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## Little Black Books: Exploring Modes of Reclamation of Black American Identity through Afro-American Children's Literature

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Little Black Books:  
Exploring Modes of Reclamation of Black American Identity through Afro-American  
Children's Literature

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2018



## Acknowledgements

This project is dedicated to all of the little coco puffs in this huge bowl of kix. I want to give a special shout out to all of the Black American kids who will come to discover that their culture is a rich and deeply important one even if it has been invisible or misrepresented by everybody else. May you always know your power and thank the ancestors that gave it to you.

To my friends and family, thank you for always encouraging me to be my best.

“To whom do I owe the power behind my voice? To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?” -Audre Lorde, *Zami*

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	9
Chapter 2.....	33
Chapter 3.....	50
Chapter 4.....	72
Conclusion.....	81

Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

– African Proverb

## Introduction

Racial interpellation: the moment in which an individual becomes aware of their race or racial background and how those racial features will be read by the outside world. “Liyah, you know you’re Black, right?” Too young and heavily influenced by teeny bopper tell-lie-vision to realize that my literary imagination had only the same few White characters with straight hair and freckles making their rounds every time I entered the imaginary world of Children’s and YA books, it took a while to discover that this experience of realizing one’s blackness is not a unique one. One would think that coming of age in a Black household, with a multitude of different and unique Black figures present should have been enough for the little Black child that I and many others were or currently are. Was it that I didn’t know that I was Black until I was seven years old? Or was it that I knew full well who and what I was, but the consequences of being Black; aware of the fact that being born to parents who were, born to parents who, were born to former American slaves came with the task of detaching oneself from the shame that others projected onto me for this fact of life? Being Black meant feeling ugly in the world of fair skin and straight hair. Being Black meant being told that you don’t have a valid culture outside of the mainstream American one. Being Black meant being scolded by White teachers who cared more about silencing you than teaching you and being Black meant being unnecessarily targeted by police officers because your existence is a threat. Was the burden of being Black heavier than the beauty of being Black? Perhaps. We’ve seen this scenario, the realization of the struggle of being Black, unfold many times over. We’ve seen it with W.E.B Du Bois’ recount of the greeting card encounter with a little White girl in *The Souls of Black Folks*, we’ve seen it in the results of the doll test created by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s, and we see it in the countless

number of little Black children who draw blond haired and blue eyed characters when asked to draw pictures of their families. The regenerative nature of these historical trauma induced identity crises suggests that other young Black people too understood the burden of blackness that gets passed on when we have forgotten who we are. This thesis is my contribution to changing that narrative.

One of the goals of this thesis is to investigate the influence and generational reach of themes consistent in Black American narratives created by outsiders of the racial and ethnic community --specifically by Euro-American authors, illustrators, and entertainers-- in the children's literary genre. Through exploring the stereotypes attached to blackness imposed on Black communities' historical memory and epistemic thought by creators outside of that community and experience this thesis will explore the tactics adopted by Black American writers from past and present in attempts to reclaim those narratives and images of blackness outside of the ones spawning from the White imagination. Writers of Black children's literature referenced in this work will be highlighted for their efforts towards legitimizing, redefining, and nuancing the narratives of Black American literatures for young readers

By identifying the roots of both, the insider and outsider perspectives that popularized particular characterizations of blackness in the American mainstream, it may be possible to track the methods employed by contemporary Black children's writers to reclaiming antiquated Black narratives that have been historically sanitized. By employing a scale of incremental modes of reclamation, the constructions of Black American identity will be measured by how Black American narratives over time have implemented the political and artistic strategies passed onto them from previous generations to further the eventual piecing together of an authentic Black American narrative and by extension Black personhood as valid. In reclaiming Black autonomy



in the development of these narratives it allows for new meaning to be placed on signifiers and traditions attached to the Black American identity that have historically been out of our control.

The identification of this root is not new. There still exists varying interpretations of and debates on how the Black community should overcome the effects of systemic oppression. Do we follow the teachings of Du Bois and prioritize academia? Do we learn a trade and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps as suggested by Booker T. Washington? Or perhaps we should follow the teachings of Marcus Garvey, pack our bags and return to the home we never got to know? It's complicated, undoubtedly, to identify a solution and find a reconciliation between our dual identities of who we were and who we were later forced to be. This reconciliation has become especially difficult for Black Americans whose Black identity has become both, racial and ethnic, yet the ethnic qualities of American blackness are often forgotten, ignored, or made to be monolithic instead of multiplicitous. This is a direct result of the false characterizations deeply rooted in the history of Black American identity. The awareness of one's blackness and its consequences so often are explored from the social aspect of race. It is understood that to be visibly Black in America--no matter the transnational and ethnic contexts that distinguish us from one another-- is to be in constant danger. But equally as important to know is that there is danger in the erasure, denial, and demeaning of a people's culture because without it we have no way of knowing who we are outside of this skin. This is the fear of the descendants of Black American slaves, to lose ourselves in the speculations that others make about us, to be lost in our own history, and denied the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging to something and to each other. Hence we reach back to the strategies imbued by our ancestors to move forward the understandings of ourselves as a people and take back the modes of blackness that have been sullied for us by mainstream White American tastes.

The media that we consume and allow our young people, the newer generations, to partake in can either positively or negatively affect the relationship that they have to their sense of Black ethnic identity and historical memory. The question that has continuously resurfaced as Black Americans have relentlessly pushed to reclaim their narratives has been whether or not the stain of shame that White antebellum authors and entertainers have normalized in the conversation of blackness have rooted themselves too deeply in our epistemology to be removed. Or perhaps the increasingly nuanced tactics of reclamation of Black stories, spaces, and identity will continue to be an effective dissent from our mental colonization; ultimately creating ideal opportunities to promote higher self-esteem, pride, and collaboration between Black communities. The goal of this thesis is to promote the latter.

Black American cultural identity is deeply rooted in traditions of orality and music and like most forms of art, Black American cultural forms have been long open to interpretation. The interpretations of such forms as Black American folktales or Negro Spirituals, however, did not come by way of Black peers. Black American Identity and historical memory is also characterized by the political strategies developed and passed down generations to move the race towards a cultural and ethnic understanding of self, despite their subjugation within American society. The Black political narrative, like the artistic one, has also been historically critiqued from outside of the Black community. The first chapter of this thesis explores the dangers of false interpretations of Black cultural practices, traditions, and experiences—both the artistic and the political-- by outsider influencers for the sake of affirming whiteness and especially White childhood. By weaponizing Black portrayals and using them as tools for recreating the power structures between White and Black individuals in the American context, it suggests that these tactics were implemented with the intent to be lasting, reproducible ideas.

This chapter highlights specifically the legacies of White authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Joel Chandler Harris' contributions to the collective misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Black historical memory and thought. This chapter begins the discussion with the influence of Harris' *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*. Although Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* predates Harris' *Uncle Remus* by about 28 years, the initial focus on Harris is done in an effort to center the conversation around the influence of an even older Black literary genre that predates both Harris and Stowe; Black American Folktales. By centering the discussion around Harris and his misappropriation of Black folktales, this enables the conversation to address the ways that Harris' infamous misuse of these highly political Black narratives have been countered and reclaimed by Black American writers writing specifically for and to Black audiences, particularly Black youth. By establishing Black American Folktales' powerful political influence via the vehicle of how White influences attempted to depoliticize them, it supports the claim that Black fables too, have reproducible properties that have influenced the ways that modern Black American writers have decided to push the values of those narratives forward. From here, the discourse shifts into Stowe's *UTC*, where the focus will be on Stowe's use of White childhood as a method of re-establishing social hierarchy, despite the sentimental novels underlying abolitionist values. These authors and their works have become central to this thesis' conversations around Black identity formation as they provide examples of the historical sanitization of the Black American experience and contributions to society; and as a result, have created a framework through which a recreation of White/Black power structures within White and Black children during stages of socialization occurs.

Chapter two continues the conversation on Stowe's use of White children to assert power over blackness from chapter 1. This chapter will dig deeper into the role that Black children

featured in Stowe's novel play in reproducing ideas of Black/African primitivism in contrast to White civilized society. The role of the pickaninny caricature and its popularization via Stowe's character of Topsy is explored through the lens of how White American characterizations of blackness may have influenced global ideals of Black primitivism when it enters into conversation with Helen Bannerman's children's book *Little Black Sambo*. Through investigating the influence that characters like Topsy and later, Sambo had on young Black readers, this leads into a brief discussion of the ways in which Black readers who may have encountered these derogatory images of Black childhood and family have attempted to reconcile with these negative visuals of African adjacent Black American-ness; inscribed by White outsider opinions of African-ness as uncivilized.

Chapter three follows the influence of the Slave Narrative in the development of a Black Children's literary genre. As one of the first forms of texts authored from the Black perspective that detailed the brutal realities of American slavery, this genre too, was not exempt from being influenced by the White gaze. The narratives of Black former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano are used as a way to not only highlight their efforts in exposing slavery, but also to acknowledge the influence that White abolitionists had in curating Black narratives to their liking. As an effect to the influence of the White gaze, these narratives were propagandized to promote assimilationist culture in young Black readers which was not made to nurture their constructions of Black cultural identity. From here, the conversation moves into the way that these White abolitionist and assimilationist values have crept their way into following generations; most notably utilized during Harlem Renaissance in the development of the New Negro Movement. Discourse on W.E.B Du Bois and his efforts to develop the first attempt at a Black Children's Literary canon--and as an extension politicize Black childhood--is meant to

highlight the rift between the Black community in defining what blackness should look like. This era opened up discussions of what the development of a Black aesthetic and culture might look like, as influenced by White ideals of respectability and from characterizations that fall outside of that norm. Du Bois, promoted many assimilationist themes during his editorial career at *The Crisis*, but also utilized and paid homage to many Black American political traditions in his works. This, however was in direct conflict with the values of Black individuals who felt that fashioning oneself in the image of what White people saw as civilized was a stagnation, and not a development of Black cultural identity. Du Bois' work in conversation with his contemporaries who prioritized artistic development of Black culture opens up a discussion on how these varying ideals of how to define blackness and Black culture have been utilized by contemporary writers for Black children to incorporate all of the schools of thought and traditions presented during the Harlem Renaissance to promote a new method of reclaiming the Black American identity as a multiplicity. This chapter sees a significant shift in the modes of incremental reclamation as this is where the methods used by contemporary Black children's writers are not simply moving forward on one aspect of Black identity and tradition pushed forward by the most recently preceding generation, but instead incorporates all of the developments of Black cultural and political thought all at once. In this way, Black children's writers who use the Harlem Renaissance as a framework to guide their characterizations of blackness, do so to note the multiplicities of Black American identity and culture as a collective..

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis addresses contemporary Black children's picture books and their methods of gradually reclaiming the Black body, through destigmatizing physical features that are racialized as Black. This chapter does so by exploring one particular visual attribute of blackness that has been steadily reclaimed in culturally conscious Black

children's literature for the past few decades; Black hair. By noticing the ways in which particular contemporary Black children's books address afro textured hair as a social, political, historical, and cultural attribute of Black identity, this chapter highlights one of the stepping stones allowing Black features and spaces that are centered around glorifying those Black features to be reclaimed outside of the White mainstream stigmatization. The final chapter was written to end on a positive and proactive note, providing examples of successful moments of reclaiming Black history, culture, and identity and properly passing down those understandings to the younger generation.

“Liyah, you know you're Black, right?” I do, and it's great! Who knew that a declaration that at one point moved me to pitiful tears would actually end up being the entire reason behind this love letter to my Black American history and identity? I may not have been able to expand on all of the multiplicities and nuances of Black American culture and identity in this piece, but I do hope that this unique understanding of Black identity and experiences reaches the readers who need it the most. As the saying goes; “Be the person you needed when you were younger.”

## Chapter 1

### White Lies: The Effects of the White Imagination on Black Narratives

American blackness as a culture and an identity grew out of acknowledging, surviving, and overcoming a shared struggle within the American context as descendants of American slaves. Early on in the communal formation of this Black American cultural identity the brutality that many newly displaced African peoples experienced led to an involuntary amnesia of African cultural identity. This resulted in the formation of new and creolized<sup>1</sup> cultural identities, often built around principles brought over from varying homelands on the African continent to reflect not only the identity that existed prior to captivity, but also the ones that many now possessed post-middle passage. Remnants of an African cultural identity survived to a degree during the formation of the new Black identity in the American context including the practices of oral traditions, song, and dance. While the amnesia of previous African cultural identities prior to bondage worsened throughout the generations, a spiritual connection to an ambiguous African continental homeland persisted through the newly fashioned culture and customs that instilled hope for enslaved Black Americans. The repurposing of African cultural practices, most notably that of storytelling, helped maintain the enslaved peoples' spiritual connection to an African homeland, simply through the act of preserving the practice itself. But this act also provided a medium through which critique of the brutality of White American society was made possible for those who bore the brunt of its violence. This brutality and violence would go on to continually reinvent itself to adapt to changing times, made possible through reiterations of ideas of Black inferiority promoted through literature and other modes of media dominated by Whites.

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<sup>1</sup> Creolization as it is being used here is to denote a mixture of two or more concepts that come together to form a single unified entity.

In a society where people are divided by wealth, privilege, power, and color comes a literal game of historical ‘he said, she said,’ between White and Black communities; one claiming the good treatment of or justification for a people in bondage, while the other cries out of the inaccuracies in that historical memory. As time persisted and history was recorded, this game of ‘he said, she said’ morphed into what some might call a bad game of telephone. With White Americans holding positions of power and privilege, and by that virtue holding the power of the narrative, recorded history of American slavery favored the sentiments of powerful Whites,<sup>2</sup> even the ones who held vaguely benevolent anti-slavery views. This extends to White society’s interpretations of Black life from the outside looking in, and from a perspective that neatly places Black life and experience into the context of the justification of White supremacist actions and mindsets.<sup>3</sup> What is often forgotten or ignored in this context, however, is the fact that there exists many Black narratives and histories that predate White outsider influences and have acted as efforts to preserve a culture, or cope with a changing one. Black American Folktales merged these two concepts together upon arrival on American Plantations and have proven to be a lasting oral history of a people. The point in all of this is essentially to establish the antiquity of Black folktales--and other Black ideas, art forms, and schools of thought-- as a genre that predates White interpretations of Black culture and experience, but were clearly not exempt from the invasiveness of White influence.<sup>4</sup>

A few key texts that shape the foundations of this particular recreation and misappropriation of Black narratives includes Joel Chandler Harris’ *The Complete Tales of*

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<sup>2</sup> Sims, Rudine. *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982. p.1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.5

<sup>4</sup> MacCann, Donnarae. "African American Folktales Versus White Supremacist Juvenile Fiction." In *African American Folktales Versus White Supremacist Juvenile Fiction*, edited by Osayimwense Osa, 147-59. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995. p.153



*Uncle Remus* (1881), and Harris' Predecessor and noted influencer Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). These two texts which were compiled and created by White authors present the early formations of an outsider's understanding of Black identity and Black/White power structures as interpreted through the literary and historical imaginations of White individuals. In conversation with these two texts are Virginia Hamilton's collection of Black folktales *The People Could Fly* (1985) and Mildred D. Taylor's *Song Of The Trees* (1975); both authored and developed by Black American women. In beginning this chapter with analysis of Harris, Hamilton, and Taylor's vastly different manifestations and interpretations of the historico-cultural relevance of early Black American folklore, this is to situate the reader in a historical timeline that prioritizes the Black folktales as a source from which all other texts referenced later in the chapter credits its themes. With Black American folklore (Pre Harris) placed at the center of this discussion as represented through its legacy in adaptations written by Black writers, the genre and its motivations stand apart from its misinterpretations by White authors.

Black American oral traditions, folktales and negro spirituals as well as the interpretation of these practices and art forms by their White counterparts sets the stage for a discussion on the centuries long battle over control of the Black American narrative. By exploring the differences in the assumed motives that Black slaves/their descendants and Harris as an individual had in preserving this folklore and their eventual adaptations in children's literature we can begin to understand White influencers' motivations in weaponizing blackness. One such motive that makes itself apparent in Harris' adaptation is the glorification of White childhood; resulting in the socialization of White children to understand their assumed superior status in the social hierarchy presented to them. In this discussion we may also begin to understand how Black

writers of children's literature are using the genre to reclaim their stories and prevent them from being used in re-inscribing White supremacist ideals. By navigating the remnants of these strikingly different insider/outsider narratives in the development of an African American literary genre and later a modern Black American children's literature, the enduring nature of Black American folklore proves to be just as influential in pushing Black creators of literature and media to counter the whitewashed versions of their cultural history, and by that virtue reclaim them.

The following conversation around the differing historical memories experienced by both White and Black Americans will be highlighted to support the argument that there is indeed a trend in the reproduction of sanitized Black American Historic-Cultural practices and experiences when recounted by non-Black individuals. Hamilton and Taylor's texts act as a counter to Harris' historical and political sanitization of Black folktales and by extension the re-inscription of the social hierarchy. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes an important addition to this conversation around the recreation of systemic White/Black power structures and historical memory because of its noticeable influence on Harris' specific use of a stereotypical Black caricature and themes of the superior white child. Harris' adaptation of the Black figure to assist in the re-development of superior White identities in his largely White child readership; simultaneously re-inscribes those systemic power structures and adapts them to the changing times and social climates that supposedly threatened collective White identity, pushing those ideas forward to be further readapted in later works.

The goal of this chapter is to investigate and identify the impact of White influenced Black narratives of the past as well as to highlight the conscious acknowledgement and revision of such misinterpretations by Black critics and creatives in contemporary literature marketed

towards Black American Children. This chapter executes its goal by putting contemporary Black children's literature authors in conversation with White outsider authors predating them several generations attempting to highlight the legacies of each perspective. The Black contemporary authors are representative of the influence that Black folktales places on its descendants to reclaim a narrative that historically they had little control over, and the Antiquated White authors are representing their influence in promoting the regeneration of systemic oppression that tries to inhibit the former from reclaiming what's theirs. By analyzing different interpretations of Black art forms and cultural artifacts such as Black folktales from both, insider and outsider perspectives, this aide in further analysis of how insiders and outsiders go about recreating or reclaiming those specific practices and their histories. The argument cementing this investigation is that there is a noticeable trend in the ways that insiders and outsiders depoliticize and re-politicize varying Black characters and manifestations of blackness in books for both adults and children; with children's literature becoming identified as the perfect incubator for the calculated reiterations of historically sanitized or reclaimed Black narratives.

The historical sanitization of Black folktales did not keep the legacy and meanings attached to them from circulating within the Black community and being passed down through generations. The survival of Black American folktales with their proverbial use of allegory and metaphor--unacknowledged by Euro-Americans as a valid gauge of education or intelligence because of their beliefs in the link between literacy and intellectual capabilities<sup>5</sup>-- actually showcased the ability of this disenfranchised community to understand and express their experiences in American society; despite the fact that they were believed to be intellectually

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<sup>5</sup> Willis, Madge Gill. "African American Communication Tradition--Oral and Literate." In *The All-white World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*, edited by Osayimwense Osa, 55-73. Trenton, N.J.:Africa World Press, 1995. p.55.

inferior as a justification for their enslavement. But the inability or refusal to acknowledge the sophistication of this people group and their tales solely based on their inability to read and write begins the discourse around White domination over Black narratives. These days, there are written accounts of slave folktales and oral traditions available for anyone to read and enjoy thanks to Euro-America's prioritization of the written word as the only valid form of historicizing. This fact, however, only reinforces the staying power of genres like Black folktales and their original usage as political conduits for ensuring that White communities could not convince Black Americans that their experiences in the United States were anything other than inhumane, although White historians and authors fought tooth and nail to try.

**Joel Chandler Harris' Misappropriation of Black American Folklore via the Vehicle of Uncle Remus**

Joel Chandler Harris' *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus (1881)* is recognized as one of the earliest recordings of Black American oral traditions and folklore. While Harris's collection of tales is not in fact, a pre-Civil War era publication, its existence as a beloved folktale collection for young readers has been heavily influenced by the pre-Civil War era narratives of both, Black and White Americans. Harris' compilation of Black American folktales, as told by his character Uncle Remus, was manifested through his memorization of the tales as told to him by enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples that he sought out for the purpose of having the folklore passed onto him.<sup>6</sup> Many saw his efforts to record the folktales of an unheard peoples as a generous and noble act. And while his effort did produce a work that gave record to the tales being told by

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<sup>6</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. Introduction to *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, compiled by Arthur Burdette Frost, xxi-xxvii. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1955. p.xxv

these peoples, the tales, prior to its written publications proved to be a lasting tradition on its own without the need for being written down.

Black folktales and Harris' understandings of these immensely important politically charged stories as he recorded and distributed them for the consumption of White audiences and particularly beloved by White children, addresses a theme that many White individuals may have feared threatened the longevity of systems of White supremacy; and that is the theme of the underdog narrative.<sup>7</sup> Many of the folktales that Harris recorded placed different animals at the center of moral based storylines, but the animals that are most important to the development of this section are the rabbit and the fox. Black American folklore subscribes to the idea of literature-as-moral<sup>8</sup> since it was primarily used to instill values and morals in its Black American listeners; following in the tradition of storytelling that came by way of the African continent,

In the African homeland, the folk-tale was a vehicle of moral instruction and the trickster-hero was often punished. Under slavery, it became an instrument of political retaliation and a technique of survival under an oppressive system<sup>9</sup>

Even after the use of folktales in the political context of the United States developed, the stories did not shift from moral based to propaganda until its encounter with White influences and this is due, in part, to the power of influence and the audiences that each of the versions of the folklore developed. Black folktales shared within slave communities could not necessarily use the folktales as a propaganda tool to influence outsiders in the system of oppression that they navigated in the same way that white influencers could use it against them to influence members

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<sup>7</sup> MacCann, Donnarae. "African American Folktales" p.155.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, Judith, and Gloria Woodard. "Black Perspective in Books for Children." In *The Black American in Books for Children*, edited by Donnarae McCann and Gloria Woodard. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p.46

<sup>9</sup> Banfield, Beryle. "Racism in Children's Books: An Afro-American Perspective." In *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, 23-38. 2nd ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p.29

of their own insider group. This power dynamic that prohibits the oppressed from modes of self-actualizing explains why harmful Black caricatures remained so popular in the mainstream; as well as why more positive and nuanced narratives of blackness are still a relatively recent phenomenon. But despite this fact, the genre did provide a means of reflecting on the historic ills done against Black communities and did plant the seeds that would initiate political mobilization within the Black community throughout multiple generations; the evolution of which will be explored throughout this project.

Usually at the center of many of these folktales is the Rabbit, also known by the names, Brer Rabbit or Bruh Rabbit. Brer Rabbit's characterization in early Black American folklore is usually that of a clever, fast thinking, jokester; with many of the tales involving him resulting in the small animal outsmarting and escaping from the clutches of larger, more dangerous animals like the fox, the bear, and the wolf. The fables of Brer Rabbit and the other woodland creatures of these tales create the basis for a typical underdog story which is in alignment with the notions that enslaved peoples had around eventually reclaiming their autonomy and personhood from their masters. If one simply replaces Brer Rabbit with a slave (or slaves)<sup>10</sup> and any of the more threatening animals (the fox, wolf, or bear,) with a slave master it all begins to make sense why such a narrative could be understood as a powerful (mentally) decolonizing tool. The centralizing of Black folklore to this chapter and thesis is to emphasize the importance in identifying the underlying political themes that Black American literature and children's literature are usually contingent upon. In identifying these underlying political themes there is an acknowledgment of the political spirit that informs contemporary narratives of Black childhood and its inherent politicization as a result of the historical memory and political tactics inherited from past

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<sup>10</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "African American Folktales" p.155. MacCann notes that there are also instances where Brer Rabbit acts as a stand in for slave masters in other folktales where smaller animals like the frog or the tortoise are involved. p.155

generations to do the work of dismantling the oppressive systems and narratives that dangled over their heads.

Two examples of the folklore's blatant social commentary from Harris's collection of folktales are *The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story* and its follow up *How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox*. In the *Tar-Baby Story*, Brer Fox devises a plan to trap Brer Rabbit; and in the context of Harris' retelling, his storytelling character of Uncle Remus sets up the tar-baby tale as a follow up to a previous story in which Brer Fox was outsmarted by Brer Rabbit. *The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story* begins with Brer Fox creating a decoy rabbit<sup>11</sup> out of tar and turpentine:

Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be.<sup>12</sup>

This contraption of Brer fox's can be read as a test of Brer Rabbit's intelligence. Due to the questionable nature of the being's sentience and Brer Rabbit's ability to identify with it, this may potentially be a commentary on the mockery and dehumanization of slaves; of whom Brer Rabbit is often representative of. The tar-baby was likened to an entity familiar enough to Brer Rabbit for him to attempt speaking and interacting with it, but upon seemingly being ignored by tar-baby who is an inanimate object, Brer Rabbit decides that he wants to fight it. Upon engaging in a physical confrontation with the tar-baby, Brer Rabbit becomes entrapped in its tar and turpentine mixture and out of the bushes comes Brer Fox doubled over in laughter at Brer Rabbit's unfortunate circumstance. With the appropriate historical background knowledge and an understanding of the true use of these Black folktales, it is undeniable that Brer Rabbit

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<sup>11</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "African American Folktales" p.157. MacCann notes that there are different versions of the folktale in which the Tar-Baby is depicted as a Black woman, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story." In *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, 6-8. Compiled by Arthur Burdette Frost. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1955. p.6

represents the enslaved Black population who regularly finds themselves on the receiving end of their White masters' petty, degrading, and deceptive amusements; while Brer Fox represents the White masters and their exploitation of their slaves' assumed ineptitude.

Afro-Americans were projected as being ill-equipped to survive in freedom and as longing for the "good old days before the war" when they were secure in the idyllic and protected atmosphere of the plantation... these myths would be given support by the newly emerging social sciences,<sup>13</sup>

The story of the tar-baby ends on a rather ominous note, with Brer Rabbit seemingly helpless against Brer Fox, and Brer Fox basking in his success at capturing the clever creature; framing the reader's state of mind to prepare for the seemingly inevitable end to Brer Rabbit's life.

In the follow up story to *Tar Baby*, assumptions made about the communities that the respective characters are meant to represent become even more clear as Brer Rabbit proceeds to outsmart the Fox and save himself yet again. Still trapped inside the tar-baby, Brer Rabbit watches on as the fox devises countless plans to harm Brer Rabbit and make him suffer, his plans including, cooking, skinning, and drowning Brer Rabbit<sup>14</sup>-- which could be likened to the very real punishments received by slaves such as lashings, burnings, and lynchings--these horrible fates seem to be the last of Brer Rabbit's worries. What Brer Rabbit seems to be the most frightened by is the prospect of being thrown into a briar-patch. At the threat of each of Brer Fox's plans to harm him, Brer Rabbit laments over being thrown in the briar patch, claiming that any of Brer Fox's plans was far better than the idea that he's suggested. Brer Fox in his

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<sup>13</sup> Banfield, Beryle. "Racism in Children's Books: An Afro-American Perspective." In *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, 23-38. 2nd ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p. 29

<sup>14</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. "How Mr. Rabbit was too Sharp for Mr. Fox." In *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, 12-14. Compiled by Arthur Burdette Frost. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1955. p.13



strong desire to “hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin,”<sup>15</sup> tosses the rabbit into the briar-patch, on account of wanting Brer Rabbit to suffer his supposed greatest fear. The tale ends with Brer Rabbit escaping unharmed, having employed reverse psychology on the fox and convincing him to throw the rabbit into the briar-patch, where he had the advantage of knowing the territory well enough, and therefore having a better chance at escaping. The moral of this tale suggests that the goal of stories such as this is to express the benefits of fighting and outwitting one’s enemy on familiar territory and the importance of having the home court advantage. Literary scholar Donnarae MacCann supplements this idea in her own reading of another Black American folktale surrounding a conflict between the rabbit and the frog; ending in the frog luring the rabbit in the water where he has no power over him, “In short, you may have to fight, even when your cause is just and warrants a peaceful solution; but try to stage the battle on your own home ground.”<sup>16</sup>

Surely tales like this would be beneficial for Black individuals who understand the allegories of such tales and the contexts out of which they came, which was explicit in the act of preserving them through oral recitations before they were recorded. Because of the outsider perspective from which these stories were eventually shared, if not for the intentionally false interpretations by Whites they would then become counterproductive to the plight of reinscribing White Supremacy. This concept is not new and has been the center of many critiques by Black scholars and intellectuals on the subject of seeing themselves through the funhouse mirrors of the White imagination and the deeply entrenched Du Boisian double consciousness that it results in.:

... A world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.13

<sup>16</sup> MacCann, Donnarae. "African American Folktales."p.156. Also references a similar story involving Brer Rabbit and Brer Frog where the frog becomes the stand in for the slave and echoes a similar theme of fighting battles on one’s own homeground.

consciousness, this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.<sup>17</sup>

If not for their interpretation of these stories that position them in alignment with their agenda, the existence of an uplifting narrative for Black peoples could result in opposition to mainstream ideals of White superiority. Harris leaves the disarming of Brer Rabbit's political connotations in his retelling of the stories to none other than his character Uncle Remus; whose use of a nearly impossible to read and misappropriated dialect, as well as a shift in the meaning of the important characters' triumphs from virtue to helplessness persists throughout Harris' Uncle Remus retellings.<sup>18</sup>

Uncle Remus is a typical Plantation Negro stereotype who Harris himself asks his readers to think of as an "old Negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes -- who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery --."<sup>19</sup> The juxtaposition of Brer Rabbit (and the other characters that stand in for the triumph of slaves) and Harris' Uncle Remus dilutes the serious content that the folktales actually address. The positioning of Uncle Remus as the storyteller of these folktales to a young, White boy is meant to shape the tales as purely fictional, lighthearted accounts. This is achieved through Remus' characterization as a benevolent former slave with *nothing but pleasant memories* of enslavement who thinks back on the institution as a disciplinary action; this, in result shapes the political commentary of Brer Rabbit and the other small animal underdog tales as a phase that over time and with age eventually fades in the minds of its creators. Further, Uncle Remus'

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, Judith, and Gloria Woodard. "Black Perspective in Books for Children." In *The Black American in Books for Children*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p.39

<sup>18</sup> Carver, Helen Bush, and Mary Thompson Williams. "African Americans in Children's Literature--From Stereotype to Positive Representation." In *The All White World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*, edited by Osayimwense Osa, 13-31. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995. p.14

<sup>19</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. Introduction to "*The Complete Tales*." p.xxvi-xxvii

juxtaposition to a White child as he uses an often times unintelligible dialect in his retelling of these stories, can be understood as a tactic used to dilute the story's meanings. This also suggests that he is doing so to aid not only in upholding the standards of the White child's superiority over him on account of his perceived mental ineptitude as he recounts these narratives that provide a clear political commentary on the relationship between blackness and whiteness, but also aids in sheltering and maintaining the powerful innocence of White childhood through the veiling of the stories' meanings.

Joel Chandler Harris in his attempts to prove his *extensive knowledge* of Black people is far from the only white author to exercise their influence over the Black narrative in such a way, nor would he be the last. His efforts are actually influenced by a myriad of other books that predate his own publication; literature of the pre-Civil War era. Pre-Civil War literary genres such as the sentimental novel played a very large part in the characterization of Black and White communities as well as in the development of the dominating White voice through which Black art, oral traditions, and imagery were interpreted not only in the literature of the time, but also in literature and media to come. Harris actually credits antebellum era sentimental novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe--author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*-- whose novel predates Harris publication by 28 years as one of his biggest literary influences during the creation of *The Complete Tales Of Uncle Remus*, stating in his introduction to the text:

I trust I have been successful in presenting what may be, at least to a large portion of American readers, a new and by no means unattractive phase of Negro character-- a phase which may be considered a curiously sympathetic supplement to Mrs. Stowe's wonderful defense of slavery as it existed in the South. Mrs. Stowe... attacked the possibilities of slavery with all the eloquence of genius; but the same genius painted the portrait of the Southern slave owner, and defended him,<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. Introduction to "*The Complete Tales*". p.xxi

With an understanding that both Harris and Stowe catered to a largely white, literate readership, there seems to be a want to create an *attractive caricature of the negro*; which in alignment with the politics of the time and the heavily white readership, meant creating Black characters that were an attractive creation of the white imagination most notably the benevolent and contented slave, or uncle caricature. A point that should be explicitly stressed here is that, the insider/outsider effect as it shapes Black literary and media canons relies heavily on both the creators of content and those that they would prefer to consume their content; both the creators and the audience dictate what media portrayals go mainstream. In their preoccupation with catering to the White imagination, both Harris and his influencer Stowe in their development of the benevolent plantation character highlights the very fear embedded in the minds and hearts of the individuals who aimed to keep Black communities from developing in order to maintain power structures that rewards and reaffirms whiteness. The characterization of Harris' Uncle Remus who descends from Stowe's Uncle Tom caricature suggests that he was attempting to re-inscribe the power dynamics between White and Black characters that is rampant throughout Stowe's text. Harris does so by reproducing to the dynamic between Uncle Remus and his young White listener, referencing one particular scene in the beginning of Stowe's novel that also sets up a power dynamic between Uncle Tom and a young White boy.

When the reader is first introduced to Uncle Tom and his family in Stowe's novel they are receiving a visit from Mas'r George, the thirteen-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Shelby, their masters. The interaction between each of the Black characters and their White counterpart are approached in such a way that it continually acknowledges the power and privilege that even this young White child holds over all of the Black characters regardless of age. The relationship between Tom and George as it is explicitly referenced in the relationship between Harris' Uncle

Remus and his young White listener is framed around George's willingness to instruct Tom in learning the alphabet,

He [Tom] was very busily intent at this moment on a slate lying before him, on which he was carefully and slowly endeavoring to accomplish a copy of some letters, in which operation he was overlooked by young Mas'r George, a smart, bright boy of thirteen who appeared fully to realize the dignity of his position as instructor.<sup>21</sup>

This interaction is important because it allows the White character the luxury of knowing the power that he holds in the relationship. As George *fully realizes the dignity of his position as an instructor*, to this much older, yet subservient, Black man, his White identity is being uplifted through the acknowledgement of what was deemed a shortcoming of blackness; being unintelligent. George is the smart, White boy whose view of himself as smart and White is only enhanced in the presence of what is claimed to be a natural shortcoming of blackness. This is re-inscribed in Harris' Uncle Remus through his use of a dialect associated largely by White individuals as being unintelligible and a sign of inferior intelligence in its Black users.

Harris is not subtle in his questioning of the intelligence and sophistication of Black American thought and creativity. This is especially present in his implementation of the "eye dialect," spoken by Uncle Remus throughout his text in juxtaposition to the *proper* English of the White characters to reinforce the idea of Black peoples being intellectually inferior. In doing so he renders the Black character as incapable of truly understanding the inherently political nature of the stories that they have created and that he has re-appropriated. But to further this point, Uncle Remus' use of the 'eye dialect' as a depoliticizing method was not only meant to render the Black characters as intellectually inferior, but also to muddle the actual morals present in the tales for his audience as well:

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<sup>21</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York, NY: First Library of America, 2010. p.34

It is ironic that 19th century publications included a dialect that has itself been described as an attack upon Black culture. By taking an authentic literature and presenting it in an inauthentic tongue, the mainstream publishing world managed to weaken the themes and give the stories an association with the “blackface” theater... In folktales included in Joel Chandler Harris’s ‘Uncle Remus’ stories, an ‘eye dialect’ was invented--an incorrect spelling intended to suggest an inferior level of intelligence. Euro-American characters said ‘was’ and Black characters said ‘wuz’... He [Courlander] further notes that this treatment of dialect often overshadowed the content and meaning of the story. The white readership may have enjoyed this additional form of ridicule and its links with the ‘blackface’ tradition, but the effect on children was disastrous. Prejudice was reinforced in white children, and African American children became ashamed of a great literature.<sup>22</sup>

Harris’ also makes blatant claims to his ideas about the nature of the Black slave communities’ use of metaphor in his introduction to his book. It is in the intro that Harris acknowledges the sophistication of the allegories presented in the tales that he is collecting, but refuses to credit the Black creators of this genre for their understanding of metaphor and allegory:

The story of the Rabbit and the Fox, as told by the southern Negroes.... It seems to me to be to a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable. At least it is a fable thoroughly characteristic of the Negro; and it needs no scientific investigation to show why he brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness,<sup>23</sup> .

This claim made by Harris supports the notion that the characterization of Uncle Remus and his use of the ‘eye dialect’ could have been intentional in their undermining of the importance of the folktales themselves.

Harris’ explicit and implicit claims of Black American inferiority implemented the reproduction of these ideas in his audience, whom of which consisted mostly of young White children. Stereotypes about the mental capabilities of Black Americans only gave legitimacy to the White community’s ill treatment and low opinions of Black peoples and further embedded ideas of White supremacy in future generations. In an essay penned by author Beryle Banfield

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<sup>22</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "African American Folktales." p.153

<sup>23</sup>Harris, Joel Chandler. Introduction to “*The Complete Tales.*” p.xxv

the claim is made that “[Joel Chandler] Harris’ racism blinded him to the true nature of the slaves’ use of the folk-tale,”<sup>24</sup> but to complicate this theory, perhaps Harris, aware of his influence as a White collector of Black American folktales, could have actually understood the true nature (and power) of the folk-lore and intentionally used his brand of racism to strip them of their meaning. MacCann supports the notion that implementation of blatant stereotypes of inferiority were intentional in preparing young White children to accept their superior place within America’s racial hierarchy,

The antebellum Euro-American child was being prepared for a domineering social and political role, and the nature of that preparation in mainstream literature supplies clues and modes of discrimination and reinslavement in both the North and South.<sup>25</sup>

To assume that Harris was aware to some degree of his influence and reach as a White author recording Black stories, the same recognition of his influence could be said of the slaves who actively chose not to or were reluctant to share those stories with him in the first place. Again in his intro Harris notes the reluctance of some of the slaves to offer up their folktales to him,

Curiously enough, I have found few Negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folklore included in this volume.<sup>26</sup>

Although he notes that showing that he was already familiar with a few of the folktales disarmed the storytellers from their fear and suspicion of sharing with White individuals their stories, whether for reasons of safety,-- because they were in fact stories told to shift the power dynamics between Blacks and Whites-- or for reasons of assumed misunderstanding of the

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<sup>24</sup> Banfield, Beryle. "Racism in Children's Books." p.29

<sup>25</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "African American Folktales." p.147

<sup>26</sup> Harris, Joel Chandler. Introduction to "*The Complete Tales*." p.xxv

stories themselves, the skills involved in storytelling mixed with the survival tactics adopted by Black slaves made them masters of reading their audience. This skill associated with storytelling is a cultural trait turned innate skill developed by most Black diasporans who grow up in the culture closely connected to or in some way influenced by the oral traditions; this can also be applied to the theme of “code-switching,” which is a trait seen very often in African American literature for both adults and children. A helpful explanation of what is meant by reading the audience is provided in an essay penned by Madge Gill Willis on African American communication traditions, and speaks to the development of this skill early on in the developmental stages of young Black children:

African American Preschool children learned storytelling skills by imitating others and then by creating their own, modifying and elaborating them based on audience feedback. They developed a storytelling schema but also showed flexibility within different types of stories and audiences. They engaged in ‘style shifting’ to adjust their verbal and nonverbal behavior according to how they perceived and interpreted the situation.<sup>27</sup>

With that said it is plausible that this trait in young Black individuals came to them by way of their ancestors who were also extremely cautious of who their audience was when sharing their stories and making the appropriate modifications with that audience in mind. The hyper awareness of one’s audience present in the Black folklorists was also a tactic used for their own protection as they had to be quick to adapt themselves to the situations that they were in and the people that they needed to interact with. This skill clearly came in handy when it came time to interact with White individuals who lacked the cultural understanding and awareness needed to pick up on the skill; but might also have contributed--in a very small way-- to the inaccuracies present in White authors’ portrayals of blackness in literature and media; as a result of modifying

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<sup>27</sup> Willis, Madge Gill. "African American Communication". p.67



stories for fear of punishment from white authorities who may have caught on to their true meanings. This notion will be further explored in chapter 2.

**Reclaiming The Rabbit: Black American Women Writers Re-politicizing of Black  
American Folktale**

Joel Chandler Harris would not be the last to compile Black American folklore into a collection for the enjoyment of young readers. In fact, a few of these same folktales would go on to be compiled, adapted, and reimagined by authors like Virginia Hamilton--an authors of Black American descent-- in her collection *The People Could Fly* (1985). Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*, a compilation of Black American folktales marketed towards both African American children and adults, retells many of the same animal tales present in Harris' appropriation, but the execution of Hamilton's retellings differs greatly from the first publication of the tales. This notable time shift between Harris and Hamilton that spans nearly 100 years is a significant one in that it is meant to highlight the notion that even with influences like Harris' Uncle Remus, the influence of the original tales can and do hold power in re-inscribing their politico-cultural themes in its descendants. It is also to make note of the space that this history makes for newer generations to reclaim and redefine the often misrepresented tales and the ways in which they go about doing so in the modern context. One of the first and most notable differences between the two publications is Hamilton's absence of a story telling figure like Uncle Remus. Hamilton has no use for a literary vehicle like Uncle Remus in her retelling of the folklore--which is also consistent in many other Black retellings--, and this may have everything to do with who her intended audience is. This sentiment which is acknowledged by literary scholars like Rudine Sims suggests that who the author is and who it is they are talking to or talking about greatly

affects the way the information is received by certain audiences, “Being talked *about* is different from being talked *to*, and the choice of black or white readers as the primary audience has a clear effect on the way an author presents characters and events.”<sup>28</sup>

While Harris utilized his character of Uncle Remus as a vehicle through which he tries to depoliticize the folktales for the sake of his White readership, Hamilton is appealing to an audience, a black audience, that can be assumed to already be familiar with, at least to some degree, the cultural and political relevance of these tales and how they fall into that context. And in the event that Hamilton’s audience was not aware of the significance of this folklore, like Harris, she utilized her introduction to set the stage for what the readers are about to experience. What also separates Hamilton and Harris in their understanding and retellings of Black American folktales is the respect (or lack thereof) that they have for the stories that they are taking responsibility for. Unlike Harris, Hamilton’s understanding of the folklore came from an insider perspective as a descendant of the original creators; and presumably not needing to seek out and record these stories, but instead having access on account of them being remnants of her culture and history that could have likely been passed down to her. This distinction between Harris and Hamilton’s positioning as insiders and outsiders highlights the often undermined power of Black oral culture to be an enduring tradition outside of reproductions like Harris’ as supported by the following claim in MacCann’s observation of the inherent understanding that members of the Black community have to these traditions despite their historical whitewashing: “Still, the messages are too strong to be lost, and 19th century Black audiences undoubtedly heard many of the stories orally and without the distorting dialect of the printed page.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sims, Rudine. "What Has Happened to the 'All-White' World of Children's Books?" *The Phi Delta Kappan* 64, no. 9 (1983): 650-53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20386841>. p.651

<sup>29</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "African American Folktales." p.153

Hamilton further defends the merit and endurance of Black American folktales in her introduction where she states,

American black folktales originated with peoples, most of whom long ago were brought from Africa to this country against their will. These peoples were torn from individual cultures as they left the past, their families and their social group, and their languages and customs behind... The African in them was forcibly suppressed by the white slaveowners. They were not supposed to speak their own languages. The slave owners made them speak American English but forbade them to learn to read or write it... the slaves lived under conditions as brutal as any group of people has ever endured... But no amount of hard labor and suffering could suppress their powers of imagination. Out of the contacts the plantation slaves made in their new world, combined with memories and habits from the old world of Africa, came a body of folk expression about the slaves and their experiences,<sup>30</sup>

Here it is clear that unlike Harris, Hamilton made known the brutalities that led to such a genre being created in the first place, highlighting the difference in historical memory that she and Harris possess. Hamilton's historical understanding being a sincere and historically accurate understanding of the history of Black Americans struggles, even 100 years later, while Harris' views of the history of Black Americans was veiled by racism, making his portrayal noticeably inaccurate although the years between his publication and the actual implementation of slavery were not many years apart. This is also to suggest that the reclaiming of an authentic narrative from an insider's perspective away from the pressures of the White gaze of the mainstream, at least for Black Americans, is a particularly new development as will be explored further in later chapters. Both authors based on their proximity to the history and culture of Black Americans exercises different levels of respect for the creators of these tales as well as the cultural and political influences that informed them. While Hamilton has not experienced to the same degree what early Black Americans did during the creation of these tales, her insiderness to the culture makes her understanding of them the most accurate even hundreds of years later. Harris on the

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<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, Virginia. Introduction to *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, ix-xii. New York, NY: Knopf, 1985. p.x

other hand has expressed skepticism of the true origins of these stories and the validity of the lived experiences that undoubtedly informed the tales while underestimating the ability of the enslaved peoples to create stories that reflected those experiences although the proof was indeed in his face. This is the consequence of his outsidersness

Mildred D. Taylor's *Song of the Trees*--although not directly influenced by the tales that Harris and Hamilton retell--approaches tales like those of the rabbit and the fox, present in both Hamilton and Harris' retellings in such a way that it would dispel Harris' denial of the Black folktale genre mimicking real life events and situations. Like Hamilton, Taylor's insidersness allows her to apply the political history of Black life in the United States outside of the animal metaphors applied to them as well as outside of the historical setting by placing the context into a current one. Taylor's story revolves around a Black family, the Logan's, who must protect the trees on their ancestral land from being cut down at the orders of an antebellum type White man<sup>31</sup> named Mr. Anderson. Mr. Anderson who believes that he has the upper hand in his dealings with the Logan family by virtue of his whiteness, exudes a sly and arrogant personality; utilizing many forms of intimidation and trickery to get what he wants out of the Logan's as shown in the following exchange between Mr Anderson and Mary, the mother of the Logan household,

“I suggest you encourage Aunt Caroline to sell them trees, Mary. You Know, David [Mr. Logan] might not always be able to work so good. He could possibly have an accident.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> MacCann, Donnaræ. "The Family Chronicles of Mildred D. Taylor and Mary E. Mebane." In *The All-White World of Children's Books and African American Children's Literature*, edited by Osayimwense Osa, 115-29. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995. p.115

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, Mildred D. *Song of the Trees*. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. New York, NY: Dial Press, 1975. p.25

Upon realizing the possible fate of their land-- which is personified to represent the family's ancestral and spiritual ties to their ancestors-- and the trickery used by Mr. Anderson to dominate it, a plan is devised by the father of the household, David, who has planted dynamite in the work area of the lumbermen working to cut down the family's trees. As David threatens to blow up the entire vicinity with himself and Mr. Anderson in it, Anderson is eventually convinced to call off his crew and evacuate the area. But what does this have to do with the folktale of the rabbit and the fox? Quite a lot actually; Taylor has taken the folktale out of its original format using the animals as metaphor and re-appropriates them into the context of real people; with Mr. Anderson being representative of the sly and dangerous fox, and the Logan family as the smart, and oftentimes brave rabbit. *Song of The Trees*, would not be the only book in Taylor's repertoire that exhibits her ability as an insider to Black American culture and experience to apply the political themes also expressed by the ancestor's folktales to reflect the ways in which they have been resituated to the *changing* times. The Logan family has an entire series written after them, with all of the books addressing the deeply difficult history of race relations between Black and White peoples in the United States, but specifically in the south. Told from an authentic perspective that leaves out no details of what Black life was (and is) really like in an unjust society, Taylor moves forward the reclamation of the Black ancestors' political narratives by unveiling them and applying them to relevant themes. The connections between Black American folktales like the fox and the rabbit and Taylor's *Song of the Trees* are inseparable from each other because both narratives address the exploitation and disenfranchisement of Black peoples, families, and communities at large by exploitative White authorities; Taylor has just pulled away the veil of the animal metaphor to reveal the true intentions and influence behind why tales of the like were created in the first place. By bringing the themes of Black American folktales to the

real world and in a different time, Taylor highlights two things; the first being the recreation of the White supremacist power structure that is relevant even to more modern contexts of Black American life, and two, the political traditions that Black communities continue to apply to critique it. The fact that Taylor was able to execute the telling of the tale in such a way highlights her cultural and historical understanding of the folktales' creation, but also the relevance of her own lived experiences as a Black American who lives within the effects of slavery and White supremacy in working to reclaim that narrative. This suggests that having a connection to cultural narratives greatly shapes how one comes to understand their own experiences as they echo history, how carefully and thoughtfully you handle their meanings; and how you reclaim and transmit those meanings to younger generations.

## Chapter 2

### “But I’s So Wicked”: The Pickaninny

#### and the Visualization of Primitivism in Black Characters Written by White Authors

Many of the portrayals of blackness in early American literature and media aligned itself with White stereotypes of African-ness, which to them was synonymous with being barbaric; a result of White creators’ outsider perspectives and understandings of Black and African identity. Stereotypical portrayals of blackness, which became most prevalent in the pre-Civil War era were imagined mostly by southern slave owners as a way to depict slaves as complicit and content in their enslavement. In alignment with southern slave owners’ agenda, the first depictions of blackness came in the form of creating the caricature of the happy slave; the mentally inept slave who needs their master’s care and guidance in order to not be a danger to themselves or others. In an essay penned by Beryle Banfield, the origins of early Black American stereotypes that will go on to shape future portrayals later on in the timeline, are further explained,

Well developed racist-stereotypes of the Afro American began in the pre-civil war period. The ideology that was developed to justify the plantation system of slavery was already well entrenched in the southern states. It was based on three racist myths: (1) the black was by intellect and temperament naturally suitable to be the slave of the white; (2) Slavery was the natural lot of the African and so ordained by the creator; (3) rigid discipline and severe controls were necessary and beneficial to the African barbarian.<sup>33</sup>

These particular stereotypes were integrated into the American literary canon, manifesting themselves through identifiable caricatures such as “The contented slave, the wretched Freeman, and the Comic Negro.”<sup>34</sup> These caricatures were usually ascribed to Black adult characters, and

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<sup>33</sup> Banfield, Beryle. "Racism in Children's Books." p.24

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.25

in the case of the Black child a special characterization was developed specifically for them, the pickaninny. A spinoff of the comic negro stereotype, the Pickaninny provided both comic relief and chaos. Many depictions of Black children, but most notably the ones of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, provided again a reinforcement to the notion that the Black child was inferior to the White child. The Black child, however, was characterized as inferior to their White counterparts from two vantage points; the first on account of them being unintelligent which is reminiscent of the methods through which Black adult characters--Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus--were juxtaposed to young White Children, and the second on account of lack of religious morale or piety. When Black adults and Black children are being juxtaposed to whiteness it is usually the Black child who--although characterized as unintelligent in the same way as their adult counterparts when in the presence of whiteness -- is doubly characterized as *wicked*. Black children in Stowe's novel exist in varying degrees of wickedness. The characterization of Uncle Tom and Aunt chloe's children, for example, align more with being unintelligent than with wickedness. Their wickedness exemplified only by their misbehaving in the company of White folks as expressed in early scenes in which the family is visited by young Mas'r George,

he [George] was at leisure to notice the pile of woolly heads and glistening eyes which were regarding their operations hungrily from the opposite corner. 'Here, you Mose, Pete,' he said, breaking off liberal bits, and throwing it at them; 'you want some, don't you? Come, Aunt Chloe, bake them some cakes.'... Aunt Chloe, after baking a goodly pile of cakes, took her baby on her lap, and began alternately filling its mouth and her own, and distributing to Mose and Pete, who seemed rather to prefer eating theirs as they rolled about on the floor under the table... 'O! Go long, will ye?' said the mother, giving now and then a kick, in a kind of general way, under the table, when the movement became too obstreperous. 'Can't ye be decent when white folks comes to see ye?'<sup>35</sup>

This particular characterization of the Black child in Stowe's novel aligns these two specific child characters with the trait of being unintelligent in the presence of George, who had just

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<sup>35</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York, NY: First Library of America, 2010. p.38



gotten finished instructing their father Uncle Tom on how to write. Another more poignant portrayal of the Black child in Stowe's novel, and undoubtedly the most popular is, Topsy. Topsy, a young slave girl who is given to southern slave owner St. Clare's cousin Ophelia as a test of her Christian values is one of the most popular pickaninny characterizations.<sup>36</sup> Introduced as an unattractive, high energy character, the first impression that one gets of Topsy is that she is meant to be laughed at as suggested by the following description of her:

She was one of the Blackest of Her Race; and her round, shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment... displayed a white and brilliant set of teeth. Her wooly Hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction... She was dressed in a single, filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; ... Altogether, there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance,--something, as Miss Ophelia afterwards said, 'so heathenish'<sup>37</sup>

Topsy is very much so characterized as a figure meant to mock characteristics and traits of blackness. The extremely Black skin, the bulging eyes, impeccable white teeth, and the haphazardly braided hair; Topsy, was fashioned to be a typical blackface caricature. The description of Topsy visualizes her as a savage; uncivilized. And with that label comes a personality imagined to match it; in the case of Topsy, it was a wicked one. Identified as the chaotic and ill-behaved savage that countered the perfectly loved and well behaved White child, Eva, Topsy plays more into the intentionally ill-behaved role that Stowe has placed her in, unlike her counterparts Mose and Pete earlier on in the novel. Stowe's Topsy, who is characterized as a wild, chaotic, and mischievous character in her juxtaposition to the young evangelist Eva, has a very particular idea of herself in relation to her White counterparts; as a young girl coping with the trauma that her last owners and the institution of slavery as a whole has subjected her to.

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<sup>36</sup> Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Free Within Ourselves" p.69

<sup>37</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" p.278

Topsy views herself as inherently *wicked*, “Cause I’s wicked, --I is. I’s mighty wicked, anyhow. I can’t help it.”<sup>38</sup> The way in which Stowe plays with the varying degrees of unintelligence and wickedness in her Black child characters suggests that given the different circumstances in which the young Black children come into contact with White ones is done intentionally to counter the traits of the White children present as a way of highlighting their positive traits on account of their whiteness. Mose and Pete are characterized as unintelligent and simple minded to bring the reader's attention to how sophisticated George seems. As for Topsy, her mischievous and wicked nature is played up in juxtaposition to Eva to highlight Eva’s role as the young evangelist.

The relationship between Topsy and Eva provides even more insight on the dynamics between their characterizations of blackness and whiteness with the added layer of Topsy’s understanding of her wickedness being attributed to her blackness. While Eva’s character was created in an attempt to characterize White, Christian, feminine, purity; and influence both the Black and White characters towards a life of religious piety, she also characterizes the paternalistic white savior role present throughout the history of juvenile literature featuring Black characters. Eva through gentle and seemingly pure approaches tries to help Topsy become civilized and understand the importance of being good, and that goodness will eventually result in the child being loved and valued; but in this context, that is not a viable option. It simply reinforces the idea that good slave masters can come to love their slaves. But this is not the case, because of the slave/master power dynamics that exist between them. Topsy’s character, who understands that her masters could never truly love her, on account of her blackness, presents yet another stereotype present in contemporary children’s literature featuring black characters; the belief of blackness being inherently bad or evil and by extension, unlovable. Topsy, believes she

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<sup>38</sup>Stowe, Harriet Beecher. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” p.286

is unlovable and unworthy of care because she is Black and to her blackness is synonymous with *wickedness*; while whiteness is inherently good, suggesting that perhaps she would be more inclined to be good if she could somehow become white, “Could n’t never be nothin’ but a nigger, if I was ever so good,” said Topsy. ‘If I could be skinned, and come white, I’d try then.’<sup>39</sup> This directly aligns with the notion expressed in the intro to this thesis about being aware of the burden of internalizing conceptions of blackness as unrewarding.

The fact that such characterizations of a young Black child are present in a novel that boasts anti-slavery values adds immensely to the insider/outsider concept set up in this thesis. Perhaps it is Stowe’s outsider opinion that believes blackness to be inherently bad and uncivilized, --when outside of Christian values or not being accommodating to White sentiments, that is--. The *wickedness* to which Topsy lays claim to, is only exacerbated by the mistreatment she is subjected to by the other Black individuals (mainly adults), whom of which are in close proximity to the White masters. This abuse characterized in the relationships between Black adults and Black children in Stowe’s novel instills the notion of the Black child as a savage until they accept white sensibilities; as pushed onto them by White and Black (civilized) individuals. This is noted when one of Ms. Ophelia’s other slaves loudly states, “I hate these nigger young uns! So disgusting! I wonder that Mas’r would buy her!”<sup>40</sup> Much of the abuse thrown at young Black kids in this particular novel comes from fellow black individuals, but mainly in the presence of White individuals in hopes of appeasing them and gaining privileges for favoring the ideals that the White individuals hold. This concept has planted the seeds of assimilationist culture within Black American literature/children’s literature, and will be explained further in chapter 3. Topsy’s positioning as a savage character in the presence of what Stowe characterizes

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.330

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.281

as civilized Whites and Blacks--whom of which have been civilized by virtue of their proximity to White people-- comes from Stowe's outsider perspective, and suggesting by the inclusion of equally as negative opinions by fellow Black characters about Topsy identifies her as a universally unlovable and inadequate Black figure. This understanding of Topsy in her characterization in the novel can only be remedied by White civilizing forces.

Perhaps one of the most pressing ideals expressed in this novel as it applies to the role of White influenced Black narratives in re-inscribing ideals is a sentiment expressed by St. Clare in an exchange between him and his cousin Ophelia about Topsy in which he says: "You find virgin soil there, Cousin; put in your own ideas, --you won't find many to pull up."<sup>41</sup> When applied to the reading of Topsy's character as a savage the idea that this portrayal might put into the *virgin soil* of the minds of young Black audiences who come in contact with Stowe's Topsy or other adaptations of her character is that by virtue of their blackness they too are *savages*. This understanding of the *savage/civilized* dichotomy could encourage Black children to attempt to align themselves with whiteness to avoid the title of savage. This particular declaration by St. Clare sums up in a few words why the notion of non-Black authors having control over the Black narrative can be so destructive. Working under the assumptions that Black Americans know nothing of their condition in society and are mentally and spiritually inept to exist without the aid of Whites is exactly why it is so important for the narrative to no longer be controlled by those who will *put in their own ideas*. These are the ideas that are not productive in uplifting the community that needs it the most, nor are they consistent with the actual history of Black disenfranchisement and cultural genocide in America. Whether the influence of whiteness and White sensibilities are inherently benevolent or not, there exists a prioritization of protecting and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.283

reinforcing whiteness at all costs. For Black characters that hardly seems fair in a context in which blackness' mere existence is characterized by the epistemic violence experienced from whiteness and White institutions.

Perhaps this is why *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is such a poignant and influential book at least as far as the development of Black children's literature is concerned; not because of the fact that it claims to be an attempt to make known the wrongs of slavery from a White Christian standpoint, but because it reinforces, and has led to the reproduction of negative Black stereotypes for the convenience of White fragility. The influences made by Stowe's novel have evolved and embedded themselves deeply into present day culture and society that negatively affects the development of positive self-images within young and old Black reader alike. Until the idea of who these portrayals of blackness and whiteness are intended to empower are reassessed, portrayals of these two racial identities that are reminiscent of those in Stowe's novel will continue to be reproduced in modern culture and media; negatively affecting Black identity construction. When Black communities tell their narratives outside of how White communities may feel about them, perhaps the legacy of novels like Stowe's and Harris' will begin to stop reproducing their themes and caricatures in the mainstream modern Children's literary scene.

We see very clearly the utilization of the caricatures and tropes identified by Banfield in Stowe's portrayal of her characters. Stowe's novel, although regarded as an important piece of abolitionist fiction in the Black American literary canon, and is regarded as such for its utilization as a religious, anti-slavery propaganda tool, and seemingly well meaning; the development, or lack thereof of the Black characters in the novel only perpetuates and reinforces the harmful stereotypes of the Black savage. Although Stowe's novel was not intended for young readers, the images and ideals that she includes in the novel inspired adaptations of the characters

and their social and political positions in works like *Uncle Remus*, or Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* which accrued large followings of White and Black child readers. And unsurprisingly this creates a situation in which the White child continues to be uplifted at the expense of the Black child. Although the Black child's character has been historically abused even within abolitionist literature and later, in the re-inscriptions of those themes of inferiority in children's books. It is caricatures like this that provide the precursor to the eventual political role that Black children would play in redefining blackness in literature and in life.

### **Reintroducing the Image of the Savage: How *Little Black Sambo* Evokes Antiquated White**

#### **Visualizations of African Barbarism**

One of the most notable appropriations of typical Blackface caricatures, with the pickaninny visual caricature at the center, is Helen Bannerman's children's book, *Little Black Sambo*. Although the storyline of Bannerman's book deviates from the absurd behavioral characteristics of Black bodies imagined by Stowe except for a quick reference to the inhuman appetites of the Black characters presented in her book, the main issue present in the book was its use of the traditional cartoonish images of blackface minstrelsy. What is often said to have been a benevolent attempt at creating a story for her young children, Bannerman whose story takes place in India placed an emphasis on the blackness of the characters through the illustrations. *Little Black Sambo*, often regarded as a text that is representative of British Imperialism<sup>42</sup> since the author was English; begs the question of how do American blackface caricatures become relevant in a story taking place in India and written by an English person? This is important to ask as the setup of this thesis so far has created the distinction between insiders and outsiders of

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<sup>42</sup> Bishop, Rudine Sims. "*Free within Ourselves*." p.70

the Black American narrative as simply Black Americans as insiders and White Americans as outsiders. Bannerman who imposes on the Black narrative as an outsider on two fronts, on account of being both White--outside of the Black frame of reference-- and English--outside of the American context-- this suggests two things about the creation and eventual popularity of her book within the U.S. Bannerman's role in the creation of a literature degrading to the image of blackness in America is that she was mostly responsible for the themes of African primitivism suggested in the book --although her story was set in India--. As far as the Americanized blackface minstrel references, however, it can be assumed that the influence of American publishers may be to blame for such visual depictions. One theory is that American publishers at the time of *Little Black Sambo's* American release, took the liberty of incorporating their own illustrations of blackness to appeal to the American market, Hence the typical blackface caricatures that Bannerman's characters are fashioned after. Perhaps the themes of blackness as she aligns them with African primitivism from a White British perspective, fit perfectly into the White American perspective of the Black savage. Bannerman provided an image of African primitivism within the text and America provided the appropriate imagery that they felt fit.

The fact that such a book did so well in America is not a coincidence. It is highly likely that its popularity could be due to its contribution to the canon of books that re-inscribed harmful ideas about Black peoples that added a layer to Black inferiority outside of the context of slavery as most American literature liked to characterized its Black characters within. *Little Black Sambo* provides a generalized idea of Black inferiority, beginning from the jungles that White individuals presume all Black people came from. Surprisingly, the acceptance that this book garnered from Black audiences upon its publication in the States highlights a layer of complex understandings of Black representation. Did the Black audience simply accept the book for its

role as one of the only Books for children centering Black characters, and by virtue that was enough? Or was the acceptance of Bannerman's book by Black individuals a precursor to the methods of reclamation that Black communities use in an attempt to free themselves from stigmatized traits of blackness as characterized by whiteness?

*Little Black Sambo* remains an important example of the degree to which early children's literature characterized the literal and literary other. Bannerman's book with its over exaggerations of Black bodies highlights the biases that existed within her understanding of Black people as individuals and the Black community as a whole. Bannerman's White imagination runs wild with images of black individuals living in jungles and possessing super human appetites which sets the tone for why White portrayals of blackness in literature historically are unreliable. Although presented in an imaginary children's story format, it is common knowledge that children's books are not as innocent in content and intention as one might think.<sup>43</sup> Framing this argument around that understanding is what allows us to be critical of children's books and stories like Bannerman's despite the understanding that in its prime it was one of the only representation present in a children's book for Black peoples and therefore may be remembered fondly by some. Throughout the story, Bannerman asserts her power over blackness in many ways; the first being the use of blackface in the illustrations. In using stereotypical physical imagery of Black peoples popularized by blackface minstrel shows, the White view of blackness is placed at the forefront of the narrative. It provides a view of blackness through a funhouse mirror for the Black readers who may have encountered this book; and fogs up the window that White audiences could have looked through to gain a better

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<sup>43</sup> Tikoff, Valentina K. "A Role Model for African American Children: Abigail Field Mott's Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano and White Northern Abolitionism." In *Who Writes for Black Children? African American Children's Literature Before 1900*, edited by Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, 94-116. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. P. 95. Originally a sentiment expressed by Children's literary scholar Peter Hunt



understanding of Black identity and culture. Stories like *Little Black Sambo* and others of the like exist in such a way that it is meant to compare blackness to whiteness and imply a superiority of whiteness through portrayals of blackness that synonymizes it with being ugly and primitive. *Little Black Sambo* although it does not juxtapose its Black characters with White ones to imply this distinction, it does so merely by employing words, phrases, and literal images that evoke particular stereotypical images of blackness in conversation with the assumed whiteness of the audience.

Perhaps one of the most pressing things to be noted about this text--other than the blatant blackface-- is the significance of the character's names. Black Mumbo, Black Jumbo, and Little Black Sambo. Their names are supposed to represent blackness or in some cases African-ness; which brings us back to the point about words and phrases that evoke certain images. The use of the phrase "Mumbo Jumbo" in Sambo's parents' names is used to exacerbate the already over exaggerated African-ness (which in the case of Bannerman's portrayal of it becomes synonymous with primitivism) of the characters. Vachel Lindsay, a white American poet, became a popular figure for his use of and examination of the term, or in this case name, *Mumbo Jumbo* as well in his poem *The Congo: A Study of The Negro Race*--originally published in 1914. Lindsay whose poem comes after the original publication of Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* also uses *Mumbo Jumbo* as a term to denote primitivism and savagery as he connects it to themes and situations of traditional ritual and spiritual practices like voodoo:

THEIR BASIC SAVAGERY...  
 'Be careful what you do,  
 Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo,  
 And all of the other  
 Gods of the Congo,  
 Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,  
 Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,

Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly the term/name mumbo jumbo brings about a vision of savagery associated with the darker races within the White imagination and with that we can see a link between words and their visual associations and how the use of names like Mumbo and Jumbo in Bannerman's book reinforces the negative imagery that accompanies her story. There is no evidence to suggest that Lindsay was influenced by or even knew of Bannerman's book-- in a similar fashion to how Harris was influenced by Stowe--but the fact that both of these White writers, writing about blackness came to use the same terms to ascribe primitivism onto Black characters hardly seems to be a mere coincidence, and displays the repetitive nature of Black stereotypes informed by the White imagination throughout the generations.

"Sambo" was a term used derogatively to address Black people and individuals who had mixed Black ancestry. It is also a name found within Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; as one part of a duo of brothers named Sambo and Quimbo, two brutish slaves conditioned to adhere to the requests of the cruel slave master, Simon Legree. Sambo is also a name steeped in images of violence, ignorance, and barbarism,

Sambo has been used so often to refer to a negro in a derogatory sense. Remember that the end man in the minstrel show, the stupid one who was the butt of all the jokes, was Sambo. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines Sambo as... NEGRO,<sup>45</sup>

And just as the above quote suggests, the visual images of the Black characters in *Little Black Sambo* and the images that names like Sambo evoke have a particular history of presenting an assumed ugliness in both appearance and character, often associated with African-ness. The

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<sup>44</sup> Lindsay, Vachel. "The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race by Vachel Lindsay." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47374/the-congo-a-study-of-the-negro-race](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47374/the-congo-a-study-of-the-negro-race).

<sup>45</sup> Birtha, Jessis M. "Portrayal of the Black in Children's Literature." In *The Black American in Books for Children*, edited by Donnarrae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, 119-20. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p.119

intention with which Bannerman is using the nonsensical and culturally insensitive meanings behind the names given to her characters is to set the scene for the behaviors of the *owners* of those *names* and evoke a particular vision of what blackness physically looks like through its association with these particular words. Bannerman's use of these *names* sets up an irrational kind of White reasoning for why these *primitive* Black characters can do things like eat more than their body's weight in pancakes as described in the following, "Black Mumbo ate Twenty-seven pancakes, and Black Jumbo ate Fifty-five but Little Black Sambo ate a Hundred and Sixty-nine, because he was so hungry."<sup>46</sup>

This emphasis on the names of the characters in a way highlights Bannerman's cultural (mis)understanding--or perhaps to her knowledge and intentional misuse-- of the importance of names to the Black/African identity. Names have a deep cultural significance and history in the Black community; most notably connected to the practice of renaming enslaved peoples upon their arrival in America. This begins to explain why the use of such names as Mumbo, Jumbo, and Sambo as ascribed to Black characters in Bannerman's book are not as innocent as they may seem. In the naming of Mumbo, Jumbo, and Sambo the names are meant to denote their status as African *savages*. The names, much like the visuals and images given to Black characters in works made by White authors often denoted another's ownership over them (usually the author's). And this eventually framed the view of which not only outsiders saw Black individuals, but also the view through which Black individuals saw themselves or how they came to visualize their blackness. This historical background offers the assumption that Bannerman exercises her imagined right as a White person to control the identities, narratives, and visuals of Black bodies through her own naming practices. It reinforces the derogatory nature of how

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<sup>46</sup> Bannerman, Helen. *Little Black Sambo*. Edited by Watty Piper. New York, NY: Platt & Munk, 1972. p.21

Whites view Black people and how they intend to influence the way that they believe Black people should view themselves and be viewed by others.

Although *Little Black Sambo* is just one example of many books that play on derogative stereotypes and visions of blackness that use a white historical frame of reference to impact how Black identity is perceived by Whites and constructed within the minds of Black people; it was a highly favored book by many a Black child following its publication; mainly for the fact that it was one of the only children's books at the time that featured Black characters at all. In fact, there existed many a Black person who saw past the clearly racist characterizations of blackness in Bannerman's book to focus in on the storyline and find positivity within that. Author Toni Morrison was one of the individuals who approached books like *Little Black Sambo* in that manner. In a biography of Morrison's life entitled *Telling a Tale Untold* it is stated that,

Morrison's favorite book written for children was *Little Black Sambo*... Morrison loved that story. She once wrote that Little Black Sambo was 'a child as deeply loved and pampered by his parents as ever lived' and observed, 'Mumbo. Jumbo. Sambo. They were beautiful names--the kind you could whisper to a leaf or shout in the cellar and feel as though you had let something important fly from your mouth,'... But during Morrison's childhood, except for the books by Bannerman, the standard literature for children did not recognize the existence of blacks.<sup>47</sup>

Morrison's understanding of Little Black Sambo opens up a new discourse as it pertains to reclaiming and redefining terms historically used to degrade. This is an important conversation to open up as it introduces an idea that will be expanded upon in the last chapter of this thesis.

Morrison, whom of which can be assumed to understand the context of why *Little Black Sambo* can be viewed as offensive, decides to find beauty in the historically derogatory names Mumbo, Jumbo, and Sambo. Why might this be? Maybe it is in alignment with the reclamation of terms like the N-word, which have been re-appropriated and used out of context of its historical

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<sup>47</sup> "Haskins, Jim. *Toni Morrison: Telling a Tale Untold*. Brookfield, CT: Twenty-First Century Books, 2002. p.22

meaning. Perhaps Morrison made a critical move towards reclaiming a piece of the narrative that was created for her by the White mainstream, not to put power within the ideals of White supremacy, but to separate the negative understanding of traits often ascribed to Black communities because of their African-ness.

Similarly to the sentiment expressed by scholar Beryle Banfield in her observation of Black American folklore changing its usage and methodology into a political mode of critique within the American context,<sup>48</sup> perhaps, Morrison may have attempted to employ a similar approach with *Little Black Sambo*. Perhaps Morrison intentionally unpacked the narrative around White impositions on Black/African names to enforce a new usage and understanding of it as something to be reclaimed. Unfortunately for Morrison, the names Mumbo, Jumbo, and Sambo have reached far beyond the point of reclamation, at least as we view them now. In actuality referring to someone as a Sambo could be regarded as fighting words; but the methodology that she used to justify reclaiming something with such an ugly history and context has definitely been implemented in the reclamation of other historic signifiers of Blackness and Black history itself.

Despite the attempts made by scholars like Morrison to redefine traumatic relics of the Black narrative, the important question still remains. Was the acceptance of Bannerman's book in Black spaces due in part to the lack of proper representation that calls for Black readers to find reasons to acknowledge books written by White authors about Black people as valid Black literature? My conclusion is that it definitely played a large role. Although in some situations in which White authors are attempting to write blackness and do so under the claim that is is supposed to be a positive representation of blackness, it usually tends to still fall short. Did a

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<sup>48</sup> Banfield, Beryle. "Racism in Children's Books: An Afro-American Perspective." In *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, 23-38. 2nd ed. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985. p.29

handful of these White writers have good intentions? Sure they did! But, as literary scholars Judith Thompson and Gloria Woodard put it in their essay *Black Perspective in Books for Children*, “Good intentions’ are not enough.”<sup>49</sup> The notion of impact over intent applies nicely here. Many Black children and adults have enjoyed the story of *Little Black Sambo* as there was nothing particularly offensive about it other than its visual characterization--in older editions--and names of the Black family, and many even look fondly back on the book. But for as many young Black children and adults that were simply satisfied at having a children’s book that provided some kind of representation of Black characters; that does not take away from the fact that there was also a significant memory of young Black children feeling embarrassed and inferior in their alignment with *Little Black Sambo*. The omnipresent juxtaposition of Sambo and his parents to the White audiences that many Black children found themselves a part of in readings of the book, was enough to cast shame

“It has been proved--and experienced--that if a story of this type [Little Black Sambo] is used in an integrated story hour or classroom, there is a certain amount of discomfort and--yes, inferiority feeling--for a black child when white classmates look at him and giggle, later teasing him by calling him Sambo. No matter how entertaining a book is, one group of children should never be entertained at the expense of another groups’ feelings”<sup>50</sup>

When the notion of White writers and artists imagining a Black experience is brought up in a literary context, the unfortunate legacy that has been left behind by Stowe’s, Harris’ and Bannerman’s writings must be considered. Although books like *Little Black Sambo* with its blatant approach to characterizing the *other* have faded out over time, the very real consequences of White authors and illustrators taking it upon themselves to imagine another’s narratives can

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.40

<sup>50</sup> Birtha, Jessis M. "Portrayal of the Black in Children's Literature." p. 119

still possess a certain inauthentic and othering tone reminiscent of its rather obnoxious predecessors. When Black characters are imagined through the White imagination, it is easy to spot how these narratives consistently fail to get the intricacies and multiplicities of Black culture, experience, and identity right. Even the most progressive of books by White authors and illustrators created with the intention to promote diversity can indirectly reinforce the power structures and stereotypes that are deeply embedded in White and Black consciousness. In contrast to the Black character portrayals of the past, that are often hyper racialized and easily detectable as inauthentic, is an equally damaging yet common practice among white authors and illustrators of the modern mainstream who include any Black characters in their writings; the use of a colorblind approach. Whether these authors are inaccurately portraying Black culture, experience, and identity, or adopting the colorblind approach they are ripping out a page in the handbooks penned by Stowe, Harris, and Bannerman and using their lessons to assert specific brands of dominance over their Black characters and potential Black readers of their books.

### Chapter 3

#### The Origins of the Respectable Negro:

#### A Counter to the Romanticisation of Black Suffering While Sowing the Seeds of Respectability Politics

To counter caricatures of blackness in early American literature, the development of a truthful Black narrative told by an insider to the Black American experience would seem like a step in the right direction. While the sentimental novels of the antebellum period written by White authors reinforced harmful stereotypes of blackness while praising White sensibilities as a cure for the stain of blackness, there also existed an early genre in the Black American literary canon that made great efforts counteract those stereotypes and false histories; and that genre is the slave narrative. The slave narrative which provides an authentic look into the actual lives of Black Americans during a time where their narratives were in the control of White writers took it upon themselves to give an authentic glimpse into what the Black American experience is really like. Slave narratives in all of their cultural and experiential authenticity, also provided another poignant discourse around the theme of childhood, or --lack thereof-- for the Black child in the search of freedom. Slave narratives such as the most popular *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)* were effective in expressing the cultural and experiential explanations for why Black Americans held in bondage developed specific traits and survival tactics to critique the social and political climate of their era. Those survival tactics were not exclusive to adults.

Of these tactics of which young Black kids would need to adopt was the pursuit of education, “Slave narrators foregrounded childhood as the site where the struggle for freedom began as an intellectual exercise, if not yet a physical one.”<sup>51</sup> It is suggested that although the

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<sup>51</sup>Capshaw, Katharine, and Anna Mae Duane, eds. “Introduction” *Who Writes for Black Children? African American Children's Literature Before 1900*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017



pursuit of education was an important precursor to eventually becoming free, in the political context and tradition of the Black American/children's literary canon it also meant the loss of a childhood or death of an innocence. It also highlighted the prioritization of assimilation to be inducted into personhood as a free Black individual. The notion of the educated individualistic or self-made freedmen became a notably important trait in the political set up of the genre that would go on to be adopted into the early stages of a Black children's literature genre. The learned Black child in exchange for their childhood becomes politically educated and in that way becomes a medium through which the political genres that begat them can continue to be addressed in the mainstream. This meant that White audiences could be confronted by Black persons who had the tools to assimilate into those spaces unlike their predecessors of the early Black American folktale era,

In the narratives of escaped slaves, learning to read and write is often figured as a step on the path to emancipation and even economic success. A story such as Frederick Douglass's celebrates the romantic self-made man's life cycle, adopting a narrative that white abolitionists like Whittier admired.<sup>52</sup>

The slave narrative opens up an important dialogue about how to remain authentic in one's self in the presence of an audience that has been dedicated to misunderstanding you. It also mirrors the potential dangers addressed in the Folktale discourse in chapter one where the rule of thumb was, if a battle is to be had, make sure it is had on your homeground; and for many a slave narrator, this is unfortunately not the case; but the question remains, how has this affected the effectiveness of the genre in the act of moving forward the reclamation project of the Black narrative for future generations of Black Americans?

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<sup>52</sup> Sorby, Angela. "Conjuring Readers: Antebellum African American Children's Poetry" In *Who Writes for Black Children?: African American Children's Literature Before 1900*, edited by Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, 94-116. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. p.8

Even Slave narratives outside of an explicitly American context such as *The Interesting narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789)* provide a valuable look into the literary and political tactics adopted by Black individuals that seemed to hold a considerable amount of power over how their narratives would move into the mainstream. What is important to the development of this chapter in particular is the understanding that there existed Black figures who had the tools and opportunity-- still denied to many of their peers-- to produce a valid critique of America's social hierarchy and present a narrative centering a Black historical memory that so often gets misrepresented. But they too must have also had to cater to a mostly White audience and therefore had to watch what they said. Because of this fact of the omnipresent White gaze, many early Black American narratives may have had their messages and critiques impacted and censored through the lens of the White editors, publishers, and audiences--usually within abolitionist circles-- that could easily write them off if not in alignment with their agenda or willing to work within the confines of assimilationist culture.

Despite this fact of the influence of White ideals in the genre of the slave narrative, it is in the tropes and themes of this genre that particular Black voices were willingly heard within in the mainstream. This provided an opportunity for the adoption of these political ideologies in later generations of Black writers, eventually cementing themselves in the efforts to create a Black American children's literature in the early twentieth century. As noted throughout this thesis the theme of political critique remains an important tradition within the Black American literary lexicon that is continuously re-inscribed and readopted to push forward the act of reclaiming specific traits of blackness at different points in history. For example, the political nature of Black American folktales explored in chapter one and the slave narrative of this chapter set the tone for the reclamation of the first aspect of Black epistemology; the reclaiming of

personhood and the validity of the mind. Both genres exercised great political understanding and displayed intelligence and sophistication in their methods of social critique. What sets the two apart is that the slave narrative actively puts on display the intellect possessed by peoples in this subjugated community to express their social critiques. This is an opportunity bestowed on them because they have the vocabulary, skills, and resources to do so in White spaces. These were opportunities that were not afforded to their Black American folklorist predecessors, which explains their eventually misidentified Black narratives due to the influence of White interpretations. The politically charged Black folktales created during the institution of slavery created space for Black individuals to reclaim those political narratives and give voice and power to them where the last generation was unable to. This is where freed Black individuals like Douglass play a role in accepting the baton of moving forward the act of adding to the slowly assembling narrative of reclaiming Black personhood.

Because of the visibility that popular slave novelists at the time were receiving, most notably free ones, the continuation of the Black American tradition of political intervention through orality and literature ensured that the narrative that so often was depoliticized when appropriated and taken out of its original context would finally have a platform to speak out without being edited to discredit the validity of the issues being addressed. The development of accurate and authentic Black narratives is rooted in the continued adoption of this political memory. It is built on the works that folks of past generations have contributed to provide a medium through which the culture, and historical memory of Black America is made to be more visible, not only in the mainstream, but within the Black community as well.

One noticeably big drawback in heralding these narratives as proper reclamations of the Black American narrative instead of acknowledging them more accurately as stepping stones in

the incremental act or reclamation acted out by Black Americans over the span of different decades, is the still ever-present influence that White audiences had in developing the narratives. In addition to the mainstream White audience came the influence of White editors and publishers who had tremendous power in dictating the ways that these Black stories are told. Many slave novels that were published in the time of their popularity, were usually funded and published within White abolitionist circles; and as seen in the characterizations of Stowe's characters in her novels despite her abolitionist views, abolitionism was not always synonymous with being antiracist.<sup>53</sup> In fact, many of the abolitionists who had published slave narratives held mildly paternalistic attitudes towards the Black individuals who shared their narratives. Many of them noticeably more concerned with the mobilization of the abolitionist movement, but not necessarily in the acknowledgement of Black individuals as equals. And in the process of whiteness taking the liberty to shape the narratives of blackness however they would like, Black creators simply provided the facts of their life, the facts of their existence, just to allow the White appropriators to "take care of the philosophy"<sup>54</sup> behind it. This was noted as an actual sentiment conveyed to Frederick Douglass in an exchange between him and abolitionist John Collins, suggesting that Douglass' role in the actual formation of his narrative should be as minimal as simply providing the facts without his perspectives on them; allowing abolitionists to push his narrative as propaganda to legitimize their work as abolitionists. Due to the influence of the White editors and publishers of the slave narratives this led to the highlighting or omission of particular ideas, personal characteristics or critiques being made within the slave narratives by the writers. Again highlighting the power of the audience and the harmful effects that could

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<sup>53</sup> Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Free Within Ourselves" p.69

<sup>54</sup> Tikoff, Valentina K. "A Role Model for African American Children." p.101

come of the authentic Black narrative when it comes in contact with the White gaze and assimilationist sentiment.

The slave narrative and its exposure of the brutality that slaves actually faced, were often intervened by White abolitionist philosophies which suggests that perhaps the Black narrators of the genre simply became the mouthpieces for a semi-fabricated narrative that in large part was still just as influenced by White interpretations as Harris' Remus tales or Stowe's *UTC*. This particular genre and its use in conversation with the sentimental novel and other appropriated Black narratives, are the skeleton of the debate of whether there exists a Black narrative that has not to some degree been influenced or surveilled by the the White gaze. And even in the event that the white gaze is inescapable, how are these narratives going about the process of reclaiming the caricatures, stereotypes, and false historical memories that degraded and humiliated Black communities in past works despite the outsider influences? An equally important question as it pertains to this particular influence on Black narratives, is what new kinds of characterizations of blackness have been popularized through Black narratives like the slave narrative? Are those developments seen as negative or positive as they counteract the significantly more violent caricatures and stereotypes of the past? Or do they simply add another layer to the harmful recreation of inauthentic Black narratives?

### **The Narrative of *Olaudah Equiano* and its Use in Promoting Assimilationist Culture to**

#### **Young Black Readers**

One particular slave narrative *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, produces an interesting case in the history of White appropriations of Black Narratives. Equiano's narrative, like most other slave narratives and sentimental novels at the time also

catered mostly to a largely White readership, in hopes of convincing sympathetic readers of the perils of slavery. The difference between the execution of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, however is the accuracy in the social commentary being made by the Black writers versus the White writers about the positioning of slaves. Well aware of the White audience being written for, Black slave novelists ensured that they critiqued the institution every chance they got. In the case of Equiano's narrative, however, there exists a pruning of his radical critiques of the institution of slavery when the intended audience is shifted.<sup>55</sup> This brings about the earlier argument of Black narratives being censored for White audiences. But how might this be applied if the audience in question is Black? Abigail Mott, a White abolitionist in the 1820s, published an abridged version of Equiano's narrative in 1829 entitled *The Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano*. This abridged version of the narrative was created solely for distribution and use by African American children attending the New York African Free School.<sup>56</sup> Mott condensed all of the happenings noted in the original narrative into a children's book of less than 20 pages; positioning Equiano as a role model for the African American kids attending the NYAFS.<sup>57</sup> What Mott also achieved in her characterization of Equiano was conveniently leave out the important social and political commentary provided in the original narrative. Instead Mott highlights Equiano's favorable and respectable traits; aligning him with the abolitionist views of the time as an educated, Christian who assimilated to the values important to Mott and other abolitionists.

The resulting image of Equiano fits well with the strategies and objectives of white northern U.S. abolitionists of the 1820s. *Life and Adventures* is thus a pedagogical

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<sup>55</sup> Tikoff, Valentina K. "A Role Model for African American Children: Abigail Field Mott's *Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano* and White Northern Abolitionism." In *Who Writes for Black Children?: African American Children's Literature Before 1900*, edited by Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, 94-116. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. p. 94-116.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.97

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.98

text that manifests abolitionist beliefs, including confidence that African American children, freed and educated, might claim civic and economic roles in an envisioned American nation after slavery.<sup>58</sup>

It is in portrayals and retellings of Black narratives such as this that reinforce White standards of blackness, be they degrading images of the perfect plantation slave, or an image of absolute Christian abolitionist respectability that continually puts the fate of Blacks and specifically Black children in the hands of White powers. Even in benevolent, abolitionist circles the air of paternalistic, civilizing of the Black community can be as harmful to the development of Black cultural identity as the portrayals by both malevolent and benevolent White writers of “Black” content. Whether it is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s original or Joel Chandler Harris’ reproduction of the ‘good negro’ plantation slave, or the respectable and assimilated ‘good negro’ of Equiano’s own self fashioning within White abolitionist circles, one connecting factor between these two portrayals remains; the overarching reproduction of the idea expressed by Stowe’s St. Clare in which whiteness has the ability to *Put in their own ideas* where they believe they *won’t find many to pull up*.<sup>59</sup> Characterizations of both, the benevolent slave and the abolitionist’s respectable negro are steeped in the characterization of Black bodies reading as savage until they conform to White westernized standards. Legacy seems to be an important factor in the creation of socializing content like children’s books and may explain why many non-black authors, illustrators, publishers etc. would want to maintain a steady role in the creation of literature featuring blackness but catering to a White audience or sentiment. This is evident in the fact that early American literature that featured black characters has steadily been reproducing and rebranding itself over the centuries; whether creating positive or negative portrayals of blackness, still ensuring that in every way Black people are palatable and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p.94

<sup>59</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”. p. 283

acceptable by White standards. But with that said, it is imperative to not only acknowledge the negative reproductions of harmful caricatures and stereotypes that permeate the books that socialize our children in a systemically racist world, but to also make note of the positive tropes and accurate, unrevised narratives that survived the early African American literary canon and applaud the continued nuances being made to the canon at present. As much of an influence that the negative portrayals and stereotypes of blackness formed by the White imagination have been on the future of black portrayals in books and media, the accounts of real life lived experiences as recorded in genres such as the slave narrative have also become influential in the development of an African American children's lit canon. For every black stereotype formed by the White imagination, there exists a more truthful and genuine account of Black life and identity as told by the individuals who actually live that reality. Both the early American and early African American literary canon shapes the conversation around why the insider/outsider conversation is such a poignant and relevant one, especially in the current age of children's and young adult literature.

### **The New Negro vs. The Old Negro:**

#### **A Battle Between the Political and Artistic Modes of Reclamation During the Harlem Renaissance**

Following emancipation, a new readership was developing; a black one. The reconstruction era saw many Black Americans taking advantage of the pursuit of educational endeavors, with the pursuit of literacy being one of the top priorities of newly freed slaves, coming second only to relocating and reuniting with lost family members.<sup>60</sup> The prioritization of education and literacy carried over into the post-emancipation Black experience and has been

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<sup>60</sup> Bishop, Rudine Sims. *Free within Ourselves*". p.9



re-inscribed as a tool that will work towards freeing Black communities physically, mentally, and spiritually; providing access to spaces and discourses that would have been denied to them in the past. As the Black readership steadily developed in the decades leading up, it actually wasn't until the efforts of Black creators during the era of the Harlem Renaissance that there was an attempt to push the recognition of a Black, and specifically Black child audience into the mainstream. This thesis' earlier discourse on literature created by both insiders and outsiders that catered mainly to White audiences, becomes ever more relevant here in the developing discussion of literature that influenced modern black childhood narratives. It is during this time that the shift from catering specifically to White audiences to catering specifically Black children happens. As literacy became a priority to most Black Americans during the reconstruction period, both young and old, much of the African American Literary canon post-Civil War was made to cater to both Black child and adult readers, for whom, at that particular point in history literacy was simultaneously being achieved. The formation of this newly culminating readership overlapped with efforts made by missionaries to provide platforms for writers, both, white and black to share their works that they felt spoke to black sentiments. While many periodicals were developed by religious organizations to provide reading materials for Black readers, as well as exposure for educated Black writers, these early periodicals and publications would be the prototype for arguably two of the most influential magazines for the development of the Black American literary canon and the Black children's literary canon, *The Crisis* and *The Brownies' Book*.

In the time leading up to the Harlem Renaissance, about 1910, or so brought forth budding initiatives to actively and radically combat the stereotypes created about Black people coined in the pre-Civil War era and reproduced post-Civil War, especially through the mode of

literature. With Black literacy rates and works by the Black elite on the rise, there existed a desire to define blackness outside of the White imagination that for so long held the black image hostage. But now, the resources to do so were more available to the Black community. Leading up to the 1920's Black artists and intellectuals worked to create a canon of narratives that reflected authentic Black American experiences and create a distinct Black aesthetic. A culmination of these Black creatives' thoughts and experiences was brought forth in *The Crisis* (1910), the official magazine of the NAACP. Brainchild of W.E.B Du Bois, *The Crisis* was a publication created out of necessity, calling upon a tradition of African American activist journalism.<sup>61</sup> Du Bois' hope for the publication was to provide positive propaganda that effectively educated, informed, and activated its Black readers. In an excerpt from one publication on Du Bois' editorship of *The Crisis*, the magazine's agenda is further explained:

As Du Bois explained, the magazine's object was to, 'set forth those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly manifested to-day toward colored people.' He further outlined that *The Crisis* would 'first and foremost be a newspaper,' reporting on events and movements that 'bear on the great problem of inter-racial relations.' However, it would also review literature dealing with racial questions, respond to opinions of race relations offered in other publications, and publish short articles."<sup>62</sup>

In alignment with the magazine's homage to activist journalism, *The Crisis* made it a point to push "themes of education, unity, political activity, and ways for African Americans to seek equality and justice."<sup>63</sup> The themes from which Du Bois mounts his attempt to politically mobilize Black communities can be recognized in the themes set up within the Black American literary genres preceding his own within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Through reinscribing these themes he has been handed off the baton incremental reclamation; using his

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<sup>61</sup>Alexander , Shawn Leigh. "The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races." *Protest and Propaganda: W.E.B. Du Bois, the Crisis, and American History*, edited by Amy Helene. Kirschke and Phillip Luke. Sinitiere, University of Missouri Press, 2014, pp. 1–15. p.3

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.p.2

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.p.3

positioning as an editor which in the generations preceding him has an obstacle that kept Black narratives under the close eye of the White gaze.

Equally as important as Du Bois' position to divert from the White gaze in delivering an authentic Black narrative however, are the ways in which he attempts to feed into it. Du Bois although creating and editing content for a largely Black readership, presented ideals that were reminiscent of the respectable freed man constructed by abolitionists like Mott. During the Harlem Renaissance a divide between Black communities ensued based on differences in class privilege. During this rift, middle class Black people held particular standards that they felt might make them White adjacent and working class Black peoples were understood to fall into traditional constructions of blackness, which were frowned upon by the former. Du Bois' work which fell in line with the sentiments of the Black middle class contributed to an extensive discourse within the collective Black community at the time on how to properly reclaim the image of *the Negro*. The two extremes presented in this discourse were the pursuit of political and educational endeavors that were believed to result in White communities taking the words and actions of the Black community more seriously, and the other being the pursuit of artistic endeavors that contributed to the overall breadth and depth of Black American culture outside of the White gaze. This debate has been an ongoing one in the discussion of reclamation with newer generations agreeing on the fact that both education, politics, and arts can in fact coexist in the construction of blackness as they always have in the cultural artifacts and endeavors of Black American history. Their combined forces can actually make the task of reclaiming Black identity a more well-rounded approach. Contemporary writers of Black children's literature have acknowledged this and gone on to implement this pedagogy into their works. This allows both their characters and their audiences to experience the multiplicity of Black identity and how they

interact with one another. One such example is Walter Dean Myers' *Harlem Summer*, which make direct reference to the influence of Du Bois, *The Crisis*, and the Harlem Renaissance's discourse on Black identity which will be discussed further in the following pages.

Du Bois pushes forward the reclamation train through his providing space for Black creators to share narratives that fall under the themes of political mobility and education to be distributed within Black communities. But what he adds to the mix is his prioritization of children as a tool through which the system of incremental reclamation may inch forward a bit more efficiently. In pushing positive propaganda that encouraged Black Americans to think critically about how to better their circumstances in a deeply flawed and racist society Du Bois enacted a new method of formulating racial pride in his readers, to create publications that spoke directly to the young people and socialize them into becoming the race leaders that the Black community so desperately needed. Calling upon the notion popularized in the slave narrative, Du Bois' work with *The Crisis* and *The Brownies' Book* reopens the dialogue about the state of Black childhood; are they to sacrifice it in the fight for equality in the same way that slave narrators a few generations ago sacrificed their own in the name of freedom? Or perhaps the discourses between Du Bois, his contemporaries, and the New generations who have re-inscribed their ideas in their works provides a framework through which balance can be bestowed upon Black child readers to be both mature and childlike. The creation of the mature, sophisticated, and politically aware/activated Black child will be explored at length in the following pages as Du Bois' editorial work will enter in conversation with contemporary children's/ Young Adult texts such as Walter Dean Myers' *Harlem Summer*--a direct reference to Du Bois' work--, and Mildred D. Taylor's 'Logan' family chronicles.

### The DuBoisian Child Soldier

Du Bois, in order to manifest his idea of reaching out to younger readerships, began the annual *Crisis* children's number (1912 -1934). The children's number of *The Crisis* held a very important role in re-conceptualizing the concept of *dual address*,<sup>64</sup> a theory reminiscent of the reconstruction period where Black adults and children in the pursuit of literacy partook in literature of similar or the same content and form. Du Bois applied *dual address* to *The Crisis*, as a way of racially interpellating his young readers and preparing them to be strong political leaders through literature and images that meant to simultaneously uplift and activate his young readership along with their parents. By presenting to his young readership radicalized and often heavy concepts that were usually reserved for mature audiences-- such as his vehement anti-lynching stance--, DuBois utilized *The Crisis*' children's number as a way to make the black child more sophisticated; or rather, expanded on the sophistication and maturity that he believed they already possessed, in contrast to what mainstream society felt about the capabilities of the black child,

In contrast to primitive images of black childhood like the pickaninny stereotype of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, Du Bois reimaged the black child as culturally, politically, and aesthetically sophisticated.<sup>65</sup>

While still in the spirit of *dual address*, Du Bois, following the success of *The Crisis*' children's number, moved forward with an entire publication dedicated to the politicization of Black children and their potential to be socialized into the race leaders that could "lead the race into the future;" and that publication was *The Brownies' Book*.

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<sup>64</sup> Capshaw, Katharine. "Introduction." *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. Xiii-xxvii. p.xix, xx

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p.1

As many efforts were made during the time of the Harlem Renaissance to create a Black Aesthetic and push forward the *New Negro Movement* -- which in many ways prioritized an elite, black, middle class-- initiated the shift from degrading portrayals of uneducated, ungraceful, and unattractive Black figures of the pre-Civil War era, to the celebration of Black culture and identity. But this shift into a narrative of Black excellence too has created a bit of an issue as it affects the development of identity for young, Black, readers. Although the work of DuBois and his contemporaries during the Harlem Renaissance worked towards creating a standard for which Black people and aesthetics could thrive, it is unfortunate that many of the paternalistic and elite ideals of abolitionists like Mott era have been reproduced in the push to create respectable young race leaders suitable to be considered a part of the DuBoisian talented tenth. Aside from the construction of Black elite identities, which set the tone for the reasoning behind such work, the content itself provided tasteful visuals and of Black childhood, without sugarcoating the political agendas and responsibilities that young Black readers had to uplift the race. In this *The Brownies' Book* they paid homage to Black literary traditions present in both Black American folktales and the Slave narrative; and the vehicles of social and political commentary that they pioneered.

The influence of *The Crisis*, *The Brownie's Book*, and overall, the Harlem Renaissance has become a very visible part of modern Black American children's literature as the highlighting point of children's overall power in the advancement of Black issues, culture, and identity, but also the legacy of remembering and paying homage to the past and our ancestors who look to us to reclaim their veiled narratives. Many contemporary writers have decidedly pinpointed The Harlem Renaissance as a point in time to highlight in their quest to provide a Black children's narrative that was steeped in eclecticism and converged a number of different

Black character types; aligning with the Black figures and genres that have been discussed thus far. This is also done to provide an understand that the reclamation of Black identity can be achieved from many different angles, or all of the angles in collaboration. This is exemplified in the different modes of reclamation that presented themselves during Harlem Renaissance. One children's book in particular that does a good job of converging all of these ideas for the enjoyment of young readers is Walter Dean Myers' *Harlem Summer* (2007).

This bildungsroman<sup>66</sup> follows a young sixteen year old boy named Mark in Harlem during 1925; as he observes his surroundings and the multitude of different Black characters and characteristics he makes surprisingly insightful observations about how, why, and what things are in 1920s New York, but mainly Black Harlem. Of the first few themes explored by Mark is the class gap between Black communities during the Harlem Renaissance and how this influences their attitudes towards Black cultural and aesthetic practices and traditions. Mark, first notes this distinction in his family members, specifically making note of his mother's side of the family

I felt bad for Daddy because he was always catching it from Mama's side of the family, the Carters... My father was relaxed and I liked that. Mama's family was always on the go. What the carters wanted was to run the world, or at least the Colored part of it<sup>67</sup>

It is observations such as this that sets up a discussion around the power dynamics that exist among Black individuals based on class, but also acknowledges how this dynamic was informed by and feeds into the narrative of the respectable Black person. This ideal was first expressed and implemented by early abolitionists trying to assimilate newly freed Black people into White American society. Mark makes a lot of distinctions between what he and an elderly neighbor Mr.

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<sup>66</sup> A bildungsroman is a coming of age story.

<sup>67</sup> Myers, Walter Dean. *Harlem Summer*. Scholastic Press, 2007.p.5

Mills calls *the upper crust*, and *the crumbs*; of which Mark comes to identify himself as “more crumby than crusty.”<sup>68</sup> The distinctions between crumby and crusty as developed by Mark actually mirrors a few of the characteristics set up by Mott to distinguish between educated, assimilated, and benevolent black individuals and, well, everybody else; A notion that Du Bois would also come to recognize in his theory of the talented tenth. For instance, the notion of Mark understanding himself to belong to a lower caste because of his aspirations of becoming a jazz musician, which does not align with what his upper crust mother and her family’s ideals of opportunities that make for the development of a good, successful, and virtuous Black person; higher education,

if he [Mark’s brother, Matt] went to college maybe Mama would be satisfied and I wouldn’t have to go. What I wanted to do was play saxophone with a jazz band. Music was just naturally in my blood and that was all there was to it. I knew Mama didn’t appreciate that,<sup>69</sup>

Mark’s observation of what his mother and her *snooty* family valued was in direct opposition to what the culture of blackness at the time actually entailed, at least for him, and those like him. Mark is very much so in alignment with a cultural aspect of blackness that prioritized the artistic.

Although the characters that Mark characterizes as upper crust do in many ways align themselves with ideals of superiority based off of archetypes developed by whiteness, what makes their characterization deviate from that archetype is that they are in alignment with the political aspects of Black culture and history. An interesting way to compare the plights of the two different types of Black characters displayed in this book, would be to align the artistic, poor, and disenfranchised characters and their black cultural artistic endeavors -- jazz-- with the Black American oral traditions and songs developed by the enslaved with their clear cultural and

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.6

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*p.6



political messages being transmitted between Black peoples through artistic mediums. The privileged, middle-class, character on the other hand would be more in alignment with the tactics used in mediums like the slave narrative, whereby political motivations and ideas were expressed very pointedly and by individuals that prioritize being taken seriously within the institution of whiteness, in hopes of being validated through respectability and persuasion. The latter is even addressed in the novel via a character named Mr. Thurman, a visitor to *The Crisis*' office, where Mark works. Thurman has a strong opinion about who he thinks the publication is for:

He stood in the middle of the floor, the brim of his hat just over his eyes, and went on about how the New Negro didn't mean much to him and how he thought it was all being faked for the white press.<sup>70</sup>

Myers' book makes many direct references to *The Crisis* and its contributors through the eyes of young Mark as he interacts with and critiques characters like Jessie Fauset and W.E.B DuBois. Mark's interactions with these characters and their publication throughout the book relates directly to DuBois' philosophy of children's roles in political action:

I asked Aunt Carolyn about the other job. It was all the way downtown, at 14th Street. *The Crisis* magazine needed a bright young Man to work in its advertising department and paid \$14.00 a week, but they only wanted me for four days. That sounded all right, but just all right... I said I would take it. Aunt Carolyn said it was a good choice because the magazine was one of the Leading Intellectual Journals of the Negro race. That didn't sound too good, but I said I would go anyway. Aunt Carolyn told me to see someone named Jessie Fauset of Thursday.<sup>71</sup>

But rather than addressing Mark's role as the politically activated child in the uplifting of the Black community as an active role, the way that it is expressed and executed through the eyes of Mark and interpreted by the reader is of a passive role. This passivity is used to emphasize the conditioning of young people to be in alignment with and support the ideal of the talented tenth if they lack the potential to become one of them themselves. Notice how Jessie Fauset's

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.75

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p.15

character in Myers' book emphasizes this point in her speech about the main goals and aspirations of *The Crisis* to Mark,

We at *The Crisis* magazine represent what is being called the New Negro,' Miss Fauset said. 'Dr. DuBois has said that the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional people. We are trying to make sure that we promote and encourage that talented ten percent of black people so that they will be able to lead us. This ten percent is the core population of the New Negro, <sup>72</sup>

It seems that even in attempts made by Black individuals to take hold of their own narratives there exists a rift between doing so within strict cultural confines of blackness that reject whiteness or at least White institutions as well as the attempts to do so through working within the White system. The reproduction of ideals about American blackness as set up by White individuals via degradation or the projection of respectability have even made themselves present in spaces where whiteness is not at the center. Books like *Harlem Summer* and Myers' deep knowledge of the historical relationships within the Black community do a good job of bringing to light even this harsh and unfortunate aspect of Black life, the inner community conflicts.

A similar example of the Black child's role in the political is present again in Mildred D. Taylor's Logan Family Series, yet again.<sup>73</sup> The child characters of *Song of The Trees*, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, etc. in particular relate the role setup for characters like Mark from Myers' book. These characters who differ from Mark on the basis of their southern lifestyle in Mississippi are just as politically driven in their characterizations and juxtaposition to the hardships of Black existence. Throughout Taylor's "Logan" series the children experience White intimidation and systemic violence in the forms of shady White antebellum era land thieves,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.p.17

<sup>73</sup> MacCann, Donnarae. "The Family Chronicles of Mildred D. Taylor and Mary E. Mebane" *The All White World of Children's Books & African American Children's Literature*, edited by Osayimwense Osa, Africa World Press, Inc., 1995. p.115

KKK raids, lynchings, and the institution of separate but equal. The importance of centering the young Logan kids in the series served two very important purposes, the first, to align them with the very real threats that are simultaneously facing Black adults (like their parents) (read: dual address), and two, to make the young characters and readers aware and critical of such hardships even at such a young age (read: politicizing). In Donnarae MacCann's essay *The Family Chronicles of Mildred D. Taylor and Mary E. Mebane*, this point is driven home when it is stated that:

The epic dimensions of the African-American experience and the child's role in that communal experience are understood in Taylor's 'Logan' stories. The interlocking life struggles of children and adults have rarely been presented more effectively. At the same time, life's affirmative side is vividly projected in family solidarity, social activism, and love of the land,<sup>74</sup>

Taylor's Logan family series as well as a number of other historically relevant and poignant books for young Black readers usually do not shy away from the duality of Black children as young and naive, but also socially aware and politically vigilant. A true manifestation of Du Bois' efforts to recreate race pride and awareness in generations of Black youth to come.

There seems to be a theme of dichotomies that exist in many of the narratives and genres discussed in this thesis so far; dichotomies between good Black and bad Black, dichotomies between White people and Black people's ideas of good Black and bad Black, dichotomies between past and future, young and old, and of course dichotomies between the artistic and the political. One of the main issues up for discussion between the adults involved with both, *The Crisis* and *The Brownies' Book*--which was hashed out between the pages of both publications--was whether or not publications of the like should shield or expose its young readership to the harsh realities that come with their blackness, and what the results of either method would

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p.117

reveal. Du Bois was very clear about his idea that the artistic and the political as it concerns Black creation are not mutually exclusive; although in practice his emphasis on the political conditioning of younger generations of Black kids remained a top priority. The internal struggle facing Black parents regarding how they introduce the hardships of their existence to their kids is still a struggle that many are faced with in the modern context, and has greatly shaped the Black children's literary canon in such a way that many contemporary narratives written for black youths have taken on an approach that both addresses the painful parts of Black American history while also highlighting the strength and resilience of a continuously disenfranchised people. This approach in particular shifts the discourse on dichotomies in blackness and Black literature, into a discourse on historical consolidation; which in many way, also references the concept of *dual address*. The approach that many contemporary Black children's literatures written by Black people, takes into account DuBois' pedagogy of positive propaganda for the development of racial pride and self-esteem. But they make sure not to forget to politicize the child in the same way that DuBois and other black run publications attempted through an acknowledgement of the morbid realities facing Black individuals both of the past and of the present.

This level of awareness and historical context displayed in books written for young Black readers by Black authors and illustrators follows a distinct set of thematic guidelines. There is the acknowledgement of the physical, mental/emotional, and epistemic violence that characterizes Black existence followed by the reassuring manifestation of Black unity, communality, and resilience. Many contemporary Black authors and illustrators find themselves Instead of sanitizing history for the sake of simply catering to the positive propaganda of Black life, acknowledging both sides of history; or rather the multiplicities of history. In the above analyzed

texts by Myers and Taylor one has witnessed an acknowledgment of the recreation of White ideals in Black elite mindsets, but we have also analyzed parts of history that earlier White authors and their descendants would rather one forget, gloss over, or read in the context of upholding a positive image of whiteness. Many contemporary Black creators of content and media for young people keep no secrets from the newer generations and in this way, keeps them from viewing Black identity from one side, but instead from many of the sides that contributed to its initial formation. This is peak reclamation

## Chapter 4

### Baby Hairs, Afros, and Negro Noses with Jackson Five Nostrils:

#### Re-centering and Reclaiming Black Cultural Identifiers in Black Children's Lit

Referred to as melting pot books by Literary scholar Rudine Sims Bishop, books that take on a kind of quasi colorblind/cultureblind approach to representing blackness are a common occurrence in the world of contemporary children's literature; one of the most notable and recognizable being Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day*. Keats' book centers a young Black boy named Peter, whom Sims in her analysis of the book's success describes as "the American Everychild in a brown face and a red snowsuit."<sup>75</sup> There is nothing inherently wrong or domineering about Keats' portrayal of Peter and his mother in the snowy day--and there is no question of the influence that this innocent portrayal has had on the evolution of the Black children's literary genre as a whole-- there has been praise and criticism of the book by both white and Black critics, many appreciating the simplicity of childhood being rightfully bestowed upon young Peter, and others aware and conscious to the vision and idea of Black individuals fitting into a mold of the typical American *everyperson* being a bit unrealistic as far as systemic racism is concerned. A critique of books like Keats' 'Peter' series--which does in fact feature a few books centered around Peter's urban lifestyle-- is not so much a nitpicky, dissatisfaction with the portrayal of blackness as it is a critique of certain forms of Black American cultural erasure via the homogenization of American culture, "The fact that the melting pot books insist on an American cultural homogeneity means that they also ignore important aspects of Afro-

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<sup>75</sup> Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Free Within Ourselves" p.116

American life experiences.”<sup>76</sup> The one way in which it deviates from this American cultural homogeneity is its lack of a nuclear family at the center of the storyline; instead calling upon a common trope in Black Children’s Literature, the role of the absent father figure.

With a majority of the criticism of books like Keats’ being that it “ignore[s] all differences *except* physical ones: skin color and other racially related physical features.”<sup>77</sup> and specific good and bad experiences and cultural aspects unique to many Black Americans-- solidifying the argument that non Black authors/creators are unable to accurately portray Black experiences, and therefore should probably refrain from doing so without proper assistance; it brings about the age old conflict posed by Du Bois in both *The Crisis* and *The Brownies’ Book* of if we should or shouldn’t shield Black kids from the realities of their existence. With the focus being on the visual nature of Black representation in books it could be assumed that perhaps Keats’ books should be the standard, but what sets Keats’ Peter apart from young Black characters written into picture books by Black creatives is the other Black child characters’ moment of interpellation when educated on their history in America as descendants of slaves, and the cultural/epistemic understandings, practices, and survival tactics that came from it. Where might one find cultural signifiers of Peter and family’s blackness rather than in the color of their skin? We won’t because Keats’ audience was not exclusively Black children and perhaps he knew he could not do the Black narrative justice from his outsider perspective.

Visual blackness holds a different, yet extremely important role in Black Books by Black writers that Keats’ book falls short of, not because of a lack of desire to do so, but of an actual inability to do so. Contrary to Keats’ melting pot book about Peter void of any differences in Peter and family from the typical everyperson in America, Books such as Camille Yarbrough’s

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.652

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p.33

*Cornrows*, Natasha Tarpley's *I love My Hair!* And Derrick Barnes' *Crown: An Ode to The Fresh Cut* single out a physical attribute of blackness that holds significance to the characterization of Black individuals and approaches it from a standpoint of othering Black children, but in the best way possible.

The following discussion will be centering the reclamation of Black hair which has had a long and complicated history of stigmatization in the American mainstream; from being understood as ugly to being identified as extremely political. Because of this history of the stigmatization of Black hair in America many young Black people have noted a difficult relationship with this particular attribute of their Black identity. But thanks to the efforts made by writers of Black children's literature to destigmatize their hair and promote pride and cultural context to Black youths about the important history that hair has to their racial/ethnic identities and African heritage; pride in the versatility and history of Black hair is definitely on the rise! The influence of Children's books that are intentional in centering Black features has undoubtedly paved the way for other Black writers to begin discourses on the number of visual and behavioral signifiers of blackness that should be reclaimed.

### **"Afro-Sheen Stays on the Case":**

#### **Black Hair Culture as a Visual Signifier and Mode of Reclamation**

In contrast to what Sims identifies as melting pot books, Books such as the aforementioned ones centering Black hair exist in a category defined as culturally conscious books. These books rely heavily on visual and textual signifiers of blackness, with the above ones focusing primarily on the visual and historical relevance that Black hair possesses; this is



apparent in the sheer volume of books that exist for Black children centering the beauty and political context of their hair,

Whether writing fiction or nonfiction, for children, young adults, or adults, writers of the African diaspora, both male and female, have always had a certain preoccupation with hair... hair has not only aesthetic significance but cultural and political implications as well.<sup>78</sup>

In contrast to Keats' preoccupation with decentering blackness for the sake of re-centering human-ness, the culturally conscious books listed, address blackness and Human-ness as one and the same by centering cultural themes within their characters' everyday lives.

Camille Yarbrough's *Cornrows*, a predecessor of the two books following its lead, follows the experiences of a young brother and sister duo, Shirley Ann and Mike, who are addressed in the neighborhood by the names "Sister" and "Brother" --clearly a nod to the adoption of the terms *sista* and *brotha* during the black liberation period-- as they learn about the cultural significance of the cornrows hairstyle within the Black community and consciousness. The reader listens in on the passing on of cultural knowledge from the siblings' Great Grandma and Mother as the elders explain where the cornrows style came from and why it is important.

There is a spirit that lives inside of you. It keeps growin. It never dies... Now a long, long time ago, in a land called Africa, our ancient people worked through that spirit. To give life meanin. An to give praise. An through their spirit gave form to symbols of courage, an honor, an wisdom, an love, an strength. Symbols which live forever. Just to give praise.<sup>79</sup>

As a precursor to the story of the cornrows, Great Grammamaw acknowledges the spiritual aspect and connection that exists within all Black people that connects them to their roots and heritage in Africa. This particular evoking of the image of Africa not only deviates from the American

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<sup>78</sup> Johnson, Dianne. "Hairitage: Women Writing Race in Children's Literature." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 28, no. 2 (2009): 337-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40783423>. p. 339

<sup>79</sup> Yarbrough, Camille. *Cornrows*. Illustrated by Carole Byard. New York, NY: Coward, McCann & Geohhegan, 1979. P. 11

every person painted brown scenario of the melting pot books, but also evokes a strikingly different image of Africa and Black peoples' relationship to it that instead of being characterized as barbaric and underdeveloped, acknowledges it as an image of strength and love and courage. This overarching theme of understanding the cultural, spiritual, and political importance of certain aspects of Black physicality is only reinforced by the images of the characters' braided hair and afro sheen-ed afros.

Culturally conscious books such as Yarbrough's in addition to providing accurate cultural representation in both images and text, also does something straight out of the *The Brownies' Book* manual; it acknowledges the positive and the negative aspects of what it means to exist in one's blackness. In acknowledging the African heritage out of which came the practice of braiding, and identifying what the styles could mean:

Who was wearin the braided hair?' 'Oh lots of people,' Mama said. 'Everywhere you looked. Almost everyone that you would see. People from Egypt to Swaziland. From Senegal to Somali'... 'You could tell the clan, the village, by the style of the hair... You would know the princess, queen, and the bride by number of the braid... You would know the gods they worshiped by the pattern they made.'<sup>80</sup>

In the next few pages there was also a reference to the effects of the transatlantic slave trade and the eventual loss of those meanings to the descendants of the stolen peoples:

Then a terrible thing happened... The clan, the village, the priest, the bride, the royalty, all were packed into the slaver ships and brought across the sea... where they trembled on the auction block and on the chain-gang line... where they flickered on the pyre and while hangin from the pine...And the style that once was praise then was changed to one of shame. Then the meanings forgotten and forgotten was the name,<sup>81</sup>

Yarbrough takes the opportunity in her book to address the otherness of Black children on account of their physical and cultural differences, but frames them in such a way that there is an

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p.21

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p.35

understanding that that otherness is not inherently bad, nor should it make them feel inferior, or be erased as earlier--outsider--books may have urged them to believe.

Natasha Tarpley's *I Love My Hair!* Accomplishes a similar task of normalizing the Black child without erasing their cultural signifiers of blackness. One of the first signifiers Tarpley uses early on in her book is the pages full of images of what many a young Black girl called *clips* and *bow-bows* scattered about the inside cover and title page. Something as simple as an image of a particular kind of hair clip stresses the power of images to evoke memories and experiences of Black upbringing that seem virtually universal. Tarpley's book also features the cultural practice of a Black mother doing her daughter's hair, the image set up by both the illustration and text, which states, "Every night before I go to bed, Mama combs my hair. I sit between her knees, resting my elbows on her thighs, like pillows. Mama is always gentle. She rubs coconut oil along my scalp and slowly pulls the comb through my hair, but sometimes it still hurts."<sup>82</sup> Hair as it acts as a visual signifier for Black American identity, becomes even more of a cultural identifier through the ways in which hair care and the relatable childhood experiences of letting one's mom care for it each night is a distinctly undeniable Black American (read: diasporic) tradition that allows readers to identify not only with the image of kinks and curls atop one's small head, but also calls up the memories of (painful) combs, hair accessories, specific hair products, and the universal nightly routines that revolve around the cultural and historical relevance of Black hair and hair care; countering or reclaiming images of Black children and their hair seen in visual portrayals of characters like Stowe's Topsy whose hair was unkempt, unruly and sometimes covered with bows.

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<sup>82</sup> Tarpley, Natasha Anastasia. *I Love My Hair!* Illustrated by E.B Lewis. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998. p.1

Similarly, to Yarbrough, Tarpley also incorporates lines that denote the unfortunate aspects of Black history and existence in such as,

Once when I wore it [an Afro], the kids at school teased me... But my teacher made me feel better. She said when she was growing up... Wearing an Afro was a way for them to stand up for what they believed, to let the world know that they were proud of who they were and where they came from.<sup>83</sup>

Which very blatantly addresses the political nature of Black hair, and the ideals around Black hair being considered ugly that permeates multiple generations, but in acknowledging the saddening aspect of living with such a distinct racial and cultural signifier as afro textured hair Tarpley made sure to highlight its importance as a tool for liberation and radical activism, but also as a cultural attribute that allows the young character, Keyana, as well as the young Black children who read the book that Black hair in its natural, free state holds significance as a reminder of their history and culture.

Derrick Barnes' *Crown* acknowledges a similar importance of Black hair from the male perspective as it highlights significant hairstyles and haircuts for Black men and boys, and pays homage to a space that could be considered the equivalent to the rituals of Black mothers doing their daughters' hair; Barbershop culture. Barnes' book in particular centers a counter to the Black hair narrative that usually centers femme characters (i.e. mothers and daughters). He focuses on the aspect of Black hair pride in young Black boys whose relationship to hair can be seen as a reclamation of a feature that for many meant religiously chopping it off because of connotations of shame. Instead, Barnes' young Black character --who is nameless, not because his name doesn't matter, but because he represents a black boy everychild whose experiences w/ barbershop culture are distinct, yet very much so universal-- gushes with pride over the confidence that a trip to the barbershop gives him, focusing on Black hair from the perspective of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p.19

young Black boys as an act of self-love with a clear agenda to heighten self-esteem among its young readers.

Using buzzwords like *royalty*, *presidential*, and *majestic* to describe the other Black patrons of the Barbershop and as signifiers for the way that a trip to the barbershop makes one feel, does the very important job of signifying the book's acknowledgement of the good and bad aspects of Black (youth) experiences without making it as blatant like in the cases of *Cornrows* (ie: the acknowledgement of slavery in the loss of hair braiding meanings) and *I Love My Hair!* (ie: the nod to the Black Is Beautiful movement as a rebuttal to notions of Black hair being laughable). By using such buzzwords, the author is crediting the barbershop as a place in which Black men (read: people) can feel safe and appreciated even when the outside world is not as accommodating. This idea is further examined in the following quote,

Dude to the right of you looks majestic. There are thousands of black angels waiting to guide and protect him as soon as he steps foot out that door. That's how important he looks.<sup>84</sup>

The *black angels* referenced in this quote can be assumed to be hinting at a similar notion of ancestral spirits as protectors of the newer generations of Black peoples as acknowledged earlier in *Cornrows* where great Gramma explains that the spirit and love of the ancestors does not go away.<sup>85</sup> The fact that the black angels would only need to provide protection to the black man in question the moment he steps foot outside of the barbershop solidifies the notion of the barbershop as a space for Black culture, communities, and people to thrive while the outside world is the space in which the spirit of the ancestors and grounding in our identities and culture must provide the most protection to ensure the longevity of blackness; where the world seeks to devalue or destroy it.

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<sup>84</sup> Barnes, Derrick. *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*. Illustrated by Gordon C. James. N.p.: Agate Bolden, 2017. p.11

<sup>85</sup> Yarbrough, Camille. "*Cornrows*" p.11

There are two dudes, one with locs, the other with cornrows, and a lady with a butterscotch complexion, and all they want is a ‘shape up,’ ‘tapered sides,’ ‘a trim,’ and a crisp but subtle line. And sometimes in life, that’s all you ever need. A crisp but subtle line.<sup>86</sup>

It is in quotes like this that reinforces the notion of Black hair as a visual signifier, but does so in a way that acknowledges the multiplicity of styles (read: blackness) that can be expressed even through one’s choice of hairstyle. Black hair as an identifier of blackness seems monolithic in its role as signifier of that blackness to those outside of the community, but within the community, Black hair becomes a multiplicity of different identities within one people group. In a similar way that Yarbrough’s *Cornrows* addresses the multiple meanings of different braided hairstyles on the continent of Africa and the eventual loss of those meanings upon arrival in the Americas, Books such as *Crown* do a good job of expressing what reclaiming the meanings of signifiers of blackness looks like for a group of people for whom those signifiers were defined through outsider eyes, erasing the sacredness that many of these Black visual signifiers and practices involving them that exist even within the shared phenotypes. Afro textured hair like other features that would lead anyone who possesses them to be read racially as Black have been effectively stripped of their meanings with intentions to strip the unique cultures and practices that exist within Black communities of their importance.

Culturally conscious children’s books like the ones discussed in this chapter hold a special significance in that they address the relatively recent cultural importance that Black features like hair hold in the new American contexts. These texts also leave room for nuanced themes of reclaiming features like hair and the spaces and practices dedicated to passing on and adding onto the meanings that they hold. Not only do the legacies that earlier White authored portrayals of blackness and Black life greatly influence and impact current works that feature or

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<sup>86</sup> Barnes, Derrick. “*Crown*” p.14

center Black bodies and experiences, but they have also influenced the act of reclaiming those narratives that are especially seen in contemporary Children's literature authored by Black creatives as they give those Black bodies and experiences back not only their humanity, but also genuine meanings.

### **Conclusion**

Black American understandings of self, have historically been influenced and misconstrued by power structures that we often had no control over. And as frustrating as that history might be; the understanding that there were in fact so many ideas and traditions pushed forward by our ancestors to aid us in finding and reclaiming characteristics, literatures, and selves that for so long felt untouchable, and at times hard to want, is what makes the efforts to collect those things back so noble. In our roles as re-collectors of our histories and our pasts, items may sometimes be lost in the mix. We sometimes forget where we have placed our political spirit, or those story times with grandma where she told tales of Anansi the spider. Other days we may not be able to rid ourselves of the pesky Topsy's in our ear telling us about how wicked she is, about wicked we are, because we are Black. There are days where we notice that we are changing ourselves in the presence of White people and in White spaces; in these cases, we must ask ourselves why. And of course there are those especially annoying days where we forget how to love ourselves because we have forgotten who our selves are, or where we have misplaced them. Sometimes it takes a long while to recover those items, or uncover those memories, but the tools to find them are always there. They may not be brand new and they may be a little loose at the hinges, but they produce beautiful work. Work that is continuously built upon, work that relies on teamwork, work that should be a labor of love. So go forth and do that

work to excavate your soul; because at the bottom of that soul is where you find what your ancestors were hoping you'd find; blackness, with the potential to be *free within ourselves*.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Reference to the Rudine Sims Bishop's Book *Free within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*



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