Black Power Youth Literature: Trying to Overcome the Cultural Deficit

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Abstract

The main focus of this thesis is how children's books were used as a tool within the Black Power Movement to overcome the cultural deficit. After examining the state of children's literature prior to the movement the Black Power Era's influence on children's literature is addressed. The children's books written by Julius Lester *To Be a Slave* (1968) and *Black Folk Tales* (1969) are then the key texts with which to examine how children's books reflected the cultural changes that were developed during the Movement. The books provide a more nuanced and less overtly political view of black identity that is aimed at children. In conjunction with other materials, such as *Ebony Jr.*, I demonstrate that the Black Power Movement enabled the production of various media such as magazines and children's books that were not as extreme as the vision of Amiri Baraka's view of the Black Arts Movement but nevertheless important in the struggle against the cultural deficit. Though these images and texts are less recognizable they were part of an effort that built on work prior to the Civil Rights movement but struggled in the shadow of the militaristic and provocative cultural expressions of the Black Power movement.

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Introduction

In 1965 over 6.3 million non-white children were learning to read within the United States. During this time the four largest publishers of children's books only featured references or illustrations of black children in 4.2% of their output.[1] Furthermore, the depictions of black people within these books were seldom positive but often were the bedraggled and bunion-footed 'Pickaninnies' to accompany the images of cherubic white children.[2] Young black children perused books in their nurseries and their schools only to find, for the most part, their place in society had been omitted as the books revealed page, after page of white faces and white characters. The lack of identifiable black figures in children's literature was symptomatic of a larger problem that African-Americans faced. Many felt dislocated from their ancestry yet not accepted within American society. Eric Lincoln, founder of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, lamented that "you will not find the black contribution in the textbooks or in the archives; for that is not in the American tradition".[3]

In the preceding years, activists had achieved successes in integrating public services and gaining voting rights across the U.S, from the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to the march on Selma in 1965. During the Civil Rights era the frontline had been segregated facilities and racist voting laws. However, as frustration grew in the late 1960s culture became an increasingly important battleground in the fight against racism. The historians Jeffrey Ogbar and his predecessor William Van Deburg contend that the Black Power

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1 Nancy Larrick 'The All-White World of Children's Books' *The Saturday Review*, September 11, 1965, 63.

2 Laretta Henderson '*Ebony Jr.!* : The Rise and Demise of an African American Children's Magazine' *Journal of Negro Education* 75. no.4 (2006): 650.

3 C. Eric Lincoln, 'Founding Address of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters' March 27, 1969. Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 1. Black Academy of Arts and Letters records, 1968-1980, Roosevelt Study Centre Collections. (hereafter cited as BAAL, RSC Collection.)

movement was not just violent rhetoric and posturing but a cultural movement, one that sought to inculcate blacks in their history, language, music and various other forms of culture.

The concept of a cultural deficit has been explored in educational psychology as a perspective as to why minorities suffer as their culture is insufficiently represented in comparison with the dominant, majority culture. Many activists in the Black Freedom movement contended that a focus on black culture and consciousness was necessary to fulfil the aims of the movement. Figures such as Bob Moses helped initiate the Freedom Schools because he felt that successes could never be fully achieved if black culture was underrepresented. The term cultural deficit is used to represent the aspects in U.S. culture that, either did not represent or offered distorted versions of, black culture. With a culture that was often maligned or ignored many activists felt that this had a detrimental effect upon notions of black identity. Clayborne Carson has highlighted how within SNCC there was a development of this politics as figures like Bob Moses felt that history and culture could be a useful tool in the struggle. Johanna McLean further argues that the notion of a cultural deficit was important because it tied in with identity and self-esteem, as such the movement gradually focused on culture and racial solidarity as a source of power.[4]

Ogbar claims that the movement affected identity and politics "as much as any speech, march, or legal victory of the civil rights movement".[5] Van Deburg similarly argues in powerful terms about the importance of the Black Power movement as it forced, not just African-Americans, but the whole nation to reappraise their "social and cultural values".[6] The

4 Johanna D. Mclean, 'Refusing to Fit In: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Role in the Creation of Identity Politics' *Deliberations* (Fall 2004) 21.

5Jeffrey Ogbonna Green Ogbar. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) 2.

6William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 308.

concept of encouraging children to learn about their history was not new but the Black Power Movement's strong emphasis on culture enabled children's authors to write, publish and disseminate their material more freely to a wider audience than was previously possible. Waldo Martin, a cultural historian, claims that culture and the continual struggle over it is our "primary window onto the world. They are our principal ways of imagining and realizing our world and are crucial to being and acting in the world".[7]

This thesis will focus on children's books by Julius Lester and the black children's magazine *Ebony Jr.* These works are emblematic of the attempts made to nurture black consciousness and battle the white cultural hegemony during the Black Power era. Children were seen as an integral part of the future of African-Americans. In his address to children in the first edition of Ebony Jr. the editor John H. Johnson proclaimed: "I hope you remember that more will be required of our generation than any other generation of Black people".[8]

The Black Power era, 1965-1975 witnessed a flurry of activity. Groups like the Black Panther Party tried to instil revolutionary Black Nationalism within the black populace; Ron Karenga's Us Movement sought to fashion African traditions and culture for blacks. Furthermore, amongst others, Amiri Baraka wanted to destroy the "white way of looking at the world" and create a new black aesthetic.[9] Within this broad and often conflicted movement, writers were able to build on a long history of attempts to overcome the African-American cultural deficit and were given the opportunities and readership for works that dealt with black history, self-pride and consciousness.

7Waldo E. Martin. *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics and Postwar America*. Cambridge (Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) 5.

8 John H. Johnson 'Why Ebony Jr.?' *Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 4.

9 Larry Neal 'The Black Arts Movement' *The Drama Review: TDR* Vol. 12, No. 4, Black Theatre (Summer, 1968) 31.

Children's authors and writers also flourished during this Black Power movement as they built on foundations to impart pride and cultural roots for black children. Moreover, the notion of a distinct black consciousness and culture that needed fostering and protecting had become more prevalent in the late 1960s. The historian Johanna McClean argues that SNCC increasingly focused upon black identity and consciousness during the 1960s. As more activists considered the importance of identity and black consciousness their ideologies merged with the wider Black Power Movement. The frustrations and limitations encountered during the Civil Rights movement led many of these activists to believe that to overcome the racial injustices inherent in society, a true appreciation and understanding of black culture was crucial.

America was supposed to be a melting pot of cultures but myriad immigrant groups clung to their traditions, celebrated their holidays and were in touch with their ancestry. African-Americans, however, were a nationless people. This cultural deficit was a focus for many scholars and artists, from black schoolteachers in the early twentieth century to W.E.B Du Bois' calls for the importance of a self-consciousness to intellectuals demonstrating the depth of black culture in the Harlem Renaissance.[10] This dislocation from ancestry and culture started in childhood but was particularly pronounced in integrated schools as no longer was it a black classroom, with a black teacher; the black child was now an anomaly in their class, a cultural orphan without a history to draw from. Zoe Burkholder's work *Color in the Classroom* reveals how teachers avoided speaking and teaching about blacks in terms of culture; even as the trend for incorporating the history and culture of other minorities increased blacks were absent from this development and lacked a national heritage. [11]

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10 Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Project Gutenberg Ebooks, 2008. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm

Throughout the twentieth century, as other children were given the opportunity to present their ancestral folk tales and the holidays they celebrated with their families to their classmates, black children often struggled. Amiri Baraka, a leader in the Black Arts Movement decried that if you "tickle a Pole, and he will surely polka you to death or remind you that Chopin was one of his own". However, he then put the question to American blacks "who is your Sholem Aleichem, the recorder of your African folk tales? You do not know, nor your children? Why not? This is as necessary as bread and television sets"[12]

Educated blacks contended that the cultural deficit was felt throughout the black population. Certainly, children keenly felt the lack of representation in their reading prior to the mid-1960s. The children's books of Julius Lester from the late 1960s and early 1970s and the advent of the black children's magazine *Ebony Jr*., in 1973 are indicative of the material that proliferated during the Black Power era. These works and others that came to fruition during the movement demonstrate how this period allowed writers to write for black children and address issues that were culturally relevant. Furthermore, how during this period authors were able to challenge the white hegemony of children's literature to produce material that was entertaining but also facilitated in fostering black pride and consciousness. The works of Julius Lester and *Ebony Jr*., are emblematic of the works that flourished during the Black Power era to counter the cultural deficit and whitewashing that was apparent in children's literature prior to the mid-1960s.

11Zoe Burkholder. *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race 1900-1954* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2011) 36.

12 Sally Eisenberg. 'The Press of Freedom: The Black Man's Burden' The Village Voice, May 19 1966. Reel 1, Box 1. The Black Power Movement Part 1: Amiri Baraka from Black Arts to Black radicalism. University Publications of America Bethesda, Maryland. Roosevelt Study Center Collection. (hereafter cited as BPM: RSC Collection)

The children's books throughout the period are widely available. Many of those printed in the early twentieth century have been edited to omit the more overtly racist references. However, many online sources have compiled collections of children's literature that are copies of the original publications. The debate about children's books rose in educational magazines and school libraries during the 1960s and 1970s as the scarcity of materials for black children became obvious. After President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which granted financial aid to schools with a high proportion of low-income families, many educationalists and librarians realised that money was not impeding children access to black literature.[13] Children's literature was still a bastion of white fantasy. Calls for 'Black Power' started to be heard, schools and libraries complained about the state of children's literature and there was even a House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor that focused upon the treatment of minorities in books in public schools.[14] This new climate provided the environment for black children's literature to be greatly improved.

Whilst scholars have addressed the children's literature prior to the Black Power movement there has been little research that has focused on *Ebony Jr*. and children's books that reflect the cultural ideology of the Black Power Movement. The significant cultural changes that the Movement enabled and facilitated have been underplayed by many scholars of children's literature or simply not included in the works of Ogbar and Van Deburg in relation to the wider cultural impact of the Black Power Movement. The changes in children's literature that were made in the 1960s and 1970s answered many of the complaints and attacks from activists, educators and librarians in the preceding years yet historiography has

13 Paul Cornelius. 'Interracial Children's Books: Problems and Progress' *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol.41 no.2 (April 1971) 108.

14 *Ibid*, 108.

underplayed the significance of the Black Power Movement in providing the climate for such change to happen.

The Formidable Cultural Deficit: Children's Literature Before 1965

In 1951, for the first time the Newbery Medal for excellence in children's writing was awarded to a book centred on the black experience. Elizabeth Yates' *Amos Fortune, Free Man* won the prestigious award for her story of an enslaved African prince who eventually buys his freedom and dies a respected man. However, the representation of black experience has been criticised for its portrayal of the submissive and noble slave.[15] This is crystallized in Amos' view of his master Caleb; he is his protector and Amos views him with "reverence and loyalty".[16] Elizabeth Yates was a white, religious northerner and her portrayal of slavery is optimistic about the nature of humanity. The inherent racism of slavery is underplayed as the importance of Caleb's religious instruction is viewed as crucial in developing Amos as a moral man. The representation of black experience and portrayals of black characters in children's literature was severely limited until the mid-1960s; if black characters were included they embodied a plethora of negative characteristics. In his assessment of black

15Judy Richardson, 'Black Children's Books: An Overview' *Journal of Negro Education* vol. 43, no.3 (1974) 386.

16Elizabeth Yates. *Amos Fortune, Free Man* (1950. Reprint, New York: Puffin-Penguin, 1989) 46.

children's literature, historian Paul Deane, laments that it is only possible to come up with a "bleak conclusion" for the output until the advent of the Black Power movement. [17] Black characters were limited to menial jobs or villainous monsters, that is, if they even were included.

The glut of negative portrayals of Black people in works for children was a great obstacle in the battle against the cultural deficit. Not only were children not shown their history and culture but they were also confronted with caricatures of their race, that is, if their role in society was not completely omitted already. This deficiency in black culture limited black identity to exaggerations and provided children with very few black characters that were fully formed. The Black Power Era allowed writers, such as Julius Lester to build a positive representation of black life for children.

However, it was not a new phenomenon. Amelia Johnson, a black minister's wife from Baltimore, was the first of black writers to try and reach out to black children with her work *The Joy* in the 1880s. Furthermore, Carter G. Woodson was a black historian who embodied the view that African-American culture and history needed greater exposure and better representation. In 1915 he established the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) as he believed racial problems arose, in part, because of a failure to sufficiently acknowledge black history and culture.[18] Woodson's pioneering work in establishing the ASALH and the *Journal of Negro History* was a crucial step in viewing identity and culture as important cornerstones from which racial oppression could be fought.

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17 Paul Deane, 'Black Characters in Children's Fiction Series Since 1968' *The Journal of Negro Education* vol.58, no.2 (spring, 1989) 153.

18 Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early Black History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene*. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2007) 27.

By 1919 W.E.B Du Bois also recognised the importance of making children "familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race" with *The Brownies Book.*[19] Furthermore, the role of the Freedom Schools during the Civil Rights Movement cannot be overlooked as a precursor to the development of black children's literature and teaching black children about their past and culture. These attempts to overcome the cultural deficit and reinforce a positive self- image for black children were limited. Despite being overshadowed by the constant and permeating portrayals of African-Americans these efforts were crucial precedents in establishing children's literature that was positive and imbued with black history.

The psychological and emotional impact of this cultural deficit is impossible to quantify, but its importance cannot be overlooked. Unlike children of Irish, German or other European descent, black children were often set adrift in a cultural wasteland when they went to school. Folk tales and history could be enjoyed at home but in schools it was more problematic. Individual teachers could inspire children within the Jim Crow system but many children struggled because of the lack of materials that included their culture and history. In 1933 black educator Wilhelmina Crosson complained that as a child she did not like school because "we read stories of every race's contribution to the development of literature but our own, and of every race's part in the laying of bricks in its history but our own".[20]

In the segregated schools under Jim Crow, however, many black children were exposed to positive affirmations of black culture through certain teachers. Angela Davis, a prominent activist in the 1960s remembered that in her elementary school in Birmingham,

19 W.E.B. Du Bois, True Brownies' *Crisis*, vol.18 (October 1919) 285.

20 Zoe Burkholder. *Color in the Classroom*,38.

Alabama black identity was an integral part of her experience.[21] Furthermore, Paul Sanders Nakawa, a Black Power Activist, recalled that he had one teacher who taught him and the other children about the importance of pride in their mother nation, Africa.[22] In Southern black schools "Negro History Week" was widely observed and children. Carter G. Woodson initiated this movement in 1926 and many black teachers seized the opportunity to educate children about their ancestry.

Evidently individual teachers were capable of fostering a positive attitude amongst many children and raising the self-esteem of these children. However, as a child was exposed to textbooks and children's books this confidence could be eroded. The vast majority of reading material available to children did not reflect the positive affirmations of individual teachers or inspiring family members. Amiri Baraka, a founder of the Black Arts Movement, felt dislocated from his culture but was inspired when, as a child, he discovered his grandfather's copy of J.A Rogers *100 Amazing Facts about Negros.* [23] Baraka was fortunate with this discovery and for many children the only portrayals in books of black life were overly simplistic and derogatory.

The famous 1954 *Brown* decision was heavily based upon the research of social psychologist Kenneth Clark. His experiment involved asking children questions based on black and white dolls that supposedly demonstrated the deleterious effects segregations had on the psyche of black children. His findings revealed how black children were "dominated

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21Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow*. (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2001) 44

22 Komozi Woodward interview with Paul Sanders Nakawa, November 16, 1985. Frame 151, Reel 9. BPM: RSC Collection

23 Komozi Woodward, Kuza woodward and Vanessa Whitehead 'Interview with Amiri Baraka', January 4, 1986. Frame 566, Reel 9. BPM: RSC Collection

by negative stereotypes about themselves".[24] The experiment, however, has been criticised for being scientifically flawed. Robin Bernstein has argued that the experiment was not about black self-hatred but influenced by a variety of other factors; Clark's experiment was not scientific but followed a narrative arc of the time.[25]However, the problem of self-esteem persisted, and many felt that integration was actually harmful to many children.

Adam Fairclough's study on Black Schools under Jim Crow demonstrates how segregated schools often benefitted black children as they were an integral part of the community.[26] Moreover, Janice Hale-Benson's extensive study on black children's learning styles reveals that during integration they were "moulding and shaping Black children so that they can be fit into an educational process designed for Anglo- Saxon middle-class children".[27] Black children were integrated in White schools. They had to walk by the trophy cabinets of white achievements, the board listing all the white Valedictorians and, were exposed to the library where they were not even considered in its formulation. Once in an integrated school many black children could not remain anonymous in an institution that was built for white children. The kids who were first to integrate into the Little Rock School found themselves targeted by fellow pupils.[28]Though racism's roots are numerous it is not

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24 Kenneth B. Clark and Woody Klein. *Toward Humanity and Justice: The Writings of Kenneth B. Clark, Scholar of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Decision* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004) *72*

25 Michael Proulx "Professor Revisits Clark Doll Tests" *The Harvard Crimson*. Accessed July 13, 2015.

26 Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality,* 5-7.

27Janice E. Hale-Benson. *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1988) 1.

28 Stephanie Fitzgerald, *The Little Rock Nine: Struggle for Integration*. (Minneapolis: White-Thomas Publishing, 2006) 37.

surprising given the state of nineteenth-century children's literature that black and white children had a skewed view of African-Americans.

The destructive effects of such representations were harmful to children and thus, many argued was damaging to the future of the Black race. This had not gone unobserved, with both black and white figures calling for change. Society, however, overlooked these problems and many were simply unaware of their existence. Even in the 1970s librarian Katherine Baxter and her colleagues at the Green Street Friends School in Philadelphia were surprised at how many stereotypes permeated the children's books. She was shocked at her previous ignorance as they saw these detrimental stereotypes occurring again and again throughout the library.[29] Moreover, the majority of children's books were written by white authors with a white readership in mind. Another librarian, Dharathula Millender, in the 1940s claimed that white writers did not know anything about black culture but, nevertheless, they included black characters and people believed these ludicrous representations of black people.[30]

One of the most famous representations was the children's book *Ten Little Niggers*. Based upon the nursery rhyme in the late nineteenth century and published in 1875 it was an educational book teaching children how to count. Historian Tiffany Anderson highlights that because it was an educational book that taught children to count it also "presented the racial construction of the black population as 'niggers' with equal importance".[31] Within the book the ten characters are portrayed as comical and are dehumanised. In a series of outrageous

29 Katherine Baxter. 'Combating the Influence of Black Stereotypes in Children's Books' *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 27, no. 6 (Mar., 1974) 540.

30Judy Richardson, 'Black Children's Books' 383.

31 Tiffany Anderson, 'Ten Little Niggers' The Making of a Black Man's Consciousness' Folklore Forum vol.39 no.1 (2009) 7.

costumes the black characters are included to make the counting funny and entertaining. The rhymes about their violent deaths are amusing accompaniments, for example, “Three little Nigger boys walking in the Zoo, the big Bear hugged one and then there were two”.[32] The characters all look identical and the inclusion of black characters is specifically to provoke amusement. Books such as *The Little Lazy Zulu* and *Little Black Sambo* promoted the trend of depicting black characters as silly.[33] The Newbery Medal winner in 1946 was *The Rooster Crows: A Book of American Rhymes and Jingles* which depicted the white children as cute and innocent and the black characters were bizarre bedraggled figures speaking in dialect.

Black characters were used for entertainment and were often limited to playing the fool within children’s books. However, some writers used their race to invoke fear as they rendered black characters as menacing villains. In The *Rover Boys on the Ocean* the young, white Grace is accosted by a “burly Negro” who grabs her with a “grip of steel” dragging her away telling her “If yo’ be still, yo’ won’t git hurt”.[34] This threatening character invokes basic fears of violence but his target of the young white girl also plays into the racist fears of miscegenation between the saintly white women and the hypersexualised image of the black man. These were common racist tropes that were used to elicit fear so to make a villain even more menacing many writers felt it useful to use a black character. That the character’s name is ‘Watermelon Pete’ is just layering on more stereotypes and is indicative that many black characters were just amalgamations of racist caricatures. Furthermore, Luke Jones in *The Hidden Harbor Mystery* is again described as burly but he is mysterious and is often lurking

32 Edmund McLoughlin. *Ten Little Niggers*. New York: McLoughlin Bros, 1875. Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature, University of Florida Digital Collections. Accessed April 3, 2015. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00026617/00001/2j

33 Nancy Larrick ‘The All-White World of Children’s Books’ 65.

34 Arthur M. Winfield,. *The Rover Boys Megapack*.(Rockville: Wildside Press, 2013) Kindle.

in the shadows.[35] Often writers employed race to enhance the wickedness of villains, preying on the inherent racist fears of their readership.

Black characters were scarce in children's literature but, when included, were used for comic purposes or to instil fear. Though the overt racist depictions started to subside in the early to mid-twentieth century, children's books still contained racist attitudes. These facilitated the cultural deficit and reduced black characters to unsophisticated stereotypes. Writing in 1968, Paul Deane argued that whilst some of the cruder elements such as dialects had fallen out of favour the depictions of black characters were still grounded in racist attitudes as " his position in society, his general character, and his personality have never really varied".[36]

Positions such as maid or porter were often the roles assigned for black characters. These characters were deferential and subservient to the white characters in the books. In *The Rovers Boys at School* the waiter serving on the boys is identified as black through his dialect and position. The waiter, Alexander's language towards the boys immediately signifies his inferiority to them as he deferentially introduces himself: "Gracious, sah, is yo' a visitah sah?".[37] The boys casually refer to Alexander as "Aleck, my boy" and this language perpetuates the notion that the Black characters fulfil a supporting and obedient role. This attitude towards black characters continued into and throughout the twentieth century. Helen Boylston's nurse character Sue Barton upon visiting a hospital in Harlem is told "You'll love

35Paul Deane, 'Black Characters in Children's Fiction Series Since 1968' 156.

36Paul Deane.'The Persistence of Uncle Tom: An Examination of the Image of the Negro in Children's Fiction Series' *The Journal of Negro Education* vol. 37, no. 2 (Spring, 1968) 140.

37Stratemeyer, Edward. *The Rover Boys at School the Cadets of Putnam Hall.* 1899.Auckland: Floating Press, 2012

working with colored people…They're so willing to cooperate and so eager to learn!".[38] This trend continued into the 1960s even after series were edited to remove the more nefarious representations. Black villains were replaced but the maids, the waiters and other servile characters remained black.[39]

If the depiction of black characters was not derogatory it did not necessitate that they were positive roles. Black characters could potentially be well-liked characters yet still be entrenched in an inferior position. Many children's books in the early nineteenth century patronised their black characters and portrayed benevolent whites as the heroes. For example, the protagonist in Jesse Jackson's *Call Me Charley* published in 1945 is a positive representation of a black student struggling in white society but he is helped in his search for acceptability by his friend's white liberal parents.[40]

As American society moved from the antebellum period into the mid-twentieth century the portrayals of scary, monstrous black characters subsided. However, idealized social relations between whites and blacks remained in children's literature throughout.[41] Theodore Roosevelt reminisced about how as a child he would sit transfixed with the magazine *Our Young Folks* which reinforced his notion of genial black servants with benevolent white masters.[42] This paternalistic attitude towards happy and loyal black servants

38 Boylston, Helen Dore. *Sue Barton, Neighborhood Nurse*. (New York, N.Y: Image Cascade Pub., 2008) 133.

39 Paul Deane, 'Black Characters in Children's Fiction Series Since 1968' 156.

40 Judy Richardson, 'Black Children's Books' 385.

41Leslie R. Miller, ' The Power of Black and White: African-Americans in Late-Nineteenth-Century Children's *Periodicals' Defining Print Culture for Youth: The Cultural Work of Children's Literature*, ed. Anne H. Lundin (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003) 65

42 *Ibid*, 70.

was a pervasive stereotype in vaudeville, theatre, film, minstrelstry, and children's books. Roosevelt was one of millions whose view of black people was framed by the representations they viewed in literature as children. Continually the dynamic between whites and blacks was framed as a positive superior-inferior relationship.

The historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends that this construct led to a counter-movement within the black community in an attempt to reclaim what being black represented.[43] As well as children's literature there were efforts most famously embodied in the compendium *A New Negro for a New Century.* The ubiquity of simplistic representations of black characters, particularly with genial relations with kind white characters, was the target of many African-American authors. Though limited in access to mass production Booker T. Washington and his fellow editors sought to rectify the stereotypes with an emphasis on black history and positive black role models.

W.E.B Du Bois, principal figure in the NAACP and editor of its magazine *Crisis*, was at the forefront of African American intellectual life.[44] The NAACP's *Crisis* magazine, established in 1911, became widely popular in the United States. It was not just found in intellectual circuits in the major cities but across the South too.[45] The magazine focused on racial pride, black history and celebrated black cultural achievements. Notably, children's literature was seen as an important medium through which to challenge the portrayals of

43 Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations*, no.24 (October 1988) 136.

44 Bell, Bernard W. *W.E.B. DuBois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 115.

45 Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality,* 1890-2000. (New York: Viking, 2001)82.

black life. W.E.B Du Bois included one children's issue of *Crisis* each year to help foster racial pride in the new generation but quickly realised its popularity and importance.

In his *Crisis* article 'True Brownies' Du Bois exclaimed the need for furthering this venture and releasing a monthly children's magazine because "we are and must be interested in our children above all else, if we love our race and humanity".[46] *The Brownies Book*, Du Bois' monthly children magazine beginning in January 1919, desired to encourage black children to become "familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race…To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition, and love of their own homes and companions".[47] Du Bois aided by Jessi Faucet created a monthly children's magazine that was a significant deviation from other children's literature. Even though it was criticised for focusing on the black elite it was framed within African- American culture rather than white culture.[48]

In the very first edition the importance of the magazine was lauded by parents who wrote letters to 'Grown-Ups Corner'. Mrs C. M. Johnson of Nahant, Massachusetts wrote an admiring letter because her son was the only black child in the community and was teased and bullied because of his race. *The Brownies Book* addressed issues of identity and self-esteem; as Mrs Johnson asked: "what shall we tell him to do, and how best for him to answer them, and instil into him race love and race pride?".[49] *The Brownies Book* included poems, stories, photographs and letters in an attempt to provide black children with a

46 W.E.B. Du Bois, 'True brownies' 286.

47 *Ibid*.

48Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill, 'The Brownies' Book and Ebony Jr.!: Literature as a Mirror of the Afro- American Experience' *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 58, No. 4 (Autumn, 1989) 495.

49 'The Grown-Up's Corner' *The Brownies Book*, January 1920, 25.

magazine that dealt with their needs and their culture. Indeed, in the first issue there was a Jessie Faucet poem ‘Dedication’ that encapsulates the cultural deficit that children faced and how *The Brownies Book* was a solution to the dearth of material for, and about, black children:

To children, who with eager look

Scanned vainly library shelf and nook,

For History or Song or Story

That told of colored people’s glory-

We dedicate *The Brownies Book*[50]

The material within *The Brownies Book* simultaneously entertained children and encouraged hope and pride for their race. The section ‘Little People of the Month’ focused on achievements of a range of African-Americans from Lucille Spence getting a college education to a four year old Ida Clarke singing in front of 100 people.[51] Moreover, there were numerous photographs of black children in a range of activities to inspire pride and recognition of their achievements. From the smart-looking Philadelphia Scout group to the African children spinning cotton, the photographs detailed capable and important black children. The monthly issue was an attempt at countering the lack of material available to, and geared towards black children. One mother wrote to the editor praising the focus on black history. She was previously left dismayed after her daughter, after learning about Betsy Ross and George Washington, queried: “Mamma, didn’t colored folks do anything?”[52]

50Jessie Faucet, ‘Dedication’ *The Brownies Book* ,January 1920, 32.

51 ‘Little People of the Month’ *The Brownies Book* , March 1920, 35.

Contributions to history by black figures are an important source of affirming a positive identity and forming a black history.[53] For children to learn about African-American achievements and contributions was especially important at this time because it not only inspired pride in one's race but also gave a concrete grounding in the U.S. Like other children of different nationalities they could talk about their national heroes. Hildegarde Hoyt Swift, a black author from a northern, educated background wrote a children's book about Harriet Tubman entitled *A Railroad To Freedom*. In her introduction she describes growing up and learning about the achievements of Tubman but wondering "why it was not written down so that other boys and girls might read it".[54]

The efforts of authors such as W.E.B Du Bois and Hoyt-Swift were important contributions in the battle against the vast cultural deficit. However, it was not just racist material that they had to counter; it was battling with the publishers as well. There were few avenues for black-orientated books to be published and it was a costly exercise. *The Brownies Book* had a circulation of around 4000 copies per month by December 1921 but this was not enough to sustain continued publication. In the final published issue Du Bois implored readers to spread the word as 12 000 copies per month was what was needed to keep publication ongoing.[55] Faucet and Du Bois struggled to get the advertising and means to reach out to more readers and were limited because their material was black-orientated.

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52 'The Grown-Up's Corner' *The Brownies Book*, February 1920, 45.

53Janice E. Hale-Benson. *Black Children*, 10.

54 Hildegarde Hoyt Swift, *The Railroad to Freedom: A Story of the Civil War* (NewYork: Harcourt brace,1932) Kindle. Xi.

55 *The Brownies Book* , December 1921, 329.

Many publishers were reluctant to publish anything with black characters for fear it would have an adverse effect on sales. Publishers' hesitance was a trend that lasted throughout the twentieth century, athough it was beginning to change with the advent of the Black Power Movement. Joseph Okpaku, who established a black publishing house in 1970 claimed that such a venture was necessary because for decades either white publishers either rejected or simply never returned the calls of black authors.[56] Publishers tended to avoid anything that might elicit controversy. For example, Helen Key was forced by Hastings House to change the central duo from interracial friends to white friends. In the 1950s Caroline Rubin, editor at the publisher Albert Whitman, claimed that sales dropped dramatically and many books were returned when some stories featured interracial friendships.[57]

In light of this aversion from publishers, the affirmative portrayals of black life that were contained in *The Brownies Book* and *The Joy* are remarkable. The majority of children's literature up until the mid-1960s that dealt with black life consisted of 'safe' representations of respectable black figures or slave histories that avoided current white-black relations. After the landmark *Brown vs Board* decision in 1954 it is notable that very few children's books addressed integration. Due to its contentious nature publishers tended to avoid it. Even with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement the change in children's literature was minimal. Many publishers recognised the offensive stereotypes but instead of countering them, they simply had them removed. In his assessment of the 1950s and early 1960s approach to children's literature, Paul Deane sums up the limitations: "to remove derogatory elements in children's literature is all well and good; to include positive ones would be far, far better".[58]

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56 Charlayne Hunter, ' Writer Starts Black Publishing House' *The New York Times*, June 26, 1970.

57 Nancy Larrick 'The All-White World of Children's Books' 64.

However, Dorothy Sterling's *Mary Jane* (1959) was the exception. The titular character and her fellow pioneer Fred wade through a barrage of insults, harassment from pupils and teachers alike and endure the ogling in the newly integrated Wilson Junior High.[59] After 1965 there was an increase in material that addressed these issues and Dorothy Sterling was one of the pioneers during this period. As the Black Power Movement loomed she became a crucial figure in highlighting the importance of positive literature for black children. She called for material that was suitable for black children rather than suited to white publishers.

However limited, there were efforts at fostering a positive image within children's books of black life prior to 1965. These were important precedents during a time in which it was commonplace to cast black characters as servants or as villains. W.E.B Du Bois lamented that to grow up "a problem is a strange experience".[60] His work as well as a handful of other books aimed to rectify this. His work in *The Brownies Book* was a crucial contribution in the arena of children's literature as millions of black children were exposed to a hateful and strange world as they perused what material was available to them. From the late nineteenth century advances had been made through the important efforts of figures like Faucet and Du Bois. Furthermore, the \Civil Rights movement did initiate efforts like the Freedom Schools in 1964 that facilitated the teaching of black history and culture, but the effects within published literature, however, was inadequate.

58Paul Deane, 'Black Characters in Children's Fiction Series Since 1968' 162.

59 Dorothy Sterling, *Mary Jane* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) 63.

60 Phillips, Michelle H., 'The Children of Double Consciousness: From the Souls of Black Folk to The Brownies' Book' *PMLA* vol.128, no.3 (May 2013) 590.

After the political successes of the Civil Rights movement many figures felt that the cultural deficit still had not been challenged and to encourage more successes a positive identity needed to be achieved. In 1965, Dorothy Sterling embodied this view as she testified before a congressional committee on racial bias in textbooks.[61] Sterling claimed that African Americans were being "as badly hurt by a 'truth gap' as they are by a 'job gap' or a 'housing gap'".[62]The deficit in African American historical and cultural knowledge was far reaching and damaging. She continued that myriad blacks had a distorted view of their history and culture as their role in history was scarcely mentioned and books depicted slaves "frolicking in the cotton fields".[63]Furthermore, she helped establish the Council for Interracial Books for Children. The precedents set by authors such as Du Bois and the empowerment that the Civil Rights movement provided gave rise to a new age of children's literature. Author Helen King summed up the increased desire to empower children in the wake of the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. She acknowledged the previous inadequacy that she faced as a child and claimed: "Difficulties I have had now seem unimportant because I am going to reach black children when they need it most".[64]

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61 Elaine Woo. 'Dorothy Sterling, author of African American children's literature, dies at 95' *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2008. Accessed April 18, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-sterling14-2008dec14-story.html#page=1

62 Dorothy Sterling 'Statement', U.S House. Committee on Education and Labor. *Books For Schools and the Treatment of Minorities*, Hearing. ug. 23-24, 30 - Sep. 1, 1966. Washington: Government Printing Office (Y4.Ed8/1:B64/3)

63 Ibid, 275.

64 Helen King 'Nominations' Feb. 1972. Reel 7, Box 7, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

The Black Power Era: Ushering in a New Age for Children

In his founding address in March 1969 for the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, Eric Lincoln proclaimed that "There is something happening in America…. Something that is beautiful. It is the coming of age of the Black American".[65] Lincoln's statement encapsulates the cultural fervour of the Black Power Movement. The movement is traditionally viewed as militaristic posturing and radical Black Nationalism. Certainly, these elements were very much to the front of the organisation as it presented itself but alongside this, it also fostered a strong cultural movement.

Within the cacophony of violent rhetoric and limited political gains there was a broader artistic movement that tried to foster black pride. The Black Power movement built on a history of self-affirmation and efforts to overcome the cultural deficit faced by black Americans. Histories, folklore, plays and a plethora of other media were undertaken to empower people through black culture. In his appraisal of the Black Arts Movement , Larry Neal proclaimed that the "main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for the Black people to define the world in their own terms".[66] Whether this was through children's books, African dress or traditional songs, culture became an important tool in expressing identity and challenging the predominantly white culture that pervaded the arts.

The majority of historical works on the Black Power era focus on the political groups, the nationalistic rhetoric and the social struggle of the movement. However, in 1992 William Van Deburg made one of the most important contributions to the field with his book *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture.* He contends that the

65 C. Eric Lincoln, 'Founding Address of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters' March 27, 1969. Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

66 Larry Neal 'The Black Arts Movement' 29.

cultural element surpassed the impact of the major political groups as many individuals recognised the need to write their own histories and to create their own myths and legends".[67] It was not just a few groups with iconic figures like playwright Amiri Baraka and the leader of *Us* Ron Karenga but a broad movement that encouraged a comprehensive approach to Black art. Furthermore, Jeffrey Ogbar has more recently followed up this line of thought. Ogbar emphasises that the calls for "Black Power!" raised by Willie Ricks in 1966 were a reaction to, and a culmination of, the cultural and political consciousness raised across the nation in the preceding decades.[68]

The Black Arts Movement and various similar groups that were formed in the early years of the Black Power Movement were criticised for their vehemently nationalistic and racist attitudes. Individuals, like Amiri Baraka wrote polarising and radical work. In his poem 'Black Art' he lyricized that:

"we want poems that kill.

Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns.

Poems that wrestle cops into alleys."[69]

This extreme rhetoric was prominent amongst many black artists at the time who revelled in the shock that they elicited. Jerry Watts characterises much of Baraka's work as violent and featuring a litany of "graphic and ridiculous images of white folks in various

67 William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 27.

68 Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power*, 66.

69 Amiri Baraka, 'Black Art' 1969.

stages of depravity".[70] The militancy and extreme nature of some works came to typify the movement ; partly as a consequence, writes Henry Louis Gates Jr. it was the "shortest and least successful" in African American cultural history.[71] However, the movement had a wider and more encompassing impact on black culture, beyond the most outrageous figures.

Journalist Ray Rogers at the time described the Black Power Movement as "anti-white and anti- Uncle Tom belligerence" but added that it was not limited to this: it was also about a "spirit of togetherness."[72]There was a plethora of artistic and cultural expression that celebrated Blackness without reducing race relations to a dichotomy ; artists who did not want to prompt fear in whites but produce work that was relevant to the black community.

Though the phrase 'Black Power' for many whites was a frightening battle cry for black domination, its meaning was far more nuanced within the black community. One nineteen year old felt it meant "You know, to have power to go up to a person, you know, no matter what his skin colour is and be accepted on the same level".[73] The cries for Black Power for many did not necessitate violence but recognition of what it meant to be black. Talking to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1967 one man claimed that "More brothers today are

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70 Jerry Gafio Watts. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. (New York, New York UP. 2001) 173.

71 Henry Louis Gates Jr. qtd in Adam Gussow "'If Bessie Smith Had Killed Some White People':Racial Legacies, the Blues Revival, and the Black Arts Movement." in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006) 231.

72 Ray Rogers, 'Black Power Call is Forging Unity' Los Angeles Times, Sep 24, 1967.

73 Joel D. Aberbach and Jack Walker. 'The Meanings of Black Power: A Comparison of White and Black Interpretations of a Political Slogan' *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No.2. (Jun. 1970) 375.

acting black than ever before because they see the necessity of self-reliance".[74]The polemical figures were the ones who caught the headlines but amongst them there were numerous writers, artists and singers who exemplified a cultural movement of Black Power that represented equality and a positive self-image.

Children's books in particular reflected this more affirmative attempt at overcoming the black cultural deficit through folklore and stories. It was not just about portraying positive representations of black culture; it was as much about providing black children with humour and absurdity that was more relevant to them. Providing children with the tools to overcome the damaging effects of racism became important as many sought to use culture to enable them to flourish as human beings.

The Black Power Movement fostered nascent attempts at overcoming the cultural deficit and enabled many black writers to flourish and to produce works that reflected and celebrated black culture. In the crucible of the Black Power's cultural movements, children's books that celebrated black consciousness became more widely produced. Children's literature benefitted from expanding world of black culture and the increased focus on how black children grew up in a white-dominated society.

Those who advocated this cultural approach felt that the future of the Black Freedom Struggle would be helped if children could overcome the damaging psychological effects of racism. During the Civil Rights Movement, children proved to be a crucial political asset as they were willing to march and be arrested in their hundreds. The Children's Crusade in Birmingham 1963 witnessed thousands of children marching and rejuvenated the movement.[75] Martin Luther King Jr. later reflected on the inclusion of children "Looking back, it is clear that the introduction of Birmingham's children into the campaign was one of

74 Ray Rogers, 'Black Power Call is Forging Unity' Los Angeles Times, Sep 24, 1967.

the wisest moves we made".[76] As the 1960s wore on and Jim Crow laws were being slowly dismantled, the notion of identity and black consciousness became increasingly important. Passages of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were politically important but were not effective in overcoming the cultural and psychological legacies of racist oppression.[77] They did little to instil pride and knowledge of black history.

However, the Civil Rights Movement did witness some endeavours to foster black consciousness. The Freedom Schools that were set-up by SNCC and CORE were an important precedent for trying to combat this cultural deficit no matter how short lived. Ms. Reese a teacher at a SNCC Freedom School praised the importance of the project claiming "the children are learning that somebody is supposed to listen to them".[78] As Jeffrey Ogbar argues these nascent attempts fed into the Black Power Movement and involved many of the same people.[79]

The Freedom Schools in Mississippi in 1964 emphasised the importance of grounding black children in black history. As the Black Power Movement developed it continued this focus on black history and it was integral to the ethos. From the Black Panther Party to Ron Karenga's cultural *Us* group, history became a crucial tool to overcome the cultural deficit and move towards a better future. In their 1966 Platform, the Black Panther Party declared

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75 Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001)

76 'Children'S Crusade'. http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_childrens_crusade/. Accessed May 26, 2015.

77 Clayborne Carson, *Eyes on the Prize*, 245.

78 The Student Voice, August 5, 1964, 3.

79 Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power*, 3.

that “We want education that teaches us our true history” and that if people could not know their own history they could not relate properly to the world.[80] Moreover, in New Jersey in the late 1960s the Marcus Garvey School operated the African Free School Program in which children could learn about African history.[81]

The playwright Israel Zangwill’s idea of a melting pot of history and culture that was established as a common American trope seemed ludicrous to many involved in the Black Power movement who argued their role in history had been omitted. Black Power activists were inspired by the historian Carter G. Woodson, founder of *The Journal of Negro History.* His contention that white education produced subservient blacks was taken seriously by activists[82] who believed that the lack of historical awareness and books available for children ensured that many African-Americans grew up a rootless people. Therefore teaching children black history, whether it was African history or American history became an important tool in overcoming the cultural deficit.

Black children were taught history and folklore through children’s books in an attempt to overcome the void left by decades of official whitewashing of culture. The focus on history within the movement was reflected in children’s literature as writers and activists argued a better future for them was tied to a grounding in their past. The aim was to produce a generation of children that did not view themselves as inferior but who grew up with books and songs that reflected their lives. An increased focus on identity and culture rather than voting rights brought children into the fold of the movement in a new way.

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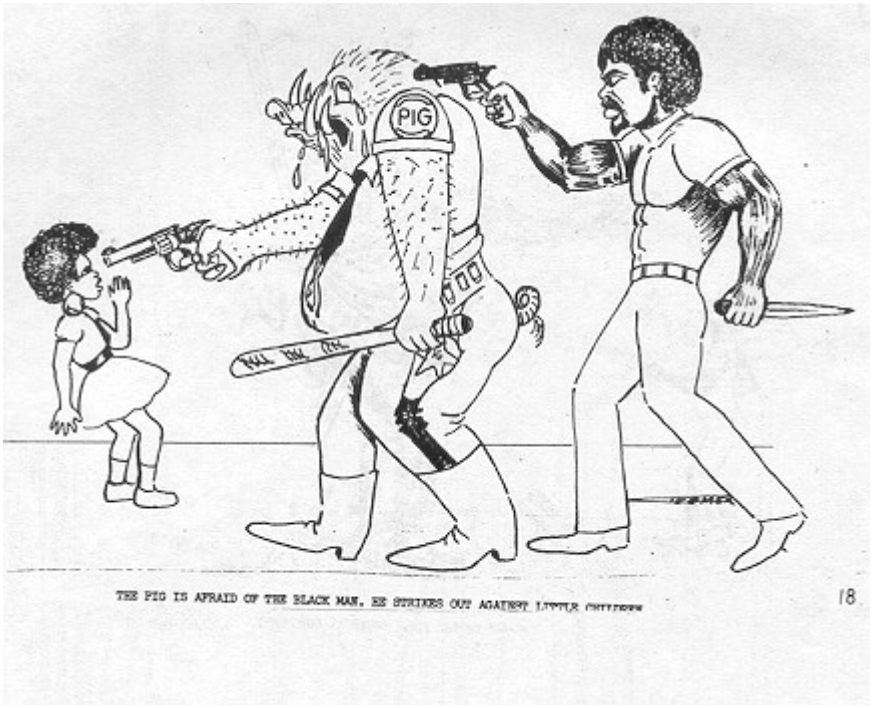
80 Black Panther Party, Platform and Program, October 1966,

81 Vanessa Whitehead ‘Interview with Eugene Campbell’, May 13 1985. Reel 9. BPM: RSC Collection

82 Fabio Rojas ‘Foot Soldiers: Desegregation and the Black College Student’ *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore. John Hopkins UP 2007.) Kindle.

Across the various facets of the Black Power Movement children were viewed as an integral part of the future. The Black Nationalist Muhammad Ahmad felt that the education of children should be the number one concern.[83] There was a proliferation of activities and groups for children that aimed to help them understand their history and build a positive black consciousness. Within the Black Panther Party children were encouraged to sing together the pertinent words: “fight for the duration, each and every generation”.[84] Furthermore, there was *The Black Panther Coloring Book* released in 1968 that was intended to demonstrate to children the evils of white oppression and the nobility of the Black man.



1. Black Panther Coloring Book, 1969.

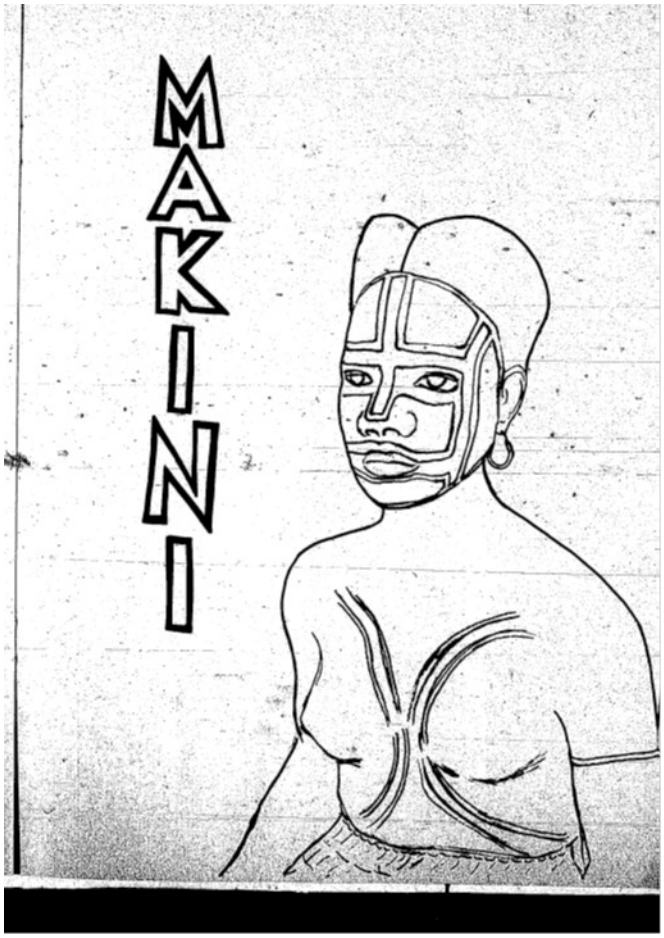
The striking difference between the grotesque white policeman and the strong black man protecting the innocent black child is representative of the Black Panther Party’s

83 Muhammad Ahmad. Basic tenets of Revolutionary Black Nationalism Institute of Black Political Studies. Philadelphia. Dec, 1977. Frame 663, Reel 1. BPM: RSC Collection.

84 Black Panther Party Breakfast Club, *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*.. Directed by Göran Hugo Olsson. (London: Soda Pictures, 2011) DVD.

rhetoric. The inhumanity of the police and the need for recourse to violence to stop them is obvious. That it is represented in a form for children to interact with is important because it demonstrates how the Party wanted children to be a part of the movement and be exposed to the ideology early on. The images of Black Power and of the police could be influential by simply providing children with a medium to engage with. The use of colouring books for children was widespread in the Black Power Movement. The African Free School also produced a colouring book that focused on African images in a similar attempt to bring children into the movement.[85] The images are less controversial but engage children with African words and imagery, a crucial aspect of the cultural nationalism that figures such as Ron Karenga wanted to instil in the new generation.

85 African Free School inc. Coloring Book, 'Reflections of the Sun, 1972. Reel 7. BPM: RSC Collection.



2. ‘Reflections of the Sun’ 1972

Efforts such as the Freedom School and the Child Development Group of Mississippi were crucial precedents for how children were involved in the Black Power Era. Children were seen as vanguards of the future of Black existence in the U.S. and they needed to be proud and knowledgeable of their culture and history. In his emphasis on the artistic elements of Black Power Larry Neal felt that “the political liberation of the Black Man is directly tied to his cultural liberation”.[86] The notion of encouraging works for and by black people became increasingly important for activists. Julia Prettyman, for example, felt that there needed to be efforts by Black Power groups to help deal with the issues that were previously hindering such works. She identified the publishing problem, how to find talent

86 Larry Neal. ‘The Cultural Front’ *The Liberator*, volume 5. 1965. Kraus reprint, New York. Frame 365, Reel 1 BPM: RSC Collection.

and most importantly she felt it crucial “to prevent documentation of the black experience from being usurped by whites”.[87]

Interest in black-orientated material rose dramatically as revolutionary tracts, African histories and children’s books became highly sought after. After problems persisted following the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, many figures undertook an introspective look at what it meant to be black in America. Cleveland Sellers described black consciousness as a “way of seeing the world. Those of us who possessed it were involved in a perpetual search for racial meanings”.[88] The Black Power Era from its inception has connoted angry young demagogues decrying white civilization.

Whilst this was certainly part of it, this aspect was blown out of proportion by the media as the complexity of the movement was overlooked.[89] The Movement’s introspective take on what it meant to be black and viewing being black as a source of pride was even lauded by Martin Luther King Jr. He argued that Black Power had positive characteristics. For too long, he argued, black people had viewed themselves as inferior and ashamed of their heritage so “something needed to take place to cause the black man not to be ashamed of himself”.[90] The Black Power Movement encouraged people to take pride in their heritage and

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87 Julia Prettyman to Members of the Board and Awards Committee ‘Memorandum’ , July 31, 1970. Reel 1, Box 1, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

88 Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return; the Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC,*. (New York: Morrow, 1973) 156.

89William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*,13.

90 Martin Luther King Jr. ‘ Conversation with Dr. King’, March 25 1968, *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle,* ed. Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill and Vincent Harding (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 399.

explore their racial identity further. From Amiri Baraka to Martin Luther King there was a consensus that this was a positive movement in overcoming the cultural deficit.

Black people throughout America were empowered by the Civil Rights Movement and inspired by leading figures' call for a stronger black consciousness. As a result, readership for black orientated works mushroomed during the 1960s and publishers were formed to capitalize on this increase. Black publishing houses increased significantly from the mid-1960s to cater for the increase in demand for works that documented and catered to black experience.[91]. The Black Power Era enabled more black children's works to be published because black-owned publishers addressed needs and desires that white publishers would not.

Fear of white alienation was not a concern for black publishing houses. Therefore writers were able to write books free from the fear of them being significantly edited and altered. There could be black protagonists, a black God, interracial friendships and vernacular could be used. Since 1817 there had been black publishers in the United States but it was not until the 1960s that black commercial publishers became more widespread. Prior to this they were predominantly religious and academic publishing houses.[92] As many more black-owned publishers were established it became easier for writers to establish themselves and release their work as intended. Children's author Harriet Ellis in a questionnaire on publishers recommended most black publishers because at least they "try to be fair".[93]

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91 Joyce, Donald F. *Black Book Publishers in the United States a Historical Dictionary of the Presses, 1817-1990.* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991) 69.

92 *Ibid*, 69.

93 'Questionnaire on Publishing and Literary Practices' July 6, 1971. Reel 6. Box 1, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

In a ‘Manual for Black Writers’, the Black Academy of Arts and Letters welcomes the black writer as a “newcomer to the publishing world”.[94] For aspiring black writers there were many opportunities and children’s authors were given great support. Groups that advocated a cultural approach to Black Power gave advice, money and encouraged the continued production of black cultural art forms. As children were viewed as an important part of the movement, children’s authors also received great support and recognition. For the BAAL’s yearly awards, persons could nominate authors from five categories, one of which was for “a distinguished work in Children’s Literature by a Black author”.[95] In these awards the material of many black children’s authors would be an asset rather than the hindrance that was often the case with the Newbery Medal.

The Council on Inter-Racial Books For Children (CIBC) established in 1965 became a crucial asset for the production of literature. The Council consisted of, primarily politically active teachers and librarians. In its early formation it had close ties with left-wing activists but in 1977 became associated with the Department of Education. It was created in response to the problems that faced children’s books in the preceding decades. An outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement, it was created by New Yorkers who volunteered during the Freedom Summer.[96] They were shocked as they were exposed to the highly racist material that was available to children and became determined to help overcome the dearth of material available to kids.

94 ‘Manual for Black Writers’ Reel 6. Box 1, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

95 ‘Nominations for Awards in Letters’ Feb. 4 1972. Reel 6, Box 6, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

96 Banfield, Beryle. "Commitment to Change: The Council on Interracial Books for Children and the World of Children's Books." *African American Review*, vol.32 no.1 (1998) 17.

In 1969 the CIBC sought to help minority writers and so established an annual competition for unpublished writers to help people who did not have the funding or the connections. Furthermore, their other annual competition recognised works that celebrated black consciousness or issues relevant to black children. The winner in 1968 was Kristin Hunter for her work *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* in which the protagonist Louretta Hawkins grows in self-confidence as she finds pride in her black identity.[97]

Institutions such as the CIBC were crucial in providing support for works that would have been shunned by publishers in the previous decades. The very presence of official bodies that recognised the importance of children's literature would have been hugely inspiring for potential writers. Furthermore, these bodies legitimised works that dealt with racial issues and were able to put pressure on libraries and schools to accept the importance of these works.

The Black Power Movement provided a crucible for a new form of black children's literature to be formed. The influence of the Civil Rights Movement from the Children's Crusade to SNCC and CORE's Freedom Schools is undeniable. Racial consciousness and ideas of the importance of black history were coming to fruition in the mid-1960s. With the advent of the Black Power Movement children undertook a new significance as vanguards of the future, imbued with black history, stories and heritage. However, within the Movement many factors combined to provide an atmosphere that was conducive to children's books that challenged the status quo. With support from publishers and Black Power groups, children's authors were able to produce works that were aimed at black children. Works that addressed what it meant to be black. These ranged from historical works aimed at informing children of

97 Kristen Hunter Lattany,. *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*. (New York: Scribner, 1968) 46.

the brutal past their ancestors went through to works that centred entertaining and funny stories round a black protagonist.

Julius Lester: Works Reflecting Black Power

For decades black children received their folklore and history through stories told by their families. Pride was instilled as stories of "blacks with no names or familiar names that stood up to whites" were repeated and passed down.[98] The Black Power Era changed how children were exposed to these stories. Increasingly works that dealt with black issues were published, adorned with images and available in schools and libraries. The poet Langston Hughes wrote that previously "what's written down for white folks ain't for us a-tall" but by the late 1960s there were writers and publishers ensuring works were written down for black children.

One of the foremost writers for children was Julius Lester. His work reflects radical elements of the Black Power Movement but he also embodies the wider cultural movement as he refused to identify with any group's sole ideology. He focused on the long historical roots that Black Power was born out of, rather than identifying with the political creeds such as those of the Black Panther Party or Stokely Carmichael, both of which he openly criticised.[99] He is representative of the children's authors of the era precisely because his work is an individual effort in representing black culture. Whilst political groups dominated the headlines there were many individuals who explored and produced works that engaged with Black Power on a cultural level.

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98 Komozi Woodard 'Interview with Ron Karenga' Dec. 27, 1985. Frame 31, Reel 9. BPM: RSC Collection.

99 Laura Axelrod. Interview with Julius Lester. *Project 1968*. Accessed March 28, 2015. http://www.project1968.com/an-interview-with-julius-lester.html

Jack Walker and Joel Aberbach's work on the meaning of Black Power emphasises just how diverse the meaning was.[100] Lester's work is important because it demonstrates an example of how Black Power was a cultural phenomenon. From the tail-end of the Civil Rights Movement and into the burgeoning Black Power Movement he focused on the critical role culture could play in overcoming some aspects that limited African-Americans. In 1966 he compiled a book of traditional stories called *Our Folktales*. The book was printed by SNCC and distributed free to poor blacks in Mississippi and Alabama as a way of showing that the stories had value and that the culture they took for granted was worth preserving and building on.[101] His work is indicative of the very significant number of works that tried to explore the meanings and importance of Black Power through children's literature.

Born in 1939 in St Louis, Missouri, by 1963 Julius Lester was involved with SNCC as a photographer, folk singer and, activist. By 1968 he was living in New York with his wife and two young children and published the seminal text *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama.* It is regarded as the first book to provide a context for Black Power that focused on the history of oppression that had built up to it.[102] His editor appreciated his very simple writing style, and wanted to know if he had ever thought about writing children's books.[103] Upon this recommendation he wrote the children's books *To Be a Slave* in 1968 and *Black Folktales* in 1969. His children were born in 1965 and 1967 and it was then that he noticed the paucity of children's books that dealt with black culture.[104]

100 Joel D. Aberbach and Jack Walker. 'The Meanings of Black Power' 369.

101 Julius Lester. Interview by Nick Batho. Email. Leiden, February 20-March 30, 2015.

102 Laura Axelrod 'Interview with Julius Lester'

103 Julius Lester. Interview by Nick Batho.

104 Julius Lester. Interview by Nick Batho

Consequentially the children's books he authored are focused on black life. In particular, the books he wrote during the Black Power Era are specifically focused towards overcoming the cultural deficit. Foremost, they contain a great deal of black history and many origin stories. From slave history and African history to complete fantasy, they give grounding and provide folklore in print that was absent beforehand. Furthermore, his books contain a plethora of black characters - from anti-heroes to loveable characters. They are imbued with attempts to provide a positive identification with black history and establish black protagonists that could be admired and celebrated. The content encompasses history, fantasy and humour to create positive black characters and lampoon how whites have treated blacks. From slave narratives to fictional lands he uses his stories to demonstrate blacks overcoming the hurdles laid out before them by whites. Lester's work is representative of much of children's literature at the time that attempted to put black orientated works into print to close the cultural gap between African-Americans and children from other backgrounds.

Julius Lester's first book for children, *To Be a Slave*, was a work compiled from slave narratives. Lester was inspired to conduct the research precisely because he felt he had no historical grounding in America. As a child he found a flyer amongst the post advertising how to trace your family tree. His father curtly responded to the discovery with the words "I know our family history. It ends with a bill of sale".[105]

The majority of slavery representations for children prior to this book focused on slave revolt heroes and omitted the violence and the everyday oppression that slaves faced. One of the most significant works that used slave narratives in the decades before was folklorist and historian B.A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down.* For Lester and many others, the

105 Julius Lester. Interview by Nick Batho

view of slavery portrayed by Botkin was not sufficient and even negative as Lester has argued it focused too heavily upon the positive impacts slavery had on black culture..[106] However, his work still stood out over the years as a work that sought to find the slaves' story. *To Be a Slave* was Lester's attempt to improve on Botkin's notion of slavery and to present to African-Americans not just where they came from but what their forgotten ancestors had to endure.

There is no recurrence of the idea of slaves who were loyal to their masters within Lester's work but, instead, a focus on the various methods that were employed to keep blacks subjugated. Many children would have been unable to trace back their roots, so Lester's compilation of sources provides the voices of those who could have been their ancestors. The book attempts to give a voice to black history and provide children with a broad spectrum of slavery in order to allow them to have some semblance of their origins. Tom Feelings, the illustrator of the book, felt that exposing the harsh realities to children was an important step in creating "well-rounded, compassionate human beings" and it was intended to strengthen their spirits and prepare them for reality.[107] Ensuring children knew about their own history grounded them within America and initiated admiration of how their ancestors overcame struggles and thus gave black children a connection with their past.

Writing during the onset of a movement of black pride and consciousness, Lester's work addresses what he deems the inaccurate portrayals of slavery prior to his work. He rejects the notion that slaves' "sole attributes were found in working, singing and dancing".[108]

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106 Julius Lester. Interview by Nick Batho

107 Tom Feelings 'Introduction' in Julius Lester. *To Be a Slave*. 1968. (New York, N.Y.: Puffin Books, 2005) 10.

108 Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 7.

The majority of literary representations of slaves up until the 1960s were of unvoiced characters like an "uncomplicated Sambo".[109] These representations permeated the consciousness of American society as the only voices heard were occasional heroes like Harriet Tubman rather than the majority of African-Americans' predecessors. Julius Lester's work was early within a resurgence for slave literature that spawned during the Black Power Era. An increasing focus on slave narratives became more widespread as understanding of African-American history became increasingly important. In her analysis on children's books that deal with slavery, Paula Connolly, describes the Black Power Era as a "renaissance" of slave literature that focused on black characters rather than white abolitionists or 'Uncle Toms'".[110]

Ideas of Black Power permeate *To Be a Slave*, as the pride in their culture is emphasised and the work is filled with admiration for how slaves retained their humanity in the face of such brutality. Even those slaves who were loyal to their masters were victims of racism, brought up without a sense of self, not even their own name.[111] The importance of identity is prominent throughout the book, as is the theme of how racist whites have traditionally tried to limit identity. Thomas Hall, the final ex-slave quoted, reflects on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* saying that "I didn't like the book and I hate her".[112] He loathes her representation of slavery and claims that "white folks have been and are now and

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109 Paula T. Connolly, *Slavery in American Children's Literature*, *1790-2010*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013) 171.

110 *Ibid*, 174.

111Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 77.

112Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 156.

always will be against the Negro".[113] Lester's inclusion of such provocative claims highlight how, during the Black Power era, there was a rejection of white representation of black life. Throughout the book, Julius Lester includes the voices of ex-slaves to give their experience rather than a distilled, white version.

Included in the book is a section on slave songs in which Lester emphasises how song became a symbol of resistance and how slaves fused African musical heritage with Western music.[114] The importance of keeping cultural heritage to overcome difficulties is a common theme throughout Lester's work. Not only does Lester provide a link with individuals who represent African-American's ancestors but provides his readers with songs and tales told by ex-slaves. This use of primary material for children is to expose them to their history without the lens of white history.

Within children's literature the origins are not just found in past years but in fantastical stories. Creation stories and tales about how things came to be within the world were dominated by white figures in print. During the Black Power Era, however, Julius Lester, among others, wrote and recreated origin tales that featured black characters prominently. More than ever before, children's books were challenging the hegemony of white foundation myths. Whether it was retelling old allegorical slave stories in print or simply caricaturing traditional white origin stories, the Black Power Movement enabled these stories to become more widely available than before.

During the late 1960s there was a renaissance of old allegorical stories or folk stories that had been popular with slaves. The focus of many of these stories was of a smaller, weaker animal, representing the enslaved, using its cunning to best a more powerful creature

113 Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*,156.

114Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave*, 112.

that was symbolic of the white oppressors.[115] In the wake of the Watts riots and unrest across the country the clamour for integration had dissipated within many communities and the resurgence of these sorts of tales demonstrate that during this era there was an increased appreciation for stories where the underdog prevailed. These stories were part of African-American culture for decades prior to the Black Power Movement but were usually recounted by an older relative. However, the increase in these tales being published and distributed to schools and libraries was important in connecting children with their own culture. The stories connected children to their ancestry as animal tales were African fables adapted by slaves and therefore provide a strong link with their history.[116] Furthermore, on the shelves at school the stories of their ancestors were becoming increasingly prominent.

Published in 1972, Julius Lester's *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales* features several animal tales that subtly address race relations. The stories within the book are retellings of traditional stories passed on orally for generations. Significant figures within the Black Power movement from Ron Karenga to Lester himself claimed that their black pride stemmed from hearing stories from their families. Therefore, by widely publishing these stories, more children could experience the lessons of the tales. In 'The Farmer and the Snake' the relationship between whites and blacks is most easily inferred. After the black farmer helps the injured snake it turns to bite him, even after promising not to. The stories were meant to impart lessons to children and this story's message is that "if it's in the nature of a thing to hurt you, it'll do just that, no matter how kind you are to it".[117] As well as

115 Rucker, Walter C. *The River Flows on Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006) 201.

116 Julian Bagley, 'Candle Lighting Time in Bodidalee', press release from American Heritage Press, Aug 11, 1971. Reel 8. BPM: RSC Collection

117 Julius Lester. *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales*. 1972. (New York, N.Y.: Puffin Pied Piper, 1985) 26.

providing a connection to a historical culture these stories flourished during the Black Power Era because they dealt with "the black-white problem, and in the stories (but not in life), blacks got the best of whites".[118]

The subject of the black/ white division in society was accentuated by artists and playwrights within the movement who sought to encourage a cultural revolution to overcome elements of racist oppression. In Amiri Baraka's play *Black Mass* a black scientist accidently creates the white Devil, the "consummate embodiment of evil, the beginning of the historical subjugation of the spiritual world".[119] Polemical works typified a lot of the cultural attempts at re-ordering the racial balance. Artists attempted to overcome the cultural deficit by attacking the white-dominated culture and encouraging a black revolution in art. These efforts represent the radical part of the movement that was infused with racism and violent rhetoric. There were many works that were laced with anti-semitism, homophobia and violent hatred of everything white. These views were crystallised in Baraka's poem "Black Art" published in *Liberator* in 1966. His violent imagery moved from the "dagger poems in the slimy bellies of the owner-jews" to his attack on the "girdlemamma mulatto bitches".[120] However, whilst these seized people's attention, there were many other cultural works that used race relations as a device to inspire racial pride and confidence without resorting to extremism.

With increased interest in black-orientated work and more black publishing houses, writers were able to address race relations in a new ways. Rather than allegorical tales, references became far more explicit. Morrie Turner's cartoon strip *Wee Pals*, which began in 1965, was a pioneering work in racial commentary. It featured interracial friendships but also

118 Julius Lester, 'A Note About the Stories' *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales*, 30.

119 Larry Neal. 'The Black arts Movement, 36.

120 Jerry Gafio Watts. *Amiri Baraka, 176.*

used them to challenge social relationships. In his analysis of children's books, Paul Cornelius argues that Lester's work is attacking whites and is part of the more extreme side of the Black Power Movement.[121] However, his assessment of Lester's work is part of the reactionary responses of commentators to works that simply made fun of whites. The book was not included in the New York Public Library's children's collection for this reason yet the library contained numerous titles that depicted highly racist representations of black people.

In *To Be a Slave* the attitude towards whites is singularly directed at the oppressive force they meted out. However, in *Black Folktales*, Julius Lester adopts a more playful attitude in satirising racial dynamics. The first story is about how butterflies were created and how they got their name but this is used to tease white attitudes and their claims of superiority. In the story butterflies are named by blacks but whites referred to them as flutter-bys as they "put their tongues through all kinds of contortions trying to talk".[122]However, as the name butterfly is far better, it is adopted, but then claimed by, whites "wanting people to believe that they'd had enough sense to think of a word that pretty".[123]

Humour was a common way for black writers to address Euro-American notions of superiority.[124] It has the effect of portraying whites as the outsiders and placing black readers as part of the printed culture. White people are not demonised but instead caricatured. White claims to American culture are ridiculed. The hatred of whites that Paul Cornelius claimed is not present; however, Lester unequivocally attacks the treatment that whites have conducted against blacks. In relation to the cultural deficit, stories like this give children something to be

121 Paul Cornelius 'Interracial Children's Books' 120.

122 Julius Lester. *Black Folktales.* 1969.(New York, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1991) 6.

123 *Ibid*, 6.

124 William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 228.

proud of as they acknowledge black contributions rather than depicting them as outsiders not central to the developments of mankind.

Moreover, stories provided strong black heroes who were absent in previous children's literature; black heroes who elicit fear, demand respect and outwit their opponents. No longer was the titular black character an associate, or defined by their criminality. Just like young members of the Black Panthers, black protagonists did not answer to whites and were not worried about how they would be viewed. As black children became a target audience for children's books the characters reflected this and did not compromise for fear of alienating whites.

Another prominent children's author during the Black Power era was John Steptoe, who published his first work, *Stevie,* in 1969 when he was aged just nineteen years old. In an interview in the *New York Times* his uncompromising view of children's literature is apparent as he claims that "society has always ignored me. I have no respect for it".[125] His approach to his work was to write it for black children, in their language with characters for them, because he said "I think black children need this. I wrote it this way because they are never spoken to".[126] The books were not separatist but simply provided a black alternative to works that were plentiful within the canon of children's literature.

The heroes of many of Lester's tales are heroes precisely because they hold power and refuse to be subjugated. Whether it is through their strength, wit or charm, they come out on top. The first hero within *Black Folktales* is High John the Conqueror, a slave who outwits his master and plays upon his greed to best him. Through a series of schemes High John eventually manages to convince his master that he needs to drown in order to earn more

125 Mel Watkins, 'Stevie' *The New York Times Book Review*,Oct 5. 1969.

126 *Ibid*.

money. The thrust of the story is that even though he is subjugated, John is smarter and able to overcome his difficulties; he does not just accept his position. High John is put in direct contrast with the 'Uncle Tom' slaves who "wanted to be white folks so bad that they always tried to walk in the shade".[127] The pejorative references to these 'Uncle Tom' figures within the story emphasise how Lester's work is a product of a Black Power context. The villains are not just the white slave owners but black slaves who were compliant and did not take pride in themselves. Though not as extreme as many of the works within the Black Arts Movement, Lester's stories reflect a desire to make children proud of their race rather than adapt to mollify others.

The most uncompromising character in Lester's work is the protagonist of his 'Stagolee' story. His version arose from songs he sang to his own children. As a folk singer he also performed the song in various cafes and clubs in New York and the audience's reaction to the bold character of Stagolee inspired him to include it in his book for children. Stagolee is a fearsome character described as "the baddest nigger that ever lived", so bad that "flies wouldn't fly around his head in summertime and the snow wouldn't fall on his house in winter".[128] In previous literature, black characters that were fearsome and brutal were traditionally menacing villains but within this story these characteristics make him heroic as he does not succumb to white authority.

The story is another example of an adapted African-American folk tale finally put into print. It was a popular legend within the South under the Jim Crow laws as Stagolee represented resistance and freedom because he was not limited by white society. He inspired fear in the Ku Klux Klan and the local authorities and Lester's telling of the story reiterates a

127 Julius Lester. *Black Folktales*, 63.

128Julius Lester. *Black Folktales*. 75.

lot of Black Power ideology. It is not didactic but instead is humorous. After Stagolee defies Death and refuses to join him, the Lord pauses for thought and asks: “St Peter have the librarian bring me all the files on white folks. Seems to em that white folks sho’ done outlived their time.” Even though he kills a man, steals his wife and frightens the local police, Stagolee is a hero simply because he refuses to accept the role assigned to him. He even opts to go to Hell when he discovers that Heaven is boring and dominated by white people. Moreover, once in Hell Stagolee refuses to succumb to the Devil and even becomes the leader of Hell himself.

Shocking characters, such as Stagolee became more prominent during the Black Power era throughout various media. Films like *Shaft* and Melvin van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* contained controversial characters that did not play by white society’s rules. Black characters who refused to accept traditional roles were lauded and became hugely popular with audiences and readers alike. After seeing *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Huey P. Newton made it mandatory viewing for Black Panthers across the nation. Powerful black characters resonated with political groups and individuals because they provided strong fictional figures who refused to compromise. The attitudes that pervaded the Black Power Era allowed for characters, such as Stagolee, to be considered heroes. The fact that the story is included in a section entitled ‘Heroes’ is indicative of how children’s books were freer to publish black-orientated material and the attitudes of white consumers became less of a concern.

With a focus on strong black characters came a bigger focus on the artwork of children’s books in representing the idea that “black is beautiful”. Nancy Larrick, in her indictment of racial stereotyping in children’s books argued that even when black characters were drawn “the litho-pencil sketches leave the reader wondering whether a delicate shadow

indicates a racial difference or a case of sunburn".[129] However, the accompanying imagery in Lester's books represents a movement that wanted to portray realistic images of black people as opposed to the litany of caricatures that dominated illustrations before. Lester worked closely with the artist Tom Feelings in both *To Be a Slave* and *Black Folktale.* From his comic strip *Tommy Traveller in the World of Negro History* in the late 1950s to his painting for Julius Lester, Feelings' work focused on providing black people with positive images.[130]

The children's author Helen King, writing during the Black Power era, felt that "black art is terribly important to the image of a people who have lived for so long with so few [positive] images of themselves".[131] Indeed, Tom Feelings stated that he wanted art that could reach as many African Americans as possible and was specifically produced to counter the usual art to which black children were exposed.[132] The artwork for *To Be a Slave* and *Black Folktales* accentuates the themes of black pride, as characters as diverse as God and Stagolee are depicted as realistic black people.

Feelings' artwork is about portraying realistic African Americans and ensuring their emotions can be clearly seen. The depictions of slaves encourage the readers to see the anguish, fear and humiliation that were felt by slaves. Slave life is documented in all its brutality, encouraging readers to imagine the complexity and difficulties of what their ancestors went through.

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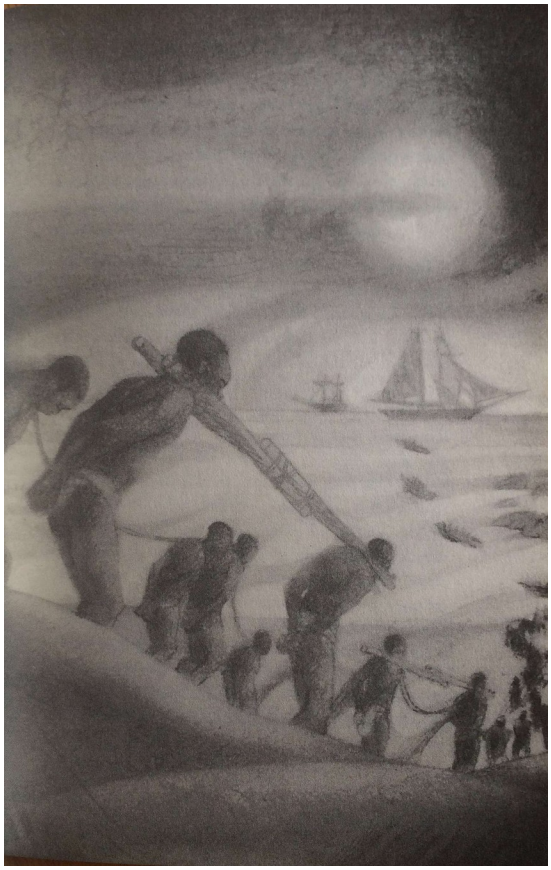
129 Nancy Larrick 'The All-White World of Children's Books' 64.

130 Amiri Baraka, 'Tom Feeling's a People's Artist' *Black Nation, 1983.*Frame 24, Reel 7. BPM: RSC Collection.

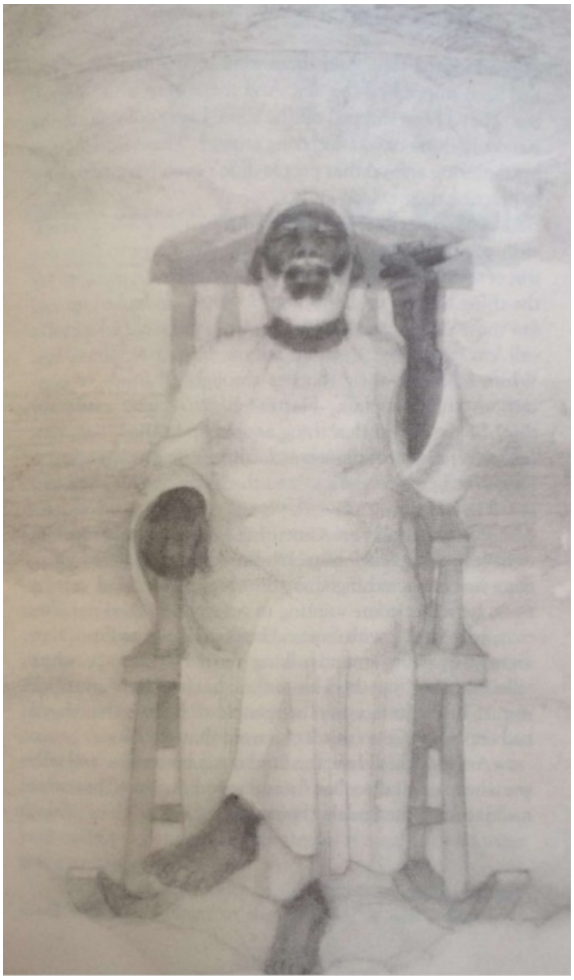
131 Helen King 'Nominations' Reel 7, Box 7, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

132 Amiri Baraka, 'Tom Feeling's a People's Artist'. RSC Collection.



3. Tom Feelings, 'Taken from Africa'

Black Folktales, however, approaches artwork in a different way. It is about portraying black characters as strong and to elicit admiration in the reader. Stagolee is stood with a cigar in his mouth, his guitar slung over his back and it captures the character's defiance as his stance is not cowed but looks as if he is waiting for whatever comes for him. One of the most striking images, however, is that of a black God in print. Sitting in his rocking chair with a cigar in his mouth, God is portrayed as a relaxed, wise, old black man. Lester's text reinforces this representation of God as he speaks in dialect and complains about his wife trying to get him to stop smoking. The images of God reinforce the idea that black people were the original people but, as with the butterflies, whites took credit and religion has been whitewashed.



4. Tom Feelings, 'Stagolee'

5Tom Feelings, 'Black God'

Although his material's primary aim is to entertain children, a strong message about black identity is threaded through his work. Many black children's authors felt that the new climate of black consciousness and Black Power enabled them to tackle issues that were previously absent. Authors such as Helen King and Kristen Hunter felt that black children needed material that celebrated blackness because, for decades, children had been subjected to the "wrong things too soon, and there's so much they don't know".[133] In the final story of *Black Folktales,* 'Keep on Stepping' Lester explicitly addresses his readers with his message. The final paragraph informs his readers that "You ain't free long as you let somebody else tell

133 Kristin Hunter, 'Nominations' Feb. 4 1972. Reel 6, Box 6, Folder 1. BAAL, RSC Collection.

you who you are. We got black people today walking around in slavery ‘cause they let white folks tell ‘em who they are”. [134]

Messages of black identity are reinforced in an attempt to redress the imbalance between white and black representation of culture. Julius Lester along with authors such as John Steptoe, Virginia Hamilton, and Mildred Taylor focused on the idea that being black was a positive attribute and that children and young adults should read material that reflects this. Whether it was history or fantasy, the messages were broadly similar. In the 1976 work *Roll of Thunder, Hear Me Cry,* Mildred Taylor focused upon the oppression faced by blacks in 1930s Mississippi under Jim Crowm whilst Virginia Hamilton has focused on everything from science fiction to black folk tales.[135]

The canon of children’s literature to which Julius Lester contributed was about addressing growing up black in America. From slave narratives to stories about how butterflies were created, Lester reflected the social and cultural traditions of African-Americans whilst also addressing contemporary issues that young black people faced. The Black Power movement involved children in myriad ways but a significant focus was emphasising their distinct culture and the importance of retaining a strong hold upon it. Children’s literature during the movement did not just feature a higher percentage of black characters but reflected the wider movement and attempted to limit the effects of the cultural deficit for the next generation.

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134 Julius Lester. *Black Folktales*, 107.

135 Lynn Atkinson Smolen. *Multicultural Literature and Response Affirming Diverse Voices*. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited, 2011) 96.

Ebony Jr! : A Magazine Born out of Black Consciousness

Children's magazines were thriving in the 1970s whilst other magazines suffered; titles such as *Sesame Street*, *Cricket* and *Highlights for Children* proved to be hugely popular across the U.S. It is little surprise, then, that this time of both popular children's magazines and the Black Power Movement saw the founding of *Ebony Jr.* (*EJ*) . It was a children's magazine that focused on education and on the cultural traditions and history of African-Americans. It was published by the black owned Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) and was targeted at black children aged five to eleven. Historian Laretta Henderson has argued that *EJ* was a response to the need within African-American communities to educate youth through culturally relevant material that was designed for black children.[136] The magazine was intended to provide black children with material that was not included within the educational system. It focused, therefore, on black history, African-American celebrities and activities that encouraged racial consciousness.

The magazine reflects a desire for material orientated towards black children. It was about providing material that was absent for black children in school. Each issue was aimed towards limiting the effects of the cultural deficit. From stories of Africa to slave history, the magazine provided knowledge and attempted to instil pride. However, *EJ* was short-lived which suggests the war on the cultural deficit was itself a limited movement. Indeed, over the years the material changed to adapt to a new cultural climate - one in which "the call for self-definition gave way to a call for economic security".[137] The magazine is representative of how children's literature that dealt with black issues waned as the Black Power Movement withered too. However, though having only a brief history, the *EJ* does

136 Laretta Henderson '*Ebony Jr.' 655.*

137 Ibid, 658.

demonstrate the presence of a strong cultural movement within children's literature even if it lasted only briefly.

With a circulation at a peak of 100,000 copies, *EJ* was the most popular African-American children's magazine in the United States at the time. From the outset the aim of the magazine was clear. The first editor, Constance Van Brunt Johnson, declared that *EJ* would reflect the black community and "it will also be a magazine of opportunity. It will challenge you and remind you of the great tradition of which you are a part".[138] The emphasis on culture and history was obvious and in order to encourage subscriptions the magazine advertised to adults the strong identification with black heritage that would be encouraged for their children.[139] Even though it reflected a more northern and middle class black child's life during the Black Power Era it was focused upon educating children about what it meant to be black. Issues of class became more prominent as the cries for Black Power faded. However, in the early years of the magazine the issue of race was integral and successive editors attempted to counter the cultural imbalance in the United States. In a question posed by *EJ* which asked why black writers are so important, ten year old Donyell Felder summed up just why the magazine and children's books were so important: "black writers know black people better".[140]

Donyell Felder was right. Black writers were conscious of what children lacked in their education. These writers had grown up in an environment without proper knowledge of their history and their folklore was limited to an oral culture. In the same way that many

138 John H. Johnson 'Why Ebony Jr.?' *Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 4.

139 Advertisement for *Ebony Jr*, *Ebony Jr!*, August 1975, 7.

140Sharon Bell Mathis 'Ebony Jrs. Speak' *Ebony Jr!*, April 1982, 26.

children's books drew their inspiration from the Black Power era, *EJ* was created because there was a market to educate children on their ancestry, their cultural roots and their history.

Laretta Henderson notes that *EJ* was unique because it was based upon a corporate structure rather than being the product of an educational or political organization.[141] This is important because it emphasises that there was a desire for this material; that schools and parents were willing to pay to have children educated in black history and culture. They deemed the education system inadequate for providing the materials for black children to be successfully educated. That the enterprise was financially orientated is crucial as it demonstrates that it was not purely an ideological message from Black Power groups but that the cultural deficit was a real concern that people were attempting to counteract.

One of the most enduring aspects of the magazine was the calendar at the start of each issue. The calendars contained dates important to black history from the birth of Harriet Tubman to when the first black tennis player, Arthur Ashe, played in the Davis Cup.[142] The black history calendar became a staple for the magazine for the entirety of its publication as it offered an accessible overview of black achievements and would provide reminders to children of the depth of black history in America. Children were connected to their history with stories and games too. Historical figures were profiled from Harriet Tubman to Fannie Lou Hamer and children were encouraged to learn about significant African-American figures throughout history.[143] Even though *EJ* offered a fairly conservative view of history the focus on African-American contributions was important. Black Power radicalism extolled by

141Laretta Henderson '*Ebony Jr.!*' 649.

142*Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 2.

143 Norma Poinsett, 'Freedom Fighter Fannie Lou' *Ebony Jr!*, February 1978, 19-22.

polemical figures like Baraka was absent in the magazine. Nevertheless, during the Black Power era there was an increased interest in all materials that focused on black history.

Black history was so important because it not only fostered admiration for black children's ancestors but also encouraged a "cultural wellspring of group strength and staying-power".[144] Learning black history was ennobling because it stressed achievement through unity and moved beyond the fatalistic view of black history that was so common. *EJ* encouraged children to engage with history on a regular basis, whether it was historical segments, stories or even games. One issue introduced the board game *Schoouple* which is focused on Black history. By playing the game those involved were "bound to find out all kinds of facts about Blacks' contributions to the growth of America".[145] In addition, *EJ* posed questions to its readers about history. For example, one issue asked children how slavery would make them feel.

Like its parent magazine, *Ebony*, the version for children was replete with references intended to "generate a bond and commitment to African roots".[146] The history of the African diaspora was an important trend, as were sections on current African identity, fashion and music. In particular, under the editorship of Van Brunt Johnson the majority of characters had Africanised names and whilst references to African culture decreased over the years during the Black Power era, inclusion of African material was integral to the magazine.

The story 'Kwame and the Lion' by Ernest Gregg is just one example of how much of the material was rooted in the culturally nationalist side of the movement which advocated a deep connection to Africa. In the story the lion is forcibly removed from his native Africa

144 William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 280.

145 'Black History Games' *Ebony Jr!*, February 1978, 24.

146 Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill, 'The Brownies' Book and Ebony Jr.!' 498.

and the parallels drawn with African-Americans are important. The lion tells Kwame that "Your ancestors and I were at home; we were free, free to roam, we were kings… and your ancestor was king of civilization".[147] Just as the cultural movement of the Black Power era set up Africa Free Schools and encouraged African holidays, this was reflected within *EJ*. There is an entire story based on an African-American family celebrating their first Kwanza, a holiday initiated by Mualana Karenga in 1966 to celebrate African heritage.[148]

As children grew up rootless, the efforts to educate children about Africa and slavery were considered important in grounding them and giving them a history of which to be proud. Africa was an important concept in the struggle to overcome the cultural deficit, as it provided people with a 'nation'; one that produced rather than maligned them. No individual nation could be singled out so Africa was chosen to represent black heritage by the cultural activists within the BPM, irrespective of how diverse it was as a continent. Indeed, there are numerous references to East Africa such as how to draw a Masai girl and information about the Kenyan plains, even though the slaves taken to America were from the West Coast.[149]However, literature, such as EJ and its parent magazine, whilst not as extreme as Karenga's cultural revolution were important in providing black people with a heritage many could connect with. Fashion tips on Afros and Dashikis were present and many activities were designed to educate black children of where they came from and how they could connect with it.

Unlike children's books, the medium of the magazine enabled writers to create activities and games that children would interact with and that could also be used to combat

147 Ernest Gregg, 'Kwame and the Lion' *Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 26.

148 Norma Poinsett, 'Gifts of Love' *Ebony Jr!*, December 1974, 16.

149 M.P. Brinah, 'A Page For You to Color' *Ebony Jr!*, November 1974, 11.

the cultural deficit. Activities were designed to encourage children to learn about aspects of black culture in stimulating ways. They required children to learn about African-American culture and history and they provided a way of learning for children who perhaps struggled reading. For example, the story of the slave, Robert Smalls' escape was accompanied by a maze for children to find their way out.[150] Crossword answers were directly related to the material of African-American history and culture that was found throughout the rest of the issue. Clues pointed to famous figures, such as Harriet Tubman or Marcus Garvey, and highlighted racial pride. One clue asked "What Black music has" with the answer being 'soul'.[151]

Racial pride was a crucial issue for the magazine. The first issue emphasises the importance of children understanding their own race and, how it was up to their generation to redefine what being black really was. Black children were viewed as the future and they could not be allowed to let racism limit another generation. This idea echoed the more extreme calls of Mualana Karenga who claimed that a black revolution could never happen if the battle for the minds of black people is lost.[152]

One of clearest examples of instilling racial pride was in Maya Sharpe's 'Draw Yourself' section in the very first issue. She declares that "black people have beautiful and exciting faces" and implores children to look in a mirror and recognise this.[153] She details how to draw different hairstyles and prominently shown is how to draw an afro. The phrase 'black is beautiful' was a recurrent theme in the magazine until it ceased publication. The

150 'Help Robert Smalls Escape!' *Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 12.

151 'Crossword' *Ebony Jr!*, November 1977, 46.

152 Cleveland Sellers, *River of No Return*, 255.

153 Maya Sharp, 'Draw Yourself' *Ebony Jr!*, May 1973, 40.

editors and writers at *EJ* fostered pride in blackness through a range of stories and activities. Indeed, their outlook was exemplified in the readership as children wrote in with their poems and views on black identity. Eight year old Tazamisha Imara encapsulated the magazine's focus on history and pride in her poem *Black Beauty:*

"Black is beautiful soft and dark.

Black is the colour of my skin

Black is remembering slavery hardships.

Black is the day when slaves were freed."[154]

Black consciousness and pride were important facets of the magazine and remained so until publication ceased in 1985. However, as times and editors changed so did the magazine. It still clung on to the importance of race but as class issues became more prominent the unity of black experience faded.

John H. Johnson, founder of the JPC, closed production of *EJ* in 1985 as he deemed it was no longer a profitable venture. Indeed, readership had dropped from its peak of 100,000 to just 40,000 per issue.[155] Evidently there was less desire for the type of material produced by *EJ*. Historian Jerry Watts contended that "the economic and political conditions in the African American community changed significantly from 1973-1985" and thus the magazine was no longer fit for purpose.[156] The black middle class grew over this period and

154 Tazamisha Imara, 'Black Beauty' *Ebony Jr!*, February 1983, 23.

155 Courtney Vaughn-Roberson and Brenda Hill, 'The Brownies' Book and Ebony Jr.!' 495.

156 Jerry Watts qtd. In Laretta Henderson '*Ebony Jr.' 655.*

became more detached from the idea of a unified black culture. This was reflected in the magazine as writers tried to adapt. African names became more infrequent, crossword answers became more generic and, interracial imagery became more commonplace. Focus was diverted to teaching black children about other cultures and features specifically dealing with black cultural traditions became sparse.

The Black Power Movement had provided a cultural environment where a magazine like *EJ* could focus on black cultural heritage. The calls for 'Black Power!' were accompanied by a more subtle movement that enabled children to learn about their history and race in a monthly magazine. *EJ* was able to be sustained for over a decade, a significant achievement given the print climate at the time. This suggests that there was a market for materials that aimed to reduce the cultural deficit. For twelve years the magazine was sustained by parents and teachers hoping to give children a strong cultural identity that would help them overcome inferiority issues that had plagued black communities for decades, if not generations.

The fall in readership is indicative of a fragmenting black community that did not see remedying the cultural imbalance as a viable way of overcoming racism. Political Black Power groups' power and influence eroded during the same period, suggesting that the Black Power movement itself was limited and ephemeral. However, as Van Deburg argues, the cultural aspects of Black Power made an indelible mark on what it meant to be black.[157]Indeed, the waning of material such as *Ebony Jr!* can perhaps be partially attributed to the fact that there was already a degree of success in expanding the portrayals of African Americans. On television black characters became increasingly visible and were more sophisticated characters than the stereotypes that dominated previously. The seminal show

157 William L. van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 291.

Roots exemplifies how black culture was more widely accepted. It was one of the most popular shows in the U.S as it received high-ratings and a plethora of awards. The writers of the era had set a precedent of overcoming the "mental and cultural domination" that had afflicted black communities for so long.[158] As such there was a gradual increase in material across all media that reflected black life and culture. No longer was it limited to niche publications but had become part of mass culture.

Conclusion

When Julius Lester brought his *Black Folktales* to the first publisher that he approached, they dismissed it on the grounds that it was too closely tied to the ideals of the Black Power Movement and thus too contemporary.[159] However, their judgement proved to be spectacularly wrong as the book has been in continuous print for almost fifty years. And even though the magazine, *Ebony Jr!* ultimately ceased publication, nevertheless, one of the movement's cultural legacies has been that since the 1970s it has been easier to find reading material for children that, firstly, is not overtly racist and secondly, provides a positive image of black life. That is not to say that the battle to overcome the cultural deficit is over but simply these publications, and myriad others, were influenced by and indeed integrated with the Black Power Movement. Through that influence, the Movement provided the framework for children's books to become more reflective of black history and culture and fostered an

158 *Ibid*, 292.

159 Lester, Julius. Interview by Nick Batho. Email. Leiden, February 20-March 30, 2015.

environment in which African-Americans were increasingly interested in exploring black identity and promoting their own history and culture.

Both Ogbar and van Deburg argue that the Black Power Movement left a strong cultural imprint on American society. From poets to hip-hop artists, the cultural importance of black power has been keenly felt, even after the political groups of the era disbanded. Historian James Smethurst has contended that the significance of cultural Black Power has been severely underestimated.[160] Artists, poets and other writers owe "a large debt to the militancy, urgent tone and multimedia aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement".[161] From Mos Def's HBO Def Jam poetry special to a Yale course on Black folk culture, the movement has made an indelible mark on U.S. culture.

For many activists like Muhammed Ahmad the cultural approach was to "create positive images that will stimulate and move our people to Black Nationhood".[162] However, many artists and writers had more modest dreams. Wilnora Holman, a writer and activist felt that Black Power really meant "trying to make others understand that as human beings we were entitled to anything that any other human being was entitled to".[163]Children's writers aimed to provide black children with a printed culture and encouragement that was absent when they were growing up. They were designed to primarily to entertain children but also to provide them with reference points for growing up black in a white-dominated society. The

160 Smethurst, James Edward. *The Black Arts: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. 2005) 371.

161 *Ibid*, 3.

162 Muhammad Ahmad 'The Education of the Black Nationalist Child' Dec, 1977. Frame 651, Reel 1. The Black Power Movement Part 1: Amiri Baraka from Black Arts. RSC Collection.

163 Nicole Marshall, 'Interview with Wilnora Holman' December 4, 1984. Frame 8, Reel 8. The Black Power Movement Part 1: Amiri Baraka from Black Arts. RSC Collection.

works of the late 1960s and early 1970s pioneered interracial and minority-focused works and provided a crucial step in providing diverse literature for all children that could help facilitate understanding between races.

Ebony Jr!, Lester's works and numerous other titles attempted to foster black pride and consciousness in children to combat the racial divisions partially sown by the lack of cultural representation for minorities. Children's authors during the time of the Black Power Movement were able to provide children with material that reflected some of the broad ideology of the movement from 'black is beautiful' to giving black children a more accurate reflection of black history. Racism is not always a conscious choice as attitudes and biases can be picked up without it being realised.[164] Everyone is impressionable to prejudices but children are more susceptible than most. Giving children the opportunity to see heroes as black is crucial for children of all ethnicities.

Ebony Jr! and Lester's works were amongst an initial impetus for providing multiracial children's literature. Ever since, there has been an increase in multiracial characters and topics. There are numerous popular titles that deal with race in a positive way, such as Phil Mandelbaum's *You Be Me, I'll Be You* and *Black, White, Just Right*! by Marguerite W. Davol. Moreover, in his assessment of how children's television series had changed, Paul Deane claimed that much progress has been made with many more realistic black characters that children could relate to.[165] However, he does stipulate that "stigma of tokenism cannot be entirely dispelled".[166]

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164 Noah Berlatsky 'The Answer to Implicit Racism Might Be in Children's Literature: Could diverse protagonists reduce racial anxiety?' Pacific Standard, December 2, 2014. Accessed May 16, 2015. http://www.psmag.com/books-and-culture/answer-implicit-racism-might-childrens-literature-95094

165 Paul Deane 'Black Characters in Children's Fiction Series Since 1968' 155.

166 *Ibid*, 155.

The Black Power Movement enabled a significant step in the battle against the cultural deficit as millions of children have been able to read books and magazines that do not omit their race but include them as heroes and characters. Certainly, a number of works in the 1960s and 70s were a breakthrough in black literature. Times are very different now from when Author Tanya Byrne grew up, with little representation in the books she read as a child, claiming “it's something I've always been aware of – that most of the characters in books aren't like me”.[167]

However, even though there has been an improvement, the production of such children’s literature has continued to fall short of what might be expected in terms of the proportion of black people to the overall population of America. The statistics demonstrate that this project is incomplete.

Of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 67 were written by African-American writers, and only 93 had black main characters.[168] Evidently, the cultural deficit has not been overcome. The Black Power Movement provided the platform for children’s books to become more representative of African-American life but ever since that powerful initial impact, the rise in the number of children’s books for black children has slowed. It is 50 years since Adam Clayton Powell chaired the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor that focused upon racism in books for children. Witnesses testified that books for children projected a distorted and racist image of minorities in books and had contributed greatly to spreading mistrust and division among the races.[169]

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167 Tanya Byrne. ‘Tanya Byrne's top 10 black characters in children's books’ *The Guardian*, March 20, 2014. Accessed June 29, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/mar/20/tanya-byrne-top-

168 Noah Berlatsky ‘The Answer to Implicit Racism’

169 Paul Cornelius ‘Interracial Children’s Books’ 108.

Half a century later, the cultural deficit has not been fully overcome in children's literature. But, more surprisingly, many books for children have continued to propagate racist ideas. In late 2014, Brooks Ames discovered that the textbook his daughter brought home from school gave an outdated and racist depiction of slavery. The 2003 edition of *Harcourt Horizons: United States History* contained the passage "Slaves were treated well or cruelly, depending on their owners. Some planters took pride in being fair and kind to their slaves."[170]As Ames claimed "when you start talking about good slave owners and bad slave owners and happy slaves and slaves that weren't so happy you're completely missing the point".[171] Indeed, that this book went unnoticed for ten years demonstrates just how difficult it has been to surmount the cultural deficit.

Black Writers have been trying to counteract the effects of decades of subtle racism that is still ongoing. Commentators across major international newspapers and magazines have been calling for change in children's literature. This renewed emphasis demonstrates just how difficult it has been to change the pervasive culture, but also reinforces how important the pioneers who were writing children's literature in the era of the Black Power Movement were.

Julius Lester is indicative of the writers in the 1960s and 1970s who, inspired by the ongoing Black Power Movement, attempted to reflect black experience and encourage children to be proud and aware of their history and culture. He and his contemporaries were important for their attempts to overcome the cultural gap created by a dominant white society. These books and magazines were tangible evidence of a distinct African-American culture.

170 James H. Burnett III 'Brookline removes textbook over passage about slavery' *The Boston Globe*. November 30, 2014. Accessed June 30, 2015. https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/west/2014/11/30/brookline-removes-textbook-over-passage-about-slavery/v5P8GhGngECGuiHqjZphYM/story.html

171 *Ibid*.

But this still continues to elude many children. Diversity in literature is more common place than it was but its importance cannot be understated. As Noah Berlatsky has argued “It lets kids see themselves as heroes—and, just as important, it lets them see that other people can be heroes too.”[172]

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172 Noah Berlatsky ‘The Answer to Implicit Racism’

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