



## Redefining African American Children's Literature before 1900

—Jill E. Silvius

Capshaw, Katharine, and Anna Mae Duane, editors. *Who Writes for Black Children?: African American Children's Literature before 1900*. U of Minnesota P, 2017. 356 pp. \$30.00 pb. ISBN 9781517900274.

Growing acknowledgement of a diversity gap in children's book publishing and movements such as "We Need Diverse Books" (WNDB) make *Who Writes for Black Children?* a timely addition to scholarly dialogue about the intersection of early African American literary studies and children's literature studies. Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane's collection tangles with both the complications and the benefits of broadening definitions of "African American children's literature." In their introduction, Capshaw and Duane reject Kenneth Warren's controversial statement that antebellum writing by black Americans only retroactively became African American literature (xvi). Instead, they characterize African American children (as well as adults) before 1900 as literary creators, consumers, interpreters, *and* disseminators and reject depictions of children's literature as incomplete or primitive (x, xxiv).

Their viewpoints are echoed by the contributors, many of whom refer to other chapters in the book, inviting cross-textual dialogue unusual for an edited collection. For example, author Angela Sorby, with her notion of "conjuring" readers (4), or "creat[ing] . . . the conditions that make literate agency possible" (6), is mentioned by the editors in their introduction, as well as by nearly half of the other contributors in the collection. While scholars might read only one chapter, the frequent connections between chapters invite them to peruse the whole book.

The first three analytical chapters dwell on Sorby's conjuring of black children as readers/consumers. They lay the foundation for the entire analytical essay section which, as a whole, is one of the book's most notable contributions: combining "African American," "children's," and "before 1900," as there is "startlingly little study of African American children's literary



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culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (x), with the exception of Michelle Martin's *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children's Pictures, 1845-2002*. Other seminal recent works are limited to literature for adult rather than child consumers (Eric Gardner's *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature*) or focus on contemporary works (Rudine Sims Bishop's *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*) rather than those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These first three chapters challenge some critics' perception of African American children's literature before 1900 as merely "seeds" (Bishop, *Free* 21); instead, Sorby, Courtney Weikle-Mills, and Karen Chandler portray several young poets as fully developed and worthy of study. In the first chapter, Sorby confronts readership issues with nineteenth-century poetry, in particular its celebration of white growth and frequent depiction of African Americans as temporally stagnant (4). She analyzes the writing of Lucy Skipwith, Daniel Alexander Payne, and Ann Plato, as well as poetry in autograph/friendship albums, exploring how each conjures its readers, as such writers struggled to secure an audience. Payne's excerpt, for example, was crafted essentially without readers: South Carolina law made it illegal to teach an African American to read or write; nevertheless, Payne envisioned young readers "bursting with potential" (10). In "Free the Children: Jupiter Hammon and the Origin of African American Children's Literature," Weikle-Mills analyzes the poetry of Jupiter Hammon, the first black author to publish for African American children. Her chapter is

especially valuable, especially in the wake of the 2013 discovery of Hammon's unpublished poem "An Essay on Slavery" that confirms Hammon's rejection of slavery and his "connection of black liberty with childhood"; previously, Hammon was believed to repeat pro-slavery rhetoric or support change "in a coded way" (23). Significantly, Weikle-Mills is only the third scholar to publish a close reading of Hammon's children's poetry. Weikle-Mills's chapter "contends that Hammon's specific vision of childhood . . . enabled him to advocate for a moderate, palatable, and pious form of freedom that did not depend on violent revolution" (22-23), which is supported by his *An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley*. Hammon's ideal reader was contradictory: "children must submit themselves to God to be freed; they must ponder dying to live freely" (26). This complex audience portrayal is echoed in Hammon's "A Poem for Children with Thoughts on Death" (33). The ending of Weikle-Mills's chapter is necessarily abrupt, as "no known records exist to tell us how enslaved children responded to Hammon's poems . . ." (37).

The fourth and fifth chapters of this collection are best read together and focus mutually on education, combining close readings with historical context to define "audience." Attendees of the Couvent School were free children, and Mary Niall Mitchell shows how the students chronicled their Creole New Orleans community via well-preserved letterbooks: "Read as a collective history . . . the letters chronicle the lives of free

people of color within the context of both American expansion and an Atlantic world tied together by slavery, colonialism, and ethnic identity" (65). The students historicized migration to the Mexican coast and Haiti, as well as the Civil War and their hopes for tangible equality. Mitchell ends with compelling details of two men who helped preserve the school's legacy: former student Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes of *Plessy v. Ferguson* fame (he aided the Comité des citoyens who initiated that case about combatting Jim Crow segregation) and his friend René Grandjean.

In "Innocence in Ann Plato's and Susan Paul's Black Children's Biographies," Ivy Linton Stabell begins her argument by defining its central premise via historian Robin Bernstein: innocence equates to ignorance, and as black children were "[u]nable to perform ignorance of the racial ideologies affecting every part of their lives . . ." (77), they were symbolically excluded from childhood. Stabell describes how teachers Plato and Paul chose role models for their joyful-death biographical subjects (all pious, admired by their communities, and dying publicly) and thereby radically "construct[ed] black childhood innocence within their pages . . ." (75). Stabell also explains how Plato amended the traditional biography to draw attention to evils of slavery, while Paul was much more explicitly political, asking the reader questions, such as about their prayer habits for abolition of slavery, thereby invoking a call to action. Stabell's juxtaposition

of Plato's and Paul's rhetorical techniques may invite the reader to consider which responses to racism might have been then, and which are now, more effective.

The next chapters, "A Role Model for African American Children: Abigail Field Mott's *Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano* and White Northern Abolitionism" by Valentina K. Tikoff and "The Child's Illustrated Antislavery Talking Book: Abigail Field Mott's Abridgment of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* for African American Children" by Martha J. Cutter, should also be read in tandem. Tikoff claims Mott depicted Equiano as a role model instead of as the original white adult British intended reader's "other" (95). (She ultimately defines Mott's choices as "editorial intervention" [96], a phrase that warrants further discussion.) According to Tikoff, Mott's abridgement portrays an idealized family, praises reading, lauds capitalism, and "'salvages' those aspects of African culture and religion that are consistent with Protestant Christianity . . ." (99); further, it reveals less social critique than the 1791 edition and therefore points to Equiano as a role model *by example*. While Tikoff addresses the differences between the 1791 and 1829 versions, Cutter "want[s] to focus on how Mott's edited text figures black children as capable of both claiming power in their own lives and becoming active in abolition debates" (118). To do so, she draws attention to illustrations by wood engraver Alexander Anderson in Mott's "bricolage" and references Perry Nodelman's

work on the interplay of verbal and visual texts. Cutter reads Mott's text as trying to "visually and narratively undermine distinctions between black and white bodies" (122), which she demonstrates in her articulation of contrasting opening images of Equiano. Much of the chapter focuses on Mott's focalizing Equiano's heroism, via verbal and visual illustrations that "blur[red] the line" between black and white (131) by their juxtaposition. For instance, a visual description of a woman locked in an iron collar immediately precedes Mott's text about Equiano's acquisition of English-language literacy; silencing of a voice juxtaposes enabling of a voice. While defining Mott's text as a "recursive feedback loop" empowering its young readers (137), Cutter raises a significant question: "Would such macabre images [of violence toward enslaved individuals] cancel out the subjectivity Equiano depicts himself achieving in the narrative?" (136). Such a query is significant because it may urge readers of *Who Writes for Black Children?* to take a closer look at otherwise-overlooked effects of abridgement on narrative shape, beyond Equiano's tale.

The final three critical chapters on disparate topics are collected in "Part III – Defining African American Children's Literature: Critical Crossovers" and theorize African American children as readers of white-authored texts. While other authors are heavily cross-referenced in *Who Writes for Black Children?*, Nazera Sadiq Wright is mentioned briefly only by Eric Gardner in chapter 12, and the final two authors of Part III, Brigitte

Fielder and LuElla D'Amico, are not mentioned by any other authors and are even overlooked in the collection's index. While interesting, their contributions are more beneficial for readers seeking specific information about their precise topics rather than about African American children's readership in general. In "'Our Hope Is in the Rising Generation': Locating African American Children's Literature in the Children's Department of the *Colored American*," Wright sets out to prove that articles in the nation's second black newspaper reveal an early black child readership. She notes that the didactic articles were carefully placed among others and that a majority were reprinted and, therefore, must be recontextualized (153). Drawing on examples from John Todd's "Ponto and Flirt," Louise Chollet's "Dog Carlos," and Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Dogs and Cats," published in the *Christian Recorder*, Fielder's chapter, "'No Rights That Any Body Is Bound to Respect': Pets, Race, and African American Child Readers," explores the racialization of fictionalized human-animal relationships. Fielder thereby proves her point that "Dogs and cats have racial significance in stories reprinted in the *Christian Recorder*, and that racial content is relevant to their framing for African American child readers . . .":<sup>1</sup> in her chapter, the animals functioned as pets, racialized subjects, and "violent adversaries" (166). She ends with a horrific example of a human-animal relationship: "A Man Given as Food to the Dogs." The 1865 article describes two slaveholders unleashing bloodhounds (the men's pets but also "perpetrators of racialized violence" [176])

<sup>1</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal Church's weekly publication and "one of the most important Black periodicals during the second half of the nineteenth century" (227).

on a defenseless man. Finally, D'Amico's "Finding God's Way: Amelia E. Johnson's *Clarence and Corrine* as a Path to Religious Resistance for African American Children" concludes the three analytical sections of *Who Writes for Black Children?* D'Amico explains how the first African American children's novel painted its author as an advocate for orphaned or abused African American children. The author remarks on the novel's (in her reading, deliberate) unusual avoidance of racial markers as indicative of Johnson's "desire to use existing power structures to create a type of subversive children's literature that would help topple injustice from the inside out" (186). D'Amico's inferences, poised at the end of the book's collection of critical chapters, raise several timely questions: Are racially indefinite characters identified black by default? If so, why? By whom? Her queries supplement scholarly dialogue about the perceived reader and are especially provocative when read in combination with the previous nine chapters' references to both child and, for some texts, adult "intended" and "ideal" (vs. actual) readers. Her questions appropriately conclude the critical chapters' exploration of author-audience relationships' complexity.

Two bibliographical chapters follow: Laura Wasowicz's "Nuggets from the Field: The Roots of African American Children's Literature, 1780-1866" chronologically arranges titles directed to African American youth, and Gardner's "Children's Literature in the *Christian Recorder*: An Initial Comparative

Biobibliography for May 1862 and April 1873" categorizes selections printed in May 1862 and April 1873, with most for and by African American adults, but also including a "massive number" of white-authored reprints (229) and material for children expanding beyond designated pages (228). Both are very valuable to scholars seeking primary sources, as Wasowicz's chapter provides readers with short descriptions of a wealth of texts for future study. Especially interesting are the following: an illustration of a slave ship from Mott's abridgement of Equiano's life story (208) because it gave illiterates (as well as readers then and now) a visual of such horrors; Susan Paul's *Memoir of James Jackson* (209) and *William Saunders; or, Blessings in Disguise* (213) because their titles did not indicate their subject's race, and white readers encountered scholarly or heroic characters "as attentive or obedient as any white child" (209) but who those readers later discovered were black; and *Little Robert and His Friend; or, The Light of Brier Valley* because it may be the only American children's book of the era with a young suicidal protagonist (215). Gardner's chapter opens with an insightful recognition of scholars' past ignorance and problematic definitions/categorizations of African American literature before his "biobibliography," which depicts the lives of authors as well as "lives" of texts (225). His thirteen-plus pages of titles and summaries are well-organized and invite further study and categorization. Both Gardner and Wasowicz inspire further research by presenting their personal

findings, Wasowicz especially by highlighting her own discovery of Plato's inscription on Charles Morley's 1838 *Practical Guide to Composition*.

The final section of *Who Writes for Black Children?* consists of nearly one hundred pages of primary sources mentioned in the chapters, which is especially helpful when such texts are of necessity excerpted and the reader desires greater literary context for short passages. The reader gains instant access to several texts that currently require subscription access or are challenging to obtain in full-text (such as "Only Once" and "Excerpts from 'Fancy Etchings'"). The editors include other primary sources that are readily available on the internet, such as Mott's version of Equiano's tale; perhaps the space they take up in the collection could have been used for less-accessible texts.

In their introduction, the editors write, "we seek to unsettle traditional histories and theorizations of children's literature to permit an expanded appreciation

of the investments and accomplishments of black children's culture" (x). While they presume their readers' familiarity with fundamental debates concerning defining and labelling African American children's literature, their collection is a refreshing look away from the belief that "[t]he body of work that we recognize today as African American children's literature did not begin to come into its own until the late 1960s" (Bishop, "Reflections" 9). While much has been written about recent works, the focus in this book is on literature over a century old. These chapters form a nuanced addition to reader-scholars seeking a broader, historically aware, and culturally sensitive answer to the question "Who wrote for black children before 1900?" Works like Dorothy Broderick's oft-cited *Image of the Black in Children's Fiction* are a start, but Capshaw and Duane's collection proves that African American children's literature before 1900 warrants its own extensive critical lens and offers its readers tools to begin that examination process.

## Works Cited

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Jill E. Silvius began teaching literature and composition courses at East Stroudsburg University in fall 2009 after attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania for her Ph.D. Her scholarly interests include the intersections of gender and landscape, literature by British authors John Fowles and Julian Barnes, and narrative closure theory, especially endings. She has published in *The Explicator*, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, and *Victorian Newsletter*, among other publications.