

Once upon a Time in Aframerica: The Peculiar Significance of Fairies in the Brownies' Book.

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Once upon a Time in Aframerica: The "Peculiar" Significance of Fairies in the *Brownies' Book*

Fern Kory

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Once upon a Time in Aframerica:
The "Peculiar" Significance of Fairies in the *Brownies' Book***

Fern Kory (bio)

Little Annabelle was lying on the lawn, a volume of Grimm before her. Annabelle was 9 years of age, the daughter of a colored lawyer, and the prettiest dark child in the village. She had long played in the fairyland of knowledge, and was far advanced for one of her years. A vivid imagination was her chief endowment. . .

"I wonder," she said to herself that afternoon, "if there is any such thing as a colored fairy"? Surely there must be, but in this book they're all white."

—Fenton Johnson, "The Black Fairy"

The *Brownies' Book* (January 1920-December 1921) was a groundbreaking but short-lived monthly children's magazine created in part to provide African American children like Annabelle with "colored" fairies. It was the brainchild of W. E. B. DuBois, the only African American founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and since 1910 the managing editor of the NAACP's official organ, *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*. The *Brownies' Book* grew out of the popular annual "Children's Number" of *Crisis*, published each October starting in 1912. In this special issue, dozens of photographs of African American children submitted by readers visually framed the usual coverage of political, cultural, and social issues. Each "Children's Number" also included a story explicitly directed to a child audience, either an African folk tale or an original fairy story like the one quoted in the epigraph.¹

The fact that the first stories offered to children by the editors of *Crisis* were folktales and fairy stories suggests that these genres were central to their conception of an African American children's literature. This idea is played out even more fully in the *Brownies' Book*—not just in stories featuring fairies and elves but also in poems (including "Fairies" by Langston Hughes in the January 1921 issue), illustrations, letters from readers, advertisements, and, of course, the magazine's title, which pointedly appropriates a European folk character, **[End Page 91]** the brownie. But to understand the rhetoric of the choices made by those responsible for first the title and then the content of the *Brownies'*

Book, it is necessary to understand the literary-historical context in which these choices were made. Only then can we fully appreciate the rhetorical ingenuity of the editors, authors, and illustrators who tried to make a place for African American children in children's literature by revising the materials of mainstream children's literature "'authentically,' with a Black difference" (Gates xxii). Specifically, I want to argue that they did so in the *Brownies' Book* by self-consciously "signifying" on the folk and fairy tale conventions that were an integral part of the Eurocentric pattern of American children's literature.

My terminology here reflects that of Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*, in which he discusses the use of "signifying" ("intertextual revision") by African American writers as a culturally specific rhetorical strategy. In this book, Gates focuses his critical lens on revision of previous African American writers by African American writers within that same tradition. But he recognizes that "black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition" (xxii) and that "[a]nyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparatist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black" (xxiv). In the context of American culture's conflation of European fairy tale and children's literature, the editors and writers of the *Brownies' Book* had compelling reasons to respond to the Western canon of children's literature.

By the time W. E. B. DuBois launched his monthly magazine for African American children, fairy tales had come to be seen as the literature of American childhood. This assumption—for it is not quite a fact—is dramatized in literature published by the venerable *St. Nicholas Magazine* (established 1873) between 1900 and 1920, in which allusions to fairy-tale characters and conventions are common. Such allusions are in fact quietly ubiquitous in poetry, realistic fiction, and even nonfiction published in *St. Nicholas*...

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