration of what enslaved life looked like for children, marking them as a category different from adults. In this book Wilma King argues the conditions and dehumanization of slavery robbed black children of youthful innocence typically inscribed on children. While subsequent scholars such as Marie Jenkins Schwartz argue against defining black childhood as an absence, this book broke ground by differentiating children from the

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<sup>13</sup> Violet J. Harris, "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years." *The Journal of Negro Education* 59, no. 4 (1990): 547. In *Construction Childhood: The Christian Recorder and Literature for Black Children, 1854-1865*, Chanta M Haywood argues African American children's literature appeared beginning in 1854 with the publication of the Baptists newspaper, *The Christian Recorder*. In this essay she dissects themes of children's education, gender roles, and proper behavior present in sections of the newspaper written to children.

<sup>14</sup> Katharine Capshaw Smith. *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 143.

“amorphous mass of bondservants.”<sup>15</sup> In *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*, Schwartz discusses the intentional and nearly impossible ways enslaved parents shielded their children from the horrors of slavery.<sup>16</sup> She emphasizes children’s agency in enslavement by pointing to their practices of giving enslavers gifts to lessen punishments and beginning field work at young ages to receive full food and clothing rations. Her thesis is that enslaved children did not see themselves primarily as victims and that one’s relationship to slavery evolved throughout each individual’s life. This agency and tact expressed by Schwartz and fellow scholars demonstrates the intelligence required to be an enslaved child, intellect that is completely undermined in contemporary white children's literature.

With recent developments in black women’s history, African American girlhood emerged as a burgeoning historical field featuring problems distinct to childhood. Darline Clark Hine and Lakisha Michelle Simmons demonstrate the difficulty of gaining respectability and demonstrating patriotism in a post-slavery world. They also address the way patriarchy intersects with racism in ways that present unique challenges for black women, specifically the threat of sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> Focusing especially on youthful experiences, Hine illustrates how young women grow into a “culture of dissemblance” and “self-imposed invisibility” in adulthood. This is where black women projected a facade of openness to their white oppressor while distancing themselves emotionally from experiences. In *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, Lakisha Michelle Simmons argues black girls' experiences

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<sup>15</sup> Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 17.

<sup>16</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000)

<sup>17</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” *Signs* 14, no. 4 University of Chicago (1989).

are further complicated as society teaches them they have no self to hurt.<sup>18</sup> Tracing the experiences of girls in 1930s New Orleans, Simmons illustrates how Jim Crow America particularly affects young women in distinct and overlooked ways.

Nazera Sadiq Wright's *Girlhood in African American Literature, 1827-1949* and "Black Girlhood in Early American Children's Print Culture" suggests the importance of analyzing messages directed at African American young women. By opening the bridge between children's literature and black girlhood studies, Wright argues black girls appear in literature as community builders and beacons of hope.<sup>19</sup> While the print culture in the period she looks at tends to feature biographies and individual-oriented stories of African American men, Wright finds that narratives featuring black girls centered on the importance of social networks, parents, extended family, and neighbors to success, instead of individual efforts.<sup>20</sup> As her work illustrates, studying black girls provides a new insight into the way systems of racism affect men and women, old and young, differently.

As scholars work to understand the lives of black girls, children's periodicals illustrate popular assumptions about African Americans along with the ways black girls distinctly are equipped to deal with challenges of racism.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on both black and white authored magazines, this paper explores the situations of African American girls in popular culture and the

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<sup>18</sup> Lakisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 231.

<sup>21</sup> Susan R. Fannon, *St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge: The Legacy of A Children's Magazine Editor, 1873-1905* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004), 105, 227. This book contains two mentions of African Americans as consumers of the magazine. One is a letter from a black child saying they read *St. Nicholas* and the other describes a story of a little boy's encounter with African Americans in the big city of New Orleans (105, 227).

ways black writers pushed against prevailing narratives. As such the first half of the paper explores white authored treatment of black girls in *St. Nicholas* magazine reflects prevalent stereotypes through physical descriptions, art, and setting. The second half of the paper looks at African American authored periodicals, especially those directed at children. Drawing on the religious African American newspaper *The Christian Recorder*, the political National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) *Crisis Magazine*, and the *Crisis Magazine's* short-lived *The Brownies Book* black authors expressed concern over the messages their black children received from white-published media.

To further racial hierarchies, white authors fill the pages of *St. Nicholas* with racialized stereotypes and dialect, abbreviated names, and isolation from peers to limit African American girls' access to the black community. In contrast to this fictional characterization, African American authors highlight the achievements of black girls in educational, vocational, and community programs to elevate perception of possibilities. These competing narratives reveal the central role girls played creating a unique twentieth century black identity.

### **Pickaninny, Minstrelsy and “Proper Girlhood”**

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century America was ripe with fictional exaggerations of African Americans in all forms of media. This was so prevalent that Black minstrel shows became the first uniquely American form of popular culture.<sup>22</sup> By exaggerating black features in minstrelsy, white authors created an artificial hierarchy. Though girls were not commonly featured in minstrel productions, the treatment of African American girls in children's literature mirrors tropes occurring with black men in minstrelsy, including comparison to animals, abbreviated

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Lott and Greil Marcus, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74.

dialect, clumsiness, obsession with dance and watermelons, and naive ignorance.<sup>23</sup> Gail Murray discusses the connection between minstrel shows and children's literature, articulating that through this medium, white America created "a hegemonic portrayal of a uniform and inferior black culture."<sup>24</sup> As such, throughout the late nineteenth century, children's literature served as a two-dimensional stage for playing out minstrel stereotypes.

African American girls at this time inherit the stereotype of the "pickaninny." Throughout the nineteenth century, the "happy pickaninny" takes life as a stereotype defined by her naivety, unruly hair, distended belly, slight intellect, and frequent comparisons to animals.<sup>25</sup> Children's literature at this time period is ripe with comparisons between African American girls and animals. In "Liz and Bednego," the African American girl, Liz, dances in a way deemed "so grotesque and outlandish, so utterly unlike a responsible human character" that her white female employer compares Liz to "a queer, sly, woodsy creature." The employer comments to a friend that Liz "always looks about as comfortable in her clothes as a squirrel, or any wild



\*\*\* AND I AM GOING TO WEAR THE WATERMELON STOCKINGS, 'CRIED NELL."

Figure 2: *St. Nicholas Magazine*, "Two Girls Walking," 1897

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 203-204. Young women appeared on minstrel stages under the trope of the "factory girl." represent female self-sufficiency. The purpose of this trope was to mock male inability to provide for their families. "Little Katy, or the Hot Corn Girl," is the only play in "Love and Theft" that featured young girls. This demonstrates the ways minstrel shows articulated not only anxieties surrounding race, but also increasingly gender roles as self-sufficient women threatened traditional masculinity.

<sup>24</sup> Murray, *American Children's Literature*, 120-122.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectables and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 143.

creature, would if caught and dressed up.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, “Sports of Negro Children” is referring to African American children when the author discusses the “comical [nature] of these happy little creatures” and an additional story compares the main character’s friend to a crow, perched on a fence.<sup>27</sup> Through these animalistic comparisons, white authors clearly differentiate black characters as less than human.

African American girls are further debased through an exaggerated southern dialect that robbed black children of language. In “Liz and Bednego,” Liz defends her babysitting ability and



Figure 3: *St. Nicholas Magazine*, “Two Girls Reading a Book,” 1897

character by asserting, “I is saw my own chile, an’ I is ten’ ter ‘im, an’ put ‘im ter sleep, hyer in hush yer bastick, wid—er—sumpin’ ter balance ‘im in de urr eend.”<sup>28</sup>

This way of speaking demonstrates black ignorance. Further, the difficulty of reading through the convoluted text means young children will most likely skip over these quotations all together. The message of the dialect is that African Americans words are to be disregarded.

<sup>26</sup> Grace Macgowan Cooke, “Liz and Bednego” *St. Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1893), 721.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Shaler Williams, “The Sports of Negro Children,” *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1901), 1004; Ruth McEnery Stuart “Marth’ Ann of the Evergreens: A Leader of a Happy Band of Piccaninnies.” *St. Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 220.

<sup>28</sup> Grace Macgowan Cooke, “Liz and Bednego,” *St. Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1900), 722.

The message of disregarding African American girls is exacerbated through the magazine's artwork. *St. Nicholas'* artwork increases racism by continually pinning pickaninny black girls against the refined white girls. Art historians describe *St. Nicholas* as “an art magazine specifically designed for the aesthetic training and art education of children” and emphasize its didactic design.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that young readers, trained to expect quality art, may take depictions of black girls literally. Artwork suggests black inferiority not only through physical attributes, but also through location within the image. In the following pieces the black girls are situated behind or below their white counterparts. Physically, African Americans must demonstrate their interiority through their position, but that in a separate restaurant or in the back of a bus. The white girls' curls, and frilly dress sharply contrast with the unkempt dresses, barefeet, and pigtails of the African American girls. These images send the message that respectability is only accessible to white girls and that African Americans girls must continually defer to whiteness as superior.

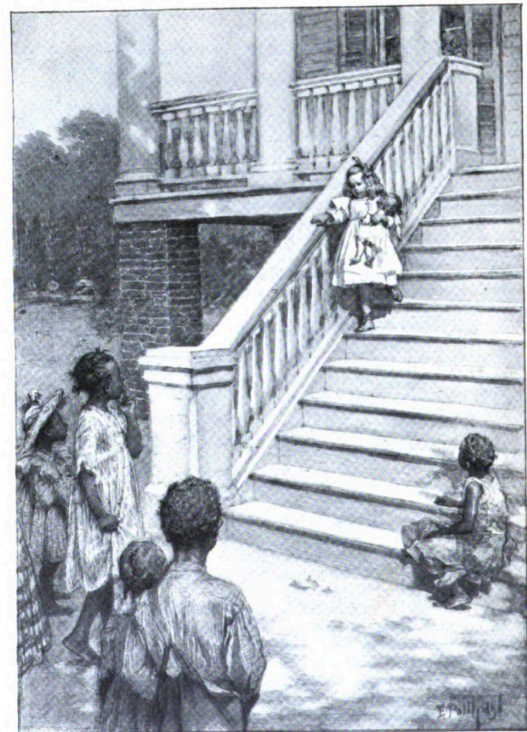


Figure 4: *St. Nicholas Magazine*, “Girl Walking down the Stairs,” 1897

The artwork illustrates the physical inferiority Marth' Ann must feel when her friend Gladys would descend down the stairs. In this way the physical differences are not simply external impositions of the artist, but they are central to the development of these stories. The

<sup>29</sup> Zawadzki, Mary Frances, "St. Nicholas Magazine: A Portable Art Museum," *City University of New York Academic works*, (2016) v.

caption to the image reads, “when her little brown hand would touch Gladys’s.” highlight black girl’s thoughts in comparison to their white peers. Throughout the story, Marth’ Ann continues to wonder at the blackness of her skin in comparison to Gladys’s white. Though author Ruth McEnergy Stuart asserts Marth’ Ann was “as comely as a little brown maid as one would wish to see,” the girl wonders at her comparison to Gladys “when her little brown hand would touch Gladys’s.”<sup>30</sup> This comparison plays a central role throughout the story as Marth’ Ann learns to focus on “soul-whiteness” as opposed to “skin-whiteness.”<sup>31</sup> As girls pray, their sins drip off, leaving them spiritually white. Through

Additionally, these black girls are never pictured with other black girl friends. Marth’ Ann switches dresses with a much taller friend, but the author spends no time discussing the intricacies of their relationship. A few girls exist in relationships with boys, yet these friendships are always tense and competitive. Instead, these girls continually exist in dialogue and comparison with white girls. This limits potential for black camaraderie and friendship which places them in the position of constantly being defined as other, as something peculiar that is not white. As we have seen with Marth’ Ann, the girls are affected by this relationship. Later in the story, Marth’ Ann prays, “Why would the good Lord, who could make so beautiful a child as Gladys, think out a plain, kinky-haired brown piccaninny like herself?”<sup>32</sup> Marth’ Ann had no access to alternative definitions of beauty. Every image told her whiteness was angelic and aspirational.

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth McEnergy Stuart, “Marth’ Ann of the Evergreens.” *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 226.



Southern authors further cement blackness as other through physical descriptions and clumsiness of the African American girls. In “The Watermelon Stockings,” ‘Mazin’ Grace is “very short and very fat,” too fat in fact to play in the pen with her white friend Nellie. Further, ‘Mazin’ Grace is “very naughty” has “kinky hair,” and is obsessed with her friend’s stockings adorned with watermelon images. At the climax of the story, ‘Mazin’ Grace sneaks into the house to try on Nellie’s stockings and is so carried away dancing that she forgets to turn off the barn stove.<sup>33</sup> The barn catches fire and ‘Mazin’ Grace bravely rushes to fight the flames. Her thoughts dwelling on her inevitable whipping, ‘Mazin’ Grace grows suicidal as the flames consume the building. She sobs, “effen our house burns down, I want to die too,” and eventually passes out from smoke inhalation and severely burned legs.<sup>34</sup> Luckily, she is saved by Nellie’s father and spends six weeks recovering from her serious injuries. Despite being unable to walk, the story resolves with ‘Mazin’ Grace smiling “in spite of the pain” as she looked at her burned feet adorned with “two new pairs of watermelon stockings.”<sup>35</sup> ‘Mazin’ Grace’s pain is a consequence of her own actions, not to be taken seriously.

As the conclusion of “The Watermelon Stockings” presents, black girls did not possess a self that could hurt. ‘Mazin’ Grace’s emotional turmoil over the potential consequences of her actions is completely overlooked. Her physical pain is belittled by receiving her sought-after socks with a smile. Black girls continually are defined by their incapacity to feel pain so much so that, as one scholar put it, “pain is what divided white childhood from black childhood in U.S. popular culture.”<sup>36</sup> This denial of personhood exposed black girls to severe racialized violence:

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<sup>33</sup> Alice Caldwell Hegan, “The Watermelon Stockings” *St Nicholas* (New York: Stuart Publishing 1897), 823.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*, 96.

physical, sexual, emotional, financial.<sup>37</sup> The fact she is saved by her enslaver/employer demonstrates black dependence upon their masters for safety. Continually, African American girls in these stories are robbed of black community and black identity.

Central to black community is the process of naming. After emancipation, many African Americans assigned themselves new names.<sup>38</sup> To capitalize on this emerging American identity, many named themselves after prominent American presidents or cultural ideals.<sup>39</sup> Yet through the story of “The Watermelon Stockings” it seems white authors further mock black naming culture through the main character of ‘Mazin’ Grace. Featured in figure two, “Two Girls Walking” ‘Mazin’ Grace’s clumsy forgetful character mocks the powerful abolitionist anthem. Written in 1772 by a former enslaver turned preacher, the song *Amazing Grace* took on life as an anti-slavery rallying cry that echoed around the world.<sup>40</sup> The shortening of the name— Amazing Grace to ‘Mazin’ Grace— reflects a dismissal of black power and repetition of black ignorance. Instead of bringing power to her community, ‘Mazin’ Grace spends her days lying around and then accidentally burns a barn in her quest to acquire watermelon stockings.

Throughout these stories, black girls’ names are abbreviated, trivializing their claims to white respectability. With only one exception, every girl name mentioned in these stories is a top

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>38</sup> Lisa D. Cook, John Parman & Trevon Logan, “The Antebellum Roots of Distinctively Black Names,” *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 55, no. 1 (2022) 2.

<sup>39</sup> Abel, Sarah, George F. Tyson, and Gisli Palsson. "From Enslavement to Emancipation: Naming Practices in the Danish West Indies." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, no. 2 (2019): 345. doi: 10.1017/S0010417519000070.

<sup>40</sup> James Walvin, *Amazing Grace: A Cultural History of the Beloved Hymn* (Oakland: University of California Press 2023), 21.

fifty most popular name for 1890.<sup>41</sup> Yet, African American names are continually abbreviated to demonstrate their non-threatening nature. Elizabeth, the fifth most popular name, becomes “Liz.” Martha, number twenty-five, becomes “Marth’ Ann,” and name thirty-six, Louise, becomes “Louizy Lou.” Number forty-five, Julia, goes by “Yuyu.” White girls get complete names- Nellie, number thirty, and Gladys, number forty-three. On the aggregate, black characters' names were more popular than those given to white characters; however, through abbreviating the names, authors demonstrate both the futility and comedy of attempting whiteness and erasing the vast culture of black naming practices. Finally, none of these characters has a last name demonstrating their disconnectedness from their community and perpetual servitude since often enslaved individuals lacked surnames or were named after their enslaver. This example demonstrates that there is limited space for blackness in contemporary American culture.

Outside of naming practices, young black girls in these stories are kept from the African American community through limited relationships with their parents. In a few instances this was a reflection of girls’ agency. For example, “although Yuyu lived with her own ‘mammy’ in the cabin in the quarters, she spent nearly all her days with [her white friend] Mimi now.”<sup>42</sup> By limiting the relationship between Yuyu and her mother, Stuart cuts girls off from learning about her own cultural heritage from their mothers; instead, white girls take on the maternal role. This teaches girls that black women have nothing to offer, that all a girl needs is a white friend to show her what it means to be an African American woman. Further, some young girls were sent off by their parents to work as expressed in “Marth’ Ann and the Evergreens,” where the titular

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<sup>41</sup> “Top Names of the 1890s” *Social Security*, SSA.gov. The 200 most popular names come from a survey of names assigned to 1,231,297 male births and 2,353,354 female births throughout the 1890s.

<sup>42</sup> Stuart, “An Old-time Christmas Gift,” 96.

girl is sent off by her mom to reside with and care for her grandma.<sup>43</sup> In this instance the young girl is kept from her parents because of work requirements, furthering antebellum ideas that work and their white family enslavers should be central to the lives of African American girls.

Yet even when parents are featured in stories, they do not have a close relationship. In “The Watermelon Stockings,” ‘Mazin’ Grace called her mother “aunt.”<sup>44</sup> This does a double role of demonstrating the powerlessness of black women and the limited vision of black womanhood. This is in stark contrast with white girls. In “Marth’ Ann,” Gladys has a two-page conversation with her mother where she begs to spend more time with Marth’ Ann.<sup>45</sup> The two discuss pros and cons in a respectful, intimate way and eventually reach a consensus. Instead of having mothers like the white girls in the story, black girls are merely given “aunts” as models of African American womanhood.

The most famous aunt and perhaps most controversial black woman, is, of course, Aunt Jemima. Named for the minstrel song “Old Aunt Jemima,” this fictional woman is lauded for her submission to the South and willingness to bestow all with pancake syrup.<sup>46</sup> Her fame was secure in the newspaper ad “Robert E Lee Visits Aunt Jemima’s Cabin” where she graciously fed the general of the Confederate Army that fought to keep her enslaved. Most importantly she is always smiling, graciously subservient, and blissfully asexual.<sup>47</sup> Aunt Jemima acts as a warning for black girls to never express frustration at systems of oppression. This literature makes it seem

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<sup>43</sup> Stuart, “Marth’ Ann and the Evergreens” 238.

<sup>44</sup> Heges, “The Watermelon Stockings,” 43.

<sup>45</sup> Stuart, “Marth’ Ann and the Evergreens,” 231-232.

<sup>46</sup> Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

black girls are accepted only insofar as they accept willingly the terms of their plantation subjugation.

The proper place of African American girls forms the core of the opening narrative, “An Old-Time Christmas Gift,” which explores the enslaved girl Yuyu’s decision to remain on her plantation post-emancipation. By concluding the story with Yuyu’s loyalty and love for her enslaver, tales such as this further the Lost Cause narrative that enslavement was a benevolent institution for African Americans. They contribute to myths that the South fought the Civil War simply to protect their way of life instead of defending a dehumanizing system of labor. In *An Architecture of Education: African American Women Design the New South*, Angel David Nieves articulates the Lost Cause narrative as a literary phenomenon wherein white women memorialized an idyllic, white, Southern past in public journals and fiction. Southern women dispersed a narrative that “was replete with racial stereotypes, emphasized the inferiority of blacks, and exaggerated the benevolence of slavery ownership.”<sup>48</sup> In “An Old-Time Christmas Gift” not only does Yuyu mourn the possibility of leaving the plantation, as a small child she counts the days until she can join the household.

Not only are Southern plantations the correct place, these stories reveal that plantations are the only place for African American girls and trivialize dreams of blackness outside the slavery paradigms. Historically, this setting is typical of most African American girls, yet it paints a simplistic picture. By 1900, ninety percent of African Americans lived in the South.<sup>49</sup> To undermine claims of slavery’s inherent cruelty, the southern women’s organization, Daughters of the Confederacy, pointed out that after emancipation the enslaved remained on these plantations.

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<sup>48</sup> Sallee, “Child Labor Reform,” 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Growth and Geographic Distribution: 1790-1910*, 44.

Surely, they couldn't have been as cruel as some attest if the emancipated choose to remain. When Daughters of the Confederacy mobilized to ban stage productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they asserted the portrayal was "utterly untrue of slavery days as a whole, as is attested by the large number of negroes who still refuse to leave the shelter of their former masters."<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates the way children's literature followed a national identity developed by the south. Southern women could not fathom a place for African American girls outside the plantation setting, and children's literature echoes those sentiments.

In an additional story, this one written by Ruth McErney Stuart herself, a little black girl opens a school to teach the older plantation dwellers how to read. When listing the rules of the school Louzy-Lou articulates "De fust rule is: No talkin' in school— widout commission," to which Stuart then adds the aside, "She meant permission, and they all understood it so."<sup>51</sup> On the surface, this story has the potential to demonstrate a girl not only claiming an education, but using her skill to better the entire community. Yet perhaps to make this message more palatable to white audiences, Stuart continually undermines Louzy-Lou's intelligence. In the end, Louzy-Lou proves unable to contain a classroom and with little educational attainment, "the funny little school was over."<sup>52</sup> This story demonstrates black education as a failed project. Not only was Louzy-Lou unable to improve adult literacy, but her efforts are the punchline for a "funny little" joke. Through undermining black education, Stuart acutely demonstrates contemporary anxieties over black intellectual capabilities.

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<sup>50</sup> *Manager Scott of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is Threatened with a Touch of it in Kentucky*, January 12, 1902

<sup>51</sup> Ruth McErney Stuart, "A Funny Little School," *St. Nicholas*. (New York: Stuart Publishing 1899), 109.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 46

Contrary to Stuart's tale, by 1900 when this article was published, just over half of all black Americans were literate, a vast improvement from the 24% literacy of 1870.<sup>53</sup> White southerners feared this dramatic improvement in black literacy would soon surpass their own capabilities. White reformers utilize race-based rhetoric to advocate child labor laws and mandatory primary education. A member of the Alabama Child Labor Committee asserted, "the negro boy is provided with the opportunities for an education, while the white boy is given the opportunity—not for growing into an intelligent and useful citizen, which should be his by right of inheritance—but to wear away his young life in the close confinement of factory and mill."<sup>54</sup> Through rhetoric of white inheritance to educational opportunities, Southerners created a shared narrative of victimization at the hands of the black community.

This furthers the incentives to portray the African American community as poorly as possible. When confronted by a reporter about her portrayals of black speech, Ruth McErney Stuart asserts, "Now what am I to do? I detest dialect, and yet the people I write about talk just that way."<sup>55</sup> Because of their proximity to African Americans, Southern authors provided the most accurate representation of blackness. As such, the public believes Stuart's defense of her accurate representation because she is the most compelling and immediate source.

The overwhelming confidence in the accuracy of their literature gave Southern women a nation-wide platform to disperse anti-black myths. In post Civil War America, writers increased the intensity of racial stereotypes to unite white northern and southerners.<sup>56</sup> By holding to black

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<sup>53</sup> *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Edited by Tom Snyder, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993); and Robert A. Margo, "Race and Schooling in the South" (1990).

<sup>54</sup> Shelley Sallee, "The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South," (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 94.

<sup>55</sup> Chicago Recorder, April 2, 1895.

<sup>56</sup> Jason H. Lee, "Minstrelsy and the Construction of Race in America" *African American Sheet Music* (Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, 2004).

inferiority, the south forged a turn-of-the-century national identity that worked to alienate African American girls from the black community. Through exclusively illustrating African American girls as one-dimensional stereotypes, writers for *St. Nicholas* revealed their ideal for African American girls to remain subservient.

Through relying on fictional narratives, southern authors ignored the reality of African American girls' lives. In contrast, black authored literature intentionally published stories of real girls to underscore their potential. The work of black publication explores girls as change-makers through editorials encouraging young women's education, images presenting girls as powerful, and blurbs highlighting their educational and work accomplishments. Though they pepper in occasional fictional stories, most of the literature discussing African American girls in black newspapers and magazines remains firmly in reality to encourage girls to realize their potential.

### **Black Response: Publishing and Organizing**

Recognizing most representation in popular media featured fictionalized stories of African Americans, editors of black magazines used their platform to elevate the lived experience of Black America. Carrie W. Clifford, an editor for *The Crisis*, the NAACP monthly magazine, writes, "The life story of the colored American is truly so marvelous that it can be woven into stories more fascinating and entertaining than any fairy-tale it has ever entered into the mind of man to conceive."<sup>57</sup> Within *The Brownies' Book*, the editor W. E. B. du Bois expressed his awe for true stories by asserting, "And when the stories are of real people who have passed through real suffering and have achieved real triumph, my admiration goes beyond

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<sup>57</sup> Carrie Clifford, "Across Race Lines," *The Crisis* (1910), 35. Editors chose the name *The Crisis* based off the poem "The Present Crisis" which explores



all bounds.”<sup>58</sup> These two quotes demonstrate that black authors preferred to highlight the lived experience of real individuals. As opposed to white authored works, African American stories serve a didactic as opposed to entertaining role to demonstrate the possibilities of blackness to a younger generation.

Black authors have a long history of publishing. As W. E. B. Du Bois exposes, publishing material that reflects blackness as anything besides wholly other and beneath white was near impossible.<sup>59</sup> Because of this, authors worked to ensure the narratives they dispersed were in line with the aspirations they wanted for younger people.

Starting in the 1850s, *The Christian Recorder*, an African American Philadelphia-based Baptist newspaper, displayed dialogues surrounding depictions of black children. Fanny Jackson Coppin ran “Our Woman’s Column” under the pen name Catharine Casey where she highlights blurbs about women’s achievements such as young women gaining careers in civil engineering and business.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, she argues for using proper titles when addressing black women.<sup>61</sup> This may be in response to white people referring to black women as aunts and not respectable individuals.

As the column entered its second year and gained a robust following, Casey began publishing editorial commentary on specific issues, frequently mentioning young girls as the motivation for her work. For example, the church had recently published a book of writings by

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<sup>58</sup> Dianne Johnson-Feelings, *The Best of The Brownies’ Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>59</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. “Criteria of Negro art” *Crisis*, 31, (1926), 290-297.

<sup>60</sup> Catharine Casey, “Our Woman’s Column” *The Christian Recorder* 25 no. 551 (30 July 28, 1887); Catharine Casey, “Our Woman’s Column” *The Christian Recorder* 25 no. 569 (December 1, 1887) 48.

<sup>61</sup> Catharine Casey, “Our Woman’s Column” *The Christian Recorder* 26, no. 17 (April 26, 1888).

members of the congregation without any female authors. She criticizes these oversights and wonders where young girls will look in the future for work by black women and urges, “in pity to those unborn girls, why can’t we have Mrs. Harper’s [a woman in the congregation] poems published by subscription?”<sup>62</sup> Additionally she motivates young women to participate in nursing and celebrates the success of primary school for black children.<sup>63</sup> This demonstrates the way girlhood inspired black women’s activism. It also reveals their dedication to creating a better future for black girls.

Though not as well known as Fanny Jackson Coppin, Belle B. Dorce frequented the pages of *The Christian Recorder* before her early death in 1891 at the age of twenty-four. Educated at the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri, Dorce made a name for herself as a scholar when, alongside Professor W. G. Sears, she entered the world of publishing.<sup>64</sup> In 1886 she married Reverend S. George Dorce and left on a mission to his birthplace of Haiti.<sup>65</sup> Though unable to have children herself, Dorce’s work in *The Christian Recorder* constantly centered around advising and cautioning children and mothers in the way to be a proper black woman. Throughout the pages of *The Christian Recorder* she continually pleads with African American girls to be patient in their quest for racial uplift.

Her words both encourage African American girls to work for equality and also encourage adults to take girls’ contributions seriously. In her piece, “The American Girl,” Dorce discusses the increase in women’s rights and points out the way national narratives ignore the

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<sup>62</sup> Catharine Casey “Our Woman’s Column” *The Christian Recorder* 26, no. 579 (6 Date: Feb. 9, 1888).

<sup>63</sup> Catharine Casey, “Our Woman’s Column,” *The Christian Recorder* 26 no. 20 (May 17, 1888).

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Brown, “Obituary,” *The Christian Recorder* no. 735 (February 26, 1891).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

work of African American women.<sup>66</sup> This quote shows the way black authors are thinking about race and girlhood. As early as 1887, Dorce recognizes that in the ample conversations surrounding the rights of women, black girls are continually dismissed. She continues, “Other writers who have occasionally written on this subject seem to include the white girl only. The time is not come when one can write on a general subject without distinguishing the black from the white.”<sup>67</sup> The last sentence highlights the invisibility of black girls in national literature. Though they are featured in demeaning roles throughout children’s magazines, contemporary discourse overlooks their struggles, increasing the value of black-authored literature like *The Christian Recorder*.

Throughout her editorial Dorce speaks directly to the young girls revealing their role as equals and co-participants in the cause of black liberation through education. Dorce concludes “The American Girl” with a direct call to action, asserting: “Be patient and fit yourselves for the highest position that your country can give you, and nothing will be lost. We want women for the hour.”<sup>68</sup> Not only does Dorce realize the importance of female education, she enlists girls specifically to fight for the rights of black men and women throughout the country. Her work reveals that African American publications view black girls as fully capable of creating change. In an earlier publication, “Our Boys and Girls,” Dorce again addresses the child readers, pleading, “Boys and girls, we should like to make you feel the importance of reading and how much your success depends upon it... Your race needs you, God needs you.”<sup>69</sup> She once again centers the children as the ones necessary to enact change, encouraging their education and

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<sup>66</sup> Dorce, Belle B. "The American Girl" *The Christian Recorder* 25 no. 50, (Dec 1887) 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Belle B. Dorce, "Our Boys and Girls," *The Christian Recorder* 19 no 62. (March 1887) 3.

highlighting the responsibility they hold to their people. Through addressing children directly as an audience, Dorce revealed the way African American authored literature both respected and was cognizant of black youth capacity to make change.

She is not alone in this work. Belle Dorce passed away one year before Anna Julia Cooper published *A Voice From the South*, the landmark book illustrating the social, political, and economic conditions of African American women throughout the South. These articles by Dorce demonstrates the ways Cooper's book belongs in the context of a community of women throughout the South discussing and advocating African American women, with concern surrounding girls featured squarely in this discourse.

As *The Crisis* took its place as the main publication of the African American community, the magazine began to publish more fictional stories to provide alternatives to the one-dimensional African American narratives of white magazines. Like *St. Nicholas*, stories published in the official publication of the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, featured dialect, yet in a more mild iteration. In "The Yellow Tree" the main character, Eva Lou, grows sick of people worrying about her illness and asserts, "An' what if I do cough! Ev'rybody's got a cold this weathuh. You have yuhself."<sup>70</sup> The misspelling of words demonstrates southern ways of talking without conveying unintelligence. Here the reader easily understands the meaning of Eva Lou's words and gains insight into her character without making convoluted dialogue the sole focus of writing. Through the character of young Eva Lou, this quotation celebrates all forms of black culture, the refined and the common, to help readers understand the depth and breadth of what it means to be black.

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<sup>70</sup> Dereath Dyrd Busey, "The Yellow Tree," *The Crisis* (1919), 153.

In addition to embracing black dialect, the fictional stories in *The Crisis* highlight African American girls thwarting segregation to achieve their desires. In “The African,” a black girl advocates for her right to enter a white-only church to listen to a preacher talk about his missionary efforts in Africa. She asserts, “I am an African, and I came to hear the preacher tell about my own country. I felt it would be pleasant to hear of home.”<sup>71</sup> Because the girl was dressed “pleasantly” and articulately spoke of her wish, the white church leaders permitted her to sit in the back of the church.<sup>72</sup> Through publishing the fictional story of a black girl using respectability to enter spaces normally off limits, this story encourages girls to question the racism around them. The story embodies Belle B. Dorce’s invitation for girls to “fit themselves for the highest positions” by overcoming racial barriers.

To further underscore the potential of African American girls, the pages of *The Crisis* are filled with accounts of women organizing to open schools and thus increase education among young girls, taking heed from authors like Belle Dorce. *The Crisis* discusses how Nannie Burroughs approached the convention at their annual meeting in 1900 with the idea of a private school for educating black girls. She did not receive support from prominent leaders such as Booker T. Washington but instead amassed enough donations from women and children. Nearly a decade later The National Training School for Women and Girls opened as the first school completely funded by African Americans.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 5: *The Brownies' Book*, “Graduates of Dixie Hospital,” 1920

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<sup>71</sup> “The African,” *The Crisis* (1910), 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>73</sup> Traki L. Taylor, ““Woman Glorified”: Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Women and Girls, Inc., 1909-1961” *The Journal of African American History* 87 (Autumn,

The opening of the school was published in *The Crisis*, sharing that the colored Baptist Women's Convention confirmed \$15,000 to the formation of the school.<sup>74</sup> Since 80% of women of non-agricultural laborers were employed in domestic services, this institution worked to teach young women skills associated with this work so they could demonstrate female respectability.<sup>75</sup>

This work earned Burroughs the nickname "female Booker T. Washington." She believed young women working as "first-class help must have first-class treatment."<sup>76</sup> If these young women surpassed expectations, Burroughs believed they could stand as ambassadors to increase perceptions of blackness. She asserted that, "Now, more than ever before, Negro girls must be trained to do any kind of work that is available, and they must be taught to do it more



Figure 6: nps.gov, "The National Training School Student Basketball Players"

efficiently."<sup>77</sup> This demonstrates the ways black women informed their organizing efforts by their desire to help black girls succeed and the ways they utilize girlhood to advance the black community.

Further, this reveals a

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2002) 399 ; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press 1993), 212

<sup>74</sup> "Education," Along Color Line, *The Crisis* v 1, 4

<sup>75</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 212

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 213

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, "Woman Glorified," 401

different approach to advocating change. As opposed to Catherine Casey and Belle B. Dorce who focused on the success of specific educated women, Burroughs believed training the masses was a more effective principle than relying on a handful of talented black individuals to campaign for equality. Through teaching principles of self-reliance and pride in one's accomplishments, she armed young girls with tools to succeed. The above picture features the National Training School student basketball team.<sup>78</sup> This image reveals the poise and power of young girls playing ball. Their mix of smiling and serious faces reveal their passion for the sport and confidence in their abilities forged in part through their participation in the National Training School for Girls. Overall, the school offered young girls the capacity to cultivate their minds and advocate for the black community as ambassadors of knowledge and respectability.

Not only were adults working to help young women, but girls rallied to support their mothers. In his article, Felix J. Koch shares with fellow children the role of young girls in increasing infant care and education. His organization, "Little Mothers of Tomorrow" created milk stations throughout Cincinnati and sponsored classes throughout the city to teach girls how to care for infants and thus decrease inner-city infant mortality. Koch asserts, "The little girls have taken to the work with avidity... They take no more pride in any of [their possessions] than they do in the small, white shield badge that proclaims them of the League of the Little Mothers!"<sup>79</sup>

National organizations additionally focused on girls' education in publications. The same column that published the formation of the National Training School for Girls consistently published the achievements of young girls. They reported everything from a thirteen-year-old

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<sup>78</sup> "Trades Hall of National Training School for Women and Girls," National Park Services, nps.org.

<sup>79</sup> Felix J. Koch, "Little Mothers of Tomorrow" *The Children's Crisis*, (October 1917), 289-292.

girl being awarded “the highest prize” offered by the New York fly-fighting committee for her essay on disease to Miss Eva B. Price achieving the highest acreage on the Census Office “punching machine.”<sup>80</sup> One girl won the Nassau-Suffolk County oratory contest and another won the spelling competition.<sup>81</sup> These spotlights demonstrate the importance of girls' success to the black community. Not only did they sacrifice

substantial money to start a school for black girls, but they consistently celebrated girls' achievements in their newspaper. As the newspaper clipping “Education” demonstrates,

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**EDUCATION.**

A colored girl has been chosen to represent the Glen Cove High School at the Nassau-Suffolk Association's oratorical contest. Ten students took part in the preliminary contest and Miss Proctor won over them all. She recited “Kentucky Belle.”

Figure 7: *The Crisis*, “Education,” 1911

*The Crisis* actively worked to celebrate the success of African American girls. Clearly, Burrough's was correct in her assessment of black girls' importance to the African American community.

In addition to celebration of individual success, *The Crisis* also reflects concerns over the social status and wellbeing of girls. They argue in “Employment of Colored Women in Chicago” that a racist job market makes it nearly impossible for a girl without secondary education to find a job outside domestic work.<sup>82</sup> They discuss various white-passing black girls being fired or denied promotions when employers found their race. When petitioning for the same wage raise given to all the white girls, one black girl was told, “she ought to be thankful that they kept her at all.” The magazine reflects the white view of African American girls as undeserving that of white girls.

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<sup>80</sup> “Education” *The Crisis* vol 2, 142; “Social Uplift” *The Crisis* vol 2, 5

<sup>81</sup> “Education” *The Crisis* vol 1, 8; “Education, *The Crisis*. 1, 112,

<sup>82</sup> “Employment of Colored Women in Chicago” *The Crisis* 1, 24.



Recognizing the importance of black girls and children more broadly, *The Crisis* published a separate magazine, *The Brownies' Book*, aimed at children. Before introducing the *Brownies' Book*, the editor W. E. B. Du Bois shared a letter from a little black girl expressing her frustration and confusion about her place in white America.<sup>83</sup> Knowing these frustrations were shared by others and fearing they would lead to resentment towards their white peers, the NAACP decided to release this monthly magazine. W.E.B. Du Bois announces *The Brownies' Book* as, “designed for all children, but especially for ours” and serves the purpose to “teach Universal Love and Brotherhood... a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter and Emulation.”<sup>84</sup> This focus on joy and beauty is a clear response to the ways black children were abused and ridiculed in contemporary literature.

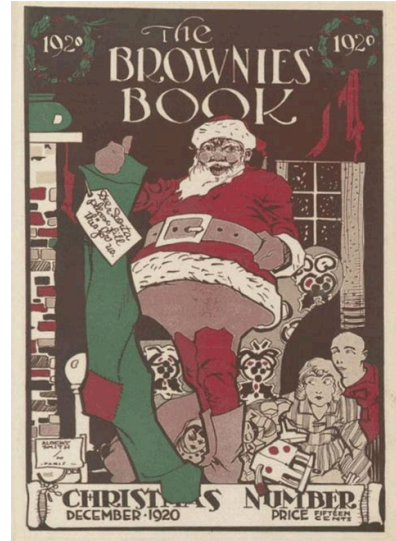


Figure 8: *The Brownies' Book* cover, 1920

The book continued publication for two years before discontinuing in 1921. It featured letters to the editor from black children and adults, pictures of children playing, and stories about powerful, historic African American men and women. The cover of the December 1920 issue of *The Brownies Book* reveals a stark parallel with the cover of the *St. Nicholas* magazine featured on page two. This raises questions about the call-and-response nature of popular children's literature and seems to imply W.E.B. Du Bois awareness to *St. Nicholas* and concerns about its content.

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<sup>83</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 19 no. 6, 285-286

<sup>84</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* 18 no. 5, 275

One of the final issues of *The Brownies' Book* featured a letter written by a white girl to the magazine apologizing to her African American friend. Based on appearances she had assumed her friend to be white and shunned her after overseeing a conversation between her friend and African American girls. Through reading *The Brownies Book* the girl embraced her friend regardless of her racial identity and sought to be better. This letter reveals the impact of *The Brownies Book* on children across both racial spectrum and the country. It similarly reveals the ways children's literature helped black children find peace in a nation that struggled to understand their humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Civil rights lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson asserted “the North won the [civil] war, but the South won the narrative war.”<sup>85</sup> White authored children's literature played a vital role in promulgating white-supremist, southern narratives throughout the United States. Yet, even as these authors degraded blackness through minstrel-esque caricatures of African American girls as lazy, unkempt, and unable to feel pain, African American authors published stories of blackness as educated and refined, intentionally and repeatedly countering southern agenda. Now, over two hundred years later, representation of minorities in children's literature is still a pressing issue. In 2016 researchers found 91% of characters in children's books were white.<sup>86</sup> Stories matter, and while most contemporary authors are not motivated by overt racism, children's literature still suffers from a legacy of white supremacy.

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<sup>85</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *A Perilous Path: Talking Race, Inequality, and the Law* (New York: The New Press 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Brynn F. Welch, “The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature: Collective Harms and Consumer Obligations,” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no 2, (Tallahassee, Florida: Florida State University Department of Philosophy, 2016).

While late nineteenth century white authors claimed to present an accurate picture of African American girlhood, their stories reveal complete ignorance of the reality. With tales perpetuating the picaninny stereotype, black dialect, abbreviated names, and alienation from black peers, white authors dispersed a white supremacist vision of African American girlhood. Their work sought to limit any possibility of racial equality or competition with white children due to fear in this post-emancipation era. White authors of *St. Nicholas* used African American characters to exclusively elevate whiteness and New York publishers allow such fantastical stories to circulate throughout the country. This work taught children from San Francisco to Saint Louis to view their female black peers as inferior to themselves, as objects undeserving of respect or identity.

Simultaneously, black authors repeated publication of real girls delegitimized any claim of white authors to accuracy. Their reports of African American young women as leaders and first-prize winners revealed the farfetched nature of *St. Nicholas's* tales. As three generations of publications— *The Christian Recorder*, *The Crisis*, and *The Brownies' Book*— published stories of success, they not only challenged these racialized tropes and expanded African American girls' vision of themselves and their potential. Nonetheless, these publications would not have been possible without African American girls themselves achieving greatness by winning first-place in fly related essay competitions, participating in social programs to increase maternal mortality, playing for the National Training School basketball team, and representing their high school in oratorical contests. Each of these successes created an alternative vision of African American girlhood that the black community eagerly celebrated in the pages of their newspapers and magazines. Through this community building, black authors gave young women a platform to

publically challenge myths and thereby create their own definition of what it meant to be an African American girl.

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