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Hair in African American Picture Books: The Quest for Authenticity in Black Kidlit

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Abstract

This research can be read as a quest for authentic depictions of black children in African American kidlit. The literary corpus analysed will consist in picture books written by American black authors from the 1970s onwards, with a focus on children's literature about blacks' hair. As a premise of our study, we will create a connection between contemporary widespread debates about inclusion in media and the relatively unknown theme of racial diversity in kidlit, also hinting at what led the writer to this investigation. Our main discussion will open with some theoretical background on representation, to then illustrate the stereotypes which affected the black population of the United States from the time of slavery onwards. We will show that the same applied to African American children, mostly absent or misrepresented in mainstream literature and kidlit until the second half of the twentieth century, a fact which had serious repercussions on the self-esteem of the black boys and girls growing up in those decades. The central part of the work will start with a mention of a far-reaching article on the exclusion of black characters from children's books, whose publication in 1965 provoked a real awakening of consciences, favoring the formation of cultural associations promoting multicultural books. We will then describe the subsequent birth and expansion of African American illustrated children's literature, comparing the different results obtained by white and black authors striving to create realistic portraits of black childhood in the USA. After this general overview on black kidlit, the heart of the thesis will be a diachronic study on the theme of hair in African American picture books. An excursus on the historical and symbolic meaning of blacks' hair in the United States will precede the analysis of some of the most significant illustrated books for children on the topic, from the 1970s to the current day. The examination of these black-authored works will be fundamental to formulate some forecasts on the future of the literary thread, and to draw some conclusions on the level of racial inclusion in current children's literature in the USA. Moreover, the survey will offer an occasion to reflect on today's growing awareness on the need of multicultural titles also in kidlit. The conclusion, however, will remark that improvement is still needed in the representation of minorities, where authenticity is rarely reached when the attempt comes from people external to the reality depicted, as proven by the white unsuccessful works explored in our research.

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Introduction

The topic of this work has a strong link with the inclusion of the so-called minorities in representation, a hotly discussed theme nowadays in media. Partially as a consequence of Covid 19, which has increased the number of people who use audiovisual products, the talk about the available panel of audiovisual products is restless. The option of going to the cinema, replaced by the access on Netflix, Disney plus or Amazon Prime for necessity in pandemic times, has remained an occasional event for many even after the end of the emergency, with the use of streaming platforms being confirmed as a consolidated habit. As a consequence, in a digitalized society where everyone can comfortably access new movies or series from home at any time, conversations over the latest releases are unavoidable.

To the generalized increase in the number of regular users of the most popular streaming platforms, adds the fact that a new, more inclusive perspective in storytelling is taking hold, offering numerous hints for discussion. In fact, many steps are being taken towards a revision of the typical portrayal of groups traditionally marginalized by the media and stigmatized by society, because of ethnicity, sexuality or mental illness, just to name some of the previously unrepresented categories. Focusing on the inclusion of black people, which will be central in this work, several recent productions have given them primary roles, arguably in an attempt to reflect also in the media the contemporary multi-ethnic society. Even if inclusive stories are still not the norm, especially in the small screen, whose schedule is orchestrated by individual nations, this tendency is expanding, encouraging a change of mindset to which not every average audiovisual consumer is ready. The re-casting of previously white idols as non white, the creation *ex-novo* of main characters whose skin is dark, or the escalation of formerly secondary black characters to protagonists, are some creative strategies frequently adopted by movie directors to respond to the need for a more inclusive representation. Among these tactics, the casting of black actors to interpret white icons of the past is probably the most controversial, often arising vast debates in pod-casts, radio talks or dinners amongst friends.

This is not surprising if one takes into account the nostalgia factor: touching the childhood idols of so many audiovisual consumers worldwide represents a particularly risky challenge to face, even for the biggest names of the entertainment business. The

emotional charge associated to the heroes and heroines that most of us grew up with is so strong that the manipulation of their features, skin color included, is very unlikely to meet a favourable reception, at least at first. A case in point is represented by the dispute about *The Little Mermaid* new live action by Disney, due to come out in 2023, targeting children and families (disney.fandom.com/wiki/The_Little_Mermaid_(2023_film). With Halle Bailey portraying Ariel, the unprecedented possibility of a black mermaid caused a backlash by a large portion of the fandom after the company's casting announcement. On Twitter, a post declaring #NotMyAriel, supposedly published by a white user, was instantly transformed into the slogan of what passed as a viral, racist protest. Even though a more accurate research on this episode reveals that the tweet had actually been posted by a troll account, with many users commenting the post only to disagree completely (reason.com/2019/07/09/ariel-little-mermaid-backlash-black-halle-bailey), decisions like this, going in the direction of inclusion, often are largely unpopular, at least at the beginning. However, these solutions, hardly welcomed by mainstream approval, ultimately have at their core something as non controversial as racial inclusion. For this reason, the pervasiveness of the protests against black re-castings of white beloved characters should arguably call for attention.

Contemporary new stories as well as retellings of old classics, then, both in the form of audiovisual products, as discussed here, or books, as it will be explored later, should not be underestimated, considering the importance of their underlying message and their potential of social agency. As inferable from the recent creation of a black Ariel by Disney, not only small production houses have engaged in this fight for minorities' inclusion in representation. This giant of children's movies has probably come to realise that, if on one side many Western spectators, when they were little, could easily identify with the adolescent princesses, kings or knights appearing on the screen as protagonists, this was not the case, on the other hand, for all the non white young boys and girls watching the same content. Disney's attempts at modifying their previously all-white representation actually started well before the 2019 *Little Mermaid* case, with their 2009 *The Princess and the Frog* being the first blockbuster starring a young black protagonist. From then, a plethora of movies, namely *Moana* (2016) or *Encanto* (2021), have featured non white protagonists created from scratch, being

indeed mostly praised by critics. Whether alimented by economic interests, or by a need of pouring oil on troubled waters after the recent protests for more inclusive castings (involving the biggest actors worldwide), this wave of inclusive representations should be praised. Leaving on a side speculations, featuring non white children in globally-famous products addressed to the youngest should be seen as a fundamental instrument for the promotion of inclusion, especially in current times, with children being exposed to audiovisual products from an earlier age than ever. In this optic, the display of ethnic diversity in movies, through the proposal of non white protagonists, becomes essential in the formation of children's mindsets, promoting the idea of a normal and pacific acceptance and coexistence with diversity. Our focus here has been on productions for the youngsters, but also in blockbusters for adults we are assisting to the same phenomenon. One example can be found, for instance, the increasing ethnic inclusiveness of Marvel movies casts in the last years, culminated in the 2018 *Black Panther*, starring a black protagonist and an almost entirely black cast, and authored by a black screenwriter. Even if its reception was quite positive, proving that completely new black characters, contrarily to black reinterpretations of white ones, can be appreciated even in movies for an elder public, it should be underlined that many other recent productions starring non white protagonists have vice versa been commented harshly, suggesting that the change in mentality aimed for by such innovative representations could take a long time to be achieved.

In conclusion, as a general tendency, nowadays audiovisual producers seem to have reached the awareness that fiction, in order to be convincing, should at least in part reflect real life, and that in our twenty-first century multicultural landscape it would be absurd to pretend that every child or every hero is white. This push towards multicultural inclusion, which is becoming consistent in titles for the big screen and for streaming platforms, also covers in vast measure the category of play devices, with brown and black dolls and Barbies having been in commerce for some decades. On the contrary, it is very rare to hear or read about racial inclusion in another area of entertainment which plays a fundamental role in little girls and boys' development, children's literature. Therefore, this work also aims to cover a gap by analyzing to what degree racial inclusion, so widely discussed in audiovisual media, is present in contemporary children's books and, if so, when the trend began.

This reflection over inclusion in representation, started from the audiovisual field, has been an important starting point for my research, and was determined both by circumstantial reasons (having watched a number of new, controversial movies and series and followed discussions on them in pandemic times) and by my long-dated interest in cinema and media accessibility, culminated in a Master in Audiovisual Translation, after which I had the occasion to work in the field of movies localisation. Additionally, an academic experience which has alimented my interest in this topic has been the writing of an essay focused precisely on inclusive representation of children across cinema and literature, at the end of the multi-modular course of Theory and Criticism of Post-colonial Literature. The research carried out in that occasion has given me a number of hints that I would have liked to explore further, and that I decided to expand here. In the current work, I have also tried to apply the critical perspective learnt in that course to literature, which together with cinema has always represented a big passion of mine. Having delved into the inclusion of non white protagonists in recent Disney movies in the previous essay, I found that a research on black children's representation in kidlit would be complementary to what I had found on their portrayal in visual media. Finally, the reading that lighted my interest in how racism can affect children, the other topic investigated in both my written works, was *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, included in Professor Scacchi's MA course of American Literature of 2020-21. The course was focused on African American writers, which was a completely new field for me at the time. The theories on internalized racism and double consciousness taught during her course, side by side with an historical background on slavery, and with a study on the manifestations of racism in the portrayal of black people in the USA, represented some preliminary conceptual bases without which this work could not have been realised.

These premises made, the current study can be read as an examination of the issue of authenticity in African American illustrated children's books. One important question to which this work attempts to answer is if, and to what extent, contemporary black children can find realistic representations of themselves in kidlit, with a focus on stories dealing with the theme of Afro-textured hair. The literary corpus examined is therefore composed almost exclusively by African American picture books, meaning: books with images addressed to black children which were written by African American

authors, but not necessarily illustrated by black artists. The decision of not discarding the works not illustrated by African Americans had to be taken because of the relatively low number of existing children's books realised by black artists both for the writing and for the visual component. A deviation from this African American kidlit main corpus is represented by some notorious pieces of literature written by white authors between 1850 and 1950 and featuring young black characters. The inclusion of these titles in the survey was functional to understand what the image of black children emerging from the American mainstream literature was before African American kidlit started being accepted by publishing houses. It allowed me to draw a comparison with the aim to reveal whether the representational inclusiveness of kidlit in the USA actually ameliorated with the publishing of books by African Americans.

Talking about the structure of my research, it has been organized in three chapters followed by a conclusion, where the first provides an overview on the representational status of black Americans before the 1960s, the second explores the different stages of the development of African American picture books contextualizing them, and the third analyses the most relevant titles of the literary subcategory under examination focusing on the theme of hair. The last chapter is followed by a conclusive section, dedicated to outlining the research's findings, and points of discussion needing further exploration in the future.

More in details, the first chapter, after some theoretical premises on the concept of representation and stereotyping, based mainly on Stuart Hall's theories, describes the distorted ways in which African Americans, old and young, were depicted before the 1960s. Whilst at the beginning of this section the focus is on the stigmas affecting black Americans in general from the time of the minstrel shows onwards, it then narrows to the images used to depict African American children in media and popular culture but also, even more importantly for the scope of this work, in American mainstream literature and kidlit. A mention of the 1940 Clarks' doll tests is made as part of a discussion on the sociological and psychological consequences of blacks' systematic stereotyping in American culture, especially dramatic for the youngsters. The chapter closes with a shift towards African Americans' attempts at literary agency despite obstacles, from the era of slave quarters until the first publications of children's books

by black authors in the 1930s, with a mention of the *Brownies' Books*' landmark-significance in the process.

The second chapter discusses the advent of multicultural children's literature in the USA and the expansion of African American kidlit, with a focus on black-authored picture books, whose problematic labelling has already been outlined. The first part of the chapter depicts the historical and cultural context in which the literary corpus to be examined was born, with a mention of Larrick's 1965 article, after whose publication white intellectuals started taking action against the racist barriers still dividing the country in the recently desegregated America. In particular, the white-founded Council for Interracial Books for Children, established after this cultural awakening to promote racial equality in publishing, is examined in its alternation of achievements and contradictions. A quick overview on black characters' representation in the books promoted by the CIBC, based on Bishop's research, follows, then the focus moves to African Americans' self-empowering initiatives in those years. The remaining part of the chapter finally offers an in-depth analysis of the most meaningful achievements of the first and second phase of African American picture books, highlighting similarities and differences between the black kidlit of the beginnings (1960s) and the main titles of the 2000s.

The third chapter, examining the representation of hair in African American picture books for children across the twentieth and twenty-first century, represents the culmination and heart of this work. Firstly, I summarize the meaning of Afro-textured hair in American history, describing the impact that black slaves' hair had on their life conditions in the plantations, and the infrequency of African American citizens keeping their hair natural still in current days. Then, I focus on the dangerous symbolic implications of this physical trait, for long considered synonym of blackness on par with dark skin color and, as such, often worn with uneasiness for its links to racial discrimination. After some considerations on the cultural specificity of black haircare rituals, and a parenthesis on the traumatic nature of hair-pressing practices, a notorious 1997 black kidlit title is presented as the initiator of a long-procrastinated debate about the prejudices associated to Afro-textured hair in the USA. Following all these premises, a diachronic study is conducted on African Americans' hair depiction in children's picture books, starting from the 1979 first big title on the theme, until current days'

most meaningful productions, without neglecting the aforementioned problematic work. As always, an in-depth critical approach is used to compare the different literary products, individuating points of consistency and of diversion, both between reciprocally contemporary works and distant in time titles.

In the conclusion, I provide a picture of nowadays' availability of realistic stories for African American children in kidlit, on the basis of what emerged from the research. In the attempt to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the work, I also take into account in which measure, in the books examined, the identity of the author as an insider or outsider of the black community affected the authenticity of the portrait given. In addition, the results of the survey on the topic of hair's development in black kidlit in the USA are summarized. Finally, some forecasts are made on the future of African American picture books, suggesting hints for further research.

Chapter 1: An Overview of the Representation of African Americans Before 1960

1.1 The Representation of Otherness: Theoretical Premises on Racial Stereotyping

It has been argued that requests for a more inclusive representation from minorities neglected by the mainstream for centuries have become a frequent phenomenon in modern society. In this perspective, representation presents itself as a significant practice which can empower a part of the population otherwise obscured, and positively affect the way minorities are seen by the majority, which conversely is used to be at the centre of representational practices. However, this has not always been the case, and representation can also have strongly detrimental effects in society, alimenting mental barriers and prejudices among different groups of people, like it often happened in the sphere of racial difference. One of the greatest theorists on representation of the twentieth century, Stuart Hall, provides a primary source for this general introduction to the issue of representation. Focusing on the representation of Otherness, he argues that visual depiction is a particularly powerful tool because it matches an immediate meaning with a more hidden yet equally effective one, alongside enticing complicated feelings, like subconscious hostility and ethical anxieties, when the subject portrayed presents elements of difference in respect to the viewer (Hall, 1997: 226).

Images have different layers of significance. The first level, or denotation, is the literal one, and shows what is represented on a superficial level. A second message follows, connotation, focusing on some less obvious inferences around the object or person represented. When the subject displayed presents some forms of Otherness in respect to the viewer, these emerge within this second layer as "meta-message" or *myth*. Whilst meanings related to one singular image are often circumstantial, Hall argues that the meta-messages activated by it are more stable, and their definition is reinforced by *inter-textuality*. This is the internal connection between individual pictures sharing the same myth, and is key in the foundation of a "regime of representation", that is, the visual repertoire through which a concept is displayed in a precise historical period (Hall, 1997: 232), with great influence on the way the "others" are seen in real life.

The concept of racial difference of interest here is indeed one of the most frequently activated meta-messages in visual representation (Barthes, 1977, in Hall, 1997: 228-230). It needs arguing that the racialization of the Other, that is, the building

of an ensemble of pre-concepts that together form a representational "archive of the racial difference", historically originated from three major moments of encounter between white Europe and black people. These were: the sixteenth-century trading exchanges, which provided Western countries with valuable primary sources, but also initiated slavery; the European colonization of Africa, followed by the power games played by the different colonial forces to establish their superiority on these countries; the post-Second World War migrations from the so-called "third World" to North America and Europe, with their aftermath (Hall, 1997: 239). The focus here will be from the period of slavery in the plantations of the South of the United States onwards, this being the time-frame in which the first forms of a deprecating representation of African Americans developed. As Hall recalls, research has found that a racist ideology started to develop in America only when the abolitionist movement threatened to challenge the institution of slavery (Hall, 1997: 242). According to scholar Frederickson, the beliefs about racial difference which started spreading in this period, largely alimented by the defenders of slavery, stemmed from both historical accounts, supposedly biological reasons and social fears. The first point emphasised that Africans had failed to develop a civilized life in Africa and drew strength from the images related to evil-veneration, cannibalism and savagery which had been used to sponsor slavery from the beginning. The biological argument, on the other hand, considered the physiological differences between blacks and whites as scientific reasons for the former group's inferiority in terms of intelligence and body. The so-formed "scientific racism", based on the theory of polygenesis, ignored the Biblical version of creation and sustained that the two racial groups had been created in two different moments, without even considering the existence of people in the middle of the color spectrum. The third topic, also enhanced by pro-slavery theorists, evolved around the assumption that the end of slavery would translate into diffused mixed marriages, unavoidably leading to miscegenation and to the degeneracy of the white race (Frederickson, 1987, in Hall, 1997: 243).

Largely deriving from these three main aspects, the racialized discourse was established from the start as a series of binary oppositions, where to each characteristic attributed to the category of whites corresponded its opposite in that of blacks. The former party represented the peak of civilization, whose components were to be seen as

intelligent, acculturated, socially regimented by governments and laws, and able to dominate their feelings with the use of intellect. The latter group was vice versa associated to the pole of Nature and, as such, its members were presented as less developed intellectually, unable to learn, relying on rituals rather than ordered institutions, and often subjugated by instinct like animals. Ultimately, to the first category was associated the idea of racial purity, thus characterising the components of the second group as inferior in lineage and potential causers of racial contamination (Hall, 1997: 243). In this scenario, the bodily characteristics of the two groups took the value of most evident manifestations of the existence of different "human species". In the words of David Green (1984: 32): "In the attempt to trace the line of determination between the biological and the social, the body became the totemic object, and its very visibility the evident articulation of nature and culture." This argument poignantly displays the link between visual elements and the formation of racialized knowledge, showing how the collective representation of physical diversity became a means to reinforce the racially-marked conception of blacks' otherness (Hall, 1997: 244).

Having framed the significance of the representation of racial difference, it should be underlined that the racially-marked iconography at the time of slavery focused mainly on two themes, the first being the congenital predisposition of blacks to servitude, in part hindered by an inner laziness almost impossible to fight, and the second being their primitive nature, which impeded them to learn, be educated or advance culturally (Hall, 1997: 244). This representational regime, ascribing such characteristics to the inner nature of black people rather than to external, more accidental processes, presented them as objective and immune to change. It is thanks to this logic, called naturalization, that black individuals' primitive status started being seen as dictated by their biology, thus unchangeable, with the same conceptual mechanism being applied to the whole range of pejorative attributes linked to this race. Laziness, non-educability and blind submission to masters, were in fact only the first of a long series of indelible labels imposed upon blacks through stereotyping, a practice which has to do with the construction of the concept of otherness and exclusion, and which mostly reflects the logics established by the group who is in power in a certain time and place. Stereotyping, it should be noticed, must be distinguished from the politically and racially neutral action of *typing*, as defined in Richard Dyer's essay on

Representation (1977). This cognitive mechanism consists in a way our brain adopts to transform the impulses received from the external world into significant information, and is based on the assignment of the new elements encountered to pre-existent ideological categories. It can be used not only for objects but also for people, in the same sense of re-conducting an unfamiliar, specific element to a wider, already internalised category. In this way, it permits to formulate an initial idea on an unknown person through details like the role they perform professionally, the social group they belong to, or their personality type. Stereotyping, on the other hand, reduces everything about a person to their most memorable and evident characteristics, attributing them a character of invariability and absoluteness which does not represent reality. This practice rejects, with its rigidity, everything and everyone who seems not to fit into the pre-existent categories of types, thus becoming a tool of discrimination (Hall, 1997: 257-258).

At this point, also the notion of power in society must be taken into account. The inflexibility of stereotypes builds a wall which neatly divides the norm from the exception and the acceptable from the pathological, and in doing so, it tends to maintain the social and symbolic order already in place, to the defence of the dominant majority and detriment of the situational minority. It is not a coincidence, then, that stereotyping, protecting the insiders who respect the types' limits and excluding those who, for one aspect or another, can be considered outsiders, occurs the most in situations of strong inequality in power, where the dividing line between the part of the population which is "in" and the one which is "out" is marked more prominently. (Hall: 258). As such, stereotyping finds a place in the grand scheme of Foucault's theory, which, linking power to knowledge, affirms that the latter is always produced by the part of the society in control, who inevitably tends to build, through representation, a mainstream ideology (or *discourse*) set to keep them in power. In short, stereotypes are unrealistic images which characterise the excluded as guilty of otherness in respect to the values of the society and whose scope is to maintain the hegemony (cultural prominence of a group, according to Gramsci) of those already at the vertices. This argument has highlighted power to be a fundamental aspect in the field of representation, since it entitles the cultural leadership to define who and what is in or out, and accepted or excluded. The hegemonic group, it has been discussed, can not only expel and exploit some

individuals, but also, arguably, as importantly, define the dominant *discourse* of the time through the articulation of a precise representational regime, thus exercising a great symbolic influence on the population's vision of themselves and of others. As such, stereotypes have emerged as key elements in the systematic perpetration, by the group in power, of symbolic violence, which operates through the creation of the concept of otherness and through the practice of exclusion (Hall, 1997: 259).

These theoretical premises were essential to introduce the importance of stereotypes, whose binary structure has affected most representations of black people in history, recurrently depicting them as one of two extremes when not constricting them to exemplify two opposites at the same time (Hall, 1997: 263). Since the years of slavery, too often the identities of actual, real life individuals have been reduced to mere replicas of stereotypical characters, like the fictional Sambo, Uncle Tom, or the Pickaninny. As it will be discussed, such stigmatizing easy associations, unlike the purely mechanical, cognitive short-cuts that types are, soon became racist representational tools, used by the whites to keep alive the assumption of their own superiority in respect to their black counterpart in the American population.

1.2 The Missing or Distorted Representation of Black People and Its Effects on Black and White Individuals

If, as stated above, any form of representation stems from a precise historical period and replicates the prevailing discourse of its era, then it is necessary to provide a succinct historical and sociological frame for the discussion around the non-existent or stereotyped depiction of black people in the USA up to the sixties. It has already been argued that stereotyping ultimately is functional to maintaining a certain political asset the way it is, and to justifying the allegations of right to power of those in command in the ~~s~~society. It has also been stated, however, that, historically, the stigmatizing discourse on African American people only started when the institution of slavery, which was very useful to the United States, found itself menaced by the claims of the abolitionists, thus underlining the link of convenience between a regime of representation and power. Some additional indications will soon be provided to complete the sketching of the historical background of African Americans' presence in

the United States, having considered that their passage of status from slaves to freemen largely contributed to the formation of the stereotypes under discussion.

In the United States, founded in 1776, the institution of slavery was a fundamental part of the country's establishment until the outburst of the abolitionist movement, which led to the Civil War (1861-1865). The country was split between slave states in the South and free states in the North until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, that ended the practice on a national scale. In response to this, the so-called Jim Crow Laws were imposed in the Southern countries and made racial segregation mandatory, enforcing it through anti-miscegenation laws. Even when segregation on racial bases was declared anti-constitutional in 1965, it was merely replaced *de facto* by systematic discrimination, perpetuating a situation of inequality among American citizens which arguably has lasted until the modern day. The color line dividing blacks from whites since the birth of the nation remained well-marked from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, building a wall between two completely different ways to experience American citizenship. Even long after the 13th Amendment had abolished slavery, being born white opened all doors in terms of instruction, career and overall success, whilst black or, more extensively, non-white Americans, were penalised in all aspects of life. The one drop rule, which in the time of slavery had helped to maintain high the number of individuals destined to enrich the fields' owners with their free labour, became, in the post-abolition period, a way to preserve the distinction between A and B categories of citizens, playing in favour of the "racially pure" white individuals.

In such a landscape, it is not surprising that African American citizens, deprived of their rights in real life, were, in most cases, not contemplated in literature, media or any other mainstream cultural production except as stereotypes. Until the sixties, when the "Black is Beautiful" movement gave a new strength to the representation of the African American population, the so-called black minority was often attributed marginal or stereotyped roles, if portrayed at all. As the author Toni Morrison declared, people like her, who were young and black, and had grown up in the forties, were not to be found in books, and when this happened, they were mere "background scenery" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0JkI3F6z-Y, minutes: 2.46-3.11). The same absence of representation characterised the whole mass-media landscape, where movies, TV

programmes and advertisements all proclaimed white standards of beauty, characterising the American dream as one charged with a very specific racial and aesthetic identity. Moreover, the only alternative to systematic exclusion from representation for African Americans, for a long time, was misrepresentation, mostly accompanied by traits-exaggeration and mockery. In addition to be objects of caricatures as a group, individual African Americans were also frequently associated to specific sub-stereotypes.

To start from the beginning, the "Jim Crow" giving the name to the earlier-discussed laws started this trend. The character, created and performed by Thomas D. Rice in the 1830s, was the first of a long series of replicas. His inventor explained he had modelled him after an amusing, disabled black slave that he saw singing and dancing in the street (www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/links/essays/vcu.htm). Rice used the slave's clothes for a more accurate representation, rubbed burnt cork on his face to blacken himself (a practice which would become very popular and take the name of "blackfacing") and imitated the man's off-kilter moves and singing in front of an enthusiastic white crowd. This was the beginning of the form of pejorative representation going under the name of minstrel show, which grew in popularity up until the Civil War. Jim Crow became shorthand for African American, thus seeding the identification of the black part of the population with buffoons (www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/jim-crow-era). After Rice's example, many other deforming filters were adopted by whites when portraying subjects who did not share their same skin color, in all forms of representation. These stereotypes were so common that the critic Sterling A. Brown, in his discussion about race-display in literature (1933: 180), classified them in seven different labels: The Contented Slave, The Wretched Freeman, The Comic Negro, The Brute Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, The Local Color Negro, and The Exotic Primitive.

These images were attributed mainly to males, but one figure of the ones listed was especially notorious in its female counterpart: the Tragic Mulatta. Constituting an archetype in literature and movies, this character represents a biracial woman, often born from the violation of a white master over a black slave, who could pass as white for her looks. Nevertheless, her aspect in most novels does not translate into a better life,

and when it does, it is only for a short period, before a tragic ending.[1] Other discrediting labels have originated from the times of black women's exploitation in the South, portraying them either as detached and careless mothers, only affectionate with the white children they had to look after, or as unrestrained female creatures constantly driven by animalistic sexual impulses. This double accusation finds a mirror in the mass media-mastered stereotypes of the florid Mammy, on one side, and of the sexy Jezebel, on the other, which have been present in the American and worldwide popular culture ever since. The former cliché is arguably the most frequent: the Mammy is in most cases depicted as a huge woman, unattractive and asexual, deprived of desires of her own and living in function of the white miss she attends to. One influential example above all can be found in the unforgettable character interpreted by Hattie McDaniel in the 1939 blockbuster *Gone with the wind*. Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel was one of the best sellers of all times, and the combined action of novel and film won the hearts of Americans and triggered a revival of the myth of the old South, fixing within it the stereotype of the Mammy. The Jezebel, on the other side of the spectrum, is the Mammy's absolute opposite: her only power derives from an appealing body, and her seductive strategies represent a threat to white women as sex-rivals. Often represented as light-skinned and slender, with long straight hair and small features, the Jezebel, paradoxically, incarnates African American attractiveness, whilst being characterised as more similar to European ideals of beauty than any other portrayals (www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/links/essays/vcu.htm). Another stereotyped image, the Sapphire, is often used to represent African American women in a distorted way. This figure of a shouting, angry black woman, emasculating her husband and allowing nobody to tell her off, first solidified through the hit show *Amos 'n' Andy*, aired from 1930 to 1950. The sassy black woman, often portrayed with finger pointed at the verbal enemy and hand on the hip, is omnipresent in the contemporary society, almost overpowering the stigma of the Mammy, who lacks in actuality (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2teqoyPe3TU).

[1] Lydia Maria Child's 1842 short story *The Quadroons* is considered the first work to have depicted a tragic mulatta. The character, often destined to a tragic end, is central also in relation to the phenomenon of *passing*, a social practice adopted by blacks looking white to escape a life of segregation and discrimination. Historically, people who passed were often treated with despise and detachment by the rest of the black community and lived in the constant fear of being discovered. Stories of the tragic mulatta can be found in literature, for instance in Nella Larsen 's (1929) *Passing*. This figure was also staged in movies, such as the very popular *Imitation of life* (1959) or the recent *Passing* (2020), directed by actress Rebecca Hall.

As it is often the case when a group's representation is neglected or distorted on the large scale, such a number of stereotypes associated to the African Americans had dramatic influences on the whole population, on both sides of the color line. The next goal of this research will be to provide an overview firstly on the detrimental psychological consequences of absent or pejorative depictions on those portrayed, and secondly on their effects on who is exposed to these images.

For the victims of this racist social practice, in a scenario where being misrepresented was the only alternative to not being portrayed at all, the disastrous power of what Kimberly G. Hébert calls the "lens of the dominant culture" was unstoppable. The whiteness pervading the world in which they lived provided African Americans with a filter in their perception of reality, which made them "see 'blackness' as white Americans did, as abject, and themselves as its signifiers" (Hébert, 2000: 185 in Heinert, 2009: 20). This created a problematic internal split in these individuals, who were pushed to absorb the negative vision of themselves coming from the majority of the society in power. This psychological phenomenon of inward, heavily damaging, dual self-perception of black individuals, was named as Double Consciousness by Du Bois in "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903) and is a key concept in current discussions about racism and its consequences. The circulation of the ideal of whiteness' superiority, spread by any possible milieu, from tabloids to primers, trapped the subgroup, otherwise mostly ignored by the surrounding population, in a constant struggle to achieve values created and extended to them by the dominant culture. Strongly connected to double consciousness, another diffused consequence of the lack of objective representation and continuous stereotyping was Internalized Racism, a problem which is still very much present. This is explained by Stuart Hall as "the 'subjection' of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them" (Hall, 1986: 7). The black individuals grown in the American cultural context of the nineteenth and twentieth century, characterized by slavery first, and segregation and discrimination afterwards, did not have the possibility of aspiring to self-fulfilment or making career choices. Even long after the abolition of slavery, the African American population had to fight for their identity in a society who wanted to either hide or ostracise them, and those who grew up in the twenties, thirties or forties often turned into disappointed and frustrated adults, quite regularly passing the problematic mind-

patterns they had absorbed in life to their children, thus also failing in their roles as models and mentors (Heinert, 2009: 20). Even if generalisations cannot be made for any historical period, this was rather likely the case for many African Americans in the Depression and post-Depression epochs, whose scarce opportunities, determined by a racist environment, sometimes led to a vicious cycle of lack of motivation, depression and low self esteem —and more often than not, black subjects were not wealthy enough to afford sanitary infrastructures. A poignant example of the existential drama of these individuals, and of how internalised racism started acting within them from an early age, is the story of Pecola Breedlove in the great novel: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, which will be examined later.

If it is true that the previously illustrated stereotypes had an impact on the self-perception of the black subjects portrayed, it is also undeniable that they had great effect on the cognitive constructions of the white people who were creating and consuming these reproductions. In regard to the Jim Crow character, for instance, the critic Engle argued that "[t]he image of the minstrel clown has been the most persistent and influential image of blacks in American history" (1978: xiv), especially for white citizens of the West and of the North who, when the minstrel shows started to become popular, had few occasions to come across black people in real life. Moreover, the idea of African Americans like “monkey-men” or savages, evolving from the Jim Crow stereotype, translated into the generalized belief that these were "mentally inferior, physically and culturally underdeveloped, and apelike in appearance" (Plous & Williams, 1995: 795), a concept whose impact is confirmed by the fact that prominent figures like Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson and Thomas Jefferson shared it (www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/links/essays/vcu.htm). For what concerns women, the depiction of the black woman as being a tyrant in her own family, as opposed to her being a tender caregiver with white children, had a double effect. Aside with spreading the idea that black women could not be good mothers, it also devalued the figure of the black man, due to the fact that in most representations the woman in control had to counter-balance the weakness of her African American companion (Jewell, 1993: 40). Characterized as masculine in temperament and unattractive for her large size, her portrayal also underlined African Americans’ physical antithesis to Eurocentric standards of beauty, by extension defining black women as wrong from yet

another (aesthetic) point of view. The Mulatta Jezebel figure, on the contrary, not only is detrimental to the image of African American women because it implies that only those who are not totally black can be attractive (as underlined earlier), but also transforms her beauty into a perilous attribute, which risks to divide the white couple. In such a way, it provides a negative connotation to a value which is presented as pure and right when it is the white woman to possess it. Not only this, but, turning this quality into a threat to whites in the process, the figure of the hyper-sexual seductress Jezebel became functional in the white storytelling of racial rape, absolving white masters of their responsibility in the sexual assaults on African-American women, which were common practice in the plantations in the South. According to the misleading reinterpretation of racial abuse alimented by the Jezebel narrative, the violence that was unfailingly perpetrated on enslaved young women out of lust and sense of possession, and as a strategy to increasing the number of slaves in the estate, was transformed into a sexual act requested by black girls (Goings, 1994: 67) or, at least, provoked by their sexy gestures. Finally, it can be argued that the stereotype of the Sapphire, immensely humorous among white Americans since the beginning of its spreading, has populated the big and small screen as well as the Internet ever since. In this way it contributed then, as it does now, to characterize black women as intractable, violent, unpleasant and aggressive, and thus to amplify a bias which would dissuade any white woman from choosing an African American as friend, neighbour, shopping helper or colleague over a white one.

To resume, this section has briefly discussed how black people, since a very early stage in American history, have been associated to a series of rather dehumanizing and diminishing figures. It has also specified that these stereotypical images emerged especially through the visual media, that, as anticipated in the premises of this research, are among the most rapid and effective instruments to influence the collective imagery. An overview of the most popular stigmas affecting black people has then been offered, starting from the archetypical Jim Crow, to arrive to modern icons, like the ever-present sassy black woman derived from the thirties' stereotype of the Sapphire. To conclude, these biased representations impacted both racial sides of the society, provoking psychological issues like double consciousness and internalized racism in blacks, but also biased preconceptions in the mind of whites, aside with

causing misleading interpretations of history to the detriment of African American folks. The next section will pass from a general approach on visual stereotypes to the more specific ambit of literary figurations of African Americans, and the focus will narrow down from the representation of black people in general, to that of African American children, thus getting closer to the core argument of my work.

1.3.1 Biased Representation of Black and White Children in Popular Literature

In a social context monopolized by white people as controllers of representation, and populated by negative images of African Americans which had a deep influence on how they were perceived, children were not spared from racist bias. Interestingly though, this had not always been the case, and it will be soon shown how and to which extent black youth, characterised as innocent and pure at the beginning of Romanticism, was rather suddenly turned, through representation, into a not fully human category, whose most recurring iconography pictured them as puppet-like Pickaninnies, insensible to pain and indifferent to the world. After such premises, this study will describe the literary mainstream achievements that, often unintentionally, contributed the most to the demonisation of the black child, and opposed to it the semi-sanctification of the white one in the collective imaginary.

As argued by the critic Robin Bernstein, a scholar of the racialization of children in the USA, the nineteenth century was the epoch in which innocence started to be considered as the quintessential quality of childhood, and in the initial phase of Romanticism, the concept of angelic boyhood and girlhood was extended to all children, independently from their race. "The Little Black Boy", by the well-known poet William Blake, and "Negro Boy", an anonymous poem dated 1821, both prove this point: whilst the former underlines the similarly good nature of light and dark-skinned children, the latter, in an abolitionist logic, conveys the message that slavery threatens, but ultimately does not eradicate, the fundamental innocence of the young black child (Bernstein, 2011b: 46). At the middle of the nineteenth century, however, sentimentalism replaced romanticism and writers started reproducing in literature the racial hierarchy diffused in American society, polarizing white and black children as opposites, when not erasing the latter from representation completely. Since then, if on one side, young, white characters were invariably portrayed as overall innocent and, in some more blatant cases,

even attributed angel-like traits, black ones, on the other, started to be depicted as unchangeably unfeeling, evil and malicious. As such, purged of any trace of that innocence which at the time was seen as the defining quintessence of childhood, African American children, symbolized in representation by a dark complexion and an equally dark soul, stopped being considered as proper children (Bernstein, 2011b: 43). This identification of African Americans as non-children soon evolved in the equation between the black child and the figure of the Pickaninny[2]. This imaginative, juvenile savage with a dark skin, who populated alphabet and picture books, was portrayed as a trickster, used to living outdoor, wearing ragged clothes when not naked, and often exposing genitals and back, which not rarely would be attacked by animals without particular suffering on the part of the subject—as it is the case in E. W. Kemble's *A Coon Alphabet* (1898), to be discussed in the section dedicated to children's books. The Pickaninny could change in some traits of figuration, but it was always young, dark, not innocent, and therefore not proper as a child, as well as extraordinarily incapable of suffering (Bernstein, 2011b: 35). Such a description, by extension, made black childhood in real life appear irrelevant and sub-human in the collective white imaginary. In particular, the supposed immunity to pain of the Pickaninny was largely exploited to justify African American children's mistreatment—the exploitation of black boys and girls on the cotton fields being the most common example of such practices—proving once again the dangers of the inferences coming from representation.

A prominent case of the mid nineteenth-century black-white division which was starting to permeate the American concept of childhood was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the anti-slavery novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The representation of the little girls in the story derives great impact from the fact that each of the two represents one opposite extremity of the pyramidal, slavery-based social structure of the time. The book's portrayal of a young, black, former slave, on one side, and of a white, blond, angelic young lady of the same age on the other, creates a contrast which scandalised most scholars and still provokes a certain disconcert in the reader. On a plot level, Eva and Topsy make their appearance in two different moments of the account, with the former

[2] The term indicated any young individual of African descent in the seventeenth century, whilst in the nineteenth century it was used principally to refer to to black children, with a negative connotation, in the United States and in Great Britain (Bernstein, 2011b: 34).

entering the scene before the latter. On one side, Tom is befriended by Eva at the very beginning of his travels, on a boat in the Mississipi: this friendship will lead Tom to risk his life to save Eva, and her father to repay him by taking him to their home in New Orleans. Topsy' s arrival in the estate happens vice versa as a consequence of a debate on slavery between Augustine St. Clare and his cousin, Ophelia. Whilst the former believes himself not to have racial prejudices on blacks despite owning slaves, the latter is an abolitionist in words, but biased against them in actions. After this debate, Augustine decides to buy a slave girl from the owner of the nearby restaurant and challenges his cousin to reform her, in the hope that this experience will change his relative' s view of African Americans. Already from the different modalities in which the two girls enter the story-plot, the reader is presented with the two opposites of a symmetry. Whilst Eva is portrayed from the start as someone who can change the others' existence thanks to her good heart, Topsy is introduced as a savage girl who requires a white's reformation to be ameliorated as a person. Under such premises, it makes perfect sense that Eva (and not Ophelia, as wished by Augustine) will be the one bettering the former slave's behaviour and leading to her Christian conversion. Even more significantly, in a circular structure, Topsy' s final determination to change will arise precisely at the moment of Eva's premature death. In essence, the tragic ending of the young, blond, angelic child is voluntarily invested with great symbolic value: after Eva shares with the people at her bedside the vision of heaven she just had, Ophelia promises to dismiss her prejudices against blacks, Topsy to become a better person, and St. Clare to free Tom. In such a way, her death is charged with the meaning of a sort of saintly martyrdom tending to guarantee the others' redemption, and the equation between the white girl and a blond angel gets reinforced. Her beneficial touch, moreover, also affects characters who do not live with her: in another compelling scene, the bright pallor of her golden tresses, twined around the fingers of the terrible slave-holder Legreen, terrifies him, dissuading him from abusing a slave woman that night (Bernstein, 2011b: 5). Last, but not least, throughout the novel Eva's kindness slowly dismantles Topsy's emotive shield in a gradual progression, whose most unexpected display takes place when the wild friend bursts into tears, in a significant passage preceding Topsy's conversion. Eva's perfection is made problematic by Stowe's insistence on her blue eyes, light brown hair and perpetually-white clothes, which thus

associate all the character's honourable qualities to the candour not only of her soul, but also of her skin. As Bernstein magnificently phrases it: "This innocence was raced white. Little Eva, the emblematic child-angel of the nineteenth century, was a spectacle of phenotypical and chromatic whiteness" (2011b: 4). Many similar literary characters to come will follow in her steps. Whilst Eva's inner and outer perfection appears as uncontested, more controversial is the representation of her racial alter ego, presented from the beginning of the novel as her opposite. Stowe' s description of the pair of characters reads:

> There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice! (Stowe, 1852: 1115).

This series of declarations has been repeatedly identified, in the years, as proof of the author's prejudiced vision of black subjects, supported by the minstrel-like descriptions of Topsy's body gestures and dancing. Nevertheless, some critics see the question differently, focusing instead on the segment which declares that Topsy is "born of ages of oppression". Examining this assertion, Bernstein finds that Stowe implies that the differences between the pair "are more the bodily effects of culture, than the cultural effects of biology" (2011b: 44). Similarly, Amanda Clayraugh, in her introduction to the Barnes & Noble Classics (2003) edition of the novel, argues that Stowe leaves open the question of the causation of Topsy' s failures (2003: 116). Admittedly, the ambiguity in the characterisation of the slave child enhanced by Bernstein and Clayraugh resurfaces in the already mentioned conversion scene, where Topsy's surrender to another human being's affectionate words and gestures offers an alternative reading to her otherwise undisguised depiction as unfeeling, unimportant female Pickaninny. In this new optic, her wickedness could be seen as the result of the violence inflicted on her by the previous master, and her bad behaviour as ultimately caused by the trauma of the brutalisation of slavery. What remained impressed in the mind of most readers, however, was the angel-like appeal of the little, blue-eyed descendent of the virtuous Anglo-Saxons, and the former slave's overall hardship and caricature traits, which, as already argued, prevail in the narrative. A proof of this was the success of George L. Aiken's (1852) staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which maximized the minstrel aspects embedded

in Topsy but discarded the details proving her humanity, strategically cutting the book's scenes where her sensitivity to pain could emerge. The resulting *Tom Show*, rich of dancing and singing, during which the audience was invited to laugh at the sight of Topsy's tears, definitely reversed Stowe's novel's declared abolitionist intent. It did so precisely by counteracting, through Topsy's characterisation, the most long-standing argument against slavery, that is to say: that slaves can indeed feel pain, and this should prove their humanity and legitimate their freedom (Bernstein, 2011b: 50).

One literary work which supported the notion that black children were immune to pain, and whose reception proved how deeply this idea was socially embedded at the beginning of the twentieth century, is *Penrod*, by Booth Tarkington. Seventh bestselling novel of 1914, its white protagonist, which gives the name to the book, perfectly incarnates the stereotype of the white adolescent, whilst his two black co-protagonists Herman and Verman, with equal force, are represented in accord to the Pickaninny formula. When Penrod meets the two brothers, Herman shows his right finger missing, and enthusiastically explains to a shocked Penrod that one day he had invited the sibling to chop it off, and so the other had done, for no real reason. The carelessness with which the two black boys of the story treat violence did not scandalise the public and the book was instead praised for his humoristic characters, showing the libel of the insensitive Pickaninny to have become part of the American culture (Bernstein, 2011b: 53).

It has already been stated that readers' sensibility, in the matter of children's representations and their influences on African American young subjects, would have gradually grown from the second half of the twentieth century. Someone who started a pacific, literary rebellion to safeguard the mental health and self-love of the black children of the United States was the aforementioned Toni Morrison, who needs no presentation in the field of African American literature. This author displayed in her first, ground-breaking novel, the consequences of mainstream representations on black children, creating a masterpiece whose echoes would have resounded in the whole Continent.

1.3.2 Effects of an All-White-World on Children: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

One literary text that invites us to reflect on the exclusion of black children from the representation of the American dream is Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye*

(1970), which poignantly stages the all-white scenario of media, literature and toys which was the only one available to US children up to the sixties, and voluntarily amplifies the possible consequences of this culture through the story of its young protagonist. The extraordinary African American author did everything in her power to dismantle that epoch's overall tendency to confine black children to the backgrounds of novels, engaging in a mission for a more inclusive representation. In fact, Morrison explicitly declared, in the already quoted interview, that *The Bluest Eye* was written out of her personal, reasoned engagement to fill the editorial and representational void unwillingly left by the people like herself, who "were black and young, and had lived in the Midwest", and had been denied a space and a voice for so long.

As scholar Debra T. Werrlein underlines, Morrison was not the first African American artist to use childhood depictions to contrast the idealized white conception of the country as a land of opportunities for all. Focusing on literature, one name above all, Frederick Douglass, had done so in his accounts of his life as a young slave back in 1845 whilst, on a visual level, a picture which made the difference was "The Young Colored American", matching the American flag to a black baby on the cover of the October 1900 Issue of the review *The Colored American Magazine* (Werrlein, 2005: 53).[3] Morrison's novel, however, scrutinizes the concept of childhood on a deeper level than her forerunners, anticipating studies that have developed only recently. Neal A. Lester, teacher and expert of African American literature and cultural studies, asserts that the book should be included in college instruction as a compulsory part of the curriculum, for its effectiveness in describing through a child's perspective the limits of the cultural and symbolic landscape of the forties, which functions as primary cause of Pecola's identity crisis (1997: xx). Placing the protagonist Pecola as object of the readers' gaze, the author provides an account which is precise yet personal, objective and subjective at the same time. Additionally, *The Bluest Eye* is precious for its displaying of identity issues rooted to gender, race, and childhood as an underestimated category, altogether, thus offering a brilliant, early case-study of intersectionality, made even more vivid by the fact that, as anticipated, events are presented through Pecola's

[3] The photograph, placed on the opposite page to Pauline Hopkins's short story "Talma Gordon," shows a young, smiling African American boy balancing an American flag across one arm, while the other one is raised in a salute, thus attempting to align the interests of the USA with those of its internal black community and reflecting the magazine's aim to recover the role of African Americans in American history and representation (Cordell, 2006: 52). For more details, see Cordell, 2006.

tragically non “blue-thus-beautiful” eyes. This novel is also one of the first to put at the centre of the stage a fictitious protagonist who, carrying the burdens coming from being female, young, black, unattractive and poor, characterizes themselves as absolute anti-hero. Pecola is reported to be considered not only anonymous, but definitely below-the-average, both by her family, her friends and the society she lives in, which in fact marginalizes her.

The tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, guilty of “excessive blackness” in the Lorraine, Ohio of the forties (birthplace of the author), narrates the struggles of a pre-adolescence spent feeling unwanted both by family and society, depicting what must have been the reality of uncountable young and old African Americans, struggling between annihilating invisibility and uncomfortable hyper-visibility in the days of racial segregation. Exasperating the psychological consequences of living in a community dominated by the law of the color line, Morrison speaks for all those who have been or are affected, in the past as in the present of the United States, by the spiralling yoke of internalized racism, thus writing a story whose dramatic kernel is, it could be argued, disturbingly timeless, and spatially not limited to the country functioning as setting of the story. Moreover, and most importantly, in respect to the focus of this dissertation, this novel “reminds readers that who and what we are as adults, is definitely connected with how and what the adult world created for and presented us as children” (Lester, 1997: xx). And the “adult world” which indirectly installs in the fictional Pecola the obsessive dream of having blue eyes, imperilling her mental health and denying her any hope of progression in life, is the whole-white one that psychologically affected, as it will be shown in the next section, so many children growing up in black, discriminated families in the USA from the forties to the seventies.

Following the previous discussion on mainstream literature and before focusing on kidlit, this novel gives the occasion to offer an overview of the other cultural instruments which were building and reinforcing the white-privilege society of the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. The focus will be limited to visual media and the importance of iconographic elements, theme which will be developed through an account of the Shirley Temple phenomenon, which plays a fundamental role in *The Bluest Eye*.

Shirley Temple (1928-2014) was the undisputed number one star in Hollywood between 1934 and 1938. No channel of communication remained untouched by her fame: baby-queen of radio, television and big screen, she was adored by the young and elder public equally. Iconic were the pictures of the little girl dancing with the much older, African American, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, images which, on one side, were said to break racial barriers, but on the other provoked allegations of racism, with some critic seeing in them the perpetuation of the myth that black people are happiest when serving whites (kidsbeddingstuff.blogspot.com/2014/02/shirley-temple-and-bill-robinson-broke.html). Temple's blond locks, happy eyes and pinkish dimples, continued the stereotype of the cute, innocent girl initiated by the Eva of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and became a sort of moral antidote for the big and small screen public of the American Depression years. As Anne Edwards, author of a Shirley Temple popular biography, reports, Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, when he met the young diva, declared: "It is a splendid thing that for just fifteen cents, an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles" (1988: 75-76). This made-in-USA "little miss sunshine", in a climax of mainstream apparitions, soon turned out to be the unattainable cuteness-yardstick for millions of young girls, may they be white or black, as evidenced in Morrison's first book. Pecola is obsessed by Shirley Temple, as much as she is aware of differing from her in all traits of physical aspect; on top of that, she is acquainted with the idea that nobody loves her. This subconscious reflex insinuates in her mind the doubt first, and belief later, that being white, bright-eyed, blond and visually pleasant equals being love-worthy, starting a mechanism of self-hatred and despise which will end up permanently alienating her from real life, due to a sort of schizophrenic syndrome. Before the miserable end of the story, many extracts display the protagonist's irrational hope of redemption through magical transformation into someone else — possibly, somebody white and famous like the national mascot discussed above. Making things worse for the "Pecolas" of the world, as it is often the case with baby celebrities, a great number of Temple-branded objects were released commercially, creating a fruitful market branch. In a meaningful passage, the protagonist's black neighbour and play-mate Claudia, who narrates some parts of the story, talking of the little Breedlove recalls: "We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see

sweet Shirley's face" (Morrison, 1970: 23). Testifying to Pecola's obsession with one of these mind-poisoning gadgets, Claudia goes on to describe a time when the friend drank three quarts of gallon of milk out of the mug—an exaggerated quantity for a child —in a fragment which makes the reader aware that psychological mechanisms, rather than thirst, are behind it. On the road to delusion since her birth, the one glimmer of happiness in the little Breedlove' s story will reverberate from fantasy— like it is the case for her mother, who has some joy only when she can forget reality at the picture show. Pecola momentarily experiences internal freedom and joyfulness only at the end of the novel, when a black magician/priest of questionable morality, who also lives at the margins of society, convinces her that he has finally realized her biggest desire and made her eyes blue. This lie, though accepted as true and welcomed by the poor girl as liberating, will dramatically mark the beginning of her own end, starting her schizophrenia.

To conclude, the novel analysed above was chosen because it is unique in its representation of internalized racism from the point of view of a little black girl in the forties. Not many authors managed to play such a big role as Toni Morrison in the attempt to denounce the damaging effects of racist representation, and Pecola's central position in the story can possibly be seen as an important achievement in Morrison's mission to make justice for the many fictional, stereotyped "Topsy*s*" and "Jim*s*" deprived of any psychological depth and systematically obscured, in literature as in real life, by the enchanting aura of their Eva or Little Lord Fauntleroy-counterparts. Additionally, this brief examination provided a precious occasion to highlight that a number of different cultural devices contributed to enforcing the idea of the white superiority on the black population, thus identifying the white film-icons of the time as, possibly, so harmful in their implications as the previously described literary angel-like girls. Nonetheless, the research carried out on the activities of children in those years, seems to suggest that the depictions of the black and white youth enhanced by mass literature were more influential than any other form of representation, and were assimilated by children to the point of becoming scripts that they followed when playing with dolls.

1.4 The Centrality of a White-Dominated Literary Representation in the Fight for School Desegregation: the Doll Tests

In the opening of this section, one particular kind of doll will be presented as starting point of the discussion, in virtue of its accurate depiction of the racial dualism which was very present in the historical period under examination. This will lead to an investigation on the roles that nineteenth century children assigned to black and white dolls when playing, an analysis which will reveal that both young boys and girls tended to replicate, through their dolls, the racial hierarchy that they constantly absorbed from the cultural devices around them, mainstream literature in particular. After a brief inspection of some testimonials on the matter, there will be a quick presentation of the Doll Tests conducted in the forties by the Clarks, which led to meaningful discoveries about the effects of a racist society on black children, highlighting the necessity of an intervention to safeguard the self-esteem of African American subjects.

The topsy-turvy doll, invented and widely used in the nineteenth century, is a puppet composed by a black and a white torso united by a common skirt at waist's height. If one turns the doll upside down, the skirt flips over, revealing the face and body of the other doll. As the scholar Sarah E. Chinn argues in her review of the already mentioned *Racial Innocence,* with such a device "It is a short commute from playing with a white doll, to playing with a black doll: a quick flip, and the doll's racial other emerges" (2012: 873). Researches carried out on the use of the topsy-turvy doll in the second half of the nineteenth century revealed that the double puppet was often used, by black and white children alike, to stage the Topsy/Eva dichotomy dictated by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with the black side chosen to personify the slave-role of the literary character it took its name from, and the white side to depict Eva, the sweet angelic saviour (Chinn, 2012: 874). The interpretations on the doll's significance as an object are many and controversial; however, its existence shows once again the level to which the black/white opposition was vivid in the representation of children at the time. Moreover, the common usage of the double doll emphasises the general tendency of children to enact through puppets the roles assigned to the different races by the mainstream, which proves the point that these playing tools are very significant in respect to the controversial discourse on racial representation.

The interdependency between toys and children's literature came to light for the first time through the commercial success of John Newbery, book vendor and publisher who in 1744 sold the little volume *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* together with balls and pincushions (Clark, 1999: 1 in Bernstein, 2011a: 162). Launching a trend which still endures today, where the most immediate validation of the popularity of a children books' series seems to be measurable by the variety of gadgets associated to the saga[4], Newbery's strategy relied on his awareness of the importance of the complementarity of the two aspects: books and material objects to bring them to life. This interdependency is evident in the behaviour of white boys and girls of the mid and late-nineteenth century, who, frequently exposed to books about slavery which overtly displayed racialized violence, used dolls (as favourite samples of material objects) to replay the power dynamics thus internalized. Many testimonials can be found on the matter: Frances Hodgson Burnett, writer of the bestseller *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, recounts of when, as a child, having finally received a black doll after reading Stowe's novel, she named her Topsy and repeatedly put in scene the episode of the black girl's conversion, making her white doll Eva lay hands on the new Topsy doll. Many other American novelists reported similar memories of their doll play, invariably staging the black puppets as victims, which sometimes they even enchained to properly replicate the forced labour practices recounted in the volumes they had easy access to. Unlike black dolls, who were always assigned the part of slaves, the group of the white puppets could basically play two different roles, sometimes reproducing the literary example of the benevolent Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and other times (practice which was even more common) interpreting the masters, as perpetrators of horrible tortures (Bernstein, 2011a: 160). As a result, this second representative modality transformed children, through the help of their playing tools, in unconscious creators of a crude replica of their ancestors' violence upon the black part of the society, thanks to the suggestions of mainstream books. Sometimes the name itself of the doll reinforced the racist lessons imparted by literature, like in the case of the so called Pickaninny or Topsy black doll, made of cloth or rubber, whose point of strength was resistance to mistreatment. A disturbing 1893-1894 launch advertisement enthusiastically announced that the "nigger dollie" was

[4] See *Harry Potter* merchandising, which has by now extended to every possible kind of goods, from clothing, to mouse mats, tea options and food recipes' books, as explored by many scholars' as well as fans' articles.

perfect to be thrown at things, without any worry of damaging the surrounding objects (Print, 1893: 550 in Bernstein, 2011b: 164). Vice versa, the prompts associated to the white dolls were very different from these, as displayed in *The Bluest Eye,* where Claudia remembers of when, at an early age, she was given by her parents a white doll and, after some instants of perplexity, she had *guessed* that she had to play with her, cuddle her, and put her to bed at night like a devoted mother. She then proceeds to specify that her assumptions on what to do with the doll had arrived to her directly from the few picture books she was familiar with at the time, all showing white-skinned, blond girls looking after their sisters or dolls. In other words, even if Claudia, who recounts this episode, is black like the protagonist Pecola, the examples that she could find, when she was little, from the only picture books available, were white, in a literary world where black people were considered as not worthy of representation. This memory of Claudia's in Morrison's novel shows doll play from the point of view of a poor African American child in the forties, displaying it as another vehicle of that racist ideology that poisoned many non-fictional generations of American citizens. To summarise, nineteenth century children mostly played with dolls by enacting the scripts internalized from the culture around them and, particularly, mainstream literature. The prescribed courses of action went in two opposite directions, depending on the color of the doll: on one side the Pickaninny/Topsy puppet was created for violent games, with a similar destiny reserved to black dolls in general due to the teachings coming from literature on slavery, to be found in abundance. On the other, tender, caring and affectionate behaviours were associated to white dolls, in a replica of the candid, motherly figures populating the often monochromatic picture books of the time (Bernstein, 2011a: 165). This dichotomy reflects how the awareness of a color line diving blacks and whites was installed in the American children of both racial sides, from 1850 to 1950, since a very early age. Popular books functioned like play-scripts for the little boys and girls of that period, whose perceptiveness, typical of children, caused them to replicate through dolls the dynamics they were used to see. In this way, the racist scheme imposed by the society infiltrated even in the activity of playing usually consisting in a moment of evasion dominated by the power of imagination.

The well-known "Doll Tests" of 1940 are often named as scientific proofs of the damaging consequences of internalized racism on American black children in those

years. This series of experiments was conducted by the American psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark as an attempt to study the psychological effects of segregation on African American children. During this procedure, the Clarks presented four dolls, identical in all details except for the skin color, to a group of children ranging from three to seven years old, and asked them to identify the race of the puppets and indicate which ones they preferred. The vast majority of the subjects chose the white doll as their favourite and attributed positive traits to it. Some subjects' reactions were particularly meaningful, like that of some children in Massachusetts who exited the room crying and refusing to answer the question, or, similarly, the response of a boy in Arkansas, who pointed to the brown doll, smiling, and said "That's a nigger. I'm a nigger."

The conclusions drawn by the psychologists were that prejudice, discrimination and segregation caused a sense of inferiority in African American children, to the detriment of their overall self-esteem, and the experiment's result was widely recognised as a scientific confirmation of the effects of racism for decades. Additionally, despite preceding the battle of the Brown v. Board of Education by fourteen years, the results of the dolls experiments provided a very solid theoretical foundation in the battle for school desegregation. In fact, The Supreme Court cited Dr. Kenneth Clark's 1950 paper in its final decision in favour of Brown, thus confirming how the tests marked an important step in the path towards the condemnation of school segregation (www.naacpldf.org/ldf-celebrates-60th-anniversary-brown-v-board-education/significance-doll-test). Given its strong link to such an important milestone as schools' desegregation, the Doll Test's resourcefulness in the racial debate was not utilised only in the fifties. In the late 1980s, with the expansion of a neoliberal backlash against race-conscious policies of equalisation, researchers conducted the Clarks' experiments again, confirming the same results of 1940. This demonstration of a preference for whiteness among African American children supported the need of a multicultural school curriculum, showing how this test outlived its creators as instrument in the fight for a more equal future in the United States. It should be mentioned, however, that not all researchers consider Kenneth and Mamie Clark's investigation exempt from fault, as argued in scholar Gwen Bergner' s paper about the

experiments' link with the Politics of Self-Esteem.[5] Regardless of the contestations though, the Doll Test's landmark-status as initiator of the racial debate on the large scale remains undisputed, with even Bergner confirming the Brown v. Board of Education case's debt towards it, because it "might not have ended school segregation with 'all deliberate speed,' but (it) did create a juggernaut for the racial preference paradigm —while simultaneously reinforcing social psychology's centrality to U.S. public policy" (Bergner, 2009: 301).

Such study has examined the influence of the mainstream literature of the time as a racial script for children, as reflected by their everyday doll play habits and as proven by the Clarks' study, which displayed the detrimental psychological effects of these internalized racial schemes on black children. Ultimately, one last doubt arises: whether an available market of picture books representing African American little boys and girls by healthy images could have resulted in more children choosing the doll of their same skin color in the Clarks' experiments, implying a generalized higher self-esteem of the subjects. Following the reasoning prompted by this question, the panorama of children's literature between the nineteenth and twentieth century will be surveyed next, as a specific sector of American culture which certainly exercised a huge influence on the self-respect of the youngest African American citizens.

1.5 The Missing or Distorted Representation of Black Characters in Children's Literature

This section approaches from a closer perspective the main focus of this study, children's literature, showing how, between 1850 and 1930, even the books specifically destined to children kept either excluding or stereotyping the African American youth, in an apparent obliviousness of the possible, disrupting implications of such a representational choice. In this way, the well-established distinction between whites and blacks in favour of the former, already displayed in society at all levels and by any cultural means imaginable, was impressed on the minds of the latter from a very early,

[5] Even if the Clarks' research is highly praised in social psychology, tests on racial preference represent a very contested site of U.S. racial politics:. As a matter of fact, many scholars point out that the results of these experiments have varied with trends in racial ideologies in the years, thus proving their weak scientific validity (Bergner, 2009: 300). For more details, see: Bergner, Gwen. 2009. Black Children, White Preference: Brown v. Board, the Doll Tests, and the Politics of Self-Esteem. *American Quarterly* 61 (2).

thus delicate, age, also through the one channel supposed to be thought specifically for children.

Starting from a type of literature destined to the first phase of a child's life, the aforementioned alphabet book *A Coon Alphabet* (1898) can be seen an example of literature teaching the equation between African American children and insensitive puppets to a target of individuals in pre-scholar age. His author, E. K. Kemble (1861-1933), is mostly remembered for his illustrations to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and to a 1892 edition of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which in both cases portray African Americans as exaggerated caricatures. The alphabet book's drawings also exasperate the caricature traits in the boys' physicality; moreover, the little Pickaninnies are portrayed whilst being scalded, stung by insects, attacked by alligators, beaten up and abused. To make things worse for the imagination of the very young readers, Kemble directs violence particularly at African American characters who move towards social advancement, thus ridiculing blacks' education and connecting the option of learning and, by extension, of progressing, to violence (Bernstein, 2011b: 75).

The Story of Little Black Sambo (1899), despite its author not being an American, deserves a mention as one of the first worldwide-known picture books for children with non-white protagonists. Sambo's dark skin, Afro hair, and bright red lips, alongside with a now iconic green umbrella and red garment (Martin, 2004: 3) were drawn by the Scottish author Helen Bannerman herself and, despite her intentions to depict the protagonist as a Tamil child living in Southern India,[6] these images passed to history as extraordinarily displaying an African young individual in children's narrative. Such a symbol of positivity was however neglected since the mid-forties, when a discussion on the impact of said representation on young readers started, causing a generalised condemnation of the novel (Martin, 2004: 7). It was then observed that the "smiling darkie", all dimples, bulging eyes, and bright colors (when dressed), had the potential of devastating irreparably the already undermined self-esteem of African American young readers, whilst at the same time providing white children with dangerous caricatures of their black co-nationals, nurturing in them a ridiculed and

[6] The protagonist's supposed nationality was linked to the life of the author. Being the writer a Scottish woman living in India, she created Sambo's story as a way of entertaining her own children during their permanence abroad, by representing the places and people they saw around them in that period (Osayimwense, 1995: 15).

diminished conception of the racially-different other (Yuill, 1976: 19 in Martin, 2004: 7). In addition, the fact that Sambo remains half-naked for a good part of the story, after offering most of his clothing to some hungry tigers in an attempt to be spared, contributes to the character's easy association to the stigmatized Pickaninny, or to Brown's Exotic Primitive. Unsurprisingly, later versions of the story, such as *Sam and the Tigers* (1996, written by Julius Lester and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney) and *The Story of Little Babaji* (same year, illustrated by Fred Marcellino) changed the original names of Sambo's parents (Black Jumbo and Black Mumbo), aside with the illustrations (Martin, 2004: 8). Unfortunately, however, the impact of the original sketches and of their stereotyped progeny in a racist country like the United States of the time remains incontestable, and so the negative contribution of said images to the conception of black children in the young subjects on both sides of the color line. Nevertheless, it must be reported that some fans defended the book when the first accusations on a racial ground went public, and declare to still love it today. [7]

The Adventures of Two Dutch Girls and Golliwog (1895) was the first of a series of twelve books for children published up to 1909 by the American mother and daughter Bertha and Florence Kate Upton. Written whilst the two were living in England, they bring to exasperation the practice of stereotyping African America children. In fact, the puppet protagonist, Golliwog, is based on an old black-face minstrel doll that Florence Kate Upton remembered from her childhood on the American soil. The success of the vicissitudes of the African doll, who in the books accompanies the two Dutch doll friends (also inspired from some of the writer's old toys) through various adventures, was great thanks to the combining action of words and paintings realised by the two creators. The Golliwog inspired endless merchandising, but the most beloved item was, without a doubt, the doll, whose production stopped only in 1960 due to accusations of racist stereotyping. Even if it could be argued that this was the representation of an African doll and not of an African

[7] It should be noticed that a conspicuous quantity of critics as of today have re-evaluated the picture book in exam. Michelle Martin, for instance, places it as a forerunner of contemporary African American children's picture books, highlighting the wit used by Sambo, as a real trickster, to escape the tigers. Moreover, underlining how rare figurations of black children were in American kidlit before 1960, Martin exalts Bannerman's choice as pioneering and explores the advancement of Sambo' s depiction if compared to the character whom she considers his predecessor — the Black-a-moor in Hoffmann's (1845) *Struwwelpeter.* For more details, see Chapter 1 in: Martin, 2004.

boy, the implications of a dozen of books and countless gadgets portraying the black face created at the time of Jim Crow were, once again, far reaching. The character's pop-eyes, blackness and huge, red lips announcing his minstrel ancestry, combined with an outfit of the colors of the American flag, conquered the Western world and thus exported, beyond the actual volumes and toys, a deeply racist concept of *Golliwoggness* (Bernstein, 2011b: 159). The Golliwog mania expanded from the United States to England, where the doll was beloved the most, to the point that Upton's original doll was housed at the home of the British Prime Minister for decades (Osayimwense, 1995: 15).

The stereotype of African American children's excessive blackness, bulging eyes, large lips and bare foots was maintained throughout the illustrations of the fiction and non-fiction of 1930 and 1940, staging plantation life. In *Frawg*, by Annie Vaughan Weaver (1930), for example, the little protagonist spends most of his time eating watermelon in company of his dog, described as far more intelligent than his owner. The stereotypes of the time of plantations continue in the language and illustrations of Anna Braune's *Honey Chile* (1937) and Ellis Credle's *Across the Cotton Patch*, where the depictions, speech and even names of the black twins, Atlantic and Pacific, are de-humanizing, while their white co-protagonists are reserved a quite different treatment. The derogatory "darky" is used, in this book, to refer to African Americans, who compose approximately one half of the characters. The representation of black childhood is equally stereotyped in the non-fiction literature of the time. *The Story Book of Sugar* (1936) and *The Story Book of Cotton* (1939), by the award-winning writers and illustrators Maud and Miska Petersham, both produce non-realistic images of African American children, playing around bales of cotton or sugarcane when not working bare foot (Osayimwense, 1995: 16). Such idealization of little black boys and girls finding work in the fields entertaining rather than hard, kept the Pickaninny stereotype alive, whilst reproducing the same racial patterns implied by the advertisements which were popular at the end of the previous century. The images of African American children in the literature just presented were hardly different, for instance, from a famous Cottolene advertising trade card from the 1890s, where a well-dressed black little girl cuddles an armful of cotton like it was a doll, her smiley, chubby face suggesting well-being rather than malnutrition and precarious health. This was yet another index of the lack of

improvement in the representation of black children which permeated the mainstream level long after the turn of the century.

A last case-study displays how exclusion from representation remained, until the mid-twentieth century, the only (arguably better, at this point) alterative, for African American children, to toxic representations. The most famous American picture books' series of readers of its times, *The World of Dick and Jane and Friends* (by publisher Scott Foresman) delivered a clear pro-whiteness racial message to the youngsters for over thirty years. The series, heavily contested also in *The Bluest Eye*, depicted the merry every-day life of the siblings Dick and Jane and of their poster-perfect family (extended to funny, lovely pets), excluding from the displayed American dream black children, who were a huge part of the population of the United States. Prolifically written from 1930 to 1965 and adopted as primers in most classrooms from the 40s to the early 60s, these books did not include any black characters until the second half of the sixties, a time by which much damage had already been done. In spite of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*[8] declaration that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional, *Dick and Jane* primers continued being the most frequently adopted books to teach reading for a decade after this date, with the usual disregard of non-white students' well-being.

However, in 1965 an African American family made their appearance in the otherwise all-white fictional neighbourhood of the Dick and Jane primers, a fact which, far from being casual, reflected a directional change in white American publishers, who progressively started to realize that they needed to reflect the multiculturalism of the nation's classrooms. *Fun with our Friends*, which came out on the 1st of January, 1965, ended the series by a sudden acknowledgement of the existence of those same black children who were finally being integrated in the formerly all-white classes of American schools, with *Dick and Jane*'s publisher not being an isolated case (americacomesalive.com/dick-and-jane-story-of-these-early-readers). As it will be argued later on, the need of new materials centred on a multicultural world was beginning to be sensed by the publishing industry, and a generalized awakening of consciences, at the end of the century, planted the seeds for a new, more inclusive children's literature, finally contemplating diversity.

[8] For more details, see: Brown v. Board of Education. History (https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/brown-v-board-of-education-of-topeka, accessed 13 April 2022).

1.6 The Beginning of African American Children's Literature

In consideration of the cultural landscape described up to this point, it is evident that the mainstream literature of the United States until the late sixties of the twentieth century had scarcely taken into account the right to representation of the youngest black individuals. However, the underground cultural stream coming from the African American population had attempted to do so, despite historical adversities, since the time of slavery, offering to black children an alternative representational archive to the mono-chromatic one whose damages have been illustrated up to now (Scacchi, 2010: 64). As Rudine Sims Bishop[9] argues, as slave-holders forbade to their human possessions to speak their native language, celebrate their culture, practice African religious ceremonies, and access literacy, slave quarter communities operated as informal schools where adults helped each other and their children to learn pieces of knowledge that could help in the resistance of masters' enforcement to total submission.

In this phase, the role of the community as a network and of the extended family was fundamental in reinforcing values which would have permeated twentieth-century African American children's literature later on. In the slave quarter's cultural formations orality was key, and songs and stories were functional both to keep alive and reinvent African folklore and to teach lessons of resilience, enhancing the importance of enduring in the fight for freedom (Bishop, 2007: 2-3). Under these circumstances, on the other hand, self-help became an equally important value, and, when it was not possible to learn from other enslaved companions, old newspapers or written material used for the plantations' running were quite regularly adopted as self-teaching tools (Bishop, 2007: 5). Self-schooling was essential in the North until 1850, when some states allocated money for the literacy of blacks and conglomerates of free African Americans funded their own schools in the biggest cities. Vice versa, it remained the only educational route practicable until much later on in the South, where, as to be expected, the real turning point arrived after the end of the Civil War. Only then, with the support of the federal government through the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, and of a great number of teachers and writers arriving to help from the North,

[9] One of the greatest scholars in the field of African American children's literature, in the book *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*, she explores the early seeds and development of this black genre. Aside with her great contributes as a researcher, she is a teacher and activist.

schools opened in the Southern states too and literacy rates among African Americans increased (Bishop, 2007: 7-10).

However, as it has been argued, African Americans found ways to making internal cultural advancement possible well before emancipation, and together with the individual and communal efforts described above, an immense contribution was given by black periodicals, in which Bishop sees the first buds of African American kidlit. Some initial steps were represented by the *Freedom's Journal*, the first black periodical published in the United States (1827), by the *Frederick Douglass Paper* (1859), and by *The Christian Recorder*, a family periodical that unlike the previous ones addressed black children and their parents. Established in 1852 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which operated in social protests as much as in religious causes, the periodical, calling attention to the education of the black children of the community, included a variety of written materials that anticipated African American children's literature. Some columns were explicitly written for the youngest, but predictably, considering the historical situation, many pieces were from well-known white personalities, the problematic Harriet Beecher Stowe among them. Other pieces for children consisted in reprints from Sunday School tracts, unlikely written by black authors, and conveying through stories moralistic messages (Bishop, 2007:10-11). Rare exceptions to the trend appeared, however, in some later editions, and the issue of July 12, 1862, in particular, seemed to put on a side the diffused evangelic scope in favor of more secular, entertaining "toads and diamonds" motifs through an original fairy tale, "The Wild Honeysuckle" (Bishop, 2007: 12). It must be concluded that, despite the prevalence of religious writings and a strong presence of white contributions dictated by the time, to *The Recorder* goes the great merit of having been one of the earliest African American publications to provide poetry and prose targeted for black children (Bishop, 2007: 13).

The most quoted exemplar of early kidlit in the context of African American literature, however, is *The Brownies Books*, published in 1920-1921 by Jessie Fauset and W.E.B. Du Bois. The idea at the base of the periodical's creation came to Du Bois from the success of the annual children-dedicated specials of *The Crisis*, periodical linked to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), of which he was co-founder (Scacchi, 2010: 65). Following the numerous lynching

episodes of the early twentieth century, one of the goals of *The Brownies Books* was to protect children from the diffused racist hatred of those years, but also to make them realize that their color was beautiful, that life was full of joy if one knew how to find it and that their racial identity was not an obstacle to become useful and successful (Bishop, 2007: 25). Each issue of the magazine consisted in thirty-two pages of poems, folk-tales, photographs, illustrations and child-friendly columns, displaying exceptional variety in forms and themes, and independence from evangelic dictates. Moreover, it combined entertainment with information, containing adapted biographies in sketches of African Americans who had contributed to the national history (one above all: Harriet Tubman) and information about current events, in a perspective which was completely new for publishing directed to a young public (Bishop, 2007: 25, 31). The founding of a magazine addressing specifically black children was extraordinary if one considers that the first samples ever of long-lasting American kidlit had only appeared at the turning of the century, with the establishment of an independent children's department in a USA mainstream publishing house happening as late as 1919. This journal's significance was great in a representational world dominated by whites and occasionally displaying happy slaves and ridiculous Pickaninnies in the background (Bishop, 2007: 23-24). By putting black children in a central position and teaching them to see themselves as normal and worthy, it signed an important milestone in the struggle against a market which did not contain any realistic depictions of African American children. It should be underlined, in closure, that, although this literary achievement was explicitly declared to be targeted for "the children of the sun", Du Bois and Fauset, through it, called for a literature adapted to all the children of the world, whatever the color, thus anticipating the push toward a multicultural kidlit that was to become mainstream only decades later (Bishop, 2007: 23).

The Brownies' Books only lasted two years, and had to be discontinued for financial reason, as announced in the final December 1921 issue. The periodical died whilst the Harlem Renaissance was flourishing, with an outpouring of proud black literature mainly addressed to adults, but the consequences of its spreading outlived it. Langston Hughes, who would soon become one of America's most respected poets, was in fact first published in the children' journal, proving *The Brownies' Books'* importance as a gym for the future biggest names of African American production for

children (Bishop, 2007: 35). When his first nationally famous poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*The Crisis*, June 1921 issue), came out both the lyrics "Fairies" and "Winter Sweetness" had already been published in *The Brownies' Books*, soon followed by six more poems, some non-fiction pieces, and games' description for the Playtime section. Follower of Du Bois, Hughes rapidly became a well-established literary personality and, when his first book for children appeared, he had already been published with four books of poems and a novel. *The Dream Keeper* (Knopf, 1932) was produced on demand of Effie Lee Power, influential director of Cleveland Public Library's children works and appreciator of Hughes' literary work, who asked him to compile a selection of his poems that he considered adapt for a young public. The resulting collection of 59 poems became a landmark of African American poetry for children, as it was one of the first books by a black writer to be printed by a major New York publishing house (Bishop, 2007: 37-38). The collection was divided into five sections, with the first containing lyrics written in a voice close to that of a child, and the other three giving more space to Hughes' identity as an African American and to his love for ordinary black people, recurring cyphers of the literary production of the Harlem Renaissance. With many of these pieces becoming classics in the field, *The Dream Keeper* was also one of the first instances in which a poet took inspiration from the black artistic forms of blues and jazz for poems destined for black children (2007: 39).

The other most prominent name in the context of black writing for children in the first half of the century was, without any doubt, that of Arna Bontemps, an African American writer whose extensive work dominated the field. In his career as children's literature's author he produced sixteen books, expanding from contemporary realistic novels to fantasy and from poetry to black history, thus giving a fundamental contribution in integrating African American kidlit into the mainstream of publishing for children (Bishop, 2007: 45). His first book for children, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* (1932), written in collaboration with Langston Hughes, who at the time was already famous, arguably overcame the achievement represented by *The Dream Keeper*, as it was the first children's book printed by a major publisher of kidlit to be both written by black authors and illustrated by a black artist. The story, born from Hughes' three months experience in Haiti, and Bontemps' inspiration about the child-characters,

described the life of a family who had moved from the country to Cape-Haiti, and managed to bring to life and present as relatable a story set in a place unfamiliar to most. Displaying a universal theme like family bonds, and presenting the protagonists as ordinary humans rather than exotic creatures, the book explores children's contributions at home and moments of fun, and parents' firmness and love at once, with a realism which would seem centuries away from the controversial *Sambo*, for instance (which preceded this work by only thirty years). Both the beautiful language and the spontaneity used to depict a story geographically far in the setting give proof of the talent of the two authors, with E. Simms Campbell adding value to the volume through compelling and realistic illustrations in black-and-white, which offered a brilliant, finally trustworthy alternative to the stereotyped Pickaninny images populating many contemporary children's books (Bishop, 2007: 46-47). Even if many other achievements of the forty year-long career of Arna Bontemps would deserve a discussion, here it will just be added that his *Sad Faced Boy* (1937) was the first novel for children set in Harlem to receive widespread attention. Both the environment depicted, the use of benevolent humour and the display of the vernacular language spoken by blacks in real life marked this book as forerunner of the urban novels of Walter Dean Myers, who decades later would become the most famous writer of Harlem stories for the young public (Bishop, 2007: 47).

As we have seen so far, the seeds of an inclusive children's literature came from a black, traditionally ignored, set of voices. The legacy of African American literature, which descended from an oral culture passed on in the secrecy of slaves' quarters, preceded by half a century the white call for multiculturalism in kidlit, that reached the mainstream only after 1965.

Chapter 2: The Advent of a Multicultural Kidlit in the USA and the Expansion of African American Children's Literature

2.1 1965: Nancy Larrick's Call to Action and the Controversial CIBC

In the previous chapter, it has been shown that in the aftermath of slavery, the racial color line dividing American society in two parts affected all aspects of day-to-day life and culture, including the relatively young field of children's literature. We have seen that black people's rebellion against their literary depictions started since the time of the plantations, giving birth to an underground cultural activism which produced texts aimed at black children but only in a few cases resulted in kidlit works published by national houses in the early nineteenthirties. Nonetheless, it has been highlighted that this only happened in a couple of exceptional instances, whilst the norm remained that of a literary production written by white people for white children, for the major part of the twentieth century. These two parallel realities arrived to partially merge with the advent of multicultural kidlit in the USA, promoted by a change in mentality to which extensively contributed a specific article which came out in 1965.

"The All-White World of Children's Books" by Nancy Larrick, Ph.D., educator and expert of children's literature, was published on the first of September in the *Saturday Review of Books*, causing a general awakening of consciences. Its influence was so extensive, that it is presented by academics as the symbolic watershed after which the exclusion of the black population from representation in books read by children was finally acknowledged as a problem by white academics, teachers and librarians. Larrick's reasoning was generated by the innocent question of a five year old African American girl who, looking at a picture book in a nursery school in New York, asked: "Why are they always White children?". The educator's consequent research on facts and figures on the matter brought up that, among the over five thousand children's books published between 1962 and 1964, only 6.7 percent included blacks, and in less than one percent they were modern time characters. Moreover, Larrick argued that the quality of the few books including African Americans was below average, and highlighted that there was an urgent need for new national school curricula and for a diversified kidlit, in order to promote and facilitate interracial integration (Bishop, 2007: 84). Larrick additionally pointed out the gravity of the psychological damages deriving

from the limitedness of the contemporary literary offer, giving a new resonance to concepts for long claimed by the penalised minority, but previously neglected by the mainstream:

> Across the country, 6340000 non-white children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them. There is no need to elaborate upon the damage much of it irreparable to the Negro child's personality. But the impact of all-white books upon 39600000 white children is probably even worse. Although his light skin makes him one of the world's minorities, this white child learns from his books that he is the king-fish. (Larrick, 1965)

Larrick's article also brought to the attention of the mainstream the fact that the absence of black individuals from children's books risked to instil a sense of superiority in the young white subjects, thus undermining the achievement represented by the desegregation of schools and the overall progress for which the Civil Rights Movements had fought, in their effort of eradicating racist policies from the USA (Scacchi, 2010: 60). If, on one side, Larrick's whiteness and influence as an activist helped the diffusion of these concepts, on the other, her article would probably have been devoid of practical consequences if published even just a decade before. Following the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965)[10], the call to action found an incredibly fertile ground. This was a period in which the need of new, multicultural scholastic material had started to emerge in the American classrooms, no longer segregated, with an echo in the publishing industry — the aforementioned, revolutionary inclusion of a black family in the *Dick and Jane* edition of January 1965 being identifiable as one of the symbols of the change. The fact that textbooks and teaching literature in general still reserved a discriminatory treatment to black characters represented a pressing problem, effectively risking to sabotage the effects of desegregation. The urgency of giving space to the historical and social African American contributions to the United States, starting from schools, stopped being a matter only felt by the neglected minorities and became part of a way more far reaching debate, also thanks to this article's fame. Not only that but, with the gradual bettering of the economic situation of African American families starting in those decades, the

[10] Signed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, as part of his plan to fight the poverty in the country, this act made available large amounts of funds to ameliorate the educational opportunities of children coming from low-income families, most of which, at the time of the amendment, were black. In an attempt to provide school material reflecting the experiences of these children to make them more involved, much money was destined to books' trading, and this led to the publishers' inclusion of African American characters first, and authors later (Bishop, 2007: 84).

demand of a recreational literature specifically designed for black children was growing too. As a consequence Larrick's exhortation, aimed especially at publishing houses, met and enhanced also the growing African American society's request of leisure books targeting black children (Scacchi, 2010: 60-61) .

The echoes of Larrick's article translated into effective actions: in 1965, Larrick was also one of the founders of the Council for Interracial Books for Children, formed for the majority by white, left wing, socially engaged civilians (mainly writers and intellectuals) coming from the Northern States. An outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, the CIBC represented a reaction to the partial failure of the Freedom Schools established in the South, which had increased the literacy rate among young black people, but whose goal to promote quality education for African American children had been, to an extent, hindered by the absence of adequate teaching material. The CIBC, especially focusing on the needs of non-white children coming from poor families, initially played an important role in the promotion of children's books about African Americans, whilst later expanded to become ambassador of all minorities. The African American community's claims for a non-stereotyping representation at the heart of the CIBC foundation were in fact soon replicated by other parts of the society traditionally ignored by the mainstream. In this way, it anticipated by half a century the contemporary interest in multicultural children's literature, a branch engaged in portraying groups of children traditionally discarded as books' characters, such as the ones belonging to a racial minority.[11] Fundamental on this regard was the institution by the CIBC, in 1969, of an annual contest for minority group writers, which at first was open to African Americans only, and later was extended to Native Americans, Latinos and Asians. This contest, in five years, led to twenty one context winning manuscripts being published by prestigious houses on a national scale (Banfield, 1998: 17-18). The establishment of this competition can be examined as one of the greatest achievements of the association, since it gave space to authors whose work was life changing for many young readers, still struggling at the time to find truthful reflections of themselves in kidlit. Among the most prominent authors of literature for black children who emerged from this contest, there were Mildred D. Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, and

[11] This type of literature started diffusing at the end of the twentieth century, but became mainstream only in the twenty-first century. It portrays stories of children whose diversity can be represented not only by the racial aspect, but also by disabilities, non conventional gender classification or sexual tendencies.

Virginia Hamilton, whose contribution to the field in terms of prose was fundamental, as well as John Steptoe, whose picture books, both written and illustrated by him, will be discussed later (socialjusticebooks.org/council-on-interracial-books-for-children-cibc). Through this kind of initiatives the Council, led by well-intentioned people coming from outside the black community or any other minority, actively contributed in the fight against the all-white array of authors creating literature for children at the time.

Even though the named merits of the CIBC cannot be denied, in the first phase of the project some internal contradictions emerged and paved the way to numerous controversies, re-dimensioning the victories of the council. Its primary scope to promote authors coming from minorities, for instance, was delayed by the competition represented by some whites orbiting around or inside the association. In fact, many white authors and publishers who were members or affiliated to the CIBC, eager to help producing the much needed interracial literature they promoted, and also tempted by a promising commercial opportunity, started writing themselves books about minorities. Their failure to portray a reality that they never lived from within in an accurate way caused them to often perpetuate the old stereotypes they harshly condemned, just in a slightly more veiled shape. Moreover, these enthusiastic white activists writing about African Americans, Latinos or Asians, especially at the beginning, interfered with the emergence of minority writers that the contest aimed to encourage, favouring the maintenance of the white hegemony in the field of publishing, that they otherwise seemed to be against.

It is true that, to avoid inaccuracy in the depictions of minorities, the CIBC also actualised *The Bulletin of Interracial Books for Children*, which included in depth reviews of multicultural books, prepared by experts of the specific minority group being represented. The *Bulletin*'s aim was to teach readers how to recognize and discard the literary sources which were inclusive in label but racist in practice, and indicate them what to look for before purchasing a book. However, criticism was launched also at the bulletin, focusing on the fact that, underlying these criteria, was the idea that literature for people of color would, indeed, continue to be created by white authors, alimenting the diffusion of the old, detrimental, "single ethnocentric perspective" that the CIBC was, at least in words, striving to abolish (Bishop, 2007: 86-87).

In conclusion, notwithstanding the awakening of minds provoked by Larrick's article and the practical efforts of the CIBC, non-white authors were not easily welcomed by publishing houses initially. The minority writers that movements like the CIBC theoretically wanted to launch, paradoxically, did not have many possibilities to emerge, at first, because of the strong rivalry represented by the big, white names of the books' industry. Nevertheless, whilst the white society was finally starting to acknowledge the problem of blacks' under representation, African American people, who had been fighting for themselves for decades, were also actively striving for progress in those years. In what follows an overview will be provided on the relative effectiveness of white interventions in the desegregation of children's literature, and on some important steps in the gradual, but consistent, black battle for a more authentic representation of non-white children.

2.2 The Ambiguous Aftermath of 1965 and the Movement towards Self-Empowerment

In spite of the numerous arguments against the CIBC, its creation was indicative of a substantial change in the attitude of the white mainstream regarding the field of children's literature. It can hardly be denied that, thanks to it, studies about the representation of minorities in kidlit became more frequent, highlighting that not much real progress had happened since the beginning of the century. *The Bulletin of Interracial Books for Children* provided readers with instruments to evaluate the degree of veracity in the representation of children of color in literature, and contributed in forming a more aware public of consumers. Moreover, the CIBC annual award gave a boost first to African American authors, and then to artists of other minorities. As a consequence of all these factors, publishers started contemplating the option of making space for black writers and illustrators; however, as aforementioned, the process was not a smooth one (Martin, 2004: 50). Having summarized the cultural changes in course in the sixties, this section will explore further the mistakes made by white activists despite their best intentions, as well as the major steps in the black fight for a truthful representation of children in kidlit, in an attempt to provide a complete historical background before analyzing the most important titles of the early days of modern African American kidlit.

It has already been mentioned that *The Bulletin*'s existence itself was seen, by some, as implying that whites would keep exercising a fundamental role in the representation of the colored part of the population. Indeed, white writers kept dominating the scene in the portrayal of minorities in kidlit well into the twentieth century, enacting a strong contradiction with the mission of the CIBC. The often mentioned and arguably biggest expert of the field, Rudine Sims Bishop, was one of the first researchers to conduct a survey on the quality of the new wave of children's books on African Americans in 1982, twenty years after the foundation of the Interracial Council. After reading statistics showing that only 14.4% of children's books published between 1973 and 1975 included one or more black characters, she examined a sample of 150 children's books of contemporary realistic fiction about African Americans published in the two decades following 1965 (Bishop, 1983: 650). In the article "What Has Happened to the 'All-White' World of Children's Books?" (1983) she comments the state of things following Larrick's article and the CIBC initiatives aiming to give rise to multicultural children's literature.

Having divided the corpus of books examined in her study into three groups, Bishop explains that the literature dating back to the first decade under scrutiny (1965-1975), which she labelled as: "social conscience" books, was written entirely by white authors (Bishop, 1983: 653). She then reports that all these stories replicated, with minimal variations, four basic plots. The first, centred on school desegregation, usually displayed the enrolling of a black child in a previously white school, followed by some episodes of violence and the final re-establishment of order, thus prompting the message that loss of control, in the rare occasions in which it happens in a mainly white environment, is only momentary. The second plot, called "guess who's coming to dinner" (Bishop, 1983: 651), typically focused on an African American family moving to a new neighbourhood and being befriended by the white protagonist, who acted as a pacifier, easing the newcomers' acceptance in the community. The third story pattern was about blacks choosing to fight discrimination through peaceful methods, such as demonstrations or marches, their white friends having addressed them towards these non-violent, more civil directions. Finally, the fourth plot showed African American children learning to live in harmony with whites. In this last subcategory, as a trend, the former group discovered the latter not to be as prejudiced against them as they thought,

and realized that hostility only occurred if white children had problems of their own. As it can be seen, each of these four plots ultimately kept the black characters in the shade of the white ones, ensuring the moral salvation of the second racial group (Bishop, 1983: 651). Commenting the disappearance of this specific category of books in the mid seventies, Bishop's eloquent words are:

> In terms of the development of an Afro-American children's literature, it is just as well. Some of these books perpetuate old stereotypes (e.g., the shuffling, flat footed, shiny-faced servant) or help to create new ones (e.g., the "Super Negro" or the fatherless black family). The black character sometimes serves as merely an instrument for the moral salvation of the white protagonist. But probably the most common characteristic of the social conscience books is a paternalistic or patronizing attitude toward the black characters. (1983: 651)

Bishop's description of the other two categories that she individuated also seems to indicate that literature on African Americans produced by whites often fails, at least in part, in terms of veracity of the representation, and that the target of an equal representation of the black and white counterpart of the society was still far to reach.

The second group in order of appearance, "melting pot books", is said to be composed mostly by picture books, realized by white authors in 87.5% of the cases, and to mark a slight improvement in respect to the socially conscious books. These well aimed volumes are divided by Bishop in three subgroups: the first one consists in stories told from the point of view of the young white protagonist, who sets out on an adventure with their black best friend, the latter's ethnicity not being central to the plot. The second subcategory depicts interracial friendship as both beautiful and normal through accounts of ordinary childhood episodes, this time from the African American child's perspective. The third group of stories evolves around a mainly or exclusively black array of protagonists, whose daily routines however seem to reflect those typical of the white middle class standard (Bishop, 1983: 651). Implying that every American child experiences this kind of lifestyle, whatever their ethnicity, this subgroup can arguably be considered the most problematic of the whole category. More generally, though, all the "melting pot" stories ignore significant details of the African American culture, such as the prominence of extended families, or the particularly strong attachment between the youngest and eldest members of the community. The only tool by which these books manage to signal the characters' ethnicity, according to Bishop, is the use of illustrations, in most cases positive and free from stereotypes, except for those in the earliest exemplars of the category, which sometimes lacked of precision,

mixing typically white features with ambiguous shades of black and brown (1983: 651). To summarize, on one side "melting pot books" favoured the identification of white American children with the protagonists, promoting the universality of childhood experiences and encouraging interracial friendship. On the other, however, they deprived the black community of their cultural specificities, and conveyed the unlikely message that African American families incorporated the realization of the American dream as much as white ones. This depiction of homogeneity between black and white lives, declaring that the two racial extremities of the American society experimented exactly the same lifestyle, was obviously far from the truth in the early aftermath of desegregation. The unrealistic traits of the portrayal of African Americans provided by the "melting pot" stories definitely did not benefit from the whiteness of the majority of their creators, proving, once again, the unlikelihood of success in authentic representation of minorities, when the racial identity described does not coincide with the writer's.

The third category in exam, that of "culturally conscious books", is presented by Bishop as the one which makes the difference, being produced by white authors only in 28% of instances and showing a quality undetectable in any other works of the previous phases. These stories, capable to touch upon universal values while being written from the point of view of black characters, are at once easy to relate to for the minority portrayed, and significant for readers of all ethnicities (Bishop, 1983: 653). Furthermore, some of these works display such a high degree of authenticity that they will come to be considered the heart of the beginning of contemporary African American children's literature. Differently from the "melting pot books", "culturally conscious" ones aim for pure veracity and do not hide the peculiarities of black children's microcosm in order to be more saleable and shareable. Exploring with an insider's perspective themes which later would become typical of black kidlit, they are divided by Bishop in seven conceptual groups, respectively focusing on: African heritage, racial discrimination, everyday dynamics, urban life, friendship, family relationships and growing up. The first theme, forming with the second the only portion of the group effectively limited to the black experience, will find a brilliant example in Yarbrough's *Cornrows*, to be analysed in the third chapter. Additionally, one of the greatest achievements belonging to the subcategory about everyday stories is the picture

book *Stevie*, by the already mentioned Steptoe (Bishop, 1983: 652), to be examined in the next section. Finally, Lucille Clifton and Eloise Greenfield are among the biggest authors of the last two thematic groups, the former being mainly focused in family relationships with their complications, and the latter in the difficulties that one faces in the process of becoming adult —both to be discussed later,

To conclude, Bishop's analysis powerfully displays, among many other aspects, what was hinted at earlier: the publishing industry of the second half of the twentieth century was still predominantly white, even when other cultural groups were being represented. This set of well established authors would be replaced by a selection of more authentic, yet (initially) unknown voices only to an extent in the upcoming years, and through a very slow, yet fruitful, process. It should be specified that Bishop is not alone in her stance. The predominance of white authors in early multicultural kidlit is described in similar terms by another scholar, Gillian Klein, who defines the efforts of the so-called "well intentioned novels", written by whites in the sixties, as counter productive because of the outsider point of view of these authors. Klein in fact argues that these children's books, despite their writers' claims of focusing on black children, came from someone belonging to the white part of the society, and as such presented African American characters in a way which would make them acceptable to white readers. Consequently, these portrayals still reflected the hegemonic, and not the minorities', values and life vision:

> For the well-meaning novels of the 1960s [...], the problem in all those works was identical. All the authors were white, and all were committed to creating in their novels black characters who would elicit their readers' sympathy and approval. The trap that all fell into was that they perceived their readers also as all white, and the ways in which they justified the worth of their characters were ways that would be wholly acceptable to white values and standards. (Klein, 2002: 2)

Notwithstanding, in a social climate like the one depicted, the overall participation of the black community in monitoring and giving feedbacks on the new literature supposedly dedicated to them was growing exponentially.

In an attempt to react to the insufficient results produced by the CIBC movement, and to literary representations still unable to nourish the self esteem of African American children, particularly emblematic was the creation of the Coretta Scott King Award. Founded by the librarians Mabel McKissack and Glyndon Greer and the publisher John Carroll, this award is described by Bishop as a precious indicator of

African Americans' vindication of their resourcefulness as authors at the time, and as an empowering move, by which they tried to redefine the canons of a truthful representation of black children. The contest, created in the year following the death of Martin Luther King Junior (1969), was meant to fill a specific gap since, at the threshold of the seventies, still no black author of African American kidlit had ever won a prestigious award. Destined specifically to American authors of African descent distinguishing themselves for their contribution in the literature for children or teens, the award was to be given to the artists able to meet the criteria for a faithful depiction of black youth. These parameters mostly coincided with the principles of veracity and carefulness first emerged in Du Bois' declaration of purposes behind *The Brownies' Books.* It should however be noticed that also the Coretta Scott King Award was not immune to criticism, specifically for the fact that, in the first decade of the initiative, some white writers were shortlisted. In this regard Bishop points out that, notwithstanding the apparent contradiction, the award still went to authors whose work had fully met the contest's guidelines, despite them not being African Americans. Moreover, in the following decades, the Coretta Scott King Award successfully testified the black professionals' continuous reassertion of the values at the heart of children's literature (Bishop, 2007: 90). This literary award, arguably more than the CIBC annual contest, marked a fundamental threshold in the reinforcement of African American kidlit as an independent category. Besides, it contributed to the launching of unparalleled authors, and of works which still nowadays represent an important resource for teachers seeking instruments to develop competitive multicultural programmes.

The discourses about the characteristics that African American children's books had to possess intensified during this epoch, involving black teachers, critics, consumers, activists and librarians. Another significant step in this discussion was the (1975) publication, in *The Horn Book* journal, of an article by the aforementioned Eloise Greenfield, soon to become one of the main poets in the field of black children's literature (Bishop, 2007: 91). Here she resumed the main goals of African American kidlit and the ideological stance behind it, emphasising the relevance of children's literature for the self esteem of young black readers, the importance of teaching them how to face difficulties with a positive attitude, and the necessity of highlighting

African American historical and artistic achievements of the past and present. The aims reported did not present strong elements of novelty in respect to the already named Du Bois' letter of intents written fifty years before, showing that the needs from which *The Brownies Books* were born in the twenties had largely remained unsatisfied, and that there was a strong continuity in the values perceived by the black community as essential in the growth of African American young individuals. Ultimately, these standards would be set in stone by the writing and drawing of one core group of authors and artists, who were to shape the body of black kidlit (Bishop, 2007: 92-93).

It has been previously argued that, before the sixties, the seeds of African American children's literature had been disseminated by a relatively small group of intellectuals and artists, such as Du Bois, Hughes and Bontemps. Interestingly, in spite of the post 1965 cultural climate, which had enlarged by much the circle of people involved in the debate about black kidlit, the landscape of African American children's literature would be transformed, also in the seventies, by a quite limited number of game-changing authors (Bishop, 2007: 93). The next section will focus on the artists who made flourish the field of African American children's literature in the second half of the twentieth century, thanks to a lifetime dedication to the youth, which often involved classroom hours, first person parenting and militancy in the social field, in addition to publishing. The ensemble of works produced by these personalities formed a whole new range of inclusive books, which frequently reported insiders' voices and were able to speak to children of all colors. Such a truly innovative literature, largely created from within the discriminated minorities depicted, would succeed where the previous white productions had failed, arguably contributing to fighting racism in the USA, starting from the youngest part of the population.

2.3.1 The First Phase of African American Picture Books

All the premises made about the difficult beginnings of black children's literature are also valid for a particular subcategory of the field, that is African American picture storybooks, on which the remainder of this analysis will focus. It has been demonstrated that the visual element has always played an important role in books, as shown, for example, by the emblematic case of *Sambo,* whose images arguably had a greater impact, on readers and on the following productions, than the narrative itself. In the post

1965 era, which spread awareness of the reliance of racism on visual stereotypes, authors of picture books featuring non-white characters had to be particularly aware of the graphic element, in order to contrast the repertoire of stereotypical images of Pickaninnies and Sambos disseminated by the literature of the previous decades. In such a delicate general context, however, the visual aspect was even more crucial in the subgroup of picture storybooks, these being fictional narratives where an extensive part of the story is told by illustrations, whose function is hence greater here than in other picture books, where the images embellish the story but do not actually complete the plot (Bishop, 2007: 115).

Before starting to analyse the first modern examples of African American picture storybooks for children, a contextualization of this labelling is necessary. The definition of African American picture storybooks is a controversial one, due to the fact that, among the few black authors who managed to be published in the twentieth century, not many were author-artists able to produce both the written and visual part of their work —this being a rarity in literature, independently from the book's genre or author's ethnicity. For this reason, most works classified as African American picture storybooks have actually been written and illustrated by two different persons, not necessarily being both African American. This has been a problematic aspect since the beginning of the genre, and many scholars exclude from the category books written, or even only illustrated, by non-black authors. As a premise to the upcoming examination, it should be specified that my approach has been one of compromise, focusing on picture books by African American writers, independently from the ethnicity of the illustrators. The first book under examination will be the only exception to this rule in the whole discussion, but because of its leading function in the history of the genre it has been included in spite of being written (as well as illustrated) by a white author. Adopting inclusive criteria was necessary for the aim of this study, which is to examine picture storybooks appreciated by the black public and critics for reflecting positively African American children, independently from the background of the artist. A more rigid stance on this respect would have drastically diminished the number of books

examined in the core of this work, forcing the exclusion from the discussion of noteworthy publications belonging to this literary category[12].

The Snowy Day (1962), written and illustrated by the white author/artist Ezra Jack Keats, was the first picture storybook featuring a black child to win the prestigious Caldecott award for the best illustrations (1963), and conquered the mainstream in a quite unprecedented way for a work with an African American child as protagonist (Bishop, 2007: 116; Martin, 2004: 51). In this simple but powerful book, the little, brown skinned Peter is portrayed in his red snow suit whist he enjoys a snowy day as any child would, having fun whilst not fully understanding how snow turns into water sometimes. The illustrated story was beloved by young readers of all ethnicities and arguably made of Peter the first character in children's books to have become symbol of the American "everychild" despite his dark skin. The experience described in the storybook was universally shareable, and readers' identification with the protagonist was eased by his portrayal as a typical, little boy of a middle class black family, freed of any of the stigmas which for long had been so recurrent in the depiction of African American individuals. The intent of naturalness of the drawings reflected Keats' background: son of two poor Polish immigrants, he had grown up in Brooklyn's council houses in the years of the Depression, surrounded by children of all ethnicities. According to his own admission, the idea for *The Snowy Day* came to him in the fifties because he had never received a full color picture storybook portraying a normal, African American little boy for what he was, independently from his relationship with white children or families (Keats, in Martin, 2004: 51). *The Snowy Day* was his first book as both author and illustrator and paved the way to other interracial works, showing both to future authors and publishing houses that a picture book about a black child could be as successful as those with young white protagonists (Bishop, 2007: 117). Nonetheless, some negative characteristics can be found also in this benevolent and groundbreaking work. Keats' desire to indicate, but not overemphasize, Peter's blackness, resulted in sketches which, whilst universally valid and deprived of

[12] It was not easy to find a solution consistent with the African American scope of the research, but also not precluding the discussion of important titles of the field just because of the non-African American ethnicity of the artists. Extended researches on the picture books most beloved by black children and most praised by critics, however proved that the majority of them were not both drawn and written by non-white artists (the websites consulted can be found in the sitography, namely: *We Need Diverse Books*, *Lee and Low Blog*, *The Brown Bookshelf*). Also the fact that the main scholars of the field, African American themselves, adopt an inclusive approach in their studies and compendia(Rudine Bishop Michelle Martin, Neal Lester) gave further ground to my final stance.

caricature traits, pictured the African American child with a certain vagueness. Peter's portrayal lacks, in fact, the physical details realistically associable to a black little boy, and almost gives the impression that the illustration might have worked as well as the depiction of a white child, if Keats had not colored the drawing. Moreover, some critics pointed out that, if on one side the writer never mentions explicitly the characters' ethnicity in the text, and has an open and accepting attitude, on the other, his sketches of Peter's mother vaguely resemble the oversized, exotically dressed characterisation of the mammy that for a long time prevailed in the literature depicting black women, and that was condemned as widely stereotypical (Martin, 2004: 52). It could be observed that, despite *The Snowy Day*'s predominantly enthusiastic reception, its narrative and drawings present the same defects that Bishop found in most "melting pot books". This work, not by chance produced by a white son of immigrants dreaming to abolish racial distinctions, falls in the trap of exaggerating in the opposite direction, pretending, in his fiction, that there was no difference between black and white children, both in terms of physical attributes and experience of life. If its significance has remained uncontested up to current days, it is because the appearance on the market of *The Snowy Day*, despite its many imprecisions, still broke a tradition of children's bestseller books with one hundred percent white protagonists, thus contributing to normalize blackness in society. It should not be forgotten that this work was printed before the mind opening movements of 1965, in a period when schools were still segregated and integration was a mirage. If the same book had been realized by an African American author, on one side it is plausible to assume that the drawings could have been more realistic, but on the other it may as well have been discarded by white publishers, and hardly would it have reached as many non-black people. In fact, five more years had to pass before a mainstream press published a storybook by an African American artist for the first time.

Jacob Lawrence's *Harriet and the Promised Land* came out in 1968, and did not obtain the same success of *The Snowy Day*. A tribute to the life of Harriet Tubman, the much celebrated hero of the Underground Railroad, it was an adaptation into picture book of one of Lawrence's famous series of paintings about the important personalities of black American history. Nurturing an aspect which had been encouraged in African American kidlit since the *Brownies' Books* and would have remained essential in the genre, it narrates one of the proudest achievements of black history in a contemporary

rhymed ballad. Nonetheless it was its visual aspect to strike most readers, through the "dynamic cubism" which was Lawrence's signature, characterised by deformed figures and intense colors with a strong symbolic meaning. Praised by critics as second forerunner of modern African American picture storybooks, its triumph was in reality partially contested by a portion of the black community who, engaged in the aforementioned post 1965 fight for realistic portrayals of black people in kidlit, found Lawrence's dramatic illustrations inauthentic and disturbing (Bishop, 2007: 117). In this sense, the graphic element of this book was not necessarily more reflective of African Americans' actual features than Keats' approximative sketches in *The Snowy Day*, constituting the only case study, in this chapter, of a black authored portrayal considered unauthentic by the same African American population.[13] In summary, this picture book marked relative progresses in the path towards a faithful representation of African Americans in kidlit, in spite of its status of first black publication in the genre.

Those contesting *Harriet and the Promised Land* found the realism they were craving for in *Stevie*, marking, in 1969, the debut of the great John Steptoe, first African American author-artist of picture books in the panorama of contemporary black children's literature, aged eighteen at the time of his exploit. The progressive cypher which was missing in the first African American title of the field can definitely be found here, in the second book of the period by an insider. This work's landmark status came from its combined linguistic and artistic quality, given by a true to life reproduction of the spoken black language on one side, and by the fresh, expressionistic illustrations, defined by heavy black outlines and colored with vivid tonalities of pastels, on the other. The story, still universal in its broader themes, differently from *The Snowy Day* was told with a specifically black audience in mind, focusing on the collaboration between African American neighbourhoods' families, often necessary for very practical reasons. The plot is simple: little Steven's mother works full time and asks Robert's mum to babysit him when she is away. Robert is jealous at first, but discovers his new affection for Stevie when he misses him after he is gone. Images and words convey the urban setting and familiarity of Robert's home, showing the everyday aspects of the ordinary city life of African American children. The cast is entirely black and the characters are clearly portrayed as such in the drawings, rich in details revealing their specific,

[13] It should however be noticed, in this respect, that cubism as an artistic form hardly comes from a strive to realism.

individual physical features, but also their personalities, thus providing a strong contrast with the stereotyped images that the author, admittedly, had at disposition when he was young (Bishop, 2007: 117-119). A number of early works of his, such as *Uptown* (1970), the story of a black teenager living in Harlem, therefore efficiently mirrored a city environment similar to the one in which Steptoe grew up in the Brooklyn of the fifties, and launched the trend of urban settings in children's literature, to be followed by a large array of African American picture books in the seventies. Even if this author's versatility consented him to excel in any possible declinations of literature for children and teens, his very first work already displayed the greatness of his skills. The adoption of black vernacular, which was one of the many *firsts* in the field signed by this giant of African American kidlit, would have become a must for all those wanting to describe everyday blackness after him. For the numerous aspects discussed, this literary masterpiece, deprived of any superfluous embellishments or moralistic generalizations, can be seen as the emblem of the passage between "melting pot" and "culturally conscious" books, with a black author finally writing about and portraying visually his community in a faithful way, without any veils. Furthermore, since Steptoe was the initiator of more than one subgenre of black kidlit, a brief mention of at least another literary archetype of his own creation will be unavoidable. It has already been mentioned that, in addition to the thread of everyday life narrations started with *Stevie,* Steptoe's *Uptown* expanded the former title's authenticity trait with the depiction of the specific context of urban teenager gangs. A key element of this rendering was the linguistic implementation of the city black speech, but also of African American teenagers' jargon of the day, whilst his vibrant paintings reinforced words' veracity from a graphic point of view (Bishop, 2007: 119). After becoming a father, Steptoe also created two illustrated family stories featuring him and his own kids as main characters, thus promoting the figure of the single, caring African American father, at the time unusual in black literature. His crowning achievement, after *Stevie*, however, was *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987), the last book of this author to be discussed.. This accurately researched-upon adaptation of a Zimbabwean tale, written and illustrated by Steptoe, obtained a nomination as Caldecott Honor book for its full color images, resembling real life photographs, and won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for illustration. In this book, Steptoe managed to bring black folklore to life whilst

rendering it familiar to the average American child, thanks to the Cinderella motifs of the story and to some easily recognizable Biblical references. The mix of well known narrative *topoi*, such as the rivalry between the two protagonist sisters, and of foreign settings, brilliantly reproduced by the awarded illustrations, got to show to the American public the architecture, nature and tradition of the widely unknown African region of Zimbabwe (Martin, 2004: 91-92).

John Steptoe's groundbreaking career was shortly followed by the prolific production of Lucille Clifton, whose voice dominated the field of African American children's literature between 1970 and 1979, with the realization of the text of fourteen picture books. Her poetic writing, succinct and easy to memorize, was perfect to accompany illustrations, and her mission in picture books was the authentication of the world of African American children. Her concern for the almost total absence of black history teachings in schools, shared by many at the time, emerged in her early books *The Black BC*'s (1970) and *All Us Come Cross the Water* (1973). The first is a primer which resulted from the many questions posed to Clifton by her six children whilst they were growing up (Bishop, 2007: 120). For each letter, the book features a short poem about African culture, whilst Miller's black and white oil drawings portray black people who contributed to American history[14].The powerful associations displayed, such as A for Africa, G for Ghetto, M for Middle Passage, aim to dismantle stigmas and counter-propose a revisionist history to the monochromatic one still taught in most schools of that period (Martin, 2004: 56). *All Us Come Cross the Water*, illustrated by Steptoe in his typical colourful style, also focused on teaching African American children about their roots, telling the story of Ujamaa, a young black boy who has to do a research on where he comes from and would be lost without the help of his grandmother and elder black friend. Underlying the story, is the message that the accounts passed on intergenerationally in African American families and communities represent an indispensable source of strength for the black American citizens-to-be, in a society which often undermines children's notion of self worth and psychosocial survival (Bishop, 2007: 121). After these first books worked as manifesto of her moral goals,

[14] The Jamaican artist Donald Lloyd Miller, politically engaged, was mostly famous for his oils and watercolours dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement. Information were retrieved at: https://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/10/obituaries/donald-l-miller-69-painter-and-illustrator.html (accessed 14 June 2022).

Clifton will start authenticating the world of black children by setting of her stories there, as Steptoe had done. Similarly to him, she conveys a sense of familiarity through linguistic tools such as the display of the actual spoken style of African Americans, also adopted in *My Brother Fine with Me* (1975), which was largely considered her most significant kidlit achievement. This picture book well exemplifies themes recurring in the majority of Clifton's works, like the importance of family bonds — arguably becoming the main topic of African American children's literature —in the form of the often controversial relationship between siblings, and the struggles of living with scarce financial resources. These features interact in the story of Johnetta, eight years old, who has to look after her little brother Baggy whilst both parents are at work. When one day he decides to run away, she does not oppose to it at first, but once he is gone she realizes she misses him, in a reminiscence of *Stevie*'s plot. It is worth noting that in Clifton's universe, where honesty and fidelity to reality are key, many children are described as having to put playing aside to help their parents because of the limited finances of the family. In the picture book under examination, Johnetta is not the only child in the neighbourhood who has to babysit a sibling, and this dynamic also appears in other books by Clifton, such as *Don't You remember* (1973), where the adolescent protagonist drops out of school in order to take care of his younger sister. The recurrence of this theme reflected the poet's declared intention to write about poor children, as an attempt to normalize the black everyday reality, that did not dictate, but could often involve, poverty (Bishop, 2007: 122). Nonetheless, as aforementioned, the real heart of this picture book is the often ambivalent sister-brother relationship, whose unfiltered description by the young black protagonist makes of this work a brilliant example of a "culturally conscious", authentic story, clearly coming from an insider of the minority represented. Johnetta initially helps to organise her little brother's escape, dreaming about finally being free to play outside with her friend Peaches without having to drag Baggy with her, and confessing to miss being the only child in the family sometimes. However, after he is gone, her perspective changes: she feels lonely, she wonders who will eat Baggy's favourite spread and whether she will be able to sleep without him in the same room.; even the idea of playing with Peaches suddenly seems to have lost its attractiveness. In the end, when she finds him still in front of their house, she feels relieved and happy, which makes her reflect: even if it is quite stressful to look

after Baggy at times, now that she got used to it, she cannot deny to be"fine with it". Talking about the graphic aspect, *My Brother Fine with Me* was among the most famous picture books illustrated by the well known African American artist Moneta Barnett (1922-1976), invested in many literary genres, who started working in the field of kidlit in the fifties. Her soft pencil drawings, here as in the few other children's books that she took care of, represent expressive, bright eyed boys, sweet long legged little girls, mostly wearing plaits or cornrows, and adults with Afro hairdos. Her illustrations in this work reproduce everyday life and domestic details of African American working families (Bishop, 2007: 154), with an accuracy impossible to find in images by artists who never got in touch with the black community.

Another African American author who affirmed the worth of black children's lives was the already mentioned Eloise Greenfield, whose literary production blossomed in the same decade as Clifton's. In her aforementioned article, she had identified self-love, passion for learning, knowledge of African American history, family unity, respect for the elders, assertiveness in the difficulties and black pride, as main values that she wanted to transmit in her writing for the young public. Her authenticity mission translated into a precise artistic stance: she was one of the few African American writers of the time who insisted from the beginning on collaborating only with black illustrators, thus contributing to the emergence of a few names which would have big resonance in black children kidlit, but also in other genres. This was the case, for instance, with the 1977 reprint of her first book *Bubbles*[15], for which Greenfield chose to rely on the black artist Pat Cummings, who would become one of the most established African American kidlit illustrator of the eighties, also winner of the most prestigious awards in the field. Cummings' beautiful, humorous watercolor images much contributed to the relaunch of the first picture book by Greenfield, a celebration of literacy which tells the story of a little boy who is impatient to let everybody know that he has learnt to read. The theme of family support, which will be the predominant one in her career, but was not prominent in *Bubbles*, first emerges clearly in *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (1974), whose lively and colorful illustrations were one of John Steptoe's most praised works, acclaimed with the 1975 Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Award for

[15]The first edition of the book, in 1972, was brought to press with an inexperienced black publishing house. It came out in a spiral binding, with unremarkable illustrations by Eric Marlow (Bishop, 2007: 124) and did not meet an enthusiastic reception.

Illustration. Graphically bringing to culmination the already discussed characteristics typical of Steptoe's art, the book tells the story of Kevin, a little black boy who, initially jealous of his baby-born sibling, manages to change perspective about his responsibility as an elder brother by listening to the similar past experience of his uncle, who grew up with Kevin's mum as a sister. *Me and Neesie* (1975)[16] also portrays a child who overcomes a personal problem thanks to the help of a relative, establishing this concept as a sort of thematic signature of Greenfield, attentive to highlight, in her production, the primary role of family and elders' bond for the African American culture (Bishop, 2007: 124). This picture book, published in the same year of *My Brother Fine with Me*, was also illustrated by Moneta Barnett, who used a repertoire of characters effectively reminding those appearing in Clifton, testifying the artist's stylistic consistency and renewed engagement in the depiction of black families' situations. A last, promising literary thread introduced by Greenfield was that about the unconditional love between grandparents and grandchildren, central in *Grandmama's Joy* (1980) and *Grandpa's Face* (1988), and destined to become recurrent in African American children's picture books. In the first, more serious, storybook, Rhondy, raised by his grandmother, reassures the elder woman, who is overwhelmed by a difficult economic situation, that what really matters is their mutual affection, offering her support in a hard moment. The second, rather humoristic book, restores the more traditional logic of the elder helping the younger through the peculiar story of the little Tamika, who gets scared finding out that her grandfather, who is an actor, sometimes turns to look very angry or even mean. Grandpa, though, reassures her that it is his acting job which on occasions requires him to seem furious or scary, but that this is only fiction, whilst his love for her is true and will always remain untouched (Bishop, 2007: 125). In terms of pictures, the versatile visual artist behind *Grandmama's Joy* was Carole Marie Byard (1941-2017), winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for this contribution, just one year after achieving it for *Cornrows* (a book which will be discussed in depth in connection with the theme of hair, investigated in the last chapter). Using charcoal and graphite, she portrayed characters with very dark skins, nonetheless infused with a sort of light in their faces. Byard's depiction of Rhondy, in particular, was praised for perfectly

[16] The storybook describes the situation of Janell, who discards the possibility of making new friends at school in favour of conversations with an imaginary friend, until this disappears after the support received by the girl by her uncle (Bishop, 2007: 124).

exemplifying this artist's ability of promoting the association between blackness and warmth, attractiveness, livelihood and goodness, creating a vibrant alternative to the traditional negative connotations of color (Bishop, 2007: 162). Byard's contribution in the reconstruction of the meaning of black can be seen as an example of the many, big and small actions taken by African American artists, back in the eighties, to reinforce the values promoted by the Black is Beautiful Movement twenty years earlier. Choices of this kind, often not accompanied by large scale advertising and rarely reaching mainstream attention, still helped, one step after the other, to keep black pride alive, and to remind readers of the relevance of the racial matter, even after the advancements made in the field of civil rights. Coming back to Greenfield's works about grandparents, *Grandpa's Face* also featured the graphic contribution of a great illustrator of African American children's literature, Floyd Cooper, who discovered what would become his favourite literary niche thanks to Greenfield's proposal to work on this picture book for her.. Famous for his realistic portrayals of people of diverse ethnicity, his signature style, also displayed here, consists in an elaborated technique: drawing on top of an oil wash with a kneaded eraser, and adding more color with acrylic watercolors when the oil wash is dry (Bishop, 2007: 182)—the result being an extraordinary brightness, which makes the images seem to stick out of the page . These two books were included in the analysis because, aided by the visual support of such great artists, they foretold the fortune of the prolific theme of the bonds between youngest and eldest members of the black family, which, as it will be seen later, will expand to the point of becoming an autonomous subcategory of African American illustrated kidlit.

A final, direct link to the literary trends of the nineties can be seen in *The Patchwork Quilt*, archetype of many picture books of the end of the millennium, also focusing on intergenerational love. Winner of the 1985 Coretta Scott King Award, this picture storybook was written by Valerie Flournoy, also famous for the already mentioned *Cornrows,* and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, who contributed to over one hundred children's books between 1964 and 2021, both African American. In this book the relationship between the little protagonist Tanya, her mother and Grandma, both validates and is reinforced by patchwork quilt making, ancient practice of great significance for the African American population, which also played a role in helping

slaves to escape plantations in the nineteenth century[17]. The plot, in a narrative circle which also reflects the African idea of circularity of life, begins with Grandma wanting to make a patchwork quilt and explaining the art of it to a curious granddaughter, and closes with the young Tanya taking over the work, after much observation of the practice, in the hope that seeing the quilt expanding will uplift grandma who has become ill in the meantime. This picture book, in a conjunction between past and future, alternates consolidated key concepts of African American kidlit and new declinations of the core ideals of the genre. Among the meanings of this work in line with the literary tradition of the past, on one hand, is the relevance of the teachings of the elders for future generations. The author, through the example of the grandma in the book, encourages all grandparents to pass on their traditions and memories, by sharing personal experiences' accounts and advice with the youngest members of the family (Martin, 2004: 90-91). The concept of the relevance of teaching African history to the young generation, far from being innovative, had been highlighted since the very beginning of published black kidlit, with Lawrence's *Harriet and the Promised Land*. Additionally, the importance of elder friends and relatives' individual stories had previously been stretched, most noticeably, in Clifton's *All Us Come Cross the Water.* Furthermore, this story deepens a thematic thread already hinted at in *Grandmama's Joy*, showing a granddaughter trying to help her grandmother to recover through her love — here, not just by reminding her the significance of their relationship, but with the emulation of Grandma's quilting example. At the same time, in terms of novelty, quite original for the genre is the display of a skill, in this case quilt making, first as it is taught by the elder character (at the opening of the book), and later as it is emulated by the descendent and former apprentice (at the end of the story). This picture book also represents one of the first instances in which appears the topic of a sometimes difficult communication between mother and grandmother, on one side, as opposed to the easy mutual understanding between grandmother and granddaughter, on the other, a sub-theme which later became a constitutive element of the genre, also recurring in Phyllis Alesia Perry's (1998) *Stigmata,* among other noticeable literary productions. It should

[17] In that time, the quilt became a precious instrument for countless slaves looking for freedom. Abolitionists, such as the Quakers, invented a quilt pattern called Jacobs ladder, which was used to identify safe houses for slaves who were fleeing the plantations where they worked. Additionally, since most slaves could not read or write, quilts also represented an important mean of recording events in their lives, adopting particular colors and shapes as markers of memorable moments (https://purehistory.org/history-of-the-slave-quilts, accessed 20 June 2022).

be added that also in this case the signature of the illustrator added value to an already brilliant written work. Jerry Pinkney (1939-2021) was one of the most prominent illustrators of African American children's picture books, and dominated the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Awards by winning five times, unlike any other artist, receiving unanimous praises from librarians, teachers and professionals of the field (Bishop, 2007: 165). His unprecedented involvement in the creation of the illustrations for *The Patchwork Quilt* even included a trip with the writer to follow a portion of the Underground Railroad, with the storybook largely benefiting from such an invested approach, which will become typical of his work. His illustrations here, as in many books to follow, enhance the family members' peculiarities and the details of the African American middle class environment, going far beyond the script provided by the text. His drawings for *The Patchwork Quilt* resulted from a collaboration between him, his wife and some models, with whom he shared the text to then observe their interpretation of it, a practice which helped him with the characterisation of the subjects to be portrayed in an original mix of literature, visual and performative art. The illustrations are drawn in pencil, with the outline of the pictures often left visible, and colored with watercolors. The transparency of Pinkney's images, evident here, would become his trademark, together with the soft tones of color used, which only occasionally would leave space to brighter shades in order to convey historical accuracy (Bishop, 2007: 166-167). This picture storybook, combining the resourcefulness of such great artistic personalities, largely contributed in identifying quilt making as symbol of intergenerational love, not only in children's picture books, but in all African American literature.

This section has opened by a comparison between two picture storybooks which have been largely acclaimed as precursors of African American contemporary kidlit, the first one being by a white author and the second one by a black one, each characterized by as many points of strength as of weakness. Soon thereafter, Steptoe, Clifton and Greenfield have been described as the main protagonists of the consolidation of African American picture books as an independent literary stream in the twenty years following the 1965 cultural awakening. With the first of these three authors starting realistic fiction in urban settings, and the other two enhancing in different ways the concept of black children's experiences being worth telling, such personalities constructed, with

their literary work, the canons of African American children's picture books, whose characteristics had been under discussion in the previous years. Even more importantly, they affirmed and helped diffusing the message of the relevance of authentic depictions of the everyday life of African American children, which were essential to normalize the long mocked image of little black boys and girls.

2.3.2 The Second Phase of African American Picture Books

The decade of the eighties definitely benefited from the influential works by the outstanding authors above mentioned, with a generalised increment of interest in Afro-centric themes in picture storybooks for children. Very significantly, this period saw the founding of *Just Us Books,* an independent publisher specifically dedicated to literature for young black children, which is still active and influential today (Martin, 2004: 56), and whose existence would have been difficult to imagine before Lawrence's or Steptoe's groundbreaking works. However, not many names rivalled Clifton's or Greenfield's until the nineties, which saw a boom of publications of illustrated black kidlit, also as a result of the growing national attention in regard to multicultural instruction and children's literature. Finally, new, non-white authors began entering a publishing field which was gradually becoming open to different ethnicities. The second era of African American picture books arguably staged an intensification of the already mentioned capacity, of black authors and illustrators, to produce literary works meaningful not only for their main target (black children), but also for an extensive, multicultural audience (Martin, 2004: 62). This further development of African American illustrated kidlit was based, on one hand, on the expansion of already well established themes, like family love, or the importance of transmission of ancestors' memories and stories as a means to enrich younger generations. On the other hand, though, it was also made possible by the introduction of a series of new content threads, like that of self-love or believing in dreams.

As in the two previous decades, a few names distinguished themselves above the others for their writing production, one of these undoubtedly being Angela Johnson. This prolific author published fourteen picture storybooks between 1989 and 2000, mostly focused on middle class, two parent contemporary African American families. In her writing, the normalization of the black experience translates into a not too direct

emphasis on black racial pride, rather treated as a given (Bishop, 2007: 134). Three noteworthy picture storybooks by Johnson talk about the ritual of passing down stories, giving a slightly different turn to the already presented concept at the core of *The Patchwork Quilt*, where a practical skill was being taught to posthumous generations. These books are: *Tell Me A Story, Mama* (1989), *The Rolling Store* (1997), and *Down the Winding Road* (2000), all portraying children who have heard their parents or grandparents' stories so many times that they know them by heart. These exemplify one of the main key concepts of the African American literary offer, for the youngest as well as for grown up readers, at the end of the millennium, more specifically: the resourcefulness represented by elder relatives' memories for one to fully appreciate their roots, family and ultimately, identity as an individual. Despite owing much to Clifton and Greenfield on the theme of family, Johnson's repertoire stands out in more than one respect. Stylistically, her picture books reflect the predisposition for poetry upon which she would build her successive award winning career, adopting a more lyrical than childlike first person narrative, and recurring to an abundant and original imagery. Moreover, her mirroring of the black experience of children discards the previously common abundance of action in favour of a closer look at the protagonists' feelings, thoughts and emotions, properly rendered by her lyrical language (Bishop, 2007: 135). Of the three titles named, *Tell Me A Story, Mama,* dedicated to Johnson's grandfather, was the first and arguably most popular one, setting out the trend for her following picture books. At the centre of it is a little girl who, at bedtime, is always eager to hear her mother's well known stories about when she was her daughter's age. The child can anticipate most of them: she wants to listen again to the account of when an old, mean neighbour scared the storyteller's young self and her brother, or of when the two siblings had separate from their parents for a while. The young protagonist enjoys every bit of these family memories, portraying the past of her parents, grandparents and uncle, and the book closes with her making her mother promise to tell her more stories on the following evening. The sweet enthusiasm of the child, probably to be seen as the writer's young alter-ego, reflects the already discussed re-evaluation of authentic storytelling characteristic of the black literature of this period, of which Johnson became one of the proclaimers. The other two picture storybooks mentioned echo a similar plot, with the only difference that the focus is more on grandparents' than

on parents' memories. Regarding the visual aspect, it should be underlined that Johnson, differently from Greenfield, did not pick exclusively black illustrators for her works, as proven here. *Tell Me A Story, Mama* was illustrated by David Soman, a widely known white artist, as of today, for being co-creator, with his wife, of the New York Times bestseller *Ladybug Girl* series[18]. In the picture book under survey his often humoristic sketches, painted with watercolor, were overall appreciated for their spontaneity, despite not presenting strong elements of novelty. The aforenamed *Rolling Store* also saw the contribution of a white artist, Peter Catanalotto[19], whose watercolor illustrations did not trigger any negative criticism, but were not particularly praised either. *Down the Winding Road* instead features pictures by Shane Evans, versatile, mixed race American artist whose illustrations in this work are quite unique, combining oil, ink, pen and computer digital art[20]. It has been hereby shown that many books by Johnson develop the theme of intergenerational relationships, often declined in the specific form of love between grandparents and grandchildren. Her *When I am Old with You* (1990) perfectly exemplifies this trend, narrating of a child who does not contemplate the thought of having to separate from the grandfather one day, and imagines growing old with him[21]. This nuclear concept, also present in the formerly examined *The Patchwork Quilt*, would be echoed by a number of future African American picture storybooks from the nineties onwards. After the already mentioned Greenfield, Flournoy, Johnson and Perry, the thread was expanded by authors such as Dolores Johnson, Evelyn Coleman, Irene Smalls, Jacqueline Woodson, Karen English and Sandra Belton, whose shared, fond approach to the subject was also testified by the recurrence of some features in their characterisation of the protagonists (Bishop, 2007: 136). African American grand-families themed picture books, however, did not just represent a momentary tendency

[18] Information were retrieved at: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/231382/david-soman (accessed 11 June 2022).

[19] To date author of seventeen and illustrator of over thirty books for children, his works, like Soman's, are not solely focused on the representation of African Americans. Information were retrieved at: https://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Peter-Catalanotto/1785909 (accessed 13 June 2022).

[20]The multi-prized artist has always been passionate about multicultural representation in children's books. Already receiver of the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, he was recently honoured with the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Non-Fiction for Children, too. Information were retrieved at: https://us.macmillan.com/author/shanewevans (accessed 11 June 2022).

[21] The colorful illustrations of this picture book, recalling the vibes of those in *Tell Me A Story, Mama*, are by the aforementioned Soman.

and continue flourishing in the twenty-first century.[22] To conclude, Johnson gave a new depth to some important topics which were not new in black literature, but would keep being investigated after her. The main three books just presented, for instance, also enacted one of Du Bois's and Greenfield's founding purposes, that being: the promotion of black history, which can be taught through grandparents and parents' stories. Such a narrative strand would be given a new dimension by the second biggest author of this period: Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard.

Former professor and academic, Howard's specialty was to use stories based on her family memories, so as to highlight aspects of the African American past which at her time were not sufficiently enhanced in traditional history. This aspect emerges prominently in *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*, one of her most popular picture books, published in 1991. The plot is simple, but full of cues: the two young protagonists, Susan and Sarah, every Sunday visit their great aunt Flossie and on these occasions they get to try her uncountable hats, each of which is associated to a memory that she is happy to share. Aunt Flossie's accounts interlock with important events of the black past, like the big fire in Baltimore or the parade in honour of the African American soldiers back from World War One. Furthermore, Howard often focuses on the achievements of black people like her ancestors, who, despite not reaching fame, remarkably contributed to their work field in an epoch in which African American professionals represented an exception to the white norm. Aiming to fill such problematic representational gaps in history, she also brings into light, through this and other books, the less resounding conquests of who, in the past, had put a silent effort into bettering the country through social activism, for example teaching, keeping alive community centres and churches, or encouraging African American children to pursue studies or ambitious careers in spite of blacks' segregation. In the picture book in exam, Aunt Flossie's belief in the educational function of storytelling reflects Howard's affirmation that the simple fact of being African American implies having stories. Hearing the accounts of elder family members in this context is almost defined as a moral duty, since it builds up a fundamental part of the black individual (Bishop, 2007:

[22] A proof of the longevity and actuality of the theme of grandparents in African American children's books, can also be found in its prominence in contemporary programmes promoting multicultural literature, such as the Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature, whose website (www.CSMCL.org) includes a seven-page list of books for children and young adults about African American grandparents, ranging from 1968 to 2015.

141). Passing to the graphic element, the realistic and full color illustrations of *Aunt Flossie's Hats* definitely adds to its overall impact, the artist behind them being James Ransome, one of the biggest African American illustrators of the twentieth century, who in his career took care of over sixty picture books, many of which about black children. Strongly influenced by the aforenamed Jerry Pinkney, his art, to his own admission, also owes some traits to his early film making attempts and to painters he had studied, such as Edgar Degas (Bishop, 2007: 181). His oil painting technique, mirroring his master's affinity with strong shapes and colors, reproduces facial expressions and real life details with intensity and dramatic energy, conveying great veracity in the depiction of characters and ambiances, as visible in *Aunt Flossie's Hats*.

The historical element constitutes the foundation of one's self belief in the work of the last great personality of the second phase of African American illustrated kidlit that we will analyse: Faith Ringgold. Her first children's picture book, *Tar Beach* (1991), marked her beginning in the niche at a time when she was already internationally famous as an artist. The book enjoyed a sensational success, making of her the initiator of a vast collection of literary works inviting young African Americans to follow their dreams. This exhortation is thematically grounded, in Ringgold, to the grandness of African American history, which is perpetuated in the present by the ambition and uniqueness of the black population. *Tar Beach* won twenty awards, among which the 1992 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, and got a Caldecott Honor Book citation. The narrative of the book actually was a written re-elaboration of the concept displayed in a story quilt from the "Woman on a Bridge" series, also by Ringgold, exposed by the Guggenheim Museum (Bishop, 2007: 143-144). The illustrations for the book were created by the artist later, in a groundbreaking combination of acrylic paintings and quilt border. The genre of this literary work is as hybrid as its graphics, mixing autobiographical, historical and fantastic elements and defining a thematic complexity which also characterises the rest of Ringgold's production, from *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993), to *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992) and *If a Bus Could Talk,* to *The Invisible Princess* (1999). *Tar Beach* has for protagonist the eight year old Cassie, whose not wealthy family uses their rooftop as a spot for picnics. From here, the girl imagines to fly over New York city, pass over the George Washington Bridge, and take action against those who had discriminated her father

when he was looking for work, despite his past contribution to construct both that bridge and the Union Building. The picture storybook develops many themes dear to the African American heritage, in a sort of summary of the definition of the black identity: from the flying motif, consolidated by a long literary tradition of slaves flying back to Africa (Martin, 2004: 97), across the historical recall of the racist practices of labor unions, to the celebration of quilting through its use as one of the mediums exploited for the illustrations. The last one, in particular, is seen by Ringgold as a reminder of the artistic quality of the many black women who passed this ancient practice from generation to generation. In such an interplay of text and pictures and of facts and fantasy, *Tar Beach* embodies all the characteristics which will become trademarks of Ringgold's kidlit, mixing a remembrance of the struggles endured by blacks in the past, a celebration of African American women of all times, and an enhancement of the importance of empowering black children, both by teaching them racial history and by validating their imagination and dreams. Impersonating all these values, Cassie, the absolute protagonist of the story who ultimately manages to dominate the metropolis from the sky and shows to the reader that everything is possible, is not only a child, but also a (future) woman.

The concept of believing in oneself, well exemplified by the little girl flying over New York City in *Tar Beach,* begins a narrative thread which will expand at the end of the twentieth century and become dominant in the 2000s. The black population's need of self reaffirmation after decades of stereotyping, emerged since the seventies, translated into a number of picture books functional to reinforce children's self confidence in the decade from 1990 to the 2000. To follow, we will discuss three titles seeming the most suitable to display the slow but constant progress enacted by black kidlit in respect to the theme of children's self perception. *Bright Eyes*, *Brown Skin* was the first of a kind, published in 1990. It was written by Cheryl Willis Hudson, (black) editorial director of the aforementioned *Just Us Books*, and Bernette Ford (of the same ethnicity), engaged in the field of publishing for the African American youth since the aftermath of 1965. The illustrations were by the George Ford, 1974 winner of the Coretta Scott King Award for his contribution in Sharon Bell Mathis' *Ray Charles*, by then well known in the field. *Bright Eyes*, *Brown Skin* enhances African American children's physical features and capabilities through a series of short and simple rhymes,

whose meaning is enriched by colorful, vivid pictures (Bishop, 2007: 139). The small, lively group portrayed takes part to collective activities fit for pre-school children, such as playing, snacking, listening to music or napping. Art and text act in synergy to fabricate a positive image of the often underestimated black youth, enhancing their beauty and positive energy. The picture book closes with a two page, full colour sketch of the four young protagonists, each with their name tagged. Depicted in pairs, hair to shoulders, their expressive eyes reveal their characters, with the first two children smiling confidently and the other couple more shyly. *Something Beautiful*, published in 1998, targets a slightly more mature age group with the story of an African American little girl who, looking for beauty in her neighbourhood, initially does not see any of it, but gradually learns to find it even in the most ordinary corners (Bishop, 2007: 138). In the end she will discover that, for her mother, the most precious source of beauty is the daughter herself. Written by author Sharon Dennis Wyeth[23], and illustrated by artist Chris Soentpiet,[24] this picture book surely encourages the youngsters to see themselves in a positive light, but the universality of the message is arguably weakened by the intimate details of the narration, with the protagonist's aesthetic quest being presented as a quite personal path. Vice versa, the much praised *Shades of Black* unambiguously re-proposes, ten years later (2000), the concept which was behind *Bright Eyes*, *Brown Skin.* Written by the African American couple Sandra and Myles Pinkney, long engaged as authors and visual artists in black children's representation, it celebrates, through new graphic mediums, the good looks and variety of physical features of the young African American population, which, contrarily to what the literature of the previous centuries had suggested, can indeed manifest in a palette of different skin, hair and eye colors. The picture book, easily accessible to a very young public on the linguistic level, is dominated by the written refrain "I am Black. I am unique", side by side with a range of color photographs of children, among whom also feature the couple's own sons[25]. The combined strength of text and graphics praises, at once, the youngsters' collective

[23]She is member of the Cave Canem Fellowship for African-American Poets and writer of numerous award-praised children's books focused on multiculturalism. Information were retrieved at: https://aalbc.com/authors/author.php?author_name=Sharon+Dennis+Wyeth (accessed 15 June 2022).

[24] He is a medal-winner Korean American kidlit illustrator, whose attention to details also reflects in the pictures of this book, mirroring reality so vividly to seem proper photographs. Information were retrieved at: http://www.soentpiet.com/young-art.htm (accessed 10 June 2022).

[25] Information were retrieved at: https://www.encyclopedia.com/children/scholarly-magazines/pinkney-sandra-l-1965 (accessed 14 June 2022).

identity as a racial group, and their appealing, reciprocal physical differences defining them as unrepeatable individuals. An element of absolute novelty in this work is given by the association of children's bodily attributes to pleasantly connoted images, in such a way that, for instance, skin has the same color of chocolate, licorice or ginger, and hair can be puffy like cotton, straight like grass, or, when tied in dreadlocks, firm like lambs' wool's ringlets, each of these traits being characterised as equally, and undoubtedly, "good" (Bishop, 2007: 139).

To summarise, the aim of this section has been to propose a survey of the most influential writers (and illustrators) of the second age of African American children's picture books, to show similarities and differences in respect to the thematic categories founded by the forerunners of the genre, back in the seventies. It has been highlighted that, together with the expansion of kidlit concepts anchored to the black tradition since Du Bois, new trends also appeared in this period, with the one aiming at an enhancement of children's self appreciation being particularly meaningful. The picture books' production of the last decades of the twentieth century, started by Johnson, brought forward by Ringgold and culminated in the last selection of authors described, reaffirms the importance of intergenerational affection, whilst deepening the aspect of self-love in children. This last conceptual thread, initially focused on reversing past stereotypes, and then on celebrating the variety of bodily features of the young black population, will soon branch out towards an even more specific literary trend. Such a new subcategory, to be explored in details in the next chapter, will be dedicated to dismantling the many preconceptions, rooted in the American society, about the most controversial and symbolic African American physical attribute of all, hair.

Chapter 3: The Representation of Hair in African American Picture Books across the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century

3.1 Black Hair in History and Representation

The twentieth century, still dominated by Eurocentric portrayals of black people for most of its years, saw a radical improvement, especially for what concerns the representation of African American children, in its final decade. From *Bright Eyes, Brown Skin* (1990) to *Shades of Black* (2000), a whole range of kidlit proposed a narrative that went decidedly against the last echoes of two centuries of Pickaninny-style depictions of children. The authentication of different hair, eye and skin colours in black boys and girls realised by these books was essential to fight a racist mentality which only recognised physical diversities among white individuals, whilst characterising African Americans as a uniform, stereotyped mass. Their dark skins, full lips and kinky hair had been for long reminders of a presumed African inferiority, of which hair was probably the most emblematic symbol. Therefore, it was just matter of time before an entire literary subcategory emerged to give back a positive connotation to this physical trait, especially in the eyes of the young public. Yet, an exception made for a couple of precursors to the field, the expansion of the hair-topic in kidlit took place as late as in the1990s.

The physical appearance (hair *in primis*) of African Americans was particularly significant in the era of slavery. In the big plantations of the Southern states, the offspring of white masters and African American women were often born with straighter hair, thinner features and lighter skin than the other slaves, and on this aesthetic ground they ended up being treated better (Sims, 2007: 138). As underlined by Neal Lester, professor and expert of black children's literature, these mixed-race individuals often had the "privilege" of becoming house slaves, whilst darker-skinned blacks were forced to work in the fields. Additionally, the easy grooming of the hair of the landowners' children frequently led enslaved women to internalize an inferiority complex regarding their own hair. This uncomfortable feeling would sometimes even result in them covering their hair with kerchiefs, and displaying a sort of contempt for their children's hair too (Lester, 2007: 83).

The historical context just described was the matrix of the binomial "good hair" versus "bad hair", destined to last up to the present. The first label was attributed to straight, fair hair, as similar as possible to white women's, in a reflection of the Eurocentric mentality of the time, which considered the canons of Caucasian beauty universally valid. Vice versa, African American natural hair, with its darkness, tight curliness, was called "bad". Since kinky hair often led to worse life conditions for enslaved women, as seen above, the first rudimentary straightening attempts were staged in the plantations, with "bad-haired" slaves using axle grease and lye to make it slicker and longer, in the hope of getting closer to the white ideal of attractiveness and thus being assigned to less heavy duties (Lester, 2007: 83). This pursuit of physical transformation, even if supported by practical causes, could also be read as an early display of the aforementioned concept of double consciousness by Du Bois.

Because of this historical context, negative images of "nappy" hair pervaded American folklore, literature and culture from the seventeenth century onwards, going hand in hand with the many other caricature-traits previously explored. Afro "bad" hair gradually became as much a symbol of African American ethnicity as skin-colour itself, to the point that black poet Maya Angelou, in her *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* writes about 1850s United States:

> … There were churches in Philadelphia, in Virginia and in New Orleans which had a pine slab on the outside door of the church and a fine-tooth comb hanging on a string. And when you tried to go into the church you had to be able to stand beside that pinewood and be no darker than that, and take that fine-tooth comb and run it through your hair without snagging. That's how you could get into the church. (Angelou, 1971 in Lester, 2007: 99)

The pervasiveness of Afro hair stigmatization was unlimited: an article from the *New York Times* dated 9 February 1859 enacts a racist interpretation of the Bible, linking blacks' enslavement to the curse of Ham, and combining African Americans' representation with the popular coon image (Lester, 2007: 86). Richard M. Dorson's "Why the Negro Has Kinky Hair" (1956), one century later, insinuates that blacks' hair results from their own laziness. According to his story, during the world's creation, African Americans arrived late when hair was being distributed, the reason of the delay being that they had been too busy devouring watermelon, so they ended up with the hair that nobody wanted (Lester, 2007: 83). Also, numerous minstrel songs of the late-

nineteenth and twentieth century mocked blacks' "kinky hair", and so does a vast repertoire of "snaps", these being rituals of insults belonging to the tradition of blacks' self-fashioning through linguistic performance (Lester, 2007: 84). Such a deeply rooted negative attitude towards African American hair was not even defied by the 1960s "Black is beautiful" movement, whose assertion of black natural hair's beauty favoured proud exhibitions of big Afros only for a while (Sims, 2007: 139).

The aftermath of these prejudices is not over yet: in many top western corporate environments, straightened hair has been the safest choice for black professionals' acceptance for decades, and arguably still ensures better chances of integration. Pressure about hair is alimented outside as well as within the black community. Still in the present day, African Americans' hyper-awareness on this regard translates into family members judging each other (and themselves) according to a beauty polarisation, which defines matted and woolly hair as "bad" and unnaturally silky one as "good". The same Lester, after confessing to have dismissed the attention raised by his own hair for too long, reasons:

> Competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African Americans' self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities. The implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people's hair become ways of building or crushing a black person's self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual's hair. (Lester, 2007: 81-82)

Hair care has always been a crucial component in the life of African Americans, and not only for its historical implications. The peculiarity of this type of hair contributes, in fact, to its double-sidedness: if, on one hand, its texture makes it particularly hard to fix, on the other it allows many more hairstyles than those possible with non-Afro hair. Even if much time and effort have to be invested in it, African Americans can reinvent their appearance choosing among an extraordinarily high number of hair options: in addition to the universally practised curling, straightening, braiding or balding, they can obtain a unique style by wearing it natural, dreadlocked, faded, cornrowed, twisted, permed or crimped, in most cases obtaining better-defined and longer-lasting effects than with any other type of hair. Nevertheless, nobody thought about investing in the creation of products designed specifically for African American hair until the end of the nineteenth century.

The absolute pioneer of the field was Madame C. J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove; 1867-1919), acclaimed as one of the first self-made multimillionaire women, who from 1905 on built a commercial empire on the care of black hair. She was the initiator of a new beauty method, known as the "Walker system," involving scalp preparation, lotions and iron combs, by means of which she revolutionized the hair-care routines of millions of African American people (Lester, 2007: 82). Even if her name may be associated, for some, to memories of physical discomfort coming from experiencing the straightening comb, her contribution to African American culture was extraordinary. Not only a member of the NAACP, to which she donated a generous portion of her income, but also an activist of the Harlem Renaissance, as part of her business plan she trained other black women as "beauty culturalists", offering them wages well superior to those that they could have earned as maids or cleaners.

Even if prejudices about black hair unavoidably concern both sexes, this subject in literature has been mainly investigated by African American women, both in the form of memoirs and literary fiction. The young-self version of poet Angelou, in one of her autobiographies, fantasises about her hair magically becoming straight and blond, to the envy of the rest of the community. The same happens with Pecola, who in *The Bluest Eye* prays for the physical trait that she has learnt to associate the most to love and desirability, and for what concerns toys, declares: "all the world has agreed that a blue-eyed, *yellow-haired*, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured" (Morrison, 1970: 20, in Lester, 2007: 86-87). Years later, journalist Kim Green, in her 1993 essay "The Pain of Living the Lye" opens up about the rage, shame and embarrassment that she had to go through, as a child, because of her hair:

> I grew up mad at my hair because it wasn't "pretty" like the swinging manes of the white children who surrounded me. [...] It refused to move with me and fought against me. That was how my rage was born. The shame came subtly, but it was the hardest to bear. The shame of my hair started with me watching my mother struggle to gather money to send me to the hairdresser. As a young child, I grew through Afros and cornrows. I suffered the grueling embarrassment of being the only Black child in a sea of blondes. [...] They wondered why it was that on some days my hair was "straight" and just weeks later it was lackluster and no longer "moving." I was wondering the same thing and felt rage toward a God who wouldn't explain it for me. (Green, 1993: 38, in Lester, 2007: 87)

In spite of the effectiveness of these and more testimonials, the majority of contemporary mainstream icons for children, from Disney princesses (such as Rapunzel

or Elsa from *Frozen*) to Barbies, keep providing little black girls with a reiteration of the same white-beauty standards promoted by the blond Shirley Temple or Dick and Jane in the fifties. Furthermore, except for some late formats moving in the direction of inclusiveness, widely known TV programmes and movies still are prevalently thought for a white audience, and as such expose children of any other ethnicity to images which, once again, do not reflect them, leading to damaging psychological consequences. On the other hand, however, to complicate the picture, adverts targeting African American mothers and daughters and sponsoring dangerous hair-straightening products, like relaxers, have existed for a while.

The narrative of these commercials, presenting hair-straightening as the only viable possibility for young black girls to reach beauty, depicts what are in fact strong chemical treatments as natural part of the everyday hygiene routine. Additionally, some relaxers' ads claim their products as a must for mothers who really *do* care about their young daughters, calling potential guiltiness in as part of their marketing campaign (Lester, 2007: 87). In this cultural context, despite the availability of black-readership magazines that treat the matter of hair-beauty with due awareness, offering alternatives to the adhesion to white standards, the wearing of natural hair is still an uncommon choice for African American women. This is not surprising, considering that the biases against African features reach black girls from childhood, convincing them they are not good enough the way they are. This perceived necessity of changing to fit into mainstream beauty-standards also deprives African American little girls of a portion of their childhood, projecting them into the world of adults' obligations years before their white counterpart. As a result of all these factors, most African American women confess to having a difficult relationship with their hair, and, as suggested earlier, only a minority of them opt for natural hair or short dreadlocks in the name of authenticity. It does not help that recounts coming from the few personalities wearing Afro hair are not easy to find, especially in children's literature —not even when the person is famous (Lester, 2007: 88-89).

In addition to the psychological pressure discussed, another aspect connected to the straightening of black hair, but widely unspoken, is the physical pain involved in the process. In fact, even the labels of relaxers' kits recommend to keep them out of the reach of children, contrasting with the same companies'

claims that these products are for mothers attentive to their daughters' well-being. Many are the safety risks listed, from eye injury to cutaneous irritations, scalp burns, hair damage and loss. Nonetheless, products dedicated to the youngest occupy a vast slice of this market, their use being forced upon children before these can be able to decide for themselves (Lester, 2007: 91-92). The most vivid recounts of the traumatic experience of having one's hair straightened, come from women who grew up between the fifties and the sixties, a period when Madame Walker's pressing comb was not yet rivalled by any less painful products. C. A. Hammons, who spent her childhood in the conservative Phoenix (Arizona), recalls the treatment she had to undergo every Saturday morning. Part of this was hair-relaxing, as a must for black girls willing to be accepted by the society (Lester, 2007: 106-107). As she puts it, "I never equated pressed hair with attractiveness. My pressed hair was a disguise that announced to the world that I came from a family as cultured as white folks, and that I was an especially 'nice' colored girl." (Lester, 2007: 110). As Hammons describes further, the distressing ritual, executed by Hammons' grandmother, started with a vigorous washing, her head pressed under the bathtub spigot in the kitchen, at the expense of legs, back and neck, hurting for the long pose. Later came the hateful "breaking" phase, parting the hair in workable fragments. The combing out often diminished until tearing the thick hair, causing the child to flinch on the chair: stillness would then be restored by the slap of a belt, a shoe or a hand, or by a stern reproach. From this point onwards, the instrument of pain was Madame Walker's pressing comb, a metal tool with closely spaced teeth which used to be heated by the full-open flame of the gas range. Whilst the comb was basically on fire, the hair was coated in a perfumed petroleum dressing or in Vaseline. Along the process, Hammons remembers encountering all the hazards mentioned by relaxers' labels and more. Her ears and neck would get many scars; the melting grease would burn her scalp and her grandmother's hands; the occasional sizzling noise, produced by the damp hair, would make her move suddenly, causing more burns or recriminations. Furthermore, an intense odour of fire and a cloud of smoke would fill the kitchen, momentarily blinding the comb's holder and causing more accidents. The occasional gulping of frying hair, not

infrequent during the hair-beauty ritual, caused Hammons asthma as a child—this health condition stopping when the practice ended. Finally, matching what today would be called physical abuse with psychological one, Hammons' grandmother frequently accompanied her combing movements with harsh reproaches about the little girl's "bad hair", or other negative traits of her appearance or personality, sometimes emphasising them by tapping the comb on her scalp, thus adding burns to burns (Lester, 2007: 107-109).

Beside the many female voices on the ritual, a number of black academics has explored hair politics as a crucial aspect of African American women's reality, affecting them both on a sociological and psychological level. To name just a few, feminist theorist bell hooks[26] and Michelle Wallace, respectively in "Straightening Our Hair" (1992) and "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood" (1990), have examined the racial, cultural and gender-related specifics involved in hair straightening (Lester, 2007: 84). As aforementioned, though, the same cannot be stated about the theme's development in kidlit, in contrast with the amount of adult African American literature focused on black girls trying to make peace with their hair (Lester, 2007: 113). From the blossoming of black children's literature until the 1990s, relatively few picture storybooks have been dedicated to the topic, and only one title, *Nappy Hair*, has been able, for controversial reasons, to bring attention to the subject on the large scale at the end of the twentieth century (Sims, 2007: 139). Before providing a diachronic exploration of the hair-theme in kidlit, we will examine the factors that caused *Nappy Hair* to be at the centre of an unprecedented debate, involving both the topic itself, its appropriateness in schools and the words allowed to talk about it. Without this famous controversy, after all, the previously dismissed Afro-hair matter would not have caught the attention of the American nation, gaining a new resonance.

Nappy Hair (1997) was written by African American Carolivia Herron and illustrated by Joe Cepeda, a white Californian illustrator of more than thirty-five children's picture books and receiver of many honours in kidlit. A picture storybook promoting black body positivity, it could be seen as a brilliant

[26]bell hooks' non-capitalization of her name is an artistic-political choice of the theorist.

example of the culmination of the self-love trends started in the nineties, and it fore-runs, for some aspects, books written as late as twenty years later (one above all: *Hair Love*, 2019, to be examined). Additionally, it presents in an easily-accessible, humoristic way an aspect of black culture which was not often talked about when the book came out (Lester, 2007: 100). In spite of its quality as a tribute to the African American identity, celebrating black community, family, vernacular language, hair and beauty, it became famous for the very hostile response that it provoked in a portion of the black public. The title itself, combined with the choice of a white teacher to read the book out loud in a classroom, attracted harsh protests from within the community, starting a heated debate. The reactions by some African American parents culminated in an anonymous death-threat to the writer, which testified once again to the complexity of racial matters in children's books, where even an insider-author cannot be guaranteed immunity from harsh criticism (Sims, 2007: 139-140). Such a backlash was mainly caused by the memories that the adjective in the title caused in blacks, representing an umpteenth proof of the tight relationship between words and identity and between language and political discourses, as highlighted by Stuart Hall.

The adjective "nappy" indicates the texture typical of African Americans' hair, curled to the point of looking "woolly". In spite of having the same meaning of "kinky", "messy" or "wild", none of these synonyms sounds as loaded with reminiscences of the African American historical baggage (Lester, 2007: 99), the reason being that, for years, "nappy" was used pejoratively among black people. Even if using this appellative in front of whites was taboo, and it appears that the latter group never adopted it, condemners of *Nappy Hair* found that the racially implied adjective could provide white children with an offensive nickname for their dark-skinned classmates (Sims, 2007: 139). Moreover, the fact that some extracts from the book were read to a racially mixed class of third-graders in Brooklyn by Ruth Sherman, a white teacher, aggravated the situation dramatically: considering the historical tension between European and African American standards, from language to hair and beauty, this teaching choice was seen as yet another white appropriation of black culture. To make

things worse, a certain degree of acting was required, in the reading, by the linguistic format of *Nappy Hair*, structured as a call-and-response dialogue which reproduces the involvement and musicality typical of black churches' masses. Sherman's transport was interpreted as an example of mimicking by a group of African American parents, who plausibly saw in her recital of black vernacular a later reincarnation of the sadly famous 1800s minstrel shows (Lester, 2007: 102). The book's illustrations also provoked a part of the uproar: Cepeda's sketches, particularly in the cover, recalled the stereotyped images diffused in the American literature of the past centuries (Sims, 2007: 139). These problematic aspects added up to the underlying complexity of the theme, considering that, as it has been argued, hair had long been as indicative of one's blackness as skin-colour, hence representing one of the main meters of discrimination even within African American communities (Lester, 2007: 99). In a conference following *Nappy Hair*'s publication, the author declared that the whole controversy, in her opinion, had been caused by three elements: Sherman's students' families being given photocopies of some pages at the children's request, a risky move since African Americans' pictures are often dangerously distorted by printings; the ethnicity of the unlucky teacher; some black adults' hyper-sensitivity around this word. She finally added that the point missed by the offended parents was that, in fact, the children who participated in the lesson loved the reading, and responded to it more than enthusiastically — were they Latinos, African Americans or white.

Up to this point, only the problematic aspects of the book have been highlighted. Later on, in our diachronic analysis of hair-centred African American kidlit, the occasion will be provided to discuss *Nappy Hair* as the unparalleled landmark in the field that it was. In fact, with its unapologetic style, it arguably contributed more than any other book in the category to nurture the child's self-esteem, helping to transform what had been for generations a love-hate relationship into pure *Hair Love*.

3.2.1 From the Pride in Tradition in *Cornrows* to the Upfront Praise in *Nappy Hair*

Nappy Hair brought to light that pre-concepts around African American hair still represented an open wound for black parents at the end of the 1900s. Even if Herron's was not the first book for children talking about hair from an insider's perspective, fair portrayals of Afro hair arrived relatively late in kidlit. Back in 1966, when African American children's literature was just starting, they were still a mirage: *Straight Hair, Curly Hair*, for instance, which aimed at describing hair's characteristics to the youngest, reflected the limited perspective of the time. Written by Augusta R. Goldin and illustrated by Ed Emberley (both white), it included only two drawings of brown-skinned, curly children and did not show in any way the specificities of Afro hair, exemplifying that much progress was needed in terms of representational inclusion (Lester, 2007: 89).

Vice versa, an authentic portrayal of black hair is offered by a title of great significance in the landscape of African American illustrated kidlit about hair: *Cornrows.* The picture storybook, which came out in 1979, is presently seen as a classic. Written by Camille Yarbrough, versatile artist active in theatre, dance, music and film industry, its drawings were realised by Carole Byard, twice-winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, who achieved it with this contribution for the first time, before obtaining it again for *Grandmama's Joy* the following year. Together with placing in a prominent position the theme of hair, still unusual at the time, the book continues the literary tradition focusing on African American values, such as historical and cultural heritage, family bonds and intergenerational storytelling. Yarbrough combines these concepts with teachings of women's worthiness and children's need of self-esteem, whose propagation was only at its initial stage in the black kidlit of the eighties. The significance of this work was also increased by the uncommon way in which the author mixes past and present, history and fiction and prose and verse. Furthermore, concerning hair in general and cornrows in particular, the timing of the publication was perfect. The hairstyle in the title of the book, coincidentally, was becoming popular that year because of the blockbuster *Ten*, whose seductive, blond protagonist, interpreted by Bo Derek, wore it. For this reason, the popular media started calling cornrows "Bo braids". Yarbrough's vindication

of this hairstyle as belonging to the African American tradition was effective in undermining what could have been yet another appropriation, by white Americans, of an aspect deeply rooted in the black identity. Fore-running also the literary thread of black grand-families, most prolific in the nineties, this picture book portrays a great-grandmother and a mother adjusting the latter's children's hair in cornrows, whilst teaching them the symbolic implications of this hairstyle. Great-Grammaw and Mama, alternating plain narration to a chant resembling today's hip-hop, link cornrows to the ancient spirit of the African population and invite the youngest members of the family to name their braids after people who contributed to black history, obtaining contrasting results (Sims, 2007: 125-126). Whilst the elder, Shirley Ann, names her hairstyle after Langston Hughes, knowing one of his poems by heart, the little Mike, affectionately nicknamed Brother "MeToo", opts for "Batman", probably not having fully understood the complexity of values entangled in his cornrows. This detail aside, the two women-protagonists turn the critical process of hair-fixing into an occasion to instruct their offspring about the resistance shown by their ancestors to survive slavery and become leaders, and to emphasise the role that hairstyle played in their struggle. Great-Grammaw, as matriarch of the family, explains that Africans' hairstyles identified their village, clan and religion, and adds that female slaves coming from the Yoruba population, for example, wore more than thirty braids each, whose pattern indicated if they were brides, princesses or queens. In terms of the narrative of the book, it should also be observed that, in spite of a stronger feminine presence in the overall hairstyling tradition, as well as in the great-grandmother's stories here, the little brother is also included in the ritual, to highlight its significance for all African American people. Additionally, *Cornrows* enhances the role of the family's elders before this became a *topos* in the genre, underlining their merit for offering the youngsters an Afrocentric vision of the world otherwise unknown, and widely obscured by the mainstream America (Martin, 2004: 88-89). The pictures of the book contribute too in promoting a positive image of Afro hair and in claiming cornrows as products of the black heritage. In spite of a mismatch between book-cover, where the two children wear Afros, and text, stating that by the end of the

story they sport braided hair (Martin, 2004: 88-89), Byard's black-and-white drawings finely reproduce the spiritual dimension evoked by Great-Grammaw, the features of the typical African hairstyles, and the overall family-union feeling emerging from the book. Her delicate sketches also include scenes and artefacts from African history and portrayals of famous characters of the black history who are named in the text (Sims, 2007: 126). All these powerful attributions to African hair, arguably unattainable by an outsider's description, make of *Cornrows* the main precursor to the field of hair-themed black kidlit that would develop only at the end of the twentieth century.

The continuation of this trend was not immediate and *Cornrows* was followed by a decade of silence on the theme from the African American perspective. A new group of hair-centred books for black children was produced between the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, but none of them presented such ground-breaking traits as Yarbrough's work. Among these, Alexis De Veaux's *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (1987) was nonetheless well-received, achieving the 1988 Coretta Scott King Award for the best author of the year (www.ala.org/awardsgrants/enchanted-hair-tale). De Veaux is a black lesbian feminist, culturally and socially engaged as a writer, speaker and activist; winner of the 2015 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, she fights for minorities' inclusion in the arts (alexisdeveaux.com). Her *Enchanted Hair Tale* celebrates the imaginative power of a black boy who wears dreadlocks (Lester, 2007: 89), placing centre-stage a young male protagonist for the first time in the history of hair-themed black kidlit. Little Sudan, at the beginning of the story, does not like his dreadlocks, because they attract the derision of peers and neighbours, who call him "strange". The boy's conception of his hair takes a better turn when he finds out that a group of itinerant circus-performers that he admires wears dreadlocks too (Lester, 2007: 203-204). Another noteworthy trait of this work, is that it is the first in the genre to counter-pose two opposite stances on hair by its owner, displaying a self-discovery journey which leads the child from hair-hate to appreciation. On the other hand, the illustrations by white American artist Cheryl Hanna, consisting in essential black-and-white pencil sketches, did not meet particular enthusiasm.

Tanzanian Tololwa M. Mollel, passionate about children's arts and engaged as writer, lecturer, theatre director and storyteller, was the author of *The Princess Who Lost Her Hair: An Akamba Legend* in 1993. Telling a moral tale inspired by African folklore (the Akamba population living in Kenya), this book warns against vanity: the protagonist girl's long hair, initially taken away to punish her selfishness, is given back to her when she has learnt her lesson (Lester, 2007: 204). Illustrations are by Charles Reasoner, a white American author, artist and translator of children's books. Obtained by a combination of manual drawing and digital art, these are characterised by an abundance of geometric forms and strong, warm colours, greatly adding to the attractiveness of the book, which however did not receive any prize.

Another hair-related work which deserves a mention was the retelling of *Rapunzel* by Fred Crump, Junior. Professor Crump (1931-2005) devoted his life to fighting for black children's inclusion in representation, first as an art teacher and then as author and illustrator of over forty publications featuring African American characters as protagonists. Published in 1991, his *Rapunzel* recasts the traditionally candid-skinned, long, gold and straight-haired princess as a brown girl, whose dark, resistant braids turn to be easier to climb for the prince than those of white Rapunzel. Despite not reaching the fame of other titles of African American kidlit, this revisionist rendition of one of Grimm's tales reflected the writer's determination to give main roles to dark-skinned little girls.[27]

Leaving on a side these less notorious achievements, the second huge title focusing on hair, after the epic *Cornrows*, was the already introduced *Nappy Hair*. Having already examined the aspects which gave ground to its negative reception, now its positive qualities will be analysed. Herron's book was autobiographical, based on the fun that her family poked at her rebel hair when she was little. The story of Brenda, "cute little brown baby girl" between five and eight years old, is told by Uncle Mordecai. In the middle of a family picnic, after announcing the purpose of the narrative, the man assumes the guise of an enthusiastic preacher to present his nephew's hair-vicissitudes through an

[27] Interestingly, this was happening a decade before Disney confirmed the Eurocentric look of Rapunzel in its far-reaching 2010 movie, *Tangled.* More details on the movie can be found on: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0398286 (accessed 6 July 2022).

entertaining mix of African folklore, American history, rapping rhymes and Biblical references. Whilst Mordecai validates the beauty of Brenda's unmanageable hair in sacred terms, the other members of the family comment Mordecai's affirmations in the way typical of southern black church services, this call-and-response ritual contributing to the performative effects of the sermon, which soon becomes an upfront celebration of African American culture as a whole (Lester, 2007: 90-91). The little girl's story is therefore pretext for an ode to the past of the black population living in the USA, with Brenda's hair's resistance to straightening being compared to the opposition of her ancestors to slavery. The protagonist's hair is fearlessly defined as "the kinkiest, the nappiest, the fuzziest, the most screwed up, squeezed up, knotted up, tangled up, twisted up, nappiest … hair you've ever seen in your life", and its refusal to submit to relaxers is seen as "an act of God that came straight through Africa" (Lester, 2007: 91). Addressing the text mainly to young African American girls, more affected by hair-beauty ideals than boys, Herron also hopes to reach all those parents surrendering to advertising campaigns which proclaim hair-straightening to be key to their children's attractiveness and success (Lester, 2007: 91). Furthermore, the absence from the plot of Brenda's own feelings about her hair configures the story as a universal parable aiming to discourage black people's too rigid stances on their appearance (Lester, 2007: 94). The supportive family of the protagonist is in fact unconditioned by mainstream negative judgements, and validates Brenda's "nappy" hair as an appealing manifestation of African American unique identity. This example is offered by Herron to question the diffused condemnation of Afro hair in its natural state, too often leading black subjects to change what is in fact a physical characteristic they should be proud of (Lester, 2007: 93). This message is reinforced by Brenda's hair-shape, recalling the silhouette of a black woman's typical headdress. Moreover, the other proud members of the family, displaying skins of different shades of brown, wear typically African hair-styles, from cornrows to dreadlocks and Afros (Lester, 2007: 94). Herron's challenge of the Western mythologies associating blue-eyed, blond-haired little girls to angels is also perceivable in the part of the book about the world's creation. Here, we are shown an Afrocentric

God who defines Brenda's hair as symbol of spiritual completion, asserting that "One nap of her hair is the only perfect circle in nature" (1997: 28). Praising the roundness of Brenda's locks, this God enhances Afrocentric spiritualism as opposed to the occidental cult of linearity (Lester 2007: 104). The book's strong Afrocentrism, accentuated by the presence of black angels, is exasperated by some critics who interpret this God's adhesion to a black church-style speech pattern as an indicator of his own African American ethnicity (Martin, 2003: 169). However, the absence of illustrations portraying God in the book makes it impossible to prove this hypothesis. A final aspect to acknowledge is Brenda's relatives' participation, which testifies to the writer's praise of the black community's unity, often displaying in extended-family gatherings and talking rituals, from pulpits to picnics (Lester, 2007: 104). Coming to the linguistic aspect, the black church-dialogue adopted in *Nappy Hair* makes public a form of communication otherwise only familiar to African American people, in an attempt to dignify another practice long stigmatized as a sign of ignorance (Martin, 2003: 176). The importance of defending black speech from whites' prejudices is also reflected here by the protagonist's inspiring attitude: Brenda can speak both "good" and "bad" English, and is not shackled by others' perception, both in matter of hair and language (Lester 2007: 104). Finally, from a graphic point of view, parents' objections condemning Cepeda's drawings as stereotyping were invalidated, once again, by the main targets of the book: children themselves. As Herron reports about children's reaction to a reading of her book that she attended in Binghamton (New York):

> You should have seen the look on the three black girls' faces as they looked at their own kind—all happy about nappy hair—and then at the white faces all enchanted about how wonderful this hair is. It's about pride and respect. Everybody was speechless. They couldn't even talk after that. (Lester, 2007: 106)

The water-colours' everydayness vibe makes them very effective reminding of Steptoe's works, and the mixture of realism, humour and lightness that they convey matches well with the musicality and positivity of the work in its whole. Through this wide display of techniques, Herron invites all readers to imitate Brenda and her universe in resisting gender, race and beauty ideals which exclude them *a priori,* embracing the book's spiritual and cultural revival to gain a stronger self-confidence. This book, more vehemently than any other, claims

that “nappy”, despite its past derogative use, in contemporary days should be perceived as associable to happiness, attractiveness and proud blackness. Only the adoption of this point of view, the author seems to suggest, will permit to black people to abandon hair-damaging practices without guiltiness, and will ultimately prevent children from feeling wrong or ugly since a tender age, confining internalized racism to the past. In the end, the arguments against the book and the teacher involved, in addition to dramatically increasing the title’s sales, proved that Sherman’s intervention had indeed happened at the right time and place, and that Herron’s exhortation to her black con-nationals to break with “the good and bad hair syndrome” was more than needed. The fallout of Brooklyn black community, causing the ban of the incriminated white teacher from the school, arguably gave the opportunity to African Americans of the whole nation to do some introspection and address their historically-rooted habit of judging themselves through the lenses of Eurocentric ideals (Lester, 2007: 115).

In this section, it has been shown that the first samples of African American hair-themed kidlit displayed an intermingling of different ways to approach the taboo topic. If a title of the beginnings admitted to some discomfort being related to hair, counter-posing the young protagonist’s initial shame to his final acceptance of his difference (*An Enchanted Hair Tale*), the others took a fully positive approach, with one book even making Rapunzel black, in itself a deconstruction of white standards of beauty. Finally, the two pre-2000s main works took different approaches, but maintaining the same positive attitude. Where *Cornrows* was founded on grandmothers imparting practical and historical knowledge to the youngsters and evoking their African ancestors’ spirits, *Nappy Hair*, twenty years later, anchored to these past traditions the parable of a nappy-haired little girl whose most rebel feature was firmly wanted by God himself, in a remarkably Afrocentric hymn to black hair-love. To continue, the post-*Nappy Hair* African American kidlit will be analysed, in the hope that the integration of some contemporary books in our overview will allow us to make predictions about the future evolution of black children’s literature.

3.2.2 Herron's Aftermath: Contemporary Validations of the Black Self

Since *Cornrows*' publication at the end of the 1970s, it had become evident that the depiction of blacks' hair, even (if not especially) in books written for children, could be pretext to deeper political, sociological and historical considerations about blackness. Whilst some picture books such as *Nappy Hair,* similarly to *Cornrows,* incorporated history, religion and storytelling, many other literary works at the threshold of the twenty-first century took the distance from this tendency, favouring easy-plotted, every-day recounts from which the overall message of hair-positivity could emerge in an even more direct way.

Wild, Wild Hair, published in the same year as *Nappy Hair* (1997), can be seen as an example of this new trend. This picture book, whose title probably signals the writer's intention to avoid potentially problematic words ("wild" being a safer choice than "nappy"), tells the story of little black girl Tisa who hates Mondays, because on this day of the week her long, thick hair gets combed; so, every time she hides. The upcoming hair-ritual becomes here an occasion to play hide-and-seek; moreover, when the fastidious procedure is over, she loves her hair so much that she cannot stop looking at it in the mirror (Lester, 2007: 90). The writer behind this book is African American Nikki Grimes, Children's Literature Legacy Medal Winner and Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Nominee (www.nikkigrimes.com), whilst the realistic water-coloured and pencil illustrations are by the aforementioned, by then notorious, George Ford. This piece of kidlit, quite appreciated by the public, does not hide completely the pain involved in the process, hinting at it in more than one passage. Nonetheless, the happy ending reveals Grimes' decision to focus on the bright sides: the little girl's fear is transformed at the beginning into pretext for a game involving all family members, and, most importantly, Tisa's excitement for her princess-braids at the end of the operation justifies retrospectively the mother's effort and the daughter's pain

I Love My Hair (1998) was written by African American poet, memoirist and children's books' writer Natasha Anastasia Tarpley and illustrated by E. B. Lewis, winner of the Caldecott Honor and of the Orbis Picture Award, and author of over seventy books targeting black young readers. In this fictionalized

autobiography, similar to *Wild, Wild Hair* for the positive vibe, the shift from annoyance to hair's acceptance is explored more in depth. The young protagonist Keyana every night, before going to sleep, has to sit down between her mother's knees to have her hair combed. At the beginning of the story, the child states she does not feel lucky about her hair, whose thickness makes the combing hurtful despite Mama's attentiveness. However, when mum reminds her of all the beautiful ways in which her hair can be fixed, she changes her mind about it. The hair-styling moment is here described with familiar details which testify to Tarpley's sensibility as a memoirist, mentioning the coconut-scented oil, the mother's hands' delicateness, and Keyana's sometimes vain efforts not to cry. In these pages, the author is actually recalling how she fell in love with her hair, as a young child, thanks to the emotive connection between hair-fixing and her mother's intimacy in the gestures involved (Lester, 2007: 204). In this case, like in the previous one, the positive finale celebrates African American hair with a decidedly apolitical stance (Lester, 2007: 90). Differently from Grimes's book though, here the focus is on the many hairstyles possible precisely thanks to Afro-hair's texture. Hence, the little girl narrates that for example, when she wears braids, she loves dancing at the music produced by their beads. In another passage, she learns to ignore her classmates' mockery of her Afros thanks to her teacher, also African American, who encourages her to be proud of her blackness. Besides, like Pinkneys' *Shades of Black* (2000) would do some years later, Tarpley makes the little protagonist compare her hair to beautiful things in nature, like forests, cotton candies and vines. Having reached unconditional hair-love by the end of the book, Keyana confesses that her favourite hairstyle is two pig-tails: they stick out so firmly, she says, that they look like wings, ready to make her fly. Lewis' watercolours, abounding in pastel nuances, provide illustrations at once cheerful and realistic, with two entire pages being dedicated to a display of all the objects used for Keyana's hair-beauty: a rainbow of mini-combs, barrettes and elastic bounds.

More significant in the history of the genre than both the titles just described, was: *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), written by bell hooks, and illustrated by Chris Raschka, a white artist also winner of the Caldecott Medal.

Published two years after *Nappy Hair* (1999), the adjective in its title did not cause conflicts, arguably testifying to one of Herron's achievements. The writer being a veteran of hair-related discourses —she also authored an essay on it, as already mentioned —, she dedicated this self-empowering picture book to her nieces (Lester, 2007: 203). Here the author/narrator openly celebrates nappy hair, described for its array of positive qualities in its natural state, not last the unique adaptability to most different styles. *Happy to Be Nappy'*s encouragement to self-assertion was so unequivocal that it provoked no misunderstandings or protests, differently from its almost homonym. hooks brings to completion an ideological revolution begun with Grimes' and Tarpley's works, showing that hair-straightening is not any longer the way to go. Where Herron's publication ambivalently teased Brenda's hair's intransigence against relaxers, in *Happy to Be Nappy* the very idea of placating Afro hair is refused. Moreover, Raschka's illustrations were so abstract, that they were spared the negative feedback often arising from pictures striving for realism, as was the case with Cepeda's art in *Nappy Hair* (Sims, 2007: 140). Raschka depicts a display of little, African American nappy-haired "girl-pies" explain in their various, equally pleasant skin-shades and hairstyles. Their most rebel physical trait is now clean-smelling and billowy soft, then frizzy and fuzzy, and can be twisted and plaited or brushed and braided (Lester, 2007: 90), but never straightened. Following a whole trail of books which had aimed for replacing the negative associations linked to black people's hair with a unilaterally positive image of it, hooks' masterpiece represents the calm after the two-year long socio-political storm of *Nappy Hair* (Lester, 2007: 203). The book's defiant affirmation of kinky hair as status-symbol of the beautiful cultural uniqueness of African Americans, is also conveyed by the cover's warm pastel colours. The abundance of orange, yellow, light green and blue, typically associated to cheerful emotions, reinforces the optimistic feeling transpiring from hooks' text. Whimsical words and playful drawings support each other, and the rhyming scheme helps punctuating the core ideas of the poem, reinforcing the stream of positive adjectives used to describe hair textures, colors, shapes, shades and sizes (Lester, 2007: 205-206). The joyful façade of the book, however, does not mean that socio-political intentions

are completely out of the picture. In fact, hooks is trying to find a remedy for the inferiority complexes caused in African Americans by the white gaze. Hence the writer, here, is also attempting to cancel the many stigmas diffused around blacks' lack of hair-hygiene. For instance, the oily look associated by whites to Afro hair, far from indicating dirtiness as Caucasian standards would sustain, is caused by scalp oiling as a fundamental part of the washing needed by this type of hair (Lester, 2007: 206-207). Another point underlined in *Happy to Be Nappy* is the importance of the rituals associated to hair-care, which occupy five of thirty-two pages. hooks recalled on many occasions that hair preparation, when she was little, was also lived as an occasion for women's bonding, and her picture book underlines this aspect. Not only beneficial to mother-daughter relationships, the hair-styling routine, may it be at someone's home or at the parlour, represented a pleasant excuse for regularly-cadenced gatherings, including grandmothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and neighbours (Lester, 2007: 207). One fragment of the book in particular, illustrating four little girls having their hair combed each by an African American woman, transforms the kitchen-setting of the scene into one of the beauty salons recalled by the author. The hymn to black children's self-appreciation, not complicated here by Afrocentric versus Eurocentric polarizations, also reiterates the value of the African American community in a climax of stylized drawings. The "girlpie" standing on the cover, hands on the hips and defiant smile, is joined in the epilogue by thirteen proud and happy, variously brown-shaded, counterparts, each with their hair styled in an original, if not extravagant, shape. All these elements contribute to *Happy to Be Nappy*'s landmark quality in the field under examination, offering a visual and written "performance of black 'girlpie happiness' in their celebrated nappiness" (Lester, 2007: 208).

The path from hair-hate to "kinky"-hair-love may seem concluded, in many ways, by hooks' fundamental work. Starting from the title, it would be difficult to imagine a more straight to the point wording. Retracing the steps which led from the first to the last work described, some considerations can be made. Drawing a line between Yarbrough's and hooks' development of the thread, it could be asserted that one of the shifts involved was that from past to

present. The little brother and sister in *Cornrows* are introduced as spiritual offspring of the formerly-enslaved African American population, and their hair is connected to the great-grandma's memories of ancient symbologies and traditions. Mollel, Crump and De Veaux experiment alternative storytelling on the theme, generating a shift from past to present-oriented stories. The first of the three, *The Princess Who Lost Her Hair*, evokes a past legend with a parable-configuration reminiscent of Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, published six years before. *Rapunzel*'s black recasting marks a jump into the future of African American kidlit (and not only), maybe aided by the influence of "in Living Color", a now-irretrievable cartoon parodying the ever-white princess which was aired by FOX the year before the book's publication (Lester, 2007: 89). Finally, *An Enchanted Hair Tale*, despite the title, provides a link to the realistic matrix literature to come, for the sex of the little protagonist and for the change undergone by his hair-perception in the course of the story. Where De Veaux counter-poses to the initial teasing of Sudan's dreadlocks his final contentment for the hair-style, so similar to that of the acrobats he admires, both *Wild, Wild, Hair* and *I Love My Hair* depict parents and teachers replacing their little girls' association of hair to pain with a reason for racial pride. Last but not least, Herron's and hooks' notorious publications can arguably be seen as two sides of the same coin. Printed at a couple of years distance, the adjective "nappy", dominating both children's books, leads to the insurgence of Brooklyn African American parents in the first instance, whilst it is received, in the case of *Happy to Be Nappy*, with the same cheerful feeling pervading the whole book.

Nonetheless, hooks' was just the first of a new plethora of kidlit works moving in the direction of self-esteem, probably encouraged by this editorial success. The 1999 book was shortly followed by same author's *Home-made Love*, 2002 (enhancing self-appreciation in more general terms), and successively by a multitude of titles highlighting the beauty of African American children's hair, whatever the style chosen (natural one included). These last twenty years of African American children's literature have been characterised by a uniform stance on the subject, with hair being presented in a positive light, accordingly to the contemporary trend of black-self-validation. Even if the

combo black author and illustrator remains hard to find, for the statistic reasons recalled at the beginning of this examination, African American children can nowadays see themselves mirrored in a certain range of books for youngsters, written by insiders and beautifully illustrated.

Surely, the way is still long to go for racial equality, and yearly surveys on published authors' ethnicity, both in the context of this micro-theme, of overall kidlit, and of literature in general, prove a persistent imbalance between the white and non-white editorial presence. Indeed motivated by this awareness, though, a growing number of popular publishing houses is today attentive to reserve a space to multicultural and/or specifically black children's literature, one example being provided by the English division of Penguin Books. This change of attitudes is happening slowly, but it is there. Meanwhile, black *ad hoc* editorial realities are diffusing at exponential rapidity on paper, but even more on the internet. Often starting as independent publishers founded by a few teachers, parents or activists, these associations, willing to create a collective, fully inclusive bookshelf for their children, frequently meet an immediate positive response, generating a spontaneous networking between followers and collaborators. Case in point to the productiveness of this recent phenomenon are the Centre for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature, We Need Diverse Books and Lee and Low Publishing, focusing on the interests of all minorities, as well as the already quoted Brown Bookshelf and the more recent Mocha Books, for what concerns African American-specific kidlit needs—listed in the sitography, as precious sources of inspiration for this research. Coming to the topic under discussion, Mocha Books dedicated an article to the best titles celebrating black children's hair (www.readwithmochabooks.com/blogs/news/childrens-books-that-celebrate-black-childrens-hair). To follow, we will analyse the top-list picture book, which blends together old and new ways of addressing the theme.

Hair Love's simple title certainly sums up well the new millennium mantra. It was written by African American author, director[28], producer and editor Matthew Cherry and illustrated by writer, graphic artist and film-maker

[28] Among his many broadcast contributions, there are also multiple episodes of the famous TV programme *Black-ish* (https://www.matthewacherry.com/about, accessed 30 June 2022).

Vashti Harrison. The result of this collaboration, benefiting from their shared passion for children-targeted story-telling and communal background in cinema and TV, was a title of multi-medial potential. In fact, *Hair Love*, six times New York Times best-seller, is the picture-book transposition of a multi-prized project, which started as an animated short movie in 2019 (winner of 2020 Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film) and is currently being turned into an animated television series with HBO Max (www.matthewacherry.com/about). In terms of plot, as reported by the Mocha Books article, Zuri's kinky hair has a mind of its own, but she knows it is beautiful. On a special occasion, her dad has to step in to style it, facing a challenge which is completely new to him. However, his determination to make his beloved daughter happy will allow him to achieve his goal, despite Zuri's hair's rebel nature. Whilst from a first glance the book may seem to reproduce the usual self-empowering pattern, a closer examination reveals that this ode to natural hair presents several points of detachment from the previous literary achievements.

The first elements of difference to be analysed will be the ones regarding the characterisation of the little protagonist girl. Interestingly, Zuri affirms she knows that her hair is beautiful from the opening of the book, stating: "Daddy tells me it is beautiful. That makes me proud. I love that my hair lets me be me!" (2019: 3). This aspect arguably reflects the progresses made, in terms of black-beauty awareness, since the times of Grimes' or Tarpley's publication. Moreover, the description of the girl's hair alternates images recurrent in hair-themed kidlit and rather unconventional portrayals. On one side, she first compares herself (when she wears beaded braids) to a princess, a similarity to Crump's Rapunzel that is reinforced by the image accompanying this passage, which depicts a dreamy Zuri letting a butterfly rest on her hand, on the balcony of a tower (even if it is a children's park castle, the reference is clear). On the other, the representation of the second hairstyle, occupying two pages instead of the canonical one, displays a determined-looking, hands-on-hips version of the little girl, who states: "And when my hair is in two puffs, I am above the clouds like a superhero" (2019: 5). Even if she is wearing a pink mantel, the reference to

Wonder Woman is clear, reflecting the 2020s era, where females are no longer reserved only secondary roles as side-kicks or male superheroes' lovers. It is important to notice that the undermining of gender stereotypes in fiction emerging here, is actually pervasive in contemporary African American kidlit. Whereas some girl-protagonists still dream to become ballerinas or teachers, at least as many in recent productions pursue traditionally masculine careers, are passionate about space-ships or super heroes. Vice versa, these last traits are now less recurrent in the depiction of little boys, who are often featured as chefs, musicians or dancers to be, challenging the stigma according to which artistic paths are more for women than for men. In the classification of the 2021 best picture books by the Brown Bookshelf, for instance, one title, *When Langston Dances*, focuses on a black little boy who plays basketball to make his dad happy, but actually feels true to himself only when he dances. *Remember to Dream, Ebere,* instead, in perfect symmetry with the story just described, tells of a little girl who, encouraged by her mother to dream big, starts fantasising about becoming the captain of a rocket ship.

Secondly, the figure of Zuri's dad also testifies to the modernity of this picture book. Covering the traditionally-female role of hair-styler of the household (despite this circumstance being presented as exceptional), he marks a first in the field, defying the idea that only mothers, grandmothers, aunts and elder sisters can braid girls' hair. The fact that this is a modern-day daddy is further proved by the reason why the little girl decides to let him rest a little longer, seeing him asleep. As Zuri explains, he is worn out because every day he has a busy schedule: he makes her breakfast, takes her to school, goes to work, picks her up, and sometimes, like the day before, he even takes her to the park to bike together. This celebration of *daddies*, rather than *mummies*, marks a first in African American illustrated children's literature about hair. For its involvement of the father in the hair-style process, *Hair Love* provides a link with the expanding male-rendition of the hair-theme. This, following a thirty-year pause after De Veaux's *Enchanted Hair Tale*, has been properly flourishing in the last years. Even if our focus has been on the more prolific female account of hair-love, a few recent titles going in the opposite direction are worth naming here.

This new subcategory may be connected to the present day spreading of physical appearance-related anxieties among young men, which are now as diffused as between girls. The Mocha Books list also acclaims a couple of male-protagonist titles: *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* (2017) praises the beautiful humanity of black boys and encourages them to appreciate their looks; *Furqans Flat Top* (2019) is about a boy of colour who goes to the barber for the first time, with his dad, and passes from fear to enthusiasm for his appearance; *I Have Good Hair* (2018), finally, recounts the experience of a boy and a girl who, travelling the world together, rediscover the beauty of their own natural hair. Last but not least, 2021 *J. D. and the Great Barber Battle*, sponsored by Penguin Random House, arguably represents one of the most curious recent re-elaborations of the topic: the protagonist, trying to remedy to his mum's first home-haircut on him, discovers he is so skilled that he opens a barbershop in his own bedroom, and ends up having to fight the official local barber in a duel.

To end the examination of the picture book under discussion, a final note should be added on Harrison's attractive digital art, which definitely contributes to the enticing nature of the work, and reveals its up-to-datedness also in the visual aspect. Her technique combines cinematic-like vividness of details, humour and contemporaneity' indicators: Zuri's young dad, for instance, in addition to true-to-life-defined muscles and dreadlocks, exhibits stylish tribal tattoos on his right arm. There is no denying that, in terms of visual representation, we are miles beyond the first African American kidlit work examined staging a father's efforts: the drawings of *Uptown* by Steptoe, ground-breaking in the 1970s, appear rudimentary in comparison to these.

In conclusion, *Hair Love* has been chosen, among many modern picture books, because it represents the ideal culmination of the black-beauty path started with Herron and hooks for what concerns female Afro hair. This work also reflects the self-love trend that is presently spread worldwide on all kinds of media. Additionally, this picture book perfectly symbolises the contemporary gender stereotype reversal, which finds a symmetry in the mentioned modern stories of little black girls wanting to become astronauts or boys loving to dance. Finally, *Hair Love* offers a window onto the male relationship with hair, which

could represent the future of this previously female dominated theme in black kidlit.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to create a bridge between contemporary debates about racial inclusion in audiovisual media, and past interventions of African Americans for a fair representation, with the scope of understanding what makes representation authentic. We have seen that this theme has deep connections with the current situation, since some black stereotypes born at the beginning of the nineteenth century have not yet been completely overcome. Blackfacing practices prove this point: started with the creation of Jim Crow's character at the beginning of 1800, they still resurface from time to time, among college students, TV presenters or you-tubers, despite having been universally labelled as racist. Also, the mainstream representation of black women has consisted of sterile clichés from slavery onwards, and whilst formerly common stereotypes, like that of the sexy Jezebel or of the overweight Mammy, have almost disappeared from recent media productions, others resisted in time. This would be the case, for instance, of the Sapphire stereotype, whose twenty-first century version corresponds to the character of the angry black woman, very familiar to us.

Also the category of African American children, as we have seen, has been for long stigmatized starting from the mid-nineteenth century, with racist prejudices affecting both black little men and women. On one side, the wild, dark-skinned young girl counter-posed to the white, angelic Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the model for many successive caricatured characters, culminating in the creation of the Topsy doll, which did not need to be cared for but could be thrown at things without breaking. On the other, at the end of the nineteenth century, the worldwide fame of Sambo, first non white protagonist of a picture book, universalized the image of black children as dark-skinned, smiley and poorly dressed, all big lips and bulging eyes, and always in danger. Even if Sambos and Topsys have become more rare from the 1960s, my analysis has highlighted that the inclusion of the so-called "ethnic minorities" of America in representation has been controversial from the beginning, and that whites' intentions to help authors of different racial backgrounds to emerge not always found coherent applications in practice. Not only that, but white activists' urgency toward a more inclusive representation often translated into writing books about minorities themselves, thus competing for publishing space with the non white writers that in theory they wanted to promote, and inadvertently perpetuating old stereotypes.

We have also tried to bring out the fact that today's representational situation, which at first glance appears as definitively improved from the epoch just described, is nonetheless full of white, well-intentioned initiatives which do not necessarily lead to an actual increase of inclusion. In fact, several recent tendencies are displaying an effort to diminish racism and to look at things from the perspective of minorities, the critical re-readings of American literary classics effectuated in the last fifty years being one of them. Among these, the 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been at the centre of a long dispute, throughout the twentieth century, because of the frequent racial stereotypes and use of the n-word in the book. Banned at the end of the nineteenth century and removed from the reading materials for juniors by some schools in the last decades, some critics have proposed revised versions of the work, deprived of all potentially uncomfortable elements. As reported by The Harvard Crimson, one example of these modified editions can be found in that by American Professor Alan Gribben, (2011), replacing all instances of the n-word with "slave". This attempt to make the book more accessible to young readers and to the general audience has however attracted controversial reactions, with many professors of English seeing the modified text as an insult to the historical significance of Twain's work (www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/2/1/word-term-text-american). More recently, in 2021, *Dr. Seuss Enterprises* decided that six titles by the beloved writer of illustrated children's books of the 1950s, would no longer be published because of their racist images. In the same year, after the news invaded the media, President Joe Biden omitted Dr Seuss from the Read Across America Day list just one day before the annual festival, which is celebrated each year on the birthday of Dr. Seuss himself (the recurrence was established by the National Education Association in 1998 in order to promote reading among children; the choice of the date was tied to the author). It did not matter that the writer, having apologised for his early racially loaded works, had created, at the end of his career, many inclusive picture books beloved by a very diverse audience, praised by the former USA president Barack Obama among the others. Also, this decision by Dr. Seuss' estate met with some disapproval, on the ground that stereotyped portrayals of black people, in the historical period when Seuss was writing, were the norm. Moreover, numerous fans who grew up with his books voiced their disappointment on social media, one post declaring that the author who had instilled the love for reading and taught to

dream big to so many students of the USA, surely did not deserve banning (www.ibtimes.sg/dr-seuss-which-books-writer-have-been-banned-why-55952).

All these ambivalent feedbacks on late modifications and banning of popular children's literature, interestingly come from both black and white audiences, pointing out, once again, to the complexity of the matter of racial representation. On one side, individuating and voicing the racist elements embedded in what were considered children's classics for decades is positive, reflecting nowadays' more attentive perspective on diversity, especially when the youngsters are involved. Banning influential books of the past because they are perceived as potentially offensive for minorities today, on the other hand, is a quite drastic measure to take, hardly shareable by everyone. Even if excluding these titles from the market may seem an obvious choice to prevent the diffusion of racism, it should be noted that banning books rises the interest towards them, and of course does not cancel the impact they might have had on black children's self-esteem decades ago. For this reason, when it comes to the representation of minorities (in general) and black people (in particular), observing the mistakes of the past to learn how to avoid their repetition in the future could, arguably, be more effective than ostracising works of art of different, more racist epochs.

Up to now, I have focused mainly on the mistakes committed by whites whilst they were trying to ameliorate blacks' status in representation, both after the sixties, when the revolution of kidlit started, and in the last decades, with the trend of subjecting old literary works to anti-racist modifications and banning. However, it should be kept in mind that, among the titles which have made the history of African American kidlit, some white contributions also appeared, proving once again that generalisations should never be made, both in positive and in negative. More specifically, about a third of the picture books that I have analysed were written by African Americans but illustrated by non black artists. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the first modern picture storybook featuring a black child as protagonist with an inclusive purpose, *The Snowy Day*, was written and illustrated by a white author, and greatly contributed to normalizing the image of African American children in an epoch, the early sixties, where they never figured in kidlit. White writers and illustrators, then, played indeed a part in the evolution of African American children's books. Notwithstanding, their works, differently from African American creations, were never entirely immune from

the black community's criticism. *The Snowy Day*, despite its significance, was accused of portraying a black protagonist whose physical features, skin color excluded, could have perfectly suited a white character. Moreover, it was pointed out that the story was lacking any references to the African American culture. In regard to the aforementioned illustrations by white artists, my research shows that they were met by a tepid reception at best, and only managed to be spared negative feedbacks when they were abstract images, not striving for realism (like in the case of Raschka's contribution in *Happy to Be Nappy*). To summarize, the problem of all these white attempts was that they were missing a quality which is impossible to recreate artificially, this being, the point of view of an insider and the resulting authenticity of the portrayal given.

This last consideration leads us to the two main questions posed at the beginning of this work, more specifically: the relationship between the author's racial background and the work's credibility, and the status of the contemporary literary offer for African American children, with a focus on the theme of hair. In regard to the first point, we have already seen that white works, despite their authors' best intentions, were always missing a certain quality. The examination of the main corpus of this study, constituted by African American picture books written by black authors from the seventies onwards, has shown what makes the difference between a mediocre and a brilliant representation, highlighting how works by the giants of the field, from Steptoe to Ringgold, were always characterized by an impeccable authenticity. Any work of art, in fact, comes from a specific cultural and, in this case, racial background, that finds a reflection in the perspective from which the story is told. This is universally valid across genres, but especially prominent in the realistic fiction that we have dealt with here, with everyday details becoming a warranty of authenticity. The display of values distinctive of the African American community portrayed, such as intergenerational bonds, pride in ancestors' history, importance of one's inner strength but also of the community's support, granted to these titles an unprecedented success also among the black audience. The determination of these writers to depict a faithful rendition of all the aspects familiar to the young black reader, unpleasant ones included (like black neighbourhoods' poverty, children's falling from school to help their family, and parents struggling to maintain them), made their stories fully relatable for the main public addressed, whilst the parallel references to universal values (such as family love,

or relationships among siblings), made them easy to appreciate for children of any ethnicities. Whatever the thematic thread, therefore, the apex of black picture books for children consisted in works which were both written and illustrated by African American artists. These authentic titles, entirely produced by insiders of the reality described, staged realistic portraits of characters and vicissitudes, finally offering to the young black audience a mirror where they could see their own image and their everyday life reflected without deformities, thus normalizing and dignifying all African American children and their universe.

Having established the strong connection between authors' knowledge of the world portrayed and overall credibility of their works, our final observations will be on the status of African American children's literature nowadays, with a focus on the theme of hair. In relation to the first aspect, the new millennium has seen a certain spreading of the interest on racial inclusion in kidlit, with black parents and teachers creating virtual communities where to suggest each other meaningful titles to read to their children. At the same time, there is still a strong imbalance between white and black representation in children's literature, both in terms of published authors and books' protagonists, therefore much work still needs to be done to raise more awareness on the urgency of an inclusive kidlit, especially in our multicultural world. Finally, in regard to the exploration of the more specific topic of hair-love, it has offered us an occasion to reiterate that the core values of black kidlit have not changed since the 1970s, and that the best results are obtained when both illustrator and writer can offer an insider's perspective on the matter portrayed. The last title proposed was particularly meaningful for its hints to topics which could be object of further investigations, more specifically: the contemporary reversal of gender stereotypes, which is already expanding in black kidlit, and the male declination of hair-love, to which at the moment only a couple of titles are dedicated, but that, in our opinion, could represent a new frontier of African American picture books. If that was the case, the literary phenomenon could arguably have very beneficial effects on the American society, where, still nowadays, prejudices about African-textured hair are present.

In the end, both our initial reflections on inclusion in the audiovisual field and our central quest for authenticity in black kidlit have led us to a similar conclusion, this being that superimposing black characters over white stories is not the most valid way

to achieve fair representation, which, at the contrary, can be obtained when history and culture of the minority portrayed are taken into account in the storytelling. This concept often finds an echo in the audience's reaction to inclusive attempts: whilst new, non white protagonists and stories are generally enjoyed by both blacks and whites, remakes limiting themselves to starring black actors to interpret traditionally white characters rarely provoke much enthusiasm. Making the skin color of characters interchangeable, and neglecting the physical and cultural specificities associated to being black or white, in fact, far from diffusing the message that everyone is equal, deprives both parties of representational veracity. Similarly, ignoring historical and cultural differences deprives any story of credibility and effectiveness. To put it simply, drawing a parallel between two works already discussed, these being, the upcoming remake of *The Little Mermaid* on one side, and *The Snowy Day* on the other, we could certainly say that, beside their distance in time and genre, they both can be appreciated for their attempt to make the protagonist relatable to black children, in a world where white representation still prevails. Nonetheless, as pointed out previously, the picture book was only in part appreciated, because of the lack of physical and cultural specificity of both protagonist and story. In the same way, Disney's upcoming remake could result in a disappointing example of inclusion, if it replaced Ariel's skin and hair color without an adequate African American adaptation of the original story, which displays an array of Western-matrix architecture, characters' features and traditions, not to mention the underlying references to Greek mythology. We will be looking forward to Disney's solution. In the meantime, we will maintain that the creation of brand-new characters and stories at the moment appears as the most valid formula for real inclusion in representation, as demonstrated by the popularity of most one hundred per cent black picture books, from the sixties to today, and as proved by this African American child's reaction, seeing the unedited character of Antonio, so similar to him, in the widely acclaimed, truly multicultural *Encanto*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXPfmOhIc-g?playerapiid=ytplayer.

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Summary in Italian

Il lavoro di ricerca svolto in questa tesi mira a inquadrare la letteratura afro-americana per bambini prodotta in America, che costituisce una microcategoria recente e poco conosciuta nel nostro Paese. L'obiettivo sarà valutare il grado di autenticità dei libri illustrati per bambini con protagonisti neri disponibili oggi negli Stati Uniti, attraverso l'analisi di opere riguardanti una tematica in particolare. Dopo una rassegna sullo scarso realismo con cui venivano rappresentati adulti e bambini di colore fino al secolo scorso, seguirà un excursus sulla nascita e sull'espansione della letteratura afro-americana per l'infanzia, durante il quale verranno presentati i titoli che hanno fatto la storia della letteratura nera per bambini in USA. In seguito, ci si soffermerà su libri illustrati incentrati sul tema dei capelli afro-americani, scelto per il valore emblematico di questo tratto fisico nella storia del razzismo negli Stati Uniti. Il corpus letterario esaminato per rispondere alla domanda posta in apertura sarà quindi costituito specialmente da libri per bambini significativi rispetto al nucleo tematico individuato, dalla seconda metà del novecento ad oggi.

A livello argomentativo, l'analisi sarà strutturata in tre capitoli, preceduti da un'introduzione e seguiti da una conclusione. Nell'introduzione, si cercherà di creare un nesso fra il multiculturalismo in rappresentazione a cui mirano molte case di produzione cinematografiche d'oggi, su cui i dibattiti sono frequenti, e l'inclusione razziale nella letteratura per bambini, di cui si parla poco, nonostante il ruolo fondamentale esercitato dai libri illustrati nella formazione dei bambini. Inoltre, si spiegherà come sia scaturito l'interesse della sottoscritta per questo tema e si stabilirà quali siano le domande a cui il lavoro successivo cerca di dare risposta.

Il primo capitolo sarà incentrato sulla situazione rappresentativa della popolazione afro-americana prima dell'avvento della letteratura nera per i più piccoli. Dopo una premessa teorica sul concetto di rappresentazione della diversità di Stuart Hall, descriveremo gli stereotipi attraverso cui i neri d'America sono stati dipinti dal diciannovesimo secolo alla prima metà del novecento, e discuteremo brevemente gli effetti di questa visione distorta nella società americana. A seguire, il focus si sposterà sulla mancata o falsa rappresentazione dei bambini neri fino agli anni sessanta, in un contesto culturale in cui TV, cinema e bambole, ma anche letteratura popolare, testi scolastici e abecedari, perpetravano l'idea della superiorità bianca. Una volta illustrata

la contrapposizione fra il modo in cui venivano rappresentati i bambini bianchi e quelli neri nei successi letterari del tempo, passeremo alle conseguenze di queste immagini nella gioventù nera, utilizzando la protagonista di un romanzo di Toni Morrison come emblema della dannosità del razzismo interiorizzato. In quanto al contesto storico, inquadreremo il famoso esperimento delle bambole dei Clark come tassello di un più ampio discorso razziale sulla necessità della desegregazione delle scuole. Infine, si passerà alla rappresentazione dei neri nella letteratura per bambini, tanto distorta quanto quella dipinta nei libri per adulti, nonché peggiore per la psiche dei più piccoli, condannati a riconoscersi nei personaggi stereotipati descritti. Quest'ultimo punto offrirà una connessione con la nascita della letteratura afro-americana per l'infanzia, necessaria in un contesto razziale come questo.

Nel secondo capitolo, ci si soffermerà sull'avvento della letteratura multiculturale per l'infanzia negli Stati Uniti e sulla contemporanea nascita, e successiva espansione, della letteratura per bambini afro-americani. Si partirà da un excursus sul 1965, anno-simbolo di un risveglio di coscienze negli intellettuali bianchi americani di sinistra, causato da un articolo dell'interventista Nancy Larrick sulla totale assenza di neri nella letteratura per l'infanzia. Si discuteranno poi le conquiste ambivalenti delle associazioni culturali bianche nate in seguito a questo evento per far emergere autori per bambini di altre etnie, quella afro-americani *in primis*. Dopo aver contrapposto a questi risultati parziali i successi degli attivisti neri nella lotta per l'emancipazione a livello letterario, si passerà all'analisi dei libri illustrati che hanno inaugurato il genere della *black kidlit.* Anche qui, inizialmente si instaurerà un confronto fra un primo tentativo bianco, di grande risonanza ma in parte contestato per la rappresentazione del protagonista di colore, e una seconda pubblicazione nera, anch'essa apprezzata solo in parte. Si passerà quindi alla presentazione degli autori che definirono i concetti chiave del genere dai primi anni settanta, ponendo le fondamenta per la letteratura nera per bambini successiva. Infine, analizzeremo le pietre miliari della seconda fase evolutiva del genere, sottolineandone aspetti di continuità e divergenze rispetto alle opere precedenti, e stabilendo un nesso fra questa letteratura di seconda generazione, e l'emergere del tema dei capelli dei neri nei libri illustrati per bambini.

Il terzo capitolo entrerà nel vivo della tematica scelta, proponendo uno studio diacronico dalla rappresentazione dei capelli nella letteratura afro-americana per

l'infanzia, dalla seconda metà del ventesimo secolo a oggi. Prima di analizzare i casi letterari selezionati, ci soffermeremo sullo status problematico dei capelli dei neri e delle nere in particolare, dai tempi della schiavitù ad oggi, mettendo in risalto aspetto storico e implicazioni simboliche di questo elemento estetico negli Stati Uniti. Inoltre, si farà riferimento alla dolorosa pratica di lisciamento dei capelli, tutt'ora parte della routine di molte ragazze e donne nere in America per facilitare la propria accettazione in una società dominata ancora dal canone di bellezza bianco. Terminate queste premesse, si osserverà come la specificità di questo tratto sia stata ignorata dalla letteratura per l'infanzia americana fino alla fine degli anni settanta, quando comparve la prima opera di un'autrice nera sul tema. Da qui, inizierà l'analisi del nostro corpus letterario principale, composto da libri illustrati scritti da autori afro-americani e incentrati sui capelli, dagli anni ottanta ai giorni nostri. Dedicheremo particolare attenzione a un'opera molto contestata che, alla soglia del ventunesimo secolo, scatenò un dibattito nazionale sulla stigmatizzazione dei capelli dei neri. La parte finale della ricerca, incentrata sul recente trend di libri che invitano i bambini neri all'amore per i propri capelli al naturale, farà riferimento a un titolo in particolare per mostrare come sia cambiato il modo di affrontare questo argomento negli ultimi quarant'anni.

Nella conclusione, si tenterà di rispondere alle domande poste inizialmente, tirando le somme sul livello di autenticità raggiunto dagli albori della *black kidlit* a oggi, e sulla qualità dell'offerta letteraria attualmente disponibile per i bambini neri americani in materia di capelli. Inoltre, si stileranno delle ipotesi sulla futura evoluzione della microcategoria tematica esaminata. Infine, si evidenzierà quanto sia importante, nel cinema come nella letteratura, fare inclusione in un modo intelligente, che tenga conto del background culturale specifico di ogni gruppo, onde evitare gli errori rappresentativi del passato.