
Josie Briggs Hall and Post-Reconstruction African American Border Crossing

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Abstract

Josie Briggs Hall, 1869-1935, African American educator and writer from Waxahachie, Texas, is the author of *Hall's Moral and Mental Capsule for the Economic and Domestic Life of the Negro, As a Solution of the Race Problem* (1905). This text is both typical and atypical of other advice manuals written for African Americans around the turn of the twentieth century. The writer of the introduction to Hall's text characterizes her critique of black Americans as unusually "severe." A twenty-first century critic describes her advice as "harsh" and functioning to "shame women into a prim domesticity" (Mitchell 131). Hall's disciplinary critiques, however, are accompanied by many of the more typical commands in these self-help publications: read, study, obey, pray, and work industriously.

A look at Hall's rhetoric in the first four chapters of her *Capsule*, however, indicates that her critique's severity is de-stabilized by two elements: 1. a desperate, almost hysterical tone in her discussions of the consequences of "impure" or "degenerate" behaviors, and 2. a paragraph structure that moves repeatedly from victim blaming to a condemnation of perpetrators and back to victim blaming.

In order to understand this de-stabilization, I will contextualize Hall's work in terms of specific racial boundaries and the violence that resulted when they were violated in the Texas of 1895-1905, demonstrating that Hall's life required a constant vigilance around dangerous, knife-sharp, racialized boundaries. Her negotiation of them and, by extension, the rural, white Texans who established them to uphold white supremacy, demonstrates a constant border crossing that is neither neat nor always rational. These messy, sometimes contradictory, rhetorical border crossings are the focus of this paper.

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