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Black Aesthetics in Children's Literature

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BLACK AESTHETICS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

Tammy Shonta Smith

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

Eastern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English with a Concentration in Children's Literature

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Ypsilanti, MI

Dedication

To my son, who will someday read this and understand.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the children's literature faculty, Dr. Annette Wannamaker, Dr. Ian Wojcik-Andrews, Dr. Sheila Most, and Dr. Harry Eiss for being patient with my progress and sharing your knowledge with me as I pursued my educational endeavors. Thank you, Dr. Elisabeth Daumer and Dr. Robin Lucy, for taking out the time to answer my continuous questions concerning African American theory and literature.

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to show that although many African American children's books have been used as "race texts" to give children insight into race relations of the past, many are important in that they preserve the Black dialect and encourage child activism and social change. Black aesthetics are most beneficial in that they educate children about not just race but about the African American oral tradition of Black dialect. They also provide children with a strong foundation in Black aesthetics, which prepares them for the higher forms of Black aesthetics found in African American adult literature. Not only is African American children's literature just as political as African American adult literature, but it also preserves the Black dialect. Most important, African American children's literature adds diversity to the study of children's literature in that educators, parents, and librarians are better able to teach and appreciate its aesthetic value. Thus, my research project will reveal how African American children's books are not just "artifacts of race" but "artifacts of aesthetics."

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Introduction: The Black Aesthetic, Black Aesthetics, and The Black Arts Movement

The introduction of my thesis will begin with a brief overview of the aesthetic expression of African American literature, dating back to the blues period, which Houston Baker argues in his book, Blues, Ideology and Afro American Literature, changed the vernacular realm of American culture (Baker 11). The Black Aesthetic differs from Black aesthetics in that it is the movement. Black aesthetics are the elements which stem from this movement. I will be discussing the literary elements that stem from the movement, known as Black aesthetics.

Black aesthetics has come to be defined in many different ways. Stemming from the Black Arts Movement, the black aesthetic is contrary to the traditional aesthetic of the dominant culture because its aim is to interpret the black experience (Tolson 65). According to Nancy Tolson, in her article, “The Black Aesthetic within Black Children’s Literature,” “the black aesthetic was not created for Whites to understand or critique; it was a cultural connection from Blacks to Blacks,” and that it was cultural independence that blacks were seeking (Tolson 66). While some critics dismiss black aesthetics in children’s literature as poor grammar or slang, the purpose of the black aesthetic in children’s literature is to build the self-esteem of children of color and to remind them of Black achievements (Tolson 66). In this ongoing research, I will prove that African American children’s literature contains the same aesthetic quality as African American adult literature and that African American literature has set the foundation for African American children’s books. However, because children’s literature is usually chosen by teachers, librarians, or other administrators, who may use textbooks to introduce children

of color, the social and political importance of the richness of the black aesthetic is sometimes overlooked, mostly due to misunderstandings or stereotypes that are attached to the language.

In chapter one of my thesis, I will discuss the black aesthetic in relation to the beginning of the Black Arts Movement (Tolson 67). According to Nancy Tolson, the black aesthetic began to emerge slowly during the 1950s. It was during this period that the black experience was beginning to be recognized, though it is not fully articulated by blacks. White publishers began considering publishing stories about black experiences, but they wanted these stories to be written by white authors. The reason for this could be explained in the sensitivity of the subject matter. Racism told from the point of view of a white American would have a different perspective than if told by an African American. Therefore, history could be somewhat altered and presented in ways that would not offend white Americans but that also were not accurate. The black experience was now being shared with white audiences, but it was not authentic (Tolson 69-70).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s further set the tone for the black aesthetic. There was an explosion of black art, and the Black Arts Movement was in full bloom. Writings about the black experience were truthful with expressive language, venting the anger and frustration of the black race. Publishers could no longer ignore the dialect and aesthetics of Black literature. Thus, unlike in the 1950s, the buying power during the 1960s praised the black aesthetic (Tolson 70).

With the acceptance of black expression comes the quandary of creating a market for it. In chapter two of my thesis I will expose the downsides of the contemporary mainstream marketing of books for children, which I feel allows dominant buying

audiences, such as librarians and educators (many of whom are not black), to determine the aesthetic. Perry Nodelman states in chapter 6, “Children’s Literature in the Marketplace,” from his book, The Pleasures of Children’s Literature, that “it [children’s literature] is powerfully influenced by the teachers and librarians in educational institutions who purchase most children’s books” (110). Because of this fact, books are marketed with particular buying audiences in mind.

This idea of “know your audience” is validated in Katherine Capshaw Smith’s book, Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance. In her chapter titled “The Aesthetics of Black Children’s Literature,” Smith notes that even Jane Dabney Shackelford, teacher and children’s author of The Child’s Story of the Negro (published in 1938), remarked that she was told by Arna Bontemps at the Chicago Exposition of 1940, “Do not write books for Negroes alone because Negroes do not buy books” (qtd. in Smith 233). Therefore, it is evident that some African American writers were conscious of just who had the buying power in regard to children’s books. “Bontemps recognized that the buying power within the children’s marketplace rested largely with white children and their parents, and he appeared anxious about the images of African Americans offered to white readers” (Smith 233). It seems that even though Bontemps gave this advice to Shackelford, he didn’t feel comfortable accepting it. This was a dilemma that many African American writers of adult and children’s literature faced and still face. W. E. B. Du Bois referred to it as the “double consciousness,” defined as looking at one’s self through the eyes of others (Du Bois 5). This is the struggle that the black artist has to face: satisfying white America without jeopardizing the integrity of black America. Eloquenty stated in his book, The Souls of Black Folks, Du Bois

explains how trying to maintain this balance psychologically affects the black artist. “The waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage of faith and deeds of ten thousand people, --has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves” (Du Bois 7). Although Bontemps became successful writing African American children books, he too was not immune to the marketing trap of double aims. In my thesis I will explore the way this double consciousness still affects the writers of children’s books.

It is clear that perceptions from the dominant audience have determined African American literature, but can I justify my stand that it determines children literature as well? The reason I can make the argument that the dominant audience has and will continue to determine black aesthetics, especially in children’s literature, is because during my research I found that even though black aesthetics was expected in African-American adult literature, the standards and expectations of African American children’s literature were viewed differently. The works of Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes serve as a starting point to explore this question because according to Katherine Capshaw Smith, initially Bontemps and Hughes had two motivations for writing children’s books: monetary benefits and social change. The depression had hurt their financial stability because patrons of the Harlem Renaissance could no longer financially sustain them. Smith notes that Langston Hughes’s biographer Arnold Rampersad that stated Hughes and Bontemps felt that children’s books would be a good way to earn “some quick money” (237). Like the statement that Bontemps made to Jane Shakelford at the 1940 Chicago Exposition, Bontemps knew he could not profit from writing books about

African American children without gaining acceptance from white audiences. He made a comment in a letter to Langston Hughes on how successful his book series Famous American Negroes had become. “The fact that a book like FAN can be included in a famous series is quite an advance, and kids will catch a good many hints even though you don’t dwell on Jim Crow” (Smith 232). However, in addition to monetary gains and social change, Bontemps and Hughes also had a “passion for social change” (Smith 237). They both realized that African American children’s literature could instill children with “affirmative images of themselves and help effect economic and social transformation” (Smith 238). However, Bontemps was careful not to focus too much on black social issues or racial injustices, and relied on children to pick up hints. He also was well aware that if the messages were written too direct, white parents would not buy these children’s books (Smith 232-233). Ironically, contemporary African American authors of children’s books face similar dilemmas.

Racial biases have always existed in children’s textbooks. Nancy Larrick’s article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” which was published in 1965, became one of the driving forces behind revealing and confronting images of minority stereotypes in children’s books (2). In her article, Larrick notes that biases are not just found in fiction but that they trickled over into trade books as well, omitting black images.

Analysis of the replies and examination of several hundred books led to the discouraging conclusion that the vast majority of recent books are as white as the segregated zoo of Golden Press. Of the 5,206 children’s trade books launched by the sixty-three publishers in the three-year period, only 349 include one or more Negroes, an average of 6.7 percent. (2)

In other words, Larrick faults the publishing company.

Larrick goes on to address images of African American children, which she argues were “gorilla like,” and while I would argue that the images have improved with texts such as Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, occasionally a stereotyped image appears. Larrick states, “Many children’s books which include a Negro show him as a servant or slave, a sharecropper, a migrant worker, or a menial” (5). Larrick also argues that the Negro’s mother has appeared as being ungraceful and “stout” (4). While I believe the images of African American children in books such as with Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, have improved, the maid image of the African American mother does appear in Freedom Summer. In the text of Freedom Summer, the reader is introduced to John Henry’s African American mother who is a maid for Joe’s parents, who are white. John Henry’s mother is also depicted as being short and stout.

While there have been various debates regarding African American children’s literature, my sole purpose is to analyze two children books, Freedom Summer and Nappy Hair, and two young adult novels, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry and Black Boy, in terms of black aesthetics. My purpose in evaluating these texts is to show educators and readers that these books contain more than just issues on the surface, such as images and political motivations. These texts are aesthetically valuable to youths because they contain elements of the black aesthetics, which are also found in African American literature. Laretta Henderson, in her article, “The Black Arts Movement and African American Young Adult Literature: An Evaluation of Narrative Style,” argues that literary elements and style in young adult African American literature should be the same as those used in adult African American literature. “I suggest that being introduced to

traditional African American storytelling devices as a young adult helps prepare the young reader to decode those same devices when they are used in African American literature” (300). She further states that European American young adult literature prepares youths for European American Adult Literature; therefore, it would only make sense that African American young adult literature would do the same for African American adult literature (300). For example, a text such as Nappy Hair is an example of the tradition of black aesthetics because it links politics and history. Freedom Summer addresses social change through racially selective language, and Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry and Black Boy exhibits aesthetics of the trickster and the African American humorist. These are all important elements of Black aesthetics, which youth need before they can intellectually analyze African American Literature.

Michelle Martin, in her chapter “The Influence of the Black Arts Movement on African American Children’s Picture Books” in her book Brown Gold, quotes Hoyt W. Fuller, who quoted Larry Neal as stating that “this [black literature] is not protest literature but rather literature that speaks directly to black people with the underlying purpose of radicalizing or destroying the Western aesthetic (qtd. in Martin 73). This movement of blacks creating their own art and written expression to appease their own culture is what began the start of The Black Arts Movement.

The 1920s set the tone. Tolson goes on to state that black voices began to emerge, wanting to celebrate their culture but also wanting to create positive images of blacks (67). Katherine Capshaw Smith also agrees with this time period as being the emergence of black children’s literature. In the introduction of her book Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, Smith states that during the 1920s up until the 1940s, writers were

concerned with the image and identity of the black child. This began a launching of books for children by black writers. The man to take the lead was W.E.B. Du Bois, with his magazine, *Crisis* (Introduction xiii). In this magazine Du Bois published *The Brownie Books*, which emphasized the importance of children's participating in the "black social progress and artistic distinction" (1). However, the literature for black children's literature in the 1920s frequently blurred the lines of what was adult material and what was appropriate for the child. Therefore, children became engrossed with the political concerns of their parents, making the home an appropriate place for black parents to address political activism among their children (2).

Two other influential men in the field of African American children's literature were Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. Smith states that "they were the first black children's writers to publish consistently through mainstream houses and to reach a national, integrated audience" (230). Because Hughes and Bontemps wanted to introduce black images to mainstream America, they were part of the white publishing companies that separated children's literature from adult literature. Smith argues that this was something that had not previously existed in African American children's literature (230). These men were well aware that whites controlled the children's literature market; therefore, they were sensitive to how whites would react to their children books. They wanted to invent a positive image of black children but also wanted to appease whites (231-234). "Because Bontemps and Hughes were working through white publishing houses which did not necessarily place the black child at the forefront of social change, they had little opportunity for the rich variations in cross writing employed by other

authors in this study” (231). Therefore, while they were vehicles of change, they also had to compromise.

Review of Literature

Nappy Hair and Freedom Summer

Sandra Y. Govan argues in her article, “Alice Childress: Rainbow Jordan: The Black Aesthetic Returns Dressed in Adolescent Fiction,” that the black aesthetic was able to flourish because it grew out of political doctrine. She states that nowadays the black aesthetic is “shunned” because of its strong, blunt, militant appeal. However, in order for her to discuss Alice Childress’s Rainbow Jordan, she must address the black aesthetic because one factor affects the other (70). In other words, the aesthetic affects the text and vice versa. This is also true in regard to the texts that I will discuss. In chapter 3 of my thesis I will analyze the two contemporary picture books that I believe to be rich in black aesthetics: Nappy Hair by Carolivia Herron and Freedom Summer by Deborah Wiles. Both of these books are rich in black aesthetics, particularly language, because of their use of black linguistic traditions. Nappy Hair introduces the African American church tradition of call and response, where the preacher makes a statement and the congregation replies or finishes his sentence. Freedom Summer is different from Nappy Hair in its use of language. In Freedom Summer, the Southern black dialect is used to introduce children to the complexities of racism.

Michelle Martin, in her chapter titled “Ain’t I fine” from her book Brown Gold: Milestones of African American Children’s Picture Books, 1945-2002 argues that “stylized language and more specifically black modes of discourse--surface as a common element in many of these stories authored by African American writers who have live experience with these modes of communication” (165). Martin asks the question “How

does ‘traditionally black storytelling’ look when translated into a picture book?’ (165).

Nappy Hair is a book that gives one insight into traditional black storytelling.

According to Martin, African American children’s picture books relate to “double voicedness,” a term coined by Henry Louis Gates. Gates argues that because of its marginalization, the black text contains dual traditions: Western and black. Therefore, it has a dual audience (Martin 165). Gate’s argument is similar to Du Bois’ coined phrase of “double consciousness” or “double aims.” Nappy Hair is an African American picture book that demonstrates this because it explains African American hair to both an African American audience and a white audience, who may know little about this aspect of African American culture.

Martin discusses the call and response tradition in African American churches, which is applied to the text of Nappy Hair. Nappy Hair preserves the African American dialect while at the same time capturing the audience with its rhythmic language. The call and response demonstrated in the book works this way: First, the storyteller informs the audience about a situation (in this case, it would be Brenda’s hair), then the audience responds after each snippet of information. The response signals to the preacher (or storyteller in this case) that he or she is listening, or following along. I would also argue that the response is a form of prompting that encourages the preacher (or storyteller) to deliver a more profound and descriptive message. For example, first, the storyteller, Uncle Mordecai, begins by informing Brenda of how nappy her hair is. Then he states that Africa had nothing to do with her hair. It is nappy because of divine power. Mordecai then crescendos into dynamic similes of what Brenda’s hair is “like scrunching through the New Mexico desert in brogans in the heat of summer (Heron 6)...like crunching

through the snow” (Herron 9). Then, Mordecai strays off topic. Mordecai addresses debates of black aesthetics itself by poking fun at Standard American English, announcing to his audience that Brenda is the only one at school who can “talk right.” The audience ironically replies, “Ain’t she something?” (Herron 10). This is the section in the text that demonstrates the rebellion tied to black aesthetics. The text of Nappy Hair is about much more than just nappy hair, but within the text is embedded the oral tradition of call and response of black aesthetics, distinct from Standard American English.

Nappy Hair is clearly political as well. It contains just as much historical information as it does aesthetic quality. First, it uplifts the African American dialect as being superior to Standard American English. Mordecai then refers to the trials of slavery by depicting a picture of Brenda with her nappy hair preparing to travel the middle passage. Then Mordecai gives a brief introduction about the sale of slaves once they reached America.

Mordecai: “Sold your momma for a nickel.”

Audience: “Yes, Lord, they did it.”

Mordecai: “And your daddy for a dime.”

Audience: “Yep”

Mordecai: “I say they sold your momma for a buffalo.”

Audience: “That’s the way it was.”

Mordecai: “And your daddy, they sold him for one thin dime.”

Audience: “That’s what they did.” (Herron 22).

Govan argues that “function is the most significant cornerstone of the black aesthetic” (73). She also argues that it is this function that addresses a certain audience. So, how do black aesthetics function in Nappy Hair? I would argue that Carolivia Herron utilizes black aesthetics to weave together history and art. The art of the oral tradition and black dialect are used to remind children of African American history, and they are used to build the self-esteem of children of color.

Freedom Summer, by Deborah Wiles, is much different from Nappy Hair in that elements black aesthetics are more subtle. Comparing the two books can help children and older audiences recognize how black aesthetics are apparent in each book, and how they work on different levels and for different functions. Language works to introduce a particular region – the Deep South. Freedom Summer takes place during the summer of 1964. The story is of two boys: John Henry, a black boy, and Joe, a white boy. Both struggle to maintain their friendship on an equal stand, regardless of the hindrance posed by Jim Crow laws.

The dialect is subtle because the story is told from the point of view of Joe, a young white boy who is the best friend of John Henry. John Henry’s brother, Will Rogers, uses black southern dialect when he sees John Henry and Joe and points in the opposite direction for them to leave. John Henry notes that this gesture means “Git on home!” The word “shoo” is also used by John Henry’s mother, indicating a form of southern black dialect. However, the author does not just reveal black southern dialect, but southern dialect in general. For example, Mr. Mason, a white general store owner exhibits dialect as well. He greets Joe saying, “How you doin,’ Young Joe?” and expressively commenting on the weather. “Yessir, it’s mighty hot out there!” (10).

In other words, Freedom Summer depicts both Southern dialect and Southern black dialect, and the differences are subtle.

In Katharine Capshaw Smith's chapter, "The Aesthetics of Black Children's Literature" from her book, Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, it is stated that one thing Arna Bontemps wanted to change as he set out to write children's literature was the stereotypes that people had about black southerners. In two of his children's books, You Can't Pet a Possum and Blubber Goes to Heaven, Bontemps confronts black southern stereotypes right away, revealing the "mammy" figure, deep heavy vernacular, and poverty. "By initially offering the audience what it expects to see in a depiction of the Deep South, Bontemps compels the white reader's assent that Bontemps presents the true picture of static black southern identity" (253). I argue that Deborah Wiles does the same in Freedom Summer.

Wiles immediately confronts the "maid" stereotype by introducing John Henry and his mom on the very first page, as they approach Joe's house. The stereotype of John Henry's mother's job is confronted immediately as the text begins in the voice of Joe as he states, "John Henry Waddell is my best friend. His mama works for my mama" (Wiles 2). This is the image that the audience expects to see and the role the audience expects John Henry's mom to play. However, as Bontemps introduces the stereotype and then diminishes it, so does Wiles. By the third page, attention is diverted from John Henry's mom to the *real* purpose of the story, which doesn't involve John Henry's mom at all, but John Henry and Joe. "Thus Bontemps reconfigures the terms of cultural exchange between a white readership and black artist, and compels the white readers' re-visioning of their own prejudices and cultural assumptions" (Smith 254). The same is true with

Freedom Summer. The audience has already approached the text with expectations and stereotypes; therefore, by confronting the stereotypes, this makes the story believable to the reader, thus maintaining further attention. It is only then, after you have the reader's attention, that you can gradually break down the stereotype that they already have envisioned. This is done with John Henry, who turns out to be a strong character by the end of the book. Although there are many pictures of him and Joe together, signifying unity, in the end John Henry realizes that he is willing to confront prejudice on his own. He decides to walk through the front door of Mason's General Store instead of going to the back. It is then that Joe realizes that, as John Henry's friend, he must confront prejudice as well.

Ultimately the different aesthetics of these two books boils down to one common denominator: audience. Nappy Hair is written by a black author catering to a black audience, while Freedom Summer is written by a white author catering to a white audience. Because Freedom Summer caters to a white audience, it avoids the reality of the violence that John Henry and Joe will possibly face after John Henry goes through the front door of Mr. Mason's General Store. It also only gives the reader glimpses into the harshness of segregation, again avoiding the reality of violence caused by racist white Americans.

Black Boy and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

I will discuss the impact of black aesthetics in two young adult novels, Black Boy by Richard Wright, a modern African American author, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, by Mildred D. Taylor, a contemporary African American author. I will also discuss the role of the trickster in Taylor's novel and how Wright uses humor to tackle subjects of child activism and social change, which is very important in African American children's literature. Therefore, both Black Boy and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry are texts that are rich in black aesthetics and address forms of racism with two very politically complex stories.

Black Boy is Richard Wright's autobiography of growing up in rural Mississippi in the early 1900s. Wright's dad leaves the family, and his mom ends up very sick. As a result, Wright has to grow up living with his extremely religious grandmother, who views Wright's desire to become a writer as a gift from the devil. The biography is comical, introducing the humor in African American discourse; however, it has serious tones as well, as Wright has to deal with racism on a daily basis. The text preserves the African American dialect even though Wright uses Standard American English when he narrates the story. I argue that it is this "switching" that gives insight into Wright's belief about language and writing in the language of white America. For example, Wright's characters use dialectical phrases such as "Let's buy 'im drinks" (20) and "Naw sir. Please don't shoot me" (44). Then Wright switches to narration that is in Standard form. "Upon another day I was playing out of doors in front of the house and I accidentally looked down the road and saw what seemed to me to be a herd of elephants coming slowly toward me. There was in me this time none of that naked terror I had felt when I had seen

the soldiers, for these strange creatures were moving slowly, silently, with no suggestion of threat” (57). Wright manages to maintain the oral tradition while asserting the intelligence of the narrator for a white audience who might equate intellect with white English.

Mildred Taylor’s novel, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, a novel about an African American family growing up during the post-depression era in rural Mississippi also captures black aesthetics by preserving the southern black dialect, using colloquialisms and personification. For example, Big Ma makes Stacey and Cassie aware of the fact that Mr. Berry, a neighbor, is sick, but she does it by using a colloquialism that would be familiar to blacks in rural Mississippi. “...Mr. Berry was low sick and needed her to help nurse him, but he ain’t said nothing bout no burning” (Taylor 9).

Taylor uses other colloquialisms that children native to the area would recognize. Mr. Logan tells Cassie, Christopher John, Little Man, and Stacey that if he catches them near the Wallace’s store, they’ll be whipped, but he does this by using a colloquialism, “I’m gonna wear y’all out.” Cassie responds to this by using a colloquialism of her own, notifying the reader(s) that Papa [Mr. Logan] “swung a mean switch” (41). Elsewhere in the novel, personification is used to describe the evil symbol of segregation of the education system. “Little Man turned around and watched saucer-eyed as a bus bore down on him spewing clouds of red dust like a huge yellow dragon breathing fire” (Taylor 13). Capturing the language of southern blacks by using colloquialisms and personification makes Taylor’s novel successful in that she fuses Standard American English and literary style with Southern black dialect.

Texts such as Black Boy and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry are not beneficial to children just because of black aesthetics. They are beneficial because they help them psychologically deal with racism through age-appropriate characters, thus preparing them for a much deeper form of racism that they will be exposed to in African American literature written for adults. Cicely Cobb argues in her article “If You Give a Nigger an Inch, They Will Take an Ell” that Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is beneficial to the education of children because it helps them deal with racism psychologically. Therefore, Henderson’s argument is refuted. Cobb notes that “...Taylor relied on both social and psychological realism to depict how Blacks attempted to survive in the racist South, circa 1930” (Cobb 196). Cobb also argues that Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is important because children get an informal education about black sharecropping and African American history in the South. She notes that this is also relevant in the text, where the Logan children are informally educated about the history of the family land (Cobb 196-197). In other words, the lessons that the children learn are lessons that they would never learn in a textbook. The same is true for Wright in Black Boy. Wright’s grandmother feels that he would be better off if he gave his life to God; however, Wright is aware that sitting around waiting for God will not help him escape poverty; therefore, he works tough jobs and tries to make a living for himself. He is able to learn what it is like to be a man by earning his own money. Later, when his grandmother tells him to choose God (the church) or the devil (writing), Wright runs away to Chicago, where he knows he will be able to make a living, thus surviving. It is this type of informal education that serves to educate young readers about life during this time and prepares them for the issues and the aesthetics of African American literature for adults.

Picture Books

Freedom Summer and Nappy Hair: Racial Politeness and Taboo

Freedom Summer and Nappy Hair are two picture books about African American history, but they use different methods to portray this history. Freedom Summer, by Deborah Wiles, is set in Mississippi in 1964, during the heart of desegregation. The text is about two boys: John Henry, who is black, and Joe, who is white. The two boys share a close friendship because John Henry's mother works for Joe's mother. The boys spend a lot of time together. Nonetheless, there are some things that the two of them cannot share. One is going into Mason's General Store together, and the other is swimming together in the town pool. After changes in the law end segregation, Joe believes that he and John Henry will be able to swim in the town pool together. However, the reality of the matter strikes John Henry hard as he realizes that although the law has changed, some people's attitudes have not.

Freedom Summer

Freedom Summer is more than the title of Deborah Wiles's book; it symbolizes is an important part of African American history. The title points to a time of chaos during the 1960s. At this time many African Americans were attempting to register to vote. However, many were unable to vote because of voter intimidation and unfair testing procedures. However, Wiles focuses on the freedom summer desegregation movement aimed in Mississippi aimed at encouraging blacks to vote. Part of the freedom summer agenda was to assist blacks with registering to vote without their fearing losing their jobs. However, registering black Mississippians was not the only focus of the freedom summer campaign; establishing schools was a major goal of the program as well. As a result,

there was much violence toward blacks and white northerners who came to the state to liberate blacks.

Freedom Summer, a picture book written by Wiles and illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue, is about a friendship between two boys of two different races: white and black. During the summer of 1964, John Henry, a black boy, and Joe, a white boy, are struggling to maintain their friendship while the world around them continues to remind them of their skin color. Throughout the story, the boys go through the phase of innocence to experience as they struggle within the confines of society to protest prejudice.

Their only solitude comes when the two of them swim together at Fiddler's Creek. It is here where the two are able to forget about their skin color. Fiddler's Creek is the place where Joe recognizes the color of their skin on the surface; however, he does not concentrate on society's expectations of their race or the color of their skin. His description can be found in the passages below.

John Henry's skin is the color of browned butter.

He smells like pine needles after a good rain.

My skin is the color of the pale moths that dance around the porch light at night (7).

Joe describes his and John Henry's skin color in a natural way. It can be argued that what Joe is alluding to is nature. This is the only way that Joe can describe the tone of their skin because to him their skin color is natural, something they have no control over. To further support the argument, the illustrator, Jerome Lagarrigue, places the boys in a picture where they are swimming, surrounded by the colors brown, gold, and green.

These are colors that blend in with Joe and John Henry's skin colors. When they are swimming in Fiddler's Creek, their skin colors blend in with the earth tones of the lake in which they are swimming. Therefore, there is no distinction between the color of the water of the lake and the boys' skin tones (8). In other words, Joe and John Henry are at one with nature.

However, the opposite is true for the boys when the two expect to swim in the town's pool. Unlike Fiddler's Creek, the town's pool represents oppression, and it reminds Joe and John Henry of the present social constraints. Robert Young, in his article "The Linguistic Turn, Materialism, and Race: Towards an Aesthetics of Crisis," states, "At the moment it is generally accepted that race is a social construction. It is also generally accepted that race has been constructed along an oppressive axis" (33). The town's pool is part of this social construction and acts as an oppressive axis, which reminds John Henry and Joe of their places in society. Therefore, swimming together in the town's pool seems to be a goal that is unattainable. It is something wished for by John Henry and Joe. It is an object that the two feel will bring light into their lives. The irony of the reality of what the town pool stands is not easily ignored. The word "town" would lead one to believe, especially John Henry and Joe, that "everyone" should be invited; however, it is apparent this is not so. John Henry realizes that the town, meaning whites, would rather the pool be filled with asphalt than have "coloreds" swimming in it (17). In other words, Fiddler's Creek represents the ideal world that Joe and John Henry yearn for, while the town's pool represents the reality of a racist, segregated society.

The picture on page six of the two boys swimming is interesting, particularly because of the colors that Lagarrigue uses. Unlike page eight, where Lagarrigue uses

more earth tone colors, page six gives the reader a more playful and safer feeling because of the lighter colors. Molly Bang, a well-known Caldecott Honor book author, states in her book, Picture This: How Pictures Work, that “White or light backgrounds feel safer to us than dark backgrounds because we can see well during the day and only poorly at night” (68). Likewise, the opposite is also true. Because of the darker tones on page eight, the picture of Joe and John Henry swimming does not seem as playful and safe as it does on page six. The reader gets a sense that there is potential danger lurking.

While it is clear to the reader that the town's pool represents reality, it is not quite clear to Joe. Joe, in his best effort, sees the town's pool as an ideal world because he himself is an idealist. He wants so much to believe that the town's pool will validate him and John Henry as equals, and when this fails, Joe is then faced with a harsh reality. Joe first tries to convince John Henry that the town's pool is ideal when he describes the color. “And the water's so clear, you can jump to the bottom and open your eyes and still see (13).” However, Joe's attempt to prove to John Henry that the town's pool is as wonderful as he describes is destroyed when the two boys approach it the next day. Instead of the two splashing in the pool of integration, the two of them are told by John Henry's older brother, Will Rogers, who has been assigned to fill the pool with steaming asphalt, to “git on home” (17). Instead, all that the boys are left with is the smoking steam that comes from the hot asphalt (19). Wiles captures the feeling of racial oppression through language. “But our feet feel stuck, we can't budge. So we hunker in the tall weeds and watch all morning until the pool is filled with hot, spongy tar. Ssssss! Smoky steam rises in the air” (19). Wiles's description of the pool being filled with hot, spongy tar represents the darkness and disappointment the boys feel as they find

themselves not being able to move.

In addition, through his images, Lagarrigue captures the stifling of racial progress. Right after page nineteen, as Wiles describes the despair of having the pool filled with tar, he introduces a picture of John Henry's brother, Will, standing up in the back of a truck with a shovel in his hand. His face is tense and he is frowning. His posture is very rigid, and he remains stiff. The image makes it obvious that Will Rogers is angry that the pool is being filled with tar and that he is the one who has to do it. Wiles confirms Will Rogers's anger through the voice of John Henry. "His face is like a storm cloud, and I know this job has made him angry" (19). Will Rogers is also looking over his shoulder, as if looking at Joe and John Henry. He appears to be angry that the two boys have to see the harsh reality of failed integration. Even the color of the sky reflects the darkness and despair that Will Rogers is feeling. Lagarrigue uses dark colors, such as black, dark brown, forest green, and grey to foreshadow the beginning of future turmoil and violence. However, Wiles does not concentrate or directly expound on the upcoming danger. She only presents the young reader with the frustration of the characters at the present moment.

Wiles's text is important because it preserves a part of African American history and shares it with a dual audience. Freedom Summer introduces race in a lighter, non-violent tone, which allows words and pictures to create tension. I argue that while Deborah Wiles is successful at revealing racial tension in the story, she doesn't necessarily use black aesthetics to accomplish this. I argue that Wiles's intended audience is an interracial one because she presents a part of African American history without embracing a black aesthetic tradition.

With the exception of black southern phrases such as “shoo,” stated by John Henry’s mother, and “git,” yelled by John Henry’s brother, Will Rogers, Wiles sticks to a language-neutral approach. Thus, the narrative escapes some of the cultural baggage that a black dialect can bring to the text. Henry Louis Gates, in his essay “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes” argues that “language signifies the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling the difference between subordinate and superordinate, between bondsman and the lord” (1580). In other words, there is a power in language, and the type of language a writer chooses to tell a story determines *who* will hold the power to tell that story. In this case, the point of view is mostly that of Joe, a white character, and Deborah Wiles, a white author. Because the point of view is coming from whites, the text is sensitive to race, as Wiles chooses the words of the text carefully.

Language also adds another dimension to the text in that it creates a neutral setting for interracial audiences. Therefore, some of the racial tension is released as Wiles shoots for a more traditional aesthetic of personifications, metaphors, and oxymoron. For example, Joe exclaims, while he and John Henry are swimming in Fiddler’s Creek, “This means war!” (7). This is a loaded statement in that the two races are literally at war even though Joe and John Henry are seeking what they think is peace and equality. The doom of war is prevalent throughout the entire text even though Wiles never directly confronts the possibility. She only alludes to it, and so does Lagarrigue.

An example of this occurs within Mason’s General Store. On page nine, Lagarrigue introduces a picture that reveals the tension prevalent within the friendship. Joe is inside Mason’s General Store buying ice pops for John Henry and himself. Outside of the general store stands John Henry with one hand on his hip, looking away from Joe,

as if he is in deep thought. Joe seems to be unaware of the fact that John Henry is bothered by having to stand outside of the store and not purchase his own ice pop. Joe also naively dismisses the racial issues. There are two examples of this. The first is when Mr. Mason comments, “You gonna eat these all by yourself?” Joe then responds with fear (the narrator notes that his “heart does a quick beat”), then says, “I got one for a friend (10)” without ever mentioning John Henry. Perhaps Joe is aware that Mr. Mason would disapprove of him buying something for John Henry. This further proves that Joe is well aware of the social expectations and constraints but tries to ignore them for the sake of friendship. However, by the end of the story we learn that because the discrimination has a greater impact on John Henry’s life, he is the one that is provoked to action.

John Henry’s revelation of segregation is the most profound. It occurs on page twenty-three, but the picture enhances his revelation as the audience gets a close-up shot of all the things John Henry longs for. This close-up of John Henry’s face aesthetically compensates for the lack of language available to describe his inner feelings. The enlargement of John Henry’s face is a cue to the reader that this scene is a poignant part of the story. Bang argues, “The center of the page is the most effective center of attention. It is the point of greatest attraction” (62). In addition to this, Bang adds, “Artists seldom place their figures in the exact center of the page unless that figure is meant to be an object of meditation” (67). This is exactly the purpose of Lagarrigue’s portrayal of John Henry on page twenty-four. This picture is meant to make the audience think, to put them in John Henry’s shoes. Lagarrigue successfully captures John Henry’s revelation in a picture, while Wiles captures his revelation in the passage below:

John Henry’s eyes fill up with angry tears.

“I did,” he says. “I wanted to swim in this pool.

I want to do everything you can do” (23).

It is only *after* John Henry’s revelation that Joe has his as well.

I want to go to the Dairy Dip with John Henry

Sit down and share root beer floats.

I want us to go to the picture show, buy popcorn,

And watch the movie together

I want to see this town with John Henry’s eyes.” (23)

The last sentence of the passage is one that exposes Joe’s coming of age. Joe states, “I want to see this town with John Henry’s eyes” (23). It is this statement that suggests to the reader that a new point of view or perspective is about to take place. This idea is also true for the author as well. Up until this point, Joe has pretty much described the dilemma of his and John Henry’s friendship. He also in some ways tries to shield John Henry from the ugly truth. An example of this is found on page twenty one, when Joe and John Henry are sitting on the diving board of the town’s pool, which has been tarred. John Henry tells Joe, “White folks don’t want colored folks in their pool.” Joe tries to console John Henry by reassuring him that it is not true. Joe states, “You’re wrong,” but reveals to the reader that he knows that John Henry is right. However, Joe once again would rather avoid conflict by saying lightheartedly, “I didn’t want to swim in this old pool anyway” (21). However, in defending Joe, I argue that he is unconsciously avoiding the issue. Joe would rather maintain the happy-go-lucky friendship, one based on equality, at Fiddler’s Creek. However, their friendship can not remain equal because whenever they leave Fiddler’s Creek, society reminds them that they are not equal.

Joe and John Henry will eventually have to use what little power they have to cause some change. Kelly McDowell, in her article “Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: A Culturally Specific, Subversive Concept of Child Agency,” describes child agency as the child’s taking action or having some control in his or her life. She argues that “Often child characters, as well as intended child readers, occupy the object position and are directed by adult subjects. In this relation, children are denied subjectivity and agency” (214). In other words, most of the time in children’s texts, the child is talked *to* instead of being given just enough information to allow him or her to make up his or her mind for himself or herself concerning issues such as discrimination.

John Henry and Joe share friendship, which is within the boundaries of *limited child agency*. The two friends want equality within their play; however, conflict between friendship and the outside world emerges when the two realize that society does not consider them equal. They have to deal with the social constraints and roles that society has already put in place for them. The children can’t do much, so they do what they can in order to protest or take action. The two boys cannot physically make the town open to all. They cannot change the minds of adults. However, they can choose to support each other. This is seen when John Henry tells Joe that he no longer will allow him to go into Mason’s General Store and buy his ice pop. Joe understands John Henry’s stand and together they walk into the front door of the store. This is an example of child agency. The children are now aware of how their friendship has been affected by discrimination and make the choice to take a stand. In the end, John Henry boldly protests when he articulates to Joe and the reader that he will no longer accept what he is deemed to have by white society. He will no longer wait outside the store for Joe. He protests social

injustice and takes action by revealing to Joe and the reader that he plans to face conflict head on, not run or submit. It is with this protest that John Henry and Joe prepare to walk into the store together. Jerome Lagarrigue, the illustrator of Freedom Summer, reveals the protest from the child's perspective through clear, thought-provoking illustrations that force the child to make decisions about segregation on his or her own. The illustrations do not insult children's intelligence by spoonfeeding them information. The illustrators allow the pictures to aid child readers in their search for truth.

In addition to illustrations, images in Wile's text play a powerful role as well. One of these is the "maid" stereotype. Arna Bontemps is noted in Katharine Capshaw Smith's chapter, "The Aesthetics of Black Children's Literature" from her book, Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance, as stating that one of his objectives as he set out to write children's literature was to change the stereotype people had about black southerners. In two of Bontemps' books, You Can't Pet a Possum and Blubber Goes to Heaven, Bontemps confronts the maid, or "mammy," stereotype by immediately introducing it, then diminishing it. "By initially offering the audience what it expects to see in a depiction of the Deep South, Bontemps compels the white reader's assent that Bontemps presents the true picture of static black southern identity" (Smith 253). Like Bontemps, Wiles immediately confronts the black "maid" image by introducing John Henry and his mom on the very first page as they approach Joe's house. This economic reality is confirmed when the text begins in the voice of Joe as he states, "John Henry Waddell is my best friend. His mama works for my mama" (Wiles 2). These opening lines create tension, and this is a very intense scene as the audience is reminded that the maid stereotype is reality. This is the image that the audience expects to see and the role

the audience expects John Henry's mom to play. However, like Arna Bontemps, who introduced images of stereotypes in his book, then diminishes them, so does Wiles. By the third page, attention is diverted from John Henry's mom to the *real* purpose of the story, which doesn't involve John Henry's mom at all, but John Henry and Joe.

Bontemps thought that this technique helped whites evaluate their prejudices. "Thus Bontemps reconfigures the terms of cultural exchange between a white readership and black artist, and compels the white readers' re-visioning of their own prejudices and cultural assumptions" (Smith 254). The same is true with Freedom Summer. The audience has already approached the text with expectations and stereotypes; therefore, confronting the stereotypes makes the story believable to the reader, thus maintaining their attention. It is only after you have the reader's attention that you can gradually break down the stereotype that they already have envisioned. This is done with John Henry, who turns out to be a strong character by the end of the book.

Although there are many pictures of Joe and him together, signifying unity, in the end John Henry realizes that he is willing to confront prejudice on his own. He decides to walk through the front door of Mason's General Store instead of going to the back. It is then that Joe realizes that, as John Henry's friend, he must confront prejudice as well. Also, instead of giving the text closure, one that is bluntly realistic, Wiles chooses to shield the young reader from the expected violence that can erupt from Joe and John Henry's confrontation with Mr. Mason. In other words, Wiles only presents the young reader with glimpses into the harsh realities of segregation, again avoiding the reality of the potential violence. Whether this is a strength or fault, it is hard to judge because the book is aimed at the young reader; therefore, too much violence would be insensitive to

the child.

The pictures in Freedom Summer are very important because they are able to stand on their own. The intensity of emotions that the author may or may not be able to capture is enhanced in Lagarrigue's illustrations. These pictures not only evoke feelings from the audience but reveal the reality of the lives of the characters, particularly the pictures of Joe and John Henry. Bang states, "Our feelings arise because we see pictures as extensions of the real world. Pictures that affect us strongly use structural principals based on the way to react in the real world in order to survive. As soon as you understand these principles, you will understand why pictures have such specific emotional effects. You will understand how pictures work" (41). In other words, Bang insists that when we, the audience, view pictures, we make judgments about their meanings on the basis of our emotions.

In several scenes, Lagarrigue, the illustrator of Freedom Summer, accomplishes the bond between pictures and emotions that Bang speaks of by making up for Wile's political politeness with his thought-provoking illustrations. Lagarrigue first introduces pictures that place Joe and John Henry on equal planes. For example, on page three, the two boys are seen sweeping the front porch. Then, on page five, the two are enjoying a swim together at Fiddler's Creek. Page eight also reveals a picture of Joe and John Henry swimming side by side in Fiddler's Creek. However, Lagarrigue changes the tone of the story, which adds more depth to Wiles's text. For example, on page nine, as previously mentioned, John Henry stands outside of Mason's General Store while Joe is inside buying the two of them ice pops. This is the first picture introduced to the reader where the two boys are separated, but not by choice. Lagarrigue introduces a transition in tone

between pages nine and sixteen. Immediately after page nine, Lagarrigue introduces Joe and John Henry together again in pictures. However, on page eighteen, Lagarrigue heightens the tension of Wiles's text as Will Rogers is revealed with a rigid composure, holding a shovel. On page twenty, Lagarrigue reveals Will Rogers once again, from a different angle, with the same rigid posture, holding a shovel. On page twenty-two, Lagarrigue then introduces Joe and John Henry on the diving board, but their body expressions relay a different message. In previous pictures, the two are seen together laughing, running, and doing chores. However, this picture on page twenty transmits a troubling feeling to the reader. We no longer see the happy, smiling faces of Joe and John Henry, but the backs of the two boys. The two are sitting on top of the diving board, which Lagarrigue surrounds in a sea of dark blue and black, which gives the picture a serious, dark tone. In other words, Lagarrigue no longer depicts the two boys' figures as animated. Unlike in the previous pictures, there is no action. There is only stillness as the boys are engrossed in thought. These colors continue onto page twenty-four as Lagarrigue sprinkles in splotches of green, yellow, and light pink and purple, signifying hope. These same splotches of colors are represented on the next page in the painting of John Henry's face. His chocolate skin is invaded with patches of purple, green, red, and sky blue (24).

Although Wiles's text does not necessarily use black aesthetics to write about a part of African American history, her illustrator, Lagarrigue, tries to make up for her lack of confrontation with his aesthetically profound pictures. Lagarrigue forces the reader to confront the tension that surrounds interracial friendship. In other words, Lagarrigue's oil paintings of racial tension bring balance to Wiles's racial politeness.

Nappy Hair

The second picture book that I will discuss is Nappy Hair. Nappy Hair is the opposite of Freedom Summer in many ways. The one major difference is that it takes a bolder approach on racism. Written by Carolivia Herron and illustrated by Joe Cepeda, Nappy Hair uses language and imagery unique to black aesthetics to direct its message to a black audience. For one, it is written by a black author, and the language is keen to black aesthetics. Freedom Summer introduces part of the African American experience to an interracial audience, while Nappy Hair or caters to a black audience. But most of all, the narrator in the text boldly confronts issues of racism and oppression while praising the uniqueness of African American kinky hair.

The first important aspect of Nappy Hair is how the narrative works. Nappy Hair introduces the African American church tradition of call and response, in which the preacher makes a statement and the congregation replies or finishes his sentence. Freedom Summer is quite different in that it uses only a bit of southern black dialect, it differs in style and subject matter, and it attempts to introduce children to the complexities of racism.

Michelle Martin, in her chapter titled “Ain’t I fine” from her book Brown Gold: Milestones of African American Children’s Picture Books, 1945-2002, argues that “Stylized language and more specifically black modes of discourse – surface as a common element in many of these stories authored by African American writers who have live experience with these modes of communication” (165). Martin asks the question “How does ‘traditionally black storytelling’ look when translated into a picture book?” (165). Nappy Hair is a book that gives one insight into traditional black

storytelling. For one, the language is more oral and spontaneous rather than rehearsed or what would be considered grammatically correct in Standard English. Nappy Hair raises the question of what is considered correct grammar. Wiles challenges the English language as her characters use terms such as *yep*, *chile*, and *ain't*. In addition to the terms, phrases such as *what you say*, *did we jump*, and *ain't it the truth* are also utterances of defiance. In his book, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, Lorenzo D. Turner, a black linguist, gives an explanation for the dialect of African Americans, relating it to the slave trade.

When the Negroes were first brought to America they could have known no English. Their usefulness as servants, however, required that some means of communication between master and slave should be developed. There is little likelihood that any masters exerted themselves to understand or to acquire the native language of the Negroes in order to communicate with them. On the contrary, from the very beginning the white overlords addressed themselves in English to their black vassals. It is not difficult to imagine what kind of English this would be. It would be very much simplified English – the Kind of English some people would employ when they talk to babies. It would probably have no tenses of the verb, no distinctions of case in nouns or pronouns, no marks of singular or plural. Difficult sounds would be eliminated, as they are in baby-talk. Its vocabulary would be reduced to the lowest possible elements. As the Negroes imported into America came from any unrelated tribes, speaking languages so different that one tribe could not understand the language of

another, they themselves were driven to the use of this infantile English in speaking to one another. (6)

In other words, Turner argues that the African American dialect was concocted by white slave holders who eliminated certain words and sounds in Standard English in an effort to communicate with non-native-speaking people. Elements of this language are found within sentence structure and phrases in Nappy Hair (such as the ones previously listed).

According to Martin, African American children's picture books relate to "double voicedness," a term coined by Henry Louis Gates. Gates argues that because of the marginalization of the black text, it contains dual traditions: Western and black. Therefore, it has a dual audience (Martin 165). Gate's argument is similar to Du Bois's coined phrases "double consciousness" and "double aims." Nappy Hair is an African American picture book that demonstrates this because while the text or message is mainly for an African American audience, it also explains the significance of nappy hair to a white audience, who may know little about this aspect of African American culture.

Herron manages to maintain the oral tradition in a way that is authentic. Martin discusses the call-and-response tradition in African American churches, which is applied to the text of Nappy Hair. Nappy Hair preserves the African American dialect while at the same time capturing the audience with its rhythmic language. Martin states that the response is a form of prompting that encourages the preacher (or storyteller) to deliver a more profound and descriptive message (Martin 166-167). The call-and-response pattern demonstrated in Nappy Hair works this way: First, the storyteller informs the audience about a situation (in this case, it would be the texture of Brenda's hair). Then the audience responds after each snippet of information. The response signals to the preacher

(or storyteller in this case) that the reader is listening or following along. An example of this call and response is illustrated in the dialogue below:

Call: Sweet little girl like that, and you napping up her hair like you ain't got good sense.

Response: That's what they said

Call: "Napping up her hair, five, six, seven, maybe eight complete circles per inch."

Response: Brother

Call: I'm talking about eight complete circles per inch of hair

Response: Please

Call: And the angels tryin' to talk him out of it.

Response: Yep

Call: But God...

Response: Well

Call: God wanted hisself some nappy hair upon the face of the earth.

Response: That's what it was. (Wiles 14)

Uncle Mordecai, who serves as the call, begins informing the reader about the texture of Brenda's hair, announcing that Africa had nothing to do with her hair, but that it is nappy because of divine power. As Mordecai makes each statement, the choir, or spectators, responds, acknowledging their understanding.

Mordecai addresses debates of black aesthetics itself by poking fun at Standard American English, announcing to his audience that Brenda is the only one at school who can "talk right." The audience ironically replies, "Ain't she something?" (Herron 10).

This is the section in the text that demonstrates the rebellion tied to black aesthetics. The text of Nappy Hair is about much more than just nappy hair; within the text is embedded the oral tradition of call and response of black aesthetics, distinct from standard American English.

Nappy Hair is clearly political as well. It contains just as much historical information as it does aesthetic quality. First, it uplifts the African American dialect as being superior to standard American English. Mordecai then refers to the trials of slavery by depicting a picture of Brenda with her nappy hair preparing to travel the middle passage. Then, Mordecai presents a rhythmically flowing description of the slave sale when they reached America.

Mordecai: “Sold your momma for a nickel.”

Audience: “Yes, Lord, they did it.”

Mordecai: “And your daddy for a dime.”

Audience: “Yep.”

Mordecai: “I say they sold your momma for a buffalo.”

Audience: “That’s the way it was.”

Mordecai: “And your daddy, they sold him for one thin dime.”

Audience: “That’s what they did.” (Herron 22).

Sandra Govan argues that “function is the most significant cornerstone of the black aesthetic” (73). She also argues that it is this function that addresses a certain audience. So, how do black aesthetics function in Nappy Hair? Carolivia Herron uses Black dialect to teach black children their history, thus empowering these traditions and building self-esteem among children of color.

The language in Nappy Hair serves as a device to revisit history and evaluate culture. According to Neal A. Lester's article "Roots That Go Beyond Big Hair and a Bad Hair Day: Nappy Hair Pieces," the term "nappy" is loaded with historical baggage (171). This is because of the negative stigma that has been attached to natural African American hair, which mainstream culture has deemed inferior to white hair. Lester quotes the famous author Maya Angelou, who says, "A hundred years ago...there were churches in Philadelphia, in Virginia and in New Orleans which had a pine slab on the outside door of the church and a fine-tooth comb hanging on a string. And when you tried to go into the church you had to be able to stand beside that pinewood and be no darker than that, and take that fine-tooth comb and run it through your hair without snagging. That's how you could get into the church." It is a comment such as this that reminds African Americans of the history and uniqueness of their hair. What makes Herron's picture book so aesthetically valuable is that the subject of "hair" becomes a lead into a rhythmic oral history lesson on African American identity. Lester remarks, "Herron's text "performs" African American cultural identities of resistance and of individual and collective cultural affirmation" (172). This affirmation of hair is made by Mordecai (preacher) and the audience (acting as the congregation). The wildness of Brenda's hair reflects the spontaneity of the African American dialect.

One stark difference between Nappy Hair and Freedom Summer lies in images. The illustrator, Joe Cepeda, uses colors that are bold and rich. For example, the outside book cover of the text of Nappy Hair features a picture of a little girl who is supposedly Brenda. Brenda's thick, bushy, black tresses cover most of the cover and are surrounded by a bright red background. Brenda's skin is also a major focal point because Cepeda

chooses to use a deep, dark brown for Brenda's face (front cover). Most of Cepeda's pages tend to introduce bold, bright backgrounds, such as red, orange, and yellow. However, he contrasts the backgrounds with the dark-toned colors of African American hair and skin. Just as Bang states that pictures affect our feelings, she also states that the colors one chooses determine them as well. For example, she discusses the power of the color red: "Somehow red excites us. Psychologists have found that people tend to get into more fights in bright-red and hot-pink rooms with red walls than they do in rooms with paler colors. Part of the reason may be that we associate red with blood and fire..." (32). Bang's explanation is interesting considering the fact that Cepeda chooses the color red for the background of the text's color. Brenda's nappy tresses and the bright background give the reader an immediate sense that Nappy Hair will be a text that is emotionally driven.

The color red reappears within the text. One vital picture is found on page twenty and twenty-one of Nappy Hair, where Brenda is sitting on a large rock reflecting on her roots. Cepeda chooses a bright-red background encircled in bright orange-yellow. This picture is emotionally captivating. Although it is a picture of reflection, the color red suggests that Africa is a powerful land that represents "fire and blood" (qtd. In Bang 32) of the black race. In other words, Africa is the root of the black race's historical pulse. Even Mordecai, the narrator who would serve as the oral historian, wears a red bowtie (Herron 2, 4, 27, 29). This suggest Mordecai's tie to Africa. The red bowtie is an emotional representation of, for example, the bloodshed that occurred because of the slave trade. In other words, it ties African Americans to Africa.

The issue of color arises once again in this text. This time it is in relation to race.

All of Cepeda's African American characters, with the exception of Mordecai, who has silver hair, have jet-black hair and dark-brown skin of the same tone (4-5, 13, 17, 18, 23, 27-29). The illustrator's choice of black and very dark brown seems to support the idea of a common black aesthetic and portrays racial pride. However, there are critics who look at the dark-brown color he uses as pushing the stereotype that all black people are alike or that all black people look alike. Michelle Martin argues in her article published in The Horn Book Magazine, "Never Too Nappy," that "while Cepeda's choice of more or less uniformly darker skin tones for the characters in the book could come under attack for its implication that all black folks look alike, I feel that this artistic choice also contributes to the theme of acceptance" (285). I, too, agree that the choice to use the same very dark brown portrays acceptance, or as I previously stated, racial pride. I also feel that Cepeda could have made the pictures contribute more to the black aesthetic by sending the message that black people, or, the forms of black aesthetics are diverse; however, my argument is challenged by Martin because she argues that it is the sameness that portrays authenticity. "But since Brenda's relatives all have dark skin like Brenda, they speak to her not from a position of superiority but one from equality" (285). I can understand where Martin is going with the idea that sameness represents equality, not superiority. If Brenda's hair remains nappy or natural throughout the text and there are some members who have processed hair, it would defeat the purpose of presenting racial pride and strength. However, there is one picture in the book that causes a little uneasiness. This picture is found on page twenty-three.

In the picture on page twenty-three stands an African American family: mother, father, sister, and brother. The mother and daughter are dressed in colorful, dashiki-type

dresses, and father and son both wear colorful bottoms. The problem with the picture goes back to the previous argument I made about sameness or the belief that all black people look alike. This picture is troubling because in it the mother's face is the exactly same shape as the daughter's. The sister's ears, eyes, eyebrows, lips, and nose are exact clones of her mother's. The two females look exactly the same, right down to their hairstyles. The same is true for father and son. To the audience this gives the impression that Cepeda's illustrations were rushed and that not much thought went into constructing the individuality of the African American family. However, since the book's main focus is on nappy hair, individuality is portrayed in the family member's hairstyles. This argument is supported on pages twenty-eight and twenty-nine, in that the characters' hairstyles range from short cuts to corn rolls, braids, and afros. In other words, while nappy presents diverse styles among African Americans, it also emphasizes unity. Nappy hair is a metaphor for a more powerful spiritual connection. Nappy hair represents the power of kinship and heritage among African Americans.

Hair becomes an important element to consider in Herron's text, particularly because of the ways in which the hair is shaped. Most of the hair styles are triangular in shape. This shape could be intentional or unintentional on Cepeda's part. However, Bang discusses the meaning and impact certain shapes have on pictures. Bang notes that stability is the main characterization of the triangle and notes that "a triangle placed on a flat base gives a feeling of stability," while a triangle placed diagonally gives the audience a "sense of movement" (50-51). Bang's statement is true for Nappy Hair in that from the cover to the beginning of the first page, Brenda's thick hair scatters in a triangular mass (Herron's cover, 3). The theme of stability runs throughout the text as Brenda's triangular

mass sits on her head as she makes a speech at school and poses for a picture with her family (11, 29). Even on page twenty-three, the hair of the African American slaves is cut and shaped in a triangular pyramid (Herron 23). If this isn't enough, Mordecai wears the symbol of stability with his red bowtie (Herron 27). A sense of movement is stressed by Brenda's hair as she participates in what seems to be a family reunion at which Brenda seems be the star of the party (20). What is interesting about Bang's observation is that even when Brenda appears to be placed in a still position, the position of her hair continues to give the reader a sense of movement. For example, on page twenty, Brenda is watching the setting sun; however, as previously noted by Bang, because Brenda's triangular shaped hair is at a diagonal angle, the reader can get the sense that even though the sun is setting, there could be the possibility of some wind movement, which allows her hair to stand on end. Also, the diagonal shape could symbolize Herron's movement back in time, a flashback to the middle passage, which is alluded to on page twenty-one when the narrator states, "Getting ready to come to America with them slaves. Didn't we come over here?" Therefore, the position in which Cepeda places the hair can be a reflection of the events that occur in Herron's text.

Freedom Summer and Nappy Hair are two books that are aesthetically valuable in the genre of African American children's literature. However, it is pertinent that educators recognize that even though both books preserve a portion of African American history, they each have a different tactic in doing so. Freedom Summer addresses segregation while not necessarily engrossing its audience in black aesthetics. Nappy Hair takes the opposite approach by remaining mostly Afro-centric in language and pictures. While each book has its various controversies, it is evident that the writers and illustrators

are successful in that they maintain a balance between oral and written traditions. Wiles, a white writer, uses indirect, neutral language to ease the young audience into the difficult subject of interracial friendship, while her illustrator picks up the slack by creating pictures that portray racial tension. Herron, a black writer, gives in to the spontaneity and orality of the black dialect. Herron embraces black aesthetics by rejecting formal sentence structures that appear on the page in linear fashion. Instead, she capitalizes words in the middle of sentences and italicizes and pauses whenever the need arises. Flashbacks also occur out of order and in the middle of the story, such as when Brenda sits on a rock reflecting on her roots back in Africa (20-21). Herron also approaches a race-sensitive subject in the form of racial pride. These two picture books, Freedom Summer and Nappy Hair, are important because they help educators explain to the young reader that black aesthetics are not this monolithic characteristic of black children's literature. They also give children the opportunity to indulge in dialogue about race and race-sensitive subjects.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: Tricksterism and the Child Trickster

Elizabeth Ammons states briefly yet powerfully in the introduction of her book Tricksterism in the Turn-of-the Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective that “Trickster disrupts” (Introduction vii). In other words, the trickster crosses boundaries and breaks the mold. It is this disruption that is necessary for change. One young adult novel which exemplifies this is Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, by Mildred Taylor.

Mildred Taylor’s novel, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, a novel about an African American family growing up during the post-depression era in rural Mississippi, captures black aesthetics by preserving the trickster. I argue that Taylor introduces the trickster through the main character and narrator’s voice, Cassie. However, Little Man, Stacey, and Christopher John are also minor tricksters in the novel because they assist Cassie in her trickery. Bradley Monsma explains further in his article “Active Readers...Observe Tricksters: Trickster Texts and Cross Cultural Reading” the importance of tricksters and the purpose that they serve. Monsma states that such trickster characters from many fiction novels (some mentioned are Maxine Hong Kingston, Ishmael Reed, and Gerald Vizenor) “reveal the processes by which humans construct and reconstruct cultures,” but, most important, Monsma argues that these same trickster type characters “enlighten not only ‘outsiders,’ but also those most self-assured in their understanding” (84). Cassie is the perfect example of Monsma’s argument.

There are several examples of Cassie at work, enlightening outsiders and insiders. However, the classic scene of her trickery is when Cassie plots revenge against

Lillian Jean, a racist white girl. Cassie's trip to Strawberry leaves her humiliated because of her confrontation with Lillian Jean and her father.

When Cassie accidentally bumps into Lillian Jean, she and her father make it their business to publicly dehumanize Cassie.

“You bumped into me. Now you apologize.”

I did not feel like messing with Lillian Jean. I had other things on my mind.

“Okay,” I said, starting past, “I'm sorry.”

Lillian Jean sidestepped in front of me. “That ain't enough. Get down in the road.” (Taylor 113)

As a result, Cassie is forced to apologize to Lillian Jean, calling her “Miz Lillian Jean” even though Lillian Jean is no older than she is. It is after this event in Strawberry that Cassie's role as a trickster is defined.

Monsma argues that “the notion of performance is particularly important to a discussion of tricksters because of the capacity of many traditional tricksters to embody multivocality. Most recent trickster theories have made use of the trickster's many voices” (85). This becomes apparent in the dialogue between Cassie and Lillian Jean. For example, what Cassie says is taken literally by Lillian Jean.

Lillian Jean looked at me with astonishment that I could see the matter so clearly.

“Well I'm glad you finally learned the way of things.”

“Oh, I did, “ I piped readily, “The way I see it--here, let me take them books for you, Miz Lillian Jean – the way I see it, we all gotta do what we

gotta do. And that's what I'm gonna do from now on. Just what I gotta."

(Taylor 172)

The above passage reveals a key trickster trait, language. Cassie cleverly uses language as a way to trick Lillian Jean. Her language conveys a double meaning. At the same time that Cassie shows subservience and contriteness, she communicates her intent to obtain revenge.

Bradley Monsma observed the significance of tricksters in his article "Active Readers...Obverse Tricksters: Trickster Texts and Cross-Cultural Reading."

Tricksters have populated oral and textual narratives of many cultures since the beginning of words; they have long been the focus of much anthropological, ethnographic, and religious scholarship. More recently, characteristics common to many tricksters--shape-shifting, cross-dressing, disruption, playfulness, and liminality-- have proven irresistible to critics and theorists of ethnic literatures looking for indigenous and/or marginalized voices with which to challenge the powerful discourses of mainstream critical theory. (83)

Monsma gets at the heart of tricksters. Tricksters, particularly child tricksters, are ones that have to use their wits and disruption to change their current situations or change the world. Taylor's novel reveals this through the Logan children. They must use their wits and be cunning in order to gain some control of their lives and not be totally dominated by whites. One way this is done is through language. Monsma uses an example from Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada as an example of how the trickster uses language to deceive. He states, "In Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada, we can begin to see how

trickster performance plays with the difference between the figurative and the literal and articulates what it means to interpret in ways which reveal the complex interplay between the two” (86). This is true with the discourse between Cassie and Lillian Jean. Lillian Jean interprets Cassie’s words as being sincere and submissive. She thinks that Cassie has come to terms with the fact that she is black and thus considered inferior by whites. However, Cassie is in fact insinuating that doing what she “gotta do” is anything but literal. Cassie cannot allow Lillian Jean to humiliate her, but she also cannot allow Lillian Jean’s father to cause trouble for her family. Therefore, she will do what she has to in order to maintain her dignity without putting her family in danger. Cassie plans to humiliate Lillian Jean just as much as Lillian Jean has humiliated her. Through language Cassie is able to deceive Lillian Jean into believing that she has a confidante and that Cassie is a “good Negro.” Cassie takes advantage of Lillian Jean’s trust in order to gain revenge. Later Cassie tricks Lillian Jean into the woods, where she punches her in the stomach and buttocks. Lillian Jean is astonished and unable to understand Cassie’s motives, questioning her: “But Cassie, why? You was such a nice little girl” (Taylor 181). Cassie, the trickster, is astonished at Lillian Jean’s reaction. She is shocked at Lillian Jean’s naivety. “I stared at her astonished. Then I turned and left the forest, not wanting to believe that Lillian Jean didn’t even realize it had all been just a game” (Taylor 181).

The school bus scene is yet another way that Cassie and the other Logan children prove that within the bounds of segregation they may not be able to do much, but “they will do what they gotta do.” The school bus is a metaphor for segregation. The Black children of Great Faith Elementary School have to walk to school since Great

Faith is unable to afford a school bus. White children at the Jefferson Davis School, on the other hand, ride the bus to and from school. In addition to the bus being a metaphor for segregation, it is personified as a living object that hunts down the Logan children, threatening to dirty their clean clothes.

Little Man turned around and watched saucer-eyed as a bus bore down on him spewing clouds of red dust like a huge yellow dragon breathing fire.

Little Man headed toward the bank, but it was too steep. He ran frantically along the road looking for a foothold and, finding one, hopped onto the bank, but not before the bus had sped past enveloping him a scarlet haze while laughing white faces pressed against the bus windows. (Taylor 13)

It is this daily incident with the bus's spewing of mud and dust onto the Logan children that makes the Logan children spring into action. Stacey comes up with the plan to even the score between African Americans at Great Faith and whites at Jefferson Davis.

Cassie, you start digging over there on that side of the road right across from me. That's right don't get too near the edge. It's gotta look like it's been washed out. Christopher-John, you and Little Man start scooping out mud from the middle of the road. (Taylor 51)

As a result, the tricksters -- Cassie, Stacey, Christopher-John, and Little Man -- succeed in their quest for revenge. The bus's axle is broken (Taylor 55).

For a moment it [the bus] swayed and we held our breath, afraid that it would topple over. Then it sputtered a last murmuring protest and died, its left front wheel in our ditch, its right wheel in the gully, like a lopsided billy goat on its knees. (Taylor 54)

The Logan children's victory is confirmed when they hear the bus driver say to one of the Jefferson Davis students, "Girl, all y'all gonna be walkin for at least two weeks by the time we get this thing hauled outa here and up to Strawberry to get fixed. Now y'all get on home" (Taylor 55). The Logan children secretly rejoice in their ability to make the white kids of Jefferson Davis "walk in their shoes." The white kids at Jefferson Davis will now have to walk to school. However, Taylor does not condone the Logan children's wrongdoing. Mrs. Logan serves as the children's conscience when she remarks, "If that bus hadn't been there when I came along, I'd probably have fallen in myself" (Taylor 56). However, Mrs. Logan and Big Ma reveal their satisfaction in knowing that the Jefferson Davis students will now experience the inconvenience of walking to school.

Mama smiled. "You know I'm glad no one was hurt--could've been too with such a deep ditch--but I'm also rather glad it happened."

"Mary!" Big Ma explained.

"Well I am," Mama said defiantly, smiling smugly to herself and looking very much like a young girl. "I really am."

Big Ma begin to grin. "You know somethin'? I am too."

Then all of us began to laugh and we were deliciously happy. (Taylor 57)

Kelly McDowell explains in her article "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: A Culturally Specific, Subversive Concept of Child Agency" that the children in the novel demonstrate what is called child agency. She describes child agency as the adults teaching the children "in a way that encourages autonomous action." She describes subversive child agency occurring through "demystification of history and the unveiling of power structures. In the process, the child characters become agents of resistance"

(213). This is true, as the Logan children (tricksters) take matters into their own hands, intentionally sabotaging the school bus. The Logan children realize that they cannot publicly humiliate the children of David Jefferson School. So, just as Cassie plots her revenge against Lillian Jean, the Logan children do what they can under the limitations of segregation and the Jim Crow laws. In other words, the Logan children exercise child agency by retaliating within the boundaries of the social construction of segregation.

Although Cassie is the main trickster in the novel, T.J. serves as a secondary trickster. Ammons further states in the introduction of her book that “embodied in trickster and trickster energy is a principle of human rebellion and resistance that exists both within a protagonist/antagonist framework and within a totally different context, one in which the disruly – the transgressive is accepted as part of the community’s life” (ix). Cassie and T.J. fit this contrast in that Cassie acts as the protagonist seeking retribution for being humiliated by whites. T.J. on the other hand, initially comes across as sharp and cocky. But to his dismay, he is unaware of how to channel his rebellion. Although he is as clever a trickster as Cassie, by the end of the novel he ultimately fails as one. This is because T.J. fails to use his wits to survive the white reign of the south; instead he uses his wits against his own people. Turning his back on his race ends up causing him to fall into the hands of white racist southerners, thus sealing his fate.

With this glimpse of T.J., the reader gets an impression that T.J. is the antagonist of the group of well-behaved children, and if this isn’t enough, the reader gets a deeper insight into T.J.’s trickery when it is revealed that he allowed his baby brother to take a whipping for him. T.J. laughs, telling the Logan children how he went dancing at the Wallaces’ store. His mom forbids him to go because the Wallaces are racist whites who

allow black youths to come into their store to drink and participate in frivolous activities. However, hardheaded T.J. goes anyway, and when he gets caught, he blames it on his younger brother Claude. The passage below is T.J.'s telling the Logan children how he got out of the whipping for going to the Wallace store.

But don't worry, I got out of it though. When Mama asked me 'bout it, I jus' said ole Claude was always sneakin' up there to get some of that free candy Mr. Kaleb give out sometimes and I glad to go and get him' cause I knowed good and well she didn't want us up there. Boy did he get it. (Taylor 11)

The above passage reveals that T.J. is willing to sacrifice his own brother's well-being in order to save himself. Although T.J.'s deceit towards his brother is troubling, perhaps the most deceit from T.J. occurs when he has Mrs. Logan fired and tricks Stacey out of his winter coat by teasing him: "Like I said, its all right... if you like lookin like a fat preacher" (Taylor 136). T.J. makes fun of Stacey in front of others by suggesting that the coat makes him look like a fat preacher. "Here comes the preacher," How do you do Reverend Logan?" (136). This statement reveals that T.J. is willing to betray Stacey's trust. In other words, T.J. has no respect for friendship. This is also evident early on in the novel when T.J. refuses to take responsibility for the cheat note Mrs. Logan catches Stacey with (Taylor 81).

What the reader does not know right away is that T.J.'s arrogance and trickery are a front to hide his insecurity. Unlike Cassie and the other Logan children, T.J. longs to be accepted, and this longing will reappear later on within the novel. It is also what will ultimately determine his downfall. He says,

"I been tired of y'all always hangin' 'round for a long while now, but I

been too nice to tell ya...I should've known better. What I look like, havin' a bunch of little kids 'round all the time and me here fourteen, near grown... ..Got me better friends than y'all! They give me things and treat me like I'm a man and...and they white too. (Taylor 194)

T.J. is the oldest in the Logan group. However, he does not feel he has any authority. T.J. feels that he is a man but lacks the affirmation of this from the Logan children. Therefore, he falls for the first attention he gets, which seems to come from two older white boys, R.W. and Melvin. Mrs. Logan explains T.J.'s association with R.W. and Melvin to Cassie, who is confused by T.J.'s lack of caution. "Some people just like to keep other folks around to laugh at them...use them" (Taylor 198).

When Mr. Logan discovers that T.J. was framed for a robbery that R.W. and Melvin committed, he realizes that if he doesn't act quickly, the sheriff will lynch T.J. Not only do the Logan children experience an awakening when T.J. explains the robbery, but they learn the meaning of sacrifice after their father is forced to set fire to their land in order to save T.J.'s life. This is noted by Cassie, the narrator.

I knew why Mr. Morrison had come for him alone. Why Mr. Jamison was afraid for Papa to go into town. Papa had found a way as Mama had asked, to make Mr. Granger stop the hanging: He had started the fire. And it came to me that this was one of those known and unknown things, something never to be spoken, not even to each other. I glanced at Stacey, and he saw in my eyes that I knew, and understood the meaning of what I knew, and he said simply, Mr. Jamison's going now. (Taylor 273)

What is chilling about Taylor's novel is the stark contrast between the

awakening of the Logan family and T.J.'s downfall, both unfold in the spring. Taylor sets the scene, foreshadowing the upcoming ironic dilemma.

Spring. It seeped unseen into the waiting red earth in early March, softening the hard ground for the coming plow and awakening life that had lain gently sleeping through the cold winter. But by the end of March it was evident everywhere in the barn where three new calves bellowed and chicks the color of soft pale sunlight chirped, in the yard where the wisteria and English dogwood bushes readied themselves for their annual Easter bloom, and the fig tree budded producing the forerunners of juicy, brown fruit from which the boys and I would have to do battle with fig-loving Jack and in the smell of the earth itself. Rain-drenched, fresh, vital, full of life, spring enveloped all of us. (Taylor 196)

In some ways the above passage is T.J.'s eulogy. He is a failed trickster; however, T.J.'s presence remains within the story, even at the very end of the novel. Even Cassie makes note of this as she mourns at the end of the novel, "I cried for T.J. for T.J. and the land" (Taylor 276).

Although Cassie is a trickster character, her tricksterism is anything but trivial. Her character does not just serve as a character of mere games, but Cassie is more significant because she is the ears and eyes of the novel and the one with whom the reader most identifies. She brings out many details about the racial politics that lie unknown to the reader. One particular scene of vital importance is the one between Mrs. Logan, Cassie's mother, and Miss Crocker, Cassie's teacher.

As Monsma previously argued, performance is important because it reveals the

many narrative voices of the trickster (85). This is true of Cassie in various scenes where the tone or situations are characterized by more adult content. Cassie, the narrator takes on many different voices. As Cassie eavesdrops on Miss Crocker and Mrs. Logan's conversation, the reader learns of (through Cassie's voice) Miss Crocker and Mrs. Logan's background. The reader also learns of the politics within the African American community.

Miss Crocker and Mrs. Logan are discussing Cassie and Little Man's outburst in the classroom. It is during class that Little Man calls the book that Miss Crocker gives him dirty. Then Cassie brings to Miss Crocker's attention that the book has the racial slur "nigra" written in it (Taylor 23, 25). When Cassie brings the racial slur to Miss Crocker's attention, she remarks, "That's what you are" (Taylor 26). Mrs. Logan accepts the fact that Miss Crocker must punish Cassie and Little Man, while sarcastically remarking to Miss Crocker, "They disobeyed you" (Taylor 29). Then Miss Crocker responds with "You understand that if they don't have those books to study from, I'll have to fail them in both reading and composition, since I plan to base all my lessons around" (Taylor 29). Miss Logan interrupts Miss Crocker by springing into action. She cuts papers to the size of the books and glues them over the list of racial slurs (Taylor 29-30). Instead of being angry with the county, Miss Crocker is appalled at Miss Logan's action. "Mary Logan do you know what you're doing? That book belongs to the county. If somebody from the superintendent's office ever comes down here and sees that book, you'll be in real trouble" (Taylor 30). In this scene, Mrs. Logan is modeling trickster behavior for her daughter; Cassie witnesses how to subvert authority by watching her mother trick the county's segregated school system. Unlike

T.J., though, this is behavior that benefits the black community.

This discourse that Cassie overhears between Mrs. Logan and Miss Crocker is crucial to understanding the two. Miss Crocker is educated but also ignorant and submissive to the rules of the whites in the county. Mrs. Logan, on the other hand, has wisdom and is more experienced. It can be suggested by the two women's titles, *Miss* and *Mrs.*, that Miss Crocker may be younger and unmarried and have no children, and thus, inexperienced. Most important, she is not as powerful as Mrs. Logan. Mrs. Logan, on the other hand, is a veteran teacher and realizes that black children's self-esteem is more important than *white people's orders*. Mrs. Logan is an advocate, and, unlike Miss Crocker, she is willing to take action rather than submit to oppression. Cassie reveals this crucial information to the reader.

Although Mama had been a teacher at Great Faith for fourteen years, ever since she had graduated from the Crandon Teacher Training School at nineteen, she was still considered by many of the other teachers as a disrupting maverick. Her ideas were always a bit too radical and her statements a bit too pointed. The fact that she had not grown up in Spokane County but in the Delta made her even more suspect, and the more traditional thinkers like Miss Crocker were wary of her. (Taylor 31)

The contrast between the ideological views of Mrs. Logan and Miss Crocker informs the reader about the political tension residing in the African American community. These two political views were held by two prominent leaders in the African American community: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Booker T. Washington was one of the most influential and controversial African

American leaders during the early twentieth century. He was the first principal of the Tuskegee Institute, founded in 1881 as a school for blacks living in Macon County, Alabama. Washington believed in self-help. He felt that blacks could only succeed in a white world by submitting to whites and investing their time in agriculture and industrial skills, not pursuing political rights (Washington 33). In his book, Up from Slavery, Washington gives an analogy of a ship lost at sea that is supposed to represent the Negro race. His response to this ship lost at sea is “Cast down your bucket where you are” (Washington 35). In other words, if the Negro race does not want to “die of thirst” it must submit to white America (Washington 35). Below is the analogy that Washington gives.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, “Water, water; we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A second time the signal, “Water, water; send us water!” ran up from the distressed vessel and was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” And a third and fourth signal for water was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance for cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are – cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are

surrounded.” (Washington 34)

It is this ideology that Miss Crocker possesses. Her analogy is similar to Washington’s when she tells Mrs. Logan that by defying white authority or the county that she is biting the hand that feeds her (Taylor 30). In other words, Miss Crocker has accepted the superior reign of white America. She is blinded to the true intentions of the white school officials, who purposely want to keep the black children of Great Faith behind the white children by giving them old books from Jefferson Davis. However, Miss Crocker views the badly worn books with racial slurs as a blessing to the students of Great Faith. She remarks, “Now we’re very fortunate to get these readers. The county superintendent of schools himself brought these books down here for our use and we must take extra-good care of them” (Taylor 21). Whether it is intentional or unintentional, Miss Crocker is blind to the racial prejudice that the books represent. She is willing to accept the racial inferiority that it stresses and passes this same ignorance on in her classroom. When Little Man brings it to Miss Crocker’s attention that the books are not so wonderful and not so new, that they are indeed dirty, Miss Crocker becomes upset and unwilling to address Little Man’s concern. “Dirty! And just who do you think you are, Clayton Chester? Here the county is giving us these wonderful books during these hard times and you’re going to stand there and tell me that the book’s too dirty? Now you take that book or get nothing at all!” (Taylor 23). And as previously stated, Miss Crocker’s ignorance is further pronounced when Cassie tells Mrs. Crocker that the textbook has labeled her as being a “nigra” (Taylor 25). Miss Crocker responds coldly, “That’s what you are” (Taylor 26). Miss Crocker’s attitude is much like that of Bledsoe, a character in Ralph Ellison’s novel, Invisible Man, who is supposed to be the ambiguous presence of

Washington. In Invisible Man, Bledsoe tells the narrator, “Learn where you are and get yourself power...then stay in the dark and use it” (Ellison 145). Mrs. Logan, on the other hand, is a different type of educated woman. She knows that in order for blacks to succeed, they must do what they can to fight the social constructions of segregation; this includes participating in tricksterism. Mrs. Logan knows that just because they do not have sanctioned power does not mean that they are powerless. Miss Crocker, on the other hand, is not a trickster. She is working with the system, not against it. In fact, Miss Crocker tells Mrs. Logan that soon her children are going to have to accept the way things are. Mrs. Logan responds, “Maybe so. But that doesn’t mean they have to accept them...and maybe we don’t either” (Taylor 30). Mrs. Logan’s ideological views represent those of the famous director of the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People, W.E. B. Du Bois (Du Bois 39). Du Bois argues that “black Americans must disavow accommodation and instead struggle for absolute political, economic, and educational equality” (Du Bois 39). Mrs. Logan shares in Du Bois’s belief when she organizes neighbors to boycott the Wallaces’ store because of the well-known fact that the Wallaces poured kerosene on Mr. Berry and his nephews, setting them afire. She is aware of the power of boycotting. She knows that one way to hurt the Wallaces is to hit them where it hurts--their pocketbooks. Mrs. Logan, unlike Mrs. Crocker, is an activist. She is not willing to sit and submit but willing to take action. The passage below is Mrs. Logan’s response to Big Ma, who feels that Mr. and Mrs. Logan and Uncle Hammer should let the matter of boycotting rest.

Is it better to just sit back and complain about how they do us? Mama snapped, her voice rising. “Everybody from Smellings Creek to Strawberry knows it was

them but what do we do about it? We line their pockets with our few pennies and send our children up to their store to learn things they've got no business learning. The older children are drinking regularly there now, even though they don't have any money to pay, and the Wallaces are simply adding the liquor charges to the family bill...just more money for them as they ruin our young people. As I see it the least we can do is stop shopping there. It may not be real justice, but it'll hurt them and we'll have done something. (Taylor 151)

The fire in Mrs. Logan's voice is like that of Du Bois as he answered Washington's call that blacks need to wait on political rights, civil rights, and higher education (Du Bois 44). Du Bois argues in his book, The Souls of Black Folk, "We have no right to sit silently by while the inevitable seeds are sown for a harvest of disaster to our children, black and white" (57). As previously argued, Mrs. Logan responds to Du Bois's argument by taking action and covering the racial slur that seeks to sow seeds of disaster for Miss Crocker's students. Unlike Miss Crocker, Mrs. Logan is educated in the sense that she knows blacks cannot fight injustice by keeping quiet. Du Bois felt this way also. He states, "We cannot settle this problem by diplomacy and suaveness, by policy alone" (Du Bois 60). Mrs. Logan knows that action has to be taken, and she is willing to do her part; as a result, her children see this expand their education of activism. Miss Crocker, on the other hand, has educated the children in a negative way, and like Booker T. Washington, she portrays to her students the idea of submission and acceptance of inferiority. Mrs. Logan in her own way is a trickster, using wisdom and education to fight the system.

The stark ideological contrast between Miss Crocker and Mrs. Logan brings up the issue of education. Cicely Cobb argues in her article “If You Give a Nigger an Inch, They Will Take an Ell” that Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is beneficial to the education of children because it helps them deal with racism psychologically, but most importantly, she argues that the novel is significant because children get an informal education about black sharecropping and African American history in the South. She notes that this is also conveyed in the text when the Logan children are informally educated about the history of the family’s land (Cobb 196-197).

Once our land had been Granger land too, but the Grangers had sold it during Reconstruction to a Yankee for tax money. In 1887, when the land was up for sell again, Grandpa had bought two hundred acres of it, and in 1918, after the first two hundred acres had been paid off, he had bought another two hundred. (Taylor 6)

In other words, the lessons that the children learn are lessons that they would never learn in a textbook. The school system or Great Faith and teachers like Miss Crocker, are incapable of teaching the Logan children the importance of owning land or of fighting larger political systems.

I asked him 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 as 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. (Taylor 7)

Taylor’s African American young adult novel successfully exhibits traditional

elements of black aesthetics by using the trickster to relay informal modes of education, which I argue are found in experience. Although Cassie and her siblings learn how to survive the racist South through a history book and family stories, they also learn through the actions of their parents. Teaching through action is what aids the Logan children in their ability to learn through experience.

Robert Young, in his article “The Linguistic Turn, Materialism and Race: Toward Aesthetics of Crisis” remarks the following:

Experience, though, is not self-intelligible and should not be posited as the limit text of the real, as is often done. Experience is a highly mediated frame of understanding. While it is true that a person of color, a woman, or gay person experiences oppression, this experience is not self-explanatory – it has to be situated in relation to other social practices. Experience, in short, only seems local; it is like all cultural and political practices, interrelated to other practices and experiences, and as such its explanation comes from its “outside.” (337)

Young’s argument that experience comes from the outside rings true for the Logan children. They learn by having to dodge the Jefferson Davis school bus how segregation can affect their daily lives. Cassie discovers through her experience of retaliation how ignorant Lillian Jean is concerning racism. She also learns what the outcome of retaliating and not being cautious can be through the lives of Mr. Berry and T.J. I argue that it is lack of experience or informal education that hurts T.J. Therefore, T.J. is gullible to the trickery of white America, which approaches him in the form of friendship: R.J. and Melvin.

Mildred Taylor gives adolescent readers a novel that is anything but simple. Her

novel prepares adolescents for the role of the trickster in novels, and it also introduces them to historical facts usually ignored in history books. In addition, a trickster story such as Taylor's is important because it helps students and teachers to draw parallels to other trickster stories in literature.

Charlotte K. Brooks also comments on the importance of tricksters. She notes in her article, "World-Wide Tricksters," that there are classic novels that can be analyzed for examples of tricksterism, such as Anne Frank, Tom Sawyer, and Huckleberry Finn. Brooks also argues that biographies written by Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass are "real life examples" of tricksterism. They show how the spirituals were used to trick whites, helping the "slaves achieve freedom" (109).

The trickster is a major part of black aesthetics in African American Literature. Its significance cannot be ignored in African American children's literature. Understanding the trickster figure is crucial to educators and students' preparation for more advanced African American literature. But most important, the trickster serves as a vital figure in African American children's literature because it reveals to African American children how the art of rebellion or tricksterism can be channeled into positive means that provoke change, as seen with the Logan children.

To Laugh or Not to Laugh: Black Masculinity and Humor in Black Boy

Black Boy is an autobiography, or, as Richard Wright puts it, "a record of childhood and youth." This young adult novel bears some similarities to Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because it expresses to the young adult audience what life was like for blacks living in segregated Mississippi during the Jim Crow era. However, Black Boy separates itself from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because in it Wright takes a grim look at oppression. Unlike the Logan children, Wright does not maintain the strong two-parent family structure that the Logan children are fortunate to have. Instead, his mother is sickly throughout his childhood, and he spends most of his childhood living with his grandmother, Aunt Addie, and Uncle Tom, all of whom consider him to be a demon child because of his resistance to religion and authority. Most important, Black Boy gives the reader insight into the psychological and emotional fear that reigns in the black male, crippling his masculinity.

Jerry W. Ward, Jr. states in his introduction to the 1991 edition of Black Boy that "the black boy is forever denied the achievement of manhood, so defined. The black male is to be made a permanent child and denigrated into the posture of the stereotyped female--victim, underpowered!" (Wright, Introduction). Although Wright faces hardships and ridicule from family members (especially Granny), he manages to tell his tragedy through humor. Wright's voice does not come across with self-pity and self-loathing. Instead, Wright transforms difficult scenes of pain into comedy. Because Wright is able to successfully mask tragedy with humor, the novel does not come across as depressing. Even issues such as hunger and chastisement are presented to the young adult audience through vignettes of comedy, serving as alleviation of the pain that lies hidden within the

passages that contain deeper meanings.

However, the art of humor has not always been considered a positive aesthetic. In Dexter B. Gordon's article "Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression," a brief history of humor is given. Gordon states that humor goes back to the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who frowned upon humor as being overly used, especially in regard to serious matters. They believed that good-natured humor was okay as long as it didn't stem from anger; however, humor that came as a result of someone's "folly" represented a lack of dignity. In other words, to Aristotle and Plato, humor was considered a part of "pleasure and amusement, having very little social value" (255). Aristotle believed humor was permissible only when based on a set of rules that it must follow. They are the following: (1) The style must be appropriate to its subject matter. (2) The emotional tone (pathos) must also be appropriate to its subject matter. (3) The speech should fit the character, age, and nationality of the speaker. Gordon argues that what Aristotle failed to recognize is that, unlike Aristotle and Plato's standards, humor arises from passion and expresses human feelings (Gordon 255). This is certainly the case in Black Boy.

African American humor breaks away from the traditional Greco-Roman definition of humor. Instead, humor is used to vent frustration, pain, and oppression. Gordon argues, "As we will see from our analysis of African American humor, when the rage of the oppressed is spoken, humorous discourse may provide a vital rather than a convenient channel" (Gordon 255). This is relevant to Wright's novel, in which humor is often used to deal with emotions of frustration, which begin to surface when Wright has to deal with a lack of food, beatings, and religious domination.

Gordon states, “With the great Black migration of the first half of the 20th century, Black folk humor moved to the north, with adaptations for northern White audiences. In the 1920s, Blacks transplanted to the cities and used humor to celebrate their folk culture; by the 1930s, this celebration became a protest against racism” (258). Gordon also goes on to explain how the circumstances of Southern life are what encouraged African humor to serve as a “mask.” African Americans were not able to become individuals and had to conform to certain demeanors and behaviors. Their attitude was in some sense controlled by whites; therefore, humor was all they owned to make the best of their situations. It in many instances served as “protection” (264). I argue that humor protected them from retaliation, as seen in Black Boy, although Wright eventually retaliates by challenging his grandmother’s beliefs and leaving the South for good.

Gordon further argues that humor is often an effective means for addressing touch subjects. However, he adds that behind humor, particularly African American humor, lies darkness or tragedy, which he refers to as "the seriousness of African American humor." Gordon uses Mark Twain’s 1895 interview about humor and pathos to further explain African American humor.

Mark Twain's fiction, in which he links humor and pathos, is a precursor of contemporary black. Twain's linkage of humor and pathos is mirrored in African American humor as well. As Twain observed in a 1895 interview, humor and pathos are inseparable, and behind the broadest grins, the most exquisitely ludicrous situations, they know there is the grinning skull, and that all roads lead along the dusty road to death. At its base, then, African American humor is very serious. (256)

Wright's novel contains many seriously toned scenes that might seem almost unbearable to a young adult audience. However, Wright cleverly crafts these serious scenes with undertones of humor. These scenes include moments of chastisement, identity, and history. These moments first surface through humor when a young Wright learns that there is no food in the house.

"Mama, I'm hungry," I complained one afternoon.

"Jump up and catch a kungry,"

"What's a kungry?"

"It's what little boys eat when they get hungry," she said smiling.

"What does it taste like?"

"I don't know"

"Then why do you tell me to catch one?"

"Because you said that you were hungry," she said smiling.

I sensed that she was teasing me and it made me angry. (Wright 15)

This poetic passage of call and response between Wright and his mom is most profound in the way that Wright depicts his mom's use of humor, which distracts Richard from hunger. This lighthearted passage shifts the younger audience's focus from hunger to humor. Poverty is a serious problem in the novel; however, dwelling on this fact would ultimately change the tone of the novel. Therefore, to avoid a more serious tone, Wright uses poetic language to lighten the mood. Throughout the novel, Wright is seriously malnourished and lives off a diet of mush (a mixture of grease and flour) in order to carry on his daily activities.

The lack of food resurfaces as he and a school boy crack jokes on each other. As

Wright makes the transition from a young boy to a teenager, hunger remains a problem. Humor is even used by Wright and his friends on the playground to cover up the fact they are lacking a meal. As Wright is leaving the school grounds, stumbling around on the streets, he comes into contact with a boy. As Wright is walking, the boy, who is trying to make conversation, asks Wright whether he has eaten or not. Wright replies that he has indeed gotten his fill. The boy then tries to outdo Wright by boasting that he has had cabbage and potatoes. Wright tries to outdo the boy by telling him that he has eaten buttermilk and black-eyed peas. The boy, now with an audience, in return uses Wright's response to crack a joke on him. Wright and the street boy go back and forth in a humorous call and response.

“I had buttermilk and black-eyed peas.” Meekly informational.

“Hell, I ain't gonna stand near you, nigger! Pronouncement.

“How come?” Feigned innocence.

“Cause you gonna smell up this air in a minute!” A shouted accusation.

Laughter runs through the crowd.

“Nigger your mind's in a ditch.” Amusingly moralistic.

“Ditch nothing! Nigger you going to break wind any minute now!”

Triumphant pronouncement creating suspense.

“Yeah, when them black-eyed peas tell that buttermilk to move over, that buttermilk ain't gonna wanna move and there's gonna be war in your guts and your stomach's gonna swell up and bust!”

Climax.

The crowd laughs loud and long. (Wright 79)

The comical reply from Wright's mom and the call and response between Wright and his friend serves as distractions from a serious issue facing blacks during this time-- hunger. Therefore, the grinning skull reappears because behind the laughter lies much more. The humor serves as medicine to disguise a lack of food. Gordon states, "With the great Black migration of the first half of the 20th century, Black folk humor moved to the north, with adaptations for northern White audiences. In the 1920s, Blacks transplanted to the cities and used humor to celebrate their folk culture; by 1930s, this celebration became a protest against racism" (258).

This image of the "grinning skull" reappears in many of Wright's passages, particularly the beating scenes, in which Wright uses humor and word play in order to show his defiance of authority and religion. An example from the text is when Wright plays with the thought that his mother came close to killing him by beating him senseless. The grinning skull is revealed because behind the humor is the touchy issue of severe chastisement or beatings from his family. For example, when Wright's mom discovers that he is the one who burned the house down, she proceeds to chastise him by beating him senseless! However, it is almost unimaginable, whether entirely true or not, that Wright has indeed been beaten with the severity that he describes. Therefore, his description of the encounter with his mom's switch is comical because Wright seems to be an unreliable narrator in his description of the beatings.

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still...Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udder of cows,

suspended from the ceiling above me. (Wright 7)

While this may not be humorous to some, the thought of Wright's being beat until he's delusional (seeing udders of cows) further supports that he is jokingly describing the severity of his beating and is an unreliable narrator.

Wright faces yet another beating. This time it is from Granny, who, after bathing Wright, is outraged at his comment that she kiss his behind. Wright absentmindedly comments to Granny, "When you get through, kiss back there" (Wright 41). With this comment comes a violent retaliation from Granny as she stings Wright across the back with a wet towel, which Wright describes as "fire burning and quivering" on his skin (Wright 41). Wright states, "She lifted the wet towel and struck me again with such force that I dropped to my knees. I knew that if I did not get out of her reach she would kill me. Naked, I rose and ran out of the room, screaming. My mother hurried from her bed" (Wright 42). The reader is faced with the uneasy task of mentally processing the seriousness of Wright's beating. However, Wright delivers the scene with humor in an attempt to make the reader dismiss the seriousness of the beating scene. This is suggested through the image with which he chooses to end the passage. In other words, the beating is harsh, but the image of a naked Wright running from Granny distracts the reader. More attention is focused on the humor than on the seriousness of the situation. I argue that this is Wright's intent. While severe punishment was part of his life, Wright does not wish the reader to dwell on the pain, which would give the text a melancholy tone.

Wright uses this humor to disguise the pain. However, it is apparent that the beating scenes psychologically affect Wright in that he comes to expect physical pain from adults as a part of life and in turn learns to inflict pain onto others. Thus, the

laughing skull is revealed again. This psychological pain surfaces at the beginning of the novel when Wright kills a kitten. Wright's father tells him and his brother to kill the kitten. However, he doesn't literally mean what he says. He in fact just wants Wright and his brother to get rid of the kitten or remove it from his sight. Wright knows this as well; however, out of resentment for his father's shouting, Wright makes the decision to kill the kitten in order to get back at his father. This is his first experience defying authority, and it will not be his last.

"I killed 'im," I whispered.

"You did bad," my brother said.

"Now Papa can sleep," I said deeply satisfied.

"He didn't mean for you to kill 'im," my brother said.

"Then why did he tell me to do it?" I demanded. (Wright 11)

Wright is aware of the fact that he has mistaken his father's words; however, he does not fear being beat because he knows if his father beats him, he will lose credibility. His words will mean nothing. Wright exposes his knowledge of this fact in the passage below:

I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at least found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that, if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give serious weight to his words again. I had made him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without punishing me. (Wright 12)

Although young Wright was aware that his father did not mean for him to kill the kitten,

he struggles throughout the story about how to “appropriately” communicate with adults. His literal interpretations cause a lot of trouble for him, and it is apparent that a young Wright must be careful of what he does and says, or the result is a beating. The chastisements that Wright receives are ironic in a sense because this is the same way that slave masters kept slaves under control. In fact, Wright’s life is much like that of a slave, as he is forced to obey adults (particularly Granny), never questioning their authority. His personality is suppressed, and his freedom to express his thoughts and opinions are stifled as Granny, Aunt Addie, and Uncle Tom demand that he stay in a child’s place. Wright has not quite learned the rules or place of a child in the African American community, and because of this he continues to clash with the adult members of his family. Granny constantly proceeds to put him in his place, which often results in his being beaten, demonized, or both.

Granny said, “Shut up, you!” and leaned forward promptly to chastise me with one of her casual back-handed slaps on my mouth. But I had by now become adept at dodging blows and I nimbly ducked my head. She missed me; the force of her blow was so strong that she fell down the steps headlong, her aged body wedged in a narrow space between the fence and the bottom step. (Wright 134)

After ducking a blow from Granny, which causes her to dislocate her back, Wright becomes a target of Aunt Addie. She considers him to an evil person and a troublemaker.

“Why do you butt in when grown people are talking?” she demanded, finding her weapon at last.

“I just wanted to talk,” I mumbled sullenly. “I sit in this house for hours and I can’t even talk.”

“Hereafter, you keep your mouth shut until you’re spoken to,” she advised me.

“But Granny oughtn’t always be hitting at me like that,” I said as delicately as possible.

Boy don’t you stand there and say what Granny *ought* to do,” she blazed, finding her ground of accusation. “If you don’t keep your mouth shut, then I’ll hit you! She continued. (Wright 135)

While some scenes are hilarious, there are times when one wonders whether or not he or she *should* laugh. In his article “The Five Humors,” William Boerman-Cornell states, “Sometimes a scene can be funny even if it was not intended to be” (67). Gordon adds, “All Negro literature is suffused with an uneasy laughter, the wry reaction of the ironist” (258). Whether or not the above passages are meant to be funny, the audience (especially the adolescent audience) can’t help but to imagine the young, defiant Wright outsmarting his traditional-thinking granny and aunt. The above passage also reveals the analogy of the grinning skull. The scene of Granny flying headfirst into the fence is hilarious and serves her justice considering the fact that she has physically and mentally abused Wright throughout the novel. Thus, this scene gives Wright and the adolescent reader satisfaction.

Granny and Aunt Addie’s tyrant rages of discipline are much like what happened to slaves in the industrial South, where Wright is beaten into submission (Starobin 112). These beatings are the grandmother and aunt’s way of controlling Wright. In other words, Granny and Aunt Addie are no different from slave drivers. They beat Wright in order to make him obey. To further prove their slave-master mentality, the two use another,

perhaps higher, form of oppression to suppress Wright's spontaneity and force obedience. This form of oppression is religion.

Robert Starobin, in his article "Disciplining Industrial Slaves in the Old South" states that Christian indoctrination was successful at implementing discipline or controlling slaves because it relayed to slaves that by disobeying their masters they were disobeying God and that slaves who were obedient would receive their reward in heaven for being faithful servants (Wright 113). Granny tries to indoctrinate Wright in this same way. She sees him as evil and feels that the only way any good will come of him is if he becomes "saved." When Wright refuses, she goes as far as ignoring his existence.

It is true that Granny has inflicted harsh punishments onto Wright. It is also arguable that Granny's harsh punishment is her way of helping Wright to survive. Because Wright is so defiant and "disrespectful," it is a possibility that he could run into trouble in the racist South. This in fact is what happens to T.J. in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor. Wright's behavior is indeed dangerous during this time. Even his uncle comments that if he doesn't slow down he'll end up hung. Therefore, it can be argued that their extreme discipline is their way of protecting him. However, Wright challenges Granny's world and the world of the South, allowing himself to look beyond its limitations. This is what scares Granny, Aunt Addie, and Uncle Tom. Therefore, their inflictions of severe beatings could stem from fear of having their values challenged.

Although the beatings could be justified, there still remains the fact that the humorous scenes within the chapters require attention and again bring into question the method of discipline being used in Wright's family. Shirley H. Hill states in her article "Class, Race, and Gender Dimensions of Child Rearing in African American Families"

that during the 1930s, “empirical research” was done on black lower-class families. Researchers argued that the behavior and attitudes of black people had been replaced with those shaped by slavery. Thus, black mothers were viewed as “harsh and arbitrary” and the fathers as being violent or uninterested in their children (497). However, Hill argues that child-rearing practices were judged on the basis of the white middle-class families; thus, black parents were considered incapable of teaching their children American values. However, Afro-centric theorists have since challenged these claims of inferiority of African American disciplining because they argue that African American discipline reflects discipline of West African traditions, which enforce respect for the elderly, domestic work, racial pride, and flexible role relations (497). This is true with Wright’s family as well. Disrespecting elders in the fashion that Wright does is shocking, and a child who does so is considered an outcast in the community. Although Wright’s outbursts of defiance cause one to laugh out loud, his behavior is a kind that is still ridiculed in African American families today. No matter how unfair an adult is, verbal and physical defiance is unacceptable and is met with harsh discipline. One incident in particular that emphasizes this is when Wright raises up against his uncle. Uncle Tom asks Wright to tell him the time. Wright looks at his watch and responds that it is eighteen past five. Uncle Tom is doubtful that the time is correct and questions Wright about whether or not the time is correct. Wright, half sleepy, responds, “If it’s a little slow or fast, it’s not far wrong” (Wright 157). Because Uncle Tom asked Wright a direct question and received an indirect answer from Wright, he considers this to be a form of disrespect or sassiness and angrily ridicules Wright.

“Why you impudent black rascal!” he thundered.

I pushed back the covers of the bed, sensing trouble.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “You asked me the time and I told you.”

“If it’s a little fast or slow it’s not far wrong,” he said, imitating me in an angry sarcastic voice. “I’ve taught school for thirty years, and by God I’ve never had a boy say anything like that to me.”

“But what’s wrong with what I said?” I asked, amazed.

“Shut up! he shouted’ “or I’ll take my fist and ram it down your sassy throat! One more word out of you, and I’ll get a limb and teach you a lesson.”

“What’s wrong with you, Uncle Tom?” I asked. “What’s wrong with what I said?” (Wright 157)

Uncle Tom refuses to communicate to Wright what his role is in the house. He, like Granny and Aunt Addie, assumes that Wright is aware that what he has said is considered sarcastic. As a result, Wright retaliates by threatening to cut Uncle Tom with the razors that he is hiding in each hand. Uncle Tom then calls him a criminal, predicting that he will end up lynched.

“Somebody will yet break your spirit,” he said.

“It won’t be you!”

“You’ll get yours someday!”

“You won’t be the one to give it to me!”

“And you’ve just been baptized,” he said heavily.

“The hell with that,” I said.

“Boy I’m sorry for you,” he said at last.

“You’d better be sorry for yourself,” I said.

“You think you’re a man,” he said, dropping his arm and letting the switch drag in the dust of the yard. His lips moved as he groped for words. “But you’ll learn and you’ll learn the hard way. I wish I could be an example to you...”

“You’re not an example to me; you could never be,” I spat at him. “You’re a warning. Your life isn’t so hot that you can tell me what to do.” He repaired chairs for a living now, since he had retired from teaching. “Do you think I want to grow up and weave the bottom of chairs for people to sit in?” (Wright 160)

This scene is one of the most humorous and defiant scene in the book, as a smug teenage Wright attacks Uncle Tom’s manhood. However, there is sadness in the words of Uncle Tom. Wright has attacked his manhood. Hill argues that studies have suggested that black men feel that they lack acceptable routes to masculinity through educational and career success and thus are prone to identify manhood with aggressiveness or physical activity (502). While Uncle Tom’s manhood may be reflected through his aggressiveness and disciplining, so is Wright’s. However, Wright takes it a step further. He rejects Uncle Tom’s peasant life. Wright has dreams of escaping the South and exercising his thirst for writing. Therefore, he attacks Uncle Tom’s new and dull occupation as being inferior to the way a black man should live.

Hill proceeds to explain the gender roles of African American children, which may explain some of Wright’s behavior. She argues that gender expectations affect a

black mother's parenting and that mothers tend to be more protective of boys and less likely to discipline them. This statement could be seen as being contrary to Granny's actions, but in regard to Wright's mom, it would be somewhat true. She is the only one in the novel who is lenient towards him. When Wright defies Granny's wishes for him not to work, his mother only smiles and kisses him on the cheek. With the exception in the beginning of the story, when she beats him for burning down the house, she is usually protective of him. Her beatings become fewer as Wright gets older in age. However, Granny's beatings become more frequent and severe as Wright enters adolescence. Hill states that "understanding that their sons face many obstacles and even dangers in expressing masculinity, parents may develop higher expectations for daughters than for sons and be more tolerant and self-indulgent with sons" (503). Hill goes on to state that even racial socialization differs for black males and black girls. "Black male adolescents were more likely to be cautioned about racial barriers, where young women were more likely to be socialized with reference to racial pride" (503). An example of this is found in the text of Black Boy, when Wright begins to question his mom about race. Wright makes a profound statement, one that I argue shapes his life from the day of riding the train with his mother to the end of the novel. Richard asks his mom, "Then what am I?" (Wright 49). The mere fact that Wright asks "*What* am I" instead of "*Who* am I?" is troubling. "What am I?" suggests that Wright does not associate himself with humanity, but rather as a "thing," an "object" belonging to someone. In other words, the word "what" takes on the meaning that Wright considers himself a piece of property; therefore, his question "What am I?" could stem from his observations of black and white relations. Wright has seen blacks and whites separated on the train. He has seen whites on the chain

gang, and his own grandmother, who severely chastises him on a daily basis, has skin the color of whites. Therefore, Wright is searching for his role and identity in the racist South.

The question *What am I?* is one that is part of human nature. We all place ourselves in society. However, what Wright finds at an early age, just as the children from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry and Freedom Summer do, is that society has constructed his identity. When Wright's mom tells him that he will be called a colored man, Wright becomes angry, thus rejecting his identity, one that he can not change, at least not in the early 1900s. However, Wright's anger is not directed at his race. He does not mind being colored. He is angry more at the oppression that comes with being colored. He intuitively knows this, and he recognizes that the feelings he is having are the same feelings that his mom is hiding from him. This example further supports Hill's statement about the African American mom's protection of the male child.

I was angry and I did not answer. I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know, and she became angry when I prodded her. All right, I would find out someday. Just wait. All right, I was colored. It was fine. I did not know enough to be afraid or to anticipate in a concrete manner. True, I had heard that colored people were killed and beaten, but so far it all had seemed remote. There was of course, a vague uneasiness about it all, but I would be able to handle that when I came to it. It would be simple. If anybody tried to kill me, then I would kill them first. (Wright 49)

As Wright and his mother are boarding the train, Wright asks his mom whether or not he can “peep at the white folks” who are seated in another part of the train. His mom scolds him, and this is when Wright begins to question his mom about Granny’s skin color because she is a very light-skinned woman, resembling a white person. Wright’s mother tries to protect him by distracting him. When Wright asks his mother questions about Granny’s race, she “plays dumb,” refuting his questions with questions.

“Mama, is Granny white?” I asked as the train rolled through the darkness.

“If you’ve got eyes, you can see what color she is,” my mother said.

“I mean do the white folks think she’s white?”

“Why don’t you ask the white folks that?” she countered.

“But you know,” I insisted.

“Why should I know?” she asked. “I’m not white.” (Wright 47)

It is clear that Wright’s mom is playing a game with him. With each question that he asks, she avoids a response by responding to him with a question in order to distract Wright from the issue of race. She is not ready to explain to Wright about the dilemma of being black and the complexities that are associated with having black blood even if you appear to be white, as in Granny’s case. and seems to hope that he will figure things out sooner or later on his own. This is her way of protecting him; however, this is also evidence of a possible source of Wright’s “*What am I?*” question. Richard continues to pester his mom about the origin of Granny’s light skin until she finally gives in and answers his questions.

She slapped me and I cried. Later, grudgingly, she told me that Granny

came of Irish, Scotch, and French stock in which Negro blood had somewhere and some how been infused. She explained it all in a matter-of-fact, off hand, neutral way; her emotions were not involved at all.

(Wright 47)

Wright's mom has slapped him in order to make sure he complies with her orders, then immediately realizes that she must tell him the truth.

The question of *What am I?* comes into play again. It is when Wright mistakenly identifies men of the chain gang as being elephants. Wright notices that there are men in gray walking in a line down the street, men whom Wright mistakenly takes for elephants. "The black creatures were digging a shallow ditch on each side of the road, working silently, grunting as they lifted spades of earth and flung them into the middle of the roadway. "One of the strange striped animals turned a black face upon me" (Wright 57). This statement is interesting, indeed, because it reveals that the black man looks foreign to him. This mistake is also very telling and troubling because it reveals that Wright is unable to distinguish black men from animals.

"Mama!" I yelled.

"What?" she answered from the kitchen.

"There are elephants in the street!"

She came to the kitchen door and stared at me.

"Elephants?" she asked.

"Yes. Come and see them. They're digging in the street."

My mother dried her hands on her apron and rushed to the front door. I followed, wanting her to interpret the baffling spectacle I had seen. She

looked out of the door and shook her head.

"Those are not elephants," she said.

"What are they?"

"That's a chain gang." (Wright 58)

In order to explain what a chain gang is, Wright's mom knows that she will have to answer more questions that Wright will have, all of which will eventually end up with her talking about race. As it has been in the past, this is an uncomfortable situation for Wright's mom, and when Richard's probing questions force her to reveal the harsh realities of being black she usually avoids questions or presents the answers with humor.

John H. Burma states in his article "Humor as a Technique in Race Conflict" that humor is often used as a "conflict technique" (710). He goes on to state, "In any conflict it is most gratifying to cause one's adversary to appear ludicrous in his own eyes. Where this is not possible, very considerable satisfaction can be secured by making your opponent appear ludicrous in your eyes. It is exactly this which humor does" (711). This is true with Wright's mom and her use of humor. When Wright asks about Granny's race, she gives him answers that make his questions seem foolish. Her intention is to make Wright embarrassed for asking them; thus, his probing will end. Also, when Wright first sees what he think are "elephants," she makes him seem foolish for mistaking a chain gang for elephants. Her intention is to stop his curiosity so she will not have to reveal to him the harsh realities for black men. This in turn can explain Wright's identification of a black man being classified as a "what" and not a "who." Therefore he continues to ask, "What am I?" Therefore, humor in Wright's text is not only being used to alleviate pain, but it is also being used to ease tension.

While humor is the method of delivery in Wright's novel, the book serves as more than comedic literature. The novel is important because it gives adolescents insight into a way of life for African American boys growing up in the 1920s and opens up conversations about black masculinity. John Morreall states in his article, "Humor and Aesthetic Education," "The artist or humorist, then, is not simply a generator of fantasies. His imagination is grounded in the way things are; he is versatile in playing with reality, because he has seen so many aspects of reality" (59). This statement is relevant to Wright's novel in that he takes subjects of reality, such as beatings, hunger, and segregation, and reveals them in humorous narrations in order to address deeper issues. By the end of the novel, Wright escapes the South and heads to Memphis, then further north, where his life as a writer will begin. Wright's humorous autobiography reminds the young reader that although Wright's biggest obstacle was succeeding as a black man in the Jim Crow era, his biggest obstacle was escaping the oppression that his relatives tried to inflict on him, through religion and extreme discipline. It is Wright's perseverance and longing to pursue writing that keep him afloat during his life in Mississippi in the 1920s. However, it is Wright's delivery of the story through humor that helps the reader bear its grim, underlying issues.

Conclusion

This research project is important because it helps educators and researchers understand the historical and aesthetic history of African American children's literature. African American literature serves as the foundation for African American children's literature. However, many African American children's books, such as Freedom Summer, Nappy Hair, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, and Black Boy have not been introduced into the class room or have been taken out because of racially charged subjects. Books such as Nappy Hair pose difficulties. On one hand, the book exhibits how a group of people are proud and aware of what makes them different, yet alike, but on the other hand, it also brings attention to this difference. This can be both good and bad. Focusing on a key characteristic of African Americans could cause some children to become uncomfortable. It can also put the teacher into a difficult situation (especially if the teacher is white) of having to explain the purpose of introducing the text to the class in the first place. The issue lies with the word "nappy." Neal A. Lester states in his article, "Roots That Go Beyond Big Hair and a Bad Hair Day: Nappy Hair Pieces," that controversy arises because many African Americans disagree about whether or not the term "nappy" should be used. Lester states, "Yet what intrigues me is at the root of this controversy is the lingering racial, emotional and psychological pain regarding hair, of which some African Americans cannot rid themselves" (174-175). Therefore, being unaware of the historical baggage that comes with this introducing this text can prove a disaster for a teacher.

According to Herbert N. Foerstel's book, Banned in the USA, in September 1997, a white teacher, Ruth Sherman, at a rough Brooklyn, New York, public school began

reading Nappy Hair to her third graders. Little did Sherman know that this book would cause her to be in so much danger that she would have to leave this particular school system. The third graders were so pleased that they begged her for a copy of the book, so Sherman made photocopies of it for them to take home. Soon after, parents were outraged, and Sherman feared for her life. “The first I knew of the problem was when this parent came into my room and said she was surprised she didn't see a white [Klu Klux Klan] hood on my desk” (58-59). Sherman tried to defend herself, but emotions were running high, and her defense was lost in the midst of angry parents. Through all the commotion Sherman was sent home, suspended. Some sympathized with Sherman but understood the sensitivity of the subject. The chancellor, Rudy Crew stated “This is a case of parents rushing to judgment of a teacher without knowing the facts or the context at all. It's a misguided deed that these people did.... At the same time [that] we are trying to give children strong images of themselves, we're also sending a message that you better not do it if you are a white teacher” (61). I too agree that the situation involved parents’ (most of whom I would assume were black) misunderstanding the context of the book. It also involves a teacher who also taught the book without being knowledgeable of the history and sensitivity of the subject matter.

For these reasons I believe there needs to be more research and scholarly insight into the black aesthetic, the movement, and black aesthetics, the art, in African American children's literature. If parents and teachers are not educated about the black aesthetic, misinterpretations are bound to occur. During the ordeal in Brooklyn, the Reverend Herbert Daughtry remarked, “‘Nappy’ is a word that has and always will have negative connotations because of its origins” (61). He later added that some parents felt that the

book provoked “self-hate” and “self-rejection,” the exact opposite of Sherman's intent. It is important aspects such as these that make issues in African American children’s literature a complex matter. A teacher, black or white, cannot just walk into a classroom and teach the book Nappy Hair without in-depth research about the political and historical associations. The nappy hair dilemma gives credit to Govan’s argument that children's literature can not be taught in isolation from black aesthetics and that one ultimately affects the other (70).

Racism is always a sensitive subject to tackle in children's books. However, when the account is autobiographical, it seems that the subject would be more accepted. However, Black Boy is often challenged as well. According to Foerstel, Wright's book is not just a portrait of poverty and racism, but Wright's discovery of the written word (262). This is surely an aspect of literature that will have a positive influence on youth. So why is the text challenged in some schools? In May 1977, the Reverend Dale Shaw felt that the book should be removed from Jacksonville, Florida's schools because of the profanity and fear “it may cause hard feelings among students of different races” (263). Nineteen years later the book would still get complaints when the Round Rock Independent School District in the state of Texas voted 4 to 2 to remove both of Wright’s famous books, Black Boy and Native Son, from the library shelves (262).

Even Mildred Taylor's novel, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, has been challenged for its realistic depictions of racism and use of the “N” word. Censors of these books may be ignoring the benefits of texts written in black aesthetics or may be censoring them precisely because the black aesthetic, the movement, is connected to politics. Well-meaning parents may feel that the texts featuring the black aesthetic are not appropriate

for young children. However, it is important for children to read texts rich in the black aesthetic because these texts can prepare children to understand such texts written for adults. Also, books like Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry are important because they feature African American children working to overcome racism in their communities.

Kelly McDowell's article, "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: A Culturally Specific, Subversive Concept of Child Agency," suggests that the text is important because it demonstrates "child agency," which is defined as not instructing children, but allowing giving them the tools to help or teach themselves (214). Child readers learn about racism from the child character, not from adults. In other words, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry allows children to decide for themselves how to respond to racism, which is a necessary skill.

Perhaps the only book I am researching that has not been challenged is Freedom Summer. The question then is, why? I believe this is because Freedom Summer deals with racism in subtle ways. It is not as racially charged as the other texts discussed here. It is also not as direct as Nappy Hair, Black Boy, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. Perhaps it is because Freedom Summer is more racially polite, catering to both white and black audiences. It is also written by a white author, which brings my conclusion full circle. Audiences will determine the aesthetic and can possibly determine the outcome of a book (whether it is challenged or not, whether it sells or not). It is a travesty that most books that adhere to the true black aesthetic are challenged. Therefore, it is critical that educators fight for the books written in the black aesthetic and strive to teach books that will expose children to it as well. Texts such as Nappy Hair need to be analyzed in terms of more than just being a text about black pride. The language is more than just dialect: it

is language of deep expressions particular to African American groups. It is a language tied to the oral tradition of the call and response of the black church. Black Boy and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry are also texts that contain more than just surface issues, such as racism and marginalization. These texts preserve the black aesthetic that is at the heart of African American literature, and they pass this aesthetic on to children. Therefore, in order for these texts to be utilized more in the classroom, parents and teachers must be educated about the aesthetic value of the texts.

Notable African Americans who Contributed to the Field of African American Children's Literature

Mari Evans, author, 1923-

A writer and distinguished assistant professor of the African American Resource center at Cornell University, Mari Evans gained fame in 1970 for her collection of poetry, I Am a Black Woman. Evans refused to compromise white values and forms that were cherished by black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance period. Her well-known poem, "Who Can Be Born Black," is a response to Countee Cullen's 1920 sonnet "Yet Do I Marvel."

Tom Feelings, artist and illustrator, 1933-2003

Before joining the Air Force in 1953, Tom Feelings went to the School of Visual Arts in Brooklyn, New York. Later, Feelings began working in London as a staff artist for the Graphics Division of the Third Air Force. Through 1959-1964, Feelings worked as a freelance artist drawing black people in his community. In 1961 he traveled south to draw the people of the black rural communities. In 1964 he traveled to Ghana and worked for its government's magazine, The African Review, teaching illustration and serving as an art consultant for government publications. His most notable book is The Middle Passage, which depicts slaves traveling from Africa America.

Eloise Greenfield, author, 1929-

As head of the Adult Fiction and Children's Literature divisions of the D.C. Black Writers Workshop, which encourages the writing and publishing of African American

literature, Eloise Greenfield has published 32 children books of fiction, poetry, and biographies.

Stereotyping is what prompted her to focus on publishing children's books.

Virginia Hamilton, author, 1936-2002

Influenced by her parents' gift of oral storytelling, Virginia Hamilton celebrated her African American and Native American roots. She used traditional storytelling methods in her writings. Two of her well-known books are The People Could Fly and Miz Hattie Gets Some Company.

Jerry Pinkney, illustrator, 1939-

While struggling with dyslexia in elementary school, his sketches caught the attention of John Liney, who shared his love for art with Pinkney. This convinced Pinkney that he could become an artist. He went on to receive many awards. His recent book, Noah's Ark, received a Caldecott Honor award for 2005.

Charlemae Hill Rollins, librarian, author, 1897-1979

Agitated by the depictions of black children in children's books, Charlemae Hill Rollins led the 1941 study, We Build Together, which was a bibliography of positive depictions of minorities, particularly African American children, in children books.

John Steptoe, illustrator, 1950-1989

After quitting school three months before the end of his senior year, John Steptoe

submitted illustrations to Harper Junior Books and was advised by an editor to write a book to accompany his illustrations. His first book, Stevie, earned him national attention and a gold medal from the Society of Illustrators. Steptoe has illustrated sixteen books and written two, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters and The Story of Jumping Mouse. His books have been praised for being realistic and portraying black life and universal themes that appeal to children of all races.

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