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Abstract

“A Faithful Escape: The Empathetic Adventures of a Black Caribbean Dollhouse Doll”

American author Susan Schoonmaker Baker’s *Babes in the Basket; Or Daph and Her Charge* (1859) tells the story of a black woman and white children’s harrowing escape from a “southern island” amidst a slave rebellion and their struggle to survive in New York City. The book achieved international circulation as part of Frederick Warne and Company’s “Round the Globe Library” and was commonly given as a Sunday School reward book. Notwithstanding the book’s international scope and readership, a fact subtly conveyed in the text and confirmed by an inscription in a copy owned by a member of Baker’s family is that Baker wrote the story using characters from the hyper-domestic space of her daughter’s dollhouse.

This paper contextualizes Baker’s text within the material culture surrounding black dolls and dollhouse play in the nineteenth-century U.S. to draw attention to the peculiarities of its emotional demands. Black dollhouse dolls in the U.S. were often predictably Mammy-esque. U.S. children also encountered Afro-Caribbean dolls in institutions such as the Young Men’s Missionary Society museum in Bethlehem, PA. These two doll cultures, I argue, combine in Baker’s *Daph*. I further unpack the literary and cultural influences on the story, namely “faithful slave narratives”; abolitionist stories and newspapers; minstrel shows; sea adventure stories; conversion narratives; and the ubiquitous children’s story *The Babes in the Wood*. I claim that Baker’s conglomeration of these textual and material forms ultimately offers the black woman-doll as a focus for a constrained form of empathy among her Anglo-American readers.