

LITERARY CONSTRUCTS OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDHOOD
IN THE 1930S IN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
of the University of Coventry
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

AUGUST 2006

University of Worcester
In association with Coventry University

Abstract

This literary study presents an analysis of literary constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s in American children's literature. The purpose for such a study is to determine, identify, and analyse the constructions of African American childhood offered in such books.

The critical approach employed involves theories based in post structuralism and post colonialism. The literary constructions of African American childhood are influenced by the society in which they were produced; hence this thesis includes a contextualisation of the historical time period in relationship to the works discussed. Furthermore, this thesis considers constructions offered through illustration in equal terms with textual constructions.

Representations of African American childhood are also presented through the use of dialect. The position adopted considers dialect as African American patois since such written dialect is pre-proscriptive African American Vernacular English rules. Analysis has been carried out of the ways in which language written in African American patois constructed African American childhood rather than focusing on the linguistic aspects of the written dialect.

Finally, four key texts, all written after 1965 and set in the 1930s have been evaluated: *Souder* (1970) by William Armstrong, *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* (1976) by Mildred Taylor, *Tar Beach* (1991) by Faith Ringgold, and *Leon's Story* (1997) by Susan Roth. These contemporary writers offered a different view of the 1930s since they are 'writing back' into the previously assumed stereotypes.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that in the 1930s, positive progression was achieved, bridging ideologies concerning the African American community fostered in the Harlem Renaissance and the search for African American identity for children and adults. While negative stereotypes established before the 1930s were included in some publications, defiance of mainstream views, resistance to overt racism, and a complication of representation of African American childhood is present in American children's literature in the 1930s.

Acknowledgements

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Preface

When I moved to England in September of 2002 to begin this thesis, I had no realistic idea of the changes I would undertake in order to complete this study. In my mind at that time, I was moving to a country that spoke the same language and had the same sort of government as what I knew. To my way of thinking, completing a research thesis about African American childhood in England would be difficult work but not anything different than what I had already experienced in my academic background. I could not have been more wrong.

Little did I realise that I was moving into a foreign culture of which I was not a part. My American background made me very un-British in ways I had not anticipated. There were the 'little battles' such as understanding idioms, adjusting to different food - some unknown and some that just tasted different, as well as learning a new method of spelling. There were larger, personal battles. American politics made me unacceptable in certain groups. This was shockingly revealed to me when I was told by a 'friend' that America deserved 9-11. For the first time in my life, I was the "other". I looked American. I sounded American. I acted American. I was labelled before I had the opportunity to demonstrate who I was and how I felt about issues at hand. My nationality - and politics and values - were questioned as soon as someone heard my American accent. Every American policy that was frowned upon in the UK became my fault - from the war in Iraq to the handling of Hurricane Katrina.

During the beginning of my transition from life in America to life as a foreigner in Britain, I realised that my personal experience - my life as "the

other” - was important to how I needed to approach my research. I could understand to some extent the feelings emanating from such dislocation and marginalisation. This uncomfortable experience, while subtle in comparison to the African American experience, was invaluable for a white middle class female who was undertaking the study African American childhood in the 1930s. I do clearly recognise that there is no direct correlation with the African American experience. I merely state that I felt some echoes of cultural marginalisation and dislocation. However, my personal experience raised a sensitivity through which I could approach literature concerning a culture of which I was not a part.

In undertaking this study concerning African American childhood, I have had to question my own past, my own culture and society, including my ‘programming’ and identity.

Although there is nothing intrinsic to race, and culture is learned, my position as a critic of this literature involved certain considerations in order to maintain an objective perspective on the literature under analysis, to find ways to speak without speaking for the African American community.

As I study the changing constructs of African American childhood, I am ready to question my own assumptions about childhood and race and history and the identity created through this process.

In order to question my assumptions, I first needed to learn about culture, specifically African American culture. Extensive reading, which in most cases would be considered outside the narrow scope of this thesis, gave me a glimpse into African American culture, showing me a rich world of tradition and family. Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) made me see the family and

personal history of African American life in the United States. Richard Wright opened my eyes as he learned about the world of the South and the politics of the North in *Black Boy* (1945). Toni Morrison made me sing in *Jazz* (1992). The defeats and triumphs in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) emotionally tied me to a deeper understanding of the black female. The list could go on including W.E.B. DuBois, *The Soul of Black Folks* (1903), Ralph Ellison's, *The Invisible Man* (1947), and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Through my readings, I found a new world, rich in culture and tradition. Some of these authors wrote in a political vein and some chose a more personal narrative in their writings. However, while reading these works aimed at an adult audience, I kept returning to the same question: what writing existed for a child audience to become aware, as I had done.

I began by questioning if there was an importance in the time period. I wondered if literature of the 1930s bridged the Harlem Renaissance with the Civil Rights Movement and if literature written after the Civil Rights Movement but set in the 1930s would offer different constructs of African American childhood. The genesis of the following thesis began with such questions and considerations in mind.

I am specifically focusing on literature with a setting in the 1930s in order to make this change visible and to draw out what can be written about now which could not be written about then. However, there is more work to be done. This thesis furthers the continuing discussion, with the hope that more research will soon follow.

Chapter One

Introduction: Literary Constructs of African American Childhood in the 1930s in American Writing for Children

Literature is indispensable to the world...The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimetre, the way a person looks at reality, then you change it.

James Baldwin

1.1 Rationale

This study investigates the literary constructions of African American childhood in the 1930s in American children's literature and analyses both texts and illustrations which reveal the representations of African American childhood. African American childhood as a topic of study has had little research, especially in terms of the field of English Studies. The justification for this study results from a scarcity of scholarship specifically written about African American children's literature. Key names, such as Violet J. Harris, Donnarae MacCann, Michelle Martin, Nina Mikkelsen, Kate Capshaw Smith and Rudine Simms Bishop will resurface throughout this study, as they are the few recent scholars working in this area. The research used in writing this thesis is centred in the field of English Studies. That is not to say that African American Studies have been ignored; this thesis is the result of a combination of African American Studies and Children's Literature Studies that have been wedded relatively few times. These two fields have been fighting for academic acceptance and have gained some success, as witnessed by the publications of the literary critics previously mentioned.

American children's literature published in the 1930s predominately maintained the historically developed white mainstream, negative

stereotypical views of African American child characters in children's literature. However, some literature produced during the 1930s, and about the decade of the 1930s constructed positive views of African American childhood. Children's literature, as the carrier of such constructs, also provided a space for "double-consciousness" to be expressed, keeping alive the positive features of the African American culture fostered by Black America in the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance which were juxtaposed with the flat, characteristic, racist portrayals established in previously published children's and adult literature. In children's literature set in the 1930s yet published after the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965), subversive ways of undermining the dominant ideology that existed in the 1930s become more apparent as these writers wrote back into the past.

Previous critical studies have considered constructions of minority cultures, most notably Claire Bradford's award winning *Reading Race: Aboriginality in Australian Children's Literature* (2001). However, critics of specific studies centred on African American children's literature have used an issues based approach (MacCann) and/or analysed the literature in relation to educational considerations (Pinsent). Likewise, the 1930s has been overlooked as an influential time period when considering the literary history of the construction of African American childhood in American children's literature. The critic Violet J. Harris, in her fifteen page article entitled "African American Children's Literature: The First Hundred Years," includes three paragraphs on the 1930s through the 1940s, choosing to focus on educational activist Charles G. Woodson and his mission of promoting

equal education opportunities for African Americans. Harris neither lists nor discusses a single children's book published in this time frame (Harris 1990).

In more recent critical work, the focus has shifted into literary criticism however the 1930s remain an understudied decade. In *Brown Gold; Milestones of African-America Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002* (2004), author Michelle Martin includes only four paragraphs about the 1930s. In this limited section, she discusses the difficulties Langston Hughes encountered in attempting to publish *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* in 1936. Martin contrasts Hughes work with *The Brownies Book Magazine* (1920-1921) from two decades earlier with Elvira Gardner's *Ezekiel* books, concluding that the difference between these two examples illustrates the "chasm between stereotypical and honourable texts for and/or about black children in the 1920s and 30s" (Martin 43). However, Martin fails to analyse the *Ezekiel* books for their strengths, such as the exclusion of a white Standard English narrator as discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. Kate Capshaw Smith's *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2004) greatly adds to the discussion of literary constructs of African American childhood during the Harlem Renaissance (which she defines as 1917 through the 1940s). While the scope of her focus is more detailed than Martin's when considering the 1930s, much of her analysis is on better-known authors from the 1930s such as Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps.

This thesis begins to deepen the existing research and rectify the scholarly omission by focusing specifically on the 1930s, bringing together children's literatures from African American and Caucasian cultures written during the 1930s and set in the 1930s. My purpose is to analyse the literature

revealing constructions of African American childhood and draw conclusions concerning previously established construction, to identify and evaluate changes in those constructions, and to scrutinize the implications of those changes.

1.2 Aims

The hypothesis underpinning this thesis is that constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s offered identities resistant to stereotypes previously published through mainstream dominant ideology expressed in written text and illustration. The aims of this thesis therefore are to critically examine literary representations of the constructs of African American childhood during the 1930s in writing for children by both African American and Caucasian American authors. Throughout this thesis, I will define ways in which African American childhood was constructed in literary texts through representations of childhood and examine the ways in which literary texts function in the construct of African American childhood in American children's literature published in the 1930s and children's literature published after 1965 but set in the 1930s.

This thesis begins by examining textual stereotypes, visual representations, and dialect established before the 1930s. This investigation continues by identifying and analysing the constructs published during the 1930s. Finally, this thesis demonstrates how constructs of African American childhood alter when authors write back into the 1930s.

1.3 Methodology

The title of this thesis specifically identifies the literature under study as American children's literature. It should be understood that only certain American texts were chosen. The texts for this study were selected for particular reasons: the presences of African American characters, publication date, and setting. African American characters were necessary since the hypothesis concerns constructs of African American childhood. Publication date was important for the historical aspect of this study. The Harlem Renaissance (1917-1935) was a time for growth in pride and respect in the arts of black America. With the crash of the stock market on "Black Tuesday" 24 October 1929 and "Black Thursday" 26 October 1929, the Great Depression began and continued until America entered World War Two on 8 December 1941. I felt the 1930s would be of interest because it was a time period following the fashionable social acceptance of black culture during The Harlem Renaissance.¹ It was also a time of social upheaval and financial difficulties during The Great Depression. I began this study wondering how such factors would affect or be reflected in children's literature produced during this time.

Setting also was important for the literature published after the Civil Rights Movement. Because I wanted to maintain the focus on the 1930s, literature published after 1965 needed to have a setting in the 1930s. While re-reading the children's literature published in the 1930s, it is important to re-read the literature about the 1930s from a post Civil Rights perspective in

¹ This "fashionable social acceptance" was not a nation wide embracement of black culture but was instead an arts and literature movement. It was the time in which "Harlem was in vogue."

order to examine how such authors were writing back into history, yet using children's literature as the means for such action.

It was already noted in this chapter that writing for children is a political act. This political act encompasses the total complex of relations between people living in society; the political act of writing envelops ideological influences including culturally embedded heritage, education and economics. By taking into account such influences while acknowledging present day assumptions, a more comprehensive context is available for examination. For example, investigating the education systems in the 1930s from official government documents generally leads to a singular white historical perspective. Other documents from black newspapers and journals, teachers' reports, reports on schools in Harlem or the South from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and textbooks written for African American children in the 1930s give a different historical perspective. Analysis of these various perspectives contributes to the understanding of constructs of African American childhood since much of the literature from the 1930s has now been lost through neglect. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, which served as a primary resource for this study, houses an extensive collection of African American books from the 1930s and was also the primary library in Harlem where children could come in contact with African American children's literature. Previously known as the 135th Street Branch of The New York Public Library, the Schomburg Center itself rose in stature during the 1920s and 1930s. Its collection of children's literature is extensive as are its documents concerning issues about representation in the literature.

As will be demonstrated and discussed in this thesis, the fifty books under consideration are clearly influenced by the historical and political factors of the 1930s in the construction of African American childhoods. This study will argue that the radically different styles in children's literature in the 1930s showed a resistance to traditional stereotypes while pretending, for publication reasons, to fall within the accepted boundaries of majority thinking about race and society. The black child in the 1930s was invisible yet became visible, silent yet voiced, and typified by both negative and positive images. The study of text in both words and illustrations will show the struggle within the dominant society and the African American community to define African American childhood. Likewise, literature produced after the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965) maintains an historical and political influence, but provides a different view of the 1930s in children's literature as authors learned to write back into their history. I suggest that it is only after the Civil Rights Movement that authors are beginning to write politically about the 1930s, publishing a discourse that was previously not allowed.

Utilisation of terminology in this thesis to identify and locate the culture of my subject area was an important consideration since I did not want to give offence or express a position of power. The fluidity of identity for today's African American is symbolized by the changes in name: African – African slave – Negro – Black – Afro-American – African American, with or without the hyphen. These are not all self-chosen names. An entire history is embodied in these cultural titles/name/references. I will use the terms 'Black' and 'African American' as my main terminology and will use historical terms where appropriate.

It should also be noted that this thesis is written using spellings from Britain. However, since the majority of the sources are American, and since some primary source are also in dialect, American spellings have not been changed nor have they been cited by the conventional [sic] label.

1.4 Critical perspective

Social constructivist theory claims that social identities are fluid and an emergent product of social interaction (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; He, 1995; He & Keating, 1991; Ochs, 1993). An individual has multi-faceted identities, and the relevant identity is negotiated in interaction (See Schegloff, 1991). This critical perspective is utilised to identify, analyse and evaluate the constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s as published in literature of the 1930s and literature set in the 1930s which was published after the end of the Civil Rights Movement in 1965. Literature for any type of audience (age, race, political allegiance, etc.) cannot be produced in a sterile environment therefore, the outside influences on authorial perceptions of African American childhood require examination in order to properly investigate the literary constructs offered in the text. These outside influences support socially constructed concepts of childhood and are informed by ideologies that change as societies change (Lesnik-Oberstein 27). Margarida Morgado adds to the argument concerning shifting constructions of childhood when she states that “myths” of childhood are repeated and reinvented through representational practices such as, but not limited to, cultural tradition, illustration, and discourse (Morgado 204). By examining these representational practices in

literature, historically and culturally accepted 'truths' of that society's constructs of childhood are determined.

Constructed 'truths' are presented specifically in literature and represent authorial attitudes concerning an expansive list of 'issues' both political and personal. As John Stephens states "...[T]here is little doubt that the socio-cultural values of the writer's period will determine which 'universals' are inscribed within the fiction's teleology" (207). I adopt the position and demonstrate through this thesis that an author creates, through representation and re-presentation, his/her constructed worldview. This authorial worldview includes an author's ideologies concerning society and cultural values. However, the author may or may not be aware of such personal ideologies within their writing. Clare Bradford writes:

Children's books seek to promote sociocultural values that incorporate views about the past (about cultural meanings and traditions of the past), about moral and ethical questions important to the present, and about the projected future in which the child readers will be adults...And children's texts reveal many of these tensions and uncertainties, often invisible to those who produce them. (8)

In analysing children's literature with constructs of African American childhood produced during the 1930s and about the 1930s, the tensions between diverse 'truths' concerning socio-cultural values, moral and ethical questions, are constructed and represented through the use of children's literature as the carrier of various ideologies.

However, in order for new constructs to be written, the old construction must be made strange or deconstructed to allow discursive space for the new

construct to take shape and replace or revise the previous construct. Discursive space is created through discourse written and produced in a particular time and place which circumvents the mainstream ideologies of that time and place. For the purpose of this thesis, the time and place under study is the United States during the 1930s. The historical context is one of many discourses which influences literature since history itself is a narrative discourse. The historical context and the constructs in literature are analysed for consistencies and differences in the embracement of white, mainstream, dominant ideology. Differences between such constructions in literature and history with the dominant ideology of the time serve to note resistance. The discourse of literature is perceived here as both the means of transmission and communication within a society, reflecting society as a mirror while at the same time it is employed as a means of critiquing that society. Literature can also function as a guide, leading the society in thought and attitude. In this thesis, the layers of constructs of African American childhood in literature are made apparent and the implications of the evolutionary change in the representation of the African American child, childhood, and culture discussed through analysis of representations in children's literature of the 1930s and about the 1930s.

I argue that a previous construction can be represented but also re-presented within the discourse using various literary devices within the same literary work; the author and the illustrator express their own individualistic constructs of childhood. These constructs can stand in agreement with one another or stand in opposition of one another. I examine these constructions via the discourse of literature in order to determine the ideological positions of

the authors and illustrators. The evolutionary development identified in the African American literature for children under study is a symbiotic process of interaction consisting of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction, that is, a process of writing by which what is read is re-reflected and developed in the ensuing literature. In this thesis I examine how representation is constructed, what is represented in the constructs and by whom such representations are determined, taking account of contextual factors such as history and cultural tradition.

Discovering constructs through representation is challenging since the act of representing often has an accompanying political, cultural, and/or personal agenda. Gregory S. Jay articulates the difficulties in attempting to aptly represent minority cultures in his article “Knowledge, Power, and the Struggle for Representation.” Jay comments:

This struggle is multifaceted, plural, complex; it includes struggles over the theory of representation as well as over the actual cultural and political distribution of representation. The questions we face might be put this way: “Who represents what to whom, for what reason, through what institutions, to what effect, to whose benefit, at what costs? What are the ethics of representation? What kinds of knowledge and power do authorized forms of representation reproduce? What kinds of people do such representation produce? Who owns and controls the means of representation? And what new ways of representation might better achieve the goals of justice and democracy in the overlapping worlds of education and politics? (10)

These questions form the framework of this study. Applying these questions to the children's literature under consideration and analysing the multi-layered answers to the questions reveal representations forming constructs of African American childhood. Jay's questions help probe the literature in this study to reveal racial issues concerning how representation presents a minority. Likewise, Jay's questions are also important for determining how adults construct childhood for children. As this study will demonstrate, the constructs of African American childhood are varied as a result of the complexities of the time and the power relationships within the two main dichotomies investigated in this thesis: i.e. adult/child and white/black.

In addition to these two over-riding dichotomies, constructs of African American children's literature must be viewed through two different perspectives; the literature must be viewed as African American literature and children's literature, while at the same time maintaining the connections between the two positions. In this approach, I privilege children's literature, for through children's literature, the adult world passes on its values and ethics. As Bradford notes:

Books are necessarily informed by the cultures in which they are produced. But children's books do not merely mirror what exists; rather, they formulate and produce concepts and ideologies, also *within the context of adult views about what children should know and value.*

(5, emphasis mine)

The development of the representation of African Americans in literature, specifically children in the 1930s, is revealed in work produced for children, hence my privileging of children's literature. In this study, societal

assumptions about childhood, as seen in the literature produced for children, are re-examined and re-positioned in order to scrutinize the subversive undertones. The very questions that Jay articulates concerning representation must be asked specifically about African American children's literature in the 1930s, keeping in mind that both African American literature and children's literature, on the continuum of their developments, were less than a hundred years old. I posit that African American children's literature from the 1930s is both a part of African American literary tradition and a part of the history of children's literature.

1.4.a Constructing childhood

When viewing childhood as a construct and within the dichotomy of adult/child, the child becomes a "cultural phenomenon" and an "ideological construct" and not a 'real child' (Morgado 204). This study is not focused on the real child in the 1930s but the literary constructs representing African American childhood. For the sake of clarity in this thesis, the word "child" should be understood as the constructed subject and should not be perceived as a real child unless otherwise noted. It is the constructions of such representations of childhood that are explored in this thesis; it is the literature which presents the reader with constructed children who exist in an area of constructed childhood through the use of models, stereotypes and representation of the symbolic.

This separation of reality and fiction is fragile since authors write about their own childhoods or are actively creating an improved childhood for their fictional characters. However society, including authors and illustrators since

they are a part of society, has preconceived notions about the concept of childhood. The idea of childhood as a separate time and space has its own history. What today's society perceives as 'natural' is both fluid and complex, never stable, yet definable in a specific place and time. Literature, in both text and illustration, presents representations that reveal the cultural construction of childhood in a specific time and place/space, i.e. the time and place of publication.

The historian Philippe Ariès traced the beginnings of conceptual childhood when he published *Centuries of Childhood* in 1962. Ariès is seen as the 'father' of social constructionist views of childhood and his work set the foundation of the method of viewing childhood as a social construct in a specific historical context. Since the publication of Ariès study on 1962, various critics such as Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan; or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), Karin Lesnik-Oberstein in *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994), Anne Scott MacLeod in *American Childhood; Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994), Perry Nodelman in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (1992) and various articles, Roderick McGillis in *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context* (2000), and Joseph L. Zornado in *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (2001) have offered analyses of how and why childhood has been constructed in different ways. These critics working in the field of children's literature have researched social views of childhood but none have looked at the construction of minority childhood. Culturally and historically, the conclusions of Ariès and the others are focused on Euro-centric/dominate

white childhood. The constructs of African American childhood differ. Conclusions about constructed childhood for one group or culture do not automatically or naturally mesh with cultures that are unlike them. Zohar Shavit argues that although Ariès' thesis is built upon "the French case", "the same process of development of the notion of the child occurred throughout Western Europe" (Shavit 4). However, African American childhood is not Western European childhood. The premise that Ariès' work can offer a universal pattern for all concepts of childhood denies the existence of theories of childhood outside of the Western European tradition.

1.4.b Constructing African American childhood

While the conclusions of Ariès cannot be uncritically applied to African American childhood, nonetheless, his work informs this study in important ways. Constructs of American childhood were influenced by the European tradition through the borrowing of European children's literature. As people migrated and immigrated to America, they brought literatures from their homelands. New American literatures were initially based on literature from Northern Europe since a majority of new Americans came from Northern Europe and were the writers and publishers of American children's literature.

Although different, the ways in which the formation of constructed white childhood and black childhood influence each other's construction requires careful consideration. Just as Toni Morrison asks, "How is 'literary whiteness' and 'literary blackness' made, and what is the consequence of that construction" (xiv), so this study asks the same questions of children's literature. Literary constructs of African American childhood are determined in children's literature and the consequences of those constructions to

representations of African American childhood necessitate critical study of such constructs.

This study of literary constructs of African American childhood reveals relationships and exchanges between white Northern European American childhood and African American. During the 1930s, there existed a number of discourses side by side and in direct opposition to one another; in some cases, white writers appropriated black culture to make visible a minority discourse, specifically that of African American childhood; in other cases, white writers appropriated and suppressed African American literature by supplanting a dominant white culture cloaked in a seemingly black discourse. African American writers also worked in these ways, disempowering white dominant discourse by constructing African American childhood as a way to construct African American adulthood as something other than childlike.² Although different discourse elements, such as stereotyping, illustration, and dialect, were used, as demonstrated in the following chapters, these constructs of African American childhood were achieved, in part, through the production of children's literature. While children's literature was not the only means by which children were/are socialized in the 1930s, literature intended for children was embedded with the constructs of childhood which adult authors either desired or hoped children would imitate. The power over childhood was realised through text produced for child readers and labelled as "children's literature."

² This white view of African American adults as 'childlike' is seen in the terms of address used between the two groups. African American males were 'boys' or were addressed by their first names only. In contrast, white males were referred to with the title of 'Mr.' no matter their age.

1.5 What is “children’s literature?”

If the premise of this thesis is founded on children’s literature as the carrier of constructs of childhood, a relevant question to this study centres on the definition of ‘children’s literature.’ Peter Hunt in his *Illustrated History of Children’s Literature* (1995) approaches the term children’s literature with caution when he notes:

[N]obody is quite sure what children’s literature *is*, and therefore constructing its history is at best a contentious business. Ultimately most people take either the approach of Pontius Pilate on Truth or Dr. Johnson on Poetry: if we stay for an answer, the answer is that we all *know* what it is, but it is not easy to *tell* what it is (or what it is not). (ix)

Peter Hollindale attempts an extended explanation, expanding his definition to include “the author, the text and the child but with qualified meanings in each case.” Hollindale continues:

The author is the person with imaginative interests in constructing childhood (usually but not necessarily through creating child characters) and who on purpose or accidentally uses a narrative voice and language that are audible to children. The text of children’s literature is one in which this construction is present. The reader is a child who is *still in the business of constructing his or her own childhood, and aware of its presentness – aware that it is not yet over.* Where these conditions co-exist, the *event* of children’s literature takes place. (29, emphasis mine)

Both definitions as offered by Hunt and Hollindale include the adult’s role in determining children’s literature, either through ‘knowing’ children’s literature

when 'we,' e.g. adults, parents, librarians, publishers, booksellers, etc., see it or by the act of writing, with the child as intended reader. There is a power position created through children's literature since children's literature, as a field, is both created and identified by something other than the child. While this generalization leaves out the handful of books actually written by children/adolescents,³ it is relevant to the understanding of the constructs of childhood within children's literature that the adult dominance of children's literature is quintessential to the definition of such literature.

This aspect of children's literature is often ignored or simply accepted as natural, although this has become a debate amongst critics since Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* in 1984. In this book, Rose argues that the obsession with innocence and eternal childhood reveals not something about children necessarily, but rather something about the investment adults have in childhood. Rose interrogates children's fiction as a phenomenon produced by adults. Rose writes:

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. (1)

Ignoring the adult-ness - that is the adult dominance in the various levels of production - of children's literature is to deny cultural and political aspects of the text. Hollindale in his book *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* admits that "[e]ither way, to write books for children, or to write about them, is a

³ Children and adolescents authors have written a few books such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and Christopher Paolini's Inheritance trilogy, which include *Eragon* (2004) and *Eldest* (2005).

political act” (11). Since the definition of children’s literature for the purpose of this thesis includes anything intended for a reader who is considered a ‘child’ accorded to his/her culture, I acknowledge that certain cultural and political assumptions pre-exist in my approach to this research.

The gatekeepers - publishers, parents, librarians, teachers and the like - are all instrumental in creating and maintaining this colonization of the child through representing their own accepted modes of childhood. Children’s literature has always served adults as a tool, didactically directing parenting, educating, and socializing - some times in very subversive ways. Controlling children (and, by proxy, their parents,) is a power that many have sought to achieve, much like the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. The manipulation of society’s destiny is more exposed and prevalent in children’s literature for by its definition, children’s literature attempts to determine the ethics and morals of the next generation.

Rose recognizes the very foundation of looking at children’s literature in a postcolonial light when she says “children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (29). The colonizer and the colonized have a similar relationship in that one group dominate the other group. Perry Nodelman even goes so far as to say that “Jacqueline Rose’s influential discussion of ‘the impossibility of children’s fiction’ works from the premise that children’s literature is a form of colonialization” (Nodelman, “The Other” 29). When reading children’s literature as a type of discourse, and especially focusing on African American minority children’s literature, elements of colonial practise become visible.

Nodelman goes on to strengthen his argument by comparing aspects of children's literature with Edward Said's criticism in *Orientalism* (1978). Critic John McLeod points out that colonialism was made possible not only by "use of forces and physical coercion" but with a set of beliefs which justified the colonizer being in the position of power. "These beliefs are encoded into the language which the colonisers speak and to which the colonised people are subjected" (37).

Language acquisition can serve as a simplified example of adult colonization of childhood. Adult authors of children's literature, beginning with board books for pre-readers, use language to signify the world. Children have language imposed upon them through such simplistic word books which label

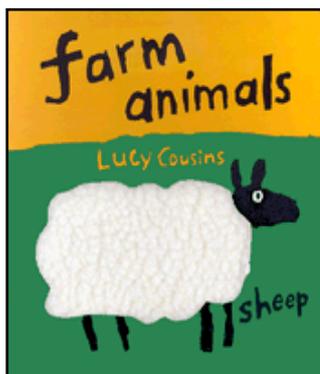


Image 1.1
Farm Animals (2003) by
Lucy Cousins places an
image with a single
identifying name

the world by presenting a picture and using one word to identify it (Image 1.1), as well as the spoken language that surrounds them. Children are provided with adult-approved discourse through language, integrating them into the world of the adults. This colonial act, which forces the child to mimic the adult, is completely controlled and demanded by adults. I consider children and adolescents (non-adults) as

colonial subjects under adults, create 'slang' and other forms of language derivations as expressions of resistance to 'proper language' as a mini-rebellion of their colonized state of existence. Bradford notes, "In colonial and postcolonial cultures, the struggle over language embodies a struggle over identity" (220). In the struggle to communicate with the colonizer (adult), the colonized (child) is forced to become a part of the community of colonizers, or

at least to adopt the community's standards of expression in order to be understood.

There are obvious positive outcomes to this act of colonization since communication is necessary, yet the representations offered through communication may not also be acceptable. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson note "Colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation" (3). Systems of representation create constructs, language being one of many systems (as I discuss in Chapter Four of this thesis). As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin note "Language becomes the medium through which hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which concepts of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (7). The child in literature is a representation, interpellated by adult writers for their own purpose. The adult controls the child's world in a very physical sense as well as through socialization processes deemed worthy or important by the society through which the child is controlled.

Perry Nodelman claims that adults have made children "'the other'-of that which is opposite to the person doing the talking, thinking, or studying" ("The Other" 29). Since adults study children, an adult is the opposite of child. Nodelman comments "We need children to be childlike so that we can understand what maturity is – the opposite of being childlike" ("The Other", 32) echoing arguments in other literary fields such as the interconnectedness of blackness and whiteness. Such constructs rely on Ferdinand de Saussure's binary oppositions and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist ideas concerning

such oppositions. Binaries define each other by claiming to be opposite of each other. If one of the opposites is removed, the definition of the first is lost. An obviously important example of binary pairs for this thesis is white/black; that white is defined as opposite of black. Likewise adult is defined as opposite of child. African American adults had a vested interest in defining African American childhood for by defining African American childhood, adult authors were constructing their own adulthood in opposition to childhood, simultaneously claiming an identity of their own.

The world of African American children's literature in the 1930s was situated within this adult world of majority dominant ideology, economics, culture, and history. The African American community was still looking for its identity and struggling to become a united contingency within the United States of America. Critic Stuart Hall identifies this as a search for "a sort of collective 'one true self'...which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common...identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Loomba 181). This lack of stable identity is not surprising. Homi K. Bhabha and other critics have pointed out that colonial discourse has failed to produce a "stable and fixed" identity (Loomba 105). However, literature serves to capture a specific moment, providing a snap shot of society, coloured by and colouring all that surrounds it. The various shades of colour of African American childhoods is presented in the literature produced. The literature offers African American children the chance to see themselves as perceived by the adult world – both the black and white sections of adulthood.

Production of such constructs does not happen in a vacuum, although it could be argued that the literature is produced in cultural isolation, via a

white dominant perspective. The contextualization of the literature that constructed African American childhood in the 1930s in American writing for children is examined and explored in this thesis. Geographical location and the economy in the 1930s were major atmospheres of influence on the production of literature; such complexities of place, time, and economy are much more in depth than generally assumed. Place, time and economy are relevant to this study since they influence African American childhood in children's literature.

African Americans were attempting to become a united people of their own in the early part of the twentieth century, yet they were at the same time, divided by geography, education, history, and political goals, a fact that is reflected in the various constructs of children's literature produced by African American authors as well as white authors. The identity of the fictional African American child was as unsettled as the African American community was in the 1930s.

1.6 Review of Historical Context of African Americans and the 1930s

African Americans have a unique history that shares the history of the white dominate culture while at the same time is a history resistant to the various forms of colonization imposed upon them throughout U. S. history.

1.6.a The Southern African Americans

The history of African slaves in the United States directly affected the geographically location of African Americans within the United States. The first slaves were brought to the British colonies in 1620 and by the time of the War of Independence in 1776, slavery was still profitable. However, since

tobacco had been the cash crop for over one hundred years, much of the land in the coastal colonies was exhausted. Either new land or new crops would be necessary for the economy of the affected areas.

Politically, the institution of slavery was protected during the formation of the United States and the compromises agreed to in order to ratify the U. S. Constitution. Ronald Davis notes this political protection:

During the great constitutional debates in the late 1780s over what the new nation would look like in the future, it was commonly assumed that slavery would gradually end soon in the next century. White southerners nevertheless managed to win from the North three significant concessions protecting the institution of slavery: (1) the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which enabled slave catchers to cross state lines in the pursuit of runaway slaves; (2) the Three-Fifths Clause agreement to count every slave as three-fifths of a free person in determining a state's representation in the House of Representatives and in the Electoral College; and (3) the continuation of the slave trade with Africa until 1808, which brought thousands of slaves to America in a rush of slave-trading activity. ("Slavery in America")

Although a number of Northern States had abolished slavery by 1804 and the government banned slavery from the Northwest Territory in 1787, it still took another sixty years for slavery to be completely abolished in the United States.

The fact that the institution of slavery had political protection was important to its survival, however, other factors fostered a resurgent growth of slavery in the South. The invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1793

allowed for easier removal of cotton seeds and made cotton a profitable cash crop since it was no longer as labour intensive. Davis also points out that the demand for cotton also increased.

At the same time, England turned from wool to cotton for its textiles and began consuming with a ravenous appetite American cotton. The surge of cotton production from the U. S. jumped from 3,000 bales in 1890 to nearly 200,000 bales by 1812. It stood at 4,449,000 bales in 1860, with each bale weighing between 300 to 500 pounds. On the eve of the Civil War, the value of cotton exports amounted to over 50 percent of the value of all U.S. exports. (ibid)

This dramatic increase in cotton production was accompanied by a massive increase in the slave population. The slave population rose from 697,897 in 1790 to nearly four million in 1860, growing fastest in the cotton producing states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas.

The economical ramifications were clear: as the demand for cotton and the price for cotton increased, more slave labour was dedicated to cotton production, increasing slave prices in the South. By 1815 cotton was America's most valuable export, and the economic and political power of cotton-growing states, often called the 'Cotton Kingdom,' grew correspondingly.

The price of slaves in the lower Southern states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana increased since cotton thrives in areas with long, hot growing seasons over two hundred days (Conrad 3). Cotton picking was back breaking work so adolescent boys and young men were most desirable. Slaves in the upper South feared being sold 'down the river' since slaves sold

to the Deep South were often never seen again, a fate that Harriet Beecher Stowe depicts in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) (See Chapter Two for literary analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). However, cotton demanded labourers and plantation owners bought slaves to work their fields. Davis notes this first non-voluntary population shift of African Americans when he states, "At the time of the Revolution, most slaves were held along the southeastern seaboard, but by 1860 the greatest concentrations of slaves were in the lower South" ("Slavery in America").

Table 1: Population of the South 1790-1860 <small>*Source: Historical Statistics of the United States (1970)</small>	
Year	Slave Population
1790	654,121
1800	851,532
1810	1,103,700
1820	1,509,904
1830	1,983,860
1840	2,481,390
1850	3,200,364
1860	3,950,511

Table 1 demonstrates the increasing slave population of the South from 1790-1860. Since it was illegal to import slaves into the United States after 1808, the growth in population is due to an increase in birth rates amongst the slave population.

With the end of slavery in 1865, almost four million freed slaves were now homeless, with no means of earning a living. General Tecumseh Sherman, acting under an edict from the War Department, issued Special Field Order No. 15, announced on 16th January,

1865. Special Order No. 15 stated:

The islands of Charleston south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering St. Johns River, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of

[N]egroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States. (“Special Orders”)

Although Sherman had obtained the approval of the War Department, this special field order was rescinded in September of 1865 and the lands were given back to the original owners who had supported the Confederate cause and had been defeated.⁴

With the end of slavery, it was necessary for the agricultural system of the South to find new ways of production. Jay R. Mandle notes that since plantation owners could no longer “exercise ownership rights with respect to their labour force,...a new basis for class relations had been established” with the ending of slavery. A new type of ‘slavery’ would take the place of the abolished system. The failure of the government to provide land to former slaves led to the “re-establishment of a post-slavery economy in the South” known as share tenancy (Mandle 121).

In greatly simplified terms, share tenancy consisted of the plantation owner dividing his land into plots to be worked by families. David Eugene Conrad notes “there were fundamentally three types of tenants with many variations: the cash-tenant, the share-tenant, and the sharecropper – often simply called “cropper” (6). The cash-tenant was in the best position and most likely to move into ownership. He owned all of his animals and tools and was able to provide for his family throughout the year. The cash-tenant paid a cash rent to the owner of the land but all other profits were his alone. The share-tenant paid one-fourth or one-third of his crop to the owner. The

⁴ For more detailed information, see Claude F Oubre’s *Forty acres and a mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black land ownership*, Louisiana State University Press (1978).

landowner provided a portion of the fertilizer and also extended credit when the share-tenant could not provide for the family.

The lowest tenant was the sharecropper. The sharecropper owned none of the tools needed to farm the land, nor was he able to provide the seed and fertilizers necessary. "He only had himself to offer. The landlord furnished land, house, fuel, half the fertilizer, work animals, implements, supervision, and the necessities of life, on credit" (Conrad 6). In return, one-half of the sharecropper's crop was given to the landowner.

The store where credit was extended was usually run by the plantation owner. The 'commissary' or plantation store was where the landowner made most of his profits. Prices were often higher than at stores in town and the landowner was able to operate a monopoly since a sharecropper's credit was only good at the commissary run by the land owner whose plantation he worked. Interest rates ranging from ten to sixty percent were also added to the advances given to the tenants. Conrad notes that landowners controlled their tenants and could increase or decrease their credit, depending on the look of the crops in the field or the health of the workers. "According to one Georgia landowner," Conard writes:

there was only one way for a planter [landowner] to make money using hired help, and that was to have a commissary and keep the books himself, making sure that at the end of the year he has gotten it all, and the labor has 'just lived,' as one would say. (11)

According to Conard's research, in 1930, more than half the farmers in the South did not own the land they farmed. One-half of all of the farms in the South grew cotton. By 1935, seventy-seven percent of all African American

farmers were tenants, while forty-six percent of all white farmers were tenants. Statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Census indicate that it was becoming more and more difficult for tenant farmers to become land owners, for “more and more land was being mortgaged, and that farmers as a class were gradually losing control of the land” (Conard 2). It should come as little surprise then that a mass migration occurred, especially of African American workers, who chose to leave the poverty of farming in the South and head North. This mass movement of over one million African Americans from one geographical location to another is known as “The Great Migration.”

1.6.b The Great Migration

There are a number of different reasons and explanations offered by experts as to why this great migration took place from 1914 through 1950. The lack of opportunities offered to African Americans in the South coupled with oppressive Jim Crow laws caused African Americans to leave the South in search of a better life. They moved as individuals or small groups with no government assistance. They migrated because of a variety of factors.

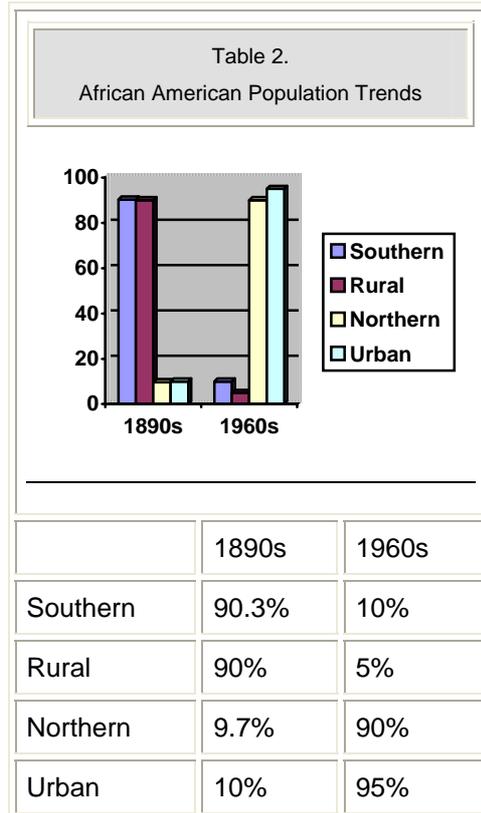
Nature played its part in causing the migration. In the late 1910s, sharecroppers were increasingly burdened by the boll weevil, a small beetle that devastated the cotton crop and forced sharecroppers to find other employment. Although destructive, the boll weevil proved to be a blessing in disguise. Since cotton could no longer be depended upon as a cash crop, peanuts were planted. Peanuts returned nutrients to the exhausted soil in Southern states and became a new cash crop for farmers who were able to stay through the boll weevil infestation.

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 also played a part in the migration North. The flood caused over \$400 million in damages, killed 246 people in seven states, and is considered the most destructive river flood in the United States. The devastating effects of the flood waters was immense. In a matter of days, ten million acres of land were under ten feet of water. Homes were destroyed, possessions were gone and crops were ruined. Moving North was the only option of some sharecroppers. One Greenville sharecropper explained that he had to "get my famaly out of this cursed South land -- down here a Negro man is not good as a white man's dog" ("Fatal Flood," American Experience).

Political factors also influenced the move North. Jobs were created for white workers in factories producing war goods during World War I. African Americans often took the service jobs left behind by white workers who moved to the factories. Immigration at this time was effectively ended and anti-immigration laws were passed creating a large demand for workers in the North that had previously been filled by newly arriving immigrants. African American migrants were lured North by the promised of jobs and money. When they arrived, many were surprised by the lack of welcome from whites and established blacks who felt they were better than the poor uneducated African Americans from the South.

The number of African Americans moving North was most noticeable in the larger cities. Cities such as Detroit tripled in their African American population from 6,000 to 120,000 from 1910 to 1929. Table 2 (below) shows this phenomenal shift of African Americans from a Southern rural life to a Northern urban lifestyle from the 1890s to the 1960s.

The increase in movement from the South to the North created many cultural centres in large cities but most notably, the critical mass of African Americans who were a part of the Great Migration made their own promised land on Manhattan island, in a city known as Harlem. This large grouping of writers, musicians and artists created the first Black Movement known as the New Negro Movement, now called the Harlem Renaissance.



1.6.c The African American Homeland – the City of Harlem

The history of Harlem emerging the central local for the black community is outlined In Cheryl Lynn Greenberg’s foundational work “*Or Does It Explode?*” *Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (1991). The name Harlem itself reveals the city’s history of colonization. The Dutch immigrants who first settled New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1658 originally called their settlement *Nieuw Haarlem* (or New Haarlem). When the British took over in 1664, the entire colony was renamed New York and New Haarlem became Harlem. The area was first used as rich farmland until the New York and Harlem Railroad was extended to link the suburb with the city the 1830s. In a report on Harlem, Elisa Urbanelli, a Landmarks Consultant writes for *Home to Harlem*:

Harlem suffered economic decline in the 1830s when many of the farms, depleted from decades of cultivation, were abandoned and the

great estates were sold at public auctions. The area became a refuge for those desiring cheap property and housing, including newly arrived and destitute immigrants who gathered in scattered shantytowns.

The advent of new and better forms of transportation, as well as the rapidly increasing population of New York following the Civil War brought about the transformation of Harlem into a middle and upper-middle class neighbourhood...Beginning in the 1870s Harlem was the site of a massive wave of speculative development which resulted in the construction of numerous new single-family rowhouses, tenements, and luxury apartment houses...Those who relocated from downtown included recent immigrants from Great Britain and Germany.

This speculative development was important since as early as 1904, major population shifts were occurring. The Jewish residents economically advanced and began moving out of Harlem, leaving behind well-built homes. Meanwhile, the construction of the Interborough Rapid Transit subway line caused speculative building, as previously noted. These hastily built poor-quality housing units were difficult for the owners to fill. Overbuilding resulted in inflated rents as owners attempted to recover their investments. Urbanelli also notes, "a general collapse of the real estate market hit Harlem in 1904-05, as loans were withheld and mortgages foreclosed, and landlords dropped rents drastically in an effort to attract tenants" (ibid).

Meanwhile in the majority of boroughs in New York, white landlords were able to discriminate against African American tenants because the influx of immigrants and migrants provided them with a plethora of non-Black tenants. Due to the general collapse in real estate prices, the situation in

Harlem was different. Philip Payton, a black real-estate agent who is sometimes called the “Father of Black Harlem” (Kellner 280), acquired five-year leases on white owned homes in Harlem. He then rented them to middle class black tenants at a rate ten percent above the deflated market prices. These black professionals were fleeing overcrowding of Black Bohemia, a twenty-block area in the West Fifties and Sixties of New York City where the black community was living at the time. Payton’s company was the first to offer decent attractive housing to African Americans who had never before had such an opportunity.

Soon after, various groups pressured white landlords to rent to black tenants due to overcrowding in other areas. African Americans also pooled their money together to buy out white landlords so that by 1925, African Americans owned an estimated sixty million dollars worth of real estate in Harlem. (Greenberg 15) While Harlem was an attraction to new comers, it was also one of the few neighbourhoods open to them. “Fewer than 4,000 blacks lived north of 125th Street in 1905. By 1920, 84,000 blacks were living there...By 1930...it held close to 190,000 blacks: two-thirds of New York’s black population and over 80 percent of Manhattan’s” (Greenberg 15).

Harlem was not the only city to have an increase in population as blacks fled from the poor conditions in the South to the promise of jobs in the North. Cities such as Chicago and Detroit also multiplied in size and in racial unrest as a result. However, this critical mass of African Americans living in crowded cities meant an end to isolation on plantation farms. African Americans began to demand full rights as citizens and began to organise themselves politically to make this demand a reality. Harlem was not just a

physical location to African Americans in this time period. The struggle for civil rights first began in Harlem through arts and literature, a movement original known as the “New Negro Movement.” Today it is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

1.6.c.1 Harlem’s Great Renaissance

Much has been written about the Harlem Renaissance and while it is not my intention to expand such previous research,⁵ it is important to this thesis to consider the results of the Harlem Renaissance and the direct effect on constructs of African American childhood in the years during and immediately after the movement.

While the 1920s are commonly identified as the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the actual dates of the movement are uncertain. Some claim the movement found its beginning in 1917 at the close of World War I while others cite the beginning of Prohibition in 1919 as the crucial event that started the Harlem Renaissance. Bruce Kellner refutes both these dates in his book *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* (1984). Kellner writes, “The Harlem Renaissance... was not born because the end of the war or the beginning of Prohibition. The 1920s only witnessed a sudden awareness of something that had been long in developing...” (xiv). Likewise author Nathan Huggins claims the movement lasted from “the opening decades of the twentieth century, down to the first years of the Great Depression” (3). While it is difficult to mark the start and finish of any movement, two events frame the Harlem Renaissance. On 28th July 1917,

⁵ See N. I. Huggins, 1971; B. Kellner, 1987; L. Harris, 1989; and H. Bloom, 1994

African American leaders in Harlem organized a protest march against lynching and race riots. This peaceful demonstration, called the Silent Protest Parade, drew between 10,000 and 15,000 African Americans and marked Harlem's "coming of age" (Kellner xvi). The end of the Harlem Renaissance was also a protest, but not a peaceful protest as the Silent Protest Parade. While some claim the end of the movement came with the crash of the stock market in 1929, most cite the 1935 Harlem Riot as the final act which closed the curtain on the movement until the 1950s and 1960s, when the movement would remake itself having learned from mistakes made in the Harlem Renaissance.

However, the Harlem Renaissance – although considered a failure in some ways - was important for the African American people and for Harlem.

Richard Wormser writes:

During this period Harlem was a cultural center, drawing black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, and scholars. Many had come from the South, fleeing its oppressive caste system in order to find a place where they could freely express their talents... The Renaissance was more than a literary movement: It involved racial pride, fueled in part by the militancy of the "New Negro" demanding civil and political rights. The Renaissance incorporated jazz and the blues, attracting whites to Harlem speakeasies, where interracial couples danced. But the Renaissance had little impact on breaking down the rigid barriers of Jim Crow that separated the races. While it may have contributed to a certain relaxation of racial attitudes among young whites, perhaps its

greatest impact was to reinforce race pride among blacks. (“Jim Crow Stories”)

As a movement, the Harlem Renaissance provided an acknowledgement of the Black Arts Movement. Huggins explains that the Harlem Renaissance brought the “Black experience clearly within the general American cultural history” (302). Huggins continues:

...the post war years found traditional values in disarray. A very articulate and sophisticated segment of the white society appeared ready to stand everything on its head...The Negro, who had long fought a white imposed stereotype found that those very traits which he had denied were now in vogue. One need merely rework the old minstrel model, and one had a new Negro image that both conformed to contemporary values and laid claim to a distinctive Negro self...

As the decade of the 1920s came to a close, the new wave of Negro literature chose to unearth the grotesque and exotic in black men, to abandon genteel standards and the embarrassment over what had been accepted as Negro traits (the stereotype). Indeed, the new effort was to accept those traits rather than to deny them, to convert them into positive and appealing characteristics. With this reversal of values, one could sometimes treat the Negro as superior to white men. (156-157)

Authors of African American children’s literature in the 1930s were a part of and followers of this “new wave.” Just as white authors, such as Carl Van Doren, were an active part of the Renaissance, so children’s authors such as Erick Berry, although white, were also actively writing for and about African

American children during this same time period. Erick Berry, whose work is discussed in detail in Chapter Three, presents an example of a white author's 'double consciousness' in trying to understand the duality the African American experienced as both African and American. The notion of 'two-ness,' a divided awareness of one's identity, was introduced by W.E.B. Dubois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the author of the influential book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903): "One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (22).

The Harlem Renaissance, as a movement, directly influenced later black movements. Higgins claims, "The name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, Black urbanity, and Black militancy. It became a racial focal point for Blacks the world over; it remained for a time a race capital. The race consciousness required that shared experience" (303). However, in order for that "shared experience" to exist, Harlem as a physical place was as important as the intellectual movement it housed. Harlem as a geographical location became a utopian setting; in mythic Harlem, blacks and whites mingled defying Jim Crow laws that were meant to segregate blacks and whites.

1.6.c.2 Harlem's Population

To the outsider, Harlem was considered one colour and race. However, inside Harlem, there was not one monolithic culture but many various cultures and histories. The first black Harlemites to flee Black

Bohemia settled on 134th Street. Kellner calls it a “modest black community” but clarifies that comment by adding this note in parentheses: “More accurately, one would say a beige colony, because at that time color lines were drawn within race itself. There were expressions among Afro-Americans trying to escape the stigma this country had placed on color: ‘The Lighter the Whiter,’ for example, and ‘White is Right’” (xv). White supremacist ideology had infiltrated the black population, dividing them among themselves. Besides the three major groups who lived in Harlem, various classes within these groups also existed with relations often strained between them. As previously mentioned, the established northern blacks had lower opinions of the southern blacks, who had been pushed off the farms by the boll weevil, soil exhaustion, as well as Jim Crow laws. This group perceived Harlem to be a haven of opportunity, a heaven on earth. However, Greenberg notes:

While northern blacks recognized their common bond of racial oppression with black southern migrants, and understood the southerners’ desire to better their condition, they also looked down on the newcomers’ seemingly backward and ignorant ways. Charles Johnson, editor of the National Urban League’s journal, *Opportunity*, wrote in 1925 that the difference between the southern and northern Negroes were “greater than the difference between whites and Negroes,” noting especially the southerners’ seemingly “primitive and reckless” behavior. (17)

If northern African Americans considered themselves closer to white Americans than to the African Americans from the South, then the gulf between these two groups was vast. The third group in Harlem were the

blacks who had migrated from the Caribbean. Again, considered monolithic by white and blacks alike, each Caribbean group further perceived itself as different from the rest; Jamaicans, Bermudans, Antiguans, Virgin Islanders, and Puerto Ricans all considered themselves as separate peoples.

The hostility between the native-born (Northern and Southern African Americans) and the foreign-born was intense. Although poor, many of the foreign-born were from the middle class. With different historical backgrounds (including racial relations) and often times with more skills and education than the native-born, the foreign-born had “contempt for body service and menial work” (ibid) and for people who accepted such employment. Many foreign-born refused to give up their foreign citizenship even after years of living in Harlem. They became the business owners, pursued higher education, and entered skilled jobs. The foreigners were called “monkeychasers” and “coconuts” while the natives were called “Handkerchief heads” (ibid) in return. Nevertheless, racial discrimination by the white majority and the economic situation before and during the Great Depression caused African Americans to live together. It was ultimately race, or more precisely – discrimination against their skin colour - that united them.

Yet the idea of Harlem, as well as Harlem as a homeland in America, was important in the production of children’s literature. Other locations more general than the specificities of Harlem, such as the city, the country, or countries other than United States, are also reflected in settings of children’s books in the 1930s as well as literature written after the Civil Rights Movement.

While many residents in the South shared a variety of backgrounds and ideals, and Northern African Americans shared a 'city' ideology, economically these groups shared the same situation in the 1930s: The Great Depression.

1.6.d The Great Depression

While causes of The Great Depression are debated, most historians and economists⁶ agree that the depression occurred due to mistakes made in various world wide governmental attempts to recover from the expenditures of World War I (1914-1918). Much has been written about the world depression but certain aspects of the Depression and the government's attempts to recover from the depression become relevant since politics and economy are interwoven. Even children's literature could not escape the realities of the time.

Specifically in the United States, as factories' production rates increased, employee wages did not. As a result, employees were unable to buy the goods produced. In *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (1931), Frederick Lewis Allen notes:

[M]ilk has jumped since 1914 from nine to fifteen cents a quart, sirloin steak from twenty-seven to forty two cents a pound, butter from thirty-two to sixty-one cents a pound, and fresh eggs from thirty-four to sixty-two cents a dozen. No wonder people on fixed salaries are suffering, and colleges are beginning to talk of applying the money-raising

⁶ For more information on the Great Depression itself see Wheeler 1998; Harris 1943; Sklar 1992; Carlo 1980; and Rothbard 2000.

methods learned during the Liberty Loan campaigns to the increasing of college endowments. (2)

As the rich became richer and enjoyed “The Roaring Twenties” the poor became even poorer. Wikipedia Encyclopaedia notes that the American economy was

excessively dependent on a few basic industries, notably construction and automobiles; in the late 1920s, those industries began to decline. Between 1926 and 1929, expenditures on construction fell from \$11 billion to under \$9 billion. Automobile sales began to decline somewhat later, but in the first nine months of 1929 they declined by more than one third. Once these two crucial industries began to weaken, there was not enough strength in other sectors of the economy to take up the slack. Even before, while the automotive industry was thriving in the 1920s some industries, agriculture in particular, were declining steadily. While the Ford Motor Company was reporting record assets, farm prices plummeted, and the price of food fell precipitously.

Other factors such as a weak credit structure, the break down of international trade, and post-war deflationary pressures all combined to lead the fragile economic atmosphere to 24th October 1929, known as Black Thursday - the day the New York Stock Exchange crashed - eventually leading to the Great Depression. “The world economy of the 1920s was fundamentally unstable,” writes James Devine of Loyola Marymount University, “in the language of cliché, [it was] a ‘house of cards’... This meant that as the 1920s progressed, the U.S. economy -- and thus the world economy -- became increasingly fragile and prone to ruin” (119).

After Black Thursday, U.S. President Herbert Hoover's administration proved itself powerless in stopping the drastic decline in the economy. The presidential election of 1932 centred on the economy in the United States. Incumbent President Hoover lacked the personality of an inspirational leader, while a jovial and self-confident Franklin Delano Roosevelt was everything Hoover was not. Politically, Roosevelt believed in a solitary philosophical principle: the nation was in trouble and it was the responsibility of government to do something about it. Roosevelt's election victory was a landslide, winning 472 electoral votes to Hoover's 59. Part of Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal program to get the United States back on course economically was called the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA put 8,500,000 jobless to work, mostly on projects that required manual labour. However, only a small percentage of those workers were African Americans. While white and black America were both affected by the depression, African Americans were discriminated against when it came to jobs in both the private sector and in federally provided jobs. "Definite proof of this economic inequality," wrote Alain Locke in his article "Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane" (1936),

is seen in the disproportionate number of Negroes on New York City relief rolls. Ten percent of the Negro population is on relief, over double its relative population of 4 percent. It has been further evidenced in the difficulties encountered by Negro workers with skilled vocational training and experience in securing work relief assignments except as unskilled laborers. Negroes did not receive their proportionate share of work relief jobs even in sections predominantly Negro, and in sections predominantly white Negro home relief clients were not given their

proportional share of referral assignments to work relief jobs. Many skilled Negro workers had either to accept places in the unskilled ranks or go back to the home relief rolls as "unemployables." Of the employables in New York City on relief the year preceding the riot [in 1935], 14 percent or 58,950 were Negroes. (par. 13)

However, one particular aspect of the WPA, known as Federal One, was a direct benefit to writers in Harlem. Federal One consisted of five elements: Federal Writers Project, Historical Records Survey, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Music Project, and Federal Art Project. The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was particularly charged with employing writers, editors, historians, researchers, art critics, archaeologists, geologists and cartographers, who produced local histories, oral histories, ethnographies, children's books and 48 state guides to America Alaska Territory, Puerto Rico, and Washington D. C. The FWP funded African American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright through literary apprenticeships. Their experiences in interviewing people, collecting histories, and archiving American stories is later seen in their fictional works which were published outside of their roles as government employees. Nevertheless, the governmental monies supported the writers, allowing them to continue writing, in addition to the writing they did as employment.

Few other programs so directly influenced the people of Harlem, or other African American communities. In Harlem, the unemployment rate was twice the national average, reaching fifty percent. In Detroit, the employment rate was even worse. In 1931, African American male unemployment was sixty percent and for African American females, it was seventy-five percent.

By 1933, according to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the percentages of African Americans on relief totalled 17.8%, 8.3% more than white Americans. The greatest percentage of differences between whites and black on relief was found in the urban areas where 26.7% of African American families were on relief, 17.1% more than white families.

However, while the Great Depression affected every race and class of people in American, the economic condition in cities, particularly Harlem, changed less drastically according to the statistics. What the statistics do not show is that the economic situation in Harlem before the Great Depression was already depressed. Residents in Harlem were previously being paid low wages while paying the highest housing rents and food prices in Manhattan. Alain Locke reported in 1936, "Whereas rents should approximate 20 percent of family income, and generally tend to do so, in Harlem they average nearly double or 40 percent" (par. 15). This combination of higher prices charged by landlords, grocery stores, and other shops coupled with lower wages and fewer jobs forced the community into an everyday economical struggle long before the rest of the nation.

During the 1920s, Harlem had been the home of poets, artists, and political thinkers. In the 1930s, Harlem became the heartbeat of the political activists. Because President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal finally brought charitable organizations into Harlem to provide relief to a certain degree, groups that had otherwise been active in helping those in need suddenly had the time to organize themselves politically. The desperation brought on by the Depression also caused people to turn to politics as a means to better their condition through political force. Boycotts such as "Don't buy where you can't

work” caused white owned businesses in Harlem to hire African American workers and were effective in the early 1930s. In 1935, the Harlem Riot, previously referred to as the end of the Harlem Renaissance, was partly caused by a false report of a beating by a white shop owner of a African American boy caught stealing a knife. This storeowner had been forced to hire African Americans until the boycott ended, at which time the African American employees were promptly fired. Such actions caused resentment in the residents of Harlem. Peter Bergman notes, “An interracial committee on conditions in Harlem headed by E. Franklin Frazier, the Negro sociologist, reported that the riot was caused by ‘resentment against racial discrimination and poverty in the midst of plenty’” (471). With the success of the boycott and the positives that stemmed from the riot, Harlemites showed that they could stimulate change by uniting as a community. United, they could wield political power that had been previously denied to them.

This historical context of the 1930s becomes important to the types of childhood constructed during and about the 1930s. Many of these historical events are echoed in the literature analysed. The works produced during the 1930s tend to present childhood within the economic sphere of the 1930s – making them ‘realistic’ for the time of their publication. With the works finished after 1965, the historical settings shift the focus, allowing these later writers to further consider the past as they constructed childhood as historical realistic through the historical perspective, rather than simply realistic for the present.

1.7 Structure of Thesis

I began this thesis by examining the theoretical foundations and underpinning presuppositions in this chapter. In Chapter Two, I continue such investigations by analysing three key historical texts which formed a literary background for the 1930s. Those three texts, *Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) by Joel Chandler Harris, and *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1898) by Helen Bannerman, provided authors in the 1930s with stereotypes in text, dialect, and illustration. Chapter Three contains the exploration of a number of books published in the 1930s, examining the constructs presented through both text and illustration. The importance of language and its relationship to identity are discussed in Chapter Four while Chapter Five continues the premise that children's literature was also important in shaping wider societal views. Investigation of the 1930s from a later time period is undertaken in Chapter Six using *Souder* (1970) by William Armstrong, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) by Mildred Taylor, *Tar Beach* (1991) by Faith Ringgold as well as *Leon's Story* (1997) by Leon Tillage. The chapters of this thesis will investigate the literature under study from the 1930s, examine what was produced for African American readers during the 1930s, and follow through with how literature published after 1965 utilises the 1930s to reconstruct African American childhood.

Chapter Two

***Tom, Sambo, and Remus:* Early Literary Constructs in books Constructing African American Childhood**

What's past is prologue.
-William Shakespeare
The Tempest

2.1 Introduction

The function of this chapter is to provide analysis of three major literary aspects - characterization, dialect, and illustration – which were utilised by authors and illustrators to build literary constructs of African American childhood before the 1930s. Through the use of characterisation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the use of dialect in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) by Joel Chandler Harris, and the changing use of illustration in the various versions of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1898) by Helen Bannerman, the early versions of literary constructions of African American childhood in the 1930s are deciphered. While this thesis is centred on literature produced during the 1930s and about the 1930s, these early constructs serve as foundations for later constructs of African American childhood.

2.2 Justification of Texts

Researching the historical content and background of minority literature is fundamental in understanding the development of that minority literature. The postcolonial critic Abdul JanMohamed observed, “archival work is essential to the

critical articulation of the minority discourse” (5). In keeping with JanMohamed’s observation, this chapter reveals early constructs of African American childhood in American children’s literature which later influenced the constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s.

The above-mentioned texts were chosen due to their popularity both at the time the texts were originally produced and today. Since its publication in 1852 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been a part of the American psyche as witnessed by the numerous times the text has been reproduced in print and other media.¹ Likewise, *Little Black Sambo* (1898), which tends to invoke intense discussion in the United States² between critics, educators, and parents about race and literature, has never gone out of publication in spite of the plethora of negative criticisms and doctored illustrations. Bannerman’s divisive book rates number ninety on the Most Banned Book list for 1990-1999 (ALA) even though it has

¹ According to Stephen Railton, director of the University of Virginia’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture web site, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was almost as important to the history of movies as it was to the history of drama in America. *The Great Train Robbery*, released in December 1903, is usually cited as the earliest American feature film, but Edwin S. Porter, who made that movie for Edison’s company, made a ten-minute version of Stowe’s novel that came out in September 1903. Altogether between 1903 and 1927, at least ten films titled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were made in the United States, which probably made it the most-filmed story of the silent era.” (“Uncle Tom’s Cabin on Film”)

² *Little Black Sambo* has undergone criticism in Japan as well. *Little Black Sambo* (the Japanese title is *Chibikuro Sambo*) was first published in Japan by Iwanami Shoten Publishing in 1953. The book was a pirate of the original and it contained drawings by Frank Dobias that had appeared in a US edition published from Macmillan Publishers in 1927. It went on to sell well over a million copies before it was pulled off the shelves in 1988 after being accused of its racist characterization. Just after Iwanami’s success, most of the Japanese publishers, including Kodansha and Shogakukan, the two largest publishers in Japan, published their versions of pirated *Little Black Sambo*. In 1988, all these publishers followed Iwanami and withdrew their books from the market altogether. In 1997, a race-free version of the book, *Chibikuro Sampo* (“sampo” means “taking a walk” in Japanese), replacing the protagonist by a black Labrador puppy going for a stroll in the jungle, was published by Mori Marimo from Kitaoji Shobo Publishing in Kyoto. Bannerman’s original was first published with a translation of Masahisa Nadamoto by Komichi Shobo Publishing, Tokyo, in 1999. The once-disappeared Iwanami version, with its controversial Dobias’s illustrations and without the proper copyright, was re-released in April 2005 in Japan by a Tokyo based publisher Zuiunsya, because Iwanami’s copyright expired after 50 years having passed since its first appearance. (*Wikipedia: Little_Black_Sambo*)

been over one hundred years since its first publication. *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) has avoided racist allegations although Harris was the only one of the three authors to have pro-slavery leanings and Harris' use of dialect also constructs African American characters in offensive ways. The constructions offered in these books are the underpinning for the focus of this particular thesis and are key places to begin a discussion since constructions of African American childhood through characterization, illustration, and dialect combine to create a stereotype of the African American fictional child.

The subject of this thesis specifies that the literature under consideration must be "American Children's Literature." This wording predetermines two specific aspects: the literature must be American and the literature must be intended for a child, i.e. non-adult, audience. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fits within the scope of this study since the book was written by an American and published in America; secondly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also intended for a younger audience as well as an adult audience since it was published in modes intended for the child reader. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was originally published in a serial form starting in 1851 and continuing through 1852. Stowe's serial instalments presented the story in segments allowing families, including the children, to easily digest these smaller portions of the story. Anne Scott MacLeod supports the claim that Stowe included children in her readership and cites *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an example in her essay "Children, Adults, and Reading at the Turn of the Century" (MacLeod). In Gail S. Murry's discussion on "Middle Class Visions and Race," she comments that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was

“certainly not intended as children’s literature” but that “the novel was undoubtedly read by and to children, as were many Victorian novels during Family reading hour in the evening” (123). Murry also notes that Stowe herself added a paragraph intended specifically for children in the last instalment:

Never if you can help it, let a colored child be shut out from school or treated with neglect and contempt on account of his color. Remember the sweet example of little Eva...[W]hen you grow up, I hope the foolish and unchristian prejudice against people merely on account of their complexion will be done away with. (Stowe qtd. in Murry 124)

Further proof of Stowe’s intention for children to read her work is seen in her modified versions of the original story. Stowe wrote a children’s edition with simplified text entitled *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). Other modified versions of Stowe’s novel specifically aimed at the child audience began to appear around 1900. Clearly, in intent and in publication, the historical record shows *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* being read to children and (re)written for children, making it available for this study in children’s literature. Its inclusion is also justified since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is considered here for the ways in which Stowe constructs African American childhood primarily through the story of her child characters Topsy and Little Eva.

The inclusion of *Little Black Sambo* might seem to fall outside the scope of American children literature since the original author, Helen Bannerman, was Scottish and lived in India at the time of the writing and the publication of *Little Black Sambo*. While considering Bannerman’s original text and illustration in

Little Black Sambo, my principal focus will be on the American illustrations of *Little Black Sambo* as it was published in the United States. *Little Black Sambo's* American illustrators constructed childhood visually through their illustrations.

The third book mentioned here and more fully considered in Chapter Five is Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Tales*. Harris complicates his own goals in attempting to embrace the African American culture by holding on to pro-slavery leanings while striving to be correct in his use of folktale and dialect. Harris is on record as being critical of Stowe's work, yet Harris' work and attitude is much criticised by literary critics (See Bickley, 1978; Bickley, 1997). Harris will be briefly discussed in this chapter in connection with his views concerning Stowe's work and the content of his stories while Harris' use of dialect will be further discussed in Chapter Five due to the extensive debates and discussions surrounding language.

2.3 Production and publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin

The historical context for the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life among the Lowly* must be scrutinized in order to fully understand the influence of Stowe's work on the construction of African American childhood. Highly politicised debates concerning the issue of slavery had raged in both public and private circles and were voiced in newspapers and in the literature produced during these times. Anti-slavery writings by abolitionist groups and ex-slaves came in many different forms including books in the form of fictional work and in the form of slave narratives, newspapers, poetry, sermons, and pamphlets. These literatures all focused on the same purpose, showing the evils of slavery

with hopes of ending the institution in the United States. This historical record, too lengthy in detail and complex in its political nuances to be fully included in this dissertation, can be found in many places such as William Loran Katz's *Eyewitness; A Living Documentary of the African American Contribution to American History* (1995), Roy E. Finkenbrine's *Sources of the African-American Past* (1997), and Kenneth M. Stamp's *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum* (1989).

Early African American authors such as poet Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) were well known, and, as shown by the large number of copies sold, American readers found slave narratives especially appealing. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) sold 30,000 copies between 1845 and 1860. William Wells Brown's *Narrative* (1847) went through four American and five British editions before 1850. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) sold 27,000 copies during its first two years in print. Narratives displayed the cruelty of slavery to whites who lived in the North. The narratives began to debunk existing myths about the African American slaves. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) program *Africans in America* noted:

By their very existence, the narratives demonstrated that African Americans were people with mastery of language and the ability to write their own history. The narratives told of the horrors of family separation, the sexual abuse of black women, and the inhuman workload. They told of free blacks being kidnapped and sold into slavery. They described the frequency and brutality of flogging and the severe living conditions of slave

life. They also told exciting tales of escape, heroism, betrayal, and tragedy. The narratives captivated readers, portraying the fugitives as sympathetic, fascinating characters.

The narratives also gave Northerners a glimpse into the life of slave communities: the love between family members, the respect for elders, and the bonds between friends. They described an enduring, truly African American culture, which was expressed through music, folktales, and religion. Then, as now, the narratives of ex-slaves provided the world with the closest look at the lives of enslaved African American men, women and children. They were the abolitionist movement's voice of reality.

(“Slave narratives and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*”)

Although the slave narratives served a very important purpose, it was Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white Northern woman, who provided the United States with the most powerful anti-slavery novel written before the outbreak of Civil War in 1863, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although not an active abolitionist herself, Stowe's novel of a Christian slave's life and death united a cause and divided a nation teetering on the edge of civil war. Within the fervour which surround *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the constructions of Southern female childhood and Black slave childhood were often overlooked.

2.4 Uncle Tom's Cabin

Ironically, this book, with its racially good intentions inter-mixed with racist projections and stereotypes, today seems flawed and damaging to the representation of African Americans. However, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the same

book that contributed greatly to the anti-slavery cause, initiating ripples of outrage through the United States in the early 1850s against the South and the slavery practiced there. Upon their meeting, President Abraham Lincoln is to have said to Mrs. Stowe, "Is this the little woman who made this great war?" (Fields 268-69).³ The publication history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* testifies to the importance of Stowe's work in America.

As earlier noted, Stowe's work first appeared as a series of instalments in a small abolitionist magazine, *National Era*. Advertised in 1851 as "Uncle Tom's Cabin or, The Man who was a Thing," Stowe's first instalment gathered an audience from the start. The last instalment appeared in the 1st April 1852 copy of the magazine. The publication date for the entire novel was set for 20th March, ten days before the last instalment was to appear. Five thousand copies of the book were sold in America in two days even though, as Ward notes, no review copies were sent out in advance. And that was just the beginning

By May, fifty thousand sets of the two-volume first edition had been sold. By this time Jewett [and Company of Boston, publishers] had three power presses going twenty-four hours a day, one hundred bookbinders at work, and three mills running to supply the paper. Sales soared to more than three hundred thousand in the first year. (479)

³ It is known that Stowe did meet Lincoln in 1862 when she visited Washington in November. Annie Fields' biography is the only source for this well-known anecdote about what he said: "It was left for others to speak of Mrs. Stowe's interview with President Lincoln. Her daughter was told that when the President heard her name he seized her hand, saying, 'Is this the little woman who made this great war?' He then led her to a seat in the window, where they were withdrawn, and undisturbed by other guests. No one but those two people will ever know what waves of thought and feeling swept over them in that brief hour." *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1898)

In England, the book sold an additional 200,000 copies in the first year of publication. Based on book sales, the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly* was clearly a marketable success. Stowe quickly received fame and notoriety – not all positive or flattering either. The PBS documentary *Africans in America* clearly states the reaction of the two sides.

Stowe convinced readers that the institution of slavery itself was evil, because it supported people like Legree and enslaved people like Uncle Tom. Because of her work, thousands rallied to the anti-slavery cause.

Southerners were outraged, and declared the work to be criminal, slanderous, and utterly false. A bookseller in Mobile, Alabama, was forced out of town for selling copies. Stowe received threatening letters and a package containing the dismembered ear of a black person. Southerners also reacted by writing their own novels. These depicted the happy lives of slaves, and often contrasted them with the miserable existences of Northern white workers. (“Slave narratives and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*”)

The large number of book sales as well as the fierce reactions to Stowe's work highlighted *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a seminal work during the time it was published.

From a literary perspective, by the time Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, basic stereotypes had long been used as a means to dominate the African American culture. Readers in Stowe's time (1850s) commonly knew the stereotypes she utilised. These stereotypes served to solidify the division between the white and black populace in order to empower white slave holders.

Stereotypes served to foster the myths that blacks were an inferior race and that white society was intended to rule them since this was the natural order of the world. This myth was supported by various structures of society from the religious congregation of Bible believers declaring God made the hierarchy of peoples with whites ruling blacks who were the offspring of Ham, to mainstream newspaper articles referring to blacks as niggers, coons, darkies and worse, to the scientific studies 'proving' that blacks had smaller brains and were physically unable to be intelligent; these societal institutions preserved the existing social order based on race and supported by the myth perceived as truth (see Fredrickson 1971).

Gail S. Murry connects the prevalent myths of racial hierarchy that existed at that time with children's literature produced and published. Murry comments, "Children's literature duly absorbed pseudoscientific racism...Thus in elaborate pseudoscientific works, in popular imagination, and in children's literature, a hierarchy of racial types directed and guided culture behavior, and politics" (Murry 120). Children's literature was utilised as a carrier of adult ideologies concerning race in the United States.

Stowe, and other authors such as Lydia Maria Child and Richard Hildreth, used key stereotypes in depicting the evils of slavery for their audiences. Sterling A. Brown's influential research "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" (1933) noted that:

Anti-slavery authors, too, fell into the easy habit [of stereotyping], but with a striking difference. Where pro-slavery authors had predicated a different

set of characteristics for the Negroes, a distinctive sub-human nature, and had stereotyped in accordance with such a comforting hypothesis, anti-slavery authors insisted that the Negro had a common humanity with the whites, that in given circumstances a typical human type of response was to be expected, unless certain other powerful influences were present. The stereotyping in abolitionary literature, therefore, is not stereotyping of *character*, but of *situation*. (193)

An example of such situational stereotyping occurs in Stowe's novel when Tom saves little Eva. Stowe writes:

[T]he little one lost her balance, and fell sheer over the side of the boat into the water. Her father, scarce knowing what he did, was plunging in after her, but was held back by some behind him, who saw that more efficient aid had followed his child.

Tom was standing just under her on the lower deck, as she fell. He saw her strike the water, and sink, and was in after her in a moment. A broad-chested, strong-armed fellow, it was nothing for him to keep afloat in the water, till, in a moment or two, the child rose to the surface, and he caught her in his arms, and, swimming with her to the boat side, handed her up, all dripping, to the grasp of hundreds of hands, which, as if they had all belonged to one man, were stretched eagerly out to receive her. (163-64)

Stowe gives Tom his humanity in this selection. Tom's human characteristics include his desire to save a child, his physical ability and mental capability to dive

into the river, wait for the body to float and then swim her to safety. Tom's actions portray a moment in which Tom is human and not slave. He endangers himself willingly through his human inclination to help a small girl in need, and not because he has been ordered to perform the task, or is under the threat of punishment for not acting.

Brown explained that anti-slavery authors, such as Stowe, maintained some pro-slavery stereotypes, choosing to use the stereotypes in order to provide the reader with a satisfied, happy ending which did not make a white audience feel guilty over the institution of slavery. Authors included "loyal submissive slaves to accentuate the wrongs inflicted upon them" (Brown 193). By contrasting the loyal submissive slave's goodness with other characters, the kind master such as Stowe's St. Clair, who intended to set Tom free, is juxtaposed with the harsh cruelty of Tom's last master, Simon Lagree, who beat Tom to death. These literary constructs of stereotypical characters as written by anti-slavery authors were a means by which the situation, i.e. slavery itself, could be examined.

Those who supported slavery in the South responded to Stowe's work with literature of their own. In his *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture*, Thomas F. Gossett lists twenty-seven pro-slavery works written in response to Stowe's novel between 1852 and the Civil War in 1861. Such pro-slavery novels, such as *Life at the South, or Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is* (1852), take Stowe's characters and mould them in different ways. The Uncle Tom of *Life in the South* runs away due to his own vanity and finally begs to return to slavery, an action Stowe's Tom

would never consider. These texts were only the beginning of the morphing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from an anti-slavery novel into a negative reinforcement of harmful stereotypes used to belittle the African American slave whom Stowe was attempting to help by highlighting their plight. In these altered works, Stowe's characters were attached to previous constructs of blackness and all abolitionist sentiment was divorced from the text.

A vivid example of how Stowe's characters have become morphed from sympathetic characters in the stereotypical situation of slavery to becoming stereotypes in character can be seen in the historical attitudes associated with Stowe's main character, Uncle Tom. Kathleen Hulser, the Curator of the Uncle Tom Exhibit at New York's Historical Society says that Stowe's Uncle Tom, "[is] very, very clearly seen as someone who suffers, has many tribulations and is ennobled by his death at the end" (Keyes, "A New Look..."). Today, the term 'Uncle Tom' is in no way flattering and is often used in the African American community towards members of their own community meaning that that individual has 'sold out' to the white community. To be called an 'Uncle Tom' is an insult. Allison Keyes makes this point by beginning her National Public Radio (NPR) report with a short interview.

KEYES: Seventeen-year-old Anthony Jones, walking the halls of New York's Historical Society on a class tour, has never read the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but he knows he'd be angry if someone called him an Uncle Tom.

ANTHONY JONES (Student): If I don't know a person and they call me that, maybe, yeah, I would get upset about it. Yeah.

KEYES: How come?

JONES: Because I know it's like--if someone call me that, that's like an insult, so I wouldn't like it.

Stowe is the one author 'everybody *almost* knows,'(ibid) i.e. many people know of the book but few have actually read Stowe's original work. Anthony Jones admitted in the interview that he has never read Stowe's book but he "knows" to be called an Uncle Tom is a cultural insult. In Stowe's writing, Uncle Tom is a Jesus-like figure who sacrifices his life in order to protect two female slaves from the sexual desires of Simon Legree. Yet in today's culture, Uncle Tom is a detested character whose name is applied as an insult. The shifting of ideas and characters through the Southern pro-slavery novels responding to Stowe co-opted Stowe's work and were responsible for the shift in perception in these works intended for adults. It would be unfair to label Stowe as the creator of the stock characterisation known today. Stowe could be considered responsible for the valorisation of stereotypes of southern gentleman slave owners such as St. Clair, as Joel Chandler Harris claims in his introduction to his book *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. However, as far as the creation of Uncle Tom as the African American stereotype he is known as today, we must point the finger in another direction: The Minstrels. Not only were the minstrels responsible for a morphed Uncle Tom, the minstrels also reinforced a number of other stereotypes, the same stereotypes which reappeared in children's literature in the 1930s.

2.5 The Minstrels and their Influences

American actors in blackface began to appear in small bit parts in the late seventeenth century, usually as comic relief to relieve the tension in serious dramatic acts. The earliest minstrel characters were based on popular white stage archetypes — frontiersmen, fishermen, hunters, and riverboatmen whose depictions drew heavily from the tall tale — and added exaggerated blackface speech and makeup.

Minstrel shows developed in the 1840's, peaked after the Civil War and remained popular into the early 1900s. As public opinion changed, so did the Negro stereotypes in minstrelsy. The man who made American minstrels famous was the Negro impersonator Thomas Dartmouth Rice. Rice first appeared on stage in blackface in 1828, years before Stowe's publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Rice's act included a highly exaggerated, stereotypical black character named "Jim Crow." Rice so embodied this character that he was known as "Jim Crow" (Image 2.1). Rice used a burnt cork, known as blackface makeup, to darken his skin. By 1832, Rice's Jim Crow song-and-dance routine was an astonishing sensation. From the United States, Rice journeyed to London and Dublin and again was met with great acclaim. At the height of Rice's success, *The Boston Post* wrote, "The two most popular



Image 2.1. Thomas Rice as Jim Crow, Courtesy Harvard Theatre Collection, The Houghton Library

characters in the world at the present are Victoria and Jim Crow" (Cockrell 66). David Pilgrim, professor of Sociology at Ferris State University, who created and maintains the web site for The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, points out that this blackface minstrel entertainment at the cost of 'other' started with Thomas Dartmouth Rice. He writes:

The minstrel show was one of the first native forms of American entertainment, and Rice was rightly regarded as the "Father of American minstrelsy"...Rice, and his imitators, by their stereotypical depictions of Blacks, helped to popularise the belief that Blacks were lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and unworthy of integration. During the years that Blacks were being victimized by lynch mobs, they were also victimized by the racist caricatures propagated through novels, sheet music, theatrical plays, and minstrel shows.

Pilgrim notes that the minstrel show's zenith was between 1850 and 1870. Stowe's work is situated during that time; while Stowe made use of situational stereotypes in her work to highlight the evils of slavery, the minstrels distorted Stowe's characters to belittle and dehumanise African Americans.

Eventually, several stock characters emerged, each representing a specific black stereotype. Chief among these were the happy slave, who often maintained the name Jim Crow, and the dandy, known as Zip Coon. Dale Cockrell comments, "The two formed a dichotomy of blackness, both equally ludicrous" (Cockrell 55). Jim Crow became the main stock character in minstrel shows so much so that the group of laws enforcing segregated society in the

South after Reconstruction (1866 to 1877) were known as “Jim Crow Laws.” Rice’s other blackface characters included Jim Dandy, Mr. Tambo, and Sambo all of which were stereotypical names defining a category of Negro. In the North and the South as well as Europe, white audiences were receptive to the portrayals of African American as singing, dancing, grinning fools, continuing the myth perpetuated by slave owners in the South.

The impact of minstrelsy on its audience was powerful in influencing the ways in which African Americans were identified visually. White actors used the burnt cork technique to darken their skin while painting large red (or white) lips and bulging out their eyes (Image 2.2). This visualizing influence continued in the illustrations in the 1930s.⁴ On The University of Virginia’s



Image 2.2 - White to "black". Reproduction of a minstrel poster originally printed by Strobridge Litho Co.. in 1900.

web site “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture”, project director Stephan Railton discusses the impact of minstrels in both their use of song and images offered to the audience:

For millions of Americans between the 1840s and the early 20th century, blackface minstrelsy was as familiar as music videos are to

⁴ Minstrel troupes composed of black performers were formed after the Civil War, had black owners and managers - were popular in both the United States and England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries In general, these minstrel shows were the only theatrical medium in which gifted black performers of the period could support themselves. A few of the larger companies employed both black and white performers. By the 20th century, women also appeared in minstrel shows, and the great blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were both minstrel performers early in their careers. Minstrel shows had

us...there are no recordings of 19th century minstrelsy...you can hear modern performances of minstrel songs, and look at sheet music covers and other illustrations to see the kinds of images minstrel put into the culture. But as a performing art, minstrelsy itself involved both images and sounds...[...] Unfortunately, these [viciously racist] images were re-inscribed on white America's retinas by literally millions of minstrel performances, and so we need to look at them in our time in order to appreciate the culture for which Stowe's novel and, for example, its various dramatic adaptations were written and staged. ("Showing Minstrelsy")

The minstrels characterised African Americans in negative and demeaning ways, not only giving African Americans a blackface look, but also provided terms of degradation, 'Uncle Tom' being only one of them.

The minstrels' use of Stowe's work was so popular that it spawned a name for minstrel shows based on her work called "Tom acts." These "Tom acts" replaced most other stories about plantation life that were performed on stage.

These sketches sometimes supported Stowe's novel, however often they turned it on its head or attacked the author. Whatever the intended message, it was usually lost in the joyous, slapstick atmosphere of the piece. Characters such as Simon Legree sometimes disappeared, and the title was frequently changed to something more cheerful like "Happy Uncle Tom" or "Uncle Dad's Cabin". Uncle Tom himself was frequently

effectively disappeared by the mid 20th century, but the effects of its racial stereotyping persisted in performance mediums well into the century." – "Minstrel Show," Encyclopaedia Britannica

portrayed as a harmless bootlicker to be ridiculed. Some troupes, known as "Tommer" companies, came to specialize in such burlesques, and theatrical "Tom's shows" integrated elements of the minstrel show and competed with it for at time. (*Wikipedia*: "Minstrel show")

Harriett Beech Stowe attempted to use pre-existing stereotypes to demonstrate slavery as the evil of the South. Stowe also attempted to show the positive attributes that existed in the African American men, women, and children whom the South chose to keep and label as chattel and property in slavery. The minstrel did just the opposite; the minstrel influence was long lasting. While minstrels were rarely performed in the 1930s, their influence and style of visual representation is clearly seen in a number of illustrations in the 1930s.

After 1870, the minstrels lost much of their popularity not because of changes in the ideology of the given time period but because of new technology: motion pictures and radio. However, new technology did not portray a new attitude toward African Americans. While the minstrels still found audiences in small towns, cartooned portrayals only worsened in films such as Thomas Griffith's 1905 film, *Birth of a Nation* and in various illustrations as witnessed by the following discussion concerning *Little Black Sambo*. Minstrels were responsible for the promulgation of negative stereotypes of African Americans, and the 'new' media of film served to re-enforced such representations.

The minstrels had no interest in the situation of slavery or in the representation of African Americans in realistic ways. Their only interest was in the entertainment value of the slave stereotype. Even the story of Topsy and

Little Eva was no stranger to the minstrel scene. This visualizing influence continued in the 1930s in the illustrations as analysed in Chapter Three. The story of Topsy and Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows a construction of white childhood as well as African American childhood through interaction between white and African American characters.

2.6 Topsy and Eva, children of the South

The constructed relationship between Stowe's white character Eva and her African American character Topsy serves as a microcosm of the greater society. This relationship signifies the representation of societies' views on interaction between the races through these two children. This same interaction between African American and white characters is often repeated in literature intended for children. Similar representations of relationships between white children and African American children are seen between Mary Phipps' Liza Jane and Patsy in *All About Patsy* (1930) (discussed later in this chapter), and between Mildred Taylor's Logan children and Jeremy Simms (1976-1990) (See Chapter Six). In each of these examples, date and place of publication directly affected the way in which the relationship between characters was represented. The historical record of adaptation and re-adaptation of Stowe's Topsy and Eva resembles the historical record of adaptation and re-adaptation of the various versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The modification of the story was sold directly to children, making Topsy and Eva a commodity and changing the intended purpose of Harriet Beecher Stowe in her original work.

As previously stated, Stowe's work at its publication was regarded as suitable for children since its initial reading was intended for family audiences and its various publications were intended directly for children. Allison Keyes of



Image 2.3
Advertisement in *The North Star*

National Public Radio comments “the merchandising surrounding [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] was extraordinary for the time period. There were toys and statues and songs, even a Topsy-Turvy doll with the black slave Topsy on one side, then, when its skirts were flipped, little Eva on the other side” (Keyes) (Image 2.3). These dolls were clearly aimed for an audience of young girls ironically showing that the

black child Topsy and the white child Eva are really one in the same. In these revised books, “The Story of Topsy” often became as important as Tom's story; the Topsy/Eva sub-plot was published as separate books for children. Three children's versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published before 1900: *Picture and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) published by Stowe's American publisher Jewett and Company; *A Peep into Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853) published in London by Sampson Low & Son, and also published in the United States by Jewett and Company; and *Topsy* (c1890) published by McLoughlin Brothers. “The remaining books,” comments Stephen Railton, “all came out after Stowe's copyright lapsed in 1892.” One book of particular interest as a rewrite was first published c1900 and was adapted to fit “a very different cultural moment.”

Railton continues:

The Young Folks' Uncle Tom, for example, went through a number of printings at the beginning of the 20th century. It completely "revises" the ending of Stowe's story, to fit the story on which America was basing the segregated realities of Jim Crow. ("*Uncle Tom as Children's Book*")

The Reilly & Briton printing of "The Story of Topsy" from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1908 is also a reflection of the ideologies embraced at the time of its publication. This isolated section of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was paired with *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, further discussed later in this chapter. This pairing was not accidental. Topsy is the story of a little Black girl; Sambo is the story of a little Black boy. Neatly packaged to attract either gender and therefore marketed to a wider audience, female and male African American childhood was read about and viewed through this book, providing a problematic construct of America's Black children. The manner of illustration by John R. Neill, better known for his illustrations of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* series (1904-44), gives a shockingly racist view of African American childhood (Image 2.4), which reflects the minstrel tradition. The differences depicted in illustrating Topsy and Eva are stark in contrast.

Little Eva, following Stowe's textual construct, is seen as a blonde angel whereas Topsy's humanity is questionable since Neill's illustration portrays her as wild and

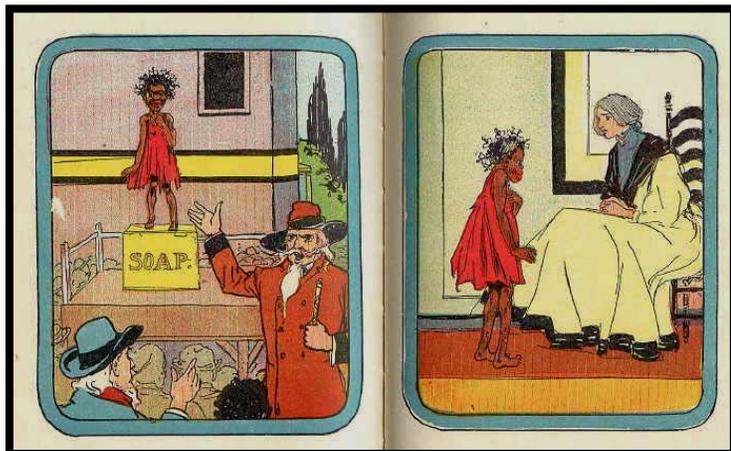


Image 2.4 Neill's illustrations of Topsy (1908)

animal-like. Stowe's text constructs Topsy as feral due to the lack of adult care. In comparing illustrations, the Topsy of Stowe's work is wild but human. Neill's illustration presents a flat static character who never undergoes the change in character as Stowe's Topsy does. The three sets of examples (Appendix 2.1) show the changes in how Topsy was depicted in various publications. Although the style of Neill's illustration differs from the work of the first two artists, one can see the similarity in the illustrations of Eva. However, Topsy's depiction is far different in Neill's version in clothing, body positioning, and facial expression. Neill's illustration belittles Topsy and in comparison, elevates Eva's character through the contrast between characters.

Stowe utilised the contrast between Eva and Topsy to portray how Topsy's situation works against her; Stowe depicts a construct of the childhood of a slave in contrast to a privileged white American childhood, in particular, childhood of the Southern white American 'master's' child versus the master's slave. Stowe's insertion of Topsy into the novel is interesting in that it does not further Tom's story. Instead Stowe used her constructed Topsy to illustrate the untamed child and yet her inclusion is problematic. Topsy's entrance into the story comes after Miss Ophelia, St. Clair's disapproving cousin from the North, has pestered St. Clair for owning slaves, even though Stowe fashions St. Clair as a "good master" to his slaves. The sub-plot involving Topsy is the battleground in which Stowe is able to debate opinions about slavery. When Topsy makes her appearance in Chapter Twenty, she is not a positive figure. Stowe describes her as "one of the blackest of her race...her woolly hair braided in sundry little tails...odd and

goblin-like in her appearance... so heathenish" (258). Topsy changes quickly in the story, at least in appearance. Five pages later, Stowe offers a new description of Topsy as a different looking child. Stowe announces, "Behold, then, Topsy, and shorn of all her little braided tails..." (623). Topsy physical appearance is easily changed; her character must undergo a reform which takes a longer amount of time.

When Stowe first presents Topsy in the story, the reader is informed of the wayward style in which Topsy was raised. These traits do not automatically disappear when Topsy is purchased by St. Clair and given to Miss Ophelia. Topsy lies and steals and is somewhat feared by the other slaves in the house. When Miss Ophelia seeks out her cousin for his advice, he turns the question back to her, commenting that she may whip Topsy if she chooses but one whipping will only lead to more.

"Whipping and abuse are like laudanum; you have to double the dose as the sensibilities decline. I saw this very early when I became an owner; and I resolved never to begin...The consequence is, that my servants act like spoiled children...You have talked a great deal about educating cousin. I really wanted you to *try* with one child, who is a specimen of thousands among us."

"It is your system makes such children," said Miss Ophelia.

"I know it; but they are *made* – they exist, - and what *is* to be done with them?" (301-302)

Topsy proves St. Clair wrong in many ways. She learns to read and write through Miss Ophelia's tutorage (although this would be an illegal activity for both the teacher and the student) and to perform her domestic duties well under the guiding hand of the white adult Miss Ophelia. Through Topsy, Stowe is able to address societal ideology that constructed slaves as lazy, ignorant and physically unable to learn. However, the contrast with little Eva remains. When Topsy has caused trouble, it is Eva whose personality traits are praised by Stowe.

There sat the two children on the floor, with their faces towards [St. Clair and Miss Ophelia]. Topsy with her usual air of careless drollery and unconcern; but, opposite to her, Eva, her whole face fervent with feeling, and tears in her large eyes.

“What does make you so bad, Topsy? Why won't you try and be good? Don't you love *anybody*, Topsy?” [said Eva]

“Dunno nothing 'bout love; I loves candy and sich, that's all,” said Topsy...

“But Topsy, if you'd only try to be good, you might”-

“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.”

“But people can love you, if you were black Topsy. Miss Ophelia would love you, if you were good.”

Topsy gave a short, blunt laugh that was her common mode of expressing incredulity.

“Don't you think so?” said Eva.

“No; she can’t bar me, cause I’m a nigger! –she ‘d ‘s soon have a toad touch her! There can’t nobody love niggers, and niggers can’t do nothin’! / don’t care,” said Topsy, beginning to whistle.

“Oh Topsy, poor child, / love you! Said Eva with a sudden burst of feeling...(303-304)

Topsy begins to cry in Eva’s lap as Miss Ophelia and St. Clair observe them. However, again it is Eva who is considered the “angel” by Stowe (321) and it is Eva who teaches Miss Ophelia the lesson. The conversation between St. Clair and Miss Ophelia confirm this:

“I don’t know how I can help it,” said Miss Ophelia; “they [blacks] are so disagreeable to me, - this child in particular, - how can I help feeling so?”

“Eva does, it seems.”

“Well, she’s so loving! After all, though, she’s no more than Christ-like,” said Miss Ophelia; “I wish I was like her. She might teach me a lesson.” (305)

Stowe uses Topsy’s character as a stereotypical dehumanized subject to discuss the child slave’s plight. Moreover Stowe used the character of Topsy to construct little Eva’s Southern feminine whiteness as loving and kind. The ultimate proof of this is that Stowe never tells us the end of Topsy’s plight. Once her usefulness is over, so is her story.

Topsy’s story, which rightly could be called Eva’s story in light of the above analysis, has an anti-slavery stance imbedded. Slavery is responsible for

Topsy's original condition. However, Stowe's inclusion of Topsy in the story offers more of a lesson to parents. While Topsy was left to nature before St. Clair bought her and is wild and untamed, Eva is clearly the nurtured child. Eva is loved and because she is loved, she loves everyone including the unloved Topsy. Topsy learns to be a better child because of Eva's love and Miss Ophelia's care. There is no discussion about giving Topsy her freedom, although Eva draws a promise from her father to free Uncle Tom (unfortunately for Tom, St. Clair dies before this comes to fruition). Miss Ophelia, shortly before the previous quotation, speaks of "being plagued" by Topsy. Miss Ophelia admits her desire to "give her up" because she "can't have that trouble any longer" (303). Part of Eva's goodness comes from the love St. Clair showers on his only child. Part of Topsy's badness comes from her lack of father or mother. So while Topsy's status as a slave is not questioned, her status as an orphan is paramount. Stowe's lesson is that good children come from good loving parents. Topsy's condition as slave has no bearing, other than providing an excuse for her initial behaviours when she first enters the story.

Authors and ministerial writers adapted this parental message and used it to support the institution of slavery. Phil. J. Cozans published one such pro-slavery children's book by Vincent L. Dill called *Little Eva; The Flower of the South* (1853). Stephan Railton comments that it was a

...children's book equivalent to the "Anti-Tom" novels published during the 1850s by pro-slavery writers in an attempt to counteract the influence of Stowe's book. The "Little Eva" who is *The Flower of the South* lives in

Alabama, not New Orleans, is rescued from drowning by Sam, not Tom, and sees nothing wrong with enslaving human beings. (“*Uncle Tom as Children's Book*”)

Stowe’s novel, even in its forms which are marketed as children’s literature, was used by others such as Dill to strengthen existing stereotypes to establish a racial hierarchy in the minds of child readers.

2.7 Morphed ‘Uncle Tom’ and Additional Stereotypes

It is an unfortunate fact that Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has become the linchpin for the names of some of the stereotypes. “Uncle Tom” was solidified as a negative stereotype by the end of World War One when Marcus Garvey was quoted in *The (Baltimore) Afro-American* on 28 February 1919. Garvey used the term “Uncle Tom” in a way that Stowe would not have recognized

From 1914 to 1918 two million Negroes fought in Europe for a thing foreign to themselves--Democracy. Now they must fight for themselves. The time for cowardice is past. The old-time Negro has gone--buried with 'Uncle Tom.' (“Garvey Urges Organization”)

The Uncle Tom stereotype is the white-serving image that white society allocated to black society. In American literature which depicts black and white characters interacting with one another, the ‘Uncle’ tends to be the character that passes on stories from the oral tradition or tells tales from slavery days. The title of ‘Uncle’ was reserved for older black slaves since they were never addressed as Mister or Misses. These titles were reserved for whites, no matter their age or level of

authority; their whiteness made them worthy of respect. 'Mister' was the title for white males other than the slaves' owner; he was called 'Master.' Stowe shows Tom's understanding of this unjust system. He knows his place in the racial hierarchy of his day and never challenges the system. Tom knows he is to be sold and yet does not run away North with Eliza and Henry. It is hard to deny that Stowe's use of stereotypes is not problematic in some ways since Uncle Tom does what is best for his master and the 'pickaninny' Topsy's story serves to highlight proper white Southern female childhood. Ironically, fellow author Joel Chandler Harris criticized Stowe for her attempt at depicting the South and slavery as she perceived it in the 1850s. In the introduction to *Uncle Remus His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris flaunts his own effort to capture the essence of the Southern black in dialect and story while disparaging Stowe's early attempt to do the same thing. Harris writes:

At any rate, I trust I have been successful in presenting what must 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 defence of slavery as it existed in the South. Mrs. Stowe, let me hasten to say, attacked the possibilities of slavery with all the eloquence of genius; but the same genius painted the portrait of the Southern slave-owner, and defend him. (viii)

While Joel Chandler Harris applauds Stowe's work, he claims she defends aspects of slavery. Yet Harris' use of Uncle Remus as the narrator for stories

which originated in African American oral tradition serves much the same function as Uncle Tom, but with even less respect than an 'Uncle Tom.' Like Tom, Uncle Remus allows the former master's son to come to his cabin to talk, just as Uncle Tom does with his master's son, George. Remus relates a "personal" story which shows him to be a greater Tom than Uncle Tom. In "War" Remus tells of the time during the American Civil War when he spotted a Union sharp shooter in the trees on his master's land. When Remus realised that this sharp shooter had his master in the sites of his gun, Remus shot the Union soldier out of the tree to preserve the life of his master. Harris writes

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed Miss Theodosia, indignantly, "that you shot the Union soldier, when you knew he was fighting for your freedom?"

"Co'se, I know all about dat," responded Uncle Remus, "en it sorter made cole chills run up my back; but w'en I see dat man take aim, en Mars Jeems gwine home ter Ole Miss en Miss Sally, I des disremembered all 'bout freedom en lamed alose. (214)

To protect the life of his master, Uncle Remus sought to injure a soldier who was fighting for Uncle Remus' freedom. Harris, who claimed he accomplished more than Stowe in correcting the errors of her stereotypes, clearly falls short of his goal. Harris ends the story by explaining that the Union soldier is nursed back to health on the plantation and ends up marrying Miss Sally, the sister of the master Uncle Remus was protecting. Mr. Huntington bears no ill will to Remus as he and his wife are parents to the little boy who comes to listen to Uncle Remus'

stories. Miss Theodosia, Mr. Huntington's sister, points out that the shooting cost her brother his arm. If there is any doubt that Uncle Remus is a form of an Uncle Tom, Remus' response to this accusation of costing his new "master" his arm puts all doubts aside.

"I gin 'im dem," said Uncle Remus, pointing to Mrs. Huntington, "en I gin 'im deze" – holding up his own brawny arms. "En ef dem ain't nuff fer enny man den I done los' de way." (215)

Remus gives himself as a replacement for the lost arm. He places himself under the authority of Mr. Huntington, positioning himself into a personally imposed slavery. Sterling Brown had noted Harris' pro-slavery stance acknowledging that Harris is "better known for his valuable contribution to literature and folk-lore in recording the Uncle Remus stories than for his aid in perpetuation of the "plantation Negro" stereotype" (184). Yet Brown continues connecting Harris' Uncle Remus character to other pro-slavery characters. He points out:

In Uncle Remus's philosophising about the old days of slavery there is wistful nostalgia. Harris comments, "In Middle Georgia the relations between master and slave were as perfect as they could be under the circumstances." This might mean a great deal, or nothing, but it is obvious from other words of Harris that, fundamentally, slavery was to him a kindly institution, and the Negro was contented. Slavery was:

...in some of its aspects far more beautiful and inspiring than *any* of the relations between employer and the employed in this day. (185)

Harris, while claiming that Stowe is at fault for her use of stereotypes, proves to be a stronger proponent of the “good old days” in both his writing and personal comments. Harris uses Uncle Remus, who is no longer a slave according to the law since the story takes place after 1863, as a representative to express a nostalgic longing for slavery. Harris’ stereotype is much more damning than Stowe’s in that Stowe’s Uncle Tom is a slave by situation and Uncle Remus is a slave by personal choice.

Critic Donald Bogle categorized Uncle Remus as one of the two versions of the coon stereotype. In speaking about stereotypes in film, he describes the coon as “the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon” (Bogle 7). He goes on to describe coons as “harmless...used solely for comic relief...stumbling and stuttering idiots...” He divides coons into the Uncle Remus and the pickaninny. The Uncle Remus as coon stereotype becomes the “unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, and butchering the English language” (8).

Adult characters were not the only coon characters. Child characters were also depicted as coons. The title character of the picture book *Frawg* (1930) by Annie V. Weaver is the coon stereotype as seen in the 1930s. Weaver constructs Frawg and his younger brother and sister as child coons who go fishing, eat a pile of watermelons, and speak in a Black dialect version of English. Child as coon fits into Bogle’s pickaninny group but Weaver clearly situates Frawg as a comic coon through Frawg’s words and actions. He and his two siblings eat an entire pile of watermelons, “eating just as fast as they could work their mouths”

(n.pag.) stuffing themselves to an uncomfortable state. Their behaviour and round stomachs construct them as greedy. Frawg spends one day “sleeping and climbing trees nearly all day” (n.pag.). There is no plot to this book and no lesson to be learned. Frawg is presented to the reader for white amusement and to strengthen the coon child stereotype.

The category of the pickaninny group is of great interest in this study since the pickaninny is usually a child. Bogle notes that the pickaninny was “a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (7). Before the movie age began in 1903, Topsy was the most famous of these pickaninnies. As discussed earlier, revised stories for children and the toys marketed with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were centred on Topsy and her good and righteous counterpart, Little Eva. This contrast between black and white, while

connecting black and white, demonstrates the interdependency that race has in the American mind. The pickaninny stereotype placed the Black child within the structure and framework of the white society. In



Image 2.5
Buckwheat
pickaninny stereotype

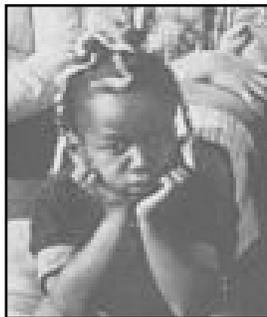


Image 2.6
Farina
Gender Ambiguous

1904, Thomas Edison presented one of his first films titled *Ten Pickaninnies*, a group of nameless Black children (Wallace 138) who ran around and were referred to as “snowballs, cherubs, coons, bad chillun, inky kids, smoky kids, black lambs, cute ebonies, and chubby

ebonies” (Bogle 7). This production became the forerunner to the *Our Gang* series (also called *The Little Rascals*). In the 1920s and 1930s, *Our Gang* was incredibly popular with American audiences however the African American characters, the pickaninnies such as Sunshine Sammy, Farina, Stymie, and, the most famous of all even today, Buckwheat, were all cast in the same roles as band leaders, doormen, and the like. For some of these pickaninnies, gender was even questionable as ‘boy’ characters could be seen in cast off women’s dresses, while ‘girl’ characters were masculine. (Image 2.5 and 2.6) In 1927, *Our Gang* produced their own version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with the Spanky, the white child leader of the gang, in blackface as Uncle Tom. Spanky/Tom spends most of the movie avoiding Simon Legree, who is Spanky’s mother. The duality of Spanky (child) being pursued by his mother (adult) with that of Tom (Black) being chased by Simon Legree (white) equates with the child/adult and white/black binary. Topsy is the comical outlet in this production. There is no lesson about slavery, nor is there a lesson about parenting. Topsy has become an amusement and nothing more. In this silent movie, Topsy the pickaninny is silenced by her lack of humanity.

The 1930s was an especially difficult time for the African American child because the pickaninny character was present in film, and also present in literature. Authors and illustrators used the pickaninny stereotype extensively in the 1930s to construct African American childhood. *Topsy’s Turvy’s Pigtales* (1938) by Bernice Anderson, *Meg & Moe* (1938) by Elsie Bindrum, *Epaminondas and His Auntie* (reprinted in 1938) by Sara Cone Bryant and illustrated by Inez

Hogan, *Pinky Marie* (1939) by Lynda Graham and illustrated by Ann Kirn, *Nicodemus and His Little Sister* (1932) by Inez Hogan, and “*Quack!*” *Said Jerusha* (1930) by Mildred Merryman (and illustrated by Mary Phipps) all portray African American children as pickaninnies, some of them directly tied to the character of Topsy by name or illustration.

The term pickaninny itself was found unashamedly in the pages of at least one children’s book. In *All About Patsy* (1930), author and illustrator Mary Phipps constructs the story of Patsy, the little white child whose plaything is the cook’s daughter, Liza Jane. Phipps writes,

Liza Jane was Hattie Pie’s little girl, and they lived in the old quarter just behind the Big House. She was the dearest little pickaninny you could imagine, with black kinky hair, chocolate skin, and shiny white teeth.

Patsy often played with Liza Jane. (4)

Words such as “old quarter” and “Big House” clearly place the setting on an old plantation. Even the name “Liza”, a shortened form of “Eliza” the runaway slave from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, brings to the mind of the reader the days where slavery was still in existence through intertextual referencing. Although Hattie Pie is no longer a slave, her situation has changed little and her slavery has only been reclassified as hired help, or more precisely, reconstructed as cheap labour. The African Americans live in the ex-slave quarters as tenants and serve the whites in the Big House. Liza Jane is not only named as a pickaninny by the author, she is subjected to being constructed as a pickaninny through action as well as words. Phipps sets the scene: “Suddenly Liza Jane jumped, and her kinky pigtales

stood on end. She almost turned white, for there was the strangest noise behind her”(19). Liza Jane’s ‘almost white’-ness comes from her black superstitions of ghosts and only serves to show Patsy as ‘pure white’ and brave enough to handle the situation. Later in the story, Mister Coon, a racoon, is hiding in a tree when the branch he is on breaks. Phipps keeps Liza Jane true to her stereotypical pickaninny nature and the irony of including a “coon” is not lost.

[Mister Coon] landed right in the middle of Liza Jane’s kinky black pigtales. Down Liza Jane fell flat on her face! Liza Jane lay there wondering what had happened! First, she thought the whole world had fallen in, then she thought perhaps only the big tree had blown up; then she thought perhaps she had fallen ‘way out of sight and she’d never see Patsy or the rest again. And then she thought, “Even if I have fallen, I should try to get out someway.” And she put her hands to her head. Goodness, gracious me! She felt the bristly hair of Mister Coon, and then she remembered! “Oh, dear! Oh, dearie me!” she cried, and jumped up and began to run as fast as her legs would take her. (63-64)

Phipps continues this train of thought. Liza Jane, apparently too unintelligent to do anything else, runs until she can run no longer. She suddenly remembers a poem and stops to recite it to the racoon on her head. Mister Coon, who is tangled in Liza Jane’s “kinky black pigtales,” makes a pact with the children and all ends well. Almost. Phipps ends the chapter with the following:

Poor little Liza Jane had been so scared that
even in her sleep her kinky pigtales s-t-o-o-d
o-n
E-N-D-S! (72)

Liza Jane of *All About Patsy* is a parallel character to Topsy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; each mirrors the white character who is bold, brave and good. They are in essence the alter ego of otherness. Little Eva literally possesses Topsy as a slave while Patsy has Liza Jane in an unbalanced friendship; each white child is in custody of a pickaninny character whose outlandish behaviour is meant for the white child's entertainment.

Liza Jane, as pickaninny, is not the only African American stereotype in the 1930s to be portrayed in both text and illustration in children's literature. Liza Jane's mother, Hattie Pie is another stereotypical figure; she is a large overweight woman with a handkerchief on her head and is the cook in the "Big House." In writing her as the cook with a jolly, self-sacrificing attitude, Phipps has constructed Hattie Pie as the mammy figure.

The myth of the mammy figure served a purpose for those who believed that slavery as the Southern way of life was right and proper. The mammy was the female house servant who embraced the same white values as the Uncle Tom figure. 'Mammy' could be the head cook or the head household servant. She raised the master's babies, often being forced to let others raise her own children because she was at the Big House. She also was constructed as the happy, content servant, willing to risk life and limb for the master's family and

children. This image of the loving mammy is oft repeated. Aunt Chloe from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is very much the mammy figure like Hattie Pie from *All About Patsy*.

Hattie Pie is mother to her own child but also mammy to Patsy. The last illustration is of Hattie Pie's children reading while Hattie Pie and Patsy walk off the page, hand in hand. In "*Quack!*" *Said Jerusha* (1930) by Mildred Merryman (and illustrated by Mary Phipps, author of *All About Patsy*), a telling scene is illustrated when "Mammy" sits telling Peter and Ann, the white children who live in the big house, a story. Ann sits on Mammy's lap with Peter at her feet. Mammy's own child, also named Liza Jane, sits behind and to the side of her own mother. Mammy's attention is given to the two white children who live in "the Big House" while her own child receives less attention and is a part of the backdrop.

In this construction, the African American child is taught that in the construct of the African American family, the white child is still of greater importance. In books such as Lucy Cobb and Mary Hicks' *Animal Tales from the Old North State* (1938), white children visit the former inhabitants of the plantation who are of grandparent age. The Uncle Tom stereotype, as well as the mammy, is a recognisable figure and represents the perceived rightness of whiteness as being more important than blackness, and the white child as being more important than the black adult.

The stereotype that is often seen within stories along with the mammy image is that of the tragic mulatto. While this stereotype is relatively absent from

African American children's literature in the 1930s, authors made use of this stereotype in books intended for adolescents. Stowe includes three tragic mulatto characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* all of whom escape to freedom. Eliza and George, and therefore their son little Harry, are all mulattoes, as is the rebellious Cassy on Simeon Lagree's plantation. The mulatto is considered tragic because of a mixed race background, which often left them belonging neither to a black culture or a white culture. They were also constructed as highly sexual beings, a topic that authors of children's literature in general avoided at all cost. Author G. M. Shelby's *Po'buchra* (1930) was an exception to this rule.

Although the "tragic mulatto" is generally female, G. M. Shelby used the idea of the tragic male mulatto. Shelby's main character Barty knows he is of mixed blood but believes what his father has told him; he is of Indian Native American and Portuguese descent. His Aunt 'Mericky is the problem, for while the rest of the family is light skinned enough to pass as white, she is not. In 'Mericky's character, Shelby presents a very different view of the mammy and in Barty, he offers a very different mulatto.

Aunt 'Mericky's character has elements of the typical stereotypes. She is a large woman, lazy, and keeps a slovenly house. Barty refers to the home as "Hell Hole, the back of Hell Hole" (Shelby 22). Her cooking is her redeeming quality. G. M. Shelby writes Barty's thoughts about his aunt as he returns home

All [Aunt 'Mericky] ever cleaned was the inside of her pots. Well, he thought as he approached the kitchen door, her cooking at least accounted for his strength. Yet he could think more than passingly of her

kindness. Look at that little mess around the barn! How nasty it smelled! And look at the place beneath the window, glazed with greasy dishwater, thrown out since God knew when!...Tchgh! He was not genteel – he knew that – and he didn't make a fuss about ordinary dirt. This was really the first time he had cared enough to make a fuss about even filth, yet now as he stepped into the house its squalor appalled him. (22)

Shelby clearly constructs this family as poor and places the blame for the squalor both in the yard and in the house on the only character who claims her blackness. Shelby equates the poor living conditions with the keeper of the house, Aunt 'Mericky.

Yet Shelby's use of the word "passing" in the above passage is of interest. This book is all about passing. While Aunt 'Mericky is too dark to ever have passed as white, she also is the character of wisdom. It is her embracement of her African American blood that gives her the insight into the white world. While she tells Barty the truth about his family background, at the same time she enables him to pass as white by giving him the knowledge of how to act/perform whiteness. Barty's reaction to the news constructs Aunt 'Mericky's blackness as something to be avoided.

Truth was, Aunt 'Mericky was a good soul, but queer...she tried in all ways to advance [Barty], and never hold him back, but she herself lived from day to day, slack in her habits and lolloping around.

But now his white blood was asserting itself. He sat there looking at her in intense protest. He did not want to be Negro. How could he go

on like this? It was hopeless to be otherwise if he lived as the nephew of a colored woman, whether people called her so or not. What chance had he of any other life? (24)

While Aunt 'Mericky embraces her blackness, Barty attempts to deny his blackness since he feels that to 'be black' means he is less white and less accepted. She limits him from being anything more than Black by simply existing. Aunt 'Mericky, for all of her faults, understands Barty's feelings. Her own mother, who was light enough to pass as well as the rest of her siblings, treated her differently. She recalls:

Your gran'maa was so mad at me for bein' dark she used to try to make me eat by myself away from the other children, and let on befo' strangers I weren't one o' her own. Co'se she couldn't do me that-a-way, even when I was little, 'cause I wouldn't let her" (28).

She goes on to explain what Barty needs to do and how he can pass as white by leaving and going to a place where his family was not known.

Aunt 'Mericky also shows a self hatred toward her own race much like that which Fanon discussed in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). Fanon, a trained psychiatrist, treated the psychological effects of racism. Like Aunt 'Mericky, he talks about the conflict one feels about being black. He writes:

The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly...The white world, the only honourable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man – or at least like a nigger...As I began to

recognize that the Negro is a symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. (109)

Aunt 'Mericky experiences this same tug-of-war. Barty is surprised that his aunt is encouraging him to run away and pass for white. She explains that she tried to raise him white so that when he was old enough to choose to be either black or white, he would decide to be white. Shelby writes

Barty looked up at her. 'But you said just now, an' I heard you say it to Pappy over and over – it was more fun an' easier to be a nigger.'

Sure I did! But look at me! With a face like mine, I ain't had a chance.' (28)

Shelby's book, intended for the category of children now called young adults, sets up the true tragedy for the mulatto, regardless of gender. They must chose between two worlds of which they are both a part. The mulatto is destined only to experience half of the two cultures of which they are members by birth. Mulatto characters were neither black nor white and were therefore unable to help others clarify what blackness or whiteness might mean. That was their tragedy. By being part black and part white, they were often rejected by both worlds.

The stereotypes listed by Stealing Brown in 1933 and utilised in literature from the 1930s are clearly descendants of major and minor characters in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While Stowe used these characters to analyse the situation of slavery, authors after Stowe did not always have the same intentions. Stereotypes in illustration often followed the same course. The history of *The*

Story of Little Black Sambo demonstrates how not only authors but also illustrators played a part in the visual representation of race in America.

2.8 The Story of Little Black Sambo and Its Illustrations

Although originally a British children's book, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* has an intriguing American history reflecting views of race in American from its first American publication in 1900 through the latest version published in 2004. The argument which I put forward here is that the American illustrations of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* parallel historical attitudes towards African American people, showing the power of illustration in reflecting cultural attitudes and how African America childhood is constructed through visual means. While the various publications of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* since its original publication were adapted textually, the historical record of adaptation and re-adaptation of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* occurred visually through illustrations, marking the shifting societal relationship between races in the United States

While debates about author Helen Bannerman and her text have been thoroughly discussed in literary and educational circles (See Yuill 1976; Yoffee 1997; Martin 2002), the American illustrations have received little critical attention. This lack of emphasis on the illustration is somewhat surprising as the American illustrations inform and reflect the time periods in which they were produced, demonstrating cultural attitudes concerning the construction of race in America. The illustrations that have accompanied the numerous publications of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* in the United States serve as a manifestation of

American ideologies and white American perceptions concerning the levels of acceptance of African Americans. This unique literary record of the various versions of *Little Black Sambo* published since 1898 are here evaluated for the ways in which ideologies concerning race are portrayed and the reactions to such representations. The blame for *Sambo's* historical controversy lies with the American illustrations, corresponding with white dominant majority attitudes towards African Americans, and demonstrating the power of illustration in culture in a time and place.

2.9 Bannerman and the *Sambo* debates

A brief overview of Helen Bannerman's life shows her to be something other than the typical Victorian woman. Born as Brodie Cowan Watson in Edinburgh in 1862, Bannerman was the daughter of a Scottish minister. Bannerman spent most of her childhood abroad since her father's career as an army chaplain took him to various parts of the British Empire, including the island of Madeira. Located off the west coast of North Africa, Madeira's mixed population included peoples from Africa. Bannerman's exposure to various cultures acquainted her with a wider view of the world than most women of her time would have had, equipping her with life skills which enabled her to thrive in cultures of which she was not a native. In 1889 Bannerman married William Burney Bannerman, who was in the Indian Medical Service and together they lived in India for the next 30 years. Helen Bannerman's life and actions in

colonial India, as recounted by herself and her family and friends, showed her to be non-judgemental of differences in race and culture.

Yet Bannerman's first book for children has often been censored due to claims of racism. Bill Yoffee's study *Black Sambo's Saga; The Story of Little Black Sambo Revisited at Age 98* (1997) sums up such accusations by noting:

In recent years, the name *Black Sambo* has been the source of controversy. It has been associated with bigotry, racism, and prejudice. It has been considered a term of derision, the product of centuries of slavery, persecution and discrimination against African-Americans. It has been used as a stereotype for all of the alleged deficiencies of the race, and to this day many African-Americans take offence. (Yoffee 3)

Such accusations are often discussed by sympathetic critics, such as Julius Lester, who considers Bannerman to be a product of her times. Lester is one of the most widely awarded and respected African American authors today; his work *To Be A Slave* (1969) was one of the first reconstructed historical texts demonstrating alternative views of African American history through the use of slave narratives. Despite the criticism of *Little Black Sambo* which claims it to be a racist book, Lester defends the text but points out that we should "acknowledge the presence of unconscious bias in a literary text." In a similar tone of conciliation, Lester also added "posterity has not been kind to Helen Bannerman." Today's authors of African American descent have various opinions about Bannerman due to their personal encounters with *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Lester has recently rewritten Bannerman's text changing the

name to *Sam and the Tigers* (1996). When asked about his opinion of the book, Lester verbalized the duality of his feelings about *Little Black Sambo* and Bannerman:

Is the book racist? In context, yes. *Little Black Sambo* was written ... during this period that the leading universities engage in measuring the skulls of blacks and whites and Indians and on the basis of skull size and capacity determine the place of each on the evolutionary chain. *Little Black Sambo* appears during the time when racism is rampant and informs colonial and imperialistic policies of the U.S., German, French and English governments.

Is *Little Black Sambo* maliciously racist? Not at all. It is a product of its times and as such, is rather benign. Bannerman does not use dialect and malapropisms. She does not deliberately or even consciously ridicule *Little Black Sambo*. In fact, there is a tension in the story between the illustrations and the story line. In the story line *Little Black Sambo* is quite a wonderful character. (Online posting, Lester)

However, some critics found the caricatures of African Americans in *Little Black Sambo* and Bannerman's other works demeaning. In 1947 a critic asserted that "the original illustrations use all the usual stereotypes found in malicious cartoons of Negroes...the thick lips, the rolling eye, the bony knees, the fuzzy hair." In addressing the allegations that are made against Bannerman, one can only say that her intentions may never be truly known. However, Bannerman's children have commented that their mother would be saddened to know the accusations

that have been made against her and her book (Hay 155). Considering all the discussion and criticism about Bannerman, Lester concludes:

She was an educated woman. She was well aware of what she was doing in placing a black boy in India. She was creating fantasy. The story has always been a fantasy, which should be obvious since tigers do not talk to little boys and ask for their clothes. (ibid)

Today, much like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is known *about* but not actually read. Sambo holds a place in the minds of American as being a racist book but in my teaching experience of reading *Little Black Sambo* to university students in such diverse places as Mississippi, San Diego, and the United Kingdom, only a small handful of university students have read the story. Even fewer know the publication story behind the book. Bannerman's story and illustrations were not originally written for publication; *Sambo* was written for Bannerman's two young daughters.

2.10 Publishing History and Early Responses

Today, copyright is strongly protected by law. Over one hundred years ago, the publishing world was different. So when Mrs. Alice M. E. Bond, a family friend also living in India, read the book at the Bannerman's home and asked to serve as Bannerman's literary agent since she was travelling to London, Bannerman had requested that Bond not sell the copyright. Grant Richards was the first publisher interested in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. After viewing the book, Richards immediately offered to publish the book under the condition that

he owned the copyright. He offered £5 – equivalent to approximately £1,787 in today's value. The time it took for correspondence to travel worked in favour of Richards and two days after Richard's offer, Mrs. Bond agreed to the sale of the copyright (Hay 17). Almost immediately, disagreements between Bannerman and the publisher occurred but with no copyright to secure her opinions on the details of publication, Bannerman was powerless to stop Richards from publishing *Little Black Sambo* however he pleased. Richard's publication was quickly printed in order to make *Little Black Sambo* available to Christmas shoppers.

Although *Little Black Sambo* was quickly rushed to publication and disagreements existed between the author and publisher, *Sambo* was an immediate success. *Sambo* was also not a children's story that was quickly to be forgotten, as is proved by its longevity in the publishing world. *Little Black Sambo* was initially regarded as a book that positively portrayed Black characters, especially in comparison to the more negative books of the time that depicted blacks as simple and uncivilized. Critics agreed that *Sambo* was something new and special. Immediate reviews highly praised Bannerman's work and the book sold well. While today's university age students are unfamiliar with *Little Black Sambo* due to wide spread banning of the book which began in the 1960s, older generations either know the story or know of the story.

Twenty-one thousand copies were in print only a year after its initial publication (Yoffee 4). Its publication date, 31st Oct 1899, and its inexpensive pricing at one shilling and six pence (approximately £1.32 today), made it a

perfect Christmas gift, which was exactly what Richards had intended. An early review of nursery books appeared in *The Spectator* on 2 December 1899. Criticizing most of the ten books it reviewed for being too didactic and parent centred, the review continued:

Very different must be the verdict on that most attractive little book *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. It has been briefly noticed in these columns before, but no comparison between old and new fashioned nursery books would be quite fair without allowing Little Black Sambo to give his protest in favour of recent books. His history was not written with one eye on parents and guardians, or the inconsistency of mixing up the African type of black with delightful adventures with tigers in an Indian jungle would never have been allowed to pass. As it is, Little Black Sambo makes his simple and direct appeal in the greatest realm of make-believe without paying the slightest attention to the unities or caring in the least about anything but the amusement of the little boys and girls for whom he was obviously created. Every parent should at once get the book and give it both to the nursery and the schoolroom. It is impossible to deny that among this year's Christmas books *Little Black Sambo* is, to use his own classic phrase, far and away 'the grandest tiger in the jungle.' (qtd. in Hay 28)

Ironically, this review praises aspects of *Little Black Sambo* that later critics identify as faults. Clearly, at the time of its British publication, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was understood in the manner in which Bannerman first wrote it; it

is an adventure story in a make-believe land where the main character, who happens to be Black, is successfully heroic because of his intelligence, not his colour.

Besides presenting a black hero, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was the first book of its kind in children's literature in other ways. Elizabeth Hay points out in her critical biography of Helen Bannerman, *Sambo Sahib: The Story of Little Black Sambo and Helen Bannerman*, that:

Little Black Sambo embodied nearly all the principles on which present-day books for young children are based and was revolutionary in its day ...The pictures were direct and vivid, and printed in primary colours...[It] is action-packed and yet repetitive. It also lacked what had been considered essential in a children's book up to that moment: a moral purpose or improving tone. (Hay 1)

Printed two years before Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*⁵, the size of Bannerman's book was small enough for a young child to hold in their hands. Critics have praised the book as entertaining and humorous; Elizabeth Gard commented:

[I]t's not difficult to see why *Little Black Sambo* has always been the favourite.... Each picture exactly illustrates a moment in the story.... The simple words, and the highly effective repetition ... rivet the attention of both reader and listener. Mrs. Bannerman seems to have fallen completely instinctively into just the right style for children. (Tucker 78)

⁵ Privately printed first and then by Richards as part of The Dumpy Book series of which *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was a part of.

While the size, shape, and content were child-centred, *Little Black Sambo* also contained a fantasy element that children loved, and yet this fantasy aspect of the story is most often forgotten today.

Today's reviews of Sambo are less flattering. Although the story has been in constant publication since 1899, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* seems to be unable to overcome its own tragic history. Critic Phyllis Yuill notes that controversies surrounding the book began appearing in professional journals in the mid-1940s and are maintained to this day. Critics, parents, librarians and authors still consider this divisive book a classic work in children's literature, much loved and fondly remembered by more than one generation of Americans. In 1971, Selma Lanes noted:

In loving Sambo, unreservedly, in some way, every white had the feeling that he was also accepting the black man as a fellow human being. The nursery bookshelf was integrated, and no prejudice could exist in a home where *Little Black Sambo* and *Peter Rabbit* stood side by side on the same shelf. (qtd. in Yuill 9)

Michelle Martin reiterates Lanes' discussion when she states "other critics felt that while many white Americans early in the twentieth century considered black people invisible within the culture, Sambo made whites acknowledge the humanity in black people" (*Hey Who's the Kid* 17), an aspect somewhat forgotten due to the popularity of minstrels and other literary works that only provided a view of the black American as comical. Others believe its historical value to be

more important, citing that it should be housed in collections as a remembrance of racial children's literature.

In spite of its continuous print record and historical and literary value, much criticism is levelled against *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. While these concerns about setting, theme, and character names are discussed in most criticism of the book, most damning, and most relevant to this thesis, are the illustrations that reveal a history of their own. Since neither Bannerman nor Richards retained the copyright, the story often appeared with illustrations other than the author's own. Such illustrations are often pictures that are stereotypical in their portrayal of Blacks in jungle or plantation settings. Racist ideology against African Americans in the United States is witnessed through the illustrations of Little Black Sambo. When viewed today, such a historical record of illustrations serve to recall the painful history of African Americans in the United States.

2.11 Changing Illustrations /Changing Ideologies

The historical record of the adaptations and re-adaptations of *Little Black Sambo* begins with the original creator, Helen Bannerman. While Bannerman's intent in publishing *Little Black Sambo* is debated, her artistic style should also be evaluated. Bannerman showed little consistency as artist in her original illustration of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1898). Cartoonish in overall style, the six different views of Sambo offered by Bannerman reveal six different looking Sambos (Yoffee 7). Helen Bannerman herself claimed that her artistic

renderings were less than perfect asking that a family friend never be shown the painting Bannerman made of her so as not to cause offence. The books by Bannerman that were published after *The Story of Little Black Sambo* maintained her cartoonish style no matter the race of the main character.⁶ But when publishers chose their own illustrations for *Little Black Sambo*, the differences in ideology and perception of the book changed drastically.

In 1900, *Sambo's* British publisher Grant Richards sold the American copyright to Fredrick A. Stokes of New York and the first authorized version of *Little Black Sambo* was published in the United States in the same form as the Richards' version but with a different cover.⁷ Only five years later, other publishers began to make their own "unauthorized" versions of this book. In 1905, Reilly and Britton of Chicago included *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Image 2.7) in their Christmas Stocking Series, along with *The Night Before Christmas*, *Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty*, *A Child's Visit to the Zoo*, *Fairy Tales from Andersen*, and *Fairy Tales from Grimm*. This was the first of many versions with either doctored adaptations of Bannerman's illustrations or with

⁶ An exception was her last book, *Little White Squibba*, published in 1966 posthumous. This unfinished manuscript was found in Bannerman's papers after her death and was completed by her daughter Day. Its style of illustration is completely different, showing Bannerman's growth as an artist but also Day's influence on the final product.

⁷ Bannerman objected to the cover Grant Richards chose for the first publication in 1899. Ironically, the cover for the Stokes publication in the United States was changed to Bannerman's illustration of Sambo, even though it was a publication into which she had no input.

altogether new illustrations. (Image 2.7) From 1917 throughout 1950, versions of Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* were published almost every year.⁸

In the 1908 version of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Image 2.8) Reilly and Britton included new illustrations by John R. Neill, who would soon after be famous for his Oz illustrations. As noted earlier in this chapter, this book was paired with and illustrated in the same vein as "The Story of Topsy" from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whereas Bannerman was a less talented illustrator with a caricature style of illustration, Neill's illustrations (Image 2.8, also see 2.9 and 2.10) clearly show an influence of the minstrel tradition, dehumanizing Sambo. American publishers in general did not retain Bannerman's illustrations. A possible explanation for this might include the fact that Bannerman's illustrations contained aspects of the story that the publishers did not embrace. The setting of post-Bannerman versions of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* has always been debated. Bannerman loosely refers to "the Jungle" in her text but never identifies

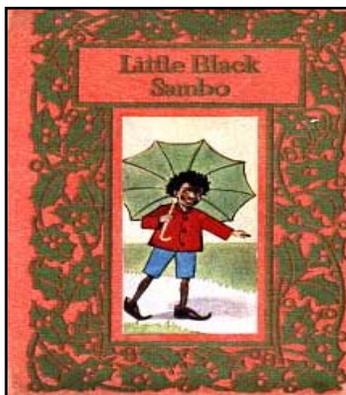


Image 2.7
Reilly and Britton, 1905

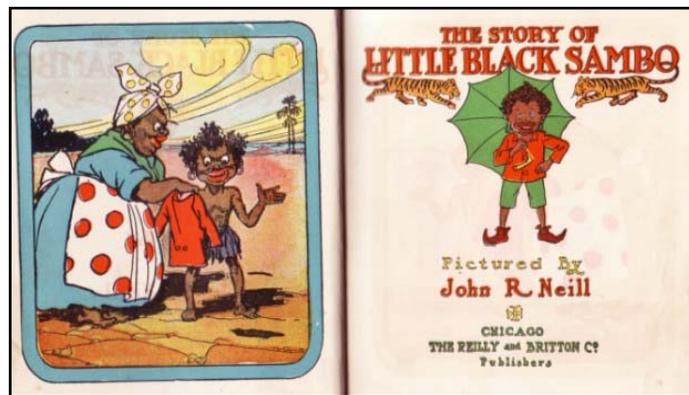


Image 2.8
Reilly and Britton, 1908

⁸ Not only were illustrations changed but the Sambo text was also changed. One author, Frank ver Beck, managed to create a new line of Sambo stories in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. He created such titles as *Little Black Sambo and the Baby Elephant*, *Sambo and the Tiger Kittens*, and *Sambo in the Bear's Den* (1930), *Little Black Sambo and the Monkey People* (1935).

a specific setting, understanding that Bannerman's fantasyland was her setting.

Bannerman's illustrations are also vague, giving very little background illustration. In Bannerman's mind, the land where Sambo lives exists only in the world of imagination. But in American illustrators minds – and thus reflected in their illustrations - Sambo has lived in Africa or in the southern United States. According to the illustrations that accompanied the written texts, Sambo did not live in India until the 1930s. These specific settings encumbered the story, implying political stances or ideologies unrelated to Bannerman's original fantasy.

Along with changes in setting, American publishers and illustrators also change the visual image of the characters. John Neill's 1908 version as published by The Reilly & Briton Co. (Image 2.9) is one of the earliest and most shocking publications of *Little Black Sambo*, which borrows Bannerman's original text. The grotesque features given to Sambo and his family emphasize the Social Darwinist view of a hierarchy of races representing the evolution of

humanity along the lines of Darwin's evolution of species. Sambo is illustrated as monkey. In comparing Neill's illustration of a monkey in the Oz series (Image 2.10) to his illustration of

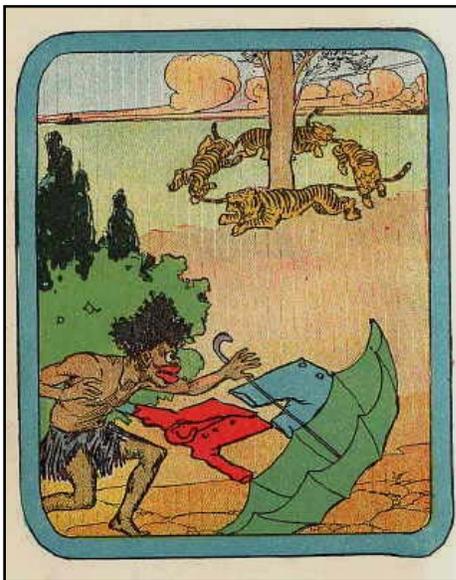


Image 2.9
Neill's Sambo (1908)



Image 2.10
Neill's illustration in *Ozma of Oz*

Sambo, his views, that blacks are the missing evolutionary link and are more closely related to monkeys rather than whites, are clearly evident.

Another famous American illustrator, John Gruelle, illustrated *All About Sambo* in 1917. Gruelle, who is best known for his books about *Raggedy Ann Stories* (1918), illustrated the jungle background and provided a “noble savage” in a loincloth. Gruelle included additional animals that, like Sambo, watched

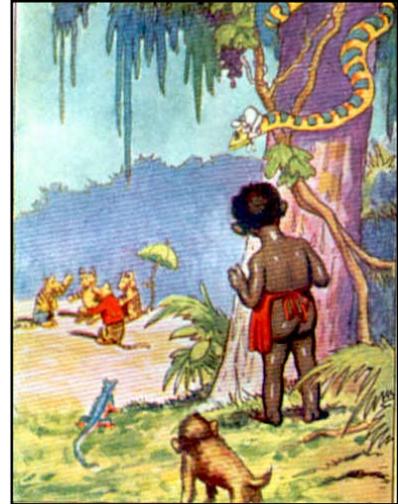


Image 2.11
Gruelle's *All About Sambo*

the tigers as they fought amongst themselves to decide who was the “grandest Tiger in the Jungle.” (Image 2.11) Sambo in his ‘natural’ unclothed state appears at peace with the other animals in the jungle, much like fairy tales in which the pure innocent child is at one with nature. The tigers seemingly depict civilisation,

since Guelle positioned them as sitting in a meeting with paws waving in humanistic form, deciding who is the grandest tiger in the jungle. When a civilized decision cannot be agreed upon, fighting commences in an attempt to settle the dispute through physical domination. The reader views Sambo as he watches from a safe distance, choosing not to be involved in such matters that are physically beyond him. The monkey shares this gaze, reinforcing the Sambo/monkey connection.

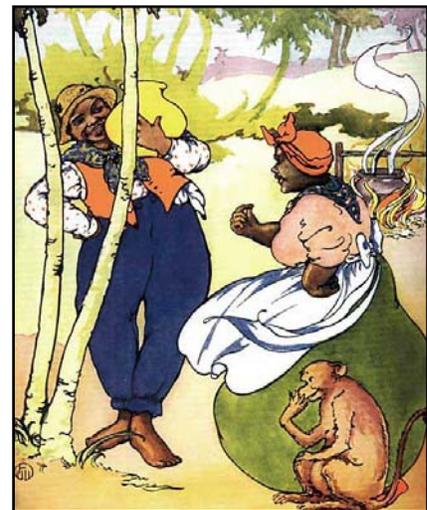


Image 2.12
Florence White Williams *Little Black Sambo* (1918). Note the laughing monkey

More confusion over setting was apparent in versions printed in 1918 and 1919. Florence White Williams' illustrations (Image 2.12) place Sambo in the



Image 2.13
M.A. Donohue & Co.

southern United States rather than Bannerman's make believe country while M. A. Donohue & Company's publication (author/illustrator not credited) in 1919 has Sambo's father dressed in traditional African clothing (Image 2.13) while Sambo is dressed as a plantation slave with his wide straw hat (Image 2.14). Sambo's father provides him

the clothing of slavery, a statement recalling that warring tribes in Africa sold fellow Africans who were prisoners of war to the slave traders. Other editions for the same era show Sambo first in a grass skirt and then in southern American clothing, constructing a clothed state as equal with civilisation while the natural state is that of the savage. The philosophical justification for slavery as a civilizing process that enhanced the African race is reinforced.



Image 2.14
M.A. Donohue & Co.

It was during this time that race riots were occurring in the larger cities of the United States. The summer of 1919 was known as the "Red Summer" due to the number of deaths in race riots. Richard Wormser writes, "The Chicago riot was part of a national racial frenzy of clashes, massacres, and lynchings throughout the North and the South. All of the incidents were initiated by whites" (The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow). While hundreds of citizens were injured or killed

in the summer of 1919, US illustrators were depicting African Americans as uncivilised savages.

Throughout publications in the 1920s, clothing continued to be utilised as a symbol of civilisation. Sambo was illustrated as a savage native who became civilised through ‘dressing right’ – which meant dressing white. The myths and stereotypes, which depict African Americans as savage, native, and only civilised through their contact with the white population, are reinforced for a new generation. Sambo’s fear is evident as he runs from the jungle partially naked, disempowering Bannerman’s original strong courageous character. Sambo’s clothed/naked/clothed circumstances are emphasised over the plot in which Sambo shows his intelligence by defeating the tigers (Image 2.15).

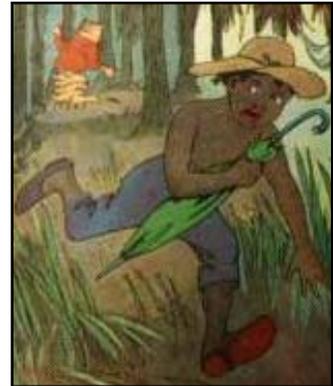
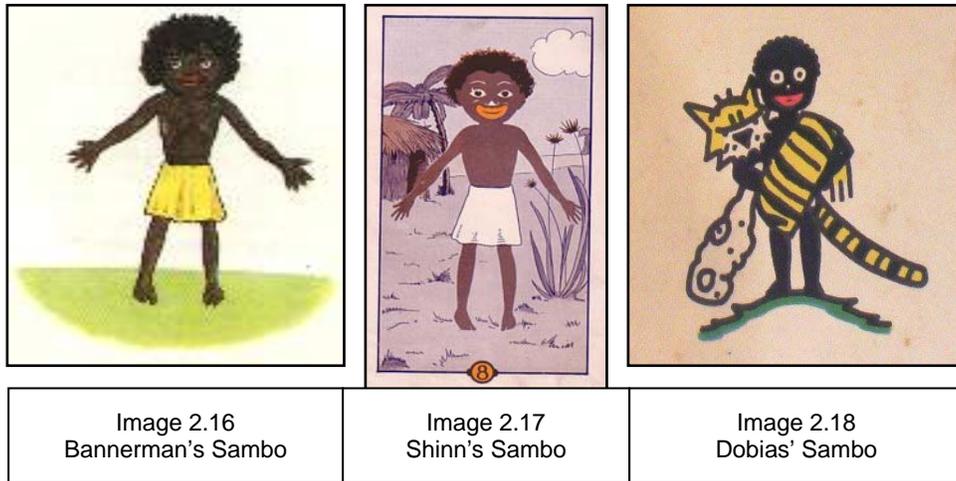


Image 2.15
M.A. Donohue & Co.

The minstrel tradition reappeared in such publications as Albert Whitman & Co., 1926 publication, illustrated by Cobb X. Shinn. This edition, which was also republished in 1935, uses Bannerman’s “poses” or positioning of character (see images 2.16 and 2.17) but paints them in the minstrel tradition, blackface with large eyes and mouth. Sambo is once again constructed in this illustration as a savage native of Africa. In Macmillian’s publication in 1927, illustrator Frank Dobias completes the savage Sambo image providing him with a club and tiger skin outfit (Image 2.18). In comparing Bannerman’s original illustration with those done in the 1920s, Bannerman’s illustrations at the time of Sambo’s first publications seem coarse. However, compared to these later images,

Bannerman's illustrations are far less culpable of racist intent than the minstrel images which were still in existence in the 1920s.



In more ways than one, colour was an issue in the publication of the Sambo books. Almost all of the Sambo books were printed in full colour, including Bannerman's original. However, in the books of limited colour (basic three tones) or partial colour, in which some pictures were in black and white, it is interesting also to note the difference in how Sambo is illustrated. Sambo in

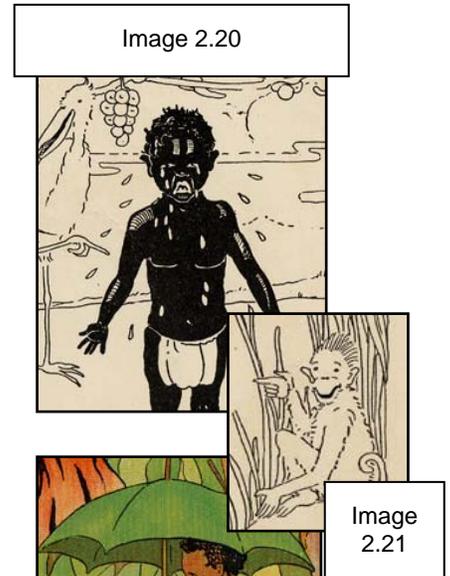


Image 2.19

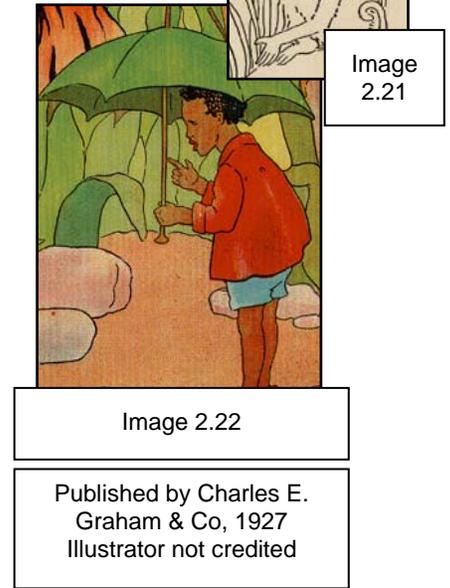
black and white becomes almost demon like (Image 2.19), with the white reflection on his head taking on the appearance of horns (Image 2.20). Illustrators seemed to struggle with how to realistically portray someone with dark skin. While other media

allowed illustrators to work in shades, black and white illustrators seemed to struggle with the concept of using lighter greys to take the place of browns in portraying the hero. Sambo was and only could ever be all black (Image 2.20).

To further reinforce evolutionary ideas of the relationship between Africans (no matter their location) and apes, a monkey began to appear as an additional character. Charles E. Graham & Company's version included a monkey in the bottom right hand corner who is laughing and pointing at Sambo as he cries, an open invitation for the reader to also laugh at Sambo. (Image 2.21)



The “coloured” Sambo in the very same book has a very different look. (Image 2.22) In illustrating the same character in such different ways, the illustrator creates ambiguity which the reader is to feel for Sambo. This ambiguity was faced by African Americans in reality as well as viewed in literature. Moreover, these depictions reinforced the view that Sambo's blackness made him a laughable character, unheroic, and animalistic.



While publishers contrasted the views of Sambo in colour and in black and white, school readers which included *Little Black Sambo* also showed the differences in races through illustration. Sambo's appearance is wild, uncivilized, and raw, while the white children are illustrated realistically in the same book, resulting in a construction of African American childhood as something different and foreign to white childhood (see Appendix 2.2).

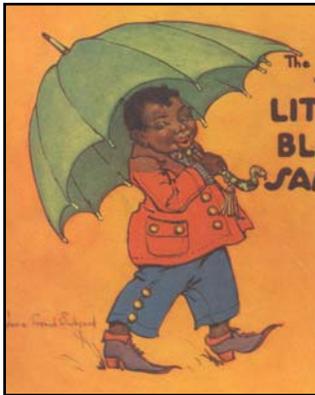


Image 2.23
Sam. Gabriel & Sons

Some illustrators attempted to make Sambo into a book for very young readers, offering a romanticized black character that white readers could safely embrace due to his cuteness, making him a pet instead of a person.

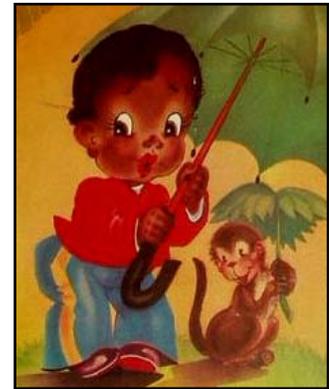


Image 2.24
Published by Grinnell
Illustrations by Martha
Castagnoli

This is especially evident in Samuel Gabriel Sons publication in 1921 in which Sambo is closer to an elf in appearance (Image 2.23). Sambo with his monkey sidekick appears even in these readers for the youngest of children, supporting stereotypes as previously noted (Image 2.24). This monkey mimics Sambo's actions, just as it was thought that the African American man needed to mimic the humanity of the white man.

However, in 1931 the representations of Sambo began to transform. Although Yuill notes that the criticism against Bannerman's book did not begin till the 1940s, publishers were already responding to movements in the market. Fern Bisel Peat illustrated *Little Black Sambo* reflecting an Indian culture. Sambo has earrings and a slant to his eyes previously unseen, reflecting an Asian if not Indian influence (Image 2.25 see below). This morphing of Sambo into an Indian location continues today and reflects the continuing confusion over Bannerman's setting, disregarding her fantasy land setting for the country she lived in at the time of writing, India. These new illustrations show sensitivity towards culture not

seen in earlier publications. However, it is an Indian culture that is presented, not an African/African American culture.

That is not to say that suddenly white America had seen the error of its ways and would no longer tolerate the degrading images previously printed in connection with the *Little Black Sambo* story. In 1931, McLoughlin Brothers published Hildegard Luprian's illustrations that identify Sambo as a pickaninny and again the influence of the minstrel tradition is apparent. (Image 2.26)

Fern Bisel Peat again illustrated Sambo in 1932 in the Calico Classic series. (Image 2.27) While the illustration style was set within the context of the series, i.e. the idea of the series was to illustrate them as cloth dolls, Sambo is reminiscent of the Scarecrow from John R. Neill's *Wizard of Oz* illustrations. Comparing the three images below, the confusion in presentation is plain to see. Sambo is Asian/Indian, minstrel pickaninny, and a scarecrow rag doll. None of these illustrations represent Sambo in a positive light. Peat's Asian/Indian Sambo is erotically othered in an Eastern setting and in body positioning.

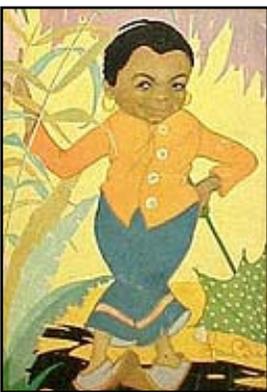


Image 2.25
Peat's Sambo 1



Image 2.26
Luprian's Sambo



Image 2.27
Peat's Sambo 2

Luprian's illustrations offer the audience an object to laugh at and mock since the goal is to laugh at Sambo's fear. Peat's cloth doll suggests memories of the Scarecrow from

The Wizard of Oz who is not only weak, he is also searching for a brain. All three illustrations invite the gaze of the audience, objectifying Sambo as black, different

than white and therefore, other.

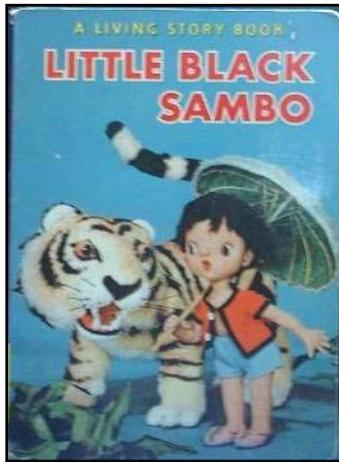


Image 2.28
A Living Story Book, 1967

Since the 1930s, Sambo has had a confused ethnic background. Illustrators and publishers have construct him as Indian while others attempted to return Sambo to his black roots, although Sambo's facial features make him look like a white child with a darker complexion. Once the Indian-ness (and otherness) of Sambo had become established, *Little Black Sambo* became a "safe" book to publish. Even though he was still called Little Black Sambo, Sambo

became white in 1967 for a claymation book with his parents very Indian in their style of dress. (Image 2.28) And as early as 1949, Sambo completely lost his blackness in various versions of *Little Brave Sambo*. His Indian-ness and his blackness are both erased as Sambo became a Native American Indian/white child in book and record in 1949, 1950, c 1960, and 1971. (Image 2.29)

The debates about Sambo are refreshed with every new publication of *Little Black Sambo*. Three new versions of Sambo have received critical acclaim while simultaneously being condemned by others. Fred Marcellino's *The Story of Little Babaji*

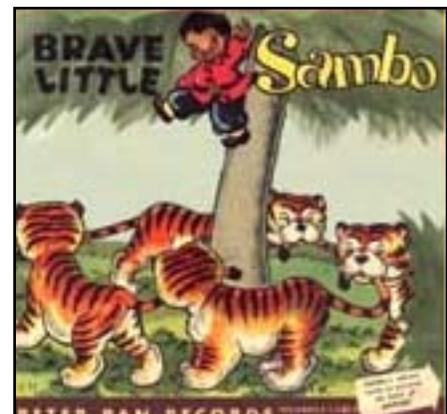


Image 2.29
James & Jonathan Company,
Peter Pan Records, 1950

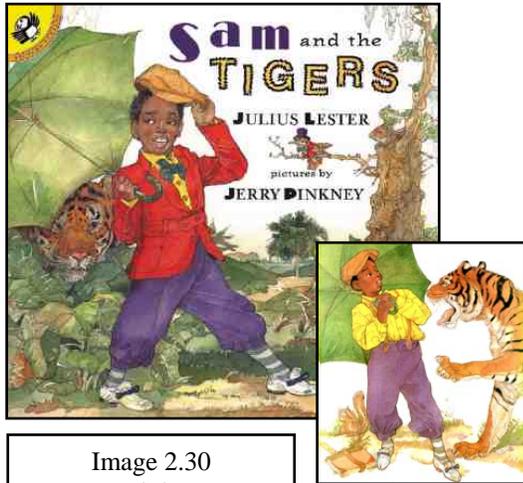


Image 2.30
Sam and the Tigers
Julius Lester and Jerry
Pinkney

shows his interpretation of Bannerman's work in the Indian theme. Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney, both of African American descent, place the story in a fantasyland, just as Bannerman wanted, in their rewritten version called *Sam and the Tigers* (1996) (Image 2.30). Lester has been vocal about his mixed feelings about Bannerman's original work. Louise Kennedy, in her article for The Boston

Globe entitled "New Storybook Reopen Old Wounds," quotes Lester, "Very unconsciously, with no malice aforethought, Bannerman was reflecting her times. And the fact that she was hurting black people never entered her mind. Which doesn't let her off the hook." The article continues, "Lester acknowledges the power of Bannerman's story, in which a boy, pursued by tigers, appeases them with his fine new clothes; he watches as the angry tigers spin into butter, which his mother uses for pancakes. "This is a wonderful story,' Lester says, but one that has caused a lot of pain." Continuing to explain his feelings about Bannerman, Lester commented:

We, blacks and whites, can acknowledge that the names of the characters and Bannerman's illustrations demean blacks. This is not because Bannerman was a rabid racist but because of the times in which the book was published and subsequent historical associations. Acknowledging the

racism in *Little Black Sambo* does not mean one must deny one's love for the book. (Kennedy)

Christopher Bing is one author who unashamedly loves *Little Black Sambo*. His version published in 2001 uses Bannerman's original text, a choice that has brought *Little Black Sambo* into debate. For Bing, this project is an attempt to rehabilitate a misunderstood artefact. "I would like to dispel the cloud around it," he says. "I don't ever want a black child to pick up the book and look at the images and feel insulted . . . I want a child to feel just the wonder I did as a child" (Kennedy) For Christopher Bing, the text he chose to illustrate is "the perfect story." "It's got everything," Bing says. "An exotic hero, an exotic location. It's got danger — the tigers — and then he outwits them. And for a kid in America, the best thing of all: It had pancakes coming out the ears" (ibid). This story also has, as Bing acknowledges, a deeply troubled history that starts right at the title. Bing's illustrations (Images 2.31 and Images 2.32) are very different to the images seen in Bannerman's original version or in the grotesque examples from the early twentieth century. His attempt to realistically portray a fantasyland is commendable but some critics are still unable to put Sambo's past in the past.

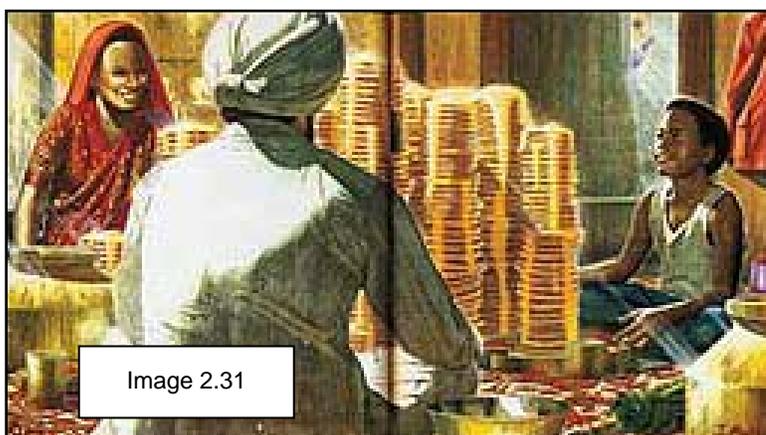


Image 2.31



Image 2.32
Bing's Sambo

A vivid example of Sambo's illustrated and turbulent history is contained in three versions of the same reader, *My Book House*. In the 1937 edition, the story titled *Little Black Sambo* retains Bannerman's original text but her illustrations are replaced with doctored, minstrel-influenced illustrations. In the 1965 version, the original text remains with an added subtitle *A Tale of India*. The illustrations reflect the title and display an Indian setting with all characters in Indian style clothing including Black Jumbo in a turban. By the 1971 version, the illustrations remain the same but the story is no longer *Little Black Sambo*. It is now titled *Rama and the Tigers – A Tale of India*. Sambo's positive reception in 1899 with negative criticism starting in the early 1900s, and shifting identity from the 1930s onward reflect an unsettled American approach to racial difference in the United States.

It is this troubling history of Sambo's past that is extended into other children's books in the 1930s. From 1930 through 1939, *Little Black Sambo* was published nineteen times, one edition almost every six months over a ten-year span. The changes through illustration reflect an interesting ideological evolution of acceptance of African Americans into mainstream dominant, but no longer solely white, society. Through Sambo's publication history in the United States, one can trace the shifting constructions of African American childhood through illustration⁹, just as Stowe's work provided stereotypes through characterization and Harris' work offered stereotypes through dialect (See Chapter Four). As authors and illustrators faced the 1930s, existing constructs could be either

⁹ See accompanying CD-Rom for more illustrations from a number of different publications of *Little Black Sambo* from 1899-2006.

maintained and defended or changed and celebrated. The literary foundations were set for constructing and re-constructing African American childhood in the 1930s.

Chapter Three

Constructing African American Childhood in the 1930s

"The true test of the progress of a people is to be found in their literature."
- Daniel Alexander Payne Murray

3.1 Introduction

The books discussed in the previous chapter, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harris' *Uncle Remus Tales*, and the American illustrations of Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, prepared literary foundations for constructing African American childhood. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how authors during the 1930s used text and illustration to represent opposing constructs of African American childhood. During the 1930s, literary uses of stereotype through text, dialect, and illustration were utilised subversively to build new constructs of African American childhood. Although the literature produced in the 1930s offered interpretations that fall in line with ideologies produced and espoused by the white majority culture, some authors offered resistance to those dominant ideologies. Authors who defined African American childhood through opposition to white American childhood subversively provided African American children with a cultural identity; while remaining invisible and silenced in the work of some authors, African American childhood began to achieve limited visibility and some degree of voice through the work of progressive authors as will be demonstrated in this following chapter.

The embracement of and resistance to positive constructs of African American childhood is seen in both the text of the book as well as in illustration. Literary criticism has primarily concerned itself with textual

analysis -‘word’- and only recently has illustration -‘picture’- engaged critics with the same intensity. Analysis of text has been a long-standing tradition within literary circles, but comparatively recent critics have begun to understand the importance of visual representation offered through illustration as society has shifted from a text-based culture to a visually dependent culture. Ross Woodrow notes:

Images have become the primary form of signification today. This recent pictorial turn in academic circles has moved visual representation to a more central position and revitalised the long running debate between the linguistic and the pictorial. Because of this, the relationship between words and pictures, which has always been of interest to artists and theorists, has become a key issue. (“Fine Art Theory”).

The shift from exclusive examination of text to the inclusion of the analysis of the visual has been important in the development of criticism about picture books and is essential to this study since the eight books discussed in this chapter are all picture books.

3.2 The Picture Book

The picture book, by its very format, offers a dual narrative through text and illustration. Both text and illustration are important elements of narrative(s) found in picture books since they can either work together to present a single united construct or against each other offering conflicting constructs. Regardless of whether the text and the visual are created by the same person or by different sources, the message communicated through word and picture may not always offer the same construct to the reader.

The metalanguage used to discuss picture books is problematic. The spelling of 'picture book' is seen in three different ways, each spelling signalling the critics' ideological stance. Perry Nodelman in *Words About Pictures* (1988) uses the two word version: *picture book*. Editor Peter Hunt's *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (1995) employs the hyphen: *picture-book*. In *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (2001) Victor Watson prefers the compound version: *picturebook*. In this thesis, I will be applying Nodelman's spelling of *picture book*. By placing a space between picture and book, I am emphasising the individuality of the parts while acknowledging that a 'picture book' is also a combination of text and illustration. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to words in the picture book as *text*, *written text*, or *printed text*. The pictures will be referred to as *visual images*, *pictures*, or *illustrations*. The creator of the text is the *author* or *writer* and the creator of the pictures will be the *illustrator* or the *artist*. I will also use David Lewis' term of *picture book maker* when the author and illustrator are one and the same person.

An identity and an image co-exist within a picture book, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in opposition. For the purposes of this study, I classify *literary identity* as a perspective constructed through textual means, tying identity to the textualisation of description. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) provides an example of literary identity. The reader is informed through the text that Harry has a lightning bolt scar on his forehead however the reader is not provided with an exact location of where this bolt appears on Harry's forehead. In looking at various illustrators' interpretations, Harry's scar moves from the right side of his forehead in the

American version, to the middle of his forehead in the British version. Rowling wrote a literary identity for Harry so that readers understand that a scar marks Harry. The exact location of the scar of Harry's forehead does not factor into the narrative. It is only important that the scar is there to identify Harry as "the Boy who Lived."

I define *visual image* as a construct built through visual means. For example, in Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* (1963), the character Max is described through limited vocabulary. The reader is told that Max wears a wolf suit and makes mischief. The reader is provided with details about Max and the mischief he makes only through viewing the illustrations. While the text presents a basic story line, the illustrations supply a visual image missing in the printed text.

The relationship between literary identity and visual image is open to various interpretations allowing subversive readings. Both written text and illustration are understood in the action of reading. However, through the discontinuity of meaning between identity/text and image/illustration, these pairings can suggest various constructions of African American childhood and ideologies within the same book. By analysing text and illustration as two specific yet separate elements, stereotypical constructs of African American childhood are juxtaposed with subversive constructs of African American childhood.

Such constructs represent ideological perspectives to the reader, as noted in Chapter One. Illustrations present ideology in the same ways as text. The reader understands illustrations in both connotative and denotative ways

and also within the political context in which the text was produced. Woodrow points out:

...it is also important not to overlook the ideological function of images.

In other words, any emphasis on the study of how pictures work in perceptual and cognitive terms must be balanced by a study of the relationship between social/political power and the power of images.

(ibid)

Constructs of African American childhood are determined by analysing relationships between social/political power and the power of images. I am identifying constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s by investigating literary identity constructed through text and analysing visual images constructed through illustration. Such constructs shape various identities for the characters, ultimately determining subjectivity for the reader as well as the character constructed.

3.3 From Identity to Subjectivity in text

Defining an identity or identities is a complicated task. Identification comes through various external and internal sources. African Americans (as well as other minorities) are often defined as 'other' by the dominant society in which they live. When the identity offered by the minority does not match with the identity offered by the majority, the subject must find ways to negotiate such differences. In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) W. E. B. Dubois articulated in that there is a duality within the African American that makes identity a complex concept. The African American is both 'African' and 'American.' This African American duality is often in conflict with itself, since

white Northern European American identity has long denied the African American his/her American identity. As Dubois points out:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sightedness in this American world, - 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, the double-consciousness, this sense of always 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. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder...(22).

Dubois' double-consciousness includes the concept of looking at one's self through the eyes of others. Dubois' is noting the subjectivity of the African American. *Subjectivity* is often used interchangeably with the term *identity*; however, the term *subjectivity* is the "social and personal being that exists in negotiation with broad cultural definitions and our own ideals" (Hall 134) while identity is "a flat, one-dimensional concept" (Hall 134). Dubois' "two-ness" is a part of a number of different identities. Subjectivity is the combination of identities, which include identities formed through race, class, gender, etc. The construction of those different identities includes authors' various constructs and also constructs of selfhood, i.e. what one thinks of one's self.

Society, that is the group surrounding the individual, also determines subjectivity since location inside and outside that group helps determine the individual's view of self. In "The Shifting Status of African Americans in the

American Collective Identity” (1998), Rebecca Kook notes that issues of identity are explained through either this inclusion or the exclusion of groups of people. Kook claims, “traditional” studies of identity “portray an identity and citizenship entrenched in ideas and concepts” whereas newer studies “approach citizenship through a prism of membership, thus shifting the discourse from ideology and concepts to issues of inclusion and exclusion” (154). Inclusion and exclusion are important considerations in viewing the constructs offered in African American children’s literature from the 1930s. Justifying Kook’s views, Sandra Carlton Alexander states that “...issues of self-actualization, social legitimation, *inclusion*, and *exclusion* are at the literal or symbolic core of some significant African American works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (379, emphasis mine). The same socio-political aspects affected constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s. In the vacuum created by exclusions of African Americans from white society, African American society developed separately. The sub-society of African American childhood has not had that same independence since its development has always been controlled by adulthood, white and black. African American childhood has had an identity projected by adults in both the white community and the African American community.

Projected identity is controlled or denied subjectivity, affecting the self-view of the individual. When self-identity is denied, passively or aggressively, selfhood radically differs. “Our identity,” writes Charles Taylor,

is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people of society around them mirror

back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (249)

Carolyn Gerald reinforces Taylor's view when she states:

...man projects his cultural and racial images upon the universe and he derives a sense of personal worth from the reflection he sees gazing back at him. For he defines himself and the world in terms of how others like him. He discovers his identity within a group. (qtd. in Sims 4)

Subjectivity of the individual is not just based in self-identity. Subjectivity is also defined within the identity of a group. Society is constructed through groupings and the identities of childhoods are found within the multiple layers of society. African American childhood's selfhood is a by-product of society constructed by adulthood. Adult formed literary constructs mould constructs of childhood, constructing the prototype of who the child will be, as well as what the child was and is through literature. (See Aries, 1960 and Rose, 1984).

The difficulty in determining identity in literature for the African American is as complex as determining identity in reality. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) and *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Radical Self"* (1987), African American critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. adapts Dubois's idea of "two-ness," applying it to literature and renaming the concept as "double-voicedness" – African American literature, like the African American him/herself, draws upon two voices and cultures, the white and the black. As Ralph Ellison pointed out in 1958, white Americans were "so absurdly self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" (Fishkin).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin expands Ellison's statement in her book *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1993). The interrelatedness between blackness and whiteness has been established through writers such as Ellison, Fishkin, Toni Morrison, and linguists who look at the influence of African Americans on language.

For the African American child, society is further complicated since as an African American, they are outside of the majority culture and as a child, they are outside of adult culture. Likewise, in African American children's literature there is a "two-ness" or "double-voicedness", which is complicated further by the power position of the adult writing for the child. Adults are the gatekeepers of childhood, determining what is published and produced for the intended child audience. Since there are no universal concepts about childhood, constructs as perceived and written by authors depend on various views of history, culture and society. Defining literary constructs involves defining adult authorial views presented to the child populace as a means to control childhood desires and possibilities. Literary constructs identify the child, silencing them by making the child reader seemingly unable to construct their own identity.

Paradoxically, in defining childhood, the adult author is also defining adulthood. Although one could argue that there is now a third level of definition between adult and child – that of the adolescent - words such as childlike, childish, maturity, etc., all refer to the defining of childhood as something in opposition to adulthood. Childlike is not adultlike. Childish, when applied to an adolescent or an adult, means not being adult. Maturity is not being childish or childlike or being beyond childhood. This defining

through negation is symbolic of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of binary opposites. Pairs such as adult/child and white/black are defined by what they are not and by which group has the power. For most of modern history, the white adult has held the power. In the 1930s in America, the white male majority held power however, areas of resistance were beginning to establish themselves in the system. In 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors was passed, mainly due to pressure exerted by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Women also won the right to vote in 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. The ratification of these two constitutional amendments signalled a shifting of power in American society. Women united together in support of just causes with a result of increased of political power. In a time when modernity was established and minority groups were finding ways to be heard in the majority, the African American community was struggling to decide who they were and just what their voice should say.

As discussed in Chapter One, great divisions existed in the African American community. The only shared identity they had with one another had its roots in the shared history of slavery and the stereotypical portrayals in literature and film. These stereotypes constructed an African American image, although it was, in Taylor's words, "a misrecognition." Various scholars throughout the last century have defined stereotypes of the African American character in literature. As discussed in Chapter Two, Sterling Brown's essay in the "Journal of Negro Education", published in 1933 and especially insightful as it pertains to the time period of this study, states that

“[t]he Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life. The majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character” (180). He identified the following stereotypes as being “important enough for separate classification although overlappings *do occur*” (author’s italics): The Contented Slave, the Wretched Freedman, The Comic Negro, The Brute Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, The Local Color Negro and, The Exotic Primitive. Brown further clarifies that:

all of these stereotypes are marked either by exaggeration or omission; that they all agree in stressing the Negro divergence from the Anglo-Saxon norm to the flattery of the latter; they could all be used, as they probably are, as justification of racial proscription; they all illustrate dangerous specious generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view – which is itself generally depicted by the desire to perpetuate a stereotype. (180)

Brown’s essay convincingly shows how white writers and white critics upheld the institution of slavery and after the Civil War, oppressed African Americans through Jim Crow laws, making the search for identity for the individual African American and the African American society with American society almost impossible. Huggins notes,

The challenge to find black identity within the American cultural context was made more difficult because the stereotype which defined Negroes for most Americans was the obverse of the Protestant Ethic, that convenient measure of deserving character. Laziness, slovenliness, and excessive sensual appetite deserved no reward except poverty and dishonor. (142)

The culturally conscious literature for the African American in the 1930s is flawed since the culture displayed centres on a white world in which the black subject is an 'other' attempting to become, or at least successfully mimic, whiteness.

Since this study privileges children's literature in searching for the constructs of African American childhood, children's literature becomes the vehicle for identity for the African American child through text and illustration. The larger context of the search for identity for African Americans in general is important when considering a sub-section of that society – the child.

3.4 Identity through text

The majority of examples constructing African American childhood offer the same stereotypes seen in literature for adult readers. In Lucy Cobb and Mary Hicks' *Animal Tales from the Old North State* (1938), the textual descriptions of race are poignantly prejudiced, against both African Americans and children. The inside front flap of the books states:

The authors are fully aware that the stories are somewhat similar to the famous Uncle Remus stories. This is so because Joel Chandler Harris drew his material from the same sources, the old darkies of the South. These stories are filled with the Negro soul, are human in appeal and utterly charming. They have a quality of adult appeal as well as child appeal that is almost as remarkable as A. A. Milne. (inside front flap)

Condescending phrases such as "darkies of the South" and "Negro soul" immediately mark the African American otherness and dehumanize African

Americans with the comment that these tales are “human in appeal,” as if there existed little humanity within the African American culture. A social difference between the groups is noted within the comment that these tales appeal to adults as well as children. The patronizing tone of voice that introduces the book to the reader is continued throughout the text.

The book contains seven chapters, each containing stories told by a “Negro” to white children. Aunt Tiny Shaw is the first such story teller and is described as “a little woman” having “a face, like a brown, dried hickory nut” and “birdlike movements...But no matter how busy her hands were she could keep her tongue busy too, and tell the children stories of old times and of the animals” (13). The textual description constructs Aunt Shaw as being a part of nature, however she is constructed as a negative aspect of nature.

The description of the children immediately following offers a construct which depicts white childhood as the sunlight that causes nature to bloom.

As [Aunt Tiny Shaw] looked up this bright afternoon, she saw three of the children, Martha, Louise and Billy, coming to her door along the flower bordered, sandy path. Touch-me-nots burst open in the sunshine, and the red princess feather, bare of leaves, flamed against the green of the other plants.

As he walked along Billy tried his fingers lightly against the touch-me-nots to see if they would really pop open, but the two little girls hurried to get their places, one on each side of the little Negro woman. Billy, getting behind, was forced to sit on the step below her, but now and then as he leaned against her, he put his elbows into her lap, and intently watched her as she talked to them.

“Tell us about Brer Bear’s grapevine,” said Billy. (13-14)

The children are not described physically, yet the reader is given a striking picture of them through the text. Although it is Aunt Tiny Shaw’s path they are walking on, surrounded by the flowers that Aunt Tiny Shaw planted, it is the children who are walking through them as they “burst open” in the sunlight, almost as if the children are causing the flowers to bloom. Nature seems to be responding to the arrival of the children.

However, there is resistance written into this passage as well. Firstly, the names of the flowers are of interest. These are Aunt Tiny’s flowers. We are reminded again that she is a “little Negro woman” but her flowers are “touch-me-nots,” a cry for independence and resistance to the white male’s abuse of African American females. The red princess feather is feminine in name but masculine in description with its flaming redness and lack of leaves; such plants are powerful in contrast to the surrounding plants, like Aunt Tiny herself in comparison with the children. Yet the children control the scene. Regardless of the chores Aunt Tiny might need to complete, she is commanded by Billy to tell the story. Billy might be only a young boy but he is a white young boy. It is Billy who has claimed the power by touching all of the touch-me-nots. It is Billy who sits in front of Aunt Tiny, positioned in such a way as to block her path. Again, it is Billy who is able to “lean against her” and “put his elbows in her lap” and “intently watched as she spoke to them.” Finally, it is Billy who voices the command for the story. His sisters remain silent. White masculine childhood is clearly in a position of power over black adult womanhood.

Cindy Garrison and Pinky Harem are two other African American storytellers in Lucy Cobb and Mary Hicks' *Animal Tales from the Old North State* (1938). Cindy Garrison is a washerwoman and Pinky Harem picks cotton. Cobb and Hicks explain that Cindy "in her 'store-bought' clothes" is a "big ginger-colored Negro" who:

dresses with a good deal of taste, but at home, wearing a blue cotton frock and with her head tied up either in a white towel or in a colored bandanna handkerchief, she is most appealing. Her round brown face is like a full moon, and when she smiles she shows very white teeth.

(55)

Pinky Harem is physically deformed, but her deformity does not affect her in anyway. She is not saved from labouring in the fields. Cobb and Hicks use her deformity as a quality that makes Pinky a better cotton picker.

Pinky Harem is little and hunchbacked, but in spite of this handicap few other darkies can beat her picking cotton. It is seldom that she picks fewer than 225 pounds a day...As fast as she picks, so fast runs her tongue, and both the white and the colored children like to get rows near her so they will not miss one word of her interesting stories. (75-

76)

Both of these women are held in high regard for their story telling abilities and the entertainment they provide. Throughout most of the book, it is Billy and his two sisters, the privileged white children, who are the main beneficiaries of the stories. However, in the chapter containing Pinky Harem stories, Pinky tells her stories in the fields as she picks cotton. Billy and his sisters would not be privy to Pinky's stories. The white children listening to Pinky's stories

are those children whose fathers were sharecroppers or migrant workers. Pinky's audience members are constructed as lower class citizens as compared with Billy, Martha and Louise, who are the main characters of the book.

It may seem that African American childhood is not being constructed since these stories do not include black children, with the passing exception of those working children who listen to Pinky Harem's tales. However, the very absence of details about African American childhood in stories intended for children and with adult African American storytellers as centre stage is highly indicative of the location of childhood for African American children. It is an invisible location, unworthy of notice and important only when it touches white childhood.

When authors in the 1930s did choose to directly speak of African American childhood, textual constructions tended to follow the same stereotypes offered about adult African Americans at the time and as listed by Brown. The African American child as fool was commonplace as seen in *Pinky Marie* (1939) by Linda Graham, *Frawg* (1930) and *Bochy's Wings* (1931) both by Annie Vaughan Weaver.

Linda Graham's textual descriptions construct the entire family as foolish and childlike. Their names are intended to be humorous and follow in the tradition of naming slaves after famous people. Although Pinky Marie's family are not slaves, her father's name is "Mr. Washington Jefferson Jackson" and Pinky Marie's full name is "Pinky Marie Washington Jefferson Jackson." Somewhat surprisingly, Pinky Marie's father is given the title "Mr."

This title of respect is ridiculed since the horse that pulls the wagon is given the same honour; Graham calls him “Mr. Giddap” (n.pag.)

Graham quickly establishes the tone of the story in the first two opening pages of this picture book, defining the characters through name and description. The use of capital letters to emphasise points and exclamation marks encourage the reader to laugh at the foolishness of this family. Graham writes:

Mr. Washington Jefferson Jackson was black. As black – as black – as black as INK. Mrs. Washington Jefferson Jackson was black, too. As black – as black – as black as NIGHT. And Mr. and Mrs. Washington Jefferson Jackson had a little girl. Her name was Pinky Marie Washington Jefferson Jackson. Oh! Oh! Oh! What a big, big name for such a round roly-poly little girl. But *she* wasn’t black. Oh, no! *She* was brown. As brown – as brown – as brown as a chocolate candy bar. And she looked good enough to eat. (n.pag.)

The comparison of human skin colour to ink is reminiscent of Heinrich Hoffman’s “The Story of the Inky Boys” in *Struwwelpeter* (1844). However, the comments noted about Pinky Marie’s skin being like a chocolate bar and good enough to eat dehumanizes her as a child, making her a commodity. While her mother is only mentioned and pictured on the second page, Graham’s short description of her is highly pertinent to the ending of the story. Graham says, “And Mrs. Washington Jefferson Jackson had – well, you couldn’t tell what kind of hair she had. Maybe no hair at all, for she always wore a big red-and-white hanky tied around her head” (n. pag.). Pinky Marie goes off with her father to town. While waiting for her father to finish a visit before they

reach town, the birds pluck the ribbons from her hair as she sleeps on the wagon. When she awakes, Pinky and her father look for the ribbons. Graham notes, “But they never found a single string, and they never knew that seven father birds had taken them for a bit of something to brighten up their seven nests” (n.pag.). The story ends with Pinky Marie eating seven different colour lollipops, replacing her seven different coloured ribbons that “the father birds” have plucked from her hair to make their nests. Again, as was noted with Billy’s white male actions in touching the touch-me-nots in Aunt Tiny’s flower garden, Pinky Marie becomes the victim of masculinity, first by the action of the birds and then by her father. When Pinky Marie’s father returns, he covers the evidence of the crime with his maleness - his own personal hanky - and proceeds as if nothing has happened. Graham writes:



Image 3.1
Pinky Marie in the
beginning

So Mr. Washington Jefferson Jackson said, “Never you mind, honey chile. I’ll fix you up so we can go to town.”

Then he pulled out his big red-and-blue-and-green hanky and tied it around Pinky Marie’s scumbled-scrambled, kinky, woolly head just like Mrs. Washington Jefferson Jackson tied hers. And the he said, “There you is, honey. You looks fine again.”

And he laughed; and even Mr. Giddap laughed, as he went trot, trot, trotting off to town. (n.pag.)

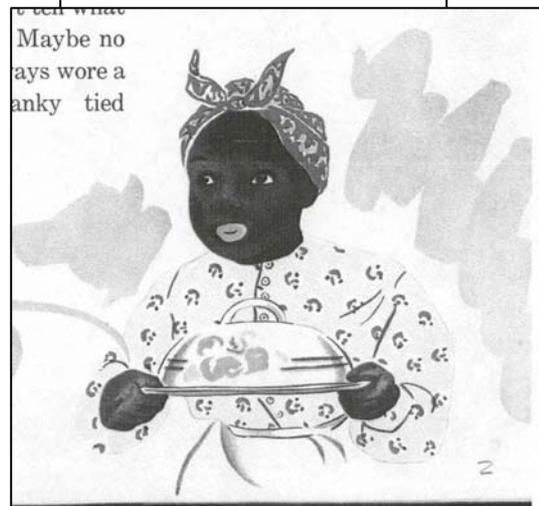
Pinky Marie is not laughing. Even when her father buys her seven lollipops to replace her seven ribbons, according to the illustration, she still is not laughing or even smiling. The final picture of Pinky Marie compared to the only illustration of her mother is remarkably similar. Pinky Marie, taken on a

journey and momentarily abandoned by her father-protector, is de-ribboned – deflowered – by males unknown to her. These male father birds come in secret and steal something personal from Pinky Marie, so that when she awakes, she is changed. Pinky Marie the child is no more. The raping of Pinky Marie’s childhood results in her loss of innocence and she has become something new and old at the same time - an adult. Pinky Marie has become her mother, a symbol of the universal African American female. Even in illustration, Pinky Marie becomes the child version of her mother (Image 3.2).

Pinky Marie is speechless throughout the picture book. She sleeps through the crime committed against her. She has no objection to her father ‘fixing’ her. She is held responsible for her passivity for it is through such passiveness that the male birds and her father impose their will. The construct of the silent submissive African American female protagonists is clearly stated and rewarded in the end with phallic lollipops.



Image 3.2
Pinky Marie and the lollipops as compared to her mother (below)



The construct of the African American male child is not as passive. In Annie Vaughan Weaver’s *Frawg* and *Boochy’s Wings*, the African American male child is constructed as foolish, yet successful. In the end, the male protagonists achieve what they intended to do; they become a wise fool. It

follows that because the fool is wise, the fool differs from the stereotype in the pickaninny, who is constructed as an entertainer. Both *Frawg* and *Boochy Wings* contain chapters in which the characters get into trouble through their foolish or prideful ways. The fact that the male character is a child is important because each narrative constructs the role of the adult as teacher and the child as student. Frawg is constructed as a stereotypical watermelon loving African American child through an encounter with his father. Frawg loves watermelons so much that he cannot seem to eat enough of them. Pa decides that Frawg will finally get enough watermelons to eat, and proceeds to ask Frawg if he thinks he can eat three watermelons, four watermelons, eight watermelons, or finally twenty watermelons. As Pa piles the melons, Frawg comments, "Dis is jes' lak er good dream" (39). Frawg manages to eat three, his dog Buckeye eats two, and Frawg's siblings eat a few as well. They break open the rest and let the animals from the forest eat the melons before Pa returns. Pa questions Frawg, although Pa clearly knows how Frawg has gotten rid of the melons. Frawg admits that he finally has had enough melons thus reinforcing that the adult is teaching the child a lesson.

Another example of the wise fool appears in the chapter called "Hawgs." Frawg and his two siblings train hogs so that they can ride on their backs. Pa names the hogs Shadrack, Meshak, and Bednego after the Biblical story of the three men in the fiery furnace "because, he said, [the hogs] were in the hands of heathens" (82). Frawg knows that Pa will eventually butcher the hogs. The children begin to starve the hogs, for the children come to the logical conclusion that their father will not butcher skinny hogs. When Ma realises their plan and tells the children to feed the hogs, the children take the

hogs and hide. The children fall asleep in the hogs' hiding place and Ma mistakenly thinks the children have run away. Ma promises the children that the hogs will not be killed. Pa makes saddles for the hogs so that the children can ride the hogs like they might ride a horse.

Even though the children had not intended to run away, Ma's thinking that they have taken such drastic action in order to save the hogs is enough to change the previous outcome and the children end up with what they had hoped for - the salvation of their pets. However, not all of the stories are as light hearted. Frawg comes up with the idea of helping Buckeye, his dog, get rid of fleas by rubbing Buckeye with kerosene and then tying rags around Buckeye's neck and setting them on fire. The resulting chaos ends with Frawg and Buckeye also setting fire to the barn. Frawg and Buckeye hide under the house as the adults fight to put out the fire. The adults assume that Frawg and Buckeye have been killed in the fire. They are understandably happy when they find Frawg and Buckeye under the porch of the house and in that joy, Frawg escapes punishment for his foolish actions. Frawg is revealed to be not a wise fool, but just a fool since his foolishness caused loss to the family and almost death.

Boochy, the lead character in *Boochy's Wings*, is constructed as a simple fool. Boochy has one goal; he wants to fly. Boochy is "ten years old, tall as a plough handle and dark as the dirt in a new furrow. He was smart too, when it came to chopping, hoeing, and picking cotton, or tending to creeturs. And nobody could outdance him" (13). Boochy's list of characteristics is pedestrian. He is constructed as a good worker and smart, but only in certain ways. Book learning is not listed and it is clear that

schooling is not important. In the chapter called "Choppin' Time" Weaver writes:

Mama and Papa believed in getting their children to the fields young and making them useful as soon as they could manage a hoe. In fact, Papa cut the handles short so that they could be managed by a small child.

These bright June mornings found the Benders rising shortly after sun-up and working in the fields until dark. There were twenty acres of cotton to be cleaned of grass and weeds so that the young plants could have plenty of air and nourishment, and grow to be big green bushes full of white balls of cotton. Upon these white balls depended the entire welfare of the Bender family. So they worked very hard indeed, even down to six-year-old Pone. (43)

For children living on farms in the South, childhood in these texts is realistically constructed as a working time, not a learning time. Schooling is of little importance for African American children who lived in rural areas. Sadly, this lack of schooling for African American children in the South was not just fiction. The Bureau of the Census notes that in 1930, the illiteracy rate for African Americans was eighteen percent as compared to only three percent for the white population. In the South, that percentage rose to twenty-two percent compared with four percent for whites living in the region. Five percent of the black population was illiterate whereas three percent of the white population were illiterate in the North and West. Better schools and less demand on children as a work force account for sharp differences in

percentage points. The Bender family, while fictional, would not be unusual in the South.

These texts include elements of African American life such as farm life and the lack of schooling. *Boochy's Wings* also includes a chapter dealing with religion in the African American family and Boochy's misunderstanding about religious fervour. Boochy wants to fly and he thinks that if he goes to church, he can become an angel and fly. Mama is the religious force in the family, while Boochy's father thinks religion is a sham. Boochy invents a "gret big vision" in which the "Lawd" walks with him and tells him to eat "batty cakes." This "vision" causes those attending the meeting to laugh. Boochy, having told his vision, now expects to fly.

But he still hadn't flown. He just stood there on the floor, waiting to fly. And fly he did! (Though it wasn't the kind of flying he had expected or hoped to do.) Mama made her way through the choir benches like a sudden storm, and caught Boochy up in her arms. They fairly flew through the church, Boochy high in the air between Mama's strong hands. Sally May follow, and soon they were in the buggy flying home.

Mama was mortified to death. (80)

The constructs of African American childhood as presented show the author's care to include cultural connections, but these cultural connections are not always presented in a positive light. Mama is constructed as being weak in a spiritual sense; her need for religion is mocked through Boochy's lack of understanding. The ridicule of religious values is underscored in the fact that

Mama is alone in attending church and so the family unit is divided for the first time in the book.

However, in *Frawg* and other books such as *The Flop Eared Hound* (1938) by Ellis Credle (see discussion below) and Erick Berry's *Penny-Whistle* (1930), biographical information about the author is included as a means to authenticate the author's right to tell such stories. In the "Afterword" of *Frawg*, Hugh Lofting, author of *Dr. Doolittle* (1920), writes:

Annie Vaughan's love for drawing pictures began to spread to all the other children on her father's plantation, both white and coloured...The pictures she draws best are pictures of coloured people...And not only can she draw pictures of them but she really knows them. She was brought up among them from the time she was born until only a year or two ago. (126-127)

This justification of the work attempts to prove that the stories were not invented by a white author constructing African American childhood but instead are recordings of events making the stories historical, not fictional. Lofting, whose fame as the author of *Dr. Doolittle* also adds to the feeling of authenticity, ends his "Afterword" by noting "most of the people in the stories really played with Annie Vaughan when she was a child. *Frawg*, for instance, "is still down there on her parents' plantation near Selma, Alabama" (128). The fact that *Frawg* is still on the plantation does not seem to be a concern to Lofting, who does not challenge the African American construct presented.

Today, it would be difficult to determine if these attempts at authentication were successful in promoting the "real-ness" of such books. The addition of cultural elements, as well as African American characters, are

the reasons why this literature was classified in the 1930s as African American children's literature. However, from a contemporary perspective, a different critical reading of these texts is determined when white authorship and the manner in which African American characters and culture was constructed is considered. Studies conducted after the 1930s, such as Rudine Sims' *Shadow and Substance* (1982), have attempted to find a cultural consciousness in works produced after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Sims' study particularly focuses on literature produced from 1965-1974 for older children. Coming from a post-Civil Rights era, Sims' definition of "culturally conscious" literature for African American children promotes a Black cultural perspective, stressing the values of black communities and culture. Such stories are told from the perspective of the African American characters and take place in a Black setting such as "an Afro-American community or home." They also include details that identify the characters as African American, including "physical descriptions, language, cultural traditions, and so forth" (Sims 49). In addition to questions of character and plot, Sims was concerned with cultural specifics, such as the role of the Black Church in the African American community, particular cultural traditions, characters' use of African American dialect, children's relationships with their grandparents and extended family, and the recognition of racism as a fact of life for African American children. These elements are included in literature produced before Sims' study, but they are not always represented in a positive way. However, while demanding culturally conscious books Sims discounts the role that illustration, as found in picture books, offers to the reader. In her discussion of picture books, Sims suggests that as long as the

author of the picture book tells a good story and uses an appropriate setting and ambience, he or she can "create a culturally conscious book" (64). However, image as constructed through illustration can be just as problematic as textual descriptions and cultural inclusions. Pictures are not always what they seem. Yet in the interpretation of pictures, space for subversive readings is created.

3.5 Image through Illustration

Rudine Sims' study categorises African American children's literature. Her views on picture books are expressed in her discussion of "melting pot" books which she defines as generically white, middle-class stories with illustrations acting as the only indicator of race or ethnicity. According to Sims, "the label *culturally conscious* suggests that elements in the text, not just the pictures, make it clear that the book consciously seeks to depict . . . major characters [who] are Afro-Americans." Brown and Sims are both highly respected critics who approach the image of the black character through text. Notably Brown's study, which focuses on adult literature, makes no mention of illustration, and while Sims acknowledges pictures, she privileges text throughout her study.

Audrey Thompson criticises Sims for this oversight:

For Sims, these cultural details are found primarily in the written text and so are most salient in books for older children. Picture books require less concern for the authenticating details, emphasis, and tone that set culturally conscious black children's literature apart from literature assuming a white perspective. At best, illustrations might confirm a book's attention to cultural details; at worst, the illustrations

might omit such details or render them in stereotypic terms. "Not surprisingly," Sims says, cultural "differences are least apparent and on some level least significant in modern picture books." (Thompson 64)

In denying that picture book illustrations can provide cultural details, Sims makes an assumption that picture books are not political; because of the form of the picture book, there is less room to make political statements. While there is limited text, Sims assumption denies the power of the genre and the complexity of the form in offering text as one story and picture as another – or a complementation of the same narrative. Therefore when Sims says, "Some of the best of the culturally conscious books by white authors are the picture books" (64), she concedes that constructs of culture and African American childhood can be discussed via picture books and that white authors might be capable of writing African American culture. However, according to Sims, it would seem that picture books require the author and illustrator to have less cultural knowledge.

The argument that illustrations have an effect on the cultural consciousness of a book depends on the idea that pictures are vehicles of signification. As James A. Francis states, "Imaging communicates power" (578). Rene Lindekens argues that pictures "are structured into binary features" (qtd. in Sonesson). For African American children's literature in the 1930s, the white/black binary pairs in illustration work on various levels since many of the books were printed in black and white or used black and white photographs.

Semiotic theory also speaks to the dual levels of meaning in such literature. Jean-Marie Floch and Felix Thurlemann noted a "presence of a

double layer of signification” in pictures that they coined as “iconic” and “plastic.” According to Flock and Thurlemann, the iconic level is the basic level in which the viewer recognises the object whereas the plastic layer serves to convey something abstract. For example, a flag’s iconic meaning is that it is a piece of material while it’s plastic meaning would include the patriotic feeling or historical background of the country represented by the flag.

This double layer of signification clearly appears in picture books of the 1930s with the iconic layer offering an acceptance of the status quo - whites in authority over African Americans whereas the plastic level offers something more subversive - a way of providing hope for a changed future by seeing through the fabric of the present society and looking ahead into a better future. In using this sort of analysis for the books with illustrations in the 1930s, the iconic and plastic levels offer the viewer two different ways of reading and constructing African American childhood. The iconic level offers easily read and understood cultural signifiers, understanding that those signifiers would depict African American culture in ways acceptable to the white majority culture. In other words, this iconic level satisfies the dominant majority, offering identities that the white segment of the population accepted as “normal.” The plastic level offers the subversive element. The reader understands this level due to experiences or knowledge that other readers may not possess.

Erick Berry’s 1930 publication of *Penny-Whistle* is once such example of reading illustration in which the iconic layer is subverted by the plastic layer, while the text itself is seemingly innocent of cultural messages. Picture book

creator Erick Berry's offers the reader a duality of levels to read in text as well as in the illustrations. The iconic text level concerns a boy on a journey through the jungle to find notes to play on his penny-whistle. The didactic role of the text is to educate the reader about the jungle and the animals found there through an adventure story. The inside cover flap summarises the plot of the story describing it as "a nonsense tale with many pictures" and continues explaining that the book is

All about a little black boy, Penny-Whistle. How he put on his Pappy's big, shiny, black, high silk hat, and went out into the jungle to find a tune. Where did he find the new notes? Everyone helped him: Big Bill, Mary the Parrot, Cricket, Little-yalla-bird. But the elephant gave him a scare. How funny he looked sailing on the river in his big black hat! (Back Jacket Cover)

Yet this tale of adventure and nonsense allows the white majority to read it in a 'safe' way, that is giving the white reader views of Africans/African Americans that follow the expectations of the time. While the minstrel influence appears in both text and illustration, Berry offers a subversive message in the plastic level of both text and illustration. Berry writes:

Mammy wore a string of beads, red beads, and a most beautiful smile.

Pappy wore a great big shiny black high silk hat, and sometimes he carried a cane.

Penny-Whistle wore a wide, wide smile too. Sometimes he had on a string of red beads and sometimes he left them off, when the day was extra special hot. (n.pag.)

The reference to Mammy and Penny-Whistle's smile is reminiscent of the actor from the minstrels in black face with a wide white smile with bright red lips. Berry describes Mammy and Pappy, as well as Penny-Whistle, by their unique and strangely misplaced possessions. Remembering that the setting is in a location extremely close to or in the jungle, there is no practicality about these possessions. Mammy wears red beads - a sign of femininity in both colour and shape. Pappy has a silk hat and cane - signs of phallic masculinity. Yet such possessions are seemingly misplaced in the context of the setting. They have no practical purpose, as do neither Mammy or Pappy in the story. In keeping with the text, Mammy and Pappy are both illustrated with their possessions - Mammy with her beads and smile and Pappy with his hat, cane, and a smile as well. They become known through their material possessions, being the sole extent of their character development. They are what they own. This identity through possessions extends to the main character: Penny-Whistle is named after something he owns, the penny-whistle which his father bought at the market. His identity is defined by his possession, and his possession therefore becomes his identity, just as his parents' possessions define them.

When Pappy threatens to break Penny-Whistle's penny-whistle because Penny-Whistle only plays one note, Pappy is attempting to shape Penny-Whistle's personality - to break him so that his behaviour fits with the society into which he is growing. Pappy's position of power comes from his role as adult. Penny-Whistle is helpless in his childness. At the beginning of the story, Penny-Whistle can only perform in one way. In order to survive Pappy's threat of extermination - breaking Penny-Whistle/penny-whistle-

Penny-Whistle must go out into the world of the jungle to find other ways to perform. The boy Penny-Whistle is literally a performance instrument, and he learns to play what the world wants him to play - multiple notes/roles. Textually, Berry offers an African American coming of age story. Yet Penny-Whistle's tune comes from mimicking the notes of those he meets in the jungle. While he learns from the world around him, he is at the same time performing mimicry. He is able to survive in his world by learning to cope with it and in it.

Berry's iconic text is offering roles for black characters from a white perspective, making prescriptive roles and constructing blackness via white expectations. Defining the Mammy and Pappy characters with material possession indicative of class, Berry depicts Penny-Whistle's parents as African Americans who have achieved a higher economical status. White Southerners would classify such African Americans as "uppity," that is, African Americans who were acting above their station in life. However, the fact, that Berry's story is about a little black boy, is literally and visually lost in her illustrations; her illustrations offer a subversive position enabling the reader to read race in opposition to the text. The jacket cover of Penny Whistle

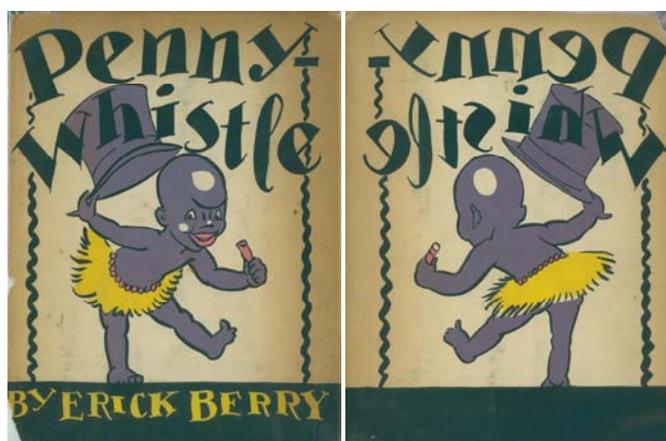


Image 3.3
Erick
Berry's
Covers of
*Penny-
Whistle*

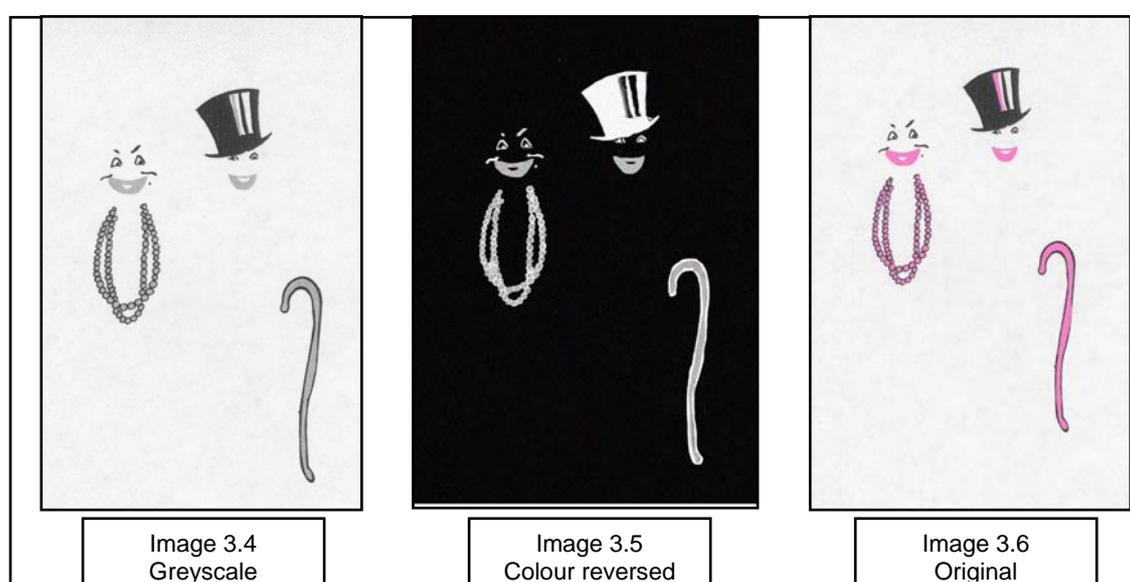
immediately strikes today's viewer as unusual due to the strange purple colouring of the character on the cover (Image 3.3). Since children's books tend to follow the convention of

naming the main character in the title and showing him/her on the cover, it is assumed that Penny-Whistle is the boy pictured. There is an incongruity here since this boy, with minstrel features such as large red lips, is not black but purple. While offering the stereotype of a black boy in the jungle, not only the colour of the child but also the fact that he wears a top hat disrupts the readers' expectations. Berry uses colour and the lack of colour to provide a message. Penny-Whistle has all the stereotypical facial features - eyes, lips, teeth, which make him black but not black; he is purple in appearance. (Image 3.3)

Berry's illustrations to her own text offer a distinctive political commentary. She illustrates Pappy and Mammy by sketching only their individual material possessions. Pappy and Mammy have no bodies, no clothes, no other defining features – not even the outline of a body form. They are almost not illustrated. Since they lack this human form, they are also not black; the paper is white therefore they become white.

While this may not seem to affect the reader, a simple experiment in positive and negative colours shows the full power of Berry's non-illustration of race. Image 3.4 is a copy of Berry's illustration, photocopied in black and white. If we take the inverse of this picture, switching the colours to their opposite, as in Image 3.5, a very different image is portrayed, an image that is very black. Berry does make use of a third colour in the picture of Mammy and Pappy. Although in her text, Berry states that Mammy's beads are red, Berry uses pink to colour not only Mammy beads but also her lips. Likewise Berry uses pink to highlight Pappy's silk hat and to colour his cane and lips. (Image 3.6) Although the lips are drawn in a minstrel form, oversized and

obvious, the use of pink softens this element, making Mammy feminised as well as humanised. However, this does not dismiss the fact that Berry is referring to stereotyped racial elements. On the other hand, bright red lips would be more noticeable than the softer pink look which has been used. While Berry uses bright bold colours in the majority of this book, it is of note that she chose not to use a bold colour in depicting Penny-Whistle and his parents.



These first two illustrations are the only moments in the book that Berry uses a non-illustration to illustrate. This dislocation of expectations also makes a strong political statement about the visibility/invisibility of different races and the importance/unimportance of race in a given society. By taking out the human figure from the illustration, Berry removes the colour figure, disturbing the reader's gaze, disrupting expectations and finally directing and controlling the reader's gaze. The lack of illustration allows the silence to speak by physically creating a space for race to be acknowledged but not judged as inferior to another race. By not drawing race, Berry is emphasising race and calling attention to society's obsession with skin colour. Penny-

Whistle is drawn in the same style as his parents. He has his smile and that is all. This is the second view of Penny-Whistle. In the first image on the cover, Penny-Whistle is purple. In this second image, he is not illustrated as being black (Image 3.7). The reader does not physically view Penny-Whistle as being black until the third time he is illustrated. (Image 3.8)



Image 3.7
Penny-Whistle as first
illustrated

In the pictures that follow the opening pages, Berry shows Penny-Whistle as a fully drawn black child, emphasising the fact that when the reader first meets Penny-Whistle, she is not focused on his blackness, but rather on his story. She first shows Penny-Whistle as purple and then as white/invisible. Berry's subversive message via her illustration states that colour does not matter; it is experience which constructs the human. It is therefore implicit that subject, identity, class and race should



Image 3.8
Full picture of
Penny-Whistle

be of no consequence. It is a story that gives Penny-Whistle identity, constructing him as the hero of his own story. Berry is able to illustrate colour blindness for the readers, de-emphasising the character's blackness, making Penny-Whistle and his parents an invisible visibility.

Yet in a very real political sense, Berry is illustrating these members of the Black community in the way in which most whites viewed them at that time, as 'invisibles.' They are invisible and yet at the same time visible. Since their blackness cannot be seen, they are constructed as white. This desire for whiteness is reinforced by the choice of a cane and silk top hat for Pappy and beads for Mammy, making her look

much like “flappers” would in the 1920s. This mimicry of whiteness is achieved by denying blackness.

Elies Bindrum’s *Meg and Moe* (1938) also asks the reader to actively read race but with different motives and means. The design of *Meg and Moe* is that of a rebus book. In a rebus book, in order for the young reader to construct a meaningful text, they must replace the picture with its previously given name; when the new picture is introduced, the textual name is provided but for the remainder of the book, the reader is given the picture and must remember and supply the textual equivalent of that picture. The visual representation stands in place of the text, replacing it yet recalling the text at the same time. An example of this sort of book would look like this:

The children saw the  lion sleeping in his cage at the zoo.

The children were sad to see  sleeping because they

wanted to hear the  roar.

In this example, the second picture of the lion must be substituted for the word “lion” in order for the story to make sense. When this technique is used in *Meg and Moe*, the minstrel pictures of Meg and Moe and well as the other African American characters in the story construct blackness and childhood as foolish and helpless. In order to make a meaningful story, the reader must read the visually stereotypical pictures of minstrel figures as the children Meg and Moe in order to complete the story.

The construct of African American childhood is stereotypically expressed. Meg and Moe are minstrel figures, incapable of helping

themselves in a situation of danger. They are sent to gather the laundry from Liza Belle, the servant at “the big white house.” They take their dog Sniffles with them. Meg and Moe and Sniffles successfully pick up the laundry and place it in their wagon but while on their way home, Slim Peters warns them to get to a safe place because a twister is on the way. Meg, Moe and Sniffles run into a cave where they are joined by a pig and a goose. The tornado knocks down a tree blocking the group’s exit out of the cave. The children have no idea how to get out so Sniffles begins to dig under the tree. He digs a hole which was “just large enough for them all to wiggle through” (n. pag.) making Sniffles the hero. The laundry was conveniently picked up by the twister and placed on Granny’s porch.

The story is engaging and full of suspense but the format is immediately problematic since the reader must partake in actively reading race as a game. The first page is a note to the readers:

Dear Little Friends – This is a read and guess book. When first you meet the folks inside they’ll all be named but after that should know they by their pictures. If you forget you must guess. Its [sic] like a game. Love Meg and Moe.

However when the pictures stereotypically view the two African American children as nothing more

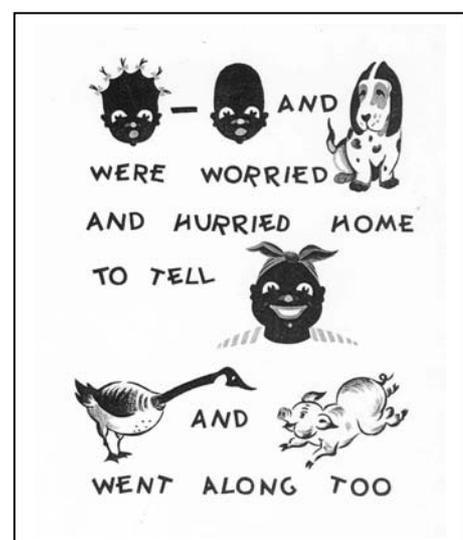


Image 3.9
Example page from Meg and Moe

than minstrel caricatures (Image 3.9) lacking individuality and intelligence, then this reading of race serves as a reinforcement of racist ideologies aimed

at constructing African American childhood as hierarchically lower than white American childhood. The absence of white children in the story confirms a difference in constructed childhoods. White childhood is protected in a place of safety while African American childhood hides out in a dark cave as the tornado rages around them.

Two other books attempt to construct a reality of African American childhood through their use of photography, namely, *The Flop-Eared Hound* (1938) by Ellis Credle and *Tobe* (1939) by Stella Gentry Sharpe which both include a justification of why the medium of photography was used and how the story was invented. The inside cover of *The Flop-Eared Hound* offers fewer details behind the origin of the story but seems more instant in its claim for authenticity. The front inside cover reads:

Here is a photograph book which is primarily a story. The adventures of the flop-eared hound have suspense and plot interest. The photographs were taken for the story and really illustrate it. This book of contemporary America will be enjoyed by readers from four to ten.

It is immediately striking that the author and/or publisher claim that this book is not a picture book but a “photograph book,” differentiating it from a picture book and naming it as something more realistic. The second sentence would lead the reader to believe that this story is about a dog when it is clear that Boot-Jack, the African American boy who finds the flop-eared hound, is truly the main character of the story. To claim that the dog is the focus of the story denies agency to Boot-Jack; Boot-Jack, the human, is less important than the flop-eared hound.

The information given about the production of *Tobe* is an interesting contrast to books such as *Meg and Moe* and *The Flop-eared Hound*. The back flap provides the story of how the book was first written.

'Sometime ago,' says the author, 'a little colored boy who lives in the neighborhood asked me why all his story books were about white children. It occurred to me to observe the activities of the little boy and his family and write a little book for the enjoyment of other children.'

(back flap of *Tobe*)

This quote provides insight into white views of African American childhood in the 1930s. Author Stella Gentry Sharpe had to be asked by an African American child as to why there were no storybooks with African Americans. While it is interesting to note that this black child lived in the same neighbourhood as the white author, the comment that it "occurred" to the author to "observe the activities" of this black family points to the invisibility of blackness. While this black family had lived in the neighbourhood, Sharpe had not taken enough notice of them to write about them until the boy and his family became her research topic.

However Sharpe's work should not be easily categorized as stereotypical African American children's literature because it is anything but a racist piece of work. Sharpe's textual contributions to this book carefully explain life for the young African American child living on a farm in the South. In her selection entitled "Picking Cotton," Tobe's experiences of what it was like to pick cotton are described.

"Boys, get your bags. The cotton is ready to pick," said Daddy.

We got our bags and went to the field.

We picked and picked.

I began to get hungry.

My arms began to hurt. Would lunch time never come?

The Mother called, "Lunch is ready."...

I said, "Mother, why does Daddy plant cotton? I do not like to pick it. It makes my arms hurt."

Mother said, "Daddy plants cotton to buy clothes for you to wear to school."

"But who buys the cotton?" I asked. "What do they do with it?"

"It is sold to the factory," said Mother. "They spin it into thread. They make cloth for your shirts and your overalls."

"I did not know that," I said. "I will pick the cotton." (n. pag.)

While the text explains the economics of cotton farming, the text does not offer the reader the happy African American worker in the field singing songs or telling stories, like the Pinky Harem character seen in *Animal Tales from the Old North State*. Tobe's arms hurt. He does not want to pick the cotton but through his Mother's instruction, he realises the need to pick cotton. This book is not written in dialect and Tobe's parents are respectfully called Daddy and Mother, not Mammy and Pappy as *The Flop-Eared Hound* and other such stories. This book stands out in sharp contrast to the majority of other pieces of African American children's literature in the 1930s because of its lack of dialect.

Just as in *The Flop-Eared Hound*, each page of text is partnered with a photo. Both books are attempting to construct a reality of life for the African American child. *Tobe* manages to present reality in a balanced way between

text and photographs whereas *The Flop-Eared Hound* fails to do this due to its obviously staged photos, minstrel inspired poses, and stereotypical textual descriptions and names. The opening paragraph provides the setting claiming the story takes place “way down South in a little log cabin underneath a honey-pod tree” (2). Shadrack Meshack Abednego Jones is the full name of the African American child who is “just called ... little Boot-jack”(2). As noted earlier, these three Biblical names, Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego, refer to the three men in the fiery furnace – and also the name Frawg’s father gave to the three hogs. The glamour of such a name is directly related to slavery times when male slaves were given names of important or famous men. The irony of this practice is clear. African American men in slavery would never become famous or important, however, by naming them in such ways, slave owners could belittle the men they kept enslaved through force. The reality being constructed is closely related to the days of slavery. In fact, when the flop-eared hound causes problems at home by chewing father’s Sunday shoes, Boot-Jack goes to “the big white house” and gives his hound to Miss Mary, the owner of the house (Image 3.10). Although seventy



Image 3.10
Boot-Jack at Miss Mary’s Big White House

years had passed between slavery being abolished and the publication of this book, the close ties of the African American to the plantation/slavery were

never distant in the 1930s. *Meg and Moe* and *The Flop-eared Hound* both contain some aspect of the story that happens at “the big white house,” which serve as a reminder to African Americans that they had not moved very far away from the centre of the plantation, the master’s home, and their position of slavery.

Resistance to such constructs is difficult to measure. Today these texts can show ways in which authors and/or illustrators were struggling against dominant majority ideology. Constructed identity in text demonstrates various storytellers who indoctrinate white children with their cultural tales in *Animal Tales for the Old North State*. Aunt Tiny Shaw’s touch-me-nots cry for independence from white male abuse while she tells the white children her tales. *Pinky Marie* is under the same domination, although she is unable to defend herself against both the strange male birds and her father. Her submissive behaviour is constructed as a positive and she is rewarded for her passivity, but forever changed by it. Frawg and Boochy are foolish males, and are constructed as forever being children.

Images also construct identity as seen in *Meg and Moe*, and *Penny-Whistle*. Reading race through images constructs different ideologies, some positive and some negative. Picture books using photographs also can construct the reality of life in very different ways.

But books such as *Penny-Whistle* and *Tobe* offered something more than the books which came before them. In the search for identity through both text and illustration, African American children’s literature was moving away from being only stereotypical literature. While the journey still needed to

cover great distances, literary constructs in African American children's literature in the 1930s show that the first steps were being taken.

Chapter Four

Representations of Speech and the African American Patois

“People want to talk like the people they want to be like.”
Carmon Fought, linguist
USA Today, Jan 2005

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I am analysing the literary representations of language employed during the 1930s, examining the constructions of African American childhood as determined by the use or lack of use of African American dialects. In the previous chapters, the analysis has demonstrated that textual representation and illustration have been used to construct African American childhood in stereotypical and subversive ways. Likewise, authors in the 1930s used representations of dialectical speech to depict African American childhood. I will consider the development of the written form of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the political motivations involved in language development before investigating the ways in which authors used dialect in constructing African American childhood in the 1930s. While referring to historical debates within the field of sociolinguistics, my focus is on the literary aspects of the uses of dialect and not the linguistic aspects of language itself, except where relevant to the overall construction offered through African American children’s literature.

The controversial observation quoted at the beginning of this chapter by linguist Carmon Fought appeared in the article “Do You Speak American?” in *USA Today* in January 2005 (MacNeil 22). Fought’s pronouncement implies that language in America is still a divisive issue. While English is the

accepted language of choice in the United States, it is not the official language. According to the 1990 Census, languages other than English are spoken in 13.8% of the homes in the United States; of those homes, 2.9%, which equates to 6.7 million people, do not speak any English at all. Over two hundred and thirty-one languages exist in the US and “of those, one hundred and seventy-six are living languages” (Gordon). The multiple languages spoken in the United States reflect the multiple cultures and ethnic backgrounds which exist within the United States.

Language is a part of the struggle for recognition and acceptance of a minority culture within a majority culture. The growth of a minority culture and its struggle for acceptance within the majority revolves around recognition of difference. Since the Clinton presidency, the use of English as the unofficial official language has been challenged through the expansion of bilingual education programs as well as American citizenship tests printed in Spanish.¹ Such bilingual programs, which are supported through federal funding from the United States government, are highly contested. One of the most famous debates took place in 1996 when the Oakland California School board passed a resolution acknowledging African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as the primary language of many of the children who enter Oakland schools. By passing this resolution, the Oakland School Board requested that teachers have an awareness of the language their students speak upon entering the classroom. The passing of this resolution quickly turned into a firestorm of debate causing outcries throughout the United States over the proper place of AAVE in the educational setting.

¹ For more information, see *Americans No More: The Death of Citizenship* (1996) by Georgie Anne Geyer.

In order to understand the use of African American dialect in children's books in the 1930s, it is necessary to investigate the development of the African American vernacular and identify the level of development of a standardised dialect for African Americans in the 1930s. Discussions about AAVE have caused such fervour among educators, politicians, lobby groups, and other speaking groups in the United States because the debate is not solely about language; the debate is about politics involving federal funding and identity, culture, and nation. The polarised positions under dispute demonstrated that language is an emotive and personal issue. Language also denotes power and is an important factor of a minority's development. The establishment of a language outside the majority language shifts power away from the dominant culture.

4.2 Origins of African American Black English

The evolutionary development of the written language now known as African American Vernacular English is vital in understanding how written forms of dialect in the 1930s were represented in literature. In 1908, John Bennett completed the earliest study of Gullah, also known as Sea Island Dialect, a Creole blend of Elizabethan English and African languages (McDavid 7). Bennett's conclusions reflected assumptions concerning the differences in language based on "the inferiority" of one race in comparison to another. Bennett claimed that African Americans speaking Gullah were physically unable to make English sounds. He noted that:

To express other than simplest ideas, plain actualities, is, however, difficult...

Intellectual indolence, or laziness, mental and physical, which shows itself in the shortening of words, the elision of syllables, and modification of every difficult enunciation...

It is the indolence, mental and physical, of the Gullah dialect that is its most characteristic feature...(qtd. in McDavid 7)

Today, this sort of research would quickly be dismissed due to its obvious pre-existing bias, yet similar ideas were repeated in studies carried in 1922 (Gonzales) and again in 1940 (Crum). These researchers seemingly ignored the whites who also spoke versions of Gullah (Rickford 90-111). It is clear from Joel Chandler Harris' writings that dialects other than Gullah were in existence, since Harris claimed he was not writing in "the lingo in vogue on the rice plantations and Sea Islands of the South Atlantic States" (Harris viii). Yet very little research was conducted in the field of African American dialects at that time.

Writers of children's literature in the 1930s would not be privy to research revealing standardisation rules of African American dialect since such rules were not established until twenty to thirty years after their work was published in the 1930s. Research printed in such journals as *American Speech* and *The Journal of Negro History* on AAVE did not appear until the late 1950s and 1960s, when the Civil Rights movement was in full motion. AAVE as a field of research had late beginnings as seen by the publication dates of the earliest papers and books discussing AAVE or African American dialect.² As research continued, a understanding of the syntax of the

² Although there is no "declaration date" of AAVE gaining the status of a language, most cited studies are from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Creolists' studies include Dalby, 1971; DeCamp, 1971; Dillard, 1973; Taylor, 1969. Dialectologists' studies include Baratz, 1970; Labov, 1971; Shuy 1971; Wolfram, 1971. For even more recent views of the origin of AAVE, see Trudgill 1995.

language started to emerge, confirming AAVE as not just a random, slang, or inferior way of speaking, but as a dialect with a historic evolution and governed by grammatical rules.

Even today, there are various debates as to how and when AAVE developed. If such debates exist today, writers in the 1930s had less information at hand to authorise their representation of African American dialect. Today different researchers focused on different aspects of the language, drawing confusing and conflicting conclusions about the genesis of AAVE. According to the present body of research, there are two accepted ways of thinking about the origins of AAVE. In 2000, Mark L. Loudon noted that Creolists claim that "modern AAVE is a descendant of originally pidginized, and subsequently creolized varieties of English which developed among African slaves from differing linguistic backgrounds who lacked a common language," while Dialectologists "hold that first-generation African-American slaves...were in much the same linguistic situation as non-English speaking immigrants...they came to learn forms of English spoken by co-territorial whites." Dialectologists examine "the structure similarities between AAVE and Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE)" (223). They propose that African Americans and Caucasian Americans had more social interaction whereas Creolists would opt for greater separation.

Yet others, continues Loudon citing Donald Winford of the Ohio State University, have combined these perspectives, "charting a middle course between the two extremes" arguing that AAVE "is not simply a variety of SWVE spoken by African-Americans, neither is it the direct descendant of a plantation creole" (224). Winford uses sociohistorical evidence to support his

claims yet neither he, nor the author of the article (Louden) "label" this middle course.

Some of the latest research rectifies this oversight. Ernie A. Smith's chapter "The Historical Development of Ebonics" (2003) clearly labels and defines the three present views of AAVE from a linguistic perspective. Like Louden, Smith starts with the Creolist position, noting that "[a]ccording to Creolists..linguistic similarity is evidence of a genetic kinship and linguistic continuity in these dialects...[which] resulted from English and African linguistic convergence" (50). Smith uses the term "Transformationalist" to discuss the group Louden identifies as Dialectologists. This group supports the theory that "the differences in Black and Anglo-American linguistic behaviour are superficial and mainly in the surface structure. In the deep structure they are the same" (50). Finally, Smith labels the third view as the Ethnolinguists who believe "the linguistic and paralinguistic features... represent the speech communicative continuation of the African Hamito-Bantu tradition in Black America" (Smith 51). This group rejects and accepts various aspects of the first two groups mentioned and is the "middle course between the two extremes" (ibid). In looking back at the dialect used in the 1930s, these various positions are of interest in determining how authors' inventive dialect compares with such contemporary linguistic perspectives.

If the focus of this chapter were purely linguistic, it would be of greater importance to detail the linguistic differences between the three prevailing views of the history and origins of African American Vernacular English. What is paramount to the focus of the chapter, as it relates to the children's literature under consideration, is that none of these views claim that AAVE is

not a language. Smith states, “As linguists, their proponents all agree that when compared with Standard English, Ebonics is different, and they assert that Ebonics is not a deficient language system” (54). It is noteworthy to view the development of AAVE on a continuum; clearly perceptions have shifted since Bennett’s 1908 claim that Gullah, and in general all forms of dialect spoken by African Americans, stems from a lazy speech deficiency. Today’s multiple views of AAVE as a language are based on thorough linguistic studies.

In order to understand dialectic writings from the 1930s, one must consider where African American speech representations were located along the historical continuum of AAVE development. Because the validity of AAVE was not standardised until the late 1960s/early 1970s, the ways in which authors wrote dialect in their stories for the child audience are variable and numerous. The success or failure of the use of dialect was often determined by the way in which dialect constructed the African American character speaking the dialect. Written language is merely a representation of the sounds made by living humans. It is the way in which that representation is constructed that is of importance in determining a complete construction of character and in determining the “correctness” in dialect.

This representation of sounds is considered ‘written dialect’ which is read as any other language. Defining the difference between ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ is a complicated task, even for those in the field of linguistics. According to Charles J. Fillmore, Professor of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkley, “The words ‘dialect’ and ‘language’ are confusingly ambiguous. These are not precisely definable technical terms even in the field

of linguistics, but linguists have learned to live with the ambiguities” (Fillmore). In tracing the development of AAVE, many researchers claim that language development starts from pidgins, which occur when peoples with different languages form a new language in order to communicate. There is a dominant language that contributes most to the vocabulary of the pidgin. Once the pidgin has evolved and acquired native speakers, it is then called a Creole. This minimal description is concerned with the development of the spoken language. There is no mention of the development of the language in a written form.

4.3 African American dialect as *Patois*

In order to fully comprehend attempts authors made at writing African American dialect, I suggest that a under-utilised term, *patois*, should be used which includes the uniqueness of a spoken language that does not yet have a standardized written form. In recent times, the meaning of *patois* has shifted from its original meaning and presently it is used as a term for popular culture language or specialized language used for a field of work or business. Yet the original definition of *patois* clearly defines a spoken language which has not yet been written. Einar Haugen explains the earlier meaning of the word in “Dialect, Language, Nation”:

In French usage a third term developed, *patois*, which applied primarily to the spoken language... Litte (1956) explicitly requires that a dialect "include a complete literary culture"... A patois, then, is a language norm not used for literary (and hence official) purposes, chiefly limited to informal situations. (Haugen 924)

According to Haugen's definition, the term *patois* should be applied to define African American dialect before it became a rule based prescriptive language known as AAVE. It is my stance that through such usage of the term *patois*, debates about the use of dialect in African American children's literature in the 1930s are better informed. While it might be easier to claim that dialect was only used in stereotypical racist ways, acknowledging the lack of development of standardised language rules allows the reader/researcher to look past the dialect as a method of writing and instead focus on the ways authors struggled to represent a style of speaking in written form.

The use of dialectic language is crucial in considering the constructions of African American childhood in children's literature in the 1930s since dialect can be used as a tool of characterisation or as a mode of representation of speech. Dialect can also be used to empower certain groups or characters while disempowering other groups or characters, as is seen in the discussion of *Teeny and the Tiny Man* later in this chapter (see page 187). Haugen notes a power issue also at work as to whether someone speaks a language, or a dialectical version of a language and states that the term language will always hold a "superordinate" place while "dialect is the subordinate term" (923). He continues:

This distinction introduces a new dimension in our discussion: the social function of a language. In terms of the language-dialect distinction, we say that a patois is a dialect that serves a population in its least prestigious functions. This distinction of patois-dialect is therefore not one between two kinds of language, but between two functions of a language. The definition in Litte (and others like it)

clearly suggests a pejorative attitude toward the patois, since it no longer carries with it “a complete literary culture.” (924)

Using the term *patois* to describe AAVE in the 1930s highlights the political aspect of language. From today’s vantage viewpoint, the negative connotations of calling African American dialect a *patois* no longer exist, whereas, early research was influenced by such connotations. For the purpose of clarity within this thesis, I use the term *patois* in its positive connotations as a language that is spoken but does not yet have a written format and which encases the political and social influences in African American culture and history.

The negative connotations of the use of the term *patois* were formed through political issues concerning race, and were instrumental in building a barrier between the races through language difference and language inequality. Historical reasons for differences in language are rooted in slavery. Language is key in communication and while it was necessary for slaves to be able to communicate with each other in order to work the fields, slave owners realized the danger of rebellion and revolt. When slaves were brought to the Americas, those from the same tribes were divided and sold to different plantations as a means of disempowering the slave by preventing the slaves from communicating in languages unknown to the white slave owners. The use of drums was outlawed; owners feared the language of the drums might convey messages of rebellion amongst the slaves. By prohibiting the use of African languages, slave owners were able to better control the slaves and keep them submissive. Slave owners actively worked against literacy

education by metering out severe punishments to slaves who were either teaching others or learning to read and write themselves.

Such a history directly affects the development of a written form of language impacting upon literary development. The definition of *patois*, as I argue in this chapter, also includes a lack of a complete literary culture. Since it was illegal to read and write during slavery, a complete literary culture was prevented from forming which served as another way of keeping the race subordinated and controlled. The term 'complete' is an important aspect in the definition of *patois*, since some writing by African Americans did occur. By labelling this pre-standardised AAVE of the 1930s as a *patois*, I am not claiming that African slaves had no culture in America but that a 'complete literary culture' (Haugen) was denied them through the oppression by slave traders and owners, and through the laws passed by both state and federal governments. African American culture was forced to develop in other ways and through different means. Other cultural aspects replaced the missing literary components - songs, spirituals, orality in folktales, and even quilts which replaced a written literary culture. (See Chapter Six for the discussion about Faith Ringgold's use of quilts to create her story *Tar Beach*.) "The literary significance of these forms seems to surpass anything written by African Americans until modern times" (Abarry 380). Since African American speech was still without a standard written form in the 1930s, the development of written African American dialect can be examined through a different approach if African American speech is considered as *patois*.

As stated previously, determining the authenticity of literary conventions representing African American *patois* in literature is a separate

area of research based on linguistic studies which fall outside the scope of this study. What is of importance to this thesis are the constructs the use of African American offered in the 1930s. In some of the children's literature of the 1930s, African American dialect was used as a linguistic insult. Writing speech in dialect was stereotypical shorthand which permitted writers to construct the African American child character with reference to previously established stereotypes. However, to claim that all literature written in dialect was a stereotype denies the use of dialect as an authentic means of expressing the spoken language. This claim is made with some hesitation, understanding the abusive ways in which some authors used dialect to dehumanise and belittle the speaker who used dialect. Disagreements about positive or negative uses of dialect often depend on who is asked and on what they are basing their judgement. Joel Chandler Harris, author of the various *Uncle Remus Tales* (1881), is another such author whose work has been debated by critics partly due to his use of dialect.

4.4 Joel Chandler Harris and his *Uncle Remus Tales* (1881)

One of the earliest pieces of writing based on the oral tales and attributed with linguistic laurels and praise for collecting tales of the African Americans is Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Tales* (1881). Harris' stories act as a conduit of political and social attitudes of his time, much like the illustrations included in the numerous publications of Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* (Chapter Two). His use of dialect and "confrontations between the 'old' and 'new' South" are important to the process of African American Vernacular English being used as a cultural construct for African American life

in the South. Likewise, Harris' use of dialect affected not only later pieces of literature but also the authors who wrote for children. Harris' inventive phonetic spelling of the sounds of the African American speech reinforce the argument that African American speech was at this time a *patois*, and as such, was pre-proscriptive of rules which standardised speech.

Originally printed as story pieces in the magazine *The Monthly Atlantic*, Harris' short stories were published as a collection in 1881 entitled *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. Harris' Introduction noted his use of dialect "if indeed it can be called a dialect" as having "solemn, not to say melancholy, features." He continued, noting his "purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect" (vii). To Harris' credit, he claimed that the dialect he used was "wholly different...from the intolerable misrepresentation of the minstrel stage, but at least [the dialect] is phonetically genuine" (viii). Harris, who was a Southern white male, attempted to write what he heard, supporting my position that African American dialect was a *patois* – a spoken language which was not yet developed into a standard written format.

Harris' concern with dialect and his uses of dialect permeate his entire Introduction. Harris drew comparisons between his collection and other collections in both North America (in Native American collections), South America (in Brazil), and in Africa. In quoting a collection called "Amazonian Tortoise Myths," Harris wrote that he had made:

some necessary verbal and phonetic alterations, in order to give the reader an idea of the difference between the dialect of the cotton

plantations, as used by Uncle Remus, and the lingo in vogue on the rice plantations and Sea Islands of the South Atlantic States. (viii)

Harris was referring to Gullah, the Creole form of English indigenous to the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, which was first researched in 1908 (see previous discussion, page 159). Harris' reference to the spoken language as a "lingo in vogue" lends credence to the classification of the dialect as being a *patois* spoken form of communication. In writing out the sounds of the spoken language, writers were changing *patois* from a spoken form to a written form of communication.

Harris acknowledged the fluidity of language within his Introduction when he noted the two different ways in which he used dialect.

The difference between the dialect of the legends and that of the character-sketches, slight as it is, marks the modifications which the speech of the Negro has undergone even where education has played no part in reforming it...the character-sketches...are embodied here for the purpose of presenting a phase of Negro character wholly distinct from that which I have endeavoured to preserve in the legends. (xvii)

He also attempted to describe to the white reader how the songs, legends, and character sketches should be read, betraying his white world view. "As to the songs, the reader is warned that it will be found difficult to make them conform to the ordinary rules of versification, nor is it intended that they should so conform" (xvi).

Clearly, Harris was not expecting black readers as his intended audience; throughout his introduction, Harris referred to African Americans in the third person – talking 'about' them but not 'to' them. He wrote of "the

Negro” and “the race of which Uncle Remus is the type” with no acknowledgement that they might be reading his work. Harris also referred to “the red-men” and “the savage Indians” showing that his white-centred world excluded others, not just the African American. It would seem that Harris felt he was able to show the “Negro character” without acknowledging their humanity and that African American readers might be a part of the audience who read his work.

Surprisingly Joel Chandler Harris has not received the same amount of negative criticism for his portrayal of African American characters as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Helen Bannerman had experienced, although all three writers were white³. Mark Twain praised Harris as the “only master” of “black dialect” in America (Gribben 296). Harris has been praised for his collection of folktales, saving what might have otherwise been forgotten⁴, while at the same time, such critics seem unconcerned with his portrayal of Uncle Remus 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 – and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system” (Harris xvii). While Stowe attempted to show the wrongs of the institution of slavery and Bannerman offered a black hero (Sambo) in her fantasy, Harris embraced “the discipline of slavery” and showed a white supremacist attitude through Uncle Remus.

Walter M. Brasch makes it clear that Harris’ writings are worthy of studying not only because of his significant talent as a writer of dialect, but because his stories reflect shifting United States racial politics. With his life

³ See Chapter Two for more details on Stowe and Bannerman.

⁴ See Bickley 1978; Baer 1981; Hamilton 1987; Callahan 1988; Nigel 1988; and Bascom 1992.

spanning both ante- and post-bellum periods, Harris "continually longed for the rural South of his youth" but also became "a visionary of the `New South'" (Brasch 291). An example of United States racial shift is seen in Harris' first published story about Uncle Remus. These conflicting impulses, according to Brasch, are reflected in Harris' character Uncle Remus, who "learned how to survive slavery and Reconstruction while presenting innumerable views about the nature of mankind" and who "show[ed] the social and geographical confrontations between the 'old' and the 'new' South" (291).

Originally appearing as a short story in the *Atlanta Constitution* on 14 October 1877, "Uncle Remus as a Rebel: How He Saved His Young Master's Life" launched Harris career as a "local color writer" (Montenyohl). In the first version of this story for the paper, Uncle Remus shoots and kills a Yankee sniper who was about to shoot his 'master.' When this story reappears in Harris' collection, now simply called "The Story of the War," Uncle Remus shoots the Yankee sniper but only wounds him, costing the soldier an arm. Uncle Remus and 'Mars Jeems' daughter nurse the soldier back to health; the soldier and the daughter eventually marry. When Miss Theodosia Huntingdon comes to visit her brother, the former soldier, in Georgia in 1870, Uncle Remus is asked to tell about the time he fought in the war. The story comes as a surprise to Miss Huntingdon. The story reflects Harris' construction of an African American who fondly remembers slavery.

"I know'd dat man wuz gwineter shoot Mars Jeems ef he could, en dat wuz mo'n I could stan'. Manys en manys de time dat I nuss dat boy, en hilt 'im in dese arms, en toted 'im on dis back, en w'en I see dat

Yankee lay dat gun 'cross a lim' en take aim at Mars Jeems I up wid my ole rifle, en shet my eyes en let de man have all she had.”

“Do you mean to say,” exclaimed Miss Theodosia, indignantly, “that you shot the Union soldier, when you knew he was fighting for your freedom?”

“Co'se I know all about dat,” responded Uncle Remus, “en it sorter made cole chills run up my back; but w'en I see dat man take aim, en Mars Jeems gwine home ter Ole Miss en Miss Sally, I des disremembered all 'bout freedom en lamed aloose. En den atter dat, me en Miss Sally tuck en nuss de man right straight along. He los' one arm in dat tree bizness, but me en Miss Sally we nuss 'im en we nuss 'im twel he done got well. Des 'bout dat time I quit nuss'n 'im, but Miss Sally she kep' on. She kep' on,” continued Uncle Remus, pointing to Mr. Huntingdon, “en now dar he is.” (213-214)

Uncle Remus could be constructed as almost heroic in saving the Union soldier after shooting him but instead, Harris' construction of Uncle Remus is that of a happy slave. Harris ends this story with the following exchange between Miss Theodosia and Uncle Remus:

“But you cost him an arm,” exclaimed Miss Theodosia.

“I gin 'im dem,” said Uncle Remus, pointing to Mrs. Huntingdon, “en I gin 'im deze” – holding up his own brawny arms. “En ef dem ain't nuff fer enny man den I done los' de way.” (214-215)

Uncle Remus places himself in a position of self-imposed slavery, offering his life to a new master.

This story appeared in each edition of *Uncle Remus His Songs and His Saying* up until 1921. After the 1921 edition, the story is omitted from later collections. The exclusion of this particular story might have to do with its format as a character-sketch rather than part of the folktales. Likewise it might have been dropped by either the publishers of later editions or by the author himself due to its subject matter and presentation of slavery.

While this story substantiates the argument of those critics who contend that Harris supported slavery, Wayne Mixon argues that Joel Chandler Harris did not embrace the institution of slavery and was writing in a subversive vein when he constructed Uncle Remus. Mixon posits that Harris was a writer living in a difficult time period and that Harris' other writings show his true attitudes. Mixon writes:

To understand his difficulties in presenting his iconoclastic views on race, one must remember that Harris was a white man working for a major southern newspaper during the South's most viciously racist era. In that capacity, he sometimes did what was expected of him. Already noted as a humorist when he joined the *Constitution*, he occasionally wrote "darky"⁵ humor in his regular feature "Round-about in Georgia." But he also wrote editorials that blasted northern pessimism over black education, denounced racial prejudice among southern whites, condemned lynching as barbaric, recognized the legitimacy of black suffrage, and attributed black inferiority to environmental rather than racial factors, all the while professing a belief in the existence of a salient South well disposed toward the Negro. (459)

⁵ "'Darky' Humor" refers to jokes made in minstrels when the actors were in black face.

The shifting views on racial politics are seen not only in the editing of Harris' story but also in the various criticisms of Harris' work. Harris was praised for his dialectical features, paving the way for future authors, both black and white, to experiment with dialect as a way to represent the sounds of African American speech.

4.5 Paul Lawrence Dunbar – Dialect and non-dialect writing

African American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906) was another author who used dialect to represent the sounds of speech. Dunbar was "one of the most significant poet [sic] in those literary beginnings" (Abarry, 386). Abarry's inclusion of Dunbar is important in the field of children's literature since Dunbar's collection of poetry for children, *Little Brown Baby* (first collected in 1940) is still held in high regard. Dunbar wrote in both Standard English and in dialect, however it is his dialect poems that made him famous. *Little Brown Baby* included poems in both dialect and standardised English. Dunbar's poems were sometimes heavily dialectical, such as "Dat Ol' Mare O' Mine":

W'en my eyes commence to fail me, dough, I trus'es to huh
sight,

An' she'll tote me safe an' hones' on de ve'y da'kes' night

Dat ol' mare o' mine.

Ef I whup huh, she jus' switch huh tail, an' settle to a walk.

Ef I wup huh mo', she shek huh haid, an' lak ez not, she balk.

But huh sense ain't no ways lackin', she do evah t'ing but talk.

Dat ol' mare o' mine. (59)

However Dunbar also used a mixed approach, using both Standard English and dialect. One such example is “A Corn Song” :

On the wide white veranda white,
In the purple failing light,
Sits the master while the sun is lowly burning;
And his dreamy thoughts are drowned
In the softly slowing sound
Of the corn-song of the field-hands slow returning.

Oh, we hoe de co',
Since de ehly mo'n
Now de sinkin' sun
Says de day is done. (51-52)

The mix of voices via Standard English verse and the dialectical chorus reflect the African American life in the fields as well as a cultural inclusion of African American song. While Dunbar’s work is in a written format, it is not far from the oral traditions. His use of dialect does not denote a lack of intelligence in the poem’s character/voice but instead represents the sounds of African American speech.

Abarry notes that Dunbar’s reputation is “always latched” to Dunbar’s dialect poems and that in such poems, Dunbar “attempts an artistic representation of the life, behavior attitudes, and sentiments of rural African-Americans...” (388). William Dean Howells, the great American promoter of American literature, publisher and author, praised Dunbar’s dialect poems, yet noted:

We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase, but they are really not dialect so much as delightful personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language. He reveals in these a finely ironical perception of the negro's limitations, with a tenderness for them which I think so very rare as to be almost quite new. (Howells)

Howells comment about the “ironical perception of the negro's limitations” as he perceived in Dunbar’s work, shows a changing ideology in literary circles towards African Americans. Howells also calls attention to Dunbar’s skill in representing African Americans in speech. However Dunbar’s dialect, according to Long and Abarry, is “not all that true” (388) even though Dunbar was African American.

Dialect was, in fact, unnatural to Dunbar whose trip to the South came long after the publication of his dialect poems. It seems he drew on the speech that he had heard in his native Ohio and successfully *constructed* a patchwork dialect similar to the idea of African American folk speech in the conception of Northern Whites. (Abarry 389, emphasis mine)

The idea that African American spoken language - *patois* - had to undergo a birthing into a written form becomes an important cultural event when such important writers as Dunbar were making “personal attempts and failures for the written and spoken language” (Howells). The New Negro writers of the Harlem Renaissance rejected Dunbar because of his use of dialect. Kate Capshaw Smith writes:

[H]is mode of dialect writing was absolutely repellent to many New Negro writers, and rejection of Dunbar became a sign of aesthetic

modernity. At the same time, the fact that Dunbar represented a version of the vernacular brought up the issue of black distinctiveness, as writers of adults reinvented the voice of the people in opposition to Dunbar's school of writing. (112-113)

The politics of language become evident because it is through language that a construction of identity is being formed. Dunbar offered a constructed vision of Southern African American-ness to his readers through his dialectical writing.

Although Dunbar's work predates the 1930s, his acceptance by the majority encouraged other writers to write in dialect; yet his rejection by some of the most important authors of the Harlem Renaissance, because of his use of dialect, marks the political issues surrounding language. Such debates about language, both spoken and written, centre on identity and lead to views of "nation" or selfhood; a people without a spoken and written language are a people disempowered. While the linguistic bases of African American speech are contested, the debates concerning use of dialect in speaking and writing are centred on social and political histories. The rejection of Dunbar's work written in dialect by other African American writers signifies such social and political histories. The representation of the spoken language in literature, specifically for this study of the 1930s and due to the lack of a standardised form of written AAVE, is important for social and political reasons. As Smith notes, "Attention to Dunbar allows us to understand how children's writers in the 1920s and 1930s made use of his biography and his verse in order to spearhead their own versions of black identity, southern history, and artistic experimentation" (Smith 113). These constructions were approached through

the African American *patois*, a representation of the spoken language not yet standardised in written form.

4.6 Dialect in Children's Literature

Authors in the 1930s used dialect in three different ways to construct African American childhood. Some authors, such as James S. Tippett, Eva Knox Evans and Langston Hughes chose to stay away from the use of dialect all together. Other authors, like Dunbar, Arna Bontemps, and Julian Meade, used a mix of standardized English and a type of dialect. The third group of authors specify wrote entirely in dialect, specifically Ida M Chubb and Elvira Garner. For the contemporary researcher, the constructs created within the literature offer possible reasons why authors chose to write using these various modes of expression and representation.

There are few authors who chose not to write in African American *patois* when using African American characters. These authors' construct the African American child as a black version of a white child. The small numbers of examples of non-dialect books are heavily didactic in nature, such as the limited vocabulary book *The Picnic* (1936) by James S. Tippett. The three children in this story are going on a picnic and want the rest of the family to join them. The language is stilted and sterile.

Father was picking cotton.

Lily Bell ran to help him.

Junior ran to help him too.

They picked and picked.

Soon the sack was full.

"The sack is full of cotton," said Father.

“Now I can go on the picnic.

I will soon be ready.”

Lily Bell and Junior ran into the house.

They ran to Mother.

“Mother! Mother!” they said.

“We helped pick the cotton.

The sack is full now.

Father can go to the picnic.

He will soon be ready.” (4-5)

This story lacks specific cultural elements to identify it as a story about African American childhood. Without illustration, this story could be about any family, including a white Southern farming family.

The lack of cultural markers in such stories negates a sense of African American identity. This lack of African American-ness is clearly seen in a series of stories written by Eva Knox Evans and illustrated by Eric Berry, *Araminta* (1935), *Jerome Anthony* (1936), and *Araminta's Goat* (1938).

Araminta is a female child who lives in the city with her parents. When Araminta visits her grandparents in the country, she quickly learns the difference between the two locations. This creative but didactic series of books is designed as a way of educating the child reader about life in the city and country, however the race of the characters is only indicated through Eric Berry's illustrations. On 12 May 1935, a particularly interesting review appeared in “The Chicago Tribune.” The unnamed reviewer praises *Araminta*, yet adopts a condescending view of children's literature and life in

the country while expressing his/her view of the use of dialect. The reviewer writes:

Araminta is some six years old and lives in the South. Her idea of bliss is to visit her grandmother on the farm. Gran'ma and gran'pa are simple people living a *primitive and consequently exciting existence*...Nothing anyone does is unusual, but because it is done by two little laughing children to whom the world is new and everything in it is a cause for innocent merriment, *anybody who likes little children and envies them this practically perpetual frame of mind can read the book himself without condescension*. But he would do better to read aloud to some little child.

I have not mentioned so far the fact that everyone in the story is colored. You would not know it save for the pictures, some of the best Erick Berry has drawn. *Colored people no longer talk like Uncle Remus*; Eva Knox Evans, an authority on farm life of Southern Negroes, knows this too well to *mess up her pages with his "dialect."* (Chicago Tribune Review, emphasis mine)

This reviewer completely misses the point that Knox's story is a "blackwash" of a white child's world, i.e. the story features African American characters in order to demonstrate how 'white' African American children might become. While the reviewer comments on the "simple life" on a farm in the South, the practicalities of time and place are missing. The reviewer ends by noting that "Araminta is just a nice little girl who gets a chance to live the simple life, and perhaps one must go to regions primitive as this, and nature as child-like, to find the simple life so sweetly functioning in America." The reviewer's

misconceptions about life in the South and the lives of African Americans in the South during the Great Depression are numerous, including life in the country being “primitive and consequently exciting.” According to the reviewer’s comments, the African American expression of language is here considered a negative aspect; the reviewer’s judgement is that the use of African American *patois* would “mess up” the story. Cultural elements within this first story include Araminta and her grandparents eating okra, greens, sweet potatoes, and watermelon, however, these are all foods eaten in the South by both white and black peoples. As the series continues, an indication that these books are specifically talking about children who are African American is lost. In the second book, *Jerome Anthony*, the character from the country who Araminta meets at her grandparents, visits his auntie and uncle in the city. Jerome Anthony meets Araminta and the two have various adventures in the city such as visiting the zoo, roller-skating, and going to the dentist. In the third and final book *Araminta’s Goat*, the children reunite in the country and have further adventures with Jerome Anthony’s baby sister and Araminta’s goat on her grandparents’ farm.

The didactic goal is achieved in a creative and interesting way in comparison to such books as *The Picnic*. When the children visit the zoo in *Jerome Anthony*, the author introduces the animals to the reader by describing what Jerome Anthony and Araminta view and then allowing the characters to guess at what the animals might be through comparison to animals with which they are already familiar.

They went a little farther until they came to another house that had a yard in front of it. And in the front yard there was a big pool of

water. They looked though the high fence but they didn't see anything. They looked at the house but they didn't see anything either. Then they looked in the pool of water and they *did* see a big grey something. It had a little tiny tail. It had a great big wide snout.

"It would look like a pig," said Jerome Anthony, "if it didn't have such a big wide snout." But it did have a very wide snout, so it wasn't a pig. Araminta looked at the printing sign on the high fence. It said:

H-I-P-P-O-P-O-T-A-M-U-S

"That's a mighty long word," said Araminta shaking her head. "I can't read that."

"My, me," said Jerome Anthony. "I don't seem to know what it says, either."

They were afraid they were going to have to ask Auntie to come and read it for them. But a man in a blue uniform was standing near, and he said: "It's a hippopotamus."

"It's a hippopotamus!" said Araminta to Jerome Anthony.

"It's a hippopotamus!" said Jerome Anthony to Araminta. (54)

In this exchange Evans is constructing her characters as literate beings. The children's ability to read is reinforced throughout this chapter as the children read the various signs at the zoo. However, any cultural element that would mark these characters as African American is not included. Writing the children's speech in vernacular is one aspect that might have been used to better depict the characters if used to construct positive views. The positive aspects of childhood such as friendship between children of the opposite gender, the learning experiences of being in the city/country, and sharing

important aspects of growing up, like birthdays and learning to read, could have all been used to construct a truly African American childhood instead of a neutrally raced childhood with illustration of African American children. The illustrations construct the race of the characters, however, the children in the text could be from any culture. There are no textual clues of any culture, with the possible exception of



Image 4.1
Berry's illustrations of Araminta and Jerome Anthony

city culture and country culture. The illustrations provide a “blackwashing” which falls short; this series of books could have constructed positive images of African American childhood without stereotyping. The author avoids stereotypical perceptions through negative use of dialect, nevertheless the result is a lack of realism from the narrative which employs only Standard English. The utilisation of any dialect, even Southern idioms reflecting the setting of the stories, could have constructed a positive image if authentically portrayed. Araminta, who is from the city, could speak in standardized English but for Jerome Anthony, and even more so, for Araminta’s grandparents to speak in standardized English seems to lack any authenticity – not because they are African American but because they are clearly Southern country folk.

Some authors who chose not to write in dialect, gave their African American characters life. The book *Popo and Fifina* (1932) by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps is heralded as one of the first great examples of

African American children's literature. Previously discussed for its political nature, *Popo and Fifina* is one of the first books to be written without dialect. Hughes and Bontemps placed the story in Haiti, a setting that immediately adjusts the readers' perspective of who the story is about since the book's story location is outside of the United States, as Haiti is located approximately 750 miles southeast of Florida. This book clearly concerns children of African descent, not African American descent. However, the author and reader view the characters from a distance. The opening journey made by the parents and children construct them as a poor but happy black family starting a new chapter in life. Yet Hughes and Bontemps write the narrative in the third person, describing the action of the book via the authorial/narrative voice. The adult voice is clear in tone through the use of an omnipresent third person point of view and themes such as the politics and education (see discussion in Chapter Five).

Bontemps' books, written without Hughes' influence, use limited dialect and include a Standard English speaking narrator. In *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934) Bontemps uses idioms and expressions to help define his African American characters through dialect as well as cultural elements. The main character, Shine Boy, lives with his Aunt Cindy in Alabama. While Aunt Cindy is away working, Shine Boy gets lonely and finds a stray dog to keep him company, much like the plot of *Flop-Eared Hound* (discussed in Chapter Three). Shine Boy gets into trouble when his dog, Butch, is caught by the dogcatcher in 'Bumin'ham' forcing Aunt Cindy to pawn her ring in order to pay the two dollars to free Butch.

Image 4.2
Nancy Green as
Aunt Jemima (1893)



According to her description, Aunt Cindy appears to be a stereotypical mammy character. Bontemps writes, “Her head was tied in a red bandanna handkerchief, and she looked very much like the big black woman whose picture you sometimes see on packages of pancake flour” (2). Bontemps’ reference to the Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix would have encoded an image for his readers (Image 4.2).

Except in character, Aunt Cindy is no mammy. Her family is clearly her first priority, rather than the white families for whom she does laundry. The use of heavier dialect, when Shine Boy first meets Butch the dog, positively constructs this non-nuclear family as realistic and African American. The dialect does not construct Shine Boy as ignorant or lazy. The use of dialect gives feeling and emotion to the story as demonstrated in the way Bontemps wrote the first meeting between Shine Boy and Butch.

“There now, suh,” [Shine Boy] said. “Don’t look at me thata way. How come me and you can’t be friends? Now, now! Don’t be showing me them ole ugly teefs. I’s jes little black Shine Boy, and you ain’t nothing but a ole yellow, no-nation dog. We oughta could be friends. Good ole pup!

My mammy’s gone west and my pappy’s gone east, and I lives wid my old Aunt Cindy. But there’s plenty of room for you too, boy; we got plenty room for you.” (24-25)

Bontemps’ successful use of dialect without degrading his African American character reflects a realism missing from books which avoid the use of dialect. Bontemps’ dialect is not a perfect representation of African American

Vernacular English but is eye dialect, i.e. phonetic spellings to represent the sound of speech yet resemble Standard English spellings (*thata* instead of the *dat'a*)⁶ to allow for easy readability while not interrupting the rhythm of the spoken language as seen in the example above. Unfortunately, not all authors shared Bontemps' attempt to create positive constructs of African American childhood through use of African American *patois*.

A few books with African American child characters who speak in dialect as a negative marker of identity of African Americans characters have been recently researched in Smith (2004) and Martin (2003). Books such as Julian Meade's *Teeny and the Tiny Man* (1937) use dialect pointedly to show the white character as better educated and of a higher class. Andrew Levy claims "dialect often appears as a degrading, 'careless' form of English, replete with clipped syllables, indifferent syntax, and limited (and often misused) vocabulary" (Levy 208). The language skills of the African American 'Mammy' Mandy are clearly constructed as a means of creating both race and class differences. In comparison with the section quoted from *You Can't Pet a Possum*, the author of *Teeny and the Tall Man* is clearly using Mandy's speech, written in dialect, to construct her as ignorant and literally, lazy.

"Pete and Mandy are too lazy to swim," Alice said.

Mandy was sitting in a rocking chair in the shade.

"I's too old an' fat to swim," Mandy replied "I ain't lazy."

"Didn't I tell you Mandy says 'ain't'?" Teeny giggled to Mr. Jones.

(*Teeny and the Tall Man* 18)

And later in the story:

⁶ See Rickford, John R. African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications (1999).

“If I fuss and, whine, grumble, pout, and all those things, may I stay in the country?” Alice asked.

Just then big black Mandy came into the room.

“No, honey chile, you can’t stay here no longer. We’s gonna be in New Yawk to-morrer mawnin’. We ain’t gonna be here no mo’ till spring. We sure ain’t. So you jus’ as well make up yo’ mind to stan’ all them crowds of peoples an’ all them subways an’ high buildings makes my head swim. Yes, honey chile, we ain’t gonna be here no mo’ till spring.”

“Naughty Mandy!” cried Teeny with glee. “Always saying ‘ain’t.’”

“Don’ be frettin’ an’ worr’in’ as long as I doesn’t say no worsen ‘ain’t.’ There ain’t no tellin’ what I’ll say when I get up there in New Yawk...Lan’ sakes, New Yawk is a sight in this world. But honey, I wish these here country niggers could see me when I rides up Fi’th Avenue in a taxicab. (39-40)

Notice that Teeny mocks Mandy *with glee*. Mandy is constructed as lower class and unintelligent, even as she attempts to defend herself claiming she is fat but not lazy and better than ‘country niggers.’ The author uses Mandy as a mouthpiece not only to construct Mandy as less equal but also as less than white.

This sort of negative use of vernacular difference caused various reactions in the 1940s, which was reflected in the library policy to remove books written in dialect. The 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, located in the heart of Harlem, was the largest collection and best-

used library by African Americans. Augusta Baker, children's librarian, storytelling specialist, assistant coordinator of children's services, and coordinator of children's services for over thirty-five years at the 135th Street Branch, wrote in 1946 that besides considering theme and illustration in choosing books, language must also be "scrutinized" (Baker 3). Baker continued, "The use of heavy dialect...is too difficult for the child to read and understand, and since often it is not authentic, but has been created by the authors themselves, it is misleading" (Baker 3). This removal of books written in dialect reinforced the general idea, first embraced by the New Negro writers during the Harlem Renaissance, that the use of dialect creates negative constructs of African American childhood.

The authors of children's literature in the 1930s with African American characters who used a Standard English narrator were following writing conventions already used by authors of adult literature. The contemporary literary authors John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford argue that early dialect black writing occurred most often in poetry "but when it came to black prose writers, the vernacular was restricted largely to dialogue" (20). They also claim that there are "strikingly few cases" in which "black fiction writers have extended the vernacular to narrative text" citing the short story "Tell Martha Not to Moan" (1967) by Shirley Anne Williams as one of the earliest examples.

Ida M. Chubb and Elvira Garner published fully vernacular children's literature offering constructs of African American childhood although neither author was African American. Although Chubb's problematic title, *Little Pickaninnies* (1929), would lead many to reject this book as a negative

construct of African American childhood, Chubb includes poems written in dialect that construct the African American child as having the same hopes as a white child. An example of this construction is found in her poem "Disappointment."

Ah's been goin' to Sunday School

To git in on the tree;

An' jes' look wot ol' Santa Claus

Pulled off and gib to me.

An' Ah did want a train ob cars

Dat would run on a track

But he give me ol' sour oyange,

An' dis dumb jumpin' jack!

Li'l black boys sho' does lak presents

De same as if dey's white.

Ah don't think dat ol' Santa Claus

Treated me zackly right. (16)

By comparing the dreams about Christmas gifts hoped for by white and African American children, Chubb points out the shared dreams and desires of American Christian childhood regardless of race and class. The small African American child who is 'speaking' this poem is realising that Santa Claus is not treating him fairly. From the adult reader's perspective, it is clear that Santa is not real and that the church the boy is attending is providing the gifts. The poor economic situation is the apparent reason for why the child

receives an old sour orange and a jumping jack as gifts. The hoped-for train is too expensive a gift for the church members to afford. The African American child is portrayed as mature in his realisation of racial issues in the comparison of his dreams to that of a white child and yet he is still child-like in his belief in Santa. Likewise the illustration of this boy holding his orange and jumping jack shows a child who is young but old enough to understand the reasons why Santa did not treat him “zackly right.” (Image 4.3)



Image 4.3
Ida Chubb's "Disappointment"

Elvira Garner wrote two chapter books in full dialect called *Ezekiel* (1937) and *Ezekiel Travels* (1938). Garner does not use a narrator who speaks Standard English but writes in full dialect, making these books difficult to decode in order to read. However, Garner avoids utilising dialect as a means of constructing African American children (and their parents) in stereotypical ways. The description of the Ezekiel's mother trying to get her children washed cleaned and ready to attend church is reminiscent of my childhood and the battles my mother had getting my siblings and myself sorted before attending service. Garner writes:

Away down in Sanford, Florida, one Sunday mawnin', all de cullerd folks wuz fixin' to turn out to meetin' at de Zion Hope Church. Mammy hotten a big kittle er water an' git de wash tub, an' de Octagon soap – an' she give all de chillum a good 'elping'g'. Lil' Plural git soap in he eye, an' he squall so loud, Mammy say she fixin' to quit 'elping' *anybody* get clean an' decent. She say hit look lak dat jist *once* in a

week dey could all wash up an' git whole clo's on widout ackin' lak dey gone wil'. But when Lil' Plural git on he new britches an' lil' white cap, Mammy say he look so nice she reckon hit wuth de worryation. Emancipation got a new dress an' Ezekiel got a nice red necktie. Assafetida got some new britches, too. Mammy say fer 'em all to go ober to Unc' Adam Joshua's house an' be quiet an' god so dey keep clean 'twell she git ready to go." (n. pag.)

The story of a mother getting her children cleaned and dressed portrays realism in many families. Critic Michelle Martin claims that "Garner emphasizes both their superstition and – through interspersing their impromptu songs throughout the text – their affinity for singing and happiness despite their ignorance and poverty" (42). Martin includes Bontemp's *You Can't Pet A Possum* in her research but only as an endnote. She seemingly disregards the superstitious beliefs and happy attitudes despite the family poverty portrayed by Bontemps, yet criticises Garner for including such elements. While acknowledging Martin's assessment, I have demonstrated above that Garner also provides realities unseen in other books and does not use dialect as a means to make her characters ignorant as in Julian Meade's *Teeny and the Tall Man*.

Garner's use of dialect throughout the two books destabilises stereotypical assumptions about happy Blacks in the South and demonstrates the realities of being Black in the South. Ezekiel is forced to face such realities in his adventures. One of the most striking examples of the realities faced by characters in *Ezekiel Travels* is when Ezekiel wants to see the glass bottomed boat.

Man say dey wuz lookin' at de fairyland'. Ezekiel say, "Ah sho' wisht Ah could see hit!" De man say dish'ere wuz a white folks boat, but if'n he want to mek a dime he could tek a rag an' polish up de boat whilst he go git a bite to eat. Ezekiel tuk de rag an' polish and dus' good lak Mammy done taught 'im how. An' den he see de flo'er er de boat was made er glass! (n. pag.)

By boldly stating the dominant culture's view in black dialect, that a African American boy can only have a place on the boat if he is a worker, Garner is destabilising the ideology of white culture concerning African American childhood. The use of dialect is essential to this destabilisation process, especially when taking the time period into account. Jim Crow laws in the South existed to belittle African Americans and to keep African Americans submissive. Garner's work reveals the harsh conditions which African Americans had to endure using dialect as a element of realism.

An emphasis on writing in dialect by some authors became important because the Harlem Renaissance fostered a new literary influence; the written word was replacing the oral tradition. As critic Katherine Capshaw Smith comments:

The child growing up during the Harlem Renaissance was increasingly sensitive to the power of the printed word; as education became increasingly available and culturally significant, the black child entered a space where written records superseded the oral, where stories and histories reproduced by a white publishing establishment displaced accounts of her or his own people... The children of the period learned

the power of textual representation and its ability to legitimate versions of history. (Smith, "Constructing" 40)

This movement from an oral to a written tradition suggests a turning point not only in literature but also in the politics surrounding the representation of spoken language. Viewing African American speech dialects as *patois* allows written literature in dialect to be considered as a process in stabilising the spoken African American *patois* into the written African American Vernacular English. In using dialect to positively construct and reflect the speech patterns of African Americans living in the 1930s, authors were using dialect as a means of expression for conveying black experiences, such as Ezekiel's experiences in the glass boat.

Dialect was also important to at least one child reader. Librarian and author Eleanor Weakley Nolan⁷ reported an encounter with one young library patron in 1942:

To one nine-year-old boy...I gave Evan's *Jerome Anthony*. It would seem incredible that this book could offend and colored child, yet he, usually talkative, returned it in disapproving silence and made instantly for the door. I stopped him and asked his opinion of the book, and I shall never forget the look of deep humiliation which came over his face. "That Jerome Anthony, he's ashamed he's colored," he muttered. I protested, and he burst out, "He talk like white folks, he

⁷ Nolan wrote a children's book called *A Shipment for Susannah* (1938). This book was not included in this study because although its publication date was 1938, the setting of the story was in the "peaceful days after the Revolution" on General Washington's Mt. Vernon farm. The main character is Susannah, a slave girl, although the word 'slave' is not used. Susannah is Washington's granddaughter Nellie Custis' "little maid." The inside flap of the cover states, "Because both girls were born on the same day, Susannah was Nellie's special friend and servant, and she was very, very proud of this honor." Although this book was interesting and its analysis would have been insightful, I found no other such works of historical fiction published in the 1930s for an African American audience. Works that dealt with the past were written as non-fictional works.

acts like white folks, he go riding to the *dentist* in a *car!*" (qtd. in Tolson, 13)

This one nine-year-old child perceived that that language he spoke, and the life he knew, was not reflected in a book intended for him. While written dialect was difficult for writers to represent authentically and for some readers to read, according to Augusta Baker, books written in dialect were important in reflecting the reader's language. The realism of dialect was necessary to replicate the reader's social and cultural world.

According to Gavin Jones by the late nineteenth century ethnic dialects provided American writers with "a voice for social commentary and political satire" and writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar valued dialect for its realism as well as "its power to structure a political response to larger social, cultural and racial issues" (Jones 20). Janet Ruth Heller claims, "Such writing implies resistance to the dominant culture, destabilizes the privileged dialect/discourse, and portrays "subversive voices" that present "alternative versions of reality" (279). In *All About Patsy* (1930) by Mary Phipps, the white child Patsy adopts African American speech when she says, "I'm really a lonesome chile..."(4). Although it is only this brief comment in which Patsy speaks in African American dialect, it subverts the self-proclaimed hierarchy of Standard English language. Positive use of African American dialect in children's literature plants those same seeds, offering subversive voices and destabilizing the majority white view.

The dialect used in African American children's literature during the 1930s was an experiment in literature and language. Authors were attempting to write what they heard. The ways of using dialect to construct

African American childhood were varied; some methods were successful and other methods were not. Each attempt at writing a language, which had no proscriptive rules at the time it was produced, created space for such work to be expanded and eventually standardised. This process of making space for other languages and dialects to be expressed in written form was also important to the development of African American identity. The positive uses of dialect in African American children's literature in the 1930s, as rare and distinctive as they are, were important steps in the development of African American childhood and African American status as full American citizens. Einar Haugen noted, "Nation and language have become inextricably intertwined. Every self-respecting nation has to have a language. Not just a medium of communication, a "vernacular" or a "dialect," but a fully developed language. Anything less marks it as underdeveloped" (927). He later says, "It is a significant and probably crucial requirement for a standard language that it be written" (929). Haugen refers to the work of Heinz Kloss who suggested that there is a "typical profile" for the written development of a language.

First comes its use for purely humorous or folkloristic purposes. Then lyric writers may adopt it, followed by prose writers. But it has not reached a crucial stage of development until success is achieved in writing serious expository prose...Beyond this comes the elaboration of the language for purposes of technical and government use. Each of these "domains" (as Fisher [1964] has called them) constitutes a challenge for the language in its attempt to achieve full development. (qtd. in Haugen, 930)

African American Vernacular English has followed and is following this path. Joel Chandler Harris used it in the form of African American *patois* for humorous and folkloristic purposes. Lyrical writers included those who wrote blues and spiritual songs as well as poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar. Prose writers of African American children's literature from the 1930s were making attempts to write AAVE for children – some failed whereas others succeeded. Successful authors interested in representing speech patterns and not using dialect as stereotypical shorthand helped the development of the written form of African American speech. AAVE has benefited from interest and research starting in the 1960s, which continues today. The Ebonics debate in Oakland is symptomatic of the continuing growth of African American language from a *patois* to AAVE and beyond. Each “domain” truly is a struggle. The struggle has to have a beginning. The constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s as established through written dialect were a step in the process of change and a better treatment of African American characters in children's literature.

Chapter Five

Defining Larger Spheres of Influence via Literary Constructs of African American Childhood in the 1930

Literature... is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most reliable of terms in which man names and transforms himself.

Paul De Man

5.1 Introduction

In the two previous chapters, literary representations of African American childhood in the 1930s were identified in various ways through characterization, illustration, and dialect in both text and illustration. The focus of such literature centred on constructing the African American child by providing various identities, including the subservient 'slave' child to the independent free thinking child. Authors of children's literature did not only construct the African American child character; at times, certain authors attempted to change the spheres of influence that affected the African American child. In this chapter, I will analyse African American childhood within the context of the 1930s, noting how literary representations of African American childhood were used by authors to express their views on politics and economics, migration and education, and finally how African American culture was represented in non-fictional works.

In Chapter One, I argued that all writing is a political act. In this chapter, blatant politicised writing in texts intended for children in the 1930s reflect the spheres of influence that effected both the intended child reader and of the adult producer. The major events of the 1930s – political shifts towards communism; the poor economy during the Great Depression; the

Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and from the country to the city; lack of equality in white schools and black school, city school and country schools (see Chapter One) – were all expressed in children’s literature in the 1930s, using the construct of African American childhood as a means of expressing worldviews and authorial ideology.

5.2 Politics and the Construction of African American Childhood

In Carolyn Sherwin Bailey’s *Li’l Hannibal* (1938) all of the main characters in her book are animals except the child character Li’l Hannibal. Bailey uses this familiar ploy in order to convey political ideology expressed through the characters interaction. Bailey constructs a forest in which everyone does their job except Li’l Hannibal, who has run away into the forest to avoid the work his “gran’mammy” asked him to do. In this collective forest, which appears Marxist in the overall approach, everyone does their part for the common good. Li’l Hannibal learns his lesson by being denied food since he did not contribute to the labour of growing, gathering, or cooking the meal. Bailey writes:

[They] all scrambled to their places at the table and Li’l Hannibal tried to find a place to sit at, but there wasn’t any for him.

‘Po’ Li’l Hannibal!’ said Br’er Rabbit as he poured out the soup.

“Doesn’t like to work. Cyan’t have no supper!” (n. pag.)

Read in the context of the political influences of the time, this story can be viewed in two ways. To the white audience, this book serves to reinforce a racist status quo in which the African American child performs his assigned role. This book serves to parallel other books of the time that depict the white

child as adventuresome and playful while their African American counterpart works to serve others. (There is no white child character in Bailey's text.) If the African American knows his/her place and does not step out of line, then there is no hardship. From a Marxist perspective, this story demonstrates how all workers must continue to do their part in order to share the benefits of an equal society. Either view constructs the African American as a worker and little more than 'slave' since the plantation work/sharecropping was divided in similar ways.

Promotion of the Communist Party as the political party founded on Marxist ideology was evident in books in the early 1930s. For many African Americans, especially those in Harlem, the political party that seemed to address their needs was the Communist Party. Communist activities during the 1930s have been widely discussed in various scholarly works.¹ Alan Wald states "From the early 1920s until the late 1950s, the U.S. Communist movement was a significant pole of attraction in African American political and cultural life" (716). Leftist leanings were common in literary circles including such children's authors as Margert Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon* (1947).² Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps's *Popo and Fifina* (1932), considered to be one of the first African American children's books written by African American authors (Harris, "First 100 Years" 545), is a vivid example of politicised children's literature.

In *Popo and Fifina*, Communist leanings are expressed through the text in hidden ways. While appearing as "child's play," political debates about Haiti surface in the Chapter Eight when Papa Jean makes a kite for Popo.

¹ For recent writings see Dawahare c2003; Ransby c2003; Naison c1983; Kelley 1990; Smethurst 1999; Maxwell 1999; Baldwin 2002.

² For more information, see Leonard Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened By the Moon* (1992).

Like the symbol of the Soviet Union's Red Army, the Popo's kite is star shaped and red. Hughes and Bontemps write:

This kite was a dream...What could anybody say who saw a great red star rising from the white beach in the daytime? It was just beautiful to look at...But Fifina knew that Popo's kite was not a real star. It just looked like a star and made her think of one. (55-57)

In the text, the kite "sings," purrs, and the children have "great fun" until an enemy kite appears. The political ideology expressed in the narrative becomes clear when taken in the context of the situation in Haiti at the time of the publication. Unites States Marines had illegal control of Haiti for the previous twenty years since the treaty was never ratified by the Unites States Senate. For many, the Marines were seen as an invading force. Haiti was a predominately black nation with an "unrivalled historical and symbolic value as the only independent black republic (despite the presence of the Unites States Marines) in the Western Hemisphere" (Rampersad, 105). Hughes, having lived in Haiti for three months, would have known of Haiti's successful fight against "European Imperialism, the defeat of the French army, and the establishment of the republic" (ibid, 105). The story clearly demonstrates the political views of the two authors via a kite battle by children on a Haitian beach:

Presently Popo looked up and saw that there was another kite in the air. When had this second kite risen? Who was flying it? And what did the stranger mean anyhow by cutting in on Popo and Fifina? There were other places to fly kites. But the strange kite, a dull brown thing, rode the wind just as gaily as did Popo's. It ducked and darted

about so wildly that Popo feared it would become entangled with his own string. It reminded him of a hawk swooping over a smaller bird.

A moment later, something happened. The big brown hawk-kite got across Popo's string, and began ducking and darting more than ever. About that time Popo caught sight of the boy who held the string. It was clear that the fellow was very proud of his rude misbehaving kite. He was jerking the cord and plainly trying to saw across Popo's string and cut it loose. It was an old game, and Popo knew something about it. Mischievous boys often cut the strings of innocent youngsters, causing them to lose their kites in the sea. But Popo had confidence in the kite Papa Jean had made for him. He believed his big red star-kite was a match for any hawk...[Popo's] kite pulled and sang as steadily as ever; but the other one, the hawk, was falling to the earth like an evil bird with a broken wing. Down, down, down it sank. A moment or two later it dropped into the ocean. Popo's big red star climbed the sky proudly, a true conqueror." (58-59)

Gretchen Schwarz notes in her review of *Popo and Fifina* which was republished in 1993:

This simple tale of peasant life is told through Popo's eyes. The eight-year-old boy loves flying kites but also loves learning to be a woodworker and contributing to his family. The language is poetic and offers beautiful descriptions of Haiti. First published in 1932, the story is idealized and poverty is romanticized. Still, no reader can finish without thinking of Haitians as humans, not just newspaper headlines. (36)

The acknowledgement that the authors treat Haitians “as humans, not just headlines” by this modern reviewer acknowledges the political leanings of the book. The humanity expressed in *Popo and Fifina* clearly marks this text as a favourable construction of African American childhood, albeit a politicised childhood. Popo, the male child character, is especially constructed as an independent child who roams the area investigating whatever strikes his fancy. Noting this construction of the independent politicised child, Julia L. Mickenberg writes:

It is certainly no stretch to call the book’s protagonists proletarian, and while the book’s politics are quite subtle, the story offers a radical critique of labor practices, of the dominant racial ideology, and of American economic policy, and it presents a model of autonomous, free-thinking children. (79)

Mickenberg claims the “politics are quite subtle,” yet the transparency with which Hughes writes is anything but subtle. While agreeing with Mickenberg’s overall view of *Popo and Fifina*, there are certain elements that she does not discuss which are important to the analysis of this text. Most noteworthy is the setting in Haiti; the setting of *Popo and Fifina* is clearly located outside the United States. Hughes, who had lived in a number of different locations in the United States, also lived in Mexico (with his father), and travelled to Europe and Africa as a steward on a freighter. After completing his education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Hughes travelled to Haiti in 1930. It is not all that surprising then that Hughes second children’s book was set in Haiti.³

What is surprising is the fact that the first African American children’s book

³ Hughes first book, *The Dream Keeper*, was published in the same year as *Popo and Fifina*. *The Dream Keeper* is a collection of poems for children. Therefore, most critics maintain that *Popo and Fifina* is the key text of this time.

denies the American-ness of the authors and at least a portion of the intended readers. Only those of Caribbean descent would recognize the setting as a homeland. Therefore, two of the greatest adult writers of the Harlem Renaissance appeared to miss an opportunity to speak for the homeland of the African American child.

5.2 Location and the Construction of African American Childhood

The location of setting in African American texts in the 1930s becomes a way to express aspects of regionalism. It is of interest to note that just as the African American community in Harlem found itself divided into three segments – the “natives” from the city and from the South, and the “foreigners” from the Caribbean – African American children’s books from the 1930s echo these same divisions but offer “cross-overs” between the divisions. The differences between city living and farm living is the basis for a number of books including a three book series by Eva Knox Evans which was previously mentioned – *Araminta* (1935), *Jerome Anthony* (1936), and *Araminta’s Goat* (1938) - in which one child from the city visits the child in the country and visa versa. Arna Bontemps’ *Sad-Faced Boy* (1937) is another example of a migration story in which three boys, Willie, Slumber, and Rags, run away to Harlem, only to find that after they have lived the city life in Harlem, what they miss is “riding on a load of cotton, all nice and soft,” and in the end, they decide to return “back down home to Alabama” (115-116).

Leaving the South was a common event since the population of African Americans had been migrating north to cities since the turn of the century.

Before 1900, nine out of every ten African Americans lived in the southern States. The Library of Congress notes:

In the early decades of the twentieth century, movement of blacks to the North increased tremendously. The reasons for this "Great Migration," as it came to be called, are complex. Thousands of African-Americans left the South to escape sharecropping, worsening economic conditions, and the lynch mob. They sought higher wages, better homes, and political rights. ("The African-American Mosaic")

The migration out of the South explains the skewed statistics recorded concerning the effects of the depression in the South. In the Southern rural areas of the United States the statistics claim that three percent of the African American population were on relief compared to the 3.8% of whites in the same area (Bergman 460). This statistic would seem to claim that the Southern rural African American was not hard pressed by the depressed economic state. Bergman notes that the opposite is true:

The Depression hit the Southern Negroes in agriculture the hardest. Two-thirds of the Southern Negroes were sharecroppers or wage laborers. In 1930, 1,112,510 Negroes were employed as agriculture laborers. By 1940 this figure had dropped to 780, 312. Of the Negroes 13.1% were owners or managers, in contrast to 42.4% of the whites in Southern Agriculture. (448)

The severity of the Depression in the South caused African Americans without land to leave their homes to search for something better. They had no choice but to migrate. Most of the stories in the South of African Americans who stayed or migrated during the Depression are not written until after the Civil

Rights Movement (1955-1965); a sample of such African American children's literature is discussed in Chapter 6.

The harsh economical situation of African Americans in both the country and the city is reflected in fictional and non-fiction books for children in the 1930s which are written in softer tones. Often the plot centres on parents who are missing due to economical hardship. In Ellis Credle's *Little Jeemes Henry* (1936), the opening chapter underscores the financial hardships and the affect such hardship had on Jeemes Henry's family. Credle writes:

Little Jeemes Henry lived with his Pappy and his Mammy in a little house in the middle of a white cotton patch. Jeemes Henry played all day long while his Pappy worked in the field and his Mammy kept the house.

Then one day his Pappy came in from the field. "Mammy," said he, "Ah cain't make no cash money on dis farm. Ah wants to go off and gits myself a job and make a pocketful of money. Reckon you can carry on de farm by yo'self for a while?"

"Reckon Ah kin," said Mammy. "Jeemes Henry, he's a smart boy, he kin help me."

And so Pappy packed his suitcase and away he went to get a job and make a pocketful of money for Mammy and little Jeemes Henry. " (3)

There is no mention of the fears or concerns a child might have with his father leaving. In fact, Jeemes Henry later finds his father in a cage at the circus, dressed as "The Wild Man of Borneo." Jeemes Henry sits inside the cage with his "wild" father and waits for his cousin to return to take him home with

no puzzlement or judgement about his father's job, and no sense of embarrassment at what his father has had to resort to doing in order to earn money for the family. Some book plots, such as in Jeemes Henry, centre on the father leaving the family and the means by which the family copes with the loss of the father's physical presence. In *The Pickanny Twins* (1931) by Lucy Fitch Perkins, Job, a boy of eight, is expected to take care of his twin brother and sister who are five. He must be the caregiver since his mother works outside the home. Perkins writes:

[Mammy] bent over the bed and gave Job a little shake. "Hey you, Job, "she said, "open yo' eyes, honey! Mammy done got you some nice co'n-bread and 'lasses for yo' breakfus'."

Job rolled over and blinked sleepily.

"Come along now, honey," coaxed Mammy, "'case I'se got to go up to de big house dis mawnin'. Ol' Miz Lizbeth, she's gittin' ready for company. I got to he'p her, an' you is 'bliged to be a good boy an' mind dem Twins ontwel I gits back."

"Is you gwine to be gone all day, Mammy?" asked Job. He looked so mournful when he said this that Mammy Jinny gave him a little hug.

"Specs I is, honey," she said, "but you is a mighty big boy now, an' I put 'dependence on you now yo' pappy is away..." (10-11)

Lucy Fitch Perkins does not included the father's departure from the family in her text. However, Perkins informs the reader of the family situation shortly before the above quote when she writes, "There were not any clothes for the children's father on the [clothes] line, because he had gone away up North to

seek his fortune and had not come back” (9). Perkins never brings the father back nor does she include any foreshadowing that he will ever return. Many books with country settings leave out the parental departure and construct the child’s world sans parents; the parental role is usually replaced by an aunt or an uncle. Although the loss of the parent/s is a tangible aspect to the plot, it is usually a means by which the author frees the child from adult control.

The contrast between city and country in these books adds to the overall constructs of African American childhood. By placing a child from the country in a city setting or a child from the city in a country setting, authors can educate the child character in relation to different jobs, social settings, and general knowledge (such as the benefit being street wise versus knowing how to plant a field of cotton, etc.). While specific analysis of these texts appears in the following chapter, the historical connection to migrational movements of the African American population in the early twentieth century is reflected in such stories. There is a pedagogical practicality in providing stories about moving between settings. In using setting in such ways, authors were able to write didactically while adding a sense of adventure into the plot. In keeping with this sense of practicality, most stories set in the South were titled to show their particular place. *Junior: a colored boy of Charleston* by Eleanor Lattimore (1938), *Little Cumsee in Dixie* by Halsa Allison Kyser (1938), *Animal Tales from the Old North State* by Lucy Cobb (1938) (the Old North State refers to the state of North Carolina) are a few examples.

5.4 Education and the Construction of African American Childhood

Education is used as a theme seen many times in children's literature but was a dangerous topic in the 1930s due to growing feelings of disappointment and resentment caused through the unfair practice of segregation, especially in the Southern States where Jim Crow laws were in existence. For the child, school operates as the social world in which children move and participate, or chose not to participate. School is a sphere which exists outside the home and as such, authors used school as a way for children to experience the world around them since going to school equated the child's first step away from home and out into the surrounding world, while still having the safety of home to which the child could return. Authors used school as an environment in which wider issues which affected childhood could be discussed, including the laws stating schools should be "separate but equal."

Education is an institution of society and as such was easily politicised since it requires taxpayers' money in the public United States education system. Education in the Southern United States in the 1930s was very much a "political cause." This cause was controlled by politicians who decided which schools were given federal and state monies as well as how much money schools received.

Eva Knox Evans the author of *Key Corner* (1938) constructs African American childhood by establishing it within an educational setting that is heavily burdened with the politics of the 1930s. Mildred Taylor does the same in her first Logan book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976). Although these two authors write in very different time periods, their two texts compared side by side demonstrate the placement of politics in education settings. This

discussion of Taylor's work foreshadows fuller analysis of her work and that of other authors writing after the Civil Rights Movement in 1965 found in the following chapter, Chapter Six.

In both *Key Corner* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, there are a number of relevant life changing events that are connected to school, yet neither book is primarily about going to school. Each author utilises the school environment to deal with wider issues of childhood. *Key Corner* is a relatively little known text published in 1938. This text centres on Johnnie as the main character and a number of his neighbours, many of whom are also his classmates. Evans uses Georgia as the setting her book and elaborates not only educational practices in the South as compared to the North, but the way of life for African Americans. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* written almost 40 years later also centres on the way of life in the Deep South in the 1930s. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) was the first of five books chronicling the history of the Logan family.

The similarities in these two books heighten their differences. Both Evans and Taylor begin their books by providing their characters with a privileged upbringing. Both families are landowners, a rarity in the South for African Americans as noted in Chapter One. Evans notes Johnnie's privileged African American childhood in Chapter Two when Johnnie comments about the crops of cotton still in the fields while on his way to the cotton gin.

“We must have gotten our cotton in the first of anybody,”
[Johnnie] remarked. “Sure are some lazy people around here.”

“We’re the first to get our cotton picked because we’re the only ones to work our own land,” his father argued. “It’s a long sight easier to work for yourself. If we had to work for the white folks, we’d be late too I reckon. It’s no picnic, working your fingers to the bone and then find out in the end your owe more’n you made.” (21-22)

Johnnie’s lack of understanding allows Evans to educate the reader as well as Johnnie. When Johnnie comments that his family is “pretty lucky to be owning” their own land, his father quickly corrects him.

“Not so much luck,” Mr. Heath said indignantly. “Not unless you call scrimping and slaving day and night, luck...But when I catch sight of our fields in the early morning, with the sun shining bright-like on them, I’m sure glad we did it.” (22)

The Logan family in Taylor’s book share the same privilege of owning land and they must work to pay the mortgage and keep their land. Land owning is a part of the construction of childhood in denoting place. Evan and Taylor are freeing their characters from being concerned with the basic necessities of life by providing this privilege to their characters. Both stories are realistic enough to include discussion about the hard times but the Logan children and Johnnie are freed from that struggle of daily survival however, their fellow classmates at school are not.

Evans provides an example of child who was not as privileged as Johnnie. Carmichael is one of Johnnie’s friends. Carmichael’s father is a sharecropper and the poverty of the family is in stark contrast to Johnnie and his friend from New York, Ellen. Johnnie and Ellen are hulling peas when a

chicken runs past them. Carmichael and one of his sisters, Crytie follow after. After they catch the hen, Johnnie asks where they are taking the hen.

“I’m selling her, biy.” Carmichael meant the chicken. “I’m so hungry I would eat her myself, but the insurance man comes today and we’ve got to have fifty cents to pay him.”

“Didn’t you have any lunch?” asked Ellen, worriedly.

“Not much,” admitted Carmichael. “There wasn’t much to have. Crytie and Cistie and C. Matilda had the grits left over from breakfast. Camilla and Clarissa and Caroline had a piece of side meat. But Mama and Daddy and I, we just had a piece of corn pone.” Carmichael sighed. “I wish I could eat this old hen. I could just about eat her raw, I reckon. I could just about eat her, feathers and all, I’m that hungry.”

(32-33)

In contrast Johnnie and Ellen never have to worry about food and are able to go to school when it was in session and to have other adventures, such as hearing Mr. Asa’s stories from the slave days.

In *Roll of Thunder*, Taylor provides both a white and black example of the poverty during the Depression of the 1930s. The reader is introduced to TJ, a classmate of Stacy, the oldest male child in the Logan family. TJ is described as a “tall, emaciated-looking boy” with no shoes, “patched and worn” clothing and a “frail frame.” Jeremy, a white boy who throughout the entire Logan series books befriends the Logan children, is also the son of a sharecropper and is noted as having no shoes and has a very pale, unhealthy look. Throughout Taylor’s works, there are families who are one bad crop away from starving.

The privileged background of Johnnie and the Logan children does not extend to the type of schooling they receive. The shortened school year was a reality for even those children lucky enough to be in a land owning family. Johnnie rides past his “one room unpainted school” (23) on his way home from the cotton gin. Evans notes:

School for Johnnie would begin tomorrow. It had been in session ever since September, but most of the boys and girls couldn't go until the cotton was picked and the peas were put into their bushel bags. November was the real beginning of school for almost everyone at Key Corner. (23)

Likewise Taylor makes the same point about the school year when she writes:

Most of the students were from families that sharecropped on Granger land, and the others mainly from Montier and Harrison plantation families. Because the students were needed in the fields from early spring when the cotton was planted until after most of the cotton had been picked in the fall, the school adjusted its terms accordingly, beginning in October and dismissing in March. But even so, after today [the first day of school] a number of the older students would not be seen again for a month or two, not until the last puff of cotton had been gleaned from the fields, and eventually most would drop of school altogether. (10-11)

Author David Eugene Conrad in *Forgotten Farmers* (1965) supports the fiction found in these two books with facts. Conrad writes:

Tenants worked from dawn till dusk, or from “can to can't” as they said in the Arkansas Delta...Children began working in the fields when they

were six...Tenant children attended school sporadically in schools which were usually open less than half the year. Throughout the rural South, schools were customarily closed during the cotton picking season. The average attendance of the children of 349 tenants in Arkansas was only 3.8 months in 1934. (15)

Not only was the term time shorter but the actual furnishings of the school were stark in contrast. Taylor has no fear of mentioning such differences when she notes that Jefferson Davis County School, named after the President of the Confederate States of American – the States that separated from the Union and were the side fighting for the right to keep slavery in the Civil War – was a long white painted building with sports fields and two yellow buses to transport the students. Taylor notes:

In the very center of the expansive front lawn, waving red, white, and blue with the emblem of the Confederacy emblazoned in it's upper left-hand corner was the Mississippi flag. Directly below it was the American flag. (10)

In the next paragraph, Great Faith Elementary and Secondary School, the school for black students, is also described in detail. It consisted of four weather-beaten wooden houses on stilts of brick for 320 students. The caretaker's cow clipped the crabgrass lawn. For most of the students, the journey to school was an hour's walk since no bussing was provided. This fictional story is rife with factual elements included not to shock the reader but to explain the realities of Southern schooling: "Hundreds of one-room Negro schools had no windows or desks. While most white children in rural areas

could ride to school in buses, most Negro and some white students had to walk” (Conrad 15).

What is interesting to note in these two texts is that Evans’ book, published in 1938, segregates white and black education by not mentioning white schooling in any way. Instead, Evans notes the differences in education in the North as compared to the South. Evan’s character Johnnie hears of the great and wonderful schools for African American children in the North from Ellen, a sickly child who has moved in with her grandparents in the South to better her health. Johnnie is convinced that Ellen would not like his school in the South since

she’s all the time talking about what they have in the North – things to paint with and maps on the walls for their geography, and tables and chairs instead of desks and benches. They even got white folks teaching colored children up there...It’s not like any school I ever heard tell of. (23-24)

Furthermore, Evans adds the character of old Mr. Asa, a former slave, to tell of the ways in which he attempted to learn to read. The children’s real life education is through Mr. Asa’s stories about the slave days and also the time shortly after the war. Mr. Asa relates to the children about the time a white woman from the North came to teach them and how she was warned to “quit teaching or get out of town”(46). The teacher moved location and “the little children would wrap their readers and their old blue back spellers and the little old pieces of slate they found, in old clothes for all the world like they was carrying washes, and they would creep up those steps to that second floor room and lie flat on their stomachs while they did their learning...”(47). Mr.

Asa continues the narrative noting how the threats did not end but neither did their learning. Through these tales, Evans downplays the disadvantages of the education system for African American children in the 1930s seemingly making the point that as bad as things were for these students, it could be, and had been worse.

This point is made again later in the book, the children ask Mr. Asa if it is true that slave masters used to cut off the fingers of slaves that had learned to write. Mr. Asa laughs and says that was true but “its been so long ago, I’ve clear forgotten about it...” (130) and agrees to show Johnnie and Carmichael his old book. Evans writes:

And with a shock that took their breath away, both Carmichael and Johnnie realized with new significance that the blue back speller was being held by a wrinkled brown hand from which the thumb and forefinger had been long missing...” (133)

It is placed upon the reader to draw the obvious conclusion that Mr. Asa had his finger and thumb removed as his punishment for learning to read and write.

Another important aspect of education was the textbooks available for the students. The descriptions of textbooks for students is also a point of comparison between schools for whites and black children. When the children of Key Corner have a new teacher, she inquires as to where the children get their books.

“People give them to us, “said Willie Clyde. “Miss Key – she’s the white lady that owns all the land around here – she gave us some; and

when they built the new white school, they gave us their old books.”

(59)

The children and the teacher accept this, although the teacher Miss Walsh, makes up her own lessons instead of using the old books.

Taylor, writing from a 1970s perspective, is able to show the emotion of this situation and the resentment of the African American students who were supplied with used, cast off books from the white schools. Little Man, one of the Logan children, is outraged at being given a “dirty” book. When he realises that all the books are in poor condition, he begrudgingly accepts the text. It is only after he returns to his seat and examines his book in more detail that the full impact of the emotions such cast off books raised in Little Man physically manifest itself. In outrage, Little Man throws down his book and stamps on it, refusing to be accept such a book. His sister Cassie, who is two grades above him but is sitting in the same shared classroom, realises why Little Man has taken such an action. Inside the book cover is a chart noting the ‘book conditions’ – such charts are utilised in American text books to track the age and condition of each book even today. Written in the chart, Little Man read the following (17-18):

PROPERTY OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION Spokane County, Mississippi September 1922			
CHRONOLOGICAL ISSUANCE	DATE OF ISSUANCE	CONDITION OF BOOK	RACE OF STUDENT
1	September 1922	New	White
2	September 1923	Excellent	White
3	September 1924	Excellent	White
4	September 1925	Very Good	White
5	September 1926	Good	White
6	September 1927	Good	White
7	September 1928	Average	White
8	September 1929	Average	White
9	September 1930	Average	White
10	September 1931	Poor	White
11	September 1932	Poor	White
12	September 1933	Very Poor	nigra
13			
14			

Taylor's distant historical perspective enables the reader to see the psychological consequences of such educational practices and how African American children were affected in the 1930s. Education was important to African Americans because they understood that to have true freedom, education must be at the forefront. Education would make life better. Education was the way forward. In both texts, parents and others like Mr. Asa, make sacrifices so that their children would be better educated. Although Evans offers a mono-coloured world, she notes the inequalities of education practices in the North with the educational practices in the South. Taylor, writing in 1976, is able to note the differences in white and black education, noting the politics involved. Although a somewhat flawed view, Evans offered a simplistic yet realistic account of childhood in the 1930s. Writing back into the 1930s, Taylor is able to construct a child's world – the world of school and relationships with peers which is impacted by prejudices and politics outside the school setting. By including situations on the way to and from school, and events inside and outside the classroom, Taylor constructs the world of childhood by means of relationships among friends and enemies, and those in between who, depending on the situation, might be friend or foe. Both authors ultimately are able to use education and the school setting to construct a representation of African American childhood.

5.5 Non-Fiction and the Construction of African American Childhood

The issue of education was important to African Americans in the 1930s, in life and in literature. Non-fiction educational materials for the African American child in the 1930s included *Negro Art, Music, and Rhyme for Young Folks* and *Negro Folk Tales* both by H. A. Whiting, *Country Life*

Stories, Some Rural Community Workers by Elizabeth Cannon and *We Sing America* (1936) by Marion Cuthbert. While fictional works embody a freedom of creation, non-fictional works by their classification intend to reflect the realities of the past or present. They are the opposite of imaginative fiction. Yet the same economic, social, and political influences of the time period are reflected, representing a bleak present day world for the African American child while maintaining a positive hopeful outlook for the future.

Negro Folk Tales for Pupils in the Primary Grades (Book I) and *Negro Art, Music, and Rhyme for Young Folks* (Book II) by Helen Adele Whiting were published in 1938 as a pair of books for educational/informational purposes. Whiting cleverly subverts stereotypes in *Negro Folk* tales. In “Little ‘Fraid’ and Big ‘Friad’,” the white slave owner is the one who becomes afraid of nothing, ‘spooking’ himself through his ignorance, a role usually given to the black

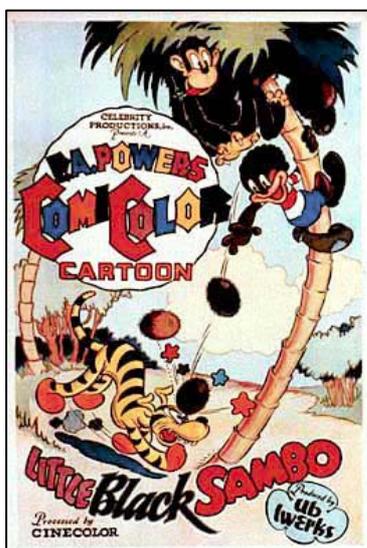


Image 3.1
1936 Advertising poster for the animated movie of *Little Black Sambo*

character. While Whiting calls it “An American Negro Tale,”⁴ she is reversing the stereotype, making the “young master” into the fool rather than the slave. She does this through the use of a monkey; the choice of this animal is not accidental, just as the monkey that appeared in the illustrations of *Little Black Sambo* was not. The “scientific racism” placed the ape (monkey) and the black man next to each other in the evolutionary chain. In Image 3.1 is a movie poster from 1936. Although it

is an image of Sambo, the relationship between Sambo in the tree and the

⁴ Please see the story in the Appendix 5.1.

monkey in the tree just above him is clearly seen. Illustrated in such ways, it is difficult to see the difference between the human and the animal. Whiting, while apparently agreeing with the prevailing ideology concerning the connection between the monkey and the slave with comments like, “The monkey, of course, tried to do everything people did, as that is the way monkeys do” (20), turns the misconception around. When the young master puts a white sheet over his head pretending to be a ghost in the woods in order to frighten his slave boy, it is the master who is frightened when he sees a figure behind him – his “pet monkey” with a pillowcase over her head. The ending clearly identifies an embedded cultural fear of the African American population in the white psyche and reconstructs the roles previously assigned. It is the master who runs out of the woods “dreadfully” frightened while the slave boy watches. The last paragraph of the story says:

Just as the slave entered the woods, he saw a little white something chasing a big white something through the woods. He said to himself, “What can they be? Oh! Those must be ‘Fraids.’” Then he yelled, “Run big ‘Fraid, don’t let little ‘Fraid get you!” (22)

The master becomes the slave to the fear he attempted to instil in the slave.

Whiting strives to recreate a shared history for African American children in a way that differs from Hughes and Bontemps’ *Popo and Fifina*. By including the history of slavery, Whiting unites African descendants who were forced to become Americans, no matter their tribe or language. The boy in the story above is clearly identified as a slave. Likewise in Whiting’s Book II, she writes:

Negro songs are beautiful.

The songs come from African music.

The Negroes were brought from African to America.

The Negroes made up these songs from their African music.

They sang them as they worked on the plantation.

They sang them as they worked in the cotton fields.

They sang them as they worked in the tobacco factories.

They sang them as they worked on the levees.

They sang them as they worked on the steamboats.

They sang them at their prayer meetings.

Some were songs about love.

Some were songs about faith.

Some were songs about hope. (n. pag.)

Whiting creates a shared culture through music, emphasising the contributions African Americans have made to America through their work, which was forced on them through slavery, but also through the music, which they shared with each other. The last line holds special importance since hope for a better future was an underlying theme for African Americans since they arrived in America.

While Whiting rewrites the African past through folktales, music, art, and rhyme, Marion Cuthbert in *We Sing America* (1936) offers a non-fiction realistic portrayal of life during the Depression. Using fictional families, Cuthbert illustrates life for African Americans, acknowledging differences in location and income levels. Whiting writes:

Not all Negro people are as fortunate as the [fictional] Longs.

And not all Negroes in the South are as unfortunate as the Longs when

they lived there. Some Southern Negroes have good jobs. Some own their own farms and their own homes. A number have become important people in the places where they live. But many thousands are poor. Even when times are good, some of them can find no work at all to do – or only the poorest kind. They go North looking for better chances. They crowd into cities in many parts of the United States. In the cities they are forced to live in the poorest sections, and there are usually more men than jobs. Mothers usually have to go out to work, because the money the father earns is not enough to support the family on. (36)

These non-fiction texts read as realistic in tone, although they offer a softer tone. Other factors, such as threats and lynchings, are not included in these texts. Post-Civil Rights literature about the 1930s does not shy away from such realities.

Unfortunately, when African American children in the 1930s turned to books to learn about themselves and their culture, little was found. Written history was white history. The history of African Americans was ignored and made invisible by authors of history textbooks. Children's literature in the 1930s tried to fill the void and construct a shared history for the African American community.

Influences of the Harlem Renaissance, the "attraction" to communism, and the Great Depression are reflected in children's literature produced in the 1930s. With the historical foundations set and the context of the times unearthed, the literary constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s in American writing for children can be analyzed and investigated.

Chapter Six

The Construction of African American Childhood the 1930s in Literature After the Civil Rights Movement

The past is malleable and flexible, changing as our recollection interprets and re-explains what has happened.

Peter Berger

6.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapters, children's literature published during the 1930s provides insight into the social and political world at the time of the said literature's production. The number of children's literature books published in the post-Civil Rights era that were set in the 1930s are copious, denoting the 1930s as a time of importance in African American history. These books written after 1965 offer different constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s. In this chapter, I analyse four books written after the end of the Civil Rights movement (1965), which are set in the 1930s. In *Souder* (1970) by William Armstrong, the construct of a lone, individual black boy coming of age is presented. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) offers a construct of African American childhood within a united family and black community, fighting against the racism of whites in the South. Leon Tillage tells the story of his life in *Leon's Story* (1997) reconstructing his own African American childhood and reinforcing with his own personal narrative the fictional elements evidenced in the first two books. These three books were chosen for consideration because of their unique geneses, all stemming from the oral tradition but in diverse ways. Both *Souder* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* also received the Newberry Award. Together, these

three books write back into history in defiance of certain white biased constructs of African American childhood written in the 1930s.

6.2 Historic/al Fiction

Because the specific focus of this chapter is on books written after 1965 but have settings in the 1930s, two of these books considered in this chapter, *Souder* (1970) by William Armstrong, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) by Mildred Taylor, are categorised as historical fiction. Historical fiction is problematic for many reasons, beginning with the definition of 'historical fiction.' The obvious definition involves setting however, the juxtaposition of historical details and fictional elements must be considered, as must also the demands for both accuracy and authenticity concerning historical aspects. In order to clarify exactly how historical fiction balances history and fiction, the critic Althea (Charlie) Reed offers a useful definition. Reed defines books that include historical figures as "historic fiction" whereas books that do not include historical figures but attempt to "bring history to life" are classified as "historical fiction" (qtd. in Brown, "Historical Fiction"). While this historic/historical clarification, which I will refer to as historic/al, helps define books more precisely, it still leaves the issue of "truth" of such fictions.

Historical fiction as a genre recreates or reconstructs the world, yet this reconstruction cannot escape the ideologies of the author, as John Stephens notes when he comments that "one of the areas of writing for young readers which can be most radically ideological is the area of historical fiction". While the different truths found in historic/al literature are debated, historic/al fiction is also classified as realistic literature. Historic/al fiction permits other aspects of American history to be written about, or re-written about since the genre is

both historic/al and realistic. Children’s literature, like other literatures, was (and is) used to rewrite history, voicing what could not previously be expressed. Writing back into history offers different ideas about how that historical time period is viewed from a distant perspective. Writing back is also done by those who were oppressed in the past but have now found space to speak about that past. The books analysed in this study have reflected those different interpretations of the 1930s in various ways by examining books written at different times – 1970, 1977, 1991, and 1997 - by authors of different genders – two male authors and two female authors - and race - two black authors and one white author. However, while differences exist in each book due to when it was published and what each author brought to each story, humanity in the face of racism and violence is an overriding theme. Children’s literature written after 1965, including the four books considered here: *Souder* (1970), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1977), *Tar Beach* (1991) and *Leon’s Story* (1997), offer constructs of African American childhood that put aside old stereotypes and construct the humanity of African American childhood.

6.3 The Universal Individual’s Coming of Age in *Souder*

Souder by William Armstrong is a landmark book in many ways. Written by a white author, *Souder* follows the pattern of white authors telling the African American story. The story originated in the oral tradition and was then written down by William Armstrong. Armstrong’s author’s note in the beginning of the book speaks of a “grey-haired black man” who taught in the one room “Negro school.” Armstrong continues:

He had come to our community from farther south, already old when he came. He talked little, or not at all, about his past. But one night at the great center table after he had told the story of Argus, the faithful dog of Odysseus, he told the story of Sounder, a coon dog.

It is the black man's story, not mine. It was not from Aesop, the Old Testament, or Homer. It was history – *his* history.

That world of long ago has almost totally changed... But the story remains. (n. pag.)

Armstrong's comment about the origin of *Sounder* is remarkably like Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Tales* (Chapter 4, pages 14-16). Both authors claim that their stories are from the African American oral tradition. Both authors are also white men raised in the storytelling traditions of African American culture. Their African American sources are not specifically named, giving credit to a culture but not an individual.¹

Armstrong employs a distinctive writing style, using only one proper name throughout the book, that of the dog named Sounder. This lack of the use of proper names was first critically praised as a universalising feature. Armstrong himself claimed in a number of interviews that "without names, ...[the characters] represent all people who suffer privation and injustice, but through love, self-respect, desire for improvement, make it in the world" (The Glencoe Literature Library, 14). Not providing proper names for characters was considered stylistic and allowed Armstrong to balance the narrative between representing the general conditions for African Americans at that

¹ Armstrong later named his source in an interview yet the name is still not included in the numerous reprints of the novel since that interview.

period of history and making the characters silenced and invisible through their lack of individuality.

Yet Armstrong is successful in his balancing act because the one character he names is symbolic of the experiences of the boy, his father, and the entire family. The coon dog Sounder is more than just a family pet. In a very Biblical sense, Sounder is the voice crying out in the wilderness. Armstrong writes:

Sounder was well named. When he treed a coon or possum in a persimmon tree or on a wild grape vine, his voice would roll across the flatlands. It wavered through the foothills, louder than any other dog's in the whole countryside...

But there was no price that could be put on Sounder's voice. It came out of the great chest cavity and broad jaws as though it had bounced off the walls of a cave. It mellowed into half-echo before it touched the air... But it was not an ordinary bark. It filled up the night and made music as though the branches of all the trees were being pulled across silver strings. (3-5)

For three pages, the author carefully describes the dog's voice. Armstrong constructs Sounder's voice as the symbol of power, family, and love.

The symbolism of Sounder's voice is evident when the father steals food for his starving family and is taken away by the sheriff. Sounder uses his bark to denounce the arrest and call out in objection, which the family is unable to do due to their fear and powerlessness. In a pointless and unnecessary act of violence, a white deputy shoots Sounder. Sounder loses the use of one eye and leg as well as having his ear shot off. But Sounder's

greatest loss, and the loss the boy also feels, is the use of Sounder's voice, subdued by the shotgun. Although he lives, Sounder's bark does not return until the father returns. His voice is apparently silenced not from injury, but through longing for his owner.

The boy accrues two losses at once. His father is taken to jail and the severely injured Sounder runs off apparently to die. With no father and no Sounder present, the boy is left to construct himself. His desire for education, while impeded at first by the eight-mile journey to and from school, never deserts the boy. His journey from child to man is the framework for this story; the boy makes his own choices and constructs his life through and in spite of oppressive circumstances. Sounder and his father start the boy on his journey, but the boy finishes it alone.

Armstrong creates the boy with a strong character. In the beginning of the novel, the boy is still a child yet one who is old enough to sit out on the porch in the cool night air and speak with his father. He imitates his father, going to the woodpile with him, cracking the walnut kernels, and generally learning from him. The boy is old enough to occasionally hunt with his father. Armstrong best summarises the construction of the father-son relationship when he writes, "But the boy was never afraid when his father was near" (9). However, for the majority of the book, the boy's father is not with the family. He is first jailed while awaiting trial and then put on the chain gang and forced away from the location of his family, working his sentence time until he would be freed.

The boy's journey to selfhood begins with understanding the racial realities in which he lives. When the sheriff and the two white deputies arrive

at the house to arrest his father for stealing, the boy is the first to see them. Armstrong writes a stunning snippet of dialogue illustrating to the reader the white supremacist attitudes of the time. “There’s two things I can smell a mile,” the first man said in a loud voice. “One’s a ham cookin’ and the other’s a thievin’ nigger” (21). This is the first and only time Armstrong uses this derogatory name, however he uses it effectively. The narrative up to this point constructs the boy and his family as poor but loving and determined to survive. With the entrance of the three white men, the outside world reaches into the family circle, disrupting the harmony within the family. The word ‘nigger’ shatters the family circle, literally taking away a piece of the whole when the father is taken away from the family. It is during the arrest of the father that the boy witnesses the racial degradation of his father at the hands of the white men.

“Get up,” the second man ordered. The warm, but frozen circle of man, woman, and three small children around the stove jumped to their feet. A stool on which a child had been sitting fell backward and made a loud noise. One of the men kicked it across the room. The boy did not move from his place just inside the door...

“Stick out your hands, boy,” ordered the second man. The boy started to raise his hands, but the man was already reaching over the stove, snapping handcuffs on the outstretched wrists of his father. (21-22)

The boy’s confusion is noted by his actions. He is the boy and does as told when the order “Stick out your hands, boy” is spoken, yet it is his father who stretches out his hands and is handcuffed. In that moment, when the white

men brand his father “boy”, the boy begins his journey to become a man in order to hold the place of, and finally replace, his father.

However, the boy is not yet ready to take the step into adulthood when it is forced upon him. He has only been constructed as a boy, not a man in the making. The reader observes the boy’s first failure during the arrest of the father. The boy is instructed to hold back Sounder, who is fighting to protect his master. The criticisms levelled at this book note that the father does not fight his arrest, nor does the boy or the family. It is only Sounder who howls in outrage at what has occurred because it is Sounder who has the voice. It is also Sounder who is punished for his instinctual behaviour; in objecting to the proceedings by “making an awful noise, a half-strangled mixture of growl and bark” (26) and by racing after the wagon when he breaks free, Sounder is shot down by one of the deputies and left to die in the middle of the road.

But within this tragedy, the boy takes his first step forward. After Sounder has limped off under the porch, the boy returns inside the cabin. Realising he has forgotten the wood he had intended to get when the white men had approached, his mother instructs him to go out to fetch the wood without the lantern. In silent defiance, the boy takes the lantern so that he can look for Sounder, the first of many journeys the boy takes to find the injured dog. While ignoring his mother may seem like a minor step for any boy, this boy is constructed as an obedient son and his action in taking the lantern is not perceived as a disobedient act, but as an independent act. It also constructs him as the man of the house, a replacement for the missing father. Armstrong writes:

“I ain’t got the wood,” the boy said at last. “I’ll light the lantern and get it.”

“You know where the wood is. You won’t need the lantern,” the woman said.

The boy paused in the doorway. Then he took the lantern to the stove, lit a splinter of kindling through the open door-draft, and held it to the lantern wick *the way his father always did*. His mother said nothing to him. She spoke to the younger children instead. “I ain’t fed you yet.”

(29, emphasis mine)

The boy’s action in lighting the lantern “the way his father always did,” and the mother’s silent consent signal a change in direction for the narrative and for the boy’s life. The mother’s acceptance of the boy’s disobedience allows the boy his independence.

From this point in the story, the mother advises the boy but does not mother him in an authoritative, parental manner. Armstrong uses food to illustrate this change. Food is of great importance to the narrative and is used to establish the significance of Sounder’s presence in the household. Sounder is fed even when food is short because of his ability to help feed the family through hunting. Food is used to enable the initial plot line; the father’s arrest is for his crime of stealing a ham and sausages to feed his family. Furthermore food is used to show the change in relationship between the boy and his mother. When the boy lights the lantern even after the mother instructs him not to, she then concerns herself with feeding the younger children. While she feeds the younger children (29), the boy is only reminded

“You must eat” (31) and still later that same night she comments, “You’re hungry child. Feed yourself” (34).

Armstrong creates a barometer to gauge the emotional mood of the cabin, through the mother’s singing, storytelling, and humming. The mother’s humming signals unrest in the family. Armstrong uses the omniscient third person narrator to inform the reader of the meaning in the mother’s humming. He writes:

Then she went back to her humming. His mother always hummed when she was worried. When she held a well child on her lap and rocked back and forth, she sang. But when she held a sick child close in her arms and the rocker moved just enough to squeak a little, she would hum. Sometimes she hummed so softly that the child heard the deep concerned breathing of terror above the sound of the humming. The boy always thought her lips looked as though they were glued together when she hummed. They seemed to be rolled inward and drawn long and thin. Once when she kissed him good night when he was sick, they were cold, he remembered. But when she sang or told stories, her lips were rolled out, big and warm and soft. (13-14)

The mother continues to hum for two months. Through this action, Armstrong notes the uneasiness of the situation when both the father and Souder are missing from the home.

While the mother is constructed as a typical mother with concerns for food and her family, the boy is different. He is free to construct himself in the way he thinks is best, a rare thing for any child especially an African American boy in the South. The chapters following the father’s arrest are filled with the

angst of not knowing when the father might be coming home and whether Souder is dead or alive. Armstrong provides the reader with the circle of the family, but when that unit is broken and the father removed, the boy begins to construct his own circles. He begins by looking for Souder in ever widening areas. He searches for Souder's body, thinking of how he will bury Souder. He starts with Souder's favourite locations such as under the porch. While each search ends with the boy returning without Souder either dead or alive, the boy's world is gradually expanding as he extends the search. Through experiencing the world around him, the boy learns about the cruelty of the world. Armstrong provides examples of the boy's growth as the boy must undertake duties and chores he would not normally be expected to do if his father were still present in the household. One of the boy's first experiences of this acceleration into adulthood involves visiting his father in jail. The mother asks the boy to take a Christmas cake to his father in jail in the town eight miles away. While the boy had been to the town before during his brief school attendance, the visit to the jail is a new experience. The guard destroys the cake, squeezing it in his hands to make sure there was not a "steel file or hacksaw blade in it" (59). The boy is shocked and scared but learns a lesson that keeps him safe on later journeys.

In the brief and heart-breaking visit, the father/prisoner and the boy/man of the house are unable to converse partly due to the change in roles. Each character has a one-sided conversation with the other. They have much to say to each other but are unable to cope with the emotion of the situation. The boy attempts to reassure his father that Souder "might not be dead" while the father states "I'll be back 'fore long" (63). Neither character is

speaking the truth yet neither character can be accused of lying; neither one of them know if there is any truth in the words they speak. Even the fellow inmates hear the hollowness of the father's words. "From somewhere down the corridor there came a loud belly laugh, and a loud voice called out, 'Listen to the man talk'" (63). The inmate's comment applies to both the father and the son. What they say is just 'talk'. The son leaves with the instruction from his father to his mother. She is not to send the son to see him again. Through this message, the boy realises his new role in the family.

During the next two months, the boy searches for Sounder. While the family awaits news about the outcome of the father's trial, the boy hunts for the dog to find out if he is dead or alive. His mission is to find the dog, in order to reconstruct a past reality that no longer exists. His mother comprehends the son's actions, knowing that the boy does not yet understand what he is doing himself, and she advises:

Child, child, you must not go into the woods again. Sounder might come home again. But you must learn to lose, child. The Lord teaches the old to lose. The young don't know how to learn it. Some people is born to keep. Some is born to lose. We was born to lose, I reckon. But Sounder might come back. (52)

But the boy does not give up so easily. In attempting to reconstruct his known world of the past, the boy is constructing himself and his future. His life is a series of ever widening missions, first for his dog, then for his family, and finally for himself.

The boy is unsuccessful in attempting to find what he has lost. One night after the boy made the visit to see the father, the mother's humming

turns into a soft whispered song. She signals a change. Sounder, now maimed and crippled, returns the next morning. Sounder returns, not because of the boy's attempts to find him, but because Sounder has lived and healed enough to return to his home. However, the wait for the father to return carries on. Word reaches the family that the father has "gone to hard labor" somewhere in the state and the boy's new mission begins; the boy needs to find his father.

At this point in the narrative, concepts of time become blurred. The boy begins to work the fields and does yard work to support his family. The boy is constructed in the shadow of his father; the boy is a hard worker and is doing what he can to provide for his mother and siblings. And yet, "the long days and months and seasons built a powerful restlessness into the boy...To the end of the county might be a far journey, and out of the county would be a far, far journey, but I'll go, the boy thought" (77). The boy makes his own way in the world by going out into the world to find his father. However, instead of finding his father, he finds something else, an education. Armstrong offers a mixed emotional message. While struggling to find his father and living through experiences of cruelty based in racism, the boy finds something he would have never found had his father not been on the chain gang and the boy had not gone out to find him. He discovers a way to be educated. It is through his education that the boy's construction becomes complete, which is Armstrong's message to the reader.

Sounder has often been criticised by scholars such as Nancy Huse, whose first objection to the book was that its author was white, a pattern of

criticism common to African American books written by white authors. Huse goes on to claim:

Sunder fails as rhetoric (and thus in some ways as a story) with the adult readers who hold that literature representing minority experience must be written by minorities themselves if it is to perform the “imaginary correction of deficient reality” Iser claims is the function of literature. (67)

Yet *Sunder* appears on lists such as *Great Book for African American Children* (1999). *Sunder* is a story that is important in the continuing evolution of African American children’s literature. If it fails as a story as Huse claims, then it is difficult to explain its popularity.² While Armstrong claims that the world of *Sunder*, with its bigoted white population in an uncaring world, is a world that no longer exist is far from correct, it is at the same time unfair to classify *Sunder* as not being a classic. Classic literature is defined in many ways but the following comments from Daphne Muse’s article entitled “Black American Classic in Fiction and Poetry for Young Readers” clearly define *Sunder* as being a classic piece of African American children’s literature.

Note the following comments:

If what distinguishes a black classic is clear, more interesting is the question of what makes a book an unqualified classic. "Classics have a humanity and universality in their characters," says Effie Lee Morris, former coordinator of children's services for the San Francisco Public Library. "There is something within the people with which you can

² As of 25 June 2006, *Sunder* ranked #4,053 in book sales on Amazon.com.

identify. It is so strong that it is unforgettable. You might forget the plot, but the character remains memorable."

And

"The ability to appeal across time is what makes a book a classic," says Rudine Sims Bishop, author of *Shadow and Substance* and *Presenting Walter Dean Myers*. "It doesn't feel dated. It also deals with the questions that we ask ourselves over and over again regarding our identity, relationships with one another and finding our place in the world." (33)

Although authored by a white male, *Souder* fits the descriptions of a "black classic." Humanity is reflected in the father's story, the boy's story, and even in the dog's story. Universality is claimed through the nameless characters. Although set in the 1930s, the language, tone and theme of the book do not feel dated to the present day reader. Children and adults alike identify with *Souder*, as proved by its "appeal across time" – the boy is finding his place in the world, constructing his identity in a world that is not particularly interested in him or his problems. While Armstrong's construction of universal childhood appears irrespective of race, Armstrong uses the boy's experiences with prejudice and the Jim Crow laws in the South to construct African American childhood in a specific time and place. The realism of *Souder* in the story, the setting, and the descriptions construct a realistic picture of life in the South in the 1930s.

6.4 Family and Community in Mildred Taylor's Logan books

Realism is common in the books written after the Civil Rights Movement and which are set in the 1930s. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder*,

Hear My Cry (1976) was the first of five books chronicling the history of the Logan family. Cassie Logan is the focaliser through which the reader sees life for African Americans in Mississippi beginning in 1933. Cassie's family is unique in that they are not sharecroppers as in *Souder*, but are land owners, working to pay the mortgage and keep their precious land. Since the majority of African Americans in the South were sharecroppers, the fact that the Logans are landowners is important in their construction of African Americans in the South in the 1930s; being landowners makes the Logans different than the majority of their neighbours, both white and African American. The sacrifices the Logan family make to keep their land, such as Uncle Hammer selling his car and David, the father, working away from the family on the railroad, are willingly offered because without the land, the Logan family has no sense of identity. For the Logans, land is also specific and personal. Their land makes them who they are – strong like their trees, good like the soil their cotton grows in, and beautiful like the lake hidden in the woods. Yet being landowners also sets them apart from their sharecropping neighbours who are both black and white. The Logans have an elevated status through their land; they are in a different class to those around them.

But owning the land does not come without a price. Cassie says

I asked [Papa] once why he had to go away, why the land was so important. He took my hand and said in his quiet way: "Look out there, Cassie girl. All that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your own and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see."

I looked at Papa strangely when he said that, for I knew that all that land did not belong to me. Some of it belonged to Stacy, Christopher-John, and Little Man, not to mention the part that belonged to Big Ma, Mama, and Uncle Hammer, Papa's older brother who lived in Chicago. But Papa never divided the land in his mind; it was simply Logan land. For it he would work the long, hot summer pounding steel; Mama would teach and run the farm; Big Ma, in her sixties, would work like a woman of twenty in the fields and keep the house; and the boys and I would wear thread bare clothing washed to a dishwater color; but always, the taxes and the mortgage would be paid. Papa said one day I would understand.

I wondered. (*Roll of Thunder 4*)

Since Taylor constructs the world through nine-year-old Cassie Logan's eyes, the reader perceives a world filtered through her innocence and discovered through her experiences. She wonders, and because she wonders, so does the reader.

The entire Logan family series provides a construction of Mississippi African American childhood, yet it is a specific and privileged African American childhood for the Logan children. As previously mentioned, the Logans are set apart from their sharecropping neighbours because they are landowners. Their Papa, David Logan, is the source of wisdom and knowledge for the African American community. Even in his times of absence, he is still a presence. He also serves as the rescuer, returning from his job laying railroad track in Louisiana to the farm in Mississippi to right the wrongs and protect the family in times of danger. Likewise, Cassie's mother

Mary is one of the local schoolteachers who leads by example. She loses her job at the school for refusing to teach history according to the history books provided by the white education board.

Yet Taylor also constructs a child's world – the world of school and relationships with peers. By including events on the way to and from school, and events inside and outside the classroom, Taylor constructs the world of childhood via relationships among friends and enemies, as discussed in the previous chapter. This authorial choice limits aspects of gender for most of the females in the story except for the Logan women. Taylor uses the stereotypes of southern woman to contrast with the new stereotypes established in the Logan females. Big Ma, Mama, and Cassie all deconstruct stereotypical ideas of Southern females through their character constructions; these three women break the mould, as Taylor presents her ideology of southern life. Although the story is told through the female eyes of Cassie, little is included about her friendships with fellow females. The females Cassie interacts with are her classmates but she is more often found in the company of her bothers and their friends. In the opening chapter, Cassie is portrayed sitting in the dirt and shooting marbles with the boys. This female as tomboy construct empowers Cassie, giving her the ability to take revenge on the white girl Lillian Jean by luring Lillian Jean to trust her and then beating her up in the woods in an act of revenge. This female tomboy construct also allows Cassie to be in a number of places she would not be if she were less masculine in her child behaviours. However, Taylor's emphasis is not in engendering her characters with masculine or feminine characteristics. Taylor constructs Cassie Logan as conduit for the reader in order for Taylor to

express her views on race and history. Taylor's books are educational but not openly didactic in nature, enlightening the reader not only about the time period of the 1930s, but the entire history of African Americans. Taylor reveals the African American history of slavery, including discussions of breeding practices and nightriders, up to the "present" time of the text, the 1930s, when lynching was still a very real threat. This demystifying allows space for reconstruction, equating in a new construction all together. The skill of Taylor's written saga is that these teaching moments occur within the context of the narrative, providing an alternative universalising history. Through the tale of an individual family, Taylor constructs a universal history not only for African Americans in the deep South but for whites in the deep South as well. Kelly McDowell notes that Taylor is engaged in writing history through memory, as Homi Bhabha discussed in his essay "The Location of Culture" (1998). McDowell writes:

Bhabha discusses the concept of allowing memory to speak both the good and bad history. For Bhabha, it is necessary to retrieve that past through intense engagement with memory.

This seems to be the project Taylor is engaged. She joins in the effort to reclaim and revive a specific, realistic African-American history. Much like the Logan elders, she demystifies history and unveils power structures for her readers. The effect of this intense engagement with the past is a new, radical history, one that has the potential to transform those who have been denied a connection to the past through the mystification and fabrication of history by the dominant culture. (2002)

Reliving the past through this act of remembering is especially poignant in the second book of the series, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981). Starting in November of 1933, Taylor unearths history for the reader by placing the Logan family in the middle of cultural and political issues. Taylor's plot lines include Suzella, Mary Logan's great niece, who "passes" for white when spoken to by local white boys, and the dangers associated with black girls interacting with white boys. Taylor also includes historical issues such as the formation of the union of white and black farmers and sharecroppers; the high unemployment rate during the Depression; and Roosevelt's New Deal programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, which began in 1933. Yet because Cassie, due to her age, is only learning about life, Taylor is able to educate her reader through Cassie's questions and determination in acquiring answers, as seen in the follow conversation.

Moe sighed heavily as he considered the reality of the "deducts," the credit charges made by the sharecropper during the year which could wipe out all the money earned before the cotton seed had even hit the ground. "Don't care 'bout no deducts," he said impassively. "We gonna get out anyway. I'll get me some WPA work if I hafta. Maybe even the CCC."

"WPA?" I questioned, looking from Moe to Stacy. "What's WPA?"

"Don't know if you get any money on CCC," Stacy said.

"I said what's WPA?" I knew what the CCC was. Civilian Conservation Corps. Stacy and the other boys in the area had certainly talked about it enough. Another one of Mr. Roosevelt's

programs, it trained boys in agricultural and forestry methods, and several boys from the community had gone to join it. Stacy had even wanted to go, but he was too young, and besides, Mama and Papa wouldn't have let him go anyway. But I didn't know about this WPA. "Well, what is it?"

Stacy sighed at my persistence. "Mama say they're projects or something President Roosevelt's setting up to give a lot of folks jobs. Works Progress Administration, I think she said..." (*Let the Circle Be Unbroken* 79)

Taylor uses Cassie's lack of knowledge to fill in historical details, didactically explaining government projects within the everyday conversation. Likewise, political policies that affected the farmers and sharecroppers, both black and white, are discussed in connection with the ploughing up of crops and the attempts to start a farmers' union. These issues are shared by black and white communities alike. Taylor gives the black perspective by constructing the world through Cassie's eyes, allowing the reader an element of innocence and discovery as Cassie ascertains the world around her, including political and racial issues. While Cassie is constructed as innocent, she is also knowledgeable and experienced. Her experience grows with her interactions with the white world.

One such interaction begins *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*. The Logan children are on their daily walk to school. When the bus, which transports the white children to Jefferson Davis Elementary, passes by the Logan children, it covers them in red Mississippi dust. When the winter rains fall, the red dust turns to red mud. Little Man, Cassie's youngest brother, is constructed

specifically to offset stereotypes that depict African Americans as lazy and slovenly in appearance. Little Man is almost obsessed with staying clean. When walking to Great Faith School, the children are forced to either climb the steep banks to get out of the way of the bus or to endure the red coating of dust or mud and the taunts of the white children on the bus. Taylor describes various encounters with the bus, reinforcing the daily racial hatred of the white community expressed through the bus driver's attempts to humiliate them every day. Taylor writes:

Five minutes later we were skidding like frightened puppies toward the bank again as the bus accelerated and barrelled down the narrow rain-soaked road; but there was no place to which we could run, for Stacy had been right. Here the gullies were too wide, filled almost to overflowing, and there were no briars or bushes by which we could swing up onto the bank.

Finally when the bus was less than fifty feet behind us, it veered dangerously close to the right edge of the road where we were running, forcing us to attempt the jump to the bank; but all of us fell short and landed in the slime of the gully.

Little Man, chest-deep in water, scooped up a handful of mud and in an uncontrollable rage scrambled up to the road and ran after the retreating bus. As moronic rolls of laughter and cries of "Nigger! Nigger! Mud Eater!" wafted from the open windows, Little Man threw his mud ball, missing the wheels by several feet. Then, totally dismayed by what had happened, he buried his face in his hands and cried. (35-36)

The combination of Little Man's intense desire to stay clean and the purposeful intent by the bus driver to humiliate the children on the road constructs the world of the Logan children is a world that is black and white. The white world is attempting to keep the black world oppressed, while the black world is fighting to overcome such oppression. The Logan children do fight back, digging a deep trench in the road in which the bus gets stuck. Little Man purposely sacrifices his cleanliness in order to help dig the trench. Such child agency was rarely seen in books published in the 1930s. Taylor is writing back into the past to provide a power to the construct of African American childhood.

Yet in this same section, Taylor gives two exceptions to this black and white world in the form of T.J. Avery and Jeremy Simms. T.J., an African American child around Stacy's age, is with the Logans when the bus incident happens. He grins at Little Man's tears and is warned by Stacy not to say a word. Jeremy Simms, a white boy, also walks to school and waits for the Logans so that he can walk part of the way to school with them, and joins the Logans and T.J. after the bus encounter. Jeremy is coolly received. Taylor writes:

"Hey," [Jeremy] said. His face lighting into a friendly grin. But no one spoke to him.

The smile faded and, noticing our mud-covered clothing, he asked, "Hey, St-Stacey, wh-what happened?"

Stacey turned, stared into his blue eyes and said coldly, "Why don't you leave us alone? How come you always hanging 'round us anyway?"

Jeremy grew even more pale. "C-cause I just likes y'all," he stammered. Then he whispered, "W-was it the bus again?"

No one answered him and he said no more. When we reached the crossroads, he looked hopefully at us as if we might relent and say good-bye. But we did not relent and as I glanced back at him standing alone in the middle of the crossing, he looked as if the world itself was slung around his neck. It was only then that I realized that Jeremy never rode the bus, no matter how bad the weather. (36-37)

Taylor creates a contrast providing a view of an adult world where black is black and white is white but a child world that is destabilised by the crossing of racial boundaries. T.J. wants to be in the white world and is set up for a murder he did not commit by Jeremy's brothers. In the second book, he pays for his attempt to be friends with whites when he receives a death sentence for a murder he did not commit. Meanwhile, Jeremy suffers through his father's beatings and remains friends with the Logans, as much as the Logan's will allow.

The relationships between African Americans and whites are carefully constructed in the adult world and the children's world. Taylor's inclusion of the tentative friendships between whites and African Americans is of great importance to the past and the present Logan family. Taylor provides a generational history of such negotiated friendships between a Logan family member and a member of the white community. Paul Edward, Big Ma's husband, bought the second two hundred acres of land from a Mr. Jamison. Since that sale, the Logans and the Jamisons have had an understanding between them. A generation later, the Logans and Jamisons might be called

friends, yet both men of the families, Cassie's Papa David and the son of the Mr. Jamison who sold the land, understand that friendships between African Americans and whites lead to trouble. Yet Mr. Jamison takes risks for the Logans and the black families in the area. Mr. Jamison secretly backs the credit for the African American families so that they can shop in Vicksburg, boycotting the Wallace's store. Mr. Jamison also acts as lawyer for the family as well as preventing T.J.'s lynching and then serving as the defence lawyer when T.J. is put on trial for murder. However, Taylor does not construct Mr. Jamison in the mould of a white saviour for the African American community. He acts out of friendship and concern. Yet Mr. Jamison and David Logan realise that a more open friendship cannot exist due to the racial climate of the times and their friendship consists of mutual admiration and respect.

This pattern of uneasy friendship is repeated with the child characters. In the white character Jeremy Simms, Taylor constructs a much more complicated relationship between white and black. The Simms and the Logans have not had the same family relationships as the Jamisons and the Logans. While Jeremy is willing to offer his friendship to Stacey Logan, it comes at a personal cost. Taylor tells us that Jeremy is ridiculed by his classmates and often has red welts on his arms which his older sister Lillian Jean reports are "the results of his association" with the Logans. The rest of Jeremy's family are clearly constructed by Taylor as racist bigots that enjoy the humiliation of African American, especially the Logans because the Logans are landowners and the Simms are sharecroppers.

In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Jeremy shows up at the Logans to give them Christmas gifts of a bag of nuts and a wooden whistle for Stacey.

When Papa politely, yet sternly advises Jeremy to leave, Stacey asks his father if it is wrong to like Jeremy. The complications of friendships between the African Americans and whites are revealed in the painful answer that Papa gives.

“No,” Papa said carefully. “It ain’t wrong.”

“Actually, he’s much easier to get along with than T. J.,” Stacey went on. “And I s’pose if I let him, he could be a better friend than T. J.”

Papa took the pipe from his mouth, rubbed his moustache and spoke quietly. “Far as I’m concerned, friendship between black and white don’t mean that much ‘cause it usually ain’t on equal basis. Right now you and Jeremy might get along fine, but in a few years he’ll think of himself as a man but you’ll probably still be a boy to him. And if he feels that way, he’ll turn on you in a minute.”

“But Papa, I don’t think Jeremy’d be that way.”

Papa’s eyes narrowed...”We Logans don’t have much to do with white folks. You know why? ‘Cause white folks mean trouble. You see blacks hanging ‘round with whites, they headed for trouble. Maybe one day whites and blacks can be real friends, but right now the country ain’t built that way. Now you could be right ‘bout Jeremy making a much finer friend than T.J. ever will. The trouble is, down here in Mississippi, it costs too much to find out...So I think you’d better not try.” (119-120)

Even though the children are warned to stay away from Jeremy, he still invades their walks to school, their times in the woods, anytime the children

are alone in their child world, Jeremy Simms is allowed a space to be, to exist even if he is white. Jeremy proves his friendship throughout the series of books.

6.5 Changing Focalisers in Taylor's *Mississippi Bridge*

The entire Logan series is not completely chronological, as Mildred Taylor has written prequels to *Roll of Thunder*. She also included a short story to the series which is slightly different than the other books. *Mississippi Bridge* (1990) includes the Logan family as characters as well as other members of the community but it differs in its point of view. As previously discussed, the rest of the series is told from Cassie's point of view; Taylor, a female African American author, writes as Cassie, a female African American child. In *Mississippi Bridge*, Taylor's focaliser is Jeremy Simms, a white boy living in a confusing world where the right he knows is not the right he is taught by his father.

The setting is familiar to readers of the series. The majority of the story takes place inside or directly outside the Wallace's store, an establishment the Logan children are warned not to be in or around because of the men who loiter there, men such as Jeremy's father and his brothers. However, the Wallace's store also serves as the local bus stop. Jeremy is ten at the time this story takes place and, after reading the events in *Mississippi Bridge*, this story influences everything else the reader knows about Jeremy Simms.

Having come to the store out of boredom during the rainy time of the year, Jeremy witnesses and also testifies through his narrative to the acts of prejudice committed by white members of the community. In one incident, Mr. John Wallace, the store owner, refuses to allow Rudine Johnson, a black

woman, to try on a hat without buying it first, warning her that once it touches her head, she cannot bring it back either. Yet when Mrs. Hattie McElroy, a white woman, turns up at the store, Mr. Wallace's attitude changes. Jeremy watches.

Miz Hattie's eyes wandered to the counter and that summer-sky-blue hat Rudine had been admiring. Mr. John Wallace took note. "Anything else I can do for ya, Miz Hattie?"

"Well... I was just admiring this hat here..." She touched it real gentle-like. "It's so springtime..."

"Hat like that sure 'nough would put a little sunshine in this gloom," said Mr. Wallace. "Why don't you go 'head try it on, Miz Hattie? It sure would set well on your fine head of hair."

Miz Hattie turned plumb red. "Go on with you now, John Wallace! Can't afford much it anyway. Not in these hard times."

"Well, it won't hurt nothin' t' try it on. There's a mirror right over here. " He handed her the hat. "Go on, Miz Hattie, brighten up the place. It would be a joy to see you in it."

Miz Hattie took the hat and placed it on that mop of red hair of hers. She pinned it down with a huge stickpin. Rudine and her mama were still in the store. I seen them watching. (14-15)

Jeremy recognises the actions as insults based on race and finds these actions wrong, yet is powerless to prevent the adults from acting in such a manner.

When African American Josias arrives, excited to catch the bus because he has a job waiting for him, Jeremy's Pa and brothers intimidate

him and make him “confess” to lying about getting a “cash job” because there were white men who could not get jobs so how could Josias? Jeremy’s conflicting feelings about his Pa and way his Pa behaves is made clear as Jeremy explains to the reader:

I ain’t liked the way Pa done talked to Josias. Josias was a nice man. He wasn’t hurting nobody. But I’d know’d that was the way for Pa and the other men to talk that way to Josias and for Josias to take it. Colored folk seemed always to have to talk that kind of talk. One time I seen Pa and Melvin and R. W. and a whole bunch drag a colored man down the road, beat him till he ain’t hardly had no face on him ‘cause he done stood up for himself and talked back. That ain’t never set right with me, the way Pa done. It wasn’t right and I just know’d that, but I ain’t never let Pa know how I was feeling, ‘cause Pa he could get awful riled and riled quick. Last thing a body wanted to do, blood or not, was to get on Pa’s wrong side. You got on Pa’s wrong side and you done had it. (21)

Jeremy’s fear of breaking out and openly rebelling against his father is clear. Just as the un-named black man had been beaten, so Jeremy feared the same could happen to him should he rebel against his father’s way of life. Jeremy’s passive aggressive behaviour, i.e. he does not openly rebel against his father’s wishes to not befriend African Americans yet he still attempts to make friends with the Logan children and helps them throughout the series, is important in understanding the personal struggle some whites experienced in attempting to change the way of life in the South and to befriend African Americans. In Jeremy’s friendship extended to Stacey and the rest of the

Logan children, Taylor is constructing of the children of the future. Jeremy, oppressed by his family and friends, is strong enough to continue offering his friendship to Stacey, who is told not to accept such a dangerous gift. Through Jeremy, Taylor constructs a child who holds the future for the white community, in the same way that the Logan children are constructed as the future of the African American community. If these children can maintain their attitudes concerning race into their adult lives, then there is hope that the world might be a better place for everyone.

Yet Taylor does not end this short story with a rainbow ending and the children, white Jeremy and the African American Logans, holding hands and singing. The reality of life in the 1930s is not forgotten in Taylor's constructed world. When Jeremy returns from his walk with the Logans, he finds that there are not enough seats on the bus and the African American passengers have been told to get off. When Josias refuses to get off, the bus driver literally kicks him off the bus. Jeremy can stand no more and calls out that he is sorry that Josias cannot ride the bus. "He stopped now and looked back at me. I stopped too. 'Well, that's jus' the way, ain't it?' he done said" (50). However, Jeremy learns another lesson that was only previously hinted at.

I was staring so hard on him [Josias] I ain't heard Pa coming.
The next thing I know'd, Pa was all over me. Pa could hit ya' blind from any side and he done got me good this time.

"Pa!" I yelped.

"Ain't I done told you 'bout snivelin' after niggers?"

"But, Pa, I wasn't -"

He struck me again. "Don't you backlip me!" He boxed my ears good.

"No, suh, Pa."

"Now you leave off being so friendly with these niggers, ya hear me? They got they place in this world and we got our'n and they place ain't along side us 'cause they ain't the same as us. You understand me, boy?"

I hung my head and took to studying my feet. "Y-yes, suh, Pa." But that wasn't the truth. I ain't understood. No, suh, I sure ain't. I liked that boy Stacey and that girl Cassie and little ole Christopher-John and Little Man. I like Josias too. But I ain't told Pa that. To me, folks was folks, but Pa he jus' ain't stood for no wrong way of thinking, so I ain't spoke up. (50-51)

Throughout the series, Jeremy offers his friendship but does so quietly to protect himself. It is only in *Mississippi Bridge* that the reader is able to see just how much Jeremy pays for his kindness. Stacey denies Jeremy a reciprocal friendship in order to protect himself as well. The future is constructed in the attitudes of these two boys. Both Stacey and Jeremy are warned from friendship with the opposite race by their fathers but for entirely different reasons; Stacey and Jeremy cannot enact their friendship due to the past. But in presenting a potential friendship between a white boy and a African American boy, Taylor is constructing a new world through the child characters she presents as living in the 1930s.

Armstrong and Taylor have both constructed similar views of African American childhood in the 1930s through the genre of historic/al fiction.

Armstrong's *Souder* presents the construct of African American childhood as a universal event coloured by personal and individual experiences. Taylor widens the scope, telling an individual family's history in the context of others' experiences, tying families together to create a community reaching towards a representation of a Southern experience. *Souder* is an example of historical fiction. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* is an example of historic fiction, since Taylor does include historical events but does not include historical people. However, these two authors, one a white male author and the other a African American female author, offer African American constructs of childhood that are constructed in different ways, yet have the same concluding constructs. Although historic/al fiction is not the only genre depicting African American childhood, both *Souder* and *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* demonstrate ways in which authors can recreate the past through this genre.

6.6 Reconstructing the Past in Illustration through Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (1991)

Illustration also plays a key role in literature set in the 1930s but published in a later time period. Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (1991) is a fascinating example of a children's book whose originals were from a quilt. The book itself provides background information on Ringgold. Ringgold was born in the 1930s in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem and began painting professionally in the mid 1960s. She chose to paint on "tankas," which are long strips of cloth with frames of fabric, rather than canvas. Ringgold worked together with her mother who was a fashion designer, dressmaker, and Ringgold's source of family history. Ringgold's mother related stories of her slave ancestors, who produced quilts on the plantations. With the help of her

mother, Ringgold created her first art quilt in 1980 entitled *Echoes of Harlem*. *Tar Beach* first appeared as a quilt in Ringgold's "Woman on a Bridge" series from 1988. It now hangs in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

While the quilt *Tar Beach* (1988) tells the same story as the picture book *Tar Beach* (1991), the picture book provides a more detailed visual experience. (See Appendix 6.1 for a picture of the quilt *Tar Beach*). The story centres on Cassie Louise Lightfoot, an eight-year-old girl from Harlem. Ringgold uses the myth of the flying Africans to enable Cassie to fly through the present, the past, and a hoped for future. The Tar Beach that Cassie visits is the rooftop of the building in which they live. From the rooftop, she can view the entire city, including the George Washington Bridge which is a focal point for Cassie. Cassie says:

The bridge was my most prized possession.

Daddy said that the George Washington Bridge is the longest and most beautiful bridge in the world and that it opened in 1931, on the very day I was born.

Daddy worked on that bridge, hoisting cables. Since then, I wanted that bridge to be mine.

Now I have to claim it. All I had to do was fly over it for it to be mine forever. I can wear it like a diamond necklace, or just fly about it and marvel at its sparkling beauty. (n. pag.)

Cassie's ability to fly gives her agency, even though her flying is only imaginary. Her confidence in her ability gives her independence. She says, "I can fly – yes, fly. Me Cassie Louise Lightfoot, only eight years old and in the

third grade, and I can fly. That means I am free to go wherever I want for the rest of my life” (n. pag.).

Myths concerning flying have been employed in a number of different novels and books for children. Toni Morrison used the myth of the flying Africans as the basis for her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). Children’s literature author Virginia Hamilton used the tale for her work in *The People Could Fly* (1995) and Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney based their book *The Old African* (2005) on the tale. The flying Africans myth originated in 1803, when a group of Igbo slaves arrived in Georgia. The Igbo (from what is now the nation of Nigeria, in central West Africa) were well-known for being fiercely independent and unwilling to endure the humiliations of slavery. The Igbo were sold at the slave market in Savannah, loaded aboard a small boat, and cramped below deck for the trip down the coast to St. Simons. During the trip, the Igbo rebelled against the white agents, who jumped overboard and were drowned. According to white historical records written by the overseer Roswell King, as soon as the Igbos arrived on St. Simons, they committing suicide by walking into Dunbar Creek. Concerning this event, Timothy B. Powell notes:

African American oral tradition, on the other hand, has preserved a very different account of the events that transpired that day. As with all oral histories, the facts of the story have evolved as storytellers elaborated the tale over the years, such that there are now dozens of variations on the original episode. In the late 1930s, more than 100 years after the Igbo uprising on St. Simons, members of the Federal Writers Project collected oral histories in the Sea Islands... An older

African American man by the name of Wallace Quarterman was asked if he had heard the story of Ebos Landing. Quarterman replied:

Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and . . . Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good. . . . Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then . . . rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa. . . . Everybody knows about them.

(Powell, "Ebos Landing")

This account of transforming the hardships of slavery into the magical powers of freedom has been retold by a number of African American authors. Ringgold's version updates the myth and interprets the myth through a child's perspective. While Cassie's father is not a slave, he is deprived of his civil rights; his hardship is his lack of equal opportunities.

Through Cassie's flying, Ringgold is able to directly address the discrimination African Americans (and Native Americans) suffered in the 1930s. Cassie's father is unable to join the union because her grandfather was not in the union. African Americans and other minorities were excluded from union membership since the union held to the grandfather clause. If a man's father was not in the union, that man could not be a member. It is Cassie who is able to free her father through her flying, and in freeing her father, she frees her mother as well. Cassie says:

Well, Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gona fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their old union, or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian, like they say.

He'll be rich and won't have to stand on 24-story high girders and look down. He can look at his building going up.

And Mommy won't cry all winter when he goes to look for work and doesn't come home. (n. pag.)

Ringgold notes the stress on families in difficult economic times. This repeated theme has been noted in the literature published both in the 1930s and about the 1930s. The construct of African American childhood within a family unit involves the loss of a parent, either temporarily or permanently, was unfortunately based in reality.

Ringgold's illustrations provide a bright view of Cassie's world. While the painted illustrations are new for the book, the page borders are reproduced from the original quilt. The first view of Cassie is during her flight over the George Washington Bridge. She then flies over her parents, who are playing cards with the neighbours, and her brother, all of whom are on Cassie's "Tar Beach." The next illustration provides the reader with a clue to how Cassie is able to fly. Ringgold has painted a picture of Cassie on a mattress with her eyes closed. The Cassie says in the accompanying text, "Sleeping on Tar Beach was magical" (n. pag.). It is through Cassie's imagination that she is able to fly and change her world.

Half way through the book, Ringgold illustrates Cassie wearing the George Washington Bridge as a necklace. Yet it could also be perceived that Cassie has become a part of the actual structure of the bridge (Image 6.1 below). And as such, the bridge keeps her in place and holds her. The dual nature of Cassie's flying ability is that she is free to leave home and yet she needs her home in order to be free. Tar Beach is the location from which her

Image 6.1
Cassie wearing the bridge as a necklace.



flights begin. At the end of the book, she takes her brother Be Be with her. He has threatened to tell their parents if Cassie leaves him behind. In teaching Be Be to fly, Cassie teaches the reader to fly as well. Cassie says:

I have told [Be Be] it's easy, anyone can fly. All you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other way. The next thing you know, you're flying among the

stars. (n. pag.)

In the illustration, Cassie and Be Be fly together to the union building. While Cassie has the ability to fly, she does not seem to have the ability to change the way things are. However, in her flights, she will keep trying and enlists her brother to help as well.

Faith Ringgold notes in a one page informational section that follows the story that Cassie's story is not historical fiction. Cassie's story is a "transformation" of Ringgold's memories of childhood and as such, it is a work of fiction. Yet elements of the 1930s are realistic. The exclusion of minorities from unions, the absent parent, and even the rooftop party were all realities of African Americans in Harlem in the 1930s. Cassie's flying gives her agency to image a world in which things were different. Like Taylor's books, African American childhood is constructed as positive although the situation around them has negative aspects. Ringgold's picture book format recalls the past

through the use of colour and the quilt to transform her memories of childhood in order to pass on hope for the future

6.7 Leon's Story

The biography/autobiography is another genre that includes an approach to history and a direct recall of memory. Taylor claims that her stories come from her family and are in many ways autobiographical. Another such book is *Leon's Story* (1997), the biography of Leon Walter Tillage. Like slave narratives from the 1860s, Leon's life story was told (oral tradition) and then written. Tillage had been telling his story to the seventh graders at the request of the teacher at the school where he was a custodian for a number of years. Susan Roth, co-author of *Leon's Story*, heard about Tillage from her daughter and asked Leon if she could publish his story. Roth confesses:

By the next day Leon had spoken his story into a tape for me.

The text for this book was transcribed from that original tape and from two other tapes that were made later for clarification purposes. We have tried very hard to be faithful to and respectful of Leon's own precise voice. All editing was done with his participation and approval.

We tried to restrict the changes to bridging the gap between the spoken work and the written word. (104)

Tillage's spoken and then written history is an authoritative force. His story is reflected in events fictionalised in both *Sunder* and Taylor's Logan books. Hearing such horrors from Tillage, the man who lived through racist prejudices as a child and as a man, and seeing the positive ways he has dealt with such injustices, prove the fictional constructs of authors such as Armstrong and Taylor are founded in reality.

The reality of Tillage's life is clear from the opening page

My name is Leon Walter Tillage. I was born January 19, 1936. I have eight brothers and sisters, and I am second to the oldest. When we were growing up, we lived near Fuquay, a small Jim Crow town right outside Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

I remember that as a young boy I used to look in the mirror and I would curse my color, my blackness. But in those days they didn't call you "black." They didn't say "minority." They called us "colored" or "nigger." (3)

Tillage's style is very direct. This is most clearly seen in the description of his father's murder.

I watched my father trying to get up, but evidently his hip or his leg was broken, one of the two or both was broken, because they'd hit him on the side and he couldn't stand up. The car came back and pulled over to where my father was and the driver ran completely over him, as though he was running over a dog or something. And my father got caught underneath the car and they drug him almost back up to the house where we were living. My brothers and sisters, we were all looking at this. And the boys in the car jumped out and looked underneath and saw that my father was stuck underneath it. They pulled him out. Then they jumped in the car and took off. We came out our front door and they yelled at us and threw beer cans at us. We ran down there.

I was the first one to my father, but he was dead. He was all busted up, big hole in his head. He was dead. (67-68)

The “apology” offered by the father of the young man that intentionally ran down Tillage’s father with his car is even more appalling and clearly shows the lack of feeling some whites had for blacks.

The next morning, this boy, the driver, and his father came up to our house. We knew who they were. They had a big farm and they were a very prominent family...They were wealthy people...The man said to my mother, “Well, I’m sorry what happened. But you know how it is, boys will be boys. My wife told me to give you a hundred dollars. I don’t know. A hundred dollars is a lot of money, but she told me to give it to you and this will help with the funeral bill.” And then he turned to his son and said, “Say you’re sorry. Tell her you’re sorry you ran over her husband.” But the boy wouldn’t open his mouth. He just turned around and walked out of the house. So the father said, “Well, I apologize for him. I’m sorry, but I hope you can get along without your husband, and you’ll just have to face the facts that these things happen.”

And that was all that was ever done about it. (68-69)

Tillage’s story, shocking and painful, is told with simplicity and truth. Tillage is able to voice the racial prejudices some whites held against African Americans because he is speaking about discrimination which he experienced starting in the 1930s from the distance of the 1990s. While Armstrong and Taylor construct African American childhood with humanity, Tillage’s story demonstrates how whites dehumanised blacks, treating them as objects of little to no value. Armstrong constructs African American childhood through an individual boy who has to negotiate through the world around him but only

in brief instances. The boy in *Souder* is primarily a lone figure. Taylor constructs a family located within a black community. Interactions with the white community are included and while painful occurrences happen, the safety net of family and the Black community protect the main characters, the Logan children. *Leon's Story* presents Leon as the child who has to learn to live in a world that mostly hates him. The reconstruction of his own African American childhood through the retelling of his life provides the reader with an understanding of the stark realities of life in the South in the 1930s through the 1960s.

At the same time, *Leon's Story* reinforces the positive approach taken to change the future of African Americans as in the fictional books discussed. The boy in *Souder* understands that education is a way out of the poverty of sharecropping and that through education many things could be accomplished. Tillage has the same attitude enforced by his mother, just as Mary Logan enforces the Logan family's education. Tillage notes at the end of the story that the school he and his brother work for has named a scholarship after them. "My brother and I," Tillage ends his narrative, "we're very proud of that" (101).

The parallels between Tillage's life and the Logan family series are numerous, both experiencing the racism in similar ways. In *Roll of Thunder*, Cassie takes her first trip into the town of Strawberry. While there, she bumps into Lillian Jean, Jeremy's older sister, on the sidewalk. When Lillian Jean demands an apology, Cassie offers an apology but when Lillian Jean demands that Cassie get off the sidewalk onto the road, Cassie refuses. Mr. Simms grabs Cassie's arm and pushes her into the road, reiterating the

demand that Cassie apologize. After being told by Big Ma to do what Mr. Simms wants, Cassie apologizes to “Miz Lillian Jean.” A similar occurrence happens to Leon when a little white boy touches his leg and says, “Pardon me, I want to get past.”

I stepped over to one side. The father stopped the little boy right in his tracks and said, “What did you say to him?” And the little boy just looked at him. He didn’t know what was going on, and the father said, “I said, what did you say to him?” And the little boy said, “I said pardon me?” And the father slapped him in the face and told him, “You never do that. You never tell a nigger pardon. You kick him if he is in your way.” He told the little boy to kick me. And the little boy kicked me right in the shinbone. In fact he kicked me twice. He started walking off and looked back at me with his blue eyes and he had a sad look on his face as though he was sorry. I’ll never forget the look on that kid’s face as long as I live. (76-77)

The blue eyes of this child showing regret recall Jeremy’s blue eyes. A dual construct is presented; a construct of the white community passing on prejudiced ways to their children and the construct of childhood, both white and black, trying to understand what the adult world is teaching.

Tillage’s story is a written history through memory, recalling Bhabha’s theory as previously discussed in connection with Taylor’s work. This “intense engagement with memory” (McDowell) is authenticated through the form of biography. *Leon’s Story*, Tillage’s history, shockingly reconstructs a past time of violence and racial hatred that was either buried, ignored or justified through racial discrimination. Tillage constructs the life of the political activist

for the reader. The hardships of his youth inspired him to participate in the Civil Rights Marches in the 1950s and 1960s. Tillage is the non-fictional child who fulfils the potential of the fictional children created by both Armstrong and Taylor.

All three authors deconstruct history by demystifying historical events of both personal and national natures. By making the accepted mainstream historical recorded strange, these authors are able to reconstruct the past, fitting a new construction on history. If it is memory that is speaking, as Bhabha notes, then the silenced voice of the 1930s is being allowed to shout, albeit through the filter of memory. However, the ability to demystify the past is absent in the literature produced during the 1930s. In the characters of the boy in *Sunder* and Cassie, Armstrong and Taylor have provided readers with characters who grow towards adulthood in oppressed circumstances. These characters are strong individuals who come to terms with the difficult times they are living in yet do not bend to the will of those whites who would have them be less than who they were. Leon Tillage's life story moves the reader one step closer to living in those times. The re/construction of African American childhood in the 1930s becomes enhanced when the 1930s are written back against some of the stereotypes offered in the 1930s. A more complete picture is created through the writings of those who remember the past because they either lived it, such as Leon Tillage, or relived and re-wrote the past through storytelling, such as Ringgold, Taylor and Armstrong.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: The Story of the Stories - Constructing African American Children's Literature in the 1930s and Beyond

We often underestimate the revolutionary potential of black children's literature. In terms of construction identity, selfhood, and purpose, there is a rich history of how literature targeted for black children has battled to defy, resist, and complicate public representations. (127)

R. D. Lane

In his article "Keepin' it real": Walter Dean Myers and the promise of African-American children's literature", R. D. Lane notes that "the legacy of intentionally stimulating liberatory change" began in the early Harlem Renaissance period with *The Brownies' Book* (1920-1921). Lane lists the *Black Panther Coloring Book* (1969) as the next important revolutionary text, skipping almost fifty years in between his two texts of note. While the *Black Panther Coloring Book* through its title alone is overtly revolutionary, Lane's gap of fifty years is problematic. Revolution, like literature, does not arise out of a void. This thesis demonstrates the importance of African American children's literature published in the 1930s in the production of resistance, and revolutionary, literature. Although many of the works published in the 1930s reinforced existing stereotypes, other texts offered a new representation. Within texts such as Eric Berry's *Penny-Whistle* (1930), 'defiance' of white mainstream view, 'resistance' to overt racism in children's literature, and 'complications of the public representation' of African American childhood in which African Americans were portrayed as negative stereotypes begins emerging through both text and illustration. The literary revolution of

construction African American childhood in primarily positive ways began in the 1930s.

One of the main premises of this thesis is that contextualisation of the texts is necessary in order to comprehend the nuances offered in the text under study. If we cannot view the history surrounding the literature, we cannot analysis the constructions present in the literature. Specifically for this thesis, the history of African Americans in the United States demands acknowledgement. A key component to the literature analysed in this study is the fact that throughout American history, African Americans have been considered as the “other.” The racial history of the United States is fraught with racism and colonisation, especially concerning African Americans. From 1620 when the first ship arrived with slaves, the British colonists imported human beings as if they were cattle. With the Revolutionary War in 1776, the new nation had the opportunity to end this practice. However, slavery was used as an element of compromise and the importation of slaves did not end until 1808. Although Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (The Declaration of Independence),” Jefferson, along with George Washington and other “Founding Fathers,” were slave owners.

Clearly, ‘all people’ did not include African Americas, nor did it include other minorities or females. In the land of “the free and the brave,” Africans, who were stolen from their homelands, were enslaved and bred as a workforce. Attempts at freedom were classified as revolts and were celebrated with whippings, mutilations, and murders.

When slavery ended in 1865, the former slavers were still not treated as full American citizens. Four million people were left homeless and without income. The basic freedoms that other white Americans had, such as the freedom of speech, the right to vote, free education, and the right to pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” was still not a reality. Slavery was replaced by laws which disenfranchised African Americans and segregated them from the white populace. These laws were known as Jim Crow laws, a name taken from the minstrel character Jim Crow (see Chapter Two). The police forces in the South enforced such laws and when they could not legally discriminate, Klu Klux Klan used intimidation, beatings, and lynching to dissuade African Americans from enacting their limited rights.

Little by little throughout history, people stood up to protest such actions. The abolitionist movement fought to end slavery as a protected institution in the South. The defeat of the South in the Civil War in 1865 insured they reached their goal yet Jim Crow laws did little to improve the newly freed slaves lives. In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance encouraged African American artists and musicians and writers, as well as their white counterparts who were of the same mind set, to express their black culture and to let America, and the world, know that African Americans had, were, and would continue to contribute in extraordinary ways to American society. In 1955, Rosa Parks, with the encouragement and backing of the NAACP, refused to give up her seat. The Montgomery police arrested and tried Parks on charges of disorderly conduct and violating a local ordinance. The African American community responded by refusing to use the city’s bussing system, causing severe financial strain on the city and ultimately causing them to

desegregate bussing. The Montgomery Bus Boycott became the first major event of the Civil Rights Movement. Almost ten years later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson. These two laws signaled the beginning of the end of legally protected discrimination in the South

The history of American/African American relationships is significant in order to comprehend the change in representation of African American childhood in children's literature. History is mirrored in literature and literature mirrors history. Much like African American history, African American children's literature also has had a difficult history. Critic Violet Harris notes the "tumultuous past" of African American literature for children. This thesis has supported Harris' view while at the same time showing exceptions and progress in moving away from stereotypes depicting African American childhood. Throughout this thesis, the literary history of African American literature, i.e. literature with representations of African American childhood, has been revealed, marking the early attempts that were morphed by a society unwilling to see African Americans in a positive light.

The development of African American children's literature was slow. "An especially important moment in literary history," claims Kate Capshaw Smith was "the birth of *The Brownies' Book* signal[ing] the origin of black children's literature as a genre separate from adult literature" (25). Most critics, like Capshaw Smith and Lane, as well as others such as Dianne Johnson-Feelings, Audrey Thompson, cite *The Brownies Book* (1920-1921) as an important landmark in African American children's literature. *The*

Brownies' Book was the first magazine intended for African American readers. Children were encouraged to write to the editors of the magazine, asking questions about the world in which they lived. As one boy wrote:

Dear Mr. Editor:

My Mother says you are going to have a magazine about colored boys and girls, and I am very glad. So I am writing to ask you if you will please put in your paper some of the things which colored boys can work at when they grow up. I don't want to be a doctor, or anything like that. I think I'd like to plan houses for men to build. But one day, down on Broad Street, I was watching some men building houses, and I said to a boy there, "When I grow up, I am going to draw a lot of houses like that and have men build them." The boy was a white boy, and he looked at me and laughed and said, "Colored boys don't draw houses."

Why don't they, Mr. Editor?

My mother says you will explain all this to me in your magazine and will tell me where to learn how to draw a house, for that is what I certainly mean to do. I hope I haven't made you tired, so no more from your friend,

Franklin Lewis

Philadelphia, Pa.

(Johnson - Feelings 25)

Franklin Lewis' letter is symbolic of questions African American children had about the world around them in the early 1920s. Children's literature

published in the 1930s attempted to answer difficult questions about race relations and endeavoured to provide African American children with a sense of identity. The short life of *The Brownies' Book* was important to the development of African American children's literature since it established a market for literature intended for the African American child.

In the past, African American children's literature had been intended for a mixed audience, black and white as well as child and adult. In literature produced pre-1930s, texts such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Little Black Sambo*, and the *Uncle Remus Tales* provided a cultural way of constructing African American childhood. Unfortunately, through the morphing of texts, illustrations and language, authors after Stowe and Bannerman constructed African American childhood according to the existing stereotypes found in adult literature. Sterling A. Brown's comments about authors who wrote literature supporting the abolish of slavery remains key to understanding the different ways in which stereotyping was used. Brown noted that, "The stereotyping in abolitionary literature, therefore, is not stereotyping of *character*, but of *situation*." While Harriet Beecher Stowe worked to portray the evils of slavery and the humanity of Tom, others commandeered her work and interposed the negative stereotypes for which it is now remembered. Helen Bannerman gave the world one of the first stories of a black child hero in *Little Black Sambo*. Sambo's intelligence saves him from the greedy tigers however, American illustrators changed the local and the image of Sambo, presenting racist views of African American childhood. Nevertheless, the Sambo story lived on and has never been out of publication. Why? In most personal accounts of African Americans who have memories of hearing *Little*

Black Sambo as children, the story was not what offended people. It was the actions of their fellow schoolmates, the name-calling, the taunts of “Sambo” on the playground.

The changing reception and interpretation of texts reflects society’s ideology. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Story of Little Black Sambo* are examples of texts with disturbing literary histories. The redeeming qualities of these texts were erased to embrace racist views. Yet there were the rare attempts were made to break the mould of construction African American childhood in negative ways. As writers faced the 1930s, they had a choice to make. They could easily use such negative stereotypes set before them or they could construct African American childhood in a positive way through both text and illustration.

The very fact that writers chose to write literature for children with African American characters and that African American authors were writing for children as well shows an emergence of African American literature, that is literature by, for, and about African Americans. The children’s literature awards lists, especially the John Newbery Award, show the emergence of African American children’s literature.

In analysing the Newbery Award list of Award winning books, seven of the seventy-three medals issued belong to authors of books with African American characters. Of the two hundred, seventy-two Honor Medals given, twenty-one have been given to books with African American characters. Newbery Award winning books with African American characters equates to 9.58% of the winners chosen while Newbery Honor winning books with African American characters equal 7.72% of the Honor Awards given to date.

The black population in the United States according to the United States Census Bureau in March 2002 was reported as equaling “Thirty-six million people in the United States, or thirteen percent of the civilian noninstitutionalized population” (McKinnon 1). In comparing the average number of Newbery Medal or Honor Medal winners with the population average, the percentage of Newbery Medal or Honor Medal winners falls behind that national average; however, if we count Newbery Medal and Honor Medal books since 1965, the results are much more favorable, exceeding the population percentage. Since 1965, fifteen percent of Newbery Winners have been books with African American characters and 15.59% of the Honor Books have been books with African American characters. Since the end of the Civil Rights Movement in 1965, children’s literature has improved in representing and reflecting the changing ideology of the nation by providing a better representation of African American characters.

Of these Newbery Medal and Honor Medal books, an emphasis on historic/al fiction is clearly noted. Fourteen books can be categorized as historic/al fiction, where as eleven are fictional, two are tales, and one is a book of poetry. The first book to receive the Newbery Honor Award was *Garram the Hunter: A Boy of the Hill Tribes* written by Herbert Best. This award was won in 1931. Incidentally, Herbert Best, a British born former army officer, was married to Erick Berry, who illustrated Best’s book and most notable was the author/illustrator of *Penny-Whistle* (1930). Best’s book is one of two books which received the Honor Medal before 1965 which were set in African. The other three books, Hildegard Swift’s *The Railroad to Freedom* (1933), Arna Bontemps’ *Story of the Negro* (1949), and Elizabeth Yates’

Amos Fortune, Free Man (1951), all deal with one subject, slavery. Bontemps was the only African American author of the four books awarded.

In 1969, the Newbery Honor Medal was presented to Julius Lester for his book, *To Be a Slave*. This was Lester's first book for children. Lester, who was born in January of 1939, quoted passages from historical documents and the oral histories recorded by the Federal Writer's Project of the New Deal to reconstruct the every day life and experiences of the slave. Lester's inspiration for writing such a book was personal since three of his great-grandparents were slaves and his use of the language of the slaves speaks a powerful message conveying what it was like to be a slave. Lester comments,

Some of my work is concerned with telling the stories of those who were once slaves - *To Be a Slave, Long Journey Home, This Strange New Feeling*. I feel the spirits of hundreds of slaves waiting for me to put their stories on paper. They want others to know them as men, women, and children who were forced to live under the condition of slavery, an extraordinary condition under which to try to be human. Yet they tried, and more often than not, were more successful than those who held them as slaves. (Children's Literature: "Julius Lester")

To Be A Slave (1969) was a landmark book for children's literature, firmly establishing African American children's literature, that is, children's literature written and produced by African Americans. Literature intended for African American children had shifted from being written by white authors to being written by African American authors.

Even today, African American literature is still emerging. In literature written after 1965, authors had the benefit of hindsight upon which to reflect. In writing back into the 1930s, they could reinforce the catalysts of change while de-emphasising the failures, or highlighting the lessons of such failures. Authors such as Mildred Taylor have been able to observe the results of past resistance and rewrite the past to construct childhood as a position of strong resistance. Taylor's Cassie Logan and Jeremy Simms are constructed characters whom Taylor provides with strength of character with which they are able to resist existing ideologies of race hate.

In the 1930s, the constructions of African American childhood were layered with complexities in text, dialect, and illustration. Textually in books such as *Pinky Marie* (1939) by Linda Graham, *Frawg* (1930) and *Bochy's Wings* (1931) by Annie Vaughan Weaver, the African American child was constructed as a fool in keeping with past pickaninny stereotypes. Such children were modelled on the minstrel morphed forms of Topsy, Stowe's counterpart to Little Eva. Yet the African American child was also constructed as wise and realistic in *Tobe* (1939) by Stella Gentry Sharpe as well as Eva Knox Evans' books – *Araminta* (1935), *Jerome Anthony* (1936), and *Araminta's Goat* (1938). The construction of strong character in and of the African American child is evident in the children's literature published in the 1930s. There was a certain amount of candour in addressing hardships experienced by the fictional characters – absent parents as in Ellis Credle's *Little Jeemes Henry* (1936), *The Pickaninny Twins* (1931) by Lucy Fritch Perkins, and *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934) by Arna Bontemps; as well as near starvation conditions in books such as *Junior: a colored boy of*

Charleston by Eleanor Lattimore, and Eva Knox Evans' *Key Corner* (1938); such books in which the characters are successful serve to demonstrate African American childhood as strong and enduring.

Dialect added to the construction of African American childhood, or at least to the development of a recognised African American vernacular structure. The various attempts in writing a previously unspoken dialect - which range from clear successes to obvious failures - showed the importance the authors placed in reflecting way the language was spoken in their writing. While some authors used non-standard English as a means to belittle and dehumanise African American characters, other authors utilised language as a means to construct African American childhood as uniquely un-monolithic; African American children spoke in any number of different ways, as did white, mainstream American children.

Illustrations in children's literature also assisted in constructed African American childhood. The publication history of *Little Black Sambo* served as a testament to the shifting ideologies seen in the varying illustrations. The minstrel influence was recognisable in texts such as Elise Bindrum's *Meg and Moe* (1938). However, the rise in photography attempt to construct a realistic picture of Southern life for the African American child in *The Flop-Eared Hound* (1938) by Ellis Credle and *Tobe* (1939) by Stella Gentry Sharpe. The most notable text in viewing construction of African American childhood is witnessed in the plastic and iconic layers of Eric Berry's *Penny-Whistle* (1930) in which the juxtaposition of text and illustration can be read as presenting complementary ideologies or opposing ideologies.

This thesis focused on the decade of the 1930s, viewing this time span as a connection between the ideas and desires fostered in the African American adults during the Harlem Renaissance before the crash of the stock market. The adults then passed their ideas and desires down to their children. That generation of children were fruitful in producing the political atmosphere for the Civil Rights Movement. The positive aspects presented in the constructs of African American childhood in the 1930s in American children's literature served to foster a growing sense of cultural pride in the African American community. As R. D. Lane noted, we – the literary scholars, educators, and parents – often have “underestimated the revolutionary potential of black children's literature” (127). The goal of this study was to unearth that ‘revolutionary potential’, to find the construction of “identity, selfhood, and purpose.” The literary history and analysis “of how literature targeted for black children has battled to defy, resist, and complicate public representations” is still emerging with many exciting aspects of study still available for research. Constructions of African American childhood have changed as society has changed and will continue to change but by unveiling the constructions during this important time period, it is possible to reflect on the beginnings of a positive view of constructions of African American childhood.

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LITTLE "FRAID" AND BIG "FRAID"

(AN AMERICAN NEGRO TALE)

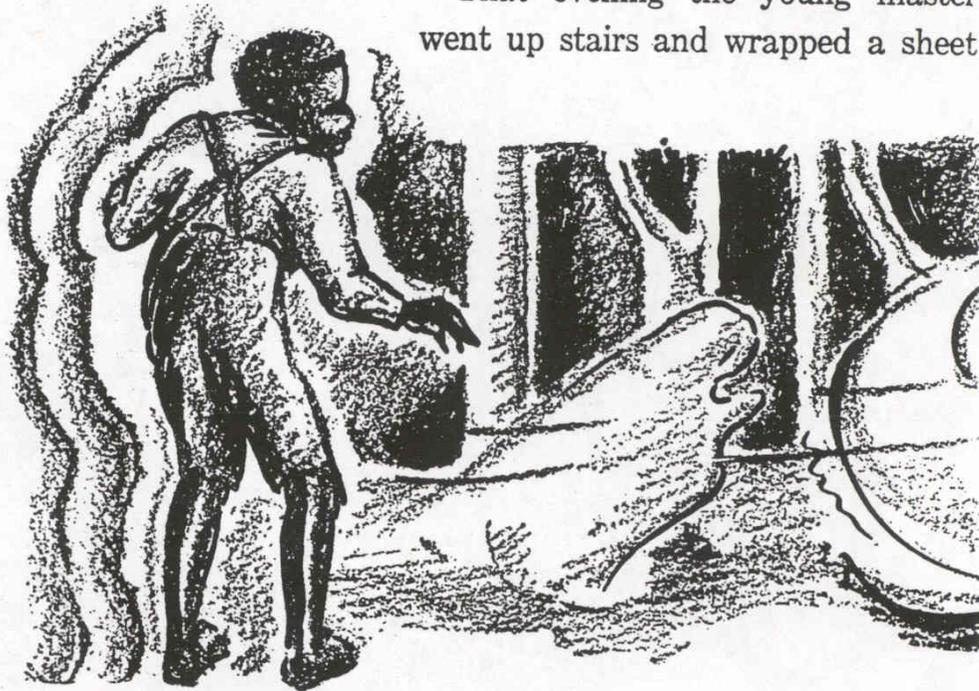
In the days of slavery one of the tasks of the slave boy was to hunt the cows and bring them home in the evening.

Late in the afternoon, the young master asked the slave boy, "Are you not afraid to go into the woods so late?"

"No," replied the slave. "I don't know what 'Fraid' is. I've never seen a 'Fraid'."

The slave owner had a pet monkey. The monkey, of course, tried to do everything people did, as that is the way monkeys do.

That evening the young master went up stairs and wraped a sheet



around him, thinking to scare the slave boy. The master tip-toed downstairs and went out of the house into the field and sat on a stump.

The monkey, which had been watching his master, put a pillow case over her. She followed the young master out of the house to the field and sat on another stump behind him.

The slave boy came along just about this time. He was walking toward the woods.

The young master looked around to see if he could see the slave coming. What should he see but a little thing, all in white, like himself, sitting on a stump. This frightened him dreadfully! He jumped up and ran as fast as he could toward the woods. Of course, the monkey knew nothing but to do the same thing. So she too ran behind the boy with all her might toward the woods.

Just as the slave had entered the woods, he saw a little white something chasing a big white something through the woods. He said to himself, "What can they be? Oh! those must be 'Fraids'." Then he yelled, "Run big 'Fraid', don't let little 'Fraid' get you!"



1 Tar Beach - Women On A Bridge Series - Part I
by Faith Ringgold © 1982
I will always remember when the stars fell down
around me and lifted me up above the George
Washington Bridge.

2 I could see the tiny light by with Mommy and Daddy that
Mr. and Mrs. Money for not their neighbors, still playing cards
as if nothing was going on, and the big, my baby brother,
looking real still on the mattress, just like I told him to,
his eyes like huge headlights tracking me through the
sky.

3 Sleeping on Tar Beach was magical, lying on the
roof on the night with stars and city lights and
all around me would not feel like I wanted all that
I could see. The bridge was my most prized possession.

4 Daddy said the George Washington Bridge was the loveliest
and most beautiful bridge in the world and that he
opened it in 1907 on the very day I was born. Daddy
worked on the bridge, heeding laborers. Since then, I've
wanted that bridge to be mine.

5 Now I have claimed it. All I had to do was fly over it
for it to be mine forever. I can hear it like it's always
nearby, it's just the above it and marvel at its sparkling
beauty. I can fly over it, and every time I fly over it
only eight years old and in the third grade and I
can fly.

6 That means I am free to go wherever I want to go for the
rest of my life. I can see the new skyscraper he is
working on. He can walk on steel girders high up in the
sky and not fall. They call him the cat.

7 Dad still he can't join the union because Daddy doesn't
remember. Well, Daddy is going to run that building cause
I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. That is what
matter that his not in their union or whether he's
white or a black bread. Union is the way.

8 He'll be rich and won't have to stand on 24 story high girders
and look down. He can look up at his building going up.
And Mommy won't cry all winter when Daddy goes to
look for work and Daddy come home. And Mommy can
wash and sleep late like Mr. Money and we can have ice
cream every night for dessert.

9 Now I'm going to fly over the ice cream factory just to
make sure they're making it right. Mommy is raising
pigs and chickens and Daddy will bring home a garden
when he's home. And they will bring the best and their old
green car that they'll sell for \$1000 and I will fly to the
sky and I will fly to the skyscraper.

10 I'll take Be Be with me. He has threatened to tell Mommy
and Daddy if I leave him behind.
11 I have told him it's very easy, anyone can fly. All
you need is somewhere to go that you can't get to any other
way. The next thing you know you're flying among the stars.
a . . .

Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

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