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Children's Literature and the "New Negro"

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Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, Katharine Capshaw Smith. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004.

Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance is a timely addition to scholarship on both African American literature and children's literature of the early twentieth century. The scope of Katharine Capshaw Smith's work makes it a particularly welcome follow-up to DonnaRae MacCann's award-winning *White Supremacy in Children's Literature* (Routledge 1998), which focused on the relationship of African American children to mainstream children's literature from 1830 to 1900. Dr. Smith moves us to the next stage, focusing on the emergence of an African American children's literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Smith looks at major players in African American children's literature in roughly chronological order, starting with the *Crisis* magazine "Children's Numbers" of the 1910s and ending with Arna Bontemps's publication of *The Lonesome Boy* in 1954. Characterizing her own work as "a recovery effort," Smith argues that "[n]eglect of children's literature has prevented scholars of the New Negro Renaissance from documenting the cultural movement in full" (xxiii), and that "[t]hrough plays, pageants, magazine pieces, dialect poems, picture books, poetry collections, anthologies, biographies, and novels, New Negro writers famous and obscure asserted their commitment to childhood as a means of cultural production" (xxiii).

Since, as Smith herself states, "most scholars agree that the cultural Renaissance dissipated by the late 1930s" (163), the scope of this book may surprise some readers given its titular focus on the Harlem Renaissance. But as Smith shows, many of the key contributors to African American children's literature who began their work during the teens and twenties continued that work into the 1940s and beyond. Early chapters focus on material that is clearly within the temporal context of the so-called Harlem Renaissance; the writers discussed in later chapters are, as Smith argues in the case of Rose Leary Love, among the "unfurling tendrils of the New Negro Renaissance" (148). In another move that problematizes the use of "Harlem Renaissance"

in her title, Smith self-consciously "devotes attention to the female writers [like Love] who were invested imaginatively and philosophically in the cultural awakening, but who were unable or unwilling to travel to urban centers like Harlem or Washington, D.C." This de-centering is central to Smith's feminist argument "for an expansion of the parameters of the Renaissance to reflect women writers' creative productivity" (xxii).

So while a more accurate title for this book might have used the less familiar but also less geographically specific term "New Negro Renaissance," the complexity of Smith's historical vision is a strength. Paul Laurence Dunbar is by anyone's reckoning a precursor to, not a participant in, this cultural moment, but readings of his dialect poems were popular well into the century, so it is appropriate and useful to discuss these performances side by side with texts produced during the time period. Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes are major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, but did most of their writing for children later in the century. Smith includes them because their writing for children reflects a version of "New Negro" ideology, as does the work of Carter G. Woodson, another major contributor to African American children's literature who began work—in Washington, DC—during the Harlem Renaissance and continued beyond it.

Smith ultimately "resists an evolutionary model" that would see the later works by Hughes and Bontemps as the "culmination of the field"; instead she looks at a number of carefully contextualized moments as "spikes or eruptions" (xxv–xxvi) in African American children's culture, each of which demonstrates multiple approaches to the project of shaping and empowering African American children (and often, as we will see, adults). Unlike many academic books, in which chapters or essays turn out to be isolated and unconnected forays into a broadly defined field of inquiry, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* gives readers more than they might expect in terms of coverage and scrupulously builds conceptual bridges to connect each of five substantial chapters. Cross-writing is one of the significant trends Smith follows from the pre-dawn of the Harlem Renaissance, when a page with pictures of children and a folktale in *Crisis* magazine was DuBois's contribution to "children's literature," through pageants performed in schoolrooms by African American children for adults in the community, to Bontemps's publications for mixed audiences of white and black children.

Subheadings within each chapter allow Smith to introduce specific literary, historical, biographical, and ideological contexts for each

subset of texts, followed by readings of these texts that clarify differences in approach. Smith's approach in *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* is fundamentally rhetorical: painstakingly nuanced readings discuss rhetorical strategies in light of the intellectual and social context in which each work was written, illustrated, published, read, or performed. Readings of a few texts reflect specific theoretical approaches (Alan Blok's ideas about "social banditry" inform Smith's reading of Hughes and Bontemps's *Pasteboard Bandit*, for example). Smith also evokes theorists and critics of African American literature (Carby, Gates), children's literature (Bottigheimer, Kuznets, Rose) and African American children's literature (Harris, D. Johnson); period scholars (Lewis, Turner) and educational historians (Akenson and Neufeldt, J. Anderson); plus the work of critics and scholars on specific texts and genre (Krasner and Brown-Guillory on drama, etc.). Most impressively, she lives up to her own call on scholars to "embrace archival work as necessary for a realignment of critical treatments of the Renaissance" (xxii).

Finally, it is texts and detailed contexts that take center stage in this study. Smith begins with W. E. B. DuBois's *Crisis* Publications, arguing that "[o]nly through DuBois' efforts did a sustained effort to address Black children commence" (4), first in the "Children's Numbers" of *Crisis* magazine, then in *The Brownies' Book* (a monthly magazine for African American children published from January 1920 to December 1921) and finally on the "Little Page" written by Effie Lee Newsome for *Crisis* following the failure of *The Brownies' Book*. Smith then moves on to drama, rehearsing some material from her 1999 article on African American community and school pageants (*Children's Literature* 27), expanding the discussion to include history plays and intimate dramas of the 1920s and 1930s, all of which attempted to "reinvent the communal space of the schoolhouse . . . to transform the child's vision of black history and identity, to galvanize the community around the child, and to empower the child audience with values of progress though education" (54).

The next chapter explores African American children's literature with roots in the problematic South. Smith analyzes performances of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems (which she tentatively reads as signifying on the plantation tradition), then the "Affrilachian" (African American + Appalachian) poetry of Bessie Woodson Yancey (who presents a multivocal South), and finally the works of Rose Leary Love, Elizabeth Perry Cannon, and Helen Adele Whiting, educational re-

formers who "assert southern modernity" (147) by rejecting dialect for standard English. Female writers also dominate the next chapter, in which Smith looks at a number of texts by the women who worked with Carter G. Woodson and his Associated Publishers in the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on the treatment of Africa and slavery in the texts intended for classroom use, and looking at the creative works in terms of their handling of the tension between their desire to "acknowledge black identity" and the strategic choice to take a more "color-blind" approach "in an attempt to advance integration, in the spirit of texts for white audiences" (167).

The last section of the book is, among other things, a precursor to future research that would treat the entire canon of Langston Hughes's writing for children into the 1950s and '60s. This pointedly selective chapter discusses Hughes's collaborations with Arna Bontemps—*Popo & Fifi* (set in Haiti) and *The Pasteboard Bandit* (set in Mexico)—plus four works by Bontemps set in the South in which he "evokes and deflates" (254) stereotypes (e.g., the "mammy") with an eye to unsettling the prejudices of his mixed audience.

Within her readings of written texts, Smith gives attention to performance issues and does not neglect visual texts (photographs from *Crisis* magazine and illustrations from children's books), all of which flesh out the picture of children's culture during this period. (Well-placed illustrations make these images available to the reader.) Future scholars will also appreciate footnotes that guide them to archival materials used in this study and, generously, to recovered texts that do not receive extended treatment in this work (there are four such notes in chapter two). It is hard to exaggerate the usefulness of the fresh contextual information from archives and other primary sources (including interviews and correspondence) contained in this book. Smith adds significantly to our knowledge of Effie Lee Newsome—one of the better-known writers Smith discusses—while making it possible to add others, like Jane Dabney Shackelford, to the canon. Building on the work of recent scholars (she mentions Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph in particular), Smith has made significant progress toward repeopleing early twentieth-century African American children's literature, which—like African American literature in general before the recovery efforts begun in the 1960s—has been remarkable for the swift passage of its participants into obscurity.

What readers will not find is a discussion of Smith's readings in relation to other critical treatments of the same texts; a discussion of how her reading of folk- and fairy tales in *The Brownies' Book*, for example, differs from those of earlier critics (Sinnette, Harris, Johnson, Kory) would be helpful. While not as vital as the contextual information Smith generously provides, information about what critics do and do not agree upon helps create a context in which students and scholars can begin to lay down a base of received wisdom and tease out the significance of our differences. In every other way, Smith's book—which has filled in a remarkable number of blanks left by previous scholarship—has put us in an excellent position to begin that project.