

SUNY New Paltz

Literature for Liberation:

The Development and Application of Black Children's Literature

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## LITERATURE FOR LIBERATION: THE DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION OF BLACK CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

### Abstract

One of the greatest injustices being committed against minority people in the United States is a lack of representation in literature. The curriculum being used in the vast majority of schools lacks representation of anyone who is not white. The few times minorities are represented, it is stereotypical or racist. This lack of representation ultimately silences students and discourages them from engaging in school. Which then snowballs into greater problems later on, fewer opportunities, dropping out, school to prison pipeline. In order to lessen the achievement gap between white students and students of color, improvements must be made in the US education system.

*Keywords:* sociology, multicultural education, Black children's literature, humanizing pedagogy

## **Introduction: Assata Shakur and Black Liberation Through Education**

Despite her considerable contributions to the advancement of Black liberation during the Civil Rights Movement, the story of Assata Shakur is not one familiar to many people in the United States. After numerous wrongful convictions, years of false imprisonment, and eventual exilement, Assata Shakur has essentially been erased from history. The erasure of Shakur, along with other members of the Black Liberation Army, was a calculated effort in concealing the history of Black people, power, and pride in the United States. As Shakur herself once said; “No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.”

Shakur briefly volunteered as a student-teacher while attending Manhattan Community College in 1967. In her autobiography, *Assata*, she details a pivotal moment in her experience as a student-teacher. “On the first day of the arts and crafts class i had nothing really prepared, so i asked everyone to draw themselves. When i looked at the drawings i felt faint. All of the students were Black, yet the drawings depicted a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed little white children” (Shakur 1987: 188). From then on, Shakur devoted herself to developing an Afro-centric curriculum and instilling a sense of pride in her students.

Upon reading *Assata* during my senior year of high school, I was inspired to pursue a career in education myself. I committed to advocate for Black representation in school curriculum, just as Shakur had. I studied Early Childhood & Childhood Education for one semester, but due to unfulfilling coursework, switched my major to sociology. My aspiration for teaching continues, however I now approach education from a sociological perspective. Studying sociology has led me to view the school as a social institution that promotes white supremacy

and produces inequality. While there are many unjust aspects of school that demand discussion, the area that I believe requires immediate and ongoing attention is the representation of Black people in children's literature, and how it affects students.

In this thesis I start by clarifying the socio-political function and impact of children's literature. I then explore how the genre of Black children's literature originated and has developed. After reviewing its history, I then provide an overview of the scholarship on Black children's literature; with a focused analysis of one subgenre of Black children's literature that has developed in recent years known as *hair books*. Finally, I touch upon the pedagogical practices that must be used when implementing Black children's literature in the classroom. In reading this thesis, I hope that teachers will better understand the history, as well as the importance of Black children's literature, and that it will encourage them to advocate for it in their students' curricula.

### **The Political Function of Children's Literature**

Children's literature wields enormous power in its capacity to persuade young minds. Depending on what stories are utilized in school curricula, children's books can both perpetuate racism and dismantle it. Despite a present and growing body of Black children's literature, many schools continue to teach the same canonical classics that deny Black existence. The implementation of Black children's literature in elementary classrooms can counteract the negative and stereotypical literary representation of the past while helping Black students to develop a positive self-image, take pride in their heritage, cultivate political agency, and improve comprehension.

Despite its intended audience, children's literature is by no means a childish matter. The bright colors and silly rhymes that are commonplace in children's books seem to have fooled people into believing that their sole function is to entertain. This assumption could not be further from the truth. In fact, children's literature serves a very specific role in the socialization of society's youngest members. From the moment a child opens up their first board book as a toddler, they are being fed information about the world around them. Through words and illustrations, they are not only taught their role in society, but whether or not they are valued as a human being. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the significant political function of children's literature plays an important role in meaningful advancements toward liberation. I believe that before we are able to make any meaningful advancements toward liberation, we must first thoroughly understand the significant political function of children's literature.

The role of children's literature as a socializing agent is a crucial component in the development of Black children's literature as a genre. Prominent Black authors and educators understood that "if African American students cannot find themselves and people like them in the books they read and have read to them, they receive a powerful message about how they are undervalued in both the school and society" (Bishop 1990: 561). Likewise, white children who are constantly fed images of people that look and live like them, receive a different, but similarly damaging message that they, as a white person, are superior.

Akin to socialization, children's literature also operates to instill in children a sense of political awareness. Most mainstream literary classics in the United States, like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Cat in the Hat* are ostensibly apolitical. However, a closer look reveals that these books are not apolitical at all, but rather "advanc[e] a political agenda that helps maintain

the status quo” (Ladson-Billings 1992: 381). For this reason, many Black authors have taken it upon themselves to offer characters that are mimetic, rather than semiotic (Klęczaj-Siara 2019).

Mimetic characters can be recognized as real people who are part of social groups and specific communities, and their actions can be better understood with knowledge about their origin and culture. Semiotic characters, on the other hand, hold no meaning outside of the literary context in which they exist (Bishops 2012, Klęczaj-Siara 2019). Black children’s literature, often teeming with mimetic characters, communicates the important message that children are agents of change, and that they have power over their future, and the future of their people.

A distinct component of children’s literature that contributes to the socialization and politicization previously mentioned is the incorporation of illustrations. Illustrations hold significance in their ability to convey a message to children, and at times can even be more influential than the actual words written on the page. For “just as authors can embed culturally influenced themes and literary devices within the text, illustrators also embed important messages in the images of picture books” (Brooks & McNair 2009: 154). When it comes to children’s literature, illustrations often show more to the reader than the words tell (Bishop 1990, Brooks & McNair 2009, Klęczaj-Siara 2019). Through implicit indicators of importance, like a character’s size, gestures, and positioning on the page, children pick up on the inferred nuances of those characters and their relationships with others and with the world. Illustrations portray images of what society deems as valuable, powerful, and significant. And children need only look to see if they themselves are considered part of the valuable, powerful, and significant.

Those who believe that children’s books are a simple, educational activity used to pass the time do not understand that children’s literature is an influential form of political propaganda. Every book teaches something, socializing children to think a certain way about themselves and

others. In understanding the inherently political nature of children's literature we can now begin to examine the emergence of a Black children's literary tradition that rejects the pejorative connotations so often associated with Black people and culture in children's literature.

### **The History of the Development of Black Children's Literature**

Within the subset of literature as a published body of written<sup>1</sup> work, Black characters have appeared since the "discovery" of the Americas in the seventeenth century. However, the genre of Black children's literature as we know it has its roots in the late nineteenth century. For the sake of clarity "African American children's literature is generally defined as not only being about African Americans but as being created by African Americans as well" (Bishop 1990: 557). Indubitably, the inception of Black children's literature at this time was no easy feat, as it attempted to overturn a selective tradition in literature that controlled how readers perceived the world around them (Brooks & McNair 2009, Harris 1990).

The selective tradition functioned to uphold white supremacy, and in turn, Black subjugation through the promotion of damaging stereotypes. The selective tradition is an

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<sup>1</sup> While this thesis focuses on literature as a published body of written work, literature does, in fact, manifest in many forms, including oral tradition. The conventional view that literature solely exists as novels, essays, and poems is undeniably Eurocentric, and rooted in white supremacy. Furthermore, the belief that oral wisdom is not a legitimate form of literature functions to exclude and invalidate Black cultural history, which is known for its folktales and generational storytelling. For despite having been denied access to education and literacy, Black people have consistently created literary content by way of song and story throughout history.

essential component of the overwhelmingly white and Eurocentric American literary canon, which is a list of works that have been deemed noteworthy and “necessary for cultural literacy” (Harris 1990: 540). Due to its alleged, and assumed relevance, most teachers revert to the canon when making book selections for their classes, which means that they are only selecting books “that reflect the experiences, values, perspectives, knowledge, and interpretations of Whites, particularly Anglo-Saxons” (Harris). The literary canon epitomizes the selective tradition of children’s literature that has completely disregarded any contributions made by Black authors, regardless of merit. The literary canon also influences what kind of books are chosen to be displayed in libraries and advertised in literary catalogs, further erasing and limiting access to quality Black children’s literature.

The other noxious aspect of the selective tradition is the stereotypical depictions of Black people and culture in literature. Sterling Allen Brown, the first Poet Laureate of the District of Columbia, analyzed Black representation in the works of the literary canon and identified seven prevailing stereotypes regarding Black people: “the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local-color Negro, and the exotic primitive” (Brown 1933: 180). These seven stereotypes dominated all areas of culture, including cartoons and picture books aimed at children. An example of the “exotic primitive” stereotype can be seen in Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* that was published in 1899 and beloved by many young white readers. Brown also determined that “the literary depictions of African Americans entertained Whites and, when combined with prevailing theological arguments and ‘scientific’ data from the social sciences, provided literary justification for institutionalized racism” (Harris 1990: 541). These stereotypical representations of Black people

in literature are significant because they were not bound by the covers of a book, but rather translated to the real-life subjugation and subordination of Black people.

The emergence of Black children's literature was "an oppositional and creative endeavor that challenged the selective tradition in children's literature" (Brooks & McNair 2009: 130). Black authors recognized the need for humanizing stories about the Black experience, so that Black children could read a picture book and feel valued as a member of society, rather than excluded. While there are a few contentious candidates for the first Black children's book, Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Little Brown Baby* (1895) is the most appropriate, as other books from the same period were either rife with stereotypes and racial slurs, or written by a white author (Harris 1990). While *Little Brown Baby* does reproduce the negative stereotype of the "comic Negro," Dunbar's collection of poems is significant in its orthographic representation of African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, which has come to be a significant theme in Black children's literature.

While the publication of *Little Brown Baby* in 1895 was a significant step in the right direction, the books produced during this time were not likely to ever reach the hands of Black children. "The majority of African American children during that time were illiterate; few could have encountered the texts in their schooling because major structures were placed on the funding, curricula, and type of schooling provided for African Americans" (Harris 1990: 544). Remarkably, this problem has still not been entirely solved in the 125 years since *Little Brown Baby*, as many Black children continue to be denied access to books that positively reflect their own culture or language.

With the turn of the new century, a more refined body of literature specific to Black children emerged with *The Brownies' Book*, a periodical edited by the sociologist W.E.B. Du

Bois in the early 1920s (Bishop 2012, Brooks & McNair 2009, 2014, Klęczaj-Siara 2019, Johnson 2009). In creating *The Brownies' Book*, Du Bois curated stories, games, and folktales written for and about “children of the sun” (Johnson-Feelings 1996) and articulated seven objectives that he hoped to accomplish in regard to his publication. These objectives were:

To make colored children realize that being colored is a normal, beautiful thing; to make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race; to make them know that other colored children have grown into useful, famous persons; to teach them a delicate code of honor and action in their relations with white children; to turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their homes and companions; to point out the best amusements and joys and worth-while things of life; to inspire them to prepare for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice. (Du Bois 1919).

Despite having been written more than a century ago, the goals expressed by Du Bois are consistent with those of contemporary Black children’s literature. Current writers continue in his legacy by creating characters that are both positively connected to their race, and politically active as agents of change.

Although Du Bois established detailed intentions for the development of Black children’s literature, many books published since the creation of *The Brownies' Book* have deviated considerably from his seven original objectives. It is true that there has been an increase in diverse children’s literature over the years. For example, the rate of children’s books containing a Black character practically doubled from 6% in 2008, to 11% in 2019 (Fetters 2019). Of course, while this is an improvement, 11% is nothing to boast about. Furthermore, the percentage alone does not speak to the quality of the characters, or how they are represented. For a more in-depth analysis, I now discuss several exemplars of scholarship on Black children’s literature.

### **Rudine Sims Bishop and the Analysis of Black Children’s Literature**

The development of Black children's literature has been accompanied by an increase in scholarly and critical attention to representation of Black characters and stories. Rudine Sims Bishop, the "Mother of Multicultural Literature," has devoted her scholarship to the formulation of criteria to be used in analyzing the quality of Black children's literature. Bishop has published a number of groundbreaking books such as *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (1982), *Expanding the Worlds of Children's Literature* (2005), and *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (2007), all of which are still considered standards in the fields of children's literature and education.

Bishop wrote her first book after conducting a study of 150 Black children's fiction books that had been published between 1965 and 1979. Throughout her analysis Bishop focused on three guiding questions. First, who is the intended audience? Books written *about* Black children tend to be rife with stereotypes, while books written *for* Black children are more likely to be genuine and empowering. Second, what cultural experiences are depicted? Books that simply contain Black characters do not necessarily portray an accurate Black cultural experience. Third, what is the author's cultural perspective? Black authors are more likely to depict an authentic Black experience than white authors who are writing from an outsider perspective (Bishop 2012). Guided by these questions, Bishop was then able to develop three categories that can be used to classify Black children's literature.

Bishop identified the first category as "social conscience" books. These are books that are primarily intended for white readers "who are being encouraged to develop a social conscience." The majority of these books were written during the Civil Rights Movement and mainly focus on racial conflicts, like school integration. The characterization of Black people in these "social

conscience” books are unideal and promote antiquated stereotypes. The second category was labelled by Bishop as “melting pot” books. These books attempt to transport Black characters into mainstream children’s literature by ignoring “anything other than skin color, that might identify the characters as Black” (Bishop 2012: 7). While these books do situate Black and white characters as equal, they refuse to recognize any cultural differences, which suggests that said differences are not valued. Finally, Bishop’s third category is defined as “culturally conscious” books. “These books are set in Black cultural environments, have Black major characters, are told from the perspectives of those characters, and include some textual means of identifying the characters as Black, such as physical descriptions or distinctive cultural markers” (Bishop 2012). “Culturally conscious” books are most aligned with the seven objectives previously established by Du Bois, that simultaneously honor African American history, while celebrating the beauty of the Black experience.

Like Du Bois, Bishop’s work has stood the test of time. Even though her analysis of Black children’s literature took place in 1980, and focused on books from 1965 to 1979, the criteria she developed continue to be utilized by educators in deciding whether or not to include certain books in their school curriculum. She has also contributed to the advancement of higher quality Black children’s literature, by helping authors to assess whether their own work authentically portrays Black people and culture.

Bishop’s work on Black children’s literature did not end after the release of her first book. In 1990, Bishop published her seminal essay “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.” Her metaphorical comparison of children’s books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors was groundbreaking in children’s literary scholarship and is frequently referenced to this

day. Due to the widespread exploitation of her work without credit, I find it meaningful to include her revolutionary quote in its entirety;

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop 1990)

It is absolutely imperative for Black children to be provided the opportunity to see themselves, and their lived experiences mirrored in the children's books that they read (McNair 2012). Just as Assata Shakur has been expelled from history books, Black children have been denied representation in children's literature. And when they have been represented, those representations have reproduced racist stereotypes. When Black children read literature that accurately reflects them, their culture, and their history, they are validated. Black children have been socialized by the systemic racism inherent in our world to believe that they are "less than." Children's literature has the invaluable power to act as a mediator between children and society (Brooks & McNair 2014), along with the ability to intervene and defuse children's negative experiences. While children's books can't end racism as we know it, they can attempt to combat the injustice experienced by Black children by letting them know that they are valued.

Furthermore, white children benefit greatly from the instruction of books as windows. Those who have been provided an incessant amount of mirror books have consequently been denied the opportunity to learn about cultures and experiences that differ from their own. Given that we live in a diverse, multicultural society, white children are being deprived of an accurate education of the world, which is unjust in its own right. Exclusively reading mirror books can

also inflate a child's ego, leading them to develop a false sense of entitlement (Bishop 1990, 2012).

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that children need a myriad of all three. Books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors are valuable in helping children to cultivate an appreciation and understanding of all people, despite their differences (Bishop 1990). Next, I discuss the set of goals and themes that have emerged alongside the development of the Black literary tradition.

### **Common Goals and Themes Visible in Black Children's Literature**

In the centuries following the inception of the Black children's literary tradition in the late 19th century, there has been considerable attention given to its development. Black children's literature has moved away from the "social conscience" and "melting pot" books of the past and has entered a new era of "culturally conscious" books that function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop 1990, 2012). Throughout this development, Black authors have come to share a consistent set of goals and themes that they strive to portray in their work. While I have already discussed the goals, as they have remained consistent to those established by Du Bois in *The Brownies' Book*, I now turn to an analysis of common themes.

Black children's literature is widely regarded as a 'literature of purpose' (Bishop 1990, 2012, Brooks & McNair 2009, Harris 1990, Klęczaj-Siara 2019). It was created in response to the damaging literary tradition, with the clear intention of providing Black children with literature that is authentic and representative of their cultural experience growing up in the United States. With this intention in mind, various themes have emerged as prominent features of the Black children's literary tradition. Bishop lists the themes explicitly, and many others agree

with her conclusion (Brooks & McNair 2014, Harris 1990, Klęczaj-Siara 2019): “(1) the importance of warm and loving human relationships, especially within the family; (2) a sense of community among African Americans; (3) African American history, heritage, and culture; and (4) the ability to survive, both physically and psychologically, in the face of overwhelming odds” (Bishop 1990: 560). Interestingly enough, these themes align very closely with the goals previously established by Du Bois. Contemporary Black authors embed these four themes within most of their literature as a way to reinforce their goals for the next generation of Black people.

### ***Theme 1: Warm and Loving Human Relationships***

To best understand the “purpose” of Black children’s books in terms of a literary tradition, it is necessary to understand how each of the four themes are presented within the work. The first theme, “the importance of warm and loving human relationships, especially within the family” is the most easily recognizable of all four. Most Black children’s books take place within the home, with the characters surrounded by generations of family members, and extended kinship. Many recurring images found in Black children’s literature involve relationships between mother and daughter, as well as grandmother and grandchild (Bishop 1990, Bishop 2012, Brooks & McNair 2014, Klęczaj-Siara 2019). The implementation of this theme operates to authenticate the Black familial experience.

Many Black children live in a family structure different from that of the nuclear mom, dad, sister, brother, and a dog that is so commonly seen in picture books. By including images of intergenerational families, Black children understand that their way of life is valid. The selective tradition has promoted the idea of the ‘breakdown of the Black family’ through years of stereotypical literary representation; with absent fathers and welfare-dependent mothers. Because of this, the theme of family is so obviously apparent in Black children’s literature given that

Black authors understand the demand for humanizing depictions of the Black family, in whatever form it takes shape.

### ***Theme 2: A Sense of Community Among African Americans***

The second theme commonly included in Black children's literature is "a sense of community among African Americans," which closely correlates to the previous theme regarding family. For many Black people, friends are considered family. It is common to have many aunts, uncles, and cousins who are not blood related, but are acknowledged as legitimate members of the family nonetheless. Black children's books that include a myriad of family, friends, and community members in the lives of the characters articulate the notion to Black children that their way of life is good. Many contemporary Black authors have made the effort to "shift from explicit racial themes to the more subtle use of race and emphasis on the authentic depiction of African Americans as they engage in typical activities such as attending picnics, hopping trains in the big city, and playing with friends" (Harris 1990: 549). This portrayal of a sense of community among Black people in children's books is significant because it provides an alternative to the "melting pot" books of the past, which often included one or two characters of color without any indication that they are culturally any different than the white characters. By celebrating the Black communal experience in literature, children are again encouraged to view their cultural experiences as valuable.

### ***Theme 3: African American History, Heritage, and Culture***

The next theme, "African American history, heritage, and culture," is meaningful given the abundance of inaccuracies that are portrayed in US history regarding Black people and their struggle for liberation. The misrepresentation, and the erasure of Black historical figures from children's literature has been a calculated move to ensure the silence and continued subjugation

of Black people. Which again, ties back to the quote I used in my introduction, “No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free” (Shakur 1987). In order to present an admirable depiction of ‘true heroes’ to Black children, many Black authors have utilized biography, folk stories, and AAVE in their work.

Biography is commonly used in non-fiction children’s literature to detail the life of a historical figure. Collins (2001) suggests that “[t]hrough Black biography, it is possible for Black young adults to tap into the accumulated wisdom of countless generations” (7). Black authors often utilize non-fiction biography to fill in the gaps created by the whitewashed history textbooks often found in US classrooms, ensuring Black children that their ancestors did, in fact, play an active role in history. Biographies, as explained by Marshall (2008), “[p]resent historical accounts and cultural memories that rewrite traditional narratives to include the unique struggles, contributions, and triumphs of African American(s)” (46).

While most biographies do contain all the elements of fiction, there are children that would prefer to read something a little more imaginative. For this reason, many authors have embedded biography into historical fiction, to provide a more enthralling read. This can be seen in Faith Ringgold’s *Dinner at Aunt Connie’s House* (1993). Two cousins, Melody and Lonnie sneak away from the dinner table to discover paintings in their aunt’s attic featuring influential Black women like Mary McLeod Bethune, Zora Neal Hurston, and Harriet Tubman. The paintings come to life and share their empowering stories with the children. By including biography in a fictional story, Ringgold is able to successfully educate young readers about history, while simultaneously captivating them with elements of fantasy and suspense.

Another way in which authors include the theme of history, heritage, and culture is through the use of African American folktales in children's literature. While some authors simply retell traditional folktales, like Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (1985), others include folktales through the retelling of family stories and family histories. The latter method often combines the first three themes of family, community, and history, as a grandparent or elderly community member often shares a folk story to a group of young children. According to Brooks & McNair (2009), "[s]torytelling is an ancient African tradition where the values and history of a people are passed on to the young verbally" (146). Utilizing folktales and storytelling is valuable in Black children's literature as it shares historical knowledge in a way that is in itself historical, and not to mention, culturally relevant.

The final way that authors portray the theme of history, heritage, and culture in Black children's literature is through the use of AAVE (Bishop 1990, 2012, Brooks & McNair 2009, Harris 1990, Kłęczaj-Siara 2019). Bishop (1990) argued that "[t]he most readily recognizable element of African American culture to appear in books is the accurate representation of many of the various stylistic, phonetic, and grammatical elements and structures that identify a speaker as a member of the African American community" (560). As already noted, the use of AAVE is why *Little Brown Boy* (Dunbar) came to be considered the first ever Black children's book. Similar to the use of folktales as a channel to provide historical literature in a culturally relevant manner, AAVE adds a layer of authenticity to stories centering Black history. Given that language is one of the major elements of culture, the incorporation of AAVE into Black children's literature is necessary for it to properly portray the Black cultural experience. Furthermore, its use in published works of literature authenticates AAVE as a recognized language. Literature that beautifully captures AAVE affords Black children, who have most

likely endured a lifetime of persistent tone policing, the opportunity to read a book that not only reflects, but also legitimizes the sound of their own voice.

#### ***Theme 4: Resiliency in the Face of Overwhelming Odds***

Finally, the fourth theme that is commonly recognized in Black children's literature is "the ability to survive, both physically and psychologically, in the face of overwhelming odds." This theme ties in with the third theme regarding history, as historical stories are often used to promote the importance of resiliency. An example of this can be seen in Ruby Bridges' *Through My Eyes* (1999). Regarding her experiences as the first Black student to integrate her elementary school, Bridges says "Still, I sometimes feel I lost something that year. I feel as if I lost my childhood. It seems that I have always had to deal with some adult issues." Bridges iterates an experience common among Black children, who are so often forced to face the consequences of living in a white supremacist, and specifically anti-Black society, at an early age. Black children's literature represents a 'storied tradition of resistance' (Bishop 1990, 2012, Brooks & McNair 2009, Harris 1990, Klęczaj-Siara 2019) that provides Black children with a replacement for the dehumanizing slave narrative that has been falsely preserved as historical fact.

Throughout the two centuries following its conception, Black children's literature has developed a common set of goals and themes in its efforts to provide children with images and stories different than those perpetuated by the selective tradition. As a 'literature of purpose,' Black children's literature rejects the damaging stereotypes commonly found in the literary canon, and instead offers Black children the opportunity to see their own family, community, history, and resiliency reflected on the pages of a book. This, consequently, validates them as a human being. In the following section, I examine how a new subgenre of Black children's

literature focuses on a particular theme, while still maintaining the goals and themes discussed previously.

### **Hair Books: A Subgenre of Black Children's Literature**

Fairly recently, a new subgenre of Black children's literature has emerged, as well as a body of scholarship that examines it. This subgenre, established in 1979 with Camille Yarbrough's book *Cornrows*, consists of picture books written by Black women that center around hair, a significant aspect of Black female identity. From a young age, Black girls are inundated with images that regard European physical features, like long, straight hair, as the epitome of beauty (Brooks & McNair 2014). Because of this, many Black girls internalize the rampant racism of the beauty industry and resent their own hair. Along with its aesthetic value, hair also has significant cultural and political implications (Brooks & McNair 2014, Johnson 2009, Lester 1999). Dating back to slavery, "straight hair translated to economic opportunity and social advantage" (Brooks & McNair 2014: 297). Unfortunately, this correlation of straight hair to improved social status has persisted over time. For example, in the workplace, many Black women face discrimination, and even termination, for styling their hair in ways that are deemed "incompetent" and "unprofessional" (Johnson 2009). However, despite these degrading experiences, for many Black women, their hair remains a source of pride. It is a testament to their Black heritage, and a constant reminder to survive and overcome despite the circumstances (Brooks & McNair 2014).

Given its cultural relevance, it is abundantly clear why hair is a central theme in many Black children's books. By understanding the important relationship between a child's self-image and sense of belonging (Johnson 2009), hair books pursue the literary tradition previously

established by Du Bois. They provide necessary counter images to children who may otherwise believe their physical appearance to be inferior and assist them in developing the belief that “Black is indeed beautiful, particularly when it comes to hair” (Brooks & McNair 2014: 300). For Black girls, hair books act as mirror books by reflecting an important aspect of their life back to them in a way that is not only positive, but empowering.

In the scholarship on hair books, three significant themes have emerged. “(1) the perspective that all hair is good, (2) the connection between Black hair and African American history, and (3) the bonding of females while hair is being combed and/or styled” (Brooks & McNair 2014: 302: see also Johnson 2009, Lester 1999).

### ***Theme 1: All Hair is Good***

The notion that “all hair is good” is undoubtedly the most recognized theme across all hair books. Closely aligned with Du Bois’ primary objective “to make colored children realize that being colored is a normal, beautiful thing,” hair books are created with the specific purpose of encouraging Black children to believe that their hair is normal and beautiful, despite what society has led them to think.

Authors portray this theme in their writing through the use of direct statements and recognizable inferences (Brooks & McNair 2014). The first method can be seen in *Saturday at the New You* (Barber 1994) as Shauna details her mama’s beauty salon; “The New You has pictures on the wall with lots of different hairstyles. Long hair, short hair, natural hair, straight hair, curly hair; Momma says all hair is beautiful.” By directly stating that “all hair is beautiful” immediately after listing various types of Black hairstyles, Barber makes it abundantly clear to the reader that “all hair is good.” This excerpt is exceptionally noteworthy in that it supports *all* Black hairstyles as beautiful, and not just natural ones.

The second way in which authors portray the idea that “all hair is good” is by making inferences that are obvious, even to the youngest of readers. This approach is demonstrated by Carolivia Herron in her book *Nappy Hair* (1998) when Brenda’s family reminds her that “her hair was an act of God,” and that “God wanted himself some nappy hair upon the face of the Earth.” Even though the author does not explicitly say that “all hair is good,” the inference of nappy hair as sacred confirms that exact sentiment.

### ***Theme 2: The Connection Between Hair and History***

The second prevailing theme commonly observed among hair books is “the connection between Black hair and African American history.” The representation of hair in Black children’s literature serves a unique purpose, it bridges the gap between past and present, and unites Black children with the power of their people. Authors strive to connect young readers to their rich heritage by incorporating historical references and utilizing cultural oral traditions (Brooks & McNair 2014, Johnson 2009, Lester 1999).

The correlation of hair with history in children’s literature emerged in 1979 with Camille Yarbrough’s *Cornrows*. Through her implementation of traditional storytelling, Yarbrough expertly weaves African American history into the minds of young readers. As Mama and Great-Grammaw cornrow Shirley Ann and MeToo’s hair, they share the importance of cornrows in the lives of their ancestors. Great-Grammaw tells them of an undying spirit that “lives inside you.” It originated in Africa and “gave form to symbols of courage, an honor, an wisdom, an love, an strength.” (Brooks & McNair 2014, Johnson 2009). Before the end of the book, the family works together to name their freshly braided cornrows in honor of people like Mary Bethune, Aretha Franklin, and Nina Simone (Johnson 2009). Not only does Yarbrough share the names of prominent historical figures, she utilizes the traditional practice of naming to do so.

Carolivia Herron similarly used hair as a means to connect readers with their history in *Nappy Hair* (1997). With Uncle Mordecai as the preacher, and Brenda's family as the congregation, Herron utilizes the oral tradition of call and response to mimic the experience of a Black church service (Lester 1999). Brenda's family traces her nappy hair back to Africa, and the horrors of slavery. The endurance of Brenda's nappy hair is symbolic of the endurance of her people (Lester 1999). By establishing a powerful connection between hair and history, both *Cornrows* and *Nappy Hair* encourage Black children to celebrate their heritage, as well as their physical features.

### ***Theme 3: Female Bonding through Hair***

The third theme deemed noteworthy among hair books is "the bonding of females while hair is being combed and/or styled." This theme has emerged previously during the analysis of *Saturday at the New You* (Barber 1994), and *Cornrows* (Yarbrough 1979). Despite taking place in different settings, both of these books depict women getting their hair done. Whether at a beauty parlor, or the kitchen table, the gathering of Black women to do each other's hair is a sacred ritual. In *Crowning Glory* (2002), a book of poems by Joyce Carol Thomas, there are a number of "images of mothers with their daughters sitting between their legs while getting their hair combed" (Brooks & McNair 2014: 305). Considering the private nature of this practice, it can be meaningful for Black girls to see a familiar experience depicted in a book.

Per analysis of the aforementioned themes, it is quite obvious that hair books are continuing the legacy previously established by Du Bois and Bishops. Not only do they accomplish the seven objectives originally intended for *The Brownies' Book*, they also successfully function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. The emergence of hair books as a subgenre of Black children's literature represents progress towards improved literary

representation. Functioning as what Bishops calls “a literature of purpose” (2012), hair books challenge the white supremacy inherent in literary tradition, while simultaneously empowering Black children by providing them with authentic reflections of themselves.

Coincidentally, one of my mother’s colleagues, Roberta McGill, a social worker at School No. 45 in Rochester, NY, just published her own hair book in 2020. *Abella and the Magical Afro Puffs* tells the story of a six-year-old girl named Abella who discovers that she has magical hair that takes her on an adventure to a magical candy land. McGill’s book aligns with two of the themes discussed earlier regarding hair books. In every illustration, Abella is grinning from ear to ear while affirming her hair by stating “I love my Afro puffs, they are unique.” The positive association Abella makes regarding her hair portrays the first theme that “all hair is good.” Furthermore, when Abella comes home from her adventure her mom says, “Put on your bonnet to cover your head,” which Abella happily does. This segment loosely demonstrates the third theme, “the bonding of females while hair is being combed and/or styled,” as Abella receives instruction on how to care for her hair from her mother.

McGill told my mother that her purpose in writing this book was to show her granddaughters that they too have magical hair. And that, figuratively speaking, their hair can take them on wonderful adventures as well. The recent publication of *Abella and the Magical Afro Puffs* confirms that hair books as mirror books hold significant value in the Black literary tradition, as well as in the lives of many Black children.

### **The Application of Black Children’s Literature: A Humanizing Pedagogy**

Thus far, I have covered the major developments that have taken place since the creation of Black children’s literature as a response to the selective tradition. Rudine Sims Bishop

provided notable contributions in the analysis of this body of literature. Through her research, books can now be determined as either “socially conscious,” “melting pot,” or “culturally conscious,” which allows for a better understanding of the political function, and liberatory potential of literature. Additionally, Bishop articulated the importance of supplying children with books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Moreover, the seven goals established by W. E. B. Du Bois have been translated into the four themes that are now common among Black children’s literature. Finally, a subgenre has emerged from the Black literary tradition, and maintains the same objectives and themes, but with a specific focus on hair.

In the ongoing struggle for Black liberation, the possession of this knowledge is paramount. However, it must be taken a step further. The knowledge regarding the development of Black children’s literature must also be applied in the classroom in order for it to effect the radical change necessary in creating a more just world. As a prospective teacher dedicated to Black representation in school, I conclude with a discussion of how I can adequately implement Black children’s literature in my future classroom.

Education does not take place in a vacuum. By this I mean that schools are social institutions, they reflect the values, beliefs, and even inequalities of the larger society that developed them (Asante 1991, Bartolome 1994, Ladson-Billings 1992). So, “a White supremacist-dominated society will develop a White supremacist educational system” (Asante 1991: 170). And inequalities present on the macro-level of the greater society will, if gone unaddressed, undoubtedly be reproduced on the micro-levels of that society, like in the school. Consequently, the solution to the ‘Black-White achievement gap’ will never be an increase in tests and standards. Rather, educators must first address the deep-rooted systemic racism in their schools before they will ever be able to ensure the success of their Black students.

Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933) was one of the first publications to address the fundamental problems pertaining to the education of Black children in the United States. He wrote that "African Americans have been educated away from their own culture and traditions... thus dislocated from themselves" (7). He also remarked that the US education system would lead to the "psychological and cultural death of the African American population." The principles established by Woodson in his work have been foundational in the development of an Afrocentric curriculum (Asante 1991), which advocates for centering the Black experience within the context of the United States. Not only does this allow for Black children to see themselves as the center of their reality, it also promotes a more accurate representation of historical facts, which is beneficial for all children.

In the 90 years since Woodson first introduced the idea of centering children within the context of their cultural history, it has become a significant pedagogical tool used by teachers who are attempting to revolutionize their classrooms. Asante (1990) explains that "[c]entricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture. The centrist paradigm is supported by research showing that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the center of the context of knowledge" (171). This same idea is now commonly known as "culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings 1990, 1992, 1992, 1995) and "humanizing pedagogy" (Bartolome 1994). Regardless of the name, the implementation of these pedagogical methods empowers students by using their existing cultural knowledge to make connections to what they are learning in school, thus acquiring new knowledge. Centering functions by allowing students to see themselves as subjects of education, rather than the objects of study (Asante 1991, Bartolome 1994, Ladson-Billings 1992).

There have been many suggested methods on how to implement these practices in the classroom. For example, Bena R. Hefflin meticulously designed and implemented a lesson plan based on *Cornrows* (Yarbrough 1979). Hefflin realized that the mere use of a culturally conscious picture book (Bishop 1997) would not engage her students if she did not simultaneously teach in a way that is culturally relevant to her students' home lives. Upon this revelation, Hefflin overhauled her lesson plan to align more closely with the way her students interact within the context of their own community. Upon including personal connections, oral reading, call and response, and illustrations, her students were "engaged and performed more fully with the culturally relevant approach" (Hefflin 2002: 247). While this lesson plan was successful for Hefflin and her specific classroom, it is necessary to understand that a "one-size-fits-all" teaching approach is unreliable.

The most effective way in which teachers can implement a culturally relevant and humanizing pedagogy in their own classrooms is, surprisingly, not primarily through teaching methods; "it is not the particular lesson or set of activities that prepares the student; rather, it is the teacher's politically clear educational philosophy that underlies the varied methods and lessons/ activities she or he employs that makes the difference" (Bartolome 1994: 179). When it comes to teaching literacy, we must move away from the "methods fetish" of *what* and *how*, and focus instead on the *why* (Bartolome 1994, Ladson-Billings 1992). In the international context of education, literacy has always been used as a means for liberation. Fidel Castro's literacy campaign during the 1960's is a perfect example of this. He viewed literacy as an integral part of political and cultural liberation, and to date, Cuba's literacy rate resides at an impressive 99% (UNESCO 2017). The US literacy rate, on the other hand, lags at 86% (Burton 2020).

Literacy education must be viewed in the same political nature as it functions in our society. Presently, “[t]he literacy message in the United States is decidedly apolitical while at the same time advancing a political agenda that helps maintain the status quo” (Ladson-Billings 1992: 381). The assumption that literacy education is merely a means to teach children how to read and write is similar to the misconception regarding children’s literature; neither are politically neutral, despite what we have been conditioned to believe. To get to the root of educational inequality in the United States, we must realize that the issue is significantly deeper than methods and strategies. Before we ask *how* to teach literacy, we need to first clarify *why*.

With the explicit understanding of literacy as a vehicle for liberation, educators can begin to foster a learning environment that empowers Black students to choose academic success while simultaneously maintaining a positive identification in regard to their own cultural heritage (Ladson-Billings 1992, 1992, 1995). As Ladson-Billings suggests in her research on successful teachers of Black students, a common practice utilized in culturally relevant pedagogy is the incorporation of student experience as “official content.” Bartolome (1994) notes that “learning only occurs when prior knowledge is accessed and linked to new information.” Thus, “[a]cknowledging and using existing student language and knowledge makes good pedagogical sense, and it also constitutes a humanizing experience for students traditionally *dehumanized* and *disempowered* in the schools” (Bartolome 1994: 183). By using their culture as a frame of reference for lessons, students can begin to realize that they already possess knowledge. In turn, students recognize that their culture is valuable.

Clearly, culturally conscious literature goes hand in hand with a culturally relevant pedagogy. Both were created in response to the selective literary tradition that has systemically perpetuated white supremacy and Black subjugation in literature and education. Unfortunately,

their implementation in schools is not widespread, and many Black students continue to be failed by their education. While it may seem daunting, teachers must find their place in the struggle for liberation. Through the utilization of Black children's literature in their classrooms, teachers have the power to teach literacy as a vehicle for liberation. To once again take from Assata Shakur, we can teach our students their true history, their true heroes. We can teach our students the knowledge that will help set them free.

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