

Brown Gold

Milestones of African-American
Children's Picture Books,
1845–2002

by

Michelle H. Martin

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Brown Gold

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I dedicate this book to Grandad, my biggest fan while he was alive,
to Glenn, my spouse, best friend, and biggest fan now,
and to Amelia Holley Martin Hare, the newest member of my family,
born May 12, 2003.

Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term "children" to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

—Jack Zipes

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For inspiring me through his amazing contributions to the field, I remember Tom Feelings (1933–2003).

Introduction

“Brown Gold”?

This book’s title, *Brown Gold*, emerged out of my reflection on the designation of the late-nineteenth century as “The Golden Age of Children’s Literature,” the era when writers such as Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain began writing novels specifically designed to address adolescent readers (although G. Stanley Hall didn’t coin the term “adolescent” until 1904). During this “Golden Age,” artists like Kate Greenaway, Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, Arthur Rackham, and Edmund Evans brought into being the picture book genre as we know it today and children’s literature became widely available that no longer sought only to teach, preach, and convert children, but which took as its mantra “*delectando monemus*,” “instruction with delight.”

The suggestion underlying the title *Brown Gold*, then, is that a century later, African-American children’s literature of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—particularly African-American children’s picture books—is now experiencing the same sort of “Golden Age” that mainstream Anglo children’s literature underwent in the late-nineteenth century. Several historical, professional, theoretical, and pedagogical phenomena have led me to conclude that we are now in the midst of the “Golden Age” of African-American children’s picture books.

When children of my parents’ generation were growing up, black parents who wanted to buy books for their children that featured black characters had choices such as Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899) or Elvira Garner’s *Ezekiel* books (1930s), neither of which offer a flattering view of blackness. Those who sought not just black images in picture books but positive representations of African-American life as well had even narrower choices. They could have chosen among texts like Lorraine and Jerrold Beim’s *Two Is a Team* (1945) and Inez Hogan’s *Nappy Has a New Friend* (1947), but parents who wanted to seek out good books about black life written by African Americans had almost no options at all. Although Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps had collaborated on picture books such as *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* (1932), and Arna Bontemps had single-authored books like *You Can’t Pet a Possum* (1934), these texts were often absent from library shelves and were difficult to find in bookstores—if, indeed, young black readers and their parents could gain entry into the bookstores and libraries at all at that time.¹

In its historical evolution, this genre has now expanded to such an extent that nearly every subgenre that one can find within mainstream picture

books one can also find among African-American children's picture books. Hence, young readers can enjoy Melodye Benson Rosales's *Leola and the Honeybears: An African-American Retelling of Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1999) alongside "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" (folklore); Nina Crews's *You Are Here* (1998) alongside Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) (fantasy); Virginia Hamilton and Barry Moser's *When Bats Could Talk and Birds Could Sing* (1996) alongside Joel Chandler Harris's *Br'er Rabbit Tales* (fables); Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *Squids Will Be Squids* (1988) alongside Julius Lester and Emilie Chollat's *Ackamarackus* (2001) (fractured fables); Virginia Hamilton and Lambert Davis's *The Dark Way: Stories from the Spirit World* (1990) alongside D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths* (1962); Cheryl Hudson's *Afro-Bets 123 Book* (1987) and *Afro-Bets ABC Book* (1987) alongside Bill Martin and John Archambault's *Chicka-Chicka-Boom-Boom* (1989) and Keith Faulkner and Jonathan Lambert's *Ten Little Monkeys: A Counting Storybook* (2001) (concept books for learning letters and numbers); Nikki Grimes and Javaka Steptoe's *Pocketful of Poems* (2001) alongside Paul B. Janeczko and Chris Raschka's *A Poke in the I* (2001) (contemporary poetry); and Tony Medina and R. Gregory Christie's *Love to Langston* (2002) alongside Jane Goodall's *The Chimpanzees I Love: Saving Their World and Ours* (2001) (biography). The fact that the range of picture books about the black experience continues to expand is significant because the more varied the genre becomes, the wider the audience of potential readers and buyers, and the more accessible these books are to all readers, the greater the chances of their long-term survival.

In addition, this genre has finally come into its own—its own authors, its own illustrators, and, to a minimal extent, its own publishers as well. Black children's literature no longer has to "borrow" artists who see their primary profession as writing for adult audiences, as was true in the 1920s when Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Carter G. Woodson, and Paul Laurence Dunbar were the primary writers of black-authored texts for black children.² African-American authors and artists can now not only write and illustrate primarily for children, but they can make a reasonably good living doing so, and many do. This stands in stark contrast to problems that many authors and artists like Wade and Cheryl Hudson and Tom Feelings had with publishers firmly and repeatedly rejecting their work because of the widespread opinion only a few decades ago that mainstream America wasn't interested in reading about black people and that African Americans, whom publishers saw as the primary audience for these books, did not read or buy books.

Related to the historical evolution of this genre is a professional phenomenon that has contributed substantially to the development of this "Golden Age" of African-American children's picture books: the contemporary emergence of African-American artistic "legacies," or children of

prominent, long time black illustrators and authors who have now entered the profession as writers and illustrators of the genre themselves. Brian and Myles Pinkney, sons of prolific watercolorist Jerry Pinkney; Javaka Steptoe, son of the late John Steptoe; Nina Crews, daughter of husband-and-wife illustrator/authors Donald Crews and Ann Jonas; Christopher Myers, son of Walter Dean Myers; and others have entered into the profession of their parents, building on a strong artistic and literary family legacy that is taking children's picture books into the new millennium.

The growing number of legacies might suggest that black authors and artists find the children's book market a more welcoming place than it once was. Though this is true to a certain extent, many black children's authors and illustrators—particularly those who have not been published previously—still do encounter many obstacles in their attempts to publish their works. The Cooperative Children's Book Center, housed in the University of Wisconsin School of Education, reports that in 1985, of the 2,500 children's books published, blacks authored and illustrated 18; of the 3,000 children's books published in 1988, 39 were by blacks; by 1992, 94 of the 4,500 were by blacks. Between 1994 and 1996, the total number of children's books remained steady at 4,500, while those by African Americans rose from 166 to 172. In 1997, the number of children's books by black authors and illustrators peaked at 216, having gone no higher than that number since, although the total number of publications has risen slightly, to 5,500 annually. Between 1998 and 2001, the number of black-authored books went from 183 down to 150, to 147, and back up to 201. The publication of black children's literature reached a plateau in 1997, experienced a slump into 2000, and seems to be on the rise again.³

Two conversations that I had with illustrator Jerry Pinkney about his perspective on the business end of the industry might partially explain the impetus behind these fluctuations. When I talked with him in November of 2001 and presented my idea to him that we are now in the midst of the "Golden Age" of African-American children's picture books, he said that he felt this is only a beginning: "It's going to get much better!"⁴ When I talked with him the following year, however, he felt much less optimistic than he had the year before, primarily because of the "bottom line that corporations are imposing on publishers." Pinkney said that midlist writers and artists (those who are producing quality books but not necessarily ones that will turn a substantial profit for the publisher) will have more difficulty getting their works published now than they did a few years ago. At one time, Pinkney said, many publishers were committed to producing works by writers of color even if the profit expectations were low. Hence, although the market for black authors and artists who produce works about the black experience has never been and probably will never be as great as that for more mainstream books, at least those artists had a chance.⁵ Now, however, as

huge publishers continue to buy out smaller presses, as larger publishing houses combine to become mega-publishers, and as the bookstore market becomes increasingly more controlled by chains that are more interested in publishing poor quality series books that sell well than higher quality books that expand the definition of children's literature and push back artistic and ideological boundaries of the genre, black authors and artists may find it harder to publish in the 2000s than they did in the 1990s. Despite this fact, I believe that the late 1990s publishing plateau, combined with the nurturing that seasoned black writers and illustrators are currently giving both to black legacies and to other young black aspiring authors and artists, will result in a relatively bright future for this genre, even given current publishing challenges.

While publishers, writers, and artists represent the professionals who *produce* children's books, a completely different and unrelated profession on the receiving end of these books has played an important role in the establishment of African-American children's literature as a legitimate field of study. Though we are still few, there are now academicians—both African American and non-African American—who study and publish criticism on black children's literature in all three of the academic disciplines that study children's literature: English Studies, library science, and education. For many years, the late Augusta Baker, New York City Public Librarian, the late Barbara Rollock, coordinator of children's services at the New York Public Library, and Rudine Sims Bishop, Education Professor (Emeritus now) at The Ohio State University, along with a handful of others, probably felt like lone "voices crying in the wilderness" in their critical discussions of this genre that was still coming into its own. Now, however, not only are those in higher education teaching children's literature at major universities, but we are also writing and publishing criticism on black children's literature in well-respected, refereed journals and placing books with reputable mainstream publishers. Nancy Tolson at Illinois State University (English/English Education), Dianne Johnson at the University of South Carolina (English/African-American Studies), Darwin Henderson at the University of Cincinnati (Education), Violet Harris at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Curriculum and Instruction), Rudine Sims Bishop, recently retired from The Ohio State (Education), and others, all African Americans, are working to bring black children's literature the kind of critical attention that it deserves within the academy. Paralleling the situation with children's literature, non-African American scholars also publish scholarship on black children's literature: to mention a few, Donnarae MacCann has written several scholarly books about the role of African Americans in children's literature such as *White Supremacy in Children's Literature* (1998) and Katharine Capshaw Smith, currently of Florida International University, completed her doctoral dissertation on the children's literature of Arna Bontemps and continues to do research in the field of black children's literature.

Significantly, scholars of black children's literature are talking to one another and networking with black authors and artists who are actively producing books in this genre. Given the gulf that has traditionally existed between education, English Studies, and library science academicians, despite their common interest in literature for children, this fact in itself signals some monumental progress. In addition, the establishment of the Children's Books Roundtable and the Langston Hughes Children's Literature Festival at the former Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, by the Children's Defense Fund's Black Community Crusade for Children has provided an incredible venue in which much of this collaborative work and cross-pollination can take place. Authors, illustrators, scholars, editors, and publishers of black children's literature attend these events for some productive dialogue between those who know best how to get black books into the hands of children.⁶ This dialogue, combined with the legitimization of African-American children's literature as an academic discipline through its growing presence in higher education, has sparked another positive trend: seasoned scholars of black children's literature are nurturing and mentoring younger scholars who are currently teaching in higher education as well as those who are still in graduate programs. This mentoring of the next generation of black scholars in children's literature (similar to what has happened to bring artistic "legacies" into producing black books for children) signals the emergence of a healthy profession on a number of different levels and suggests that African-American children's literature scholarship will continue to grow in depth and breadth.

These professional milestones—the emergence of a second generation of talented black picture book artists and writers, the establishment of African-American children's literature as a viable, full-time profession for some, and the nascent but fruitful dialogue between academicians of black children's literature—all contribute to my assessment of this era as the emerging "Golden Age" of African-American children's picture books. A theoretical shift is also taking place within this genre, though, that adds further evidence that black children's literature is carving out its own space within American culture. Prior to the twentieth century and even up until the 1950s, the majority of picture books that featured black images were written by white authors for white audiences. As I discuss in chapter 2, authorship over the twentieth century has shifted from whites writing about blacks for white audiences, to black authors writing primarily with an African-American audience in mind. Now, black authors are effectively addressing all audiences through their picture books and celebrating the black experience without reservation.

But what of the consumers? What of the children and parents, African American and otherwise, who buy, read, reread, and pass these books on to friends and relatives? As a scholar whom Peter Hollindale would label a "book people" critic more than a "child people" critic,⁷ I prioritize the work

of the professionals above that of the children because if it weren't for the creators of these texts and the favorable sociopolitical contexts that have allowed them to carry out this work, children would have no black books to enjoy—although it's also true that if consumers didn't financially support their work, authors and illustrators would not be able to continue creating books. One significant reason for my suggesting that this historical era is worthy of being labeled the “Golden Age” of African-American children's picture books in terms of children is the overwhelming diversity of books available in this genre. Though the quantity and availability of these books might leave something to be desired, a much greater wealth of books about different aspects of the black experience is available to American readers than ever before.⁸

Black children can find affirmation about their hair in Natasha Anastasia Tarpley and E. B. Lewis's *I Love My Hair* (1998); bell hooks and Chris Raschka's *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999) and *Be Boy Buzz* (2002), and Carolivia Herron and Joe Cepeda's *Nappy Hair* (1997). They can find praise for their varied skin tones in Sandra and Myles Pinkney's *Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children* (2001), Arnold Adoff's *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (1973), and W. Nikola-Lisa's *Bein' with You This Way* (1994). They can learn of their history through Tom Feelings's *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo* (1995), Dinah Johnson's *All Around Town* (1997), and William Hooks and James Ransome's *Freedom's Fruit* (1996). They can meet their heroes and heroines in William Miller, Cornelius Van Wright, and Ying-Hwa Hu's *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* (1994), Ruby Bridges's *Through My Eyes* (1999), Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe's *Daddy and Me* (1993), and Doreen Rappaport and Bryan Collier's *Martin's Big Words* (2001). They can see their own families reflected in Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard and James Ransome's *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)* (1993), John Steptoe's *My Daddy Is a Monster . . . Sometimes* (1980), and Angela Johnson and James Ransome's *Do Like Kyla* (1990). They can learn to appreciate their homes in Bryan Collier's *Uptown* (2000) and Walter Dean and Christopher Myers's *Harlem* (1997). They can admire black talent in Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch's *Amazing Grace* (1991), Leontyne Price and Leo and Diane Dillon's *Aida* (1990), and George Ancona's *Let's Dance* (1998). They can absorb the cadence of their own folklore in Julius Lester and Tom Feelings's *Black Folktales* (1992), Lester and Emilie Chollat's *Ackamarackus* (2001), Lester and Joe Cepeda's *What a Truly Cool World* (1999), Robert D. San Souci and Jerry Pinkney's *The Talking Eggs* (1989), and Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (1991).

Clearly, contemporary American children have access to a much wider variety of black children's picture books than did their parents and grandparents, and although the numbers of books published per year in this genre by African-American authors has remained relatively static since 1994,

these numbers more than quadrupled between 1985 and 2000. The wide range of texts available by black authors and about the black experience attests to the productivity and perseverance of the professionals who feel it essential to make excellent literature about African-American life as widely available to readers as possible.

Who's In, Who's Out?

In the process of creating this volume, I had to decide whether to be racially inclusive or exclusive. Many who write for children about the African-American experience are not African American themselves. When critics include the work of these authors in their discussion of the genre, they tend to write about “the black experience” or “black images” rather than labeling these texts simply “African-American children’s literature.” In fact, one of my black colleagues who writes about this genre felt strongly that I should exclude all non–African–American authors from this volume. That sounds simple enough, but what happens when Nina Crews, the daughter of Donald Crews, who is African American, and Ann Jonas, who is white, writes *You Are Here* (1998) about two little black girls enjoying adventures inside the house on a rainy day? Should she be excluded because she’s biracial or somehow “not black enough”? Or should she be included only if she identifies as African American? And how about Donald Crews’s *Rain* (1978), *Freight Train* (1978), and *Truck* (1980)—all written by an African American but on topics that have little or nothing to do with humans, much less with race. Should he be excluded because so many of his books are “black” only in terms of their authorship and not in terms of their content? How about publishing teams like Leo (black) and Diane (white) Dillon? Should they be excluded because only half of the team is African American even though they work so closely together on illustrations that neither knows who has done what when the piece is finished? Or should they be included only when they illustrate content concerning the black experience? How about Ezra Jack Keats, a white author whose *The Snowy Day* (1962) was the first picture book featuring a black child to win a Caldecott Award? Or William Miller, a white author who has published excellent and important books about key historical figures such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes? Should Keats and Miller be excluded because they write outside of their own cultural experience? Should they be excluded also because they narrow the publishing possibilities for black authors who might otherwise be able to place more of their work about the black experience and black historical figures with major publishing houses? I struggled with all of these decisions, but in the end, I have come down on the side of inclusion. Here is why.

I read *The Snowy Day* many times as a child and many more times as an adult, having no idea that Ezra Jack Keats was white. In fact, I didn't learn this until several years into my graduate study of children's literature. All I knew was that someone somewhere had thought that I, a young black reader, deserved an image of a child in my bedtime stories who looked more like me than the blond-haired, blue-eyed Sallies and Billies who stared out at me from between the covers of the basal readers I read every day at school. And although Keats's *The Snowy Day* has been lambasted for tokenism, this author was attempting to do what few others in the early 1960s were: giving black children the chance to see themselves and their experiences reflected positively in the literature they read. Keats's visual images are not blatantly problematic as are those in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, and the text in Keats's books says nothing about the ethnicity of its characters. Keats's Peter was, to me, just an ordinary little black boy who loved his dog and felt surprised to find a puddle instead of a snowball in a pocket. In other words, these characters were unextraordinarily black. Because non-African-American authors like Ezra Jack Keats and Verna Aardema have played such an instrumental part in the normalization of blackness in children's literature, and because picture books about the black experience by authors like William Miller and artists like Barry Moser can be just as positive a force in the lives of child readers as those books by artists like James Ransome, Nikki Grimes, and Shel Silverstein, I have included both African-American and non-African-American writers of black children's literature in this critical discussion. As librarian Augusta Baker said so succinctly in her 1971 article, "The Black Experience in Children's Books," "Blacks and whites have each, from their own vantage point, made a contribution to the 'Black Experience' in the past and in the present and they will both contribute in the future."⁹ Hence, I feel that a critical consideration of this genre should include those who have made substantial contributions even if they do not share the ethnicity of the people about whom they write.

Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard's *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism* (1985) also comes down on the side of inclusion. These critics articulate the concept of "'thinking Black,' or writing from 'inside rather than outside'" in their assessment of the racial ideology in children's literature.

When a book is created from this vantage point, it is likely to be aesthetically effective, as well as socially and psychologically authentic. Whether authors are Black or white, if they do not have the perspective that places value on Black identity, they cannot create a truly individualized characterization of a Black person and the whole work suffers.¹⁰

Although my postmodern sensibilities make me doubt the existence of an essential "authentically black" anything, particularly given the diversity of

what “black” means in contemporary American culture, I do believe that writers write best when they write what they know. Judith Thompson and Gloria Woodard describe how authors who write outside of their circle of experiences do so successfully:

Whether a writer is white or black, if he immerses himself in the history of a period or in the life of a man, he must to some degree “wear the shoe” to report the experience accurately. . . . The credentials of a writer who undertakes a book about blacks must include a black perspective based on an appreciation of black experience. “Good intentions” are not enough. The writer of books about black children must understand the importance of ethnic consciousness before writing about the goal of ethnic irrelevancy. Conscious of the inequities suffered even after many blacks became “just plain Americans” blacks today refuse to erase the “black” from black American. They refuse to make invisible that one attribute which connotes their unity, culture, and heritage. Certainly, integration and assimilation are not possible until the recognition of and respect for these differences are fully realized.¹¹

This is the lens out of which I look as I evaluate African-American children’s literature—in which I include books about the black experience as well as books that depict images of black children. Certain chapters in *Brown Gold*, such as chapter 3 on the influence of the Black Arts Movement on this genre, chapter 4 on the Coretta Scott King Awards, chapter 5 on black legacies, chapter 7 on picture books that depict black versions of heaven, and chapter 8, those which use black modes of discourse, deal almost exclusively with black authors and illustrators. But because *Brown Gold* discusses works from such a wide time span, readers will encounter texts whose non-African-American authors did “think Black” in creating books for children. Readers will also encounter historical texts that are all about black people but whose white authors deliberately excluded black readers—juvenile or otherwise—from their intended audience. Perhaps ironically, however, this volume begins with a text that is neither African American nor American but which I believe is such an important milestone in the historical evolution of African-American children’s picture books that it deserves inclusion in this discussion.

What’s Up with 1845?

Readers intimately familiar with African-American children’s literature may look askance at the timeline for this book, wondering how I could possibly have written a critical book about African-American children’s picture books with a starting date of 1845. It is true that African-American children’s literature, as we know it, did not come into being until well into the

twentieth century, although black characters were frequently featured in antislavery tracts such as “The Slave’s Friend,” published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in the early-nineteenth century, and that early efforts at more realistic depictions of black characters began in the late-nineteenth century.¹² It is also true that turn-of-the-century books that featured images of black people were more often than not written for white children with the intention of—at best—patronizing blacks, or—at worst—depicting them as ugly, ignorant, simple-minded, humorous fools at whom readers were invited to laugh unabashedly. In 1933, Sterling A. Brown made the following comment about this literature, whose purpose was to entertain white people: “[T]he Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life. The majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character.”¹³ Because of its negative depiction of blacks, and because its intended audience excluded black readers and alienated those who did read it, many scholars do not consider this literature as part of the genre of historical African-American children’s literature.

But in the same way that the oppression and abuse that the slavery system inflicted upon black Americans would never cause an African-American historian to exclude slavery from an account of American history, I do not exclude these early images from this critical examination of African-American children’s picture books. I see them as important. These early black images were what Harlem Renaissance writers who wrote for children were writing *against*, and black authors’ methods for creating this revisionist genre has contributed a great deal to what contemporary African-American children’s literature has become.

Perhaps more objectionably, though, I have chosen as my historical starting point a text written by a man who is neither African American nor even American. German physician Heinrich Hoffmann wrote *Struwwelpeter*, a collection of stories, in 1845 as a gift to his five-year-old son, and included “The Story of the Inky Boys” among them. Wanting to give his son a book for Christmas, but finding nothing but “stupid moralizing tales” in the shops, he wrote *Struwwelpeter* for an audience of one but later, persuaded by friends, published it for the German public.¹⁴ Never having been out of print since its initial publication, this picture book still enjoys wide popularity in Germany, although many Americans have never heard of it and, more often than not, find it both strange and offensive when they do read it. Why do I begin *Brown Gold* with “The Story of the Inky Boys” from *Struwwelpeter*, when it is neither African American nor American and which most Americans would consider obscure, at best? I begin here because apart from religious tracts, it was one of the first texts internationally that, in roundly condemning racial prejudice, attempted to deliver a positive message about a child of color. As I discuss in chapter 1, the story’s racist implicit ideology completely contradicts and undermines its explicitly an-

tiracist message, but even this failed attempt put Hoffmann at least five decades ahead of white American authors who would finally begin to write positively about children of color. The racist implications of Heinrich Hoffmann's "The Story of the Inky Boys" pale in comparison to the McLoughlin Brothers' *Nine Niggers More* (187–), E. W. Kemble's *A Coon Alphabet* (1898) and *Coontown's 400* (1899), and Nigger Ned and Toby's *New Nigger Nursery Rhymes for Little Folk* (19–).

Overview

The first three chapters of *Brown Gold* detail some of the important historical milestones of the genre and discuss the ways that revolutionary events within black history such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement have impacted this genre. The second section of *Brown Gold*, chapters 4 and 5, deals with the professional aspects of black children's literature, both in terms of the most prominent award for black children's books, and in terms of the authors and artists who are helping to shape the genre in contemporary America. The next three chapters of the book, 6, 7, and 8, make use of different critical lenses to examine a number of African-American children's picture books, demonstrating the kinds of analytical academic work that is being done within this genre. In the final chapter, I address some of the pedagogical complexities of integrating African-American children's picture books into college English classes. It is my hope that this discussion of some of the historical, professional, and analytical aspects of African-American children's picture books will help to open up a more active critical dialogue about this genre. Just as these books have become more inclusive in terms of audience and authorship, I hope that the walls that segregate the different disciplines that study black children's literature continue to crumble and that the analytical discussions of these texts become more widespread than they have been in the past.

SECTION I

History of African-American Children's Picture Books

The first three chapters of *Brown Gold* discuss selected historical milestones of African-American children's picture books that helped to shape the genre into what it has become. Chapter 1 situates "The Story of the Inky Boys," a story in Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845), as a key forerunner to Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899) both because of the visual similarity between Sambo and the Black-a-moor and because Bannerman read this *Struwwelpeter* story to her own children and was therefore familiar with these earlier images. Furthermore, even despite the problematic nature of Bannerman's depiction of black characters, she succeeds in giving Sambo what Hoffmann fails to give the Black-a-moor: agency that enables Sambo to defend himself and act and speak on his own behalf. Despite the visual images that many readers consider stereotypical and derogatory; despite the generic names of Little Black Sambo, his mother, Black Mumbo and his father, Black Jumbo; and even despite the fact that the geographical setting of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is not Africa, India, nor America, I argue here that Sambo's agency makes him both an improvement on Hoffmann's story about a black child and an important forerunner to contemporary African-American protagonists. Hence, even though I have chosen background texts that are not African American at all, I will argue that the dynamics in these two stories lay the groundwork for the positivity that emerged within the African-American children's picture book when it finally did come into existence as a genre.

Chapter 2, "From *Ten Little Niggers* to Afro-Bets: Images of Blackness in Picture Books for Young Readers, 1870s to 2000s," traces changes primarily in abecedaries and counting books from the late-nineteenth century to the present to give an overview of how depictions of black children in these books have changed over the past 100+ years. From *The Ten Little Niggers*

(1875) and *Nine Niggers More* (187–) to Lucille Clifton's *The Black BCs* (1970), the Afro-Bets books, and Tom Feelings's *Jambo Means Hello* (1974), these alphabet and counting books reveal a startling story of the literary and artistic renaissance that took place within these texts over time. While the indoctrination of racism permeated texts even for the very young in books by E. W. Kemble and some of his white contemporaries, many writers of the Harlem Renaissance played a key role in developing a literature designed to encourage black children to feel proud of their heritage.

Chapter 3 discusses the influence of the Black Arts Movement on this genre. Although children's books are not an appropriate platform for some of the ideas that came out of this movement, certain other ideas have surfaced in African-American children's picture books. In fact, these ideas appear not just in books that came during and directly following the 1960s and 70s, but they also continue to show up in the children's books of some contemporary black authors and illustrators. This chapter explores both the uplifting messages that these books convey and some of the underside of life for black children who have to live with realities like poverty, incarcerated parents, and the constant pressure of trying to live their lives against a white standard.

1

“Hey, Who’s the Kid with the Green Umbrella?”

A Reevaluation of Little Black Sambo and the Black-a-moor

Place the Black-a-moor, the protagonist in Heinrich Hoffmann’s “The Story of the Inky Boys” from *Struwwelpeter* (1845), next to Helen Bannerman’s protagonist in *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), and the resemblance is obvious (figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

Both children have dark skin, curly or Afro hair, and bright red lips. Both carry green umbrellas and wear a red garment. Even their body positions look similar: the illustration of Little Black Sambo walking home after regaining possession of his clothes mirrors the image of the Black-a-moor before and after his encounter with the three ruffians.¹ The Black-a-moor wears only a pair of red shorts, and after Sambo’s encounter with the tigers, he spends six illustrated pages in the same near-naked state as Hoffmann’s Black-a-moor. Both amateur artists, Bannerman and Hoffmann illustrated these books with crude, somewhat surreal, and perhaps even childlike sketches.

Writing just prior to and during the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, respectively, Hoffmann and Bannerman transgressed mainstream practices in writing about children of color. The fact that positive images of black children were rare in American children’s literature until the 1960s makes these early images significant.² Sharing visual similarities, common controversial publication histories, and important ideological messages that affect the depiction of black children in juvenile literature even today, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* and “The Story of the Inky Boys” beg comparison as forerunners of contemporary African-American children’s picture books.

Aside from abolitionist literature, Hoffmann’s “Inky Boys” features one of the first positive European depictions of a black child in a children’s text. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* bears significance not only as a revision of Hoffmann’s earlier image but also as a means by which messages



Fig. 1.1. Reprinted by permission from Dover. Hoffmann, Heinrich. *Struwwelpeter: In English Translation*. London: Routledge & Kegan, 1845. New York: Dover, 1995. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1899.

about the black child were disseminated to a substantially wider international reading audience than *Struwwelpeter* reached. Despite the sixty-year controversy concerning racism in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, Bannerman's book remains an important touchstone within historical children's literature because of its longevity and its permeation of so many facets of American society. Thus, as seminal representations, the texts of Hoffmann and Bannerman have strongly influenced American depictions of black children in juvenile literature both positively and negatively. In terms of its role within minority literature, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* substantially im-



Fig. 1.2. Illustrated by Helen Bannerman. *The Story of Little Black Sambo*.

proves upon Hoffmann’s image of the Black-a-moor in its implicit messages about the protagonist’s race, class, and intelligence. These two texts were written fifty-four years apart, the former at the dawn of the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, the latter at the close of this significant era; hence in addition to reflecting common racial ideologies of their historical eras, they also embody the late-nineteenth century shift in children’s literature from instruction to delight.

To uncover intertextual connections between *Struwwelpeter* and *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, one need only look at interviews with Bannerman’s children. Robert, one of her two sons, confirms that he owned a copy of Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* as a child and, although he did not specify the reasons, decidedly disliked it.³ Living in India with many native house servants, Bannerman was surrounded by dark-skinned people with whom she interacted daily. Given her experience with people of color, her illustrations of Sambo could have looked less like Hoffmann’s Black-a-moor, who is of

African descent, and more like the Indians she saw on a daily basis. Nineteenth-century British education clearly delineated class and race distinctions, and as Elizabeth Hay contends in *Sambo Sahib* (1981), Bannerman was too well educated and observant to confuse Africans with Indians (28). Given the resemblance between Hoffmann's illustration of the Black-amoor and Bannerman's of Sambo, however, the similarities between the boys seem intentional on Bannerman's part. She also seems to have deliberately made Sambo's appearance somewhat ambiguous ethnically since he looks convincingly neither African nor Indian.

Home schooled in science, Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Latin, art, and music by her father, the Reverend Robert Boog Watson, Bannerman was well read due to her passion for books (6–7). As the daughter of a minister in the Free Church of Scotland, however, she also received a rigorous religious education. Critic Phyllis J. Yuill suggests that in the conservative, religious home in which Bannerman grew up, moralistic tales would probably have been highly regarded for their didacticism.⁴ Although Yuill sees a resemblance between the tales of Bannerman and Hoffmann in both their violence and their moralism, I find *The Story of Little Black Sambo* conspicuously void of a moral (18).

The similarities between *Struwwelpeter* and *Little Black Sambo* go beyond their visual images and the moral values of their authors; the books also share complex publication histories. Both texts enjoyed an overwhelming reception during the years after their initial publication but both fell prey to censorship, though for different reasons. In a personal interview, Robert Bannerman said, “‘My mother would not have published the book had she dreamt for a moment that even one small boy would have been made unhappy thereby’” (qtd. in Hay 155). Having created fantastic stories more for delight than for instruction, Bannerman and Hoffmann would probably be astounded at the attention these texts have received from critics. For instance, Elizabeth Hay's book, *Sambo Sahib*, offers a psychoanalytic reading of *Little Black Sambo*. Just as resistant to a critical reading of a book intended solely for enjoyment as Bannerman's son, Rosemary Dinnage, in her 1981 review, “Taming the Teatime Tigers,” says that “[Bannerman] would be appalled, and more than appalled, at the flood of dizzying rubbish stimulated by her little book, but fortunately died full of years and wisdom in 1946, when the world still had sterner things on its mind.”⁵ Despite such resistance to critical readings of *Little Black Sambo*, this picture book still gets its share of attention from both critics and censors.

Like many challenged and banned books, both *Little Black Sambo* and *Struwwelpeter* still delight children who do manage to gain access to them. Susanna Ashton and Amy Jean Petersen state that while early nineteenth-century readers enjoyed *Struwwelpeter*, later in the century, the German audience began to see the tales as morbid.⁶ Ironically, while psychiatrists have

attacked the book for its potentially damaging messages to children, Hoffmann "established and ran one of the finest and most progressive mental hospitals of his time" later in his career as a mental specialist.⁷ Thomas Freeman says that nineteenth-century *Struwwelpeter* critics objected to its violence, but twentieth-century critics have challenged its authoritarian method that upholds the "prevailing attitudes of the nineteenth-century German nursery" in which fathers "expected their children to obey them without question or qualification; and severely punished any deviations from their socially acceptable code."⁸ Jack Zipes claims that this text is a children's classic not because of its popularity but because it upheld nineteenth-century values of the ruling class—values inculcating obedience to adults, government, and God.⁹

The controversy over *The Story of Little Black Sambo* as a racist text began appearing in professional journals as early as the mid-1940s (Yuill 13). In addition to arguing that the "smiling darkie" caricature in Sambo had the potential to destroy the self-image of African-American child readers, some critics, like the director of Fisk University's special collections, felt that the book damaged "the developing minds of white children by giving them a model caricature that demeans and ridicules black children" (Shockley qtd. in Yuill 19). However, other critics felt that while many white Americans early in the twentieth century considered black people invisible within the culture, Sambo made whites acknowledge the humanity in black people.

In loving Sambo, unreservedly, in some way, every white had the feeling that he was also accepting the black man as a fellow human being. The nursery bookshelf was integrated, and no prejudice could exist in a home where Little Black Sambo and Peter Rabbit stood side by side on the same shelf. (Yuill 9)

Unlike opposition to *Struwwelpeter*, the controversy surrounding *Little Black Sambo* has come just as strongly from the mainstream as from minority groups.

Yet despite the criticisms of librarians, teachers, and parents, both texts have remained continuously in print since their nineteenth-century publication. Before 1870, forty-seven editions of Hoffmann's text appeared in print; by 1876, the book celebrated its hundredth edition.¹⁰ Copyright problems prevented Twain's "freely translated" version, *Slovenly Peter*, from being published in the United States until 1935 (Ashton and Petersen 35), but by that time, the original text had been through 562 editions.¹¹ In 1977, Thomas Freeman cited that "five German publishers currently keep it in print, despite the fact that over 600 editions have already been printed" (Freeman 808). *Struwwelpeter* enjoys such popularity in Germany today

that certain phrases derived from the book have emerged in common speech. Dana Bernitzki, an East German resident, comments that everyone knows the text. A child with poor hygiene is called a “Struwwelpeter,” and those who pay little attention to where they are going are called, “*Hanns Gluck-in-die-Luft*” or “Hans Head-in-the-Air.”¹²

Like *Struwwelpeter* in Germany, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was a “runaway best-seller” in England and the United States from its beginning. Its first four editions sold 21,000 copies (Hay 1); between 1900 and 1981, over fifty different versions were published in the United States alone (156). The image of Little Black Sambo and his plethora of permutations have permeated American culture, surfacing in such diverse places as stuffed doll patterns, a restaurant chain in Santa Barbara, California, and even in Marjorie McDonald’s psychoanalytic speech at the 1974 American Academy of Child Psychiatry Conference (Yuill 31–2). Although Bannerman’s book sold for one shilling and six pence in October 1899 (Hay 28), for a reprint of the only authorized American edition of that same 4¼" × 5¾" book, American shoppers will pay approximately twelve dollars. While sales of *Little Black Sambo* in the United States have dropped dramatically in recent years, the challenges to this book, as well as to *Struwwelpeter*, have failed to remove them from American bookshelves or to eradicate them from American culture. Despite the books’ conflicts with contemporary Western values, children who read them still enjoy them, collectors and parents still purchase them, and scholars of children’s literature continue to consider them important classics worthy of research. The 1996 publication of the picture books, *Sam and the Tigers* (1996) by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney and *The Story of Little Babaji* (1996) by Fred Marcellino, both close retellings of Bannerman’s story, further suggests that the magic of Little Black Sambo lives on.

Anxious to test Sambo’s accessibility to a contemporary African-American child reader who had recently discovered the delights of Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992), I shared *Little Black Sambo* with my niece when she was eight years old. When the second, third, and fourth tigers repeated the antics of the first, she rolled her eyes and said, “Oh, Brother!” exasperated with the repetition. Several hours later, however, she asked, giggling, “Where’s that book? I like Little Black Sambo!” More recently, I have shared the stories of both Sambo and Babaji with two kindergarten children with whom I read weekly at local schools, and these books have become favorites. After many, many readings of both of the books, however, Taneal recently commented, frowning, on why Sambo’s hair and lips look like they do. Perhaps Sambo’s trickster antics and his ingenuity allow child readers to enjoy Sambo without regard to his stereotyped appearance—at least for a time. The conflict between instruction and delight, with reference to race issues, however, makes Hoffmann’s a more problematic text than is *Little Black Sambo*.

In examining the racial ideology in "The Story of the Inky Boys" and *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, one finds that Hoffmann's story is explicitly antiracist yet implicitly racist, while the reverse is true of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. The teacher in "The Inky Boys," called Agrippa in some translations and Nicholas in others, wags his finger at Edward, William, and Arthur, warning them to "leave the Black-a-moor alone!" Agrippa even explains the reasoning behind this directive: "For if he tried with all his might, / He could not turn from black to white." The boys, however, ignore Agrippa's advice:

But ah! they did not mind a bit
What great Agrippa said of it;
But went on laughing, as before,
And hooting at the Black-a-moor. (*Struwelpeter* 9)

Exasperated and angry, Agrippa dunks each of the boys, kicking and screaming, into his ink pot until "they are black, as black can be" (10). After the dunking, the silhouettes of the three boys fall in line, marching behind the Black-a-moor, holding the same mocking body positions that they held on the previous page, as if they had been created with a cookie-cutter.

The message of Agrippa and Hoffmann here is clear: one should not tease others because of differences—ethnic or otherwise. As Charles Frey and John Griffith point out, however, readers must distinguish between the kind of racism that Hoffmann denounces here from that which he uncritically accepts:

Clearly Hoffmann believes it is naughty for Edward, William, and Arthur to hoot and laugh at the black boy. Just as clearly, though, Hoffmann supposes that the boy is a "woolly-headed Black-a-moor" who would turn himself white if he could and that to be turned black is a punishment. The basic, unspoken logic of the situation is that of course anyone would rather be white than a woolly-headed black, and it is not nice for the privileged ones to tease the unfortunate about his unhappy condition.¹³

In terms of both visual images and character development, Hoffmann's Black-a-moor is a much flatter character than Bannerman's Sambo. The reader never sees a frontal view of the Black-a-moor, and his profile is only a few shades lighter than that of the three boys after they have been dipped in ink. Hence, the protagonist's name in "The Inky Boys" comments on both his race and his skin color. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *Moor* may have come from an ancient North African language and is often used synonymously with *black*. In ancient history, Moors were native to Mauritania, which now corresponds to regions of Morocco and Algeria in Northern Africa. Moor also once referred to those of Mohammedan reli-

gion.¹⁴ Remaining nameless, unlike his tormentors, this child of African descent is identified solely by his race and physical features: “woolly-headed Black-a-moor” or, in some, more accurate, translations of the German, “tar-coal-raven black Moor” (Freeman 814). Only his blackness and nappy hair matter for the purposes of this story—both as identifying features and as the reason for the white boys’ ostracism of him. The Black-a-moor appears to remain immobile throughout the plot of the story; he never responds, interacts with his antagonizers, or even changes directions physically. Likewise, though the three boys appear in a few different settings throughout the story, their body positions do not change, which emphasizes their stasis. Frey and Griffith suggest that through drawing Edward, Arthur, and William as fixed figures, “the ultimate effect is to suggest that the three brainless boys are essentially subhuman cutouts, set in their positions and their attitudes and incapable of learning or changing” (55).

Although neither the Black-a-moor nor the white children change in appearance from the first to the last page, the Black-a-moor’s muteness gives him even less character than his antagonizers have. Unlike Sambo who bargains for his own life, the Black-a-moor doesn’t even defend himself. The teacher defends him. As a result, Hoffmann does not invite the reader to see his humanity but rather depicts him as a flat, static character whose only important traits are his visible, physical ones. Hoffmann’s own promotion of racism, then, surfaces not in the explicit, but in the implicit ideology of this tale.

Sambo’s name holds as much significance as does that of the Black-a-moor. Yuill says that the Spanish word, *zambo*, means *bow-legged*, “which in turn is believed to be derived from the Late Latin ‘scambus’ and the Greek ‘skambos’, meaning ‘crooked’ “ (20). According to Hay, “a tribe called the Samboses were frequently mentioned in the accounts of the English sea captain John Hawkins, who made slaving trips to West Africa in the sixteenth century.” In Senegalese, “Sambo” means uncle; in Hausa, the second son is called Sambo (Hay 159). *Nzambu*, a Congo word meaning “monkey,” is another possible origin (Yuill 20). Harriet Beecher Stowe used the term “Sambo” as a proper name for one of the two most hated and cruel slaves on Simon Legree’s plantation in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), but if this character is Little Black Sambo’s literary forerunner, Bannerman transformed his temperament beyond recognition in the creation of her child character. By early in the twentieth century, the term *Sambo* came to be used as a generic name for any black male, particularly in the United States. Its use in Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as its common reference to black bartenders and shoeshine boys, turned this once-acceptable proper noun into a derogatory, generic one (Hay 159). “Its essence was that of a childish, dependent black person who posed no harm or threat to white society.”¹⁵

In 1899, however, it is unlikely that Bannerman was making derogatory use of “Sambo.” Following in the Dickensian tradition of giving characters

odd, sometimes onomatopoeic, names that play on commonly used words, Bannerman enjoyed verbal jokes and puns, and she chose the names of her characters accordingly (Yuill 29–30).¹⁶ In "The Inky Boys," the antagonists have names, but the protagonist does not; Hoffmann named the obnoxious Edward, William, and Arthur, but he apparently did not consider the Black-a-moor a significant enough character to warrant a name. Bannerman, on the other hand, names both Sambo and his parents, Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo. Though all three names are somewhat problematic, they give a certain amount of character to the protagonist and his parents and also suggest a higher status and respect for these humans than for the nameless though anthropomorphic tigers who live out in the jungle.

Many critics have lambasted Bannerman for her stereotyped portrayal of Sambo and his family. But all of her illustrations—those of her family and friends, as well as those in the books she wrote and illustrated—were caricatures. Hay notes that if given the chance, Bannerman would have been a much better cartoonist than she was an artist and she further argues that though they are caricatures, Bannerman's characters are not stereotypes. "A stereotype is something constantly repeated without change, a character without humanity" (158). This definition certainly describes the nameless, silhouetted Black-a-moor and his tormentors, but it does not describe Sambo, who displays wit, intelligence, and savvy in his repeated encounters with antagonists who could eat him if they chose.

Clearly, many readers interpret Bannerman's depiction of Sambo and his parents negatively. While the visual images—because they are caricatures—seem to poke fun at this black family, the family dynamics tell a different story. Not a solitary individual like the Black-a-moor, Sambo has caring parents who provide the basic necessities of food and shelter and also expend time and money to outfit him fashionably. They even buy him a pair of shoes—items that both Mumbo and Jumbo lack.

Like many other circular journeys in children's literature, Little Black Sambo leaves his parents at home, encounters a conflict that enables him—free from parental intervention—to act as an empowered individual, then returns to the safety of home and a warm parental welcome after his triumph. To celebrate his defeat of the tigers—perhaps as a rite of passage—the family eats tiger pancakes for dinner. Writing in the Victorian era when children were encouraged to be seen and not heard, Bannerman created parents for Sambo who not only value their son but give him the hero's welcome that he deserves after a long day of outsmarting tigers in the jungle.

Although Bannerman lived and wrote in India, she intentionally made Sambo's race and the book's geographical setting inconsistent with her own setting. The Indian word *ghi* (butter), the tropical setting, and the presence of tigers imply that the story occurs in India. Sambo and his family, however, look more African than Indian though not fully either. In an attempt to

explain this inconsistency, Hay says that Bannerman wrote for her own children, not for publication:

She wanted to set her story somewhere far away and exotic; she chose an imaginary jungle-land and peopled it with what were to her daughters a far-away kind of people. To have made the setting India would have been too humdrum and familiar for them. Then, because she had a liking for terrifying tigers, she brought them in as villains. (Hay 29)

Further defending Bannerman's inconsistencies, Dinnage says:

The Sambo adventures, of course, happen to never-never people in a never-never land that is neither India nor Africa nor—certainly—the American South; alas for Anglo-Indian Mrs. Bannerman, her head full of perfectly real exotic scenes, and real snakes and tigers, innocently colouring her figures black to suit the story. (Dinnage 834)

In 1899, Grant Richards purchased the rights to the book from one of Bannerman's trusted (but naive) friends for a mere five pounds.¹⁷ Despite Bannerman's humble intentions and narrow target audience for the book (her two daughters), *Little Black Sambo* quickly became popular in the United States. But having lost the copyright to the story only a brief time after composing it, Bannerman maintained control over the publication of neither official nor unofficial versions of the book (Hay 26). Many Americans who read Bannerman's original interpreted Sambo as an African-American child, despite the fact that tigers are not native to the United States. But with the wealth of bowdlerized copies printed in the United States in the early twentieth century, many readers never even saw Bannerman's original but rather versions that more closely resembled blackface minstrel images than did Bannerman's original book—images of Sambo, Mumbo, and Jumbo that Bannerman never authorized or intended. And because more than thirty different version of *Little Black Sambo* have been published, American readers were more likely to encounter bowdlerized versions of the book than they were to read Bannerman's original.

Subsequent American interpretations of Sambo's African ethnicity turned Bannerman's clever entertainment choices into a social travesty. Hay asserts that had Sambo and his family been white caricatures illustrated by Edward Lear or Tomi Ungerer, "everyone would be delighted. But because there are so few books of any real character about black children, those which offer anything more than a safe, pallid domesticity are exposed to our social critics. . . ." (168). Anyone who examines Sara Cone Bryant's 1938 *Epaminondas*, featuring an ignorant black boy with no father and a dialect-speaking Mammy who constantly tells him, "You ain't got the sense you was

born with!" (6) will realize that Bannerman did not rely on minstrel images of the black child for her source material.¹⁸ Despite these dynamics, however, many readers still find these illustrations stereotypical and offensive.

In examining illustrations of the Black-a-moor and Sambo for messages about their economic class, one will find that the illustrations of the Black-a-moor imply that this boy comes from a much lower socioeconomic class than does Sambo. Hoffmann's character wears only a pair of red walking shorts with a split (or is it a rip?) in the leg. A child might reason: "It's hot where the Black-a-moor lives." Why, then, do Edward, William, and Arthur wear long sleeve shirts, long pants, socks, shoes, and hats? Much more exposed to the elements than the three white boys, perhaps the Black-a-moor uses his green umbrella to keep the sun off and not, as does Sambo, to make a fashion statement or, as McDonald suggests, to display a status symbol (516). Although the three boys carry implements of fun (toys), the Black-a-moor's only possession, the umbrella, takes the place of an item of necessity: a shirt that could provide protection from the sun.

Sambo, much more suitably attired than the Black-a-moor, wears the same garments—minus the hat—as Edward, William, and Arthur. Like the Black-a-moor, Sambo wears shorts, but in a tropical climate where palm trees grow, shorts seem appropriate. Sambo's parents dress more warmly, but maybe shorts are more suitable for children than for adults in this setting. Losing his clothes to the tigers, Sambo obviously feels uncomfortable about his nakedness and his relief after regaining them demonstrates that he is unaccustomed to traveling unclothed in the jungle. The Black-a-moor's unresponsiveness to the boys' taunts, on the other hand, imply that this boy's bare chest, legs, and feet are the norm. His exposed upper body invites the reader to focus on the Black-a-moor's nakedness, his blackness, and the boys' criticism of both. The Black-a-moor is clearly defined as the Other.

Consistently illustrating the Black-a-moor in an outdoor setting implies not only that he belongs outside but also that he has no permanent shelter. Sambo knows the dangers of the jungle as well as the safety of home. His economically comfortable family eats a dinner of tiger pancakes on blue dishes, served on a table draped with a white tablecloth. Mumbo and Jumbo are bringing Sambo up in a cultured, European-influenced environment—even if their plaid and striped clothes hint that their sense of fashion leaves something to be desired.

In investigating whether Bannerman's image of the black child is more positive than Hoffmann's earlier image, one of the most telling tests of all is the reasoning powers of the two children. Sambo is a subject; the Black-a-moor is an object. Although Sambo fears the tigers, he demonstrates the presence of mind to take command of creatures that he cannot physically overpower; Sambo uses his verbal skills and newly acquired material possessions to bargain his way out of being devoured. The mute Black-a-moor,

notably lacking possessions and apparently unaware of his surroundings, enjoys no such privilege. Humans antagonize the Black-a-moor; animals antagonize Sambo. While Sambo's name and the title of the book call attention to his race, the tigers torment him because of his edibility not because of his ethnicity. They see him as a tasty morsel. Writing in the fairy-tale tradition of children being threatened and/or eaten by anthropomorphic, talking beasts, Bannerman focuses the conflict on the interaction between the protagonist and the antagonists. With the help of his thrifty father, Sambo prevails, not by defeating the tigers himself but by capitalizing on their self-destruction. Given the formidability of these antagonists, Sambo's choice to fight with brains rather than with brawn is a wise one.

Writing in the moral tale tradition, Hoffmann uses the Black-a-moor only as an object of ridicule so that Agrippa can preach didacticism and exact his godlike punishment on the children for their disobedience. Agrippa's height—"So tall he almost touched the sky"—(Hoffmann *Struwelpeter*, 9)—is no coincidence. Frey and Griffith see a hint of Hoffmann in Agrippa, who "is obviously some kind of writer like Hoffmann, and, again like Hoffmann, he is responsible for turning the tables on naughty boys" (55). According to the response of Agrippa, a white defender, the poor Black-a-moor can't even fight his own battles.

Although the title indicates that the Black-a-moor is not supposed to be the focus of this story, he is the protagonist. But it seems odd to label him thus when he does, says, and thinks nothing as far as the reader perceives; throughout the story, the Black-a-moor remains unaware that he is a victim. With the lack of humanity that Hoffmann gives the Black-a-moor, the boy might as well be an ugly duckling: he is the helpless, exotic Other.

Any difference for which a character could be ridiculed—such as height, weight, or hair color—would have served the purpose of this didactic tale just as well as does race. That Hoffmann chose to focus on the character's race but not on any other features of the character makes this boy a much less appealing figure than is Sambo. Child readers can empathize with Sambo because of his humanity, but they feel little or nothing for the Black-a-moor because of his lack of personhood. The Black-a-moor is a stereotype rather than an individual.

Both Hoffmann and Bannerman were European writers ahead of their time, doing things with children's literature that had not or had rarely been done before. They wrote about minority characters at a time when minorities in society and especially in literature were marginalized to the point of invisibility. In defense of Bannerman's book, Hay points out, "Certainly the book, in all its versions, had a very powerful impact on people's instinctive images. It was one of the very few books then available which even acknowledged the existence of black people" (159). Bannerman went so far as to create a black character with an intelligent mind and an appealing personality. And given the publication of retellings of Sambo's story in the 1990s,

Bannerman must have struck a chord with many a child reader for it to have lasted this long.

Both authors bring more delight and less instruction into their texts than their contemporaries who wrote for children. Hoffmann moved away from the "stupid collections of pictures" and "moralizing stories" ("How I Came" n.p.) into the absurd where children die in five days from refusing to eat their soup or have the Red-Legged Scissor Man whack their thumbs off when they continue to suck them after having been warned to stop. Based on these absurdities, Philip Hofer attributes the emergence of the modern comic strip to Hoffmann's early text.¹⁹ Writing *The Story of Little Black Sambo* in the nonsense tradition, Bannerman composed this moral-less tale not to teach anything but to delight readers.

Both authors used violence, and sometimes excessive violence, in their works. Hoffmann plays on the high infant mortality rate of the nineteenth century to persuade young readers to comply with adult expectations.²⁰ Commenting on the uniqueness of *Struwwelpeter*, Ashton and Petersen assert: "If it was a collection of subversive poetry, it was supremely entertaining. If solely a collection of cautionary tales, it deserved attention for its shameless techniques" (37). In their innovative themes and writing styles, both Hoffmann and Bannerman wrote against the sentimentalism and authoritative didacticism in the works of authors such as Sir Isaac Watts, Christina Rossetti, and even Louisa May Alcott. Hoffmann strictly supervised the lithographer who "transferred the outline drawings on to the stone and the women who colored them by hand . . . in order to prevent any hint of artificiality or sentimentality, whether in line or colour, from creeping into the pages" (Hurliman 54).

In her reluctance to sentimentalize, Bannerman also used violence to entertain rather than to teach. In *Little Black Mingo* (1902), for instance, a crocodile swallows a wicked old woman, after which both the woman and the crocodile explode. In *Little Black Quibba* (1903), an elephant and a snake are dismembered, then die after being dropped off of a cliff onto sharp rocks (Yuill 8). Following Hoffmann's lead, Bannerman, as well as her contemporary, Beatrix Potter, depicted a harsh world in which bad things can happen to young protagonists: fathers can get baked into pies or children can be gobbled up by tigers on their way home if they're not smart enough to bargain their way out of being devoured.

The two most recent retellings of Bannerman's story continue this tradition of morbid delight. Marcellino's version, *The Story of Little Babaji*, sticks closely to the original text but sets the story firmly in India by changing the characters' names and by illustrating them as "uniformly Indian" (Alderson 34). In *Sam and the Tigers*, however, Lester and Pinkney interpret Bannerman's story much more freely, turning the tale into an African-American fantasy set in a place called Sam-sam-sa-mara where everyone's name is Sam and "where the animals and the people lived and worked together

like they didn't know they weren't supposed to." Despite the differences between these two tales, readers will notice that they resolve the two most controversial aspects of Bannerman's original work—the problematic ethnic visual images and the tenuous geographical location—by turning these ambiguities into certainties.

While reviewer Brian Alderson lauds Marcellino's story for being true to Bannerman's original, he criticizes Lester and Pinkney's retelling for failing to do so. Alderson asserts that Lester's language is "overloaded . . . with unnecessary baggage," that the fantastic setting negates the mythical quality of the story, and that the anthropomorphism "makes nonsense of the whole tiger episode" (34). If one thinks of *Sam and the Tigers* as merely a retelling of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, all of this may be true. But in his introduction to the book, Pinkney says that months of researching the multiple volumes of Bannerman's story freed him to find his own interpretation "of the young black child who could outwit tigers"—the same black child whom both he and Lester had recognized as a hero when they were children.²¹ Their reconceptualization and re-visioning of the story, true to Southern storytelling more than to Bannerman's original text, offers readers a distinctively African-American hero with just as much wit and imagination as Sambo but with a whole lot more style and attitude. Pinkney's characteristic illustrations combined with Lester's fanciful language will likely give *Sam and the Tigers* the kind of staying power that many other Lester-Pinkney collaborations have enjoyed. In addition, Alderson's critique might relate to his lack of understanding of some of the black modes of discourse that I discuss in chapter 8, and readers who come to *Sam and the Tigers* with little understanding of the ways that black people have traditionally communicated with one another will appreciate Lester's linguistic play less than those who do.

So who *is* that kid with the green umbrella and the curly-toed shoes? Little Black Sambo's innocence says he's the forerunner for Peter in Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* (1960), who mopes over the loss of the snowball that he saves in his pocket from his romp outside. His cleverness says he's the ancestor of the trickster Mirandy, who captures Brother Wind in the barn and forces him to do her bidding so that she and Ezel can win the annual Junior Cakewalk Contest in Patricia McKissack's *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1988). Sambo's determination says he's the predecessor of the pretentious Grace in Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* (1991), who plays Peter Pan in the school drama despite being told that neither black kids nor girls can play Peter Pan. His Indian-ness says he's the forerunner of Marcellino's Little Babaji, and his African American-ness says he's the ancestor of Lester and Pinkney's Sam from Sam-sam-sa-mara. In light of these newest renderings of Bannerman's Sam and the proliferation of positive depictions of children from many different ethnicities in American children's literature, perhaps

it is time to acknowledge not just Sambo’s racial/gendered image as a predecessor of the nigger minstrel but also the positive contributions that Bannerman’s protagonist has made within the developing canon of African-American children’s picture books. For, as Julius Lester so aptly recalls in his afterword to *Sam and the Tigers*, “what other story had I read at age seven and remembered for fifty years?” With the power to make that kind of impression, Little Black Sambo and his antecedents may live on for another hundred years.

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