For Children Of The Sun Who Deserved Better When Pickaninnies Were Not Enough: The Celebration Of Childhood Within The Brownies' Book

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For Children of the Sun Who Deserved Better When Pickaninnies Were Not Enough:
The Celebration of Childhood within *The Brownies’ Book*

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Bachelor of Arts, The College of William & Mary, 2016
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Master of Arts

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In this thesis, I analyze how *The Brownies’ Book* projected the ideals of the New Negro Movement by positioning Black children as crucial to the period’s creation of a new Negro identity. My analysis begins by exploring various examples of racist imagery of the period and how the periodical subverted those negative representations of Black children and Black life. In my examination of *The Brownies’ Book’s* representation of Blackness, I discuss the minstrel tradition and the racist popular cultural imagery of the 1920s. By analyzing the positive representations of Blackness within *The Brownies’ Book*, my study shows how the editors of the periodical asserted the humanity of Black children and promoted racial pride. The second part of my study offers examination of how the periodical’s authors utilized fairytales to appeal to a common trope in the construction of American childhood and strategically further the mission of prominent race leaders. Lastly, part three offers analysis of the periodical as a cross-written text, meaning it addresses both child and adult readers. In each of these sections, my project presents *The Brownies’ Book* as an influential work that supported the New Negro Movement’s refashioning of the Black racial identity by celebrating Black children during the early twentieth century.
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This MA. is dedicated to my parents whose love and support continue to guide me...
Introduction

My thesis explores African American race leaders’ treatment of childhood in the late 19th and early 20th century, by analyzing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) monumental short-lived monthly children’s magazine, *The Brownies’ Book.*¹ I argue that through this publication, Black writers and artists such as Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Laura Wheeler Waring supported the ideals of the New Negro Movement by creating a counter narrative to the racist propaganda of the period by attacking the social, political, and economic elements that contributed to the erasure of Black youth as “innocent” in white America’s imagination of childhood.² Historian Robin Bernstein frames the construction of childhood as a performance, arguing that this, “performance, both on stage and, especially, in everyday life, was the vehicle by which childhood suffused, gave power to, and crucially shaped” pivotal historic racial moments ranging from slavery to the beginning of The Civil Rights Movement. My analysis of *The Brownies’ Book emphasizes* the strategic role that representations of Black childhood served to both resist racism as well as reclaim

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² Robin Bernstein, Introduction, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (NYU Press, 2011), 4. In 20th century American culture, ideas of childhood largely centered on innocence. Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence* outlines the development of the abstract concept of childhood innocence by pointing to examples from the 19th and 20th century antimiscegenation movement, which placed the needs of imagined children that were not yet conceived over the rights of embodied, tangible, living people. She explains this phenomenon by tracing the connection between children and ideas of innocence throughout American history. Other scholars who study the history of social thought concerning ideas of childhood innocence include Phillipe Ariès, Anne Higonnet, James R. Kincaid, and Linda Pollack.
childhood innocence, and by extension, their humanity and agency, during the pivotal artistic moment of the early 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance. I argue that the magazine editors’ positive depictions of Black youth, adaptation of sentimental literary tropes, and dual address to both children and adults promoted the key ideologies of the movement.

The creators of The Brownies’ Book sought to reclaim the childhood innocence that white supremacy attempted to steal by affirming the value of Blackness. In their quest to insert Black children into the narrative of childhood innocence and to promote racial pride, the writers of The Brownies’ Book understood “the child” as a political agent. The editors strategically crafted the publication to refashion the racial identity of the youngest members of the African American community. As Jessie Fauset, literary editor and contributing author, stated in the work’s dedication, The Brownies’ Book offered an alternative to widely circulated negative imagery regarding African Americans: “To children who with eager look / Scanned vainly library shelf and nook / For history Song or Story / That told of Colored People’s glory / We dedicate The Brownies’ Book.”

Because of the extreme lack of positive imagery regarding Black life, The Brownies’ Book met a significant need for Black children’s exposure to literary works that celebrated their culture and potential.

Contributing writers and editors of The Brownies’ Book employed sentimental ideas of childhood to support creating a new collective identity for

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Black Americans. The sentimental construction of late 19th and early 20th century childhood purported a raceless front, much akin to colorblind ideologies of the present. At the core of this construction of childhood was willful ignorance. As Cultural Studies scholar George Lipsitz notes, “whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.” This is evident in America’s treatment of childhood. In accordance with this sentimental construction of childhood, children who recognized race were considered as operating outside of what was deemed appropriate for innocent children. A child’s inability to see race is what made them innocent. Such assumptions inferred that childhood innocence was only attainable through racelessness, and to be raceless in America was to be white. The recognition of race became a thief of childhood innocence, rather than the true culprit, which is racism. Du Bois rejected this colorblind treatment of childhood innocence, which excluded many Black youth, whose experiences informed a much different reality concerning race and its effect on their lives. The imagined racial obliviousness of childhood reflects the covert standardization of a

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4 Bernstein refers to the seemingly inevitable manner in which childhood shapes racial moments throughout history as ‘racial innocence’. She argues that historically, childhood innocence was raced white and points to multiple examples including Little Eva, the iconic angel-child from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental literary work, Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Bernstein refers to “holy ignorance,” meaning the obliviousness of the social categories of class, gender, and race, as primary characteristics of childhood innocence. She explains that, “innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather the performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories.” (6) According to this model, childhood is an active state of race deflection. See also James Kincaid’s “Childhood,” Blackwood’s Magazine 12, no. 67(1822): 139-45.

white norm, a norm *The Brownies’ Book* purposed to dismantle by celebrating childhood innocence, while simultaneously celebrating Blackness.

Following the success of *The Crisis*, founded in 1910 and the annual issue of the “Children’s Number”, the NAACP published the first issue of *The Brownies’ Book* in January of 1920. NAACP leaders and *Crisis* editors, W.E.B Du Bois and Jessie Fauset strategically targeted children to promote the ideological shift they deemed necessary for the success of the entire African American community.⁶

While pejorative depictions of Black life dominated mainstream advertising and entertainment circles, the stories, poems, and images that made up *The Brownies’ Book* created a space for Black children to see their own beauty and potential.

In October of 1919, the NAACP announced their plans to expand the annual “Children’s Number” of *The Crisis* into a separate monthly periodical for all children, but especially for ours, “the Children of the Sun” (fig.1).⁷ As the announcement explains, *The Brownies’ Book* aimed to affirm Black racial

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identity, while also encouraging cooperation between races: “It will seek to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk – black and brown and yellow and white.” Aside from entertainment, the editorial lists the following seven objectives for the new children’s periodical:

1. To assert that being “colored” was both normal and beautiful.
2. To educate Black children on the history and accomplishments of the Negro race.
3. To demonstrate that other Black children have grown into beautiful, valuable and prestigious persons.
4. To offer practical advice in dealing with white children.
5. To shift feelings of hurt to feelings of ambition and love for their own homes and friends.
6. To highlight joy and positive things in life.
7. To instill the importance of preparing for occupational responsibilities with a spirit of determination and sacrifice.

In 1919, the year preceding the debut of *The Brownies’ Book*, the United States endured what would come to be known as “Red Summer,” aptly named considering the vast amount of bloodshed that occurred in that moment. Approximately twenty-five “anti-Black riots” took place sporadically in major cities throughout the nation. The most famous riot of Red Summer took place in

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Chicago between July 27 and August 2. After days of mob violence, the death
toll reached 38, of which 23 people were Black and 15 were white; the total
number of injured persons reached 537. This “violent manifestation of race
antagonism”, prompted by a 17 year old Black adolescent swimming across an
imagined line at a segregated beach in Illinois, speaks to the prevalent racial
tension in the early 20th century era.

The racially tumultuous climate of the early 20th century created a dilemma
for race leaders concerning the appropriate role young people ought to serve in
the resistance efforts. How should Black people engage their children, if at all, in
the dialogue concerning race relations in America? This question prompted The
Brownies’ Book editorial staff to quote from a letter they received from a twelve
year old Black girl: “I want to learn more about my race, so I want to begin
early…I hate the white man just as much as he hates me and probably more!”
As the article notes, a passionate assertion of hate such as this coming from the
mind of a child was troubling to the editors, but given the unrelenting
bombardment of racially motivated violence and terror throughout the nation, it
was not unreasonable for the girl to feel this way. In the early 1920's, race riots,
lynchings, and economic and educational injustice plagued the African American
community.

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11 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, The Negro in Chicago; a Study of
Race Relations and a Race Riot (Chicago, Ill., The University of Chicago Press, 1922),
http://archive.org/details/negroinchicagost00chic., xv.
12 Ibid., 4.
13 Ibid.
Though a child, the young girl who wrote the letter to the editors of The Crisis was not immune to the vicious realities that plagued her family and community. The news of tragedies like the Chicago Riot widely circulated and occupied the everyday conversations of Black family life. With each annual issue of The Crisis’s “Children’s Number” reporting on racial injustice, the 1919 announcement editorial about the new children’s magazine acknowledged the dilemma of educating Black youth while also attempting to protect them from the horror of racial violence. The letter from the young girl prompted editors to ask how to reconcile the magazine’s responsibility to report accurate current events and the effects of that news on its young Black readers:

This was inevitably in our role as a newspaper – but what effect must it have on our children? To educate them in human hatred is more disastrous to them than to the hated; to seek to raise them in ignorance of their racial identity and peculiar situation is inadvisable — impossible.  

Members of the Black community maintained sentimental ideals of childhood and sought to counter the discouraging bombardment of degradation and violence with pure, lighthearted joy. The Brownies’ Book would be “a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter and Emulation, and designed especially for Kiddies from Six to Sixteen.” While the editors of The Crisis were committed to reporting the injuries and misrepresentations suffered by the Black community, they also saw the need to create an outlet that both celebrated the childhood innocence of Black youth and simultaneously prepared them for resistance.

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14 Ibid.
15 Du Bois and Gill, “The True Brownies.”
The Brownies’ Book projected the ideals of the New Negro Movement by positioning Black children as crucial to the period’s creation of a new Negro identity. My analysis begins by exploring various examples of racist imagery of the period and how the periodical subverted those negative representations of Black children and Black life. In my examination of The Brownies’ Book’s representation of Blackness, I discuss the minstrel tradition and the racist popular cultural imagery of the 1920s. By analyzing the positive representations of Blackness within The Brownies’ Book, my study shows how the editors of the periodical asserted the humanity of Black children and promoted racial pride. The second part of my study offers examination of how the periodical’s authors utilized fairytales to appeal to a common trope in the construction of American childhood and to further the mission of prominent race leaders. Lastly, part three offers analysis of the periodical as a cross-written text, meaning it addresses both child and adult readers. In each of these sections, my project presents The Brownies’ Book as an influential work that supported the New Negro Movement’s refashioning of the Black racial identity by celebrating Black children during the early twentieth century.
Part 1

Our Little Friends are Cute Too: Reclaiming Innocence by Rejecting Racist Imagery

In the midst of the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature”, which refers to the 19th century emergence of well known children’s works such as Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868), Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), and Howard Pyle’s The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood (1883), racist propaganda was commonplace. Differing from their predecessors, the works produced during this period were revolutionary in that their primary goal was entertainment rather than religious education, but in seeking to “entertain” they often used Black characters as the source of amusement. As the forerunner of the African American children’s literature genre, The Brownies’ Book laid the foundation for future African American children’s works by inserting positive representations of Black children and Black life that rejected the derogatory imagery of the era.

In the wake of 19th century minstrel imagery, one of the most significant ways The Brownies’ Book challenged racism and furthered the ideals of the New Negro Movement was in its dismissal of the pickaninny stereotype of Black children. The “pickaninny” stereotype was a pejorative figure that depicted children of African descent with exaggerated features and jet black skin, who behaved in an uncivilized manner, often eating like wild animals, and even

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defecating in public.\textsuperscript{17} Though an abolitionist text, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, frequently studied as one of the most influential works of sentimental literature, relies heavily on these caricatures and reinforces the racial binaries of white children as pure and innocent and Black children as tainted. The archetypes of the characters Topsy, an enslaved Black child, and Little Eva, the slave master’s daughter, are present decades later in representations of Black children leading up to and during the Harlem Renaissance.

Stowe’s treatment of Topsy reflects the pickaninny stereotype. In the novel Topsy is given to Ophelia, a white woman. As part of an experiment to test if hardened enslaved children could be “softened,” meaning returned to a state of innocence, Stowe describes Topsy as unrefined and harsh, while she depicts Eva as angelic and gentle. In an exchange between the two girls, Topsy’s innocence is restored after receiving kind words and an empathetic loving touch from Eva. Through touch, Eva transfers her innocence to Topsy. Only after this encounter does Topsy show signs of humanity, such as emotions. At this moment she cries \textit{real} tears, whereas before only “something like a tear” reflected her feelings. Demonstrating the role of Christianity to the sentimental treatment of childhood, Eva reasons with Topsy, trying to convince her that she can be good and pure, “just as much as if [she] were white.”\textsuperscript{18} This exchange


exemplifies the clear binary created between Black and white children during the age of sentimentalism, with white children being treated as the standard of purity and innocence, so much so they are likened to angelic beings, or the case of Eva, a holy savior.\textsuperscript{19} 

\textit{The Brownies' Book} editors were working against this racial binary years later into the 20th century. 

E.W. Kemble's \textit{A Coon Alphabet}, published in 1898, is one of the most striking works that demonstrates the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century primitive depictions of Black children.\textsuperscript{20} 

The book consists of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, each accompanied with rhymes and illustrations that mockingly depict African Americans as “nappy-headed, saucer eyed, broad-nosed, thick-lipped, grinning, ragged

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{A Coon Alphabet}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{19} During the colonial period, Calvinist doctrine asserted that children were born into a depraved state, meaning, born with original sin and possessed a high propensity for wickedness. See Sylvia D Hoffert, “A Very Peculiar Sorrow', Attitudes Toward Infant Death in Urban Northeast, 1800-1860,' \textit{American Quarterly} 39, no.4 (1987):605-8. The 19th century brought with it an ideological shift concerning children. In contrast to earlier beliefs that children were born sinful, by the mid 19th century, “sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment.” Robin Bernstein, Introduction, \textit{Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights} (NYU Press, 2011), 4

\textsuperscript{20} Edward Windsor Kemble, \textit{A Coon Alphabet} (New York: R.H. Russell, 1898).
subhumans whose misfortunes were an unending source of humor for whites.”

Two illustrations accompany each letter of Kemble’s alphabet, with the first illustration depicting a common action such as riding a mule, eating a snack, fishing, or playing with fireworks. The second sketch for each letter provides the unexpected element that gives way to the purported humor. For example, the rhyme for letter “D” reads, “D is for Didimus what blew down a gun now he and his sister ain’t havin much fun.” The first image depicts a young Black boy blowing into the barrel of a rifle while a Black girl with the exaggerated features of bulging eyes, a menacing facial expression, and braids that wildly stand atop her head, grotesquely watches (fig. 2). The second illustration shows the gun firing and both children jolted into the air by the power of the explosion (fig. 3). The boy is flailing upside down and the girl maintains an expression of wide mouthed anger, her pigtails blown off from the gunfire.

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22 Ibid., 308.
Violent images of Black children’s self-inflicted misfortune such as this are prevalent throughout Kemble’s work and demonstrate the representation of Black children’s bodies as incapable of feeling pain, a trope that dates back to early 17th century American slavery. One of the most frequent arguments for the validity of slavery was that people of African descent lacked the ability to physically feel pain, a claim that cited supposed illegitimate hereditary conditions such as “dyæsthesia Aethiopsis,” an “obtuse sensibility of the body,” as evidence.²⁴ The pickaninny stereotype treated the Black child as a subhuman object, content with poverty and violence and most importantly, immune to pain. While there are varying facets of the stereotype like wearing ragged clothes or being naked, being grotesque or cute, a common trend amongst them all is that the pickaninny is always immune to pain. Thus, the

absence of pain is essential to the creation and maintenance of the figure.  

Robin Bernstein, in *Racial Innocence*, points to two key images to demonstrate how popular culture depicted Black children as immune to pain as they attempted to prove Black children were not innocent. The first picture depicts an African American girl in a cotton field with an armful of cotton. She has large eyes, dimpled plump cheeks, and a relaxed smile (fig. 4). By twentieth century standards she is cute. The other image, a photograph, depicts a frowning white girl with arms crossed standing in the middle of a cotton field adorned with harvest gear (fig. 5). Both children are doing the same act of labor, harvesting cotton, but send vastly different messages to the viewer. The viewer is meant to feel pity for the white child, outrage even, while the Black child’s labor is shown as cute. The Black child’s labor does not even appear as labor, but rather

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an act of comfort. American journalist William Cowper Brann notes, “There is probably nothing on earth ‘cuter’ than a nigger baby; but, like other varieties in the genus ‘coon’, they are not considered very valuable additions to society.”

For Brann and other racists of the period, Black children could be seen as cute, but never innocent, or fully human because they were not valued by white America. The primary factor distinguishing both images is in the depiction of the child’s ability to experience pain. The African American child appears to enjoy the labor, while the white child does not. The imposed painlessness of Black bodies rendered Black children intrinsically less valuable than their white peers, and ultimately disposable, certainly not in need of care or kindness as evidenced by the imagery of late 19th and early 20th century popular culture.

As a result of their disqualification from innocence, white systems of social power deemed Black children unworthy of protection from threats of violence and largely fetishized their bodies. An alarming example of American popular

Figure 6. McCrary and Branson, Alligator Bait, ca 1897. International Center of Phtography, Daniel Cowin Collection, New York, 1990.


culture’s disregard of Black children is the widespread imagery of Black infants as bait for alligators in advertisements and postcards. For example, one photograph depicts nine Black toddlers, labeled as “Alligator Bait” (fig 6). The photograph focuses on the fifth child standing in the center. He looks over his shoulder, yielding an expression of fear at what viewers may presume is an alligator outside of the camera’s frame. As historian Robin Bernstein notes, “By constructing these children as non-cute, this posed photograph strains against its own historically located tropes to exclude these toddlers from the visual cues that simultaneously announced ‘innocence’ and ‘childhood’.”

This photograph is a stark contrast to other studio photography of white children in the late nineteenth century. Instead of portraying the children in accordance with the standard form, these Black children are depicted in moments of ugliness, such as the children being naked, the first child

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picking inside their ear and the fourth child sobbing uncontrollably. Likewise, the cover of the sheet music of “River Side Rag” depicts the pickaninny figure bathing in a riverbank, presumably in Africa, while two alligators look onward from a small distance, one asking, “What will you have Mrs. Riverside?” and the other answering, “Dark meat without dressing please (fig. 7).” These examples illustrate the unrelenting dehumanization of Black children.

In contrast, the “Our Little Friends” section of each Brownies issue displayed pictures of Black infants, toddlers, and other small children (fig. 8). It provided a space for parents to submit “cute” pictures of their children. This section exemplifies The Brownies’ reclamation of beauty and innocence for Black youth. The section’s depiction of little ones adorned in frills, chubby cheeks, and smiling faces offers a positive alternative to the “Alligator Bait” babies whose cuteness was denied. “Our Little Friends” pictured the Black youngsters in accordance with traditional

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29 Ibid.
sentimentality, meaning in a way that showed their “preciousness” and “cuteness.”

Another example that demonstrates, with horrendous vividness, popular culture’s treatment of Black children’s bodies as painless is the 1914 best-selling novel, *Penrod* by Booth Tarkington. The protagonist, for whom the novel is named, embodies celebrated attributes of American boyhood including innocent mischief and carefree adventure. In contrast, the characters of Herman and Verman, African American brothers, adhere to the pickaninny stereotype. When Penrod and the Black boys meet, Herman shows Penrod his hand which lacks a forefinger. When asked about his missing finger, Hermon eagerly explains that upon request Verman “chop[ped] ‘er right off up to de roots!” When Penrod asks the reason for the mutilation, Herman replies, “Jes’ fo’ nothing.” This gruesome example shows how the pickaninny stereotype portrayed Black children as both intellectually lacking and void of feeling.

Unrestrained acts of violence depicted in representations of Black children circulated within the public sphere, each showing little, if any, suffering on the part of the Black victims. The widespread popularity of the pickaninny figure offers much insight into the attempted erasure of Black children’s pain and, by extension, their innocence and humanity. Photographs, cartoons, and stories within this tradition demonstrate the extreme devaluation of Black life and gives

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33 Ibid.
evidence to the need for alternative imagery of Black children during the early 20th century.

*The Brownies Book* created a counter narrative to the outpouring of racist imagery and emphasized the humanity of Black children by dismissing the myth of the painless Black body. “The Judge” section of *The Brownies’,* written by Jessie Fauset, consisted of an adult judge who spoke with children about various topics such as their friends, school, parents, and behavior. In the “The Judge” section of the February 1920 issue, Fauset presents a scenario that demonstrates the humanity of Black children through her portrayal of a Black boy’s experience of pain.34 Young Billy, expresses to the Judge the frustration and hurt he feels after receiving “an awful licking” from his mother after dismissing her instruction to come back inside after one hour of playing in the snow. He explains:

> a fellow can’t do much in an hour on a hill like that,— so I stayed another hour enough to get the hang of my new sled. Then, since the thing’s done anyway,—I just stayed right up until it was dark, and went home and explained to Mother. 35

The boy mournfully looks back to this moment of perceived injustice “in tears and pain.” He reasons that because he finished his schoolwork and did not injure himself, “it didn’t do any good just to spoil the day by whipping [him].” The judge addresses the boy’s hurt by explaining that experiencing pain is unavoidable.

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35 Ibid.
often necessary for learning lessons:

Billikins, little friend of mine, this is a world of pain. Pain is always near us. We cannot run away from it. We cannot dodge and fool it. It leaves us sometimes for days, and even years; and then suddenly, it comes back and hurts us. Without doubt, you will say this,—‘Why, then does Mother want to make more pain in the world? Is there not enough already?’ There is. There is too much. But this is a funny world, and sometimes, in order to make less, you make more.  

Fauset goes on to explain that parents bring momentary pain to their children in order to prevent greater pain in the future. She uses an example of a mother momentarily inflicting pain on her child by smacking their hands away from a hot stove. Though the child suffers the momentary pain of having their hands smacked, they forgo potentially experiencing a greater pain of a serious burn. She reasons that in the case of young Billy, his mother specifically told him to play for only one hour because a longer amount of time exposed to the wet snow could negatively affect his health, the traffic surrounding the hill was risky, it was all the time she could spare without his help in the home, and any longer would detract from the time he should dedicate to his studies. Ultimately the momentary whooping he received would teach him the valuable lesson that the world offers penalties for those who overindulge in life’s pleasures, “if you are well trained when you are little, not to overdo, then you may grow up to live a sane, temperate, well-balanced, and efficient life.”

In this edition of “The Judge” the boy’s “whooping” challenges the racist treatment of Black children’s bodies as painless. Fauset sympathetically

36 Ibid.
characterizes Billy as human, in contrast to the grotesque, inhumane depictions of Black children in works such as E.W. Kemble’s alphabet. He feels both the physical pain of being “whooped” and the emotional hurt of feeling wronged. Additionally, the mother’s infliction of pain as a means of protection is significant because instead of humor motivating the act of violence, protection serves instead as the motivation.

In, *The Negro in American Fiction*, Sterling Brown describes the manner of which humor nourishes the embodied innocence of white childhood saying, “Negro children have generally been written of in the same terms as their mothers and fathers, as quaint, living jokes, designed to make white children laugh.” Within white America’s construction of childhood, the value of Black life and specifically Black children’s lives, was largely contingent upon white consumption. Throughout the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, which gave way to *The Brownies’ Book*, popular culture treated the

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Black child as a comedic, often literally edible, commodity. Mainstream media commonly presented Black children in the likeness of grapes, blackberries, molasses candy, coconuts, licorice, and watermelon seeds.

Numerous postcards, trinkets, and even songs, exemplify white consumption of Black children. One such example includes a 1930’s postcard which reads, “How’d you like a box of chocolates?” The postcard depicts caricatures of three Black children, one older child pushing a wheelbarrow while two toddlers sit inside (fig.9). In the minstrel tradition, the children’s skin is an exaggerated inky Black and their eyes enlarged. Another example of the treatment of Black children as edible is evident in the 1907 song sheet entitled, “Four Little Blackberries”. The cover depicts the exaggerated dark Black faces of children in the likeness of berries, as if ripe for the picking (fig. 10).

While American popular culture often presented Black children in an unrelenting and grotesque manner, such as Kemble’s alphabet, other portrayals

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38 Dean, "Boys and Girls and 'Boys'”, 22.
39 Ibid., 24.
were seemingly sympathetic in comparison, but ultimately purported the same
message of Black inferiority. These characterizations of Black children as sweet
candy and fruit, though seemingly innocent, reflect racist ideals by exemplifying
the United States’ commodification of Blackness. Here, the bodies of Black
children are treated as candy and fruit, to be literally eaten by white consumers.
Images like this demonstrate the figurative consumption of Black bodies because
the value of these Black children lies primarily in their benefit to white people;
without whiteness, they are intrinsically worthless. Likewise, the
portrayal of Black children in degrading terms supports a white
supremacist agenda because without an inferior alternative, the value
of whiteness could never be recognized as uniquely superior.

The work of Langston Hughes, who contributed regularly to the publication
early in his career, exemplifies the ability of The Brownies’ Book to subvert racist
portrayals of Black life. The July 1920 issue highlights a number of graduates,
one of which includes the young poet. The Cleveland Central High graduate
states:

It might interest you to know that I have been elected Class Poet and
have also written the Class Song for the graduates. I am, too, editor of
The Annual and am the first Negro to hold the position since 1901, when it
was held by the son of Charles W. Chesnutt. I thank you for the honor of
having my picture in your publication. 40

While Langston Hughes gained attention as a poet in the mid 1920’s, much of
the poetry widely circulated in later collections was first read in the pages of The


Hughes created scenes in poetry using gentle lyrics that mirrored the settings of traditional children’s tales. His poetry offered verses that, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance period, celebrated the African American community by blending political rhetoric with nature and fantasy. His poem, “Winter Sweetness” demonstrates his covert address to the racial discourse of the time using the imagery and language of children’s literature. The brief poem, first published in the 1921 January issue of The Brownies’ Book, reads “The little house of sugar / Its roof with snow is piled, / And from its tiny window, / Peeps a maple-sugar child.”41 In the style of traditional Eurocentric American children’s literature, he creates a picturesque scene of natural bliss.

Hughes describes the Black youth as a “maple-sugar child,” a description that equates the child’s sweetness to that of the “sugar” landscape. By comparing the Black child to their landscape, Hughes adheres to The Brownies’ Book’s mission, “to make children realize that being ‘colored’ is a normal, beautiful thing.”42 Vastly different from the depictions of Black children as chocolate candy or fruit ready to be plucked from the vine, this child is sweet without the threat of consumption. Hughes coopts the minstrel description of

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Black children as edible by describing the child in edible terms, but refusing to allow for the threat of consumption. Therefore, the child’s sweetness is not meant to satisfy the taste of a white audience, but instead the sweetness is intrinsic, placing value in Black life apart from its benefit to white people. Hughes’s use of sugar and sweetness alludes to the minstrel consumption of Black children prevalent in late 19th and early 20th century imagery and literature. He refashions the “maple-sugar child” from one of comedic denigration of Black childhood innocence, to one that affirms the normalcy and beauty of Black people.  

Part 2

Once Upon a Time in the Early 1920s: Repurposing the Fairytale

In their creation of *The Brownies’ Book*, W.E.B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset harnessed popular Victorian literary convections to tell a different story that celebrated Black children by reinforcing the values of the New Negro Movement. In the 1917 issue of the “Children’s Crisis” writer and activist Carrie Clifford explained her vision for how the publication could repurpose Victorian fairytales in order to develop racial pride:

> The life story of colored Americans is truly so marvelous that it can be woven into stories more fascinating and entertaining than any fairy-tale that has ever entered into the mind of man to conceive. We hope to induce our writers to work up these lives in the form of fairy stories so that they will be interesting to the children and informing as well.  

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Meeting Clifford’s expectation, *The Brownies’ Book* did what children’s authors such as the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault, failed to do – it not only entertained Black children, but also educated them in Black cultural history. Contributing writers for the publication skillfully employed fairytale literary strategies to reflect sentimental ideals of childhood innocence and American family life, while also enforcing racial pride as a primary force in the development of a new collective racial identity.\(^{45}\) As one of the most well recognized staples of American childhood, reinventing the fairytale for the purpose of celebrating Blackness served as a valuable tool in affirming the childhood innocence of Black youth.

A common element seen throughout traditional fairytales includes that of mischievous youth in conflict with a wicked witch. In the July 1921 issue of *The Brownies’ Book*, Langston Hughes debuts his first drama and restructures this trope. In the tradition of fairytales, his play, *The Gold Piece: A Play That Might Be True*, follows a peasant boy and girl named Pablo and Rosa.\(^{46}\) The play opens in the couple’s roadside hut where they celebrate their newly acquired fortune of a “bright gold piece” In the midst of their celebration, the couple joyfully dances and discusses several items they look forward to buying with the gold piece. Their discussion is interrupted when a weary old woman comes to their door seeking refuge after traveling on foot for many miles (fig. 11). The couple learns the

\(^{45}\) Smith, *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, 30.

woman traveled to the city that day in hopes of finding a doctor who could cure her son's blindness but was turned away with no solution to her dilemma. When asked why the doctors would not come to her son, the old woman describes them as "great and proud." The doctors only would come if she paid fifty loren, the same amount of the couple's gold coin. Touched by the woman's story, they agree to give away their money. When the woman exits, the couple reflects on their decision to give away their fortune and resolve that they are happier now than they would have been with any of the things they were looking forward to buying.

In the play, Hughes adapts the orphan and witch trope of fairytales to strengthen the child readers with important values that benefited the mission of the New Negro Movement. Hughes's characterization of Pablo and Rosa adheres to the trope in that they are lowly peasants with hopes of the material treasures of the wealthy. However, he deviates in his characterization of the unnamed old woman. When we first meet the old woman her intentions are...
unclear. The mysterious and arguably magical nature of her arrival prompts suspicion of wicked intent. Unlike the typical villainous witch, we learn the woman is actually a victim and are prompted to sympathize with her struggle. The play’s ending also offers deviation from the typical orphan and witch fairy tale trope in that its happy ending does not include the expected resolution of the peasants getting the life they originally desire. They are still very poor. Hughes’s altered happy ending places the couple’s happiness solely in their act of generosity, not in the comforts of material possessions.

By utilizing this recognizable fairytale structure, Hughes was able to offer a standard component of childhood entertainment as well as appeal to the communal ethics promoted by race leaders during the New Negro Movement. As children’s literature scholar Katherine Capshaw Smith notes, “The private domestic sphere in which these fairytales were read becomes the site to prepare Black children for public action and community alliance.”47 As such, the contributing writers for The Brownies’ Book did not merely insert Black characters into fairytales to celebrate Black children. They restructured them in a way that reinforced the innocence of Black children by following a literary form commonly accepted as a marker of childhood innocence, while also promoting the values that supported the success of the Black community. As exemplified by Hughes’s The Gold Piece, the stories produced in The Brownies’ Book often made ethical

47Smith, Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, 31.
appeals to values such as generosity and communal support, aligning seamlessly with the agenda of the New Negro Movement.

Another example of the use of popular fairytale tropes within The Brownies’ Book is Alphonso O. Stafford’s “The Ladder to the Sun: an African Fairytale.” The story possesses the recognizable elements of a charming prince, talking animals, magic, and love. The main character is the handsome Prince Kee’māh, the oldest son of Chief Kee’mahnah. The prince, who was adored by the village people and fancied by every maiden in the land, would soon begin ruling and needed to select a spouse. When asked by the Chief who he would marry, he responds, “I will not marry any girl on earth, but for a bride I must have a daughter of the Sun and Moon.” The chief thought such a request ridiculous, but in an effort to appease his son, he called for one of the most esteemed writers in the land to craft a letter to King Sun requesting his daughter’s hand in marriage.

In addition to acquiring his father’s blessing, Prince Kee’māh had another dilemma. How would he deliver the message to King Sun? Because no man could make the journey to the world of King Sun and Queen Moon, the Prince looked to animals to deliver his message. After approaching various animals with his proposition, they each explained how their physical limitations prevented them from making such a journey. With no one to deliver his letter to King Sun,

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49 Ibid., 163.
the Prince was left feeling defeated and hopeless until a frog named Ma’nu hopped up to the challenge. Ultimately the frog was able to successfully deliver the message to King Sun by concealing himself in the water jug the king’s servant girls brought to him daily after climbing down and back up a webbed ladder that connected the two worlds.

In reply, King Sun said that he would consider the Prince’s request if he made him a suitable gift. Prince Kee’mäh acquired a beautiful necklace made of ivory and gold that was enchanted with a love spell. When the princess wore the necklace, she would instantly fall in love with the prince. When Princess Lâ-mô-le put on the necklace, it affected her just as planned, “making a feeling of great joy, thrilling and pleasurable” overtake her (fig. 12). The story ends with her traveling down the webbed ladder to earth to marry the prince.

Stafford’s African fairytale demonstrates the importance of Pan- Africanism to the New Negro Movement’s vision for Black children. Pan-Africanism

Figure 12. Gadfly, The Ladder to the Sun, Jun. 1920.
centered on the unity of Black people across the African diaspora. In the same way that the children’s magazine rejected the minstrel pickaninny depictions of Black children, it also sought to address treatments of Africa as primitive and create a sense of solidarity between African American children and African children. Through his use of popular fairy tale elements of a prince and princess, talking animals, and magic, Stafford encourages Black children to view Africa positively and with pride. The opening of the fairytale reads, “In the olden times long before the white man came to Africa”; the author intentionally contextualizes the story to be free of white people, thus implying that Africans are dignified aside from European influence. The African characters in his story were royal, dignified, educated and powerful in their own right, a far cry from the wild and primitive depictions of Africa that circulated in American life.

Stafford’s emphasis on Black Africans as royal in his fairytale is one of many references to Black royalty throughout the pages of *The Brownies’ Book*. In support of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Pan-Africanist plan for Black Americans, the magazine made a point to include photography,
poetry, and stories that depicted African royalty adorned in elaborate clothing and jewels (fig. 13).

In response to the image in figure 13, which appears in the magazine’s debut issue, one young reader relays her younger sister’s reaction:

She can’t get over the little Queen of Abyssinia. She hears lots of fairy tales and knows all about princes and queens, and so on. She says, “That little girl doesn’t loo [sic] very old; maybe when I’m as big as her, I’ll be creen [sic] too.”

Through popular fairy tale tropes, such as kings and queens, writers offered Black children an avenue in which they could connect with and celebrate their African heritage. Because the genre was traditionally white, these fairytales served as a point of access to an element of American childhood that previously excluded Black children.

As part of the New Negro identity, W.E.B Du Bois promoted the unification of Blacks across the African Diaspora, to encourage African American children to see and understand the plight of African children in relation to their own struggles in the United States. Creating Black children who were globally engaged was essential to this mission. As such, each issue of The Brownies’ Book contained a section entitled “As the Crow Flies”, which detailed current events involving young people from around the globe. In her article, “A Little Talk About West Africa” Kathleen Easmon directly addresses the issue of primitivism and urges Black children in the United States to value cultural differences between their

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fellow Brownies in African countries and to reject the notion that African intellect and ways of life are inferior by western standards.\textsuperscript{51}

Easmon frames herself as a messenger on behalf of children from a village in Sierra Leone (fig. 14). Upon learning that African American children refer to them as “savages,” the Sierra Leonean students explain why such a descriptive is both hurtful and inaccurate. Easmon relays the message saying:

\begin{quote}
The jest of it is that our people in the bush have heard that you call them savages, a word they translate as meaning the people who have no sense. This hurts them because as one of our sayings is, “The lion hath one mind, the eagle another”, by which they mean it is possible to do things in more than one way, — it is therefore unfair to call a person who does a thing well, but in a different way from you a savage.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Throughout the article Easmon offers insight on various aspects of the Sierra Leonean children’s daily lives, such as how communities address crime and enforce laws, the education system, and cultural norms concerning marriage.

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{51} Easmon, Kathleen,: A Little Talk About West Africa” \textit{The Brownies’ Book} (June 1921): 170-173. \\
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 170.
\end{small}
She explains that despite the differences in their ways of life, the Sierra Leonean community is intellectually astute and validates their social practices. Through articles and stories like this, *The Brownies’ Book* promoted Pan-Africanist ideologies by creating a space where African American children could learn and appreciate the lived experiences of Black children across the globe. By enlightening them to the misconceptions of African life that often appeared in their school books, it enabled them to better understand their fellow Brownies and ensure that they did not contribute to the perpetuation of those stereotypes.

The influence of fairy tales could even be found in the magazine’s advertisements (fig.15). In the April 1921 issue, readers find an advertisement for Madam C. J. Walker’s cosmetic and hygiene products. Adhering to traditional form, the advertisement tells a story opening with the familiar phrase “Once upon a time.” Readers are introduced to a “Good Fairy” who often thought of how she might...
help those “unfortunate” children of whom “nature had not given long, wavy hair and a smooth lovely complexion.” Upon a wave of her magic wand, the fairy granted those children who “would be beautiful” with a supply of Walker’s hair and skin products as a solution to their assumed problem. Admittedly, the advertisement’s claim that certain boys and girls were not beautiful as a result of a flawed skin complexion or hair length and texture, contradicted the magazine’s goal of empowering Black children to recognize themselves as inherently beautiful. Though paradoxical in its treatment of beauty, the advertisement’s use of the fairytale supported the movement’s emphasis on economic development through Black entrepreneurship because it promoted the products of a prominent Black business woman.

Part 3

For Children... and Grown Ups of the Sun: *The Brownies’ Book* as a Cross-Written Text

Cross-writing, as it relates to children’s literature, refers to the dual address of a work to both children and adult readers. *The Brownies Book* undoubtedly engaged both children and adults in its efforts to create a new racial identity for the Black community and therefore can be understood as a cross-written text. *The Brownies’ Book* was birthed during a time of ideological flux in which the racial violence spanning the years of 1917 and the “Red Summer” of 1919 forced the educated Black elite to reevaluate their relationship

with the Black working class. Elites advocated for the development of an educated Black middle class that would lead radical progress by showing the potential of the Black community to white America and thus minimize the prevalence of racial bias. Despite previously conceptualized distinctions between the Black working class and themselves, it became apparent to the educated race leaders that such division negated racial uplift. The “Talented Tenth” maintained their code of respectability, but now sought to convert Black people of all socioeconomic levels, to their ideals instead of looking to a small, educated sect of the Black community to lead the movement. In an effort to accelerate racial progress, Kevin K. Gains notes, “black elites exchanged their normative vision of rural southern black folk, rooted in the dominant plantation legend, for a sociological concept of race progress measured by the status of black families in the urban setting.” As Du Bois and other race leaders worked to achieve their inclusive vision for the New Negro Movement, targeting domestic life and increasing educational opportunities would prove to be the most impactful areas of influence. The children’s periodical met this goal because it was read primarily in the home and coincided with educational initiatives of the time. Additionally, a magazine for children was particularly useful for their mission because of the child’s unique position of power. Ideologically, Black children at large already accepted bourgeois values such as mainstream schooling and literacy, thus

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placing them in a position of control and influence.\textsuperscript{56} As race leaders sought widespread social change, they used children as a means to influence their adult parents and relatives.

The literary term “cross-writing child and adult”, first coined by U.C. Knoepflmacher, describes the centuries old phenomenon in which children’s literature is dually addressed to both child and adult audiences.\textsuperscript{57} Though specifically marketed as a children’s magazine, \textit{The Brownies’ Book} straddled the binary of adult and child readership. The increase in educational programming and state sponsored literacy commissions during the period gave way to an increase of Black households where both children and adults could read which created another avenue for race leaders’ efforts. Strategically employing cross-writing throughout the publication, the editors sought for the magazine to influence child readers along with their parents. By blurring the lines between adult and child, Du Bois inserts the child in “adult” concerns, thus leading to the development of future race leaders. Transversely, he codes political and intellectual instructions for parents as children’s literature in efforts to make the information more palatable, especially to those adults recently introduced to literacy. Through cross-writing, \textit{The Brownies’} appealed to a wider audience and sufficiently impacted the New Negro Movement’s promotion of intellectual development, cultural appreciation, and political involvement.

\textsuperscript{56} Smith, \textit{Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance}, xx.

While cross-writing often operates covertly within a text, writers can also be direct in their dual address as exemplified by “The Grown Ups Corner” section of the magazine. The 1919 premier issue of *The Brownies’* introduced “The Grown Ups Corner” which appeared in every issue (fig. 16). It focused on “adult” issues like parenting, community organizing, and the impact of the publication on the lives of young people. In their introduction of “The Grown Ups Corner” the writer made sure to emphasize that this section would be limited in space, so as not to “encroach on the children’s property.”

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 16. “The Grown Ups Corner” The Brownies’ Book Jan. 1920*

The writer goes on to explain the vital role of parents in the success of the magazine, “This magazine is published for children, but no one understands the needs of children like you do, and what we ought to publish, and what we ought not to publish, and just what their problems are, what they need for themselves and for their children.” The editors of *The Brownies’* Book (January 1920) 25.

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59 Ibid.
Brownies’ make a call to action for parents, urging them to provide feedback for the magazine’s content. This request of involvement reflects the larger call for parents to aid in raising children who would maintain the momentum of the racial movement.

One way the publication served as a cross-written text was in its emphasis on parental involvement concerning issues of education. “The Grown Ups Corner” debut also included contributing messages from parents in response to the magazine’s announcement in the previous month’s issue of The Crisis. One anticipatory remark from Mrs. C. M. Johnson of Nahant, Massachusetts, explained that such a magazine would assist her in addressing racism’s impact on her nine year old son.

The only Black boy in their city, the ongoing race riots, resulted in increasing in negative interactions with white children, many of whom call him derogatory names like “nigger.” Mrs. Johnson’s frustrations and uncertainty lead to a conversation with her son, who stated, “Mother, the only way to fight these white people is to get an education and fight them with knowledge.” In this moment the boy embodies the New Negro child. He asserts the importance of education as a means of resisting racism and does so in conversation with his mother, as if to enlighten her. The power dynamics of a typical mother and son relationship shift, and the boy acts as the race leader Du Bois and other elites hope to fashion. The message is clear to both adults and child readers: education is the only way to empower the race.
Highlighting the importance of education in the lives of young people and the adults who mentor and parent them, every issue of the magazine contained the “Little People of the Month” section, which celebrated achievements of Black young people across the country. Most prevalent were particular academic accomplishments like graduations or educational awards. Parents, educators, and youth club leaders submitted stories and images, such as the one in figure 17, to publicly recognize those students who excelled in their studies (fig. 17). The image shows graduates of I.C. Norcam High School in Portsmouth, VA, Charlton High in Beaumont, TX, Colored High in Shreveport, LA, Dunbar High in Fairmont, WV, and Straight College in New Orleans, LA. The recognition of these accomplishments brought pride not only to those young people who were featured in the section, but also to their parents. The editors treated academic achievement with great honor and framed it as a highly admirable quality to which children and adults ought aspire. For those working class families newly
introduced to the academic realm, these images and stories framed academic achievement as accessible and something all Brownies, old and young alike, must prioritize.

In promotion of an intellectually adept “New Negro” child, the editors looked to parents to provide children with a domestic sphere that supported their learning, well beyond the classroom, and facilitated historic understanding of significant figures in African American history. Advertisements for books appeared in the magazine regularly. For example, the advertisement in figure 18 offers a list of titles that would be excellent additions to a child’s library because not only did they strengthen literacy skills, they promoted racial pride by educating the reader on notable Black figures in African American history. Advertisements and articles, that spoke to the vital role of domestic learning, directly addressed parents’ responsibility to maintain a home environment concurrent with the ideals of the New Negro Movement.
The New Negro Movement’s ideal child was well-rounded and not only excelled academically, but was also engaged in extracurricular activities such as sports and the arts. As one “Little People of the Month” depicts, engagement with the arts was an essential element in the development of the New Negro child. Looking to the May 1920 issue, we see four young girls posed in various dance positions, adorned with large bows, tutu skirts, and ballet slippers (fig. 19). Harkening to the fairytale convention, the author describes the young dancers as “truly little fairies, – not the make believe fairies of the story book, but real fairies who get lots of happiness out of doing good for others.”\(^{60}\)

The article congratulates the work of an initiative named Hope Day Nursery that provides childcare and meals to children of widowed women so that they may work and provide for their families. As part of a benefit recital to financially support the initiative, the “little fairies” shared their

\(^{60}\) Daisy Cargile Reed “Little People of the Month” May 1920.
dancing talents with a crowd of 4,000 people. The author describes the girls’ fundraising recital as having four main benefits: It provided funds to help with the expenses of the nursery. It gave them an opportunity to do something they enjoy. It gave them an outlet in which to maintain their physical fitness and practice gracefulness, and lastly, it brought joy to an audience of adults who needed entertainment after working all day. As a cross-written text, the author’s message for both child and adult readers is that young people should be involved in the arts as well as be engaged in community outreach.

There are a variety of cross-writing systems writers employ in a dually addressed text. Blurring the line between child and adult audiences, the writers of The Brownies’ Book appropriated the adult newspaper and presented it in a way that looked like a children’s text. For example, the “As the Crow Flies” portion of the magazine covered current events from across the world, much like that of an adult newspaper. Not shying away from seemingly adult topics of discussion, this section covered news on war, political strife, and international affairs. Childhood Studies scholar Sandra L. Beckett describes the technique of cross-writing as re-writing an adult text for children. The “As the Crow Section” reads very much like the adult publication of The Crisis. By analyzing the similarities between both journalistic works, we can understand The Brownies’ as a cross-written text for adults and children.

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61 Becket, Transcending Boundaries.
Conclusion

In an effort to combat the effects of racial violence and the vast circulation of racist imagery, W.E.B. DuBois, Jessie Fauset, and Augustus Granville Dill produced *The Brownies Book*. Using the momentum created from the success of *The Crisis* and the annual “Children’s Number”, the editors created a magazine that strategically placed children at the forefront of the cultural awakening, contributing to the creation of a new racial identity amongst African Americans in the early 1920s. The children’s publication was, as scholar Dianne Johnson-Feelings describes, “in essence, an experiment in pedagogy and propaganda aimed at African American youth.”

Though promoting the ideologies of the New Negro Movement was the primary mission of the publication, it also served as a source of entertainment during a period of American history marked by racial turbulence and evolution. Seamlessly intertwining the innocence of sentimental constructions of childhood with the complexities of the current racial climate, the editors looked to children to refashion a new collective identity and lead their communities in the future. The publication countered derogatory images and stereotypes, utilized recognizable children’s literary tropes, and also influenced adults. In his autobiography, Langston Hughes credits the magazine as one of two of his accomplishments of which he “look[s] back with infinite satisfaction.”

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63 Ibid., 346.
publication, too, is infinite. During a time when the humanity and innocence of Black children was often neglected, *The Brownies Book* was a source of joy, love, and racial pride for little “Brownies” across the globe.