

The Unique Diversity of Black Girls' Experience



Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*. Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 256 pp., \$28.

Nazera Sadiq Wright's *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* is an exemplar of well-researched and innovative scholarship, an exciting book for scholars of early African American literature and beyond. This ambitious project is reflective of the field of early African American studies, built over decades of scholarship that has laid a foundation for continued and ever more exhilarating research. Wright positions her own work atop this strong foundation, also creating a new foundation of her own, on which future black girlhood scholarship might be built.

Wright's work is interdisciplinary, situated at several methodological and historical intersections: the burgeoning field of black girlhood studies; print culture studies; childhood studies and children's literary studies; women's, gender, and sexuality studies; nineteenth-century American studies; African American studies, and American studies more broadly. Wright's research is as meticulous as her prose. Her careful presentation of historical facts, close readings, and analysis is accessible even to readers outside nineteenth-century African American studies, as she lays open the historical and cultural contexts for understanding the myriad texts she discusses. This accessibility and precision will be useful for those interested in both the content and method of Wright's scholarship.

Black girlhood, Wright argues, is an overlooked but resonant category in American literary studies. While much attention has been given to the most widely circulated racist caricature of black girlhood, Topsy from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, actual black girls have been woefully understudied. As Wright shows, black girls are fully present and diverse in their representation in nineteenth-century African American literature, where they were recognized as holding a prime political position in larger narratives of black activism and uplift. Recognizing the politicized position of black girlhood during this period will surely "prove useful to the black girls of today and the people who care about them" (22).

In *Black Girlhood*, we see ideas about racial progress and black futures. Although age is an often overlooked site for discourses of intersectional identity, work in childhood studies has necessarily addressed childhood's intersections with race and gender. Adding further nuance to theories of how childhood fits into intersectionality, Wright discusses the various "stages" of black girlhood writers have marked. Characterizations of "youthful" and "prematurely knowing" girlhood appear as age-markers and also markers of experience (10). Further, these reveal intersectional positionalities of girls as fluid rather than static. Attending to age markers not only adds another layer to these intersectional identities, but also allows us to see "the unique diversity of black girls' experience" (14).

Importantly recognizing the phenomenon of black girls' victimization (and particularly their sexual victimization), Wright also shows how black girls were represented in other ways. Black girls, she demonstrates, were empowered within their communities. Moreover, black girlhood stories did not always focus on their sexuality or even their reproductive potential. African American women writers, for instance, imagined black girlhood's trajectories beyond wifehood and motherhood. Wright also acknowledges gendered differences in how black men and black women wrote about black girls and whether their representations leaned toward ideals or interiorities of black girlhood. Not mere reflections of white ideals and representations of childhood, however, both black men and black women approached black girls as having inherent cultural and historical value.

Wright's book traces a genealogy of black girlhood from the 1820s through the early 1900s and spans a variety of genres including newspaper editorials, autobiographical accounts, advice columns, novels, and short fiction. Each of Wright's chapters takes up a particular historical moment for theorizing black girlhood, but her progression avoids reduction to a simple narrative of racial progress.

Wright's first chapter shows how the editors of black newspapers like *Freedom's Journal* (1827-1829) and the *Colored American* (1837-1841) recognized black girls' importance to family and community. Still, black male editors overwhelmingly idealized black girls as two-dimensional models of "respectability" poised to help uplift the race. Black girls' vulnerability presented a problem that both reflected and reproduced the economic difficulties of many black households. In this, the relationship between black girls and black mothers (both as role models and as their own future selves) was key. This focus on black girls' relations to family resulted in less-nuanced depictions than those produced by black women themselves.

Chapter two turns to black women's antebellum writing and authors including Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Maria Stewart, who explored black girls' development and complex trajectories. In this, they represented black girls' interiority as they formed strategies for navigating the world and its perils. By necessity, these girls departed from earlier, "respectable" domestic representations. Wright shows that these imagined futures were varied, reading "prematurely knowing" girls not only as burdened by knowledge of their own sexual vulnerability, but also as possessing a precocious understanding of their own resilience.

Reading Gertrude Bustill Mossell's late-century advice writing for black girls in the *New York Freeman* (1884-1887) in her third chapter, Wright shows how precocious black girlhood was directed toward civic engagement. Following the failure of Reconstruction, the futures imagined by African Americans necessitated careful strategizing. Mossell presented black girls as contributing to both the push for national structural change and the creation of survival strategies within the black community. In these columns, the breadth of black girls' everyday concerns and interests come into view.

In her fourth chapter, Wright takes up Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889), a magnificent and under-read contribution to Reconstruction-era African American literature. This serialized novel offers hope and encouragement for black girls' possible futures. In this "uplift" novel, Harper foregoes important markers of "respectability" for her girlhood protagonist, Annette—including marriage. Importantly, Harper represents black girls not only as workers for the larger benefit of the race, but as valuable in their own right, offering a model of what they might need to thrive.

Wright's final chapter reads early twentieth-century black conduct books, which would make the difficulties of black girlhood apparent as they shouldered these

burdens of racial advancement. Recognizing black girls' importance to uplift resulted in the promotion of burdensome behavioral guidelines. In Silas X. Floyd's *Floyd's Flowers: Or, Duty and Beauty for Colored Children* (1905), sketches and photographs illustrated models of racial performance that responded to prejudice by departing from earlier caricatures of black people. The rigidity of such models for black girlhood speaks to pessimism in the nadir of America's racist history, evidenced by other responses to anti-black violence in the work of Ida B. Wells and the anti-lynching plays of early twentieth-century African American women writers. Wright reads this pessimism with a mind toward the specific experiences of black girls in this historical moment.

As is the case with the most compelling scholarly work, Wright invites further research to meet and engage her own. She suggests studies on nineteenth-century black boyhoods as one such avenue. By offering careful readings and analysis of recently recovered and understudied texts, including Maria Stewart's "The First Stage of Life" (1861) and Frances Harper's *Trial and Triumph*, Wright contributes to the continued reimagining of early African American literature as a body of work. Wright also projects her study into later moments for imagining black girlhood, in the writing of twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors that fall outside the scope of her project, such as Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Toni Morrison. This extension marks how Wright's work anticipates and sets the stage for scholarship in twentieth- and twenty-first-century girlhood studies and for childhood studies more broadly.

Wright's analysis further reveals the complex nexuses of the print public sphere. African American newspapers' connections to "uplift" activism and education as well as their support for black literary publication demonstrate the great potential for interdisciplinary work between print culture and literary studies. Wright's addition of girlhood studies to this interdisciplinary mix shows how girls were not divorced from this print public sphere but instead constitute a prominent subject within it. Her contribution is also methodological: "Mapping black girlhood as a representational strategy in early African American literature ... advances understandings of the black female experience in the nineteenth century and reshapes the social relationship between African Americans and the culture of print" (17). Throughout her project, Wright instructs in reading methodologies that have long been necessary for scholarship on African American and women writers, particularly in learning to read "aright," to consider both what is and what is not written, and to read each text "within and even against its social, political, and economic context" (9).

Wright's epilogue extends her discussion forward, with the knowledge that girls who grew up during the first decade of the twentieth century—like Zora Neale Hurston, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Nella Larsen—went on to participate in the Harlem Renaissance. Looking to later periods, we might understand how the tropes of black girlhood that Wright outlines here helped to frame later literary attention to black girls, by writers like Toni Cade Bambara and Toni

Morrison. This influence becomes clear as Wright ends her work with a discussion of contemporary critiques of black girl figures such as Malia and Sasha Obama, Gabby Douglas, and Quvenzhané Wallis, and the African American Policy Forum's 2015 study, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*. Wright's study shows the roots of contemporary attacks on black girlhood. In a world in which black girls continue to be overlooked, underserved, and undervalued, *Black Girlhood* is both groundbreaking and refreshing in its attention to the complexity with which black girlhood was lived, represented, discussed, and shaped in nineteenth-century African American literature.

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