

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

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To my parents, Dawn and Matt, who filled our home with books, music, fun, and love, and who never gave me any idea I couldn't do whatever I wanted to do or be whoever I wanted to be. Your love, encouragement, and support have helped guide my way.

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Introduction

The 1960s and '70s were a provocative and incendiary era in the history of the United States. Political and social changes were bombarding every facet of life: music, fashion, theater, film, and literature were especially influenced by the changes. The Black Arts Movement, the aesthetic arm of Black Nationalism, demanded that African American writers create a Black Aesthetic and give voice to the conflicts fragmenting the black community while also uniting it. Black artists were able to speak to, and for, the black community in an unprecedented way—the sheer quantity of African American writing and degree to which publishers were interested in bringing it to market were greater than ever. Though the Black Arts Movement was short-lived (1968-'75), it allowed black artists the opportunity to coalesce their politics into a Black Aesthetic while instilling race pride in and promoting self-determination among their audience. It was also during this time that librarians and writers realized a void in African American literature for youth—there was almost nothing written by African American authors targeted to African American teens. What did exist in literature for African American children and teens was typically produced by white writers, which often led to inaccurate depictions of black life, biased accounts of history, and derogatory remarks about racial identity. Widening gaps in income levels, the growing rift between black integrationists and black separatists, and a growing disillusion with the nation's trajectory were the realities facing all members of the African American community.

I take as the starting point for my project this premise: the correlation between young adult literature and the Black Arts Movement is symbiotic, as the rise and decline

of the Black Arts Movement coincides with the rise and decline of African American literature for youth—literature written by African American authors for an African American audience. Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes wrote African American children’s literature for decades; their first collaboration, *Popo and Fifina* (1932), preceded dozens of other books, plays, and poems for African American children. Hughes and Bontemps are largely credited with initiating the canon of African American children’s literature—many of their peers followed in subsequent decades with their own children’s stories: Lucille Clifton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Eloise Greenfield, Muriel Feelings, and Alice Childress were some of the African American writers producing literature for African American children. What I aim to do, however, is look at how Black Arts Movement writers used literature to speak to teen readers about Black Nationalism.

History of African American Children’s and Young Adult Literature

In the 1950s and ’60s, there was a void in African American literature for youth. Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ann Petry, among others, had created a substantial body of African American literature from the late nineteenth century on; they were well-established African American novelists. Their literary success, while positive for African American adults, exposed a lack of accessible literature by African Americans for African American *teens*. What those writers, among others of adult fiction, had done was prove that a market for African American literature existed.

One of the first scholars in African American children's literature is Dianne Johnson, whose groundbreaking *Telling Tales* (1990) is both a history and a scholarly analysis of children's literature; the book is divided into an introduction and chapters devoted to *The Brownies' Book*, Hughes and Bontemps, and Lucille Clifton, and is not a comprehensive view of *all* African American children's literature. Johnson is, however, one of the earliest to link the Black Power Movement to the "spate of children's literature" in the 1960s. (Walter Dean Myers also wrote about Black Nationalism and young adult literature throughout the 1980s [see "I Actually Thought We Would Revolutionize the Industry," 1986]). Johnson is perhaps most important for her work in defining Black children's literature and exploring its significance. "It is imperative," Johnson writes in her introduction, that "Black youth be exposed to literature which either blatantly or subtly—but always consciously—builds upon a foundation of African American experiences and sensibilities" (1-2). It is necessary to keep in mind, also, that Johnson's focus in *Telling Tales* is *children's* literature, not young adult. Lester, Childress, and Myers are mentioned, but briefly. Johnson, like Hughes, Bontemps, and countless other African Americans, expresses weariness over white authors depicting life in black communities and seeing those communities caricatured, stereotyped, and otherwise portrayed in a racist manner. This lack of literature for children and youth based on African American culture by African American writers, coupled with the lack of *positive* depictions in mainstream children's literature, worried Bontemps and Hughes in the 1930s. Michelle H. Martin, in "Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and the Roots of African American Children's Literature" (2008), explains that both men "recalled feeling

disappointed and cheated as children by the absence of literature for black youth” (69). Writing during Jim Crow-era segregation, Hughes and Bontemps had to work within a white-dominated publishing industry, which meant their children’s literature had to be relatable to white *and* black children.

Even before Hughes and Bontemps began writing literature for children, *The Brownies’ Book*, W. E. B. Du Bois’s compilation of stories for African American children, targeted black youth. *The Brownies’ Book* was the children’s complement to *The Crisis*, an African American magazine and had, Johnson reports, “a circulation of over 100,000” (35), not a modest number by 1919 publication standards. However, two years later, financial problems and a post-World War I recession forced the magazine to shut down. Johnson suggests, “[M]any young people read their parents’ magazines and thus did not feel the special need for *The Brownies’ Book*” (35). The cost of each issue was fifteen cents, and twelve thousand copies each month needed to be sold for the magazine to remain profitable; however, only about five thousand copies each month sold. Bontemps and Hughes realized they needed to create “cross-racial success” to avoid the problems Du Bois experienced with *The Brownies’ Book*. Martin further explains, “[H]ad their work spoken exclusively to black readers or dealt too directly with United States race relations, they would have been dismissed as ‘too political’ and would have been unable to publish with mainstream presses” (70). The duo had literary success for decades, and were able to break new ground in the publishing industry: Bontemps’s *The Story of the Negro* (1948) was a Newbery Honor book, the first for an African American writer. By the 1940s, Hughes was a successful poet (*The Weary Blues*, *The*

Dream Keeper and Other Poems) and newspaper columnist (“A Toast to Harlem,” “Here to Yonder”); his popularity and collaborations helped sustain a nearly four-decade-long career. Both were able to demonstrate, through their children’s stories, “respect for the black working class” while validating “folk culture in ways that were rare in mid-twentieth-century children’s literature” (73). Finally, Bontemps in particular is praised by Violet Harris in “From *Little Black Sambo* to *Popo and Fifina*: Arna Bontemps and the Creation of African American Children’s Literature” (1990) for providing “alternatives to the generally negative images pervasive” in books by white writers such as the Civil War-era *Two Little Confederates*, written by Thomas Nelson Page. Harris notes the difference between African American and white writers’ depictions of black youth: characters in Bontemps’s and Hughes’s stories “are described as ‘black’ with appealing physical features,” adding, “The importance of descriptions that celebrate blackness cannot be underestimated” (117-18). The authors were working to counter racist caricatures so often seen in literature for children while promoting blackness as something beautiful.

Bontemps’s first nonfiction book, *The Story of the Negro* (1948), was revolutionary because it demonstrates for children the rich history and culture of Africa and African Americans. Martin explains that while Bontemps does not “gloss over the cruelty of the Middle Passage and slavery” (76), he does provide for children (and, often, their parents) a counter-history to the dominant mid-century one. It was the first of many historical and biographical stories attempting to reconstruct American history targeting African American youth. Through the 1970s, some of the best-selling books for African

American children and young adults were biographies of Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, and Paul Robeson. *To Be a Slave*, Julius Lester's 1968 Newbery Honor book, will be discussed later, but it must be noted here that the book is part of this tradition of re-educating black youth; the Black Nationalists wanted to remind children that, despite frequent images to the contrary put forth by mainstream culture, African Americans played an integral role in the creation of the United States. Instilling race pride and creating a heightened sense of race consciousness, while not new concepts in the 1960s, were growing concerns during the early years of Bontemps's career.

In 1965, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), a product of the Civil Rights Movement, began advocating for African American writers by sponsoring contests for writers of color; the winner each year would have his/her book selected for publication. Former CIBC president Beryle Banfield, in "Commitment to Change: The Council on Interracial Books for Children and the World of Children's Books" (1998), explains how the newly formed CIBC strove to "address the issues of racism and sexism in children's literature." She notes, "[T]hese had become critical issues for certain groups, including African Americans, who had been demanding accurate and adequate treatment of their life, history, and culture in children's literature and textbooks" (17). The CIBC's goal was "to promote a literature for children that better reflect[ed] the realities of a multi-cultural society" (vii). They were approaching children's literature with a goal of integration, as opposed to the separation advocated by Black Nationalists.

The Role of Early Libraries and Librarians

Harlem teacher Herbert Kohl looks back on his career in “Staying Alive” (1991), writing that in 1964, “[T]here simply were no texts or children’s books with which my students could identify” (495). One year later, the CIBC began publishing youth-oriented books, and their *Bulletin of Interracial Books for Children* provided parents, librarians, and teachers with lists and reviews of African American and other ethnic authors and illustrators such as Faith Ringgold, Jerry Pinkney, and John Steptoe, who were writing for children and teens. It was in 1965 that some African American librarians began taking political stands, advocating for the incorporation not only of African American writers, but books for African American *teens*.

The distinction between children’s and young adult literature coincides with the creation of the CIBC. In 1966, the American Library Association (ALA) changed their annual list of the year’s best new books from “Adult Books for Young People” to “Best Books for Young Adults,” a shift Michael Cart explains in his book *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (1996). Books were being categorized as either children or adult. When the ALA realized teen readers were disinterested in children’s literature, they began suggesting adult books as alternatives. The ALA’s list, according to Cart, “[W]ould remain confined to adult titles until 1973, when there would finally be a body of literature of sufficient size and literary significance, published specifically for adolescents, to warrant the inclusion of ‘young adult’ books” (8-9). Much contemporary scholarship still combines young adult texts and writers with children’s. However, it is important to note the distinction: first, and

most obviously, is the audience. Children's literature is geared for infancy-4th grade; young adult targets teens 13-18. Second, children's literature is almost always didactic, whereas young adult literature may be—but isn't always. Third, young adult literature is not only geared towards teens, but is *about* teens, focusing on their lives, issues, culture, language, and development, whereas children's literature can be from the perspective of parents, older siblings, or animals, and often involves fairy tales, folklore, or unrealistic settings.

Librarians explicitly trained to deal with youth in the early- to mid-twentieth century were nearly nonexistent. Some African American librarians were starting to realize by the late 1960s that there was a need for libraries to cater to the growing needs of African American teens. The problem was initially two-fold: first, libraries needed to purchase youth-oriented books by African American writers for an African American audience. Second, African American writers needed to publish quality books for teens—quality, as defined by Johnson, is “literature written by African Americans that seeks to represent, interpret, and envision the lives, real and imagined, of African American people” (3). The CIBC, attuned to the growing need for African American teen literature, aided struggling black writers by holding annual competitions and promotions; Kohl explains that “in the late 1960s more than 100 authors and illustrators who later won awards were brought to publishers' attention by the council, and more than half of them received illustration assignments or book contracts” (495). Banfield explains the CIBC guidelines: “unpublished writers in African American, Asian American, and Native American communities were invited to participate. Manuscripts were required to be of

high literary quality, culturally authentic, and free of race and gender bias” (18). The CIBC’s efforts opened the door to young adult writers such as Kristin Hunter, Mildred Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, and Virginia Hamilton; the genre began to be published with more frequency than in past decades.

Augusta Baker, an African American children’s librarian at the 135th Street branch in New York City (later renamed the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), took action in her library: In “Making Books Available: The Role of Early Libraries, Librarians, and Booksellers in the Promotion of African American Children’s Literature” (1998), Nancy Tolson writes, “Baker took the initiative to remove from the shelves the books that negatively depicted African American characters as poverty-stricken, lazy but happy, living on a plantation with largely distorted body features, and speaking with the thick, difficult-to-interpret dialect commonly encountered in children’s books. This was not the image that Baker wanted the children that visited her library to absorb” (10-11). Baker was instrumental not only in removing offensive images, but in replacing those books with fiction and poetry by Harlem Renaissance writers like Claude McKay and Countee Cullen. White publishing houses did not often publish African American writers in the 1960s, and in 1970, Baker “petitioned publishers, presenting them with the criteria so that publishers would know what African Americans wanted to see in children’s books” (13). Viking Penguin, Scholastic, and Putnam are a few houses that began publishing young adult literature by authors of color in the latter ’60s. The criteria Baker advocated were her own, formed from her experience as a librarian in a black neighborhood and based on issues she saw in her community. Baker worked

independently from the CIBC, though her work nonetheless did further its goals. The CIBC was interested in a multicultural and diverse range of ethnicities and issues—sexism, sexuality, class, and race—while Baker was focused on African American depictions in literature.

James Smethurst, a leading scholar on African American literature and culture, writes in *The Black Arts Movement* (2005) that the movement “dramatically transformed the landscape of public funding for the arts and the terms of the discussion of public arts support” (372), especially regarding public libraries, which in the late 1960s received unprecedented amounts of federal money to purchase books by writers of color. Libraries were institutions that underwent desegregation in the 1950s and ’60s, and began catering to a public showing growing interest in African American culture; Baker and librarians across the country were able to take advantage of this funding to purchase the rapidly growing number of African American books available for children and young adults.

The New Breed

The Civil Rights Movement advocated integration as the means to solving racism. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his followers used a peaceful method of resistance to protest segregation laws; Darlene Clark Hine and others explain in *African Americans: A Concise History, Volume Two* (2006) that King believed sit-ins, marches, speeches, and preaching were the way to achieve equality. As the 1960s progressed, however, many blacks were unwilling to patiently wait for white people to change—they began to initiate change within their own communities. The Black Panthers, for example, served

breakfast and lunch to low-income white and black children in the Bay area. Worldwide events influenced a growing number of increasingly radical blacks, which even came to include King himself: the escalating Vietnam conflict, Hine writes, was seen as “hypocrisy” because of “the federal government’s determination to send black and white men to Vietnam ‘to slaughter, men, women, and children’ while failing to protect black American civil rights protesters.” The authors further point out that King believed “the president was more concerned about winning in Vietnam than winning the ‘war against poverty’ in America” (496). The independence of Ghana (1957), election of Kwame Nkrumah (1960), and the American-approved assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 sparked new interest among blacks in the U.S. to fight for freedom at home. The poor of America’s ghettos identified with the poor of Latin America, which was also seen as a collection of colonized nations. Malcolm X’s 1965 shooting turned the tide toward young blacks who began, as Stokely Carmichael explains in “Toward Black Liberation” (1968), “to define ourselves and our relationship to the society” (119). Carmichael, a leader in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), grew impatient with Dr. King’s non-violent resistance movement, and in 1967, joined the Black Power Movement, severing ties with SNCC. The same year, he wrote *Black Power*, signaling his ideological shift away from the non-violent means he had been advocating. *Black Power* caught the attention of Black Panther leaders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who gave Carmichael an honorary position within the Panther party. The “New Breed,” a term coined by Peter Labrie in his 1968 essay of the same name, referred to young, urban African Americans who would take power “by any means necessary” (75). The

integrationist, non-violent Civil Rights Movement evolved into something nationalistic and militant as the '60s gave way to violent race riots in Watts, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Newark. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did little to close the disparity between rich and poor. The New Breed believed Christian platitudes and non-violent Civil Rights strategies were not enough to bridge worsening class differences or create racial equality. As a result, many New Breed African Americans took action by forming the Black Panthers and initiating change themselves.

Four authors of young adult literature whose works appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s are Walter Dean Myers, Alice Childress, Julius Lester, and Virginia Hamilton. Their aim was to address racism, sexism, and the realities specific to African American culture. For Myers, Lester, and Hamilton, the late '60s were a coming-of-age in their literary careers. Childress was already an established playwright at the time her first young adult novel was published in 1973, and had long been advocating Black Power in her works. Childress, Myers, Hamilton, and Lester were among the first writers to go beyond the integrationist ideas of the Civil Rights Movement; they, like Black Arts Movement leaders Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), advocated writing that was functional, community-oriented, and political. These teen writers specifically favored art that was separatist, which stood in direct contrast with earlier attempts of black artists to write for an integrated children's audience. Specifically, literature of the Black Arts Movement, and the 1960s-'70s in general, tended to be grounded in reality—what today is often referred to as urban literature. As the discussion in succeeding

chapters will show, Childress, Myers, Lester, and Hamilton embrace this black aesthetic in their work.

The Black Aesthetic

Against this backdrop of turmoil and confusion, black writers of the 1960s were advocating a theory of art that became known as the Black Aesthetic; it was the artistic arm of the Black Nationalist Movement. Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater (BART) in 1965, providing what Hine calls “a bridge that linked the political and cultural aspects of black power” (497). BART provided space for African American artists to create, and in turn inspired writers’ workshops across the country. The theories coming out of BART led to the emergence of new writers—Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Jayne Cortez are among those who thrived in the aesthetics of the growing Black Arts Movement. Some older writers, like Gwendolyn Brooks, came to embrace the new aesthetic and celebration of black culture.

In truth, the Black Arts Movement, for years widely viewed as homophobic, misogynistic, and male-centered, had little to unify it, as there were disparate guiding principles that were formulated to tie the artists and art together. Generally speaking, most of the artists tended to agree that black art had to be affirmative, functional, collective, and committed to change. In 1968, Baraka, with Larry Neal, published *Black Fire*, a seminal collection of essays, prose, poetry, and plays that reflected his view of the Black Aesthetic—and reflected the four ideological views enumerated above. This philosophy influenced adult writers such as Toni Morrison, not often associated with the Black Arts Movement. Nevertheless, Morrison explored Black Nationalism, and,

arguably, a Black Aesthetic, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and other novels. In 1970, Addison Gayle, Jr., edited *The Black Aesthetic*, a compilation of essays that attempted to elucidate what the Black Aesthetic actually was and find cohesion among a wide-ranging group of writers, each with his/her view of the black aesthetic. *The Black Aesthetic* spans the scope of African American aesthetics over a period of 75 years; it includes selections from Alain Locke's *The New Negro* ("The Negro Youth Speaks," 1925), Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1927), and then-contemporary essays exploring new aesthetics regarding black theory, music, poetry, drama, and fiction.

* * *

Much scholarship has been written about African American adult literature and fiction of the 1960s and '70s. Very little has been done on young adult literature of that time; even Caroline Hunt's "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists" (1996), for example, focuses on the years 1980-'95; while she does briefly mention some titles written in the 1960s and '70s, they are by white writers. Virtually nothing has been said about the role of the Black Arts Movement or the Black Aesthetic in young adult literature. The research conducted for this project has been restricted to young adult literature, and while Smethurst and others are working to reevaluate the role the Black Arts Movement had on society, that role in young adult literature has not been looked at closely. I am also working to show how the decline in African American young adult literature is linked to the decline of the Black Arts Movement. During that era, young adult literature was not given scholarly attention and was rarely even reviewed. It was

left to librarians to promote the inclusion of African American writing in their patrons' lives. Schools were able to purchase African American books in larger quantities than ever because of a surplus of federal money, and the hard work of Baker and the CIBC in creating bibliographies provided white teachers and librarians the information needed to purchase books by African American authors.

In the late '60s, young adult literature and the Black Arts Movement coalesced in three young adult novels: *Zeely*, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, and *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, and one young adult nonfiction book, *To Be a Slave*. These four books will serve as examples of how the aesthetics and ideology put forth by the Black Arts Movement coincided with the problems facing libraries and black communities during the Black Nationalist Movement. This study will also demonstrate that a body of African American young adult literature exploring the Black Aesthetic existed, and describe how its decline in publishing in the mid-1970s coincided with the decline of Black Nationalism as a viable political movement.

Revelation, Not Revolution:

The Black Arts Movement's Early Influence on Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely*

In her contribution to *Celebrating Children's Books: Essays on Children's Literature in Honor of Zena Sutherland* (1981), Virginia Hamilton writes, “[I]t is important to reveal that the life of the darker peoples is and always has been different in a significant respect from the life of the majority. It has been made eccentric by slavery, escape, fear of capture, by discrimination” (104). That belief has informed all of Hamilton's books, and is demonstrated in her first young adult novel, *Zeely*. At the time of *Zeely*'s publication in 1967, the 1960s version of Black Nationalism was not yet fully developed, and the Black Aesthetic was mostly confined to theater—it had not yet widely spread to literature and poetry. Culturally the “Black is Beautiful” slogan was growing in its appeal to African American women and men to embrace their natural looks and celebrate their African roots; in 1967, Martin Luther King gave a speech surrounded by signs reading “*Black Is Beautiful* and It Is So Beautiful to Be Black.” Though the country was still a year away from the full-fledged Black Arts Movement, elements of it can be found in *Zeely*—specifically, Hamilton's celebration of blackness and Africa, and her emphasis on community. Her novel serves as a transition between the integrated approach of Civil Rights and the developing separatist ideology Black Nationalists were espousing.

Zeely is the story of Elizabeth “Geeder” Perry and her brother John, whom she renames “Toeboy.” They travel by train to their Uncle Ross's farm for the summer, where Geeder's imaginative story about “night travellers” frightens her brother and she becomes fascinated by Zeely Tayber, a neighboring farmer. *Zeely* is the first African

woman Geeder has seen—and something about Zeely captures Geeder’s attention like nothing had before. Described as “more than six and a half feet tall, thin and deeply dark as a pole of Ceylon ebony . . . She had very high cheekbones and her eyes seemed to turn inward on themselves,” Zeely’s exotic appearance and the “calm” and “pride” in Zeely’s face, “the face was the most beautiful she had ever seen,” are striking to Geeder (42). Soon after her first glimpse of Zeely, Geeder begins to fantasize about talking to her and attempts to find out all she can about this mysterious woman.

Geeder’s growing enthrallment with Zeely leads her to shun the children who visit Uncle Ross’s farm. Hamilton writes, “Some of the village children got into the habit of stopping by the farm to see if Geeder and Toeboy wanted to play. Toeboy either went off with them or invited them to wade in Uncle Ross’s pond” (49), but Geeder says, “I can’t think straight about Zeely with them around” (50). Soon she begins to feel lonely, until she begins to imagine Zeely there for company. What Geeder doesn’t realize is that Zeely is a metaphor for Africa, and part of her isolation and loneliness stems from her ignorance of her own heritage and background. Though Geeder brags to Uncle Ross, “I’m three years older than the last time I was here. That means I know ten times as much as I did then” (24), her lack of cultural knowledge brings about a humiliating turning point in the novel. Geeder, believing she found proof that Zeely comes from Watutsi royalty and is a queen, refuses to heed Uncle Ross’s observation, “You may have discovered the people Zeely is descended from . . . but I can’t see that that’s going to make her a queen” (63).

Delighted by her discovery, she decides to join Toeboy for a bonfire at a neighbor’s house. Geeder begins to tell the tale of Zeely’s past—that is, Geeder’s false

interpretation of Zeely's past—but is interrupted by a boy who says, “I know about Watutsis . . . they are bad people. They keep people as slaves!” (70). The boy, Warner, recounts the history of the Watutsis and tells Geeder, “You're a silly girl” (72). Geeder disregards his comment and continues to create fantastical tales about Zeely for her audience. What Geeder fails to understand, however, is Zeely's history—and, therefore, the history of Africa as a continent. She sees the beauty and exotic appearance of Zeely, but views her as an object, creating assumptions about her life and being that are incorrect. Geeder's refusal to believe Warner's history lesson and heed Uncle Ross's comment create a divide between Geeder and her peers; Toeboy also starts turning to Uncle Ross for answers, instead of Geeder, creating a community of their own.

In “Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” Addison Gayle, Jr. writes, “The acceptance of the phrase ‘Black is Beautiful’ is the first step in the destruction of the old table of the laws,” and African American critics must “unearth the treasure of beauty lying deep in the untoured regions of the Black experience” (46). Hamilton has frankly spoken and written of her desire to “write the black experience” (19), which is clearly explored in *Zeely*. Some of her desire to instill the black experience in her stories is derived from her own background, which is rooted in slavery: a 1995 *Time* magazine story explains, “Hamilton's grandfather, Levi, was taken out of slavery in Virginia to southern Ohio by her great-grandmother, Mary. ‘I was named Virginia so I would always know my heritage,’ [Hamilton] says” (n.p.). Hamilton uses Geeder as a tool with which to dig and “unearth the treasure.” In *Zeely*, the treasure is Geeder's growing understanding of her African roots and heritage. What makes this groundbreaking in Hamilton's writing is that *Zeely* is among the first young adult books to fully explore this

area. In “Books From Parallel Cultures: Celebrating a Silver Anniversary” (1993), Rudine Sims Bishop writes, “At a time when few positive images of Africans and African Americans existed in mainstream children’s literature, and few African American writers were involved in the creation of what images there were, *Zeely* appeared” and helped affirm “beauty where others had found only difference and exoticism” (175). Judy Richardson explains in “Black Children’s Books: An Overview” (1974) that in the 1960s, many African American authors wrote historical nonfiction or biographies; Hamilton was one of the first to target young adult literature in such a specific way, with such a specific “black is beautiful” message, in fiction. While *Zeely* is often written about, it is generally listed as part of Hamilton’s biographical information (i.e., *Something About the Author, Contemporary Authors*) or as a book of mention (i.e., the American Library Association’s “Notable Books” award). No work has linked this novel with the Black Arts Movement or Black Nationalism, though scholarly essays do exist, such as Boyd H. Davis’s “Childe Reader and the Saussurean Paradox” (1982) and Linda P. Parsons’s “*Zeely*: A Foremother of the Feminist Children’s Novel” (2006) which use, respectively, post-structuralism and feminism to analyze *Zeely*.

Racial memory, to Black Nationalists, has various meanings. Larry Neal categorizes it in *The Black Aesthetic* as memory of Africa, which is the heart of *Zeely*. Hamilton herself said, in her speech “On Being a Black Writer in America” (1986), that “I’ve attempted to portray the essence of a race, its essential community, culture, history, and traditions, which I know well” (137-38). Hamilton explores not only African culture in *Zeely*, but African American culture as well. Geeder frightens Toeboy with stories of the night traveller; she tells him, “If you see one, you’d better close your eyes fast and

dive as far under the covers as you can go. They don't like kids watching them. In fact, they don't like anybody watching them!" The narrator then describes Toeboy's response: "Toeboy stayed uneasily beneath the lilac bush. He was glad to be so near the house, for if he heard any sound, he could race inside" (36). Geeder later admits to fabricating the story, though frightens herself when she sees something "tall and white moving down the road. It didn't quite touch the ground" (39). Geeder believes the vision is Zeely, though Uncle Ross has a different story for Toeboy—he sings, "Night travellin', Night travellin' / I step my feet down strong, / I'm Night travellin'," explaining, "Slaves used to sing that" because it "was how they told one another in the fields that they planned to get away from slavery" (99). Uncle Ross teaches Toeboy more slave songs and their origins, but the songs—one about fleeing to Canada and one about escaping from jail—confuse Toeboy, leading him to wonder if "a night traveller is a slave or a prison man?" (100). The subject matter is clearly new to Toeboy, who is looking for answers. Uncle Ross reassures Toeboy that there are no night travellers, only "somebody who wants to walk tall. And to walk tall, you most certainly have to run free," later continuing, "it is the free spirit in any of us breaking loose" (101). Unknown to them, Geeder has been listening in on their conversation. She feels something stirring in her, something she describes as "the feeling of movement. Not dreaming, exactly, for she saw no pictures, but the feeling that there was something beyond her vision trying to catch up with her" (105). Geeder doesn't realize it, but what is trying to "catch up to her" is her memory—her racial memory, which will help her understand her background and heritage.

It is at this point in the novel that Geeder and Zeely meet face-to-face and talk in the woods. Zeely shares with Geeder a folk story passed down from her mother, and

Geeder is not unaware of the importance of Zeely's story: Hamilton writes, "Geeder listened, hardly breathing for fear she would miss some of it. Never had she heard such a tale. It was about the beginning of the world and it told of a young woman who waited for a message to come. The message would tell her who she was and what she was to do" (117). It is as though these African stories are what Geeder needed to fill a void in her life—the void that led her to create aliases and fantastical stories about Zeely. By learning the truth about Zeely's African roots, Geeder is able to learn about herself and her own culture, and better understand who she is. Storytelling is an African tradition, and one in which Hamilton herself grew up. She often discussed how important storytelling was to her and her family, and those influences are seen in *Zeely*. Hamilton understood herself better through the use of storytelling; Geeder and Toeboy do as well. Geeder needs to hear Zeely's story directly to believe it and come to terms both with who Zeely is and who Geeder is. Toeboy reaches this understanding when Uncle Ross sings slave songs and explains what the night travellers really are; it takes Geeder longer to negotiate her thoughts and reach this same level of cultural understanding.

The storytelling also functions as a way to bring Geeder back into her family and rejoin the community. Toeboy is not as impacted by Uncle Ross's or Zeely's stories as Geeder, because he was never as far outside his community as Geeder was. Zeely's stories help bring Geeder back to herself—to Elizabeth—and enable her to once again be close with her uncle and brother. Though the book ends with Geeder and Toeboy still at Uncle Ross's farm, readers can likely assume that this change is lasting, and isn't a pseudo-identity, like "Geeder." Nicknaming is, without a doubt, an important part of African American culture. Ex-slaves renamed themselves after Emancipation, cultural

figures in the '60s were renaming themselves (i.e., Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka, Muhammad Ali), and nearly all who did change their names did so to shed their “slave names” or exert autonomy over their lives. Geeder, however, does not understand the historical significance of her actions, and her nickname is not a political statement, but rather part of her search for identity. Hamilton’s point is that only by understanding one’s heritage can one understand him/herself. *Zeely* not only reinforces the storytelling heritage important to Africans and African Americans, but *Zeely* as a novel serves to reaffirm the beauty in *being* black. Geeder and Toeboy are welcomed to the community surrounding them, and the children are eager to befriend Geeder and Toeboy. Early in the novel, the narrator says about Elizabeth (before she renames herself), “She liked being by herself. Alone, she could *be* anybody at all and she would have only herself to take care of” (16). Geeder feels “cut off” from her brother and, when traveling to Uncle Ross’s farm, the train’s other passengers. By the novel’s end, Geeder is still alone physically, in her room, but her mindset has been expanded by *Zeely*’s stories and the knowledge that she is not alone metaphorically anymore. Geeder no longer feels cut off from her family or the people she is surrounded by. After Geeder’s climactic meeting with *Zeely*, Geeder says, “I don’t mind the dark of it,” adding, “It’s being alone in it that’s the trouble” (137). After Geeder returns to Uncle Ross’s, she is able to reconnect with him and Toeboy, and share her stories with them.

John Henrik Clarke stresses in “Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage” (1968) the importance for blacks in America to understand their cultural roots and beginnings. He wants to counter the “school of thought supporting the thesis that the people of African descent in the Western World have no African heritage to reclaim . . . that Africa was a

savage and backward land with little history and no golden age” (11). Clarke, like other Black Arts Movement writers, worked to counter “distorted” images of Africa and reclaim that continent’s ancient history. Geeder’s persistent belief that Zeely is a Watutsi queen and her initial bafflement over Zeely’s folk tales is Hamilton’s way of demonstrating the importance of knowing one’s culture. Geeder needs to create identities for herself and immerses herself in daydreams because she lacks the knowledge needed to understand who she is as an African American—she lacks the knowledge of her people, her culture, and her history. Zeely attempts to give Geeder some of that knowledge. Clarke also writes, “It is singularly the responsibility of the Negro writer to proclaim and celebrate the fact that his people have in their ancestry” royalty, religious leaders, scholars, and emperors. Again, Hamilton uses Zeely as a metaphor—as the embodiment of the regal beauty and stateliness of her ancestors.

Hamilton would follow up *Zeely* with dozens of young adult fiction, biography, mystery, nonfiction, history, and books of folk tales, and would win every major literary prize available to young adult authors—including the Newbery. She said, in a 1972 speech, that in her past novels, “I wrote of characters who, among other things, were reaching for their black American history or their African heritage” (25). Hamilton integrates *Zeely* with some early tenets of the Black Aesthetic—affirming black beauty and celebrating African culture, two benchmarks of the Black Arts Movement. But *Zeely* is also about “revelation,” not revolution, and revolution is, more than anything, at the heart of the Black Arts Movement. *Zeely* is not a call for social change, and does not have the same racially separate tone as her subsequent peers’ works have. Also, *Zeely* is targeted to an integrated audience; the other three works examined here are directed at an

African American reader. Geeder and Toeboy are trying to gain a better understanding and consciousness of their own black selves—they are trying to reconcile their African American and African selves. Hamilton navigates her way between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement carefully, but her ultimate goal is to “take hold of one single theme of the black experience and present it as clearly as I can” (19). Her original, even groundbreaking, story for youth can be seen as helping pave the way for more revolutionary writers like Julius Lester, Walter Dean Myers, and Alice Childress, who would soon follow Hamilton into the literary world of young adult literature.

“They Were Not Slaves. They Were People”: Julius Lester and *To Be a Slave*

The mere imparting of information is not education.

Carter G. Woodson

By the time Julius Lester wrote *To Be a Slave*, slavery had largely fallen prey to the nation’s cultural amnesia: whites and blacks alike wanted to move past the horrors of slavery and referred to it as a “bad time.” Black Nationalists, while supportive of black jazz musicians like Charlie Parker and Sun-Ra, avoided blues music because it was too closely linked to slavery, a topic Jimmy Stewart explores in his “Introduction to Black Aesthetics in Music” (1970). He writes, “[M]usic of the sixties represents an absolute break with the past” (89), referring to early twentieth-century blues artists who were too closely connected to church music of slave times and were unable to “deliver an adequate theory of aesthetic value concerning what we have produced. This is due in a great part to the long historical consequences of the way slavery was practiced in this country” (83). In the 1960s “revolutionary” artists saw themselves as creating an aesthetic, one that conveniently overlooked slave times. Black Nationalists wanted to instill black power in their communities and saw reminders of life in bondage as the antithesis to empowerment. It was easier for the Black Arts Movement artists to ignore early blues musicians and erase more recent racial memory and focus instead on racial pride derived from the more distant history of Africa.

It is a bit paradoxical, then, that people comprising a movement based in large part on reclaiming African pride and celebrating blackness would be so selective in what they chose to remember. Baraka and other Black Nationalists ardently supported and wrote about new black musicians like James Brown and Ornette Coleman because they broke with the bluesy style of earlier musicians like Ray Charles and Ma Rainey. Baraka

appears to be creating a new racial memory—one that is not steeped in sorrow and pain. Lester, not unaware of the Black Nationalist ideology, nevertheless chose to write a book about slavery at a time when it was not a popular topic. What Lester does do through his book is use the Civil War and Reconstruction as metaphors for the 1960s—an era of great hope, promise, and social change that ends in violence against blacks and, eventually, little change in the status quo or race relations. *To Be a Slave*, then, is an indictment of the integrationist Civil Rights Movement and an endorsement of Black Nationalism.

To say that slavery had completely fallen out of the nation's memory is an overstatement. A small but influential group of historians was working to revise previous beliefs about Reconstruction and the role African Americans played in it. As indicated in the introduction, Bontemps's *Story of the Negro* was the first in a long line of African American-written history books. During the 1960s, however, white and black scholars were reevaluating Civil War and Reconstruction history: historian Eric Foner explains in "The New View of Reconstruction" (1983) that "the full force of the revisionist wave broke over the field" at that time, leaving "virtually every assumption" (184) of race in United States history changed. Adult readers had numerous Civil War-era book selections available to them: *The Road to Harpers Ferry* by J.C. Furnas (1959), *Ante-Bellum Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper on Slavery* by Harvey Wish (1960), *Forever Free, the Story of the Emancipation Proclamation* by Dorothy Sterling (1963), and *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* by David Brion Davis (1966) were only some of the titles specifically dealing with slavery in the United States. At the same time, white author William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), loudly criticized by the black community as racist, depicted Turner as a hypersexual and

aggressive threat. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize, and while Styron can perhaps be credited with attempting to delve into black psychology, he nevertheless reinforces negative stereotypes. White historian Stanley Elkins's book *Slavery* (1959, reprinted in 1968) also depicts blacks in a negative way. *Slavery* was so successful that the '68 republishing was a second edition; his book was also highly influential on historians. The view of slavery in the late '60s was complicated and conflicting; despite efforts by revisionist historians and African American writers to counter persistent stereotypes, many white writers still continued to put forth racist and historically inaccurate images of antebellum America.

Lester's reasons for writing *To Be a Slave* were two-fold: he was, like Bontemps and Hughes before him, unhappy with black depictions in children's literature. The *Children's Literature Review (CLR)* explains, "[T]he young Lester never found material in children's books with which he could identify" (91). Lester describes in *To Be a Slave's* introduction how, when he became a father, he was again reminded of the lack of quality literature for children. So, like Bontemps and Hughes before him, Lester decided to write his own story, and published *To Be a Slave* in 1968. He also wanted to fight against the racial stereotypes he saw. Lester writes in chapter one's introduction, "Slaves are often pictured as little more than dumb, brute animals, whose sole attributes were found in working, singing, and dancing," before explaining common nineteenth-century beliefs about blacks: "They were like children and slavery was actually a benefit to them—this was the view of those who were not slaves. Those who were slaves tell a different story" (29). Those stories had been silenced or drowned out by film, radio, and television depictions of African Americans, or because of the white power structure,

which often denied blacks the chance to tell their own stories. What *To Be a Slave* does is expose the truth about slavery by fighting against what Lester saw as “the stereotyped blacks of the movies of the forties and fifties—happy, laughing, filled with love for white people. I did not doubt that such slaves existed . . . However, I refused to believe that all slaves had loved slavery” (5). It is no coincidence that *To Be a Slave* has two chapters titled Resistance. Lester is using his book to comment directly on Elkins’s “Sambo” depictions, as well as depictions found in film and literature. Those images shaped Lester’s worldview and would inevitably inspire him to join the Civil Rights Movement.

It wasn’t until 1967 that Lester returned from peaceful protests and Freedom Rides to writing, this time for *Sing Out!*, a magazine that “sought to combine political activism and music” (n.p.). His essay “The Angry Children of Malcolm X” covered the growing Black Power Movement, and created enough interest to generate a book offer. After the book was rejected, he tried another publisher, who commented on Lester’s “simple writing style” (7) and suggested he meet with a children’s editor. Three months later, *To Be a Slave* was finished and his career as a youth author was born.

To Be a Slave was inspired by Lester’s own family history. In the 1998 reissue of the book, he writes in the new introduction how, as a boy, he saw his father open a letter promising to “research the Lester family tree.” Lester’s father threw the letter away after telling his son, “I don’t need to pay anybody to tell me about where we came from. Our family tree ends in a bill of sale. Lester is the name of the family that owned us” (3). That moment proved to be pivotal in young Julius’s life, causing a new outlook on his heritage and existence: he describes it as “a sense of loss. There was an emptiness within me that could not be filled” (4), and it was not until the early 1960s that he realized

exactly how unfulfilled he was by this lack of information about his past. When Lester came across B.A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down* (1945), a white man's compilation of slave narratives collected at the Library of Congress, he hoped it would be a chance to discover something about his slave ancestry and African American history in general; instead, it led to anger and disappointment about the stereotyped images of slaves who loved slavery.

Lester decided to discover for himself what the ex-slaves said. In 1963, Lester began his own research at the Library of Congress, initially searching for a clue about his great-grandparents. The project, however, was put on pause when he traveled to Mississippi in 1964 as part of the Civil Rights Movement. He writes in *To Be a Slave's* introduction, "I looked around, and suddenly I knew that more than a hundred years ago a slave had stood at that exact spot and had looked north as I was doing. In that moment I was returned to that need born in childhood to know from whom I had come historically" (6). Lester's slave research ceased to be solely about his own great-grandparents and instead turned to the shared experience of slaves in the United States.

There was also a curious dichotomy happening culturally and academically in the '60s: historians were working to revise the public's view of post-slavery America, but when *To Be a Slave* was published, the film industry had mostly refrained from making Civil War-era films or depicting slavery. At the same time, though, the phenomenally popular *Gone With the Wind* was re-released in movie theatres across the nation in 1961 and 1967, thus ensuring racial stereotypes were never truly erased from the nation's collective consciousness. Though that film was not targeted at the young adult readers

Lester spoke to in *To Be a Slave*, its effect on society and pop culture in general would have been noticed by the youth of America.

Lester divided his book into nine chapters: Prologue, To Be a Slave, The Auction Block, The Plantation, Resistance to Slavery-1, Resistance to Slavery-2, Emancipation, After Emancipation, and Epilogue. Starting with the beginnings of the slave trade and ending with emancipation, Lester spared no detail or horror, despite writing for a young adult audience. Each chapter begins with an historical overview of the selected topic—plantation life, resistance to slavery, emancipation and after—before quoting men’s and women’s experiences; Lester explains in the book’s introduction that in addition to his research at the Library of Congress, he researched slave narratives in New York libraries for well over a year before writing *To Be a Slave*. Lester is following trends in African American writing for children; Judy Richardson explains in “Black Children’s Books: An Overview” (1974) that from 1954 to 1966, biographies and “[s]lavery and underground railroad stories were . . . big at this time” (387-88). She attributes the increasing interest in African American history to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, but it is indicative of the revisionist historical work being done as well.

The thorough research and attention to human emotions are demonstrated by Lester’s ability to weave stories of hopelessness, torture, enslavement, separation, desperation, and, perhaps most importantly, resistance into a book that speaks directly to the Black Arts Movement tenets. One such tenet is the need for black separation, which Lester would later write and speak about at length. The last chapter of *To Be a Slave* includes ex-slave Rhody Holsell’s view that “it would have been better to have moved all the colored people way out west to themselves. . . . It would have been better on both

racess and they would not have mixed up” (155). Ex-slave Thomas Hall gets the book’s last word:

He [Lincoln] give us freedom without giving us any chance to live to ourselves and we still had to depend on the southern white man for work, food and clothing, and he held us out of necessity and want in a state of servitude but little better than slavery. . . . White folks are not going to do nothing for Negroes except keep them down. (155-56)

Hall’s words (from 1937) fit seamlessly with Larry Neal’s aesthetic, which “is predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?” (274). *To Be a Slave* is essentially a rewriting of history—it is Lester’s attempt to situate the African American experience in the annals of American history while providing young adult readers a realistic view of slavery. Hall’s later comment, “[W]hite folks have been and are now and always will be against the Negro” (156), anticipates writer Nathan Hare’s essay in *Black Fire*, “Brainwashing of Black Men’s Minds” (1968): “the Negro in America has been everlastingly misled, tricked and brainwashed by the ruling race of whites” (178). Hall’s prophetic words from 1937 also ring true when events of the ’60s are considered: the efforts by whites to prevent African Americans from voting, the violence unleashed by Bull Connor on African American Civil Rights activists, and the refusal of George Wallace to integrate the University of Alabama were attempts at keeping blacks “down.” The high unemployment rates, indicative of the “state of servitude but little better than slavery,” led to A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin’s March on Washington in 1963.

The bitterness and anger in Hall's tone can be found in much Black Arts Movement writing, including Lester's.

In *Lay My Burden Down*, Botkin tells readers "bright sayings and funny stories," describes slave reports of how "Old Master was good to us," (2), and claims "everybody happy on Massas's place till war begin" (238). Stories have such titles as "I Wished I Never Run Off" (198) and "When I Got Back to Master Haley," which describes how "Massa Haley am kind to his colored folks, and him am kind to everybody" (172). In contrast, Lester was hoping to counter lingering racist images of plantation life: as an example, *To Be a Slave's* chapter two, "Auction Block," presents the heart-wrenching reality of slave life, that at any moment, for any reason, a family could be torn apart. "Auction Block" also gives detailed descriptions of the inhumanity slaves endured at these auctions: "They 'zamine you just like they do a horse; they look at your teeth and pull your eyelids back and look at your eyes, and feel you just like you was a horse" (49). That anonymous speaker's explanation of the inhumanity of slave life offers an inclusive and alternative view of American history, which revisionist historians in the '60s were working to do as well. Hare also refutes Elkins's depictions of slavery, writing, "The slave plantation was a total institution in that a large number of persons were restricted against their will to an institution which demanded total loyalty and was presided over and regimented by an 'all-powerful' staff, and 'master'" (180). While Lester attributes a speaker's name to his selections, Botkin lists the speakers in a pseudo-epilogue at the book's end. Though *Lay My Burden Down* is dedicated "To the Narrators," Botkin's introduction undercuts their authority as being "damaged or weakened by internal contradictions and inconsistencies; obvious errors of historical fact; vague, confused, or

ambiguous statements; lapses of memory; and reliance on hearsay,” going so far as to say, “By comparison with the first-person accounts, the few written in the third person seem completely lacking not only in flavor but also reliability” (xi). Botkin refers to the narrators as “characters,” further undermining the importance of their words by implying the slave narratives themselves are little more than stories. Lester, by contrast, makes no qualifications and interprets the slave narratives as fact—not folk tales, not hearsay, and not unreliable. He refers to the enslaved as “captives,” and writes, “My object in writing the book was to enable the reader to experience slaves as human beings” (8), emphasizing the reality of their lives and giving their words weight and authority.

The new aesthetic Neal and his contemporaries advocated included abandoning western values and art forms. In an essay for *Katallagete* entitled “The Revolution Revisited” (1970), Lester writes that revolution “means the destruction of the system (capitalism) and the replacement of it with a new one (socialism)” (31). However, it is very difficult to get around the paradox of an artist using the dominant culture’s language to *fight against* the dominant culture’s oppression. Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, for example, used irregular punctuation, spelling, and capitalization to avoid “white” English. Reginald Lockett and Joe Goncalves played with the physical aesthetics of poetry by writing in circles or alternating left and right justifications in the type. Many poets infused their poetry with jazz idioms—syncopation, repetition, and improvisation. In *To Be a Slave*, Lester is not interested in subverting the dominant language; he even makes a point to change the vernacular: though the slave narratives were transcribed for the Federal Writer’s Project word-for-word, most of Lester’s selections are written largely in standard English. He makes the aesthetic choice to modernize “punctuation, as

well as the dialect spellings which were the attempts of white writers to record Negro speech” (15). While the Black Arts Movement valued the colloquial speech of folk tales, Lester’s decision does make his book easier for his target audience—young people—to read. Lester may also have been aware of a disturbing paradox in 1968: publishing houses were finally, albeit slowly, publishing young adult literature by writers of color, but, as Richardson explains, some young adult authors such as June Jordan and John Steptoe were being censored because their work was “written in so-called ‘Black English’” (381). Lester’s use of dialect and vernacular in the slave narratives is indicative of the race consciousness and racial pride Black Nationalists were instilling in their communities, though he is careful to standardize the language enough to avoid the censorship issues some of his peers encountered.

In his contribution to *Black Fire*, “Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage” (1968), John Henrik Clarke writes: “Many writers and scholars, both black and white, have pointed to a rich and ancient African heritage, which, in my opinion, must be reclaimed if American Negroes in general and Negro writers in particular are ever to be reconciled with their roots” (11). Clarke advocates the overthrow of the “European concept,” which denigrates Africa’s history and cultures—and its people. In *To Be a Slave*, Lester does stray from this facet of the Black Arts Movement, which often results in a leap over slavery to focus on Africa. Baraka, Sun Ra, Charles Anderson, and Henry Dumas are only some of the Black Arts writers who use African aesthetics and influences as inspiration in their work, and use their art to express pride in their African roots. Lester has taken up Clarke’s call to write authentic history about his ancestors, while still humanizing the experience of bondage for a new generation of “American Negroes.”

Lester's work is important in reclaiming black American history. What makes *To Be a Slave* different from other historical texts of the late 1960s is its target—young people. In 1968, the CIBC and libraries were slowly working to correct the dearth of literature aimed specifically at teens, particularly in the African American community. Lester writes in his introduction to chapter one, "To be a slave was to be a human being under conditions in which that humanity was denied. They were not slaves. They were people. Their *condition* was slavery" (28). That sentiment is repeated in various ways throughout the whole book, and its repetition—written and reinforced through Tom Feelings's illustrations—directly challenges the assumptions of whites like Elkins and Botkin.

Feelings's artistic contributions amplify what Lester does with his book. In the 1998 reissue of *To Be a Slave*, Feelings writes about the enduring legacy of the book, and admits to being inspired by his "dual heritage: Black America's bittersweet complexities and Africa's powerful celebratory rites" (10). Double-consciousness, Feelings indicates, is an inescapable part of African American life. First defined by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), double-consciousness is a "twoness," or the "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (3). The idea of twoness—of being African American in an often-hostile America, of reconciling the idea of civil rights with slavery's past, and of reclaiming African pride in a white society that believes Africa is a primitive place—is reflected in Feelings's art. Feelings's *To Be a Slave* drawings are borne out of the "pain of the past with all its horror" (10) and out of his "admiration" for the stories depicted. His goal as an illustrator echoes Neal's desire to expose the truth and meaning behind oppression: "As painful as this is for many adults,

the sooner we expose this truth to even *younger* children—aware of the fact that *they* can take it—the sooner we start to develop well-rounded, compassionate human beings. Because the truth can stretch children’s minds” (10). What he implies is that children can handle America’s “Shameful Past,” as Feelings refers to slavery; though he says “children,” it can be assumed that he is including teens in this estimation as well. His point is, ultimately, that black youth should not be shielded from their painful history.

Feelings’s art achieves the quintessential goal of the Black Arts Movement: to have aesthetics serve a political end. The illustrations in *To Be a Slave*, while depicting horrific scenes of brutality and captivity, nonetheless praise the strength and dignity of a race ripped from its homeland. Illustrations in the book’s first chapters—Africans packed on a slave ship, a slave being whipped, and a long line of slaves shackled together heading for ships—seem to emphasize the nature of their surroundings. The people, primarily the white men, are small—an apt metaphor for their deeds and actions. As the illustrations progress throughout the book, the slaves, despite the horrific circumstances endured, portray pride and dignity. Lester stresses that slaves were people throughout the book, and Feelings captures the human emotions described by the ex-slaves Lester quotes. Each illustration clearly shows the emotional weight of the story, putting human faces and human feelings to a very inhumane system. Gone are racially drawn caricatures or blacks drawn as amorphous creatures without distinguishing characteristics, and in their place are nuanced drawings of families ripped apart, slaves wedged in ships, burning crosses, black regiments, and whippings.

The illustrations in *To Be a Slave* are drawn from Feelings’s recollections of time spent in Ghana, when living as part of the majority, he was filled with racial pride—a

sentiment that is seen in his illustrations. Like Lester, Feelings advocated for blacks writing about black history: in his autobiography, *Black Pilgrimage* (1972), Feelings writes, “If we want to hold onto what is ours and not see it distorted and corrupted, we must lay the ground *now* so that we direct the recording of it, the telling of it, the writing of it, the publishing and distributing of it ourselves” (65). He did not want to rely on white patrons, fickle white readers, or the whims of white publishers, which Feelings believed doomed writers of the Harlem Renaissance; he writes in *Black Pilgrimage*:

We must learn from the mistakes of the past, so that we won’t end up going through a second Reconstruction Period, or another Harlem Renaissance, with the publishing of our writing and art depending almost entirely upon the whims of a white publishing establishment, or an art patron, or a changing white readership. (65)

The combination of Feelings’s illustrations and Lester’s words achieves what Neal required of black art: in “speak[ing] directly to Black people” (Neal 273), it becomes a powerful antidote to the dominant beliefs about white superiority.

Feelings also says in *Black Pilgrimage* (1972), “[T]he things I do are for and about” the black masses (67), and he believed that art must be returned to the community—that “[p]eople who cannot afford to buy original paintings can often afford the same piece of work reproduced as note paper, a poster, a card, a book or a film. It then becomes functional art, accessible to more people” (67). Making art functional was the rallying cry for many participants in the Black Arts Movement. Neal, Baraka, and Ron Karenga advocated this kind of art; *To Be a Slave* is Lester’s and Feelings’s contribution to functional art designed for the black community. Both men believed *To*

Be a Slave was a way for them to reject a history that did not include them or their communities, and both men wanted to collaborate in supporting the revolution. For Feelings, his art was personal and personally designed for African American children everywhere. In *Black Pilgrimage*, Feelings describes how he was told, as a young art student, that African art was “primitive” and there were no significant black artists. Feelings became disillusioned with white art and worked to show the uniqueness of being black. Feelings wanted to put an end to white mandates about art for black artists and the white community’s standards of beauty. *To Be a Slave*’s illustrations depict African Americans as proud, dignified, and, above all, working to create a life in a nation that dragged them from their home in chains.

While some historians were rewriting the nation’s past to include a fuller, more accurate picture of race relations, other writers were working in tandem to convey that history to children. Lester’s *To Be a Slave* works the same way—he is rewriting slave narratives in a more truthful and honest way than a white writer like Botkin did in *Lay My Burden Down*. In *To Be a Slave*’s epilogue, Lester specifically references the historical moment at which he begins his career as a writer: “The legacy of slavery has been bitter and in the 103 years since the end of the Civil War little has been done to alleviate the bitterness” (153).

In many respects, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s-’60s began the same way the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement did: the promise of whites and blacks working together to end racial inequality. The Freedom Rides and voter registration drives in the twentieth-century South mirror the fight for black suffrage post-Emancipation; Foner, in *A Short History of Reconstruction* (1990), quotes Frederick

Douglass discussing the link between freedom and suffrage: “Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot” (30-31). Lester is using *To Be a Slave* to speak to the same issues facing blacks in the 1960s. That Lester ends *To Be a Slave* with the angry and disillusioned words of ex-slave Thomas Hall shows the disillusionment that still existed in the late ’60s. Hall says, “[W]ith all the promises that have been made, the Negro is still in a bad way in the United States, no matter in what part he lives. It’s all the same” (156). The focus on slavery and Lester’s constant references to it outside of his book demonstrate how little had been done to improve the conditions of African Americans in the U.S. Holsell, the ex-slave also quoted above, speaks of separation between the races. Again, these particular passages are no coincidence—Lester specifically selected these words from these slaves to reveal how little has changed since Emancipation, and to make a case for separation. In his essay “The Necessity for Separation” (1970), Lester echoes this sentiment himself: “In the mid-’60s, when blacks defined for themselves what the problem was, integration as a solution to that problem was shown to be unrealistic. In fact, it had never been a viable solution, because it was only another variation on the theme of white supremacy,” because, he explains, “[i]ntegration means that the minority must become a part of the majority by accepting all the values of that majority. . . . [T]he only viable alternative is for blacks to separate themselves from this insanity called the United States of America” (168). Lester believed integration failed—surely a disappointing realization for a young man who initially dedicated himself to SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement. Nationally, though, numerous events were forcing the changing tone of Civil Rights: some progress had been made with the Voting Rights Act in 1965, for example. Darlene Clark Hine describes the

creation of the first black studies program in 1966, at San Francisco State University; that same year, Robert C. Weaver also became the first black cabinet member. Hine writes, “[W]hite opposition to civil rights helped elect Republicans” while governor “George Wallace, an outspoken opponent of racial integration and civil rights legislation, was emerging as a national political figure” (483). Young blacks were increasingly disillusioned with promises made by white leaders, and J. Edgar Hoover’s COINTELPRO, targeting Black Nationalist leaders, did nothing to bridge the growing gap between white establishment leaders and black youth.

Written a century after the Civil War, *To Be a Slave* still proves to be a relevant resource for young adult readers, white and black. In “A Tool for Change: Young Adult Literature in the Lives of Young Adult African Americans” (1993), Carol Jones Collins writes, “Slavery nearly destroyed this country, leaving a legacy of poverty and ignorance that is still in evidence today. Knowledge of that period for the black young adult is self-knowledge. It is not enough to know the names of battles and generals. It is more important to know that human beings with human feelings lived behind the slave’s mask” (384). She does not specifically mention Lester, though Collins emphasizes the importance of making books available to black youth who may need guidance, education, or a “friend” to turn to. Lester recognized the importance of sharing this knowledge accurately and honestly—he used his own “mis-education” (to borrow Carter Woodson’s word) in history as the impetus for *To Be a Slave* by sharing “human beings with human feelings” during a movement attempting to relocate a people’s position in history, culture, and society. Herbert Kohl, speaking from a history teacher’s point of view, writes in “Staying Alive” (1991) that in 1964, *Our America*, the textbook he was given, “describes

slavery as follows: ‘Most Southern people treated their slaves kindly. It was true that most slaves were happy. They did not want to be free. The people of the North did not understand this’” (495). It was exactly that kind of racist ideology that black writers and revisionist historians were looking to erase. Lester understood the damaging effects of racism on a black child’s mind and upbringing, and, as the 1960s progressed, championed Black Nationalist ideology. The importance of factual, historical books for young people depicting their heritage and culture in a positive, life-affirming way was important to both Feelings and Lester. In the *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* (1976), Dr. Luis Nieves Falcón writes, “the part played by children’s books is critical since their educative function enhances a socialization process aimed at conformity” (4). *To Be a Slave* is one example of a young adult book trying to counter a kind of conformity damaging to black youth, and since schools were slow to incorporate black studies into their curriculum, those books needed to be available in other places—namely, libraries.

Through his experiences with SNCC, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Freedom Rides, Lester observed how little was changing in America, and how blacks needed to take it upon themselves to change the political tone of the nation. He sought to accomplish this through his writing. *To Be a Slave* was a 1969 Newbery Honor book, and received the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1970. *Children’s Literature Review* quoted *School Library Journal’s* (1975) review of *To Be a Slave*: the book was “a much needed balance to the usual glorified biographies of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson” (115), while *Times Newspapers* (1970) wrote of the book’s “inestimable value” (115). The *New York Times Book Review* wrote in 1968 that the documents “help[ed] destroy the delusion that black men did not suffer as another man would in

similar circumstances, a delusion that lies at the base of much racism today. They help[ed] also to explain the depth of the black man's current resentments" (114). The book was a hit, and launched Lester's career as a young adult and children's author.

In a 1970 written exchange with white *New York Times* book reviewer George Woods, Lester writes, "It is the black writer's job to tell black people about themselves"—and in his writing, Lester strives to do exactly that. Lester thought the public perceived *To Be a Slave* as more palatable and less political or confrontational than his subsequent books, some of which were not received with the same acclaim. Lester was not interested in books—written by him or others—designed to make white readers feel at ease with their complicity in maintaining the white power structure. In one of Woods's responses to Lester, Woods claims, "I try not to look at kids as white or black . . . I still want books that talk about both of us, all of us, as plain people."

Woods misses the point of Lester's correspondence, which continues from April to May 1970. Woods is attempting to be colorblind and look at stories as something separate from politics or race. He wants to evaluate literature based on how children feel after reading it and thinks "we're being oversold on" books specifically for African American children. Woods fails to understand the Black Aesthetic, or even the *need* for one. In the same year, Julian Mayfield's essay "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours" is published in *The Black Aesthetic*; he defines the Black Aesthetic as "our racial memory, and the unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going" (27). That spirit of community and collective memory is what Lester draws from in *To Be a Slave* and is what prevents Woods and white consumers from fully understanding the need for African American literature that

speaks directly to African American youth. In an interview with journalist Phyllis Meras in 1970, Lester says, “Up until 1965, to be successful, if you were a black writer, you had to use a universal theme. Black writers were told that if they really wanted to be relevant, they shouldn’t write at all about black people” (763). Lester is not only challenging Western views of art, but what the role of a black writer is. Woods appears to support this kind of colorblind, universal writing. The problem, of course, is that “universal themes” in literature often become white themes that fail to relate to the racist system in which people of color are forced to live. Woods, and many white readers who read *To Be a Slave*, missed the point of Lester’s book, which explores black themes and is written for a black audience.

Lester’s racial views evolved over the 1960s from integrationist to Black Nationalist. In 1967, Lester published “The Angry Children of Malcolm X” in *Sing Out!* before using *To Be a Slave* in 1968 as his first public foray into Black Nationalist-style work. By 1970, Lester became outspoken about the need for racial separation and his belief in the Black Nationalist ideology, publishing essays and articles in such venues as *Ebony*, *Katallagete*, and *The Nation*. Lester would revisit slavery again in *Day of Tears*, *The Old African* (2005), and *Long Journey Home* (2008). Celebrating black pride and raising black consciousness in children’s and young adult literature is a hallmark of Lester’s prolific work, which is uncompromising in its belief that black children need positive images in literature.

While many in the Black Arts Movement were eager to pass over the unpleasant reminders of slavery, and hastened to celebrate black culture and Africanism, Lester, despite being aligned with the tenets of Black Nationalism, realized that artists could

celebrate culture while remembering the horrors of slavery. *To Be a Slave* is a celebration of the 60 million people brought to the United States in chains who resisted and triumphed over slavery and gained their freedom. Lester's book is a celebration of community, freedom, and survival. Though the book ends with a tone of anger, it is anger intended to inspire more of the change so long denied African Americans in the U.S.

To Have and Have Not: Poverty, Drug Addiction, and Teen Boys

In Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*

During the height of the Great Migration (1910-'40), many African American families moved to northern states hoping to find better wages and living conditions than they experienced in the South. The majority of these families settled in northern and Midwestern cities, creating adjustments in black life not only in terms of South to North, but also rural to urban life. Many artists of the Black Arts Movement had no immediate and direct ties to the South, or to rural life; that generation of writers had grown up in urban centers like Chicago, Harlem, and Los Angeles, leading to literature based primarily in northern and Midwestern cities. In his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle, Jr., writes, "Is it any wonder that black people, falling sway to increasing southern tyranny, began, in 1917, the exodus that swelled the urban areas of America in the sixties and seventies?" (xvii). During the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, Rudolph Fisher, J.A. Rogers, and James Weldon Johnson lauded Harlem as the "Culture Capital." *The New Negro* (1925) was filled with glowing stories about the opportunity and freedom available in Harlem, and for a short time, it was a thriving, vibrant home to artists, musicians, and writers. In the 1930s, race riots helped destroy the Harlem Renaissance and the black community began to see northern urban areas in a more negative way. By the late 1960s urban black neighborhoods were seen as cause for concern (as in Daniel Moynihan's *The Crisis of the Negro Family*, 1965). Race riots in the 1960s, unlike earlier decades' riots, were infused with anger over both socio-economic inequalities and civil rights. Writers of the Black Arts Movement used those riots in their work as evidence for the need for racial separation.

Cities everywhere were struggling to keep up with a rapidly changing culture. By the late 1960s, Darlene Clark Hine explains, schools and universities across the nation began incorporating black studies into their curricula, and black elementary and high schools were using both fiction and textbooks about African American history and figures, altering what was taught and by whom. Within a few years—by the early 1970s—Hine also reports, “some two hundred black studies programs existed in the United States” (502). It was against this backdrop of educational and social change that Alice Childress wrote her first novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* (1973). Childress's lengthy career was spent primarily as a playwright, where she had long favored radical ideals in her work—strains of feminism, communism, and Black Nationalism influenced her storytelling. Through *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, she argues for cultural separation between races and the need for black self-determination by showing the hypocrisy of whites involved with the main character, a thirteen-year-old heroin addict named Benjie, who fails to understand his home, his culture, or his place in society. What this novel does is two-fold: it demonstrates the danger of adults being caught up in politics at the expense of the community's youth, and it shows the problem with a white power structure that economically suppresses the black community. The story does align itself with some Black Nationalist ideology, but it also serves as a cautionary tale about what adults' extreme engagement with politics can do to the nation's black youth.

A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich tells the effect of Benjie Johnson's drug use on those closest to him: Butler, his stepfather; Rose, his mother; and Nigeria Greene, his teacher. Each character alternates in telling Benjie's story; each character also gives

voice to the various debates and social commentary about black life in the 1970s. The book, because of its gritty and realistic depiction of black life in Harlem, was censored and banned in schools across the nation. Childress's direct engagement with race, class, and social issues, however, was not new in or exclusive to *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*: in her essay "Alice Childress" (2002), Roberta S. Maguire writes that Childress's "work repeatedly challenged what she referred to as 'the status quo.' She brought front and center biases and prejudices that were uncomfortable for her audiences to confront" (31). In *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, the discomfort stems from what have at times been described as "obscene" discussions of race, family, and drugs—the reasons the book has been frequently challenged.¹ (A challenge occurs when someone takes issue with the language or content of a book; the book is not necessarily pulled from the shelf, like a banned book would be.)

Maguire's essay, based in part on interviews conducted with Childress shortly before Childress's death, explains much about recurrent themes in her work. Shows like *Amos 'n' Andy*, which was televised from 1951 to 1953 and on the radio from 1928 to 1960, especially "rankled" Childress with their unflattering depictions of African Americans; *Amos 'n' Andy* was particularly touchy for her, as her first husband, Alvin Childress, played the role of Amos. It was likely during this time when Childress was observing her husband participating in a show that she saw as demeaning to their race and culture that she began to challenge stereotypes of African Americans in all her work. Even more notable is her commitment to what Childress calls in "A Candle in a Gale

¹ The most well-known is the 1976 Island Trees School Board challenge of *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* and eight other novels, which eventually led to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Board of Education v. Pico*. The students (Pico) won and the books were returned to the school's library.

Wind” (1984) the “have-nots” of society, which is shown in the Butler-Johnson family comprising the heart of *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*. The blended family element was also essential to Childress: in *Alice Childress* (1995), La Vinia Delois Jennings writes, “Because she had been reared by a caring adult other than her mother, Childress felt it important to emphasize adults’ responsibility in rearing children other than their own” (12).

Also strongly represented is Black Nationalism, brought to life through Nigeria, who is described by the white teacher, Bernard Cohen, as “the local Gestapo, with Black Power, like crazy, all over the emm-eff community. His name is Nigeria. No joke. He didn’t become a take-a-new-name Muslim or anything like that” (34). Early in her novel, Childress uses Cohen as a conflated example of how whites felt about Black Nationalism and race in general. Cohen is one of two white characters in the novel, and he most effectively shows the hypocrisy of whites who are determined to maintain power over schools, communities, and the nation. Since the novel is written in alternating monologues, Childress gives readers a straightforward glimpse into the mind of Cohen—and his commentary about Nigeria, race, and place in society.

Cohen is uncomfortable in his school because of his whiteness. He says, “You have no idea how things go down when you’re whitey in a Black setup. I go out to work every morning, like a lamb to a slaughter” (34). But what he is most uncomfortable with is the inverted power structure at work, where African Americans are the majority and the educational culture is shifting toward curricula of black studies—like Nigeria tries to do in his classroom. For decades, schools taught “American” history with little or no mention of African American contributions; English classes were filled with canonical

white writers, and art and music students were taught Western styles and aesthetics of beauty. Africa was usually equated with primitiveness, as Tom Feelings is quoted explaining in the previous chapter, and the result for African American students was often ignorance about their contributions to society and their culture.

Nigeria, then, as the embodiment of Black Nationalism, counters those outmoded views of education. Cohen describes Nigeria's classroom as having "pictures of Black people—Marcus Garvey, Du Bois, Robeson, Harriet Tubman, and also many slaves who knocked off whitey in order to get free, and so forth" (34). Whites in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* see what Nigeria is likely doing—promoting African Americans who contributed greatly to America's history and society—as dangerous or subversive, because it threatens their ability to maintain the power structure. Cohen feels he is experiencing "segregation in reverse" (46) but the fact is, Nigeria and the black students are treating Cohen the way they have themselves been treated by whites. Cohen says, "You can't know what it's like to feel their contempt" (35), completely disregarding the contempt whites heaped upon blacks for centuries in this nation. Since Cohen perceives himself as tolerant of Nigeria and the African American students in general, Cohen feels he should be exempt from black students' scorn.

Perhaps Cohen's greatest problem is understanding the raised black consciousness that Black Nationalism encouraged. He says, "What will this country be if the all-Black schools get all-Black teachers? . . . Is it healthy for kids to learn nothing but Black history, Black supremacy, and Black power?" (35). Again, Cohen is willfully forgetting that the opposite had been the educational norm since Reconstruction created public schools for blacks and whites to attend. Childress is demonstrating, through Cohen, the

problem with this sort of double standard: it is somehow acceptable, even “healthy,” for African American students to learn nothing but white history, white supremacy, and white power, but not the other way around. Or, when the educational paradigm shifts to a more inclusive view of history and culture, whites become frightened by the threat to their view of superiority. Malcolm X, in his “Not Just an American Problem, But a World Problem” speech (1965), said, “[W]hen people are discussing things based on race, they have a tendency to be very narrow-minded and to get emotional” (414). Cohen is quick to blame his lack of rapport with his students on Nigeria, and his narrow-mindedness is evident throughout his monologues. Cohen implies that his job, his school, and, by extension, status, were somehow better before Nigeria was hired or before black studies was integrated into the school’s curriculum. Nigeria does not always use the textbooks given, as they “lie,” and Cohen uses this as evidence that Nigeria “gives his students a workup just before they hit my class. They come to me, at the beginning of the term, with eyes narrowed down to slits” (34). Cohen does teach about a few African American historical figures, but Nigeria interprets this as Cohen’s “mission in teaching,” which is “to convince Black kids that most whites are great except for a ‘few’ rotten apples” (41). Childress is directly addressing the problem with teaching history in schools, especially in New York City: Charlayne Hunter writes in the *New York Times* article “Black Studies Changing Schools Here” (1969) that “there is no uniform curriculum” and an “absence of detailed guidelines” (1). Cohen completely fits the teacher who “remains opposed to singling out black studies as a special field of study” (1). Clearly, Childress is addressing this confusion in *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*: while demonstrating, through Nigeria, the importance and power of knowing

one's heritage and history, she also shows how problematic the idea of an integrated curriculum is.

The animosity between Nigeria and Cohen goes beyond white superiority or black oppression; it is representative of how the growing Black Nationalist tide had shaped and influenced numerous aspects of life and public institutions in the U.S. by the end of the 1960s. Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint frequently wrote and spoke throughout the Black Nationalist Movement about the intersection of race and psychology; he was primarily interested in the psychological effects of white racism on black youth. His alignment with Black Nationalism or the Civil Rights Movement was a bit ambiguous at times, though he does write in *Ebony* (1969) that “the ‘black consciousness’ movement is definitely in the vanguard of constructive revolutionary change in American society” (152). As the keynote speaker at the CIBC conference in 1976, he said, “It’s very hard to teach the truth, because one can’t teach in the schools that many aspects of the American system should be changed because they function to oppress people. This concept is very threatening to people in power” (2). Again, Childress’s character Cohen underscores Poussaint’s point about the American system of oppression. Cohen is unable to see that what he and his white colleagues do is overtly racist. Nigeria works to break that cycle of oppression and enact the change Poussaint describes by empowering his students; Nigeria says, “‘Our’ school is fulla white-face books written by white writers . . . I don’t go by what’s in these history books or we’d be dealin’ in lies” (42). Cognizant of the need to go beyond superficial fixes for racism, or, as Poussaint says, “hang[ing] up signs that say, ‘Black is Beautiful’” that don’t provide “the skills needed to participate fully in society” Dianne Johnson, in *Telling Tales* (1990), repeats in her book one of Childress’s topics in

(3), Nigeria is promoting self-determination and refusing to allow whites the power to define his life, his heritage, or his worth, and modeling that for his students as well.

That educators play such an integral role in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* is no accident. As Alfonso Hawkins explains, Childress's fiction often communicates how "the community must take on the responsibility of educating black youth as to facts left out of Jim Crow texts. The first step in the educational process is reversing the cycle of mis-education" (467), adding that "Childress depicts the perpetrators and victims of the American educational process" (467). While Hawkins is specifically referring to *Like One in the Family*, which is more precisely a collection of newspaper columns—monologues of a domestic worker—it is clear that in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* Cohen is the perpetrator of the racist ideologies and the willful suppression of African American contributions to society that are part of the American educational process and that Benjie is one of its victims. Hawkins also claims that Childress's fiction functions as "attacks on the wrongs of America regarding its youth" (468). He further explains the position Childress's work stakes out: "American society must claim and reaffirm its nurturing role," so as to "counter with self-awareness the racial reality that black youth face" (468). *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*'s gritty look at urban life and Benjie's life—drugs, poverty, broken home—indicate the harsh reality many African Americans face in searching for self-determination during the era of the Black Arts Movement. Childress also uses school to show how wronged African American children of the nation had been by their teachers and by a system designed to instill antipathy about their heritage.

A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich: “[C]hildren are not only educated but often are miseducated through formal educational channels” (8). She also notes how “[c]hildren’s literature can be a powerful tool of transmission not just of harmless, innocent yarns, but of interpretations of histories and ideologies” (8). Johnson supports literature that focuses on all aspects of black life, even the unsavory parts like drug use, which Childress explores at length; Johnson also calls for African American writers to write more books reflecting the realities of African American life. Benjie’s heroin use is a reality of 1970s American life. Johnson writes, “The theme of role models and heroes is one that writers of Black children’s literature consistently address and use” (75), a topic Childress is indeed dealing with in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*. But the book’s details do not quite align with how Johnson suggests that theme works in *Hero*. Benjie, who has a bleak outlook on life, she suggests “is balanced by his friend Jimmy-Lee’s being influenced, in all his youthful hopefulness, by biographies of various historical African American figures—heroes, if you will” (75). Yet if Jimmy-Lee lists the biographies in his home, he does not claim to have read them and therefore does not really provide the counter-balance Johnson claims. And Nigeria, who rightly can be considered one of the novel’s role models, recognizes that Benjie himself “is one of the best kids we’ll ever see” (37), implying that Benjie has a degree of potential hidden from the reader. While Johnson’s point that African American writers of children’s and young adult literature often employ heroes and role models is well taken, in the case of *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* she is overstating their function. What Childress is doing instead is showing that, while role models existed in the community (in the form of Nigeria, Butler, and even Jimmy-Lee), Benjie fails to see them as people to be admired or

emulated. Though Benjie does grow to respect and accept Butler as his father, there is never a moment when Benjie attempts to follow in Butler's footsteps in terms of character, work ethic, or integrity.

Poussaint, in the same speech quoted above, says, "There is a need for children's books that not only reflect the reality of the ghetto experience, but explain the causes and take the onus for the conditions off the minority child" (2). While Childress's novel predates Poussaint's speech by three years, it is important to note that scholars and artists alike were addressing the issues facing black ghetto life. *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*'s Benjie provides the book's first monologue, which expresses his bitterness and anger at the rich who are "livin it up and their room is perfect-looking and their swimming pool and their block and their house and they also ridin round in one them quiet rollin Cads" (9). His explanation of the wealthy is contrasted with his statement that he is a man—he has to be, for safety reasons. Benjie gives readers a glimpse into his life in Harlem, where "[s]omebody gonna cop your money and might knock you down"; there "[a]in't no letrit light bulb in my hallway"; and "a chile can get snatch in the dark and get his behind parts messed up by some weirdo" (9-10). Fear has pervaded Benjie so thoroughly, and has already shaped his identity, that by claiming manhood, he seeks to protect himself from "them sexuals" who look to abuse and molest young children. He has, then, unsurprisingly adopted a "[f]uck the society!" (10) attitude—the society he sees is one where his grandmother lives in perpetual nervousness, his mother is overworked and critical, and his stepfather is denied job advancement. Benjie's own societal coming-out seems to occur when he mainlines (or shoots heroin) for the first time. Benjie feels alienated from society, a feeling intensified by his father's abandonment of the family

and Nigeria and Cohen's decision to turn Benjie in to the school principal. Benjie's stepfather Butler's entrance to the family has also, in Benjie's opinion, caused a rupture between Benjie and Rose, whose time and affections are now split between the two males in her life. Benjie says, "When I was a child, me and my mother was cool with each other, got along just fine," until "Butler took over and stole" her (40). As a teen, Benjie has already justified his disengagement with society.

Cohen is initially reluctant to turn Benjie in for using drugs. He tells Nigeria, "I'm not turning in anybody. The parents get upset, the principal gets upset, the kid feels betrayed" (48). Cohen wants to ignore the "race business" and resents Nigeria for challenging his beliefs about race. When Nigeria finally persuades Cohen to confront Benjie about his drug use, Cohen attempts to displace blame for Benjie's stoned behavior onto staying up "all night watching late TV" (48). The needle marks in Benjie's arm finally convince Cohen that Nigeria is right—Benjie needs help. The Nigeria and Cohen monologues demonstrate, perhaps more than any others in the novel, the danger of letting animosity born of racial politics interfere with the well-being of the nation's black youth. Benjie gets help only after Cohen and Nigeria set aside their differences. While this may be seen as an integrationist, civil rights-type approach to race issues, what Childress is pointing out are the shortcomings of that approach, as the underlying prejudices held by Cohen and the principal have not disappeared. Their attitudes toward Benjie and the black students they serve have not changed. The principal is merely biding his time until he retires; he admits to being "uncomfortable" about drug abuse and believes that "parents are afraid of their children. I share the same fears" (56). Cohen's and the principal's reluctance to involve themselves in the lives of their black students points up

the larger issues in early 1970s America, which is how to fix the problems of urban life—poverty, drug use, lack of parental involvement, absentee parents—when few are willing to confront the issues directly. The principal and Cohen, the novel’s two white characters, express a desire to move out of the city, and neither lives in Harlem. Nigeria creates rapport with his students—something Cohen disapproves of—and encourages them to ask questions and seek the truth about their history. He challenges the white principal about knowing what’s best for the students. The point Childress appears to be making, then, is two-fold: that political fights are being won or lost at the expense of youth, and that white people cannot understand what the black urban experience is because their prejudices and stereotypes blur their vision. Because the novel ends with no change in Cohen’s and the principal’s attitudes, Childress is suggesting that whites are unchangeable.

In contrast to Benjie is his former best friend, Jimmy-Lee, who makes the basketball team, restricting time spent with Benjie. As the novel progresses, Jimmy-Lee consciously turns away from drugs, creating a rift in his relationship with Benjie. Jimmy-Lee says, “[N]eedles divide guys, because the user rather be round another junkie. He through with you because he thinking you lookin down on him. You through with him because you get scared of him . . . and he hangs out with nobody but other hard hustlers” (86). Like Benjie, Jimmy-Lee feels disenfranchised from the adults in his community. Benjie, recounting his first time trying heroin, says, “I like how they [Tiger, Kenny, Carwell and other “fellas”] watchin me and payin their respeck, lookin at me like they know somebody fine when they see him—and not just sittin back like I’m nobody” (68)—that desire to fit in somewhere, to belong, is lacking in Benjie’s life. Jimmy-Lee,

who is often ashamed of his father, does maintain good grades, holds a job, and makes the basketball team. Yet he yearns for a drum set and, like Benjie, searches for something unattainable. Benjie turns to drugs to attain that elusive “something”; Jimmy-Lee does what is expected of him.

Ironically, Jimmy-Lee has, at least on the surface, a stable life. His parents are together, he stays drug-free, and he makes responsible decisions. He has the family structure Benjie lacks, but Jimmy-Lee’s home life is still stricken by poverty. He is also smart enough to realize that Benjie is becoming “brainwash” with rationale for drug use: Jimmy-Lee says that Benjie “try to tell me how his daddy run off and how that make him a child from a broken home. Shit! Sometime I wish my home was broke” (25). The desire Jimmy-Lee has to “divorce” his home, family, and neighborhood comes from the same place as Benjie’s desire to shoot heroin—the need to escape the reality of their lives. Alone, unsupervised, the boys are left on their own. Jimmy-Lee’s father, a street corner speaker, is “broke down from peaceful protest” who “ain’t got much time” for his wife and child (26). This is, again, the political point Childress is making: that when parents lose themselves in politics, the children suffer for it.

Childress’s novel can also be read as a response to “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (1965), otherwise known as the Moynihan Report. Soundly criticized by the NAACP and black leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, the report tries to explain the problems in the black community by its “matriarchal structure,” which “is out of line with the rest of the American society” and “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole” (n.p.). Moynihan also makes such sweeping claims as “Negro children without fathers flounder—and fail” and “[i]t is probably that at present, a

majority of the crimes against the person, such as rape, murder, and aggravated assault are committed by Negroes. There is, of course, no absolute evidence,” leading readers to wonder why he mentions it at all. Childress directly addresses what Moynihan says: Benjie does “flail” and his home is broken in part because of his absentee father. He mocks the males who could potentially be role models in his life—Nigeria and Butler—and turns to drugs as a way to escape the poverty that affects his life. But Childress complicates Moynihan’s argument with the character Jimmy-Lee: from a two-parent household (one that is likely patriarchal) and maintaining good grades, he is still disengaged from his family and his community. He is “fakin” when people praise his accomplishments and, as explained above, wants to “divorce” his family. Jimmy-Lee is attempting to correct the problems facing him by himself, which is something Moynihan’s report does not address—the ability of the individuals in the African American community to self-determine. Moynihan, in fact, blames the black community for their problems, and fails to see how larger socioeconomic factors like poverty affect (and even heighten) these issues. Many African Americans took issue with the Moynihan Report because of its paternalistic view of blacks and its assumption that the only way for the black community to improve itself was through white help. Childress, then, uses *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich* to make the argument that the community’s ability to be self-determinant is limited by its poverty. The stress caused by poverty—the need to work two jobs, as Rose does—in turn leads to a rupture in families. Jimmy-Lee’s and Benjie’s home lives are disrupted by constant financial stress, which has created a sense of alienation in the boys from those who love them. While the dominant culture’s racism is a major cause of black problems, Childress is arguing through *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’*

But a Sandwich that the black community must be left alone to deal with these problems themselves.

Many of the Black Arts Movement writers blame the problems in the black community on the shortcomings of whites to protect, assist, and empower the African American community. James Boggs writes in “Black Power—A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come” (1968) that “the concept of Black Power expresses the new revolutionary social force of the black population,” which “must struggle not only against the capitalists but against the workers and middle classes who benefit by, and support, the system which has oppressed and exploited blacks” (113). Poet Marvin E. Jackmon writes in “Burn, Baby, Burn” (1968) about white men who “WHEELED US INTO / 350 YEARS OF BLACK / MADNESS” (269), and David Henderson writes in “Keep on Pushing” (1968) about “store owners and keepers—all white / and I see the white police force / The white police in the white helmets / and the white proprietors in their white shirts” (240). Jimmy Garrett’s “We Own the Night” and Henry Dumas’s “Fon” also explicitly blame whites for black problems. In *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*, Butler says, “Yeah, it’s shit, that’s also what [Benjie’s] usin, and that’s what authorities be shovelin at everybody. Social workers and head shrinks don’t take kids home to their house after they get through plantin dumb ideas” (16-17). Benjie’s social worker Hank is white, and “live as far off from [Harlem] as his white ass can get. No matter how many stories he tell bout baseball players and boxers who come out the slums, I notice he ain’t movin in here” (88). Some writers do share Childress’s belief that economic factors play a role in oppressing blacks, and many assign blame to poverty as a symptom of white power. Childress’s novel indicates that the problem is much more complicated than that,

and uses *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* to show how whites have kept blacks down—but how blacks can also keep other blacks down, too.

As stated above, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* has been frequently challenged in schools by parents for its explicit language and references to drug use. What Childress is doing, however, is expressing her version of the Black Aesthetic, which recalls Julian Mayfield, in “You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I’ll Touch Yours” (1970): “For me the Black Aesthetic is . . . men and women working, working, working, and then dying and leaving nothing because they hadn’t earned anything. There is nothing beautiful about that. It is the bright hope on the faces of children sketched by the artist Tom Feelings, and the murdered hope one sees on the faces of these same children, now barely out of adolescence” (28). The “murdered hope” can be seen in Benjie’s hopeless attitude about life—he says, “I’m in this sad world all by myself. Nobody care, why should they if your own daddy run off? . . . I’m laying here learnin how to expect nothing” (73). Even Jimmy-Lee, with his good grades and basketball skills, says, “I ain’t really got it all together” (85). These boys, at age thirteen, have seen what their parents—the “working, working, working” people—have endured, and are reluctant to enter into that life. Childress’s Black Aesthetic reveals the gritty reality of street life, where many Black Arts Movement writers both found inspiration and set their stories to illustrate that self-determination is a struggle: Jimmy Garrett’s play *We Own the Night* (1968) opens in “an alley way, dark, dirty, dingy” (527). Calvin C. Hernton describes Harlem, in “Jitterbugging in the Streets,” as “the asphalt plantation of America / Rat-infested tenements totter like shanty houses” (206), and Sam Cornish in “Promenade” writes how a school’s “paint hangs like peeling flesh / its rooftop looks sadly down / with

melting artful tar” (398). Mayfield also writes in “You Touch My Black Aesthetic” that the Black Aesthetic is “drowsy, blinking addicts on the subway and the young winos sitting on the doorsteps waiting for the juice joint to open. But succeeding from all that, beautiful, relevant, and immediate, is a new breed of clean young black men who know they have been programmed by the white world and who reject the program” (28).

Blame is on the white power structure, not the black community, as it is unlikely that Childress would blame them for their poverty and economic issues. What she may indict some in the black community for, however, is buying into the “white world” and failing to “reject the program.”

Benjie functions as both the addict and New Breed—after he is sent to a rehabilitation center, the novel shifts from the radical adults in Benjie’s life to the hopeful compassion of his family. He makes peace with Butler and, in the book’s emotional climax, reaches an understanding about their relationship and family. With the coming-together of the Johnson-Craig family, and their unification in caring for Benjie and attending to his needs, the reader is left with a sense that Benjie has overcome his addiction. Illustrating for her young adult readers the dangers facing people in cities, Childress emphasizes the power of blacks reaching out to other blacks, and the good that it can bring. That hopeful note lingers in readers’ minds, and is a lasting reminder that when adults are embattled, it is the children who lose. Benjie is clean, rebuilds his relationship with Butler, buries the ghost of his father, and makes amends with Jimmy-Lee. But Childress complicates Mayfield’s definition of a Black Aesthetic by ending the book in a manner that suggests Benjie may not, after all, remain drug-free. That ambiguity is Childress’s aesthetic—it is her reminder to readers that, as Johnson writes,

“African American youth live in a society and in a world in which the ‘happy ending’ does not constitute a realistic model. Their realities must be represented, explored, and interpreted in the literature that they read” (2).

Drug use, a widespread problem in inner cities, was of so much concern in 1973 that President Nixon created the Drug Enforcement Agency. In “Law Enforcement and Drug Abuse Prevention” (1973), Nixon himself said in his State of the Union address,

Americans in the last decade were often told that the criminal was not responsible for his crimes against society, but that society was responsible. I totally disagree with this permissive philosophy. Society is guilty of crime only when we fail to bring the criminal to justice. When we fail to make the criminal pay for his crime, we encourage him to think that crime will pay. . . . Drug abuse is still Public Enemy No. 1 in America. (354)

Drug dealers were powerful figures, present in a child’s life when parents were often not. Childress demonstrates this through Walter, the drug seller, who sees himself as a businessman taking part in “free enterprise.” Again, Childress complicates Nixon’s drug policy of “putting heroin pushers in prison and keeping them there” (355) with Walter’s role, and uses him to voice social commentary: “The parents done sent big brother’s ass off to get murdered . . . smiled and waved ‘good-bye’ to the boys. ‘Send him to the Army, that’ll keep him outta trouble.’ They pushin war, dig it? Ain’t no way to live without pushin something” (Childress 63). The “they” referred to by Walter is the white power structure—Nixon and other white politicians making decisions for the African American community. By 1973, Hine writes, the “United States and North Vietnam signed a peace agreement” (506), and while fewer soldiers were being sent overseas, the

draft was still a lingering threat to young men. Childress, then, uses Walter to show how sending black youth to war and the possibility of death is similar to what he does by selling drugs; the difference, however, is one is legal and sanctioned by the dominant culture, while the other is illegal and a threat to their communities. Jimmy-Lee's father, a street-corner speaker, makes the correlation for Walter by addressing drug use in the community: "Whitey chargin us money to off ourselves, niggas out here hustlin for him! . . . DIG HOW TO KILL A NIGGA WITHOUT FIRIN A GUN! Teach him to kill hisself!" (121). Walter sees himself as a "baby-sitter," and is critical of his neighborhood's parenting abilities: he says, "If I had me a kid, his Black ass would be home in bed at night, in the day he'd be in school, and I'd trouble myself to see to it" (60-61). *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, however, has shown readers that it is more difficult to be a parent than Walter claims—most importantly, while he justifies what he does, his cynicism prevents him from accepting any responsibility for his contribution to drug dependence in children.

The realistic nature of *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* may be a reason why it is often overlooked in scholarship on young adult literature. Childress is the least-written about writer in this study, and her first novel is less written about than her other work, perhaps because she is known primarily as a playwright. In terms of scholarly work regarding this novel, Johnson mentions *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* in one paragraph in *Telling Tales*; Maguire's interview and essay help bring into focus Childress's goals and provide greater insight to her motivation. Given the blatant commentary regarding feminism, sexism, racism, education, race, and economics in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, it is somewhat surprising that more isn't written

about this novel. Part of the lack of scholarship can be attributed to the non-canonical status of Childress and her work. Part of this must also be attributed to the overall argument made in this work: that the publishing industry's interest in bringing out African American young adult literature had declined to the point that writing more young adult books may not have been an option for Childress. In an interview with Maguire, Childress recalls how *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* came to be marketed as a teen novel: she was asked by her editor at Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan to write a young adult book based on her piece "Happy Mother's Day." Childress responded, "Why should it be a young adult book? It seems to me it should be an adult book that may be about a child" (63). Capitalizing on the early 1970s booming young adult field, her editor said, "It's a young adult book because I'm vice-president of the young adult division" (63). The boom made it possible for *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* to be written, but it also made it anomalous in Childress's oeuvre.

In her essay "A Candle in a Gale Wind" (1984), Childress writes, "I concentrate on portraying have-nots in a *have* society, those seldom singled out by mass media," except for "condescending clinical, social analysis" (112), like the Moynihan Report. Her black pride and desire for blacks to be self-determinant is evident in all her work; what sets *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* apart from the plays for which she is best known is the audience. That Childress was able to publish such a forthright and realistic novel for youth, and address both strengths and weaknesses of Black Nationalism head-on, was indicative of the influence of both the CIBC and the Black Nationalist Movement on the publishing industry. The fractured family, generational divides, and class and race issues speak to a changing nation, weary of war at home and abroad. Benjie is caught

between generations—between the New Breed (and future generations) of black youth struggling to find their place in a nation that will neither integrate nor segregate them; in a school that institutionalizes racist assumptions about white superiority; in families too disillusioned or overworked to notice their presence or absence; and in communities rife with adults who prey on young children. Childress's often-scathing view of society and Benjie's pessimistic outlook on life is indicative of early-1970s political and cultural views, but *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*'s ending leaves a bit of hope that when adults refrain from becoming overwhelmed with passionate political beliefs, real change can be enacted and self-determination can occur.

“Fast” Friends and Close Communities: Racial Uplift and Togetherness

In Walter Dean Myers’s *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*

By 1975, the Black Arts Movement was coming to a close as a coherent, loosely unified group of artists. The United States was starting to pull troops from Vietnam, finally ending its fractious involvement there; economically, the '70s were marked by recessions: income levels, according to Darlene Clark Hine, were growing in disparity. Some positive changes in the African American community marked the decade: African Americans were gaining electoral power, Hine writes, and between “1971 and 1975, the number of African American mayors rose from 8 to 135” (508). Black Studies programs were growing in universities across the country, and African American students were attending college in higher numbers than ever before. African American women writers of adult fiction such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou were creating a neo-Renaissance with their creative voices while exploring the Black Aesthetic in new, often feminist ways. The early efforts of the CIBC and literary successes of black young adult writers made it possible that year for Walter Dean Myers, a 1968 CIBC award winner for the children’s book *Where Does the Day Go?*, to publish his first young adult novel, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*. This novel, indicative of the mid-1970s political and social climate, demonstrates how oppressive forces can work to motivate a community to strengthen itself from within. Myers, offering an alternate depiction of urban black life from that of Childress in *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*, uses teen characters as examples of a community’s ability to come together and change itself in the face of a socio-economic system that attempts to restrict change.

Many of the Black Arts Movement writers shared Childress's sentiment that black communities were limited by socio-economic factors and criticized the dominant culture's system of oppression for that reason. As *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* demonstrates, Harlem, representing urban black neighborhoods, was dangerous for youth, and its residents were unable to prosper because of limited opportunities for advancement. Benjie says to Butler, "When they gonna have a opportunity for you?" and tells readers, "I don't see him doin nothing but bein a janitor in one of whitey's downtown buildins" (12). Yet a large number of Black Arts Movement writers also showed, like Myers, that the black community could change its conditions from within. Clarence Franklin, for example, writes in "Two Dreams (for m.l.k.'s one)" about "a million black hands / linked like a chain, surrounding the world" (364); Clarence Reed's "My Brother and Me," "Harlem '67," and "In a Harlem Store Front Church" function as celebrations of Harlem and the spirit of togetherness with which Myers has infused *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*. Reed writes in "Harlem '67" of "Sulking streets / Raging hearts / This is Harlem / This is love" (404). This image of Harlem as a loving place, to be celebrated and even praised, contrasts with the gritty depiction in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, where pedophiles lurk in dark corners and pushers entice children with drugs. To be clear, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* does not gloss over the hardships and societal influences facing black youth—one character is shot and killed, gangs roam freely, and the title characters are falsely accused of theft. Death, parental abandonment, drug use, familial pressure, and discrimination surround the characters—but they refuse to let it define who they become.

Myers's novel tells the story of Francis, a thirteen-year-old boy new to 81 West 116th Street. Francis, quickly nicknamed "Stuff" by his new friends and hereafter called that, narrates stories of their block and adventures in dating, basketball, and growing up. Stuff becomes close to "Fast" Sam—so-called because of his speed and athletic ability, and Clyde—"Cool" because of his ability to keep calm under pressure. Clyde's father dies accidentally, and shortly after that, Gloria, another main character, witnesses her father hit her mother and walk out on the family. After those incidents, Clyde invites his sister and their group of friends over to Gloria's and creates the group known as the Good People, so the friends will "always know that [they] have each other to fall back on" and "[s]omebody who cares for [them] all the time. Whether things are right or wrong" (75). They agree not to "put anybody down or keep them out of the club" (75-76). The Good People solidify the bonds of friendship between the characters, who vary in age from twelve to fifteen, and are Puerto Rican and African American. The coming together is Myers's way of acknowledging that while Harlem is a rough place in which to grow up, the Good People represent the power to overcome those challenges. Clyde is not a militant revolutionary, but he realizes what many Black Nationalists were saying in the late 1960s: that, as Stokely Carmichael explains in "Toward a Black Liberation" (1966), "It is white power that makes the laws, and it is violent white power in the form of armed white cops that enforces those laws with guns and nightsticks. The vast majority of Negroes in this country live in these captive communities and must endure these conditions of oppression because, and only because, *they are black and powerless*" (124). Indeed, the characters in *Fast Sam*, *Cool Clyde*, and *Stuff* are powerless to prevent their fathers from leaving—either by choice or accidental death—and they are powerless over

the police, who wrongfully arrest the titular characters *three times* throughout the novel. Despite that, the Good People are able, as Carmichael also writes, to “create [their] own terms through which to define” their own lives and “relationship to society,” which “is the first necessity of a free people” (119-20).

The Good People also function as a metaphor for the solidarity many Black Nationalists felt with oppressed people of color around the world. Harold Cruse explains this in “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” (1962): “the Negro has a relationship to the dominant culture of the United States similar to that of colonies and semi-dependents” (40), later adding,

The American Negro shares with colonial people many of the socio-economic factors which form the material basis for present-day revolutionary nationalism. Like the peoples of the underdeveloped countries, the Negro suffers in varying degree from hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to the land, urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind. (41)

This distinction is important to make in *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, as Myers’s novel incorporates both African American and Puerto Rican characters. *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich* and *To Be a Slave* focus on strictly black-white race relations; *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* broadens the scope to include other oppressed ethnicities of Harlem. Aligning himself with writers of color around the world, Myers referred to CIBC-sponsored writers as “Third World.” In “The Black Experience in Children’s Books: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1979), he explains that, up to 1968, he “had

been writing short fiction primarily, with only a dim awareness of the crying need for children's books reflecting the Third World experience," continuing, "It became clear upon examination of the materials then available that books did not do for Black or other Third World children what they did for white children" (222-23). The year 1968, of course, was also when the Black Arts Movement arguably first gelled as a forceful phenomenon, with Baraka and Neal's publication of the Black Arts Movement anthology *Black Fire*. Like Julius Lester, Virginia Hamilton, Arna Bontemps, and Myers's own literary hero, Langston Hughes, by the 1970s Myers was committed to contributing to the growing field of young adult literature, as the responsibility fell to him and other Third World writers to create stories for their own children, since white writers could not be expected to depict their stories accurately or honestly.

Angel and Maria, the Puerto Rican brother and sister, have supporting roles in the novel; Stuff, Sam, Clyde, and the other black characters drive the plot. But the awareness of the need for people of color to unite that Myers brings to his novel reinforces a key dimension of the Black Arts Movement. Angel and Maria's presence reminds readers that racism is not limited to interaction between blacks and whites, and, more importantly, reinforces for teens the importance of people of color standing together against white oppression. Myers is certainly in line with Henry Dumas, a Black Nationalist writer killed by police in 1968 (apparently in a case of mistaken identity) who used literature to demonstrate the power peoples of color have when they are united. In Dumas's "Strike and Fade," published posthumously in 1970, the narrator and his friend Big Skin compare themselves to the Viet Cong—they "strike and fade . . . scout in the street the next day to see how much we put down on them" (99). By aligning his

character with the VC, a group seen by many African Americans as victims of colonization, Dumas is making clear the connection between blacks in the United States and people of color around the world. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” (1970), another Dumas short story, while a celebration of the black community, is a cautionary tale to whites, showing them the power and strength of a collective black force that is beyond their comprehension. He describes Ron, a white character so desperate to join the black musicians that he nearly took them to court, as ignorant: “He could not understand why the cats would want to bury themselves in Harlem and close the doors to the outside world” (92). Later, Ron thinks that “if he believed strongly enough, some of the old cats would break down” (92). He cannot understand why the black community does not want him to join their circle of musicians; when he and his white friends finally bully their way into the club, the black musicians Probe and Rafael begin playing so intensely that the white musicians die. The Third World solidarity of Dumas’s fiction, then, finds a home in Myers’s young adult novel, emphasizing, like Dumas, that the audience is black first.

White bullies also appear in *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, but this time as embodiments of institutional racism—the police. Stuff, Sam, and Clyde chase down two boys who stole a woman’s pocketbook; instead of being thanked, Stuff says, “all of a sudden this big hand and arm goes around my neck and just about lifts me off the ground. Whoever it was that had me—I think it was the son of King Kong—slammed Clyde into the building,” while another “grabbed Sam and hit him across the face. These were grownups. Then they started talking about how they had us . . . what I didn’t know was *why* they got us ” (90). The three boys are pushed into a police car and taken to the station, handcuffed; any attempts to prove their innocence are met with sarcasm and

disbelief by the police. When two other witnesses fail to identify Sam, Clyde, and Stuff, they are eventually released. Stuff says, “We went on home and I told my father, and he said that I was learning what the world was all about. I don’t think so, though. Because the people I like most, like Clyde and Sam and Gloria and Kitty, aren’t like that. Neither are my parents but sometimes my father seems a little mean” (93). Though the boys come away mostly unscathed (Sam had been hit by an officer; his face was “puffed up”), Stuff is seeing firsthand the power white lies have over his life, and how the people he likes—that is, people of color—“aren’t like that,” meaning not quick to judge or falsely accuse. Sam’s intentions were honorable, but white society was reluctant to see that honor. Only after two other white people corroborate the boys’ story are they released.

Like *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*, Myers delves into the influence of drugs on teen lives. “Carnation” Charley is an acquaintance of the Good People; when readers meet him at the dance contest, Charley is described as a fantastically talented dancer, gracious when he thinks he lost to Sam and Clyde. A few months later, however, the boys see Charley “high on dope” at a party. When Sam and Clyde confront Charley about his drug use the following day, his response is, “Man, what you talking about? You jive dudes wouldn’t know when a cat was nodding out or not” (151). Charley’s denial, like Benjie’s, is part of the problem with drug addicts. Sam and Clyde try to persuade Charley to join the Good People; their pleas fall on deaf ears. The Good People meet to discuss Charley’s problem and how to handle it. Again, Clyde takes charge, saying, “[L]et’s stop talking about things we’ve heard or think we’ve heard and get down to the problem . . . We either are going to try to help people or we’re not. It’s as simple as that” (154). In many ways, this short scene reflects the greater political issues and the

inability of politicians and adults in the community to solve problems. The kids rely on each other for support while realizing that no one else will deal directly with Charley's drug use.

Unfortunately for the Good People, Charley's drug use puts Sam, Clyde, and Stuff back in jail. In an attempt to help Charley, they run an errand for him—they pick up a package; otherwise, “Carnation Charley might get hurt” (156). Clyde, ever the leader, doesn't think twice about picking up the package. He and Sam argue about the errand; Sam wonders, “Man, what do you want to mess around with these dope people for? You don't even like Charley that much” (157). Clyde sees past the relevance of liking or not liking someone; he realizes that Charley “is still people” and needs help. Clyde's words function as a reminder—and a critique—to the adults in his world that personal relationships or preferences are immaterial when it comes to solving problems affecting everyone. Clyde also realizes what Nigeria in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* does: that if someone, at some time, does not make the first attempt at fixing the drug addict, no one will. It is also indicative of Myers's and Childress's implicit assertions that help must come from within the black community; both novels also depict whites as institutional authority (principals, social workers, employers, police) and therefore representations of white domination. Myers especially represents the law negatively, as demonstrated by the false accusations against Sam, Stuff, and Clyde, and the eagerness of the police to apprehend a criminal—which, for the boys, meant the police were searching for any black teen boy.

Charley, like Benjie, enters a rehabilitation center and gets clean; both Benjie's and Charley's sobriety is left ambiguous. Stuff reports that “They” claim Charley was

trying to rob a store and “They had chased him two blocks and then had shot him to death” (185). Newspaper reports referred to Charley as an addict, but Stuff—like the readers—is left wondering whether the reports are true. Myers bookends *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* with funerals—Clyde’s father’s at the beginning and Charley’s at the end—demonstrating how fragile inner-city life is and how death surrounds teens. Indeed, death is a very real part of the Good People’s existence: pervasive drug use, street fights, and police shootings are part of urban life. Stuff, Sam, and Clyde try to avoid trouble whenever possible; as Myers shows, though, their good behavior is still not enough to keep them out of jail.

Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff dwells much less on the explicit politics and radical left economics than Childress’s novel, probably because Childress did not intend for her book to be marketed for young adult readers. The slightly didactic and moral messages of *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* are indicative of the young adult literature field; the absence of that in *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich* is likely because it was not envisioned as a young adult novel. *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* is, because of its language, subject matter, and teen characters, clearly meant for young adult readers. Myers’s novel also represents a shift in young adult literature—his tone is much softer than Childress’s; the goals for black art remain but the way of meeting these goals (the *aesthetic*) is different from Childress’s.

Myers has written over one hundred novels, memoirs, biographies, historical novels, and books of prose. Because of his prolific nature, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* is often lost among his many titles. In fact, research has turned up no scholarship specifically written about the novel. Much is written about Myers, and he does a great

deal of writing about African American young adult literature himself—in many ways, there are few greater authorities on the subject than he is. Rudine Sims Bishop even asked rhetorically, “Where would children’s literature be today without Walter Dean Myers?” (Horning 2-3). This project is intended to remind readers why this book is relevant, not just to the canon of young adult literature but also to the lasting influence of the Black Arts Movement.

Many of Myers’s stories are set in Harlem and nearly all feature a young African American boy as the protagonist. His career was built on coming-of-age stories about youth and their struggles with identity, race, poverty, and family. The celebration of black culture and commitment to Third World solidarity would also be a theme in most of his future novels. What made *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* possible were the particular societal, political, and cultural factors of the mid-1970s. Black Nationalism was waning, though what *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* demonstrated was that the ideology and themes that came out of the movement would not disappear. Myers truly believed he was part of a revolution that was working to transform the publishing industry. His role in the historical moment of 1975—as the Black Arts Movement began its decline as a movement per se—was to continue promoting the ideas propagated by Baraka, Neal, Gayle, and writers of the Movement. With *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, Myers demonstrated an ongoing need for a Black Aesthetic in art and a determination to not let the progress made during the Black Arts Movement disappear along with the Black Nationalist Movement. He, like other writers, continued writing novels celebrating black culture, promoting solidarity with people of color, and providing African American children with accurate depictions of their culture. Though Myers

would later grow disillusioned with the lack of progress being made in the publishing industry, his first young adult novel stands as a reflection of the promise and hope of the Black Arts Movement and the potential that was lost.

Conclusion: A Movement Interrupted

The Black Arts Movement was a disparate group of writers working to promote and encourage a Black Aesthetic in literature. Black Nationalism in the 1960s began as a reaction to national and global events, including the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to achieve racial equality in the United States. The Black Arts Movement, functioning as the aesthetic arm of Black Nationalism, literarily concretized the political and social commentaries about race occurring across the nation. There was no artistic area left unchanged by the Black Aesthetic—music, literature, art, and drama influenced, and was in turn influenced by, the changing American landscape. In *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005), James Smethurst describes this era as having “produced some of the most exciting poetry, drama, dance, music, visual art, and fiction of the post-World War II United States,” adding, “it reached a nonelite, transregional, mass African American audience to an extent that was unprecedented for such a formally (not to mention politically) radical body of art” (371). Part of the mass audience is seen in the large number of young adult books published during 1965-'75, often influenced by the Black Arts Movement.

Smethurst’s book does not mention the role young adult authors played in representing the Black Aesthetic into African American young adult literature. In fact, very little attention has been paid to the Black Aesthetic in young adult literature at all; Laretta Henderson’s 2005 essay “The Black Arts Movement and African American Young Adult Literature: An Evaluation of Narrative Style” is, to my knowledge, the only scholarship directly discussing *young adult literature* and the Black Arts Movement. What this study has demonstrated is the need for scholarship in young adult literature and

its relationship to Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement. Some scholarship has been done on the Black Arts Movement's influence on *children's* literature (see Michelle Martin's *Brown Gold: Milestones of African American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002*), and scholars are, with growing frequency, tracing the history and scholarship behind African American children's literature (see Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard's *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, Dianne Johnson's *Telling Tales*, Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. McNair's *Embracing, Evaluating, and Examining African American Children's and Young Adult Literature*, and works by Rudine Sims Bishop). My research has shown a lack of comprehensive examination of the relationship between a Black Aesthetic and African American young adult literature during the '60s and '70s, or recognized the correlation between the rise and fall of the Black Arts Movement with African American young adult literature.

There are a few reasons why this examination has not happened: first, as stated above, almost no publishing houses kept track of the ratio of African American to white authors being published. Second, a great deal of backlash against the Black Arts Movement occurred in the late 1970s and lasted throughout the '80s. Third, many literary critics and scholars pay little attention to any young adult literature. Much of this lack can be attributed to the sudden growth of young adult literature—to be sure, young adult literature was not a new phenomenon in the 1960s. The politically charged messages in African American young adult literature was new, and since much of the existing Black Arts Movement art was done by and for adults, scholars have failed to notice its presence in works for teens. Part of the lack is also due to the scant attention paid to young adult literature by critics—an issue still in the twenty-first century;

Caroline Hunt's "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists" (1996) nicely summarizes this, as she argues that "virtually no theoretical criticism attaches to young adult literature *as such*" (4) and "young adult books being reviewed and written about are not on the bookstore shelves, and those on the bookstore shelves are not being written about or reviewed" (5). The CIBC was instrumental in ensuring an increase in published African American writers and in promoting their literature. Indeed, Virginia Hamilton and Walter Dean Myers likely would not have received the national acclaim they did had they not been supported by the CIBC.

It is noteworthy that 1965 saw the creation of both the CIBC and Amiri Baraka's BART. The assassination of Malcolm X, escalating Vietnam conflict, Watts riots, and Selma marches that year signaled a turning point in the integration/separation discussions in the African American community and blossomed into a full-fledged political and literary movement three years later. Novels like Hamilton's *Zeely* in 1967 were a preview of the pride in their African heritage and celebration of blackness promoted a year later in *Black Fire*, Baraka and Neal's seminal anthology that laid out the hopes and realities of 1960s life while critiquing the reasons for persistent racism. Addison Gayle Jr.'s equally seminal *The Black Aesthetic* in 1970 was his attempt at collecting the distinct definitions of black art and its function. Undoubtedly influential on Black Arts Movement writers, these collections helped solidify and create a blueprint for artists to follow.

Julius Lester, the most politically active author in this study, epitomized Black Nationalist ideology. As a member of SNCC in the early 1960s, Lester traveled South on Freedom Rides, marched for Civil Rights, and promoted integration as a solution to racial

inequality. By the time he wrote *To Be a Slave* in 1968, though, he was disillusioned with the Civil Rights Movement and saw how ineffective the integration movement was at eliminating racial inequalities. By his book's publication, he had become an advocate for separation, and frequently argued for it in *Ebony*, *Katallagete*, and *Sing Out!* magazines. Childress, more radical left in her political leanings than the other authors examined here, used her first young adult novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, to demonstrate the disparity between haves and have-nots and the detrimental effects of economic inequality on the African American community, especially its youth. Myers's *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, written in the waning years of the Black Arts Movement, demonstrated the need for people of color to unite against white oppressors. While the authors themselves held differing views about the causes of inequality and how to solve the problem of racism, they were united in their vision of a Black Aesthetic and the importance of black art in young people's lives.

The CIBC made it possible for a new generation of African American writers to write for youth. The demand for books relating to the lives, issues, and needs specifically targeting African American youth had never been higher than the early- to mid-1970s. Libraries were able to purchase African American books in larger quantities than ever before, the creation of Black Studies programs showed publishing houses that African American writers were a viable commodity, and a generation of African American children were able to read books absent of racist or stereotyped depictions of black life. The Black Arts Movement advocated art by the black community, for the black community, a position with little support in the non-violent integration movement of the early 1960s. Disillusionment in the African American community over white trepidation

and hesitation in creating substantial social change is especially mirrored in *To Be a Slave* and *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, and reflects the need for change many felt by that decade's end.

The CIBC was primarily focused on children's literature—a younger demographic than Lester, Myers, Childress, and Hamilton were writing for. However, the success of white writer S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) had proven to Viking and other publishing houses that young adult literature was a viable genre, and publishers took advantage of this growing boon. By 1973, book editors were capitalizing on this trend by mandating to their writers what would and would not be marketed as teen literature (see Childress's explanation of this in chapter 4). Michael Cart, in *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (1996), refers to the 1970s as a "golden age" of young adult literature. But, after the Black Arts Movement stopped being a viable movement, publishers also stopped publishing African American young adult writers in large quantities. The golden age would continue, but mostly for white young adult writers.

Since the genre was just beginning to distinguish itself from children's literature in the 1960s and '70s, there were virtually no statistics during those years comparing the number of young adult black authors to white, or what percentage of the industry they comprised. The CIBC's urgency in publishing Third World writers waned after 1975, and by the mid-1980s the organization had stopped publishing its annual *Bulletin* completely. When the Black Nationalist Movement ended in 1975, with it went its power and influence over publishing. By the end of the decade, Myers was writing about his disillusionment over the inability of African American young adult writers to be

published. The Movement had been so loosely connected at its start that by its end, it was unable to maintain its organization or unity; Smethurst describes these “sectarian battles” as having “wracked the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the mid-1970s” (369).

Darlene Clark Hine writes, “The black arts and black consciousness movement opened up new avenues for the expression of black unity and positive black identity. A new generation of black poets, dramatists, and musicians found receptive audiences. The legislative successes of the early phase of the civil rights movement illuminated how much more needed to be done to achieve a truly egalitarian society” (512). The works in this study—*Zeely*, *To Be a Slave*, *Fast Sam*, *Cool Clyde*, and *Stuff*, and *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*—all found receptive audiences demanding black literature depicting positive black identities. The Civil Rights Movement’s push toward an integrated nation allowed for the creation of the CIBC, which in turn allowed African American writers a greater voice in children’s and young adult literature. Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement helped further the goals of the CIBC, which, as Beryle Banfield explains, were to address “the lack of minority-group writers in the field of children’s literature,” “promote a literature for children that better reflects the realities of a multi-cultural society,” and “effect basic change in books and media” (17-18). The CIBC’s success also coincided with the “sizeable grants from the federal government” used to purchase books. Their annual *Bulletin*, coupled with Augusta Baker’s bibliographies, provided lists of African American writers and books for parents, educators, and librarians, negating claims that a body of African American literature did not exist. Libraries, then, had unprecedented amounts of money available, and were

therefore able to purchase unprecedented amounts of literature by African American writers, and, Banfield, writes, “Publishers rushing to take advantage of the new market for cultural materials issued a spate of volumes purporting to answer the demands of” various minority groups lobbying for nonracist depictions of their culture in literature (18). Young adult literature in general, and African American literature specifically, had never been in higher demand.

Yet, in 1975, when the federal money for schools and libraries dried up, librarians were reluctant to spend their budgets on African American books, and after 1975, the amount of African American young adult literature books published yearly also declined—a fact noticed by Myers in his “The Black Experience in Children’s Books: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1979) and the CCBC in 1984 (when it began tracking publishing statistics). Hamilton and Myers, perhaps because of their association with the CIBC, were able to sustain their careers and publish frequently during the 1970s, despite the decline other writers experienced. Childress, for example, would not write another young adult novel until 1982. It must be noted, though, that while the output of African American literature was declining, the message was often the same. For some, like Myers and Tom Feelings, the Black Arts Movement never ended. Their works would continue to carry on the ideology and tenets of it and the Black Aesthetic.

This study has argued that four books—*Zeely*, *To Be a Slave*, *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*, and *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*—are examples of the Black Aesthetic and Black Nationalism in young adult literature. This study is also arguing that the rise and fall of the Black Arts Movement and African American young adult literature of the 1960s-’70s is symbiotic. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the books would have

been published without the cultural shift toward Black Nationalism and its subsequent tenets—its celebration of black culture, emphasis on African heritage, separatist views of race relations, and focus on the community. The combination of those factors allowed the CIBC to flourish and contribute to the transformation of children’s and young adult literature. While there is much work still to be done on this subject, the general scholarly opinion of Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement is changing, thanks in part to the work of Smethurst and his efforts at reexamining the lasting effect it had on national culture. Young adult literature during the Black Arts Movement is a largely untapped critical area; hopefully this assessment has demonstrated that a link exists. The hope and promise felt by African American young adult writers during the Black Arts Movement was interrupted by outside political and economic forces; their work remains as a testament to the historical moment in which they wrote and their commitment to Black Nationalism.

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