



African American Children in American Political Life: The Literature and Politics of the Impossible (Children's Literature and Culture)

Myisha Priest

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This book explores the ways that figures of Black children and writing for them articulate complex and contested notions of justice arising from the entanglements of black freedom and black subjection, articulations made material in spectacular performances on the political stage. Connecting childhood studies, cultural studies, and literary studies it examines how competing claims over the meaning of the lives, the bare lives, and often the deaths of Black children shape the fraught and contested terrain of rights, citizenship, and justice. Figures of Black children have been utilized on the political and cultural stage to negate black personhood as well as to reclaim it, often at the very same time. Engaging this tension, Priest argues that the precarious life of Black childhood has been not only site of subjection, but also of a radical imagining. The volume examines the striking pattern of Black writers who write primarily for adults writing for and about children in an effort to reinvigorate the imperiled and unfinished project of freedom, and the ways that these written acts echo the uses of children on the political stage. It reads Black childhood as represented in literature, social practice, political discourse, and action to argue that literary images of Black children, their appearance as political actors, and the construction of a radical tradition of children's literature are related strategies addressing the limitations of articulations of black personhood. Priest juxtaposes antebellum texts with those written around the Civil Rights Movement in order to magnify the ways that figures of Black children and writings for them emerge from and mark heightened states of crisis about the connection between race and freedom. The book makes the claim that writing for children, and writing through the figure of the child, are connected impulses that characterize African American writing as early as the slave narrative. Engaging squarely with a contemporary political moment in which Black children are central to an escalating crisis about the meaning of race in American culture, this book considers how the history of imperiled figures of children work to theorize black political subjectivity, and in so doing, to reimagine foreclosed political horizons.

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