

AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN THE JIM CROW NORTH: LEARNING RACE AND

DEVELOPING A RACIAL IDENTITY

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This thesis explores how African American children in the North learned race and racial identity during the Jim Crow era. Influences such as literature, media, parental instruction, interactions with others, and observations are examined.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A little girl lived with her grandmother in a suburb of a Louisiana city. Under the separate-street-car law of that state, white and colored passengers are separated by means of a movable board, about a foot and a half high, that is fitted by supporting rods into holes in the backs of seats. On the street-car line from this suburb to the city, the two back seats are always provided for colored people, and the little girl had not known of any other possible arrangement when a relative brought her to Brooklyn N. Y. During the first few days, this colored woman had occasion to take the child on street cars with cross seats similar to those in the Louisiana city. She noticed that the little girl on entering by the rear platform ran and climbed upon the first back seat. At first nothing was thought of this, but when the woman found that the child clung to the back seat even when she herself started farther into the car and that she hung back as if in fear even when she took her by the hand, it became obvious that a great mental impression had been made upon this child, not yet four years old, by the sacredness in which the Jim Crow institution had been held in the South.¹

The Jim Crow era is often referred to as the “nadir” of race relations. Following the hope of Reconstruction, whites sought to systematically dismantle the gains of the previous decades and reestablish their dominance over African Americans in all aspects of life. Jim Crow was a system that is generally associated with the South, and there is much validity to that association. The legacy of slavery still loomed large in the South. Economics, politics, and social status were all in play when it came to maintaining white supremacy and to achieving these aims, whites employed a variety of methods. The courts enacted segregation laws that legislated behavior between the races, but laws alone were not sufficient to enforce the supremacy whites insisted on.²

¹ Bruno Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929), 118.

² Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940*, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1999), 19 -24.

The term Jim Crow is used by many scholarly disciplines; even within the discipline of history it can have nuanced meanings and span a variety of years, depending on the focus of study. Historian Leon Litwack asserts the “seeds [of Jim Crow] had been planted in the forcible overthrow of Reconstruction in the 1870s, and the Age of Jim Crow would span more than half a century.”³ Other historians place the end of Jim Crow at the feet of the Civil Rights’ Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights’ Act of 1965.⁴ And like its variable time frame, the nuance of exactly what Jim Crow meant can also shift slightly with the focus of the study. It can refer to de jure segregation, which is legislated, or to de facto segregation, which is “enforced by custom and habit.”⁵ Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse argues that, “segregation was only part of the story of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century race relations. Or, as I tend to think of it, segregation was only part of ‘Jim Crow,’ the total experience of life, for both black and whites, in a society structured around racial inequality.”⁶ As the focus of this study is African American children in the North, where segregation was primarily de facto, my definition will follow in the spirit of Ritterhouse’s and consider Jim Crow as a matter of custom rather than of law, as a “total experience of life.” This study will primarily focus on the 1890s through 1954, the year the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that separate schools for white and black children was unconstitutional.

³ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), xiv.

⁴ Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Closer To Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory and Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 10.

⁵ Litwack, xv.

⁶ Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 8-9.

The northern world of Jim Crow did not materialize in a vacuum. In *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States 1790 - 1860*, historian Leon Litwack explores the legal and extralegal state of free blacks in the antebellum North; he paints a sobering and depressing picture of rampant discrimination and degradation in nearly all facets of life. He argues that schools, churches, employment, and the legal system all relegated African Americans to a highly inferior status.⁷ Litwack recounts the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman who toured the United States in 1831, who stated, “the prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant than in those states where servitude has never been known.”⁸ He also notes that in regions that lacked legislated “racial distinctions ... custom and popular prejudices exerted a decisive influence.”⁹ Clearly the seeds of what would become the Jim Crow era in the North were sown decades, even centuries, earlier. But by the time the era took a firm hold on the country, the behaviors that African Americans were expected to exhibit manifested differently in the North and the South.

African Americans in the South had to learn a complex code of behaviors to satisfy white Southerners. Behaviors such as averting their eyes from a white person’s gaze, giving way on the sidewalk, and always referring to a white person as Mr. or Miss were just some of the accommodations blacks had to make toward white people. This unwritten code of behaviors,

⁷ Richard Bardolph, 1962. Review of *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States 1790 - 1860*, by Leon Litwack. *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (Jan.): 439.

⁸ Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States 1790 – 1860*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), kindle 628.

⁹ Ibid.

often referred to as “racial etiquette,” became especially important for black males as they approached adolescence, as any perceived impropriety toward a white female could quickly turn deadly.¹⁰ Whites used violence in many forms, from brutally beating a black woman for not paying a bill to vicious public lynchings to enforce this code and maintain white superiority.¹¹

For African American children growing up in the South during Jim Crow the racial boundaries of life were clearly drawn. Segregated schools, segregated public facilities, and the real and pervasive knowledge of possible violence for stepping out of one’s place all worked in concert with the less overt racial signals of social status, language, and degradation inflicted on them by southern society. But despite the absence of de jure segregation, the North was far from a racial utopia.¹² The Chicago Race Riot during the Red Summer in 1919 left at least twenty-three African Americans and fifteen white people dead. The catalyst was a breach of racial etiquette by an African American boy while swimming in Lake Michigan, but the riot revealed a cauldron of racial tension, fueled by burgeoning housing issues between blacks and whites brought on by the Great Migration.¹³ Discrimination existed in housing, employment

¹⁰ Ritterhouse, 37-42.

¹¹ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1944), 179-180; Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890 – 1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 24.

¹² For the purposes of this paper, the North generally refers to those states and areas where segregation was not practiced or the prevalent manner of segregation was de facto rather than de jure. Generally, this will apply to non-Confederate states east of the Mississippi and north of Kentucky. However, other areas of the country, such as many areas of the West, also lacked legislated segregation laws; the experiences of individuals in such areas would also be applicable to this study and may be included with clarification of location.

¹³ Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1919 (accessed at <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11045.html>, October 12, 2012).

and in schools.¹⁴ Clearly racism existed and existed strongly in the North, just as in the South.¹⁵ But the cues were more subtle, the lines less easy discerned; in 1944, Gunnar Myrdal stated, “The social paradox in the North is exactly this, that almost everybody is against discrimination in general but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in their own personal affairs.”¹⁶ This paradox created an uncertain and tenuous racial landscape for northern African American children, and presented a different racial environment for them to help their children form their identity.

In the absence of staunch segregation and observable racial etiquette, how did African American children in the North learn about race? What forces shaped their racial identity? And how did their experiences differ from those of their southern counterparts? Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse argues in *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* “racial etiquette was also important for individuals, particularly for children who were trying to figure out where they belonged and how they fit into their social world.”¹⁷ For all its indignities, the Jim Crow world of the South was at least fairly consistent in its expectations for white and black behavior. The experiences of northern African American children often lacked such consistency.

¹⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xv.

¹⁵ For further reading on the state of race relations in the North, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, and Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870 – 1930 (Blacks in the New World)* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

¹⁶ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, as cited in Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xiv-xv.

¹⁷ Ritterhouse, 4.

At the same time as white Southerners attempted to subjugate African Americans through enacting Jim Crow laws, racial etiquette, and violence, an opposite ideology arose and took hold from leaders in the African American community. The ideology of racial uplift and W.E.B. DuBois' "talented tenth" philosophy firmly challenged the narrative of inferiority put forth by white culture and white society. Born in 1868, DuBois was an African American historian, sociologist and civil rights activist who was born in raised in a relatively integrated area of Massachusetts. A highly educated man who earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895, DuBois was a strong African American leader who believed that "leadership was essential for the uplift of the masses, and self-help efforts were the efforts of the race, as a race."¹⁸ He also identified who this leadership should be comprised of, and what their duty was:

The cultivation of heritage, customs, and the conditions under which blacks could come to thrive was the responsibility of the black leadership (the college-bred community, the Talented Tenth), for it was these individuals who possessed the capacity to link the past with the ideals of the future and who would emphasize the importance of education as not only the acquisition of skills and the means to make a living but the "making of men."¹⁹

He asserted such efforts were "collective on many levels, for the members of the Negro race have an obligation to help each other: the Talented Tenth must help lift the masses."²⁰

Uplift ideology affected northern African American children's experiences in several ways. Leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois were at the forefront of challenging racist stereotypes of blacks that were so pervasive in American culture. His publication of the *Brownies' Book*, a publication targeted specifically for black children, was a direct attempt to give all African

¹⁸ Gayle McKeen, 2002. Whose Rights? Whose Responsibility? Self-Help in African-American Thought. *Polity* 34, no. 4 (Summer): 423.

¹⁹ Ibid, 425-6.

²⁰ Ibid, 427.

American children positive images and instill pride in their race.²¹ The qualities of uplift he espoused, as well as the more popular uplift ideology described by Gaines, found especially fertile ground in the less strictly delegated racial canvas of the North. Parents who were tasked with helping their children navigate their unpredictable place in northern society relied heavily on many uplift precepts such as self-help, education, manners, and an overall dignity for their race.²²

This narrative of uplift, along with many other factors, affected a child's development of racial identity, and how that identity fit into the society they lived in. Many scholars have studied the numerous facets that contributed to African Americans' development of racial identity.²³ Using social psychologist James M. Jones's definition, racial identity can be defined as "describing a set of race-related adaptations to the sociopolitical and cultural constructions of race in our society" or more simply put, "who one is depends, in part, on what racial group one belongs to, what sociopolitical position that group has in society, and how one is socialized within that group and in relation to other groups."²⁴ In their article "Passing as Black: Racial Identity Work among Biracial Americans," sociologists Nikki Khanna and Cathryn Johnson study

²¹ *The Crisis*, October, 1919, 286.

²² For examples of African American parents in the North who exemplified qualities of racial uplift in their child rearing practices, see Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1958; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Kindle edition, 517-535; James P. Comer, M.D., *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black American Family* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.), 1988; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); Price M. Cobbs, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement* (New York: Atria Books, 2005).

²³ For discussions of the factors affecting African Americans developed racial development, see W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903; repr., (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003); Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Bruno Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children*; Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*.

²⁴ James M. Jones, *Prejudice and Racism* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 288.

racial identity through the framework of “social interaction – race and identity arise out of a social process in which meanings are created and modified through social interaction with others. Society shaped an individual’s identity, while at the same time, the individual plays an active role in shaping his/her own racial identity.”²⁵ For African American children in the South, while their parents attempted combat these messages, society’s expected parameters were fixed from an early age. Ritterhouse recounts the words of Charles Evers (the brother of civil rights activist Medgar Evers), “Our mothers began telling us about being black from the day we were born. The white folks weren’t any better than we were, Momma said, but they sure thought they were.”²⁶

As lessons about race lacked the concurrent role of segregation for northern African American children, this social interaction, and the ways an individual interacted with society, could be more nuanced and more difficult to navigate. Price M. Cobbs recalled as a boy riding the public bus in Los Angeles; he could sit anywhere he liked, but he knew there were “certain neighborhoods in L.A. in which I would never pull the cord to indicate that I wanted to get off.” He explained, “My understanding of this was not based on overt threats, as it would be in the South ... The South was so rigid that the lessons of where to get on and where to get off the bus would have been among the first you would learn. In Los Angeles, this knowledge was based much more on trial and error, knowledge that required a more subtle reading of the territory than was needed in the South. As I got older, I learned how to sense the situation.”²⁷

²⁵ Nikki Khanna and Cathryn Johnson. 2010. Passing as Black: Racial Identity Work among Biracial Americans. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (December): 383.

²⁶ Ritterhouse, 5.

²⁷ Price M. Cobbs, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement* (New York: Atria Books, 2005), 55.

For African American children in the South the racial etiquette that scripted their day to day lives, that their very lives could depend upon, gave little room for questioning or challenging these roles in overt manners. As this thesis will explore, African American children in the North often had more latitude to determine the extent to which they participated in these roles, and much differing input as to what those roles should be. In the North the environment helped their parents to craft a different experience for them. This thesis will examine the forces that shaped northern African American children's racial identity, both positive and negative. I argue that while some experiences such as literature and media were similar for both southern and northern African American children and influenced their racial identity, many areas of their life such as schools, homes, and many public spaces were much more difficult to understand than in the segregated South. They were exposed to many conflicting messages about their racial identity and place in white dominated society that often led to confusion and hurt. African American parents and leaders employed many tactics, often incorporating the tenets of uplift ideology, to try and combat these messages. Their efforts did have many positive effects on children, however, they could not control the unpredictable nature of the experiences their children would encounter. A diner might seat them but punish their presence in other ways; a school might be segregated or integrated; a teacher might be supportive or horrifically prejudiced; a shop might take their money for goods, but deny them access to a rest room.²⁸ The segregation and discrimination of the South could be horrible, even horrific, but one thing it did offer was predictability – there was little ambiguity in African

²⁸ Hazel Rowley, *The Life and Times of Richard Wright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 350.

Americans' expected place and behavior in the South. This thesis will show that for northern African American children, the most certain thing about the society they lived in was that it was uncertain.

In his book *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, historian Kevin K. Gaines argues that racial uplift had a strong class element which was reflected in differing focuses and meaning of the ideology, and was used by elite blacks to differentiate themselves from the struggling black masses.²⁹ For elite blacks, "uplift came to mean an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth." According to Gaines, the more "popular meanings of uplift [were] rooted in public education, economic rights, group resistance and struggle, and democracy." Both of these meanings affected African American children. The elitist ideals of uplift were passed on to the masses in the form of race ideals, some examples of which were found in black sponsored advertising and literature. But by the very name, the elitist faction of African American society was not the majority; during the Jim Crow era most blacks, northern or southern, struggled to define themselves in ways white society strove to deny them.³⁰ For African Americans in the North, the popular meanings of uplift were most impactful in their day to day lives. Their desire for a good education for their children, their insistence that their children could aspire to professional occupations, and perhaps above all that they never accept the limitations ascribed to them by white society were

²⁹ Kevin H. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2-3.

³⁰ For further reading on the development of African American identity, see August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880 – 1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (United States: University of Michigan, 1963).

hallmarks of many northern African American families' child rearing practices. While Gaines' insights on racial uplift are applicable to the study of northern African American children's experiences, this thesis does not explore the role of class. That is not to imply that it did not have a role; to the contrary, readings of numerous autobiographies of African Americans raised in the North suggest that Gaines' argument of racial uplift being a class issue for many blacks appears to have merit. But this argument generally falls outside the parameters of this thesis. However, it does invite further investigation.

While Gaines' approach studied the black experience through the macro lens of racial uplift, ideology and class, historian Leon Litwack took a much different approach. In his sweeping work *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, Litwack draws on personal accounts and stories of everyday people to explore the southern experience of living Jim Crow. Replete with accounts of humiliation, beatings, and lynchings, his collection of black southerners' experiences during this nadir paint a dark and depressing picture of life during this time. Unlike Gaines' work that dealt heavily with ideologies and movements, Litwack relies almost solely on the anecdotal experiences of individuals to explore the forces and events that shaped southern blacks' racial identity. Within the stories Litwack relates, there are both correlations and differentiations to the northern experience.

In the chapter "Baptisms" he relates an aspect that was universal to the black experience in America: "The images of blacks they encountered in school, moreover, were not calculated to inspire them about their race or history: their parents, teachers, and newspapers, consciously or not, often held up white values, behavior, and racial features for emulation and the popularity of skin whiteners and bleaching creams, and the ways in which many blacks of

all ages attacked their “nappy” hair with hard brushes, combs, and creams attested to the pervasiveness of white standards. They were impossible to escape.”³¹ While this passage exemplifies a universal facet of the black experience in America, much else Litwack relates stands in stark contrast to the northern African American experience, most notably educational opportunities and above all, the pervasive and omnipresent threat of violence.³² Litwack’s work offers both correlating and contradictory information to northern African Americans’ experiences, highlighting the more difficult and nuanced terrain they had to traverse.

Moving the focus to education, that there was a contrast in northern and southern educational opportunities does not mean to suggest that the North was an educational utopia for African American children, or as scholar Gunnar Myrdal proclaimed in 1944, “Negroes have practically the entire educational system flung open to them without much discrimination.”³³ In *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865-1954*, historian Davison M. Douglas argues that despite segregation being outlawed in most northern communities, “the greatest barrier to integrated schools was not legal – in a constitutional or statutory sense – but rather political and cultural.”³⁴ This paper does not explore the greater struggle for integration and equality in northern schools, but focuses more on the individual

³¹ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 33.

³² Lasker, 126; also, for further reading on northern schools during Jim Crow, see Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865-1954*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 879 (accessed through <https://archive.org/details/AmericanDilemmaTheNegroProblemAndModernDemocracy>, October 12, 2016).

³⁴ Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865-1954*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

struggles many northern African American families faced in the more complicated northern educational system.³⁵

Litwack's accounts, like most historians who explore the forces that shaped racial identity during the Jim Crow era, is primarily grounded in the experiences of adults, and is firmly rooted in the South. While he includes anecdotes of African Americans' first "baptisms" into the world of race, the narrative is largely one drawn from the world of adults. In 2006, Jennifer Ritterhouse published *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*. While many scholars studied the forces that shaped people's perception of race and their place in that narrative, Ritterhouse's work was the first to examine to such depth these forces in the world of children. Drawing heavily from personal stories and narratives, Ritterhouse attempts to bring to light the influences in a child's day to day life that taught them the racial code they lived under in the South. She argues that racial etiquette, the unwritten set of rules that governed social behavior between the races in the private sphere, taught children the roles they were expected to fulfill. While many of the underlying beliefs about race were not bound by region, the racial etiquette Ritterhouse bases her argument on largely was. That is not to indicate that southern black children identified with these roles as an innate part of their racial identity – to the contrary, she states, "Black children might reject etiquette's lessons of inferiority but not its lessons of difference."³⁶ But growing up in the Jim Crow South required learning the rules of "being black" from birth. The racial roles children fulfilled, whether in truth or as performance, contributed to the shaping of their identity. Growing up in the Jim

³⁵ Ibid, 2.

³⁶ Ritterhouse, 5.

Crow North, while certainly not free from its own racial environment, was not bound by the same overt racial etiquette that defined the world of southern black children.

Historian Kristina DuRocher examined the Jim Crow era with a focus on children in her work *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*. Her work focuses on the ways in which southern white children were “socialized” to perpetuate the carefully constructed racial hierarchy of the South. She explores how “white southerners actively created and adapted the racial code of behaviors elaborated in Ritterhouse’s study, “and challenges Ritterhouse’s argument that racial etiquette was the “best way to maintain social control, superior to methods of violence,” arguing that segregation was itself ultimately a “system enforced by violence.”³⁷ She also examines how white southern children adapted these behaviors to suit their own ends, and further asserts that indoctrinating white children into the world of white hegemony was crucial “for their actions would ultimately either maintain or destroy the system of white supremacy.”³⁸

While DuRocher does look at the experiences of children, her focus is on white children of the South and their role in continuing the legacy of white supremacy. Her chapter “Consumerism Meets Jim Crow’s Children: White Children and the Culture of Segregation” does offer some universal insights into children, advertising, and racial stereotyping, but her ultimate focus is on how this shaped white youth in the South. This focus does little to shed

³⁷ Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 8.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

light on what forces shaped northern African American children's racial identity, and how they learned to navigate the inconsistent racial terrain they lived in.

How then did African American children in the North develop their racial identity, and learn to navigate the world of race? How were their experiences different from black children in the South? In some ways, they were not. Many facets of their lives were filled with the same messages of inferiority and "otherness" ubiquitous throughout the country; literature, media images, often inferior physical spaces, and segregation in many public spheres such as hotels, beaches, and movie theaters attempted to assault their sense of self-worth and assign them a lesser innate value than white people. In their personal lives, negative messages of skin color and hair often came from their own community; interactions with both white peers and adults of all color, including their parents, alerted them to the inferior and oppressed role they were expected to play. But racial identity is not an innately fixed thing – with new information and new experiences it had the capacity to grow and change.

To study these issues, I have looked at many of the influences that affected northern African American children. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss factors that appear to generally be very similar experiences for northern and southern children. Chapter 1 looks at some of the popular children's literature of the time and studies the racial narratives within. Some of this literature was part of school curricula. At other times, black children encountered it in different settings. I look at the messages it attempted to send to African American children and how they reacted to these ideas. I also look at the response of African American parents and leaders, and at how they tried to offer alternate narratives that were designed to instill pride and dignity in their race. In Chapter 2 I expand my examination of the racial images and stereotypes children

encountered to include advertising, film, and the entertainment industry. As in chapter 1, I examine common examples children were exposed to, alternate positive examples in their world, and their feelings concerning them. In this chapter I also look at standards of beauty, such as light skin and smooth hair, and how children incorporated or refuted them into their understanding of race and their influence on racial identity. Chapter 3 shifts from looking at general influences in society to more direct experiences in their day to day lives. Interactions with adults and children, as well as more indirect experiences such as language in society and games, were more confusing in the more integrated world of the North than the highly segregated South. I look at the ways that their parents and other children helped them reconcile the mixed messages so pervasive in their experiences. Chapter 4 continues looking at black children's experiences with an emphasis on observable factors such as housing and schools. Like chapter 3, I explore how integrated spaces exposed children to many opposing messages, and how they and their families worked to guide them and instill a positive racial identity. Finally, I look at how the lack of violent repercussions (relative to the South) affected the choices they and their parents made in their day to day lives.

Sources

To answer my query as to how African American children in the North learned about race and developed their racial identity, I used a variety of sources including scholarly work from a variety of disciplines (history, psychology, education), primary sources such as newspapers, literature and advertising; I also drew heavily from autobiographies of African Americans stories of growing up in the North during the Jim Crow era. A note on

autobiographies: using autobiographies as source material has strengths as well as weaknesses. Among the most obvious weaknesses are “deliberate lying” as well as “misremembering and remembering.”³⁹ But as historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach argues in *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory and Jim Crow*, there is value and information to be gleaned even in distortions. That is not to say that facts do not matter, but speaking of individuals’ memoirs, “whether or not their memory is always reliable, whether or not they are always telling the truth,” “Memories and memoirs ... reveal a great deal about the people doing the remembering and their social world.”⁴⁰ Their stories, including the way in which they remember them, have historical value.

As alluded to during the discussion Gaines’ views on racial uplift and class, uplift often had a strong class component. Drawing heavily upon autobiographies, intertwining them with the highly studied concept of uplift, gives little voice to the stories of African American children whose stories were not written. Their stories, their experiences, seem not as likely to be recorded into memoirs or autobiographies as those of children raised in a middle class environment. In my research I have encountered snippets of them. A fourteen-year-old mother who described housing states, “That building where my cousin lives at now is terrible. I remember one time they shot crap from one o’clock at night on up till in the morning. ... Some of them women in that building was a hustling. You know, they sell themselves. A man go up

³⁹ Wallach, 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 34; for an in-depth discussion on using autobiographies as source material, see Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Closer to the Truth Than Any Fact: Memoir, Memory and Jim Crow*.

there , you know, and then they charge them \$2.00.”⁴¹ In another anecdote a girl recalls going to school, saying, “Them children down there was bad. They used to carry knives and guns. A man used to follow me every day when I was going to school. When I would turn and look back he would turn in.” She goes on to describe how her father was stabbed in a robbery and in the building where she lived “they used to kill little babies. I don’t know how they killed them, but the janitor would find these dead babies down in the basement. They would just be new born babies.”⁴² But overall, the stories of lower socioeconomic African American families are not well represented or studied in this thesis. Both the availability of sources and the focus of the study rely heavily on the experiences of middle class black Americans. The experiences of different socioeconomic classes of northern African American families invite further investigation, but generally fall outside the parameters of this study.

⁴¹ E. Frankin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, (1939; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 262.

⁴² Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago*, (1932; repr., New Dehli: Isha Books, 2013), 196.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

African American children were inundated with negative images of their race in books and magazines as well – images and stereotypes that young African American children could find incredibly confusing and hurtful. A passage from Bruno Lasker's *Race Attitudes in Children* (1929) exemplifies the effect of such literature on both the African American child and the white child, as well as the effect adults' responses could have:

Catherine, aged five, attended kindergarten and was taught the story of Little Black Sambo who was pictured as a rather stupid and silly boy, doing a series of silly things. There was no lesson of interesting facts to be learned from the story. A white child called Catherine a "nigger," and she reported it to her teacher, who answered, "Well, aren't you a negro? Aren't you a little Black Sambo?" at which remark the children laughed. Catherine was very much hurt because the children laughed. Her mother took it up with the school principal and pointed out to her that the story was planting in the children's minds the first seed of the idea that colored people were inferior. Little Black Sambo, she pointed out, is rather a silly uninteresting person; but later when the children can read newspapers for themselves they will notice that one colored man has done one crime and another one another crime; their minds will go back to childhood stories in kindergarten and he will remember little Black Sambo. The ideas will be correlated, and with each additional unpleasant fact that is brought to his notice his opinion will be strengthened that Negroes are worthless. On the other hand, she continued, had the story been told of the life of Booker T. Washington or of Paul Dunbar or Frederick Douglass, and if the newspapers printed in headlines the inventions, musical, literary and scientific accomplishments of Negroes, good opinions of Negroes would be built up. The story of Little Black Sambo also had planted the seed in Catherine's mind that she belonged to an inferior race.⁴³

Clearly, the negative effects of such literature were far reaching. The African American child was directly hurt by the negative and demeaning characterization of her race, but the white children and white teacher internalized and reinforced such depictions, further

⁴³ Lasker, 164-5.

‘validating’ the message for the black child. Catherine’s reaction shows she is upset at being associated with the characteristics of Sambo – clearly, it was not an identity she understood as her own. Her mother’s response suggests that Catherine was raised in a home that understood and presumably incorporated the tenets of racial uplift, at least knowledge of and pride in their race. Viewed through that lens, Catherine’s reaction of hurt and confusion seems quite understandable, even inevitable. Her mother understood the effect of racist literature, and actively fought for her child to be exposed to reading material that would reinforce a positive racial identity. This chapter will examine some of the literature that affected African American children, and will show how this literature was often confusing and hurtful to them. Parents and leaders of the African American community recognized this, and actively strove to give these children alternative narratives of their racial identity and self-worth.

In *Growing Up Jim Crow*, Ritterhouse asserts, “As much as we might be able to learn ... reading through the ‘Southernness’ in schoolbooks and children’s stories authored by southern whites, we would mostly be learning about the reinforcement rather than the initial laying down of white children’s racial lessons.”⁴⁴ While there may be much validity in that approach for studying racial learning in the South, it may yield a less accurate picture of children’s learning about race in the North where racial inequality manifested itself differently. In *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, historian Thomas J. Sugrue delves deeply into the “struggle of African Americas in the North for equal rights and

⁴⁴ Ritterhouse, 67.

opportunities during the period 1925-c. 1985.”⁴⁵ He notes, “Most northern communities did not erect signs to mark separate black and white facilities: only some northern schools were segregated by law: and black voters were not systematically disenfranchised in the North. But in both regions, private behavior, market practices, and public policies created and reinforced racial separation and inequality.”⁴⁶ The North was not free from racial inequality, but without the overt segregation the South practiced, its nuances could be more difficult for children to understand. Literature was one way they gathered information about their world.

Raymond Williams, a scholar known as the father of Cultural Studies, developed the theory of “selective tradition” as a lens through which to study literature. “Williams defined selective tradition as, “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification.”⁴⁷ In her 1984 dissertation, professor of Education Violet J. Harris used selective tradition to study *The Brownies’ Book*; however, this approach can be applied to literature in general and speaks to the important influence literature could have on a young mind, as well as shed possible light on the intent of authors. Expanding on Williams’ work with that of language education scholar Joel Taxel, Harris writes:

Williams (1977) asserted that selective traditions are essential components of a "hegemonic culture" which pervaded the "whole process of living" and represented the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes" (pp. 116-119). According to Taxel (1984), ". . . the practices, meanings, values, and ideologies comprising the hegemonic culture became part of 'practical consciousness' --our shaping perceptions of

⁴⁵ Robert H. Zieger. 2009. *Northern Exposure*, review of *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* by Thomas J. Sugrue, *Reviews in American History* 37, no. 4 (2009), 572-77.

⁴⁶ Sugrue, xv.

⁴⁷ Violet Joyce Harris, *The Brownies’ Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children’s Literature*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1984), 6, (accessed at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED284167.pdf> on Oct. 9, 2016).

ourselves and our world--by virtue of their saturation of all aspects of social life, such as politics, art, popular culture, and schooling."⁴⁸

An examination of some of the types of literature African American children were exposed to shows the battle of the "hegemonic culture" that produced it and the drive by African Americans to give their children alternate narratives, and how children responded to that battle.

Especially in the absence of any other information, literature could be a powerful force that shaped children's perceptions of 'others'. In 1926, The Committee on Christian Education of the Federal Council of Churches administered a questionnaire at the boys' choir school of "a church known throughout the country as a center of liberal Christianity in a cosmopolitan city." The test asked the boys to "write down the names of any peoples that they did not like," and to explain why. The boys listed a wide variety of races and ethnicities in their answers, including Negroes, Italians, Jews, Mexicans, Germans and many others. While different boys listed different names, almost every one responded with "Chinese," claiming they were "to crafty," "they kill," and "You can never tell what they are going to do next." Many respondents said the Chinese were bloodthirsty and killed people, and three boys specifically said the Chinese would kill them with knives. When asked how the children developed such ideas about Chinese people, the teacher responded, "The answers suggest that the boys had been reading stories of the Chinese which were bloodthirsty. There is no other known source for such ideas."⁴⁹ This report suggests that in the absence of other modes of information, children incorporated the

⁴⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁹ Lasker, 139-41.

qualities and characteristics of race and ethnicity they found in books into their own belief system. While this report does not address how children of different races and ethnicities viewed themselves, it does show that books could have a strong influence in developing racial attitudes and beliefs. If children received no other narrative, they could make their own inferences based on literature. And with few exceptions, “negative or nonexistent portrayals of Black in children’s literature were the norm during the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries.”⁵⁰

While it is unknown the extent to which African American children encountered racist literature, it is reasonable to assume many, if not most, had exposure to at least some of the more popular books of the time. Many northern African American women worked in the homes of white employers as domestics. The 1890 Census of the United States listed that over ninety percent of employed African American women in Pennsylvania worked in domestic service; in 1930s Chicago the figure was over fifty-six percent.⁵¹ White employers sometimes passed down children’s possessions no longer needed in their home to their employee. Thomas Sowell, who went on to become a preeminent economist, political theorist and author, moved from North Carolina to Harlem when he was nine. His mother was wary of him falling in with “roughnecks” and restricted his freedom to roam the neighborhood, a common story among African American parents striving to live up to the ideals of racial uplift. He recounts in his autobiography *A Personal Odyssey* that his mother and two sisters “all worked in white people’s

⁵⁰ Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill. 1989. The Brownies’ Book and Ebony Jr.!: Literature as a Mirror of the Afro-American Experience. *The Journal of Negro Education* 58, no. 4 (Autumn): 494.

⁵¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 428; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Life in a Northern City, Vol. 1* (1945; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 220.

homes” and would often bring him along, and that through them “all sorts of toys, books, and games that [the employer’s children] outgrew found their way to me, giving me a sort of second-hand middle-class lifestyle.”⁵²

Sowell’s most grandiose exposure to books would come not directly from his family, but indirectly from a family friend with whom his mother wanted him to foster a relationship – another African American boy who was from “a good family” and whose hobbies included piano and Chinese checkers. While they never quite connected as close friends, Sowell remembers, “Most important of all, he took me one day to a kind of place where I had never been before and knew nothing about – a public library.” Although Sowell admits he was confused at first, being in a store of books with no money, once he understood how it worked it became, “a turning point in my life, for I then developed the habit of reading books.”⁵³ It is impossible to know which books young Thomas picked up (just as it is difficult to determine how widely used the library was by other African American children). But it seems reasonable that if two African American boys gained admittance to the library without incident, then others did as well. As African American women were often employed in white family’s homes, it also seems reasonable that many African American children would have had similar access to literature as Thomas Sowell.

One example of such children’s literature is by author L. Frank Baum, who is best known for his children’s classic *The Wizard of Oz*. He wrote many other children’s stories; one of his most popular was a collection of short stories written under the pen name of Laura Bancroft

⁵² Thomas Sowell, *A Personal Odyssey*, (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 17.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 16.

which came to be known as *Twinkle and Chubbins; Their Astounding Adventures in Nature-Fairyland* which was first published in 1906. The stories were initially marketed individually, but the series was so popular (selling nearly forty thousand copies in the first year alone) that the publishers reissued them as a single volume in 1911. The stories remained extremely popular and in 1916 and 1918 they were reissued individually. One of the stories, *The Bandit Jim Crow*, was so popular that in 1907 Baum wrote a sequel (Policeman Bluejay) under his own name. While it is impossible to determine the extent African American children read these books, their popularity and sheer number of books published suggest they were widely available. Whether accessing them through public or school libraries, reading them at a friend's house (white and black children, especially when young, often played together), or receiving them as hand-me-downs (such as from a parent's white employer) it seems likely that at least some African American children in the North certainly would have had access to Baum's books.⁵⁴

The Bandit Jim Crow, the most popular story in the collection, is the story of an ungrateful black crow that cannot escape his savage and evil nature. In the story, Jim Crow (named so by the little girl "because papa said that all crows were called Jim, although he never could find out the reason") is taken in and kindly cared for by a little white girl after injuring his wing. Rather than be grateful for the care he received, when he discovers his wing had healed and he could

⁵⁴ Autobiographies by northern African Americans often recall playing together with white children in homes; for examples on this subject see Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*; Price M. Cobbs, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement*; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir*; James P. Comer, *Maggie's Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*.

fly, "With the knowledge of his freedom a fierce, cruel joy crept into his heart, and he resumed the wild nature that crows are born with and never lay aside as long as they live."⁵⁵

He makes the "foolish humans" pay by killing baby chicks, and then flies away to the South. He is too lazy to forage for his own food, so he eats other birds' eggs, killing their babies. When he is suspected of the crimes by the blue jay policeman, he rolls himself in chalk to become white and goes unwatched by the blue jay because, "white birds never rob nests or eat eggs, as you all know very well." Eventually, however, he is discovered and all the birds of the forest he has wronged attack him, leaving him blind. Despite all the wrongs inflicted by Jim Crow, in the end the birds of the forest, because they are good and kind, take care of the helpless crow for the remainder of his life.

The racist messages within the text are clear: black equates with bad, lazy, and helpless, while white stands for justice, kindness, and morality. Moreover, the narrative of black people as childlike and helpless, dependent on kind and capable white people, is represented as well. There are some critics who claim Baum's stories carry little further meaning than to entertain but the evidence, as well as some of Baum's own words, show otherwise. In the introduction to a 2005 reissue of the stories (including the sequel Policeman Bluejay) Katherine M. Rogers, professor emerita from Brooklyn College, discusses how Baum uses his work as a vehicle to discuss his views on many subjects, including theosophy and feminism; also, many scholars claim his writing (especially the Oz works) are political allegories.⁵⁶ Referring to his *American*

⁵⁵ Frank L. Baum, "The Bandit Jim Crow" in *Twinkle and Chubbins* (Chicago: The Reilly and Britton Co., 1919), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28552/28552-h/28552-h.htm#2-7> (accessed Nov. 28, 2012), Chapter I, Chapter II, Chapter VI.

⁵⁶ Katharine M. Rogers, *The Twinkle Tales* by Frank L. Baum. Introduction. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xv-xvii; Nancy Tystad Koupal. 1989. *The Wonderful Wizard of the West: L. Frank Baum in*

Fairy Tales (published in 1901) Baum himself wrote that the stories “are not serious in purpose, but aim to amuse and entertain, yet I trust the more thoughtful readers will find a wholesome lesson hidden beneath such extravagant notion and humorous incident.” Baum expert Michael Patrick Hearn expands that possibility to his Oz books as well, and other scholars have noted the purpose driven nature of much of his writing.⁵⁷

In the introduction to the *Twinkle Tales*, Rogers draws very clear connections between many of Baum’s beliefs such as feminism (he was a strong supporter of women’s suffrage, a charged issue of that time) and his writing, and hails his writing as generally progressive with diverse characters represented. On the issue of racism within his work (specifically the stories *Sugar-Loaf Mountain* and *The Bandit Jim Crow*) however, she gently explains, “Readers should realize that this casual, unconscious racism, also reflected in the title “Bandit Jim Crow,” was virtually universal in Baum’s day.”⁵⁸ In its summary of the book, the University of Nebraska Press website notes that *Sugar-Loaf Mountain*’s “society mirrors that of humans in some unsettling ways,” and *Policeman Bluejay* (the sequel to *The Bandit Jim Crow*) “casts disturbing light on the world of humans.”⁵⁹

These temperate criticisms ignore some of Baum’s very public discourses on race in America. In 1890 and 1891, Baum wrote two letters which were published in the *Aberdeen*

South Dakota, 1888 – 91. *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Fall): 203-215 (accessed <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1387&context=greatplainsquarterly> on Sept. 30, 2016).

⁵⁷ Ranjit S. Dighe, *The Historian’s Wizard of Oz: Reading L. Frank Baum’s Classic as a Political and Monetary Allegory* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 42.

⁵⁸ Rogers, xi.

⁵⁹ “The Twinkle Tales,” University of Nebraska Press website, <http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/672967.aspx?skuid=10566> (accessed Oct. 3, 2016).

Saturday Pioneer concerning the death of Sitting Bull and the Indian Wars. In them, Baum states, “The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent” and goes on to call for “the total annihilation” of Native Americans. In addition to his message of absolute white superiority, he also considers their annihilation necessary for white Americans safety. In a follow-up letter the next month, Baum doubles down on his call for their extermination, writing, “Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one or more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.”⁶⁰ While there appears to be no evidence that Baum ever verbalized these feelings toward African Americans, his writing seems to affirm racist beliefs toward them as well; phrases such as “the wild nature that crows are born with and never lay aside as long as they live” from *The Bandit Jim Crow* are synonymous with descriptions of the Native Americans as “untamable creatures” in his letters in the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, and certainly centuries of slavery, the Black Laws, lynching, and ongoing oppression of African Americans could be equated with “Having wronged them for centuries.”

Perhaps it was this fear of retribution for past and ongoing wrongs against African Americans, in combination with Baum’s belief in absolute white superiority and domination of the continent, that prompted Baum to write the story Sugar-Loaf City. In this story, two children, Twinkle and Chubbins, discover an enchanted city made entirely of sugar inside of a mountain. While everything and everyone was made of sugar, there were many different

⁶⁰ L. Frank Baum, Editorial. *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*, December 20, 1890 and January 3, 1891, accessed through A. Waller Hastings, “L. Frank Baum’s Editorials on the Sioux Nation,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20071209193251/http://www.northern.edu/hastingw/baumedts.htm> (accessed Oct. 3, 2016).

grades of sugar, or “colors” throughout the land. While objects came in a wide variety of bright and beautiful colors, the people of Sugar-Loaf City ranged in color from pure white to very dark, with accompanying characteristics according to their shade. Baum writes

There were several different kinds of these sugar people. Some, who strutted proudly along, were evidently of pure loaf-sugar, and these were of a most respectable appearance. Others seemed to be made of a light brown sugar, and were more humble in their manners and seemed to hurry along as if they had business to attend to. Then there were some of sugar so dark in color that Twinkle suspected it was maple-sugar, and these folks seemed of less account than any of the others, being servants, drivers of carriages, and beggars and idlers.⁶¹

This passage speaks very directly to the color hierarchy of society, instructing African American children to both acceptable societal behaviors based on the hue of their color and to the occupational and moral inevitabilities assigned to them in Baum’s vision of society. This view contrasted sharply with the ideals of education and pride in their race that formed much of the foundation of racial uplift that guided many African American parents’ child rearing practices.

While literature that portrayed blackness in a negative light, whether direct or indirect, sent powerful messages to African American children, the absence of African Americans in literature sent a message as well. As African American Studies scholar George Lipsitz writes, “whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”⁶² For African American children, if literature didn’t portray them in a negative light, it did not portray them at all. Perhaps the most relevant example of this can be found in *McGuffey’s Readers*, the predominant series of primers used in

⁶¹ Bancroft, Laura (Baum, Frank), *The Twinkle Tales: Sugar-Loaf City* (Chicago: Reilly and Britton, 1911), accessed at <https://archive.org/details/twinklechubbin> on October 12, 2016.

⁶² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 67.

schools for the latter half of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first century. William Holmes McGuffey was a teacher by trade; at the request of a publishing house, beginning in 1836 McGuffey developed a series of six readers for use in schools. The series was extremely popular for over a century; between 1836 and 1960 at least 120 million copies were sold.⁶³

McGuffey believed that schools should teach children through the lens of morality and spirituality, and to this end the readers promoted values such as piousness, hard work, and Christian morals. He was close friends with many abolitionists, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, and was “known for his philanthropy and generosity among the poor and African-Americans,” which may have influenced his decision not to include negative or stereotypical images of black people. However, his feelings did not extend far enough to include positive portrayals of them, either; rather, they are simply absent from the texts. McGuffey’s Readers were designed to both educate and to give children a clear vision of the ideal American – a vision that was clearly white.⁶⁴

The profound effect literature could have on the young African American child is well illustrated by a recollection in Lasker’s work:

When I was about to finish the grades, we were studying the races of men in the geography class, and I remember distinctly the picture of the African savage that was used as our representative. I was quite innocent of the fact that I had the same racial lineage as he. Underneath the picture it said “Ethiopian – he belongs to the most backward race on the face of the globe” – and my white schoolmates turned around to me and said, “Now, that’s your folk.” Nothing else was said concerning Negroes in any text book we used, except that they were slaves. This made a profound impression on my mind and

⁶³ The Museum Gazette, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://www.nps.gov/jeff/learn/historyculture/upload/mcguffey.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2016).

⁶⁴ Ibid, <https://www.nps.gov/jeff/learn/historyculture/upload/mcguffey.pdf>, accessed May 12, 2016.

resulted, many years after, in my touring the country for four years in a Ford coupe, carrying with me a two-foot shelf of Negro literature in the hope of doing something to offset the silence of the textbooks with regard to the achievements of the colored people.”⁶⁵

As an adult, an African American physician spoke quite plainly about the effect of literature, as well as other examples, to the young black child, “Any Negro who is honest will admit that he is dominated by the standards of the society he is brought up in. When we are little children we use story books in which all the characters have long blond hair. When we go to church we’re taught that God is a white man. The Virgin Mary is white. What can you expect? All our early concepts of desirable physical attributes come from the white man.”⁶⁶ Northern African American children received a clear message from white dominated literature, but a very different one from the leaders of their own community.

As mentioned, African American adults realized the detrimental effect on children of being bombarded by negative images of African Americans, as well as the lack of positive role models for black children in books and elsewhere; there were attempts to address this disparity, especially in literature, with the NAACP being at the forefront in this struggle. Started by W.E.B. DuBois in 1910, the organization’s magazine *The Crisis* was a staple in many African American homes; its circulation reached 100,000 by 1920. While children may not have read the words, certainly the images of African Americans in fine dress, in caps and gowns, and on the tennis court stood in stark contrast to the realities of most African American children’s

⁶⁵ Lasker, 160-1.

⁶⁶ St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City, Vol. II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), 495.

lives.⁶⁷ *The Crisis* did more than just indirectly provide positive imagery in the home; it actively promoted it. In each edition, *The Crisis* carried many ads that promoted products, services, or opportunities of special interest to African Americans, including advertisements for African American colleges, for jobs, for clothing, and for products.⁶⁸

In the October, 1919 issue of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. DuBois announced the creation of *The Brownies' Book*, the children's counterpart to *The Crisis*. He clearly stated its goals, some of which included: "(a) To make colored children realize that being "colored" is a normal, beautiful thing. (b) To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race. (c) To make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons. (d) To teach them delicately a code of honor and action in their relations with white children. (e) To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their own homes and companions." It was a publication for African American children almost entirely by African Americans; "Ninety-eight percent of the contents were produced by blacks."⁶⁹ During its brief time of publication, from January, 1920 until December, 1921, *The Brownies' Book* strove to provide positive images as well as information to its young readers.⁷⁰

In her dissertation *The Brownies' Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children's Literature*, Professor of Education Violet J. Sims identified eight themes that promoted the stated purpose of the publication: "(1) race pride, (2) duty and allegiance to the race, (3)

⁶⁷ For further reading on the subject of African American socioeconomic status in the North, see Chapter 4, esp. 81-84.

⁶⁸ *The Crisis*, November, 1920 <http://thecrisismagazine.com/history.html>, (accessed Nov. 23, 2012).

⁶⁹ Harris, 6.

⁷⁰ *The Crisis*, October, 1919, 286.

intelligent Blacks, (4) beautiful Blacks, (5) moderation, (6) political and social activism, (7) knowledge of and respect for African culture, and (8) inculcation of specific values such as kindness, truthfulness, egalitarianism, and love."⁷¹ Pictures, articles, stories, and ads all worked in concert to deliver these themes. Education professors Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill explored *The Brownies' Book* (contrasting it with a later publication *Ebony Jr!*) in their article, "The Brownies' Book and *Ebony Jr.!*: Literature as a Mirror of the Afro-American Experience." Discussing the magazine under the leadership of DuBois and author Jessie Fauset, they wrote, "despite any controversy over their somewhat elitist leanings," with stories that "spotlight upper-class Black children, most are set within an Afro-American, not a White, cultural element."⁷² Vaughn-Roberson and Hill discuss the story "Retrospection," which was written by DuBois' daughter Yolanda while she was at Fisk University. In "Retrospection," Yolanda writes:

Out of the past - into the future they creep - voices, insistent and clear. So I am sure that when at length I stand at the end of the road and earthly shadows fall across my path, my eyes will grow dim, but far ahead the veil will lift, and beyond that I shall hear again-even as of old-the sad, sweet music of the ancient songs of my people.⁷³

They describe her experience as both "a personal experience of racial consciousness-raising" and an expression of her being "infused with an appreciation of past Afro-American

⁷¹ Violet Joyce Harris, *The Brownies' Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children's Literature*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1986), accessed through Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill. 1989. The Brownies' Book and *Ebony Jr.!*: Literature as a Mirror of the Afro-American Experience. *The Journal of Negro Education* 58, no. 4 (Autumn), 496.

⁷² Vaughn-Roberson and Hill, 495.

⁷³ Nina Yolanda DuBois, "Retrospection," *The Brownies' Book*, (August 1921), 239 (accessed at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=rbc3&fileName=rbc0001_2004ser01351page.db&recNum=664 on Oct. 9, 2016).

struggles.”⁷⁴

Many stories were about famous African American historical figures such as Harriet Tubman and Phillis Wheatly, but others were about lesser known figures that children could look up to and emulate, such as Katy Ferguson. Katy was born a slave in 1774, but “when she was eighteen, due to her own efforts and the fortunate impression she had made on some friends, she became free.” Katy’s life remained hard, with her husband and children dying and leaving her alone; once again, she rose above her “sorrows” and spent her life taking care of needy children both physically and spiritually. The story ends with the encouraging thought, “So now you know the story of a noble colored woman. But she is not the only colored woman to do great deeds for her race. There are many splendid colored men, too. Think of all the wonderful folks you have still to hear about!”⁷⁵

While African American leaders were at the forefront of offering African American children alternative images of their race, there were people in white society that pushed back against the negative messages for black children as well. In 1920, Myron T. Pritchard, the principal of the Everett School in Boston, Massachusetts joined with Chairman of the Board of the NAACP Mary White Ovington to address the lack of a positive children’s reader for African American children; the result was *The Upward Path: A Reader for Colored Children*. This reader sought to positively affect African American children on a variety of levels. As stated in its introduction, “the education of any race is incomplete unless the members of that race know

⁷⁴ Ibid, 500.

⁷⁵ “Katy Ferguson: A True Story,” in *The Best of the Brownies’ Book*, ed. Dianne Johnson-Feelings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 36-7.

the history and character of its own people as well as those of other peoples,” and while some African American history books existed, “until recently no effort has been made on a large scale to see that Negro boys and girls became acquainted with these books and the facts they contained concerning their people.”⁷⁶ For African American children in the North (if they had not yet been exposed to racial differences or discrimination) this lack of any information of their race could lead to identity confusion in the young black child. In Lasker’s *Race Attitudes in Children*, he writes of this confusion being “amusingly illustrated” by this example: “A little colored boy who lived in a northern city where he had not been made conscious of racial differences had begun the study of American History. One day he said to his father, “Tell me something about our ancestors.” The father began to tell about life in Africa, but the boy soon interrupted, “That’s not what I want. Tell me about our Pilgrim ancestors!”

Upward Path sought to help African American children learn their history and form a positive identity from their own racial roots; its contents were not only about African Americans, but also by African Americans. Many of the most popular and influential black writers of the time, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jessie Fauset, and Charles Chesnutt were included, but there were also entries of famous African Americans of the past such as Phyllis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass. Black children learning about and finding pride in their history was one of the main goals of *The Upward Path*, but not its only goal. Tucked within its pages were passages and stories that elevated and gave respect to everyday African American life and struggles, both past and present. William J. Edwards, founder of the Snow Hill Normal

⁷⁶ Mary White Ovington and Myron T. Pritchard, eds., *The Upward Path* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, Inc.), 1920, p. x. (https://archive.org/stream/upwardpathreader00pritch/upwardpathreader00pritch_djvu.txt, accessed September 12, 2016).

School (often referred to as a little Tuskegee, the institute from which he graduated), contributed the essay *The Greatest Menace of the South*. He discusses the difficulties of the southern farmer, citing soil depletion as the greatest threat. He further asserts that the plight of southern farmers of both races are inextricably tied to each other and that “whatever helps one race in the South will help the other and whatever degrades one race in the South, sooner or later will degrade the other.” In addition to outlining the problems farmers face, with an eye turned towards the future he also makes suggestions to fix these problems. Unlike the literature that portrayed African Americans as child-like or even helpless, dependent on the kindness and generosity of white people, this story shows black farmers as not only capable of succeeding on their own and fixing problems, but integral to the success of the white man as well.⁷⁷

Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper, the first black cadet to graduate from West Point, included an essay describing his experience the first day of cadet school. He is clear that it was not easy, and he suffered taunts, jeers and insults, but he persevered and succeeded; the moral of hard work and perseverance in the face of hatred and oppression is a common theme throughout the book, and clearly intended to help African American children navigate the tenuous place in society forced upon them by the white society in which they lived and functioned. An introductory passage by Booker T. Washington contrasts the man who is looking up with the man in the tower, stating, “However poor his present plight, the thing he aims at and is striving toward stands out clear and distinct above him, inspiring him with hope

⁷⁷ Ovington and Pritchard, 59.

and ambition in his struggle upward.”

The essays and stories of *The Upward Path* gave pride to the African American race, but also strove to exemplify the value of education, hard work, and perseverance in the face of adversity, even within the lives of ordinary people. The stories of people such as Flipper and Matthew A. Henson in “A Negro Explorer at the North Pole” were certainly exciting and inspiring, but it was in many of the stories that mirrored ordinary life and struggles that African American children most clearly saw themselves. The story of a mother who cut up her own clothes so that her children would look respectable, or of a boy who got in trouble at school although he was not at fault and yet he held his head high knowing he had done the right thing – these were the stories in which African American children could see themselves represented, and represented positively.⁷⁸

Over a decade later, a young African American teacher studying for her master’s degree inquired about an African American school book geared for young primary students; when she found out none existed, she set to work writing one herself. Jane Dabney Shackleford was from Indiana, and knew firsthand the lack of positive images and materials for black children in school. When she returned to Indiana and became a teacher herself, she filled her classroom at Booker T. Washington school in Terre Haute, Indiana with images and examples of “school life in Africa, playtime in Africa, games of African children, the story-telling hour, the blacksmith at work, the weaver at his loom, and the merchant in the market.” At the same time, she started working on a primary school book for African American children, an endeavor which culminated

⁷⁸ Ovington and Pritchard, p. x-xi.

in the first manuscript for *The Child's Story of the Negro*, which she sent to C. G. Woodson in 1934.⁷⁹

In the ensuing years Woodson, drawing heavily on his own self-proclaimed failures to write for children on their level, guided Shackleford through expanding and improving the work through numerous revisions; it was published in 1938. Woodson gained much respect for Shackleford and the work she did to expose children to positive images and knowledge of the African American race during their years of correspondence, even writing of her students, "How well prepared they must be to face the insults and injury which lie before every Negro! In this test these properly educated children have the satisfaction that the cause of such humiliation lies not in their race origin but in the inhumanity of the oppressor."⁸⁰

The Child's Story of the Negro was highly acclaimed; it garnered positive reviews from professionals and children alike. A review in the *Indianapolis Recorder* stated it was a unique book of its kind and "It is a book every Negro child should possess," and the Negro History Bulletin named it Book of the Month in its February, 1938 edition. For Shackleford, perhaps the best endorsement of her years of work came from the children themselves - letters from children such as Richard, who wrote, "I like the story of "How Africans Came To America." I am going to ask mother to buy one of your books for me." In the 1956 revised edition, she included a retrospective preface in which she wrote, "When I wrote in 1938 the first edition of

⁷⁹ C. G. Woodson, "Jane Dabney Shackleford Lauded As Great Teacher by Woodson: Single-Handed Effort To Overcome Barriers of Historians in Book For Children Praised," Unnamed, undated newspaper article, Jane Dabney Shackleford Collection (Terre Haute, Indiana: Vigo Library, accessed Dec. 9, 2014).

⁸⁰ Katharine Capshaw Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 173; C. G. Woodson, "Jane Dabney Shackleford Lauded As Great Teacher by Woodson: Single-Handed Effort To Overcome Barriers of Historians in Book For Children Praised," Unnamed, undated newspaper article, Jane Dabney Shackleford Collection (Terre Haute, Indiana: Vigo Library, accessed Dec. 9, 2014).

The Child's Story of the Negro, I addressed it to Negro children. I wanted to place in their hands an easy, interesting book that would help them appreciate the traditions, aspirations, and achievements of the Negro." Letters such as Richard's indicate that Shackleford was correct about the hunger of African American children for positive depictions of themselves.⁸¹

There seems to be little evidence that African American children in the North read particularly different literature than their southern counterparts. But as Sugrue noted in *Sweet Land of Liberty*, the racial landscape of the North was less delineated. Much of the racist literature northern African American children were exposed to stood in contrast to their experiences and to the ideals espoused by their parents and African American leaders. While this thesis focuses highly on those experiences of children in an integrated environment, even if a child went to a segregated school they were still more likely to see integrated spaces such as streetcars, and the overt racial etiquette of the South was largely absent. Juxtaposed against this environment, this exposure to such negative (or absent) literature about their own race gave the northern African American child many mixed messages that could cause hurt, anger and confusion about their racial identity, and more difficulty understanding racial roles than southern African American children. The lack of de jure segregation, often integrated public spaces, and mostly African American produced literature gave the message of self-worth and pride in their race, yet literature such as Baum's sent messages of inferiority to white people and negative innate characteristics of the African American race. School books did not include the positive contributions, or as with McGuffey's Reader any contributions, of African

⁸¹ Smith, 173; Correspondence from children, Jane Dabney Shackleford Collection (Terre Haute, Indiana: Vigo Library, accessed Dec. 9, 2014).

Americans to the country, but literature such as *The Crisis* and *The Upward Path* celebrated the lives and contributions of many African Americans.

The African American girl who recoiled against the characterization of Little Sambo may not have clearly understood the larger implications of literature and its effects, but she certainly recognized and was hurt by the characterization of her race. Her teacher reinforced the characterization, and attempted to get the girl to accept it as her own; but she came from a home that appeared to actively foster pride in their race. Two entirely different messages about her race and her developing racial identity were sent to the child, and it caused hurt and confusion. These incidents could stay with children into adulthood, as well as the pain and confusion associated with them. How profound must a woman's childhood experiences have been to shape her behavior to the extent that she drove around with a pile of positive African American literature in the hope of sparing other children the pain she experienced?

The world of literature was hardly the only area where African American children experienced such images, or that left them unrepresented at all. They were also exposed to the areas of advertising, media, and the entertainment industry, and many of the same African American stereotypes and expectations concerning their place in society were present in those media as well. The selective tradition discussed by Williams and expanded upon by Taxel was not applicable only to literature. As Taxel stated, it shaped "perceptions of ourselves and our world – by virtue of their saturation of all aspects of social life, such as politics, art, popular culture and schooling." The "hegemonic culture" that Williams argued actively worked toward "the dominance and subordination of particular classes" functioned in a very similar manner in

those media as well.⁸² As this thesis will explore next, northern African American children encountered many of the same inconsistencies and mixed messages from advertising, media, and the entertainment industry.

⁸² Violet Joyce Harris, *The Brownies' Book: Challenge to the Selective Tradition in Children's Literature*, (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1984), 6, (accessed at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED284167.pdf> on Oct. 9, 2016).

CHAPTER 3

ADVERTISING, MEDIA, AND ENTERTAINMENT

Advertising, media, and the entertainment industry were powerful media for transmitting messages about racial attitudes, culture, image, and standards of beauty. The Jim Crow years saw these media become increasingly accessible and powerful. Cinematography grew from a brand new medium at the turn of the century to a major part of American culture by the end of the Jim Crow years. Newspapers and magazines found their way across the nation, and within those pages – and elsewhere - the world of advertising exploded. For African Americans, these burgeoning media mirrored the culture of white superiority and appealed to white readers' desire to keep African Americans in their place. To this end, these mediums portrayed some of the worst stereotypes of African Americans. With the ubiquity of the consumer culture and entertainment industry, African American children could hardly escape these images. African American parents and leaders could not stop the cultural juggernaut their children were exposed to; however, what they could do was offer them an alternative vision of their race and themselves. African American children saw the negative stereotypes and were hurt and embarrassed by them. As with literature, the African American community worked to offer them alternate positive models for their race. While these efforts helped children envision a different racial identity than the one ascribed to them by the images pervasive in white society, they also contributed to the inconsistent messages they received about their race and their place in their world.

Film

Even before consumer culture, media, and advertising's spectacular rise of the twenties, African Americans were angered by and fought against degrading and harmful images of themselves in media. Some of the first organized resistance African Americans gave to these depictions came in response to the film *Birth of a Nation*. Released in 1915, *Birth of a Nation* incorporated some of the most vile and heinous representations and myths of black people.⁸³ Directed by D.W. Griffith at a time of shifting racial and gender roles, it struck at the heart of many white people's concerns about African Americans. Griffith specifically exploited the belief that black males were sexual brutes lusting after white women as well as fears of blacks gaining political power.

African Americans protested to get the film banned across the nation; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) published "scathing reviews" in its magazine *The Crisis*, published a forty-seven page pamphlet titled "Fighting a Vicious Film: Protest Against *The Birth of a Nation*," called for a boycott of the film (which failed), and finally attempted to at least get the most racist and inflammatory scenes deleted from the film.⁸⁴ In Boston, 800 women met at a Baptist church, where one proclaimed, "If there are men here who are afraid to die there are women who are not afraid. This movie would not be tolerated if it affected any other race or people... They think us a poor helpless set of black people, but if

⁸³ Elaine Frantz Parsons. 2015. "REVISITING THE BIRTH OF A NATION AT 100 YEARS." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 4: 596-598.

⁸⁴ Catherine Lavender, "D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)," The College of Staten Island of The City University of New York, June 11, 2001, <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/birth.html>, accessed April 7, 2013.

this thing is humiliating to us it should be double humiliating to the white people."⁸⁵ Although these attempts were mostly futile, African Americans demonstrated not only a keen understanding of the damage these negative images in media could do to them, but also the capability and resourcefulness to actively work to combat these images.

Certainly, African American parents would not have encouraged their children to see *Birth of a Nation*, but their vehement protest against the film demonstrates their concern over the portrayal of their race in American culture. These portrayals could affect children. Thomas Sowell's autobiography *A Personal Odyssey* recalls an incident where he was the only (as well as the experimental first) black child at a summer camp. A young white boy asked him, "How come ... you don't act like the colored people I see in the movies?" to which he responded "Well, they get paid to act that way – and I don't." That seemed to satisfy him and, with a sigh of relief, he went back to where he had been."⁸⁶ Sowell's experience at camp exemplifies that while movie portrayals could define the black race in a white child's mind, it did not necessarily define the black child in his own mind.

What it could do, however, was to humiliate the child and cause embarrassment for his race. Malcom X recalls being the only black person in the theater when he went to see the movie *Gone With the Wind*. Of this experience he writes, "when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug." As an adult, he remembered this incident as marring

⁸⁵ "Negro Women Offer to Die to Stop Film," *The Boston Herald*, April 26, 1915; "The Birth of a Nation Sparks Protest," MassMoments, project of Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, <http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=125> (accessed June 2, 2013).

⁸⁶ Sowell, 26.

an otherwise happy time in his life.⁸⁷ Conversely, while positive portrayals of African Americans in the movies were scarce, when they did occur they had a positive impact on the black community, especially children. In his autobiography *My American Life*, Price Cobbs discusses the black actor Herb Jeffries, star of black westerns of the 1930s. According to Cobbs, Jeffries approached the movie industry to cast black actors in positive roles explaining, "I felt that dark-skinned children could identify with me."⁸⁸ As an African American who grew up in America, his sentiment appears to come from a place of knowledge and first-hand understanding; the stereotypical and negative portrayals of African Americans in film were inconsistent with the ideals of uplift and worth that drove many African American parents' child rearing practices.

African American children did have a desire to see themselves represented positively in entertainment. In 1941, Price Cobbs was a "self-conscious thirteen-year old" living in Los Angeles. Like many African American children who lived in an integrated and white dominated society, Cobbs experienced many mixed messages concerning his race and his place within it. His father was a highly respected doctor in the area, yet Cobbs remembers his shock and confusion when he realized his father was denied practicing privileges at a white hospital.⁸⁹ His parents taught him to be proud of his race, yet his mother, who was herself "a beautiful darker skin woman," was quite vocal and adamant about her preference for lighter skinned blacks.⁹⁰ Despite the lessons of self-worth he received, he also received mixed messages about his race;

⁸⁷ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964), 113.

⁸⁸ Cobbs, 60.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 40-43.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 8.

the world of advertising and entertainment offered few opportunities to see the black race portrayed with the dignity his parents insisted he and his race deserved.

One such opportunity did present itself when Duke Ellington and Joe Turner performed a concert at one of the main music venues in Los Angeles, The Mayan. Cobbs notes The Mayan was not a segregated theater, and when the concert was announced “there was no question we would attend.” The concert filled the young teenager with many thoughts and emotions. The music was a joy to experience, but what affected him the most was the example of black men taking the stage with such command and dignity. As soon as Duke Ellington walked across the stage “It was immediately clear that Ellington had a very secure sense of himself ... and he owned the stage! He conveyed an air of personal integrity and purpose that I had not seen before.” As he listened to the music many questions ran through his head: “I wondered where he had grown up, what kind of family he was from, what gave him the easy assurance to speak to the huge audience between numbers ... Had anyone called him nigger?” Reflecting back on this experience from adulthood, Cobbs articulates how important it was for him and other black children to see “somebody who could expand their world, open up the potential life they might envision for themselves.” Cobbs considered it an event that “had a seminal effect ... on my personal understanding of myself, how I wished to view the world, and how I wished the world to view me.”⁹¹ In the uncertain and conflicting racial world Cobbs navigated, the positive role models of Ellington and Turner greatly influenced Cobbs own development of his racial identity – and its possibilities.

⁹¹ Cobbs, 45-51.

Advertising

Advertising existed well before the 1900s, but it was not until the twentieth century that the advertising industry began assuming its distinct and market driven character of modern times. By 1929 advertising ballooned into a \$3 billion business.⁹² The years around World War I, and the marketing lessons learned from the propaganda during the war, are generally hailed as the advent of modern advertising. It was at this time that “advertising began to hold a mirror to American society, seeking to explore and exploit the innermost doubts, loves, hates, fears, and aspirations of the target audience.”⁹³ But advertising, as all media, does more than just mirror attitudes and culture in society; it helps shape it. James M. Jones, professor of social psychology, writes in *Prejudice and Racism*, “The power of the media ... is that it both reflects and creates images of minority-group members and women that lead to stereotypical perceptions and often, biasing expectations and behaviors.”⁹⁴

Children were especially vulnerable to the manipulations of advertising, both in influencing the constructs of their society and culture as well as their self-identity. Images conveyed expected societal roles, moral stereotypes, assumptions about intelligence, and standards of beauty. Language scientists Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson note that children, due to their still evolving knowledge of the world, are “especially vulnerable to the fictional claims” put forth in advertising.⁹⁵ This included claims that influenced a child’s self-concept of race,

⁹² M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1998), 87.

⁹³ Manring, 79.

⁹⁴ Jones, 457.

⁹⁵ Greg Carlson and Julie Sedivy, *Sold on Language: How Advertisers Talk to You and What This Says about You* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 188.

which children as young as preschool age appear to recognize and attempt to foster a positive self-image of, both for themselves and others in their group.⁹⁶ The established racial hierarchy, that is white superiority and black inferiority, was clearly transmitted through advertising and other images children were inundated with in and around the 1920s. Advertising served as a shaper and reinforcer of racial attitudes and beliefs, both internal and external, for all children. For white children, it was a natural affirmation of the racial superiority their parents and society instilled in them. For black children, the message was equally clear: you are inferior, you are limited, you are bad. Through advertising and imagery (among other avenues), it was a message that white society worked to maintain, and one that black society actively worked to dispel – especially for their children.

Children paid attention to and were influenced by advertising, a fact that was known even in advertising's early days. In *The History and Development of Advertising*, published in 1929, author Frank Presbey wrote, "Children figured largely in the thoughts of the advertiser because of their presumed greater interest in pictures and the family interest which would be aroused by a child's liking for an illustration."⁹⁷ He goes on to qualify "family interest" as the interest of the mother, who was the primary consumer of household goods; not unlike modern times, capturing a child's interest when shopping with his mother was a valuable marketing tool. Written in 1929, Presbey is clearly referring to the importance of capturing the interest of white children (it would be the 1940s before the Pepsi company developed the first advertising

⁹⁶ Bradley S. Greenberg and Dana E. Mastro, "Children, Race, Ethnicity, and Media," in *The Handbook of Children, Media and Development*, eds. Sandra L. Calvert and Barbara J. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2011), 78.

⁹⁷ Frank Presbey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1929), 383.

campaign targeting the African American consumer). In addition to white children's value to general advertising, by 1920 they were being targeted as consumers (primarily of toys) as well.⁹⁸ Whether targeted directly in advertising or exposed indirectly to images, children saw these images of both white and black adults and children, the roles they were assigned, and were affected by them.

The world of advertising exhibited highly stereotypical and negative imagery of the African American race. At a time when black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were championing African American advancement (although they advocated drastically different methods), white society was trying to maintain the established racial hierarchy. In *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*, professor Richard Ohmann states, "But modernity is never felt just as progress, and advertising ... often reassured its audience that old values and social relations were still somehow present and dependable, among the new."⁹⁹ Advertisers used images of the happy servant and the pickaninny, in particular, to evoke feelings of nostalgia for an era that, in the face of urbanization and rapidly changing racial and gender roles, was quickly slipping away. These images were directly contrary to the message of the New Negro and racial uplift that African American leaders and parents wanted to instill in their children.

In 1922, Jello released an ad aimed at alleviating many of the anxieties of a quickly changing society; it harkened white consumers back to a simpler time and place when

⁹⁸ DuRocher, 76.

⁹⁹ Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London: Verso, 1996), 264.

established racial and gender roles were not challenged. The setting suggests a southern plantation: two, young black children approach a white woman with a book seated on a wide porch with a stately, white column and offer her jello, stating, “Mammy sent dis ovah.”¹⁰⁰ The ad addressed some common concerns in white thought during this time; urbanization, the industrial revolution, and electricity all contributed to changing and more independent behaviors – especially by young people and women. The woman in a long, flowing, pink dress, sitting contentedly on her front porch reading was the antithesis of the modern, working, city woman – and certainly the opposite of the flapper image so popular in the twenties.

Racially, it reinforced the superiority of whites and the role of blacks as happy servants anxious to please their white masters. The woman sits elevated on the porch, and the children stand below her offering the jello from their mother; the woman looks somewhat surprised. This not only relegates African Americans to servants, but as slavery has passed and the mother appears to choose to cook for the woman unsolicited, it infers that black people enjoy serving white people. The ad also had the words “It is appealing enough to turn the sinful, of any color, away from his neighbor’s melon patch.” One stereotype of African Americans included the belief that they were inherently immoral in many ways, including stealing; the wording of the ad implies that black people were sinful and likely to be found in “his neighbor’s melon patch.” This ad reinforced the racial hierarchy and established stereotypes for all who viewed it, but for children, seeing images of themselves was particularly powerful.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ “Racism in advertising: 1922 Jell-O ad,” Found in Mom’s Basement, <http://pzrservices.typepad.com/vintageadvertising/2009/02/racism-in-advertising-1922-jello-ad.html> (accessed March 18, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Presbey, 383.

The mammy is arguably the most well-known of the African American stereotypes; she was particularly powerful in white thought because “the happy mammy was a symbol of proper order, living proof of the racial and sexual harmony that results when blacks and whites occupy their separate and well-understood roles.”¹⁰² Her smiling countenance served as an affirmation to the established racial order of white superiority and conjured images of the old plantation days, when everyone knew their place and the world made sense – at least, to white people. She was also a safe representation of black females: overweight, loud, with her hair hidden under a bandana, she offered no sexual threat to white women (that place was reserved for the Jezebel stereotype).¹⁰³ For African Americans, however, that link to the past was a reminder of slavery and oppression. In advertising, Aunt Jemima, an iconic mammy figure since 1890, served these respective roles for both races since her inception.¹⁰⁴ Specifically, for African Americans she was “a symbol of the denigration and domestication of black identity and of the way blacks have been reduced to functionaries in white fantasies.”¹⁰⁵

Another aspect of Aunt Jemima, as well as many other stereotypical representations of black people in advertising, concerned their speech. Feeding into the stereotype of African Americans as ignorant, stupid, and ‘other’, images of them portrayed with a strong dialect in their speech was a pervasive trend in advertising until the mid-twentieth century. Aunt Jemima

¹⁰² Manring, 24.

¹⁰³ For further discussion of the Jezebel stereotype, see Manring, especially 21 – 23.

¹⁰⁴ Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 65.

¹⁰⁵ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 155.

ads prominently displayed text of her stereotypical speech, such as, “Lawsee! Folks Sho’ Cheer for Fluffy, Energizin’ Aunt Jemima Pancakes.”¹⁰⁶



Figure 1. Aunt Jemima Pancake Ad (Image courtesy of The Columbo Herald, "Racism in Advertising: 50 Shocking Examples").

Often touted as the mammy counterpart, the character of Uncle Tom was also well represented in white dominated advertising. A 1937 Sal Hepatica Laxative ad shows a smiling porter anxious to help a white newlywed bride with a cold, stating, “Pahdon me fo’ overhearin’ yo’, but Sal Hepatica does BOTH dose things. It’s a min’ral salt laxative and it helps Nature counteract acidity, too. Las’ trip a doctah tole me.”¹⁰⁷ In *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, author Marilyn Kern-Foxworth straightforwardly asks, “did the bastardized language used by Aunt Jemima have any effect on the black

¹⁰⁶ “Racism in Advertising: 50 Shocking Examples,” *The Colombo Herald*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.colomboherald.com/business/racism-in-advertising-50-shocking-examples> (accessed May 2, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ “Sal Hepatica Ad,” “12 Outrageous Racist Vintage Ads,” Oddee (website), http://www.oddee.com/item_96917.aspx (accessed April 19, 2013).

psyche?"¹⁰⁸ Many scholars believe it did. To answer this questions, she cites Roger D. Abrahams, a folklorist and black English scholar, who states, "... we tend to forget that a person's image of himself is intimately bound up with the ways in which he chooses to talk. To criticize a way of speaking, or to denigrate it any way, is to attack the image a person has of himself."¹⁰⁹ In a society that highly prized good speech – McGuffey's reader devoted a whole section to teaching children proper diction – these speech patterns reinforced negative images of African Americans.

Advertising and Standards of Beauty

Another prevalent image in advertising that children were confronted with concerned the concept of beauty and cleanliness; dark skin was portrayed as inherently bad and dirty while white skin represented beauty and purity. While certainly not the only product that exploited African American skin color, soap ads were historically some of the most blatant examples of this racial stereotype. The concept of black children desiring to have white skin, or being ashamed of their color was a persistent advertising ploy for many decades. A Fairy soap ad published around the turn of the century assaulted the African American child's sense of self-esteem and dignity on many different levels. The image itself shows a black child dressed in dirty and torn clothing, barefoot, which stands in stark contrast to the white child, blonde and fair, who is well dressed. The body language of the children is also designed to reinforce the

¹⁰⁸ Kern-Foxworth, 93; "Bastardized" language is a term coined by Dr. Walter Brasch, a journalism professor who specializes in communications and culture, to refer to the stereotypical speech of African Americans portrayed in advertising (also referred to as black English). For further reading on the term see Walter M. Brasch, *Black English and the Mass Media*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1981).

¹⁰⁹ Roger D. Abrahams, *Talking Black*, (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1977), 13.

inferiority of the black child: her head cocks downward, her bare feet turn in, and her hand clutches her tattered dress suggesting insecurity or nervousness, while the white girl's face tilts up, her stance is solid and she even appears to be leaning in slightly. Below the image are the words "WHY DOESN'T YOUR MAMMA WASH YOU WITH FAIRY SOAP?"



Figure 2. Fairy Soap Ad (Courtesy of Fairies World, "A Pictorial History of Fairy Soap Advertising")¹¹⁰

Not only does this imply that blackness is undesirable and needs to be washed away, but a more subliminal message is also encoded: that the black child's mother is either ignorant or uncaring towards the care of her child. Another soap company's, Vinolia soap, ad may have lacked the number of levels Fairy soap used to reinforce the black stereotype, but its words were even more pointed: "You dirty boy," says the white child to the very dark one, "why don't you wash yourself with Vinolia soap?" Again, the message that black skin is bad and dirty is

¹¹⁰ "Fairy Soap Ad," Fairies World: Fairy Soap – Historical Advertising, <http://www.fairiesworld.com/pixs2/fairy-soap/Fairbanks-Fairy-Soap.jpg> (accessed Oct. 22, 2012).

clear.¹¹¹ This ad sent a very contrary message to children than the one found in many African American homes; good parenting, particularly of the mother, and cleanliness were basic tenets of the racial uplift that guided many parents' child rearing practices.¹¹²

This association of white skin color with good and black skin color with bad clearly affected the African American community; popular skin bleaching products formulated for black people promised users lighter, brighter complexions. In an ironic twist, ads for these products often ran in black newspapers and magazines that, among other goals, strove to instill race pride and showcase the positive accomplishments of African Americans. *The Chicago Defender's* self-proclaimed title of "The World's Greatest Weekly" may have been overstating its global importance, but it did boast a very impressive readership that reached far beyond the Chicago area. The newspaper found its way into not only homes but was also read aloud in public spaces such as churches, street corners, and barbershops. According to Stanley Nelson's documentary *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*, it is "estimated that at its height each paper sold was read by four to five African Americans, putting its readership at over 500,000 people each week."¹¹³ Certainly, large numbers of black children and adults alike had access to the paper; autobiographies of African Americans such as Price Cobb and Thomas Sowell affirm reading these papers while growing up. Rather than refer to African Americans as "Negro" or

¹¹¹ "Vinolia Soap Ad," The Society Pages: Sociological Images, <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2008/08/page/2/> (accessed Oct. 22, 2012); for further reading on negative portrayals of African Americans in advertising, see Kristina Du Rocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky), "Consumerism Meets Jim Crow's Children: White Children and the Culture of Segregation."

¹¹² Gaines, 80; James P. Comer, M.D., *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black American Family* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.), 1988, 64, 128.

¹¹³ Stanley Nelson, *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*, Half Nelson Production, Chicago Production Center at WTTW, 1999 (accessed Nov. 23, 2012) <http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/index.html>.

“black” the paper used the term “the Race” and people as “Race men” and “Race women,” yet despite these references of racial pride, the paper carried ads for products to try to make black features appear more Caucasian.¹¹⁴

One such ad was Madame Mamie Hightower’s Golden Brown Beauty Preparations, which was a skin bleaching soap. In the main, small text of the ad the preparation claims that this product will bring out “the natural beauty that belongs to *our Race*” and that “We have no desire to be white.” However, the large, bold text at the top of the ad read, “Pride in Our Race demands that we look Light, Bright and Attractive.”¹¹⁵ In the center of the ad is a large picture of a woman who appears to be white; while the black and white nature of the print might be ambiguous as to the race of the model, her features such as the shape of her nose, her lips and her eyes show no hint of African American lineage.



Figure 3. Golden Brown Skin Bleaching Cream Ad (Courtesy of The Chicago Defender)¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ *The Chicago Defender*, July 14, 1923.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

This ad is an excellent example of the inner conflict the African American community dealt with in regards to the color of their skin. The ad ran in a black newspaper that worked to promote race pride; the text claims “Pride in Our Race” and “We have no desire to be white;” yet, the text also claims proud blacks should be “light, bright and attractive,” the product itself was designed to lighten the skin, and the model pictured looked decidedly white. Clearly, the white image of beauty glorified by the advertising industry, as well as by society in general, affected African Americans’ view of themselves.

A society’s, and a community’s, standard of beauty is developed from many different sources; it would hardly be fair to say advertising alone was responsible for the obsession with light skin during this era. To be sure, the preference for light skin largely predates the advent of advertising. However, as previously noted, media also serves to create and shape images of minorities, and children are particularly susceptible to the effects of these images. Black children learned the preference for lighter skin early in life, and even reflected this learned knowledge in their play with each other. They viewed it as a continuum: the darker the skin, the lower the status. In their seminal study of northern urban black life *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City, Vol. II*, sociologists St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton recount a participant’s remembrance of the hierarchy of African American children’s playgroup:

I was about ten or eleven years old when I began to learn what the different colors of Negroes meant. We were playing house. Some of us were very fair children; some were light-brown; and some were very dark. We were choosing up for playing house. We made the very fair person the father, and so on down the line until we came to the darkest children. We tried to make them the servants, but they refused. We couldn’t get enough co-operation to play house that day.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Drake and Cayton, 501.

In *Black Metropolis: A Study of a Negro Life in a Northern City* a young girl's lament is reported: "My oldest sister, Lucy, was always calling me names and telling me that the buzzards laid me and the sun hatched me. I hate to say this but she made me hate her."¹¹⁸

As mentioned, advertising was not the only source that taught children the general preference for lighter skin; perhaps the most insidious knowledge came from the adults in their lives. Blanche Ashby was a live-in maid in Washington D.C. in the early 1900s. As many black women did, she found childcare for her own children; she left her children at the home of her cousin. Her daughters who were light skinned fared well in this situation, but her cousin abused her darker skinned son. Ms. Ashby relates: "I didn't see at first how bad my boy was being treated by the cousin he was left with. He was dark, and they made a bad difference between him and my girls, who was light skinned."¹¹⁹ Whether advertising created the "white skin" standard of beauty or merely reinforced it with its images and text, it contributed to African American children's prejudice against their own skin color.

Malcolm X's remembrances of his childhood exemplified many of the color issues that African American children faced within their own families, as well as the greater African American community. His father viciously beat all of the children except for Malcolm; Malcolm attributed his light skin (in contrast to his siblings) for sparing him his father's wrath. When he wrote his autobiography years later, Malcolm X would surmise that his father was actually subconsciously a victim of "the white man's brainwashing of Negroes." While he may have

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Clark Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910 – 1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 165.

lacked the ability to understand and articulate those beliefs as a child, another incident from his childhood demonstrates that he was aware of the negative connotations of the physical attributes of dark color. While Malcolm was in seventh grade, an aunt came to visit. She was a large woman, jet-black, and he attributes her with being the “first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life. She was clearly proud of her very dark skin. This was unheard of among Negroes in those days, especially in Lansing [Michigan].”¹²⁰ It is clear that issues of self-esteem were inherently steeped in the color of skin – dark was perceived as bad, and certainly not something to be proud of – and whether consciously or not, children were well aware of this belief.

Another physical characteristic of African Americans that was deemed undesirable was black hair. Even among the staunchest advocates of African American race pride, kinky hair was considered a negative attribute and something to be changed, or at the very least hidden. One of “Harlem’s greatest success stories,” Madame C.J. Walker, built a hair empire based on her secret formula for straightening African American hair, one that thrived well beyond her life. By the time of her death in 1919, she had amassed an estimated fortune of over \$1,000,000 helping black women straighten and style their hair.¹²¹ Images and ads in black newspapers and magazines, such as *The Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and the *The Brownies’ Book* were filled with women who had smooth and well-coiffed hair; in addition to the child periodical of *The Brownies’ Book*, with impressive readerships and circulations, it is almost

¹²⁰ Malcolm X, 7, 37.

¹²¹ Obituary of Madame C.J. Walker, *The New York Times*, May 26, 1919.

certain children viewed these images from a variety of sources even if they did not read the words.

African Americans Push to Offer Alternatives

African Americans, too, were well aware of their negative portrayal in media; they also knew it could negatively impact their self-identity and that it worked to reinforce the established racial hierarchy. Cyril V. Briggs, editor and publisher of *The Crusader* magazine (a short lived but radical black publication around 1920), emerged as one of the earliest and most outspoken critics of the Aunt Jemima logo, as well as all negative portrayals of African Americans in advertising.¹²² In addition to vilifying the white press for such images, he also took to task the black press for running ads for products such as hair straighteners and skin bleaching creams, claiming they were traitorous to the race. While Briggs was one of the most vocal critics, many African American leaders recognized the harm these images caused and strove to offer their race alternatives.

Certainly, the white advertising world was not going to alter their campaigns. While black Americans were gaining a reputation as brand name consumers – prepackaging protected them from unscrupulous merchants and brand names were one place they could hold equal status with whites – they did not have the purchasing power to influence companies' marketing strategies.¹²³ Additionally, advertisers were well aware that white consumers would not buy a

¹²² Manring, 151-155.

¹²³ Paul R. Mullins, *Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 172 – 174.

product that was associated with African Americans in any role except negative. In the 1940s, for example, the Pepsi Company attempted to target black consumers with ads showing African Americans in a favorable light. Amidst swift backlash, however, president Walter Mack quickly changed his stance claiming, “he no longer wanted to be known as a black drink, using a famously objectionable epithet.”¹²⁴ Similarly, the Pillsbury Company declined sponsoring black actor Fred Silvera, with an ad executive stating, “If it became a popular perception that a Pillsbury product was a ‘nigger flour,’ the company would be severely hurt in sales.”¹²⁵

W.E.B. DuBois strove to redefine both the image of African Americans in society and blacks’ image, hopes, and aspirations for themselves. Perhaps more than any other black leader of the era, he stressed that the path of racial uplift necessitated that African Americans needed to present and conduct themselves with refinement and dignity. It is not surprising, then, that as editor of *The Crisis*, the literary arm of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People he made sure the images and ads within promoted those ideals. *The Crisis* was a staple in many African American homes; its circulation reached 100,000 by 1920.¹²⁶ In stark contrast to the stereotypical, negative images showing African Americans in oppressed and subservient positions found in white dominated advertising, ads in *The Crisis* contained images of black men in suits, of women in finery; it contained ads for universities of higher education and for music lessons. *The Crisis* did more than just indirectly provide positive imagery in the home; it actively promoted it.

¹²⁴ Douglas Martin, “Edward F. Boyd Dies at 92; Marketed Pepsi to Blacks,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2007.

¹²⁵ Kern-Foxworth, 38.

¹²⁶ “modernism began in the magazines.” The Modernist Journals Project, (Brown University & The University of Tulsa), http://www.modjournal.org/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=crisiscollection (accessed October 11, 2016).

The December, 1914 edition included an ad for a brand new Negro picture from the Douglas Specialties Co. titled "A Mother's Love;" it depicted a "beautiful young colored mother fondling her sturdy babe." Described as "rich and elegant," the ad stated, "every home should have a copy hanging on its wall." While it is not clear how many copies of this particular picture were sold, the ad states sales of another offering by this company exceeded 25,000 - in all likelihood the picture did indeed hang in many African American homes, providing a feminine and tender contrast to the crude mammy stereotypes that so often depicted African American motherhood. Physically the woman in the picture is the antithesis of the classic mammy; where the mammy is fat and sexless, she is beautiful and slender, with long flowing hair, styled with a ribbon that accents her femininity; while the mammy stereotype is loud and often crude, the expression of the woman in the plaque exudes gentleness and serenity.



Figure 4. "A Mother's Love" Plate Ad (Courtesy of *The Crisis*)¹²⁷

¹²⁷ *The Crisis*, December 1914, 110.

The significance of the “A Mother’s Love” picture was not simply in its physical contrast to the mammy image, but in its implications of the role and status of black women and children. In *Slave in a Box*, historian M.M. Manring argues that the perpetuation of the mammy image strove to “make them [black women] just what they used to be, according to popular myth, and thus implicitly to make white men and women just what they used to be, too.”¹²⁸ This new image of a black woman uplifted her to a refined position of femininity and motherhood; instead of caring for white people’s children or leaving her own in the care of others to work for white people, she was at home caring for her own child. The “sturdy babe” stood in stark contrast to negative images of black children that pervaded advertising, media, and literature.¹²⁹

DuBois realized black children were especially vulnerable to the pervasive, degrading depictions of African Americans in white society, not only in advertising but in school, public spaces, and virtually all other areas of life. He was particularly concerned that these images and depictions would create a lack of self-esteem and ambition that would define them as adults, and therefore the race overall. While its publication run was brief, only two years, the intent of its creator was clear: DuBois attempted to offer African American children a visual, real alternative to the stereotypes of their race they were confronted with in daily life.

At the same time, white society was striving to cling to the established racial hierarchy. In the twenties, these racial concerns were further intertwined with fears of shifting gender and moral issues as well; all these fears were reflected in advertising. In *Selling Culture*, Ohmann

¹²⁸ Manring, 23.

¹²⁹ The Crisis Magazine: Timeline,” <http://www.thecrisismagazine.com/timeline.html> (accessed December 1, 2012).

states, “advertisements enter significantly into the fabric of meanings that constitutes culture... By glossing these meanings, ads also explain how to participate in society.”¹³⁰ Williams’ hegemonic culture’s tactics to solidify “the dominance and subordination of particular classes” clearly extended far beyond literature; white dominated advertising served to reinforce and maintain the status quo in African Americans’ participation in society.¹³¹

Much like the literature children read, white dominated advertising, film, and the entertainment industry sent clear messages to African American children about how white people viewed their race, and what their expected participation in society should be – a participation that was firmly subservient to whites in all areas. It also offered horribly stereotypical characterizations of their race, characterizations that hurt and caused feelings of shame in children. Like the little girl who rejected and was upset by the character of Little Sambo, Malcom X was mortified and “felt like crawling under the rug” when he saw the character of Butterfly McQueen in *Gone With the Wind*.¹³² Those characterizations of black people were clearly ones that these children rejected and that upset them – they starkly stood at odds with the messages that their homes and African American leaders were sending them. African American children received very inconsistent messages about the African American race, what it meant to be black in America, and what their role in society could and should be.

African Americans recognized the goal of white dominated society to perpetuate established racial norms as detrimental to their race, to their progress as a people, and to their

¹³⁰ Ohmann, 212.

¹³¹ Harris, 6.

¹³² Malcolm X, 113.

children's developing identities, and they actively worked to combat these stereotypes. They had little power to affect the white advertising world but they could, and did, begin constructing their own marketing niche. While African Americans never escaped the negative imagery that pervaded their world, leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois worked to offer positive alternatives to the black community, and especially to their children. Actors like Herb Jeffries worked to combat the negative stereotypes children saw in film, and children like Price Cobb noticed and took pride in seeing such positive role models. Seeing Butterfly McQueen made Malcolm X ashamed of his race, but Price Cobb was awed when he saw Ellington take the stage and it profoundly affected his "personal understanding of myself ... and how I wished the world to see me."¹³³ Unfortunately, there was no way for children to escape the negative messages that inundated their world; instead, they needed to try and make sense of both of them.

One of the ways that African American children learned to try and make sense of these mixed messages was through interactions with others, especially parents. Parents taught their children about race in both direct and indirect ways; a parent might straightforwardly tell a child how to behave in a racially charged situation, or might subtly model behavior, such as quitting a job when their character has been maligned because of their race. Other children also contributed to a child's learning; siblings and playmates all impacted an African American child's developing racial identity, and their growing sense of how they fit into society. But like the messages of literature and media, the messages received from interactions with others and the experiences of childhood were often mixed and confusing. Next, this thesis will move from

¹³³ Cobbs 45-51

the larger influences of society to the more personal interactions and experiences the northern African American child encountered.

CHAPTER 4

DIRECT AND INDIRECT INSTRUCTION AND EXPERIENCES

Literature, advertising and media sent general messages about white society's view, whether truly believed or simply desired, of African American's racial identity and role in society. As mentioned, other influences in children's lives came through instruction and experiences with people and objects, and some of these were very straightforward. African American parents often gave their children direct instructions on how to conduct themselves, how to interact with adults, and how to navigate the world of race. Other experiences, such as language and games were less direct but very hurtful and confusing to black children. As Price M. Cobbs' experiences riding the public bus exemplified, navigating the racial world of the North "required a more subtle reading of the territory than was needed in the South."¹³⁴ I argue that the more integrated racial terrain of the North exposed African American children to more conflicting messages than southern black children, and that often led to hurt and confusion about who they were and their place in society. Their parents, and occasionally other children, gave them tools to navigate a confusing racial world and to define themselves in the face of negative experiences.

The World with Adults

One of the most influential factors in a child's life was simply what they were told. Parents were the most important of these influences, but other adults such as teachers and

¹³⁴ Cobbs, 55.

parents of friends directly and indirectly attempted to shape African American children's beliefs about themselves. Direct instruction in matters of race for both white and black children is well documented by many historians such as Leon Litwack, Kristina DuRocher, and Jennifer Ritterhouse. For black children in the South, much of this instruction was designed to both keep them safe and to bring pride to their race in the public eye, much like the practices of uplift espoused by leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and others. Ritterhouse defined this facet of instruction to their children as "respectable black child rearing," arguing that in addition to the above aims, it had "an additional function: to teach children to be self-defining in their own minds."¹³⁵ It provided parents a way to combat the lessons that segregation and racial etiquette aimed to instill.

In the North, "respectable black child rearing" was employed in much the same manner, although the factors of segregation and racial etiquette of the South did not come into play in nearly the same fashion. As discussed in Chapter 4, the perceived lack of life threatening repercussions for their actions allowed both parents and children to assert themselves in manners generally not seen in the South. As discussed in previous chapters, in the North, African American parents dealt with the inconsistent nature of their children's experiences; schools were often integrated, but their children were treated differently. They played with white children in their homes and in social situations, but the feeling of "otherness" was still present, especially as adolescence and the specter of sexual maturation approached.

¹³⁵ Ritterhouse, 85.

Many African American parents in the North took the firm stance that it was undignified and harmful to the advancement of their race to provoke racial conflict, but also wrong to accept unfairness or injustice because of it. According to historian Kevin H. Gaines, in addition to general characteristics such as “self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth,” racial uplift “also represented the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society.”¹³⁶ Parents had to deal with uncertain terrain in this regard; their children often got highly mixed messages from schools, teachers, and other children. Teaching their children to deal with racially diverse types of experiences while teaching them to value themselves and promote their race required diligence and a consistent message from the home.

One of the most unpredictable spaces for African American children was the school. Some were segregated, some were integrated – and moving could thrust a child from one category to another. Some had only white teachers, a few had black teachers.¹³⁷ Some teachers were highly supportive of the black children in their classroom, while others communicated horrific stereotypes and even threats to black children. Within a school, a child could have the support of some, and was still the object of hate and discrimination from others. Despite all of these inconsistencies, most parents did their utmost to provide secure and steady support and stability that countered negative experiences.

¹³⁶ Gaines, 3.

¹³⁷ For a study of schools in the North during Jim Crow, see Davison M. Douglas, *The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865 – 1954*. For personal accounts, see autobiographies Thomas Sowell, *A Personal Odyssey*; Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*; Price M. Cobbs, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement*; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir*; James P. Comer, *Maggie’s Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*.

In integrated schools teachers, and certainly administrators, were almost universally white; commonly the only African American worker a black child saw was the janitor.¹³⁸ Feelings within the black community on separate schools for African American children were mixed. Some parents believed that it was important for their children to have the example of black teachers to help foster ambition and the expectation that they could aspire to greater heights than menial jobs, as well as to protect them from the racist beliefs and prejudices that white teachers often brought into the classroom.¹³⁹ Douglas notes in *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865 – 1954*, “Many blacks favored segregation to ensure that their children were taught by black teachers ... complain[ing] that white teachers did not properly nurture the educational aspirations of their children.”¹⁴⁰ This sentiment appears to have merit, at least in some cases. Thomas Sowell recounts how his white teachers in Harlem could treat his academic prowess differently than white students, citing instances when other students were told “they had made 100 percent on the Brooklyn Tech exam and told me I had passed. A couple of weeks later, one of the other teachers leaked to me I had also made a perfect score.”¹⁴¹ Another time he fought with a teacher who had arbitrarily reduced his term grade from a 96 to a 93, although he never received a grade lower than a 95 all semester.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899; repr., Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1996), 113; also see autobiographies of Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*; Price M. Cobbs, *My American Life: From Rage to Entitlement*; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir*; James P. Comer, *Maggie’s Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*.

¹³⁹ Lasker, 101.

¹⁴⁰ Davison, 109.

¹⁴¹ Sowell, 35

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 41.

Not all African American parents agreed with that assessment of what would best serve their children's educational goals. Maggie Comer was well aware of the prejudices some white teachers showed towards her children; when one teacher refused to ever call on her daughter in oral exercises, she went and bought the books herself and supplemented her daughter's learning at home.¹⁴³ Despite these obstacles, when she was approached about her children going to an all-black school, with all black teachers, she responded, "No, I don't think so. I don't think we would have the same facilities and a band and all. I figure we'd get the leftovers."¹⁴⁴ Many African American families did not have any choice, and a move could thrust a child from segregated to integrated schools. Paul Robeson attended both segregated and integrated schools, depending on where the family was living and what grade he was in.¹⁴⁵ There was great uncertainty and diversity in the educational experiences of many northern African American children, but integration and prejudice in the classroom often went hand in hand.

In the 1920s, one integrated school system in Pennsylvania was so prejudiced in the treatment of its African American students that the local African American branch of the Y.W.C.A. and the Negro's Protective Association appealed to the Board of Education to address the issue. They cited the fact that without any teachers of color their children felt "no incentive in going through school ... since they could be nothing but servants after they finish school."¹⁴⁶ But perhaps the more immediate and distressing issue was the racist attitudes and direct speech of some teachers to their young students. A social worker reported that while

¹⁴³ Comer, 65.

¹⁴⁴ Comer, 66-7.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (1958; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Kindle edition, 517-535.

¹⁴⁶ Lasker, 101.

punishing an African American student, a teacher told his student that he should be sent back to the South where the KKK could take care of him, and “if he had his choice, he would send all the Negro boys back there so they could be “lynched,” as that was the thing they deserved.”¹⁴⁷ To protect their children from these horrific types of dialogue this African American community requested a black teacher to teach the black students – a request that was denied.

Many northern African American parents had to help their children navigate their uncertain status in integrated schools. They were tasked with fostering the ideals of respectability and dignity in an environment that often treated them without those ideals. James Comer fought with another boy and was defended by his mother; Thomas Sowell fought with a teacher because he recognized that there was a limit to their power over his body. But some parents taught their children to restrain their actions and instead allow the parents to handle altercations in the school setting. Price M. Cobbs grew up in Los Angeles in the 1930s and went to an overwhelmingly white school; he estimates that at Trinity Street School there were no more “than ten black kids in the entire school, out of a student body totaling six hundred.”¹⁴⁸ Drawing from her conversations with other black mothers who told her of their children being singled out for physical punishment, Cobbs’ mother gave him very specific instructions on how to handle the situation should he ever be mistreated by anyone at the school: he was to immediately come home and tell her about it.

Her concerns came to fruition when Cobbs was in third grade. While playing with a white student there ensued an altercation. The teacher made no attempt to learn what

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Cobbs, 33.

happened and instead immediately slapped Cobbs. Remembering the words of his mother which he understood as “law,” he instantly left the school and ran home and informed her what had happened. She immediately went down to the school and marched into the classroom without knocking. Addressing the teacher in front of the class she pointedly stated, “Mrs. Shields, you slapped my son.” As the teacher “feigned innocence and surprise,” Mrs. Cobbs informed her she was never “to lay a finger on him or any of my children ever again.” She led weight to her words by reminding the teacher her husband was a respected doctor and threatened to speak to the principal and pursue legal action if another incident occurred. Cobbs recollected, “There was no retribution afterward from Mrs. Shields. I was not afraid of her. My mother had taken care of that.”¹⁴⁹

More often children needed to respond to these situations without the intervention of their parents; to this end, many African American parents gave their children explicit instructions on how to conduct themselves. These instructions intended to teach their children how to succeed, but also how not to internalize many of the negative messages they heard. Perhaps colored by the fact he himself had been a slave, Paul Robeson’s father urged restraint, telling his son, “Climb up if you can – but don’t act ‘uppity.’ Always show that you are *grateful*. Even if what you have gained has been wrested from unwilling powers, be sure to be grateful lest ‘they’ take it all away. Above all, do nothing to give them cause to fear you.” He also taught young Paul that to be considered equal with a white man, he would in fact have to be superior.¹⁵⁰ James Comer recalls the words of his parents whenever he would complain “about

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 34-5.

¹⁵⁰ Robeson, 546.

some minor unfairness, something another student got away with and I didn't, Mom would say, "Look, Johnny is white and he can do that and get away with it, but you can't." His father's words were designed to help the young boy define himself: "Don't let that bother you. The measure of a man is from here" – with his finger on his neck – "up," pointing to the top of his head. "They can't take that away from you." Like the senior Robeson, Comer's father also transmitted the life lesson that was common among African American parents: that to succeed, "You can't be just as good as the white man to get the same thing. You must be better!"¹⁵¹ Just as southern African American parents did, northern parents often did try to teach their children a form of racial etiquette to navigate their world, but as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, these lessons lacked the weight of possible violence behind them. The northern racial landscape required more nuance to understand, and to teach.

There are few examples of integrated schools employing African American teachers; however, there is some evidence to show that being taught by a person of their own race did have positive repercussions for African American children. Thomas Sowell spent his entire educational experience in the New York City public school system and he notes in all his years he only had one African American teacher, a West Indian woman. He remembered her as a "little austere and distant" but an exceptional teacher who "was plainly dedicated to getting the most out of the black kids she taught, and was openly critical of the low expectations and low standards of the white teachers."¹⁵² In his comprehensive work *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), W. E. B. DuBois cites there were about forty African American teachers in

¹⁵¹ Comer, 129-30.

¹⁵² Sowell, 20.

the Philadelphia area (out of a total population of approximately 40,000 African Americans). He states that “Save in the kindergartens, or in one or more temporary cases, they teach Negro children exclusively” and “are in nearly every case well equipped and have made good records.”¹⁵³

Despite the positive example of having African American teachers for African American students, many children who went to predominately black schools received an educational experience substandard to those of their white peers. Marshall Conway was amazed and dismayed to see the stark differences between his school and those in neighboring white communities. Lorraine Hansberry’s family fought for integrated housing, but could not spare their daughter from going to segregated schools. She notes that because “the children of the Chicago ghetto were jammed into a segregated school system” they received “one-half the amount of education prescribed by the Board of Education.”¹⁵⁴ For African American children in the North and their parents there were many variables in their education, and each one offered its own positive and negative consequences. Whichever route their children’s education took, African American parents strove to instill pride and a positive identity in their children. Parents like Maggie Comer and Mrs. Cobbs worked within the sometimes racist environment of the integrated school system, but many parents whose children suffered the indignities of a lesser education were no less diligent in teaching their children to take pride in themselves and their race. Of these lessons Lorraine Hansberry wrote, “We were also vaguely taught certain vague absolutes: that we were better than no one but infinitely superior to

¹⁵³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 113.

¹⁵⁴ Hansberry, 63.

everyone; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man; that there was nothing enormously difficult about life; that one *succeeded* as a matter of course.”¹⁵⁵

Certainly, not all African American children experienced racist teachers or a substandard education in the northern school system; however, even with supportive teachers, the racist world they navigated sent mixed messages to their worth and status in a white dominated society. In his memoir *Here I Stand*, Paul Robeson remembers many of his teachers in the integrated Somerville high school that he attended with great fondness. He writes the music teacher Miss Vosseller “took a special interest in training my voice. Anna Miller, English teacher, paid close attention to my development as a speaker and debater” and “Miss Vandever, who taught Latin, seemed to have no taint of racial prejudice.”¹⁵⁶ The principal of the school, however, “made no effort to hide his bitter feelings. The better I did, the worse his scorn ... when the music teacher made me soloist of the glee club it was against the principal’s furious opposition.”¹⁵⁷ As was the case with many African American children who maneuvered their way through the northern school systems, based on his race Paul Robeson got many conflicting messages about his innate worth and possibilities, and how his blackness was expected, or not expected, to define him.

Dorothy Height was a renowned educator and activist for both civil rights and women. She was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1912, but her family moved to Rankin, Pennsylvania

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 48.

¹⁵⁶ Robeson, 542.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 550.

when she was four years old. Although there was “a clear hierarchy” with native-born whites occupying the top spot and southern born African Americans the lowest, she states, “Rankin was a lucky choice.”¹⁵⁸ The population of Rankin was largely foreign born and the school was integrated with all colors and classes of the community. While racial prejudice was clearly present in the community – Height recalls her first sting of racism at eight years old, when her best friend, a blonde, blue eyed white child told her she could no longer play with her because she was a “nigger” – the school environment itself seemed to operate free from most racial prejudices.¹⁵⁹ Height was an accomplished student and when she was fifteen, she won the Western Pennsylvania High School Impromptu Speech Contest and qualified for the state finals, which were held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Her mother, who was unable to accompany her, must have understood the possible ramifications of the trip, for she sent Dorothy off with the direct instruction, “No matter what happens Dorothy, just hold *yourself* together.”

Her mother’s fears were not unfounded. When she reached the hotel with her Latin teacher, Miss Mohr, and the principal, the hotel where she was to get ready for the competition turned them away, stating “they did not know [she was] a Negro girl.”¹⁶⁰ The contest was that evening, her principal was “red as a beet” and Miss Mohr was uncertain how they would get her ready for the competition in a strange town - circumstances that could have rattled Dorothy to the core. Instead, however, she writes, “I heard my mother’s words: “Dorothy, just hold yourself together.” I told Miss Mohr not to worry.” She suggested they

¹⁵⁸ Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003) 3.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

could find a delicatessen where she could buy ingredients to make a sandwich, and then she could then dress in a Carnegie Hall ladies' room – suggestions that were followed. Dorothy Height went on to win first place at the competition, somewhat ironically using her experience at the hotel to highlight her message of respect and peace. Rather than be shaken by her experience of discrimination, she drew on her mother's words to give her strength and resolve, and like Ritterhouse's parents who practiced "respectable black child rearing," her mother's words helped Dorothy define herself rather than be defined by her circumstances or the messages of others.

The World with Children

Interactions with children could also send the African American child through a conflicting sea of messages and interactions. For children, the first sting of racism often cut the deepest, a concept reported by countless African American authors. Leon Litwack also explored this concept in depth in the chapter "Baptisms" in his sweeping account of the southern black experience during Jim Crow, *Trouble in Mind*. Based on those accounts, this truism is reported by northern African American children with much the same emotions as their southern counterparts, although without the veil of fear to color it. In the South, "from an early age, black children knew that they had to be cautious when playing with whites; as one young black girl told Charles S. Johnson, "if you play with white children and hurt 'em you might get into trouble.'"¹⁶¹ African American children in the North may not have had the

¹⁶¹ Ritterhouse, 164.

repercussions of “trouble” looming over their head, but their experiences with language, toys, and play in a white dominated culture had much in common with African American children in the South.

As in the South, exclusion, hurtful language, and games were some of the processes through which white children imparted lessons in race, whether intentional or unintentional.¹⁶² Perhaps it was in this sphere, the world of children, that African American parents in the North found themselves least able to protect their children. They could attempt to avoid public spaces that subjected their children to the indignities of segregation, they could aide their children when they were faced with injustice or harm at school, but the world of children offered them little opportunity to intervene. To give their children the tools and confidence to navigate their world, and support them when the first stings came, was the best most parents could do.

As with young Dorothy Height and young James Comer, the word “nigger” was often the first exposure a northern African American child had to the fact that they were perceived as different by their white peers. Although they often didn’t know precisely what the word meant, the negative connotation was unmistakable. Raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, playwright August Wilson attended an integrated school, but was not fortunate enough to be welcomed or accepted. White classmates left notes on his desk that read, “Go home nigger.”¹⁶³ Tommie Smith was raised in central California and went to integrated schools there.

¹⁶² Kristina DuRocher extensively explores how white children used these mechanisms to help sustain the racial hierarchy of the South in *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the South*.

¹⁶³ Randall Kennedy, *NIGGER: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 22.

Smith went on to become an Olympic gold medalist in track and field in 1968; in a 1991 interview he discussed his childhood, recounting, “One day my mother gave me a *nickel*. And I bought an ice-cream cone. And this white kid, Wesley, knocked it out of my hand and said, 'Niggers don't eat ice cream.' I didn't know *what* to do. I went home and pondered it in my heart.” Despite the fact that four decades had passed, that he had become an Olympic gold medalist and gone on to live a full life, Smith not only remembered the incident, but the name of the child who offended him and the feelings it created. He goes on to tell how seeing the child three years later, he attacked and beat him. Black children understood when they were being insulted and the negative connotation of the word, and were appropriately hurt and offended – and the feelings stayed with them.¹⁶⁴

This understanding of the word “nigger” gave rise to powerful emotions in adulthood, emotions that were rooted in the pains of hearing it as a child. In 1940, the esteemed black writer and poet Langston Hughes wrote, “The word *nigger* to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull. Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter. The word *nigger*, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America. ... The word *nigger* in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word *nigger* in the mouths of foreman on the job, the word *nigger* across the whole face of America!”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Kenny Moore “A Courageous Stand: In '68, Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos Raised Their Fists for Racial Justice,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 5, 1991, 68.

¹⁶⁵ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea, An Autobiography* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940), 268 – 69.

There was little African American parents could do to protect their children from the word nigger and its connotation except to counter the message it sent with one of pride and dignity, and a bit of reality for the world their children had to live in. After Dorothy Height's best friend told her she could not play with her anymore because she was a nigger, she went home stunned and crying and asked her mother, "Am I really a nigger?"¹⁶⁶ Her mother assured that she was a nice and smart girl, and told her "there are many things that you can do. If Sarah Hay doesn't want to play with you, just think of all the friends you have who do want to play with you." Her mother speculated that Sarah didn't know what the word meant, although her usage indicates she was aware it was a mean and hurtful thing to say and that she was attempting to stratify her relationship with Dorothy into superior and inferior.

While Dorothy was directly instructed by her mother to avoid the situation with her playmate, African American children employed that tactic on their own as well. In a story which is similar to many African American children, Price Cobbs recalled the first time the word was used against him; the fact it was used by his best friend further deepened the wound. In *My American Life* he described how his best friend used it suddenly and without foreshadowing, wielding the word like a sword designed to cut him down. Cobbs described his friendship with his white neighbor Frankie as close and unaffected by race – just two boys who played and hung out together. One day, a dispute arose over a toy shovel; as Price grabbed the shovel the words, "You nigger" erupted from Frankie's mouth. Cobbs eloquently describes the painful gamut of emotions that flooded him, writing, "The words invaded me with their dark

¹⁶⁶ Height, 12.

aggressiveness. Frankie suddenly was the enemy, The Other.” In the world of adults, Cobbs’ mother was able to afford her son protection from the pain and discrimination he was subject to, but in the world of children Price had to navigate the terrain alone. He employed one of the few tactics that would preserve his, and his race’s dignity: he removed himself from the situation, rather permanently. He stood up and went home, and recalls, “Frankie and I seldom, if ever, played together after that day.”¹⁶⁷

Occasionally, instruction in navigating the often hurtful and demeaning world African American children dealt with came from other children. While Paul Robeson’s father taught his son to always show restraint when dealing with white people, his brother Reed taught him a much different lesson, instructing him, “Don’t ever take low. Stand up and hit them harder than they hit you!”¹⁶⁸ In other cases, children helped children learn the specific behaviors of navigating integrated spaces. In *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York City*, Mary White Ovington tells the story of watching a line of black kindergarten children walk by, and seeing them be pelted with sticks and called “nigger” by a group of Irish boys. At the tender age of four, Ovington recounts, the lead child had already learned to navigate by not reacting. “Don’t notice them,” she told the child beside her. “Walk straight ahead.”¹⁶⁹

However, children’s use of the word ‘nigger’ was not always with conscious malicious intent; Malcolm X recalls going to school with white children in Lansing, Michigan around 1930.

¹⁶⁷ Cobbs, 39-40.

¹⁶⁸ Robeson, Jr., 12-13

¹⁶⁹ Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York City* (1911; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1969) 4; David I. Macleod, *The Age of Child: Children in America, 1890 – 1920* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998) 136.

He remembers the white people in the area “didn’t mind” because there were so few African Americans in the area that they didn’t pose any threat and “white people in the North usually would ‘adopt’ just a few Negroes.” Following the example of their parents, the white children “didn’t make any great thing about us, either,” he continued, but “They called us ‘nigger’ and ‘darkie’ and ‘Rastus’ so much that we thought those were our natural names. But they didn’t think of it as an insult; it was just the way they thought about us.”¹⁷⁰ As a regular and accepted part of most white American’s vocabulary, the word also found its way into children’s world of play in games and rhymes,. One of the most well-known rhymes shouted in schoolyards was:

Eeney-meeney-miney-moe!
Catch a nigger by the toe!
If he hollers, let him go!
Eeeney-meeney-miney-moe!

Another variant of the rhyme ends: “If he hollers, make him pay, Fifty dollars every day!”

Some rhymes seemed to transmit moral aspersions about African Americans:

(So and so)’s mad and I am glad
And I know what will please him-
A bottle of ink to make him stink,
A bottle of wine to make him shine,
And a little nigger (colored) girl to squeeze him!

This rhyme not only disparaged the morality of black girls, but also insulted them because, “the accusation of desiring the caresses of a “little nigger girl,” however obviously unfounded and absurd, could only be humiliating and insulting.”¹⁷¹ Price Cobbs noted the first joke he remembered was from about five years old: “Niggers and flies I do despise and the more I see

¹⁷⁰ Malcolm X, 87.

¹⁷¹ Kennedy, 6; Kenneth Porter “Racism in Children’s Rhymes and Sayings, Central Kansas, 1910 – 1918,” *Western Folklore*, 24, No. 3 (July 1965): 193.

Niggers, the more I like flies.” He makes clear that his parents and other adults specifically confronted these aspersions against the black character as being untrue and only from the white mind, but such ‘jokes’ were part of an ongoing assault that taught him early “that the society in which I lived considered people like me lazy and dumb, loud and violent, irresponsible and dishonest. Such notions seemed to come from everywhere.”¹⁷²

Robin Bernstein argued that the toys, games, and play of children were scripts that both formed and reinforced racial identities in their participants. Bernstein defines scripts as, “not a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation.”¹⁷³ The ‘scripts’ that many toys and games constructed was one of worthlessness of the African American race, and that their role was one of amusement for the white race. In the 1930s the Marx Company produced a wind-up toy of a stereotypical black man with his mouth open, looking distressed. He is holding a chicken in one hand a dog is biting him from behind. The name of the toy was “Hey! Hey!! The Chicken Snatcher;” the box the toy came in had pictures of a black man running away from a farm with a chicken in his hand being bitten by a white dog, and being pursued by a white farmer with a gun. The toy clearly aimed to reinforce the stereotype of black people as amoral thieves, and white people as having to defend themselves from African Americans’ perceived ‘moral defects’.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Cobbs, 10.

¹⁷³ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 11-12.

¹⁷⁴ For discussion of toys and the reinforcement of African American stereotypes, see Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*, esp. 74-79.

A particularly troubling aspect of many of the toys was they specifically made a game out of aiming for black people – that is, black people were literally considered target practice. Produced in the 1940s, the cork gun shooting gallery had four circular targets, each with the hideous caricature face of a black man on it; under each face was a name: Joe, Pete, Rastus, and Sambo. Another game made by the Milton Bradley Company in the 1910s was called “Darkey Ten Pins;” this game came with three balls and five stand up cardboard cut outs of a caricature black man holding a watermelon. The box showed a red lipped, white eyed, poorly dressed black man (as well as bowling pins) flying backwards through the air after being hit by a ball.¹⁷⁵ The concept of a black person as a target was so popular that fairs and festivals had amusement games such as “Hit the Coon” and “African Dodger.”

Children didn’t necessarily need a manufactured game to pretend to hit black people. A prime target for aggression and playing out ‘scripts’ was a simple doll. Florence Kate Upton created the Golliwog, a popular black doll and book character, in 1894. Golliwog dolls were stereotypical caricatures of a black minstrel doll the Upton children played with that had “very dark, often jet black skin, large white-rimmed eyes, red or white clown lips, and wild, frizzy hair.” The minstrel doll was “treated roughly by the Upton children.” Upton recounts, “Seated upon a flowerpot in the garden, his kindly face was a target for rubber ball ... , the game being to knock him over backwards ... We knew he was ugly!”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ “Darkey Ten Pins.” Milton Bradley Co., ca. 1910, Lot 638. <http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/8358458>.

¹⁷⁶ Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, “The Golliwog Caricature,” <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/> (accessed September 14, 2012); Porter, 192.

Historian Kenneth Porter remembers growing up in central Kansas in the early 1900s; he writes that a homemade slingshot, commonly known as a nigger shooter, “next to his pocket knife, was then a boy’s most prized possession.” While he stresses that the slingshots were never actually employed on people of any color, merely on inanimate objects or perhaps an unlucky sparrow, surely the name itself hurt and angered African American children. As with the word nigger and the playground rhymes, toys also sent the same clear message to black children: you are inferior to whites, you don’t have worth, you are bad.

There is no way to know the extent that African American children in the North were exposed to such toys and games. While it is doubtful parents had a part in such exposure, the integrated nature of white and black children’s play, combined with their popularity in culture, suggests they did have to deal with these images and invited “scripts” of play. Much like hearing the word “nigger” from a friend, there was little they could do to control the white dominated culture. But like the darker skinned children who refused to “perform” their assigned subservient roles when playing porter, they could refuse to participate.¹⁷⁷ In *Racial Innocence*, historian Robin Bernstein tells the story of Daisy Turner, a young African American girl who grew up in Vermont, who turned a black doll and school assignment from “a tool of coercion into one of resistance.”¹⁷⁸

Around 1891, when Daisy was about eight, her teacher assigned each of her students a doll to represent a particular country and an accompanying passage to recite in a school pageant; Daisy’s doll, Dinah, represented Africa. For reasons that were not recorded, Daisy

¹⁷⁷ For further reading of this incident, see Ch. 2, p. 53.

¹⁷⁸ Bernstein, 194.

wanted no part of Dinah or the passage from the moment it was assigned. Her father insisted that she follow her teacher's instructions, but on the day of the pageant Daisy became more and more irate at the thought. She tells of looking at the other girls with "lovely" dolls dressed in "white and ribbons" and at the last minute she rebelled and recited a very different poem of racial defiance and resistance. Daisy remembered her feelings stating:

Well, the more I thought of it ... I begin thinking what a fool I'd been to let my father work me into taking this black doll and saying it was all right, and thinking it was all right 'cause he said so. With my dolls at home, my white dolls, and my white dress and everything, I could have been the best. Instead of that, there I was, the old school dress they all had seen, my hair braided instead of being fluffed and everything. I was angry.

Bernstein notes, "Daisy Turner's story raises as many questions as it answers. Exactly what was it about the doll, the poem, and the school pageant that angered the girl and provoked her resistance?"¹⁷⁹ Those reasons appear lost to history; but the fact that northern black children had strong and often negative reactions to toys, games, and children's play remains.

African American children in the North dealt with a barrage of mixed messages in their lives from the direct and indirect instructions they received and the racial world they were expected to navigate. Be proud of your race, but don't act 'uppity'. Don't be the cause of conflict with white people, but don't let them treat you unfairly. Even when the people in a child's life were consistent, as with Dorothy Height and her trip to Harrisburg, the environment they functioned in could quickly shift under their feet and force them to quickly adapt to an entirely new racial landscape. Even when they were in familiar and perceived 'safe' racial settings such as school or playing with a friend, the specter of racial vulnerability could strike

¹⁷⁹ Bernstein, 194-6.

without warning in the form of discrimination, language or games. While the more integrated society of the North offered many African American children a seemingly more racially egalitarian environment, it could vanish in an instant, and there was seldom any way to predict when or where these racial assaults would appear.

African Americans parents did their best to protect their children from racial abuse, and like southern parents worked to help them define their own worth rather than internalize any negative messages communicated to them about their race. Just as the African American community strove to offer their children alternate literature and media to help instill racial pride and other qualities of uplift, parents tried to offer words and actions that communicated those attributes as well. In addition to personal dignity and self-definition, many lessons were designed to help children learn to navigate the racial landscape on their own. Dorothy Height's mother knew that leaving the relative safety of Rankin for Harrisburg came with many racial risks and tried to prepare her daughter, telling her no matter what happened, to keep herself "together." Their children had to learn to live in a world that would put them in contact with white people, in a society that considered them inferior but did not show it overtly. In the South, the segregation and strict racial code white and blacks lived by in their personal interactions, while oppressive, offered a sense of security and consistency that the North did not.

Integrated physical spaces such as neighborhoods and schools were often racial minefields for northern African American children. Unlike most of their southern counterparts, white and black children played together in each other's homes, often went to school together, and attended parties together. Building on some of the lessons they learned from adults and

children, in the next chapter this thesis will look at how children learned about race and the experiences they encountered in some of these spaces. It will shift the focus from exploring children's experiences to the more concrete world of what they saw, such as homes and schools. As the witnessing of violence was a powerful tool of racial control in the South, and tangible reminders were part of the racial landscape, it will also contrast the role violence played in the development of racial behavior in the North and South.

CHAPTER 5

OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

What did northern African American children see and experience? Many factors in developing racial awareness were easily observable: physical spaces such as homes and schools, violence against African Americans, justice – or often the lack of justice. African American children in the North had many mixed messages from what they observed. On one hand, segregation in the North was rarely de jure, and many public spaces chose not to segregate. However, as migrations from the South brought more and more African Americans to the North, de facto segregation increasingly became the norm, especially in the realms of housing, schools, and some public spaces.¹⁸⁰ That is not to say it was ubiquitous. For many African American children in the North, there was great variability and inconsistency in these spaces. Additionally, how people and society treated them was very unpredictable, especially in the realm of physical violence. This chapter will examine what children saw in their day to day lives, and the different ways they were treated. It will also look at physical violence against African Americans in the North, and how it differed from southern blacks' experiences. Their racial world, and their place in it, was very difficult to navigate. Integrated educational opportunities and housing often caused confusion and hurt in African American children, but the lack of fear of violent repercussions gave them and their parents confidence to stand up for themselves. However, repercussions could come in other forms; as with previously discussed

¹⁸⁰ For further reading on the changing racial landscape of the North in housing, schools, and public spaces, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*; Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865 – 1954*; Kenneth L. Kusmar, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870 – 1930*.

areas of their lives, the racial world of the North was inconsistent and sent many mixed messages.

Physical Spaces

For many African American children, the homes and neighborhoods they lived in stood as tangible proof of the stark disparity between themselves and white children. The housing market was one aspect of northern life that was often staunchly segregated, particularly in urban areas; already confined to small, less desirable areas than whites occupied, the Great Migration exacerbated an already bad situation. Sociologists St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton documented the inequity in black life in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City, Vol. II*, concluding that while there was great socioeconomic diversity within the black community, overall African American life remained disadvantaged, with “higher rates of sickness and death ... and the lowest average incomes.”¹⁸¹ As the influx of African Americans from the South increased, space as well as the quality of the housing reached crisis proportions in many areas; even garages and sheds became homes for people. The renowned black writer Langston Hughes and his mother moved to Cleveland, Ohio after he graduated from grammar school; in *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, he describes many of the difficulties his mother faced finding adequate housing there. The accommodations were both meager and expensive for African Americans:

White people on the east side of the city were moving out of their frame houses and renting them to Negroes at double and triple the rents they could receive from others. An eight-room house with one bath would be cut up into apartments and five or six

¹⁸¹ Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis, Vol. II*, 382.

families crowded into it, each two-room kitchenette apartment renting for what the whole house had rented for before.¹⁸²

Historian Kenneth L. Kusmer studied housing issues and socioeconomic status in Cleveland during this period in *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870 – 1930*, establishing that the situation Hughes and his mother encountered was prevalent throughout not only Cleveland but urban areas throughout the North. He documents that “white hostility and an economic barrier...kept over 97 percent of Cuyahoga County’s black population within Cleveland” and furthering his study to other areas, argues that “by the eve of the Depression, the vast majority of urban centers outside the South had clearly defined black ghettos.”¹⁸³ Especially when situated within large cities such as New York, Chicago, or Cleveland, the environment African American children of the North grew up in was usually starkly differentiated from those of white children, and the disparity clearly favored white people. The reality of most urban, black children’s general surroundings, cramped and meager at best but often impoverished and impecunious, surely sent a clear message of inequality to them. As an adult, noted African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry attests, “... when we speak of the scars, the marks that the ghettoized child carries through life. To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten – or deliberately cheated of one’s birthright – at best.”¹⁸⁴

As with many facets of racial oppression and discrimination, adults practiced agency to try and improve their circumstances, which the entire black community, including children,

¹⁸² Hughes, 27.

¹⁸³ Kusmer, 165, 172.

¹⁸⁴ Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: An Informal Autobiography of Lorraine Hansberry* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1970), 63.

bore witness to. One of the most visible of these fights occurred in the economically desperate times of Depression Era Chicago. Lorraine Hansberry was the noted playwright of a “Raisin in the Sun,” a play that chronicled the struggles of an African American family in inner Chicago as they tried to better their circumstances under the cloud of racial segregation. Her writing drew heavily from her own childhood; Lorraine was born in Chicago in 1930, to Nannie Louise Hansberry (a schoolteacher) and Carl Hansberry, a successful real estate broker. In 1937, Carl Hansberry bought a house in the white neighborhood of Washington Park; the violent backlash from the white community compelled Hansberry to take legal action to fight the restrictive covenants in place restricting African American home ownership. Nearly thirty years later, in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, Lorraine wrote a letter to the editor of the New York Times eschewing “proper” forms of protest over “radical.” In it she recalls what she endured as a small child during her father’s fight:

howling mobs surrounded our house. One of their missiles almost took the life of the then eight-year old signer of this letter. My memories of this “correct” way of fighting white supremacy in America include being spat at, cursed and pummeled in the daily trek to and from school. And I also remember my desperate and courageous mother, patrolling our house all night with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court.¹⁸⁵

Her father “won” the court case with headlines of the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender* celebrating, “Hansberry Decision Opens 500 New Homes to Race: Court Holds Covenants Non Existent,” and concluding that “the decision has a broad social significance in that it will aid in relieving the housing congestion on the South side of Chicago

¹⁸⁵ Hansberry, 51.

where most of the colored people reside.”¹⁸⁶ But like the slave of W. E. B. DuBois’ famous quote, African Americans looking for greater housing opportunities in Chicago stood for a brief moment in the sun, and then moved back again toward the ghetto. However, the legal victory did not translate into any actual or lasting change in housing freedom for blacks; Hansberry notes “the cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my father’s early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever.” For the African American children of Chicago (and elsewhere, who read newspapers and listened to adults speak of the events) it was a dark lesson in racial inequality, and in futility. They saw the virulent hate and, undoubtedly for many, a first and rare glimpse into the life threatening violence that could accompany it. While the violence that accompanied these incidents was relatively rare, the lack of justice for African Americans seems less so. Throughout these injustices, however, many African American parents repeated many of the tenets of racial uplift: to always act with dignity, to stand up for yourself without endangering yourself, and to never internalize the messages of inequality being thrust upon you by white society and rule.

Housing was not the only difference where young African American children noted the disparity between their lives and those of white children; for some African American children, the fact that all people did not live as they did came as a sudden realization when they ventured outside their neighborhood. Marshall “Eddie” Conway, who would eventually serve as Minister of Defense of the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party, was born in

¹⁸⁶ Enoc P. Waters. “Hansberry Decision Opens 500 New Homes to Race: Court Holds Covenants Non Existent: Four-Year Old Fight is Settled by Decree of U. S. Tribunal.” *Chicago Defender*, Nov. 16, 1940.

Baltimore, Maryland in 1946. As a small child, Conway did not realize that they were poor, just that he was loved and cared for. It was not until a school function in third grade caused him to travel to another school in a white neighborhood that he saw the differences between his world and that of whites, a realization he later referred to as “something of a culture shock for my young mind.” The recently built school campus not only stood in stark contrast to his dilapidated own, but also had the added facilities of an auditorium and swimming pool. The books and materials were new and clean, whereas the ones in his school were in such bad condition so as to render them unreadable. The trip to the white school had a deep and profound effect on the young boy, causing him to lose interest in school altogether. Shortly after this incident, the landmark school desegregation federal law *Brown v. Board of Education* passed; Conway recalled how everyone believed the decision would change schooling for the better. “But nothing happened,” he writes, and “the next year I had failed for the first time.”¹⁸⁷

Certainly, not all African American families lived in ghettos and attended inferior schools. There was a tremendous amount of diversity in northern cities’ racial attitudes, especially in the realm of education. Numerous books and studies, both historically and sociologically based, discuss racial attitudes and school integration in northern cities in the years following Reconstruction until the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954. Some communities, such as Calvin, Michigan, Boston, Massachusetts and Cleveland, Ohio boasted excellent integrationist policies in their schools; some school districts even included black teachers among their regular staff, with “absolutely no tendency or inclination on the part of

¹⁸⁷ Marshall “Eddie” Conway and Dominique Stevenson, *Marshall Law: The Life and Times of a Baltimore Black Panther* (Oakland: A K Press, 2011), 10.

the school authorities to segregate them.”¹⁸⁸ In *Black Neighbors: Negroes in a Northern Rural Community*, sociologist George K. Hesslink studied the schools in Cass County, Michigan around 1900, finding that they were “integrated;” citing a letter to African American leader Booker T. Washington regarding conditions there, it states, “there is increased attendance at schools. There is more desire for education. There are six schools in Calvin in which white and black go together.”¹⁸⁹ That is not to suggest, however, that all schools in the North were integrated and free of discrimination and social disparities for black children; some northern communities did segregate their schools, and even in integrated schools there was usually discrimination in varying levels.¹⁹⁰

With growing educational and occupational opportunities (among other factors) in the North came growing stratification of the African American community, and a small but growing middle class. In his heavily statistical analysis of African American life in Chicago around 1920, sociologist Edward Franklin Frasier shows that out of 23,715 black families living in Chicago in 1920, 1,704 of them, or 7.2 percent owned their own homes.¹⁹¹ Frasier’s analysis of the data shows that while much of Chicago’s housing was staunchly segregated, there often appeared a transitional time period in a neighborhood when blacks and whites lived in close proximity to

¹⁸⁸ *The Advocate* (Cleveland, Ohio), May 15, 1915 quoted in *A Ghetto Takes Shape, Black Cleveland, 1870 – 1930*, p. 62.

¹⁸⁹ *Black Neighbors: Negroes in a Northern Rural Community*, quoted in *A Ghetto Takes Shape, Black Cleveland, 1870 – 1930*, p. 62

¹⁹⁰ For an excellent discussion of differences in integration in schools in northern communities, see Kenneth L. Kusmer’s *A Ghetto Takes Shape*, especially pages 62 – 64; also see B.D. Bassett’s discussion of schools and teachers for African American children in the article “Education and Schools in Philadelphia” in *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, January 1899, Vol. 15, No. 3, 718 – 728.

¹⁹¹ Frasier, 264.

each other.¹⁹² While the middle class environment certainly gave children advantages – safe and comfortable homes and (usually) better schools – it could also cause hurt and confusion in the young child.

One example of this positive yet sometimes confusing childhood experience can be found in the story of Maggie Comer and her family. *Maggie's American Dream* is the story (part autobiography of James P. Comer, M.D. and part biography of his mother, Maggie Comer) of an African American family living in East Chicago beginning in the 1920s, and exemplifies many of the qualities of racial uplift that helped define the growing African American middle class in the area. At sixteen, Maggie Comer came from Mississippi to East Chicago to live with her sister and brother-in-law. She was barely able to read and write, and was so far behind the other children of her age that she was never able to assimilate into northern schools. She went to work as a domestic in white people's homes and became active in the neighborhood church, where she met her future husband Hugh Comer. She described Hugh Comer "as near perfect a man as there can be. He didn't smoke. He didn't drink. He didn't care for the wild life ... and honest as the day is long."¹⁹³ He also was very serious about his convictions and goals in life: convictions such as "religion, education and just plain being somebody... He believed you could live the better way of life," and goals of owning his own home, a family, his children being educated – convictions and goals which were also exactly what she wanted in life.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Ibid. 110-112.

¹⁹³ Comer, 45.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 48.

Through thrift and hard work, they did attain their goal of home ownership in a self-described “lovely,” integrated neighborhood. She notes that the whites that lived in the area were poorer than the black residents, but most were good people and it was a place where neighbors helped neighbors. Their children grew up playing and going to school with white children, and were taught that there were good and bad people in all races. For the children, relationships with the neighbors they knew were usually uneventful in the way of race; however, living in close proximity to whites could, and did, occasionally cause pain for the children. James Comer tells the story of walking home from school the day after his fifth birthday, which due to circumstances, his mother had celebrated at the school. At the insistence of his white classmate, they took a different route home that passed by the boy’s house. As they walked by the boy called out to his mother and identified James as the birthday boy from the day before, to which she looked at James “quizzically and said, “You didn’t really have a birthday party, did you? ... Well! ... It’ the first time I ever heard of a nigger having any kind of party but a drunken brawl.” Comer admits that at the time he was too young to fully understand the weight of her words, but he “knew that she said something bad about me. I cried.”¹⁹⁵

Comer goes on to state that the event was an unusual occurrence for him and his siblings, and that they were often invited to the birthday parties of their white friends (although he notes his mother always called to let them know they were black). Other incidents also exemplify the mixed messages African American children in the North received and the

¹⁹⁵ Comer, 108.

negative feelings that resulted from these inconsistencies. While attending another friend's birthday party, Comer remembers the mother told the children that she was happy they all were there, and then to James added, "And you too." The other children seemed confused by the "special recognition – I was one of the gang – but they dismissed the comment and kept going. I understood, felt a little uncomfortable, but also kept going."¹⁹⁶

In contrast, African American children in the South rarely had to deal with the inconsistent nature of being singled out; in many areas and social situations segregation was an accepted, in some ways even encouraged, fact of life. Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse states, "whether children noticed it or not, their play was almost always limited to the interstitial spaces of white supremacy – yards, fields, creeks, kitchens, and sidewalks."¹⁹⁷ She argues that this segregation was actually a positive thing in many black children's lives, and that middle-class parents often went so far as to forbid their children to play with white children. For them it was a way to protect their children from the indignities and hurt that so often accompanied interracial situations, a protection that afforded southern African American children "greater happiness and a sense of privilege."¹⁹⁸ Short of totally isolating their children, it was a protection Hugh and Maggie Comer could not give their children. Although the fact the Maggie Comer called ahead to let parents know the race of her children shows she knew the risks and tried to protect her children, there was no way to spare them the indignities of hurtful and confusing messages from the white people they encountered in day to day life.

¹⁹⁶ Comer, 109.

¹⁹⁷ Ritterhouse, 164.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 166.

While there were some middle class integrated neighborhoods, the situation with Carl Hansberry's law suit and the white mob's aggression shows many areas were vehemently white only. These neighborhoods could be off limits not only for living accommodations, but also even for simply being present in. Malcolm X recalls as a child he often accompanied his father on meetings of the Garvey United Negro Improvement Association, which were normally held in the evening. One meeting, however, was held in what was referred to as "White City" (forty miles outside of Lansing, Michigan); it had to be held in the day, as African Americans were not even allowed on the streets there after dark.¹⁹⁹ There was a strong lack of consistency in housing and neighborhoods for African American children in the North to rely on to help them navigate the invisible racial boundaries.

Violence

Whites used violence in many forms to control the behavior of African Americans; while forms of violence, the most powerful of them lynching, were hardly unique to the South, over the course of the Jim Crow years it became more and more uniquely the domain of the South. That is not to suggest they never occurred. On Nov. 11, 1909, in Cairo, Illinois, a black man named Will "Froggie" James was accused of murdering Anna Pelly, a young white woman on the way to visit her grandmother. He was apprehended and jailed to await trial, but the people of Cairo dispensed their own "justice;" a mob charged the jail and dragged James to the center of town where they hung him from a steel arch. When the rope broke, his body was "riddled

¹⁹⁹ Malcolm X. 85.

with bullets. The body was then dragged by the rope for a mile to the scene of the crime and burned in the presence of at least 10,000 rejoicing persons.” Finally they put his head on a pole and erected it in the town square and left it there for all to see, where it, as well as the charred remains of James’ body, stayed for days.²⁰⁰ A picture (which became a postcard) taken the following day shows both black and white boys surrounding the ashes:



Figure 5. The Lynching of Will James (Courtesy of Without Sanctuary) ²⁰¹

During the Red Summer in 1919, the catalyst for the Chicago Race Riot was a perceived breach of racial etiquette – before it was over twenty-three African Americans and fifteen white people were dead. During the heat of the summer, while swimming in Lake Michigan, a black teenage boy strayed into the white section of the beach; he was hit with a stone and drowned, and the white perpetrator was not arrested. The assault, as well as the authorities’ refusal to arrest the perpetrator, ignited the tinderbox of racial tensions that had been growing all

²⁰⁰ “1909: Will James “the Froggie”, lynched in Cairo,” Nov. 11, 2009, <http://www.executedtoday.com/2009/11/11/1909-will-james-the-froggie-lynched-cairo-illinois/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2016).

²⁰¹ Without Sanctuary: The Lynching of Will James, http://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_46.html (accessed Sept. 24, 2016).

summer. The death of this boy sent a clear signal to the African Americans of Chicago, especially the children: law may not sanction racial etiquette, but a breach of it is punishable by death. And further, the white community will not prosecute crimes against black people.²⁰² What this said to an African American child about their worth in society, about their value as a human being, and about justice and fairness being rules to live by seems impossible to calculate. For southern African American children, Litwack argued that “the perceived absence of legal redress compounded the impact of these initial encounters with white violence.”²⁰³ There is little reason to believe these experiences affected northern African American children any differently.

In his autobiography, Malcolm X tells of his “earliest vivid memory,” what he refers to as “the nightmare night” in 1929. He remembers being awakened by shouts, smoke, and flames:

My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in the night in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground.

The white community considered Malcolm X’s father, a preacher and leader in the UNIA, as a troublemaker. Rather than prosecute the men who burned down the house, the police questioned Malcolm X’s father about the gun used to shoot at the white men who started the fire.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Carl Sandburg, “The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919.” Encyclopedia of Chicago, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11045.html> (accessed October 12, 2012).

²⁰³ Litwack, 15.

²⁰⁴ Malcom X, 5-6.

This incident must have transmitted many different lessons about race to the young boy. He learned that whites harbored hatred for blacks, and that it could incite them to commit violent acts, even murder, against African Americans; even women and children were not spared their wrath. The fact that his family was targeted because of his father's 'troublemaking' (he was a leader in the UNIA movement and wanted to own his own store) showed that black people who stepped out of the subservient role assigned to them by white society were perceived as threats. The fact that the white police and firemen simply watched the house burn and the refusal to prosecute also showed, as did the death of the boy in Lake Michigan ten years earlier, that blacks could not expect justice from their society.

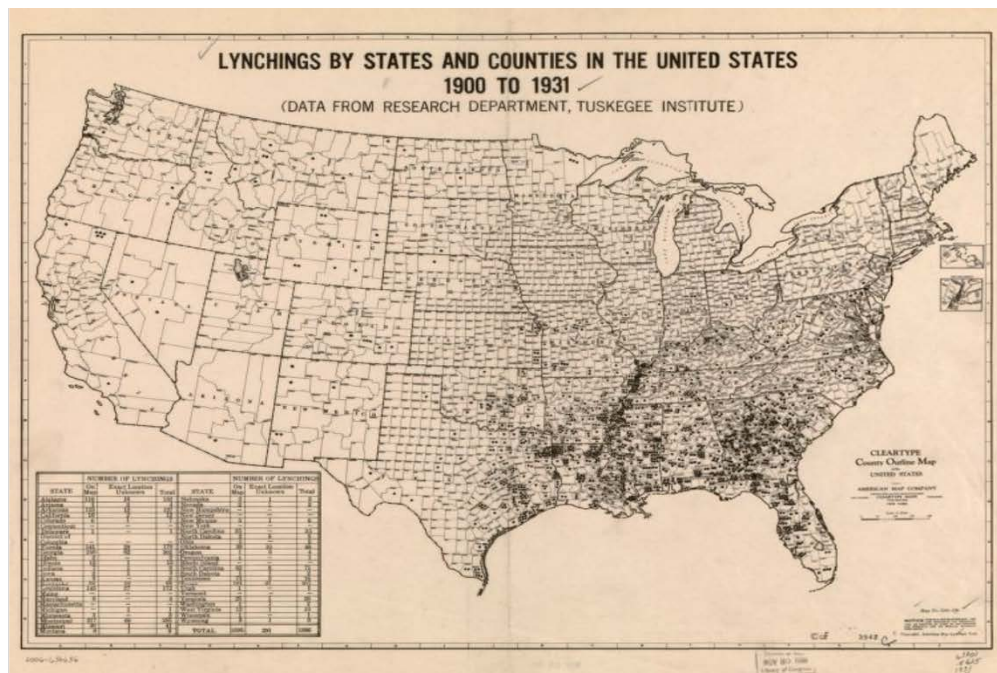


Figure 6. Lynchings by states and counties in the United States, 1900-1931 (Courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division) ²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ "Lynchings by states and counties in the United States, 1900-1931," Library of Congress: Geography and Map Division, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3701e.ct002012/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2016).

As these examples show, violence was used not only as a form of punishment, but also as a form of control. As historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage notes in *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880 – 1930*, “By resorting to mob violence, whites drew caste boundaries and reaffirmed their superiority, both to themselves and to blacks.”²⁰⁶ But as the Jim Crow era progressed, this type of violence became increasingly the domain of the South. Statistics compiled by the Tuskegee Institute show that while 1,886 lynchings occurred from 1900 – 1931, less than three dozen occurred in the North.²⁰⁷

While the threat of violence, even death, at the hands of white people did exist, African Americans in the North generally lived in relative (to their southern counterparts) safety from mob violence. In the case of James, the alleged offense had been murder. Lorraine Hansberry’s father, as well as Malcom X’s, challenged the foundation of white superiority in the adult world; the boy in Lake Michigan transgressed racial lines in the public arena of the beach. And in the world of children, history is replete with stories of racial taunts, jeers, and even fighting. But for African American children, breaches of racial etiquette in their day to day lives were unlikely to result in such frightening or harmful ways as in the South, a fact understood by their parents, and transmitted to their children in a variety of ways.

First and foremost, African American parents in the South had to keep their children safe from the very real physical threat living in the white dominated South posed. For their boys, the very real threat of lynching loomed if they didn’t follow racial etiquette, most

²⁰⁶ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880 – 1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 10.

²⁰⁷ “Lynchings by states and counties in the United States, 1900-1931,” <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3701e.ct002012/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2016).

especially toward white women – so much as direct eye contact could have horrific results. For their girls, fighting with white children could have dire consequences, and as they grew the specter of rape was a threat, especially since they almost assuredly would end up working in white families’ homes. Southern parents were tasked with helping their children learn the intricacies of the adult race world before the consequences were life threatening, and fighting back was not a long term solution. Certainly white and black children did fight, but the possibility of white backlash was always part of the equation, and African American parents were put in a tenuous and frightening position standing up for their children. It also meant that “tragically, parents had no choice but to actively suppress those very qualities in their children – self-confidence, curiosity, ambitiousness – that might be construed as insolence or arrogance by whites.”²⁰⁸

Two stories that Ritterhouse narrates in *Growing Up Jim Crow* help illustrate these points. Dorcas Carter was born in New Bern, North Carolina in 1913. She was a self-described passive child who lived in a predominantly black area; when she was nine, a couple of older girls got into a scuffle with a white girl who had called them “black niggers,” punching and shoving her. These actions terrified young Dorcas, and she ran to her aunt’s house and hid under her porch and listened to the paddy wagon slowly pass by, crying, “Oh, Lord, I think this is going to be a lynching.” As Ritterhouse astutely points out, “Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Dorcas Carter’s story is her fear of being arrested or lynched.”²⁰⁹ Another story demonstrates

²⁰⁸ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House), 2002, 83.

²⁰⁹ Ritterhouse, 176.

the difficult position African American parents in the South had defending and protecting their children. Georgia Bays was a sharecropper in Depression era Mississippi. One day her eldest son Bill came home and told her that the son of the white family they worked for had knocked his hat off of his head, to which Bill “whooped him good.” By the time the boy got home, Georgia Bays was already there with his mother; when he complained that Bill had gone after him his mother demanded what he had done to Bill, determined that Bill would not have attacked him unprovoked. As the true story unfolded, the mother dismissed the incident feeling her son had gotten what he deserved, however, Georgia Bays confessed, “Oh, I was so scared, honey. I didn’t know what to do.”²¹⁰

African American children in the North and their parents generally had a different experience when faced with physical altercations, and their responses to these situations exemplifies that fact. Paul Robeson, a famous African American actor, writer, and activist was born in 1898 to Reverend Will Robeson (a former slave) and Maria Robeson (nee Bustill), a teacher. He grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, which Robeson described as “spiritually located in Dixie” and “for all the world like any small town in the Deep South” due to the large influx of southern aristocratic types that were drawn to Princeton University. His father was highly respected in the town, and in manner and behavior embodied many characteristics of uplift: respectability, education, impeccable manners and grooming, and most of all dignity; he taught his children to shun fighting. While this lesson was taken to heart by Paul, his older brother

²¹⁰ Ibid, 175.

Reed was “restless, rebellious, scoffing at conventions and defying of the white man’s law.”²¹¹

In his autobiography *Here I Stand*, Robeson recounts:

Many was the time that Reed, resenting some remark by a Southern gentleman-student, would leap down from his coachman’s seat, drag out the offender and punish him with his fists. He always carried for protection a bag of small, jagged rocks – a weapon he used with reckless abandon whenever the occasion called for action. Inevitably there were brushes with the Law, and then my father, troubled in heart, would don his grave frock-coat and go down to get Reed out of trouble again.

Eventually, the elder Robeson did ask his son Reed to leave citing that his example to Paul was “dangerous.” But by then young Paul had already internalized the message, stating that he learned from Reed, “a quick militancy against racial insults and abuse.”²¹²

Years later when Paul was in high school, he fell under the wrath of a racist principal who punished him for any infraction he could find – as Paul’s father preferred for the school’s hand to meet out physical punishment, which included paddling. One day Paul respectfully told his father that he could do whatever he felt was necessary, but “if that hateful old principal ever lays a hand on me I’ll do my best to break his neck!” Rather than rebuking his son, Will Robeson seemed to understand and “let it go at that.” While Princeton may have appeared to Paul Robeson as “any town in the Deep South,” talk like that, as well as the actions of his brother, would have been a different matter in the true South. Reverend Robeson considered discouraging fighting in his children as a matter of respectability, but when it came to Paul standing up for himself, he felt secure enough in Paul’s safety to acquiesce to him asserting himself.²¹³

²¹¹ Robeson, 456.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Robeson, 559.

James Comer relates a story of overhearing a telephone conversation between his mother and the principal of the school concerning his brother Norman. While he could hear only her side of the conversation, the situation was clear: Norman had got into a fight with a white boy and had fought back, biting him. Maggie Comer supported her son's actions, citing that the other boy was bigger and had started the fight, stating, "I most certainly teach them to defend themselves, whatever way necessary ... I don't expect my children to let anybody walk over them." She agreed to pay the doctor bill if there was one, perhaps trying to mitigate any further problems, but refused to back down from her son's action of defending himself. This was a much different experience than four black girls in 1906 Athens, Georgia. Having been found guilty in a court for the "crime" of insulting five white girls as they were walking home from their separate, segregated schools, the girls were both fined ten dollars each and expelled from school.²¹⁴ While census records indicate the expulsion may not have been permanent, the fact remains that African American children in the North did not have much likelihood of retribution, physical or otherwise, from asserting themselves by any means they needed to when necessary. And African American parents felt comfortable enough to stand up for and protect their children as well.

A story by Thomas Sowell, retelling an incident from his fifth grade year in a Harlem school, exemplifies that children understood this as well. His teacher walked into the classroom and observing some sort of "mischief," was convinced Thomas was the culprit. He chased Thomas around the room with a ruler until the boy landed on his back. Rather than submit,

²¹⁴ Ritterhouse, 180.

Thomas “kicked him as hard as I could in the lower belly – only because my aim was bad. He doubled over in pain and threatened to take me to the principal, which I dared him to do. By this time, I knew that teachers were not supposed to do anything they felt like.” His actions would have been physically dangerous in the South, but the educational repercussions would likely also have been dire. Unlike the four African American girls who were expelled for insulting white girls, young Thomas’ outcome was quite different, as he notes, “Yet, strangely enough, this man must have seen some sign of promise in me, for the next term I was promoted to 5B1 – the first time I was put in with the best students.”²¹⁵

Perhaps no more clearly is the difference between the black experience in the South and in the North seen than in a story related by Thomas Sowell, an economist, political philosopher, and writer who, as a young boy, moved with his mother from North Carolina to Harlem in 1937. As a young teenager, like most boys in New York, Thomas developed a passion for baseball – a sport he immediately showed talent for. He describes it as an important development in his life at the time; much else was unpleasant and local games of baseball gave Thomas his first real sense of camaraderie with the neighborhood kids. He also notes that his childhood affiliations turned from white to black “almost overnight.” All races played baseball, but he notes that most teams were made up predominately of kids from one race or ethnicity, primarily white, black and Hispanic. The field that they played on accommodated both unsanctioned local games and official league games, which provided their players with a permit. The normal protocol was if league players showed up having reserved the field, they simply told

²¹⁵ Sowell, 20.

the local teams and either showed their permit or at least told them it was in the park director's office.

One afternoon when Thomas was functioning as captain of his pick-up team, a white team walked on to the field in the middle of the local kids' game, offering no permit and no explanation, acting as if Thomas' team was "invisible." Thomas' teammates begrudgingly started to leave the field, but he suddenly yelled "Don't go anywhere!" He motioned the pitcher to throw the ball, and proceeded to hit a line drive which whizzed right by the unsuspecting ear of the white shortstop. As Sowell explains, "He looked up, livid, and charged at me. A couple of his team mates grabbed him and held him, while he struggled to get loose. "Turn him loose," I said. "He'll think somebody's scared of him." He was bigger than me but I had a bat in my hands. "You wouldn't dare talk to me that way, back where I come from!" he shouted in a Southern accent. "You're not back where you come from," I said. "And you may not get back." The park director was summoned and informed the local boys that the white team did indeed have a permit, after which they "quietly walked off the field, but with our heads up."²¹⁶ Clearly, the rules of race and the consequences of breaking those rules were quite different in the North than in the South. In *Trouble in Mind* Litwack asserts, "Young blacks underwent the rites of racial passage in a variety of ways. But the specter and threat of physical violence – "the white death" – loomed over nearly every encounter."²¹⁷ There is no way to know if Thomas Sowell understood the breadth of the difference, but the relative safety

²¹⁶ Sowell, 43-45.

²¹⁷ Litwack, 12.

of the North afforded him a confidence that allowed him to stand up for himself in a manner that could have had dire consequences for southern boys.

African American children in the North saw and experienced a vast and often contradictory variety of racial lessons from their world. Housing was often substandard for African Americans, and many communities viciously opposed integration, but in some middle class neighborhoods black and white people lived side by side in relative harmony. Living in close proximity to whites sometimes was free from racial incidents, and sometimes it was not. As with virtually every facet of life for African American children in the North, they could never be sure what to expect or when the issue of race might appear. Sometimes even a white person's kindness could backfire, as when young James Comer was singled out at a birthday party.

Like people, the physical landscape was also uncertain; there was rarely any way for a child to easily ascertain which area was 'safe', and as Malcolm X and Price M. Cobbs recounted, travelling between these areas could be dangerous. While lynching and overt violence toward African Americans was largely the domain of the South, under certain circumstances, circumstances that carried nuances generally not clear in the world of children, it could erupt in the North also. Lorraine Hansberry's family told her black people were as good as white people, but when they tried to move into a white neighborhood a mob so violently harassed and intimidated them that they feared for their lives.

As with the other areas discussed in this thesis, physical spaces and the reactions of white people presented uncertain and unpredictable situations – situations that African American children often didn't expect and could not predict. For some children like Lorraine

Hansberry and Malcolm X, even their homes could not offer them safe haven from racial strife. For northern African American children, physical spaces and the experiences within them could bring the same anxiety and uncertainty as other topics discussed in this thesis; the racial landscape of the North remained unpredictable and the lessons in race were inconsistent and confusing.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The legacy of slavery and the overt segregation and violence of the South contributed to a very strict set of rules that were designed to define interactions between whites and blacks during the Jim Crow era. While the expected behaviors and parameters of interactions changed as they grew, both white and black children learned expected racial etiquette from an early age. Legislated segregation served as powerful reinforcement for these lessons. The incident of the young southern child desperately clambering to get to the back of the streetcar demonstrates that even at a very young age, she clearly understood what her expected place in society was.

The North was far from a racial utopia for African Americans, but the laws as well as unwritten rules that so clearly defined race relations in the South were much harder to understand in the North. Blacks could look whites in the eye, but African American parents often warned their children not to act “uppity” or cause problems. Black and white children might go to school together, but be treated differently by teachers and administrators. Or they might not. School books and literature either portrayed African Americans in a negative light or not at all, but publications from the African American community offered stories and images that promoted their race as a strong and beautiful one that boasted many great accomplishments. A child might go to an integrated school in one neighborhood, but be forced into a segregated school if the family moved. Ritterhouse argues that racial etiquette was the main vehicle through which southern children learned race; DuRocher includes that narrative, but argues that the threat of violence was vital to enacting it. But in the North, there simply

was no consistent and understandable set of rules or expectations, nor was there an omnipresent threat of violence, to direct children in their acquisition of racial knowledge.

Given the very different racial landscape of the North, this thesis studied four main areas that contributed to northern African American children's learning of race and development of a racial identity: literature; advertising, media, and entertainment; direct and indirect instructions and experiences; and observations and experiences. Certainly there are other areas that could be investigated, such as radio programs or religious life; the four chapters of this paper are designed to look at some of the most prevalent and major forces that affected African American children in their day to day lives. Chapters 1 and 2 look at some of the common, macro influences children encountered. Books and magazines, whether for educational or entertainment purposes, were powerful vehicles of information and could trigger strong emotions in children. Whether white produced literature purposefully used African American stereotypes to promote and maintain the hegemonic culture of white society, as Williams argued, or merely reflected the beliefs and culture of the times, children understood the negative and disparaging messages contained within it.

Advertising, media, and the entertainment industry functioned in a highly parallel manner. The character of Little Sambo in a book and Butterfly McQueen in a film affected their readers in very similar and understandable manners. But in both areas, the African American community pushed back and worked to offer their children positive alternatives, and their effects were virtually identical, as well. Whether taking pride in reading about good and dignified African Americans in *The Crisis* or *The Upward Path*, or watching a black cowboy in an all American style western, African American children responded positively to these offerings.

The messages children received could not have been more different: white society that dominated much of the material children were exposed to barraged them with negative and demeaning examples of their race, while the mainly African American produced media and flooded them with positive images designed to instill pride in their race and in themselves.

While macro influences such as literature, film, etc. were powerful forces in a child's growing racial knowledge, studying them without also studying the more individual experiences and situations that faced African American children in the North, as in Chapters 3 and 4, would yield a very incomplete picture of how they developed their understanding of race. Parents communicated very powerful messages about race, both in developing an internal pride and strength in their race that could withstand the racial degradations white society inundated them with, and information to literally navigate the situations they might find themselves in. Whether it was instruction to immediately find a parent if they were physically hit by a teacher or instruction on how to handle a situation themselves by staying calm, parents played a large part in helping their children resist the negative messages they encountered and teaching them how to successfully navigate an unpredictable racial terrain. What people actually see is powerful, and African American children in the North saw many conflicting messages about race. Chapter 4 looks at some of the tangible differences they actually saw, such as homes and schools, and the impact of what they saw. As Marshall Conway's story shows, the stark differences between the black and white schools profoundly upset him, and when the hoped for justice of Brown v. Board failed to materialize, he lost hope and failed school.

In learning to navigate the racial landscape of the North and develop their racial identity, African American children in the North were influenced by many factors, both from the larger society they lived in and their individual lives and experiences. The South's segregation and racial etiquette may have been more overtly oppressive than the racial landscape of the North, but it did offer clearly defined expectations and continuity for children, and there was a sense of security and comfort in that knowledge. In the less delineated and unpredictable North, African American children had no such continuity, and the uncertainty of what the racial rules and expectations were often led to hurt and confusion. While African American parents and leaders worked to give them a positive and consistent message about their race and place in society, the racial landscape of the North remained a tenuous and shifting place.

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