Imagination, Interrupted:

The Black Child's Public Sphere & Critical Race (Literary) Spaces

By

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INTRODUCTION:

Since the early 19th century in the U.S., even though Black literacy was coveted as a means associated with advancing the social and economic well-being of the race (Duster 2009), Blacks in America faced illiteracy rates of about 90%, compared to the White citizenry, which boasted a near 90% rate of literacy (Cornelius 1991, Anderson 1988). Historically, the southern Black community's relationship with, and pursuit of, literacy had largely been a clandestine enterprise (Herman, 1984). Specifically, in the U.S. south, literate status "was a property that was traditionally owned and used by whites in the society" (Rogers et. al. 2006: p. 462), whereby literate Blacks who did gain this status did so largely at the behest of their religiously motivated masters (Herman 1984, Cornelius 1983). The predominantly White-run Methodist, Baptist, and Quaker sects established formal schools for Black children of the enslaved, as well as for Black children of freed persons, for the sole purpose of literary instruction on Sundays. Black-run organizations, as well as Black-run Sunday schools, provided formal and covert educational spaces for young Black people who desired to become erudite. Some Whites and educated Blacks even held such secret teaching and learning sessions in their own homes, instructing eager, young Black pupils (Herman 1984, Anderson 1988) out of a great sense of moral obligation and societal betterment.

Yet by the late 18th century to the early 19th century, spurred by Whites' increased vigilance of slave revolts and uprisings, Black's access to literacy began to change drastically in antebellum southern states. The onset of southern territorial decrees, such as the South Carolina Slave Codes of 1740—which prohibited enslaved persons from learning to write (Herman 1984)—constrained Black education. These motions

exacerbated the already strained opportunities for Blacks to attain literate status. First hand historical accounts describe the length of unconventional strategies to which some undaunted youth—both White and Black—would strive, together, in order to deliver and glean literacy status. For instance, already aware of the dangers and ramifications associated with teaching and learning to read in her home state of South Carolina, young Sarah Grimke—who would in adulthood become known as a staunch abolitionist and outspoken women's suffrage leader—provided reading instruction to the young people who were enslaved on her family's plantation, namely to the young housemaid, Hettie (Herman 1984). "Flat on our stomachs before the fire, with the spelling book under our eyes, we defied the laws of South Carolina" (Lerner 2004; p. 18), she would later say of her ardent stance for equitable social justice, a life long conviction that burgeoned in her childhood. As a child enslaved in the city of Baltimore, Frederick Douglass "set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" (Douglass 1851; p.36). After Douglass' irascible master forbade his wife from formally instructing the young Douglass in his letters, Douglass strategically made teachers of White boys in Baltimore:

> The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read (Douglass 1851; p. 39).

In their defiance and doggedness, these young people navigated a social system that defied Black learnedness, demonstrating their symbolic and practical understanding of what it meant to be able to read in spite of the racist oppression that hindered Black advancement and insisted upon the separation of the races. Being able to read had the power to change one's material access within the world. However, it was the interactive

mode of young people—such as Sarah and Hettie, and Frederick with his childhood comrades—reading with each other that I wish to highlight here. The interactive activity of reading engendered a higher awareness of social dynamics within their racially strained world, the ramifications of which yielded highly influential and racially conscious world leaders whose legacy is venerated, still. Around the communal, interactive space of engaging literacy, via engaging each other, exists possibilities of not only gaining a necessary life skill, but also of coming into contact with how young readers view themselves, how young readers imagine the world, and how young readers regard racialized "others" through literature. To these points, this paper:

- Investigates the racial theories Black children hold as truisms
- Explores the spheres in which Black children (have) develop(ed) their racial theories; and,
- Interrogates whether the interactive activity of reading children's books has the power to transform Black children's racial theories.

In short, how does, the collective practice of reading children's books enhance the Black child's racial imagination, that is, their awareness of the past, present, and future social consequences of their race, and development of strategies necessary to successfully navigate a racialized society? In a 2014 interview, Psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman contended that the imagination is "the mental representation of things that are not immediately present to your senses" (*Can Imagination Be Measured?*). Similarly, I posit that the act of racially imagining manifests as an expression of one's ability to empathize with, as well as envision beyond the present social perception accorded to the racial group to which the imaginer belongs or observes. A racial energy colors this imagination, and it illustrates the extent of one's racial musings, giving light to one's aptitude to

develop racial theories, and to change one's mind around racial concepts as one experiences broader racial-social encounters. In a Black child's case, I argue that the racial imagination is shaped and triggered by the social environment—the Black Child's Public Sphere (BCPS)—in which said child is reared, and the racially charged experiences to which they are exposed (Figure 1). It may be altered –whether enhanced or compressed—by active engagement with specific products of their social world (Figure 2). While there are myriad social products, which may be analyzed in terms of its impact on the racial imaginings of a child, in this study I evaluate the intervening effect of children's books on the racial imagination of young, Black children. The eventual goal of this study is to demonstrate that interactively reading children's books may buttress the racial imagination of all children, but Black and White children's books may have different, yet equally important effects on a child's racial imagination, and thus the racial theories they develop as truths. In effect, the process of racial imagining that I evaluate here operates as illustrated in Figure 1. I expect a literary intervention to have an impact in the manner as illustrated in Figure 2.

Expounding on the concept of a racial imagination may aid the social scientific community's understanding of mechanisms by which the racial theories of children alter when encountering a racial-social situation through a cultural medium, such as a book. In addition to building literary skills, books are a critical source through which children ascertain cultural mores (Bettelheim 1977) and learn about their world in a dynamic processing of internal and external forces. As reading—especially the practice of interactive reading—provides opportunity for conversation on textual themes, which mirror the social environment, books hold the power to serve "as a catalyst that shift[s]

the conversation from basic comprehension to students' reflections on their own identities" (Wood and Jocius, 2013: p. 7). As cultural objects produced by adults to display social systems that govern our way of life, children's books present ample opportunity for children to analyze, perpetuate, or press the social status quo.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In their scholarship concerning the transformative power of culturally representative children's books on young, Black boys' literacy performance and social development, Wood and Jocius demonstrate the effectiveness of a critical race discourse platform. Theoretically, this is also the base of this study. That is, using books—in this case children's books—to aid children in generating their racial social consciousness. Critical race discourse is a dialogue method employing literary texts as an opening to engage in race construction (Wood and Jocius 2013); it implicates the sociological research scope incorporating children's unique insights. Wood and Jocius made use of the critical race discourse platform when evaluating the comparatively low literate performance of Black boys. Stemming largely from the inability to relate to books that do not feature people, histories, and life experience that are familiar to them, the young boys in Wood's and Jocius' study struggled in their reading journeys. Yet following the intervention of books that did "look like" their students, the authors were able to conclude, "when students engage in critical literacy, they are able to "expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 55), and can work collaboratively through issues stemming from the literature, and also explore different opinions and beliefs. This is the socially interactive

function that critical literacy engagement presents. In their study, the authors demonstrated what they call the "three C's" of critical literacy: culturally relevant texts, collaboration, and critical conversations. Critical conversations provide opportunities for students to "critically examine texts" and "challenge and inform one another's ideologies" (Wood and Jocius 2013). This is the formula I employ in this study wherein children shift from being mere receptors of textual information to collaborators with the text in an effort to make meaning (Rosenblatt, 1968). Critical discourse analysis around culturally salient texts facilitates racial identity development, thwarting what Helms refers to as the "internalized societal racial stereotypes and negative self- and own-group conceptions" (Helms 1995:p 189), which may very well arise in a Black child's literary process.

Other social scientists have located this very effect that stereotyping people in literature actually has on young people. For instance, the classic, "Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Pre-School Children" (Weitzman et al 1972), cited the dangers of rampant gender stereotypes repeated in pre-school children's literature, preceding a similar claim Bigler and Liben made as it applies to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Given that children's books often model roles for children to emulate (Turner-Bowker 1996), rigid adherence in children's literature to classic male and female character roles, like working outside of the home compared to keeping house, are injurious imagery for the child susceptible to stereotypical internalization of sex roles. Barclay's study on the matter in the late 1970s demonstrated that children who were exposed to sustained periods of stories that defied gendered stereotypes then expressed a reduction in their tendencies to stereotype by sex. In their 1980 study, Campbell and

Wirtenberg uncovered that greater exposure to children's literature that was free of gender bias affected the child reader's attitudes about gender and the amount of time they retained that schema. In 1996, Ochman, in a similar study, demonstrated that young girls who encountered children's book heroines, and likewise boys who read about heroes, then expressed a significantly strengthened sense of self and agency. But an absence of affirming gendered representations is akin to "symbolic annihilation", argues Tuchman (1978), as it does not give space to female characters in popular cultural objects, thereby generating a patriarchal gender system.

The mechanisms of intervention through literature encounters may apply to other modes of stereotype, including racial generalizations. As a follow-up to the Weitzman et al. study, Clark, Lennon, and Morris (1993) examined the gendered depictions in children's books written by Black authors in their work, "Of Caldecotts and Kings". Each of the 45 books analyzed in their study were selected from a pool of Caldecott Award winning books—those deemed the most outstanding picture books—or King Award winning books, which are given to Black authors or illustrators whose work is also tied into social justice. The authors concluded that female character visibility was greater in King award books than in Caldecott Award books, and thus argued that, more than any other genre, culturally sensitive Black literature did a better job of integrating active Black women characters in their stories.

Stereotypes located in children's literature leave children susceptible to harmful imaginings, which, fortunately, may be undone, as some of the aforementioned studies suggest. It is quite clear just how fragile and volatile is the imagination of a child, and

largely dependent on life exposures and life experiences. On the general topic of imagination, Vygotsky asserted as much:

> If we want to build a relatively strong foundation for a child's creativity, what we must do is broaden the experiences we provide him with. All else being equal, the more a child sees, hears, and experiences, the more he knows and assimilates, the more elements of reality he will have in his experience, and the more productive will be the operation of his imagination (Vygotsky 2004; p. 15)

This may be especially the case for children of resource stricken, historically marginalized populations, wherein there exists strong unequal socio-structural barriers—such as poverty or constrained social networks—that may limit their exposure to broad life experiences. Fortunately, an imaginative activity such as interactive reading does not require a substantial financial undertaking, or a robust physical social network of diverse associates. Wood and Jocius illustrate this very point. A critical race discourse platform may facilitate a Black child's contact with a book character whose phenotype and/or social situation may look familiar to, or differ from, that of the child reader. This platform presents opportunity for that child to accumulate more elements whereby s/he may give voice to, grapple with, and confront long-standing social realities that have racial relevance. Scholars including Quintana (1998) argue that, at certain levels of cognition, children are able to process racialized experiences. In his scholarship around social perspective of ethnicity and an ethnic-group consciousness (Quintana 1998), he posits that children at what he calls Level 2 are "able to comprehend that prejudice does exist" (p. 39). At Level 3, "adolescents develop the ability to integrate their experiences of themselves and others across social events and integrate environmental influences over time" (p. 39). In a Vygotskian and Quintanian sense, critical race discourse could be a way in which to elevate the levels a Black child's awareness as they approach racialized

ordeals, helping them to imaginatively and more productively navigate social realms while realizing the social consequences historically tied to their racial status. In sum, the potentials of literacy interventions are promising toward helping Black child readers to stretch their racial imaginations, as well as to encounter racialized others.

While quite rich, none of the aforementioned scholarship has engaged the idea that children can act as sovereign thinkers in terms of their racial leanings, nor has previous, similar scholarship featured children's voices in the empirical data. This present study attempts to fill this sociological gap by engaging the potential for literature to intervene, aiding readers to interrogate racial beliefs, presenting them with opportunities to change their minds with the turn of every page. How would a literary intervention play out with Black children? In the next pages, I illustrate the thoughts that the Black child cultivates with respect to race—theirs and of others—the environments in which they do so, and investigate the differential ways in which books predominantly featuring Black or White characters may facilitate the racial imagination.

METHOD and DATA:

Method

This is a child-centric study. As such, my primary knowledge generators were child respondents. Using the purposive snowballing method, I identified child participants and their parents initially through asking for assistance from child advocates, community members, and other child-focused professional "gatekeepers" in a city in Tennessee. These informants facilitated my access to potential child participants,

organizing platforms whereby parents, teachers, and children could become familiar with me, and learn more about my research. I carefully and consistently formulated relationships with them over a period of eight months (May 2014-January 2015), gaining their trust by attending national and local meetings pertaining to the education, health, and protection of children. Eventually, an opportunity presented itself wherein one of the organizations with which I had become familiar—an African Methodist church in a predominantly Black neighborhood—was preparing to recruit young people of color into their summer reading program. I expressed my interest to the leaders in serving as a volunteer reader to their organization's children, and in meeting with their parents. At this time, I also disclosed my research intentions and requested their assistance in recruiting children and their parents into my study. Together, we decided that I could host research focus groups during the organization's all-day summer reading program recruitment event. In between the event's regularly scheduled program, I held two focus groups. Since I had secured a working relationship with program directors, they then put me in touch with some of their colleagues at another predominantly Black neighborhood site, this time an after-school reading enhancement program. Through this connection, I was able to secure more child respondents and conducted two more focus groups. Thus, my sampling frame consisted of the children (n=25) who ultimately participated in these reading programs.

My intention of cultivating these relationships with child gatekeepers was two-fold in hopes that all parties would achieve benefit: (1) to gain the trust of the gatekeepers, children, and their families through volunteer service, and (2) to establish ongoing rapport within the community, while working to achieve my research goals. This

approach greatly improved the chances of my investigation. Given that there is often a social reluctance for people to discuss sensitive topics—such as race—with strangers, I relied on an exchange of my time and service for access to child informants. The gatekeepers were able and willing to vouch for my character, as well as for my research intentions. In this way, I was able to overcome the shields that are often erected to protect my study population by gaining access to their broader social networks. This tactic is consistent with Fine and Sandstrom's (Fine and Sandstrom 1988; p. 24) approach to conducting qualitative research with children.

Subjects

In order to investigate the relationship between Black children's critical discourse around children's books and their racial theoretical development, I conducted focus groups in the winter and spring of 2015 with 25 Black and multi-racial school-aged children (who self-identified as Black), ages 10-13 years. The children of this study lived in one of two neighborhoods, which are occupied by 85% and 24% Black residents, respectively (U.S. Census 2013). According to publically available 2014 data from the Tennessee Department of Education State Report Card, the public school district wherein the children of this study reside serves 73% children who are classified as economically disadvantaged. 45% children who attend public schools in this district are Black, 31% are White, 20% are Hispanic, and 4% are Asian. Consistent with Hart and Damon's (1985) contention about the rapid development of self-identity during late childhood and early adolescence, I chose to conduct focus groups with children within this age range because

of their enhanced and independent social interactions beyond the home, and minted racial identities, compared to younger children.

During each focus group, I simulated a critical race discourse platform. In this study, I use critical discourse procedures to interrogate the race talk of Black children as generated by children's literature. Each focus group included an experimental design element wherein I read aloud a children's book, which featured either almost all Black characters ("Black book") or almost all White characters ("White book"). This categorical differentiation is consistent with that of the Children's Cooperative Book Center maintained by the University of Wisconsin at Madison**.** During each of the four focus groups conducted, I first asked the child participants a series of initial questions (pre-questions). During this pre-question phase, child respondents were asked to explain their thoughts on a) Black people; b) White people; c) their community; and d) how they envision their life will be 20 years from the present, as well as how they will achieve that vision. Following the pre-questions, the children had a 5-minute snack and bathroom break before I read aloud a Black book (two focus groups, n= 13) or a White book (two focus groups, n= 12). Following the reading of each book, I then asked the children to address a series of post-questions assessing the immediate impact of the Black or White book on their thoughts about a) Black people; b) White people; c) how the book reminds them of themselves and/or their community; d) how they imagine life will be like for the book's main character 20 years from the present; and e) how the book reminds them of other books they have read.[*]

[*] After conducting the first Black book and White book focus groups, I adjusted my question strategy to include the repeated questions about child participants' thoughts pertaining to Black and White people in the post-question sections. In this way, I was able to directly observe how, if at all, each

In an attempt to capture the larger social context in which the children develop their racial theories and form their reading habits, I also surveyed adult participants—their parents and parents of children who fit the sample criteria. In addition to completing consent forms, parents filled out surveys for each of their children who were eligible for the study. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain a glimpse into this demographics' social atmosphere—a space I call the Black Child's Public Sphere (BCPS), an interactive space wherein the young Black American community receives, elaborates upon, and formulates racial meanings. At the nexus of the BCPS is where the Black child's beliefs collide with the social world. Viewing it this way is my attempt to do as Wendy Griswold calls, and find "a way to conceptualize how culture and the social world come together, or, in other words, how people in social contexts create meaning" (Griswold 2013; p. 12). In this case, I argue that the Black child is both the receiver and creator of racial meanings. The surveys offered clues into the BCPS, specifically as it pertains to the children's racial influences and upbringing, as well as their reading experiences. Given that "environmental and family influences have seldom been considered in previous research on Black youths' personal and group identity" (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams 1990; p. 296), it was very important to capture these data. While these were secondary data, the survey attempts to provide a general picture of the racial attitudes to which the children are likely exposed. In total, I collected 28 surveys from adult participants, three of whom filled out surveys as parents to children aged 14.[**] All quantitative data analyses were conducted using SPSS. The survey consisted of basic demographic questions,

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book immediately influenced the groups theories about people who are Black and people who are White. I presented all other questions for all four focus groups.

[**] Initially, I was going to include older adolescents in the study, but after experiencing difficulty securing sufficient numbers of 14 year olds, I decided to concentrate efforts on 10-13 year old study participants.

namely, the family's annual income, the educational status of the parent (who completed the survey), and that parent's employment status (at the time of survey completion). These data are tabulated in Table 1, and depict what may qualify as an ideal type of family involved in this study. The survey also captured parents' attitudes around reading and race. Tables 2 and 3 (in the appendix) show these data.

Experimental Instruments (Children's Books)

For the sake of defining a Black book, I echo the categorization upheld by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Cooperative Children's Book Center in that a Black book is any book that is written by or about Black people, and features Black main characters. This definition guided the books I selected for this study. I approached, very carefully, my method of book selection. First, I perused the list of all of the books on the Children's Cooperative Book Center's website that were categorized as White and those that were categorized as Black. I then more carefully reviewed the list of books that, under each of these categories, were granted a highly recognized children's book award (e.g. Caldecott Award). I narrowed the search to these books because they are generally more widely and frequently circulated, and "present a different set of racial images than do other books" (Pescosolido et. al. 1997: p. 446). Next, I went to a large main public library, and pulled each of the books from that list which were available; in total, that equaled about 70 books. I read each of these books, conducting an informal content analysis, and then separated them into Black and White books, consistent with the Center's definition. I then separated these books into sub-categorical themes based on the storylines. These categories included "teamwork/triumph to overcome adversity",

"curiosity", and "dealing with parent lose/abandonment". For the purpose of my study, it made most sense to use the books in the first category. I assigned each Black book in that themed category with a number and each White book in that themed category with a letter, and then randomly generated a selection of one of each. This yielded the Black book, *Henry's Freedom Box* (published 2007) by Ellen Levine and *A Chair For My Mother* (published 1982) by Vera Williams.

Henry's Freedom Box is the creative non-fiction tale of Henry "Box" Brown, a man who was enslaved in the U.S. south in childhood, was sold away from his family while a teenager, and then witnessed his wife and children sold in captivity. With the help of a friend, James, and a kindly White doctor, Henry devised a plan to mail himself in a wooden box to freedom lines in Philadelphia. Aside from the storyline, the illustrations of the book are quite vivid. *A Chair For My Mother* tells the tale of Rosa, who lives in a matriarch-run home with her mother and grandmother. When their apartment catches fire, Rosa and her family lose everything, including a couch that provided Rosa's mother respite after long days of working at a neighborhood diner. Their neighbors are helpful and offer the family food and home fixings so they may settle into their new apartment, but Rosa is still without a couch for her mother. In an effort to replace her mother's beloved couch, the three save all of their loose change in a large jar and await the day they may purchase a new sofa. This book's illustrations are also very colorful.

A Brief Word On Emergent Themes

During the pre-question phase of the focus groups, a series of similar themes emerged in the children's discourse, which are outlined in Table 1. During this process, I

was awed by how sophisticated their racial theorizing was, as at some points they used metaphorical language to describe their thoughts and situations. I was also moved by how forthcoming the children were willing to be with themselves, with each other, and with me, an outsider. Race was not an emotionally easy topic for them to grapple with. At times, some child respondents dropped their heads in contemplative silence after hearing a group mate share, or blushed beet red when articulating an experience that perhaps they had not before vocalized. Sometimes, everybody laughed as a way to release the very palpable tension that was building up in the room.

While some child respondents differed slightly in their responses from their larger focus group cohort, specific emergent theme consensus persisted across both the Black and White book groups, offering insight into the racial theories of Black children of this particular sphere, and support for my first research inquiry. The following sections will elucidate the themes, which emerged during both the pre and post question phases, followed by a brief comparison of themes prompted by each type of book. Each focus group was recorded and conversations transcribed. I coded the transcripts using Atlas ti software. Below, I also make use of pseudonyms to safeguard the identity of each child respondent.

FINDINGS:

Black Book & White Book Group Pre-Questions Analysis

When sharing their thoughts about Black people, child participants of the two Black book groups persistently described Blacks as "good" people who are "victims" of

institutional, as well as interpersonal racism, ranging from enduring inconvenient social nuisances, such as segregationist policies and practices, to outright violence. Without my prompting a racial comparison, Mercedes (age 10) surmised that Blacks are "nice" and are "brave", precisely because Blacks have refrained from oppressing other groups of people in ways in which minority populations have been for generations. Mercedes continued, expressing that Blacks "don't do bad things like white people do to other people." Citing past and present instances of racism as the root cause of these "bad things", the child participants provided relevant support for their racial rationale. For instance, with reference to institutional racism of the past, Niema (age 11), exclaimed incredulously, "there were even White and Black water fountains!" Here is Sullivan (age 12), sharing his perspective on present-day, violent striations of racism:

> I think Black people, like, when I think of them, I think of racism. Because Black people get shot by other people that's not Black. For instance Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray, they all died. They all got killed by white people.

As the children present their thoughts, they vacillate between the past and the present (and in later conversation threads, the future) in their process of identifying Blackness, a process that is consistent with Erikson's contention about identity processes. He contends that identity "contains a complementarity of past and future both in the individual and society; it links the actuality of a living part with that of a promising future" (Erikson 1968; p. 310). This tendency persisted throughout the bulk of the critical discourse.

Across the group discourse, the children engaged each other by asking questions or expounding on each other's comments. Isa (age 12), addresses Sullivan's previous remark, adding that Blacks "always get shot by people that's not Black" and Blacks "always get accused of doing something that they didn't do." The theme of victimization

as a proxy for Black people's social reality in America stayed within their discourse, as well. "I think the term 'Black people' means 'get beaten and abused'", adds Kyra (age 11), and "Black people get killed by White people because White people don't like Black people", Tasha (age 11) interjects. This narrative is not to suggest that their evaluation of Blacks is without variability; the children also display willingness to be critical of not just Black people, but also of the ways in which "other" people regard the larger Black community.

Although each of the children offered various iterations, their attitudes about Black people overall was rooted in references to racial segregation, and Black group victimization at the behest of White people who they largely consider to be racist. The child respondents launched the thread of discussion regarding White people without my prompting. By introducing specific accounts of personally experiencing racism, the group discourse segued well into my second question, and illustrated their sophistication of expression with respect to racial thought and language. The children assisted each other in elucidating their collective thoughts about White people, both as informed by their life experiences and first-hand observations. In the following line of conversation, two distinct themes—"The Attention" and "We/They"—emerge from their dialogue, about which I will then offer analysis, as these manifested as insistent themes of the children's racial theories:

Petal: White people think that they're not equal with Black people. Like...
Julian: I think what she's trying to say is…
Isa: I think what they're trying to say is that Black people get more attention than Whites and the White people think they're not equal, so the White people murder [Blacks] because they think they're not equal…we get more attention and stuff like that. They murder us and we get more attention than them.
Iyenda: Some White people don't like to sit by some Black people.
MRK: Give me an example. Where does that happen?
Iyenda: Like, if you're at a doctor's office and you sit close by a White person, they might move. They act like they're going to the bathroom, and move somewhere else. I've seen it.

Kyra: Downtown, too. At the restrooms.
MRK: What happens at the restrooms downtown?
Kyra: You be sittin' at the table near a white person and they move.
Isa: I agree with Kyra. At the restaurants or something, if you're at the restaurant and you're sitting by somebody who's not your color, they move just because they don't like your color, or if they think they know that somethin' is fittin' to happen. Or something about you that they don't know.
Riley: They probably think we're bad, that's why White folks don't like Blacks...
MRK: You've answered my second question. How does all this make you feel?
Sullivan: I feel sad.
Isa: They make me feel like we get more attention than them, and it makes me feel sad and, like, frustrated because it's fewer Whites getting shot than Black people. In the whole United States of America.
Julian: I feel betrayed. I feel betrayal.
MRK: Tell us why.
Julian: (He drops his head in silence. The group gives him time to recover). The reason why I feel betrayed is because different people…because I feel like the Whites at first they treat us good, but then they treat us bad.
MRK: When you say "at first", when did that happen?
Isa: What I think is they didn't treat us right because of segregation, and when that started I felt like… I felt like the world changed after segregation was over. Because now we can be in the same schools as Whites, we can drink the same water, we can be in the same restaurants, but since Blacks been getting' shot by Whites, I think that segregation is going to start back over again.
Julian: When segregation ended, they were treating us right at first.

The theme **"**We/They" implies an internalized sense of racial group identity among the children. Given that the children tended to use the pronouns "us" and "we" with relation to Black people, and "they" with respect to White people, it is clear that they maintain social psychological ties to other Black people and a social cognitive dissonance with Whites. Moreover, the child respondents seem to be assessing a correlation between their personal and the broader social experiences of the Black community.

Within the Black book groups, all but two child respondents, Iyenda (age 11) and Gabriel (age 10), typically projected feelings of mistrust or wariness toward White people. As seen above, Iyenda uses the qualifier, "some" to express her theories, but then provides evidence of a racially motivated micro-aggression that she witnessed and retained in her conscious memory. This would not be the only story she affectively recounts. Gabriel uses the same qualifier, stating, "just because a few of them are mean doesn't mean that all of them are mean". Unlike Iyenda, Gabriel does not offer an

account to his peers in support of his assertion, and still makes use of the We/They paradigm, suggesting that while he may not maintain as strong of feeling as his cohort with respect to people who are White, he does vocalize a more latent sense of recognized difference between what he thinks 'Black' and 'White' mean.

As is implied by the data captured in the parent survey, the children of this study represent Black or multi-racial, largely matriarch-run households wherein the family income for most is at or below $10,000 per year. At various points of the discussions, several child respondents referenced living in a public housing unit nearby; otherwise, they all lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the focus group sites. When describing their thoughts on their community, the children offered both positive, as well as disconcerting, responses. The communal benefits of having access to immediate family members and maintaining close social ties for the sake of achieving specific goals tended to sound similar to Isa's affirmative description:

> I think my community is good, like, by my house. I think it's good because it's quiet and the people that are friends stick together, and if we get into an argument, it won't be as bad as it used to be at a different place. My family, they help me with my work and if I don't get help from them, I will go to my friends, or I'll go to someone that knows about it and we can go over our interests together.

Other children's contributions, like Tasha's (age 11), offered more weighted considerations regarding their community, giving way to broader themes of navigating violence, and consequently, a perpetual air of feeling insecure not too far beyond the boundaries of the home. These themes would again manifest in the pre-question phase of the White book groups.

Tasha**:** I don't like where I live. I mean I do. I don't like where I live, but then I do like where I live. Sometimes, there's a lot of shooting where I live. One time we were outside, we were with my friends and this man – it was at night – he walked past us. He tried to see who all was over there and then he walked back and then he started shooting.

MRK: He started shooting at you and your friends?

Tasha: He started shooting at everybody over there. And everybody went to go hide behind something. And then everybody went to run in the house.
MRK: So that's an example of why you don't like it. But then you also said that you do like it. Why do you like it?
Tasha: The people who live in the projects over here, they're good...
MRK: I have to just say how really brave you all are. Really brave.

Having the children to voice their perspectives on their community meant engaging them on a most stressful topic of violence and adverse conditions, yet it was a necessary topic to approach as it implies much about the social environment in which the children are developing their theories on race. While myriad studies cite the relationship between childhood adversity—like poverty, violence, segregation, and racism—and negative life outcomes, the children echo an intense resilience. In spite of the broader, blighted social conditions in which the child respondents lived, all offered very vivid retorts with respect to what they imagine their lives would be like in 20 years time.[***] This theme—which I coded as "Holding Fast to Dreams"—emerged as personal expectations to first achieve higher education as a mode through which to accomplish their overall mission, and reiterated the 100% expectation that parents of children in this demographic also have of their children to exceed high school education. Moreover, the children then elaborated with clear strategies on how they would personally strive to realize their dreams by growing their skills, as well as making use of their social networks to help them reach their life goals.

The realities, as well as the appearances of socioeconomic disparities between Blacks and Whites in America are not lost upon these children, either, at least in ways that typically resound in the mainstream discourse. As Alejandro-Wright (1985) found,

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[***] Let me offer a brief caveat: this illustration should not be interpreted as a representation of how *all* children who are Black live in urban environments. To come to that conclusion would be irresponsible and insensitive.

by age 10, children, like Frieda, are able to observe and understand racial cues, including socioeconomic status. As she grapples aloud with her theories about people who are White, Frieda addresses a point about the intersection of whiteness and socioeconomic class:

> Another reason why I think "bad" is because some Caucasian people think they too good to be Black. They think they too good because most Black people are poor. But they got money. They buy houses and stuff because the Caucasian people rich, and not as much Black people are rich, and the Caucasian people call the Black people "poor" because they don't have as much money as them. They just think they too good for everybody. But some Caucasian people do the same thing without having money. They think they too good to be Black too. Saying bad and racist things.

While it is important to consider the broader social context—both historical and present-day—in which the Black child is developing as cognitive beings, the racial cognition of the Black child is not a passive by-product of their socialization**.** Within the BCPS, Black children reach their own conclusions about race based on evidences they conceive in their daily experiences, and are developing strategies by which to navigate their world (and the world) that is tinged with racial tensions. The children of my study demonstrate a high level of socially and personally understanding their ethnicity. Displaying an acute understanding of how race operates in society, Quintana would argue that the child respondents have achieved Levels 2 and 3 of his ethnic perspective model. In none of these aforementioned narratives do the children use language, such as, "my mother told me…" or, "my daddy thinks…" to address the questions or scenarios raised. Consistent with the findings within former child-centric scholarship, the social shifts in U.S. society for certain bear influence on young people's racial theorizing (Quintana 1998). While it is very likely that they may in fact form opinions influenced by the expressed thoughts and behaviors of their parents, their teachers, their peers, and the media, the children are actively filtering what they have learned, what they observe, what they feel, and what

they envision for their lives, incorporating all into their personalized racial knowledge building processes. Using phrases such as “I think”, and “I feel like” imply their non-reticent ownership and independence of thought. This pre-question phase was meant to illustrate the baseline racial theories of the Black child respondents, addressing this study’s first line of inquiry. In this next section—the post-question analysis—I investigate the ways in which Black and White children’s books appear to differentially alter the racial imagination of the Black child.

Black Book Group Post-Questions Analysis

When again I asked the Black book group respondents to explain their thoughts about Black people, they echoed the major themes of Black victimization, segregation, “We/They”, and “The Attention”. To the latter theme, Tasha and Nicole both expounded on the notion of “The Attention” that Black people garner, saying that it is because “they just want everybody to know what happened to us…” and Blacks commit acts to get “The Attention” because of how the Black community has historically been treated by Whites. In terms of their thoughts about White people, their theories also had not changed much. Rather, they recounted more stories of enduring interpersonal racism from peers who are White, as well as from their White teachers. However, new information did emerge when I asked the children about how the story, *Henry’s Freedom Box*, reminds them of themselves and their community:

MRK: How does this book remind you of you and your life and your community? Does this book remind you of those things?
Julian: Yeah, because the Black people in the story were treated wrongly.
Isa: In the story, Black people were treated unfairly and that's how it is now. And segregation was there, and that's how it is now.
Julian: And sometimes you have to escape in a box.
MRK: Tell me what you mean by that.
Isa: You gotta find different ways to figure out, you have to think outside the box. Figure out a way to

get out of something without being seen or without people knowing that it's you.
Julian: To get out of the situation.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued, people often make use of metaphors as a way to conceptualize and better understand their world. Isa and Julian invoke the metaphors, “think outside the box”, and “escape in a box” while comparing the strategies necessary to overcome the past hardships of slavery and segregation—which they personally did not withstand—with strategies that are still applicable to overcome present-day ordeals. They have, however, experienced general hardship in their communities that are connected to historic, racially patterned conditions of poverty, violence, and inequities as evidenced in their claim that “that is how it is now”. As Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) have previously noted, “the risk factors of poverty and racial oppression remain a part of the social ecology of Black children” (p. 294); this is so for the children of this study. By extending empathy to the main character and his circumstances, the child respondents were able to imagine and retroactively engage the resilience that Henry “Box” Brown displayed while attempting to overcome the conditions put on him by society and an era of racial depression of Blacks. Consequently, the child respondents expressed a strengthened resolve to overcome in the face of adversity.

White Book Group Post-Questions Analysis

When describing how the White book reminded them of themselves and of their community, the child respondents replied:

Grant: It reminds me that I’m living in a community that I can be a part of, and sometimes I don’t want to be a part of my community, and but most of the time I do want to be a part of the community. Because sometimes people do weird stuff, like cross the street when cars are coming. People stay out past curfew, and lots of other stuff that I don’t feel like talking about.
Aaron: I think it shares things with my life because sometimes my neighbor keeps throwing grease out the window and it keeps doing stuff bad to the grass. And now all the grass near my house is dead.

One time, when I was leaving my house, I left to go to school one day, she came outside with a bucket and she dumped it in the grass. It was a bunch of grease and stuff.

Dillard: Well, about that couch. When we [my family] got that couch, I loved it! It was long, it was a little bit long. And I could just jump in it.

MRK: Anybody else? How does this book remind you of yourself, your life, or your community? (No one else responds).

Even though the White book was also about a character enduring trials and prevailing in the face of adversity, it spurred a series of responses qualitatively different from those of the Black book group. Aside from those whose families had either purchased a new sofa, prompting a situational memory from the respondent, or who felt the book conjured a very different depiction of community, the only children who responded to this question were children who had either been in a fire, or for whom fires were a common occurrence in their neighborhood.

MRK: Does this book remind you of your community? How does this book remind you of your community, of your life, or of yourself?

Sabirah: It reminds me of my life with the fires. It's a lot of fires near my house because people on [street in majority white neighborhood] keep coming down and setting the garbage cans on fire. We just got a new one yesterday.

MRK: You just got a new one after how many fires?

Sabirah: After two fires.

MRK: Anybody else?

Cody: I think it's myself because on the news, houses had been burned down. My friends house burned down too…this might be unusual…this might be awkward because my mom, her and my sister can pick up a couch. They moved the couch while I brought in the boxes when we moved. And I just laid there on the couch.

With the exception of Sabirah's suggesting that people outside her community abuse the property in a predominantly Black neighborhood, there is no mention of race in relation to the book's characters, or how the characters' plight or triumph in adversity is tied to their race. When explaining how they thought their lives would be 20 years from the present if they were the main character, Rosa, the responses were also stilted, addressing only the fire or the couch, not mentioning Rosa's and her family's personal traits as impetus for overcoming hardship. All utility of reading the White book to Black children

is not lost, however. When again asked to share their thoughts about Whites, child respondents had this to say:

> Frieda: Some are mean, some are nice. And then some other cultures are nice too. But about Caucasian people, I think they are mean and nice because sometimes if you're at a store or something and they see that you need help or something, if you left a dollar or something, they can help you out. But some people, they just stare at you. Caucasian people, I think, there are meaner than nicer.
>
> Khari: I still think the same thing, but my perspective changed a little bit because it's teachers at schools that don't mind the color race that you're actually in. They just care about helping you learn what you need to do…

While Frieda—who presented similar equivocating statements in the pre-question phase—maintained her mixed leanings, Khari was able and willing to change her mind after reading the White book. She initially had not commented on the benevolence of her teachers who are White, but did so after reading the White book. This must mean that exposure to White characters through literature may offer opportunity to self-challenge and change one's previous notions of the social possibilities of whiteness.

Post-question Comparison

From these data, it appears that reading the Black book with Black children aids in augmenting their racial imagination, provides a mode of connectivity to the historical and present strife of the Black American community, and also supports their belief in the resilience of the Black community. "The text serves as a catalyst that shifted the conversation from basic comprehension to students' reflections on their own identities" (Wood and Jocius 2013: p. 7). Specifically, the Black book is a source by which Black children are able to relate to, and empathize with, situations that are familiar in that they are narratives of collective struggle. The White book, on the other hand, did not facilitate enhanced imaginative musings around the race of the characters. The White book did, however, seem to provide opportunity for members of the White book group to develop

renewed and more empathetic orientation toward White people, even if other people around them expressed views otherwise. Thus, it appears that the Black child's cognition regarding the racialized "other" is not permanent, but is malleable, and, when encountering the "other" in literature, has the potential to lend toward a more empathetic disposition.

DISCUSSION:

The children who were a part of this study expressed very similar, and specific, thoughts about people who are Black and people who are White, beyond merely identifying phenotypic differentiation. They enunciate markedly different social experiences, which separate Blacks from Whites, and other social examples in which they notice this difference. In this study, I have endeavored to demonstrate that Black children are acutely aware of how race plays out not just in their lives, but in the broader social context over time. Indeed, their unique theory of race intersects socio-historical memories, present-day observations, and personalized experiences. This cognition is the operation of what I call their racial imagination. Children in both book groups cited themes of Black victimization, historical and enduring segregation, institutional racism, and interpersonal racism at the hands of White people, both strangers and people with whom they have relationships. The children use these instances to support their racial theories. My research indicates that reading Black books may help to strengthen the racial imagination, as the Black child reader is able to identify with the struggles and strategies that the main Black character evokes. Reading White books may help the Black child reader to transform their thoughts and attitudes toward people who are White as a

consequence of engaging empathetically with a White book character. While cross-sectional and perhaps specific to low-income Black children of this southern demographic, these data suggest that the racial imagination of Black children is not a fixed attribute; it is in the process of evolution. Like a muscle, it seems to be able to change in a specific manner depending of the external stimuli, such as reading a Black or White book.

Understanding the influences of my own biography—my apparent race, gender, and social class—on the data the children generated is of significant mention. While I had not spent substantial time with them prior to the actual data gathering process, I had established rapport with their gatekeepers; in this way, I feel I gained insider status, and had become an accepted member of this community. My social position afforded me a privilege of sorts, yet, I was still very much an outsider to the child respondents, and some were quick to let me know. For instance, when reviewing the assent forms with them, Grant rattled off a slew of questions questioning what I would do with the focus group data, who would have access to his answers, and whether or not he'd be able to view my final report once completed. Other child respondents would preface their answers with polite disclaimers, such as, "excuse me if this is rude…" or, "I hope I don't offend *you*…" before disclosing their opinion of Black or White people or for whatever response the question called. In essence, I feel that most of the child respondents eventually reached a point where they could speak openly around someone who looked familiar to them, phenotypically, but whose social position still presented a bit of distance. This could have encouraged their willingness to speak; future similar studies

with similar groups of children should experiment with an investigator who is not a Black woman to ascertain differences in effect.

It is also important to note that this study was conducted during a season of highly publicized acts of justice-involved killings of Black men and women. The children in my study knew the names of the deceased, mentioning Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Freddie Gray, and even Emmett Till. That these stories—and others—were a vivid part of mainstream media and discourse during my study is an important consideration when interpreting these data, but should in no way take away from the larger point, which is that these children were very much capable of sophisticatedly processing and voicing their thoughts on race. Likely, this social air also influenced the way they "read" the stories. Finally, future studies would be good to analyze books that may be more similar. I relied on a randomized selection of the experimental elements, which left to chance the comparative nature of the main conflict across each story line. In *Henry's Freedom Box*, the main conflict was clearly racialized, which was not the case in *A Chair for My Mother*. Perhaps future studies could instead use the same story, but different racial characters—like John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, which is very similar to the Europeanized story of *Cinderella*. In this way, future studies may tease out possible alternative reasons for why one story resonates differently with Black children.

CONCLUSION:

Texts are political. In every form, they convey power dynamics, depict status quo, and reify societal structures. As Patricia Hill Collins contends, "novels can expose readers to information about social systems, about inequality, about gender stratification

and racism" (Collins 2005: p. 308). While we no longer live in a time where it is illegal for Blacks to learn to read, there remain inequities in the racial representation of Blacks in children's books, a paucity that could have implications for the racial theory development of the nation's future adults. Of the estimated 5,000 children's books published annually since 1994, an average of 63% are received at the CCBC for review[1]. Between 1.9% and 4.3% were authored *by* African-Americans (Figure 3, red line); between 3% and 7% were written *about* African-Americans (Figure 3, yellow line). These recent figures do not offer the most optimistic growth trends, especially in consideration of past analyses. In her 1997 article, "The Portrayal of Blacks in U.S. Children's Picture Books Through the Mid- and Late-Twentieth Century", sociologist Bernice Pescosolido and colleagues use qualitative and quantitative methods to illustrate the extent (or, rather, the lack) of Blacks, and the cooperative relations between Blacks and Whites, portrayed in children's books from 1937 to 1993. Up to that moment in time, most mainstream children's literature employed narrow, stereotypical depictions of Blacks, if they were included at all (Pescosolido et. al. 1997; Klein 1985; Larrick 1965). According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, current publication of Black children's books has improved since then, but not by much.

The conscientious scholar should inquire about the differential effects actual components of a story—the characters, the plot or experience of the characters—have on the reader. The consistent practice, within the BCPS of reading children's literature featuring Blacks in central roles may encourage Black children to challenge the racial social status, which Blacks in America have occupied for so long. It may furthermore aid

[1] While the CCBC has been recording the number of children's books published annually since prior to 1994, only since 2002 had the CCBC began tallying the number of books received to the center. This number reflects the average since 2002.

Black children to develop a stronger cognition concerning what is presently attainable in their life and in the lives of people within their sphere. Without doubt, it takes a highly concerted effort to combat domineering cultural images. This is precisely why additional research need be pursued; the lack of diversity in children's literature may not just affect Black children, but all children. In considering the socio-cultural inheritance of whiteness, which "most whites collude tacitly in agreement not to question" (Picca and Feagin 2007: p. 9), one can extend the disparity of literature representing children of color to child readers who are not Black: what does it mean for White children to have slimmer pickings of literature that represent characters of color? White children also need literary spaces where they may be introduced to experiences that are not embedded in their own cultural memory. The development in childhood of a healthy racial cognition is an imperative part of a future adult's life (Quintana 1998). Therefore, future studies should interrogate what happens if White children are introduced to Black books as, currently, there is no scholarship that illuminates this process. In these times, the need is great for more Sarah's and Frederick's among our world leaders, children who are consistently improving their awareness of self, of the world's racial inequities, and of the social dynamics through literary encounters. Whether or not adults realize it, children are listening, they are watching, and are masterful independent thinkers. They are developing their racial theories "in the context of systems, structures, institutions, government, and culture, all of which are racialized within the U.S. context", but they are not undiscerning (Winkler 2012: p. 1). A book could change their mind. And they can change the world.

Figure 1:

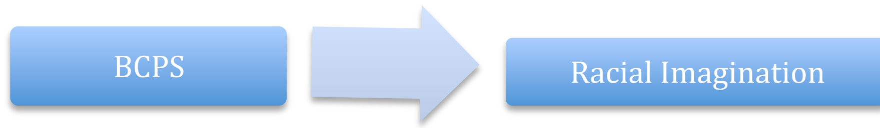


Figure 2:

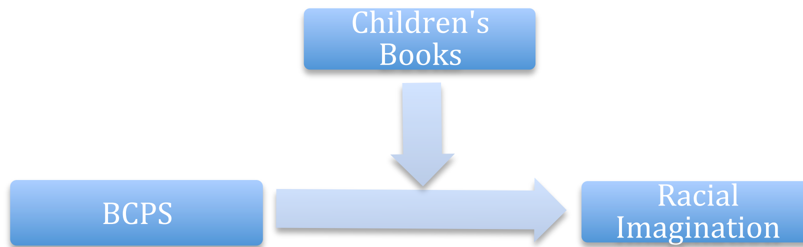
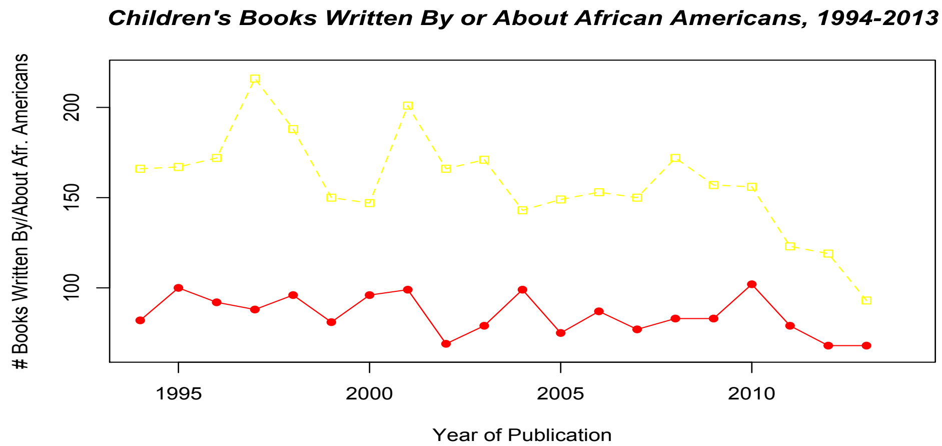


Figure 3:



Based on data from Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison

Table 1:

Table 1: Emergent Themes Pre and Post Black/White Book Literary Intervention			
Pre-Question Themes		**Post-Question Themes**	
Black Book	White Book	Black Book	White Book
We/They	We/They	We/They	We/They
The Attention	The Attention	The Attention	*Racial Empathy*
Holding Fast to Dreams	Holding Fast to Dreams	Holding Fast to Dreams	
Black Victimization	Black Victimization	Black Victimization	
		Escape in a Box	

Table 2:

Table 2: Parent SES & Elements of the Home	
	Total % (n=28)
Income (household)	
$10K or <	57
$10k-$25k	18
$25k-$40k	7
$40k or >	18
Education	
< High School	4
High School	39
> High School	57
Employment Status	
Employed	64
Head of House	
Female	93
In home, there are...	
Black toys	75
10 Black books	68
Photos w/Black family	96
Black artwork	79
Black figurines	79
African print items	46

Table 3:

Table 3: Parental Attitudes on Reading & Race					
			Total % (n=28)		
	Several times/wk	**Several times/month**	**Several times/year**	**Almost Never**	**Never**
Reads to child	21	14	32	28	4
Talk to child about race	21	40	29	11	0

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