

THE BROWNIES' BOOK: PRESERVING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEMORIES THROUGH TEXTUAL LINEAGE

By LaVerne Gyant

As editor of the *Crisis* magazine, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a monthly column, “The Children’s Number,” which was first published in October 1912. “The Children’s Number” discussed current issues that affected young people and their achievements.¹ According to Du Bois, it was “easily the most popular number of the year.”² In the 1919 edition of the *Crisis*, Du Bois announced the publication of *The Brownies’ Book*, a new periodical for Black children—which became the first publication to target African American children.³ Historically, *The Brownies’ Book* will be remembered as a hallowed publication that sought to preserve young people’s memories and spark their curiosities through textual lineage. In Du Bois’s announcement of the publication, he characterized *The Brownies’ Book* as

a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter, Emulation, and designed for Kiddies from Six to Sixteen. It will seek to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk—black and brown and yellow and white. Of course, pictures, puzzles, stories, letters from little ones, clubs, games and oh everything.⁴

The Brownies’ Book grew out of Du Bois’s concern for what Black children were learning and their daily experiences in schools. It also grew from a letter a young girl wrote about her desire to learn about Black history and her hatred for Whites.⁵ The stated goals of *The Brownies’ Book* were:

1. To make colored children realize that being “colored” is a normal beautiful thing.
2. To make them familiar with the history and achievement of the Negro race.
3. To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous people.
4. To teach them a delicate code of honor and action in their relations with white children.
5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions.
6. To point out the best amusement and joys and worth-while things of life.
7. To inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice.⁶

According to Harris, these goals sought to teach children “knowledge of and respect for African culture.”⁷

Du Bois, Augustus Granville Dill, and Jessie Redmon Fauset offered the first issue of *The Brownies’ Book* in January 1920. It was published by Du Bois and Dill publishers, sold for 15 cents a month or \$1.50 for a year’s subscription, and had a circulation of 5,000. As one of the first periodicals for children, *The Brownies’ Book* was published from 1920 through 1922. In the final issue of *The Brownies’ Book*, Du Bois noted that they needed a minimum of 12,000 subscriptions and that the economic times were the reasons they had to stop publishing it.

The fault has not been with our readers. We have an unusually enthusiastic set of subscribers. But the magazine was begun just at the time of industrial depression following the war, and the fault of our suspension therefore is rather in the times, which are so out of joint, then in our constituency.⁸

In *The Brownies’ Book*, there were stories and poems by Jessie Redmond Fauset, Augusta E. Bird, Nella Larson, Augustus G. Dill, Langston Hughes, Effie Lee, and Alphonso Stafford. Stories, games, poems, and puzzles were also written by children from around the world. Sections in the periodical included “The Judge,” written by Jessie Redmond Fauset, who had conversations with children—Billikins, Billie, William, and Wilhelmina—about their parents, their behavior, their friends, their schoolwork, and Black history. “The Jury” focused on letters from children. Then there was “As the Crow Flies,” which focused on multicultural awareness, responsibility, and international news, written by Du Bois. The other sections included “Playtime,” which offered puzzles and games from around the world; “Our Little Friends,” which praised

and highlighted photographs of children; “Little People of the Month,” which featured African American children excelling in academics, music, writing, and art and in the community; and “The Grown-Ups Corner,” which served as a venue for adults and parents to make suggestions and share their views about the magazine. Through each section, “children of the sun” were encouraged to dream, to read, to learn about their history, and to know they were part of a “big world with many different countries and many different kinds of people, all with their own ways of doing things.”⁹

For this paper, I will focus on the sections “The Jury” and “As the Crow Flies,” and highlight the connections between *The Brownies’ Book* and *Ebony Jr!*.

The Jury

“The Jury” focused on letters from children who lived in New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Washington, DC, among other locations. In these letters, the children wrote about their pain, their questions, racial uplift, pride, gratitude, curiosity and honesty. The letters demonstrated that they “were normal children with normal wants and needs.”¹⁰ Harris¹¹ noted that the letters focused on request for assistance, assessment of transforming self, response of Whites/international readers, and effects of institutional racism. For example, a young man from Philadelphia wrote:

My mother says you are going to have a magazine about colored boys and girls, and I am very glad. So I am writing to ask you if you will please put in your paper some of the things which colored boys can work at when they grow up. I don’t want to be a doctor or anything like that. I think I’d like to plan houses for men to build . . . I said to a boy . . . “when I grow up, I am going to draw a lot of houses like that and have men build them.” The boy was white, and he looked at me and laughed and said, “Colored boys don’t draw houses.” Why don’t they, Mr. Editor?¹²

Another young man asked that “The Judge” write a story about sugar rising:

I have been reading *The Brownies’ Book* for some time and like it very much, especially that story about the bees. I wish that you would ask the Judge to tell the story of sugar raising sometimes. I’d like to know how people raise things in other parts of the country.¹³

A young girl from Pittsburgh spoke about her frustration in

learning about White heroes:

I get tired of hearing only of white heroes and celebrating holidays in their honor. I think every year we ought to have parades or some sort of big time on Douglass’ birthday and on the anniversary of Crispus Attucks’ death. I wish you’d say something about this in *The Brownies’ Book*. All the colored girls in my class said they wished so too when I told them I was going to write you.¹⁴

Another example is from two young men from Paul Quinn College, who spoke about their pride and motivation:

We are very close pals and in the same grade, and both of us are striving for leadership of our class. We find that this magazine broadens our ideas and increases our vocabularies. We are advising every boy and girl to read it.¹⁵

The letters from White and international readers were few, but addressed the positive effects *The Brownies’ Book* had on them.

I want to tell you that I enjoy the *Brownies’* magazine immensely. I am a little white girl; I am ten years old . . . I was especially interested in the pictures of those who did so much. Paul Johnson’s smile makes laugh back to him. I like the cover also.¹⁶

A young lady from Cuba asked the readers to be her friend and challenged them to translate a poem she wrote in Spanish:

Now my dear lectores (readers), I have all as my best friends. I am a Cuban born, but my parents are natives of St. Kitts. Think for one instant and then answer these few words: Would you like to have me as a friend? Tell me what you want to know of Cuba. Now I am looking out in the next number to see all my friends. And if there is any that can read and write Spanish.¹⁷

In addressing the issue of institutionalized racism, some of the letters focused on the negative images, while others discussed racial acceptance. For example, in the February 1920 issue, a young girl asked about finding a home among “a good Christian colored family.”

I am a girl sixteen years old. I am an orphan, having neither a mother or father . . . White people have kept me, that is, I have worked for them to earn my living. Realizing that I did not always want to be a scrub girl, I have tried to educate myself, as I could

not go to school. Do you think I could through The Brownies' Book get a home among a good Christian colored family? I would like to be in a family where they had no large children. I wouldn't mind one small baby, as I love them. I wouldn't mind being with elderly people. Just anywhere among good Christian people, where I could go to a good public schools . . . I am a dark brown skin girl, with Negro hair, not being very tall nor good to look at. But I wear my clothes nicely.¹⁸

In another letter a young girl discussed what she had learned about Africa in her geography class,

Sometimes in school I feel so badly. In the geography lesson, when we read about the different people who live in the world, all the pictures are pretty, nice-looking young men and women, except the Africans. They always look so ugly. I don't mean to make fun of them, for I am not pretty myself; but I know not all colored people look like me. I see lots of ugly white people, too, but not all white people look like them and they are not the ones they put in the geography. Last week the girl across the aisle from me in school looked at the picture and laughed and whispered something about it to her friend. And they both looked at me. It made me so angry.¹⁹

As the Crow Flies

The section "As the Crow Flies" taught children "about current events in America and all over the world."²⁰ It was written in a language children could understand. It informed readers about World War I, the League of Nations, how Africa was divided, the opening of a colored hotel (the Whitelaw), and the race relations and race hostility in Europe.²¹ Through "As the Crow Flies," Du Bois hoped readers developed a "radical political posture that rejected racial intolerance, war, colonialism, inequality and economic exploitation."²²

In the first issue of *The Brownies' Book*, the "Crow" was described as "black and O so beautiful, shining with dark blues and purples, with little hints of gold in his mighty wings. He flies far above the Earth, looking downward with sharp eyes."²³ On several occasions, the Crow would make comments about particular events. For example, in the March 1920 issue, the Crow informed the readers that "Congress is trying to frame a bill to keep people from advocating violence and riot. So far, the bills proposed would stop folks from thinking."²⁴ Another time he spoke on intolerance and relations between nations: "England and

Russia have arranged an understanding by which they are to trade with each other. Other understanding with various European countries will doubtless follow. The United States still stands aloof."²⁵ The Crow also addressed the issues of children in the United States and the world.

I never before saw so many hungry children. They are begging, and half-naked on the streets of Vienna, in the bitter winter weather. They are dying in Poland, Serbia, and Russia. They need food and clothes and coal, and it will be a long time before industry is organized to supply their wants. Is not war an awful thing? We must do all we can to avoid another war.²⁶

The Crow reported facts and commentary on a variety of issues. For example, in the August 1920 issue, he accused "Americans of being partially culpable for the dying and starving babies in Eastern Europe."²⁷ He later spoke about how the colonial struggles in Egypt, Haiti, India, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines "were like the struggles of Blacks in America."²⁸ In several issues, he reported about the race riots, informing children of the "insurgence of the Ku Klux Klan" and their intimidation and violence toward Blacks.²⁹ While talking about these situations, he also shared information about anti-lynching organizations, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the NAACP, and the number of African Americans who received bachelor's and graduate/professional degrees from both historically Black institutions and predominantly White institutions. He also supported and spoke of the benefits of unions: "An international trades union congress in Holland is appealing to the workers of the world to form a union against all future wars."³⁰ Later he spoke about women's right to vote:

The fifty-first annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association was held in Chicago. Over 2,000 women were present. This will be the convention, as the object of the Association will soon be accomplished, namely, giving of the vote to women. Frederick Douglass spoke at many of the early conventions of this Association.³¹

At the same time, he informed the children that thirty-three states had passed the amendment to give women the right to vote.

"As the Crow Flies" informed children of current events and helped them to develop and discuss events and issues from a radical political standpoint, to reject racial intolerance, and to shape their perceptions.

Discussion

The Brownies' Book was an important magazine for children. Each section—"The Judge," "The Jury," "As the Crow Flies," "The Grown-ups Corner," "Little People of the Month," "Our Little Friends," and "Playtime"—sought to remind children that being colored was a normal, beautiful thing; informed them about the history and achievements of African Americans and how other colored children had grown into beautiful, useful, and famous people; taught a code of honor and action in their relations with White children; and taught them to prepare for occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice.³²

"The Jury" and "As the Crow Flies" highlight how *The Brownies' Book* taught children about each other and about friends around the world through stories, games, and letters. They also highlight the knowledge that *The Brownies' Book* "was . . . an experiment in pedagogy and propaganda."³³ "The Jury" demonstrated that children had a significant, valid, and deciding voice in discussion about what was happening to and around them, how they viewed their lives, their desires to become someone, and their need to meet other children around the world. "As the Crow Flies" presented events from around the globe and helped children to "understand the interrelatedness of events occurring in different parts of the globe."³⁴ As Du Bois noted in the final issue of *The Brownies' Book*, "For twenty-four months we have brought Joy and Knowledge to four thousand Brownies stretched from Oregon to Florida . . . for it has been such fun. After all . . . perhaps we shall meet again."³⁵

Children did meet again some fifty years later, when *Ebony Jr!* was published by Johnson Publications in 1973. Like *The Brownies' Book*, *Ebony Jr!* was developed to share with children the history and achievements of African Americans, information about international and national events, and achievements of children around the country, and to remind them "of the great traditions of which you are a part."³⁶ Both—as hallowed sites for African American memory and curiosity—sought to heighten racial consciousness and show that reading is fun and opened doors to a new world of opportunities.³⁷ *Ebony Jr!* ceased publishing in the mid-eighties. Since that time, there has not been another publication that has targeted African American children.

Notes

1. J. B. Stewart and LaVerne Gyant, "Africana Studies for Young People: Reflections, Sounds, Sights, and Color in *Ebony Jr!* and the *Brownies' Book*," in *Flight, In Search of Vision*, ed. J. B. Stewart (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2004), 221-234.
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The True Brownies," *The Crisis* 18 (1919): 285–86.
3. Violet J. Harris, *The Brownies' Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children's Literature* (Unpublished dissertation, University of Georgia, 1986).
4. Du Bois, "The True Brownies," 286.
5. Harris, *The Brownies' Book*, 2.
6. Du Bois, "The True Brownies," 285.
7. Dianne Johnson-Feelings, ed., *The Best of the Brownies' Book* (New York: Oxford Press, 1996), 15.
8. *The Brownies' Book* 2, no. 24 (1922): 400.
9. Johnson-Feelings, *Best of the Brownies' Book*, 15.
10. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 1 (1920): 15.
11. Harris, *The Brownies' Book*, 189.
12. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 3 (1920): 83.
13. *The Brownies' Book* 2, no. 3 (1921): 89.
14. *The Brownies' Book* 2, no. 7 (1921): 208.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 52.
17. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 2 (1920): 52.
18. Ibid.
19. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 6 (1920): 78.
20. Johnson-Feelings, *Best of the Brownies' Book*, 15.
21. Stewart and Gyant, "Africana Studies for Young People," 226.
22. Ibid.
23. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 1 (1920): 23.
24. Ibid., 77.
25. *The Brownies' Book* 2, no. 6 (1921):184.
26. *The Brownies' Book* 1, no. 2 (1920): 63.
27. Ibid.
28. Harris, *The Brownies' Book*, 169.
29. Ibid., 172.
30. *The Brownies' Book* 2 no. 10 (1921): 318.
31. *The Brownies' Book* 1 no. 3 (1920):77.
32. Du Bois, "The True Brownies," 286.
33. Johnson-Feelings, *Best of the Brownies' Book*, 336.
34. Ibid., 344.
35. Du Bois, *The Brownies' Book* 3, no. 12 (1922): n.p.
36. John H. Johnson, "Why Ebony Jr!?" *Ebony Jr* 4 (1973).
37. Stewart and Gyant, "Africana Studies for Young People."



LaVerne Gyant, Ed.D., is a professor at Northern Illinois University, where she is also the director of the Center for Black Studies. She has served as advisor of the John Henrike Clark Honor Society and Afrikan Cultural Pageant, and is currently co-advisor

to S.I.S.T.E.R.S. and Zeta Nu Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority. She has also assisted in organizing an intergenerational Sister Circle for women of African descent and Black Professional Women Rock. Gyant is currently serving as vice president of the African Heritage Studies Association and on the board of the Institute of Whole Life Healing.

LEADERSHIP THROUGH KNOWLEDGE: U.S. ARMY ROTC CADETS' SOJOURN THROUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND MILITARY LEGACIES

By **Karina Avila, Maria Colompos, and Shanell Walter**

Protecting Hallowed Grounds: African American Soldiers 1778–1948

"I am the past—the spirit of those warriors who have made the final sacrifice"¹ is a resonating phrase that Army ROTC cadets proudly recite within the Cadet Creed. A cadet must be resilient to develop into a leader whose primary mission is to protect the United States and its people. Additionally, a cadet learns how to support a military community. Learning how to create and maintain strong bonds between service men and women is a crucial element to accomplish the ultimate goal of protecting the people of the United States. As ROTC cadets at Northern Illinois University (NIU), we reflect on the past to protect the future. Thus, it is pertinent to examine social justice challenges in the U.S. Army and inclusion milestones.

African Americans have fought in wars and battles in support of the United States. For example, they fought in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.² Notably, in 1778, the First Rhode Island Regiment was the first all-Black military unit in United States contracted into the service under the authority of White officers.³

On August 29, 1778, these exceptional men fought in the battle of Rhode Island on Aquidneck Island, where they effectively held their linear attack for four hours against British-Hessian assaults, which allowed their fellow soldiers time to transition.⁴

In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment that made African Americans full citizens of the United States and prohibited states from denying them equal protection or due process of law was ratified.⁵ The Fourteenth Amendment