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P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet

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

P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet

Karen Coats (bio)

Running the Road to ABC (1996), by Denize Lauture and illustrated by Reynold Ruffins, is a lushly crafted celebration of Haitian landscapes and

images. Bright gouache illustrations alternate between full-page and double-page spreads. The text itself presents sensually evocative images as well, as it tells the story of six Haitian children who wake every morning before dawn to run the many miles to their school. Dyesèl, Milsen, Preneyis, Loud, Kousou, and Toutoun "run by the slopes of coffee trees and the meadows of corn plants, the gardens of millet and the acres of sugarcane. They run over the sweet potato mounds like fish dancing with sea waves. They dash across dangerous crossroads, leap over mapou tree roots where hunting snakes sleep and dream. They climb slippery hills and go down rocky cliffs" (n.p.). They endure the pain of twisted ankles and bleeding toes to get to school. As the text tumbles over itself in time with their breathless rush, its rhythms become poetry—"And up and down every day, morning moon evening star, morning star evening moon, running left and turning right, counting one and counting two, learning A and learning B, a hum today, a song tomorrow"—until finally the words disappear and the image explodes into a double-page spread of the interior of the schoolhouse with the children, bodies now still but in postures of eager expectancy, watching their teacher (n.p.).

It is a curious irony, however, that the song that carried them through their journey is rendered silent when they reach their destination, the school, which—according to the text—is the very reason for their song. They have come to school to learn their ABCs, "a hum today, a song tomorrow," but the song itself falls out of this culminating image. The wordlessness, size, and riotous color of the image accentuate and make curious the final scene. Up until this point, the reader or viewer has been on the same horizontal plane as the children, and the images have been large and full of lush reds and oranges, cool purples, greens, and blues. In the final illustration, we are offered a bird's eye view of the schoolhouse, a tiny white building on a field of arid brown, tightly bordered by a tiny, repeating, English-language alphabet. The celebratory, freedom-evoking, sensuous experience of the "road to ABC" ends with something not celebratory at all—something lonely, confining, and distorted by an impossibly detached perspective. With the exception of three separate, rather phallic-looking trees, nothing grows on the ground surrounding

the schoolhouse. The verdant landscapes that have characterized the children's journey are strangely absent from their destination, and the whiteness of the school building itself suggests something sinister and colonial about the origin of the alphabet the children have come to learn.

So what exactly happens to the child on the road to ABC? What are the net gains and losses of the ways in which children become literate? In what follows, I explore these questions from psychoanalytic, philosophical, and historical perspectives by tracing recent developments of the alphabet book. I suggest that the view of language as presented in alphabet books is changing from a traditional, linear, epistemological, masculine model, in which language is a way of knowing an existing reality, to a more performative, ontological, integrated model, in which language is recognized as a vehicle for actively constructing that reality. Obviously, the progression from one model to the other is neither linear nor absolute, but there are clear structural differences in alphabet books that operate traditionally versus ones that operate in a more postmodern vein. These models are linked historically and materially to issues of gender and the body, which I explore as well. If we understand ourselves to be not only users of language, but also as having our identities structured by language and representation, it seems important to look at how our first introductions to the uses of language and literacy may in fact be changing in and through contemporary alphabet books.

The Costs of Alphabetic Literacy

According to Jacques Lacan, the child...

P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet

by Karen Coats

Racing the Road to ABC (1996), by Denise Lature and illustrated by Reynold Kuffins, is a lushly created celebration of Haitian landscapes and images. Bright gouache illustrations alternate between full-page and double-page spreads. The text itself presents sexually evocative images as well, as it tells the story of six Haitian children who wake every morning before dawn to run the many miles to their school. Dyesèl, Milsen, Prereyis, Tnal, Koussou, and Boulour "run by the slopes of coffee trees and the meadows of corn plants, the gardens of millet and the acres of sugarcane. They run over the sweet potato mounds like fish dancing with sea waves. They dash across dangerous crossroads, leap over mapou tree mounds where hunting snakes sleep and dream. They climb slippery hills and go down rocky cliffs" (n.p.). They endure the pain of twisted ankles and bleeding toes to get to school. As the text tumbles over itself in time with their breathless rush, its rhythms become poetry—"And up and down every day, morning moon evening star, morning star evening moon, running left and turning right, counting one and counting two, learning A and learning B, a hum today, a song tomorrow"—until finally the words disappear and the image explodes into a double-page spread of the interior of the schoolhouse with the children, bodies now still but in postures of eager expectancy, watching their teacher (n.p.).

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The Costs of Alphabetic Literacy

According to Jacques Lacan, the child's entry into spoken language is the most profound of a series of losses the child experiences as he or she moves from the immediate bodily pains and pleasures of being into the pale, alienated space of representation or meaning. It is, in fact, the site of a death-like other theorists and philosophers before him. Lacan argues that "the word kills the thing" (*Scrabble* 165). In other words, when we use a language to talk about experiences or things in the world, we are not really talking directly about those things but about their collectively constructed and understood representations. Our use of language, then, bars us from immediate experience, and necessarily so, because in order to have significance in the world, we have to enter into the place of collective understanding—the place of words and representations. Pictures and images offer a more immediately available form of representation, since they operate on a less abstract, more sensual principle of expression, but even they are read and interpreted through the use of language. Most children effortlessly absorb the language that surrounds them. Their language learning is quite an affair of the body. They learn the music, the sounds, and the rhythms of their language long before they learn its semantic content.

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